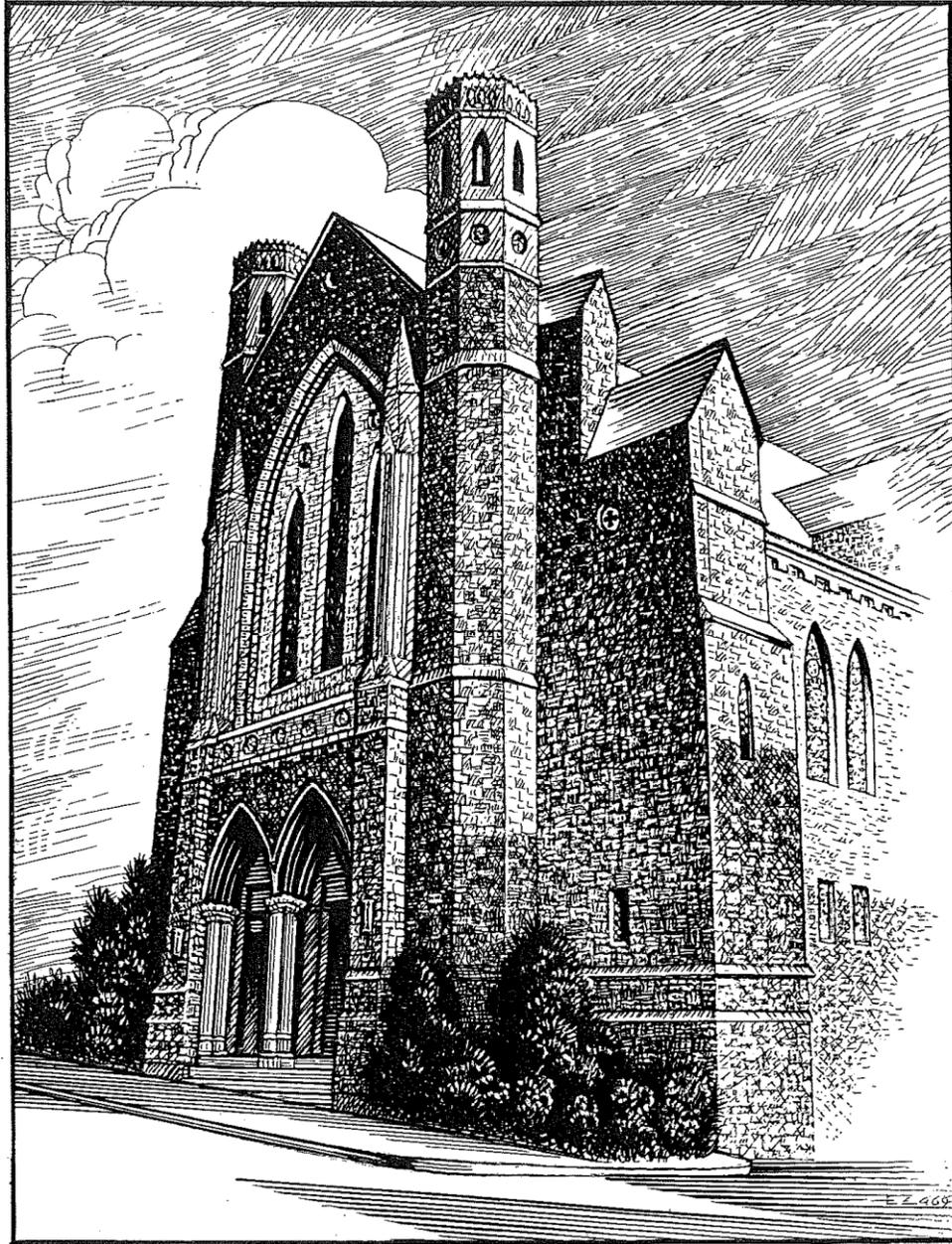
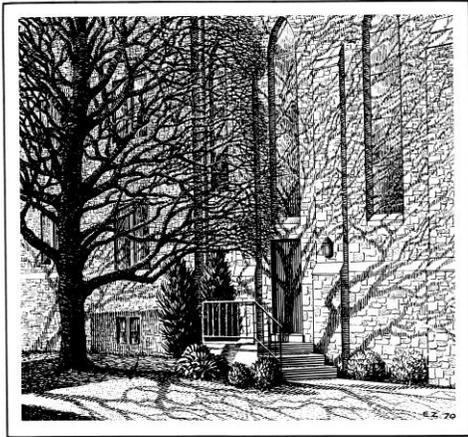

THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
300 SOUTH MAIN STREET
GREENSBURG, PENNSYLVANIA



ADVENT DEVOTIONAL 2022
TAKE HEART!
THE REV. DR. MARTIN R. ANKRUM

THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT



Sunday, November 27, 2022

From Psalm 39:

And now, O Lord, for what do I wait?

My hope is in you.

Deliver me from all my transgressions.

Do not make me the scorn of the fool!

I am mute; I do not open my mouth,
for it is you who have done it.

Remove your stroke from me;

I am spent by the hostility of your hand.

When you discipline a man

with rebukes for sin,
you consume like a moth what is dear to him;
surely all mankind is a mere breath!

The season of Advent is about waiting. Having heard the glorious, good news of God's activity in Jesus Christ, we now await its final consummation in days yet to come, yet which are hinted at even now in our daily living.

For many folks, waiting is about patient endurance, gritting one's teeth and holding on for dear life. This is not the case for the Christian. Our waiting is not so much an expression of human endurance, but rather a hope that comes from without ... a hope that comes from God.

Here the Psalmist makes a definite claim connecting both waiting and the appropriate response of placing our hope in God. Karl Barth, in one of those sermons he preached to the inmates in the prison in Basel, wrote this about that: **Hope is joy, is expectation of a hidden treasure in store for us. Although invisible at present, it will most certainly be uncovered one day, and will be ours. To hope is to live in this expectation and in this joy.**

In this sermon, Barth encouraged his hearers (the inmates of the prison) to seek more than comfort in life, finding that comfort is just an avoidance of our ultimate hope in God. Barth rightly sets his hearers' hopes in God rather than mere human comfort and finds that this hope can only be based upon God's action for us: **It is quite simply that God is God, our God, who does not abandon us in spite of our abandoning him ever and again; who is present and at work in our lives; who tells us, whether we are attentive to his voice or not, 'In me there is not only comfort, but hope. I am your helper and redeemer.'**

In this holy season, let us then seek not just our comfort, but our hope ... a hope that endures because it comes from God and not from us.

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)

Lord, our God, show us how glorious you are and how glorious it is trust to in you and to obey you! Amen.

Monday, November 28, 2022

From John 16:

His disciples said, "Ah, now you are speaking plainly and not using figurative speech! Now we know that you know all things and do not need anyone to question you; this is why we believe that you came from God." Jesus answered them, "Do you now believe? Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. I have

said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

In one amazing sermon delivered on a Christmas Eve in the prison at Basel, Barth dealt with the passage we consider this day. He confessed that there is more than enough anxiety in this life to make us all perk up our ears at Jesus’ words: ‘But take heart, I have overcome the world.’ If we experience anxiety, difficulty, and even doubt in this world that is hurtling towards its Advent comeuppance, there is yet hope for us. We are called to take heart because in Jesus Christ – in that babe born in a manger who will give up his life on a cross – God has overcome the world. And in him – in his work in Christ – we are gifted with this overcoming in hope. Because Christ lives, we shall live – *really live* – also!

