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February 1, 2011 – Unending Tasks



Our home is a place where books are treasured and read. If the current spate of cold weather were to keep us home-bound, we would be good for quite a while. I'm sure we would run out of food to eat before we ran out of books to read. We actually own two unabridged dictionaries and have been known to have them both out to check for variations, inconsistencies and nuances of word origins or meanings.

We know better than to think that any single dictionary would have the last word.

Increasingly, we have been using our computers to research meanings and information. The computers are wonderful, but one has to wade through a lot more trivial - and often untrue - information. A trusted dictionary is usually a quicker route to a true meaning than a google search.

What we don't have is The Oxford English Dictionary. The 20-volume hardcover set is priced at over \$1,200. and stocks of the books are running low. The publisher won't be coming out with another print edition. The full Oxford English Dictionary is now available online for subscription by institutions. Students who are lucky enough to attend a university that has a paid subscription can browse the dictionary at will. At 205 pounds (\$330) per year, the subscription is a bit steep for an individual. Still, it is a marvelous dictionary and worth a trip to a library just to spend some time looking through the volumes.

In the middle of the 19th Century, the Philological Society in London formed a committee to seek to correct the problems that they saw with existing dictionaries. There were many errors in dictionaries and often the history of the usage of a word was not made clear by dictionary entries. Obsolete words were often not to be found. Often the dictionaries did not provide context for the words, which made their usage unclear. Eventually the Society launched a project to develop a new comprehensive dictionary of the English Language.

Originally published as “A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles” (NED), the name Oxford English Dictionary was attached to the 1933 edition of 12 volumes plus a supplemental volume.

The production of the Oxford English Dictionary has been a massive task over the years. According to the publisher, it would take a single person 120 years to just type the text of the 301,000 main entries. The 20-volume set contains 21,730 pages. The word “set” has a 60,000 word definition.

But it is not perfect. In fact as the size of the dictionary has grown, so has the number of disputed definitions and usages. Even if agreement could be reached on the meanings of existing words, the vocabulary of the English Language is growing so fast, that it is impossible to keep up.

The job started by the Philological Society is one that can never be finished.

Maybe that is what is so engaging about any dictionary. It contains only part of the truth. While a dictionary may resolve a dispute over the spelling or use of a single word, there are enough variations in the language for a lifetime of exploration and conversation. A lifetime is far too short to explore all of the meanings of our language. And if we were to become competent in the use of the English language, there are 6,808 other languages in the catalogue of languages at Ethnologue, one authoritative source for a list of distinctive languages. The Bible, considered to be the most widely translated book in the world, has only made it into about 2,200 languages.

All of this is just trivia, I suppose. But it is interesting to me that we humans continue to work at jobs that are so much bigger than our abilities. Like the Philological Society starting a dictionary project that will never be finished, we like to start projects that extend beyond the span of a lifetime. There is something in human nature that engages us in really big ventures.

Along the way we have our successes. The completion of each edition of the OED was a kind of publishing landmark and a success worth celebrating. Creating a complete and error-free dictionary is an unending task.

For now we will have to live with the simple fact that no one has yet gotten in the last word.

In our Websters, the last word is zymurgy (the art or science of fermentation). The American Heritage Dictionary lists zyzyva (tropical American weevil). I think the American Heritage is sort of cheating. After all, those naming plants and insects have control over the spelling of the names they make up and it is obvious that zyzyva was made up with the intention of being the last word in the dictionary.

Neither word is technically later in the alphabet than the spelling used in comic strips for snoring: zzzzz, which might be a typical response to today's blog.

It simply is not possible to get the last word in.

And that is a good thing, because it means we will keep talking.

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February 2, 2011 – Happy Woodchuck Day!



It is cold outside this morning, nearly -15. But the forecast is for sunny skies and the cold snap should start to break sometime today with warmer temperatures for tomorrow. So, there is little chance that the woodchuck can avoid seeing his shadow in Rapid City by any other means than just staying in its burrow. Of course, staying in the burrow is exactly what all good woodchucks want to do. *Marmota monax*, the largest

species of ground squirrel in North America, is one of the few true hibernators. They rely entirely on body fat to make it through winter. Their heartbeat slows from about 75 beats per minute to as few as 4, and their body temperature drops from the 90s to the 40s.

The creatures go by several different names: "Groundhog," "Woodchuck," and "Whistle Pig" are all used. The latter name probably comes from the noise one of the creatures will make when disturbed. They whistle, squeak, bark, chatter and grind their teeth.

So, unlike the folks in Punxsutawney, PA and Vancouver, BC, we have no intention of reaching into a burrow to drag out one of the critters to expose it to the sun. Just let sleeping woodchucks lie, I think.

The roots of the holiday go back way farther than the 1887 recognition in Punxsutawney. The ancient Celtic peoples had a festival of Imboic, usually held February 1, halfway between the Winter Solstice and the Spring Equinox. The festival was a time of praying for an anticipating the coming spring. There were attempts at predicting how quickly spring weather might arrive incorporated into the observances.

As Christianity spread throughout the British Isles, the Celtic goddess of Imboic, Brigid, became St. Brigid of Kildare, patron saint of Ireland. The date of the observance was moved to February 2 and christened "Candlemas." In churches that observe the Latin Rite, Candlemas is also known as "The Feast of the Presentation in the Temple." It is also known as "The Purification of the Blessed Virgin" in Greek Rite congregations.

As an observant Jew, Mary would have complied with the Mosaic law and stayed away from the sanctuary for forty days after the birth of her son. Then she was to bring a lamb and a pigeon to the temple to sacrifice. If the supplicant couldn't afford a lamb, as was likely the case of Mary, two turtle doves or pigeons would be accepted by the priest. The celebrations also recall the presentation of Jesus in the temple and the response of Simeon and Anna reported in Luke 2:22. A solemn procession with candles and the repeating of the Song of Simeon is incorporated into the observance of the holiday.

Although observed as a religious holiday, even the strong influence of the church couldn't stifle the tradition of forecasting the weather as part of the observance. Tradition held that winter wasn't over if Candlemas was sunny enough to cast shadows. A cloudy, shadow-free day suggested that spring was just around the corner. According to one old British saying, "If Candlemas Day be bright and clear, there'll be two winters in the year."

The connection between Woodchucks (or groundhogs) and the holiday seems to be an American invention with a bit of German tradition behind it. There was an ancient German practice of predicting the end of winter based on observing the hibernation patterns of various animals including bears and badgers. As people of German descent

settled in Pennsylvania in the 1800's they brought their customs with them. I'm thinking that the substitution of woodchucks for badgers or bears was a practical notion. I know I don't want to have to deal with a badger or a bear who has been disturbed in its sleep.

I don't put too much stock in the weather-predicting abilities of hibernating mammals. The National Climatic Data Center has released an analysis of the predictions of Punxsutawney Phil's predictions from 1988 to 2005 and found that the forecasts were only correct 39 percent of the time. A study of Canada's 13 most popular weather-forecasting groundhogs found the success rate to be about 37 percent over a 40 year span. That puts them about on par with television weather forecasters and a bit less accurate than the Internet.

So here is my formula for the day. If there is a pile of wood that is split and ready to deliver in the church yard on woodchuck day that means that the winter has not yet been quite as severe as some years. If the pile were all gone, we'd know that there had already been extra demand for firewood. Since we have wood, it follows that there have been no major power pole-splitting blizzards in the region of our partner churches this year. It has been cold, and there has been a bit of snow, but people have not been stranded without electricity for more than a few hours so far.

Whether or not spring comes early, we are prepared with enough firewood to make a large extra delivery to one of our partner congregations should the need arise. And, if the Woodchuck doesn't see his shadow, we have a jump on our preparations for next winter.

I intend to greet folks today with a cheery "Happy Woodchucks Day!" It will make them wonder what I've been up to. And it might give me a chance to talk about the real connection of the day. I'm not thinking about the one between secular and religious holidays or the one between the lunar calendar and weather prediction. I'm thinking about the connection between faith and the service of others.

The woodchuck predicts that as long as people of faith gather, they will be moved to act in service to others. I'd rather be a part of a community of service than have accurate weather predictions any day.

Happy Woodchucks Day!

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February 3, 2011 - Communion



Taking communion to people in nursing homes is something that I have been doing for more than three decades. Church members often have questions about communion. They may have opinions about children receiving communion or who should serve communion or how often it should be served. But there is agreement that communion should be made available to those who live in nursing homes. I have never had someone ask me whether an elder living in a nursing home understands the meaning of communion in the way they might ask the question of a child. I have never felt any pressure to make sure that I know the membership status of a nursing home worshipper before serving communion. As a result, nursing home communion services have an openness and a quality to them that I appreciate. And I appreciate the services more and more as I grow older and layer experience upon experience.

I say that because I write today's blog with a bit of fear. I want to tell a story of yesterday's experience, but I don't want readers to think that I am making fun of the people I was serving. They are not stupid or incapable or somehow less faithful than the people I serve in our church sanctuary. They are people of genuine faith who participate fully in the life of Christianity. When I serve communion at the nursing home, it not a case of taking the church to them. It is being the church together in their unique setting.

There has been a bit of sickness at the nursing home and the congregation gathered for communion yesterday was smaller than usual. The room was a bit more quiet than normal. Some of the participants had recently been confined to their rooms and have

just returned to activities in the public room of the facility. As is my custom, I read the gospel before beginning the communion liturgy. This week's reading is from Matthew from the Sermon on the Mount. It is very familiar to the residents, and I could see several heads nodding in recognition as I read.

I use the same liturgy for communion each month in the nursing home. As memories fade, there is security and meaning in the familiar and I strive to provide a worship service that connects with the congregation.

After reading the liturgy, I began to serve the people. I take the tray of bread first and when everyone has been served, I take a tray of cups. I invite people to eat and drink as they are served to minimize problems with dropped bread or spilled cups. There is a woman who usually attends the services who almost always falls asleep while I am reading the liturgy. She lets her teeth slip from her mouth as she goes to sleep. Once I just passed her by when I was serving, only to have to go back and serve her after we had shared the prayer of thanksgiving when she woke. So now I make it a point to wake her and give her a minute to readjust her teeth as I am serving. I try to wake any resident who is sleeping to see if they want to receive communion.

Yesterday as I was serving two things happened that I had not previously experienced. One resident who is new to me seemed eager to receive communion. When I came to her with the bread, she took a piece. Then she took another. Then she took another. She had four pieces of bread in her hand before I could get the plate out of her reach. I don't know how many she might have taken had I just held the plate out to her as is my custom. I said, "The body of Christ, given for you." She stuffed all four pieces into her mouth. When I came back around with the cups, I took a single cup and handed it to her and kept the tray out of her reach. She had a big grin as she drank from her cup.

There was a gentleman who was sleeping when I came with the bread. I touched his hand and waited for a response. He opened his eyes and said, "What?" I said, "We're having communion. Would you like a piece of bread?" He looked at me and repeated, "What?" I explained that we all were sharing communion and that he was welcome to a piece of bread. He didn't respond, so I took a piece of bread and placed it in his hand. I went on to serve the others. When I came back with the tray of cups, he held up the bread and asked, in a voice loud enough for all to hear, "What the hell is this?" I explained that it was the bread of communion and that he was welcome to eat it. Then, because his choice of words surprised me, I said, "If you would prefer not to receive communion, I can take the piece of bread." He gave it back to me and looked at me blankly. I have served communion to this man dozens of times. I had never received such a response before.

One woman so eager that she wants to eat it all. One man questioning the meaning and the purpose of the practice. I probably have at least one of each type in the

congregation every time I serve communion at church. The folks in our congregation have some inhibitions about acting out their thoughts and usually they are more restrained in their outbursts. One thing I've discovered about losing one's hearing is that it seems to grant permission to speak very loudly in public places.

I have multiple communion services on the days that I serve at the nursing home. After a short time to visit with those who joined the service, it was time to head to another nursing home, so I didn't have time to explore the thoughts of the worshippers more fully. As I greeted the people individually after the service, the eager woman took my hand warmly, but didn't say a word. I realized that she hadn't said anything since I arrived. The man who had been sleeping thanked me for coming. I began to think that he wasn't fully awake before when I was trying to serve communion.

The truth about the sacrament is that it is the experience of the holy in a human form. God's presence comes to us in ordinary, everyday elements of bread and juice. Those of us who are called to serve are very human and prone to mistakes. The congregations we serve are full of unique individuals and different levels of experience and faith. Despite all these things, Christ is present with us.

I can't explain it any more than I was able to answer the gentleman's question about what it is. I do, however, remain grateful for the privilege of witnessing the miracle. It surprises me no less after decades of service than it did the first time, I read the words and held out the elements for others to share.

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Friday, February 4, 2011 - Chicago Blizzard



The Groundhog's Day blizzard that dropped snow from Canada to Texas is moving off to the east and is now one for the record books. We received news from folks in several states hit by lots of snow and cold weather. Friends in Missouri were digging out yesterday, others in Indiana were having a similar experience. As many as seventy people spent the night stranded in their cars on Interstate 29 in Northeastern South Dakota. An acquaintance was having a terrible time getting from Texas to South Dakota for her mother's birthday party following a series of cancelled flights.

I spend a half hour or so looking at pictures from Chicago.

We lived in Chicago from 1974 to 1978. The last two years that we lived there, I worked in Hinsdale - about 25 miles west of our apartment in Hyde Park near the University of Chicago. My commute was the opposite of most of the traffic. I drove out of the city in the morning and back into the city in the afternoon. We had an Opel Kadette, a light-weight, underpowered import from Germany that was easy on gas and simple to repair. It was a dozen years old during my last year of commuting.

But I was a kid from Montana. I had a trunk full of blankets, candles, snacks, coveralls and other supplies. I always carried a shovel and a good ice scraper. And I had tire chains - something people in Chicago seemed not to know about. The car had 13" tires

and weighed only 1700 pounds. I could put the chains on it in less than 15 minutes. And I never met a storm in Chicago that stopped us.

The record-setting storm for the time that we lived there was known locally as the great blizzard of '78. It started snowing on January 25 and the snow lasted for a couple more days. There was plenty of wind and it snowed about 16 inches. My sister was flying into O'Hare Airport for an interview with Bell Labs and our plan was for Susan to take the train to Hinsdale after work. I'd meet her there and we'd drive to the hotel where my sister was staying and take her back to our apartment for dinner and overnight at our place, returning her to her interview the next morning.

We didn't have cell phones, but Susan called the office before she left the apartment to walk the four blocks to the train station, so I knew about what time she left. It took her almost an hour longer than I expected to get to the Hinsdale station. When she switched trains in the loop the station was very crowded and the trains were running way too full. They were also running late.

On our way through town it became obvious that there weren't going to be too many snow plows. I stopped at the church parking lot to put the chains on the car and we headed up to the motel where my sister was staying. The weather got worse and we decided to have dinner and spend the night at my sister's motel rather than drive on the snow packed freeways after dark. She had had a harrowing ride in a limousine from the airport driven by someone who didn't seem to have much experience with snowy and slippery roads. She said she almost offered to drive the car for the terror-stricken driver.

