

*Ruthless Mercy,
Savage Grace*

Co-Pastor—Peace/Elias Lutheran Parish,
Tilleda, Wisconsin

SENECA FALLS

Louie had told me about it
Earl had shown me a picture
I told Kathy
She was curious as I
So one evening we packed up Maggie to go exploring
Drove the truck over to the ballpark
Crossed the road
Walked down the edge of the cornfield
Plunged into the woods
Crossed a fence or three
And there it was

As we approached the knotted sinews of its current
We tried to take our two-year old by the hand
But she wanted nothing of our guidance
Nothing of our restraint
For she was drawn to the waters

Living waters:
 Flowing strongly
 Falling exuberantly
 Wrestling with the rocks
Sculpting waters:
 Carving, buffing, and glazing
 The haughty boulders
 That esteemed themselves
 Immune to such an
 Insubstantial touch

Deadly waters:
 As ready to quench her life
 As her thirst

Innocence is fearless
In her parents' eyes
Foolish
Yet had we not offered her ourselves
To just such a deadly flow?

In baptism she was drowned into new life
But to watch
You would not have known it

A gentle rinse in tepid waters
Effective in cosmic terms
But lacking in drama

Our ritual has become
But a shadow of what it claims to reveal
So, maybe we ought to do baptisms
Amongst the slippery rocks of Seneca Falls
Where parents would bring their children
With fear and trembling

Hesitating
Letting go
Trusting
Receiving again
And learning again that life must be yielded up
If it is to be saved

newsletter

FROST WINS

My home town is Columbus, Ohio
It lies at a latitude tortured by temperateness
Far enough north to freeze hard
Too far south to stay frozen
So through the winter months
it freezes and thaws
Again and again
And watches frost grind its pavement to rubble

Quietly
Peacefully
Relentlessly
Frost wins

Tilleda's latitude is less familiar to me
Northwest of Green Bay
Its winter fluctuations are more likely to
Bracket zero degrees
Fahrenheit
Than Centigrade
So the dynamics may be
Different from what I am used to

Still, I have seen Tilleda pond
Its dam once a strong shoulder
Proudly bent to the wheel of the old sawmill
But frost has taken its toll
Now that shoulder is arthritic
Tired
And crumbling

Quietly
Peacefully
Relentlessly
Frost wins

Frost says
Begin again

And I believe
That the township of Heaven
is shaped by a frost
That heaves up all our superficialities
And wedges into the tiny cracks of all our insecurities

Quietly
Peacefully
Relentlessly
Frost wins

Making us whole by making us dust
Raw material
Fit for the hands of our creator

newsletter

ON LIVING IN THE TOWNSHIP OF HEAVEN

To what shall we compare the township of Heaven?
More to the point:
Why do we have to keep asking that same question
Over and over?
My best answer is to be found
In recent time spent with one Jack Leidy

On their way from Denver to Maine
Jack and Mary Ann
parked their motorhome by the parsonage
For a night and a day

For part of an afternoon
Jack and I stood on a boulder that
juts out into the river
Catching crayfish

This was a novelty to Jack
In fact
He found the very *idea* of angling for crayfish
to be intriguing
After all
He had always classified crayfish as bait
A means
Rather than an end

My technique was fascinating to him too
The tackle was simple
 A line
 A pole
 A rancid piece of bacon
The mechanics were odd
 Sighting the crayfish on the bottom
 Dropping the bacon on its head
 Waiting for it to climb aboard
 Pulling it out of the water
 Shaking it off into the bucket

It wasn't even very sporting
Crayfish wrestled each other for the bait

Which meant that sometimes we got twofers

Then we boiled them and started cleaning them
Which involves an amazing amount of painstaking work
For very little meat
(That's when Jack declared me a saint and went for a nap)

So little meat
But so delicious
I made it into cream of crayfish soup
And Jack was tickled to find that it was good
Very good

The township of Heaven is kind of like that
It has us feast on things that we once lacked
Not because they were absent
But because they were overlooked
Or disdained

So living in the township of Heaven
Is alot like making crayfish soup

But only for a moment
'Cause once crayfish find a place on the menu
They may retain their flavor
But they lose their ability to surprise us
And finding ourselves in the the township of Heaven
Is always a surprise
Appearing when and where we said it could not be
And withdrawing from the ground we thought
safely hallowed

Familiarity breeds contempt
So the township of Heaven keeps slipping out of our grasp
Leaving us to wonder again
what it is really like
Even as we savor the taste
That tells us that the Lord is good

newsletter

STEWARDSHIP

You may have noticed that this is the
stewardship season
It is a time of the year when pastors
do their sermon preparation
With one eye on scripture
and the other on the treasurer's report
Which tends to make us cross-eyed
which gets us confused
And in this unstable frame of mind
It doesn't take long for us to get Stewardship
mixed up with fund-raising
And frankly, that is a mistake
neither pastors nor the church can afford

So to clarify:

Fund-raising is when I try to persuade you to give me your
Money
Stewardship is when I try to persuade you to give
Period

Fund-raising in the church hints that
 God can be bought
Stewardship says:
 We give thee but thine own
 What e'er the gift may be
 All that we have is thine alone
 A trust, O God, from thee

Fund-raising is concerned
 to keep the building debt free
Stewardship is concerned with the victims of
 hurricanes and earthquakes
 And considers selling the building
 to help them

Fund-raising waits for something impressive to buy
Stewardship nickels and dimes itself away day to day

Fund-raising hires an ad agency to create a marketable
image
Stewardship looks deep into its soul and begs God for mercy

Fund-raising holds everybody to their pledge
Stewardship forgives its debtors

Fund-raising dances to the tune of the rich
Stewardship cries over the pain of the poor

Fund-raising learns lots of tricks from the business world
Stewardship is good business

Fund-raising never ruffles feathers on geese laying golden
eggs
Stewardship knows that its goose is already cooked

Fund-raising counts money
Stewardship counts hearts

Fund-raising measures its success by its bank account
Stewardship enjoys changing the world

Fund-raising is like the man
who saved his strength for a great challenge
Only to strain his back picking up a small child
He was proud of the suffering service given
But decided to avoid such trauma thereafter

Stewardship is like the man
who gave children piggy-back rides every day
His strength grew with his children
And he gradually started helping big people
Without even thinking about it

Fund-raising always attends to the squeaky wheel
Stewardship doesn't know what a squeaky wheel
sounds like

Fund-raising motivates with guilt
Stewardship motivates with joy

Fund-raising uses gimmicks that grow old
Stewardship nurtures habits that last a lifetime

Fund-raising treats you like a child
Stewardship encourages you to grow up

Fund-raising finds offering envelopes
almost as embarrassing to talk about as sex
Stewardship talks openly with its children
so that they are not left ignorant

Fund-raising tries to back you into a corner
Stewardship tells you to follow your heart's desire

Fund-raising is a necessity
Stewardship is a gift

Fund-raising says "meet your budget"
Stewardship says "give yourself away"

sermon

GIVE YOURSELF AWAY

You've got to

Give yourself away
Give it all and don't delay
You know the time is right for us
To give ourselves away

I'm begging you Don't hold back
God will be the things you lack
Because today's the day for us
To give ourselves away

Start by giving one in ten
A dime from every dollar spend
On winning freedom back again
Set aside one day in seven
Search it for a taste of Heaven
Rest yourself and bless yourself and fill yourself
So you can....

(chorus)

Take the time to lend an ear
Bolster courage where there's fear
Brush away a falling tear
Swallow pride and learn to bend
It's okay to make amends
You might even make a friend
But you must....

(chorus)

Clothe the naked; hire the poor
Don't avoid the prisoner's door
Spread the good news more and more
Feed the hungry; heal the lame
Show the world things aren't the same
Give the Church a better name
If we just....

(chorus)

song

VARIETIES OF FAITH

I don't suppose any pastor every accepted a call
Just because of the yard around the parsonage
But ours one would almost be worth it

Of course, in this case
"Yard" is a bit of an understatement
Because we live in a park
Where stately cedars are tastefully arranged
Amongst massive granite boulders
Where pines and hardwoods part to frame
Sunset over the Embarrass

This is where we finally planted the tulips
That Tureks gave us when we moved
A task we have awkwardly avoided
I think because we don't really believe in bulbs

I mean
You farmers and gardeners take it for granted that plants
grow
But we don't
We know that when things are buried in the ground
They rot

Food comes from the grocery store
Trees and grass have always been there
And what you commit to the earth
You lose

That would seem to limit me as a keeper of this garden
But I am not without virtue
I know how to prune
And this garden needs it
For fecundity untamed chokes itself

So I cull the volunteers
Trim the encroachers
And eye the rest critically
Even as I marvel that anything grows there at all

In the garden of souls
The shoe is often on the other foot

The very folks who annually
Bet the farm (or garden) on seed corn
Seem to doubt the germinative powers of the Word

Despairing of new life
They prune the old with zeal
Which is not without virtue
But is limited in yield

And sometimes as I venture to plant new seed
I find myself needing to turn a deaf ear
To those who know better

So it is clear to me
That preacher and gardener must turn to each other
To relearn what each already knows

That though we may not have
confidence in the harvest
We must have faith enough to plant the seed

newsletter

GUT CHECK

Over coffee

Pastors sometimes swap stories of being taken

One-upping each other

With all the scams that have knocked upon our doors

Tales of empty gas tanks and barren cupboards

Tales of urgent bills that seemed so believable

Because the odd cents trailing after the dollars

Sounded so much like the bills

Sitting in the parsonage

As the coffee pot goes 'round again

We talk about our moments of lost innocence

Thinking to help the "needy"

Only to find that we had financed a binge

Or been the seventh pastor to pay that dentist bill

So we refine the techniques of suspicion:

How to make

"referrals"

How to have always

"just used up all the available funds"

How to assume that the most desperate story

Is but a tribute to the skill of the storyteller

How to shut the door

without slamming it

How to convince ourselves

that there is no other way

This is the wisdom we share over the decaf

And though we respond to each

Other with reassuring noises

Our hearts rest hard within us

At home
Half listening for the doorbell
We rehearse the logic of our refusal

Justified
Righteous
And afraid

For we know that Advent is not a season of the Church year
But a moment of decision

newsletter

DOWNSTREAM OF EPIPHANY

He was passing as father for a child that was not his.
He had spirited the child and its mother
out of Bethlehem

in the middle of the night
one step ahead of a bloodbath

Leaving behind whatever was left of his good name
A fugitive

He got them lost in a refugee camp in Egypt
Biding their time until

he could sneak them back into Palestine
to some backwater town where
they could lie low until it was really safe

If that time ever came

Those were the facts
And he wondered if the facts didn't mark him as a fool

But then, there were the visions
Visions of angels
Visions of glory
Everybody was having them for a while
He even had one or two himself
Or had he just momentarily lost his wits?