Here's what Barth told the inmates on that snowy Christmas Eve in 1963:

‘Take heart’ does not mean: Just think of something else. Jump across the thing that is causing you anxiety. Run away from your anxiety – to some amusement or to some feverish activity or to some wild undertaking. You can and will not escape from it any more than you can escape from yourselves. And be careful: this very attempt to run away from anxiety, utterly impossible and useless as it is, for some reason or other is regularly the cause of all evil and all new suffering. Take heart means: open your eyes and look up: to the hills from whence comes your aid – and look forward: to the few paces you can take on your way now without hindrance. And then walk on with firm steps: Then take courage. Then even cheer up a bit – right where you are, in the middle of the anxiety, the great anxiety, about facing life and death which no doubt troubles you.

Do you see why I love the old Swiss theologian so? His words ring out to me in my own anxiety about living life in this world at this time and I remember that I am called to ‘look up’ and live. May the same be true for you this day and all through this Advent season.

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)

Lord God, speak your word to all of us so that, called together by you, we may become your people. Amen.

Tuesday, November 29, 2022

From Psalm 111:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom ...

Our culture is gravely mistaken: wisdom is not the source of acquisition. Think about it – our culture seems to believe that those who have acquired the most apparently are the wisest amongst us. What the world thinks is wise is only mere human cunning.

Cunningness is about being so clever that we can deceive our neighbors and ourselves. We begin to believe our own press and think that we are so successful, so capable, so able that we are more-than-adequate managers of human life. When we believe such things about ourselves we are anything but wise; we are foolish.

The Psalmist is convinced that the inklings of wisdom are found lodged deep in our respect for God. Our acknowledgement that God is God and that we are not God is at the heart of the initial glimmerings of the great brilliance that wisdom can become.

Early in his sermon on this text, Karl Barth remarked: **What then is wisdom? Wisdom is the knowledge of life or, as we might say, the art of living. Knowledge and art both presuppose ability. This is the greatest knowledge as well as the most difficult art: to be able to live!**

That gets right to the heart of the question, but it leaves us with still a greater question: ‘If wisdom is found in the ability to really live as a human being, just how does one acquire such wisdom?’ Most folks would answer, that wisdom comes with age. I’m not so sure about that; I’m older than I used to be and maybe a bit more able to cope with life than when I was younger, but I also find myself less open to others, more cynical, and less optimistic than I was in my youth. Is that really wisdom? I don’t think so.

We are best served by something else Barth said in this treatment on this text. He found that out of reverence for God, the wise person trusts God rather than one’s own abilities to acquire and gain, no matter how finely honed such abilities may be: **This is why the godfearing man will again and again stretch out his empty hands. This is why he can only ask. Solomon was wise because he asked God precisely for this capacity to discern between good and evil.**

In short, Solomon was wise because he knew enough to admit that he did not know and so turned to God. Otherwise, he would have only been merely cunning and there are far too many who already are well trained in that.

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)

Lord God, speak your word to all of us so that, called together by you, we may become your people. Amen.

Wednesday, November 30, 2022

From Psalm 50:

and call upon me in the day of trouble;

I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.

Can we really take this singular line from the psalm with any confident surety? Is the psalmist putting into the mouth of God something that is pleasing to us, but is not reliably honest about God? Would God, the creator of all there was, and is, and ever shall be, really issue such an invitation to those who are troubled?

This is at the heart of the great and alarming, but also comforting, assertion of this biblical passage: God is willing to hear our pleas for assistance in the midst of our trouble. God is not so great and so ‘big’ that he does not bend his ear and his heart earnestly to we, the small and meek, the seemingly insignificant and numerous. God’s mercy and graciousness is asserted here as being greater than even our need and our abandonments of him and his way. All of that doesn’t seem to matter to his mercy; what matters to God is that as we are in need, we might be assured that he is willing to hear and to act.

Here is how Karl Barth described the claim of this text in one of his sermons: **Let’s just put it this way: The one who is calling me here and telling me to call him back is the one who is different: who is indeed utterly different from you or me, from us all, from the whole world. He is the one to whom you belong. For you do not belong to yourself but to the one who has created you and the whole world ... Now he, the Lord of all things, is also the one who means well and does good in everything, including his dealings with us, with you and with me: good, even when we do not always understand that what he is planning for us and doing with us is good.**

Barth’s point should not be missed: this God who is the creator and sustainer of all things intends good for us even though we do not always realize or understand how that goodness is being born out in our lives. This is not an encouragement to some how ignore the hurt we feel or suppress the anxiety that rather humanly rises in our heart when faced with the uncertainty of life. Instead, this means placing our trust more fully and completely in God’s willingness to hear us and act for us ultimately as he has acted for all humankind in Jesus Christ.

Life is such that anxieties and challenges can seem overwhelming at times. Yet, as the children of God, we are asked to remember that it is God himself who entreats us to call upon him in such times. Let us all trust that God does hear and let us know that God has acted and continues to act for the good and for us all.

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)

O Lord our God, our Father in Jesus Christ! We turn once more to you, as you have allowed us and commanded us to do. Amen.

Thursday, December 1, 2022

From Ephesians 2:

... by grace you have been saved ...

If you listen closely and carefully to a good deal of the talk about salvation and grace that comes from various corners of the Church, you might be left with the conclusion that grace and salvation is the end goal, the final point, of the faith. If, however, you take the witness of Paul and the rest of scripture seriously, you might just come to a different conclusion. Rather than the end point, grace and salvation is actually the starting point of real human life lived in response to God.

Too many folks believe that somehow God's grace and saving action is what is earned in this life whether by acting the right way or believing the right things. This is not – I repeat – NOT – the message of scripture. Paul makes it clear that it is by a divine gift that any of us are saved from ourselves and what our desertions of God might deserve. Grace and salvation are ultimately the gift of God, not the reward of right life or right belief.

Thus, grace and salvation are the starting points for us who take God and God's claim in Jesus Christ seriously. We live our lives now in response to the good and glorious news that God has acted in Jesus Christ and given both grace and salvation freely to us. Barth, preaching to prisoners in the Basel jail, said this:

By grace you have been saved. No man can say this to himself. Neither can he say it to someone else. This can only be said by God to each one of us. It takes Jesus Christ to make this saying true. It takes the apostles to communicate it. And our gathering here as Christians is needed to spread it among us. This is why it is truly news, and very special news, the most exciting news of all, the most helpful thing also, indeed the only helpful thing. ... Consequently we shall never possess salvation as our property. We may only realize it as a gift over and over again, with hands outstretched. ... This means constantly to look away from ourselves to God and to the man on the cross where this truth is revealed. This truth is ever anew to be believed and to be grasped by faith. To believe means to look to Jesus Christ and to God and to trust that there is the truth for us, for our lives, for the life of all men.

Grace and salvation are not the end but rather the very beginning of our lives lived in God's gracious light.

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)

O Lord, our God! You see and hear us. You know each one of us far better than we know ourselves. You love us without our deserving it. Amen.

Friday, December 2, 2022

From 2 Corinthians 5:

But neither exile nor homecoming is the main thing. Cheerfully pleasing God is the main thing, and that's what we aim to do, regardless of our conditions. Sooner or later we'll all have to face God, regardless of our conditions. We will appear before Christ and take what's coming to us as a result of our actions, either good or bad.

Well, finally – five days in and we’ve finally reached a scripture about judgment. Advent is a season of the church that emphasizes the judgment of God in Jesus Christ. The scriptures make it quite plain that ultimately, all humanity, no matter when we have lived and died, will face the judgment of God in Jesus Christ. Christ is recognized as the ultimate judge of humankind.