The next morning, we were up early and headed to Hyde Park to show my sister our neighborhood. We didn't have any trouble getting where we wanted to go, but it was a challenge to drive around all of the cars that had been abandoned on the Stevenson freeway. Lakeshore drive was a little better. I had to snake my way around abandoned cars, but didn't get stuck until I tried to go over the snowplow berm at the driveway to our parking lot. A little bit of work with the shovel and a push and we were in our parking space.

Susan had to walk in the middle of the street to get to work and there was no traffic moving in our neighborhood.

I couldn't believe that people would just give up and abandon their cars. I couldn't believe that so many people could live in a place with that much winter and not have tire chains.

So it was "deja vu" for me as I looked at the pictures of all the cars stuck on Lakeshore Drive yesterday. The blizzard of 2011 brought more snow and deeper drifts than the one we experienced in '78, but the principle is the same. People drive their cars every

day in a place prone to storms and are not adequately prepared for the weather they encounter.

Assuming they are able to make it safely to some shelter, once the people are warmed up they still have a challenge trying to get to wherever it is they are going on overcrowded trains. The busses can't go once the roads fill up with abandoned cars. Clean up takes days. Fleets of tow trucks follow the plows and start clearing the roads. Impound lots fill up with towed vehicles. Back in '78 it took some people weeks to recover their vehicles, which were accumulating fees as the people figured out how to get them out of impound. Who knows how long it will take to sort out the vehicles that were abandoned during this week's blizzard?

But then I grew up in Montana. I had gotten a jeep stuck a dozen miles from the nearest home in -20 weather before I was 18 years old. There was no question of abandoning the vehicle. I had to shovel and then jack the jeep up in order to get the chains on it. Then I had to shovel some more to lower the jeep enough to get it going. I remember the first time I got a car stuck in a snow drift delivering newspapers when I was 15. I walked home to ask my dad for help. He suggested that I needed to learn to get myself out of such situations, advised me to put on a pair of coveralls, grab a shovel and head back to the car.

I heard that all sorts of things were selling in hardware stores on the day before the blizzard. Big box home improvement centers were selling out of salt and generators and flashlights. Bottled water was a big seller. (Hint, in case of emergency, your water heater is full of guess what? . . . water!)

I wonder how many people bought a pair of coveralls, tire chains and a shovel. They may not even know that when the drifts get deep an aluminum grain scoop is just the right shovel, but it doesn't hurt to have a spade to reach under the vehicle as well.

But, then, I'm just a kid from Montana. What do I know of blizzards in Chicago?

Stay warm out there. And be careful. We don't want anyone to get hurt. Every blizzard you survive without losing fingers, toes or ears to frostbite gives you a story to tell.

I can almost see my kids' eyes rolling back in their heads as I responded to the 2011 blizzard by blogging about the great blizzard of '78. With a little luck, the folks who endured the blizzard of '11 will be able to bore their children and grandchildren with stories for years to come.

Saturday, February 5, 2011 - Save a Tree Octopus



There has been a lot said and written about the quality of Information that is available on the Internet. It isn't that the Internet cannot be a source of solid information and research. It is that there is a lot of misinformation and outright lies mixed with the genuine information that is available on the Internet. I'm sure I am not the only one who has opened an e-mail message from a friend or associate to discover that she or he has been taken in by some sort of hoax.

Dr. Donald Leu, professor of Literacy and Technology at the University of Connecticut has conducted several academic studies that focus on the use of the Internet by students. In one study, a group of students, all of whom were in the top 50% of Internet readers in their class, were asked to evaluate a website. The website invites readers to help save the endangered Pacific Northwest Tree Octopus from extinction. It is a fairly

complex web site with multiple tabs and links to other sites, including a marketing site with t-shirts and other items that promote the cause. It is also filled with copious scientific terms and even a link to the Miriam-Webster Ask the Editor web site. There are plenty of photographs and even a short video clip.

But it is also obvious that many of the photographs are digitally enhanced and more than a few are pictures of a child's toy in a tree. It also takes only a few seconds to discover that the site is the creation of Lyle Zapato, a name that may or may not be the actual name of the creator. Zapato is also the creator of other sites including: Aluminum Foil Deflector Beanies for protection from mind control; Belgium Doesn't Exist!; The Truth about Black Helicopters; Psychalking (a hobo language for paranoids); NixonFly and Lyle Zapato Lifestyle.

However, in Dr. Leu's study 88% of the students claimed that the site was reliable and the information accurate. Even after the researchers informed the students that the site was bogus, many students argued and continued to claim that the site was reliable and true. Remember the students in the study came from the top 50% of Internet readers in their class.

I have considered whether or not to include a link to the site in this blog, as I don't want to be contributing to misinformation, but it is easy enough to find, so here it is: <http://zapatopi.net/treeoctopus/> However, you might also want to check out the work of Dr. Donald Leu, who is similarly easy to find, but involved with a much more reliable website and institution: <http://www.education.uconn.edu/directory/details.cfm?id=46>

Always a teacher, Professor Leu concludes from his study that we need to teach new Internet reading skills. He points out that no state requires any form of source evaluation in their state standards. That might explain some of the factual errors that are contained in the state standards of Texas and other states. Teaching students strategies for how to evaluate the source of their information simply is not occurring in public education in the United States.

This might be acceptable if we believed that healthy skepticism was the product of maturity and that people naturally become more skeptical as they age, but that simply is not the truth. You can be appalled at the results of Dr. Leu's study, but don't think that the results are caused by the age of the participants. A study by the National network of Libraries of Medicine found that adults, especially older adults, lack the necessary skills to evaluate information for credibility and quality.

The inability to apply critical thinking to information to discern truth from fiction is rampant in our society. And people can be passionate in their defense of information that is blatantly false. More than a small amount of political rhetoric involves the manipulation of public opinion through the use of false information. A few minutes of

listening at any state legislature or national House and Senate debates will reveal that those who are crafting the laws of the land rarely, if ever, evaluate the sources of their information.

Lacking critical thinking skills is expensive for our society as well. The National Academy on an Aging Society estimated that additional health care costs due to low health literacy were about \$73 billion in 1998 dollars.

Hospitals that eliminate consumer health libraries may believe that they are saving money, but they are merely shifting costs. The lack of public health education costs far more than the cost of the education, but the expense is born primarily by the federal government. (OK that's a political plug, my son is a Hospital Librarian.)

More and more adults gain their health information from the Internet. It is therefore critical that they be given the skills to evaluate the sources of their information. Most of the health information that is available on the Internet comes from drug companies that have a specific financial interest in high rates of consumption of their products. Information that is geared at increasing consumption of specific products may be incomplete and misleading. In more than a few cases, misinformation can lead to increased suffering and even death.

Since my college days, and perhaps before, I have been a skeptic. Healthy skepticism leads to looking deeper, asking probing questions, evaluating sources, and drawing conclusions only after the weight of information clearly informs the conclusion. I was taught the skills of critical thinking primarily in college logic and philosophy classes. But it is easy to plan an educational career without taking any classes in philosophy these days. The focus on career-based education has led to many educational paths that are evaluated only in terms of future earning potential.

A population focused on the accumulation of wealth without the skills to discern the truth is a vulnerable population. The link between truth and freedom is not merely theoretical. It is practical. People who lack the ability to discern the truth are less likely to achieve or maintain freedom.

If we believe that the truth will set us free, we had better get serious about teaching students the skills to evaluate information and see the difference between the truth and deception.

By the way, I have no intention of buying any of the t-shirts, caps, coffee mugs, buttons, magnets, posters or bumper stickers urging people to save the Pacific Northwest Tree Octopus. It is evident, however, that more than a few people are willing to make the hoax pay for its creator. We skeptics don't have a marketing website. We still believe that the truth and freedom are more important than wealth.

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Sunday, February 6, 2011 - One Disaster after Another



I pay attention to the news from Australia. We have many friends in that country, some of whom we've known for more than 30 years. And we had the good fortune to travel in Australia in 2006 during a sabbatical.

This year has been one of multiple natural disasters in Australia. Throughout the spring and early summer (fall and winter here) we watched as record rainfalls caused the most damaging floods in history throughout Queensland. Last week news came of the record-setting cyclone Yasi slamming into the Queensland coast. Although there was extensive damage from the cyclone, it wasn't as bad as some had predicted. At the opposite end of the country, five major brushfires are burning out of control near Perth with as many as 35 homes destroyed and hundreds forced to flee. Some residents have ignored evacuation orders and remained in extremely dangerous situations. Now the aftermath of Yasi is striking the southern part of the country with record-setting thunderstorms dumping excessive rain and causing flash floods throughout Victoria.

For the most part, our friends in the country have been distant from the disasters, but the Victoria Flooding reached the towns and neighborhoods of some of our friends yesterday.

The picture with today's blog is of Narre Warren Road near Berwick, near where we stayed during our '06 sabbatical. Because of the differences in time zones the picture was taken this afternoon in Australia time. People in the area are being asked to plan changes in their driving routes as many roads in the Melbourne metropolitan area are closed and will remain closed for tomorrow's commute. Dozens of homes across Victoria have been inundated by flood waters. In Berwick where we have friends, a failed storm sewer caused flood damage to 20 homes with another 50 at risk.

The reports are that the flooding is more severe in areas to the north of Melbourne. Residents of Koo Wee Rup, near Pakingham has been ordered to evacuate. Paramedics helped to relocate the 50 patients at Koo Wee Rup Hospital to Melbourne. The flooding seems even more cruel in the Dandenong mountains, where next Sunday is the two-year anniversary of devastating wildfires that destroyed hundreds of homes and claimed dozens of lives. Record-setting floods just two years after record-setting fires seems almost too much for some people to take.

Flash flood warnings are out in Bendigo, a couple of hours' drive northwest of Melbourne. Bendigo was another community where we visited friends in '06. It is a community with many similarities to our home. Bendigo is a gold mining area with impressive Victorian buildings and wide streets. There is a wonderful museum in Bendigo that celebrates the heritage of Chinese-Australians and their role in the community. Bendigo has an annual festival where large dragons are paraded through the streets supported by dozens of people.

According to the Bendigo Advisor, officials have responded to over 250 calls for assistance as the rivers continue to rise and the rains continue to fall. Total rainfall of between 60 and 100 cm (29 - 33 inches) have already fallen.

It is almost impossible for us to imagine the rain and flooding in Bendigo. We visited at the height of a major drought. The hillsides had been blackened by wildfires, water was being carefully conserved and neighboring agricultural fields lay parched and dry and unproductive. Our memories of five years ago are of a desert climate. Now, during the first year in nearly a decade that farmers have dared to plant crops, the crops have been destroyed by the flooding.

There is little we can do. Australia is on the other side of the planet. The Internet makes it possible for us to follow the news and see photographs almost as soon as events happen. But watching and waiting are about all we can do at the moment.

So we pray. We know that in the busyness of preparing for rising waters and keeping track of friends and loved ones, life is hectic for our friends in Australia. We know that sometimes when nature seems overwhelming it is hard to know exactly how to pray. So we join with the world-wide community of people who are praying together. We do not

pretend to know what to ask of God. God is already present in the lives of the people of Australia. God already knows the needs of the folk who are in the midst of the disaster. We do, however, want the people of Victoria to know that they are not alone in their prayers. There is a wide world of people who join with them.

The simple truth is that we are not alone in this world. What happens to people in distant locations has an impact on our lives as well. Perhaps in some small way we can decrease the burdens others bear by haring with them our concern and our prayers.

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Monday, February 7, 2011 – Watching the Super Bowl



In 1974 the famous Christian minister Norman Vincent Peal said, “If Jesus Christ were alive today, he’d be at the Super Bowl.” That may have been true in 1974, though I have my doubts, but I watched most of last night’s Super Bowl, and I’m thinking that finding Jesus there requires a stretch of the imagination of which I am not capable.

Admittedly, I’m not much of a football fan. I find my mind occupied with other things most of the time. I have to make myself pay attention around the time of the playoffs so that I will at least know the names of the teams when they come up in conversation. But I am a student of our culture. I like to read books about what is distinctly American. And the Super Bowl is a cultural phenomenon.

As a people, we spent more than a billion dollars on last night’s version of the annual ritual. And there is as much ritual around the event as there is in the highest of church ceremonies. If you don’t believe that, compare the coin toss to the rite of reconciliation. On Saturday, the grocery store was more crowded than it was on the day before Christmas - way more crowded than it will be on the day before Easter. Super Bowl Sunday may be our nation’s greatest feast day - more parties than any other.

This morning, I find myself a bit mystified about the whole phenomenon. And I guess I’m a bit disappointed at what it seems to say about us as a people. Maybe my mind is just a bit muddled from listening to too many insipid Back Eyed Peas songs, but there certainly are a lot of things about the event that I just don’t understand.

What was it with Christiana Aguilera and the national anthem? I thought every kid memorized the words to that song when they were in grade school. Did she really forget the lyrics in front of a crowd of 106 million people? I remember the controversy when Roseanne Barr botched the anthem at a baseball game in 1990. Her appearance in the Super Bowl last night was in a Snicker's candy bar ad where she gets whacked by a great big log. I wonder if Aguilera is embarrassed this morning. It certainly was embarrassing to watch last night.

What was it with them showing video of Cameron Diaz feeding Alex Rodriguez? It can't be good for the image of the New York Yankees to have a third baseman who is so lazy he can't feed himself. And the look on Diaz's face is nearly pure anger. I guess that it is a part of the general theme of gender warfare that seems to be woven into the game. In general, it seems to me that the image of the macho men of the football game who take multiple slams to the head and keep playing in the midst of pain is easily forgotten when one looks at how totally stupid men look in the ads. Contrary to what the ads portray, there are men in the world who are not doofuses obsessed with large-chested women, beer and chips. I can't figure out which was more upsetting, watching Diaz sticking her fingers into Rodriguez's mouth or the guy sucking Dorito dust off his co-worker's fingers. A great big YUCK to both!

While I'm on the subject of YUCK, GoDaddy's anticlimactic revelation that Joan Rivers is their new hot celebrity, superimposing River's head atop a buxom new body, goes beyond YUCK to ICK!

I'm not quite sure what Groupon sells, but they are unlikely to sell me anything after tastelessly mocking the very real cause of Tibetan freedom. "Tibetans still whip up an amazing fish curry!" may be true, but the restaurant in which Timothy Hutton is enjoying the curry is located outside of Tibet because of the oppression and exile of Tibetan citizens. To them it is not a laughing matter. To us it is not a cause that should be exploited for financial gain. I'm more embarrassed at what that says about our culture than I was over the way the National Anthem was sung.

Oh, and there was a football game, too. It was surprisingly close at the end, 31-25. Most of the evening one team looked great and the other like the season had been too long and the injuries too extensive. It is just that they kept switching roles, so that the first quarter and a half were dominated by Green Bay. The second quarter and a half were dominated by Pittsburgh. Then they couldn't sustain domination for such long periods of time and kept switching back and forth, making the 4th quarter the most interesting of the game. We really didn't know who was going to win until right at the end.

There were a couple of moments that I enjoyed.

I liked the Chevy Silverado ad where the pickup keeps coming to the rescue just like Lassie. But then I used to be a BIG fan of Lassie. The commercial was aimed at men my age, so I must fit into some of the stereotypes that play in the heads of the ad creators.

