

“A New Adventure”

January 2010

Hymn “Onward Christian Soldiers”

Scripture So from now on we don't look at anyone the way the world does. At one time we looked at Christ in that way. But we don't any more.

Anyone who believes in Christ is a new creation. The old is gone! The new has come! It is all from God. He brought us back to himself through Christ's death on the cross. And he has given us the task of bringing others back to him through Christ.

God was bringing the world back to himself through Christ. He did not hold people's sins against them. God has trusted us with the message that people may be brought back to him. So we are Christ's official messengers. It is as if God were making his appeal through us. Here is what Christ wants us to beg you to do. Come back to God!

(2 Corinthians 5:16-20 New International Reader's Version)

Prayer Let us pray – O God, our strength and our guide, we call on you as we enter this New Year. Our hearts are gladdened in your presence. Help us to discover truth and speak it; to feel your glory and to show it; to hear your direction and to follow it, in Jesus name. Amen.

Lesson There is a grand feeling inside us when we sing “Onward Christian Soldiers”. Despite valid objections to its warlike imagery, it remains one of the most popular of all hymns. For many it evokes feelings of the adventurous faith we knew as young people, when all our lives lay ahead of us. The strong words and rousing melody still stir us.

When Jesus says, “Follow me,” and we do so we embark on life's most challenging and demanding venture. What if we respond, “Well yes, but first we must settle the issues of Sunday shopping, our position on native land claims, and how we feel about marriage of homosexual persons.” But the countless issues the church deals with will appear on the agenda in due course. Nothing ends with those first few following steps, but everything begins with them.

Adventure begins with the realization that Jesus is going somewhere. He is on the move. Jesus is more interested in the future than in the past. It is not where we have been that counts but where we are going.

It isn't always easy to accept change. New friends join our circle of relationships; things suddenly aren't the same, and we feel out of balance. We move and the stores and street signs are strange, and we feel uncomfortable. Our financial situation or health alters and we're worried and concerned. We have to learn to do things differently, and we don't like it.

In the Bible, God reveals to us that he is a God of new things, of change and movements. He longs to bring us into a new way of life – a new way of thinking about people and places, a new way of accepting the changes he sets before us.

When we refuse to accept change, we refuse to grow. We miss out on wonderful opportunities. We may even miss out on relationships that could bless us in ways we can't imagine. Even a change that brings limitations can be a chance to be still, to listen to God, to allow others to bless us in new ways.

For some, when they follow Jesus, in some parts of the world it may mean being ostracized, or tortured, or even killed. For others, following Jesus costs far less, but it could mean refusing a bribe that competitors are willing to take, thereby losing a profitable tender. It can mean so minor a matter as taking time to visit a lonely person confined to home. We are not expected to know what may be asked of us before we begin the journey; nor where it will take us. We are expected to understand only that we follow one who will lead us into adventurous living.

Discussion Are you ready for new adventure in your life and in the life of your men's group as we begin this new year?

Prayer Let us pray – Our God, too often we follow at a distance or not at all. When we falter and are uncertain, speak to us with commanding love and help us to become what we were meant to be. Lead our steps into the way of service that lives lived in the shadow of doubt or pain or need may find new hope. We bring our prayers for a world in need and pray that some who follow in the footsteps of Jesus may be led to positions of power and influence, to bring to those offices the strength of your Spirit. In Jesus' name. Amen.

This meditation is based on material from "A time to gather" by Robert A. Wallace and "Devotions from the Heart" by Pamela Kennedy

“the power of appreciation”

February 2010

Hymn “Jesus, United by Your Grace” VU 591

Jesus, united by your grace, and each to each endeared,
with confidence we seek your face, and know our prayer is heard.

Help us to see in each a friend, each other’s cross to bear,
let all their friendly aid extend, and feel the other’s care.

Up unto you, our living head, let us in all things grow,
till you have made us free indeed and faithful here below.

Drawn by the lodestone of your love, let all our hearts unite,
let us toward each other move, and move toward the light.

Scripture (*Ephesians 4:1-3 and 30-32 from The Message*)

“In light of all this, here’s what I want you to do. While I’m locked up here, a prisoner for the Master, I want you to get out there and walk – better yet, run! – on the road God called you to travel. I don’t want any of you sitting around on your hands. I don’t want anyone strolling off, down some path that goes nowhere. And mark that you do this with humility and discipline – not in fits and starts, but steadily, pouring yourselves out for each other in acts of love, alert at noticing differences and quick at mending fences.

