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December – December 1, 2016

Welcome to the first of December. Most years the first of December is the 335th day of the year, but this year, since it is a leap year, it is the 336th day of the year. Having an extra day in the year means that it took us a full day longer to get to December 1 than is the case in other years. Personally, I didn't notice the difference. It seems like it came around rather quickly. I'm just getting used to 2016 and I'm looking at having to adjust to 2017. Part of that is a pure function of age. When you are 2 years old, a year is half a lifetime. When you are 63, the percentage is significantly smaller. There is, however, more to the phenomenon than just age. Social scientists tell us that the rate of change is accelerating. We notice it particularly with technology. The latest gadget is soon considered obsolete not because it has ceased to function but because newer gadgets perform more functions.

I'm not concerned with keeping up. I'm perfectly content to have a phone that is a couple of models back from the latest. I call my 5-year-old truck "new," and enjoy the look on the service technician's face when I bring in my 17-year-old car for an oil change. When he asks how long the "check engine" light has been on I can't remember, but it has been more than a year. I once had a pickup that I drove 60,000 miles with the check engine light on. I'm pretty sure that a persistent warning light on his dashboard would drive that technician up the wall.

When we moved into our current house, we were pleased that it didn't come with appliances. It gave us the opportunity to get a new refrigerator, something we'd never previously had. That refrigerator is now older than any of those other refrigerators. It doesn't have LED lighting. In fact, it's getting hard to find the old-style screw-in lightbulbs that it requires. The food is still cold, and we could always look for it in the dark if we can't get light bulbs in the future.

Sometimes I pay attention to small details that are probably unimportant. For example, there are 52 weeks in the year, but it doesn't come out exactly. A regular year is 52 weeks and one day and a leap year is 52 weeks and two days. Since 2017 starts on a Sunday, the extra day is a Sunday and so January 1, 2017, and December 31, 2017 are both Sundays making 53 Sundays in the year. The people who give monthly to support the church aren't likely to notice it, but a few of the folks who give weekly might. I receive an annual salary divided into 12 monthly payments, so it won't affect my income, but I'll be leading one more worship service during the year, so I'm a slightly better buy for the congregation in 2017 than I was in 2016. I doubt that many of the folks will notice that, except of course those who read this blog.

The name "December" is a bit deceiving since the word comes from the Latin decem, or 10. On our calendar it is the 12th month, not the 10th. It got its name from the old Roman calendar, which began with March, making December the 10th month. If you think about the cycle of seasons, you can understand how they might have chosen

March to be the beginning with days getting longer and new plants appearing. January and February can get pretty old around here some years.

I don't anticipate traveling very much in December this year. It is a good time to stay home. Despite a year with above average temperatures, we'll still probably see a bit of winter weather sometime during the year and December through February are the most likely months. The high winds combined with just a bit of snow this week to close some local roads and more of that will come in time. Some of our snowbirds have already headed south for the winter. I've never felt attracted to that lifestyle. I have trouble keeping up with one home. Two seems like more work that I want to take on. Besides I like winter. I've got good boots and warm clothing and there is plenty to do outdoors when the temperatures are cold. Driving to and from work in the dark gets a bit old after a while but that doesn't last for long. That's another advantage of getting older - winters don't seem to last as long as they used to.

All in all, the coming of a new month isn't very dramatic around here. I rose at the same time and am sitting at the same desk, though writing today's blog is slower than some days. As you can tell, I really didn't have much of a subject in mind when I got up. I'm not planning any big, life-changing events. I need to save some energy for next year when I've got that extra Sunday to contend with.

Winter is a time for a lot of festivals. When we spend enough time indoors, we begin to plan parties. The winter solstice lands on December 21 this year and for those who are paying attention the days will start to get longer after that day. The dating of our Christmas celebrations has its origins in the observances of solstice. Winter is a good time for bonfires and hot beverages. For me it is also a good time for curling up with a good book and finding the right place on the living room floor where the sun is warming the carpet.

Happy December, folks. May you find a warm spirit to offset the cold temperatures outdoors. May you travel safely when you need to travel and enjoy your home when you don't need to roam.

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Deep Desires – December 2, 2016

St. Ignatius, founder for the Jesuit order, in his book, “The Spiritual Exercises,” discussed praying for what you desire. He also wrote about praying to understand what you desire. The first time I read those thoughts, as a student nearly 40 years ago, I was dismissive. I felt deep down that there has to be something more important that operates in prayer than just asking for what you want. Something about praying for one’s desires seemed to me to be incredibly selfish. I had a vision of a world full of people who concentrated solely on getting what they wanted, and that vision wasn’t a very pretty one.

Some ideas, however, take a long time to mature and now I think I am beginning to understand that teaching in a new and different way. At least I think I may be ready to try to learn to pray to understand my desires.

A quick example from this moment in my life. Yesterday our daughter and son-in-law flew to Seattle and were picked up at the airport by our son. The two families get to spend today and tomorrow together before our daughter and her family fly on to Japan where they will live for four years. Part of me really wishes that I could be there with them for these days. I knew about their plans early enough to have purchased airline tickets, arranged for time off, and gone to be with them. But I didn’t do it. I rationalized my decision by thinking of the tasks that need to be accomplished here at work, the coming cold season and the folks who need firewood, and my sense that our adult children need to form their own independent relationships that will sustain them beyond the span of my life. The reasons are complex, but the bottom line is that I didn’t make the trip. That leaves me with the question of what I really want in the first place.

On the surface our desires come across as a kind of wish list. I wish I had a little more time off. I wish I was more organized. I wish I had more disposable income. I wish, I wish, I wish. One thing about being a bit older is that the wish for items, consumer goods, new cars and other things diminishes. But there is still a long wish list, when I take time to think about it.

My deepest desires, however, aren’t really about possessions. When I think about what I really want it comes more in terms of becoming a better person. I want to become more loving, more open, more free. Those desires are not selfish at their core. When I take time to really concentrate on my deepest desires, I quickly move beyond the selfish wish list. And there, beneath that wish list is a genuine desire to serve other people faithfully, to live in lasting covenants, to establish relationships that endure.

St. Ignatius might have been right after all. When you get down to your deepest desire, you discover not just what you want, but what God wants for you.

When we were preparing to adopt a child, we filled out all kinds of questionnaires and forms and even through interviews in which we imagined what adopting might be like. There was a generic sense that there was a need in the world for adoptive parents and that there were many children who could benefit from a family. If they had handed me a catalogue and said, "Here, choose a child." I would have been overwhelmed and unable to make a choice. Instead, one day we received a phone call and the next day a case worker placed a tiny baby in my arms. Looking back, I have no doubt that God worked through the bureaucracy of the state and the structure of the agency and the processes of the courts to place not just any child in our family, but the one child who was right for us. Even now, I have trouble finding the words to express my sentiment. I believe that it was meant to be - that somehow in the process we discovered true vocation - the calling of God. When I took time to really listen to what I wanted, I discovered God speaking to me in that desire.

I know that I will never become a mystic - a fully contemplative person who can totally focus my attention inwardly. When I meditate, even when I dedicate a long time for a breath prayer, I find that my mind is directed to other people and relationships. That discovery, however, might be a revelation of who I am. Who I am before God is a person who is called to care about other people.

It makes sense to me when I think about it. God made me. If I look inward, I'm bound to discover the creator - the one who made me. To discover who I am is to meet God.

Of course, there is another truth, which Ignatius might have known, but which I don't remember reading in his book: God isn't just in me. God is in all things. If you look deeply enough into a drop of water, you will discover the miracle of creation. If you look toward the stars, you will discover the vastness of God's realm. God, who made all things, is present in all things.

As much as my life is caught up in the institutional church, as much energy as I invest in public worship and prayer, when I am honest, I have to admit that God is not confined to the church or worship services or prayer groups or bible study. People are constantly glimpsing God in their daily lives, in the work that they do, in the experiences they have and the emotions they feel. When I listen, I find that people often report to me sensing God's presence in a sunset or in a family dinner or someone they met at work.

Perhaps the time is right for me to pay more attention to my desires - not my wish list, but my deepest desires - to discover what it is that God is calling me to do and to be.

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Giving Advice . . . Or Not – December 3, 2016

In a recent blog post, Parker Palmer wrote about the perils of giving advice to others. Often the advice is not wanted and not needed. He told the story of a man who'd recently been diagnosed with terminal cancer. The man had emailed his news to a few family members and friends. One came over right away and asked how he was feeling. His response was, "I'm feeling amazingly at peace with all this. I'm not worried about what lies ahead."

The friend replied, "Look, you need to get a second opinion. At the same time, you should start exploring complementary medicine. You should also sign up for a meditation program, and I know a good book that can get you started down that path."

The man reported that the visit from his friend had left him less at peace.

Back in my seminary days I completed a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education followed by a year serving as a pastoral counselor in a health clinic. Those experiences taught me to be very slow in offering advice. My counseling consisted most of listening and often involved simply inviting people to tell me more about what was going on in their lives and how they felt.

There are some, however, who come to a pastor seeking advice, who want the pastor to share the responsibility for the decisions that need to be made and the actions that must be taken. I remember a time, many years ago, when a parishioner came to my office and shared how she was struggling with decisions regarding the care of her mother. The mother needed nearly constant care and it was becoming clear that the care she needed might not be able to be provided in the woman's home. The family was struggling with the options of expensive home care, expensive nursing home care, temporary respite care and the like. She asked me what they should do.

I began by simply sharing that I wasn't an expert in elder care and that I had little experience with such decisions. This was before I had assumed responsibility for my mother's care or witnessed my wife's care of her father. I then complimented the woman on her care and the seriousness with which she was considering the difficult choices. I offered a prayer, but no advice.

At the time I thought that I had handled the situation well, but I soon heard from a family member that the woman was very disappointed with the exchange. She had come to me wanting advice on how to proceed and had left my office without any sense of direction. Fortunately for me, the woman continued to be faithful in her commitment to the church and continued to be thoughtful and careful about the care decisions for her mother. A short time later, when the mother died, we were able to plan a meaningful funeral that provided much needed support to the woman and she became very much at peace with the decisions she had made.

Despite that experience, I still operate on the assumption that most people, deep down, don't want advice. They don't need to be fixed or saved. What they need is to be witnessed: to be seen and heard. Their situation is complex, and their circumstances are unique. They want another person to acknowledge those things. They want a companion as they pursue their journey. My role is less to be the helper and more to be the one who recognizes the soul-deep needs that lie below the surface.

I am called to witness and to be a companion.

All of this doesn't mean that there aren't people who need salvation. It is just that I'm not the one who is the source of that salvation. Efforts to "save" another person often involve applying a solution that has worked for someone else in different circumstances and makes the one being "saved" feel as if she or he hasn't even been heard.

Some of the deepest ministry in my experience has come in moments when there are no solutions. I've joined families at the bedside of a loved one who is nearing death. I've gone to the homes of parents who have experienced the death of a child. I've been with people who have recently received devastating diagnoses. I spend a remarkable amount of my time in situations and with people for whom there is no "fixing" the brokenness of this world.

In his blog on the topic, Palmer quotes Mary Oliver, a favorite poet of his and mine:

"This is the first, the wildest and the wisest thing I know: that the soul exists and is built entirely out of attentiveness."

What I have to offer others is my attentiveness.

There are others who feel confident acting as spiritual advisors, who offer suggestions on specific practices or beliefs that help others. I do not fault them for their good work. I simply know that giving advice isn't among my gifts. I often feel that I don't have a solution, or even the ability to clearly see the next steps. I can fetch a glass of water, respond with a hug, and share silence with those who are in need. I do not know how to tell them what to do.

The skill that I hope to develop is that of asking the right questions. There are questions that give the other the chance to express more of his or her own truth. There are questions that reveal paths that were previously unseen. There are questions that remind the other of the strength and wisdom that lies within. I have occasionally stumbled onto those questions during conversation. There are no "one size fits all" questions, however. Each is the product of careful listening and attuning myself to the deepest needs of the other.

I have, however, compiled a short list of competent counselors and professional consultants just in case I encounter a situation where someone really wants advice and I have none to offer. Perhaps referring the person seeking advice to another is the most helpful thing I can do.

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Listening to the Prophets – December 4, 2016

Every Advent we read the words of the prophets. Part of the reason for this is that over the centuries church leaders have put a lot of emphasis on Jesus' role as the Messiah of Jewish tradition. They pointed to the words of the prophets as having predicted Jesus - or rather to Jesus as the fulfillment of the visions of the prophets. This emphasis has, in some of its expressions, fostered a misunderstanding of the nature of the prophetic role in the history and culture of Israel. Some thinkers have relegated the prophets to mere predictors of the future. That image really isn't fair to the depth of prophetic thinking. If you want predictions about the future in Hebrew Biblical Literature, you might as easily turn to some of the apocalyptic literature and those predictions aren't very often accurate now that we have had time to witness the unfolding of history.

Contrary to some contemporary presentations, the biblical prophets were serious critics of the status quo in their own setting. Their words served as warnings about the failings of the leaders Israel to practice justice and the dire consequences of such injustice. But these were not disinterested critics. They were people who loved Israel, who understood the ancient vision of a country that would live with justice and peace with its neighbors. They also believed the basic principle that the route to peace was not forged by military might, but rather by the conscientious practice of justice. From the perspective of the prophets, political disasters were expressions of the displeasure of God. Yet they also believed in God's mercy and capacity to forgive.

As a result, the prophets never lose the vision of the peaceable kingdom where justice is available for all, including those who have been outcast and live at the fringes of society: the widows, the orphans, and the immigrants.

Jeremiah, especially, repeated over and over two critical triads. The first, named above is the triad of those who have been marginalized by society: widows, orphans, and immigrants. The second is the triad of responses God expects: compassion, justice, and steadfast love.

As we journey through the Advent season this year, I am freshly struck by the words of the prophets. I have long admired their call to Israel and their ability to provide criticism of some aspects of the story of Israel that we have often spoken of admiringly. Jeremiah tackles the excessive wealth of the elite, especially the consolidation of wealth practiced

by Solomon and the kings who followed him. He speaks out against the power brokering; arms dealing; and attempts to consolidate power and influence.

In contrast with the deep criticism, I have been aware also of the compassion of the prophets. When disaster befalls Israel, the prophets change their tune and become encouragers of those who have fallen victim to the ravishes of the outside oppressors.

This year, however, I have been drawn to another prominent stream in the writing of the prophets. That is the way in which the books of the prophets begin with dramatic descriptions of their vision for Israel. They describe a kingdom of peace and justice and righteousness.

This week is the famous vision from the 11th chapter of Isaiah: “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his root. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding . . . with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth . . . The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the falling together, and a little child shall lead them.”

At the core of all the other important poetry that forms the bulk of the prophet’s teaching is a vision of the way things could be - a vision of what God intends for all living creatures on this planet. It is a vision of peace, and it is a vision of a system of justice that is fair to all of the people. Isaiah is consistent in addressing the lack of justice as problem for the poor and the meek and that this imperfection in the current system is not in accord with God’s intentions.

That criticism of the ways of ancient Israel could well be a criticism of our current society. In the United States of America today our jails and prisons are disproportionately filled with those who come from impoverished backgrounds. Here in our county, those who are arrested who can afford to make bail are quickly out of jail as they await trial and the decisions of the jury. However, the poor remain incarcerated because they do not have the means to pay bail. That is a common pattern across this nation. Then when trial occurs, those who lack funds are represented by court-appointed attorneys, some of whom are excellently trained and prepared for their work, but many of whom are carrying extremely heavy caseloads. There are horror stories of exceptionally poor representation by court attorneys. Shane Claiborne reports of a case where the defense attorney fell asleep not once, but twice during the proceedings of a death penalty case in which the convicted was later exonerated, but only after spending decades in jail for a crime he did not commit. The stories of grave miscarriages of justice caused by the inability to afford competent legal counsel abound.

What the prophets remind us of is that we don’t have to accept the brokenness of our society. We can speak out and stand up for a better way of living. We can keep alive the vision of a society in which justice is afforded for the poor as well as for the rich, where

the benefits of health and education and freedom are offered to all and not just to some, where the resources of the society are shared in an equitable fashion.

We need to listen carefully to the words of the prophets. Their vision is not a relic of a long-passed time, but rather a beacon of hope for the troubled times in which we live today.