So as he endured those years of exile
He passed the time by gnawing at a question

Which are more real?
Facts
or visions?

newsletter

BETTING ON A SURE THING

Three pastors in nine years
works out to about three years per pastor
and too much change
in too little time

And now you're going to have to wait
to see if we beat those odds
But while you're biding your time
Let me tell you how to cheat
How to rig the table
Stack the deck
Load the dice
It's really very simple

Just make this parish a safe haven for wounded souls
Make that the most important thing
The only thing
Such a simple thing
And yet so rare
Especially for a church

Do that one thing as well as you are able
And hobo's will chalk "safe" on your doorposts
And the angel of death will passover
And the nations will seek you out
And you'll only get out in a box
the ones who swore they'd only come in that way

And what pastor would be fool enough
to leave such a place soon?
Not these two

pastor's annual report

AFTER THE FALL

When I move into new territory
I like to learn the lay of the land
And so I've wondered, off and on
about the land that lies beyond the Embarrass

Out my back window I can see it rise
to complete the valley
But the river forms a moat
The bramble serves for barbed wire
And I'm in no hurry
Winter will come in its own season...

And so it has
The moat is now a highway
The barbs have gone to rust
The cold unlocks the gates to show me
nature's secret places

Walking the river and up the hill
I see the new and new facets of the old
For after the Fall
In the midst of the cold
Nature shows its secrets

Mother nature is like that
Human nature, too

When things are warm and flush and growing
Both natures funnel us to beaten paths
Steering away from hidden corners
Wearing down curiosity with busyness and clutter
Until we are content with superficial familiarity

We know the paths
And so claim to know the woods

Winter lays bare deeper truths if we but walk them
But the cold that reveals also causes us discomfort
For woods and souls can be threatening places
when bitter cold sets in

And warmer places can be found
And ignorance knows not what it misses
(Though it thinks it does
and thinks it hasn't missed much)

To really know the township of Heaven
To learn the lay of its land
We must seek it out in winter's time
We must face the cold
Risk its bite
Know the death it holds

And in its hidden hollows
finding that dry and shattered husk
that rattles in the wind
We find, also, the seed of hope

newsletter

SALT

At the edge of the woods
the buck sniffs the air for danger
and smells it
but he eases out into the open anyway
crunching through the dead weeds of a field that farmers
have neglected
but hunters have not forgotten

It is a stupid thing to do
even as measured by deer sense
but some things reach deeper than intelligence
overriding it
redirecting it as a magnet redirects a compass

A stray breeze brings some new information
and as his head snaps around to take it in
a surge of adrenalin hits his heart
and tightens his muscles
but he doesn't bolt
not yet

His rack sweeps the horizon like a radar dish
and judges it safe enough
So he heads out again
aiming for a spot where the weeds
have been trampled down
around a small brown block
that sits upon the ground

If that buck had any imagination
and cared to use it
it might occur to him that the block
must have once been a cube
the shape itself a warning of some human design
some human intention
but no such thoughts cross his mind

His thought being only to lower his head
and lick the rounded surface
that he stumbled onto once

and that has called him back
again and again and again
Maybe it calls him finally to die
Maybe he even senses that
But maybe it is enough to die
with a taste of life upon the lips

And the Word said
"You.... are the salt.... of the earth"
and as I wonder what that really means
I know at the very least
that salt must bear a taste of life
so savory that it could lead the soul
to brave the line of fire
to taste of it again

Salt

Animals crave it
as if paying homage to the briny oceans
from which all things were brought forth

Salt

Nothing sweet here
But nothing bitter either
Just the biting, stinging, cleansing
Rock of our salvation

And we are to be the salt of the earth
a trace of the one spirit
from which we draw our life and our being
offering a taste of the ocean of God's goodness
to those who have wandered far from the sea

Salt

Now let me tell you of my vision

In the dark of the night
as I stare up at the ceiling

and ponder the saltiness of God's people
I behold the image of a church
It is a small white church
Set in the middle of some neglected field
the location is all wrong
It should have been closed down long ago
and yet the weeds are matted down around it
and closer in
they are even worn away
the earth exposed and packed hard
by a multitude of shoes and hooves and paws

The church itself is standard issue
excepting that all the corners and edges
are rounded off
worn away by every soul who ever tasted it

Few come looking for it
But lost souls stumble on it blindly in the night
and having found it by accident
They return to it by design
Heedless of distance
Heedless of cost
Heedless of predators lurking within the shadows

Their thought being only to bow their heads
and taste the rounded surface
they stumbled onto once
and that calls them back
again and again and again

That is the vision
The reality is too often something else
how often have I seen hungry souls
taste a church for salt
only to sigh
and turn
and look elsewhere for savory and sustaining food

You are the salt of the earth

but if salt has lost its taste
how shall its saltiness be restored?
It is no longer good for anything
except to be thrown out and trodden under foot

You are the salt of the earth
but don't rest assured
until you lick the back of your hand
and tell me if you are worth your salt

If the taste is bland
then what exactly is missing?
hospitality?
conviction?
passion?
generosity?
justice?
forgiveness?

In its absence
You may may not even be able to describe what is missing
But seek it out anyway
For you will know the taste of salt when you find it
And you cannot afford not to find it

Look around you
and if that gives you no result
then look within
for a body that has forgotten the taste of salt
hasn't worked up much of a sweat lately
hasn't opened its soul enough to shed a few tears
hasn't licked the open wounds
the world inflicts on us all each day

You are the salt of the earth
but this call to saltiness is costly
for it calls for sweat
and blood
and tears

Maybe it calls us finally to die
Maybe we even sense that
But maybe it is enough to die
with a taste of life upon the lips

sermon

LIVING BREAD

Flour
Water
Yeast
Oil
Salt

Mixed and kneaded
The dough rises
Only to be punched down
once and again
Only to have the life baked out of it

The incense of its demise
Calls us from the corners of the house
To be fed

It is holy
Yet the holy must be broken
if it is to feed us
if it is to become a part of us
So we break it
knowing that we may next be called to brokenness
or at least
called to break off some of our own crust
from time to time
so that the little ones might
grasp the tender selves within us
and be fed

This is what we practice in these days

Lenten bulletin cover

FEBRUARY 12, 1990

Yesterday was their day
After the waiting came
First sight of one so long unseen
His face only vaguely recalling the old pictures
His words savored and swallowed
Finally the exultation

Watching events unfold on TV
I knew the Pretoria government
Though still in power
Must recognize the sentence of death
that hangs over it

Verdict of the ancient law
Eye for eye
Tooth for tooth
Sovereignty for sovereignty
Justice long delayed

That was yesterday
Today the televised images
Refract through my thoughts
Illuminating the life I live
And I wonder
What Mandela's freedom has to do
With life in Shawano County

Maybe it is just
that having moved here
I can no longer evade the parallels
between Africa and America

Now I cross paths
with Menominee, Stockbridge,
and the occasional Oneida
too often not to squirm with the recognition
that our one nation under God
Is also one nation under judgment

But I am not supposed to say such things

The hackles rise
The chorus begins its demand
That some history must be forgotten

So I turn the channel
And watch another interview
This one a man who wants his daughter's murderer
to be executed
jailhouse conversion be damned

For some crimes
can tolerate no mitigating circumstances
no statute of limitation
nor can they be redeemed
by mere restitution

In principle
I disagree with vengeance
But I still hesitate
to question such logic
knowing that
a person can lack mercy
without lacking justice

Forgive and forget?
No
Our own medicine men tell us
that forgetting is itself a refusal to forgive

So abused children stuff their traumas
Down deep memory holes
Gravity wells that namelessly
suck whole lives in after them
even unto the next generations

Forgive and forget?
No
We forgive so that we might remember
what is otherwise too painful
and so retrieve the selves we have denied

Selves that look so strange upon their release
Not quite what we expected
Only vaguely reminiscent of
what we recall being locked away so long ago
But ours nonetheless

Forgiveness
Victims finally give it for their own sake
lest they collapse into the empty ache within
lest they explode and so continue the violence

They give it for their own sake
Trading in justice for mercy
Calling the bluff of restitution masked as charity

They give it for their own sake
Giving it freely
Yet knowing its reception will still be costly
Requiring remembrance
and the death of denial

Will black South Africans forgive?
That decision is of great geopolitical consequence

Will Native Americans forgive?
That decision is of little more than local consequence
And rarely of local concern

Yet, if we inheritors of the fruits of genocide
Feel no need for Native American forgiveness
We should recall
That "one nation under God"
Refers as much to jurisdiction
As it does protection
And the wrath of God
May come quietly
with late-blooming seeds of self-destruction

newsletter

RESTRAINT

Maggie and I have an arrangement
She plays among the boulders
I carve among the trees
We go our own ways
and occupy ourselves within each other's orbits

She gradually becomes
a figment of my peripheral vision
only half there until she is well gone
and silence interrupts my concentration
to send me around the house
limb saw still in hand
looking beyond the edge of the yard
to see the green coat back in the brush
where little children run when monsters give chase

Tangled up as usual
she needs rescuing
Gathered into safe arms
she explains her plight one more time
to ears too old to be convinced
Still, I lay aside my well reasoned admonitions
to ask the child if I should tell her a story of monsters
She nods her head
So I proceed

Once upon a time there was a little girl
who was being chased by a monster
She ran and ran and ran
but could not get away
so she screamed for her father
who came and cut the monster up
with his saw

For good measure
I wave my limb saw in her face
and while this tiny drama
doesn't cut the monsters from her soul
it does trim them down to manageable size

My limb saw

Infinitely slower than chain saws
taking ever so much time to digest
the no-longer-just-saplings
that crowd the yard

Yet it serves me well
For it trains my soul

Yes, I crave the power and speed
of internal combustion
and when I get to the bigger stuff
I will borrow such expedience
But I refrain as long as possible
For tools of the hand too quickly
become metaphors of the mind

I am both pastor and parent
Double cause to learn patience and persistence
For the temptation to make quick work
of tangles in the spiritual undergrowth
is always strong

Yet, a quick hand may not be a wise hand
and a powerful hand not the most discerning
So I learn from my limb saw
for I cannot afford chainsaw expectations

newsletter

FRICTION

It was an innocent question
Our parish secretary simply asked
this pastor if there would be a work day
to help us clean up the "rock garden" this year

But I think I had been waiting
for a whole year
for somebody to ask

I didn't actually fly off the handle
or shoot off my mouth
but I did blow off a little steam
muttering about
how it would be easier to
do it all by myself
at my own pace
than it was to try and
get the job done
in just a few hours
with just a few extra hands
just so that the congregation
could feel it had done its duty

Much thanks to those who showed, but
Never again!