Don’t grieve God. Don’t break his heart. His Holy Spirit, moving and breathing in you, is the most intimate part of your life, making you fit for himself. Don’t take such a gift for granted. Make a clean break with all cutting, backbiting, and profane talk. Be gentle with one another, sensitive. Forgive one another as quickly and thoroughly as God in Christ forgave you.”

Prayer Let us pray – God, like a baker, you bring the leaven which causes our hopes to rise. With your strong and gentle hands, shape our lives. Warm us with your love. Take our common lives and touch them with your grace, that we may nourish hope among humanity. We pray trusting in your name, through Jesus our Christ. Amen.

Lesson In her book “Keep on Kicking as Long as You’re Ticking”, Nell Mohny has collected a group of brief stories she has written. Each story is about an inspiring person who is either battling cancer, depression, or a failed marriage, and who has found the Christian faith to be the answer. Nell’s love for Christ and for people crosses all denominational barriers.

One of her stories is titled “The Doctor’s Office”. It concerns an experience she had in a doctor’s waiting room while she was waiting for her appointment. An excerpt follows:

As I hesitated for a moment in my writing, I heard a female voice say, “When you take time for a deep breath, I’d like to tell you something.”

Glancing to my left, I looked into the warm and friendly face of a woman I'd never seen before. She introduced herself as Shirley from Georgia. She thanked me for my Sunday articles and told me that she had a scrapbook full of them. She also told me that her husband died after a ten-year struggle with cancer. The disease was in various parts of his body, but it was brain cancer that finally took his life.

Then she became specific about the articles that meant the most to her during that time. She mentioned the ones I had written about attitudes, encouragement, faith, and particularly the ones in which I shared my own struggle with this devious disease called cancer. The funny thing was that I had come into the doctor's office feeling fatigued and not too well. By the time I was called back to the examining room, I was already feeling better. The medicine had been a sincere dose of appreciation.

Suddenly it occurred to me that the things I had always believed about appreciation were absolutely true. Sincere appreciation lifts the spirit, motivates, provides hope, and allows the recipient to renew his or her belief in themselves. Then I thought of the persons who have influenced my life for good. They were people who obviously saw my faults, but believed in me anyway and helped me to believe in myself. This didn't mean that they didn't correct me or offer constructive suggestions. But they did these things without anger and in an ambiance of appreciation.

When we get together with others, such as our fellow AOTS men, we have an opportunity to express as well as to receive appreciation. Even just listening to one another we show respect and sincere appreciation of that person as an individual. I find that careful listening makes me feel as good as being heard.

Over the many years I have been involved in men's groups, both in Presbyterian Men and in AOTS, I have come to appreciate the many spirit-lifting gifts that are freely shared with the group. I have learned a great deal from many great men. I am sure I have not expressed my appreciation as well as I might.

The funny thing is that we each have the power to lift the spirits of others. We have the power, through sincere appreciation, to motivate and enable others to believe in themselves. Let's use the power.

Discussion What are some of the opportunities you have to show appreciation? What are some of the ways you can show appreciation? What can we do for people in desperate need – such as in Haiti? - Or in some of our First Nations communities? - Or on some of our street corners?

Prayer Let us pray – O God, we thank you for your gift of grace, that we are acceptable and loved by you whatever our state of obedience to your word, our level of understanding and our following of your guidance. We would be workers for your kingdom. We would be followers of your great commandments. You have given us the power to appreciate and to love. Give us the courage to use that power wherever we are. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

George Bishop – Spiritual Life Chair

“Towing and healing – the dance of the Spirit”

March 2010

Hymn “for the healing of the nations” VU

Scripture *Luke 8: 49-56 (New Living Translation)*

While he was still speaking to her, a messenger arrived from the house of Jairus, the leader of the synagogue. He told him, “Your daughter is dead. There’s no use troubling the Teacher now.”

But when Jesus heard what had happened, he said to Jairus, “Don’t be afraid, just have faith, and she will be healed.”

When they arrived at the house, Jesus wouldn’t let anyone go in with him except Peter, John, James, and the little girl’s father and mother. The house was filled with people weeping and wailing, but he said, “Stop the weeping! She isn’t dead; she’s only asleep.

But the crowd laughed at him because they all knew she had died. Then Jesus took her by the hand and said in a loud voice, “My child, get up!” and at that moment her spirit returned, and she immediately stood up! Then Jesus told them to give her something to eat. Her parents were overwhelmed, but Jesus insisted that they not tell anyone what had happened.

