“See, I am doing a new thing!  
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?  
I am making a way in the wilderness 
and streams in the wasteland.”

Isaiah 43:19

God is always doing a new thing –
even when we don’t have eyes to see it.

We may struggle to embrace such new things, however, especially when they challenge our assumptions, change our routines, and throw us off our game. But God’s new work is almost always where we’ll find springs of living water that turn deserts into gardens and impossible situations into places of hope.

The men and women of the Ministry Service Center are committed to joining God in the never-ending “new thing” of extending the healing ministry of Jesus throughout this broken world. With creativity, wisdom, integrity, dedication, reverence, and partnership, we are invested in God’s own passion for Service of the Poor, bringing hope wherever people feel as if they are alone in the wilderness.

Morning reflections have become one of the means by which we keep calling each other back to this ongoing work. Five days a week I have the joy of writing and sharing these brief pieces. This, our fourth annual “stand alone” volume, includes a number of the reflections that our associates have found particularly helpful during the past year.

May these pages provide springs of refreshment in whatever deserts you might find yourself, and may God’s own Spirit renew your hope.

Glenn McDonald  
Director of Mission Integration  
April 2017
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A Wretch like Me

A near disaster at sea transformed one man’s life. And that ended up changing both music history and spiritual history.

On May 10, 1748, the wooden frigate Greyhound – built to transport Africans to a life of slavery in the New World – was caught in a violent storm off the coast of Ireland. As wave after wave broke over the decks, its 23-year-old captain, John Newton, screamed into the wind, “God, have mercy!”

This was decidedly new behavior for Newton, who freely acknowledged he had no serious spiritual convictions. When the storm began to die down, Newton concluded his prayers had been heard. He decided to devote his life to God.

Newton’s conscience, unfortunately, remained untroubled by his human cargo for nearly seven years. As his faith moved from his head to his heart, he resolved to leave the trade. Years later he would write, “I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders.”

At first he was rejected for ordination in the Anglican Church because of his disgraceful past. In 1764 he was finally granted permission to enter the ministry, in which he served for 43 years. Newton became one of England’s fiercest opponents of the slave trade. He died in 1807, the very year that slavery was formally abolished in the British Empire.
Today Newton is chiefly remembered as a hymn writer. His most famous work was published in 1773, three years before the start of the American Revolution:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see.

Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved  
How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed.

Through many dangers, toils, and snares I have already come.  
Tis grace has kept me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.

Newton's original hymn included at least nine other verses, most of which are unknown to modern congregations. It's estimated that *Amazing Grace* has been recorded by more than a thousand artists, and is sung or performed at least 10 million times every year. What would no doubt warm Newton's heart the most, however, is that his simple hymn gradually became one of the most beloved expressions of the Good News in African-American churches, and was sung spontaneously by President Barack Obama at a funeral. The epitaph on his London tombstone reads:

John Newton, clerk,  
once an infidel and libertine,  
a servant of slaves in Africa,  
was, by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,  
preserved, restored, pardoned,  
and appointed to preach the faith he had long labored to destroy. •
William Golding’s first attempt at writing a novel, to put it kindly, fell short of expectations. His 1954 book sold only 3,000 copies in its first two years, then promptly went out of print. *Lord of the Flies*, however, ultimately became an international bestseller. Golding went on to win a Nobel Prize for Literature.

The book is a survival tale of a group of British schoolboys who are stranded far from civilization on an Eden-like island. Cut off from all adult authority, the well-educated boys endeavor to govern themselves. At first things seem to go well. But the mirage of orderliness soon gives way to chaos. Most of the boys opt out of contributing to the common good. A power struggle emerges between Ralph, who has humane instincts, and Jack, who is intoxicated by command and control.

Paranoia begins to grip the group. The boys imagine that a Beast lurks on the island. The Beast must be slaughtered. Savagery escalates. The social graces they once exhibited back at school are overwhelmed by primitive impulses.

Just as things seem to have reached a point of no return, Ralph, fleeing for his life, staggers onto the beach. There he looks up to see a British officer wearing a clean, starched uniform. The officer, leading a rescue party, stares incredulously at the scene before him: the best and brightest of British society, the very ones groomed to be its future leaders, have descended into violence and disorder. Theologian Gary Burge reflects, “The point is that deep within their little hearts resided a monster of untold ferocity.”
The title *Lord of the Flies* is intriguing. It appears to be a reference to an ancient Hebrew put-down of a pagan god in 2 Kings 1:2-3, 6, 16. The Philistines worshipped a deity called Beelzebul, or “Lord of the High Place.” The Israelites – in a strategy reminiscent of kids dissing each other on an elementary school playground – mocked Beelzebul by changing the last letter of his name. They called him Beelzebub, which means “Lord of the Flies.”

Lord of the High Place, you say? No, your god is more suited to supervising the insects attracted to garbage and excrement. By the time of Jesus, Beelzebub had become the title of a powerful demon or even another name for Satan himself.

Golding’s point is subtle but powerful. As the veneer of “being nice” is pulled back, we always end up counting on false gods. Whatever strategy we embrace – whether using paranoia to intimidate others, or choosing ethically shady options because they work, or holding on to power at all costs – will ultimately come back to bite us. Where can help be found?

Salvation comes from without. The schoolboys can’t grasp what has happened to themselves until the officer shows up on the beach. They can’t see their true condition until they see it through his eyes, and are shocked at how far they have fallen.

Our culture likes to hold up a caricature of God. *We’re having this great party until God shows up to make sure no one has any fun.* It’s more discerning to say that God has arrived on the beach at the head of a rescue party.

To save us from ourselves. •
During the First World War, a young Bible college teacher named Oswald Chambers became chaplain for the British army in Cairo, Egypt. At first, not everyone appreciated his presence. “I can’t stand religious people,” said one soldier, getting into his face. “Neither can I,” replied Chambers.

Within a year he had won over the vast majority of those under his care— not by imitating the religious stuffiness that was fashionable 100 years ago in England, but by teaching the Good News and encouraging the troops with an authentic and contagious joy.