It is this truth that makes us all a bit uneasy at best. We are uneasy because we know ourselves well – we know that we have not always behaved well, lived for others, or produced all the good fruits we could have in this life. We know that we all ‘fall short of the glory of God’ as one of the more well-known scripture verses reminds us.

Barth accurately put our feelings of unease to words: **What then? We hear: this life of ours, once real, but now completely part of yesterday, will then be shown up for what it is. At the moment it is hidden by a veil. Just now there is much, a great deal, really everything, that we don’t see as it really is. We don’t even see ourselves as we really are. And others do not see properly either. God sees us properly even now, he sees what is going on inside us – he sees what our wishes and intentions have been from our earliest days and what our wishes and intentions are today – he sees how things were, are and will be between us and our fellow-men. ... We don’t see like this yet. We see, to use the words of the Apostle Paul, only through a glass darkly ...**

So true, so very true. If we are honest about ourselves, we must agree with the witness of scripture: we deserve condemnation. But if we believe scripture, we know that what we receive from God and what we will receive from God in judgment is something quite different: grace. And it is this grace that is the very root of faith; not a self-inspired deception that we somehow deserve grace, but rather the surprisingly good news that grace is what God has already done, is doing and will do in Jesus Christ, the very one who is the Judge after all.

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)

Lord, let it be day! Lord, shatter, break, destroy all the power of darkness! Heal us, Lord, then we shall be whole! – if this cannot be done entirely yet, then do it in small and passing things as a sign that you are alive and that we, in spite of everything, are your people! Amen.

Saturday, December 3, 2022

From John 14:

I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.

The words belong to Christ, and they were originally directed to his disciples. We hear them from afar in the sense of temporality, yet the import of their meaning grips us (if we are really listening) as if the words were whispered in our ears by the one who is nearest to us.

There is both an intimacy in these words and a universality extended. We live – no matter who that ‘we’ are – because he lives. Because he lives – you (the most intimate pronoun) also will live. All this to say, it is because Christ, God in our midst, lives that we are ourselves shall have life and life in the manner that God has intended it for us and for the world. At the heart of our life, whether we know it or not, acknowledge it or not, is Jesus Christ.

Barth professed that it is by Christ’s gift of grace that we can live this life as God intends the life that God really gives us: **But there is no need really for us to seize anything. We may simply receive what is already laid out for us. Everything is prepared for us all. Whatever had been in disorder has been put to order. We**

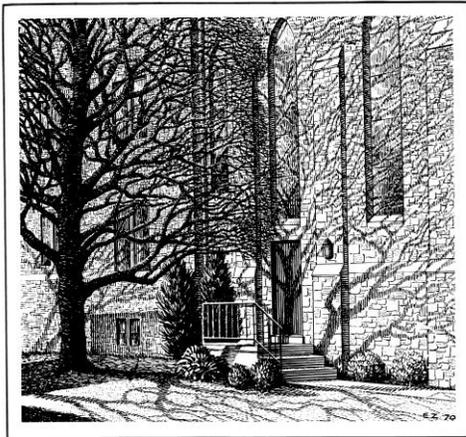
only need to accept the already established order. We only need to see what is spread out before our eyes and to hear what is said with unmistakable clarity. We only need to open and stretch out our hands instead of ever again hiding them in our pockets and clenching our fists. We only need to open our mouth and eat and drink, instead of setting our teeth, as we used to do when we were children. We only need to walk forward instead of going backwards in the manner of fools.

We should not miss Barth's point: the life that we live IS the life that Christ inhabits and enables for us. There is no special 'Christian' life that is dispensed to us when we hear and believe the good news; we begin to really see this life for what it is, this great gift from God of his very self to us. God chooses and elects to come to us in Jesus Christ, just as God chooses and elects to grant us life; the two are tied together. It is really only we who fail to see that. And when we do fail to see that it is because that Christ lives and lives in our midst, then we fail to really see our life as God intends for us. In this Advent season, may we see life for it really is!

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)

O Lord, our God! We know well our plight and you know it even better. Amen.

THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT



Sunday, December 4, 2022

From Psalm 31:

But I trust in you, O LORD;
I say, "You are my God."
My times are in your hand ...

During our waking hours – and sometimes even during our troubled sleep – we may experience anxiety about our life. How will we cope with what life throws our way? How are we to perceive the hours and the minutes, the days and the weeks, the months and the years that we have been given?

We don't actually know how to answer these questions fully and faithfully for – honestly – we know not when this life will end or how. How are we not to be anxious about this particular day since it could well be our last?

The psalmist's answer is this: trust in God ... our time is secure in his hands. Easier said than done, we might think, placing ourselves in his fatherly care.

Karl Barth, in a sermon on this text, said this: **My time does not roll along like a skittle-ball hurled by some unseen hand. It does not tremble like an aspen leaf in the wind. It is secure. It is held. It is carried. It is safeguarded. It is not secure because I am perhaps such a steadfast fellow; after all, none of us is that. It is secure because it is in God's hands. What is in God's hands is secure. So my yesterday is secure, my today, and my tomorrow, with everything that belongs there, whether hidden or open to view. So my time, my life story, I myself have been secure by God's decree for a long time, from long before I was born and so from all eternity. And it will continue to be secure: not only until my death, but beyond it, forever. Nothing, nothing at all of what came then and still comes into existence and now is, will ever be lost, forgotten or obliterated. I am, I shall live, though I were dead, because my life is secure in God's hands.**

I hope that Barth's word struck you as they did me the first time I read them. All that anxiety that tends to wash over me from time to time when I face the immensity of the universe and the smallness of my own individual life was abated and a calm and a trust in God's ultimate providence for me took its place. Such assurance is

offered to us through the scriptures as they bear witness to what God has wrought in Jesus Christ and continues to work in our lives as well. We can trust ourselves and our 'piece' of life to his hands. Indeed, our time, the time that God has given us, is more secure in his hands than it is in our own. Thanks be to God.

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)

O Lord, our Father! You are telling us today as you did yesterday, and will tell us tomorrow as you are telling us today: the you have always loved us and so have drawn us towards you simply out of kindness. Amen.

Monday, December 5, 2022

From Psalm 73:

Nevertheless, I am continually with you;
you hold my right hand.

After thirty-five years in the ministry, I have learned to pay close attention to what is said in the text of scripture. It is not just for plain sense that I read the Bible and it is definitely not to 'ferret out' some hidden meaning behind the text: it because I am called to consider seriously how God has addressed all humankind, including this particular human, that I pay close attention.

Here, in this one singular verse from the psalm, we read together the opening word of this sentence: **NEVERTHELESS**. This nevertheless means 'in spite of' or 'despite all that passes before this saying'. No matter what has transpired in our lives and the life of God and his involvement in this world and the life of humanity, still he is continually with us. No matter how many times we have rejected the way of God and favored our own ways of doing and being in this world, **STILL** it is God who is continually and constantly at our side. This is not because we deserve such faithfulness, for we ourselves have been so faithless. No, this is because such constancy, such faithfulness is the very nature of God.

Here's how Barth explained it to the prisoners in the Basel jail: **'Nevertheless I am continually' implies: at all times and in all circumstances, whatever happens, through thick and thin. Hence, not only occasionally, not only in the morning, but also in the evening when the darkness deepens and the night falls, not only in good times but also in bad times, not only when the good news pour in but also amidst the steady flow of distressing news, even in the grip of disappointment and dejection.**

This is God's work in our lives, not our free and unconditioned response. Nevertheless, God takes our hand and goes with us into and through this life, asking not for cooperation and obedience first as if it were a currency, but reaching out to us because such reaching out and such constancy is the very nature of who God is. Again, Barth: **We are not asked to extend the right hand of fellowship to the Lord God. There is no need for it whatever. The gesture is belated. He holds us by our right hand, he takes us seriously where it counts to be taken seriously.... Our right hand is no longer free. He holds it! It is already in his own hand!**

The good news is that God has already acted – he has already taken our hand in Jesus Christ. Now, the question presents itself to all who are paying attention, what will we do with what we know?