Well, I s'pose there's something to be said
for blowing off steam
but having done so
let me amend those emotions

It's not just a matter of never saying "never"
It's not even that an extra hand would really help

It's that churches already
give up too quickly on cooperation
and what we consistently miss
is that we need to work together
more than the work needs to get done

For we are like stones in a gem tumbler
and if we're to have the coarseness of our egos
worn smooth
then we're going to have to bang against each other
Often and actively
Gaining luster by being diminished
in a grind that chips and scuffs
before it shines

We are like players at a ball diamond
Who get to know each other
So they can play together
Until finally they play together
because they know each other

We need each other
So we need to work together
more than the work needs to get done
and if we focus merely on the jobs
we will never recall
why we do them
and eventually
we won't

newsletter

DANDELIONS

As a child
I understood them

I knew enough to
gather up bouquets
and blow seeds into the wind
But the more I learned about them
the less I understood

For my mother
used to tell her children
of the Great Depression
and of how she used to gather
dandelions by the bagful
to sell as salad greens

Yet
She was also the one
who taught us how to
cut and dig and poison
the dandelions
that flourished in our yard

Then there is Jesus

As a child
I understood him, too

I knew that he loved me
but the more I learned
the less I understood

My teachers used to tell their students
of the days of the Law
and of how Jesus died to save us all
They taught me of the nourishment
of his body and blood

Yet
They were also the ones

who taught me how
to keep his cross from
sprouting in my own yard
How to be good enough
that I might not need forgiveness
after all

Well
What I know now is that
Dandelions win
and the cross comes to us all
and like it or not
the salad days of the Spirit
reach their fullest bloom
in days of depression

homily

APPRENTICE

I drop by the nursing home at half past noon
to make sure I will find Adella awake
to take a seat by her table
to help her with the mug
too full of tepid coffee

She appreciates the help
but cannot place my face
for the span of her memory
does not bridge to my last visit

Sometimes I wonder if these visits
are worth the confusion they bring
but today she seems to consider it
an equitable exchange
and I am learning not to be
so protective of the fragile

In that course of study
Grandpa Bill was recently my tutor
when he took gentle note
that I had returned overdue

I had thought this for the best
Recalling his last perilous
journey from bedroom to sitting room
to take communion

I had worried that
the odds of crippling him
before I could commune him
would increase with the
frequency of my visits

But his patient
gauging of the span
of my absence
taught me that I had missed the point

Which is that the sacrament is for the sake

of real presence

and that
even as I try to
spin the kingdom out
from a powerful center

I must be prepared
to receive it
hobbling in
from the margins

newsletter

FAMILY KNOTS

Our morning routine was underway
And as I walked into the "TV room"
the electronic shrine was turned on

It was your standard morning news show
With your standard cheerful reporter
Interviewing your standard successful movie actor

She asked him about his childhood
and he told her stories of halcyon memories
Broadway productions on the kitchen table

Finally he became impatient when she seemed not to notice
the hook, the line, or even the sinker
as they slid down her throat

Come on, he said
I grew up in a dysfunctional family
Just like you did

She giggled
still not feeling the barb
or still not wanting to

Her failure to understand
was probably more willfull
than witless
For
What she wanted to be the unfortunate exception
He knew to be the ironclad rule
That families fall short, too

And if we save our souls in isolation
ignoring larger constellations
our families shrivel
unshriven

Yes
Each family needs redemption, too
but not through sacrificial blood

nor by the correction
of the past nor the perfection
of the future

nor by the silence
of denial nor the scream
of catharsis

the pages may not be revised
nor can they be torn
but they must be turned

What can be destroyed are
all those I.O.U.'s
not the memories
but the ledger entries

the War Bonds of our maturation
reach their maturity
by not being cashed

No
we are not
required
to yield them up
But until we forgive our debtors
We will always have too much leverage to be lovable

newsletter

WISDOM GROWS SMALLER AS IT INCREASES

Two and a half years of raising Maggie
had given me a sense of
understanding “the way kids are”

Now after but a month of Nathan’s presence
I have revised that understanding to
“People are different”

It’s not the same the second time around
the routines are different
the crises are not the same
the lessons are fresh

At one point
He was nursing ‘round the clock
but still hungry
crying his mother to tears
and to the phone
over which an expert in such matters
told her that
baby was hungry
because momma wasn’t well enough fed

It’s not enough to eat enough, she said
A nursing mom needs protein
Lots and lots of protein
which Kathy now consumes in quantity

Actually, that hasn’t quite solved the problem
‘cause Nathan is by nature a nibbler
but the image remains powerful

Through it we might notice that
Even older children are a little
Like nursing infants
Drawing spiritual sustenance
from their parents as they grow
Weaning late
maybe at confirmation
maybe not even then

So
if we parents
do not give meaty nourishment
to our own souls
then what is to become of our children?

This much is certain
Their colicky spirits will
test the stamina of our undernourished souls
But what then?

Will we consider our own ability to nourish
and so gnaw at the meaty wisdom parenthood requires?
Or will we be content to absolve ourselves
with a shrug of our shoulders
Upon failing to fix the child?

newsletter

“No”

Car seats are designed for children
to save their lives even when taken by surprise
But children were not designed for car seats
Their bodies may fit
But their energy is harder to constrain

For hours she rides with some kind of contentment
for hours she calmly lets the straps
restrain her animal energy
for hours she occupies herself
with books and songs and crayons

Until finally she reaches the extremity of her patience
and hurls herself bodily
against the car seat’s fabric fetters
and rages against her longsuffering captivity

Of course, her outburst comes at the end of the day
during the last twenty of four hundred miles
a distance measurably short
but immeasurably lingering
the part of the journey that fathers refuse to interrupt

So while navigating busy interstate traffic
father must also calm the hurricane
strapped into the car seat next to him

"Margaret"
You see,
this is a ritual and rituals require formal address

"Margaret"
But the flailing of her arms and legs shreds
even the most formal of words

"Margaret"
In the riptide of her invective
even my most patient of voices flounders

"Margaret"

Yet, I continue to feel my way
into the eye of the hurricane
to find the stillness within the storm
that leaves us room to talk

"Margaret"

Finally the kicking stops

"Margaret"

A fragile stillness hangs in the air
A ragged stillness that threatens to unravel at any moment
For the eye of the hurricane is only a moment wide
Yet for all of that moment
She is listening to me
Waiting to be calmed

Maggie, do you want an elephant?

NO!

Do you want a tiger?

No!

Do you want a polar bear?

No

Do you want to read a book?

No

Do you want to sing a song?

No

And so it goes

We have gone through this ritual a number of times

It is a lengthy one

that never comes up with anything she does want

But that is the point

There seems to be something very, very important
to the nay-saying itself
something that has little to do with her preferences
or desires

but much to do with defying the lack of control
she experiences in her life

In fact
the greatest hazard of this exercise
is that I might find something too tempting
for her to say no to

For affirmation is not yet in season
and will not be timely
until all the pits are spit
and all the spite is lipped
until the jutting of her lower lip recedes
and all the small craft warnings are furled

Until such time she must say
No
Lest she stumble over some new desire to storm over

I have found it to be generally true
that people go through phases when they must say
No

Since I work in the church
that is where I see it most

I have seen freshly confirmed members
who must immediately say no to going to church
until they can say a yes that is truly their own

I have seen faithful workers
who must say no to the tasks at hand
until they can say a yes that is not forced and resentful

I have seen cheerful givers lose their smiles
and reluctantly say no to passionate pleas for funds
until the passion returns to their giving

Such negations are hard to hear
but serve a purpose nonetheless

As a way of life they are a disease of the spirit
But as a stage of life they can be a cure for what ails

Like a fever that cleanses the body
nay saying can serve to purge the spirit
Granted, fevers are worrisome
but they are also signs of recovery in the making

Maybe what we need is a sign
a symbol that warns of souls under reconstruction
a button
or a sticker
or an arm band
or a baseball cap
with a . . .

with some kind of a picture
that lets people know what to expect
and how to act

I recently saw just the symbol to serve this purpose
We were vacationing in Michigan at the time
It was painted on a bath house wall
at a campground in Petosky

I only half noticed it at first
just enough to recognize
the familiar red circle
with a diagonal line running through its center

I looked again to see what the red slash was running
through
to find out if I was
standing on
or doing
or being
something that was prohibited
but the red slash wasn't running through anything
It just seemed to be sitting there
Waiting for me to ask

Waiting to say
No

A circle
A slash
Complete in the totality of its negativity
Yes
I think that would do

But it will do only as long as we remember
that the point is
not to steer clear of the naysayer

The point is to ask
and to be told no
and to ask again
until enough no's have been said
that there are no more no's to say

Maggie, do you want to sing in the choir?
No
Do you want to sign up to usher?
No
Do you want to teach Sunday School?
No
Do you want to play dartball?
No
Do you want to run for church council?
No
Do you want to run to the playground?
No
Do you want a big truck?
No
Do you want a big doggie
No
Do you want an armadillo?
(amused) No Daddy

Through it all
Her answer stays the same

But through this odd consistency
her world is rearranged

Now, kids shouldn't ought to act that way
and churches shouldn't work at such a pace
But fathers learn to stop expecting sense
and pastors learn to recognize the odd designs of grace

sermon

AURORA BOREALIS

It was our last night in Petosky
a chilly night
So I sat in the trailer
reading the paper
until Kathy came back from doing some chore
and asked me if I had seen them
Seen what?
The Northern Lights