There’s something about the prospect of “becoming religious” that sends people running for cover. Most of us have known at least one person who, having claimed to be in a closer relationship with God, quickly became a lot less fun, considerably more hung up on social taboos, and generally not the kind of person one would think to invite to a barbecue.

Oswald Chambers won the affection of the men around him because his passion for God made life richer and happier, not more dismal.

In the fall of 1917, he felt a tenderness in his stomach. His appendix was inflamed. He held off going to the hospital, not wanting to take a bed from a soldier who might need emergency medical care. By the time he had abdominal surgery, his condition had worsened. A few weeks later he died at the age of 43, leaving behind his wife, Biddy, and their little daughter, Kathleen.

Only when he was gone did the world begin to grasp the full impact of his teachings. Biddy spent years editing his beloved sermons and Bible presentations. Ultimately they were turned into 50 books. The most famous is the daily devotional My Utmost For His Highest, which presents 365 selections of Chambers’ talks and has never gone out of print.

More than three decades after his death, a group of seminary students timidly knocked on the door of the London house where Biddy was living with Kathleen. She immediately invited them to stay for supper. The students were in awe. They were in the home of the wife and the daughter of the Oswald Chambers. They spoke reverently about deep theological issues.
Biddy would have none of it. Religious formality had never been allowed to take root in their home.

Biographer David McCasland writes in *Oswald Chambers: Abandoned to God*, “To the astonishment of her very serious guests, she looked at her 35-year-old daughter Kathleen and said, ‘Why don’t you see if you can spit a cherry seed clear to the top of the over-mantle?’” Kathleen knew what her mother was up to. “She whooshed a tiny projectile toward the target. Ping. It was close, but fell short of the top.”

Then Biddy sighed and asked her daughter, “I don’t suppose any of these young men could do better?” With that, scores of cherry pits began to fly. A would-be bishop spat a seed almost to the ceiling. Everyone exploded into laughter. Biddy smiled with satisfaction. “Oswald would enjoy this,” she thought.

Is it possible to fall passionately in love with God and other people and not become a religious stuffed shirt? Of course it is. On the road to heaven, make sure you stop to experience the never-ending simple joys of the journey.

*Ping.*
Robert Frederick Chelsea “Bobby” Moore wasn’t just a famous English footballer (or what Americans would call a soccer player). He was captain of the team that won the 1966 World Cup, the only time England has broken through to win that global honor.

The Brazilian superstar Pele described him as the greatest defender he ever played against. It’s hard to overstate his celebrity in football-crazed England. At the turn of the century, Moore was actually named one of the 100 Greatest Britons of All Time.

An interviewer once asked him what it was like on that one-of-a-kind day when he ascended the balcony in historic Wembley Stadium to personally receive the Jules Rimet Trophy from Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. “It must have been a wonderful experience to do that before a home crowd,” the interviewer gushed. “Actually,” said Moore, “it was terrifying.”

He continued, “As I was going up the steps I noticed that the queen was wearing some beautiful white gloves. I looked at my hands and realized that they were covered with Wembley mud. I thought, ‘How can I shake hands with her like this? I’ll make her gloves dirty.’”

When you watch the historic footage of the ceremony, you can see Bobby Moore desperately wiping his hands on his shorts. As he gets closer to the queen, he even wipes his hands on a nearby velvet tablecloth. For English football fans, it is one of the endearing images of that memorable day.

For centuries, theologians have pondered a crucial question: How can people with dirty hands – we who have soiled ourselves through our actions, words, and motivations – ever come into the presence of a holy God? How can we approach a deity whose essential nature is infinitely purer and whiter than any queen’s gloves?

The answer is wrapped up in the name that the angel gave to Mary when announcing her child’s birth: He would become known as Immanuel, or “God with us.” We cannot ascend to the place where God rules the cosmos. But against all expectations – something unimaginable for a royal – the True King has descended to be with us.

Where will you encounter Immanuel this week? God-with-us will be God-with-you.

Always in the midst of whatever muck and mire you’re facing.
A Light in the Darkness

At first glance, we may not recognize the two objects in this picture. But they are poised to change the world. On the left is a solar energy panel. On the right is the small electric lamp (made of durable plastic) that it charges.

When the sun goes down every day on Developing World countries, darkness descends. Electrical power grids may be unreliable or may not exist at all. Typically, impoverished families have to rely on wax candles or kerosene lamps for light. Candles don’t last long. And kerosene lamps are both expensive and dangerous. Their toxic fumes and open flames take an estimated two million lives a year, mostly of women seeking nighttime illumination.

It just so happens, however, that Developing World countries are among the sunniest places on earth. The charger, when exposed to 8 hours of direct sunshine, can provide 100 hours of bright light – the stored-up power of the sun. And just like that, night becomes day.

Children can now study after dusk. Homes can become cleaner, safer, greener, and cheaper. Towns and villages can “stay awake” for more hours, and workers can be considerably more productive. What’s even more revolutionary is that each portable light has a phone jack. People who have generally been cut off from the world can now dream about using a mobile phone that will bring them news, commerce, and contact with neighboring villages.

The initial cost of the charger and lamp is comparatively high for a poor family. But by eliminating kerosene as an ongoing expense, the debt can rapidly be paid off. And then the technology is free. It requires nothing but a sunny day. Sociologists are already calling this the low-carbon industrial revolution.

While the industrial world has struggled to figure out how to make solar power reliable and affordable for immense cities, this simple technology is already becoming a game-changer for one third of the earth’s population. The sun – an inexhaustible resource – is turning darkness into light, one humble power pack at a time.

Jesus made a similar observation concerning spiritual life: “You’re here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept… If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I’m putting you on a light stand… [Therefore] shine!” (Matthew 5:14-16, The Message). God – an inexhaustible resource – is turning spiritual darkness into light, one humble heart at a time.

And you’re called to shine brightly in the darkness today.
Between the Trenches

The ceasefire that ended the horrific conflict known as World War I went into effect at 11:00 am on November 11, 1918. That was the eleventh hour on the eleventh day of the eleventh month. It was called Armistice Day – ultimately to become known as Remembrance Day in Britain and Veterans Day in America.

