

# Living In The New Age

Selected Sermons Delivered  
at the

United Church of Christ

(Congregational)

WILLIAMS BAY, WISCONSIN

by the Reverend Michael G. Bausch, Minister

ened in that he knew God was calling him to be involved in speaking up for his people---and that if his life were to be taken, he would be satisfied knowing he had done his best to fulfill God's plans for his life.

I shall never forget Abel Muzorewa's passion for justice, his patience with those in this country who disagreed with and even questioned his motives, his love for his people, and the love for the God who challenged him to be involved in shaping the destiny of a new nation on the African continent.

He, too, fulfills in my mind the definition of a saint as one who is exceptionally "gentle, charitable, and patient" ---living an exceptionally holy life.

\* \* \* \* \*

I think of another saint I have known, not a night minister and not a bishop involved in politics. In fact, this saintly person hardly went to church---my Aunt May Potter. She told me why she didn't go to church very often. It seems that one Saturday night when my Aunt May was 16 years old, she came home from a dance a little early to do her homework for Sunday School. While working on this lesson, her father entered the room and told her she was a hypocrite---going out dancing on a Saturday night and then preparing for Sunday School. She told him that if she was a hypocrite, then a hypocrite she was, and she would not go to Sunday School. She never did attend church regularly from that time on. And yet, without a doubt, her friends in California and I still can call her a saint.

Her whole life was spent doing things that so many saints do, unnoticed: loving her family, cooking and washing and working to make ends meet. She offered food and conversation to all who came near her humble home. I really didn't get to know Aunt May until a few years ago, when she was in her middle 80's. Her hands severely knarled by arthritis---or "arthur-itis" as she called it---she would painfully knit baby clothes in pink yarn and in blue yarn, putting them away as a supply for the next generation, whoever they might be and whenever they might be born. She would knit slippers and sweaters, something to make the baby's entrance into the world smoother and more comfortable.

Unable to write because of her fingers, and just barely able to poke painfully on a typewriter, she would still keep scores of names and birthdates, and send cards to those on her list at the appropriate times. For all her concern for others, she sought not to be a burden to anyone else, and scrimped and saved and spent, so as to have enough to pay the rent and utilities, buy some groceries, and to squirrel away a little for her funeral. Never complaining, ever-stoic to her family, she maintained a strong faith and a deep devotional life---one of simplicity and sincerity.

Her saintly qualities are illustrated by a couple of poems I found among her belongings:

"Isn't it good at the end of the day  
To look up to God and be able to say,  
'Dear Lord, I helped someone today.'"

And this thought about friendship:

"A little act of kindness, a little bit of trust,  
A helping hand when needed, and judgment that is  
just;  
A share in joy and sorrow, devotion to the end,  
These are the things most needed, to be and to  
keep a friend."

\* \* \* \* \*

Each of us has been touched by a saint or two in our lives: by those living or dead who have left their contribution with us---who, in their actions, their words, their style of life, or in their beliefs, have taught us how human life can be a joyous gift, how human experience can be made religious and sacred, how life can be fulfilled in service to others.

Paul's letter to the Hebrews helps us understand more clearly our relationship with the saints: how the saints have begun the work of bringing the earth to its final fulfillment---but that their work is not fulfilled apart from us. The work of the saints whose labors have preceded ours is completed only as we remember them, and as we incorporate their gifts into our lives---bringing their efforts closer to bearing the fruits of the kingdom.

As we reflect upon the gifts many saints have given us, may we know that by their lives and efforts, we are drawn into a fuller communion with God---a communion shared with the saints living and dead---a communion drawing us into deeper realms of service for all humanity.

May God bless the saints past, present and future, as the Church moves forward into the coming of the New Age.

"GIVE THE KING THY JUSTICE"

November 9, 1980

Text: Psalm 72

\* \* \* \* \*

If anyone tries to tell you that religion and politics are mutually exclusive, that they don't mix, tell them to read Psalm 72.

Very clearly, this is a song of hopes expressed at the coronation of a king. Intended for the ears of the political figure and those who attended the coronation, the song is couched in religious language and filled with ethical guidelines.