The best moment of the evening for me, however, was the Volkswagen ad that gets you to think, "What's this? They spent all that money on a kid in a Darth Vader costume?" The kid stomps around the house trying to use the Force. It doesn't work. Then he stomps out of the house to the "Imperial March" soundtrack, confronts his father's Passat and . . . it starts!

I love playing with kids and remote control devices. We have a remote control that turns the lights on our sanctuary Christmas tree on and off. The look of surprise on the face of children when they think that pulling their ear will make the lights turn on is delightful.

I don't aspire to be like most of the men we watched on television last night. I don't want to stand off with other men and hurl our bodies at each other to the point of injury. I don't want to be obsessed with women's anatomy or beer or chips. I don't want to be insensitive to real and important causes for human freedom. I don't want an actress who used to be a model to feed me popcorn. I can't imagine ripping off a colleague's pants to sniff Dorito dust.

But I can imagine driving my pickup to help save Timmy.

I can imagine using a remote car start device to join in a child's play.

I guess I was as entertained by the event as the rest of my fellow citizens.

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Tuesday, February 8, 2011 – Winter Weather



Somewhere I heard this quote that I have repeated several times: “Whether you’re a saint or whether you’re a sinner, the size of your funeral depends on the weather.” Although I am sure that the weather does affect turn out at events, the humor in the quote lies in its exaggeration. People around here will endure significant weather to pay tribute to a fallen friend and to support a family in their time of grief.

Our weather is what I would describe as typical for this time of year. It is about eight below this morning and there are about 4” of fresh powder snow on the ground around the house. That’s deep enough that I’ll start up the snowblower in a little while. I’m not adverse to using the shovel to clear the driveway, but yesterday it was snowing enough that a half hour after I shoveled, everything was white once again. The day was busy enough that I didn’t get back to shoveling so things are piled up this morning. The county is out and about with their snowplows and it shouldn’t be much of a problem getting to work.

But yesterday the snowfall kept ahead of most of us all day. The hill going up to the church got slippery and folks who don’t have four-wheel-drive were having a little trouble making it. They came anyway. We held a funeral for a wonderful man who was well-respected for his honesty and integrity. His three sons and widow were pleased to see so many friends. All of the sons have lived away from our town for many years and

the one who did move back has been engaged in caring for their father, so all had a chance to visit with friends that they haven't seen for quite a few years.

The man whose memory we were honoring had been a singer and a large contingent from the Shrine of Democracy Chorus turned out and paid a beautiful musical tribute to their friend.

But it was cold standing in the falling snow at the cemetery and after the committal, folks were quick to head back to their cars and head for warmer places. I stayed with the cemetery crew until the casket was lowered into the vault and the cover was put into place.

It was incredibly beautiful at the cemetery with the light snow falling.

The paper says that the city police were busy yesterday responding to 18 slide-offs and other vehicle accidents. Fortunately there were no serious injuries. Our town is always a bit dangerous during the first few snowstorms of the winter, but by February, we're usually more practiced and less likely to go sliding through intersections. Still it is good to be wary and to keep one's eyes out for the vehicle that has lost control. There is a corner where Sheridan Lake Road goes by the golf course and every winter vehicles slide off the road and go through the chain link fence. We try to keep track of how many times this happens each winter. Sometimes it is hard to know for sure because cars tend to slide in the same place, so the fence remains broken throughout the winter unless we get a spell of good fence-fixing weather. Farther up the road where people slip into the pasture of a ranch family, fences are fixed regardless of the weather. Keeping the cows off the highway is always a good idea. The car that went through the fence at the golf course yesterday found a new place to slide and there are now a couple of breaks in that fence.

Susan and I went out to dinner last night for an early celebration of her birthday, which is today. Since we have meetings in the evening today it made sense to go out on an evening when we could relax and take our time. The restaurant definitely was not busy. We got a table right away and were able to linger after dinner without feeling like they needed our table for folks who were waiting to be fed. The waiters were relaxed and you could tell the restaurant could handle a much bigger crowd than they were getting last night. It really wasn't that bad driving around, but we did take the pickup because the car had already been put into the garage.

The truth is that I like winter. This is just the right kind of snow for skiing. I don't mind shoveling a bit of snow and I have the right equipment for the days when we get a lot. We have plenty of winter clothing so we can spend time out of doors without worrying about getting too cold. Frankly, I can't imagine living in a place where you have to mow the lawn year round. I'm perfectly happy to have the garden under a blanket of snow

knowing that gardening is a part-time adventure around here. When it gets cold and stormy we have a few less meetings and are able to stay at home more.

And compared to so many places around the world, we've got it so good. I watched a bit of Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard addressing Parliament yesterday. She was on the verge of tears as she spoke of the 35 people killed in last month's floods in Queensland. She noted that the past few months will long be remembered as Australia "watched in horror as day after day a new chapter in natural disaster history was written."

"We will always remember the days of despair and the days of courage we've lived through together this summer," she said.

Floods, a cyclone of record proportions, bush fires burning house after house - it doesn't seem too bad to have to clear a little snow from my driveway.

Stay warm out there and allow a little extra time for driving. We'll get through this one together.

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Wednesday, February 9, 2011 – Tatanka



We have called them buffalo in the part of the country where I have lived. Technically speaking they are not buffalo, but bison. That technicality was lost on the folk in my neck of the woods. The Lakota word is Tatanka. When I was a kid, there was a small herd in Yellowstone National Park, but we hardly ever saw them anywhere else.

Depending on whose estimate you use, there was a time when 30-60 million head of buffalo freely roaming the plains. This land where we live and the prairies that surround our hills were all buffalo country. In the 19th century there was a clash of cultures on the plains. The indigenous culture was based on the buffalo. Most of the tribes of the plains were semi-nomadic, following the big buffalo herds and harvesting animals for much of their sustenance. In addition to the food that was supplied by buffalo hunting, plains people obtained clothing, covers for their tipis, and other useful items. Food, clothing, and shelter - all came from the buffalo. Just as there were many different tribes of native people, there were many different types of settlers who came into this land. Many were of European background. Some came to trap animals for their fur, others came to trade with the Native tribes, others came in search of gold and other valuable minerals, others came to find a piece of ground that they could call their own. There were farmers and ranchers and loggers and miners and adventure seekers.

The newcomers culture was not dependent on the buffalo.

What had been for centuries the strength of the plains people - the buffalo - became their weakness. In less than a century, the population of the buffalo was decimated. Less than 1,000 animals were alive at the turn of the century. It was no longer possible to survive by following the herds. Everyone, native and newcomer, had to find other ways of making a living. There were some who tried farming on the plains. The practice worked in places that got enough moisture. More than a few homesteads failed. More successful was the practice of raising cattle and sheep on the land. When the price of wool was high the sheepherders did well. When the price of veal was high the cattlemen made a profit.

The native populations were decimated. The 20th century was a century of poverty for the majority of reservation residents. They became dependent upon subsidies and charities for the basics of life. Food, clothing and shelter were the products of federal programs instead of the buffalo culture.

Some of the old ways were remembered however. In 1990, the Intertribal Bison Cooperative was formed to restore buffalo to Indian Country and along with the re-introduction of the animals to tribal land to preserve the historical, cultural, traditional and spiritual relationship between tribal people and the buffalo.

Ranching is significantly different from following enormous herds of free-range animals. The skills of the new culture of Tatanka are different than those of centuries ago. It is a

new set of practices that is undertaken with respect for the cultural foundations of plains tribes.

Two cultures and more are living on the plains these days. In our better moments we are learning the art of reconciliation and forging a common future. It is hard work. A century and more of mistrust isn't overcome with one meeting, one shared project or one program. Along the way there are many memorable moments.

Among the treasures on a table in my office is a buffalo tail, the gift of a Lakota family with whom we have had many shared experiences. As moved as I was by the gift, the thought has occurred to me, "What am I going to do with a buffalo tail." I do not practice the disciplines of Native Spirituality. I have respect for those traditions. I have participated in inipi, climbed paha mato, walked around mato tipi, sat in circle with elders and been cleansed with the smudge of sage and sweetgrass. But I remain firmly rooted in my own church with its own religious practices. I leave the ceremonies of the Lakota to the Lakota people. So, for me, the buffalo tail is a symbol of our relationship. And relationships between people are sacred in both of our cultures.

Still, it brings a tear to my eye to read the story of the unfolding tragedy on the Wilder Ranch. The ranch is owned by a Florida man who has 71 farms and ranches in seven states. He has received \$2.3 million in farm subsidies since 2005, including \$108,000 for the ranch in Corson County, S.D. But a man with 71 farm and ranch properties doesn't pay attention to all of them. Somehow, he figured that he could build a herd of 4,000 to 6,000 buffalo on his ranch, turn them loose and they would take care of themselves.

It doesn't work that way. People began to notice animals outside of the fences and on the road. Animals were struck by vehicles and injured. When folk took a closer look, they discovered that the buffalo were starving and neglected. Deep snows prevented them from getting access to adequate forage. Dozens died. More are barely surviving.

Authorities have finally acted. Corson County Sheriff Keith Gall is now making daily ranch runs. The county has spent between \$50,000 and \$100,000 on feed and snowplows to clear feeding lanes. Neglected animals in South Dakota are normally removed and impounded. We don't have a place to put 6,000 buffalo. So now the court struggle to decide the animals' fate will begin.

It is simply a sad situation. It has been going on for several years and so far hasn't gotten any better. Maybe this year a solution will be found. It is likely that the buffalo can be sold to ranchers who will provide proper care for the animals, including the Intertribal Bison Cooperative.

People on the plains are still mourning the mistreatment of the buffalo. As long as there are some who don't understand the connection between the well being of the animals and our own, this will continue. I'm not a practitioner of Lakota religion, but there is a value in that culture with which I resonate. One of our purposes in life is to care for others and animals are in that circle of care as well of people. When any person focuses his or her attention on taking care of himself or herself only, they fail to fulfill their deeper purpose of life.

Once again the buffalo and the people of the plains are falling victim to greed.

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February 10, 2011 – Welcome Elliot



Dear Elliot,

It is very possible that you will never read this blog. At least it will be a long time before you do. You are less than eight hours old as I am writing it. It will be quite a while before you gain fluency in this crazy language we call "English," and even longer before reading and writing become acquired skills. Then, you will only read this note if someone happens to think to save it and show it to you. Still, that is no problem because you already know it's message.

You have been surrounded by love since before you were born. The love of your mother and father and Grandma Lynn and Grandpa Jeff that you have been experiencing for all of your life are just some of the layers of love that encircle you. There are so many people who are part of the circles of love that surround you that we are confident that

you will always know that you are loved. And if, in some future moment you try to forget, we will do everything in our power to remind you of that love.

There are many ways to fall in love. Like you, both your grandmother and I were born into love. It took us quite a while to find each other. And after we did find each other, we had to grow up in love before we knew that we were in love with each other. That took years. Of course, we are still discovering new dimensions of love. One of the greatest joys of marriage is the joy of growing old together. But you have decades to discover that.

Another way to fall in love that takes its time is the way your mom and dad and grandparents and aunts and uncles fell in love with you. Long before we even knew that you were on your way, we were in love with the idea of you. I think I have loved the idea of a first grandchild for at least as long as your folks have been married, and perhaps even longer than that.

I remember the months of waiting for your father to be born. They were among the most exciting months of my life. Every day I woke with a sense of excited anticipation. I knew that the future would be bright and wonderful. I wasn't so naive as to believe that there would be no problems. I already knew the reality of grief and loss. But knowing that the baby who grew up to be your father was on the way gave me hope for the future. His birth was one of the moments of purest joy a human being can experience. It was as if all of the stars in heaven were shining for just one baby. It was as if all of the love of a thousand generations had been expressed in one baby. It isn't possible for people to be more delighted than we were with his birth.

We feel that way with you. We couldn't be more joyful.

You have been born into a family that has been surrounded by love for so many generations that we will spend hours and hours telling you stories of great grandpas and great grandmas for generations and generations. When you are older, I can tell you the stories of your great, great, great grandmother and great, great, great grandfather Hattie and Roy raising their children in a small frontier town in Montana. They didn't have much, but they always had love. They had died before I was born, but their love is a part of all of our stories.

Not all love takes a long time. I have been blessed with love at first sight. That's the way it happened with me and your aunt Rachel. One day I didn't even know that she existed. The next I knew about a baby girl a long way away who needed a home. The next day I was standing in an office and a social worker handed me a baby that was smaller than you were when you were born last night. I looked into that tiny face and instantly I was in love with that baby. I never stopped loving her. I never will.

You will only know us as old people. Our family doesn't cram its generations very closely together. That is of no worry to us because being old is not a bad thing. Everything we have done in this life has been worth it because in some small way that love we have shared gave rise to the love from which you were born.

Here is one more thing about love that I want you to know. The more a person loves, the more love there is to give. You can never run out of love. In time our family will have others of your generation. You are the first grandchild for all your grandparents, but we have a sense that there will be more. Perhaps one day you will have a brother or sister. Perhaps you will have cousins. We are confident that if and when these events occur the new people that come into our family will be as beloved as you are. More people to love will not mean that we love you any less. If anything, we will love you more.

You have been born into a world where love abounds.

For your old grandfather the best way of talking about love comes from the Bible. In the first letter of John it says simply, "God is love." The great creative force from which all of the universe came is the only thing that is worthy of our worship. We call that reality God. And God is love. And love is God.

So, you already know God. You may not yet know that your name means, "The Lord is my God." You will learn that in the years to come as you learn more of the amazing power of God. God is love.

Of course, we can't wait to meet you face-to-face. Our arms ache to hold you and we have more than a few hugs for your dad and your mom as well. The plane tickets are bought. We are counting the days. (There are eleven still to pass before we are there.) Even for old people like us the excitement and joy of anticipation is very powerful.

Welcome to this world. It is truly a wonderful place. Your birth has made it even more so.

May you dwell in love all of the days that are yours and then some. Love never dies.

Love,
Grandpa (You have no idea how much fun it is to have that title. One day you will know.)

Friday, February 11, 2011 – Crafting in Hyperbolic Space



Mathematics is not my strongest area of academic ability. I understand and use basic mathematical concepts in my everyday life but have never become accomplished at calculus. When I was a student, math educators believed that the process of teaching mathematics was sequential. Students first learn counting, then addition and subtraction, then multiplication and division. Next comes fractions and then simple Algebra. After Algebra comes Geometry before tackling calculus. We now know that not all students learn sequentially, and different methods of teaching are employed. My own personal experience was that there were some concepts that I found easier to learn than others. I actually enjoyed fractions and when we got into basic algebra, I was following the basic concepts, though my grades weren't as good as they were earlier in my learning career. I aced high school geometry, however. I was learning to fly and the navigational techniques that were being taught at the time were pure geometry.

Euclidian geometry was good enough for the ideas we were learning in those days. There are some basic definitions of a point and a line. Any line can be extended. A circle is defined by a point and a radius (which is a line with a finite length). All right angles are the equal. If you have a line and a point, there is only one line that will pass through that point and not intersect the line if the lines are extended.