Armistice is what all soldiers long for. It means a ceasefire. Standing down. Terminating hostilities. Forsaking the hellish business of killing or being killed.

Long before the fighting came to its merciful end, there had been another armistice of sorts in the winter of 1914. A series of trenches had been dug across Europe, with millions of young men facing each other day by day. On December 25, German and British soldiers alike disobeyed the orders of their commanders, waved white flags of truce, and walked hesitantly into the no-man’s land between the trenches. They intended to celebrate Christmas with their enemies.

This is one of the photos that captures that remarkable event. British and German fighters are mingled together. Notice the weariness and wariness in their faces.

But then something amazing began to happen. Soldiers who just the day before had been trying to slaughter each other discovered their mutual humanity. They sang together. They traded cigarettes and toasts. One Welsh regiment received a barrel of Christmas beer from the Germans who were entrenched directly opposite their line. A Scottish Highlander produced a soccer ball. Within minutes the two armies were playing what can only be described as an “international friendly” on the frozen ground of no-man’s land.
Historian Rick Beyer writes: “The soccer game, of course, had no referee; but the men on both sides took a perverse pride in playing precisely according to the rules.” The Germans prevailed, three goals to two.

And the generals? They were furious. The soldiers were ordered back to their trenches. Some of those who participated in the fraternization were ultimately court-martialed. The brutal sameness of the war resumed on December 26, and nothing like that surprising truce ever happened again until Armistice Day four years later.

Combatants always yearn for peace. Which is exactly how most of America’s culture warriors feel after decades of lobbing political grenades into each other’s trenches.

By God’s grace, it’s time for armistice. We need to find each other in no-man’s land and rediscover the humanity of those who don’t think, act, or vote the way we do. But instead of crawling back into our trenches after a momentary truce, our call is to turn down the flames of hurtful rhetoric and begin to build bridges over canyons of mistrust.

Impossible? That’s what the cynics will say. But we can be sure of one thing: All the resources of heaven are available to those who seek peace.

And their joy will be the greatest when God’s own Armistice Day finally dawns. •
Sing Your Prayers

All her life, Carly Simon has battled the Beast.

The Beast is her name for the all-consuming sense of Not-Good-Enoughness that has plagued her from her earliest days. She was supposed to be a boy. Her parents, who already had two daughters, had even picked out a name for their new son: Carl. Upon her arrival as a girl, Mom and Dad navigated their disappointment by simply adding a “y” to Carl.

Because her father was Richard L. Simon, the founder of the Simon & Schuster publishing empire, Carly’s New York City childhood was decorated with elegant parties and high profile celebrities. Jackie Robinson and Albert Einstein might drop by for dinner. But underneath it all was the deep suspicion that she was not pretty enough or talented enough. She felt neither favored nor loved.

At age eight she began to stutter. Her stuttering became so severe that she shrank back at school and at any public function where she might have to talk. One night at the dinner table she couldn’t even say the words “pass the butter.” Her mother, in a rush of compassionate insight, asked Carly to sing the words instead. The words came out flawlessly. The whole family joined in. Soon everyone was singing “pass the butter” in harmony.

Older sister Joey would go on to become an opera singer, and sister Lucy briefly pursued a pop singing career. No one suspected it at the time, but their shy, awkward,
self-doubting little sister – the one who was finding her voice while singing for her butter – would go on to become a global musical superstar.

She still battles stuttering from time to time, and the Beast can still manifest itself as overwhelming stage fright. She is one of the few guest artists on *Saturday Night Live* ever permitted by Lorne Michaels to pre-tape her performance. But it can truthfully be said that Carly Simon got beyond her stammering and found her voice by singing.

Do you stutter sometimes when you pray? Do you struggle to find the right words, express the full range of your emotions, or get across to God what's really on your heart?

Then try singing your prayers. Or sigh them. Or scream them. Or cry them out with real tears.

Some people pray best by dancing. They don’t utter words at all, but offer movements and gestures that mere language could never express. Still others walk their prayers. Or silently drive them on country roads. Or wordlessly pour out their deepest feelings – whether gratitude, grief, hurt, or hope – while exercising.

The psalms of the Bible – the prayer book of the human race and one of Judaism’s priceless gifts to the world – endorse and applaud this full range of human expression.

Don't let the Beast have the last word. Find a way to find your voice. God is always eager to hear whatever you have to say.
On November 1, 1755, the citizens of Lisbon, Portugal were crowded into church services celebrating All Saints Day. At 9:40 am the world as they knew it came to an end.

Somewhere offshore there was a sideways lurch along the border of two tectonic plates, which are giant slabs of the earth’s crust. What followed was the most intense earthquake in recorded history, estimated at 9.0 on the Richter Scale. For seven terrifying minutes, the city shook. Fissures as wide as 15 feet opened up in the central squares. By comparison, the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, estimated at 7.8 on the Richter Scale, lasted only half a minute.

Before the citizens of Lisbon could even make sense of what had happened, the first aftershock – almost as strong as the initial quake – rocked the city. Another aftershock came 2 hours later. But the real horror happened along the shoreline. The waters of the Atlantic Ocean receded from the city’s harbor, then returned as a 50-foot-high tsunami. Within the space of an hour, 60,000 people had died. Virtually every building was rubble. Fires burned unchecked for days.

For all the suffering experienced by those in Lisbon, the most lasting damage happened in the minds and hearts of Europe’s intellectuals. After this disaster, how could any thinking person seriously believe that the world was ruled by a powerful and benevolent God? Weren’t the citizens of Lisbon the very picture of innocent, faithful people – doing the right thing at the right place at the right time? Why would God allow such a catastrophe?

The French philosopher Voltaire gave up all hope that God could ever be let off the hook. The notion then fashionable in European drawing rooms – that “everything is for the best” because this is “the best of all possible worlds” – was widely abandoned.
There was a similar reaction after the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami of 2004. Slate magazine published an article by Heather MacDonald titled Send a Message to God: He Has Gone Too Far This Time. MacDonald wrote, “Where is God’s incentive to behave? He gets credit for the good things and no blame for the bad.”