No, I had not
and never had

Fearful that these lights of legend
might flicker once or twice like an old fluorescent tube
and then expire
I popped out of our canvas cocoon
to verify this marvelous rumor
and it was marvelous

For a few moments
I stood on the edge of a growing crowd of spectators
that was gathering in the midst of the trailers
but the glare of the security lights
and the glaring errors of a few scientific commentators
drove me to seek refuge in deeper darkness

The path took me to the beach
and as I walked across the sand
bright pinpoints of light from the far side of Little Traverse
bay
caught my attention

Their intensity pulled my gaze down to the horizon
for a moment
but pinpoints of intensity are no match
for rippling sheets of grandeur draped across the night

The shimmering light filled the sky from East to West
from baseboard to ridge pole
and as I watched, it danced above me

enchanting me with its gentle movements
and as it sang its silent song
it showed me things no thunderstorm ever could

It showed me my place in the township of Heaven
and I could see that it is a small place
not small in significance
yet small in proportion
a good thing to know
when even the small problems of my life
seem monumental

More than that
I could see that this small place of mine
is in some far suburb of that township
not in the center
Which surprises me every time I notice it

After all
When I look around at my life, through these eyes
The place where I stand seems to be the center of it all
the hub around which the great wheel must turn
An illusion?
Yes, and a convincing one
but one that yields to overwhelming physical evidence
of the contrary

I stood there on the beach a while longer
Until fatherly instinct sent me
back to find my little family
and leaving the blessed darkness of the beach
I returned to the blindness of a well-lit world

Yes, night lights keep us from stumbling
when the darkness is thick
and our bladders are full
and security lights give us a feeling of safety
in an uncertain world
But sometimes we must turn out the lights
and step into the darkness

and listen for a still small voice

Otherwise we will be transfixed by the glare
of our own headlights
and miss the shimmering grandeur
of the county of God
that ripples across the vaults of heaven
just above us

sermon

FORESHADOW

It has been a good cocoon
The parish has been this writer's playpen
Freeing me with its safe boundaries
Encouraging me with its low expectations
Rewarding me with its sense of surprise

yet I am restless

I am a kept poet
and orthodoxy is a narrow language
removed from public discourse
self-contained
semi-private

My voice will always bear its accent
will forever employ its metaphors
will persistently seek and speak its wisdom

still the preacher's yoke chafes me
and sometimes chokes me
and though it restrains me
so as to protect me
its fabric fetters
have outlasted their usefulness

I am ever so grateful
even as I wonder
whether I am any longer able
to write
without inevitably producing one more
moral exhortation
or piety

Not that I regret what I have written
but certain words have escaped me
and I must seek them out
without having to look over my shoulder
to see who is looking back

journal

LINE OF SIGHT

During the summer months
waves of children
wash over
the boulders of the Rock Garden
scouring off patches of moss
or maybe depositing patches of skin
on unburnished and unyielding granite

It is interesting to watch
the currents and eddies of this tide
which runs against the grain of the watershed
cascading uphill
seeking the high ground
assaulting the path of greatest resistance

The pattern of this ebb and flow
becomes familiar
predictable
Until the day it rises in torrents
and pools upon
a mighty stone
heretofore left unscaled

It is a rock of unquestionable attractiveness
A great mass with one barely scalable face
The whole of it
awkwardly embraced
and laddered
by an oddly contorted pine
the phone company banzaied
to clear a line

But why now?
Why never before?
Oh yes . . .

It was only the week before I had
cleared away the brush
that had gradually swallowed that rock
over the years

And for all its massive and imposing presence
Once obscured
That rock did not exist
except maybe in the fading memories
of those who climbed it in less cluttered days

Do not wonder at children
who do not take their stand upon the rock
Do not require them
or shame them
or even tell them of your own ascent
no matter how fondly remembered

But clear away the brush
Clear away anything
no matter how precious
or beautiful
or sacred
that stands between the children and the rock
tear down even your own good intentions

For though the rock needs only a clear line of sight
to exert its tidal pull
That much it does require

Do not obscure it
with embellishments
nor let it be obscured by neglect
but trust in its gravity

Look for it yourself
Feel its pull again
and scramble up its face once more
scouring off patches of moss
or maybe depositing patches of skin
on unburnished and unyielding granite
to find the child within you
to find the children with you

newsletter

DARK STARS

Look at the night sky
and you will not see the dark stars
much as you may try

Stars so full of themselves
that they have collapsed to a size
smaller than the head of a pin
a place where even angels cannot dance

From the safety of their black holes
dark stars think weighty thoughts
yet words cannot leap
beyond the edge of their brooding

And maybe it is best that their calls cannot be heard
for innocents who stumble over their thresholds
are crushed
by the burden of all that used to be

They never die, yet
They have no life
They remember so much, yet
They shed no light

It is in there
It is in there
It is all in there somewhere

Some metaphors are fitting
Some churches are dark stars
but the best of metaphors
are only the most convincing of lies
and churches only follow the laws of astrophysics
in poems

No
It is not the force of gravity
that binds churches up within themselves
but force of habit
and no matter how well a church

imitates a black hole
it still has light to shine

It is in there
It is in there
It is all in there somewhere

journal

SUFFER THE CHILDREN

As I watched her from pulpit's view last Sunday
it irked me to see Maggie
taking great advantage of Nathan's
eighteen-pound restraint on Momma's mobility

After service Kathy and I talked over the incident
with an eye toward making it as unique as possible
and I wish that that had been enough

But then the mail came Tuesday
and with it an envelope containing
a hastily photocopied article
title fallen off the edge
So its subtitle met my eyes first
with the words "Managing your monster. . ."

Penciled into the margin were the instructions
"Read & learn!"
Signature and return address had been omitted

Oh, how quickly the sanctuary can be stripped of its sanctity
for though "sanctuary" speaks of safety
it can readily become a place of danger
one best to be entered well armored
and well armed

Instead of being a place of healing
it becomes the arena where we play at righteousness
a stern game
a game for adults
But a game that gives us no peace
and never can
For the Gospel withholds its peace
until we receive it as children

As children
Not of the type the righteous require
not the domesticated variety
old enough to maintain an image
regardless of its honesty

Rather
Heaven is conquered by monsters like the one
lodged between me and this computer keyboard
even now

She who is no respecter of adults
and their schemes
and their schedules
who only knows that fathers
must hold their daughters
on demand

But don't worry
She will be relieved of this
innocent egocentricity

We will teach her guile
disguised as compliance
and she will learn to cloak her demands
in laws and principles
and to bury them
under resentments
And so become an adult

She too will try to bluff her way
into the township of Heaven
as we all do

She too will fail

But hopefully she will
then find something left
of what we try so hard to
weed out of her now

Don't get me wrong
her childishness can be more than trying

But sometimes it drives me up
the very wall I need to scale

Which is why Puckett's
first law of parenting
is that God sends us
precisely the kids it takes
to drive us crazy

That is a blessing
For guardian angels
are often antagonists
and prophets
are usually rude

And who better to play those roles
than the children
who drive us to distraction
today
and cling to our dying hands
tomorrow

Another service is over
and the adults quickly move on
to the next items on their agendas

But the children linger to celebrate
with a joy rarely to be found in this room
between invocation and benediction

Such joyousness makes the sanctuary their turf
and they know it
and they revel in reclaiming it
running up and down the aisles
and peeking from behind the pulpit
and if we cannot stoop to follow them
maybe we can at least
suffer the children to seek the holy on their own

newsletter

ANTICIPATION

A glass tank sits on the counter to my left
Bought from Nancy and the boys
last summer at their garage sale
Three 59 cent goldfish swim in its waters
Bought at Farm & Home
half a year later

Three fish
This odd number grates on my sense of order
Three in memory of the two
For Kathy still remembers the pair
that died one night
oh, so many years ago
Get three, Gary
So there will still be one left

Fragile beauties
Put them in the tank
See how long they take to die

Teach the catechism of low expectations
Teach it all too well
Till Maggie examines the golden glimmers
in the glass puddle
and cheerfully asks if they are dead yet
No, not yet

Be patient

A stained and painted window is set in a wall
two buildings to my right
When the sun shines from the East
it floods the sanctuary with emotions
too powerful to ignore
through glass too fragile to endure
and it reminds me again that
beauty is tenuous
transient

Next week

Kathy will send me to cut a tree
that we will festoon with
bright but short-lived bulbs
and brittle spheres
and undergird with painstakingly wrapped packages
and we will watch it all die
and break
and burn out
and crumple up
all for the sake of beauty

all for the sake of a holy child
who traded the hot-dipped
galvanized durability of the law
for the momentary beauty of mercy

And having lost
and having grieved
we will still conclude
that beauty is worth the price

journal

NEW YEAR

Put new calendars on the walls
Misdate the checks that pay new bills
Resolve to be more resolute
It's a new year
It's a fresh start

Farm out the kids
Shake out the rugs
Take out the trash
It's a clean house
It's a fresh start

Dig out the sidewalk
Fill up the birdfeeder
Watch for fresh tracks in the yard
It's a new snow
It's a fresh start

Shed an old grudge
Make a new friend
Do something everyone knows you won't
It's a new life
It's a fresh start

newsletter

NAVIGATIONS

The river was high and fast as we began
yet the water ran flat
So the nine of us in that rubber raft
were content to go with the flow

But upstream came a noise
and just before his voice was swallowed by the roar
our guide yelled at us to paddle
Hard

Whitewater

Going with the flow into such churning froth
means doing what the water does
Crashing against massive boulders
piling up and rolling over
and spewing out at the bottom
agitated
and well ventilated

That first stretch of stone and foam
chewed us up a bit
But spit us out whole
(more or less)
And once hauled out of the water
and rethroned on the raft that tossed him
our guide tried to prepare us
for the hydraulic pounding yet to come

Time to learn

learn to read the current
learn to find the still pools
halfway down the cascade
learn to make the raft
bounce off the rocks
instead of climbing them
But most of all
learn how to pull together

and when to be obedient
and why the most threatening water
must be entered with the greatest haste

Two hours finished
a four hour itinerary
but we didn't feel cheated
by a river ride run fast forward
the adrenalin rush lingered
long after our clothes had dried
and the metaphor endures
to this day

You see
Most of our lives are lived out
in flat water
our habits formed
by the safety of drifting
our level of conversation stunted
because we usually don't much need each other
and though we may recall
past challenges met
we have forgotten
how to pull together
and when to be obedient
and why the most threatening water
must be entered with the greatest haste

But upstream comes a noise
and into the roar
a voice is speaking
and it is telling us to paddle
Hard

pastor's annual report

ELLUSIONS

We're following the leader
the leader
the leader
We're following the leader
wherever he may go

So long unsung
the song returns effortlessly
So long unplayed
the game is still a part of me

Follow the Leader
Game of children
Path of adventure
Trail long abandoned
for whatever the rhyme
for whatever the reason

Was it
that we didn't get our turn to lead
that some leader badly misled us
or just that we decided not to be children
anymore?