Euclidian geometry works very well on flat surfaces, like maps. The only problem is that a flat map of the earth is distorted because the earth is really a sphere. For the

purposes of navigation over relatively short distances, small corrections are all that is necessary. When traveling larger distances, it takes a stretch of the imagination to understand three-dimensional geometry. The shortest distance between two points on the globe isn't a straight line, it is a curve.

So far, my brain is able to understand the basic concepts. In spherical geometry there is constant positive curvature. It works for navigation about this planet. However, once travel extends out into space negative curvature becomes possible. Euclid's fifth postulate - the one about parallel lines - no longer applies. The system of mathematics that once was seen as rigid with absolute rules no longer works. Johann Carl Friedrich Gauss, sometimes called the "prince of mathematicians," was so disturbed by this discovery that he didn't publish his work. He and other mathematicians who followed him postulated that multiple parabolic lines can pass through the same point without intersecting at any other point.

Since my mathematical skills are limited, my explanation may be less than clear, but for today's blog suffice it to say that hyperbolic space demands non-Euclidean geometry.

So here is the story: In June of 1997, Daina Taimioa was in a workshop about hyperbolic geometry being led by David Henderson. Henderson was using paper and tape to construct models to illustrate hyperbolic surfaces in three-dimensional geometry. The paper models took a long time to construct and they were fragile because any tear or crease destroyed the model. After participating in the workshop and understanding the concepts, Daina showed Dr. Henderson a much simpler way to craft a model of hyperbolic surfaces.

She crocheted a hyperbolic plane for him. The combination of higher mathematics and a simple craft skill produced a conceptual breakthrough. Now you can find simple instructions for crocheting an annular hyperbolic plane on the Internet.

The Hyperbolic Crochet Coral Reef is a project by the Institute For Figuring in Los Angeles. The Crochet Reef resides at the intersection of mathematics, marine biology, handicraft and community art practice. Sisters Margaret and Christine Wertheim instigated the project to crochet a woolen reef. The crocheted reef has grown far beyond its original incarnation on the sisters' coffee table and now is made up of many sub-reefs, each with its own color and styling.

Margaret Wertheim now has published a book, *The Field Guide to Hyperbolic Space: An Exploration of the Intersection of Higher Geometry and Feminine Handicraft*. Additional information on the project can be seen at <http://theiff.org/oexhibits/oe1.html>

It is clear that understanding the nature of this magnificent universe goes beyond the skills of pure mathematics. As beautiful as mathematics is as an intellectual pursuit and a way of explaining the observations we make of the universe, it is not itself perfect. Mathematics has limitations. These limitations may only be the limits of human imagination, but they exist nonetheless. This is an important understanding for those of us who were raised to think of some intellectual pursuits as “higher,” and others as “lower.”

It may well be that simple crafts hold as many keys to understanding the nature of the world as complex intellectual concepts.

It is a lesson that is taught to me daily in our church. I love intellectual theology. I enjoy arguing, reading, discussing and discovering the finer points of logical arguments about the nature of God and the relationship of God and humans. I invest a significant portion of my income in purchasing books and a significant amount of my time in reading them. I try to craft sermons that are intellectually consistent. I find deep beauty in a well-crafted argument.

In the meantime, volunteers from our congregation are knitting and crocheting prayer shawls to be delivered to persons who have crises or special needs in their lives. Over and over again I have witnessed the power of a warm shawl to convey the love of God more elegantly than a well-crafted theological statement. Our actions speak more clearly than our words.

I love the story of the woman who taught the mathematician to crochet.

I remain absolutely convinced that engineering schools need fine arts departments.

There are many ways to teach and learn the truth and we have been promised that we shall know the truth and the truth shall set us free.

Keep crocheting!

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Saturday, February 12, 2011 – Freedom's Long Road



For thousands of years our people have been telling a story of freedom that starts in Egypt. The story is reported in our Bible. It is one of those stories that we have told and re-told so many times that we have to get out the Bible from time to time to be reminded which of the details are officially recorded in the scriptures of our people and which have grown up with the telling of the story.

The basic facts of the story are relatively simple. Joseph becomes the victim of his own pride and his brothers' jealousy and is sold to slave traders who take him to Egypt. His ability to interpret dreams earns him respect and finally position in the Egyptian government. A famine forces the rest of his family to travel to Egypt in search of food where a reconciliation takes place. The people dwell in Egypt for many years. The times of Joseph are forgotten by the Egyptians. The people of Israel are enslaved and forced into labor. They long for freedom. God chooses Moses, whose life had been one of privilege through a strange set of circumstances, to lead the people out of slavery. Pharaoh resists. Plagues befall Egypt. Finally the people are released. As soon as the departure begins they are pursued. They are saved by a dramatic and miraculous passage through the Red Sea.

Once out of Egypt, the freedom of our people is far from secured, however. Even though God delivered us, we were unable to trust God. We worried about food and

drink. We experimented with other religions of the region. We forgot our covenant with God.

Despite the fact that freedom is God's intention for humans, it is a difficult state to achieve and maintain. We seem to be adept at using our freedom to make choices that restrict our freedom. Consider the ten commandments. Ten simple tips that lead to freedom. You want to be free? Have no other gods. You want to be free? Don't lie or steal or commit adultery or desire the possessions of others. It seems that each generation of God's people has more than a few people who convince themselves that the road to freedom lies in decisions that end up enslaving them.

So it is with mixed feelings that I watch the reports of the celebrations in Egypt. Tens of thousands of demonstrators in Cairo and other cities are celebrating the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak after weeks of protests. A new era seems to be opening for the country and the celebrations and joy are appropriate. Yet there is also trepidation. The road to freedom is a long and difficult one. This weeks celebrations are only a first step and there are plenty of things that can go wrong.

One of the things that seems to be a part of our story is that leadership is important in the quest for freedom. In the story of our people, God's choice of the unlikely candidate Moses is critical. Moses had the ability to lead the people when others would have given up. At one point in the story, God is ready to give up on the people of Israel. Moses pleads with God, arguing that saving them would be better for God's image than starting over. Even people who barely know the story know Moses' name and that he was central to that chapter of our history.

Moses died before he entered the promised land. Our journey toward freedom was more than one generation. It continues today. And our steps continue to falter and we continue to make mistakes.

Those of us who live in the United States are aware of our leaders in this season. Today is the birthday of Abraham Lincoln, a president who provided crucial leadership at a time of great threat to the dream of American Freedom. There were some who believed that partial freedom was acceptable. They thought that some could be free while others were enslaved. Of course they were wrong. It took a bloody war and a threat to our national survival before we began the changes that were required to assure our freedom.

Ten days from now is the birthday of George Washington. In typical American fashion, we have combined the two birthdays into a single holiday and planted that holiday on a Monday, so the official celebration doesn't occur for a week. But in that combination, we also acknowledged that there are other presidents worth celebrating. Our Presidents'

Day holiday is an annual reminder that we have inherited a rich tradition of exceptional leadership.

Even with the freedoms we enjoy, the journey for freedom for our nation is far from complete.

We set the standard for ourselves incredibly high. As long as one person remains in slavery, our freedom is not complete. As long as one person is unjustly imprisoned, our freedom is not fully achieved. Our freedom is connected to and dependent upon the freedom of all of the people of this world.

News of a change of government in Egypt raises our hopes. Freedom for others in far away places is connected to our freedom. We perk up with other news of freedom, whether it be the release of captives by Farc rebels or freedom for dissident Cubans. Wherever people are engaged in the struggle for freedom, it is our struggle.

We know it is a long road. We acknowledge that it will not be achieved in a single generation. And for those of us who are older, we realize that it will not happen in our generation. Like Moses, we will die before complete freedom is achieved for all of the world's people.

The greatest causes are also the biggest causes.

So we celebrate with the people of Egypt even as we fear for them. We'll be paying attention as they travel freedom's road. Perhaps we will be gracious and fortunate to walk with them some of the steps of the way. It is a long and winding road. And we've only just begun.

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Sunday, February 13, 2011 – What a Father Wants



When we lived in North Dakota, we lived in a parsonage. The home was very comfortable and well-maintained. We moved to the home from a one-bedroom apartment in Chicago, so we didn't have enough furniture for our new place. Slowly we acquired pieces of furniture. When we learned we would have a baby we purchased a rocking chair. That chair remains one of my favorite pieces of furniture in our living room.

I remember one night, shortly after we had brought our new son home from the hospital. Susan was getting some much-needed sleep. The baby had been changed and fed and was being alert for a few moments. We sat in the rocking chair and as I held him I looked at him in amazement. His tiny fingers were stretching out and exploring the world. He wasn't yet quite able to make them go where he wanted and occasionally he'd surprise himself by touching his own face. I was fascinated and amazed at those tiny fingers.

As he started to nod off, before I laid him in his crib, I remember thinking about what a big change this baby would mean in our lives. A father is supposed to want what is best for his child, and I certainly felt that way. I pledged to myself that I would always try to do what is best for this baby.

Of course a pledge like that is easier to make than it is to keep. It is not that one ceases to want what is best for one's child. It is that one doesn't always know what is best for one's child. We knew that over-indulgence and always getting his own way wasn't what was best, but there were plenty of times when it wasn't clear how much to purchase for a birthday or Christmas. We knew that being over-protected wasn't in our child's best interests, but we were responsible for basic safety and wanted to manage risks carefully. Parents have to allow their children to make mistakes and suffer the consequences of the decisions they make, but that is not an easy task.

So we did what all parents do. We made our decisions in context and tried our best. And there were times when we didn't know for sure if we had done the best thing for our children.

The years go by quickly. Soon both of our children had become adults and were living on their own. They have achieved a level of success that would make any parent proud. They are thoughtful and loving and they are both very good at keeping their parents informed of their lives. It seems to us that they have good lives. It seems to us that somehow, mostly through the grace of God, we discovered a path in parenting that enabled our children to become adults.

You never stop wanting what is best for your children.

Yesterday, through the wonderful technology of Internet-based video conferencing, we sat at our kitchen table and watched our son holding his newborn son. Three day old Elliot had been changed and fed and he was being alert and exploring his world. After a while, he managed to get first one hand and then the other out from the blanket in which he was wrapped. We looked at those fingers. They are so amazing. He can move them, but he doesn't always know where they are or what the things he touches mean. He kept trying to check out his own face with his fingers. While we watched, he never got a finger or thumb into his mouth, but he got close. All the while he was yawning from time to time and opening his mouth to see what tastes he might experience.

We could have watched him for hours without losing interest.

The thing that was most impressive to me, however, was watching his father. Here were those same hands at which I had marveled nearly 30 years ago. They are larger. The fingers are longer. Now one of his hands is nearly the size of the head of his new baby. His son's fist is barely larger than his thumb. He was holding his own son. And looking at the child more than he was looking at us.

I am impressed at how confident and competent our son and daughter-in-law are with their newborn child. They haven't had much time to practice, but they seem to know what to do. They hand the child off between them with ease and grace. They still have a

lot to learn, but they are good students and having their own baby is a good set of motivations to learn.

I looked at our son - at the man who once was the tiny baby I held in my own hands - as he held his son and I realized that one of my deepest wishes for him had come true. For all of his life I have wished the best for him.

There is nothing better than being a parent and holding your own child in your arms.

I watched that tiny baby nestled against his father's chest and I could remember the feeling of having my own son nestled against my chest. It is the best thing in the world.

We may not have been able to take our children on all of the trips that we could imagine. We didn't have money for private schools or fancy wardrobes or new cars. But we always wanted what was best for them. It certainly seems that we have gotten what we wanted.

I know that Isaac and Allison will face frustrations as parents. There will be nights with too little sleep. There will be decisions where the way ahead is not clear. There will be the fine balancing act between earning enough money to provide for your family and freeing enough time to be with your family. The road ahead will not always be easy.

But nothing in the future will take away the memory of the days they are living right now. The tiny hands, the feel of a baby snuggled tight in your arms, the joy of seeing your love expressed in a new human being - they will remember these things for the rest of their lives.

And, although I haven't heard quite these words said out loud, I know that they want what is best for Elliott.

I pray that their wishes for this child will be fulfilled as richly as ours have been.

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Monday, February 14, 2011 – Happy Valentine’s Day



Let's see, we'll need candy conversation hearts, a box of chocolates, lots of cards with pink images of cupid, hearts, and couples kissing. If the ads in the newspaper are to be believed, gifts of jewelry and lingerie are appropriate. Perhaps a fancy cake, decorated with strawberries. I'd think red velvet might be the kind of cake one wants to bake. I noticed at the bookstore that you can now get Jelly Belly brand jelly beans with romantic conversation words on them just like the little hearts, except these might actually have some flavor.

It is a day to celebrate love - a worthy cause.

But it is also a day where we have so many layers of tradition and story that it is a bit hard to figure out how we ended up with our celebration on this day.

The name "Valentine" (in Latin Valentinus) means "worthy." The word also has connotations of strength and power. It was a popular name in the first two or three hundred years of the church. It is possible that there were as many as 14 Christian saints who were martyred in early Rome before the time of Constantine and the legalization of Christianity in the Empire. Of the Saint Valentine whose feast day we celebrate today almost nothing is known for sure. The story has been lost to antiquity. We aren't even sure that the day celebrates one or several different saints with the same name. The official Roman Catholic list of saints names "Martyr Valentinus the

Presbyter and those with him at Rome” as the ones to be venerated on this day. In the Eastern Orthodox Church, St. Valentine the Presbyter is venerated on July 6. Valentine Bishop of Interamma is celebrated on July 30. Still, members of the Eastern Orthodox Church who are named Valentinus or Valentina celebrate their name day on February 14.

If all of that sounds confusing, it is because we Christians are confused about the story. The earliest list of Roman martyrs, compiled in 354, does not include anyone named Valentine. Pope Gelasius I established the feast of St. Valentine in 496. The day was for saints whose names were known, but whose stories had been lost to history. The declaration dedicates the day to those “. . . whose names are justly revered among men, but whose acts are known only to God.”

So there is no known history of St. Valentine.

That doesn't stop legends from forming. Sometimes the stories we tell are very interesting, even if we do not know their literal truth.

Here is the legend that is often told about St. Valentine: Like other saints, the day of celebration is the day of the death of the saint, so we might as well start there. It was February 14, 278, Valentine, a priest at Rome was beheaded by the Roman authorities for defying the law. It was in the days of Emperor Claudius the Cruel. Claudius had a problem. The Roman army was short of soldiers. Recruitment was going badly. The empire needed leagues of soldiers and was having trouble getting young men to enlist. Claudius got the idea that Roman men were unwilling to join the army because they were too attached to their wives and their families.

Claudius' solution was to ban marriage of young men. In some version of the story he bans all marriages and engagements.

Ah, but you can't stop people from falling in love.

Valentine became a conscientious objector to Claudius' decree. He defied the ban and carried out marriages in secret. He became the “go to” priest for young lovers who wanted to marry despite the official ban. He became so popular that the authorities found out and Valentine was arrested. He was sentenced to be beaten to death with clubs then beheaded. According to legend the sentence was carried out on February 14.

If the gruesome death by beating and then beheading doesn't put you in a romantic mood, here is another legend: While he was in jail, Valentine himself fell in love. The jailer's daughter was the one to bring food to the prisoners. Valentine, impressed by her kindness, fell in love with her, and according to the legend, she with him. But their love

was no match for the cruelty of the Roman authorities. Valentine would not live for them to declare their love in marriage. So, on the day of his death he wrote her a farewell note and signed it, "from your Valentine."