But let’s pause a moment. Before we dismiss God’s goodness (or the idea of God altogether), we should take note of something: The Bible is tougher on God than the world’s most famous skeptics. David Hume, Bertrand Russell, Jean-Paul Sartre, and (in our own time) Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris have all slammed God for failing to care for the people he claims to cherish. But none of them have advanced complaints more emotional and sharp-edged than the Bible’s own role models:

“Truly you are a God who hides himself” (Isaiah)
“Though I cry, ‘Violence!’ I get no response. Though I call for help, there is no justice.” (Job)
“Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.” (Solomon)
“If the Lord is for us, why has all this happened to us?” (Gideon)
“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Jesus)

You have to admit that the Bible isn’t afraid to tackle its own toughest problem straight on. And how does God typically respond to these cries of the heart on the pages of Scripture? With silence. Then there’s the fascinating finale to the book of Job. Job, it would seem, has every right to find out why he has had to endure so much suffering. But God provides no explanations.

Instead, God goes on and on about the complexities and wonders of the natural world. In the words of Frederick Buechner, “God doesn’t explain. He explodes. He asks Job who he thinks he is anyway. He says that to try to explain the kind of things Job wants explained would be like trying to explain Einstein to a littleneck clam… God doesn’t reveal his design. Hereveals himself.”

Author Philip Yancey remembers attending the funeral of a child in Chicago. The pastor shocked the mourners by suddenly looking down at the coffin and interrupting his own eulogy: “Damn you, death!” He then gathered himself and reminded his listeners that God would indeed, one day, damn death.

Until then, even with death all around us, we can experience the two gifts we need more than any other: the assurance of God’s own presence, no matter what happens to us.

And the promise that this broken world shall one day be made whole.
A few years ago one of the students in a class taught by Dr. Dallas Willard was seized by a moment of sheer arrogance.

Until his recent death, Willard – a theologian and philosophy professor at USC – was widely regarded as one of the world’s sharpest minds. The student, trying to pick a fight, raised his hand and attempted to rekindle a trivial argument he had had with the prof.

The rest of the class held its collective breath. They waited for Willard to demolish the young man’s position, and no doubt leave him humiliated. As one observer later wrote, “I joke sometimes that I never get into an argument with Dallas, because I’m afraid he will prove I don’t exist.”

Willard’s response surprised everyone.

He said warmly, “Well, I think that’s a good place for the class to end. Let’s just stop there, and then we’ll pick it up next time.” After the class another student approached Willard. “You could have let him have it! Why didn’t you do it?” Dallas responded, “I’m practicing the discipline of not having the last word.”

Most of us could rattle off a list of spiritual practices: prayer, worship, contemplation, and servanthood come to mind. But rarely do we consider restraint – intentionally holding ourselves back in a spirit of humility – as a way of loving others and imitating the character of Christ.

This week, choose to let someone else have the last word: at home, at work, and in that argument that never seems to end.

And if you find you just can’t do it?

Well, there’s one sure-fire way to always have the last word:

Apologize.
In the movie *Signs*, Mel Gibson plays Graham Hess, a man who used to believe in God. In fact, he used to be a priest. But a seemingly random and meaningless accident has taken the life of his wife, leaving him with two small children. His brother Merrill, played by Joaquin Phoenix, has moved into the house to provide friendship and support.

Early in the film they’re facing an entirely different kind of problem – rampant fear that aliens are poised to invade the earth. Late at night, as they watch media coverage of the crisis and cradle the sleeping kids, they talk:

*Merrill:* Some people are probably thinking this is the end of the world.

*Graham:* That’s true.

*Merrill:* Do you think it could be?

*Graham:* Yes.

*Merrill:* How can you say that?

*Graham:* That wasn’t the answer you wanted?

*Merrill:* Couldn’t you pretend to be like you used to be? Give me some comfort?

But Graham refuses to pretend that he still believes. He says to his brother, “People break down into two groups. When they experience something lucky, group number one sees it as more than luck, more than coincidence. They see it as a sign – evidence that there is Someone up there watching out for them. Group number two,” he goes on, “sees it as just pure luck.” When the members of group two experience a crisis, “Deep down, they feel that whatever happens, they’re on their own. And that fills them with fear.”

People in group number one, he explains, see the same data but come to different conclusions. “They’re looking at a miracle, and deep down, they feel that whatever happens, there will be Someone there to help them. And that fills them with hope.” Graham then turns to Merrill and asks the movie’s central question:

“So you have to ask yourself, what kind of person are you? Are you the kind that sees signs, that sees miracles, or do you believe that people just get lucky? Or look at the question this way: Is it possible that there are no coincidences?”

The Bible is essentially a collection of stories about these two groups: those who journey hopefully and those who go through life fearfully. During the movie, Graham Hess has to decide if there is sufficient evidence – enough “signs” – to bet his life once again that reality resides in group one.

That’s the decision we have to make every day as well.
Most of the accounts we have of the life of Jesus happen around the Sea of Galilee. What ancient Jews called the Sea is actually a large freshwater lake in the middle of northern Israel. During the time of Jesus, the region around this lake was roughly broken into four territories.

The northwest shore of the lake was called Galilee. This was home to thousands of observant, faithful Jewish families. Many familiar stories concerning Jesus, including the feeding of the 5,000 and the Sermon on the Mount, happened here at “11 o’clock” (if the lake were a clock), and the village of Capernaum became his adopted hometown and base of operations.

The southwestern region (“8 o’clock”) was also called Galilee, and it was also heavily Jewish. But these were the Jewish families that watched HBO. They did business with the occupying Roman Empire. They had compromised with the world. Those in northern Galilee (think Bible Belt) would rather die than do such things. Many of them, in fact, did just that.

Likewise, the northeastern region (“2 o’clock”), also populated by secular Jewish households, was spiritually lukewarm. It was called Gaulanitis. That name is still associated with the high ridge on that side of the lake – the so-called Golan Heights – where Israelis and their Arab neighbors warily confront each other to this day.
That leaves the southeastern quadrant, or “5 o’clock.” It was known as the Decapolis or Ten Towns. This region was thoroughly pagan. No Jewish boy who valued his spiritual integrity would ever be caught dead on the southeastern side of the lake. Dr. Jim Martin, an archeologist, points out while these areas weren’t that far away in terms of actual miles, for all intents and purposes, for a Jewish young man, they were equivalent to the dark side of the moon.