The Psalm points to a special kind of relationship between the religious community and the political community: that all political power is subject to the judgment of religious values. The values in this case are spelled out quite clearly: defending the poor, delivering the needy, taking pity on the weak, saving the lives of the needy, and freeing them from oppression and violence. It is only when these mandates are accomplished that the king will be truly great. And only then will the political leader be in favor with God.

Throughout biblical history, there has always been a tension between the values of those who hold political power and those who seek to live by biblical ethics. The prophets are the most obvious of those people lifting the value questions before the rulers---"what are you going to do about the poor? Why do you accumulate riches and power for yourselves, and put the poor further and further into debt? Woe to you who surround yourselves in riches and grind the face of the poor into the dust."

Besides the prophets, we can read about other characters having a different perspective from that of the recognized political authorities. Abraham probably left the city of Ur because of political problems in the city, or economic problems caused by policies of the king. Moses could not accept the cruel policies of the Egyptian government, and the slaves fled its tyranny.

Maybe the most revealing of biblical passages regarding

conflict with political authority comes in I Samuel 8:10-18. The time is just before Israel decided to set up its own monarchy, and the people wanted to have a king rule over them. Samuel took their pleas to God, who was the only king they had known up to that point. And God told Samuel what they could expect from a king if they had one to rule them:

The people would lose freedom of movement and basic rights, for the young men would face compulsory military conscription, either to ride the chariots or to be horsemen, or to be troops running in front of the chariots; some would be required to plow the king's land and harvest his crops; the daughters would have to work in the city as perfumers, or as cooks and bakers; the king would take the best of the fields and orchards to feed the army, and on top of that, take 10% of the grain and grapes as taxes, take a tenth of the flocks, and finally, "you shall be his slaves. And in that day, you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day because you have insisted upon this order of government."

Psalms 72 knows about I Samuel, and knows about the abuses of political power. And so the psalmist makes clear the religious values that will hold the king accountable for a long and beneficent reign, prays for the king to have dominion over all kingdoms of the world, and prays for the king's prosperity. But it is quite clear, as seen in verse 12, that the reason for all the successes come not from a strong military or from strong nationalistic ideas, but from delivering the needy when they call out, the poor and those who have no one to help them. "The king has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence, he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight."

All power, honor, and glory follow from the observance of this ethic. It is also interesting to note that a strong national economy comes as a result of these compassionate policies: there will be abundance of grain in the land, and the people in the cities will blossom. Political security for the psalmist comes not by superiority in war or in chariotry, but by creative example of caring for the weakest in the nation.

One of the wonders of the Bible is that it is timeless. Perhaps that reflects the fact that people over thousands of years are really not much different, as people go. Technologies may change, numbers and distribution of people may change, but human emotions and drives and needs seem to be the same over all time.

The psalmist, writing close to 3000 years ago, speaks of a relationship of religious value and political power which I find helpful for us today.

We have just completed our national ritual of electing a president and congressional leaders. Just as it didn't matter what party the Hebrew king was from at his coronation, so too, it does not matter now who is elected---the voice of the people has spoken. What our job is now, is to hold our choices accountable to basic ethical standards, just as the psalmist did to the king in Psalm 72.

While the new government is not yet in place, we can read signs of what other people expect as far as the values and perspective of our new leadership. Whether or not they will live up to these expectations remains to be seen. But it is helpful to know what some expect, and to begin thinking about how those values relate to our sense of the ethical as known through the guidelines given in the Bible.

For example, some countries are expecting certain behavior from our new officials. UPI and Associated Press reported this past week that certain rightist governments are welcoming the election of our new President. I quote from an article in the Milwaukee Journal, "There seemed to be a sigh of relief...in expectation that Carter-administration pressures on them to democratize and to respect human rights would be relaxed."

That statement seems to be contrary to the ethical stance of the psalmist, who in fact said that human rights are the first order of business. The Journal article stated that the governments who have expressed their satisfaction with our election results were the military dictatorship in South Korea, the "president-for-life" in the Philippines, and such Latin American countries as El Salvador and Guatemala.