Thus the tradition of cards declaring and asking one to be a valentine was born.

It probably didn't happen that way at all, but it makes a good story.

What is worthy of our time is the celebration of love. Personal notes, poems, and cards are a wonderful way to celebrate the day.

Chocolate is a different matter. The Aztecs believed that the cocoa bean stimulated sexual desire. The emperor Montezuma was said to consume the beans in copious amounts to fuel his romantic trysts. There may be some scientific basis to this. Chocolate contains tryptophan, one of the building blocks of serotonin, a brain chemical involved in sexual arousal. It also contains phenylethylamine, a stimulant released in the brain when people fall in love. Most researchers, however, believe that the amounts of these two substances in chocolate are too small to have any measurable effect on desire. Studies have failed to find a direct link between chocolate consumption and heightened sexual arousal.

Like the stories of St. Valentine, the myth may be more powerful than the reality.

What does work is paying attention to those we love. Dedicating a day to the celebration of love has value because love begets love. What really makes us feel loved is loving others. The more we give love away the more love we feel.

So happy Valentine's day! May you discover even more love today and throughout the year.

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Tuesday, February 15, 2011 – Fire and Poverty



Slum fires in the Philippines are so common that they rarely make the headlines in the world press these days. Last April a particularly dramatic blaze left over 7,000 people without homes. In January a fire killed 12 people and destroyed some 100 shanties. Last week 600 shanties burned and 20,000 people were left homeless. Around 10,000 people lost their homes and a child was killed today as fire raged in one of the largest slums in the Philippines. Almost as many people lost their homes to fire in Manilla in the last year as there are people living in Rapid City.

To understand the fires, one has to have some sense of the scope of urban poverty in Manilla. Poverty is common throughout the Philippines. One in four Filipinos live on a dollar a day or less, according to the latest government poverty data released earlier this month. the Philippines have both urban poverty and rural poverty, but the crush of people in the urban centers was accelerated by Tropical Storm Ketsana in 2009. The deadly floods that followed the storm killed more than 400 people and left large rural and urban areas devastated.

The people move to the city in hopes of jobs and better living conditions and rarely find either. The crush of people is so intense that they crowd into the smallest of structures. The World Bank has said that 40 percent of the population of the Philippine capital are informal settlers living in shanty towns. The people construct shelters of whatever materials are at hand and then welcome whatever family members the structure will

accommodate. Typical is Marilou Erabon. Until yesterday, the 53-year old woman lived in a shack that was about 10 feet by 10 feet. Living with her in the same space was her unemployed husband, four children and six grandchildren. When they lay down to sleep, they literally covered all of the floor space in the home. The roof leaked, but they were able to survive. Now the shack is gone, burned to cinders. They lost all of their possessions. They don't even have a tarp under which to crawl to sleep tonight.

Think of it another way: Today's fire burned about 500 shacks. It left 10,000 people homeless. That is an average of 20 people per shack. By the standards of our community, the people were homeless before the fire destroyed what little shelter they had. Several thousand survivors have made their way to a covered basketball court several blocks away from the fire, but it has become so crowded that there is no way to get any more people under the roof.

The conditions are cramped and dangerous.

The city mayor visited the fire victims and promised to repair the slum, but no firm commitments were made on providing building materials. In similar situations in the past there has been some government effort to provide minimal building materials, usually plastic tarps and sheets of roofing tin distributed in a chaotic first-come-first-served basis without any advance warning of when or where the materials will be distributed.

So the people build more shacks out of scavenged materials. They build them small and close together. And they cram their families into the hovels until the next fire sweeps the area. It happens so often that the world press often fails to take much notice of another slum fire in the Philippines. I was unable to find any photos of today's fire online. I think that the photo with this blog is from last April's fire.

It is easy for us to forget that in the eyes of most of the people of this world we are among the super-rich. From the perspective of a family huddled under a sheet of construction plastic on a crowded street corner in Manila our wealth is indistinguishable from that of Bill Gates or Warren Buffet. A full pantry and reliable transportation are beyond their wildest fantasy. I once heard it said that if your feet touched a floor instead of dirt when you crawled out of bed you are one of the 20% of the world's richest people. Just having a bed is a luxury that many people in this world will never know.

Poverty is one of the most common subjects in the words of Jesus that are recorded in the Bible. Any attempt at Christian ethics has to take into account a mandate for those who have excess to share. Story after story tells of the miraculous effects of sharing. We are called to dedicate our lives to a world where sharing by all will mean scarcity for none.

The reality of our world today, however, is that many people experience scarcity.

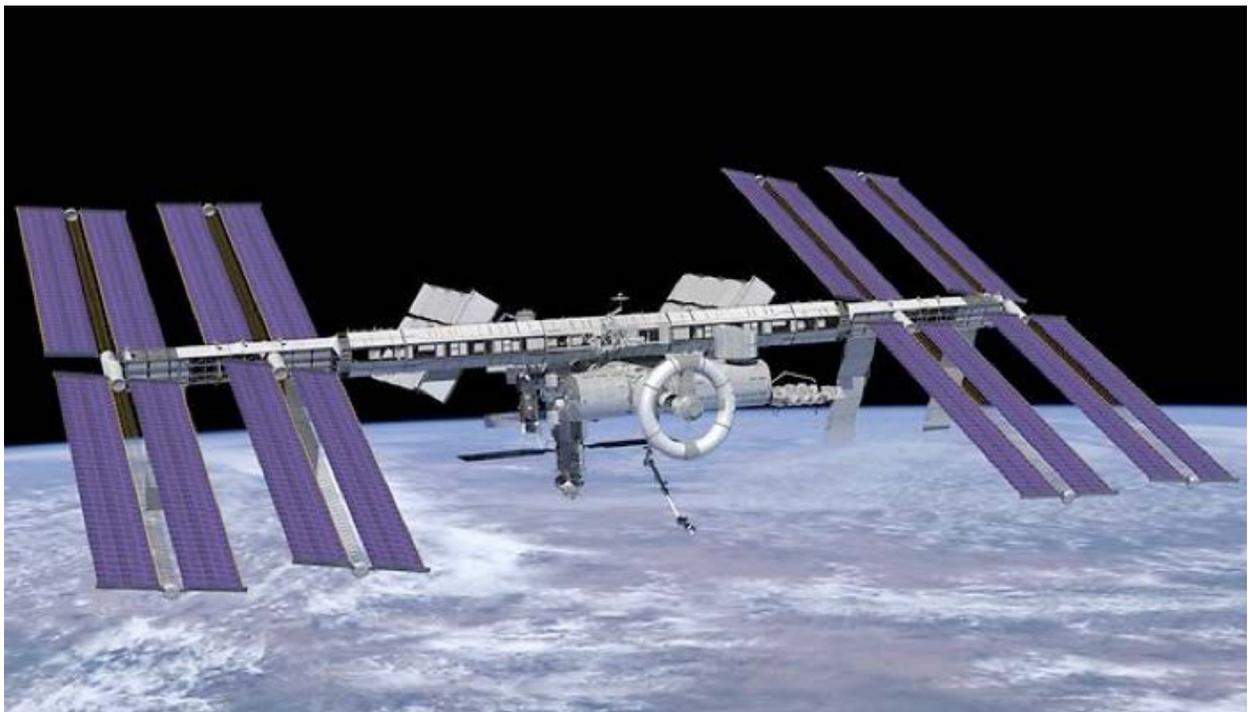
I do not have the solution to the poverty of Manilla. I do not have a solution to the poverty of countless other cities around the world. But I refuse to ignore it. I refuse to isolate myself from the stories of those who live in the slums and shanty towns of Manilla. I grieve with those who have lost loved ones in the fires. I grieve with those who have lost their homes. I contribute to support our long-standing partnerships in the Philippines. I know it is not enough.

But I also know the story of the feeding of 5,000 people that started with the generosity of one boy with five loaves and two fish. The generosity of one can be multiplied by the grace of God.

Pray with me for the people of Manilla. They sure could use a miracle.

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Wednesday, February 16, 2011 - Envisioning



A possible configuration for the Nautilus X Spacecraft. Picture: NASA

Sometimes we call the process “dreaming,” though it is not primarily an activity that is undertaken while we are sleeping and likely is quite different than what occurs when we dream in our sleep. Sometimes we call it “thinking big,” which may be an apt description of the process. Biblical prophets used a word that is roughly translated

“vision” though they were not talking about what could be seen with the human eye. Another term used is inspiration, a term that is literally translated “breathing,” but contains the sense of drawing the holy into one’s being. To be inspired is to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Whatever terms we use to describe the process, the human imagination can be powerful when it is focused on really big tasks.

Scientists at the Johnson Spaceflight Center have just wrapped up the first of several meetings set for this year to explore the possibility of developing a craft for carrying humans into deep space. They have come up with an intriguing name for the effort. They are calling it the “100-Year Starship.” The name was chosen because creating such a craft would require a long-range sustainable effort.

What they are envisioning is something that is far beyond the capacity of a single human being. Unlike the push to land a human being on the moon, it is beyond the capacity of a generation of human beings. If you are going to develop a vision, it helps to be able to think big - really BIG.

The challenge outlined by President Kennedy - to land a human being on the moon and safely return that person to the earth within a decade - was achieved. It was tiny in comparison to the challenge of humans traveling into deep space. The size of the challenge has not stopped engineers and scientists from crafting a vision.

The proposed spacecraft is called the “Nautilus X MMSEV,” a very long acronym for “Non-Atmospheric Universal Transport Intended for Lengthy United States X-ploration Multi-Mission Space Exploration Vehicle.” The stretch of the language in order to come up with the acronym is itself a demonstration of the capacity of the human imagination. They even had to spell “exploration” two different ways to come up with the name of the vehicle.

Building such a craft will require a lot more imagination. The idea is a craft that would support a crew of six for missions of one month to two years. It would need to overcome the major obstacles to long distance space flight, such as radiation and lack of gravity.

It is uncertain if or when such a vehicle would be built. No one has proposed a method for funding a project estimated to be in excess of \$3.7 billion. It doesn’t cost money to dream big, however.

As a child I was fascinated by the efforts to land a person on the moon. I watched every liftoff and wrote letters to astronauts. I even dreamed that I might one day be an astronaut.

Perhaps as an adult, I can let the audacity of imagination that is a part of NASA's envisioning process inspire me to dream big. I don't have any special insights into spacecraft, but I have seen the edges of some really big dreams.

Together with others who are involved with Habitat for Humanity, we have envisioned a world where poverty housing is eliminated. The Habitat model, which used mortgage payments on houses to build more houses has resulted in amazing building capacity. Each year Habitat can build more homes than the preceding year. And the impact has been substantial. But it will take more than Habitat for Humanity to truly eliminate poverty housing in the world. At the present, world population is growing at a rate that exceeds the growing capacity of Habitat to build houses. Still the vision of a world where every child grows up in a safe and secure dwelling is a worthy vision.

Together with others in Bread for the World and other organizations we have shared a vision of an end to hunger as a cause of death in the world. It is an achievable goal from an agricultural standpoint. The globe has the capacity to produce enough food to feed all of the people who live on this planet. But we are a long ways from having every person adequately fed. In order to accomplish that goal, everyone - without exception - would need to share. More than a few of us who consume more than our own share of the world's resources would have to modify our lifestyles. It is not yet achieved, but it is a worthy vision.

Peace with justice for all of the world's citizens has been a dream of humanity for thousands of years. It is easy to become frustrated and think that no progress is being made when we live in a time of increasing warfare and increasing numbers of innocent victims of war. But there have been some moments of hope for those who dare to dream of peace. The transition in power in South Africa with the truth and reconciliation process remains a shining light of our generation. Non-violent transfers of power in other countries have occurred and are occurring in other places. We may not see a world without war in our lifetime, but it is a worthy vision.

And there are more dreams that are big enough to be worthy of a century of dedicated work: finding effective treatments for diseases, ending domestic violence, eliminating crimes, ending prejudice - the list could go on and on.

The prophet proclaimed, "Where there is no vision, the people perish."

When we dare to envision our future, may we be willing to think beyond ourselves and even beyond our own time on this earth. In order to belong to a people that endure for more than a single generation, we must dare to imagine a future that is bigger than our time on this earth.

Keep dreaming BIG. I'll dream with you.

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Thursday, February 17, 2011 – Happy Birthday Madame Butterfly



I have had a happy career as a father and I am incredibly proud of our children. They are intelligent, articulate, generous, responsible and they work hard to make their contributions to this world. I taught them some of the values that have been a part of our family for generations. But I did not teach them to enjoy opera.

It isn't that I didn't try. You know how it is with teenagers. They are continually complaining that you play your music too loud and asking you to "turn that garbage down." At one point, they even requested that I limit my opera listening to the garage, where I work on building canoes and other projects. One even suggested that I consider keeping the garage door closed when listening to Wagner.

You won't find opera on either of their ipods.

Last night was a gala night in Pierre. The governor's awards in the arts is a biennial event that recognizes South Dakotans who have made substantial contributions to the arts. Four of the six recipients of the Governor's awards last night were from our end of the state. I have had the honor of working with three of the four over the past years. Vic Weidensee, honored for outstanding service to arts education serves with me on the board of the Black Hills Chamber Music Society. Over the years we have

found that we have very similar taste in music. Vic's tireless work on the society's music in the school and elder music programs have added richly to our community. They are but a few of a lifetime of contribution to music and the arts.

Ruth Brennan and were on the board of the Allied Arts Fund at the same time. She is a hard worker and dedicated to all of the arts with a special place for the visual arts in her heart. She was honored for outstanding service to the arts community.

Each year for several years now, I have been honored to serve as master of ceremonies for the Claire and Joseph Meier Young Vocal Artist's Competition, held at our church. Promising young singers from our community compete for scholarships and the opportunity to appear in concert with the Dakota Choral Union. Johanna Meier always provides a few comments for the awards ceremony and greets the singers individually. She was honored by our Governor last night for distinction in creative achievement.

Johanna Meier knows opera. During her 15 years at the Metropolitan Opera, she made 78 appearances in 15 roles. She has appeared on stage with the New York Philharmonic, the Boston Symphony, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, as well as orchestras in Germany, France and Israel. She ended her opera career on a high note - literally - singing the title role of Electra in Milwaukee in 1994. She ended her career by coming back to the Black Hills to assist her aging parents with the Black Hills Passion Play. The Johanna Meier Opera Theatre institute in Spearfish each summer gives young musicians a taste of opera production and performance and each year offers students an opportunity to work with some of the finest musicians in the nation.

So there are at least two of us in Western South Dakota who love opera. And today is the anniversary of the 1904 premier of Giacomo Puccini's opera Madame Butterfly at the La Scala theatre in Milan, Italy. Puccini came up with a couple of winners in the powerful arias of the production. The story is rather simple. American sailor, B.F. Pinkerton, meets and marries a young Japanese geisha, Cio-Sio-San (Madame Butterfly), in Nagasaki. Pinkerton leaves and Butterfly continues to believe he will return. Butterfly gives birth to their son. Her friends ask her to consider what she would do if he never returned. She refuses to believe that he won't come back. When he finally returns, after three years, he has another wife. Pinkerton and his new wife offer to care for the child. It takes a while for Butterfly to understand that Kate is the new wife. In the end she tells her child not to feel sorry for her, but to remember her face, steps behind a screen and dies by suicide with her father's knife. Only when it is too late does Pinkerton rush to her arms.