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)

O Lord our God! Come yourself into our midst! Awaken us all! Grant us your light! Be our teacher and comforter! Keep us and all the world in your word! Amen.

Tuesday, December 6, 2022

From Isaiah 54:

For the mountains may depart
and the hills be removed,
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,
says the LORD, who has compassion on you.

God's love and care for us is not conditional but is permanent and persistent. This is a statement that can only be understood as a profession of faith fueled by the Word of God delivered to us in scripture.

The passage from the prophecy of Isaiah speaks of such an assurance of God's permanence amongst us. The word, 'steadfast', implies a consistency that is beyond human equivalence. We cannot equal this consistency, but God excels at it.

The people of Israel, to whom these words were originally addressed, were a people who had held great promise yet failed to fulfill it. They defected from the way of God and preferred their own ways to the ways of the Lord. And yet ... God still promises that his love is 'steadfast.' In short, his love and providential care for the people of Israel is never retracted or reduced regardless of the faithfulness or faithlessness of the people. God is constant whether we are or not.

Karl Barth put it this way in a sermon he preached on the final week of 1959: **Yes indeed, there are such times when men lose faith in God and obedience towards him. And then everything else is lost as well. Israel was lost, together with true faith and obedience; the might and brilliance of the kingdom of David and the city of Jerusalem were lost, together with the House of God built by Solomon; the homeland, the land of their fathers was lost; their freedom was lost. Just one thing was still left to them: the Lord who had mercy on them. He remained, and in spite of their unbelief and disobedience did not stop being merciful to them – or living, acting and speaking in their midst, exactly as he has done through this prophet too.**

The assurance is that even when we are faithless – even when we lose hope and the vision of faith – God remains constant and remains for us in Jesus Christ. God's providential care and love for us is not conditional to our faithfulness – God is faithful still: always!

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)

Dear Father in heaven! Preserve us from all stupidity, depression and thoughtlessness which might be temptations for us in the new year as they were in the old! Amen.

Wednesday, December 7, 2022

From Psalm 34:

Look up to him, your face shall shine,
and you shall never be ashamed.

Barth associates this Old Testament passage with Jesus Christ in an Ascension Day sermon delivered at the Basel Prison. The psalmist's injunction to look away from ourselves and look up to him, Barth turns to explain the importance of the Christian holy day of Ascension Sunday.

Barth wrote: **But to look up to him, to Jesus Christ – this is our help! He is over us. He is in the center of that encompassing mystery. He is in heaven. Who is Jesus Christ? He is the man in whom God has not only expressed his love, not only painted it on the wall, but put it to work. ... To look up to Jesus Christ means to accept his righteousness and to be content.**

Content here does not mean to be complacent, but rather to rest ourselves in the assurance that what God has done in Jesus Christ, God has done for us and for all humanity (which includes us!). We can begin to really ‘look up and live’ as the Bible encourages. We can take our eyes off our own apprehensions about whether or not we are loved by God, for we know this to be true. We can begin to place our emphasis upon life in service towards others. This is the very thing that God calls us to do in living out our faith – looking to serve others rather than merely satisfying ourselves.

Again, Barth spoke to this: **We should get this simple truth straight, dear friends. We are in the world not to comfort ourselves, but to comfort others. Yet the one and only genuine comfort we may offer to our fellowmen is this reflection of heaven, of Jesus Christ, of God himself, as it appears on a radiant face. Why don't we do it? Why do we withhold from them the one comfort of mutual benefit? Why are the faces we show each other at best superior looking, serious, questioning, sorrowful and reproachful faces, at worst even grimaces or lifeless masks, real Carnival masks? Why don't our faces shine?**

The reception of the good news of God's action in Jesus Christ should cause us to lift up our heads and really begin to live toward God and the ways of God. It should draw us out of our normal paths of self-concern and self-obsession and move us toward our neighbors in this life. Barth asks a pertinent question: ‘Why don't we do it?’ Why do we offer to the world a false mask of self-protection, or worse, superiority instead of the radiant face of compassion and care to which the gospel calls us? This is the very thing that we should meditate upon and consider this day and all through this holy season of Advent ...

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)

O Lord, our God, grant us to be faithful stewards of your gifts, making good use of the time. Amen.

Thursday, December 8, 2022

From Mark 1:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

Repentance is a key element of the Christian faith. It means for many saying sorry and amending one's behavior to avoid previous transgressions. This is certainly part of repentance, but it does not fully embrace what the scriptures means by it.

Here in the Gospel of Mark, we are told that Jesus initiates his ministry by calling his listeners to repent and believe. John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, preached repentance out in the wilderness, on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Mark makes it appear that Jesus is picking up where John left off.

Yet, there is something different in Jesus' understanding of repentance. He pairs it with believing the good news of the gospel. It is not just a matter of coming clean and seeking forgiveness; it is also about believing that there is something else, something beyond just our actions – good deeds or misdeeds. More than just what we do or don't do, this is also about placing our trust in something else entirely.

Karl Barth, in a sermon preached to those in jail, said this: **To repent certainly means to make an about-face, to leave behind many, if not all, things which we assumed were necessary, important, or exciting, and to start afresh in a new direction. ... It is both a command and a gift that we repent, not because we must, but because we may. How do we go about repenting? We are told to *believe in the gospel*. ... To believe in the gospel means to accept the good news told not by man, but by God, to accept it as told by God, to make it our own, to let it take root in our hearts and grown and bring forth fruit. This leads quite naturally to repentance.**

And how did Barth define this good news that we are called not only to believe but to take to heart and to let it take root in our lives? He found the good news to be Jesus Christ himself. It is in Christ that God demonstrates his love and grace for us and for this world. In the work of Christ, we see that God is for us and not against us. In this world, we learn (or mis-learn) that God is against us, so righteous and pure that he would never deign to accommodate our weakness and our sin. In the Word of God, we learn that God's righteousness and purity is rooted in his love and his grace and thus reaches out to us ... even us.

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)

O Lord, our God, have mercy on all who do not, or not yet, acknowledge you and your kingdom, who may have known you but have long since forgotten, misunderstood or even denied you. In your mercy, Amen.

Friday, December 9, 2022

From Galatians 6:

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. For each will have to bear his own load.

Advent, you will remember, is a season of waiting. It is about the waiting that all human flesh experience as we yearn and long for justice to be ultimately done and for the chaotic fragmentation of life to be reconciled into a meaningful whole.

Yet Advent is not just about waiting, its about living as well. We live in anticipation of God's final judgment that brings with it wholeness and reconciliation, but yet we actually do live. We get up every morning, put on our shoes and go about living the life that God has given us. And when we live, really live, we come in contact with others. We live communally in varying degrees, but we do live this life with others.

Paul's admonition to the Christians in Galatia is to live in such a way that we are careful of others. Paul calls us to seek to restore, with gentleness, those who have isolated themselves or have become isolated from us. We are called to carry others' burdens and not to be so very preoccupied with only our own.