These nations have a certain value orientation which is

different from our democratic ideals and our passion for basic human rights. For example, Guatemala is suffering great repression by its government. Right wing death squads killed 3200 people last year and run unchecked throughout the country. Things are so bad, one entire Catholic archdiocese has closed down. Recently, 50 armed troops stormed into a Presbyterian seminary where 65 pastors had gathered for an evangelism workshop. They were held at gunpoint while the troops searched for "subversive literature." Protestant missionaries in Guatemala say that civil war seems imminent.

In the midst of this, US companies have \$400 million in investments in that country. Most likely, the US government will side with the business interests, and against the rights of the poor and the needy.

At least, this is what the government there is hoping, as well as those other governments named. These national leaders are expecting certain ethics and values to be promoted by the US government in support of their policies.

Whether our leaders do support them or not depends upon our participation as citizens in expecting certain values to be held. Again, I must say that what is important for us as Christians is not whether our nations's lawmakers are conservative or liberal, or somewhere in-between. What should be important to us is that our leaders reflect the values which promote human freedom, dignity, and which guarantee to all human beings access to minimal necessities of life.

Just as the people of the Bible watched over their public servants and expected of them compassion, justice and concern for the lowest in society, so too, do we, as members of that religious tradition, need to expect the same of our lawmakers, whatever their political persuasion.

For our democracy to really work, we must not sit back and allow our elected officials to do as they please. We must hold them accountable to the trust we have placed in them, and let them know that we expect of them high ethical standards.

We must be watchful then, not being satisfied by rhetoric

and nice sounding phrases. We must watch specifics of national policies as they evolve. And then, I would suggest, we take up Psalm 72 and read it over again, weighing the latest legislative maneuver in light of the standards mandated by God in the Psalm.

As the psalmist writes, our peace and prosperity depend upon our compassion for those who cannot take care of themselves, our compassion for those who are victims of oppressive policies and procedures, our compassion for those who are crushed and then forgotten as policies roll over their dignity and their rights. The greatness of any nation in this world is judged not by the number of chariots and soldiers and swords at its disposal, but by the equitable distribution of the resources which God has granted to the entire human community.

May God grant us discernment to see through rhetoric and simplistic approaches to difficult problems. May God grant us strength to participate in the work of building our nation upon principles of freedom and justice for all people, ultimately moving towards cooperating with other nations in a combined effort to protect human dignity across the globe.

May we learn to live creatively, then, in the tension between religious faith and political process, ever holding before ourselves the biblical mandate to be compassionate and just with those who are poor, needy and forgotten.

Our greatness as a nation, and our survival as a human race, depend upon the protection and propagation of those values.

"PREPARE THE WAY"  
December 6, 1981

Text: Isaiah 40:3-5; Mark 1:1-8

\* \* \* \* \*

Last night, if you were out at about 10 p.m. and were quiet and still, you would have seen a most amazing thing. The tiniest, most delicate flakes of white were slowly floating down, sparkling against the beams of street lights.

These tiny flakes, by the time I had noticed them, had already covered the uppermost branches of the trees, highlighting the finest detail of each and every branch against the dark night sky.

To look at those frosted branches against that night sky was for me an experience of awe---and it was as if for a brief moment I was a resident of some imaginary world filled with fairy-tale trees amid innocent silence.

How wondrous it is to know those moments when all's right with the world, when for seconds this earth seems pristine once again, quiet and still and safe, and at peace.

Those moments are precious to us because for so many of our waking hours we know it's not true. We watch almost helplessly as things seem to run out of control. The papers are filled with rumors of assassination teams roaming our land, waiting for the moment to unleash chaos upon us.

We read with disbelief that millions upon millions, yes, even billions of dollars will be invested in systems designed to rain unspeakable death upon our designated enemies---and thus, upon our own families.

We hear how violence among families and among perfect strangers is getting even more brutal and more fierce in these times.

We wonder what will happen when resources get scarcer and scarcer, when little has been done to deal with the situation, save for a few well-meant words of hope. The absolute paradox of our Christian faith is that the worse it gets, the stronger shall be our hope. When hope is absolutely unthinkable, it is all the better to passionately

embrace it.