When Jesus told the parable of the prodigal son and said that he went to live in a “faraway country,” all Jesus had to do was point to the opposite shore of the lake. Visiting the regions of Gaulanitis or the Decapolis would be like a Sunday School class dropping in on Bourbon Street in New Orleans. Therefore Luke 8:26 is a verse that brims with drama: “They [Jesus and his disciples] sailed to the region of the Gerasenes, which is across the lake from Galilee.” What is Jesus doing?

Keep in mind that he is about 30 years old. His disciples are anywhere from 15 to 22 years old. This is essentially a youth leader taking twelve kids from his high school or college fellowship into an exceedingly threatening situation. Martin points out that it would have been reasonable for the young disciples to assume that Jesus was taking them into battle. They are crossing over into enemy territory. They are going to the other side of the lake, where they have never been before. Demonic forces will be waiting for them. Martin wonders if the disciples even got out of the boat. This isn’t Kansas anymore.

What about you?

If Jesus were to look at you and say, “I want you to go across the lake with me,” would you do so? What if that means representing the reign of God in a business meeting where all kinds of divergent priorities are about to clash? Or standing against injustice? What if that means confronting the entertainment industry? Or freeing women and children who are being trafficked? Or resisting the governing powers that seem to perpetuate the cycles of poverty instead of breaking them?

We can spend all of our days hanging out with spiritually convinced people in some local version of the Bible Belt. Or we can set our hearts on the other side of the lake.

Will you follow Jesus into uncharted territory?
Before my two brothers and I got too old to attempt new outdoor adventures, we decided to hike about 45 miles of the Appalachian Trail in Shenandoah National Park in Virginia. Our time together began like all such quests – with glorious optimism.

The AT is rugged and beautiful. It meanders more than 2,100 miles from Georgia to Maine through woods and over rocky peaks. I outfitted myself with everything I thought might be crucial to my hiking success. We loaded our backpacks with sleeping gear, several days’ worth of food, and generous supplies of water, since the heat index on these July days was going to push 100.

As we began trudging up our first hill, we felt the heaviness of our 30-pound packs. It wasn’t long before we received subtle reminders that our bodies had changed somewhat from our Boy Scout days. My younger brother, Bruce, actually turned 50 on our first day of hiking. As he progressively melted in the heat, we predicted the headline of the local newspaper: *Hiker Who Goes over the Hill Dies on the Hill.*

I felt confident. I’m an active, year-round walker. Little did I know that I had blundered on a crucial aspect of preparation. I had borrowed the backpack that I was carrying. It had not been professionally fitted to my frame. I wasn’t worried, though. *How hard could this be?*

Within the first hour I realized that the weight I was carrying was unbalanced. I began to feel like a contortionist, continually making physical adjustments just to go forward.
I pitched my weight forward, which put tremendous pressure on my left knee. By the middle of the second day, I was hobbling and in serious trouble.

I recalled the celebrated expression of horse owners: “No foot, no horse.” It doesn’t matter what shape the rest of your horse is in. If it has one bad foot, everything stops. I started saying to myself, “No foot, no Glenn.”

Finally I came to a halt at one of the places where the Appalachian Trail crosses the park’s main road. I dropped my backpack. I couldn’t take another step. My brothers went on without me. Ultimately I was able to hitch a ride with a nice retired couple from Brooklyn, who chauffeured me down the road to our planned stop for the evening. For the better part of the next two days, my hike was over.

Jesus had something to say to would-be disciples whose enthusiasm for spiritual journeying outstrips their actual readiness to walk: “The Spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26:41). Or as Eugene Peterson memorably paraphrased that verse in The Message: “There is a part of you that is eager, ready for anything in God. But there’s another part that is lazy as an old dog sleeping by the fire.”

On a hot summer day I stepped out of my regular existence and tried to excel at a life that required a serious commitment to wilderness hiking. I faltered.

The same thing happens whenever I forget that my spiritual life has to be an actual life. Walking with God is not an occasional day hike – dropping in from time to time for a mission trip, devotional break, or retreat – after which I go back to my “real” world.

Have you ever tried to walk with God, only to see your glorious optimism fade away? Don’t give up. Begin again.

We serve a glorious God, one who will make sure we learn how to stay on the trail.
The One Thing in Your Control

From time to time, author and humorist Mark Twain was asked, “Of all your accomplishments, which one makes you the most proud?” He always gave the same answer: “I’m most proud that I was born on November 30.”

Say what?

Twain was born on November 30, 1835, at 11:10 pm. Hurtling across the night sky was Halley’s Comet. The comet, which is fixed in a long orbit around the sun, becomes visible every 75-76 years. Twain thought it noteworthy he was born during such an appearance. Furthermore: “I came into the world with Halley’s Comet, I’m going out of the world with Halley’s Comet.”

Excuse me?

Twain was predicting that he would die within a two-week period in the spring of 1910. He actually succeeded. The most famous American writer of his generation didn’t take his own life, but died of natural causes on April 21, when the comet was at its nearest. The ultimate showman (who was also an incurable show-off) managed to pull off something certifiably beyond his control.

Most of us presume we’re in control of a great many things. But it’s easy to demonstrate that’s largely an illusion. We can’t control the circumstances of our birth. Or who brought us into the world. Or our nationality, ethnicity, or generation. You can’t control
the weather. Or the stock market. Or how your favorite team performs. Despite all appearances to the contrary, it doesn't really matter whether you turn off your TV, leave the room, or wear the same socks during every game.

We can’t control what others say or do. Or what they feel. Nor can we control what others think about us. You can’t control the traffic. Or gas prices. Or your cat. Or the fact that you’ll be a day older at this time tomorrow.

Then again, there are a few things that are very much in our control. We can control what we’re learning. And what we’re paying attention to. And what we’re trusting for ultimate security.