As we got older
we found substitutes for leaders
Presidents to preside
Treasurers to count
Secretaries to take note
Vice presidents to . . . wait
Everybody else gets to vote

We gather to make decisions
We say "yes"
We say "no"
We resolve various matters
We just don't go anywhere
anymore

If anyone dares to lead us
We watch them go
If anyone cares to follow us
We sit still till they wander away
Certain it is better that way
Till Lent calls certainty into question

We don't like Lent for what it is
So we make it into something else
something that allows us
to count quarters
and search our souls
A time of penance
a season of self-denial
anything but what it is:
an invitation to follow the leader
the leader
the leader
we're following the leader
wherever he may go

We learned long ago
to protect ourselves from leaders
Especially one who would lead us
through the eye of the needle
and on to an early grave
We promised ourselves
nevermore to ask "Mother may I?"
and not to care if Simon says
So what then to do with words
that say faith means following the leader
the leader
the leader
we're following the leader
wherever he may go?

We won't be back till mourning
till mourning
till mourning

We won't be back till mourning
because he told us so

newsletter

WINTERTHAW

Cabin fever
parsonage style
cooped up
hunkered down
poking at the weak spots
picking at the scabs
wondering how we ended up
wintering north of Green Bay
wondering where to go next
and when

Then a thaw reminds me of summer
not a forty degree day
of water dripping past the windows
but a cold night
a midweek service with
guitars
mandolin
banjo
close harmonies
long stories
smiles
and protestations against brevity

No
a winterthaw is not likely to be mistaken
for summer
but it reminds me that it is better
to huddle close and fan what fire there is
than to lick a frozen flagpole
just to prove that my tongue will stick

newsletter

HANDS

Hands
Open
Reaching
Grasping

Bearing the cup at Elias
I see the hands that reach to sup
Some steady
Some less so
Some that reach in pairs
Some one-handers
 whose fingers wrap the stem
 precisely the same each time
Some intincters
 dipping the wafer
 careful not to drip the wine

Distributing the bread at Peace
I notice the open palms
 Patient while I fish out the next wafer
 Some small and innocent
 Some calloused and worn
Fingers curling to receive
 Some neatly manicured
 Some scarred
 Some missing altogether

Body united with body
Blood mingling with blood
It is one thing to speak
of the Word made flesh
and dwelling among us
Quite another to see it in the details

newsletter

TO BUILD A PLAYHOUSE:

One old smokehouse foundation
 at the edge of the ledge with a view of the river
One load of scrap lumber
 cleaned out of Grandpa Burkheimer's garage
Twenty two by fours
 overpriced and bought with plastic
Shingles to cover fifty square feet
 begged off of Medard
Screen by the foot and nails by the handful
 bought piecemeal at the hardware
Such an enterprise does take on a life of its own

 when Kathy asked me if I was
going to drywall the inside, and I said
"maybe," and she rolled her eyes, and I
hadn't even raised the issue of proper
insulation, I figured maybe I needed to ease
off a little after all it's only a playhouse .
. . . a structure not to be taken too seriously,
since it is just a facsimile, a toy, an
amusement

"Thy kingdom come . . . "
Sometimes we get the kingdom
confused with the church
and then reduce the church to a building
and so justify the indulgence of our edifice complex
in the name of the glory of God

Not that church buildings are bad
For playhouses are fun
and if we truly use them to pretend the kingdom
our play might even prepare us for its coming
but let us keep our play playful
and our plans prayerful
lest the eyes of God roll
at the seriousness of our designs
and we not even notice

too caught up in our facsimile of the kingdom
to catch the body language of the king

newsletter

RESULTS

Elias Lutheran Church
Sits by County highway "G"
Peace Lutheran by County "D"
Sit inside of either and listen to the traffic pass
going somewhere else

Now, bicycle down Hatchery Lane
Dead-end backwater of our county flowage
Pedal past the barking guardians of the trout farm
and again next week
and again next month
and again two summers hence
until curiosity bids you to check out the ponds
and familiarity bids you to ignore the dogs
and appetite bids you to catch supper

What happens next is crucial
Is the greeting friendly?
Is the harvest simple?
Is the eating memorable?

Elias Lutheran Church
Sits by County highway "G"
Peace Lutheran by County "D"
Sit inside of either and listen to the traffic pass
going somewhere else

You cannot get those drivers
Into the parking lot
Into the sanctuary
Into the pews
Merely by wishing for them
But should they stop by
You best have good fishing for them

newsletter

TEXT: EPHESIANS 4:30-5:2

Paul begins with the assumption
that we have already been redeemed
The things he has to say are not intended
to scare us into good behavior
with the threat of damnation
Rather
His assumption
implies a question:

If our salvation is such a great gift
Why does our behavior sometimes show
such little gratitude?

We can all relate to what Paul is talking about
As parents
If we pack up the kids
and take them to Bay Beach for the day
We're going to be really hurt
if all they do is fight and complain
while we're there

Likewise
If you kids decide to clean up your rooms
on your own
and all we parents do is
tell you what you missed or
tell you that it's about time
we hurt your feelings
and get you wondering why you even bothered
Don't we?

So
We know what Paul is talking about
We know that showing gratitude
only begins when we say
"thank you"
What really counts is how we behave
after we've said
"thanks"

So
How much do we really value our salvation?
How much do we really appreciate the fact
that condemnation no longer hangs
over our heads?

According to Paul
there are a lot of things we do
that would seem to indicate
that we don't think
that salvation is any great gift
These are things that Paul wants us to be
done with

His list
bears going over
point
by
point

Paul says
Put away all
bitterness
Bitterness is something we taste
Bitterness is a memory we
carry around in our mouths
that makes everything else in our lives
taste bitter
Bitterness makes us feel righteous
but bitterness makes
us
hard to swallow
So Paul says
Be done with that flavor

Then put away all
wrath
Wrath is the condemnation we
carry in our hearts
that sets us up as judges

of all that we behold
and makes everything around us look
suspicious
Wrath makes us feel righteous
but wrath makes
us
dangerous to be around
So Paul says
Be done with that conviction

Then put away all
anger
Anger is the fire
that burns in our bellies
and sets the torch
to all that would threaten us
Anger makes us feel righteous
but burns
us
up in the the process
So Paul says
Be done with that passion

Then put away all
wrangling
Wrangling is something we do with our words
but we feel in our hands
as if we were wrestling
with every one we meet
With it we turn every encounter
into a contest
and press on to victory
Wrangling makes us feel righteous
but wrangling makes
us
wearisome to our companions
So Paul says
Be done with that drivenness

Then put away all
slander
Slander is the razor we hide in our tongues
that makes truth whatever we say it is
and slices away
anything we find to be disagreeable
Slander makes us feel righteous
but slander makes
us
lose touch with reality
So Paul says
Be done with that fantasy

Then finally
Put away all
malice
Malice is the bias of our minds
when we dabble too long with
bitterness
or wrath
or anger
or wrangling
or slander
Malice doesn't make us feel righteous
any more
but it makes us content
that everyone else is wrong
Malice simply defeats
us
So Paul says
Be done with that ill will

So much evil gets done
for the sake of feeling righteous
for the sake of trying to take our salvation
by force
Revealing the shakiness
of our faith in God's grace

So Paul reminds us
that we are already
sealed for salvation
by the Holy Spirit
and so have no use for the tactics
of self-righteousness

Put away all such behaviors
Says Paul
and put on those behaviors that befit
a confidence in our salvation

Be kind to one another
Says Paul
Kindness has to do with
treating each other as kindred
as people with whom we are
more mindful of things held in common
than of differences

Be tenderhearted
Says Paul
Which sounds a lot like vulnerability to me
Don't spend so much energy
trying to be tough
Instead
try to create a climate
where toughness isn't so necessary

Finally
Be forgiving
Says Paul
Be forgiving

If anything is the key for us this is it
Be forgiving
not as people deserve it
but as God has forgiven
you

Be
kind
tenderhearted
and
forgiving
but don't confuse these qualities
with being
nice

Niceness is an external thing
It has to do with
smiling
acting agreeable
doing favors
There's nothing wrong with being nice
but
niceness sometimes hides a lot of
unkindness
hardheartedness
and unforgiveness

Paul calls for a change that runs deeper
A tall order
But he tells us exactly how to do it

Paul tells us to be a little childish
to become as impressionable as our little ones
Then keep our eyes focused on Jesus

Isn't it true that little kids
learn all too well
So that we have to watch what we say
and be careful what we expose them to
For in their youth
they are like sponges
soaking up the identities they will
carry with them
through their lives

Children are great imitators

That is how they learn about life
And Paul says
That's the best way to learn the Godly life, too
We are to become
imitators
of Christ
and then we will know what to do

So
when all is said and done
what Paul
means
is that living the Godly life
is child's play

Living the Godly life is a matter of
childishly imitating Christ
then playing with the enthusiasm and abandon
of children who know
that they can't lose

So let us stop working so hard
trying to keep our righteousness secure,
and let us put on the playfulness
of those who live out
a childish trust
in God's redemption

sermon

NO-CATCHING TIME

Paul tried
At night
He took me up to Pentwater pier
to dip for smelt
By day
He took me out on the swells of Lake Michigan
To troll for salmon
He never made a fisherman out of me
But I did get glimpses through fishermen's eyes

One evening at dusk
We drove out onto Benona Beach
Put on waders
Slogged out into the surf till it made us nervous
Cast out farther yet
Then came back and set our poles
into the stake-pockets of the pickup

Reclining into the beach sand
We watched by lantern light as our pole tips bobbed
And jumped when the waves
teased us with a tug
and caught not a thing
but Paul's reassurance that our time was not wasted
For fishing requires putting in "no catching time"
and we had just put in ours

The memory of that casual persistence
has stayed with me
and still reminds me
That successful fishers
of fish or of folk
are the ones who have kept their line in the water
when others have given up and gone home

newsletter

GOOD FALL

She pedals ahead
Off to the hardware store
Her intensity heedless
of being beyond the hands
that reach to catch her

Heedless of the broken sidewalk
Heedless of the hole that reaches for
the training wheel she leans against
Swallowing it whole
and launching her over the starboard beam

As she spills she steps over the bar
pushes away from the seat
reaches out to meet the ground
and as she hits she cries out
almost gleefully
"Good fall!"