Picture the prophet Isaiah, writing some 600 years before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. There he sits, in Babylon with his people, prisoners of war in a strange and foreign land. Their homeland has been torn to pieces by the invading army, families have been separated, the most "valuable" people have been taken captive and forced to live in exile in refugee camps outside the great city. Jerusalem was devastated, and the seat of the great religion, the Temple, was utterly destroyed. Forced into the terribly marginal existence of the refugee, without homeland, torn from families and friends, longing for peace, Isaiah writes about the realities of the situation (Isaiah 59:9-11):

"Justice is far from us---we look for light, and all we see is darkness; we look for brightness but we walk in gloom. We grope for the wall like the blind, like those who have no eyes; we stumble by day, among those of full vigor we are like dead men. We growl like bears, we moan and moan like doves, we look for justice, but there is none; for salvation, but it is far from us."

Mere pawns in a great international struggle, these refugees had little hope for restoration. What could a few scraggly POW's do to effect policy changes in the mighty Babylonian nations?

And still, with the full impact of the realities of their lives ever before them, these people could somehow manage a hope. Isaiah expresses it eloquently in the words:

"A voice cries in the wilderness: prepare the way of God."

Prepare the way of God. PREPARE THE WAY OF GOD!

"Make straight in the barren desert a highway for our God; every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall be level, and the rough places a plain."

Somehow, some way, we're going to get out of this God-forsaken land, and we're going to have this broad freeway from here to Jerusalem---no mountain passes, no deep

valleys, no rough trails, no speed traps---a straight shot back to home, back to that land flowing with milk and honey.

And do you know---it happened! The messiah came. He came in a form no one could have guessed. He came in the form of a Persian general, Cyrus the Great. You can read it in Isaiah 45:1---the first non-Jew to be called a messiah. Cyrus got his troops together to take the Babylonian capital, and in the process, set the Jews free and homeward bound.

The imaginative embracing of hopeful ideas for the restoration of peace and justice led to the actual release of the refugees to their homeland.

Picture now, if you will, that fiery desert prophet clothed in leather and camel hair, eating what the wilderness would provide. Jerusalem was once again defiled by a military power---this time the "civilized" Romans. Jews were forced to worship the emperor or face death. Statues were placed in the temples; ritual observances were punished unless clearly in allegiance to the Roman empire. The Jews lived in poverty and in terror, occupied by a foreign army, subjected to arbitrary controls over liberty, the pursuit of happiness, and life itself...

And so another voice cried out in that unspeakable wilderness: "prepare the way of God. Make the paths straight."

How dare he speak of such hope in the midst of utter hopelessness! Who could stand up to Rome, the most powerful army on earth---the wealthiest of all nations---cosmopolitan and seductively civil? Times were bad, and yet fierce hope abounded.

John the Baptist would see his hopes materialize in the form of the new messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, and Israel would once again be delivered from the clutches of oppression and darkness---and ushered into the new age of everlasting light and peace.

Now, in these moments, we, too, are in the wilderness. A lot of the time, we don't think about it. Yet privately, in those quiet moments, we feel the grip of darkness over our lives---we feel the spell of hopelessness taking effect

in the hearts of millions across the globe.

And yet, in its deepest level, in the furthest reaches of the wilderness---once again the word comes to us: prepare the way of God, make straight his paths.

In 1922, archaeologist Howard Carter was completing nearly 15 years of digging in the famous Valley of the Kings in Egypt, hoping to find the royal tomb of Pharaoh Tutankhamun. Having found nothing, his days of digging were slowly coming to an end because the money was running out. And then workmen discovered 16 stairs leading into the earth. Perhaps a corridor to a great tomb lay beneath.

Over the years, tens of thousands of tons of rock and sand had been scooped into baskets, carried and emptied slowly and meticulously millions of times. The way had been prepared for a great discovery. After still thousands more baskets filled with rocks and sand had been carried away, a door was found at the end of a long passageway. Carter drilled a small hole in the door, and stuck an iron-testing rod into a dark, blank space. He then inserted a candle into the hole and peered in. As his eyes grew accustomed to the light, details emerged into his view, and he saw strange animals, statues, and everywhere, the glint of gold.

He wrote of that moment, "for the moment, I was struck dumb with amazement." A partner asked, "Can you see anything?" And his reply was, "Yes, wonderful things."

