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Repent

Ash Wednesday

Joel 2:12-18

“Let your heart show your sorrow.”

In Old Testament times, people used ashes in a variety of religious ways.

For example, the Second Book of Samuel (13:19) tells how a woman who had been raped sprinkled ashes on her head as a sign of grief. The book of Jeremiah (6:26) tells how people rolled in ashes as a sign of mourning. And the Book of Job (42:6) mentions the custom of sprinkling ashes on oneself as a sign of repentance.

Jesus referred to this latter practice in New Testament times. Speaking to some people, he said:

“If the miracles which were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, the people there would have long ago put on sackcloth and sprinkled ashes on themselves, to show that they had turned from their sins!”
Matthew 11:21

This brings us to the use of ashes in our times. Each year on Ash Wednesday, we mark our foreheads with ashes. We do this for two reasons.

First, ashes are a sign of repentance. They indicate that we are sorry for our sins and will do penance for them during Lent.

This explains why the priest may say, when he marks us with ashes, “Turn away from your sins and be faithful to the Gospel.”

Second, ashes are a sign of our mortality. They indicate that we will die someday. To understand this second sign, recall that right after Adam and Eve sinned, God said to them:

“Because of what you have done . . . you [will] go back to the soil

from which you were formed. You were made from soil [dust], and you will become soil [dust] again.”
Genesis 3:17, 19

This explains why the priest may also say, when he marks us with ashes, “You are dust and to dust you shall return.”

And so the ashes we will receive in a few minutes have a twofold meaning.

First, they are a sign of our repentance. They say that we are sorry for our sins and will do penance for them during Lent.

Second, they are a sign of our mortality. They say that we will die someday and have to give an account of our lives to God. This brings us to what we will do during Lent.

For those ages 21 through 59, the Church prescribes a minimal penance of fasting on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. And for everyone 14 years and over, the Church prescribes abstinence from meat on all Fridays during Lent.

This leaves each of us to decide what added personal penance we will perform. [Make suggestions that are appropriate to those attending Mass.]

Let's close by praying these words from the Preface (Lenten II) of today's Mass:

“Father . . .
This great season of grace is your gift to your family to renew us in spirit. You give us strength to purify our hearts, to control our desires, and so to serve you in freedom. You teach us how to live in this passing world with our hearts set on the world that will never end.”

I set before you life and death

Thursday after Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Ash Wednesday

"Choose life!"

Sometimes news reporters embarrass us by the insensitive questions they ask people, especially people who have just suffered a major tragedy.

For example, a news reporter asked John Cogan, a 51-year-old victim of terminal cancer, "What are your feelings as you face death?" Cogan stunned the reporter and his audience by saying:

"There's a joy I can't express deep down inside me. I feel perfectly free. . . . I want to reach out and embrace the whole universe."

Cogan's terminal illness had set before him the choice of life or death. He chose life—eternal life.

Do we see tragedies in our life as opportunities for life?

"Whoever wants to save his own life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it." Luke 9:24

This is the fast I want

Friday after Isaiah 58:1-9
Ash Wednesday

"Share your bread with the hungry."

Under the listing of "Dog" in the yellow pages of the Evanston, Illinois, telephone directory there is an ad for American Pet Motels. Here are some of the services these kennels provide for their clients' pets.

Deluxe and imperial suites
FM music in every room

Beauty salon
Senior citizens' care plan
Daily cookie breaks

When the initial humor of the ad fades, we suddenly realize that we take better care of our pets than we do of the poor.

This is the kind of thing God confronts us with, through the prophet Isaiah, in today's reading.

What are we doing toward feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked?

"If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich."

John F. Kennedy

God speaks

Saturday after Isaiah 58:9-14
Ash Wednesday

"Help others and I will help you."

A woman named Linda was in a state mental hospital. She said she was without hope for the future and without faith in God.

Then one day she happened to notice a small sign: "Volunteers needed to help the elderly." She says she doesn't know why she responded to that sign, but she did.

Several months later she wrote about her experience, "Each day spent with these elderly patients awakened something within me."

Linda's experience with the elderly patients restored not only her faith in the future but also her faith in God.

Recall a time when our faith and hope were restored after sharing love with another.

When we reach out to others, we frequently help ourselves far more than we help them.

God instructs his people

Monday Leviticus 19:1-2, 11-18

"Be holy, because I am holy."

The Great Wall of China is reputedly the only man-made structure that is visible from the moon. The cost of building the wall was staggering.

When it was finished, the people relaxed. They thought it was impregnable. But their enemies breached it easily. How? They simply bribed one of the gatekeepers.

We Christians have a "Great Wall of China" inside our hearts: our Christian faith. It is a gift from God that assures us that when we die, nothing can keep us from God. It makes us impregnable.

Satan knows this, so he doesn't attack us head-on. Instead, he bribes the gatekeeper; he tries to infiltrate our lives in tiny, "harmless" ways. This is what today's reading warns us about.

Do we examine our conscience daily to see if we are drifting in our Christian values?

"He who stops being better stops being good."
Oliver Cromwell

God has sent his word among us

Tuesday Isaiah 55:10-11

It will bear fruit, if we let it.

A group of Nicaraguan high school students boarded a boat for the island of Utila, just off the country's northern coast. After they got settled, one student asked the captain if he could steer the ship. The captain agreed, telling the boy to keep the needle pointed to 335 degrees north.

Two hours later the boat arrived at Utila. The youngster was still at the wheel.

How was it possible for the youth to guide the boat to an island he couldn't see? He simply followed the captain's directions.

The Bible is like that. It can guide us to an "island" we can't see. If we follow it, it will take us safely home to our Father.

When was the last time we thanked God for the gift of his word?

"The message proclaimed by the prophets . . . is like a lamp shining in a dark place until . . . the light of the morning star shines in your hearts." 2 Peter 1:19

God calls Nineveh to conversion

Wednesday Jonah 3:1-10

Nineveh responded to God's message.

The *Dallas Morning News* carried a photo showing prisoners on a work-release program, restoring an old house on the city's west side.

Several days later one of the prisoners wrote a letter to the editor, saying that the last time he had his picture in the paper was when he was sentenced four years ago. He wrote:

"It was a real joy to see my picture in your paper doing something good. . . . When I entered prison 18 months ago, I was a lot like the house we just remodeled. . . . But God took charge of my life and has made me a new creation in Christ."

To what extent have we let God take charge of our life?

What keeps us from turning our life over to him completely?

"When anyone is joined to Christ, he is a new being; the old is gone, the new has come."

2 Corinthians 5:17

Esther prays to God

Thursday Esther C:12, 14-16, 23-25 (NAB)

"I have no help but you."

Lois Olson contracted polio at the age of ten. The entire lower part of her body was in a cast.

One night a tornado struck. She felt the bed and the entire house tremble. A feeling of utter helplessness swept over her. All she could do was lie there.

Just then her father appeared at the door. He took her in his arms, heavy cast and all, and carried her down the steps to the basement.

She said she can still see the beads of sweat form on his forehead and the blood vessels bulge out of his temples as he struggled under the heavy burden.

God is like that. He is always ready to help us, especially when we are powerless to help ourselves.

How great is our trust that God will help us, especially when we can't help ourselves?

"Fear is useless. What is needed is trust."
Mark 5:36 (NAB)

God makes a promise

Friday Ezekiel 18:21-28

"Turn from sin, and you will live."

The Cross and the Switchblade was a best-selling book years ago. It describes the work of a young minister, David Wilderson, with New York delinquents. The book is filled with remarkable stories of young people who turned from sin to God.

One young man said, "When I heard about Jesus it kind of shocked me that he loved people in spite of their sins."