Prayer Let us pray – Great Healer, you have made us for health, for wholeness and for holiness. We know that you do not will the pain or suffering of your children. We earnestly pray for friends and family. May your spirit bring healing to those ailing persons we name in our hearts. Give them patience and serenity, knowing that you are near. May they be assured that underneath are the everlasting arms. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Lesson The healing miracles in the Bible are told in abbreviated form. They are there to witness to the healing powers that God has written into human life, and which Jesus relied on to bring relief to sufferers. In these stories relief is often immediate. Life today contains the same potential for recovery, but it occurs at a pace that belongs to daily life rather than miracle stories.

Sometimes we have to be towed, or pushed, or pulled until our spirit begins to dance and we begin to heal. Sometimes it is a member of our family or a friend that hits the right notes for the dance to begin. Sometimes we do not recognize the cause.

There are stories about a Father Peter Rookey having the gift of healing. As a youngster, he was blinded when a firecracker rocket exploded in his face. He promised he would become a priest if he could see again. His family prayed for him continuously. In about two years, his sight began to come back and eventually he could see well enough. As a priest he has healed many people.

Father Rookey does not feel responsible for the healings nor does he feel responsible for those who are not healed. God’s mercies are indeed a mystery. Father Rookey’s job, like our job, is to be faithful and to leave whatever healings take place to God. After all, the great healing is to be transformed into the likeness of Christ, and God knows best how to accomplish this within each soul.

Father Rookey spends a great deal of his time in prayer. When he prays for healing, he prays with the people seeking healing. He prays what he calls “the Miracle Prayer”, which is essentially a prayer of conversion: “Lord Jesus, I come before you just as I am...I repent of my sins...Lord Jesus, I accept you as my Lord, God, and Saviour. Heal me, change me, strengthen me in body, soul, and spirit.”

Sometimes it is us who need the healing. To be without one’s normal strength, reactions, resilience, is to be in chaos. Nietzsche wrote, “Chaos trusted becomes a dancing star.” Miraculously the Holy Spirit is present to bring order and shape out of the chaos in our own lives.

Psychiatrist David Spiegel states: “We are dependent for our emotional well-being, and it turns out in a lot of research, for our physical well-being, on our relationships with other people. Connect with people. Cope by seeking support from others.”

We are wonderfully made in the image of God. Jesus often used the phrase, “How much more....” when talking about the extravagance of God’s love. How much more than anything else we can know is God’s care for each of us who are not simply God’s creatures but God’s creations. Health, wholeness and holiness come from the same word-root. They obviously belong together. Our God-given human heritage allows us to seek sustenance through prayer and supplication during our time of restoration to wholeness.

Discussion In what ways are you a healer? In what ways is your AOTS or other men’s club a healer in your congregation or community?

Prayer Let us pray – Creator God, healer, we bring to you our prayers for all in pain, all those who await the result of diagnostic tests, all who face surgery or difficult medical treatment. Sustain those who are taking the first steps on the long road of recuperation. Grant patience and hope, serenity and endurance to those who linger long with illness. We ask your healing, loving, comforting presence with each. Amen.

This meditation is based on material from “God at the Corners” by Robert A. Wallace and “The Living Christ” by Harold Fickett

“We will be faithful! Will we not?”

April 2010

Hymn “When the Son of God was dying” VU 153

Scripture *Mark 14:27-40, 50 (Contemporary English Version)*

Jesus said to his disciples, “All of you will reject me, as the Scriptures say, ‘I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.’ But after I am raised to life, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.”

Peter spoke up, “Even if all the others reject you, I never will.” Jesus replied, “Before a rooster crows twice, you will say three times that you don’t know me.” But Peter was so sure of himself that he said, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never say that I don’t know you!” All the others said the same thing.

Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he told them, “Sit here while I pray.” Jesus took along Peter, James and John. He was sad and troubled and told them, “I am so sad that I feel as if I am dying. Stay here and keep awake with me.”

Jesus walked on a little way. Then he knelt down on the ground and prayed, “Father if it is possible, don’t let this happen to me! Father, you can do anything. Don’t make me suffer by having me drink from this cup. But do what you want, and not what I want.”

When Jesus came back and found the disciples sleeping, he said to Simon Peter, “Are you asleep? Can’t you stay awake for just one hour? Stay awake and hope that you won’t be tested. You want to do what is right but you are weak.”

Jesus went back and prayed the same prayer. But when he returned to the disciples, he found them sleeping again. They simply could not keep their eyes open, and they did not know what to say.