Preparing the way of God might mean that we sift through the rubble of our lives---the rubble of broken dreams, the faded sands of time, the dusty old memories---and basket by basket, haul it out of ourselves in preparation for uncovering the pathway to an exciting door.

And when we get to that door, we can drill a small hole and peer in. Then we can get a glimpse of wonderful things: the treasures which God has promised to those whose faith is strong and whose love is great.

To prepare the way of God means to clear out those obstacles littering the entrances of our hearts---and to open them up to the exciting entrance of the New Age, the Holy Future, the Divine Kingdom.

To prepare the way of God means to clear away the obstacles of daily life---to break down the barriers that prevent our seeing God at work in our jobs, our homes and our schools. We need to smooth over the rough edges of our lives and to make ready a path for God to enter in and proclaim the new reality.

Sometimes it's hard to put a finger on what specifically we can do to prepare the way. Certainly, I think we each know what we need to do in our own lives to open ourselves to experiencing God's calling and claiming us to do wonderful things.

Another dimension of this is to practice clearing the way for other people---providing a certain quality to our experience with one another that says these moments together are important and sacred, and it's important that you know God's love for you in these moments.

Thursday night, someone cleared the way for me to know Christmas more completely this year. I was driving in that snow storm, doing some visiting, and I got to a certain hill when I couldn't go any further---it was too slippery. So, I parked the car and walked the rest of the way, figuring I'd deal with the situation later.

Arriving back at the car, I wasn't quite sure how I'd get further up the hill so I could turn around in a driveway. And I wasn't sure I wanted to back down and risk sliding into a ditch. So I decided to try the uphill move first. I got into the car, turned the key, put the car in gear and started to move forward. Almost immediately, I felt my rear tires grip the pavement.

I thought that strange, and wondered if perhaps somebody had put some sand under my tires while I was gone.

As I returned to the spot while driving down the hill, it was obvious that someone had come out into the night and shoveled the snow from behind my car, exposing the pavement. They had prepared the way for me. In those moments, I was flooded with feelings of warmth and joy and peace---knowing, yes, things are right with the world. There is hope---there is something to be thankful for in these days.

Maybe that's what Advent can be about---preparing the way



for one another to experience the joys of human love and caring; and preparing our hearts for the entrance of the ONE who showed us the fullness of love eternal, Jesus, the Christ, Lord and Savior, Prince of Peace, Love Divine, all loves excelling.

"LOST INNOCENCE"

March 8, 1981

Text: Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11

\* \* \* \* \*

Thousands and thousands of pages have been written about those brief lines in Genesis where Adam is instructed by God not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; where the serpent discusses with Eve, and quite possibly with Adam, too, the implications of their eating the fruit, and how Adam and Eve did eat of the fruit, resulting in the opening of their eyes and their expulsion from the garden.

Many speak of the meaning of this passage as "the fall of humanity." Others talk about "original sin." Still others discuss biblical views of sexuality. One thing is certain: these lines from Genesis, like any other lines in the Bible, point to infinite possibilities for our understanding. My job as a preacher is to try and focus on one possibility at a time, always being open to considering other possibilities at other times.

All week, as I struggled to understand this passage, and as I tried to find one or more ways to share my understanding with you, I kept coming back to the line which follows their eating of the fruit, "then the eyes of both were opened."

As I read and re-read the passage, I came up with some new thoughts---thoughts which conveniently form into three points for this sermon: the first having to do with what it means that our eyes are opened, having lost our innocence; second, how we try to close our eyes and regain our lost innocence; the third, how keeping our eyes open is moving towards fulfilling our lives.

Apparently, according to the story, God did not plan that Adam and Eve would eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil---God expected that they would live in blissful ignorance, having every need provided in the garden of Eden. But through the exercise of their divinely created human freedom, they ate of the tree, opened their eyes, and thus could distinguish between good and evil. Adam and Eve lost their innocence; blissful ignorance gave way to having to deal with complicated matters of life and death.