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Speculating on Emergence – December 5, 2016

In her 2009 book, *The Great Emergence*, Phyllis Tickle posits the thesis that every 500 years, the Church goes through a rummage sale, and cleans out the old forms of spirituality and replaces them with new ones. This does not mean that previous forms become obsolete or invalid. It simply means they lose pride of place as the dominant form of Christianity. Constantine in the late 4th and early 5th century, the Great Schism in the 11th century, the Reformation in the 16th century, are all cited as examples. And, by her theory, postmodernism in the 21st century represents the next major emergence in the history of Christianity.

I'm not completely swayed by her argument, but she does make a compelling case from a historical perspective and there are grains in truth in her observations. The problem for a contemporary thinker is that the age in which we live is ongoing and the transformations in culture and in religion are unfinished and their impact is yet to be revealed. I'm not sure that those living in the time of the Reformation were fully aware of its impact on culture and the practice of religion. It sometimes takes time to understand the flow of history.

What she does have right is her claim that the world is undergoing some major changes.

I've been thinking of those changes, not so much in terms of their impact on religion, but in terms of wider social impacts. My place in the religious community is fairly set and as I near the time of retirement from this phase of my ministry, I am content with the knowledge that in times of great emergence old practices are not rendered obsolete or invalid. Just because I belong to what will become the past doesn't mean that I have lost a meaningful place in the practice of religion. I'm comfortable with allowing others to lead the transformations while I assume the role of a faithful follower.

More interesting to me is my amateur observance of the wider social order.

The great emergence of a little more than 500 years ago was the impact of the invention of moveable type printing on social life. The invention of the printing press meant that

multiple copies of the same document could be provided. Mass printing and distribution of pamphlets, circulars, articles, and books allowed people living in different places to share similar ideas. Shortly after the invention of modern printing, ideas fomenting in one part of the world could be picked up in another. As this process continued, people made a rather dramatic and sudden shift from relying on oral transmission as the beacon of truth to the printed word as the standard. No one in the 14th century would have declared, "Put it in writing!" as the way to cement a contract. Writing was subject to many errors and considered to be unreliable. Only a face-to-face spoken encounter could be fully trusted. Within a few centuries, however, writing was the most suitable vehicle for transmitting the truth.

Printing transformed university education. Publishing became the mark of a scholar.

It also allowed for the rise of modern democracies. Printing allowed for the mass distribution of concepts and ideas in a way not previously practical. The rapid spread of ideas allowed for those who previously had been silent and unheard to participate in governance. Printing, combined with the rise in literacy allowed for truths to be shared across distance. By the time of the writing of the Declaration of Independence of the United States, people had come to believe in the concept of truth: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

Such an assertion of an absolute truth was not possible in a pre-printing world.

It is important to note that the printing press played a major role in the Reformation as well as the rise of democracy, but that is the topic for another day.

But the years have passed since those heady days of political revolution and the emergence of modern democracies, and we are now in the middle of a technological revolution that is at least as striking as the invention of the printing press. The emergence of the Internet is combining with the rapid decline in printing to produce what some have dubbed a "post truth" society. Instead of arguing for universal truth, contemporary pundits and writers posit a view that truth is flexible and what makes something true is not some independent verification, but rather the telling of the story. A completely fictional and false "news" story carries the weight of "truth" simply by being repeated. A candidate can argue that the economy is weak, and that unemployment is the issue despite all kinds of positive economic indicators and the presence of millions of new jobs and the statistical decrease in unemployment. The alternate reality is put forth through a myriad of social media channels and becomes its own kind of "truth."

A Stanford University study published a week ago concluded that many students, from middle school through college, cannot discern what is legitimate reporting and what is not. 82 percent of middle-schoolers couldn't distinguish between an ad labeled

“sponsored content” and a real news story on a web site. 40% of high school students believed, based on a headline, that a photo of deformed daisies on a photo-sharing site provided “strong evidence” of toxic conditions near the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant even though no source or location was given for the photo.

Fake news has been repeated by media figures such as Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity and even president-elect Donald Trump. You might argue that they are just as gullible and naive as middle-schoolers, or that they are malicious and are willfully spreading lies. However, you see it, the result is that misinformation has become the stock and trade of political discourse.

The fear, of course, is that the demise of trust in the printed word as a source of truth and research as the mode of sifting fact from fiction might correspond with a decline in democracy as the mode of government. As I said at the beginning of this blog, we are in the midst of a transformation and do not have the perspective to understand fully what is happening. Nevertheless, some of the prospects of this new age are truly frightening.

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Coffee – December 6, 2016

When I headed off to college, I was not a coffee drinker. My parents both drank coffee and I had occasionally had a cup from my father's thermos when we were working outside or hunting, but it wasn't something that I had learned to like. My first work study job in college was opening the college library, which meant that I had only fifteen minutes for breakfast. The cafeteria opened 15 minutes before the library and I would be waiting when they opened the line, get my plate of eggs and potatoes, and get a quick bite before heading across to the library. Coffee wasn't my tradition, but breakfast was. We always got a hearty breakfast in the home where I was raised. If, on occasion, we left the house before breakfast, we'd stop by a local 24-hour diner for a good breakfast before heading off to whatever job was set for the day. The exception was when I delivered newspapers, which was a time when I rushed off to deliver the papers and came home to a hot breakfast after completing my route.

Not a big fan of coffee, I did enjoy hot chocolate. Early in my freshman year of college I obtained a used coffee pot that could be used to heat water in my room and kept a box of packets of instant hot chocolate in my desk. The practice of making a pot of hot chocolate combined with my earlier habit of reading in bed, however, proved to not work. No I didn't take the hot chocolate to bed. It was just that if I sipped the cup and then laid down on my bed to read, I would quickly go to sleep and I needed to be alert and focused when reading. And college represented a boost in the amount of reading that was required. I discovered that a cup of coffee would keep me alert and able to complete my work and it wasn't long before a pound of coffee was a staple in my dorm room. Coffee also became part of my breakfast routine.

I quickly formed a habit that I kept for decades: making coffee first thing in the morning. In college, I usually filled the pot with water the night before so that all I had to do was to plug it in and within a few minutes there was a steaming cup ready to sip as I prepared for the day.

I've always been an early riser and so when we married it was natural for me to be the one to make the morning coffee. In the early years of our marriage my wife didn't drink coffee, and she started drinking gradually and often didn't drink coffee with breakfast. Over the years, however, her habits shifted and soon it was pleasant to have it ready when she got up. Later we obtained an inexpensive espresso machine, followed by a quality espresso pump and I gravitated to pulling shots for my coffee beverages in addition to brewing coffee in our drip machine.

By the time I was in my fifties, it wasn't uncommon for me to have three or four double shot espresso drinks a day and be carrying around a cup of brewed coffee most of the rest of the time. From time to time, I would think that I needed to cut back and would do so and even would give up coffee entirely for a few days, which always resulted in withdrawal headaches, and I would soon abandon my efforts to go caffeine free.

Then one day I had an episode of ventricular arrhythmia while I was at my doctor's office for a routine physical. My blood pressure wasn't where it should have been either. I had never previously experienced high blood pressure. I was a regular blood and platelet donor and had my blood pressure checked regularly and believed myself to have a very healthy heart. The incident at the doctor's office resulted in a series of tests including wearing a holder monitor and echocardiogram.

I decided it was time for a change in lifestyle and gave up caffeine. I switched to decaffeinated coffee, limited myself to one decaf espresso drink per day and allowed myself to have a couple of cups of decaf tea in the afternoon and evening. I switched to drinking plain water at most of my meals and between meals.

That's way more personal information than anyone needs to know about me, but the change was remarkably easy. I still make coffee as part of my morning routine, though I do so after I have written my blog. I prepare a pot in our drip machine so the coffee will be ready shortly after my wife rises. It is a familiar and comfortable routine.

The rituals of sharing coffee are deeply ingrained in our society. As a pastor I have found that sitting down for a cup of coffee with parishioners to be a very valuable format for sharing faith and listening to the concerns of my community. I still occasionally find myself in settings where coffee is simply assumed. People don't ask whether or not you want coffee, they just serve it and it seems almost rude to refuse. I still drink an occasional cup when the setting makes refusal awkward. There are, however, many settings where decaf or an alternative beverage is readily available. Slowly I am

learning that it isn't the coffee that makes for the fellowship. It is the people and the practice of taking time to sit and listen. The coffee is an extra. Our church still serves only caffeinated beverages - both coffee and tea - during its Sunday fellowship hour. Those of us who refrain usually sit without a beverage or get a glass of water. I suspect that the practice will shift. Churches are often a bit slow to respond to change and the number of people who don't drink caffeinated beverages is small.

So, I'm off to prepare for my day. Among the routines will be making a pot of coffee - a practice that is a part of nearly every house in the neighborhood, I suspect. I think I'll have orange juice with my breakfast.

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A Brief Introduction to Chaos Theory – December 7, 2016

In science there is a complex and well-developed theory that explains phenomena that are nonlinear and unpredictable. Known as chaos theory, there are principles that can be applied to the understanding of natural phenomena that are effectively impossible to control: turbulence, the weather, the stock market, brain states, and so on. In chaos theory, complex and specialized mathematics are employed to provide understanding of how things are connected and how multiple factors can have long-reaching effects.

Chaos theory is not the study of disorder. It is rather the search for order in systems that are so complex that they cannot be predicted. Recognizing, studying and beginning to understand the chaotic, fractal nature of our world can yield new insight, power and wisdom. One example is the ability of the pilot of a hot air balloon to take off from one location and land at a predicted spot. There are many factors affecting the direction and speed of flight. The atmosphere is complex and displays chaotic dynamics. The wind doesn't blow in the same direction or at the same speed at all altitudes. Variations in temperature and relative humidity affect the rate of rise or descent of the balloon. Balloon pilots don't land in the same field every time and they can't predict with complete accuracy the duration of their trip, but the more they understand, the more precise their flights become. In some locations balloon tour operators have honed the experience into a marketable adventure. That is just one example of chaos theory in application.

Another area of study that has yielded increased understanding from the application of chaos theory is the study of ecology. A seemingly small cause in one location can have a dramatic effect in another. When wolves were reintroduced to Yellowstone National Park, certain fish species began to increase in population. The wolves practiced predation on the elk herds, decreasing their size. The elk then ate less of the waterside plants which allowed the beaver population to increase. The increase in beaver activity produced more pools and ponds as fish habitat. This summary is a very elementary overview. The actual process was much more complex, but you can see how in an

ecosystem, there can be distant and seemingly unpredictable results. The more we understand chaos theory, the more responsible we can become in the decisions we make.

Once again, chaos theory posits that the world isn't merely random. It is not based on total disorder, but rather on the study of the complexity of systems.

One principle of chaos theory is known as the butterfly effect. The theory is that a butterfly flapping its wings in New Mexico, causes a small disturbance in the air surrounding it. This disturbance affects other factors, such as the density of water molecules that can be suspended in the tiny space around the wings. That effect in turn increases the water density in other areas of the atmosphere. It might even contribute to precipitation. Effect piles upon effect throughout the entire atmosphere of the planet. If we could fully understand all the effects, there would be a traceable relationship between that butterfly and a hurricane in China. This is not to say that the butterfly caused the hurricane, but rather that small changes in initial conditions can lead to drastic changes in the results.

Another important principle of chaos theory is unpredictability. It is simply impossible to know all of the initial conditions of a complex system in perfect detail. There will always be factors that we failed to observe. Therefore, we cannot predict outcome with complete accuracy. Even a slight error in measuring one factor can be amplified dramatically rendering the prediction useless. To return to the butterfly example, since we don't know about all the butterflies in the world, we can't predict the weather with 100% accuracy.

In chaos theory, systems become chaotic when there is feedback present. This is directly observable in the behavior of the stock market. As the value of a stock rises or falls, people are inclined to buy or sell that stock. Their decision, in turn, affects the price of the stock. The effect results in chaotic behavior that makes the market impossible to predict with complete accuracy.

The science of chaos isn't based in unpredictability; however, it is the search for patterns within complex systems. Chaos theory leans heavily on the search for fractals. A fractal is a never-ending pattern. The pattern is most commonly very complex but appears to operate in a similar pattern over different scales. The process of repeating the same simple process over and over in an ongoing feedback loop in which the simple process affects the next step in the process. We can understand the simple process, and observe the repetition, but lack complete information to fully diagram the fractal. The pattern of a seashell, the distribution of trees in a dense forest, the spread of a river delta, and the shape of a mountain are examples of fractals in nature.

Albert Einstein wrote, "As far as the laws of mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain, and as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality." He wasn't dismissing

mathematics as a tool to study reality, but rather acknowledging the complexity of living systems.

People are more comfortable with chaos than you might expect.

A winning combination of Americans, not a majority, decided that they were so fed up with the status quo that they took a gamble on someone who had no government experience and had never held elected office. It was a metaphorical, “let’s throw everything up in the air and see how it lands - it can’t be worse than it is.”

The result of the decision is an increase in the unpredictability of government. The dictionary defines “rogue state” as one “that conducts its policy in a dangerously unpredictable way.” So far it appears that our country is heading in that direction under the new administration.

Chaos theory leads us to believe that there are patterns. They are complex and dynamic and very difficult to observe. A “tweet” could be the flapping of a butterfly wing that results in a diplomatic superstorm in another country.

The problem with the incoming administration is that its chaos doesn’t seem to be signaling new policies as much as the improvisation of an ill-prepared and unqualified leader. So far, the unpredictability of the administration is not a theory. It’s the absence of one.

I’m no more qualified to predict the future of politics than I am to predict the weather. I guess we have to take a “wait and see” attitude. Still, I think it would be prudent to be prepared for a storm.

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I Don’t Get Twitter – December 8, 2016

Last night I signed up for a new social media platform. It was suggested by my daughter, who has moved to Japan for four years with her husband who is serving in the United States Air Force. The new platform will allow us to exchange text messages, engage in online chats, and even make video calls over the Internet using our mobile phones. I’m eager to keep up with the events of their lives and learning how to use a new application on my phone seems like a very small price to pay.

I wasn’t very far into the signup process, however, before I began to wonder what I was getting myself into. The new application wanted to create a link to my Facebook account. Then it wanted to search my address book for people in my address book who are participating in the new platform. Right away it made the mistake of recommending that I include in my social network a person who had the same name as an

acquaintance of mine, but whom I've never met and with whom I may have nothing in common.

I'm no master of social media. I might be described more accurately as a reluctant participant. I was slow to get caught up in Facebook, but when a nephew was traveling outside of the U.S. it was the only convenient way to keep up with his travels and see his pictures, so I signed up. Not long after I signed up it became obvious that Facebook was one of the places where we could communicate with people who were hard to reach through other media, so the church established a Facebook page. It has been a good way to communicate some messages. Interestingly, we must keep track of which media work best for which people. In our small youth group, for example, there are those who are best reached by text message, those who are best reached by voice phone, those who are best reached by Facebook, and on and on.

The days when the church would print a newsletter and send it through the mail and assume that most of its members would know what is going on are past. Our newsletter goes out in the mail, is placed on a table in the entryway for physical pick up, is sent out by email, is placed on our web site with links posted on Facebook and sent out through Twitter. And I'm confident that the number of people who actually read the newsletter has been in steady decline despite all of the different methods of disseminating the information.

I must admit that I simply don't get Twitter. I have an account, which is used only for sending out the church's newsletter. I don't "follow" anyone on twitter and only a few dozen of those who follow that monthly link to the newsletter are recognizable to me. Most of them don't live anywhere near Rapid City, South Dakota.

As you can tell by my blog, I'm an essayist. I rarely confine myself to 140 characters. The reason for the 140-character limit is that at the time Twitter was established, SMS messages (phone text messages) were limited to 160 characters. So, Twitter dropped the number by 20 to allow for the @ names to be added at the end. The format ballooned to 300 million customers and then stopped growing. The number sounds impressive, but the reality is much less impressive than the numbers indicate. A few other statistics about the format might reveal a bit of what is really going on. 87% of Americans know about Twitter, but only 7% use it. Fewer than 1 in 13 of the Americans who know about Twitter use the format. And of those 53% never post any updates.

For all the attention Twitter gets in other media, more people get information on what is going on in the format from other media than directly from the format itself. Twitter posts are known as "tweets" and are reposted on television, in print articles, in online websites and dozens of other formats. To the extent that Twitter was a factor in the recent presidential election, it was probably because news people followed the candidates and quoted their posts in other formats.

What gets reposted are the most outrageous and inflammatory comments. When a presidential candidate reposts comments made by white supremacists, what had once been a fringe group suddenly has an audience of millions. Views previously relegated to the darkest corners of the Internet somehow become mainstream.