All of Jesus’ disciples ran off and left him.

Prayer

An upper room did our Lord prepare for those He loved until the end;
And his disciples still gather there to celebrate their risen Friend.
A lasting gift Jesus gave his own: to share in bread, his loving cup.
Whatever burdens may bow us down, He by his cross shall lift us up.
And after supper He washed their feet, for service, too, is sacrament.
In Christ our joy shall be complete: sent out to serve, as He was sent.

Lesson I began to prepare this on Maundy Thursday prior to our celebration of the Seder meal, similar to Jesus’ last supper with his disciples. I could not help thinking of how the twelve must have felt. They had followed this ‘man’ Jesus for many months and now he was telling them they would soon desert him. “We’ll show you how faithful we can be!” they thought to themselves, but they couldn’t even stay awake for one hour while Jesus prayed.

Following the Seder meal, we hold a prayer vigil with one-hour shifts from 9 p.m. to 9 a.m. on Friday morning with one or more people praying in the sanctuary and one AOTS man at the door of the church to welcome the next persons. Regardless of your hour, it’s a good time for reflection and contemplation.

The disciples temporarily gave up hope

In the April, 2010 issue of 'the Observer', Keith Howard notes how 'folks ride a spiritual teeter-totter between despair and hope, wondering if they have it within them to cope with, much less embrace, what lies ahead.'

And he goes on, 'yet, from my vantage point, the church has been blessed with a remarkable spiritual resource – women, of a certain age, as they say.'

But, what about the men of the church? Do we drop off when times are tough? We're in tough just now – our numbers are dropping; our clubs are folding; it's almost impossible to find younger people who will commit to continuing leadership.

It's not that Jesus has "deserted" us.

Just because our neighbours, the men of nearby churches, are not active, it is no reason why we who are devoted to AOTS and to men's ministries should fall asleep. From what we read, men are seeking to find spiritual meaning in their lives. The call to help to deepen the spiritual life of our neighbour is strong. We're just not sure what we should do. Let us prayerfully prepare to eagerly and joyfully go out "as one that serves".

Discussion When things aren't going the way you would like, do you react with outrage or with action? Is there room in your reaction to struggle for God's justice and for the benefit of your neighbour? Where is your faith in your response?

Prayer Let us pray – God, grant me serenity through all life's trials. Bless me with honesty in my relationship with you, with courage in my actions, and with a faith that allows me to believe without yet seeing. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

“Yearning for Living Water”

May 2010

Hymn “Living Christ, bring us love” VU 599

Scripture *John 4: 7-15 (The Message)*

A woman, a Samaritan, came to draw water. Jesus said, “Would you give me a drink of water?” (His disciples had gone to the village to buy food for lunch.)

The Samaritan woman, taken aback, asked, “How come you, a Jew, are asking me a Samaritan woman for a drink?” (Jews in those days wouldn’t be caught dead talking to Samaritans.)

Jesus answered, “If you knew the generosity of God and who I am, you would be asking me for a drink, and I would give you fresh, living water.”

The woman said, “Sir, you don’t even have a bucket to draw with, and this well is deep. So how are you going to get this ‘living water’? Are you a better man than our ancestor Jacob, who dug this well and drank from it, he and his sons and livestock, and passed it down to us?”

Jesus said, “Everyone who drinks this water will get thirsty again and again. Anyone who drinks the water I give will never thirst – not ever. The water I give will be an artesian spring within, gushing fountains of endless life.”

The woman said, “Sir, give me this water so I won’t ever get thirsty, won’t ever have to come back to this well again!”

Prayer Let us pray – We are thirsty, God. Our lives are dry. Give rest to our bodies, peace to our souls, and water to refresh our spirits. We need living water to nourish us with hope and love. Amen.

Lesson In these supposedly secular times there is a deep yearning for the sacred. Bookstores are full of books on spirituality, such as the best-sellers *Care for the Soul* by Thomas Moore, *The Road Less Travelled* by Scott Peck, and books by authors such as Deepak Chopra, James Redfield, John Shelby Spong and the Dalai Lama. The spiritual thirst that is at the heart of our age is found both inside and outside traditional church communities. People want, not to just talk about God, but to experience the sacred in the midst of frequently chaotic, rapidly changing lives.

There are rivers mentioned in scripture from Genesis to Revelation. Some are powerful images of the river of life that flows for the very beginning to the very end. Some are images of hope and promise. Others are images of God’s promise in terms of water and river.