I've tried to look back on my own experience and try to pinpoint my feelings of innocence, and the time when my eyes were opened. I quite vividly remember the innocence of my early years. Some weekends I would stay with grandma and grandpa, and I would sleep in grandma's big bed. I remember one morning in particular, waking up from a deep sleep, feeling the room bathed in warm sunlight, hearing the sounds of singing meadowlarks, and feeling the gentle warm summer's breeze. My feeling was one of complete peace---not a single care in the world crossing my mind---but a feeling of complete restfulness and happiness. My innocence was blissful.

I don't remember when my eyes were opened, when I knew of the difference between good and evil, but I do know that sometime during my early years I became aware of death. I soon developed great fears that my parents and grandparents would be taken from me. My innocence gave way to knowing something about security and uncertainties. The final blow to my innocence, I think, came when President Kennedy was assassinated. I was in the ninth grade at that time. From that moment on, I could no longer trust in a benevolent and secure nation or world---but only knew that tragedy and death forced me to understand life differently.

Since becoming a parent myself, I think I've learned something more about innocence, and losing it. Through my parental eyes, I now imagine God in Genesis, chapter 3, being like a loving parent who did not want children Adam and Eve to have to face good and evil. God would have preferred that they live in blissful innocence. I understand this through my own experience with the birth of my daughter. During her first months, I saw nothing but pure, blissful ignorance and sweetness. And yet, all around I saw a world of contradiction, a world which said she would lose this innocence. Within weeks of her birth, families with infants and children were leaving the area surrounding Three Mile Island, for fear that leaking radiation might endanger their health. The ripples of confusion stirred by 900 deaths in Jonestown were still moving across our land; television and newspapers were depicting violence on every street corner. I discovered my daughter's innocence was impossible to maintain.

Just a few months ago, I was faced with the very difficult situation of wanting to protect my child from the realities of life, and at the same time, wanting to help her embrace

the realities and understand them better than I.

My own experience with opening my eyes to death came when I was seven or eight. I found myself in a situation with my daughter and death when she was 18 months old---and she knew what was happening. I had taken her to Toynton's Funeral Home on a quick trip to get some information about a person at whose funeral service I would be officiating. After receiving the information, I asked Mr. Toynton if he would watch my daughter a moment while I went into the viewing room to see the deceased. As I approached the casket, I found Anica was at my heels. I picked her up, and we both viewed the body.

I was aware of ambivalent feelings, exposing my innocent daughter to this very real experience. And then to make things worse, she said, "night, night?" I chose to ignore her comment, but as we got out to the car, I felt I needed to explain to her what we had experienced. I told Anica that the person was not "night, night," but was dead. And then I told her that "dead" was something that happened to everybody---to me, to her mother, and to her, too. Just facing that reality and telling her that truth bothered me a lot.

The next day, Anica was playing with a doll. She dropped the doll to the floor and said, "dead." My daughter's innocence was lost---or her eyes were opened. And I have come to feel that she and I are healthier for that experience.

I am reminded of a song written by Carole Etzler:

"Sometimes I wish my eyes hadn't been opened,  
Sometimes I wish I could no longer see  
All of the pain and the hurt and the longing  
Of my friends and me as we try to be free.

But now that I've seen with my eyes,  
I can't close them because deep inside me  
somewhere  
I'd still know the road my friends and I have  
to travel:  
My heart would say 'yes' and my feet would  
say 'go.'

Sometimes I wish my eyes hadn't been opened,  
But now that they have, I'm determined to see  
That somehow we will be one day  
The free people we were created to be."

It is difficult to have our eyes opened. It is difficult to watch innocence being lost. Yet, the reality of life is that our eyes are opened, that we have the equipment with which to see, and hear, and touch, and smell---and that we have a world which needs the gifts which we bring. As much as we wish to have our eyes closed, it can never be that way. God calls us as children to accept our sight, and all our limitations, and to be transformed into persons seeking to remake the world into the garden which it might become.

The sin in Genesis, chapter 3, I am now convinced, is not that Adam and Eve and the rest of us now eat from the tree of good and evil, and lose our innocence and open our eyes ---the sinning comes when we try to regain our innocence, and we refuse to see the good and evil around us. The sin is our trying to close our eyes to the realities of life.

There are countless examples these days of how people try to close their senses to reality, and try to regain lost innocence by not facing the world as it is.