Since I don't like much of what is circulated on twitter, I thought I might at least try to circulate something more positive. Here are some great quotes. Each of them, posted as a separate paragraph below, is less than 140 characters:

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are they who mourn,
for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek,
for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful,
for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure of heart,
for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they shall be called children of God.

Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Here are a couple more posts worthy of re-tweeting:

They shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,

What does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, to love kindness
and to walk humbly with your God?

You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.

If we are going to play to a media form that encourages simply passing on information without considering its source, perhaps we should post a few items that come from a very solid source indeed.

Then, again, I'm no expert on Twitter. I suspect it might be better for me to stick to my usual: "The December issue of The Call newsletter is now available."

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Another Tribute – December 9, 2016

Any tribute that I could write for John Glenn would pale in the avalanche of memorials, eulogies, and articles that are filling the media at the news of his death yesterday at the age of 95. The actual cause of death has not been released, but he did suffer a stroke after heart-valve replacement surgery in 2014. And he was 95. And he lived his life at a pace that was far faster than his contemporaries. The first US astronaut to orbit the earth, he was the last of the original 7 Mercury astronauts to die.

He was just six months younger than my father. They both served as Army Air Corps pilots during World War II. Although my father at one time aspired to be a test pilot, his career and life took a far different direction than that of John Glenn, but he kept a close eye on all of the early astronauts and paid close attention to their activities.

I can remember the day that Glenn circled the earth three times in just under five hours in "Friendship 7" and then splashed down and bobbed in the capsule in the Atlantic east of the Bahamas for 21 minutes before being picked up by a US destroyer. In those days our television stayed on and we watched the flights of the astronauts from before launch to after recovery. And the television was new in our house and not left on for long amounts of time for any other type of programming. The next time our television stayed on that long was for the coverage of the death of President Kennedy.

It has already been said and it will be said over and over in the weeks to come, but the death of John Glenn really feels like the end of an era in our nation's history. Perhaps it is just a reflection of my age, but I am intensely aware that the figures we had to look up to were vastly different from those who are in the public eye as my grandson nears the age I was when Glenn was given a visit by the President and a ticker tape parade in New York City.

Today's youth have plenty of fictional heroes - the product of computer aided animation and the fervent imaginations of teams of people who produce entertainment. Today's youth have plenty of idols - people who make the headlines for sports prowess, or entertainment success whose life paths cannot be replicated by any one else. Both fictional heroes and idols fail to show others what they can become. Instead they are an

illustration of what one can never become. In the end they disappoint by the huge differences they display.

Today's youth have plenty of anti-heroes - those who achieve success and fame and wealth by gaming the system - who cheat and lie and claw their way to the top by making personal attacks against others. They demonstrate a path that no parent would choose for their child.

John Glenn was different. He compiled an amazing life story: 149 combat missions in two wars, Distinguished Flying Cross (six times!), Air Medal with eighteen award stars, first pilot to fly faster than the speed of sound, first American to orbit the earth, four consecutive terms in the US Senate, a return to space as a payload specialist aboard the Space Shuttle at the age of 77 . . . the list goes on and on.

The list, however, isn't solely the thing that made John Glenn a hero. Despite all of his accomplishments, he never lost the virtue of humility. He didn't count himself as above other people. He never tried to pretend that he was anything that he wasn't. And, after living a long and full life, he now has shown us that he was mortal - a flesh-and-blood human being.

Instead of showing us what we could never achieve, he showed us what we could become. Real heroes show us what we might become. They inspire us to live lives with meaning and purpose.

Dale Butland, in a New York Times op-ed piece yesterday, told a story that I had not previously heard. After he retired from the Marine Corps, Glenn took a position as president of a major American corporation's international division. "We were living in New York, and they were paying me \$100,000 a year, which at that time was real money," he told Butland. "For the first time in our lives, Annie and I didn't have to worry about putting our kids through college or helping our parents financially as they got older."

When John Kennedy decided to run for president, John Glenn, a friend of his brother Robert, agreed to campaign for him. John Glenn was summoned to an emergency meeting of the corporate board where a resolution barring any board member from "engaging in partisan politics in 1968" was proposed. John Glenn rose from his seat and said there was something his colleagues should know before taking their vote. "Bob Kennedy asked me to campaign for him and I told him I would. And I will because he is my friend. And if keeping my word means I can't be associated with this company any longer, I can live with that." No vote was called and the meeting was quickly adjourned.

Politics aren't the point of the story. What stands out is the fierce determination to keep a promise to a friend, even at the expense of sacrificing financial security. It is just one more story that reveals the integrity and courage of the man. And integrity and courage

are in short supply in our country these days. Quite frankly, unpredictability, personal attack and fear mongering are poor substitutes for integrity and courage.

It leaves me wondering where the heroes for my grandchildren's generation will arise. While we search and wait for genuine heroes, we could do worse than to tell the stories of some of the real heroes we have known.

John Glenn was certainly a hero.

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Polar Vortex – December 10, 2016

Well, it is above zero this morning - at least on the Fahrenheit scale. The last couple of days I have awoken to temperatures on the minus side. And the short-term forecast calls for slightly warming temperatures. Today's high should be above 20 and tomorrow may even get above freezing. That's little consolation for the paddler in me. The lake is frozen and is likely to stay that way for some time. Next week is heading colder and it is going to stay that way for a while.

Meteorologists call the phenomena the polar vortex. There is a large area of low pressure and cold air that normally surrounds the poles. It is kept in place by the jet stream, an area of fast upper atmosphere winds that create a sort of barrier between warm and cold air masses. From time to time, a strong ridge of high-pressure forms in the jet stream and drives that cold arctic air south. The same thing happens in the southern hemisphere with the south pole's vortex. It can happen at any time of the year, but we are more aware of it during the winter because the Arctic air is colder due to the lack of sunlight and the jet stream makes a more extreme move to the south.

It pretty much feels like someone left the freezer door open when you step outside.

Most of the state of North Dakota is under a wind chill advisory with temperatures as low as -35 with the wind chill factored in. Having lived in North Dakota during the December polar vortex of 1983, I'm aware of how cold it can get. That year the cold outran the furnace in one of the small churches we served, and the interior temperature of the building plummeted below 50 degrees even with the furnace running full time. When the air temperature (not factoring in the wind chill) sinks below -40, everything, including metal, becomes brittle and breaks easily.

That particular polar vortex sort of settled in and kept things cold for quite a while. We even made the national news for the coldest temperature in the lower 48 on Christmas Day.

From that experience, I also remember that there wasn't much press coverage during the days when the coldest weather was in North Dakota. Cold temperatures in North Dakota simply aren't news. However, when the jet stream pushes a bit to the east, people will start to notice. Below zero temperatures are mildly interesting in Minneapolis, news in Chicago and headlines in Boston and Washington, DC. This pattern should plunge much of the United States into temperatures that are way below normal for the next couple of weeks. It looks like it could be below freezing in Texas and other parts of the Deep South by the end of next week.

So, we're off to Bridger with a caravan of pickups and trailers filled with firewood this morning. It's the same destination to which some of us headed last week. We're stockpiling firewood there for distribution to private homes and to provide support for the annual Chief Big Foot memorial ride to Wounded Knee.

Last year's ride was one of the largest ever as it was both the 25th anniversary of the modern ride and the 125th anniversary of the massacre at Wounded Knee. That first ride, now 26 years ago, was made by just 19 riders, who retraced the 7-day journey made by Big Foot's people in 1890. The ride was repeated from 1986 to 1990, when the original riders were joined by walkers, runners, and hundreds more. The size of the ride meant that support people were needed to carry off the venture. The participants camp outdoors and survive the cold temperatures as their way of remembering and healing from the crimes and tragedies of the past.

This year, with temperatures even colder than recent years, support teams will be needed to ensure the safety of the animals and riders.

The group will arrive at our church in Bridger on December 21 and there will be a rest day in Bridger on the 22nd. Meals will be prepared and served from the fellowship hall of our church there and the horses will be cared for in the fenced area provided for the horses of the church's horse program. Those who are not prepared to camp outdoors will be housed at the Takini School. Bridger is the half-way point in the ride, which begins up on the Grand River just west of Little Eagle on the Standing Rock Reservation. The riders will leave Bridger on the morning of December 23, camping near Phillip and Scenic before riding through the canyons of the badlands on Christmas Day and arriving at Wounded Knee after the final night on the trail near Kyle.

The ride is interspersed with prayer services held at a variety of sacred sites including Chief Sitting Bull's camp, the place where he was slain on December 15, 1890. Covering nearly 200 miles of trail, the ride is intended to combine spirituality with education. It is geared especially for teens to develop a deeper appreciation for the history and culture of the Lakota people. It is about never forgetting, but it is also about healing.

I have had the opportunity to listen to the stories of a couple of people whose lives were transformed by the experience of the ride. One person I know had been trapped in a cycle of alcoholism and chronic unemployment until the ride with its strict rules about sobriety and discipline provided an opportunity for him to make some fundamental changes in his life. He now serves as an instructor in a youth horse program, working to prevent some of the problems that plagued his young adult years.

We, of course, will be traveling in modern pickup trucks with reliable heaters in a caravan with others who could help should we experience any problems. This will likely be the last firewood delivery of 2016 for our crew unless an emergency call is received.

Still, it is cold out there, folks. Bundle up and be careful. If only we could remember what it felt like last summer when we were sweltering as we mowed the lawn . . .

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Highlights – December 11, 2016

There are many people my age who associate the children's magazine Highlights with anxiety since the magazine was a staple in doctors' and dentists' offices. We, however, didn't read that magazine in those locations because we got it at home. It was a monthly staple in our home, and we turned to it for craft ideas and enjoyed its cartoons. I think we learned a few life lessons from the reading.

The magazine was less than subtle. The cartoon "Goofus and Gallant" wasn't funny in the way that many of our favorite cartoons were. It was a direct lesson in manners. "Goofus bosses his friends; Gallant asks, 'What do you want to do next?'" "Goofus takes the last apple; Gallant shares his orange." The lesson was obvious. Be kind even though there are folks in the world who are not kind. There are some problems with the cartoon, however. You always knew who was the good guy and who was the bad guy. Despite over 60 years of cartoons, Goofus continued to always be rude, selfish and annoying. He never met any punishment for his actions, and he never changed his ways. No one ever tried to understand why he was such a jerk. And no one ever tried to change him. Likewise, there never was a reward for Gallant's polite behavior. He just went on to the next issue. The lesson was clear: be nice despite the impulsive, mean people in the world.

My life is very different. When, on occasion, I am the victim of mean or impulsive behavior of another, I might react with an intense burst of emotion, but in most cases, I need to quickly remind myself that the other is a person who is capable of change. I try to look at the reasons for the rude behavior and in most cases, there is a person who needs to be given a bit of extra leeway. Perhaps that person has just suffered a loss or is experiencing challenges. Perhaps that person really wants to have positive relationships but lacks the skill to pull them off. You'd think that after 60 years of bad

behavior, Goofus would, at a bare minimum, be a very lonely person after having offended all of his friends.

One of my favorite features in the magazine was called “Spot the Differences.” At first glance, the two pictures appeared to be the same. But if you studied the pictures, you would notice small differences. Perhaps the rabbit ears on the television set were turned in a different direction in one of the pictures. A common difference was a change in the number of clouds in the sky. The shading of a character’s clothes might be different. A balloon might have a string in one picture and none in the other. A character might have a watch in one and none in the other. You get the picture. Most of the time I could spot some of the differences easily, but when I counted the number of differences, I would fall short of the number the magazine claimed. Usually, I was quickly down to hunting for one or two differences. When I gave the process enough time and focus, I could usually finally find all of the changes. It did, however, require discipline. Later, when our children were growing up, I found a similar call for focus when looking at their “Where’s Waldo?” pictures. Maybe the feature taught some children about how our minds sift and sort images because we are so visually overloaded most of the time. What it taught me was the skill of focusing attention. It wasn’t so much the practice of seeing. I’ve long worn glasses and others see better than I. However, if I could clear my mind of distractions and focus my attention, I could usually find the subtle differences. That ability to focus helps with many of my contemporary practices, including the practice of silence and prayer.

There was another feature in the magazine called “What’s Wrong?” You were supposed to look at a cartoon picture to discover the things that were out of place. Some were easy, like a chandelier filled with water or the rain falling only under the umbrella. I didn’t enjoy that feature as much simply because from my point of view, the entire scene would be wrong. The picture was an absurdity in its entirety as well as in the details. If the scene was a birthday party, for example, I’d think to myself, “No one has a living room that holds that many people!” The pictures themselves were so absurd that the penguin sitting on the sofa didn’t seem any stranger than the fact that the artist drew all of the people walking straight legged with no bent knees. Is a snowman being indoors more absurd than a snowman with feet? And why isn’t the snowman melting? Is it really that cold inside? I was continually coming up with things that I thought were wrong that were not the ones the artist intended to be discovered.

Highlights is still publishing a magazine for children. It costs about \$40 a year to subscribe. They also have magazines called “Hello” for children under 2 and “High Five” for children 2 to 6 years old. They also have online subscriptions and applications for mobile devices. But I haven’t seen a physical issue of the magazine for many years. I don’t think that they are present in my doctor’s or dentist’s offices. Then again, I don’t frequent pediatricians these days, so there may be doctors’ offices that still have the magazines. We didn’t subscribe to the magazines for our children and I’m not sure why I remembered the magazine when I was thinking of topics for my blog.

I suspect that what I like about the memory of the magazine is that it pointed to a time when we had agreement about right and wrong. Everyone knew who you should emulate: Gallant, not Goofus. These days politeness isn't a virtue celebrated by much of our media.

At any rate, the memory is pleasant and if I do see a copy lying around one of these days, I hope they still have "Spot the Differences." I already know how Goofus and Gallant will turn out.

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Thinking of Christmas – December 12, 2016

Yesterday I listened as a couple with young children were discussing their Christmas plans with another family at the church. The family has two children, an infant about 6 months old and another just over 2 years old. They plan to travel to Eastern South Dakota to celebrate Christmas with family and were wondering what to do about Christmas presents for the 2-year-old. On the one hand it seems a bit silly to take presents that they have here in Rapid City on a 350-mile trip to be opened on Christmas Day and then load them back up and haul them back home. On the other hand, they thought that it might be confusing for the 2-year-old to open the presents before they go on the trip and then have a Christmas celebration without gifts or with fewer gifts when they arrive. The dilemma of Santa Claus also was a bit daunting. They like the spirit of holiday generosity, but don't want to get into the bind of intentionally lying to their children about the existence of a stranger who enters their home and deposits gifts once a year.

It wasn't an occasion for my comment, and I don't think I would have had any expertise to offer, but it was a moment to reflect on how we make choices what and when we tell our children about various aspects of life and faith. I am grateful that there are thoughtful parents who are giving such matters serious thought and who persist in intentional parenting.

As is true of other aspects of Christianity, the story of the celebration of Christmas is complex. For the first Centuries of the emerging Christian movement, there was no official holiday celebrating the birth of Jesus. The biggest festival in the early centuries of Christianity centered on Easter. Among other things, Easter was the annual time for the reception of new members into the Christian community. This ceremony was preceded by a six-week period of fasting and preparation. After Christianity received official status as a Roman religion in the time of Constantine, the stream of new members became so big that the church needed a second entry point in the year. At the same time, the church was trying to avoid becoming too secularized and was resisting the over celebration of the annual solstice events that were pagan. The result was a

second day of celebration preceded by a six-week time of preparation. Advent was the name given to the time of preparation and Christmas was set on December 25. The variation between the actual date of the holiday and the winter solstice is itself complex and has to do with differences between the Julian and Gregorian calendar and increases in accuracy in measuring the movements of the planets, but the celebration date ended up close to the solstice.

The emergence of gift-giving as part of the celebration of Christmas was much later in the history of Christianity. In many parts of the world, gift giving is focused on St. Nicholas Day, celebrated on December 6, with Christmas being reserved for religious observances. It is all very complex, with all kinds of cultural differences and variations. Suffice it to say that religious leaders of the first 500 years of the church would not recognize the contemporary secular celebrations as having any connection with their faith.