Then one day the youth cried out to God for help, saying:

"That's when he came around. He took over my lips and my tongue and I was speaking a new language.

"At first I thought I was crazy, but all of a sudden I knew I couldn't be. . . . I didn't want any more drugs. I loved everybody. For the first time in my life I felt clean."

How firmly do we believe that we are loved by Jesus in spite of our sins?

"God, have pity on me, a sinner!" Luke 18:13

You are God's people

Saturday Deuteronomy 26:16-19

"Walk in his way." (NAB)

Martin Luther King wrote a famous letter while confined in the Birmingham City Jail. He recalled how early Christians rejoiced that they were able to suffer for their faith.

"In those days," he wrote, "the Church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular belief; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society."

He continued:

"If the Church of today does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early Church, it will lose its authentic ring, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social fan club with no meaning for the twentieth century."

Why aren't we more of a thermostat than a thermometer among the people we work with and among our acquaintances?

"A man becomes a Christian; he isn't born one."
Robert E. Segal

The prophet speaks

Monday

Daniel 9:4-10

"We have rebelled against God."

A few years ago there was a TV program called "The Mork and Mindy Show." Mork, an alien from another planet, had remarkable powers.

One day Mork gave some of his power to some friends on earth.

Touching his fingertips to theirs, he transferred just a little bit to them. Right away they began using it to make people do ridiculous things, like turn cartwheels and jump around.

Mork was horrified and shouted, "Stop! You're misusing the power. Give it back!"

Sometimes I think God must feel that way when he sees us misuse the power he gave us. Instead of using it for good, we abuse it and use it for evil.

What power from God are we inclined to abuse or misuse?

"We have the powers of gods and we use them like irresponsible schoolboys." C. E. Joad

The Lord speaks

Tuesday

Isaiah 1:10, 16-20

"You are doomed to die."

Pietri Bandinelli was an attractive young man. He sang in the Milan Cathedral choir. Leonardo da Vinci chose him to be his model for Jesus in his painting of "The Lord's Supper."

Years later Leonardo had not yet finished the painting. But one day the spirit moved him, and he went out into the streets to look for a model for Judas.

He found the perfect man. The man was depraved and vicious looking.

Later, as he was painting, Leonardo paused. Then he asked the man, "Have we met before?" The man said, "Yes, I was your Jesus model, but much has happened in my life since then."

This is what God is trying to tell us in today's reading. Repent, and all will be well with us. Repent not, and all will be otherwise.

What motivates us most to want to repent?

We don't break God's laws; we only break ourselves against them.

The people persecute Jeremiah

Wednesday

Jeremiah 18:18-20

"Let's bring charges against him."

A Vietnam veteran told a college chaplain:

"When I was on an aircraft carrier off Vietnam, bombing towns and cities, all the chaplain preached about was the sinful prostitution in Vietnam—which we were far, far removed from.

"Now I'm home, and the problem of prostitution is all about me.

And what does our chaplain preach about: the sinful bombing of Vietnam."

The Vietnam veteran makes a disturbing point. It's easy to preach about faraway sin.

It isn't easy to preach about sins that are near at hand. That's what made Jeremiah so unpopular. He dared to confront the people about their own, near-at-hand sins.

How courageously do we face up to *our* sins?

Jesus said, "First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will be able to see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye."

Luke 6:42

The Lord probes our heart

Thursday

Jeremiah 17:5-10

"I treat each one according to his deeds."

The *Christopher News Notes* for May 1977 carried a report about a young attorney handling a case for a large corporation.

A woman had sued the corporation for an injury she received in one of its plants. While researching the case, the young attorney uncovered information that strengthened the woman's case. He secretly and deliberately suppressed it.

"This is my first case," he argued, "and I want to win. It could affect my career. Nobody knows that detail—not even the woman or her lawyer."

Are we more concerned about our career than we are about doing what is right?

"For when the One Great Scorer comes
To write against your name,
He marks—not that you won or lost—
But how you played the game."
Grantland Rice, "Alumnus Football"

Let's kill the dreamer

Friday

Genesis 37:3-4, 12-13, 17-28

"Then let's see what becomes of his dreams."

On a hot August day in 1963, Martin Luther King stood before 250,000 people in front of the Lincoln Memorial. He abandoned his text and spoke from his heart.

"I have a dream today.
I have a dream that one day . . .
little black boys and little black girls
will join hands
with little white boys and girls
and walk together as brothers and sisters."

As he spoke, others were sneering,
"Let's kill [the dreamer].
Then we'll see what becomes of his dreams."

What is our own attitude
about Martin Luther King's dream?
What are we doing about it in a concrete way?
Do we let fear kill our own dreams—
fear of failure,
fear of what others will think?

"You see things as they are;
and you ask 'Why?'
But I dream things that never were;
and I ask 'Why not?'" George Bernard Shaw

Our God is forgiving

Saturday

Micah 7:14-15, 18-20

He casts our sins into the sea.

A note was found near a dead child's body in Ravensbruck concentration camp. It read:

"O Lord, remember
not only the men and women of goodwill,
but also those of ill will.
Do not remember
all the suffering they inflicted on us;
remember the fruits we have bought,
thanks to this suffering—

"our comradeship, our loyalty,
our humility, our courage,
our generosity, the greatness of heart
which has grown out of all of this,
and when they come to judgment
let all the fruits that we have borne
be their forgiveness."

Do we imitate God in our own forgiveness?

"When we confess our sins,
God casts them into the deepest ocean,
gone forever.
Then God places a sign out there that says,
NO FISHING!" Corrie ten Boom

Elisha tells Naaman to wash

Monday

2 Kings 5:1-15

Naaman expected something harder.

James Michener's book *The Source* has a section that treats a time period that parallels the Old Testament era.

One episode of that section deals with people in a place called Makor. They have just adopted a new god called Melak, who demands human sacrifice. Michener writes:

"[The people adopted their new god] partly because his demands upon them were severe . . . and partly because they had grown somewhat contemptuous of their local gods precisely because they were not demanding."

Some people think modern Christianity has been watered down and is no longer demanding or challenging. How do we feel about this?

Jesus said,
"If anyone wants to come with me,
he must forget himself,
take up his cross every day, and follow me."
Luke 9:23

We can't offer animal sacrifices

Tuesday

Daniel 3:25, 34-43 (NAB)

But we can offer a humble spirit.

A large truck got wedged in an underpass in a tiny western town. It couldn't go forward or backward. Traffic was lined up for miles. Officials were at a loss at what to do.

Finally,
a little boy who'd been watching all the while said to one of the officials,
"Want to know how to get the truck loose?"
The official said in an irritated voice,

"Yeah!

I suppose you've got it all figured out."

"Well, I think so," said the boy.

"Just let a little air out of the truck's tires."
The officials did, and it worked.

Later, after the traffic began to move, the humbled official joked about the incident, saying, "The truck wasn't the only one that got a little air taken out of its tires."

How do we respond when someone lets a little air out of our tires and humbles us?

Jesus said, "Learn from me,
because I am gentle and humble in spirit."
Matthew 11:29

Moses instructs the people

Wednesday

Deuteronomy 4:1, 5-9

"Don't forget what your eyes have seen."

Lewis Carroll's famous book *The Adventures of Alice in Wonderland* has a lot of soft or low-key humor in it. An example is when the King tells the Queen about a terrifying moment he just had.

"The horror of that moment,' the King said, 'I shall never, never forget!'
'You will, though,' the Queen said, 'if you don't make a memorandum of it.'"