Karl Barth described this practice thusly: **Carrying means: treating each other with a little kindness, not as we would treat rough, wicked men, but as we would treat poor, sick ones – rather like the way that seems natural to patients in the same room in a hospital. Carrying consists of the help given mutually when people receive and accept each other, together with each other's load, as comrades on a journey that they have begun together and can only continue together and end together.**

As we celebrate the season of Advent, may we remember this call of Paul upon our lives – that we would carry the loads that threaten to crush the others with which we live in this life. And in so doing, let us put our trust in the One who carries the load for us all, that he might help us in this work of burden-lifting that God sets before us during this season and in all seasons.

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)

Lord, we thank you not only for having shown us the better way but for having opened it up for us. Give us courage to start out along it and to walk along it and so to make use of the freedom granted us in the sacrifice of your dear son! Amen.

Saturday, December 10, 2022

From Deuteronomy 8:

If you start thinking to yourselves, “I did all this. And all by myself. I’m rich. It’s all mine!”—well, think again. Remember that GOD, your God, gave you the strength to produce all this wealth so as to confirm the covenant that he promised to your ancestors—as it is today.

Our lives are such that we are often tempted to believe that we are self-made people. Moses is credited with the words that we read above. He cautions the Israelites to not get their heads turned by any success that they might have. If they prosper and grow in power and wealth, it is not solely due to their own efforts, but rather is attributable to the God who gives them the strength to live.

Karl Barth, preaching to a congregation of inmates in a Swiss prison, lifted part of this passage rendering it this way: **You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power.**

This slender version of the passage is the text that he preached from. His goal was to place all the emphasis upon the giver of power and strength rather than the recipients and their possible response. He likened the word power to strength and then went on to speak of the gift of God in the strength we receive to live.

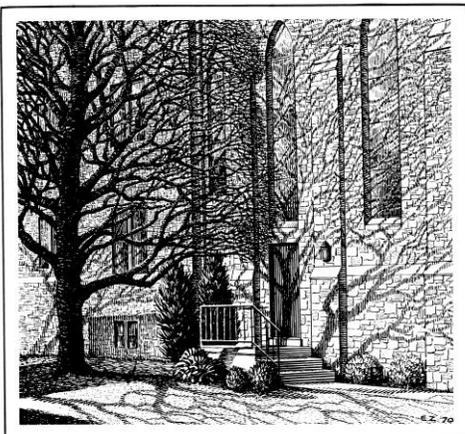
Power is know-how, skill, freedom to do something. It is our human predicament that we should know how to do so many things we can’t do, that we need so much power and strength that we don’t have. We need strength to live, and we need even more strength to die. ... We need strength to be young and we need even more strength to grow up and to grow old. We need strength not to grow bitter and not to despair in the disappointments of life and in times of bad luck. We need even more strength not to become wanton, vain and foolish when things go well and good luck is with us.

Strength is needed when things challenge us and even more so, needed when things go well. Barth is right; it is only to God that we can turn for such strength in life. This is a power that we do not manufacture for ourselves for such power has a shelf-life or a quantity about it that is limited. God’s help is without limits and is abundant in reserve.

Let us cast our trust upon God and the strength that he lends us in each and every day of life; when things are going well and when they are not. Either way, such strength can come only from the one who freely offers and freely supplies it to his children.

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)

Dear Father in Jesus Christ, abide with us, we ask you, and accompany each one of us to his own place when we depart! Do not abandon anyone! Amen.



THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

Sunday, December 11, 2022

From Isaiah 54:

For a brief moment I deserted you,
but with great compassion I will gather you.
In overflowing anger for a moment
I hid my face from you,
but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,”
says the LORD, your Redeemer.

You can’t blame the writer of Isaiah for placing in the mouth of God

a confession of desertion and anger-inspired hiddenness. Elsewhere in the scripture, we receive assurance that God does not desert us or leave us. We are assured again and again that even though we are faithless, God is faithful still.

However, you can't blame Isaiah for his desperate sense of abandonment. The people of Israel experienced exile and a horrendous captivity in Babylon. They felt as if God had certainly deserted them and abandoned their cause. Isaiah expresses that very feeling in this remarkably human and deeply honest passage.

We can all feel this way. At times life is sweet and easy, as if we are living in a dream. We move from one success to the next and begin to sense that we live charmed lives, that nothing can touch us. Yet, at other moments, we experience deep despair and anxiety. We feel lost and left to fend for ourselves in a world that is nothing close to sweetness and light. It is in these moments that we can feel as if we have been left behind by God; that he has, in a sense, picked up and moved on without us and all our shining moments are but tarnish and corrosion.

Yet, even in this bleak pronouncement in Isaiah, a light does dawn. Here we also receive the assurance that though we may feel abandoned, this will not endure forever. What will endure is the 'everlasting love' with which God 'will have compassion' on us.

Barth, rather remarkably, used this text as the setting for an Easter day sermon to inmates in the prison. Towards the end of the sermon, he shared this: **The truth is this, that God holds us fast, whoever we are and whatever our situation, whatever we may feel and think, however difficult our mood may be today and tomorrow, because, and by the very fact that, we have once again abandoned him and continually abandon him. He is present, he does not abandon us, even when we cannot help thinking ourselves abandoned. And his countenance is shining for us even when we think with good reason that we cannot see it anywhere.**

In this season of Advent, as we look in anticipation to God's great restoration, let us remember this and live.

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)

O God may all those who place their trust in you work while it is day for them! You hear those who are sincere in heart. Give us sincerity of heart so that you may hear our prayers also! Amen.

Monday, December 12, 2022

From 1 Timothy 4:

For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.

Yesterday, we considered a passage from Isaiah that revealed the deep sense of desertion that can exist in the human heart. This day brings a different focus indeed: a profession of faith that the evidence of God's goodness is all about us. Paul, the author of this letter from the New Testament, is convinced that all of creation is good and can never be rejected for it is the very handiwork of God.

Eugene Peterson, translated the same verses thusly: **Everything God created is good, and to be received with thanks. Nothing is to be sneered at and thrown out. God's Word and our prayers make every item in creation holy.**

Nothing is beyond redemption then. Certainly, the things that humanity makes and crafts are not perfect or good in the sense of God's creation as being good; they are tainted by our own corruption and sinful nature. But since we too are creations of God, what we do and what we make are not beyond redemption. God can and does make use of even our attempts to do good, to be at peace, to offer love in this world.

Paul's admonition should be heard by us. We are not to reject anything that comes to us from the hands of God. We are called to live in this world in the life that we have been granted and be thankful indeed.

Karl Barth put it this way: **The imprint of God's good creation in our lives, and in the world around us, is always and everywhere recognizable, in as much as we may and even must receive with thanksgiving what is offered to our experience.**

It is only right then that we would take time this day and during this season to meditate upon the great gifts of God's creative love that surrounds us. We take so much of creation for granted and the possible terrifying alteration to the ecological shape of our world demonstrates just how much we humans do take things for granted. Let us instead be thankful and thoughtful and willing to live with a sensitivity to the gifts that God has granted us in creation.

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)

Lord have mercy upon us, upon your people, upon your creation! We praise and magnify you, knowing that your mercy is without end and your power without limit. Amen.

Tuesday, December 13, 2022

From Jeremiah 31:

For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

We romanticize the past ... at least the good times in our past. We find ourselves wondering why life isn't like that golden time, whatever it was, from our past. We think that it was better for us then, whenever that "then" was.

We romanticize the past because it is just that: past. It is ground that we have already covered. It is a path and a route that we have already taken and we know every twist and turn that we travelled. We think it might have been better only because we now see it in the rearview mirror ... we know where we have been.

This is not unlike the experience of the people of Israel as they are still living in exile. Some of them, no doubt, wanted to return home with an expectation that that would fix everything, and all things would be set to right. Others may have perceived that their plight was a bit more complex than just a change of scenery could manufacture.