One way this is done is by not taking personal responsibility for one's actions. The primary example for this comes from the Nuremburg Trials after World War II, when defendant after defendant made a defense by saying he "was only following orders. It wasn't I who committed all those atrocities ---it was my superior." And everybody blamed somebody else, so that the guilt could be pinned on no one, but on everyone.

Another way we try to close our eyes is by fatalistic concepts. We say there is nothing that can be done about war---it's human nature. We say there is nothing we can do about poverty, the poor will always be with us. Like blaming somebody else for our actions, we blame human nature, or we blame the problems themselves as being too tough to conquer.

A third way we close our eyes is by isolating ourselves from any kind of experience outside or our own personal life ---turn off the TV, don't read a paper, don't talk with any-

one about a hard public issue; just eat, drink and be merry, and dull the senses.

A final way we close our eyes and seek to regain our lost innocence is the way we allow language to be used in order to deaden our perception of what's really going on. George Orwell, in his novel, 1984, coined the term "double speak" to illustrate this fact. His key example is the statement "war is peace." Word games help us not to think, but to accept the policies behind the terms. The military in this country is very good at hiding meaning behind innocuous phrases.

The military speaks of NUWAX, and while we think about hardwood floors, they are talking about a "nuclear weapons accident exercise." The government reports about "broken arrows," a harmless phrase pointing to the fact of nuclear weapons accidents in this country and around the world. A "football" is the black box that follows the President every day, containing the codes for unleashing instantaneous death across the earth. MIRVS and MARVS are not friendly buddies, but deadly accurate weapons designed to create a MAD scene, that is, Mutually Assured Destruction.

All around us are possibilities for our deadening our senses, our knowledge of good and evil, and returning to some kind of pre-Adam and Eve oblivious state. We just close our eyes and become sleep-walkers, unaware of the moral choices available to us. We refuse to take responsibility, we think fatalism, we isolate ourselves, we accept non-specific language. As we do this, we commit the sin of Adam and Eve.

Luckily for us, Jesus resisted the temptation to close his eyes when confronted by the devil during his 40-day experience in the desert. He was given three temptations that would have made life one big party: he could turn any stone into bread and feed everybody; he could rule over all the kingdoms of the world and become one of Satan's buddies; he could use angels to save himself from personal distress and even death, if he wanted.

Yet Jesus told the devil where to go every time. He resisted the temptation to return to the garden, to close his eyes and to be innocent once again.

Our eyes are open. There are many methods lurking around designed to help us close them, but our call is to join Jesus in finding creative ways to keep our eyes open, our vision keen, our perceptions clear.

All we need do is accept that we do know the difference between good and evil. Through Adam and Eve, we are given that experience. We, too, have tasted of the fruit of good and evil. We then must become aware of those methods and persons trying to lull our senses into some sort of innocent oblivion. We must seek ways in our lives to decrease evil and to increase the good.

As John Kennedy said, "the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good people do nothing."

The struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil continue to this day. There are those who would have us believe that there are only shades of gray, that morality need not be exercised. Those of us who are formed out of the Judaeo-Christian tradition need to know that God depends upon us to promote love and justice and peace, with every sinew in our bodies, and with every ounce of spirit in our hearts.

Keep your eyes open. Look to the vision God has provided us. Share in the ministry of opening the eyes that are blind, and proclaiming God's favor to the whole earth.

"Sometimes I wish my eyes hadn't been opened;  
But now that they have, I'm determined to see  
That somehow we will be one day, the free people  
We were created to be."

## "MOUNTAINS"

March 22, 1981

Text: Exodus 24:12-18

\* \* \* \* \*

The grandeur of mountains has often been captured by poets. One described the mountain by saying, "Round its breast the rolling clouds are spread. Eternal sunshine settles on its head."

Another spoke of mountains as "the beginning and the end of all natural scenery."

For as long as human beings have seen mountains, in whatever culture or country, they have been inspired and awed by their greatness. People perceived mountains as something wondrous and mysterious, powerful and awesome, beautiful and breathtaking. They have also witnessed their wrath in avalanche, eruption and severe weather.