Moses makes the same point to the people as they are about to enter the Promised Land. Talking about the many things God has done for them, he says:

"Be on your guard!
Make certain that you do not forget,
as long as you live,
what you have seen with your own eyes."

How do we keep God's many blessings to us from slipping from our memory?

"God gives us memory
so that we may have roses in December."
James Matthew Barrie

God speaks through Jeremiah

Thursday

Jeremiah 7:23-28

"No one obeyed or paid attention!"

Columnist Ann Landers

received a letter from a woman. It began:

"Recently you printed a prayer for people who are hearing impaired. Now will you please print a prayer for those who must live with these folks?"

The woman went on to say that her 83-year-old mother refuses to wear a hearing aid. It sits on her dresser because she thinks it makes her look old. As a result, she complains about being left out of conversations.

We're a lot like that 83-year-old woman. God gave us a conscience, a kind of hearing aid, that enables us to hear him speaking to us. But we turn it off. Then we complain that God never speaks to us.

How conscientious are we in following the dictates of our conscience?

"God is more anxious to communicate with us than we are to listen." Morton Kelsey, *Dreams*

God speaks through Hosea

Friday

Hosea 14:2-10

Return to the Lord!

Father Malachi's Miracle by Bruce Marshall has a moving scene of a priest trying to help a dying sailor make a good confession. The trouble is the sailor says he's honestly not sorry for his many affairs in many ports. They are his only pleasant memories of an otherwise difficult life.

Finally, in desperation, the priest says to the old sailor, "Are you sorry, at least, that you're not sorry?"

Sometimes it's also hard for us to realize how badly we've failed God in our lives. As a result, we don't feel repentant or any need to "return to the Lord." If and when this happens to us, we should at least tell God we're sorry that we aren't sorry for our failure.

How conscious are we of our shortcomings?

"Many do not recognize Christ because they do not recognize themselves as sinners. If I am no sinner, I have no need of Christ."
Kilian McDonnell

God speaks through Hosea

Saturday

Hosea 6:1-6

"I want love, not sacrifice."

A news reporter was on assignment in Clay, Kentucky, in the 1960s. A black woman, named Gordon, was going to try to enroll her two children in an all-white school.

On Sunday the reporter stopped in at the local white church, where worship was in full swing. The congregation was praying mightily and singing lustily.

After the service one of the pillars of the white church talked to the reporter. He told the newsman that he would rather have his taxes tripled to pay for separate schools than have the races mixed in the same school.

Do we worship God on Sunday but ignore his teaching the rest of the week?

"The test of worship is how far it makes us more sensitive . . . to Christ in the hungry, the naked, the homeless, and the prisoner."
John Robinson, *Honest to God*

The past will be forgotten

Monday

Isaiah 65:17-21

"I am making a new creation."

Jim Ryun nearly died as a child.
His illness left him frail and thin.
In high school, Jim went out for track,
but the coach told him to try a different sport.
Jim went out for bowling.
But the next year, Jim tried track again.
He did better,
but his parents began to worry.
Night after night he came home exhausted,
sometimes going to bed without eating.
Whatever happened to Jim?

The answer sounds like a fairy tale.
In his junior year, Jim became
the first high school boy in history
to break the four-minute mile.
The same year the 17-year-old qualified for
the U.S. Olympic team in the Tokyo Olympics.

All past failures and pain were forgotten.
A new life and world opened up to Jim.

How convinced are we that today's struggles
will be tomorrow's glory?

"The gem cannot be polished without friction;
no person is perfected without trial."

Chinese proverb

Water flowed from the Temple

Tuesday

Ezekiel 47:1-9, 12

The water transformed all it touched.

Two symbols
call for explanation in today's reading:
the Temple and the water flowing from it.

The Temple signifies God's presence in Israel.
The water signifies the blessings
that come to Israel because of God's presence.

The Temple and the water are also images
of what Christians should be:

signs of God's presence
and sources of blessing to all.

Jesus describes our role in the world this way:
"You are like salt for all mankind. . . .
You are like light for the whole world."

Matthew 5:13-14

If someone kept tabs on us all week,
would they uncover enough evidence
to convict us in a court of law
of being followers of Jesus?

"Proclaim the wonderful acts of God,
who called you out of darkness
into his own marvelous light." 1 Peter 2:9

Can a mother forget her child?

Wednesday

Isaiah 49:8-15

"Neither can I forget you."

Author John Powell's favorite story
is about a student named Tommy,
whom he taught at Loyola University, Chicago.

Tommy claimed to be an atheist.
When he turned in his final exam, he smirked,
"Do you think I'll ever find God?"
Without waiting for an answer, he left.
As he headed out the door John yelled,
"Tommy, you may never find God,
but God's going to find you."

Months later the boy learned he had cancer.
In the course of the illness,
God found Tommy in a most beautiful way.
Just before Tommy died, he asked Fr. Powell
to share with his future students
the story of how he didn't find God,
but how God did find him.

Have we ever experienced God's presence
and love
after thinking that God had abandoned us?

Lord, help us realize that you care about us
and love us more than we do ourselves.

The people sin

Thursday

Exodus 32:7-14

God forgave them.

Patt Perkins and Marcia Hootman wrote a book called *How to Forgive Your Ex-Husband*.

The authors were appalled to discover how much energy and money are wasted by women getting even with former spouses.

One insane example they document is a New York woman who hired a skywriter to fly over her ex-husband's present residence and write "John S. is an S.O.B."

The book was written to help divorced women forgive their ex-spouses, get rid of their anger, and get on with their lives.

Today's reading portrays God as listening to Moses' prayer and forgiving his people. It invites us to reflect on whether or not we too forgive those who sin against us.

How inclined are we to hold grudges and not forgive those who sin against us?

"It is easier to forgive an enemy than a friend." Austin O'Malley

Let's put them to the test

Friday

Wisdom 2:1, 12-22

"We'll condemn them to death."

The great Indian leader Mohandas Gandhi was killed by a Hindu extremist in 1948. The assassin was standing beside a garden path, his hands folded before him, palms together, in the Hindu gesture of greeting.

Between the palms of the assassin's hands was concealed a small, low-caliber revolver.

As Gandhi passed, the man fired three shots, at very close range, into the leader's body.

Gandhi crumpled to the ground, instantly putting his hand to his forehead in the Hindu gesture of forgiveness.

Like the righteous man in today's reading, Gandhi was put to the test and gave striking proof of his righteousness.

How forgiving are we when others wrong us, not just slightly, but gravely?

"If you are suffering from a bad man's injustice, forgive him, lest there be two bad men."

Anonymous

Jeremiah knew about their plot

Saturday

Jeremiah 11:18-20

It didn't deter him from his cause.

Jeremiah had the hard job of calling the people of his time to repentance. But instead of heeding Jeremiah's call, they plotted to silence him by taking his life.

Even when Jeremiah learned of the plot, he did not stop preaching to the people. Instead, he placed himself at God's disposal in spite of the personal consequences.

In this supreme act of trust, Jeremiah foreshadowed Jesus himself. Jesus too had to call the people to repentance. But instead of heeding Jesus' call, the people plotted to silence Jesus by taking his life.

Even when Jesus learned of the plot, it didn't keep him from continuing to do the job God gave him to do.

What keeps us from placing ourselves more fully at God's disposal?

Lord, give us the courage to trust when just having to trust seems to be an impossible task in itself.

Two men accuse Susanna

Monday Daniel 13:41-62 (NAB)

Daniel uncovered the deceit.

In 1986 the state of Georgia granted a posthumous pardon to Leo Frank, a Jewish businessman. Frank was accused of killing a girl in 1913. He was subsequently abducted from prison and lynched by a bigoted mob.