Victor Frankl, a Jewish psychiatrist, was forcibly taken from his home in Vienna to a Nazi detention camp. His captors took everything from him: his freedom, his job, his possessions, his family. He was compelled to stand completely naked before his inquisitors. They even took his wedding ring. The Nazis tried to rob Frankl of everything associated with his identity.

But as he recounts in his book *Man’s Search for Meaning*, it gradually dawned on him that there was one thing no one could ever take from him – not even torturers who held the power of life and death. No one could ever rob Victor Frankl of his freedom to respond to whatever was happening to him. Nor can anyone ever take that precious freedom away from you.

A great many things will happen today that are out of your control. But you can choose to respond with humility, gratitude, perseverance, and hope.

Comets will come and go. But character is what really matters, in this world and the next.
In the summer of 2016, Omran Daqneesh became known simply as the Syrian Boy. Dazed, covered with dirt and blood, the five-year-old sat in an ambulance after an airstrike to his hometown of Aleppo. Omran gave the world a face to remember as people tried to come to terms with the horrific Syrian civil war. A six-year-old American boy named Alex, who lives with his family outside New York City, did not forget what he had seen. He wrote the following letter to the President:

Dear President Obama, remember the boy who was picked up by the ambulance in Syria? Can you please go get him and bring him to [my home]? Park in the driveway or on the street and we will be waiting for you guys with flags, flowers, and balloons. We will give him a family and he will be our brother. Catherine, my little sister, will be collecting butterflies and fireflies for him.

In my school, I have a friend from Syria, Omar, and I will introduce him to [Omran]. We can all play together. We can invite him to birthday parties and he will teach us another language. We can teach him English, too, just like my friend Aoto from Japan. Please tell him that his brother will be Alex who is a very kind boy, just like him. Since he won’t bring toys and doesn’t have toys Catherine will share her big blue stripy white bunny. And I will share my bike and I will teach him how to ride it… And he [can] smell Catherine’s lip gloss penguin which is green. She doesn’t let anyone touch it.

Thank you very much! I can’t wait for you to come! Alex, 6 years old

Jesus said that unless we become like children – like Alex – we cannot enter the kingdom or reign of God. What will it look like when the words of the Lord’s Prayer finally come true: when God’s kingdom comes and God’s will is done “on earth as it is in heaven”?

People will collect butterflies and fireflies to give to those who hurt. They will invite others into their families and share their bikes and big blue stripy white bunnies. And they will form welcoming committees to greet each other with flags, flowers, and balloons. That is more than just a child’s dream. It’s a dream worth living for, praying for, and working for every day.
People are defined by their problems.

Here’s a more accurate way to put it: You are defined by whatever you consider your most important problem. Something like half the world has to address the same vexing problems day after day:

What are we going to eat today? How can I keep my children safe? Where can we find adequate healthcare? Who will take care of me when I can no longer take care of myself?

People who experience greater prosperity begin to trade up for what we might call better and more interesting problems. The problem with your problems, however, is that they might not be big enough. Sometimes we obsess over problems that are far too small:

How can I get the recognition I deserve? What are the most secure opportunities within my field of work? How can I get rid of this sag around my middle? Who should my team draft to put us on the road to the Super Bowl? What’s the simplest and easiest way to get rich?

You might protest that figuring out how to become rich is hardly a small problem, or everyone would have solved it. But it’s wiser to say that accumulating wealth is not a noble problem. It’s not a problem worth living for and dying for. People with larger visions and what we might call “large souls” surrender their lives to extraordinary problems:

How can we end human trafficking? How can a free society be both secure and welcoming to outsiders? How can we safeguard the earth’s fragile ecosystems? How can we eradicate extreme poverty, so that no one has to wonder what they will eat today?

Sometimes the Good Life is pictured as the condition of having to face fewer and fewer problems. Sometimes spirituality is actually marketed as the surest route to a problem-free existence.

But as corporate change guru Ichak Adizes points out, the only condition that absolutely guarantees the cessation of all problems is death: “Having fewer problems is not living. It’s dying. Addressing and being able to solve bigger and bigger problems means that our strengths and capacities are improving.” In other words, growing up and being successful doesn’t mean avoiding problems. It means having the courage to trade up for far more worthy problems.

So what’s your problem? We all need a problem so big and so important that it cannot be solved unless God shows up. Which, interestingly enough, turns out to be the truest definition of what it means to be rich.
Love Bugs

A few years ago I finally had the chance to encounter, firsthand, one of the world’s strangest insects. I got up close and personal with love bugs.

These small black flies with orange heads are native to Central America and to the American Gulf Coast. They exhibit a bizarre life cycle. They thrive as larvae in the soil for the vast majority of their existence, only to morph into airborne entities whose numbers radically explode during two brief mating seasons – one in the spring and one in the fall.

I happened to visit Louisiana during a September outbreak. “Are those real love bugs?” I excitedly asked my hostess as I walked with her outside the Baton Rouge airport. “Oh, yes, they’re real,” she said with a sigh. “Will I get to see more?” I asked, the hope rising in my voice. “You can be sure of that,” she answered, exhibiting about as much enthusiasm as Pharaoh would have mustered for an 11th plague.

Love bugs are named for the fact that they almost always fly in pairs. A male bug and a female bug link up and zip around like little black-and-orange bi-planes. When their amorous acrobatics and egg-laying are completed, they expire, piling up into gigantic heaps that only the land of Mordor might appreciate. A Louisiana radio station was running a promotion while I was visiting: whoever brought in the most gallons of dead love bugs won a pair of concert tickets.

According to urban legend, love bugs are the result of a bioengineering catastrophe at the University of Florida. UF scientists were trying to conjure up an anti-mosquito
organism. Instead, their Frankenstein creation somehow escaped into the wild. Philip Koehler, a professor in the university’s entomology department, has pointed out that this story is obviously contrived. “If we had created them, they would be orange and blue.”

Actually, if they were genetically engineered by anyone, it would be a car wash company. Love bugs tend to swarm. Ominous clouds of them shroud the landscape, oblivious to approaching traffic. Driving through a love bug infestation is a bit like driving through falling rain. In sufficient numbers they cause radiators to overheat. Their patented bug goop is mildly acidic. Those who live in love bug zones have to wash their cars every few days or risk paint corrosion.