And papa is so proud
For papa so commends her
each time she bounces
from boulders, swings, and
assorted pieces of furniture

And now she possesses the wisdom
that living life abundantly
does not mean learning how not to fall
It means learning to fall well
and often

Which we must learn, too
and practice on the little things
until we've learned to take the big risks
and face the cross
embracing loss

and hear the words, "Good fall!"

newsletter

END TIMES

Outside

Fall colors pass their peak
The feverish flush that rose defiant
to challenge frost's icy grip
mutes into the deeper hues of patient resignation

Inside

The recliner sits near the bay window
and through its transparency
Art sees his own time of life
reflected in those autumn leaves
and finds a kind of freedom
in accepting the signs of the times

Freedom from playing blind-man's-bluff
with the doctors
Freedom from playing charades
with the family
Freedom from playing hide-and-seek
with the preacher
who has come to call again

Sometimes we speak of death
Sometimes we speak of life
Sometimes we just sit in the warmth
of a well formed silence

Outside

The leaves fall one by one
as another cycle of growth runs its course

Inside

Fall stands on the brink of winter
resting serenely
in the promise of spring

newsletter

ALL SAINTS

Death leaves empty spaces
The aching void of the heart
The unused chair at the dinner table
The bed too-small-now-too-big
The bathroom once too cluttered
Now too neat

A body fills alot of space
when it keeps moving
When it falls still
The space around it collapses
like a heartbroken balloon

Then it gets real complicated
Dancing around how simple things have become
No more fights
No more resistance
No more reason not to remember
Whatever it was you always wanted to do

So go ahead
Squeeze the tube in the middle
Use up all the hot water
Track mud in
Paint the kitchen pink

And blessed are those who mourn
for they will get the last word

Unless
Of course
What Jesus promised is true
I mean
Let's give the Sadducees their due

They knew better than to believe in resurrection
For they recognized that
Making life eternal
would make simple order and decency impossible

Come on Jesus
they said
If life is eternal
then heaven is full of bigamists
and we won't believe in a hereafter
less lawful than we are

But
Jesus dismissed marriage
as an earthly convention
and I suppose that takes care of any legal problems
He said that we won't get married
cause we'll be like angels
whatever that means
But for all the wonders of heaven that he promised
he didn't say that things will be simple

You see
To live is to weave
and though death is an unraveling
of the patterns of this world
life eternal means
elaborations beyond imagining
a rag rug tightly braided out of tattered lives
Coiled around a holy center
and spiraling out without end
So that God is like old Ella
one more ancient lady
tearing and sewing and twisting
the discarded into the renewed

If what Jesus said is true
Then the kingdom of heaven is a comforter
Solitary strands crocheted into squares
then tied one to another
piece joined to piece to form a whole
And God is like crazy Esther
off in her group home
surrounded by chaos
but turning simple yarn into complex beauty

The communion of the saints is a tapestry
woven and knotted and embroidered
the intricacy of single threads brought together
to form a picture
to tell a story
making our story into God's story

It is a process of gathering and binding
that reaches beyond death
and before birth

Steve called the other night from Kansas City
He is godfather to one of my children
I am godfather to his one child
He tells me that he and Connie
have conceived another
Due in June
So we talk about complexity

Being single is not always easy
but it is a simple relationship

Marriage makes for conflict and cooperation
but two points still define a line
of only one dimension

Having a child gives things more depth
the variations in personality are now compounded
by the gaps between the generations

Having more children
introduces both rivalry and solidarity
and the challenge of being
us and them at the same time

To have an extended family
is to make the earth-shaking discovery
that your parents
are somebody else's children
with all that that entails

To live in community is finally
to lose track of all the connections
that support and tangle us in webs of relationships
leaving us overwhelmed
but undergirded by the obligations
that link all of us to that child
yet unborn

But to be part of the communion of the saints
is more complex still
it means having the hosts of heaven
drop by for dinner
but it also means having a cloud of witnesses
to listen to our complaints
So being in communion with the saints
is both an imposition
and a dispensation
for it is life
and it is eternal

This was our first Halloween
since Kathy's mother died
and somehow it was fitting
that Maggie and Nathan
went down to Janesville
to mock the powers of darkness
and sleep a peaceful sleep
in the house where Grandma died

when they woke the next morning
it was the day of all saints
an occasion they paid no attention to
but unlike the night that preceded
the power of the day
had nothing to do with the intensity
of its celebration
and everything to do with the complexity
of life's continuation

What that means
Is not that we must remember Vanita
Or Grandpa Bill, or Walter, or Louie, or Art
Or any of the others who have gone beyond
Rather
it means that we must allow for the possibility
that we are even now
being influenced
and accompanied
by a host of lively souls
we never even knew to forget

And that is not the power of remembrance
That is the power of resurrection

sermon

CHRISTMAS EVE MEDITATIONS

Help Wanted

Position now open
for a messiah
must be state certified as
Wonderful Counselor
Mighty God
Everlasting Father
Prince of Peace

Should have experience in government
Military background preferred
Candidate should come to interview
prepared to suggest remedies to recent
hostile takeover by Roman Empire

Application should be made at Temple office
during business hours
References required
Notarized certificate of Davidic ancestry required
No drunks

Clay

A child is born
Born through trauma
Like every other child
pushed
and pulled
and twisted
and wrenched
and chilled
and scarred
and shaped forever by his passage
into separateness

Momma holds the boy tightly
and having counted his fingers and toes
she breathes a deep sigh of relief

Then she looks at his smashed features
and the way one side of his head
is a little pushed in
and she shivers
to think of how
in her labors
she has already
put her mark on the boy

Her husband
tells her that the boy has her eyes
and he means well to tell her so
but she is disconcerted nonetheless
Pleased
Yet anxious

How much of me is in the mix?
She wonders
And how much more will I add
from day to day?
How can I mold him into the likeness
of what he is to be
Without pressing upon him
the shape of who I am?
And who else out there
will leave their mark on his growing?

Or will we all leave no lasting impression
upon this holy child?
Will he have my eyes
and nothing else?

Maybe it would have been best
For a creature of such destiny
to come into his own fully formed
For him to just walk out of the wilderness
with no history to come to terms with
no attachments to hold him back
no resentments to nurse
to arrive undamaged

to be unaffected by anyone else's mistakes

Or could it be that
In my rush to keep him untouched by this world
I have misunderstood
The intentions of the divine?

Angels

Who to tell?
The cadre of messengers
scans the horizon
for an attentive audience
with no success

In Jerusalem
neither palace
nor temple
could hear the news of joy
as anything but threat

In the suburbs
everyone is too busy
filling out census forms
and complaining about taxes
to pay much attention

So who will listen?
The search broadens
beyond the powerful and the productive
to the pastoral
to a flock of shepherds
with time on their hands

Yes, these few will do
The choir director softly clears his throat
and so calls his chorus to order

After the all great halls they have played
the choir feels out of place
on these barren rural hills
but this audience is the right one

Of all the souls to be found
These few are listening
Oh yes, I know
It is just the stalking predators
that prompt this attention

But they are listening

Ready now?
It's show time

Safe Haven

In ancient days
there was a safe place
for people in trouble to go

When the dogs of anger
or retribution
were nipping at your heels
you ran hard
and ran fast
till your side ached
and you gasped for your breath
and you made it to the Temple

When you got there
you did not stop to talk
to ask for help
to plead for protection

You pushed through the crowd
and elbowed aside the ushers
and you ignored the cries of the priest

and you lunged for the holy altar itself
and you hung on for dear life
and you were safe

When we were children
We had the same code of mercy
We said that the front porch was base
And nobody could tag you there
But as we got older
all our safe places lost their power to shield us
and sometimes it seems
that the hounds of hell are never far away
with nothing to keep them at bay
and maybe that is why
so many have lost faith

And yet the old stories
have not entirely lost their power
and on this night
even the most forgetful
remember

They come to church
Knowing that there is at least
one night when the preacher
will not shame them
They sit in the congregation
Knowing that there is at least
One time when they can feel they belong
They listen to the music
and in their hearts
They reach out and grasp the corners
of the manger
and hang on for dear life

Knowing that
blessed by the smile of the babe
this one time
they are safe
And in that moment

they believe

sermon

OVENATIONS

Kinda cool outside
Kinda day stay home
Open up a bag 'o flour
Declare a day of ovenations

Me first
Doing yeasties
Old yeast
Throw in extra
fluff up the flour
then teach a kid
to knead

turn it
fold it
push it back
push it down
let it rise
punch it down
loaf it
bake it
slice it 'fore it cools

see the children smile

My wife does the sweeties
cookie dough
with chocolate chips
ball it up
bake it down
deck the halls
with sweet temptations

celebrate the ovenations

journal

READING SIGN

Snow's coming down
Right on time
Kathy left with the kids yesterday
to beat the forecast down to Grandpa's
so there's nobody to take to the sitter
and today I walk to the post office

My mind wanders as I glide through the water dust
But when it returns
It notes that I am backtracking
somebody else's footprints
Looking over my shoulder
I run the prints fast-forward
and conclude that Shirley must be in the office
and that I better pick hymns
for her to put in the bulletin

Onward
The physical memory of Shirley's trek veers
away from mine
Fresh snow
Then an odd knot of prints
But when I squint hard I can almost see
kids waiting for the school bus

Onward
The apron of the hardware is a busy chalkboard
that I cannot decipher
but having passed over
I recognize familiar treads
One set out
X'ed by a second set coming back
Shirley must have picked up the mail
before she went to work

Finally
the post office bounces me back home
and I follow the trail of my observing

Proof-reading my own prints
and double-taking a zig and a zag
that I do not recall walking