Frank's pardon was set in motion when a dying 84-year-old man divulged evidence that clearly pointed to Frank's innocence. The man, who was 14 years old at the time of the girl's death, had suppressed the evidence for 70 years.

False accusation is a deadly crime that doesn't always have a happy ending, as it did in today's reading.

How prone are we to judge others falsely, even if it's only in our own mind?

"Who steals my purse steals trash . . .
But who filches from me my name
Robs me of that which enriches him not,
And makes me poor indeed."

William Shakespeare, *Othello*

Serpents attack the people

Tuesday Numbers 21:4-9

They were healed by the raised serpent.

Jesus said,
"As Moses lifted up the bronze snake
on a pole in the desert,
in the same way
the Son of Man must be lifted up,
so that everyone who believes in him
may have eternal life." John 3:14-15

Jesus, of course,
had in mind the episode in today's reading.

A number of Old Testament episodes resemble New Testament episodes. Scholars often refer to these parallel episodes as *types*.

Early Christians used *types* to show Jews how the New Testament clarified and fulfilled the Old Testament.

How diligent are we in trying to deepen our faith by reading and praying over the Bible?

"In the Old Testament, the New lies concealed;
in the New Testament, the Old lies revealed."

Augustine of Hippo

Three men are condemned

Wednesday Daniel 3:14-20, 91-92, 95 (NAB)

An angel rescued them.

In the second century before Jesus, Jews suffered in a violent persecution under the Syrian tyrant Antiochus IV. He tried to force them to give up their religion and worship false gods.

Devout Jews cried to God in anguish,
"How long will your anger burn like fire? . . .
Where are the promises you made to David?"

Psalms 89:46, 49

Into this crisis of faith stepped the author of the Book of Daniel. Consisting of inspirational stories and visions, the Book of Daniel exhorts suffering Jews to remain faithful under trial. Today's reading is an inspirational story assuring persecuted Jews that God sees their suffering and will soon save them.

How do we motivate ourselves to remain faithful to God when it seems he no longer hears our prayers?

"Faith is dead to doubt,
dumb to discouragement,
and blind to impossibilities." *The Defender*

God covenants Abraham

Thursday

Genesis 17:3-9

"I will be your God."

During his presidency,
Jimmy Carter, a devout Christian,
hosted a summit meeting at Camp David.
It brought together Anwar Sadat of Egypt,
a devout Muslim,
and Menachim Begin of Israel, a devout Jew.

All three men claimed Abraham
as their common father in the faith.
Muslims trace their faith ancestry
back to Abraham through Ishmael.
Jews and Christians trace their faith ancestry
back through Isaac.

If the covenant that God made with Abraham
is to bear fruit, Muslims, Jews, and Christians
must begin treating each other as brothers
of a common father, rather than as rivals.

What is our own personal attitude
toward Muslims and Jews?
Do we view them more as brothers than rivals?

"Trying to build the brotherhood of man
without the fatherhood of God
is like trying to build a wheel without a hub."
Irene Dunne

Jeremiah's life is threatened

Friday

Jeremiah 20:10-13

Jeremiah trusted in God.

The American writer Edna Ferber
wrote a moving novel called *So Big*.
In the story, Dirk DeJong, a young architect,
falls in love
with a young artist named Dallas O'Meara.

Dallas likes Dirk
but does not love him enough to marry him.
She says to Dirk, "You're all smooth.
You've never had to struggle in your life.
I like 'em bumpy!"

Dallas goes on to say
that struggle gives a person
a special kind of beauty and loveliness.
It shines through a person's eyes,
radiates from the face,
and can even be felt in the touch of the hand.

Jeremiah was "bumpy."
He struggled all his life
but never lost his deep faith in God.

Do we see struggle more as a friend
or an enemy?

"I will test them as gold is tested." Zechariah 13:9

God promises to restore his people

Saturday

Ezekiel 37:21-28

"My servant David will rule them."

The prophet Ezekiel lived six centuries
before Jesus, at a time when God's people
had lost much of their earlier glory.
Ezekiel's ministry divided into two periods:
before and after the fall of Jerusalem.

Before the fall,
Ezekiel warned the people of their optimism.
He said God wouldn't save Jerusalem
regardless of what they did or how they acted.
After the fall, Ezekiel had to restore
the crushed morale of the people.
Ezekiel the corrector
became Ezekiel the comforter.

Today's reading falls into this latter category.
It assures the people
that God won't abandon them forever.
He will restore them
and set up a great ruler over them.

Does our faith grow better in spiritual winters
than in spiritual summers?

Troubles are often the means God uses
to fashion his people into something
better than they were.

Isaiah talks about God's servant

Monday

Isaiah 42:1-7

"He won't put out a flickering lamp."

Aesop, the eight-century B.C. Greek slave, has a fable in which the sun and the wind argue about which is the stronger.

One day a chance to settle the dispute arose. A man wearing an overcoat was walking down a deserted country road. The sun said to the wind, "Whoever makes the man take off his coat faster will be declared the winner."

The wind agreed and asked to go first. It blew and blew, but the more it blew, the tighter the man held on to his coat. Then the sun took over. It merely shone in all its glory. Within minutes, the man removed his coat.

The moral of the story is that you can achieve more by gentleness than by violence.

Jesus' life was one of consistent gentleness.

How gentle are we in our dealings with others?

"Learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit."
Matthew 11:29

God speaks to his holy servant

Tuesday

Isaiah 49:1-6

"I will make you a light to the nations."

The War of the Worlds

is a story by H. G. Wells.

It concerns the invasion of earth by Martians.

The Martians' big weapon is a "sword of light."

It drops men in their tracks and turns metal into liquid on contact.

Today, Wells's "sword of light" comes close to reality in the laser beam. It shoots out the most intense light ever known

and can burn billions of times more intensely than light on the surface of the sun.

But the laser's big value is in communication. A single beam can transmit the entire Bible in a fraction of a second.

What the laser beam is to our material world, Jesus is to the spiritual world.

How consistently do we turn to Jesus for light and guidance?

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will have the light of life and will never walk in darkness." John 8:12

God's servant speaks through Isaiah

Wednesday

Isaiah 50:4-9

They insulted me and spit in my face.

The great French painter Henri Matisse died in 1954 at the age of 86. In the last years of his life, arthritis crippled and deformed his hands, making it painful for him to hold a paintbrush. Yet he continued to paint, placing a cloth between his fingers to keep the brush from slipping.

One day someone asked him why he submitted his body to such suffering. Why did he continue to paint in the face of such great physical pain? Matisse replied, "The pain passes, but the beauty remains."

In a similar way, the pain Jesus would submit to in his passion would pass, but the beauty of what he did would remain forever.

How do we handle pain when it comes?

"Nothing is costly to one who does not count the cost."

Antonin Sertillanges, *Rectitude*

Peter addresses the Jews

Monday

Acts 2:14, 22-32

"The Messiah's resurrection was foretold."

A messiah who would be nailed to a cross and raised from the dead was the last thing many Jews expected.

But Peter says that's what the Scriptures foretell about the Messiah, if we read them carefully and correctly.

Peter goes on to prove his point by citing Psalm 16. There the psalmist describes the Messiah as speaking to God in these words:

"You protect me from the power of death. . . . You will not abandon me to the world of the dead." Psalm 16:10

These words make it clear that the Messiah will be rescued from death by God.

How open is our mind to the words of Scripture?

"The Gospels do not explain the resurrection. The resurrection explains the Gospels." J. S. Whale

Peter continues to address the Jews

Tuesday

Acts 2:36-41

"Reform and be baptized."