Safely back home again in Indiana, it occurred to me that nobody loves a love bug… except another love bug. Which brings us to a sadly familiar part of human experience. We find it easy to love those who are just like us. Others are not so lucky.

We have a litany of reasons for withholding our love:

 Because you snubbed me  
 Because you embarrassed me in front of our friends  
 Because your success makes my life seem pathetic  
 Because you’re planning on voting for a candidate I can’t stand  
 Because I don’t agree with what you think about God

Life is short. Don’t waste it wallowing in lovelessness. Ask God for the capacity to love even those who drive you crazy.

And think twice about driving a new car in Louisiana in September. •
In *The Princess Bride*, Westley, the humble Farm Boy, returns to reclaim Buttercup, his true love. But he no longer looks like Farm Boy. He is wearing a black mask and introduces himself as the Dread Pirate Roberts.

In short order, however, we learn that Westley is not the real Dread Pirate Roberts. He’s only impersonating him. Roberts, in fact, had confided in Westley, “My name is Ryan. I inherited the ship from the previous Dread Pirate Roberts, just as you will inherit it from me. The man I inherited it from is not the real Dread Pirate Roberts, either. His name was Cummerbund.”

So who’s the real Dread Pirate Roberts?

In 1959, America’s “last surviving Civil War veteran,” Walter Williams, died. Tens of thousands attended a funeral parade in his honor and celebrated his life during an official week of mourning. A zealous investigative journalist, however, discovered that Williams had been only five years old when the Civil War began. He had never gotten a whiff of combat.

The journalist furthermore learned that Williams had inherited his title of honor from another pretender named John Salling. Shockingly, the previous 10 “last surviving Civil War veterans” all turned out to be phonies, too. So who was the real last surviving veteran?

Most of us would conclude that clinging to a false identity or claim to fame is a pretty sad way to go through life. But then, most of us do that all the time. We even do an effective job of hiding that disturbing truth from ourselves.
This is the problem of the False Self. I don't want you to see who I really am. Allowing you to glimpse my pathetic problems and the sources of my deepest shame — well, that feels more terrifying than a walk through the Fire Swamp and facing the Rodents of Unusual Size.

So I put on a bold mask to hide my hesitancy. Or an aggressive mask to cover my fear. Or a calm mask to divert attention from the fact that on the inside I'm a nervous wreck.

Psychologists speak of the Crisis of Congruence. That's the distance between the Real Me that I am hoping to hide and the Phony Me that I hope you will buy. The greater the distance between my actual self and the mask I am wearing, the more exhausting it becomes to keep the mask in place — and the more my loved ones tend to suffer when I come home, wearily toss my mask aside, and hit them with a full dose of the Insecure and Hurting Me that's been dying to see the light of day.

What can we do? We can unmask ourselves. We can live in the confidence that the one Person whose opinion really counts — the One who created us and sustains us — not only knows all our secrets, but treasures us.

Which means I can ponder that most interesting and important question — who's the real me? — and not feel afraid. •
Ancient mariners were famous for their stories of peril on the high seas. They spoke of the multi-tentacled Kraken that splintered whole ships; a vortex called the Maelstrom that pulled vessels down a kind of oceanic drain; a precipitous drop-off where the flat earth came to its edge; and warlike mermaids and mermen not likely to end up in a Disney animated film. In the 21st century we can safely say such accounts were just fanciful myths.

But one other enduring “tall tale” has proven to be all too real: the rogue wave. Sailors have been reporting monster waves, freak waves, or killer waves for centuries. Such stories were typically dismissed as nonsense.

Consider the wave that hit the Eagle Island Lighthouse along the Irish coast on March 11, 1861. The lighthouse sits a full 200 feet above the high water mark. At midday, for no apparent reason, an incredible wall of water suddenly materialized and slammed into the main tower, breaking the glass at the very top and flooding the interior.

Despite such evidence, scientists stubbornly held to the view that seeing isn’t always believing. The wave just couldn’t have been that high. That’s because conventional wisdom declared that it was physically impossible for a wave to exceed 30 feet. All that changed in 1995, when oceanographers were finally in the right place at the right time to measure the so-called Draupner wave, a rogue wave at least 84 feet high that slammed into the Draupner oil platform in the North Sea.

Today it is widely accepted that monster-sized waves are not only real, but are probably rising somewhere on the planet at any given moment. They are frightening – not only because they are unpredictable, but because they have a demonstrated capacity to do significant damage. It’s possible that many of the ships (both large and small) that
have vanished without a trace over the centuries were lost to waves that seemingly appeared out of nowhere.

How do they originate? Researchers have learned that most ocean waves move independently of one another. But every now and then, a “pack” of waves will form a coherent group. In a process called modulation instability, all the waves in a group pour their energy into a single rogue. With little or no warning, a towering mass appears. Then it collapses and disappears as quickly as it formed.

Every now and then it can seem as if a “rogue wave” of a different sort suddenly smashes into our lives. Lots of little frustrations – each of them independently manageable – come together at the same time. A sick child. A broken water heater. A judgmental neighbor. An overdrawn bank account. That idiot who cut you off in traffic. An emotionally charged argument with someone you love. That’s all it takes. Without warning, it can feel as if you’re drowning.

There are no rogue wave verses in the Bible. But we do have this word from King David who, in a moment of desperation, wrote: “Save me, O God, for the floodwaters have come up to my neck” (Psalm 69:1).

There is no wave so high, or ocean abyss so deep, that we can ever find ourselves beyond God’s reach. That’s our ultimate spiritual security.

And as a rule of thumb, it’s probably a good idea never to go cruising on a boat named Poseidon.
Lifesavers

The most tragic survivor of the sinking of the Titanic was surely Bruce Ismay.

The dapper, mustachioed managing director of the White Star Line had apparently persuaded the captain to race faster toward New York. Why shouldn't the most magnificent ocean liner on the planet delight everyone by arriving a full day early?

But that put the Titanic on a collision course with an iceberg. During the ship’s death throes, Ismay sneaked aboard one of the very last lifeboats.