In the land of Israel, there are two lakes. One, which is completely void of vitality, is the Dead Sea. Here, there are no trees or shrubs or even blades of grass. There is no sound of birds singing or insects chirping. The second lake is known as the Sea of Galilee. It is surrounded by lush forests, fields of grain, masses of flowers and the air is teeming with birds and insects.

The difference between the two seas is living water. The Dead Sea is so salty that nothing can survive. The Sea of Galilee contains fresh water and it teems with life.

Jesus probably spent time near the Dead Sea and would have seen and felt the heat and lack of life in that scene. But he also stood beside the Sea of Galilee and saw

and felt the vitality of a land that had fresh running streams. In that land, as in many today, the difference between life and death is living water.

At the well in Samaria, Jesus gave the woman living water. An old song goes:

Jesus gave her water that was not from a well.

She went away singing

And came back bringing

Others to the water that was not from a well.

It was living water, the water of life, and it changed her life. She came as a lone figure, isolated from her neighbours, and left as a life-giving influence on others.

We too are called to drink of the life-giving water and then to act. We drink from the well and new life germinates within us. We respond to that energy and we act, move, risk, and grow in faith. Every step we take, every stage in our faith journey is a starting point for new growth. We drink living water and we begin to live, open to the wisdom and power of God. We share what we have learned, and become for others a spring of living water.

Discussion What comes to mind when you think of a river?

When you think of “living water”?

Describe your life today in terms of a river – what kind of a river? – how are you flowing?

Can you think of ways to bring others to the water that is not from a well?

Prayer Let us pray – Creator God, as you moved over the waters and life came into being, we would ask you to move in us and create new life among us. Give us the water of life that we may thirst no more. Fill us with your spirit and enable us to become springs of water, places of refreshment and hope for the thirsty.
Amen.

“Let me see now!”

June 2010

Hymn “Teach me God to wonder” VU 299

Scripture *Psalm 8 (The Message)*

God, brilliant Lord, yours is a household name.

Nursing infants gurgle choruses about you; toddlers shout the songs that drown out enemy talk, and silence atheist babble.

I look up at your macro-skies, dark and enormous, your handmade sky-jewelry, moon and stars mounted in their settings. Then I look at my micro-self and wonder, why do you bother with us? Why take a second look our way?

Yet we’ve so narrowly missed being gods, bright with Eden’s dawn light. You put us in charge of your handcrafted world, repeated to us your Genesis-charge, made us lords of sheep and cattle, even animals out in the wild, birds flying and fish swimming, whales singing in the ocean deeps.

God, brilliant Lord, your name echoes around the world.

Prayer Let us pray – O God, we long to see a world at peace, where people live in harmony. We need to see balance in our lives and in nature. We struggle to find grace in our world of confusion. Help us to see your presence around us in the world and in the people we meet. Amen.

Lesson What does it mean “to see”? When a blind friend says “I see now what you mean”, what is he really saying? What about “I’ll see you later”, or “See if you can fix that problem”.

What in the world do you see? It depends on who you are, what you are thinking at that particular time, but mostly on your point of view.

In Betty Radford Turcott’s book, “There is a Season”, she notes examples of how scientists, historians, accountants, and theologians see the world.

Scientists look at the world from a scientific point of view. They see a world that can be explained by theories and formulae. Creation was a “big bang”. Light is broken into different colours with different wavelengths. Substances can be broken down into different symbols and numbers. Sound patters can be written on paper. We read their reports and hear the complicated explanations. The scientist sees the world and we marvel.

The viewpoint of an historian is different, enriched by her knowledge and background. She looks out at the port on the ocean and sees what it was like when different civilizations were in control of the geographic area. She sees the world in terms of great events. Events are reported in terms of lasting effects on humanity. Wars are analyzed for the root causes, the humans and war machines involved and the final outcome. The historian sees the world and sometimes we tremble.

When an accountant sees the world, it is through columns of figures, ledgers and balance sheets. He sees “paper” being bought and sold. Profit or loss is the bottom line. Growth is the prime mover. The accountant looks at the world and we question our values.

Theologians see the world with another vision. The world is an expression of God's creative power and compassionate care. Noah saw a rainbow and knew that God had been present in the flood. A poet writing a psalm saw God in the moon and the stars. The people of Galilee met Jesus and saw in him God's mercy and love for humankind. Mary Magdalene met Jesus in the garden and saw God's redeeming action in the risen rabbi.