A missionary was showing slides of the life of Jesus to a group of people in rural India. When a slide of the crucifixion appeared on the wall, an old man got up from the group, went up to the wall, and said, "Come down from the cross, Son of God. I'm the one who should be hanging there, not you."

William Barclay, who tells the story, says that once we become convinced of our role in the crucifixion, we cannot help but be pierced to the heart, as the Jews were in today's reading.

Once this happens, only one response is logical and possible for us: repentance and reformation.

How fully convinced are we that our sins played a role in Jesus' suffering and death?

Jesus said, "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to me." John 12:32

Peter and John heal a man

Wednesday

Acts 3:1-10

"In the name of Jesus, walk!"

Peter Matthiessen describes a pathetic sight in his book *The Snow Leopard*.

He and a friend were traveling in India. One morning they came upon a little girl with crippled, useless legs. She was pulling her body along a gravel path like a wounded cricket. Her nose practically touched the stones.

Peter's friend remarked that some beggars "break their children's knees to achieve this pitiable effect for business purposes."

Peter longed to restore the girl to health, but there was nothing he could do.

Peter and John had access to a power that Peter Matthiessen and his friend did not. They were able to do what Matthiessen and his friend could not.

How do we use our power of faith and prayer to help people, especially the needy?

Jesus said, "Ask, and you will receive."

Luke 11:9

Peter addresses the crowd

Thursday

Acts 3:11-26

"Faith in Jesus healed this man."

In *The Empire Strikes Back*, Luke Skywalker flies his X-wing plane to a swamp planet. There he seeks out a guru, called Yoda, to teach him to become a Jedi warrior. Luke wants to work to free the galaxy from its oppression by the evil Darth Vader.

Yoda teaches Luke to lift things with his mind. Then one day Yoda tells Luke to lift his plane out of the swamp water. Luke complains that lifting rocks is one thing, but lifting a plane is quite another. Predictably, he fails to raise the plane. When Yoda takes over and lifts the plane, Luke exclaims, "I don't believe it." Yoda replies, "That's why you couldn't lift it, because you didn't believe."

If we believe in Jesus, we will be able to do remarkable things, also.

How firmly do we believe what Jesus tells us?

"If you had faith as big as a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Pull yourself up by the roots and plant yourself in the sea!' and it would obey you." Luke 17:6

Peter witnesses to Jesus

Friday

Acts 4:1-12

"The power of Jesus healed this man."

Ralph Waldo Emerson was a great American essayist and poet. He once remarked, "Our chief want in life is someone who can make us do what we can."

Emerson's point is that we human beings are constructed in such a way that we need somebody or something outside of ourselves to inspire us and fire us to live up to our potential.

Peter and John found that somebody in Jesus. He inspired them to heights of achievement and courage that they never dreamed they had.

How powerful a figure is Jesus in our life? To what extent can we honestly say that he inspires us and fires us to live up to our full potential?

"His legend will call forth tears without end; his sufferings will melt the noblest hearts; all ages will proclaim that among the sons of men there is none born greater than Jesus."

Ernest Renan

Peter speaks out

Saturday

Acts 4:13-21

His boldness amazed the Jews.

Achilles was a skillful and courageous Greek warrior. One day he was planning a bold battle strategy. His friends admitted its merit but said that his chance of coming out alive was practically zero.

Achilles remained undaunted in spite of their fearful and gloomy forecast. He was not one to be governed by statistics when it came to doing something that needed to be done.

Peter was a lot like Achilles in this respect. He knew the danger of speaking out boldly before the most powerful body of men in the land. But he too was not one to calculate risks when it came to something that needed doing.

How courageous are we in undertaking things that need to be done?

"Courage is doing what you're afraid to do. There can be no courage unless you're scared."

Fighter pilot Eddie Rickenbacker

The believers pray to God

Monday

Acts 4:23-31

The place shook as they prayed. (NAB)

A woman with three small sons asked for prayers for her alcoholic husband. He had deserted her some months previously.

Shortly afterward, the husband called his wife long distance from Chicago, explaining how he suddenly experienced an overwhelming desire to change his life. "For the first time in my life," he said, "I got on my knees and asked God to help me."

Later the husband figured out that his change of heart occurred at the very moment that his wife's request for prayers was honored.

Prayer can shake not just a house, as it did in today's reading, but also people living thousands of miles away.

What kind of faith do we have in prayer?

"At the judgment seat, the most embarrassing thing the believer will face will be the smallness of his praying."

Leonard Ravenhill

The believers share everything

Tuesday

Acts 4:32-37

They were one in mind and heart.

The *Chicago Tribune* carried a story about 250 Christian adults and children living a common life in Evanston, Illinois. Dave Jackson, a member of the group, said:

"All our members are committed to sharing our lives as Christians and to contributing our resources, including all financial assets, to a common purse."

He went on to say that adult members got a monthly allowance and that all major decisions were made prayerfully at a public meeting. The group has been in existence for 20 years.

These Christians were inspired by the account in today's reading.

How sharing are we when it comes to the Christian community?

"Christianity is not a puzzle to be solved, but a way of life to be adopted. It is not a creed to be memorized, but a person to be followed." Author unknown

The Apostles bear witness

Wednesday

Acts 5:17-26

Not even prison kept them from teaching.

"There are three kinds of people in the world: those who make things happen, those who watch things happen, and those who don't know what's happening."

Author unknown

The Apostles belonged to the first group. They made things happen in their world. Not even prison or the threat of prison could stop them or dampen their enthusiasm.

In modern times there're still three kinds of people in the world: those who make things happen, those who sit in the grandstand of life and watch things happen, and those who bury their head in the sand and don't know what's happening.

To what group of people do we belong?
To what group of people did Jesus intend his followers to belong?

"Our business is not to do something for the Church, but to do something *with* it." John Fort Newton

The Apostles speak out boldly

Thursday

Acts 5:27-33

"We must obey God, not men."

During the Mexican War
Henry David Thoreau went to jail
rather than pay a tax
that he thought was being used to wage a war
to expand slave-holding territories.

His friend Ralph Waldo Emerson,
also an opponent of slavery, heard about it.
Visiting Thoreau in prison, he said gently,
"Henry, why are you here in prison?"

Thoreau's response became the classic reply
of the fully committed person
to the partially committed person:
"Waldo, why are you *not* here?"

By their reply
to the Sanhedrin, or Jewish Council,
the Apostles showed their total commitment
to what their conscience told them was right.

How courageous are we in carrying out
the dictates of our conscience?

"Do not be afraid of those
who kill the body but cannot kill the soul."
Matthew 10:28

Gamaliel speaks up

Friday

Acts 5:34-42

"If it's from God, you can't defeat them."

Gamaliel's advice to the Jewish Council
boils down to this: Let history be the judge
about whether the Christian movement
is from God or not.

Two thousand years later, H. G. Wells,
a prominent historian and non-Christian,
named Jesus "history's greatest person."
In doing so, he said:

"The historian's test of an individual's greatness
is 'What did he leave to grow?' . . .
By this test Jesus stands first."

In other words,
history appears to have passed judgment
on Jesus and the Church.
And the verdict is that they are from God.

Do we love and respect the Church
as being the Body of Christ,
the extension of Jesus into space and time?

"There's a monastic order today called
'The Community of the Resurrection.'
It would be a good name for the whole Church."

Robert McAfee Brown

The Apostles make a choice

Saturday

Acts 6:1-7

"We will focus on prayer and preaching."

Nobel prize winner Alexis Carrel once wrote:

"Prayer is the most powerful form of energy
one can generate.
The influence of prayer on the human mind
and body
is as demonstrable as that of secreting glands.
Prayer is a force as real as terrestrial gravity.
It supplies us with a flow of sustaining power
in our daily lives."