Back at the parsonage porch
I kick the ice barnacles from my boots
and sweep the snow mantle from my shoulders
and pause to review the whole story
and glean a simple message of mercy:
That when the sun comes out
and we become children of the light
The paths that we have walked will all melt away
and Spring will
not long remind us of where we have been
for God is content to offer more time to our days
and new life to explore

pastor's annual report

MERCY ME

Jesus got baptized
such a simple thing
He stood in line with the rest of the crowd
waited his turn
walked down into the river
braced himself for that sudden plunge
into the waters of the Jordan
But then John recognized him
and wouldn't do it

John looked at Jesus and knew
that this was the one he had been waiting for
all these years
but things weren't turning out right
and John was beginning to lose his grip
the fulfillment of his life's dream
was turning into a nightmare

For the savior that John the Baptist had expected
Would have ended all the baptizing
After all
What John had been preaching was that
God's patience had been worn out
God's mercy had been used up
The people had been given fair warning
The last call to repentance had been announced
Now all that was left was for the messiah to come
and bar the door
and clean the house
winnow the wheat
and burn the chaff
and John was ready to walk away from the river
to smell the sweet smoke of the fires of justice

All that had been lacking was the one who was
good enough that none could find fault
and great enough that none could look down on
and pure enough that none could corrupt
and strong enough that none could find weakness

When this one would come
He was supposed to end it all
But now he was here
And he wanted to be baptized

He wanted to be baptized
For God's sake
The savior came to be saved
Which is the one possibility that John had
never considered

Of all the worries that John had worried
this one had never even occurred to him
He had sometimes feared
that he might not live to see the savior
Other times he had feared
that the savior would come
and find his work to be unsatisfactory
but through all those nagging self doubts
he had always been certain
that he knew what was going on
and now he wondered if he was losing his mind
and while John wondered
Jesus waited
to be baptized

Jesus motioned him to continue
but John refused
insisting that Jesus had things backwards
Jesus claimed the right to be baptized
and John heard the words
but could not do it
Finally
Taking John's hand
Jesus laid it on his own head
and lowered himself into the waters of salvation

Then Jesus prayed
and the heavens opened
and the dove descended

and the voice of blessing spoke its approval
So John could no longer argue
But neither could he follow

The crowds followed Jesus
and some of his John's disciples followed
but John could not follow
He stayed at the river
and baptized those left behind
but the fire had gone out of his eyes
and the passion had gone out of his preaching
and the man who once had made the politicians
tremble in fear
was soon bound up in their chains
locked up in their prison

and all of this because Jesus was baptized

Baptizing Jesus had demoralized John the Baptist
and the two were never reconciled
Jesus kept out of the way until John was in prison
but even in prison
John could not hide his disappointment
He let it be known that his endorsement of Jesus
might have been a mistake

Jesus responded by praising John
but admitted
that even the least in the kingdom of Heaven
had an advantage over the Baptist

You must understand what is at stake here
John the Baptist lost his faith
because he wanted a God of judgment
and Jesus revealed to him a God of mercy

John wanted Jesus to be revealed as an impostor
because then he could be angry with Jesus
but if Jesus was not an impostor
then John was stuck being angry at God

John wanted judgment
John wanted God's mercy to be
nothing more than the calm before the storm
and John prayed for the storm to come quickly

But if the savior
chose to be baptized
If even perfection
came looking for mercy
then God's forbearance was more than just a way
to give sinners enough rope to hang themselves

If the messiah revealed himself through his humility
Then God could not be trusted
to punish the unrighteous

And maybe John was right
because for all the
sinners and tax collectors and prostitutes
that Jesus hung around with
I don't recall him telling any of them
that they were trying God's patience

and as John sat in prison
He may have even wished
That Jesus would come and try
to convince him that he had been wrong
in his judgments of those sinners

But Jesus did not
And John knew better anyway
Because he grasped the point that Jesus was making
Which was not that John had judged wrongly
but that judges had become obsolete
and that being right was no longer enough
if being right
meant trying to make God's mercy
unnecessary

So what the baptism of Jesus
tells us
and what the disappointment of John
shows us
Is that
more than any thing else
God wants to be merciful

And if the objective of our faith
is nothing more than to
minimize our need for mercy
then by our very righteousness
we minimize our room for God

sermon

ARTISTRY

Back home in Ohio
Back home with my folks
Reacquainting the generations
Regenerating old acquaintances

I make a phone call back in Dad's "office"
And smile to find the iron dragon still on his desk
Not my best work
But memorable as among the first of many daydreams
Wrought from incandescent steel

The ongoing presence of that failed letter opener
Pays homage to the artless artistics
With which our souls extend themselves
Clumsy attempts at self-expression
Whose artifacts stumble gracefully into a parent's life
Filling the heart
And cumulatively papering over the refrigerator door
Cherished not for skill employed
but for innocence enjoyed

This innocence is not reserved to the young
Nor this admiration to parents
So I treasure the fruits of my parents hands, too
The music of my father's impulsive
decision to play the organ
The sudden needle craft
of my mother's crippled hands

And in the background of all this earthly cherishing
God papers over the pearly gates
With awkward missives
Marked with scribbled lines
or streaked with salty tears
Saving and showing the artless artistry
of aged children leaping into prayer

newsletter

NO MESSAGE TODAY

On some days there is no message
No inspiration
No wise reflection
Not even a minor technical clarification
No Message

The preacher goes to the well and finds it dry
Emptied out by a run of funerals
Or maybe just too much running without much resting
But that is the one truth that a preacher cannot preach

So I climb into the pulpit and fake it
Stringing together enough stories and cliches
To fill the time
Hoping not to get caught in the act

But in this space I am a poet
Not a preacher
So I can write what I cannot preach:
No Message Today

Better dial God direct
Read some scripture
Say a prayer
Sit down on a rock by the river
Until a parable appears

I think I shall do the same

newsletter

SING A NEW SONG

The four most terrifying words in scripture are
"Sing a new song"

These words mark
the changing of the guard
the closing of each era
the passing of the baton
the coming of age of an upstart generation

Luther's flock stole the faith from Rome
by singing it in German
Our immigrant ancestors
transposed their German faith
by singing it in English
Each generation must renew the faith again
finding its own voice
choosing its own words
singing its own slang

It is a song that must be fashioned
with fear and trembling
lest it be untrue to the old story
It is a song that must be honed to a keen edge
lest it tear the cords to the past that do require
a clean cut

Parents must resist this betrayal by foolish children
who think themselves wise
Even so
They must also admire these youths
who claim their own piece of the sky
by pruning back the sheltering arms of the aged
And even as the parents disavow the children's song
They do well to hum it softly nonetheless
and rejoice that God is not to be confined
even by the habits of holy history

newsletter

BAIT

Here at the Hatchery
I am keeping company with a porcupine

This nettlesome rodent minds its own business
a few yards down wind of where I mind mine

It gnaws on a salt block
Aware of my presence
Maybe even concerned by it
Yet unwilling to bolt

Bartering the smell of death for the taste of life
Balancing the possibility of disaster
against the certainty of salinity

This land-locked creature
So far and so long removed
From the ocean's womb
Still craves contact with the holy brine
Still makes its pilgrimage to the shrine
Still grasps the horns of the altar
Still follows deep memories it cannot understand

This epitome of defensiveness
Always ready to turn its back
and bare its spines to me
is still a seeker
is still a seeker
As are the spiritual porcupines
with whom we more often keep company

So let us not chase them
and grab them
and curse them
for the barbs
they give us for our troubles

Better to stand in a quiet clearing

and offer the backs of bared hands
trusting that we are the salt of the earth
outposts of the primordial soul
Irresistible to the hungry spirit
that longs for the savory flavor
of a memory neither fully tasted
nor quite forgotten

meditation

SATURATION

Behind the parsonage
Between the playhouse
and the rock garden's trailing archipelago
there sits the bottom half
of an old oaken barrel

The gardener has good intentions
for this great wooden bowl
It is to be a summer cottage for goldfish
and a finger (arm & shoulder) bowl for children
But these intentions require
a certain insistence

Through the winter
This barrel has accommodated itself to emptiness
and actually seems reluctant
to leave behind the dry times
shrugging off the garden hose's ministrations
Sitting defiantly empty
though a steady stream of water gurgles in

But the gardener persists
Bathing the dried and shriveled staves
Today
and tomorrow
and tomorrow again
Until the tired timber remembers its former self
And swells to embrace its purpose

Through sheer excess
the wastrel wood is redeemed
and so it shall ever be
and so it shall ever be
and so it shall be for me

newsletter

AMORAL

Down in the basement of the public library
I searched for children's lessons among the picture books
And found instead my own professional bias
Revealed in just how many stories I found unusable
For lack of a moral
Either explicit or implied
So many good stories
So few pastoral stories

The moral of this story is that
We cannot help but reveal our souls
By the ways we end the tales we tell

Every story tells a picture
painted in feelings
on the canvas of our souls
Each moral has the power
to lift
or shame
And we are responsible
for the trajectories of our tales

The story of this moral is that
the measure we give
is the measure we receive
and the ways we end our stories
will shape the stories of our endings

Gossips will sit with ears burning
Having overheard each detail of their lives discussed
on the other side of the pearly gates
Kidders will be uncertain
whether to protest or preen
as their awkward moments
are teasingly recounted by amused angels

The moral of this story
is that our fundamental choice is between
humility and humiliation

Each human story
told in isolation
is tragic
Each mortal life lived unto itself
is less than sufficient
This truth can be accepted
willingly
or inevitably

For the story of this moral
is an ongoing tale
of which we are merely a strand
and if we can bear to face
how short and frazzled the fibers
of our lives are
we might also notice
that we are God's yarn being spun

newsletter

VOCATION

I recall Lloyd's confident words
spoken into the synod's camcorder
and played back at last year's assembly

"God made me to be a farmer"

More than just confident
Lloyd was congruent
His pastoral vocation proclaimed
With both boots planted
firmly in the muck of the barnyard
His skills and temperament
matched to the toils
of herd and harvest

The confidence I can relate to
still
The congruence I envy
for
God made me to be a writer
but
The Church called me to be a pastor
and
The vestments bind a bit

For seven years
I have been a scribe in shepherd's clothing
Three and a half years to give parish ministry a fair shake
Three and a half more to give my wife a break
But the babes are all born now
"Momma" has more time to be "Pastor" now
So it's time for Dad to set a new course now