Today we see through all these eyes. For many it is a composite of all the world views we read about and hear about. As an Easter people, we are striving for a world where there is justice and peace. Acceptance, compassion, hope and love are the bottom line. We see much that causes us pain and concern – we see the world as it is and ask “why?” But also we see hope and promise in the world – we see the world as it could be – as God meant it to be...and ask “why not?”

Discussion How does an AOTS man see the world?

 What should we do to see the world as God meant it to be?

Prayer Let us pray – Loving God, the pain of the world confronts us at every turn. At times we feel the need to shield our eyes from so much suffering. We need to see the world through your eyes of compassion and understanding. Help us to see your face in the face of everyone we meet. Help us to see the world as you saw it in the beginning- whole fruitful, harmonious and good. And help us to use that vision to recreate the world as a better place for all people. Amen.

“Why do you spend?”

Sept 2010

Hymn “Now thank we all our God” VU 236

Scripture Isaiah 55: 1-3a (New American Standard Bible)

Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come; buy wine and milk, without money and without cost.

Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourself in abundance.

Incline your ear and come to me. Listen, that you may live.

Prayer Let us pray – O God, you have provided for our every need; good food, shelter, knowledge, skill, friendship, affection. In our ignorance we often feel that these are our possessions by right, in our best moments we know that they are your gifts and behind all life’s wonders we find your very presence. For all of this we thank you. May we spend ourselves and our substance in striving for Christ’s goals. May we hunger and thirst after righteousness. So we would give of our time and our talent, our treasure and our toil in the name of Jesus. Amen

Lesson My wife, Helen, and I have just returned from a driving trip to Charleston South Carolina and back. The occasion was for the wedding of a nephew aboard a cruise ship. The ceremony was short but sweet and sufficient from a legal point of view.

Charleston is a beautiful old city with many fine old Christian churches. We were told that Charleston has more churches per capita than any other American city. We went on a carriage tour and a walking tour and observed the exterior of several of these buildings on Friday and Saturday. As we left Charleston for Myrtle Beach on Sunday morning we noted how full the church parking lots were for the many suburban churches of different denominations along the highways. That was good to see.

And then we came to a Wal-Mart where there were thousands of people “worshipping”. Not worshipping God, but worshipping “stuff”. “Why do you spend your money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy?” the author of Isaiah asks.

I am in the middle of a book called *Money Enough* by Douglas A. Hicks. He notes that this Isaiah biblical narrative declares that genuine satisfaction is more than instant gratification. It is more than happiness as an emotional feeling or as a fluctuating subjective state dependent on material goods. Why do we spend our money on stuff that doesn’t satisfy? Economists have reminded us that the endless pursuit of consumer goods will more likely place us in competition with our neighbours than provide any sense of enduring satisfaction. We will be chasing consumer happiness that remains just beyond our reach.

Hicks states that he has been reading about how much it would cost to provide basic education, clean drinking water, safe sewage, basic health care, and adequate nutrition for all people in the world. The best estimates for meeting all these basic need for everyone are on the order of \$200 billion per year. Note that the bailout for Wall Street institutions in October 2008 was \$700 billion.

I look forward to completing this book in which there may be more I wish to share in this column.

I will close with a short anecdote. In a large Canadian city a family from a wealthy area was told about a huge bargain food outlet where they could buy groceries for much less than in their own neighbourhood. They drove their van down to the food terminal. The customers weren't quite their kind of people, but the price was right. They loaded up with cases of canned goods and produce. On the way home the axle broke. Sounds like an update of one of Jesus' parables.

Discussion How much "stuff" do you need?

Prayer Let us pray – Our God, you have given us so much with your gift of life, yet we wish always for more. We push beyond the boundaries. May we be aware of how that striving creates burdens for those around us. We would pray for all who bear sorrows unseen yet heavy on the heart, those who feel an inner shame that needs the cleansing of your love and ours; those who are exploited for the satisfaction of others, especially for those whom they love. So may our prayers and reflections not be casual this day, but standing in the deep centre of our own needs grant us grace to stretch our hands of care to others in Jesus' name. Amen.

“We need to be farmers”

October 2010

Hymn “I, the Lord of sea and sky” VU 509

Scripture Luke 10: 1-4, 17 (New International Version)

After this, the lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. He told them, “the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road.”

The seventy-two returned with joy and said, “Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.”

Prayer Let us pray together – We gather to hear your call, O God of love. Speak to us in this time of fellowship and worship that we may hear your call to service and answer, “Here am I, send me.” Amen.