When the Apostles decided to make prayer
a priority in their lives,
they knew what they were doing.

What kind of priority do we give to prayer
in our lives?

What kind of faith do we put in prayer?

Do we view prayer

as "a force as real as terrestrial gravity"?

"Ah, there's the secret of the success
of these primitive ministers!

They had calloused knees." Charles Finley

Stephen is arrested

Monday

Acts 6:8-15

Stephen was the Church's first martyr.

Westerns once enjoyed great popularity on TV. We liked them because they projected a savior-hero who made us feel good. The hero wore a white hat, won his battles without getting hurt, and, in the end, rode off into the purple sunset.

In time, new TV savior-heroes replaced the man in the white hat: nurses, detectives, and teachers. They too saved people: the brutalized child, the disturbed teenager, the senior citizen. And they too saved people without denting their shining armor.

In sharp contrast to the TV savior-hero are the savior-heroes in real life—heroes like Jesus, Stephen, Joan of Arc, Gandhi, and King. These authentic heroes tell us a different story. They tell us that waging war against evil involves great personal cost and suffering.

How willing are we to suffer to right wrongs?

“Some men . . . go down in flames,
But most men perish inch by inch,
Playing at little games.” Author unknown

Stephen prays for his persecutors

Tuesday

Acts 7:51-8:1

Saul approved of Stephen's murder.

The story of Stephen's martyrdom ends with Scripture turning our attention away from the bleeding young man on the ground to another young man sitting on the sideline. That young man is Saul of Tarsus, who will become Paul, the world's greatest missionary for Christ.

As our eyes glance back and forth
at the two young men,

several thoughts run through our minds. One is expressed this way by St. Augustine: “The Church owes Saul to Stephen's prayer.”

Another thought is expressed this way by Tertullian, a third-century Christian writer: “The blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church.” Without Stephen there wouldn't be a Paul.

What witness do we give
to those who don't belong to the Church
when times get painful and difficult for us?

“Men reject their prophets and slay them,
but they love their martyrs
and honor those whom they have slain.”

Feodor Dostoevski

Persecution scatters the Church

Wednesday

Acts 8:1-8

Philip preached and healed in Samaria.

Dr. Charles Townes won the Nobel prize for his work on the laser beam. A breakthrough in his work came by accident while he was sitting on a park bench looking at some flowers.

History shows
that many other discoveries and movements
owe their origin to apparent accidents,
rather than to carefully planned programs.

Such was the case
with the first great missionary movement
in the early Church.
Had Christians not been persecuted in Jerusalem,
they would never have gone to Samaria—
at least so early—
to preach the good news about Jesus.

Recall an accident in our life
that yielded an unexpected reward.

“My thoughts . . . are not like yours,
and my ways are different from yours.
As high as the heavens are above the earth,
so high are my ways and thoughts above yours.”

Isaiah 55:8-9

Philip instructs an Ethiopian official

Thursday

Acts 8:26-40

The official believed and was baptized.

In Philip's day, many good Gentiles were fed up with the proliferation of gods and the widespread decadence of religion. In search of an authentic religion, they turned to Judaism with its one God, high moral code, and noble style of worship.

These Gentiles attended the synagogue and followed certain other Jewish practices. Some eventually were converted and accepted Judaism completely.

More often than not, however, these Gentiles frequented the synagogue to pray and hear the Scriptures read; but they didn't accept Judaism completely. Apparently the Ethiopian official was like this. When he learned how Jesus fulfilled the Scriptures, he believed and was baptized.

How deeply do we appreciate the faith into which we were born and for which others had to work so hard?

"A man becomes a Christian; he is not born one." Tertullian

Saul is converted

Friday

Acts 9:1-20

Saul learned that Jesus and his Church are one.

We sometimes hear people say, "I believe in God, and I believe in Jesus, but I don't believe in the Church."

Whenever we hear this, we want to cry out, "But there's no Jesus apart from the Church. The Jesus you're talking about no longer exists. He died on Golgotha."

The only Jesus there is today is the Jesus who rose from the dead on Easter Sunday.

He is the Jesus who lives on in the body of his followers. He is the Jesus who lives on in the Church. Trying to separate Jesus from the Church is like trying to separate a person's head from a person's body.

How firmly do we believe Paul's words in his Letter to the Colossians: "[Jesus] is the head of his body, the church; he is the source of the body's life." Colossians 1:18

"All of you are Christ's body, and each one is a part of it." 1 Corinthians 12:27

Peter raises Dorcas to life

Saturday

Acts 9:31-42

Many believed and joined the Church.

A careful reading of the Acts of the Apostles reveals that the life and the experience of the early Church parallel the life and the experience of Jesus.

Jesus healed the lame and the sick; so did the early Church.
Jesus expelled evil spirits; so did the early Church.
Jesus raised the dead to life; so did the early Church.
Jesus suffered and died for what he said and did; so did the early Church.

The conclusion is inescapable. The early Church extends the risen Jesus into space and time. Where the Church is, there is Jesus also.

How deeply do we believe that where we find the Church we find Jesus?

"The Church is never a place, but always a people; never a fold, but always a flock, never a sacred building, but always a believing assembly." Anonymous

Peter preaches to the Gentiles

Monday

Acts 11:1-18

The Holy Spirit descended upon them.

Every movement in history has a turning point—an event that aimed it in the right direction at the right time.

A turning point in Christianity took place in the home of the Roman officer, Cornelius, when the Holy Spirit descended upon Gentiles after Peter preached the Good News to them.

This “Pentecost of the Gentiles” clarified beyond a shadow of a doubt that Christianity wasn’t just the beginning of another religious group inside Judaism, like the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

Christianity was a totally new religious reality. It was a totally new creation by God. It was the extension of the Risen Christ into space and time.

It was a new reality that opened its arms to every human being, not just an elite few.

Do we treat one another
as members of the risen body of Christ?
If not, where do we fall short?

“We are Easter people and Alleluia is our song.”
St. Augustine

Christians preach at Antioch

Tuesday

Acts 11:19-26

The people responded and were baptized.

The spread of Christianity to the whole world followed three progressive steps.

First, Philip preached the Good News to the Samaritans, who were “half Jews.”

Next, Peter preached to a Roman household to which he had been invited.

Finally, Christians in Antioch took the initiative and reached out directly to the Gentiles in the city.

And so Antioch became the place where Jesus’ followers not only received the name “Christian” but also launched their missionary outreach to the entire world.

How comfortable are we
bearing witness to Christianity
in the presence of nonbelievers?

“Religion
is not a way of looking at certain things.
It’s a certain way
of looking at everything.” Robert E. Segal

Paul and Barnabas sail to Cyprus

Wednesday

Acts 12:24-13:5

They set out to preach together.

Every movement in history has its champion. Organized labor had Samuel Gompers. Women’s suffrage had Susan B. Anthony. Civil rights had Martin Luther King. Christianity had Saul of Tarsus.

Paul was catapulted into prominence not by something he did but through the power of the Holy Spirit. From that point on, the Acts of the Apostles could be called the Acts of Paul. He dominates the Church’s missionary action the way the sun dominates the summer.

From this point on, also, Paul drops his Jewish name, Saul, and uses its Roman or Gentile form, Paul—possibly as a sign of his calling to preach the Good News to the Gentiles.

Do we believe the Holy Spirit continues to guide the Church in our day, just as surely as it did in Paul’s day?

“As the sun radiates light to all the earth, so the Holy Spirit radiates grace to all people.” St. Basil the Great

Paul and Barnabas come to Pisidian Antioch

Thursday

Acts 13:13-25

Paul preached in the local synagogue.