OK, the story is a bit sappy. It is, by the way, the basis for the contemporary Musical, Miss Saigon. But it is set to gorgeous music. And there is something quite international

about listening to the story of a romance between an American and a Japanese person all sung in Italian.

For what it is worth the opera bombed at its first performance. It was greeted with boos and hisses and was withdrawn after the single performance on February 17, 1904. Puccini re-wrote it again and again. The original version had only two acts and the second act was way too long. The second version got better reviews. It opened in Brescia in May of that year and was performed in 1906 in its American debut in Washington D.C.

Puccini kept revising. The fifth version has become known as the “standard version,” and is the most performed these days. I have a new recording of the opera is this version with 34 tracks featuring the Puccini Festival Chorus with Andrea Bocelli singing the lead. and Marzio Glossi singing Pinkerton.

So happy birthday, Madame Butterfly! Over a century later the opera is still bringing pleasure to audiences.

I've pretty much given up listening to opera with others at the present. I can listen through my headphones without annoying my wife or the cats, neither of which are especially fond of classical music. From time to time, when I have a long road trip alone, I crank up the car stereo and sing along.

Still it is nice to know that even though he isn't particularly a fan of opera himself, our governor has recognized the contributions of a true opera diva in our midst and has given her recognition that is well-deserved. I wish I could have been there to attend the awards ceremony.

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Friday, February 18, 2011- Early Fire Season



Just a week ago, the hills around the church were covered with snow. We've had several days of unseasonably warm weather and it was windy yesterday, but that is typical for our part of the world. It is not at all uncommon for us to have several mid-winter thaws and we know we can have spring blizzards into May. But it was tempting to give into spring fever this week. I've been walking outdoors at lunch hour and enjoying the weather.

But we haven't been thinking about wildfire. We knew that there is a healthy fuel load in the forest - the grass grew green and tall last year and there is a lot of dried grass on the forest floor in the hills. Early in the week there was a burn pile fire that got away not far from Placerville, our church camp in the hills.

So we were just doing our regular work yesterday morning. I have a beautiful office with a gorgeous view of the hills and I have taken to working with my desk to the wall to reduce the distractions from the window and to open up floor space in the middle of the room. But I do have a mirror that enables me to see what is going on in the church yard even when I have my back turned.

Around 4 p.m. I looked at the mirror and all I could see in the yard was smoke. I turned around to confirm what I saw and went into the other offices to let the rest of the people know what was going on. I walked down the hall to the west end of the building and

from there could see that the fire was on the hillside above the church. The wind was blowing in the right direction, but the fire had to come down hill to threaten the houses that are between the church and the fire.

Since there was no immediate danger, the church parking lot and yard became a gathering place for spectators and firefighters fought the fire on the steep hillside. When the wind would blow the smoke away for a few minutes, we could see that the fire was near Skyline drive, the road that runs below Dinosaur Park, which is on the skyline above the church. Several times during the fire brush trucks would head up Fulton Street to the end. Since they would come back down quickly, we knew that the fire wasn't threatening the houses there. We later learned that it came within yards of the last house on the street. The homeowner is a firefighter and he was at home at the time and extinguished flames at the edge of their property.

A few blocks away on Columbus Street, staff prepared to evacuate the 40 residents of The Victorian Assisted Living facility, but an evacuation was never necessary. The fire came fairly close to the gift shop at Dinosaur Park but it too was never really in danger of burning.

One thing about having a forest hill in the middle of town: the response from the fire department is quick.

I spent nearly an hour visiting with neighbors, a few curious church members, and other people who came to the church yard for a look at the fire. Crews from the newspaper and a couple of television stations set up briefly to take pictures of the fire.

By the time we were ready to head home for the evening, crews were mopping up and there was very little smoke coming from the fire. It was dusk by then, so it was hard to see exactly, but we could easily see the flashing lights from the trucks so knew the locations of the firefighters. We could no longer see any flames and were pretty relaxed about any immediate danger.

The church sits in a safe area with a big parking lot that would make it relatively easy for firefighters to defend. And our crews are very good at defending structures from wildfire. Still yesterday's blaze was a reminder that we live in a forest and that fire is a natural part of the ecology of our region. In a pine forest, the question is not if there will be a fire, but when there will be a fire.

The cause of the fire is unknown at this point, but if we were going to have a fire on Skyline drive yesterday, we were lucky with the location. The drive runs below the crest of the hill in that section and there was a little shelter from the wind in that location. We had had gusts of over 30 mph earlier in the day. A little ways to the south and the fire might have gotten into the trees before firefighters could get ahead of it. This fire stayed

in the grass. We did hear a chainsaw running during the mop-up operation, so there must have been at least one tree involved, but what we could see was grass fire with flames leaping about 10 feet off of the ground.

Today we have a funeral at the church. It is good that we don't have the excitement of both events going on at the same time. The children had gone home from the preschool before the fire broke out, so we never had to worry about safety or consider the possibility of evacuating our building. It turns out that we were fortunate on many accounts.

Still, it was a bit of excitement on a Thursday afternoon and it gave me a topic for this morning's blog. All in all, it wasn't a bad day.

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Saturday, February 19, 2011 - Hope



We've been having these gorgeous sunrises lately. There may not be much of a blog in that fact because we live in a place with a great view of the sunrise and most of our sunrises are so beautiful that they take your breath away. I never get tired of the sensation of awe at the beauty of the sky filled with color. I've taken so many pictures of sunrises over the years that I could arrange them to show the changes in the location of the sunrise as the seasons pass. I don't think I will ever tire of watching the sunrise.

There is something in the nature of a morning person (and I am definitely a morning person) that gives us joy and pleasure at the start of a new day. Even in hard times there is a sense of promise that lies ahead.

It has been a little over a month since our mother died. Things have changed around our house. We are beginning to shift our routines. At first, I followed the same routines as we had kept for the last three or so years. Mealtimes had to be regular to help keep mom's blood sugars in check. We had an evening routine as well. Usually by the time that mom was settled, I was exhausted and I would head to bed as quickly as possible. But I am no longer attached to that schedule. Instead of going home in the middle of the day to prepare a meal and eat with mother, I have been eating a light snack and taking a walk. It is better for my health and it gives me some time for reflection in the middle of the day.

We have gotten through the first round of sorting. There are boxes to go to the church rummage sale, boxes to be delivered to brothers and sisters, and a few boxes of treasures to be stored. Special equipment like the bath bench, grab bars and the like are ready to be delivered to a place that will recycle them for use by others who have needs. The power lift recliner and one of the walkers have already found new homes and are in use by another.

And my mind is starting to adjust to the reality as well. Like the house, I had to sort out some of my thoughts and feelings. We were so fortunate with the way things turned out. We had the joy of mother living in our home for her last years. Her final illness was very short. She was in the hospital for less than 48 hours. She always sad that she didn't want to linger and she didn't. I have some great photographs that were taken of this stage of her life. We have done a lot of smiling and joking. At the end, one of my brothers and one of my sisters were able to be with us at the hospital.

Although I have made plenty of mistakes in my life, for the most part we were able to lay my mother to rest without regrets. We took care of things in the way that our family prefers, with a worship service at the church.

Still it takes a while for me to process my grief. I am still surprised by my lack of focus. Yesterday we had a funeral at the church for a mother with a son about my age. I totally forgot that it was my job to turn on the recorder so that we could make CD's of the service for the family. Later, during the service, I forgot the order of events temporarily and walked into the center of the chancel as if I was ready for the benediction before the pastoral prayer had been offered. No big problems came from my mistakes, but these are not typical for me. I am a person who is used to remembering large portions of worship services and I do not like the sensation of not remembering when it comes to the most important things I do.

Fortunately I am surrounded by people who are loving and caring and who remind me that my mind is busy with the tasks of grieving as well as the tasks of everyday life. I know that this time will pass and that I will regain my ability to focus my attention on the present.

There is much in the future that draws us forward. I only have to glance at a photograph of our new grandson to be reminded that my current experience is not the whole story.

Back in 1969, Peter Berger published a book entitled *Rumors of Angels*. In the third chapter he presents five arguments for the existence of God that he labels signals of transcendence. I am not too intrigued by arguments about the existence or non-existence of God. They carry a certain philosophical interest, I suppose, but my entire worldview so presumes the existence of God that I find it impossible to think of anything different. Without God nothing exists. Since things exist, God is. When Moses asks God, "Who shall I say has sent me?" God responds with a verb: "I am - tell Pharaoh 'I am' sent you." God is existence itself.

Berger, however, is more systematic in his thought and gives five concise arguments. His third argument is based on the fact that the tendency to hope is innate in human beings. Despite despair and death and all of the reasons that might cause us to lose hope, we continue to seek out hope. He says, "The profoundest manifestations of hope are to be found in gestures of courage undertaken in defiance of death. . . . In a world where man is surrounded by death on all sides, he continues to be a being who says 'no!' to death - and through this 'no' is brought to faith in another world, the reality of which would validate his hope as something other than an illusion."

As we said our good byes to the body of one of the grandmothers of our church yesterday, I returned to words that I have used many other times. I pointed out to the grieving family the signs of hope that surrounded us in that place: the flowers, the trees, the beauty of the hills, the sacred place we had gathered, and, most importantly, one another drawn together in care and concern. Death is not the final victor in this life. It is a present reality, but life continues in the face of death.

Paul put it simply, "Faith, hope and love abide." Many things die. We all will one day die. But hope does not die.

So each morning I rise and look to the east for the first signs of light on the horizon. I know I will not be disappointed. The reality of the sunrise is more glorious than any photo, more dramatic than any memory. And, when the colors fade from the sky I know that I can count on another gift of beauty tomorrow.

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Sunday, February 20, 2011 - Work



Picking up on terminology from technology, psychologists sometimes refer to personality traits as “hard wired.” They really are not talking about the electrical connections in the human brain, although electrical impulses are part of cognitive activity. Rather the term “hard wired” is used to refer to parts of human thinking and personality traits that are universal. Some things are a part of every human being.

Some scientists use the term to identify traits that have deep roots in human evolution. There are certain things about being a human being that have been a part of people’s lives for many generations. The so-called “fight or flight” instinct that we share with other animals, for example, was necessary for survival in the time when most humans survived as hunter-gatherers. Certain parenting instincts are necessary for the survival of the species. Time refines these traits. Those who are better at making quick fight or flight decisions are more likely to survive and reproduce. Those with the best parenting skills are more likely to pass those skills on to subsequent generations because their children are more likely to survive and have children of their own.

The term work was first coined by the French mathematician Gaspart-Gustave Coriolis as a term in physics. Work is the amount of energy transferred by a force acting through a distance. Mathematicians have developed a scale for measuring work. For most of

us, however, the term is applied to human labor. Whether we are referring to work for which we are paid wages or tasks we do to support a family such as housework, we use the word to talk about effort and energy invested in accomplishing a task. Often we are thinking of manual labor when we say work, but we know that there are other types of work that allow one to contribute to society.

From a Christian theological perspective work is used specifically to acts of charity - the things we do to help others.

I think we are “hard wired” for work in both senses of the word. Human beings need to engage in work in order to survive. Without work life loses meaning. And we need to help others - to engage in acts of charity - in order to find meaning.

In our congregation, there have long been opportunities for different kinds of work. We engage in charity through the giving of financial gifts. A significant portion of all of the funds that are donated to the congregation are given to other institutions and agencies within the church and beyond the church. We respond to natural disasters in distant locations primarily through gifts of financial resources. We support local relief agencies, ministries with college students, theological education, and many other projects through the giving of financial donations.

But we also have opportunities for hands-on ministry. Some of what we do is to give of our time and physical strength. Yesterday a handful of church members gathered at the church then traveled to Mt. Rushmore to load and haul wood from trees that had been cut down at the national monument. One employee of the monument told us that they had considered hauling the wood to the landfill after the trees were thinned. When they found that we cut, split and deliver firewood to people who use it for heating their homes, they were glad to let us have it. There were two big piles of logs. Together we loaded six pickups and three trailers with as much wood as we could haul in one trip. The piles were reduced to a single smaller pile that can probably be hauled in a single trip with our biggest trailer and a pickup.

After we had loaded we drove back to town. It must have been comical to watch us climb out of our pickups when we arrived at the church yard. We were all stretching and perhaps even groaning a bit. We were stiff. The physical labor of loading the heavy logs had used muscles that were out of practice. Soon, however, we were back at work unloading and piling the wood. Many of the pieces of wood will have to be cut to stove length before being split and stacked for delivery next fall. The wood is dry so if we need to deliver more wood than we already have split yet this winter, we could have a splitting party and deliver some of this wood yet this year.

The firewood project focuses primarily on our physical work, but it isn't inexpensive. Workers donate the fuel for their vehicles, their tools and other things that are costly.

The pickups we drive are expensive to own and maintain. But we believe in sharing with our neighbors and we use the resources we have to do so. As we share we are building relationships and partnerships that open doors for more sharing in the future.

I suspect that some of the other Woodchucks are like me this morning. I'm a bit stiff. Part of me thought that it might feel good to like in bed a bit longer before getting up and feeling the twinge of sore muscles. But I'm up for the work of this day. After all it is my job - my work - to make sure that things are in place for our worship. And it is good work.

I'm glad we have the opportunities to flex our muscles and lift heavy objects as part of our charitable work as a congregation. We need to work and working together is an excellent way to build community.

Work is more than a way to get things done. It is a blessing. How fortunate we are to be able to work together.

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Monday, February 21, 2011- Superpowers



When you are born with superpowers, you don't know that you have them. Since you are the only thing that you know when you are born, you become normal.

There is nothing super about you. You just are who you are and you have the powers that you have.

When you are the first born, your parents don't recognize your superpowers at first, either. In the first twenty-four hours of your life, they spend more time with you than they have ever spent with any baby. You become the definition of baby-ness for them. You are normal to them.

It took me a while to understand that my name is Elliot Thomas. I kept hearing repeating sounds, but there were plenty of different sounds, so how was I to know which was my name? After all, I didn't yet know what a name was. For all I knew I might be named "I love you," or just "love you." I heard that repeated. The first clue is that my parents kept saying that to each other as well as to me. It wasn't long before I recognized that the thing that was unique about what they said to me was my name. Elliot Thomas.

One of my powers is the power to entertain adults. I have had no problems with that power from the beginning. Every adult who was in the room at the moment of my birth was paying attention to me. In fact, they were so focused on me that it took me quite a while to realize that there was anyone except me. And all I knew of my father was the sounds he made. I just assumed he was another part of my mother. There were others in the room at the time too. I still don't know who they were.

Within minutes, I had reduced my grandmother to baby talk. She could barely get out a complete sentence and she had a special tone in her voice when she addressed me. She didn't seem to use that tone with anyone else.

Naturally I assumed that I was unique in the entire world. No one had ever seen anything quite like me before. They seemed incredibly surprised to see me. They kept checking me out to see how many toes and fingers I had, and they couldn't keep their hands out of my hair.