The councils are aware of changes to come
The Bishop knows and understands
And though I may become more scarce
I'll not be gone
For finding my own way

and keeping out of Kathy's way
Leave room for Bible study with the Brotherhood
and doing sums with the money counters
and comparing notes with all those
who wrestle with God's intentions

newsletter

BACK AT THE HATCHERY

There is a noise within my soul
The chattering of an inner worry
That distracts me from the narrative
of frog and songbird

There is a ringing in my ears
The residue of an automotive nap time
When the kids fell asleep
between Shawano and Tilleda

So I drove by my turnoff
To Hatley and back
Lest the silence of our arrival
stir their slumbering too soon

Now the kids are home
and I have wandered to the woods
and turned off the engine

It is not quiet here
The buzz and babble are unceasing
But the sounds are neither mine
nor echoes of my world

They call me out of myself
out of my worries
out of the gears of my routine

Just an hour of retreat
Yet this is my holy time
Listening for a wordless Word
Grateful for a space of waiting

journal

CHANGE

Habit

A curious creature

Constant companion

Trusted advisor

Automatic pilot

It is thick armor

for a lazy mind

but also an unbarred

back door to the spirit

So go ahead

Believe what you want

But let me fashion you three habits

and I will shape your soul

Give

Don't ask why

Don't worry about what

or to whom

Just make a habit of lightening your load

and your spirit will rise

Forgive

Don't bother keeping score

Don't worry about justice

or reciprocity

Just make a habit of accepting the past

and you will not be stuck in it

Seek forgiveness

Don't trivialize the burrs under
your conscience

Don't worry about balancing
power

or making the wrong impression

Just make a habit of cleaning your
own house

and you will find it a more
comfortable home

No
Don't bother changing your mind
Cause no one will notice a difference
But change a few habits
and you change the world

newsletter

GRACE

Gingerly

I let the spray of the shower head
bathe the mottled skin of my face

I make twisted faces at the wall
and as this grimacing rips and flakes and frees
the dead leather that once was
the outer perimeter of my countenance
I relive that moment which so emphatically
scorched itself into my visage

The impatient hand that turned the cap
The burst of boiling antifreeze
The cascade of reflexes
screaming
running
dropping to the ground to receive

Mercy

Cold water to quench the heat
Hands and wheels and sirens to hurry me to help
Comfort and compassion for my spirit

When they all wandered off
To fill out hospital paperwork
I knew that I would be okay
That I had lost face
but only the outer layers

Sometimes mercy is symbolic
A legal pardon
an accounting exemption

But sometimes mercy
Speaks to us by hand
binding and anointing
and so infusing in us the grace
to endure the healing

newsletter

LOST AND FOUND

Wandering alone in Michigan woods
late five thousand nights ago
I felt my way down familiar trails with no flashlight
Until dead-reckoning gave way to confusion
A clearing was what I had expected
but pine trees randomly dotted a meadow
where expectation insisted corn stalks stand in lines

I looked around
But found no clues to guide me
Till I looked at the cloudless night that chilled me
Dipper big led to Dipper small
And once I'd grasped its handle
I knew I'd not been walking East at all

Pole star

The ancients stood tedious watch
To find that one fixed point in a moving sky
They drew a constellation around it
A picture I could locate quickly
follow to its anchor
And accept its fixity by faith

I have found that spiritual direction
requires similar navigation
for I lack the time to find
some Godly fixity
in the midst of human change

But pictures have been drawn for me
parables and metaphors
through which I remember
a place I have never seen

Pictures with a promise
just a promise
nothing more

but the stars remind me quietly
that promises have led me home before

newsletter

UNEXPECTED

This is the season of expectations
As the song says:

Come, thou long-expected Jesus
Born to set thy people free
From our fears and sins release us
Let us find our rest in thee
Israel's strength and consolation
Hope of all the earth thou art
Dear desire of every nation
Joy of every longing heart

The people of Israel waited for Jesus for so long
They searched the scriptures
looking for clues
They searched their hearts
for their deepest desires
and knew that he must fulfill them
They dreamed of his arrival
and argued late into many a night
about who had figured
how and when he would arrive
and some even stood watch in the Temple
day after night after year
just to be the first to behold him

And they still wait
day after decade after century

Two year olds are blunt
making daily demands to open presents
Five year olds are more sophisticated
Running downstairs each morning
to light up the Christmas tree
then stopping during the day
to stare at it and to dream

Parents are more methodical
Following a schedule that has

carved itself deep into their bones
over the years
They are the ones who
cut the trees
and change the bulbs
and pay the bills
that make the magic happen again
They know too much to
be very light of heart
They long ago traded in
innocence for competence
and some wish that they could
just skip the season altogether
Yet even these have their expectations

Even the crustiest of curmudgeons
harbors secret hopes
and so even those most disdainful of this season
cannot hide from its disappointments

For the Christ never comes quite as we expected
and sometimes we find our spirits all dressed up
with no place to go
Sometimes the waiting and the watching are not rewarded
The gift was a dud
The phone call didn't come
The difference of opinion turned into a fight
Things did not go according to expectations
And so, it seems, the Christ did not come

That was the word that got passed around
two thousand years ago
Sunrise dawned again on the temple
and the watchmen could only report
that the Messiah was still missing
The priests went to the altar
performed their duties
and saw no angels
And if they felt no disappointment
It was only because the feeling had

become too familiar to notice

And yet
And yet years later
testimony would be gathered
that something *did* happen on that day
True, the priests saw no angels
but the shepherds did
And though the Messiah didn't show up
where he was expected
It was only because he had arrived
where he could not have been

It was true then
It is true now
That sometimes the savior is hardest to see
precisely when we are the most
determined to find him
The very intensity of our search
narrows our willingness to see
The signs that we are looking for
Blind us to the clues that we never considered

What that means tonight
here at worship
here at church on Christmas Eve
Is that you will not find him where you are looking
That would be too easy
But you will find him, nonetheless
What we gather here tonight are clues
Memories and promises
But to produce the presence of the Christ child
is beyond us
and should be beyond us
for the savior we need
must be much livelier
than any spirit we might summon
with our rituals

But if the Messiah

doesn't show up where he is expected
It is only because he has arrived
Where he couldn't be
Housed in flesh too familiar
Friends
Families
Foes
who knows?

Hidden
but present
Flesh born of flesh

Born thy people to deliver
Born a child and yet a king
Born to reign in us forever
Now thy gracious kingdom bring
By thine own eternal Spirit
Rule in all our hearts alone
By thine all sufficient merit
Raise us to thy glorious throne

sermon

LAME DUCKS

Sometimes pastors
must declare their tenure
mortally wounded
just to call a merciful close
to the hunting season

The timing of that moment
is advanced by pain
yet its arrival
is oddly peaceful
for there is freedom to be found
in defeat

The cross has borne witness to that truth
through a score of centuries
proclaiming a wisdom so perverse
that I hesitate to suggest it
to those seeking
a meaningful way of life
for
The Gospel is but
a meaningful way of death
Let none convince you otherwise

So this is your inheritance:
that in the savagery of its grace
the Gospel scorns
the vindications of this world
content to let evil devour its own
and convinced
that resurrection
is the sweetest revenge

newsletter

SAVAGE GRACE

Lying down with the kids at eight thirty
I fell asleep
Kathy turned in at ten thirty or so

Now as the day expires I rise alone
to ponder the stillness of the night
Yet I find even these wee hours
ruffled and turbulent
As the lights of traffic on County D
Play tag among the pictures on the wall

So consider with me this era of ceaseless activity
Behold a generation that holds contemplation
Successfully at bay

As we work and work and play and play
and spackle over the empty hours with
sitcoms and "reality" shows

We tolerate no day of rest
Insisting on a ceaseless
schedule of production
and distractions

In doing so we
stave off any
thorough
examination
of our busy lives
Until the night we find ourselves
lying awake with God sitting on our chest
poking a boney finger into the tender regions of
our spirit

It is a ruthless mercy that robs us of our sleep
to save our souls

It takes a cruel compassion to jam a stick in the spokes
of the stationary bicycle of our compulsions

It is a severe charity that reminds us of our mortality
and warns that all our activities will someday stop

But it is a blessed harshness that so troubles us
For we are meant to be more
than the sum of our accomplishments

And in the sabbath of our strickenness
we may receive the peace we have so long pursued
being no longer able to elude it

newsletter

ANONYMOUS

Down to the post office
Unload the big drawer below the little boxes
Pay for the address corrections
Shoot the breeze
and hear the local headlines

Back home the stack sorts out into smaller piles
His & hers
Personal & impersonal
Periodicals & paperwork
But some pieces just don't sort

The one's that make you pause
are hand addressed
with no return address
which either means nothing
or everything

Some pastors have trained themselves
to play bomb squad technician
at the slight hint of postal anonymity
But I've never learned how not to read
an unsigned letter

Another one came last week
So once again a covert hand
Has created a parish full of suspects

Could have been any one of you

Anyway
Thanks for the tickets

When we're at the smelt fry
We'll be watching for guilty faces
But not too hard
For some suspicions are worth savoring
And sometimes the persistence of uncertainty
magnifies the blessing

newsletter

TAKE TWO

No, No, No, No, No
Friends and foes alike who heard complaint
Please
Go back one poem and read again

Listen closely
Hear the mail being sorted
The thud of junk mail trashed
The rip and rustle of bills
peeked into and set aside

Listen to the silence
As dread and curiosity
Wrestle over the letter with no name

Listen to the laughter
As two tickets with no fingerprints
Peer out over the torn flap
of that anonymous envelope

Such a perfect "crime"
And you are all suspects
Every last one of you

Maybe a supporter seeking no favor
or better yet
An antagonist with faith enough
to love an enemy

I haven't a clue
And desire none
Content to let one gracious and sneaky soul
Cast a shadow of generosity
Over an entire parish

newsletter

ELLIPSIS

After days
and months
and years
of words

Words
spoken and written
Words
comforting and controversial

The time now approaches
for last words
And I'm not sure
That there are any

It is a curious silence that reigns
Not the cold shoulder of anger
Nor the hollow echo of emptiness
Though each emotion claims its moments

No
This silence is something different
It is a silence of punctuation
A trail of dots off an unfinished sentence

I am soon to be preaching elsewhere
My last month pastoring here has no newsletter
and I am relieved to let my words
trail off into quiet anticipation

For there is no conclusion
no summary
not really
only germination

newsletter