Some people believed that the mountains were the gods themselves who lorded over life and creation. Others thought the mountains were the dwelling places of the gods--- complete with thunder and lightning and clouds and mists. Others believed the highest mountain represented the center of the universe, like a great hub of a wheel, with all life growing and radiating from the center. Travel was guided by the mountain the point of reference for all life.

The Assyrian King, Sargon II, living 800 years before Christ wrote on a clay tablet about a mountain he knew, describing it as a place "whose peaks above lean against the heavens, while below, its roots reach the heart of the nether world."

People who live with mountains and who study them know other things about them. They know how mountains represent eternity, taking millions of years to form. They know how the outer crust of the mountain is continually adjusting to changes that are happening deep inside the mountain. They know how mountains go through periods of building and growing, and then rest a while in relative calm. They know how mountains affect the world around them by blocking warm winds, or cold winds; by directing the migratory paths of peoples; by providing sanctuary and refuge for those who are fleeing from threatening situations on the plains and

in the valleys. They give streams greater force; they provide rich minerals; they sustain green pastures. Mountains provide us with mystery---with their eloquent silence whispering to us about life and its meaning.

A couple of brothers who spent years walking the Sierra Nevada range in California spoke of their experience by saying "it feels good to say 'I know the Sierra'...but of course, you don't--what you know better is yourself; and the Sierra have helped."

Mountains provide us with ways of understanding ourselves in relationship with life's mystery, and in relationship with God.

The Bible is filled with stories taking place in or on mountains. Moses received the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai. Moses and the leaders of the people spoke, ate and drank with God on the mountain. Swirling mists and clouds of fire accompanied the voice of God in these experiences.

Jesus would time and again go into mountains to be alone, and to pray. It was during one such experience, with several disciples, that he was transformed into God's son, and spoke with Moses and Elijah.

For the Israelites, God was not the mountain itself, but the mountain was one of God's dwelling places. As such, it was the sight of these important experiences with biblical figures like Moses, Elijah and Jesus.

Mountains provide us with different ways of understanding the nature of God:

Psalm 90:1-2 (God's eternity)

God, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or before you formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting, you are God.

Psalm 114:3-7 (God's awesome power)

When Israel went forth from Egypt...the sea looked and fled, Jordan turned back. The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs. Tremble, O earth, at the presence of God,

...who turns the rock into a pool of water, the flint into a spring of water.

Psalm 46:1-3 (God's comfort)

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble. Therefore, we will not fear though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

Isaiah 49:13 (God's goodness)

Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For God has comforted the people, and will have compassion upon the afflicted.

Isaiah 30:3-5 (God's redemption/liberation)

Prepare the way of God. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of God shall be revealed - and all flesh shall see it together.

If mountains teach us something about who God is, they also teach us something about our own lives. We can learn something more about ourselves as we contemplate the truths that lie in mountains. The psalmist has written in Psalm 30 that "God has established me as a strong mountain." We, as creatures formed of the same creator's hand which formed the mountains, have some similar qualities.

We, too, are continually building and growing. We are always changing on the outside, and on the inside. Sometimes we go through periods of major and rapid change, and other times we live in relative calm.

We affect the world around us as well. Sometimes we are a shield for friends and family in the midst of stormy winds. Sometimes we provide sanctuary and support for those who are in need, who are fearful, who are fleeing from real or imaginary dangers. Through our care and our love, we affect the people in our lives, and the paths they take as they journey.

Our very lives can reflect, like mountains, God's eternity, God's awesome power, God's comforting strength, God's goodness, and God's redeeming and liberating concern.

In order to understand more fully how our lives can reflect these very special qualities, we need to become more like the mountains. Part of us needs to be saturated with the heavens, in continual relationship with the mystery and power of the universe. Another part of us needs to be attuned to the continual shifting and changing going on inside ourselves, and on the outside as well. And another part of us needs to be rooted firmly and deeply in the earth of our lives: particularly the biblical traditions out of which we live and move and have our being.

Each one of you contains the grandeur of God's creation, each one of you is shifting and changing, each one of you is in relationship with God and with the biblical tradition handed down to us through the ages. Be strengthened in this relationship---know it well, sit and talk and be with it frequently, that your stature as one of God's creatures be increased, and that you be a sign of God's love and power all your days.