Christmas as a secular marketing phenomenon is evident in a quick drive around our neighborhood after dark when the lights are turned on. You'll see a 10-foot-tall Santa Claus, dressed in red and white, a cartoonish reindeer, several plastic snowmen, and a variety of other creatures. No one in our corner of the community has erected a nativity set or creche scene and the closest thing to a religious symbol that I have observed are several stars, mostly five-pointed ones. Don't look for religious references in the advertisements that clog the newspaper and pop up in annoying ways when you are trying to find something on the Internet. It seems as if the holiday is primarily an orgy of buying that exists to boost retail sales to make stores profitable before the end of the year.

Somewhere in the midst of all of the other things, however, is a beautiful and very important religious concept that is worthy of our exploration. Incarnation - God taking on human form - is not unique to Christianity. In fact, it existed in both Egypt and Rome in variant forms before its prevalence in Christian theology. In both of those variants there was a connection made between the leaders of the official government and religious authority. The pharaoh or emperor was depicted as the child of God acting under the authority of God. As such the emergence of the ruler was filled with all kinds of magic and ceremony and the ruler was to be treated with special deference and afforded unique luxury and power.

The Christian story stood in stark contrast to previous ideas. In our faith God take form as a humble, everyday human being, born to poverty and subject to the vulnerability shared by every newborn baby. He did not grow up in luxury despite early recognition by his family and the leaders of the temple. He wasn't given a life of power and recognition, but rather knew the struggles of the life of common people in an oppressive society. The details of his birth were not recorded in official record books, but rather preserved as family story, passed down from generation to generation in the manner of family tradition.

Only one of the four gospels gives any detail to the story of the birth. Luke's narrative leaves much to the imagination, and we have enhanced that story in our pageants and displays. Matthew tells of the visit of the Magi without any information on the actual birth. The melding of the two stories into a single event has become tradition, but is not presented as an accurate picture of the events.

As a result, there is no single "correct" way to observe Christmas. There is no single day, either. The church recognizes the twelve days between December 25 and January 6 as the season of Christmas.

Incarnation itself is messy. There is no reason for our celebrations to be overly neat and orderly.

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Cleaning up Messes – December 13, 2016

Being a grandfather has given me a greater awareness of those who will come after me. It isn't that I was unaware of future generations before I became a father, or if having children somehow focused my attention away from the future. It is just that being a grandfather affords me more reason to be concerned about the future and the messes that we leave for future generations. There is an often-used proverb, sometimes said to have a Native American source, but more likely from the pen of environmentalist David Brower, that goes like this: "We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children." Dr. Jane Goodall has a different version of the proverb:

"Someone said that we do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, but borrow it from our children. Look at the world around us. The line is a lie! We aren't borrowing from our children. Borrowing means that we will pay it back, but we aren't paying back. We are STEALING from our children...."

I am struck by how often we leave messes for others to clean up. An entire blog and more could be devoted to big messes like the 176,000 gallons of oil that was spilled into Ash Coulee Creek, a tributary of the Little Missouri River near Belfield, N.D. The company that operates that pipeline has experienced at least three dozen oil spills, including dumping 30,000 gallons of crude oil into the Yellowstone River. The pipeline is equipped with electronic monitoring equipment that is supposed to detect leaks, but that equipment failed, and the leak went on without detection until someone saw the oil spewing from the ruptured pipe.

At least with an oil spill, there are people out there, working in the cold temperatures, trying to clean up the mess. About 37,000 gallons of oil have been recovered so far.

We aren't very good at cleaning up after ourselves. Anyone who has visited a public restroom knows that. Last night I attended a Christmas party held at an upscale hotel in our community and, after wiping down the countertop that had been ignored by previous patrons, I picked up a half dozen paper towels that had been thrown on the floor instead of placed in the wastebasket, which was not overfilled. I know that the hotel has employees who regularly clean the restroom, but they can't clean it after every single use. It isn't just hotel restrooms. Our church has a janitorial service that cleans regularly, but I still find myself cleaning restrooms in our building when the messes left behind can't wait for the next visit of the janitor.

I pick up litter from the church parking lot almost every day. And, frankly, it isn't much better when I go inside. A quick trip through our sanctuary last week netted a large stack of paper for recycling. There had been a public concert in the room the previous week and some of the left-behind paper was programs from that concert. But there were also worship bulletins from our own services, used tissues on the floor and on the seats, pew cards with doodles and even one shopping list left behind.

Ours seems to be a careless generation that doesn't have much skill at picking up after ourselves. And we really chafe at someone who reminds us of this truth. I've heard the word "environmentalist" spit out as if it were a curse. I've been in groups of people who see regulations providing for clean water and clean air as unnecessary regulation of business.

It would seem, however, that we need the discipline of regulations in order to be forced to clean up after ourselves.

In our neighborhood we use wheeled toters, provided by the city for garbage collection. The toters for garbage are literally twice as large as the ones for recycling. We find the large garbage toter to be much too big for our needs and rarely fill it beyond halfway. On the other hand, I make weekly trips to the recycling center because the curbside recycling doesn't accept some items that are easy to recycle such as newspaper and cardboard. Office paper and magazines are a bit more challenging, but not impossible to recycle in our community. Still, on an average garbage pickup day, most of my neighbor's toters are filled to overflowing and it is common for the garbage crews to have to pick up loose trash bags that are left at curbside that won't fit into the toters. And some of those plastic bags will take 500 to 1,000 years to decompose in the landfill. Of course, that is just an estimate. We've only been using plastic bags for about 50 years so no one knows for sure how long it will take. Just having the trash hauled away from the neighborhood isn't really getting rid of it. The mountains of garbage in our landfills pose a problem that will be around for generations to come.

I know that I am guilty of consuming way more than I need and that I have not been good at cleaning up after myself. I try to be responsible, but it is easy to be distracted by

all kinds of other priorities. I could easily spend all day every day cleaning up messes, but I turn my attention to other projects.

So, I think of the messes that we are leaving for our grandchildren and the generations that will follow them. One of the gifts we receive from them is the awareness of those messes.

It isn't just the planet. It isn't just the rooms we visit. We certainly have messes to clean up in both of those arenas. More importantly, we have been careless and messy with the way we think. It isn't just the counter and the seats in the restroom that need to be wiped clean. We could use a bit of cleaning up our thoughts and wiping down our hearts. Sullied hearts and minds are no gift to our grandchildren, either.

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Paternalism – December 14, 2016

Paternalism is defined by the dictionary as “the policy or practice on the part of people in positions of authority of restricting the freedom and responsibilities of those subordinate to them in the subordinates’ supposed best interest.” The word comes from the Latin “Pater” meaning “father.” It is a term whose use is not restricted to the relationship between a father and his children, however. Most of the time paternalism is seen as a negative behavior that restricts the freedom of those upon whom it is imposed.

I don't aspire to be paternalistic to other people. But that is easier said than done.

“Pastor, is there any way you could help with a tank of gas?”

“Pastor, can you help with Christmas. My kids don't even have a tree?”

I field requests from people who come to me as strangers in need of help. Somehow, they have identified the church as a place where they can get help. We don't run a social service agency and we don't have budget for buying tanks of gasoline or providing cash assistance to those who are in need. But for some, often those who do not participate in any form of church activities, the church is seen as a place of last resort when they cannot meet their needs. Once, years ago, I helped a family who needed gas to get home from a funeral of a relative. The next morning there were six vehicles in the church parking lot because the recipient of the tank of gas reported at a local shelter that I gave away “free gas.” For the record, there is no such thing as “free” gas. It all must be paid for. And yes, there are weeks, including the one just passed where I pumped more gas into the cars of others than I did into my own. I paid for it all out of my own pocket.

But that isn't the point.

The point is the nagging question in the back of my mind about whether or not I am doing what is best for others. Making someone dependent upon my generosity, or even my presence, doesn't solve their problem and it may be restricting their freedom. It quickly becomes paternalism.

"Pastor, our committee needs more money to do our work."

I also field a lot of requests from members of the church who are dedicated and involved and who are trying to do what is best for our institution. So, I invite the individual to meet with the people who serve on the stewardship and budget department of our church. There is a big difference, however, between arriving at a meeting with a wish list of projects that one would like to see funded and arriving with a serious budget proposal. In the former case, the list probably contains necessary items and expenses that the entire church would want to approve. But by presenting it as a wish list instead of a serious budget proposal, the one asking loses the ability to prioritize the list. Since no church can afford everything that is wished, someone must sift and sort and decide what is most important. Taking the wish list to the Department of Stewardship and Budget results in turning over that process to the department. It also means that the one with the list can blame someone else if an item isn't funded.

The result is nearly as paternalistic as handing out a limited amount of financial assistance to strangers.

In its best sense, paternalism is behavior that can motivate growth. A father seeks a relationship with his children that helps them to grow up. If support is granted with careful attention to increasing freedom and responsibility and fostering independence rather than dependencies, it can be a vital part of a child's growth to maturity.

There are times when support is appropriate. There are also times when the most loving action is saying, "No." And there are times when I am tired and overwhelmed and I respond to a plea for help by thinking of the easiest short-term solution to the immediate problem.

I know I have been guilty of paternalism in my relationships to others.

I know that there are many times when I simply perform a task that someone else should be doing because it becomes the easiest way to get the job done. I have been guilty of contributing to dependencies.

God, on the other hand, continues to act for the freedom of the people of God. That is, of course, evident in the dramatic moments of history. God provided a ram to Abraham to free all future generations from the practice of human sacrifice. God led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt into a life of freedom. God became incarnate in Jesus to

offer freedom from the fear of death. It is equally true, however, that God works for human freedom in smaller and more subtle ways. God provided manna in the wilderness, and not seven course meals. When the people complained about the food they had to eat, God didn't change the menu. God gave the freedom for the people to worship other gods, but God did not liberate them from the responsibility for their behavior.

God has provided us with a wonderful and compassionate community where people reach out with generosity to others. And our church isn't just some kind of mutual aid society. We genuinely want to help others and are continually reaching out to those who live their lives beyond the walls of our congregation. There have been times when we thought that we were helping, and our actions weren't the best thing for those in need.

I'm pretty sure that some of the helping actions of this generation aren't really enabling people to solve their problems. We do our best, but we do make mistakes.

So, I try. I try to listen carefully for the real needs as well as to the words. I try to help when I can do so. I try not to give gifts with strings attached. I try to offer help that honors the dignity and agency of the recipient. But I worry that I am being paternalistic.

Perhaps the reason I have the freedom to hurt as well as the freedom to help is that God is working on my maturity. There is much that I have yet to learn. Maybe I should be thinking beyond my wish list when I take my prayers to God.

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Time to Get Up and Get Going – December 15, 2016

Each year, as winter gets its grip on the northern hemisphere, Rapid Media puts out the annual Paddling Buyer's Guide. What seed catalogues are to gardeners, the paddling buyer's guide is to those who enjoy human-powered boats. The five magazines of the American Canoe Association all join in a single edition. Paddle Boarder, Kayak Angler, Canoeroots, Rapid, and Adventure Kayak all team up to produce a magazine with over 300 pages of gorgeous photographs, boats and boating equipment for sale, reviews and articles. You have to be a boat geek to really want to read articles like, "Why your whitewater kayak is all wrong," or "What your canoe seat really says about you" or "How innovation is killing sea kayaking." I bet, however, that even those who have never sat in a canoe or felt the resistance of a paddle in the water could be inspired by the truly gorgeous photographs in the magazine. With two days of snow in the forecast and the temperature at 11 degrees heading towards nearly -20 by the weekend, the next few days look to be a good time to curl up with the magazine to wait out the weather.

Already I've found an inspirational quote on one of the pages of this year's issue. No author is cited, so one might assume the source is one of the staff writers of the various

magazines whose work is combined in the issue. Under a photo of a solo canoeist paddling into the sunrise on a calm lake is written, "Every morning you have two choices: continue to sleep with your dreams or wake up and chase them."

It isn't a difficult choice for me.

I've never been very good at remembering the dreams that come with sleep. I had a college professor who was disciplined to keep a daily journal of his dreams and after years of practice could remember four or five dreams every morning. I thought it was a kind of quirky and interesting discipline, so I set off to imitate him. After a week of not being able to remember a single dream, I abandoned the project and have not since put any effort at all into trying to remember my dreams. Then, if you add to that inability the fact that I'm generally not very good at sleeping, I'm not a very good candidate for choosing to continue to sleep with my dreams. On those nights when I'm up twice or three times to read in the middle of the night, I make up for it with an afternoon nap. I'm really good at falling asleep and the first 20 minutes or so of sleeping. It's the stretch after that that challenges my abilities. When morning comes, I'm ready to wake up and chase my dreams.

However, the lake is frozen solid. It's not a good day for paddling. And the temperatures are sinking to the point where it is just too cold to work on my boats in the garage. Even with my kerosene heater going full blast, the uninsulated garage gets a bit frosty when the mercury dips below zero. Of course, that is just a cute saying. We don't have a mercury thermometer and our digital one is probably placed in the wrong spot for accurate readings.

So, instead of heading to the lake for a sunrise paddle, something that I enjoy in the spring, summer, and fall, I'll get in a short session on the rowing machine before my morning shower. Even though the room where I have my rowing machine is the only area of our house that has an eastern-facing window, it isn't as inspiring as paddling on a real lake in the predawn hours. Moreover, this time of year it is still dark when I finish.

There is something wonderful about getting in an early morning paddle before heading in to work. Even when I have a meeting as the first event of my day, there is a sense of accomplishment that I carry with me into the room when I have had time to paddle before coming to the office. That sense of being someone who can accomplish something remains with me all day long and really is a boost for a job where most of the problems that come up are not ones that can be quickly solved and where I leave the office with undone work on my desk nearly every day.

I have a plan of work and I maintain a list of items to be accomplished, but the crux of my work seems to lie in the interruptions. I had planned to finish the first draft of the Christmas Day worship bulletin yesterday and draft a letter to go out with an end-of-the-year pledge follow-up letter. A text message informing me that there was someone at

the hospital who needed a visit as soon as possible and a call for assistance from another person trying to get home before the storm hit combined with a couple of other interruptions to shift my priorities. I'm not complaining. I love the changes in focus that are a part of my job. But I often arrive home at the end of the day feeling like I haven't finished much - like I haven't accomplished much. Starting my day with a trip to the lake changes my entire attitude. Having accomplished a pre-dawn paddle and made it back in time to begin my workday makes me feel like I am capable of accomplishing other things.

A study by PHIT America (Personal Health Investment Today) measuring performance by students in Illinois saw a 93-percent improvement in math scores and a 56-percent increase in reading scores after exercise. John Ratey of Harvard University wrote, "Exercise is Miracle Grow for the Brain." I confess that I'm not as disciplined as I would like when it comes to exercise, but I have discovered that I'm better at exercising in the morning than I am in the evening. By the end of my workday, I often convince myself that I'm just too tired to work out.

I guess I'm just a member of the dawn patrol. It's time to get a jumpstart on the day.

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Christmas in the Dark Streets – December 16, 2016

I know that I have been a critic of popular culture when it comes to the celebration of Christmas. I don't really have a 'Bah Humbug' spirit when it comes to Christmas and I'm enough of a fan of Dickens to understand that the church does itself no favors when it tries to ban the celebrations of people. I fully intend to celebrate Christmas this year, as I do every year. I don't want to rush through Advent, and go straight to Christmas without preparation, and my observances of Advent this year have been a bit more muted than usual. I've needed a bit more time to sit with silence and listen to the world. But Christmas is coming.

On the other hand, I do want to be open in my discomfort with what I see as a lot of celebrations that miss the point of Christmas. It amazes me how much money and effort is spent in trying to create fantasy. Bright lights and expensive decorations surround us in the season. Visions of Santa Claus on a magical sleigh that defies gravity and denies other basic principles of science are common. Fairy-tale castles of endless supplies of toys and gifts that break the budgets of the givers are the norm of advertisements. Larger than life displays of cartoon characters have appeared in our neighborhood where the everyday is wonderful. I prefer the real deer in my yard year-round to the fake reindeer that spend a few weeks in a neighbor's yard and the rest of the year in a rented storage unit. We live in a place with sparking snow and wild turkeys and frost-painted trees. It is truly beautiful and seems to be even more so in the months of the year when it is not decorated with light projectors and garland.

I don't believe the Christmas is about fantasy.

I think many of our celebrations have got the holiday completely backwards and upside-down.

Ours is a faith of light appearing in the darkest hour and of love being born in a hate-filled world. The birth of the Christ Child went unnoticed by those who were looking for parades and conquered governments and gold-encrusted temples. Instead, a young woman gave birth to her firstborn in the common room of the house and placed him in a manger because the guest room was full. It was a very ordinary moment. A few shepherds came to see. The story of wise men from the east isn't reported in Luke's gospel. Its appearance in Matthew's gospel takes a different form and the specific age of the child is not noted.