Then, right in the midst of this, the message cited above, filled with hope and expectation for something new about to happen. God promises a new covenant that differs from what they have received before only in that it will no longer be just a set of laws written on stone, but rather it will be embodied in them, the people of God. He will be their God again and they will be his people again.

Thus, the people of Israel will learn what it means to follow God into a future that they have not yet visited. But then, this is exactly what the future is for any of us ... it is a place that we have yet to visit, but, at the same time, the present moment we inhabit was once that unknown territory of the future. And, if we are honest, so is that much treasured and romanticized past that we can go on and on about ... it too was once our future.

Such is the promise of Advent ... God's hold upon the future is as sure as our death grip upon the past. But's God's future is much better than our past; we must learn to look forward with anticipation that overcomes our romanticizing of the past, for it is here, in the present, that God is moving us toward what is yet to come. This too is Advent.

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)

Holy and merciful God! Enter our hearts! Clear away whatever might prevent you! Amen.

Wednesday, December 14, 2022

From Leviticus 26:

And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people.

If we take seriously what we find in the simple, but profoundly declarative sentence cited above, we ought to be either immensely assured or greatly unsettled! If God is this close to us, this present to us, this near to us, then something ought to be tremendously different about our lives.

The proximity of God is often held at bay in our hearts and minds because we dare not contemplate it. When things are difficult and challenging for us, we might be comforted by the promise of a proximate God. Our spirits, depressed or riddled with anxiety, might be buoyed by the thought that God is near to us.

But most days, most times, we really don't give the nearness of God much of a thought. We wander about our days with some form of self-imposed purpose and take our chances ... we feel less than needful of divine direction. We think that we can navigate things quite well all by ourselves.

The people of Israel felt much the same and the Old Testament is filled with testimony as to how that particular self-delusion turned out. Of course, we are not any better. So this promise that the Israelites received in the troublesome and enigmatic Book of Leviticus, is a promise not intended as a threat, but truly as an assurance that threatens our hubris. We really do need the proximity of God not just to assure us, but also to challenge us.

Karl Barth, preaching on this text, told his hearers: **He is not at the periphery. He is closer to us than we are to ourselves. He knows us better than we know ourselves. He gives us a fairer deal than we ourselves, even with the best will and knowledge in the world, can provide. Hence his ways involve us all. In all the disparity of man and human situations, he is the one God, now here and now there, for you and for me.**

I like Eugene Peterson's translation of the text from Leviticus so much, let's end with it: **"I'll set up my residence in your neighborhood; I won't avoid or shun you; I'll stroll through your streets. I'll be your God; you'll be my people. I am GOD, your personal God who rescued you from Egypt so that you would no longer be slaves to the Egyptians. I ripped off the harness of your slavery so that you can move about freely."**

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)

O Lord, our Shepherd! Relying on you we shall now lie down to rest and take up again our work in the morning. Amen.

Thursday, December 15, 2022

From Romans 11:

For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.

In Paul's Letter to the Romans, the apostle attempts to unravel the mystery of God's saving work in Jesus Christ. Paul has spent much of his ministry explaining that what has happened in Christ and IS happening in Christ is not limited to just the Jewish people. The Gentiles are included in God's work as surely as those who were the children of Abraham.

This was not a particular popular understanding in some quarters of the growing Christian faith. Some were convinced that in order to be authentically Christian, one must convert first to Judaism. Paul saw God's scope as much larger than one people defined by either ethnicity or geography.

Here, in the eleventh chapter, Paul makes the argument that since all have been condemned by human desertion from the ways of God, all equally will receive and HAVE received mercy in the work of God in Jesus Christ. For Paul, this gracious and merciful work of God begins and ends with Jesus Christ.

Karl Barth, preaching to his congregation of inmates at the Basel prison, said this: **He who knows Jesus knows it is both impossible to dismiss him, and imperative to begin at all times in our thoughts and in our life with him, and with him alone, just as the alphabet has no other beginning with A. We must start with the fact that God had mercy and will have mercy on all – that his will and work are determined by his compassion.**

A strong profession that ought to assure us. We are included in this 'all' that Paul mentions. We are part of the 'all' just as others may be as well.

Barth follows up that profession with this and it is assuring enough to end today's consideration: **God has mercy on us. He says 'yes' to us, he wills to be on our side, to be our God against all odds. Indeed against all odds, because we do not deserve this mercy, because, as we rightly suppose, he should say 'no' to us all. But he does not say 'no'; he says 'yes'. He is not against us; he is for us. This is God's mercy.**

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)

O Lord, our God! Because we utterly depend on your care we wait for you, for your good and Holy Spirit and his gifts. Brighten this hour, let it be pleasing in your sight, and helpful and fruitful for us! Amen.

Friday, December 16, 2022

From 2 Corinthians 12:

My grace is enough.

The opening lines of Barth's sermon on this text are as follows: **My dear friends, that is a very short text – only four words – I think it is the shortest text on which I have ever preached. The advantage of this is that you can remember it all the better.**

This is exactly my hope for you ... that you will remember this text maybe above all else: My grace is enough. And that you would remember its meaning and its promise.

When is enough ever really enough? The abject consumerism of our current society trains us to never be satisfied with what we have already obtained or possess, but taunts and tempts us into greater and greater dissatisfaction. In short, we want more ... we think that we NEED more.

This is not limited to our existence as consumers of manufactured products. This bleeds over into our relationships with others and with our own inner selves and our desires to expand our reach and our grasp in all areas of life and living. And, of course, this seeps over into our relationship with God. We believe that somehow we have been shorted or that we need more from God in order to really live the abundant life that we have been promised by both the scriptures and the 'mad men' of Madison Avenue.

This creeps into our prayers and our meditations ... we ask God for more. We want more peace, more love, more assurance of God's care and demonstrations of his grace. We want more ... we just want more.

Then, graciously we are confronted with this simple task: My grace is enough. This short but powerful assertion out to bring us all up short. We ought to stop what we are doing and really spend some time considering this promise.

Essentially it is this: what God has done in Jesus Christ is really enough. The lives that we have been given are surrounded by, imbued with, and covered by this grace that God works out in our lives all because of Jesus Christ. We are tempted to believe that somehow we are missing something in our lives; that they are not glorious enough, fantastic enough or comfortable enough. No matter what we face in this life, living or dying, God's grace is really enough. It is enough to see us through and bring us around to him fully and completely.

Then if you remember anything this day, remember this: My grace is enough.

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)

Eternal, holy and gracious God our Father! Despite all our weakness, may we praise you at all times, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as in the past so in the future and to all eternity. Amen.

Saturday, December 17, 2022

From Psalm 90:

So teach us to number our days
that we may get a heart of wisdom.

The sermon Barth preached on this text is one of my favorites, so forgive me if I turn over this devotion completely to the insights he provides.

Dealing with this text with integrity and forthrightly, Barth told his congregation: **Our days are numbered, we must die. This is quite obviously true. One dies earlier, the other a little later, one perhaps after a long illness, another quite suddenly, one almost imperceptibly, another in agony. No one can escape his death. ... But what is the use of telling us that our days are numbered and we must die? We already know it all too well already!**

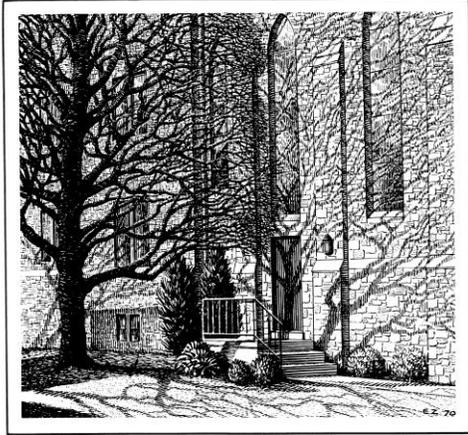
Barth answers this question of why by focusing upon the word 'teach.' The key to this passage is what we might actually learn from the obvious truth that we are mortal and will one day die. Something important is to be learned from this universal truth.