Someone asked a successful preacher how he prepared for his sermons. "My system is simple," said the preacher. "I read myself full, think myself clear, pray myself hot, and let myself go."

Paul must have followed a similar approach. His sermons reflect a deep grasp of God's Word. He undoubtedly spent a great deal of time reading the Scriptures.

Paul's sermons also reflect his deep insight into how Jesus and his teaching bring the Old Testament to its fulfillment. He undoubtedly spent a great deal of time praying the Scriptures.

Small wonder Paul was able to preach and write about Christianity so eloquently.

How much time do we spend reading and praying the Scriptures?

"You can understand the Bible only on your knees." Maurice Zundel

Paul continues his preaching

Friday

Acts 13:26-33

He told how Jesus fulfills the prophecies.

Paul's sermon in Pisidian Antioch has been described as the only complete sermon of Paul's that is found in Acts.

Even so, what Luke records here is probably only a full-length summary of Paul's original sermon.

Paul begins by reviewing what God did for his people in early times. Then he moves quickly to modern times,

telling about Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, and appearances after his resurrection.

Paul ends by showing that what was foretold in Old Testament times is fulfilled in New Testament times. Jesus is the one of whom God spoke in Psalm 2:7 when he said, "You are my son; today I have become your father."

What do we dream and hope for? In what sense is Jesus the fulfillment of our dreams and hopes?

"Jesus changed sunset into sunrise."
Clement of Alexandria

Trouble breaks out

Saturday

Acts 13:44-52

Persecution followed.

Sexual immorality and perversion posed a serious threat to family life in the ancient Gentile world. Sexual morality and family life in the Jewish world, on the other hand, were protected and held in high esteem.

Because of the situation in the Gentile world, many influential Gentile women became sympathizers of the Jewish religion. They also frequented Jewish synagogues. They saw Judaism as a strong pillar supporting sexual morality and family life.

Jewish leaders in Pisidian Antioch turned to these sympathetic women. They asked them to enlist the aid of their influential husbands to stir up trouble against Paul and Barnabas, whose preaching seemed to pose a threat to certain Jewish teachings and practices.

How do we handle trouble and opposition when it is unjustly meted out against us?

"Earth has no sorrow that heaven can't heal."
Thomas More

Paul heals a man

Monday

Acts 14:5-18

The crowd treated Paul and Barnabas as gods.

The ancient poet Ovid describes a visit of the Greek gods Zeus and Hermes to Lystra. The gods came in disguise and were treated badly. Only an elderly couple treated them kindly.

Before leaving the city, the gods punished the Lystrans mercilessly and rewarded the old couple.

This legend may account, in part, for the reaction of the people of Lystra to Paul and Barnabas.

Perhaps they remembered the legend and didn't want to repeat the mistake.

Paul and Barnabas, on the other hand, did their best to make clear that it was God, not they, who healed the crippled man.

Do we ever accept credit for something when we know the credit belongs to God?

"The more grain there is on a rice stalk, the lower it bends to the ground; empty of grain, it grows taller and taller."

Malayan proverb

Paul and Barnabas file their report

Tuesday

Acts 14:19-28

They told how God had worked through them.

A characteristic of great people is their admission of their need of God's help in their undertakings.

For example, before departing Springfield for Washington, President-elect Lincoln said to well-wishers:

"Without the assistance of that Divine Being who attended him [George Washington], I cannot succeed. With that assistance I cannot fail."

Benjamin Franklin said to his fellow statesmen:

"If a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without God's notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without his aid?"

Paul and Barnabas felt the same way about their need for God's help.

How convinced are we that we need God's help in our life and work?

"Closer is he than breathing, and nearer than hands and feet."

Alfred Lord Tennyson

Opposition breaks out

Wednesday

Acts 15:1-6

Paul and Barnabas sought guidance.

Ralph Waldo Emerson had just completed a talk at Middlebury College. The minister who was invited to give the closing prayer disliked the talk immensely. He used his prayer to express his disapproval. He prayed:

"We beseech thee, O Lord, to deliver us from ever having to hear any more of such transcendental nonsense as we've just listened to from this sacred desk."

Afterward someone asked Emerson what he thought of the minister.

Emerson said, "He seemed conscientious and quite outspoken."

Paul and Barnabas responded with similar restraint to the vicious criticism leveled against them.

How do we react to unfair criticism?

"It is better to be patient than powerful. It is better to win control over yourself than over whole cities." Proverbs 16:32

The Holy Spirit guides the disciples

Thursday

Acts 15:7-21

Gentile converts needn't be circumcised.

The film *Lili* concerns a lonely young girl who is a member of a traveling circus. Her only friends are some sideshow puppets. One day, feeling depressed and unloved, she decides to leave.

As she hugs the puppets good-bye, she suddenly feels them trembling. Only then does she realize that it's the shy puppeteer, not the puppets, who really loves her. The puppets are merely the "packages" containing the shy man's "gift" of love.

Confusing "packages" and "gifts" was at the root of another misunderstanding in Paul's time. Many Jewish Christians confused circumcision (package) for God's love (gift).

Is there any danger in our own life of mistaking "packages" and "gifts"?

"Since the Lord is no longer visible among us, everything of him that was visible has passed into the sacraments."

St. Leo the Great

A letter is sent to the Gentiles

Friday

Acts 15:22-31

"The Holy Spirit and we have agreed . . ."

The first church council, the forerunner to the Second Vatican Council, convened in Jerusalem.

The letter it sent to the Gentiles contains these striking words: "The Holy Spirit and we have agreed . . ."

These words express the council's faith in the presence of the Holy Spirit in the council's deliberations.

The same faith in the Holy Spirit's presence continues to this day, when representatives of the whole Church meet together in council on a worldwide level.

When the council ended, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch. The Church had taken a great step forward in reaching out to all peoples of all nations.

How deep is our faith in the Holy Spirit's guiding presence in the Church?

"Where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them." Matthew 18:20

Paul has a vision

Saturday

Acts 16:1-10

We got ready to leave for Macedonia.

Paul's vision, calling him to Macedonia, is followed by the first of four "we" sections (Acts 16:10-17, 20:5-16, 21:1-18, 27:1-28:16). The appearance of the word *we* in the text suggests that Luke was with Paul as an eyewitness companion at this point.

Paul's vision marked a turning point in his ministry. After it, he headed for Europe proper. Reflecting on the importance of Paul's heading for Europe, a British writer mused:

"I don't suppose that he had much baggage with him, but he was carrying a great light to shine in the darkness of a sick world. . . ."

"Paul's arrival touched off two thousand years of history, the story of Christendom."

Malcolm Muggeridge

How do we support or become involved in the Church's missionary undertakings?

Lord, maybe I can't do big things, but I can do little things in a big way.

The Apostles arrive in Philippi

Monday

Acts 16:11-15

They went to a place of prayer.

During the 1978 blizzards in Ohio, James Truly's 18-wheeler tractor trailer skidded off the shoulder of the road and wound up in a deep ditch. He turned on his CB but couldn't reach anyone. Since it was 5 A.M. and the snow was blowing and drifting badly, he decided to wait for daylight to go for help.

When Truly awoke a few hours later, his truck was completely frozen shut and covered with snow. He braced himself for a long wait. It turned out to be a six-day wait.

After his rescue, reporters asked Truly, "What did you do during those six long days?"

Truly replied, "I did an awful lot of thinking."

When and where do we think and pray best?

"Long before daylight, Jesus got up and left the house. He went out of town to a lonely place, where he prayed." Mark 1:35

The Apostles are jailed

Tuesday

Acts 16:22-34

They sang as the other prisoners listened.