Reflection Do we see the work that we do each day as a part of God’s work and God’s plan? Do we see that there are many tasks that need to be undertaken to bring about justice and peace in our world? Do we name justice and peacemaking as the work of God and therefore as our work as well? God calls us to do the work that needs to be done.

In his book “If it is to be it’s up to me”, author Thomas B. Smith tells of the powerful impact this attitude has in every area of his life. As he states in the first chapter, “An optimistic outlook on life has many advantages. It means you’re solution oriented and a possibility thinker. You look for the good. When you have a positive attitude, you’re more likely to be committed and achieve your goals and dreams.”

When we follow that message, “if it is to be, it is up to me”, as we work in our church and in our community, then we can know that we can do the work that God needs us to do.

There are many in the Bible who heard God’s call. Abraham, Samuel and Isaiah all heard it and gave the same answer, according to scripture. Isaiah heard God asking, “Whom shall I send and who will go?” They all replied, “Here I am, send me.”

In modern times, many have heard God’s call – some to be teachers, others doctors and nurses, social workers or labourers. It does not matter what the task, if it is done in a spirit of love and justice. It does not matter where the work is to be accomplished. It is our work, it is God’s work. God calls each of us to share in the coming of a world of peace and justice

Discussion What is our work at these stages in our lives?

Closing prayer Let us pray – God of call, help us to listen to your voice. Your work is our work. Our work is your work. Give us the will to follow where you lead, to reach out in love, to struggle for justice. Grant that we, with courage and daring, will stand up and be counted among your servants. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

“Rough waters, a hard place”

November 2010

Hymn “Will your anchor hold” VU 675

Scripture Mark 4:35-40 (New International Version)

That day, when evening came, he said to his disciples, “Let us go over to the other side.” Leaving the crowd behind they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There also were other boats with him. A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?”

He got up, rebuked the wind, and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” Then the waves died down and it was completely calm.

He said to his disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?”

Prayer Let us pray – Compassionate God, we are not sure of ourselves. Life can be hard and our faith is still in the growing stage. We’re OK when it seems calm, but rough waters still frighten us. We need to feel your presence in this our boat. Strengthen us, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Lesson Our reading from the gospel according to Mark is highly symbolic. The disciples are all in a boat with Jesus, trying to get to the other side of the sea, when a wild storm whips up and threatens to smash the boat and drown them all. In the gospels, and especially in Mark’s gospel, being in a boat together, and especially in a boat with Jesus, is a symbol of being in the church. That’s why the world council of churches uses the boat as their logo. We’re all in the same boat, it is saying. So our story is a picture of the church. The disciples are trying to get to the other side of the sea. The story doesn’t say whether they are going home or going away on a mission. But it presents an image of the church trying to make progress, trying to get somewhere. And soon they’re not making much progress. There is a wild storm, and a storm at sea is a very frightening image to the people of Israel.

So here we have a boat load of Christ’s followers, the Church, trying to go where Jesus has called them to go, and the forces of darkness and chaos have risen up to smash them to pieces and sink them. It is a picture of our endeavours to live the life of discipleship in the Church. All too often it feels as though it is all in vain and our efforts to brave the sea and make it to the promised land on the other side are going to see us driven back where we came from, or swamped and drowned. And where is Jesus when all hell is breaking loose around us? He seems to be asleep and not paying attention to our problems. A lot of help He is.

So the disciples wake Jesus and accuse Him of showing no concern for their safety, but Jesus speaks severely to the wind and the waves and there is immediate calm. But then he challenges the disciples: “Why are you afraid? Are you still unable to trust?” Whatever storms are battering us; Christ is present and can be trusted to get us through. And while it may look to us as though he is asleep or just doesn’t care, he will still get us through. The only question is whether we will trust him enough to not jump overboard.

The disciples placed their security in the boat, and in the conviction that Jesus wouldn't allow anything bad to happen to them. All of a sudden their security was endangered. They were in the midst of a life-threatening storm. It was something they couldn't fight or flee from. Life was closing in on them. The storms of life were washing them away.

This was exactly what was happening to them in their relationship with Jesus. Opposition was rising against Jesus. Things were working toward a violent conclusion. There would soon be the arrest, the crucifixion. Where they prepared for that?

Jesus on the other hand realized that his security was not in the outward reality. Whether things went smoothly or if the storm raged, his security lay in the inner resources of his life. When Jesus rebuked the storm, maybe he was showing that the power of the Spirit was greater than the outward circumstances of life that conspire to destroy us.