Times were dark that first Christmas. The autocrat King Herod the Great was in charge and the oppression of the people was severe. Shortly after the birth of the Christ child he ordered the massacre of the innocents, which, according to legend, Jesus narrowly escaped by his family's fleeing, as refugees to Egypt. This child grew up to be someone very different than usually pictured. In truth he would have been profiled in our country: a brown-skinned, Middle Eastern, who hung out with "disreputable types," and had a name common in Mexico these days. He was not especially well-accepted in his country - criticized by Pharisees and other leaders of the community. He likely would not be well-accepted in our country today, either.

What he did, however, was to change the world. He taught us that love prevails, even against great odds. He reminded us in the virtue of truth and the capacity of truth to bring freedom, despite those who claim that the lie is "no big deal," and persist in spreading untruth.

Part of celebrating Christmas for me is singing the old carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

O little town of Bethlehem
How still we see thee lie
Above thy deep and dreamless
sleep
The silent stars go by
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light
The
hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight

It invites reflection on what to me is a very important concept. "Yet in they dark streets shineth the everlasting light. He hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

God's Christmas is not some kind of magical escape from a world filled with fears. It is not a denial that darkness is real and that it is pervasive. It is, rather a reminder that God meets fear with hope and even in the darkest night the light of love still shines.

In a very real sense, we still are in those dark streets. A quick look at the headlines gives genuine reasons to fear. It is not clear what the outcome of the meeting of hopes and fears will be. It seems very possible that our fears will overcome our hopes - that the worst we have feared might indeed come to pass.

This is the real place of Christmas.

Into this real world Jesus comes with a simple message: "be not afraid."

Christmas for me is an invitation to stand with those who have been marginalized and brutalized by the forces of this world. It is an invitation to go boldly to the refugees who have suffered so much in the disaster of the collapse of Syria and to stand without fear next to those that our society seeks to push away. And it is that "without fear" part that is most difficult.

The everlasting light still shines in the dark streets. Denying that the streets are dark can prevent us from discovering the truth meaning and gift of Christmas.

This year I resolve to be realistic in my celebrations. Weather permitting, I've planned another trip to spend time with my sisters and brothers in the most impoverished counties of our nation between now and Christmas day. I plan to spend some time with those whom others have ignored. I'll probably forgo some of the decorations.

Rest assured, however, despite the lack of outward signs, the celebration of Christmas is more real than ever this year.

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Tools – December 17, 2016

There are some areas in my life where the pace of change can be maddening. Less than 20 years ago, we installed new digital controls for the heating and air handling systems in our church. At the time, having those systems directed by a computer was innovative and new. The equipment we installed was state of the art. We were replacing controls that were 40 years old. This week, a technician working on those controls informed us that we are well beyond the service life of those components and that it is time to replace them. The original controls lasted 40 years, the next generation lasted less than 20. It is likely that a replacement with the current state of the art will put us in a service life of only about 5 years. One more generation and controls will be like computer software - a subscription based on nearly continuous replacement.

I am often involved in conversations with people who are frustrated by the amount of their work time that must be invested in learning to use new tools. Each software update comes with a learning curve. Each year brings a larger percentage of work time that is

invested in learning to use new tools to do the job with a subsequent decrease in the amount of time to actually do the job. Automation does decrease the number of hours required to do a job, but in some cases the gain in efficiency is offset by the demands of training.

On the other hand, I have a few tools whose purpose, function and use have a much longer service life. When I am working on a kayak in my shop, the block planes that I use are the same ones my father and grandfather used. They are sharpened in the same fashion, adjusted, and used in the same way. They work as well as was the case when they were brand new. And there is no way that my use will wear them out. I have one plane that is at least a full generation older - perhaps more. A hardwood block with a rectangular mortise cut across the center of the body holding an iron blade is a design that dates to Roman times.

I have a skin-on-frame kayak that is built to a Greenland design that dates back many thousands of years. Although my kayak is relatively new - I built it in 2007, the shape is essentially the same shape that people have been paddling with a simple straight, double-bladed paddle for thousands of years.

In this fast-paced world, it is comforting to have a few tools that aren't constantly being replaced with new ones. There are some areas in life where a very slow pace of change is a blessing.

Paddling is one of those places in my life. The tools I use to paddle are ancient. Well, that isn't completely true. I do have a modern, state-of-the-art life vest and I don't wear sealskin clothing when I paddle. The essential tools such as the shape of the boat and the paddle, however, haven't changed in my lifetime.

It is more than comfort, however, to use tools that do not change. When the tools are constantly changing, their change is what is tracked and labeled as improvement. When the tools don't change, one is freed to concentrate on human improvement. When I grab a well-balanced canoe paddle, I don't have to think about how to hold it or what its function is. I already know what it will feel like in the water and I don't have to concentrate on the tool at all. I can think about my posture and my breathing and other factors that result in my becoming a more efficient paddler. I can grow and change and improve because I'm not concentrating on the tools that I am using.

The opposite serves to illustrate. I do own one super high-tech, carbon fiber paddle that I bought for river paddling. Each time I use it, I am struck by how lightweight it feels in my hands. I have trouble with my grip because I can't tell initially how much leverage is required to move the paddle. The light weight is partially offset by the increased blade size and an increased sensitivity of the blade to its angle in the water. I find myself thinking about the paddle more than I am thinking about my posture, balance and the power of my stroke.

When I paddle a traditional boat with a traditional paddle the only way to make it across the lake in less time or with more reserve energy is to increase my human performance. When the boat and paddle remain the same, the human can't help but get better.

I recently listened to a TED talk by Amy Hazel about fishing. "When your tools don't change, you have time to learn the soft stuff," she said. "In fly fishing it's the study of insects and the habitat of the fish. You don't worry, 'I can't cast on this rod because it's so different from the rod last year.'"

I am a better paddler each year in part because I don't have to spend a good portion of my time and energy re-learning how to use the tools. The tools remain constant, freeing me to focus on other things. That's a good thing because I paddle in a constantly changing environment. The infinite varieties of water, current, swell and wind mean that I have plenty to keep my mind occupied and focused. I don't need to think about boat shape and paddle. Instead, I slip into my boat with the paddle fitting quite naturally in my hands and think about the beauty of the nature that surrounds me, the quality of solitude afforded by my setting and other important things. I don't have to think about how to get my boat to go in the direction I want. That happens naturally.

I guess I am grateful for innovation in tools. But I am even more grateful for the tools in my life that don't change. Yesterday, I held the hand of a woman as a ventilator was withdrawn. I placed my hand on her forehead and recited the 23rd Psalm as she drew her last breath. I anointed her head with oil from a bottle that I've been using for decades. I didn't have to think about my tools. I was freed to concentrate on what was important - the quality of her care and the grief of her family. In the critical situations of life, tools that are familiar and well-tested are essential.

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Blue Christmas – December 18, 2016

I don't know off the top of my head how many funerals I have participated in that have fallen in the week before or after Christmas, but there are quite a few that I can remember. Deaths occur during all of the weeks of the year, and it isn't uncommon for there to be deaths during the holiday season. A death doesn't have to occur during the holidays for the family to feel sad at this time of the year, however. Holidays can be filled with happy memories, but when one is grieving, those memories also remind people of the loss that has occurred.

The long nights of winter in the northern hemisphere provide extra time for reflection and grief and a tradition has developed of holding services of remembrance for those who have died and honoring those who are going through grief. The tradition has not been completely consistent in Christian history. Some have felt that it provides a

distraction from other Christmas celebrations. Others have felt that its association with the winter solstice links it to celebrations and observances that are not directly related to Christian traditions and history.

The reality of grief, however, is undeniable. The church's role in walking with people in their journey of grief is important. And it is important to share worship with those who are mourning. I have written many times about the journey of grief and how grief can be one of life's experiences that draws individuals closer to God. Just as some theologians speak about "think spaces" in reference to places where God's presence is very evident, there are also "thin times" when the veil between the eternal and the temporal is not as thick as usual. Grief is one of those thin times. When we honestly face grief, the result can be a deepening of our awareness of the presence of God.

And God is love. The journey of grief can be a journey of deepening love.

Yesterday I sat with a family planning the funeral of the family matriarch. One of her granddaughters said to me, "You probably do this all the time, but we've never done this before." I responded that while it is true that I have officiated at a lot of funerals, I've never been a part of her grandmother's funeral before. Each experience of loss is unique and there is no formula that makes it easy. Our conversations, complete with all of the questions and ideas and seemingly random thoughts and memories are essential to the process of grief. Planning a funeral never becomes routine. And that is a very good thing.

Prior to the moment of our own death, each encounter with God is one of an ever-deepening relationship. We never fully know God in this life. There is always more to learn - more to experience - more to grow.

Part of our conversation also involved the widower's desire that the funeral service itself take place as early in the week as possible. He wanted to allow as much separation between the funeral and Christmas day as could be provided. Part of his reason was practical. He wanted people who were traveling to the funeral to be able to get home to celebrate Christmas with their families. Part of his reason was emotional. He wanted separation between the funeral and the holiday. What I couldn't tell him is that from this time forward, there will always be an element of memory in the holiday. The memory of the funeral will become intertwined with memories of holiday events and celebrations. Our lives are like that. The tears of joy and the tears of sadness often mingle on our cheeks.

I always pay a bit of attention to the phases of the moon and the movement of the planets. I notice when events such as the solstice occur. My life isn't dictated by these events, and I place no credence in astrology or other attempts at developing belief systems around celestial events. Still, in the cold of winter it is only natural to think of longer days and the changing of seasons. Most years in this part of the world our

coldest weather doesn't come right at the solstice. The months of January and February are often colder than December. But it is cold out this morning. -8f is cold enough to get your attention. It seems even worse in Celsius: -22.

But this is South Dakota. The temperature is forecast to warm to above 20 degrees today and be above freezing by tomorrow. We live in an area where the weather changes quickly. Some of the snow that is on the ground will melt before Christmas, though we may have snow showers on Christmas day just to maintain the mood of the season.

Our moods can change as quickly as the weather. Just because we are feeling sad now doesn't mean that the next memory won't trigger laughter. Sometimes the happy and sad memories become so intertwined that we don't know exactly how we should feel.

All of this is to say that working with people who are experiencing grief is important work. This afternoon's Blue Christmas service is important even if the attendance is low. I enjoy the times when the church is filled and I will put a lot of energy into the first service on Christmas Eve, which is often one of best attended services of the year. But I also find deep meaning in the more intimate times when we gather in smaller groups to worship. I suspect that the Blue Christmas service will be one of those times. Whether we are 2 or 10 or 30 or 50 isn't the important part of the service. What is important is that we are there for the ones who need a service that acknowledges that there are sad feelings and deep grief that exist alongside the tinsel and glitter of Christmas celebrations.

There is room for all our emotions in the holiday season and I am grateful to be a part of a church that offers different moods of worship to serve people who are at different points of their spiritual journeys.

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The Span of a Life – December 19, 2016

One of the joys of our time in history is that we have a lot of adaptive technologies that did not exist in previous times. Not long ago I watched a video of an amazing product. Liftware makes stabilizing and leveling handles and attachments that are designed to help people with hand tremor or limited hand and arm mobility regain dignity, confidence, and independence by stabilizing a spoon or fork so that the food doesn't fall from the implement on its way to the user's mouth. Watching the video reminded me of a friend who died in the last year who experienced many frustrations with hand tremors. How I wished I had known about that product during his life!

One of the adaptive devices that we did enjoy very much was a reclining chair that was powered by an electric motor. The chair not only put out its footrest, and reclined under its own power, it also would lift and provide a gentle boost to make it much easier for a person with limited strength to get from the sitting to standing position. We obtained such a chair from the estate of a woman who had barely used it. The almost new chair was a real blessing during the final year or so of my mother's life. It gave her a great deal of independence to be able to sit and even nap in the chair, but also to get up on her own. We'd park her walker right in front of the chair and as it boosted her up, it placed her in just the right position to use the walker to get around our home.

That chair is currently serving a person who has a degenerative hip disease and who experiences significant pain and frustration at times.

A similar chair was donated to our church a while back and we decided to keep it to be available when someone had a need for such a chair. Yesterday one of our volunteers delivered it to the home of a member of our church. Talking about the delivery brought to mind the fact that within the last year I attended the 100th birthday party of the person who will be using the chair. A century is a significant amount of time for a human life, especially when the person living that long retains their ability to tell stories and reminisce about the past. Later in the same day I paid a visit to a man who lives in a care center that is specialized in caring for people with significant memory problems. I walked into a room full of people who could not recall that I had previously visited that place. Many of them couldn't recognize their own family members due to the dementia they have experienced.

Our life journeys are varied and unique. Here in the United States, average life expectancy is estimated to be around 79 years. More precisely life expectancy for a U.S. male is 76.3 years and a U.S. female 81.2 years. That is a slight decrease from 2015, when it was 76.5 for males and 81.3 for females. That's not far from Psalm 90's "threescore and ten, or if by reason of strength fourscore." Our country ranks 53 among the nations of the world for life expectancy. Number one is Monaco with an average expectancy of 89.47. Number 100 is Syria with 75.8. The estimate may be high for Syria with the dramatic effects of the battle for Aleppo that is currently being waged.

Averages, however, say nothing about an individual's experience. In my time as a pastor I've attended the deaths of infants whose lifespan wasn't measured in years or even in days, but rather in minutes and hours. I've responded to the homes where teenagers have died from suicide and from tragic accidents. I've been at the bedside of someone who was struck down by illness in the prime of life. And I've spent time with folks who have lived long and productive lives.

Last I visited with a family whose father is no longer able to swallow and the myriad of other health problems he faces means that there is no effective treatment short of a feeding tub to provide reliable nutrition for him. After we had our prayers and I read a few passages of scripture, we were visiting informally. One of the sons said to me, "I suppose you've seen this before." I replied that while I had been with other families as a loved one neared death, I had never been with their family or their father. Each situation and each circumstance is very different from each other one. There is no "usual" when it comes to individuals.

As a pastor with 38 years of ordained ministerial experience, I have attended a lot of funerals. My 30-year-old book of worship has probably attended more funerals than the average member of my congregation. But there is nothing routine about the transition from life to life beyond death. There is no magic formula - no absolutely right words - no common description. I've read a lot of books on death and dying and a fair number of books with descriptions of near-death experiences. They talk about similarities of experience, which I am sure exist. Those books don't seem to be very good at talking about the absolute uniqueness of each individual experience.

On average, women in the U.S. live longer than men. Of what value is that statistic to the widowers in my congregation whose wives died unexpectedly before they did? Averages become meaningless in the face of an individual reality.

Length is only one way of measuring a human life. While we find it remarkable to know those who have passed the century mark, it is equally impressive to know those whose lives are much shorter. There are lots of other ways to measure value.

I'm not holding out for any records. I'm happy to take my place amongst the averages. But I am grateful to live in a time when there are a few technologies that will ease my aging years and assist me to have a meaningful life when disability becomes a constant companion. For now it is good to be alive and to have the abilities that I do. Now that I've passed the threescore mark, threescore and ten doesn't seem all that far away. Maybe I can develop the strength to go for fourscore. My prayer, however, comes from later in that same psalm, "Establish the work of our hands upon us; yes, establish the work of our hands!"

A Brief Rant – December 20, 2016

From 1978 to 2011, the CBS news program 60 Minutes ended with a segment called “A Few Minutes with Andy Rooney.” I’m not a big fan of television, and I didn’t watch the program many times, but I saw enough of those segments to have occasionally resonated with the rant that was the topic of the evening’s conversation. There are a few memorable quotes that came from the program:

“If you smile when no one else is around, you really mean it.”

“The average dog is a nicer person than the average person.”

“Computers make it easier to do a lot of things, but most of the things they make it easier to do don’t need to be done.”

Still, the segment carried the quality of an older man complaining about the ways of the world. I don’t want to be such a person. I don’t want to sound like Andy Rooney. However, increasingly I find myself going on and on about something that really isn’t that important.

I felt a rant coming on last night as we wrapped some gifts to send to our grandchildren. We tend to be a bit late in our Christmas preparations, but with the efficiency of the US postal service the packages should arrive in time for Christmas. If not, our grandchildren will get some nice presents after the actual day of Christmas, which will help to spread the season of celebration.