One spring afternoon, Robert Bruce of Redlands, California, was walking along a crowded street. Suddenly, above the din of street noises, he heard someone singing. It wasn't a loud, boisterous kind of singing, but more like someone singing to himself.

Bruce looked around for the source of it. He couldn't believe his eyes. It was a man in a wheelchair,

pushing himself along by his two arms, the only useful limbs he had.

The ability to be joyful in the midst of adversity is one of the most attractive traits a person can have. It was this kind of joy that Paul showed in today's reading.

How do we lift our sagging spirits in time of trial?

"Our greatest glory is not in never falling but in rising every time we fall." Oliver Goldsmith

Paul talks about finding God

Wednesday

Acts 17:15, 22-18:1

"God is not far from any of us."

Walter Dudley Cavert has a favorite story that he likes to tell. It's about a father and his young son who went on a camping trip in the Adirondack Mountains in New York. They hired an experienced guide, who led them off the beaten trails and spent a week showing them the heart of the great forest.

The boy was amazed at how the old guide spotted things that the ordinary person missed.

One day, after the guide had been pointing out some hidden beauties in the forest, the boy exclaimed, "I'll bet you can even see God out here!"

The old guide replied, "Son, it's getting hard for me to see anything else but God out here."

Where do we find God most easily in nature?

"Beware of the man whose God is in the skies." George Bernard Shaw

Feast of the Ascension

Thursday

Acts 1:1-11

See Illustrated Sunday Homilies, Year B.

God speaks to Paul

Friday

Acts 18:9-18

"Do not be afraid!"

Author Ardis Whitman recalls attending a circus in Boston when she was just eight years old.

As she sat in the grandstand under the big top, she was filled with awe and amazement by the trapeze artists performing their feats high above the crowd. Suddenly she turned to her mother and said, "Aren't they afraid, Mother?"

A man sitting in the row ahead of them turned around and said to her, "Honey, they're not afraid; they trust each other."

It was Paul's ability to trust God that enabled him to overcome his fear and continue preaching in Corinth for another year and a half.

How do we handle fear when it threatens to destroy our peace of mind?

"In the midst of winter I finally learned that there was in me an invincible summer." Albert Camus

Apollos shares the Good News

Saturday

Acts 18:23-28

He knew only John's baptism.

A silver-haired grandmother lives behind the iron curtain. Her letters to her grandson in the United States invariably contain a few references to the Bible.

When her grandson first noticed the references, he thought they might contain a secret message. Later he discovered that it was merely his grandmother's way of getting the communist censor to look up the passages and read them. Maybe one of the passages would touch his heart, she thought.

Like Apollos, the grandmother didn't have a scholar's knowledge of Scripture, but this didn't keep her from sharing the Good News with others, even in her limited situation.

How do we share the Good News with others?

"Better to light a candle than to curse the darkness." The Christophers

Paul meets some incomplete Christians

Monday

Acts 19:1-8

He baptized them in the name of Jesus.

Organ transplanting involves two steps: taking out the old organ and putting in the new organ. These two steps help us understand better the difference between John's baptism and Christian baptism.

John's baptism was merely the preparation for Christian baptism.

It was a baptism of *repentance*, a rejection of one's old life.

Christian baptism, on the other hand, is a baptism of *rebirth*, a reception of a new life.

Just as a person receiving an organ transplant has to take care of the new organ, which sometimes involves taking pills the rest of his or her life, so a new Christian must take care of the new life received in Christian baptism.

How are we taking care of our new life?

"You have been raised to life with Christ, so set your hearts on the things that are in heaven." Colossians 3:1

Paul speaks of his death

Tuesday

Acts 20:17-27

"If only I can finish my mission."

In his book *The Clown and the Crocodile*, Joseph McLelland makes a provocative statement:

"One day a group of people will go to a cemetery, hold a brief service, and return home. All except one; that will be you."

Some might consider this a morbid thought, but Paul wasn't one of those people. We see that from today's reading.

Paul looked upon death not as a foe but as a friend.

He didn't consider death a tragedy; it was a glory: the crown of victory after a race.

Of course, there was sadness in death from the viewpoint of a temporary separation from loved ones, but there was also joy from the viewpoint of achieving the goal toward which all human life is oriented.

What is our view of death?

"Death and love are the two wings that carry the good person to heaven."

Michaelangelo

Paul recalls some words of Jesus

Wednesday

Acts 20:28-38

"There's more joy in giving than in getting."

Seven-year-old Richard was the second youngest of nine children. Three days before Christmas, his mother asked him to shine her shoes for the holidays. After Richard finished the job, he brought the shoes to his mother to see if they were all right. His mother was so delighted with his job that she gave him a quarter.

Later that day, when Richard's mother put on her shoes, her toe struck a hard lump.

Removing the shoe, she found a quarter wrapped in paper. Written on the paper were these words: "Here's your quarter back, Mom. I shined your shoes out of love. [signed] Richard."

When the constant giving of ourselves and our time begins to wear on us, how do we keep from losing the true joy of Christian giving?

"The fragrance always stays in the hand that gives the rose." Heda Bejar

The Lord speaks to Paul

Thursday

Acts 22:30; 23:6-11

"Keep up your courage!" (NAB)

One August morning in 1985, a 22-year-old daredevil, named Steve Trotter, plunged 176 feet over Niagara Falls in a barrel. He became the seventh person in history to survive such a feat. When asked how it felt, Trotter said it was like "being in an elevator with no cable attached."

When we think of courage, we usually think in terms of physical courage. An even greater courage is moral courage, the kind Paul talks about in today's reading.

An example of moral courage is persevering in some hard task day after day. It's the courage a faithful father and mother exhibit in raising a family through thick and thin. It's this kind of courage that the Lord exhorts Paul to have in today's reading.

How do we build up our store of courage when it runs low?

"Faithfulness in little things is a big thing."
St. John Chrysostom

Paul goes before King Agrippa

Friday

Acts 25:13-21

Paul claimed Jesus is alive.

Some years ago there was a best-seller entitled *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*. Today's reading reminds us that Jesus said the same thing to his disciples. Recall Matthew 10:16, 18-20.

"Listen!
I am sending you out just like sheep
to a pack of wolves. . . .
You will be brought to trial
before rulers and kings,
to tell the Good News. . . .

Do not worry
about what you are going to say . . . ;
when the time comes,
you will be given what you will say.
For the words you will speak will not be yours;
they will come from the Spirit."

In today's reading,
Paul experiences both promises of Jesus.

Recall a time when we suffered
for the sake of the Good News.
How did we experience God's help at that time?

"Afflictions
are but the shadows of God's wings."
George MacDonald

Paul preaches in Rome

Saturday

Acts 28:16-20, 30-31

He taught about Jesus.

In the 1960s an apocryphal *Peanuts* cartoon hung on the walls of a lot of dormitory rooms. The first panel showed Schroeder carrying a sign reading, "Jesus is the answer!" The second panel showed Snoopy holding a sign reading, "What is the question?"

The Jews of Paul's time had no problem with the question. They'd been waiting a long time for the Messiah. Where is he? Why doesn't he come?

Paul's response was,
"He has come!
He is the Lord Jesus Christ!"
In support of his claim,
Paul showed how Jesus fulfilled
the Old Testament prophecies.

Are there any questions in our life
to which Jesus is not the answer?

To the blind, he is sight to see by.
To the lost, he is a path to follow.
To the weak, he is a staff to lean on.
To the hungry, he is bread for the heart.
To the dead, he is life without end.
To all, he is Jesus the Lord.