It took me a while to realize that this uniqueness was one of my superpowers. I am I. I am the only one in the world that is quite like me. As such no one knows quite what to expect from me. It seems that I am a fascinating subject for them to study. In the first few days after I was born, they weighed and measured me. They checked the size of my head and the length of my toes. They hooked me up to an EEG machine to measure my brain waves. They checked my hearing and my vision. So far, I am not able to see through solid objects with x-ray vision, but I have noticed that my vision is improving phenomenally with the passage of time. Things that used to be just a dull blur are perfectly focused now. It wouldn't surprise me if one day I will be able to at least clearly identify objects at large distances.

I seem to be able to cause people to give me gifts: hand-made hats from my great aunt, stuffed toys from my parents' co-workers, pieces of clothing and furniture – whatever I need seems to appear. It may be some form of worship of my superpowers. It appears that other beings have a natural fascination with me that borders on obsession. They make the strangest faces and sounds when they pick me up.

Now that I think of it, I do seem to have a power over people that affects their speech, and their emotions. They blubber when they are around me. They get tears in the corners of their eyes. They mist up.

The things I have mentioned so far are rather conventional superpowers. I also have powers that are, in my opinion, far more unique. My middle name means “twin.” I didn't know what that meant until I discovered the pictures that they are taking of me. Although I experience only one of me and I am clearly singular, I cause cameras to make multiple images of me. Almost every picture they took has a duplicate taken shortly afterward. Sometimes there are triplets and quadruplets that show up in pictures even though I appear singular. I haven't quite mastered the quality of being in two places at the same time, but I believe this may be possible. If only I weren't dependent upon the big people for mobility, I would try to see if I could outrun the camera so that there would only be a singular image each time they pushed the shutter.

Here is another superpower I have just discovered. I can send out a tractor beam and cause people who are far away to come to me. I noticed this first with my parents. I would be just lying in my bed and starting to think that I was alone and they would creep into my room. Almost any time I think of them they appear. Now that I am twelve days old, I am expanding this power. I have issued the tractor beam over the computer network they call Skype. My paternal grandparents have remained over 1300 miles away since my birth, but they keep checking in with the computer and Skype.

This morning I have caused them to rise in the middle of the night. As soon as they stirred, I put them in motion. Right now, they aren't moving too quickly, but before long I plan to accelerate them to nearly 400 miles per hour. By mid-day I fully intend for them to come directly to my room.

Who knows what new superpowers I will discover in the days to come?

Tuesday, February 22, 2011 – Song of Praise



The Psalms contain poems and songs that show every human emotion. There are psalms that reflect a sense of fear, psalms that express unbridled anger, and psalms that demonstrate grief and loss. However, the majority of the psalms are expressions of joy, awe, and wonder. The most common theme of the psalms is praise of God. God is praised for mighty acts in the history of our people. God is praised for the incredible complexity of creation. God is praised for the freedom that has been granted to creatures. The ratio of songs of praise to laments seems to be somewhat similar to my life's experience. I have known sorrow and sadness. I have had experiences when things just didn't work out the way I wanted. I have suffered setbacks. But if you wanted to tell the story of my life, it would have to have "God is Good" as one of its major themes.

Here is a Song of Praise for today:

Let all of life praise God!
Tiny fingers exploring
Tiny feet kicking
Tiny stomach rumbling
Tiny heart strongly beating
Tiny lungs filling with air
Tiny ears hearing
Tiny eyes seeing

Tiny mouth tasting
Tiny nose smelling
Tiny mind remembering
Let all of life praise God!

Let all of life praise God!
Skin sensing
Nerves pulsing
Synapses firing
Receptors communicating
Genetics guiding
Cells dividing
Chemicals synthesizing
Biology regulating
Oxygen infusing
Life sustaining
Let all of life praise God!

One might imagine that the all-powerful and all-creative God might have had the option of creating a mechanical universe, where all processes are cause and effect and the universe, once created would operate as designed, without surprise. Ancient theologians saw the regularity of the motion of planets and stars, the flow of seasons and the predictability of certain parts of the world and imagined a “clockwork universe” where God as the builder had created a mechanical marvel. We now know that the universe is infinitely more complex. The universe contains self-creating and self-sustaining sub-systems.

What is more, it contains freedom and surprise.

Many of the world’s religions have discovered ways of thinking and talking about God that celebrate the power and scale of the universe. Many share a deep appreciation for the complexity of creation and the wonder of freedom. Our faith celebrates the presence of God in every part of this vast and wonderful creation. It isn’t just that God created the miraculous process of birth. God entered the world through birth and knows the process not only from the outside, but also from the inside. We call it incarnation.

God isn’t a disinterested or distant manipulator of this creation. God is an active participant, sharing the trials and temptations, the costs and calluses, the joys and sorrows, the realities of life.

Clearly I am not a poet. My attempts at songs and poems are clumsy and awkward. The rhythm of my words is halting and irregular. But if I could, I would write a new psalm. If I could I would write 150 new psalms!

There is little in biology that demands multi-generational families. Once a generation has produced and raised the subsequent generation the continuation of biology is assured. Grandparents don't have to live long enough to witness the birth of their grandchildren for human beings to continue to populate this earth. But it is a marvelous thing that we do last long enough to live in multi-generational families.

Our new grandson has very capable and loving parents, who can provide everything he needs to grow into adulthood. But there is no joy deeper than watching the mother who brought his father into this world rocking her grandson. It is as if the whole purpose of our existence is joy, pure joy. How could we help but sing a song of praise?

NOTES TO REGULAR BLOG READERS: First of all, I am sorry that the RCFirstUCC web site was down for part of yesterday. For those of you who access my blogs through the site, I apologize. It was a rather simple coding error that rendered the very first link dysfunctional. It is now repaired. Secondly, No I won't always write about our new grandson. I am actually reading books and paying attention to other things in the world. But these days are, for us, ones of deep and powerful joy, so my attention is focused for the present.

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Wednesday, February 23, 2011 – Praying with the People of Christchurch



The Maori name for the place was Otautahi (the place of Tautahi). It was a particular place on the river that is now named Avon and was a seasonal dwelling of Nahi Tahu chief Te Potiki Tautahi, whose main home was on the Banks Peninsula. Settlers from England did not learn the Maori language and didn't understand the significance of the places where they settled.

The English brought their sense of organization and their religion with them when they arrived. In March of 1848, the Canterbury Association, which settled the surrounding province and named it Canterbury, met and declared that their city would be named Christchurch. The name was suggested by John Robert Godley, who had attended Christ Church in Oxford back in England. The secretary recorded the name as a single word and Christchurch became the official monicker of what grew to be the largest city on the South Island of New Zealand and the nation's second-largest urban area.

The area, about one third of the way down the South Island's east coast, just north of the Banks Peninsula, reminded the settlers of their home and they named things after features of England and Scotland.

And they built a church. The church became a cathedral and the home to the Anglican Bishop of the area. It became a prominent feature of the city and was pictured on tourist posters and advertisements for vacationers to visit the area. It is also an active and forward-looking church with a modern congregation. It is a living house of prayer for the City and the Anglican Diocese. Among the goals of the congregation are excellence in Christian worship, a place of welcome ministering to people of all faiths and none, a symbol of the city, and a congregation engaging in the issues of the world. It's building with the soaring spire became a place for the display of visual arts and musical performance.

The region of Canterbury is known for earthquakes. A part of the Pacific Ring of Fire, there have been many major quakes. In 1888, a 7.1 magnitude quake shook the Canterbury area. More recently the 2010 Canterbury earthquake was also recorded with a magnitude of 7.1 on September 4.

The cathedral has stood through many quakes. Damage from the September 2010 quake was minimal. However, the windows in the South Transcept were destroyed the day after Christmas when a 4.9 aftershock of the September quake rattled the building. In early February, workers removed the windows and replaced them with clear glass in anticipation of new stained glass windows to follow.

All of that changed yesterday when a magnitude 6.3 quake shook the city. This quake was closer to the surface than previous shocks and the damage was devastating. The spire and portions of the roof have fallen. The building has been destroyed.

Of course the destruction of the building is not the destruction of a church. The building can be replaced and likely will be. Right now the building is not the priority. The official death toll is 75, but there are more than 300 people who are still missing and feared buried in the rubble of the many collapsed buildings. Rescues have been accomplished. At least one woman was rescued after being trapped for 24 hours. More than 500 search and rescue personnel, police, fire service staff, soldiers and volunteers are scrambling to find survivors trapped under the rubble. The main hospital is inundated with people suffering head and chest injuries.

And the church, without a building, is a center of prayer and concern. At this point it is estimated that 22 people remain trapped in the Cathedral building and the rubble in the street from the collapsed spire and roof. Prayers are being offered around the clock as workers struggle to rescue survivors and fears mount that the death toll will continue to rise.

There are people who will ask, "Why did God allow this to happen?" or even "Why did God cause this earthquake?" There is no easy answer to their anguished questions. God created a universe of amazing complexity and endowed that universe with the power to be self-creating. The surface of our planet has gigantic tectonic plates. Under the South Island of New Zealand the Pacific and Indo-Australian plates rub past each other horizontally. When the pressure builds up, the surface of the ground breaks open and the land shakes. There is no intention of tragedy, death and destruction in this process, but we humans are very small in comparison to the forces that mold and shape our planet.

Here is what we do know: Christ is present in the midst of the tragedy, with the rescue workers as they dig, sometimes with their bare hands. Christ is in the midst of the congregation as they pray for the safety of those who are missing and the consolation of those who are grieving. Christ is with the church staff as they seek to minister to a broken congregation while at the same time are overcome with fear and grief at the loss of their colleagues.

Their beautiful building has been destroyed, but the church has never been primarily a building. It is a community of faithful people who seek to bring Christ's love to the world. Christchurch Cathedral is still a beacon of hope in a dark world. It will need to call upon its deepest reserves of faith as it consoles the grieving and plans the funerals. It will need to trust God more than ever in this season of saying good bye to a place that has been its home for generations and learns to be a community based not on a building, but upon its faith.

And the message that those of us in distant locations send to them is clear. They are not alone. We are praying with the people of Christchurch. The church is a world-wide

community that does not stop at the walls of a particular building or the borders of a particular nation. Godspeed the work of the rescuers. God be with those who grieve. And may the peace of Christ - the peace that passes all human understanding - be with the congregation and the people of the city.

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Thursday, February 24, 2011 – Becoming Grandpa



I think that pastors in general have trouble with vacation. I know that I often have. There are so many responsibilities and activities that are a part of the usual pace of life, that it is tempting to just keep up the usual pace. Early in our career, we found that it often took several days to separate ourselves from our work and a few to gear up for the pace of return. As a result a week of vacation often did not seem like much of a change of pace at all. In addition, there is a certain amount of the work of a pastor that simply has to continue, so one tends to do extra work in preparation for going on vacation and extra work upon return.

But this week has been amazingly restful and restorative for me. It isn't that I have totally disengaged from my work. I have been in e-mail and phone contact with some of the people in the church and I have spent a little time each day working with some web problems that I had been putting off.

But there has been no question about the focus of our week. We are getting to know our family's newest member. And we are learning new roles in the family.

As I have had time to reflect, I realize what a whirlwind of activity and emotion this year has been for all of the members of my family. It is just a little under six weeks since my mother died. We have had tremendous support from the church and we have some experience with the process of grief, so our recovery has been typical. Part of that process, however, has to do with our house. The place where my mother lived for the last three years of her life is our home, so being at home was being constantly reminded of our loss. There are still jobs at home relative to that loss that need to be accomplished. There is a room that needs new carpet, there are boxes to move into storage and others ready for the next rummage sale. There are some things stored in the garage that need to be taken to a place that cleans, repairs and puts back into use devices used to assist those with disabilities.

So it is appropriate to take a break from our house and from the "to do" list that is constantly with us in that place. It is not that we aren't engaged in activities here. Our son and daughter-in-law have their own to do lists and we are helping with those things as we are able. But the focus of their household is their new child. And the tasks relative to his care that are given to grandparents are all amazingly restorative things to do. Rocking a sleepy child can renew one's spirit and body at the same time. Going for a walk with the dog is a gentle way of getting exercise and allowing one's mind to wander. Even simple household chores like changing a light bulb or making a trip to the grocery store are easily accomplished and freed from the weariness that we sometimes attach to such chores when we are at home.

It seems trite to say it, but we are learning a whole new set of relationships. You would think that becoming grandparents is just automatic. There isn't much required of a grandpa. It isn't primarily a set of tasks, but rather just a state of being. You just go on with your life and your children become parents. They are assuming all of the responsibility. And our children are very competent and responsible adults. We are confident of their ability to be good parents. And some of the parts of being grandparents are very similar to being parents. We have to trust our children and allow them to make their own decisions and assume responsibility for their own actions.

The tasks of being grandparents are amazingly easy for us. We haven't forgotten how to change a diaper or burp a baby. We aren't afraid to pick up our little grandson and give him a cuddle. But we are also aware that we aren't getting up in the middle of the night in the midst of the intense exhaustion that comes from weeks of having your sleep disrupted every night. We are just daytime helpers for a little while.

The shift in my life, from being primary caregiver for my mother to being a bit of back up for a pair of well-organized and competent parents is a decrease in work load. And that has given me time to think.

Each stage of our life is rich in meaning. I am deeply grateful that i was given the opportunity to be with my mother and provide care for her over the past few years. It was a blessing in more ways than I can express in words. But this new stage is also deeply meaningful. Easing into my new role is a delightful adjustment that seems to be leaving me with more energy and enthusiasm for life.

My mother used to comment, from time to time, that growing old isn't for the faint of heart. That is true, but there are some things that come with growing older that are incredibly wonderful. There is a sense of liberation that comes from watching a new generation assume new roles. The tasks that are given to grandparents are amazingly fun and restorative.

I have sometimes wondered if my growing old would result in a crusty old curmudgeon that confuses and frightens others or a blubbering and overly sentimental old fool who can't gain control of his emotions. I am beginning to sense that there are other possibilities. I can remember the years when I seemed to be too young for all of the things that seemed to matter. People urged me to be patient and to wait until I had more experience. Than, suddenly, I was too old for some of the roles to which I aspired. I have joked that there is no time in one's life when you are the right age for the things you want to know. You go directly from being too young to being too old.

But for the things that are most important to me in this life I seem to be just the right age at the moment. A white beard goes quite well with being a grandpa. And, so far, my grandson isn't in the least bit bothered by the fact that I sometimes run out of energy in the evening.

I think I'm going to like being a grandpa - a lot!

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Friday, February 25, 2011 – Walking on the Chehalis Trail



There was a time when timber was the largest industry in Western Washington. It isn't difficult to see why. The temperate rain forest that covers the Olympic Peninsula has impressive stands of Douglas Fir, Cedar, Hemlock and other trees. From 1926 through the mid-1980's the Weyerhaeuser Pulp and Paper Company operated a railroad to take trees from the eastern side of the Puget Sound to the water. At Woodard Bay, just north of Lacey, they installed a trestle over the water so that logs from trains could be dumped directly into the water. Logs at the South Bay Log Dump were then formed into huge rafts and floated to Everett for milling and processing.