Barth finds that we learn the value of life from the life and death of Jesus Christ. He told his congregation: **To remember, and to remember aright, that we must die is to remember that Jesus has died for us. ... And now our own death occurs in the power of Jesus' death in our place. Certainly only in his power! For no other man will ever die again this death, the death of the One judged in the place of all others. Our death happens in the power of his death, as the consequence, reflection, and sign of the divine 'no', of the judgment carried out in Jesus' condemnation.**

The death of Jesus Christ hallows all human death and dying. In God's suffering in Christ, God knows 'from the inside out' what death really is, for God cannot die. Death is the final outcome of the 'no' that we, as humanity, have offered to God in our own vain attempts to be God, i.e. original sin. Yet there is ultimately hope in Christ's death as Barth ends his sermon with: **As surely as Jesus himself when he suffered and was crucified, died and was buried for us, brought forth our new and eternal life, as surely may we look and walk toward our own death with confidence. This is what we must remember! If God teaches us to number our days, we may approach our death, through the power of Jesus' death, as our life, our eternal life.**

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)

O Lord, our God! Without you we can do nothing; with you and in your service we can do all things. Amen.



THE FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT

Sunday, December 18, 2022

From Isaiah 40:

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God remains forever.

The verse quoted above is well-known. It is an affirmation of the endurance of the assurance and assistance that reaches us from the scriptures. Generations of those who have gone before us have had their hopes buoyed, their sorrows lifted, and their wounds salved by the hearing of scripture.

‘The word of our God’ speaks to us in whatever condition we are, but we are not always in a condition to hear it. We think sometimes that we are not in need of such assurance or we believe that we are somehow beyond any ‘Sunday school’ advice that the Bible may offer. But yet, as faithless as we may be in our listening, God remains faithful still in his speaking.

Karl Barth, in an evening sermon delivered at the Basel prison, defined the content of ‘the word of God’ thusly:

In the Word of God we are told something we cannot understand, that God has loved us all and loves us and will continue to love us, tomorrow as he has done today, and the next day as he will tomorrow – as long as we live, and even when we are no longer alive, with exactly the same love whether we are wise or foolish, good or bad, fortunate or unfortunate. The fact that we are the ones who God loves is what makes us human beings. And since God loved us, he gave himself for us so that we no longer belong to ourselves but to him. We are not our own masters but his servants, we do not need to worry about ourselves but are in his care, we do not need to stand surety for ourselves but have him as our surety. The Word of our God says all this.

This is the heart and soul of the message of ‘the word of our God.’ It is a message that claims us not for ourselves or even necessarily for the important things of this world, but rather shows us that we belong to the God who has come to us in this world in Jesus Christ. We are claimed by a love that we could never have imagined or hoped for if the plight of this world was the basis of our judgment or discernment. This is THE word that comes from outside of us and confronts us and challenges us with a love that assures us that God is at work in this world and in us changing us and changing the world and moving us all toward that hope that is defined by the season of Advent itself. That hope is Christ Jesus himself; the One who is like us, yet nevertheless is God for us and for the world. This is ‘the word of our God.’

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)

Great God, we praise you! In you alone do we trust! Let us not be dismayed! Amen.

Monday, December 19, 2022

From Philippians 4:

The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

In the week before Christmas in 1957, Karl Barth was honored to deliver the sermon at the University of Basel's Christmas Service. He addressed himself to his colleagues, to his students and any of the administrators who remained in town so late in the term. He chose for his text the Pauline snippet quoted above.

As we near the day of Christmas and our own celebrations and those personal and familial traditions in which we imbibe, let us hear from that wise old Swiss theologian how he linked this text to the expectations, feelings, and daydreams that were probably happening out in the pews that day in Basel: **...a good friend of mind wrote me from Holland a week ago to wish me for the Christmas season as much celebration and as little ceremonial as possible. I liked that. Yet I don't want to waste one minute in criticizing or decrying the many religious and secular Christmas ceremonies of a public or a private nature. Their questionable features are well enough known. Of one thing I am certain. Christmas is an occasion for celebrating, and not for ceremonial. ... A true Christmas celebration is an event that penetrates our hearts and our lives. It takes possession of us and does not relinquish us any more. We breathe freely and no longer gasp. We are permanently freed from unrest.**

What a lovely and profound commentary on both the passage for the day and the particular place in time and space of the hearers of the sermon. The passage from Philippians assure us that since the Lord is near, we have no need for anxiety about anything. So much of our lives are spent in some form of anxious endeavor, whether it is the work that we do in order to provide for keeping body and soul together, or it is the concern that we have for our loved ones and their conditions. We are confronted by anxiety and angst all around us.

Even the prospect of Christmas may not relieve that anxiety but increase it! Will things go well when the relatives arrive? Will Aunt Suzie really like her present or will she just feign interest? Will I really have a moment of peace and good will in the midst of the barrage of family and friends? This is a bit of the anxiety that the season brings.

But the text (and the preacher in Basel) assures us that since the Lord is near, anxiety can flee. In the assurance of Christ's nearness and proximity to us demonstrated in the incarnation, we can know that there is nothing for us to fear. Such release of anxiety ought to fuel our celebrations this week and always.

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)

Great God, we praise you! In you alone do we trust! Let us not be dismayed! Amen.

Tuesday, December 20, 2022

From Luke 1:

And Mary said,

I'm bursting with God-news;

I'm dancing the song of my Savior God.

God took one good look at me, and look what happened—

I'm the most fortunate woman on earth!

What God has done for me will never be forgotten,

the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others.

His mercy flows in wave after wave

on those who are in awe before him.

He bared his arm and showed his strength,

scattered the bluffing braggarts.

He knocked tyrants off their high horses,

pulled victims out of the mud.

The starving poor sat down to a banquet;

the callous rich were left out in the cold.

He embraced his chosen child, Israel;

he remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high.
It's exactly what he promised,
beginning with Abraham and right up to now.

The Song of Mary, known as the Magnificat, in which the young woman who becomes the mother of Jesus speaks passionately about the Gospel. This Gospel is the good news of God's action in Jesus. Mary personalizes it, understanding that what God is doing within her is directly related to what God is preparing to do in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. The world is turned upside down. Mary says that the tyrants will be knocked off 'their high horses' and the 'callous rich' will be sent away hungry while the poor have their fill. This is an inversion of how things were in Mary's world and in ours even today. When God enters the human condition, things are changed.

This same life-changing and world-upsetting characteristic of the presence of Jesus was found in the story of Zacchaeus, told later in the Gospel of Luke. William Willimon, the great Methodist theologian, spoke of this:

Salvation is whenever Jesus intrudes into your space, whenever Jesus makes your sinful table the site of his salvation feast like he did for Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus didn't invite Jesus to dinner. Jesus invited himself. Hardly anyone in scripture chooses Jesus or decides to be saved by him. The gospel is a story about Jesus' choice and decision for the lost.

As our celebration of the birth of Christ approaches, let us recall how upending Christ's presence should be in our lives ... let us not fear such a change but embrace it as the mark of God's great and glorious presence and his great work to restore the world to what he has intended all along; this too is the Advent hope.