One of the challenges is getting the packages to fit into the boxes in which we are shipping them. It seems that the boxes in which toys are packaged are never the same size as the boxes we can find that are suitable for shipping. As a result, I’ve become adept at adjusting the size of the boxes. Most cardboard boxes can be cut down by an inch or more without affecting their structural integrity. I use a steel ruler and can make a nice, straight crimp in the corrugated cardboard. The pictures on the outside of the box aren’t the same with the corners having been moved, but in most cases even those aren’t affected that much.

The reason that this works, however, is the subject of this morning’s rant. It works because virtually every box in which toys are packaged is 30% larger than needed. Most children’s toys are packaged in boxes that are significantly bigger than the toy. The pictures of the toy on the outside of the boxes are bigger than the real toy inside. It’s an old marketing trick - make the customer believe that they are getting more than they are. Most of the time, the toy boxes simply have air in the empty spaces and the contents rattle around inside. Other times, cardboard packaging and a few wire ties keep the toy in place and the box is filled with extra corrugated cardboard. One of the boxes I cut down last night had elaborately folded cardboard on two sides of the toy to

keep it in place. There was a full six inches of space filled with a cardboard fixture at the bottom of the box and about four inches on one side of the box. Since the box needed to be reduced by only about an inch to fit, making the modification was pretty simple. We will still be shipping a significant amount of volume that is filled with air and cardboard. I suppose you could argue that this cushions the toy from possible impacts in shipping, but such protection is hardly necessary for a cardboard box, wrapped in Christmas paper inside of another cardboard box with other toys and a few packages of clothing. Most children's toys are relatively unbreakable anyway.

And while I'm on the topic, I wish that boxes containing children's toys would limit the pictures on the outside of the box to the toys that are in the box. One toy that we purchased has pictures of other toys and accessories on the outside of the box that makes it look, at first glance, that the box contains many more toys than are inside. The "accessories" that are pictured on the outside of the box would all fit inside of the box if they packaged the toys sensibly, but, they would require the purchase of more boxes and spending more than twice the amount of money as the toy that we did purchase.

That, too, is marketing. The toy company is trying to create a desire for the purchase of additional toys. And grandparents are probably more easily seduced into making such purchases than parents.

There, if I inserted a few "Did you ever wonder why . . .?'s into the text above, there is almost enough for a script for "A Few Minutes with Andy Rooney."

The truth is that while I am not generally filled with complaints, there are a few things about life in today's world that seem troubling to me. Not every change constitutes progress. Not every innovation is an improvement. Still, I don't want my children and grandchildren, or anyone else for that matter, to hear only complaints from me. I'd rather avoid the label of being a grumpy old man.

There were things about yesterday that were wonderful. The weather really warmed up. It went from temperatures in the single digits to above freezing. By midafternoon, I was working outside, and the snow was melting. In the morning we went into the hills to select our Christmas tree. We won't be entertaining many guests this year, so a small tree was just right for us. As we walked around the hills in comfortable weather, there were plenty of clumps of small trees from which one could be harvested and still leave plenty of trees to thrive. Looking for a six-foot tree instead of an eight-foot tree gives one lots of options that were passed by when others were choosing their trees. Cutting a Christmas tree on a sunny day with plenty of snow on the ground is a treat. And the smaller tree was easy to erect and will be simple to decorate over the next couple of days.

In general, life is good. Still, if they let me do the designing, there are a few changes I'd make in the packaging of children's toys.

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Big Problems – December 21, 2016

Yesterday I spent some time with a man who was waiting for his wife to complete dialysis at the Regional Health outpatient dialysis center, which is on the top floor of the Aspen Center here in Rapid City. I've been in that waiting room before, as I know a couple of people who routinely receive dialysis treatment there. It was late afternoon, nearly 5 pm, which is the time that the center closes for the evening. Of course, the posted time doesn't match the time when the employees are allowed to go home, as they will complete all procedures in progress before they clean up and head for home.

What struck me once again was the number of people who go through the place for their procedures. Because kidney disease hasn't affected any of the immediate members of my family, I think of it as rare, but that is hardly the case. The Regional Outpatient Dialysis Center is fully booked and handles as many patients as is possible with the equipment that they have. Those traveling or temporarily in town who need dialysis might occasionally find treatment there, but often are directed to the center in Spearfish or the Porcupine Center, which is at Sharps Corner on the Pine Ridge Reservation.

Kidney failure, also called end stage renal disease, affects more than 660 million Americans. Of those 468,000 are currently receiving dialysis. Dialysis is required at stage 5 of chronic kidney disease. The patient usually has been suffering from kidney disease for many years before coming to the point where dialysis is required to sustain life. The treatment involves filtering wastes and water from the blood. The artificial filtration must be performed several times a week. For those whose disease has progressed to this point, dialysis is required for them to survive. The only other known treatment option is total kidney transplant. There are more than 193,000 Americans who are living with a functioning kidney transplant. The waiting list for kidney transplant is long. With nearly a half million Americans waiting for transplant.

At the time I was in the center's waiting room yesterday I was struck, once again, by the number of Lakota people who suffer from the disease. End Stage Renal Disease (ESRD) is 1.4 times greater in Native Americans than in Caucasians. The variation by race is even more dramatic in African Americans who suffer a rate 3.7 times greater than Caucasians.

To put the disease in perspective, more than 47,000 Americans die from kidney disease each year. That's more people than die from breast cancer or prostate cancer. Furthermore, most people with kidney disease suffer from other circulatory diseases including diabetes and heart disease.

In our town, there is a connection between poverty and kidney disease, though it is not a direct cause-and-effect relationship. People living in chronic poverty tend to have less well-balanced diets and tend to have a lower rate of access to health care which may contribute to the development of kidney disease. And the costs of treatment are high, leaving less money for other necessities. The wife of the man with whom I was visiting yesterday was receiving emergency treatment but is not yet eligible to receive her regular treatment in Rapid City. The nearest option for her is Spearfish, which is 45 miles one way or Sharps Corner, which is 72 miles the other way. The cost of gas and the amount of time required for treatment would be beyond the means for this family were they to stay in Rapid City. The plan, for now, is for the couple to be split up with the husband staying in Rapid City and the wife staying with relatives in a home 15 miles from Sharps Corner. There will still be challenges for her, as she has no car and will need to be dependent upon friends and relatives to give her rides to her 6 a.m. appointments and the return 4 hours later to give her a ride back to the house.

It is a less-than-perfect solution, but the best option that the couple can find now. They have agreed to regular phone calls, including a visit at 4:30 a.m. on dialysis days, though changes in the husband's circumstances may prevent those phone calls soon. Still, the treatments are required for the wife to remain healthy. To discontinue treatment would result in death relatively quickly.

The challenges of dialysis are huge. And, like other families, this is just one of the problems they face. There are issues with increasing expenses and falling income. There have been problems with children and grandchildren. Winters are harsh and transportation is expensive. I have a few problems and challenges in my life. I have never faced anything remotely close to the problems that are stacking up in this family.

What struck me so dramatically yesterday as we visited for a few minutes was how many other families are facing such significant challenges. We tend to go through our lives somewhat unaware of the problems of our neighbors until something like this puts us in a place where it is impossible to ignore what is going on. Yesterday it seemed to me that there would be full time employment for a social worker in that dialysis center, would the budget support such a service.

We complain about the high cost of health care but cutting funding for health care support to the poorest of the poor in our communities doesn't seem to be an acceptable answer. Without federally funded health care programs, the majority of the people I saw yesterday would simply die. We don't like to think of poverty as a death sentence, but in some cases that is not putting it too strongly.

Education and disease prevention are required alongside effective treatment. If you project the problem into the generation of the grandchildren of the people I was visiting yesterday, the numbers become overwhelming.

I became a minister in part because of a desire to help people. Some days I become deeply aware of how small my contributions are in the face of overwhelming problems.

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Memorable Meals – December 22, 2016

Can you remember the best meal you have ever eaten? If you were given the opportunity to plan the “perfect” meal, what would you select for the menu? Recently I was listening to a science podcast from the United Kingdom and one of the persons being interviewed was speaking about how much of what we describe as taste is really smell. Our tastebuds can detect bitter, salty, sweet, sour, and umami (savory). Our noses, however, have the capacity for a much larger universe: colognes, roses, other flowers, perfumes, woody, resinous, fruity, citrus, chemical, pungent, minty, sweet, sickening, lemon, and a whole host of other odors.

Be honest, is the flavor of popcorn a particular taste, or is our attraction to popcorn based completely on how it smells? It is true that much of our perception of taste comes from the odors we smell.

That simple conversation got me to thinking about the emotional qualities that surround a good meal. When I think back over a lifetime of good eating, what I remember most about my favorite meals are things other than the menu. I remember the setting, the people I was with, and the occasion far more readily than I do the actual food.

I remember that I absolutely loved to eat at my grandparents’ home when I was a kid. Sometimes, my dad and I would get up early in the morning and fly the fire patrol over Yellowstone National Park and then land at Red Lodge and walk down the hill from the airport to his parents’ house for breakfast. I loved doing that.

But I also remember that my grandmother would ask us each how we liked our eggs cooked. We’d all place our orders: “over easy,” “over hard,” “sunny side up,” etc. Then she would fry the eggs and serve them. Every egg on the platter was cooked the same way: basted medium. She wasn’t one for fancy recipes. She cooked good basic meals: meats and vegetables and desserts. She served potatoes with nearly every meal. Desserts were basic: cookies and cakes.

I loved eating at my grandparent’s home because of the people and the adventure with my father far more than loving it because of the food itself.

If I ate the way my grandmother cooked every day, my cholesterol would be totally out of control and my blood sugars would probably be out of whack, too. I much prefer the menus in the home where I live. But I have great memories of eating at my grandparents’ home.

One time when I was working at the Radio Station, our station had traded advertising for credit at a ski resort. The resort was quite a way from our town and none of the other employees of the radio station had been able to use any of the credit. The station manager encouraged us not only to have a few days of skiing, but also to order “anything you want” in the restaurant to use up some of the credit. I am not used to going into a restaurant with the ability to order anything without paying attention to price. We planned to have a special dinner while we were there.

I can't remember what I ordered. Perhaps it was a steak. Maybe I ordered Salmon. I just don't remember. I do remember that our son, who was a baby at the time, enjoyed sucking on the lemons and I got several wedges from the salad bar to give to him. I remember enjoying the meal. I remember that the skiing was great. I don't remember the menu.

For me a great meal is mostly about the people with whom I am sharing the meal, the setting, and the occasion. Give me the right setting and you could probably pass off cheap wine and I'd think it was the best vintage ever. The food might be overcooked, and I'd still say I enjoyed it.

That may be one of the reasons that you don't turn to my blog for restaurant reviews.

My favorite place for a good cup of coffee is my own home. Actually, I make pretty good coffee. You should come over some time. I'll make you some.

We had a brief conversation yesterday about the menu for our Christmas dinner. We aren't having guests for Christmas this year. We've found that we enjoy just being home, visiting with our children over Skype, and spending time with each other. It turns out that the menu isn't the biggest thing for us. We'll have a nice dinner, probably for our evening meal as we have 2 services on Christmas Eve and another on Christmas morning. We'll likely be tired after the service. We'll have some traditional foods. We both love sweet potatoes, and we'll make a nice salad. We might have salmon and save the turkey for a day when we have a bit more time. We haven't made up our minds yet.

For his last Supper, Jesus shared a traditional Seder meal with his disciples. We don't serve the lamb or bitter herbs, but rather only the unleavened bread and wine in our remembrances.

My father-in-law died unexpectedly. We knew that his health was failing but had no way of knowing exactly when he would die. As it turned out, he died on Ash Wednesday in the morning. We had been with him at dinner time the night before, which would have been Shrove Tuesday. Traditionally, Shrove Tuesday is a day of pancakes and rich foods. The tradition is to consume all of the remaining fat in the house in preparation for

the fasting of Lent. Anyway, he wasn't very hungry at dinner time. What seemed to be good to him was the small dish of chocolate ice cream that was served for dessert.

I remember the menu of what turned out to be his last supper: chocolate ice cream. In retrospect, it turns out that it was a pretty good choice. I hope I can do as well when my time comes.

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I'm Still Learning to Listen – December 23, 2016

For all my professional life, I have been honing the skill of listening. When we were in seminary, we practiced active listening by carefully feeding back to one another the essence of what we had heard, checking for accuracy until we could consistently satisfy the one speaking that we have heard what they were saying. As a minister, one of the places where I check my listening skills is in the art of preparing a funeral meditation. When a death occurs, I conduct an interview with surviving family members that mostly is a process of provoking stories about the person who had died. I take a few notes as I listen carefully. After the funeral, I listen carefully to the family and friends. When I have been successful, I will hear them say that I got it just right, that they are amazed at how much I captured the essence of their loved one.

Over the last couple of years, however, I have been very careful to hone those skills in a different way. There is a small, emerging church group that meets in our building. I meet weekly with the group and participate by listening very carefully. Unlike much of the rest of my job, I have very little program responsibility with this group of people. I don't have a sermon to deliver, and I lead prayers infrequently. Most of the time, my role is to actively listen to the sharing of the other participants and receive their thoughts, feelings and intentions into my own. What I have discovered in this process is that it can make a big difference if I discipline myself to a half hour or so of complete silence before the group meets. As often as my schedule will allow, I simply sit quietly for a period of time. I begin with a breath prayer to center my thoughts and then go through my list of prayer concerns to offer others to God's care. After ten minutes or so, I am able to clear my mind and center myself to the place where I'm not pouring content into the silence, but simply sitting with it and allowing it to wash over me. Then, when the group gathers, I am ready to listen intently.

Still, I am aware that even with decades of careful practice and a relatively new discipline of listening even more intently, there are times when instead of just listening, my mind wanders to trying to provide information to the person who is speaking. Sometimes, I am even gripped by an urge to argue and change the person's mind. People rarely want you to convert them into a new way of thinking or believing, but I find myself tempted to make the attempt.

Not long ago I was trying to listen to a person who, like many others, is feeling very vulnerable in the structure of our economy and society. This person has modest means and small savings. It is a person who has worked hard for a lifetime and fears not being able to make it in retirement. A relatively fixed income, with some cost-of-living adjustments, leaves little for luxuries. During our conversation, the person was expressing a feeling of being victimized, specifically that the reason there was so little extra for small luxuries was caused by other people - primarily politicians who had extracted too much tax and were using too much of that tax money to support those who were unwilling to work.

I was genuinely trying to listen to the speaker, but I found myself disagreeing with the conclusions. It seems important to me that we have some social safety nets for those who are at the bottom of the ladder, so to speak. I know individuals who have collected more in Social Security than they paid into the system. They are the victims of circumstances beyond their control. In one case, the person was injured early in his life and has collected disability payments that are required to survive. He lives more modestly than the person I was speaking with. He is no less of a hard worker. I don't see him as a burden on society, but rather as the victim of an unfortunate accident.

I know that the speaker, to whose words I was listening, but whose conclusions were confusing to me, has not spent as much time as I have with those who are caught up in the cycle of entrenched poverty. I know that the speaker never experienced an extended period of unemployment and doesn't really understand that things like an owned home, a paid mortgage and no debt are merely fantasies for some people - things to which they aspire but will never know.

Still, I had to fight back the urge to try to provide a corrective to what seemed to me to be a clear case of someone whose politics clearly are not producing the results that person desires. Clearly in my mind the continuation of the widening of the gap between the ultra-rich and the rest of our population puts the person with whom I was speaking in a similar category as those who are impoverished. Helping those at the bottom would help that person. I wanted to point out that it seems to me that the person has acted against the very things that are in the best interests of people just like that person.

I bit my tongue. I listened carefully. I didn't provide a corrective to what seemed to me to be mistaken thinking. Tragically, however, I didn't succeed in truly listening. Instead of receiving the thoughts, feelings and intentions of the other, my mind kept wanting to change those thoughts, feelings and intentions.

Clearly our deeply divided society needs us to listen more carefully than ever if we are to overcome the divides in our communities. Clearly, I need even more practice at listening. I pray for the day when we will discover common ground and renew our sense of being in this together.

for the moment, however, I walked away from the conversation simply more aware of the differences in how we think and perceive the world.

I pray that even that was a modest first step.