During the height of logging operations in the area, 1 million board feet of timber were transported by rail to the South Bay Log Dump. The area was occasionally used by Pacific Northwest tribes prior to European settlement in the 1850's. It gained its contemporary name from the Woodard family who began hauling logs down to the waterfront. The family built the railway but sold to to the Weyerhaeuser Company within a few years of the beginning of operations.

During the last three decades of the 20th century, the amount of logs available decreased dramatically as urban expansion and the creation of parks and other uses of forest property created competition for the land and the trees. The process of rafting logs from Woodard Bay became increasingly expensive and eventually unsustainable. The site was closed in 1984.

Woodard Bay now been designated as the Weyerhaeuser South Bay Log Dump Rural Historic Landscape. It is a renowned bird sanctuary and is home to harbor seals, river otters, bald eagles, a colony of bats and is an important great blue heron rookery. A partnership between the Nature Conservancy and the State of Washington owns and operates the site as a public park.

The rail line has become the Chehalis Western Trail. The trail runs north-south through Thurston County, which is now the owner of the trail. It connects Woodard Bay with the Yelm-Tenino Trail and passes through both rural and urban areas of the county.

The trail passes very near to the home of our son and daughter-in-law in Olympia and is a great place for walks. Since we have been visiting, I have been able to take daily walks with their Sheltie dog on the trail.

Yesterday it snowed most of the day. The weather was warm and the snow was wet, like a spring blizzard back at home. Part of the time, the snow melted as it hit the pavement, sticking only to grass and trees, but as temperatures dropped, it began to stick to the pavement as well. For us, four or so inches of snow that rapidly settled to a couple of inches wasn't a big event. But for the area it was the news of the day. Television stations had live crews set up outside to show how much snow had fallen. Schools opened two hours late in Thurston County. Drivers with poor tires and little winter driving experience struggled to get up hills. Cars spun out and went into the ditches. People were late to work and left early to avoid getting snowed in. Grocery stores were filled with people stocking up on emergency supplies.

It was all very entertaining for us. We went on with life as usual. The dog, Oly, and I had a nice long walk on the Chehalis Trail, which was absolutely beautiful with the snow falling gently on the trees. The dog loves the snow and walks with her nose in the snow until inhaling the cold air makes him snort and shake his head.

This morning it appears that the "Snowpocalypse" that was forecast didn't materialize in Thurston County. There was no more snow over night. Streets are a bit icy with frozen slush this morning, but chances are they will be cleared in time for the morning commute and the snow should be gone in a couple of days.

Compared to the kind of spring blizzards we get at home, this wasn't a particularly dramatic event.

We have spoken to some of the locals as we have gone about our days of visiting in the area. Yesterday there was a woman who was comparing the blizzard with the earthquake in New Zealand. She saw both as signs that God was punishing people for all of the evil in the world. I didn't quite follow her point of view. I guess, however, that she must think that the people in New Zealand are a lot worse than the folk in Thurston

County. At least I couldn't see many signs of disruption of life with the little snow that fell yesterday. It seemed to me to be nothing like the devastation, destruction and loss of life that occurred in Christchurch.

If you are looking for me in the middle of the afternoon, when the baby is taking a nap, I'll probably be out walking on the Chehalis trail. It isn't worth my time to explain to the locals that I'm wearing my rain coat with a t-shirt underneath. My winter parka is in the car parked in a snowdrift in the long-term parking lot at the airport back home, where we actually do get winter weather from time to time. Five below and snow at home seems to us to be a lot more like winter than the weather we're having out here, but I doubt that much is disrupted by the weather at home today.

A little snow around here means that there will be fewer people on the trail when we go for our walk.

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Saturday, February 26, 2011 - Vision



One of the joys of being a grandparent is that you can be reminded of past experiences that went by very quickly at the time. When our children were infants we were busy people, with jobs to complete, responsibilities to fulfill and we were doing it all while we were short of sleep. They were wonderful years and we found great joy and delight in

them, but they quickly passed. These years will quickly pass as well, but they give us a reminder of experiences we once had and a second opportunity to watch and observe.

Much of the time we are spending with our grandson involves holding him and gazing into his face. Although it is still just random luck, occasionally he comes up with a smile that delights us all. We do not know exactly what is going on with his vision, but we know that changes are occurring rapidly in his vision centers.

The initial vision examination conducted by the doctor was mostly to look for signs of congenital cataracts or other neonatal eye problems. When he was born, Elliot was seeing only in black and what and shades of gray. Nerve cells in his retina and brain that control vision were not fully developed. He had no ability to focus his vision. It was as if there was just one distance where things seemed clear. When objects moved or he was moved, he couldn't adjust to the change in distance.

But his vision was already rapidly developing. By the time we arrived, when he was 12 days old, he already had developed the ability to recognize his mother and father. The recognition wasn't purely visual. His sense of smell is more fully developed than other senses, but there are large, high-contrast features that he recognizes, such as the boundary of the hairline along his mother's face or at his father's forehead.

We spend a lot of time looking at the baby's eyes because they are so big. Babies develop from the head down. When he was born, Elliot's eyes were already 65 percent of their adult size. So we really notice those dark little eyes.

Elliot isn't as sensitive to light during the first month of his life. This is a good thing because we are constantly taking pictures of him, sometimes using the flash on our cameras. He doesn't react to the flash like an adult might, which gives us good opportunities for a number of pictures with his eyes wide open.

He is already developing the ability to see in colors. Red, orange, yellow and green are already within his range of vision. Blue and violet are the last colors to become distinct and it could take a few more weeks before he can discern those colors. Those colors have shorter wavelengths and fewer color receptors exist in the retina for blue light.

He is also developing the skill of making his eyes work together. He can track objects with both eyes now, if we hold our hand or finger at the proper distance for him to focus. Colors are important for his visual development, so his parents are surrounding him with bright colors. Contrast is equally important, so placing different colors next to each other will clear lines between them helps him develop his ability to see clearly.

We know that big changes will take place in his vision in the next couple of months. By the time we return for a visit in May he will be reaching for items and occasionally be

able to grasp the object he desires. He will have learned to shift his gaze from one object to another without having to move his head. And he will have become much more sensitive to light. He still won't have the light sensitivity we adults have, but he will be much more aware of and sensitive to bright lights.

One of the blessings of this life is that we go through this process of development. Babies are not born as fully functioning mini-adults. They have to learn and grow and develop skills and abilities for many years before they are ready for independent living. This places responsibility for their care with their parents and extended families, but it also gives the joy of watching, observing and witnessing the growth and development. The universe continues to unfold in new and fascinating ways with each new birth.

Knowing that such change is continuing is a constant source of hope. Not only are new abilities being developed, but new solutions to problems are being formed. New ways of living are being discovered. The future is not fixed, but rather unfolding with each new person.

The ancients made a strong connection between eye sight and direction for the future. The word "vision" refers both to the ability to see and the ability to plan for the future. The birth of a baby expands our vision. Now our world is bigger than just the span of our years on this earth.

Elliot was born into a family where the generations are spread out more than some families. In a couple of weeks his father will turn 30. His father's mother is 60 and her father is 90. Four generations with 30 years between each provide us with a unique opportunity to observe the changes that are a part of the continual growth and development of human life. There are challenges with each stage. And there are joys with each stage.

From a technical, survival-of-the-species, standpoint, Elliot does not need grandparents or a great grandfather. His parents have all of the skills and abilities they need to raise him to maturity. So our role is not one of essence, but rather one of joy. We are here for delight and support and joy. It is not a bad role for a human.

Even though we are old, we are not too old. We are able to cuddle, nurture, and share in Elliot's life. And we are able to imagine and envision his future. We know there will be many surprises. He will see things we cannot imagine, but knowing that the future is open and newness is emerging is part of the excitement of gazing into the eyes of this tiny baby in these precious days.

The vision of our people is literally growing with the development of Elliot's vision. God has more light to break forth. We have more to learn.

It reminds me of the opening line of an old, old hymn: “Joy’s are flowing, like a river, since the Comforter has come. He abides with us forever, makes the trusting heart his home.”

Indeed Joys are flowing! Alleluia!

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Sunday, February 27, 2011 – In Our Prayers



Each week we have a small section in our church bulletin titled “In Our Prayers.” It is a short list of members and friends of our congregation who are facing health crises, are in long term care, or are isolated from the congregation because they are unable to attend worship. The list is not exhaustive. Some people prefer not to have their names or medical conditions published. More often there are people who have special needs that re unknown to us at the time we print the bulletins.

Each week, during our worship, I try to name a few other people for whom we are praying. My own personal prayer list is often very long. Sometimes I include the victims of the events that make the headlines in the newspapers. We don’t presume to be telling God where divine concern should be placed. Rather, we are reminding ourselves of our own need to think of and pray for others.

I won't be leading worship this morning, but the task of preparing a meaningful pastoral prayer is daunting. There is a lot going on in our congregation. There have been deaths of family members, serious illnesses, and hospitalizations. There are members of our congregation who are nearing the end of their time in this life. There are others who are unable to get out because of the cold weather even though today is forecast to be much warmer than yesterday.

And the world is full of tragedies of global proportion. It is a day of mourning for the victims in the earthquake in Christchurch New Zealand. At least 147 people have died. At least 50 more are missing. The recovery and identification of bodies is growing increasingly difficult as rescue workers are becoming increasingly weary from their task. Soon a giant demolition effort will be underway with between 1/3 and 1/2 of the city's buildings needing to be demolished to make space for new construction. It will take years to recover.

We need to keep those people in our prayers for years to come.

Which makes today a good day to remember the victims of the 8.8 magnitude earthquake that shook Chile a year ago today. Although there have been great efforts to re-build and to provide for the needs of the victims, it is estimated that only half of the rebuilding has been completed. There are still thousands living in temporary shelters.

And we cannot count the victims of earthquakes and other natural disasters without noting that many more people have become the victims of political unrest and violence. More than a thousand have perished in the recent uprising in Libya. At least two have died in clashes with security forces in Oman, Violence continues in Iraq and Afghanistan. After decades of conflict in their land, there are almost two million widows in Afghanistan who are living secluded, poverty-stricken lives.

The list goes on and on. It can be tempting to just create a huge list of victims. There is no shortage of people for whom to pray. But our faith is not just a list of doom, destruction, death and suffering. Although we are not blind to the realities of our world we are called to boldly proclaim that these things are not the final word.

We are the people of the resurrection. We bear witness to the hope that rises from the rubble - the recovery that can come from the deepest of tragedies - the new life that can come from the darkest of days. Death, tragedy, despair and destruction are not the final words on the meaning of human life.

Even as we pray for those who have become victims, we seek to walk with them on a journey that leads to a new place. Victims can become survivors. It takes time. Grief and recovery are not speedy processes and they can be wildly unpredictable in their course and timing. Survivors can become a source of support for other victims.

We are not untouched by the tragedies of this world. Each has an impact on us and we grieve with those who suffer through no fault of their own. But we also carry a message of hope. The future beckons with new possibility. Death and decay nurture the seeds of new life and recovery.

The prayers we offer on days like today are always incomplete. There are so many more for whom we could be praying. The list is never exhaustive even when it is exhausting. God is aware of much more that is a part of this wide universe. Our perspective is much more limited. But we are not called to be perfect. We are not called to fix all of the problems of this world. We are called to be compassionate. We are called to share. We are called to care.

So our prayers are offered from the various places where we gather. And our prayers are combined with the prayers of our sisters and brothers all around the world. The power of our prayers comes not from us or from our actions, but from God's work in our world.

We are not the only ones who care. We are not the only ones called to compassion. God is working through the lives of many others.

When we pray, we know we are never alone.

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Monday, February 28, 2011 – Dealing with Distance



I was 21 years old when Susan and I moved from Montana to Chicago. I didn't know it at the time, but it was the end of my living in the state of my birth. Although at the time it seemed natural that we would go away to school for three or four years and then return to Montana to serve the church in which we had grown up, it just isn't possible to predict the future. Although we have made a few attempts over the years, we have never been called to be pastors of a congregation in Montana.

Over the years, children were born to us, grew up, and moved away without ever living in the same state as their grandparents. The distances have been significant, but our children have had close and meaningful relationships with their grandparents. Our life has taught us that large physical distances do not have to mean large emotional distances. It really is true that love transcends our human boundaries.

One of the things that occurred in our lives before we had children of our own is that we formed close relationships with some of our classmates. Some of those relationships have grown into life-long connections of collegiality and friendship. One of the connections that has meant a great deal to us has been with a colleague and his family in Australia. In 1977, when Tony completed his Doctorate, they moved back to Australia. They have made several visits to the United States over the years and have been each of the homes we have lived in since we graduated from Seminary. In 2006, we made a trip to Australia and were able to spend a month with them.

Each time we are together it is as if we had never been apart. We share common concerns, a common commitment to the church and to family, and we have kept touch through a variety of media over the years. Physical distance does not mean separation.

Of course I am saying all of this because today we will say good bye to our Son and Daughter-in-Law and our new grandson and board an airplane back to South Dakota. The good news is that we will be back in May for another visit. We also know that they will be coming to South Dakota in July. But even May seems like a long way away in the rapidly changing life of our new grandson. He will have grown and changed quite a bit by then.

We are fortunate to have incredible technology at our disposal. Skype allows us to see and hear him in real time on our computer. That technology has been essential as we have journeyed through the last two years with our daughter living in England. At least once a week, we can chat and see her face and know that she is all right. I don't know what I would have done without that technology.

I do know that I would still have encouraged our children to live their own lives, to form their own relationships and to follow their dreams. It would be selfish of me to keep them close to home simply because I miss them when they are gone. Our children do not live their lives for us. They have never been our possessions, only a trust that has been placed in our care for a little while. Their world is larger and more expansive than ours and this is as it should be.

I look at our tiny grandson and know that he will never be surprised at computers or video communications the way we are. He will go places and do things that we cannot even begin to imagine. I am sure that my grandparents would be amazed that we can fly from South Dakota to Washington in the middle of the winter for a week's visit and then turn around and drive the distance in May. When my uncle moved to the West Coast from North Dakota, my grandparents probably never again saw him twice in the same year and often did not see him face to face for many years in a row. Their main way of keeping touch involved letters sent through the mail. The telephone was expensive and reserved for emergencies or short conversations on special occasions.

With our grandson, speaking with each other will be second nature to him from the beginning. With cell phones and the computer, we can speak any time we wish without any additional costs to ourselves or to them. It isn't just that the world is changing.

It has already changed.

Still, it will be hard to say good bye. Hard good byes are part of all loving relationships. There is a part of us that wishes we could be together in the same place every day. But we have responsibilities and obligations in South Dakota. We have no less love for the

people who live in our own town. There are taxes to file, a newsletter to edit, a home to prepare for guests, and jobs that require our presence. It is time to go home.

We will deal with the distance. And we will be grateful for the various tools we have to stay in touch and to travel as often as we are able.

One of the treasures of our faith is the assurance that God transcends all boundaries. There are no restrictions on the power of love to travel large distances. When we sing, "God be with you 'till we meet again," we do so with complete confidence that indeed God is with our loved ones and that we will meet again.

If we didn't believe it, we could not bear to leave.

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