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)

O Lord, let us have a good Christmas: let us look forward beyond its fleeting lights towards the perfect dawning of your eternal light! Amen.

Wednesday, December 21, 2022

From Romans 6:

But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The first thing that I notice in this reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans is that simple, but radically remarkable conjunction: *but*. We could also use the word 'nevertheless' here; that was a favorite of Karl Barth's. Here Paul tells us that everything about our lives points to death, but – nevertheless – what God grants, what God gives is life ... a free gift.

Some of the nuances of this passage come into starker contrast when heard through the translation crafted by Eugene Peterson: **But now that you've found you don't have to listen to sin tell you what to do, and have discovered the delight of listening to God telling you, what a surprise! A whole, healed, put-together life right now, with more and more of life on the way! Work hard for sin your whole life and your pension is death. But God's gift is *real life*, eternal life, delivered by Jesus, our Master.**

Often when we think about eternal life, we think about life never-ending. But the Greek text gives us something else to consider. What God grants us in Jesus Christ is not just never-ending, it is radically different than what has come before. The wages of sin, as Paul calls, points us to death. Our lives, lead by our own means, for our own purposes only and supremely, is not what goes on everlastingly. No, in Jesus Christ, a great change is wrought, a difference is made.

Karl Barth, using the language of eternal life, spoke of this to the inmates in the Basel prison where he preached: **Eternal life is the free gift of God. It is not the wages, the salary, the compensation, as death is the wages of sin. Eternal life is not our due from God. It is nothing we have earned. It is not a payment for services well done. Eternal life is not the grand total at the bottom of the pay slip, as death is on the pay slip of sin. For unlike sin, God is no paymaster or employer or cashier ready to settle accounts. God does not settle accounts. God is a very distinguished gentleman whose privilege and enjoyment it is to give freely and to be merciful. Hence he grants eternal life. Hence human life experienced as eternal life is his undeserved and free gift, his gift of grace.**

Peterson calls it *real life* and that is much closer to the text. It is a life that has been taken over by the mercy and grace of God in Jesus Christ. It is a life that can only come from the hand of God and it is the life that we are given by God in Christ. We are called to live this life by the ‘new’ rules that Christ sets before; rules that eschew revenge and self-absorption and instead turns to grace and compassion. This is the Advent life; this is the life that God grants us.

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)

O Lord God, give light to our eyes, we ask you, that we may see your light, the brightly shining light of reconciliation!

Amen.

Thursday, December 22, 2022

From Psalm 68:

Blessed be the Lord day by day! He who bears us up is the God of our salvation.

Take a moment and re-read that passage quoted above. Maybe, if you have the time, read it two or three more times. Sit with it awhile; let it seep into your soul. In other words, don’t pass it by quickly or gloss over what is said there. This is important.

Too often, we think of God’s intervention into our lives as just that, an ‘intervention’; something that happens rarely and is easily comprehended. The Psalmist doesn’t see it that way ... the God who is the author of our ultimate salvation does not just happen upon us some dreary Tuesday afternoon. The God of our salvation is the same God who has been with us day in and day out, the one who ‘bears us up’ and carries along in this life.

There is not a moment that the God of our salvation is not at work in our lives. Theologians call this ‘providence’, the way in which God preserves us in and out of the calms and the troubles of our lives. God does not intervene this moment and then leaves us to scramble for ourselves the next. God, the God of our salvation, goes with us.

Karl Barth put it this way in a sermon delivered in June of 1959: **Because day by day he is the origin from which we come, day by day also the destiny to which we move. Because day by day he is the one great, good and free Lord who grants us freedom. In short, because day by day he is the Lord. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep, as another Psalm puts it. He keeps watch over us. He is at work day-in and day-out until the end of time and beyond, unto eternity. Of this we have a small token in our daily blessing of the Lord until we, too, reach our goal.**

The Psalmist assures us that God does not dip into our lives and then out again, but rather is the constant presence, the constant companion along our journey of this gift of life. We may not always have a strong assurance of his presence, but he is there all the same. The God of our salvation is the God who ‘bears us up’ on a daily basis.

As we lift our heads with Advent hope, let us remember that we do not go about our waiting, our expectation and our hope alone ... the One who is the reason for this hope is with us even here, even now.

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)

Dear heavenly Father! Bear with us and bear us up, each and everyone of us, as in the past so in the future. We stand in need of you, each in his own way. Amen.

Friday, December 23, 2021

From Luke 2:

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Today we turn from the central focus of Advent to words well-known and well-associated with the celebration of Christmas. Luke ignites our imagination with his report that this is the beginnings of Jesus of Nazareth, born as anyone else may have been born, but born in a specific place and time. The time we know; the place is unremarkable – a back alley, a back room, an out-of-the-way ordinary place: a manger. A manger is a feeding trough for cattle. There is something about the Son of God being born in such a place.

Barth makes much of this in his sermon delivered on a Christmas day many years ago: **Who is he who was born the son of Mary, wrapped in swaddling cloths, and laid in a manger? Who IS he? I do not ask who he WAS, Christmas is not the birthday celebration of a man who lived long ago, then died and passed away, and whose centennial we solemnly commemorate. True, he once lived and then died – and HOW he died! – but he also rose from the dead; he lives and is present among us now, much closer to each one of us than we are to ourselves.**

That one who was born in a simple feeding trough is the One who has been born for us. Jesus Christ has come FOR us and not to be against us. In Jesus Christ, we see that God is finally and completely and without question FOR humanity and not against it as some would have us believe.

Barth goes in this vein: **Today let me say simply this: He who was born in the stable is he who stands by you, stands by me and stands by us all. I do not say ONE who stands by you, but HE who stands by you. For only One, only he who was born on the first Christmas Day, can stand by us in utter unselfishness and with ultimate authority and power.**

As we lift up our hearts to God in thanks for the gift of grace that has found us in Jesus Christ, we would do well that Christ has come to us not in principle or in some abstract manner, but has actually come to us. He has actually come to each of us and when I say 'each of us' this includes you. God has come to be for YOU in the only way that God can be ... this is the grace that overtakes us, changes us, and gives us the life that God really intends now and always FOR us.

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)

O Lord, our God! You have chosen to dwell not only in heaven, but also down on earth with us. What else can we do but rejoice in wonder and be thankful? Amen.

Saturday, December 24, 2022

Christmas Eve

From the Gospel of Luke:

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)

O Lord, our God! When we are afraid, abandon us not to despair! When we are disappointed, let us not grow bitter! When we fall, leave us not lying there! When we are at our wit's end and run out of strength, let us not perish! Grant us then the sense of your nearness and your love which you have promised to those with a humble and contrite heart who fear your word. Your dear Son has come to all men in despair. To overcome our plight he was born in a stable and died on the cross. Awaken us all, O Lord, and keep us awake to acknowledge and confess him! Amen.

Sunday, December 25, 2022

Christmas Day

From the Gospel of John:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive

him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'") For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

Prayer for the Day: (Karl Barth – Christmas 1954)

Dear heavenly Father! As we are gathered here to rejoice in your dear Son who became man and a brother for our sake, we ask you heartily – show us how great is the mercy, lovingkindness and help that you have prepared in him for us all!

Open our hearts and our understanding and we will grasp that in him is forgiveness of all our sins, is seed and growth for a new life, is comfort and counsel in life and death, is hope for the whole world!

Create in us a true spirit of freedom to go out humbly and courageously and meet your Son who comes to us!

Grant today to the whole Christian Church and to the world as well that many may break through the glitter and vanity of the holiday season and truly celebrate Christmas with us. Amen.

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