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Christmas Eve – December 24, 2016

Yesterday we were talking with our grandson, who is a couple months shy of his sixth birthday. Among other things, he explained to us that today was the day before Christmas and tonight is the night before Christmas. He has a pretty good sense of anticipation. Of course, part of that anticipation is his knowledge that on Christmas Day he will receive presents. With somewhat over-indulgent grandparents, there will be plenty of presents. He is enjoying the anticipation of new toys. We try to adhere to the formula of something to read, something to wear, something to play with, and something that is an experience. Already a year ago he would open the packages containing clothing, quickly set those aside and move on to the ones that contained toys. His sister, who is 2 1/2, on the other hand, really enjoys clothes and sees each new outfit as an experience that is worthy of pausing and trying on the new outfit. Their grandparents, of course, are delighted with the excitement and joy that surrounds the holiday for the children.

Even though they understand a bit of the sense of anticipation and excitement, our grandchildren probably don't have enough life experiences to really understand that there will be days in life that cannot be anticipated - times when life takes a turn that you don't see coming. Being with people as they walk through those changes is a part of my professional life. In the past week, I officiated at a funeral for a woman who entered the hospital for what might have been a life-enhancing surgery. Things didn't go as anticipated and she slipped into a coma and died. Later in the week I spent time with the adult children of a man who died suddenly and unexpectedly. He was not a young man, but no one had any way of knowing that he would lie down for a nap and die in his sleep.

When delivering the news of a recent death in the congregation, some people responded, "Are you kidding?" They know that this is not something about which their pastor would make a joke. They knew that I could not possibly be kidding, but the shock of the news was great enough that they couldn't help but respond with some kind of statement that allowed room for a change of perspective.

Sudden and unanticipated deaths are not the only life-changing surprises that cannot be fully anticipated. Christmas always makes me remember the evening when my wife went into labor with the birth of our first child. It was a long labor. We knew that the baby was coming. We had anticipated his birth. Even though we had been warned by many,

however, we couldn't fully anticipate how life-changing becoming parents would be. It was a wonderful experience, but one whose depth of meaning and emotion could not be anticipated even by careful listening to the reports of others.

Some days you wake in the morning and the entire day turns out differently than what you expected.

I think it must have been that way for Mary and Joseph on that first Christmas. Times were tough. The future looked dark. The oppression of the Roman authorities upon the people of Israel was severe. Now the emperor had issued a decree for a full census of the people. Registration required a trip to the ancestral home. In the case of Joseph and his betrothed, it would be a walk of 90 miles or so - a multiple-day journey. And the time for the baby to be born was drawing perilously close. If the baby were to be born on the trip, it would not be the first time such an experience occurred, but certainly more uncomfortable for the mother and enough to cause a delay in the traveling.

Imagine for a moment that you lived in the city of your ancestors and all of their decedents were ordered to return to that city. Your guest room would quickly fill up. That's what happened to Mary and Joseph's relatives. The guest room was full. Mary's baby was born in the common room, where the animals were kept. Fortunately for them, the weather was good, and the sheep were out with the shepherds that night. A manger became a makeshift crib. It was only the beginning of the surprises and changes that were to come.

According to the stories of our people, the angels didn't wait for good political news. They didn't bother with appearances to the rich and famous. They sang to shepherds, who had never before heard angel singing and were terrified by an event, they had no way of anticipating. Even after the angels had departed from them, they were left quaking in their boots and decided to go right away, in the middle of the night, to see the thing that the angels reported.

The entire story is told in a single chapter of the Gospel of Luke. And our people have been telling that story every year in the millennia that have followed.

We've merged our Christmas traditions with pre-existing celebrations, we've modified the date and adjusted the hour as we learned more about the progression of time and the movement of our planet. We've gone through major calendar revisions and refined our ability to tell time. We've commercialized the holiday to a point that it would not be recognized by the parents of the child or any of his followers in the first two or three centuries after his birth.

Still, there is something wonderful about this day. There is an air of expectation. There is the possibility of meaningful change. Surprise seems to surround us. This is a day that is different from all the others. We just don't yet fully understand the impact of the

day that lies ahead. It is a good day to watch the sunrise and greet the dawn with expectation and savor the anticipation that occurs on “the day before.”

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Merry Christmas – December 25, 2016

The primary source of the story we tell at Christmas is the Gospel of Luke. It is our tradition to read the second chapter of that Gospel, which begins, “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirin’i-us was governor of Syria.”

329 miles - or less than the distance from Rapid City to any city with a population larger than ours - north of Bethlehem, where Jesus was born, was the great trading center of the Syrian empire: Aleppo. Quirin’i-us’ trade capitol, like the tiny hamlet where the Christ Child was born, was, at the time, part of the Roman Empire. It was a thriving city that was vital to the operation of that empire - so much so that it is used as a way of noting the timing of the birth of Jesus.

Today that city, is mostly in ruins, thousands of its inhabitants have been maimed and murdered. Thousands more of them have been dispersed to any place that will take them and some have ended up in places where they are not welcome. It is a tragedy of global proportions - a part of a global crisis of refugees that is unprecedented.

The child whose birth we celebrate in this season was a Jew, born to a Jewish mother. He, like the other children in his family, was the product of centuries of Jewish thought and debate over the deepest questions of life. He was dedicated in the temple and raised according to the ways of his people and their religion. Later, after he became an adult and a teacher and was cruelly executed by the Roman authorities who were quick to hand out the death penalty. After he was raised from death by the glorious hand of God, another new religion came from the fertile minds of the scholars of that region. That religion became known as Islam and its followers call themselves Muslim. In that religion Jesus is revered as a prophet. Those who follow that religion are taught to respect and honor the teachings of Jesus. They revere the Bible of the Christians as sacred scripture.

To others, and that includes me and the members of the congregation that I serve, Jesus is known to be fully divine - the messiah - the savior of the world. We honor his words as critical lessons for the living of our lives. We understand his life as the turning point of all of history. We fully believe that Jesus spoke the truth when he said, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth, Blessed are the merciful . . . the pure of heart . . . the peacemakers.”

There are other words of Jesus, that shape our lives as well. It was Jesus, after all, who taught us this:

“‘I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’”

It was Jesus who taught us in no uncertain terms the response we are called to make to those hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, and imprisoned strangers from that city in Syria who are calling out to the world for compassion. It was Jesus who taught us how to respond to strangers. Yet, few of these strangers are being welcomed by our own country - fewer than by our far less populous neighbor, Canada, whose people have spent hundreds of millions of dollars to aid and support them. Blessed indeed are those people, for they are demonstrating their understanding of the teachings of Jesus.

Every Christmas I receive a few greetings that encourage us to “put the Christ back in Christmas.” I am not aware that we had removed the Christ from Christmas. Our congregation and the people I serve are unapologetically Christian in a nation where we enjoy and regularly exercise the freedom to wish others a merry Christmas. It is true that there are some very silly evasions of the deeper meaning of this holiday and there are plenty of very uninspiring greeting cards and more than a few office parties that seem far distant from the true meaning of the season. But ours isn’t exactly like the culture of early Christians who endured nearly three centuries of hiding in Roman catacombs before their religion became mainstream and they were allowed to practice their faith openly without fear of reprisal and persecution. We have the freedom to believe, act and proclaim our faith.

What we must remember, however, is that our actions speak far louder than our words. If we are to be serious about putting Christ into Christmas, we can do no less than celebrating his birth by demonstrating his teachings in the way we treat “the least of these my brothers.” And it is our actions that will be judged by God.

The baby whose birth we celebrate today has lessons for all of us. More than a few of those lessons are difficult. They demand of us sharing and sacrifice. They invite us into communion with those who are different from us. They reject our culture of consumerism and offer the freedom of life without worrying about what we wear or what food we will eat trusting that God will provide. They are even unconcerned with the rate of our taxes: “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's.”

Merry Christmas to all! May it be the season of renewed commitment to living the lessons that Jesus taught.

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On the Second Day of Christmas – December 26, 2016

It took me a minute to figure out what was going on as I woke this morning. I was awake before my alarm and as I lay in bed, I had to orient myself. What was going on was silence. What I wasn't hearing was the wind. When I went to bed last night the wind was really whipping through our neighborhood. There were times when it was difficult to distinguish the trees and houses across the street from our home. It was a genuine northern plains blizzard. We've spent enough winters in this country to know what that means and to know how to stay comfortable in storms. We had no plans for going anywhere, which was a good thing because there was a "No travel advised" notice out for all of Pennington County.

The storm was, of course, way bigger than a single county. According to the SafeTravel USA website, Interstate 90 is closed from Sheridan, Wyoming to Chamberlain, SD. That's 450 miles of highway closed to all travel. That has a significant impact on transportation in the area. Without the Interstate, groceries are not coming into our town. Mail and package delivery grind to a halt. Plenty of other things are disrupted.

The disruption is minimized in this storm because of the timing. Today is observed as a holiday by many businesses. With Christmas landing on a Sunday, banks and government offices and a lot of businesses were planning on being closed today. There is no school, so the busses can remain parked. We had no plans of going anywhere, so spending the morning digging out and clearing our driveway is a good plan for our day.

All in all, the impact of the blizzard was a bit less than we anticipated. We may have set a record yesterday morning for the lightest attendance at a regular Sunday morning worship service in our church, but the small congregation that gathered enjoyed the intimacy of worship and a time of fellowship before we all scurried home ahead of the heaviest snowfall and before the winds picked up. The streets were a bit slippery due to freezing rain, but we had no troubles getting around. It would not have been the same story in the afternoon. By then the county had issued the "no travel" advisory and we would have cancelled the service, had we planned one. The 4 pm gathering of The Well in which I usually participate on Sundays had already been canceled, so there were no difficult decisions to be made.

So, the second day of Christmas 2016 is staring out calm and peaceful. The new snow is beautiful and now there are no tracks in the street out in front of our house. There will be no newspaper today, so our carrier gets a day off and doesn't have to be out busting

drifts. I haven't heard any snowplows yet and I hope that the plow drivers get to sleep in a little bit. There is no rush to get things dug out.

For years I have found deep joy in the season of Christmas, but I find more peace after the first day has passed. Things are often a bit hectic and busy. We enjoy the celebration with big meals and exchanging presents and other activities, though our family often has chosen a different day for our big events because of the intensity of activity at the church on Christmas Eve. This year, we were home from church before noon and had the entire afternoon to nap, prepare a modest feast for two people, call family and friends and enjoy a pleasant dinner. We have been married for a long time and we think in very similar ways, so we also enjoyed a good laugh at the fact that we both chose the same gift to exchange. Our secrets in purchasing and wrapping the packages were mostly from ourselves as we completely duplicated the gift. At least we knew that the gift was something our partner wanted! Our children and grandchildren were thoughtful with their gift choices as well.

Since we will not be entertaining guests during this season, this is a good time for us to sit back, relax, and savor the blessings of Christmas. From a theological standpoint, Christmas is in some ways an easier holiday than Easter. Love being born in the form of a baby is so natural and so evident in the way our world works that one doesn't have the intellectual challenge that wrapping your head around resurrection presents. Still, the gap between what we know to be true about Christmas and the way we live our lives warrants careful reflection.

In the Western Church today is observed as the Feast of St. Stephen. It is observed on December 27 in Eastern tradition churches. Stephen was the first Christian martyr. In our corner of the church, we don't make much of St. Stephen's Day. For most folk, the day is simply a day to recover from some of the excesses of the previous day. A bit of exercise is a good response to what may have been a bit of overeating. A bit of cleaning is a good response to the clutter of unwrapping gifts. Throughout the United Kingdom the day is often referred to as Boxing Day - a day to remember the postman and other delivery personnel with a special box or package of treats. This too seems like an appropriate response after the intensity of pre-Christmas deliveries. The second day of Christmas is also a good time to tell the story of Good King Wenceslaus, who shared his meal with a poor peasant family, and the page who struggled to follow him through the winter weather until he discovered the trick of walking in the king's footsteps.

It appears that for us this morning the "rude wind's wild lament" is ceasing. Soon it will be time to bundle up and get to work on clearing the snow and getting ready for what comes next. But for now, in the predawn quiet, there are a few moments of peace.

Ahh . . .

What's With All the Birds? – December 27, 2016

“On the third day of Christmas my true love gave to me three French hens, two turtle doves and a partridge in a pear tree.” It is what is known as a cumulative song - one in which each verse adds a new element before repeating the previous verses. Most of the time the origins of the song are assumed to be English because it was first published in England, though some have found French roots for the song as well. There are similar songs that have appeared in Scotland and the Faroe Islands as well. In most of the versions it leaves us with the question, “What is with all of the birds, anyway?”

Modern versions of the song don't have birds for all the gifts. Unless you want to make obscure references to explain maids a-milking, ladies dancing, lords a-leaping, pipers piping and drummers drumming. The possibility that five golden rings might be a reference to ring-necked pheasants seems a bit less obscure. But how many people think of magpies when singing “maids a-milking” or the courting behaviors of lapwings when singing “ladies dancing?”

I've heard reports that the song is really a device for teaching basic Christian principles: three French hens represent the holy trinity; four calling birds are the four gospels; ten lords a-leaping are the ten commandments, etc. There is little real evidence to support this theory and it is likely that the extent to which the meanings are associated with the song has to do with interpretations that were later laid upon the song than with original intents of those who created the song.

There is also a theory that the song is evidence of the persistence of non-Christian traditions and ideas that persist after Christianity has become mainstream. There is a bit more evidence of this. After all the reason for 12 days in the Christmas season may come from the adaptation of a pre-existing holiday. Long before Christians came to the British Isles, ancient Celts observed twelve days of Yule. There are other holiday songs with counting to twelve that come from similar times and places: Jolly Old Hawk and The Dilly Song, which we sing as “Green Grow the Rushes-O.”

I'm certainly no music ethnologist and I am not even interested to do the work of researching the origins of a song that first appeared in printed form in the 19th century. Quite frankly, I'm not even sure of the “official” order of the gifts presented. I've heard the song with differing orders for the later gifts.

What interests me is that the song is one of the remnants of the celebration of Christmas stretched out throughout a season rather than being a single day. The digital calendar programmed into the datebook function of my computer shows December 25 as Christmas Day and December 26 as “Christmas observed” for 2016, suggesting that even Christmas is subject to the rather recent tradition of relegating all holidays to Monday. I prefer the practice of celebrating Christmas on December 25 regardless of which day of the week it lands, but there were some, even some in the church I serve,

who asked me, “Are you going to have church on Christmas day?” the answer, of course is “Yes, we have worship on every Sunday.” The weather was a factor in church attendance, but the separation of Christmas from worship never occurred to me. And, for the record, next year when Christmas Day is a Monday, we will have morning worship and two evening Christmas Eve services on December 24. I’m old enough that I’ve been through this before.

I do, however, find it challenging to really observe 12 days of Christmas as a continuous holiday. This year I have a funeral to plan and conduct. That is not an infrequent occurrence in a congregation of our size. There is a newsletter to produce and mail. We have worship bulletins to prepare for January 1 worship. There are end of the years finances to be settled. The annual reports and annual meeting of the congregation loom as January events that require a lot of preparation. The list goes on and on.

In our home, we will be leaving our Christmas tree up at least until January 6 and we likely will not take it down until the 9th this year. In our tradition, we observe Epiphany on the Sunday between January 2 and 8, even though the actual day of Epiphany is January 6. That means that our observance is as late as it can get this year because January 1 falls on a Sunday. That will line up fine with our home holiday decorations because we were rather late in getting our tree up, so it will remain fresh. At the church, I’m not so sure. It is likely that a crew will be assembled to take down the tree on January 7. Waiting any longer might make it difficult to recruit workers for the rather large task of taking down the big sanctuary tree.

I know from experience, however, that in the secular marketing world, Christmas is already over. The only sings of Christmas in retail stores will be the bargain discount tables that were hastily filled as Christmas stock was removed from the shelves to make room for Valentine’s Day candies. You won’t be hearing Christmas Carols on the sound systems in the stores now that December 25 has passed. After all, they’ve been playing Christmas songs since Thanksgiving and the employees are getting tired of them. I know from experience that the same people who complain about singing Advent Carols and wonder why we don’t start singing Christmas Carols sooner are the ones who will wonder why we’re still singing Christmas carols after Christmas day. The idea of Christmas as a season that comes only at the end of four full weeks of Advent preparation is not particularly popular.

So have a happy third day of Christmas. There are still more Christmas days to come. As to the French hens, I’m probably not giving any birds as gifts this year.

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A Tragedy in Our City – December 28, 2016

On December 19, our city council passed its annual Human Services Subsidy Fund Allocations. There was debate on the floor of the City Council about only one of the

items in the allocations - the fact that the Front Porch Coalition, which had received allocations in previous years was not on the list of agencies to receive funding in 2017.