Here is an illustration for you:

There was a king who offered a prize to the artist who would paint the best picture of peace and tranquility. Many artists tried. The king looked at all the pictures, but there were only two he really liked and he had to choose between them.

One picture was of a calm lake. The lake was a perfect mirror for peaceful towering mountains all around it. Overhead was a blue sky with fluffy white clouds. All who saw this picture thought it was a perfect picture of peace.

The other picture had mountains too. But these were ragged and bare. Above was an angry sky from which rain fell, and in which lightning played. Down the side of the mountain tumbled a foaming waterfall. This did not look peaceful at all. But when the king looked, he saw behind the waterfall a tiny bush growing in a crack in the rock. In the bush a mother bird had built her nest. There, in the midst of the rush of angry water, sat the mother bird on her nest...perfect peace.

Which picture won the prize?

The king chose the second picture because, as he explained, "Peace does not mean to be in a place where there is no noise, trouble, or hard work. Peace means to be in the midst of all those things and still be calm in your heart."

In conclusion, how big is your storm? How hard is your hard place? How do you deal with it? No matter how big the storm in our church or in our life, we have the assurance today in this story of Jesus and his disciples, that in faith and in the power and energy of the Spirit, we can weather the storm and we can have peace.

Prayer Let us pray – In our heart, O God, we know you are there behind the rush of life around us. May we always recognize your presence, even when we think our boat is about to sink. Amen.

“Finding Jesus at Christmas time”

December 2010

Hymn

“Seek ye first the Kingdom of God”

VU356

Scripture

Matthew 7: 6-14 (The Message)

Don't be flip with the sacred. Banter and silliness give no honour to God. Don't reduce holy mysteries to slogans. In trying to be relevant, you're only being cute and inviting sacrilege.

Don't bargain with God. Be direct. Ask for what you need. This isn't a cat-and-mouse, hide-and-seek game we're in. If your child asks for bread, do you trick him with sawdust? If he asks for fish, do you scare him with a live snake on his plate? As bad as you are, you wouldn't think of such a thing. You're at least decent to your own children. So don't you think the God who conceived you in love will be even better?

Here is a simple rule-of-thumb guide to behaviour: Ask yourself what you want people to do for you, then grab the initiative and do it for them. Add up God's law and prophets and this is what you get.

Don't look for shortcuts to God. The market is flooded with sure-fire, easy-going formulae for a successful life that can be practiced in your spare time. Don't fall for that stuff, even though crowds of people do. The way to life – to God – is vigorous and requires total attention.

Prayer

Let us pray together – We come seeking the one they call Jesus, the prince of peace. Help us, O God, to open our hearts and minds to receive the message of love that He taught and lived so long ago. Amen

Reflection

In this season which tends to be too busy, where are we looking? We go shopping for gifts for friends and relatives and are almost trampled by other shoppers. We volunteer with the Salvation Army kettles and are given warm smiles, with the occasional frown. The food banks, which seem to constantly need more help and more food, are busy feeding the hungry. The out-of-the-cold programs are bringing in the homeless to a temporary warm place. Our churches are brimming with extra services like carol concerts, white gift presentations, advent candle-lighting, and community dinners. Our hospitals, our retirement homes, our palliative care centres are caring for the sick, the lonely, the dying. Is Jesus in any of these places?

There were wise men looking for the baby that had been born in Bethlehem. He was born to be a king so they searched for him in the palace. He wasn't there. They found him in a stable.

When their eldest son was twelve, Mary and Joseph found he was missing when they were returning from the celebration of Passover. Had Jesus been kidnapped? They returned to Jerusalem to try to find him. Was he playing with some new found friends? They found Jesus in the temple, talking to the priests and elders.

Zaccheus, the tax collector, had to climb a tree to try to see Jesus. He saw him as he was walking by on the road. He saw him even closer when Jesus came to his house to share a meal.

Those who looked for Jesus found him in different places. The fishers found Jesus standing on the lakeshore. Nicodemus found him in his room. The soldiers who came to arrest Jesus found him in the garden of Gethsemane. Mary found him beside the tomb. Two disciples on the way to Emmaus were surprised to find Jesus sharing bread with them.

Jesus could be found by those who were seeking him. If we are seeking in 2010, where will we find him?

May you find Jesus in this advent season as we prepare to celebrate His birth. He is there, waiting to be found.

Discussion Why are we celebrating? In what way is Jesus part of your celebration?

Closing prayer Let us pray – We find you, O Christ, in all whom we meet along the way. May we see the light of Christ in each one we meet, and may everyone see the light of Christ in us. Amen.