Our City Council Meetings are recorded and available for the public to watch. I watched the debate after the meeting and tried to listen carefully to the positions of various council members.

The discussion of the item reflected a basic reality: The city has limited funds and there are always requests for more funding than the amount of funds available. Decisions need to be made every year about whether and how much to fund the agencies that apply. On the other hand, the subsidy for the 211 help line was doubled in the bill that passed. Other agencies were completely left out of the funding list. The Council clearly decided to change its priorities for funding. Unfortunately, however, the bill and debate also reflected some misunderstandings on the part of city council members. The proposal was brought to the Council without recommendation.

I know that there is little to no chance of changing the thinking of the members of the Council, but I am concerned about some of the mistaken assumptions behind the change.

For example, it was noted that the number of people affected by suicide in our community is lower than other issues confronting our community. The error with that thinking is that it is based in the practice of counting bodies. If you only count the number of people who die, you simply fail to count the number of people who are affected. Every suicide affects dozens of people. Furthermore, other issues such as homelessness, chronic mental illness and addiction are directly related to suicide - you cannot separate them into different categories.

Councilman Richie Nordstrom noted that he had visited with the Front Porch Coalition and that the Coalition had not taken his advice. I wish he could see his paternalism. His attitude that he wants to fund only agencies that he can control defies the way cities operate. The Front Porch Coalition is an independent non-profit agency that operates in our community precisely because the city's official government has no services for those who have experienced suicide in their families. The City Council is not involved in suicide prevention in any way. The Coalition is a way for the city to partner with others in our community, not a way for the city to direct the efforts of its citizens.

It was also noted that some of the volunteers who serve on the LOSS (Local Outreach to Survivors of Suicide) Team are tired. This may be true, but it seems hard to argue that a team of nine persons with seven in training, for a total of 16 people who maintain the ability to dispatch a team of two or more people 24 hours a day, seven days a week are tired. There is a lot of energy involved in the process of maintaining the LOSS team that has been named by national leaders as "the nation's most fully integrated with law

enforcement team.” Tired, however isn’t the reason I cringe when I receive a call in the middle of the night. It is the knowledge that some family has been struck by a tragedy.

Another huge misunderstanding that was perpetrated by the Council debate was the statement that response after a suicide is not prevention. Statistics show that a survivor (one who has lost a loved one to suicide) is at more than double the risk of dying by suicide if they do not receive proper support. When a quick response is made following a suicide, those rates can be significantly lower. In Suicide Prevention, the phrase is “postvention is prevention.” What we do after a suicide has a direct impact on the number of people. Furthermore, the Front Porch Coalition is the community’s primary source of prevention education, offering ASIST training, Safe Talk training, hosting workshops as a part of Freshman Impact, and providing speakers for groups across the city. There is absolutely no agency in our community that even comes close to the work that the Front Porch Coalition does.

As has been true in other debates, there are members of the City Council who fail to distinguish between investment and expense. There is absolutely no question that the LOSS team saves the city tens of thousands of dollars each year in decreased law enforcement costs. Preventing one suicide saves the city more than the \$3,000 the city invested in the Coalition in 2016. Having a team respond to a suicide saves time for city police and allows them to focus on their other responsibilities. Saying the City can’t afford to participate is the failure to see how much more it costs for the city not to participate.

One council member seemed to think that churches are already providing adequate suicide prevention services to the community. That member seems to forget that it was churches who were primary partners in forming the Front Porch Coalition.

I could argue for hours about what I see to be a major error in judgment on the part of the Council, but there is another point that seems to me to be more important.

The Front Porch Coalition is a group of agencies and individuals in our community who have decided to bring the discussion of mental illness and suicide out into the public. We are aware of the stigma attached to the discussion of suicide, but we know that open discussion and coordinated action can make a difference. We have decided to band together - to form a coalition to work together for suicide prevention. By working together, we have formed one of the nation’s most effective LOSS teams. We are providing suicide awareness and prevention education of the highest quality in our city.

We won’t cease our work because of the loss of city funding. We’ll make up that loss through more fund-raising events.

It is a tragedy that the city has chosen to say that it doesn’t want to belong to the coalition.

We Won't Be Going Back – December 29, 2016

I've been reading Joseph Campbell's "The Hero with a Thousand Faces," lately. I know, I should have read that book when I was in college. I have owned it for some time, and I have referred to it a lot of times. It was easy to read short sections of the book and even extract quotes and concepts for other writing that I have done over the years. The book has a very clear table of contents and is thoroughly researched with an excellent bibliography and footnotes. I knew the basic flow and concepts of the book before I started reading it word for word, cover to cover. The result, I admit, is that reading the book is a bit of a "slog." It is quite a bit more boring to read than would have been the case had I not familiarized myself with its concepts before getting around to reading it.

I'll write a review of the book in my books section on this website when I finish reading it, and I don't intend to do book reviews in my journal, but one of my arguments with the book so far (at about 2/3 of the way through it) is that the push to discover commonalities in the wide variety of stories and mythologies discussed is so intense that the book lacks any specificity about the distinctions between religions and cultural beliefs. A basic assignment of teachers seeking to enable critical thinking is "compare and contrast." Campbell got the "compare" down superbly in the book. He would have to write another volume entirely to approach the "contrast" part of the assignment. The result is that people whose core beliefs rest with one of the specific religions discussed feel that their faith has been slighted by Campbell. They approach their faith in terms of its uniqueness and what distinguishes it from other faiths. Campbell is looking for similarities and asserts that all faiths are telling the same story.

One of the areas where Campbell fails to understand the different stories by trying to make them all the same is a significant difference in the view of the nature of time. Another well-published author on the subject of mythology, Devdutt Pattanaik, focused on the fundamental differences between eastern and western thought in a TED talk a few years ago. He asserted that it makes a big difference whether you believe that history is a one-way street or that it is a loop that repeats itself. If death is a singular experience, one must achieve what one can in this life. If it is an oft-repeated experience, what is not achieved this time around can be done in another life. I'm grossly simplifying Pattanaik's argument here, but the distinction is important in understanding the world view of others. By asserting that there are distinctions between world views, Pattanaik offers a depth of understanding that is absent in Campbell's book. To be fair, I haven't finished the book and perhaps I will be surprised by its ending.

All of this is to provide a bit of background for a bit of political commentary that has been going through my head since the recent US presidential election. I'm not an accomplished political analyst, and I am not capable of explaining the results of the

election, but there are many voters who have a kind of nostalgia for the past that I don't share. The campaign slogan "Make America Great Again," is based on the assumption that somehow our country is not at present as great as once was the case. Several commentators and pundits have concluded that the desire of at least some of the voters is for a return of the 1950's when our country was experiencing a post-war baby boom, a growing economy, an expanding middle class and had a sense of increasing opportunity for workers. While other commentators have observed some of the problems of the 1950's such as embedded racism, deep set sexism and huge inequalities, I am not particularly interested in arguing whether the 1950's were greater than the 2010's for our country. The argument, it seems to me, is pointless.

No amount of votes and no map of red and blue states can change the fact that it is impossible for a nation to go backwards in history.

Just read the headlines in today's paper. Debbie Reynolds died yesterday at age 84. According to her son, Todd Fisher, she suffered a stroke while discussing funeral plans for her daughter, Carrie Fisher, who had died the previous day after suffering a heart attack during a flight to Los Angeles last Friday.

Like the people whose funerals at which I officiate, the death is real. Debbie Reynolds is not coming back. If you want to reprise "Singin' in the Rain" you're going to have to do it with another actress. If the 1952 musical with Debbie Reynolds and Gene Kelly is your idea of the moment when America was great, there is no way to make it happen. The world has moved on. Furthermore, I'm not a movie buff, but even I know that Singin' in the Rain was a nostalgia movie harkening back to the "good old days" of movie making in the 1920's.

Because we are deeply aware of the losses that come with the passage of time, our lives are compounded with grief upon grief. Like the family of Carrie Fisher and Debbie Reynolds, we are not allowed to have a single grief at a time, but our hearts are broken by many losses. We can wish for a time before we had experienced such grief, but such a wish will not change reality. In fact when grief gets hung up it can develop into a severe and debilitating mental illness that requires careful professional treatment.

History is a one-way street. There is no going back. I, for one, am grateful for that simple fact, if for no other reason that when I finish Campbell's book, I have no plans to ever read it cover to cover again. I'll be glad to put that one behind me.

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Pondering the Shepherds – December 30, 2016

Only one of the four gospels, Luke, reports of the appearance of angels to shepherds. It is told in a couple of paragraphs in the midst of a consistently brief narrative of the birth of the Christ child:

“And in that region, there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, ‘Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!’”

The Gospel goes on to tell of the shepherds going to Bethlehem and finding Mary, Joseph and the baby lying in the manger. It also reports that when the shepherds reported what had happened to them, “All who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.”

It is a very curious encounter.

One assumes that this was a once-in-a-lifetime event, that the shepherds had no prior experiences that helped them to understand what was happening to them. Their usual routines were dramatically interrupted. Then after all of that heavenly glory, which had filled them with fear what they discovered was a baby lying in a manger - a rather humble and common set of circumstances.

Babies are nice. They are fascinating. Looking at a baby can fill one with awe that is beyond the power of language to express. They are also very common. In 2013, UNICEF estimated that an average of 353,000 babies are born each day around the world. Of course, world population is much greater than it was in the time of Jesus’ birth, so the birth of a child would have been much less common. Still, it was an everyday occurrence.

Thinking of the Gospel story, I can’t help but wonder if the Shepherds had any idea what the angel meant when announcing “a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” Assuming that the shepherds were Jewish, which seems likely, they would have had some familiarity with the prophetic statements concerning a messiah. They might even have heard rabbis extolling a vision of the coming of someone who would restore Israel to its place of world prominence and liberate them from the oppressive powers of the Roman empire that was a constant drain on the local economy and resulted in significant suffering and premature death for many common people.

The lot of shepherds, however, probably wasn't that much different under Roman imperial rule than it had been in the times of the Israeli monarchy. The shepherds probably knew the stories of King David, who started out his life as a simple shepherd boy, but who was chosen and anointed to become king of the people. They probably knew stories of Solomon, son of David, who amassed a huge fortune and lived a life of luxury in the midst of the people. But they probably knew that even if there were to be a huge political upheaval, the lot of shepherds was likely to remain a very humble life indeed.

From what evils do you think the shepherds felt they needed to be saved? What would a savior mean in their lives? Higher wages? Personal security? Better health? More food? Before their encounter with the angel, what do you think they were praying for in their lives? After seeing the baby in the manger, how were their lives different?

One thing, of course, is obvious. They had a story to tell, not that many people would believe what had happened to them. It would be three decades before Jesus called disciples from the ranks of a generation younger than the original shepherds. And there is no specific record of Jesus calling a shepherd to be a disciple anyway. It would be nearly a century before the story of the encounter between the angel and the shepherds would become a part of Luke's gospel. It would be three centuries before the religion that arose in the wake of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to become mainstream in the region. The descendants of the shepherds who eventually became Christian might not even have known their personal relationship to those shepherds.

Angel song and a baby in the manger might have remained the high point, but still a mystery, to the shepherds for all their lives.

For those of us who ponder the lot of the shepherds these millennia later, it is worthwhile to ponder our own lot. Do we believe in a savior of the world? If so what would salvation look like? Political change? World peace? A change in the gap between the rich and the poor of the world? Food enough for all? Healthcare for all babies born? How do we imagine salvation? For what do we pray?

And there is an even more perplexing question. Would we recognize the savior of the world even if angels sang the song and we were allowed to see the tiny baby? Or would we simply tell a lot of stories that left those who heard them wondering?

Christmas is a season of pondering questions, most of which are rhetorical. I don't know the answers, but it still seems meaningful to ponder the questions.

This season of our lives seems to be notably dark, with many people expressing a sense of hopelessness that I have not previously witnessed in my time as a minister. The timing seems right for us to pray for a savior.

Like those shepherds of old, however, we aren't sure what we are praying for.

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Believe in the Impossible – December 31, 2016

I was in the third grade when President John F. Kennedy announced before a joint session of Congress the goal of sending an American safely to the Moon and back before the end of the decade. I had just completed my sophomore year in high school (grade 10) when Neil Armstrong stepped onto the surface of the moon. He and Buzz Aldrin not only arrived in the lander Eagle but returned to the earth safely. I connect these events with my own personal life because I attended elementary school in the era of believing in the impossible. The goal set by the president wasn't, of course, impossible. It just seemed that way to many people at the time that it was set.

I grew up in an atmosphere of believing that things that had previously been declared impossible could be achieved. I grew up with parents who were both pilots. I can't remember my first ride in an airplane, but it took place when I was a tiny infant. But I knew well the history of aviation. We had a book in our home that reported that in 1895 Lord Kelvin declared that heavier-than-air flying machines were impossible. In October of 1903, the prevailing opinion of expert aerodynamicists was that it would take 10 million years for humans to build an airplane that would fly. They were wrong. Two months later, on December 17, 1903, Orville Wright piloted the first airplane. It flew 120 feet. I have a picture of that flight hanging on the wall of my library. The plane is maybe three feet off the ground in that picture. By the time I was born, my father was routinely flying at altitudes up to 12,000 feet at speeds of over 150 mph. That kind of low and slow flying seems ancient today. We hop on jet airliners that transport hundreds of people at a time and fly from continent to continent in less than a day. In fact, before I was born, on Tuesday, October 14, 1947, Chuck Yeager flew faster than the speed of sound in the Bell X-1. Today the term supersonic is old hat. Now engineers are talking about hypersonic flight. At Mach 20, an aircraft will go from New York to Long Beach in less than 12 minutes. Engineers have achieved fully controlled, aerodynamic flight at Mach 20 in unmanned vehicles.

Believing in the impossible is more than an option for those of us who live in these times. Believing in the impossible is how our future is unfolding. It isn't just in the fields of science and engineering where believing in the impossible is helping human beings to move into our future. A few examples from the year ending today serve to illustrate.

I first heard of Teresita Gaviria in 2013. She had started a protest in front of a church in Columbia. The first event drew five mothers who had lost children in the 50-year war in Columbia. They began to gather every week. Soon there were hundreds. Then they went to prisons to speak with fighters. They lobbied the government to begin peace

talks. They insisted that victims be included in high level negotiations. They were told that peace was impossible.

Teresita Gaviria believed in the impossible. And in 2016, a peace deal was reached. It has been described as groundbreaking in part because of the contributions of victims to the negotiations. Yes, there are plenty of critics, but when President Santos and Farc leader Londono shook hands after inking the deal, the crowd cheered “Yes we could!”

Sophien Kamoun is from Tunisia. He has seen first-hand the effects of pesticides in developing countries. Every year thousands die after using pesticides on diseased crops. Professor Kamoun believed that there had to be another way to produce food. He was told that it was impossible to have plants that were no longer susceptible to disease. He had the courage to believe the impossible. “Every year we lose enough food to feed hundreds of millions of people to pathogens and parasites,” he declared. In 2016, professor Kamoun successfully used gene editing to produce a tomato that is resilient to fungal disease. There is a long road ahead for plant scientists to produce plants to feed millions without the use of pesticides, but the first “impossible” step has been taken.

Dr. Hemantha Herath saw the end of the Sri Lankan Civil War in 2009 as an opportunity for the government to do something that would significantly improve the lives of the citizens of his country. He got the government to set an impossible goal - the elimination of Malaria in less than five years. Prior to the 2009 peace agreement, health workers couldn't even get to the worst affected areas without risking their lives. In 2009 the country instituted the bold strategy of testing every patient who came to a hospital who had had a fever in the past. In 2016, it was declared official: Sri Lanka is now malaria-free.

When he was 40, Bertrand Picard traveled non-stop around the world in a hot air balloon. He made history. But after achieving that milestone, he made an impossible promise: the next time he flew around the world it would be with no fuel. He wanted to prove that clean energy was practical. Seventeen years later, on March 9, 2015, Picard took off from Abu Dhabi airport in Solar Impulse 2, an airplane with over 17,000 solar cells on its exterior. His journey was powered by nothing other than the sun. Picard took turns with co-pilot Andre Borschberg. There were a lot of challenges. The weather did not always cooperate. There were diplomatic issues obtaining clearances to land at certain airports. On July 26 of 2016, Picard landed back in Abu Dhabi, after 23 days of flight. A solar-powered airplane had flown all the way around the world.

In 2016 we have seen the impossible achieved.

In 2017 as well we've got to believe in the impossible.