Historian David Lynch writes:

“Once safely (in the lifeboat), Ismay deliberately faced the other way as the Titanic sank, a gesture that could stand as a metaphor for the rest of his troubled life. Numerous editorials and cartoons lampooned him for having saved himself while the captain and most of the other men in first class went down with the ship. More than once in the years that followed he must have regretted his own survival... Although he liked to be kept informed of shipping news, it was forbidden to mention the Titanic in his presence.”

Bruce Ismay saved his own life.

But in a real sense his life was over the moment he got into that lifeboat.

When Jesus starts talking about what it would really mean to join his movement – to surrender our private agendas, our cherished resources, and our panicked need to stay in control – most of us start looking for lifeboats.

We don’t want to stay a minute longer on a ship in which everyone is going to die, even if that’s where Jesus is.

Jesus outrageously asks: “What good will it be for you to gain the whole world – to appear to get off the sinking ship – if in the process you lose the very thing you were trying to save?”

Here’s the call of Christ in 18 words:

We give up a life we cannot keep in order to gain a life we can never lose.
Brennan Manning used to recount a story about American G.I.s in France during World War II.

One of their number had been killed in action. They approached the priest in a local village and asked if they could bury their friend in the church cemetery.

“Was he a Catholic in good standing with the Church?” the priest asked. No, they admitted.

“Then he cannot be buried in the parish cemetery.”

The soldiers felt hurt and angry.

They dug a grave as close as they could to the cemetery, outside the fence, and buried their comrade.

The next morning they made a discovery. Their friend’s fresh grave was now inside the parish cemetery.

During the night, the priest had moved the fence.

Some people spend their lives building fences as tall and as strong as possible.

Others spend their lives doing all they can to make fences irrelevant.

May God grant us the grace to be among the latter.

“[Christ] tore down the wall we used to keep each other at a distance. He repealed the law code that had become so clogged with fine print and footnotes that it hindered more than it helped” (Ephesians 2:14-15, The Message). ✤
The Game of Life

In 1856 a young businessman named Milton Bradley hatched a plan to make his fortune. He produced an immensely popular picture of a rising, clean-shaven politician named Abraham Lincoln. In 1860 Lincoln was elected president. Good news! But then he grew a beard. Overnight, Bradley’s inventory became worthless.

One of Bradley’s friends, hoping to cheer him up, brought over a crude board game. The 24-year-old entrepreneur suddenly had an idea: He would invent his own game, something highly moral that would help players grow in character and live better lives. He called it *The Checkered Game of Life*.

As Jill Lepore writes in her book *Mansions of Happiness: A History of Life and Death*, Bradley’s game presented to children the realities of virtue and vice. Decisions are required. Truth exists, and you can either ignore it or choose to seek it out. You might land on a square called Honesty and go directly to Happiness. But you might also land on Poverty and feel miserable. You definitely didn’t want to land on Disgrace. Nor was it a good thing to land on the square by which you entered politics. Bradley designed the game so that becoming a politician made one far more likely to commit crimes and end up in prison.

One hundred years later, the creative team at the Milton Bradley Company decided to re-invent their founder’s original board game to celebrate its centennial. In 1960 they introduced *The Game of Life*. Millions of Baby Boomers grew up moving little station wagons around the board, and herding blue and pink plastic “kids.”
Lepore points out that this new game was shamelessly cash-conscious. It was not about serving others, and it was definitely not about finding the best path to heaven. The team at Milton Bradley felt sure that no modern child really wanted to figure out how to become more virtuous. “You count your cash, not your good deeds,” she observes. In *The Game of Life*, you never die. You just quit working.

Then, shortly before Wall Street imploded in 2008, Hasbro (which had subsumed Milton Bradley) introduced yet another version: *The Game of Life Twists and Turns*. In this version, life is amiless. Instead of following a pre-determined path, each player decides how to spend their own time. Hang out? Travel? Have kids? *Whatever.*

Instead of pretend cash, you get a pretend VISA brand credit card. “We’re helping to educate kids. It’s never too early,” explained the folks at Hasbro. You can plunge into massive debt but still continue playing. There was a square for this in Milton Bradley’s original game. It was called the Road to Folly.

What’s the point of *Twists and Turns*? Players don’t grow in virtue. They collect experiences. Lepore reflects: There are “a thousand ways to live your life… No one dies, no one grows old, no one ever grows up… How does life begin? What does it mean? What happens at the end? Who knows? You choose.” Welcome to the 21st century.

The Bible’s authors never shy away from acknowledging life’s twists and turns. But that doesn’t mean there isn’t a real path. And a finish line that is worth reaching.

Here’s how the author of the book of Hebrews puts it:

“Start running—and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we’re in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed—that exhilarating finish in and with God—he could put up with anything along the way” (Hebrews 12:1-3, The Message).

In the real game of life, the stakes are high. Decisions are required. Truth exists, and you can either ignore it or choose to seek it out.

And every new morning, once again, it’s your turn.
Multi-Tasking God

The Bible brims with hope and encouragement. But embedded within that Good News there are stories that do not make easy reading. Such is the startling tale of the transporting of the Ark of the Covenant in 2 Samuel chapter six.

The word “ark” means chest or box. Two arks appear in the Bible. Noah’s Ark was a gigantic box-like boat. The Ark of the Covenant, on the other hand, was a wooden box about four feet long, two feet high, and two feet wide. It was completely covered with gold, and was capped by a spectacular lid that featured a pair of carved gold cherubim, or angels. The Ark contained, among other things, a copy of the 10 Commandments. It represented God’s continuing presence with God’s people.

During one of the early chapters in the history of Israel, the Ark has been captured by the Philistines and then marooned for about 30 years in the house of a Jewish priest named Abinadab. David, newly crowned as Israel’s king, figures the Ark needs a more suitable resting place in Jerusalem. So he and an enthusiastic crowd decide to become the Returners of the Lost Ark.

Now Abinadab has two sons, Ahio and Uzzah. Apparently he and his wife had read that little booklet in the checkout line at the grocery: Distinctive Names for Your New Baby. These two men assume the responsibility for transporting the Ark. They place it on a new ox cart, with Ahio leading the way and Uzzah walking alongside as a kind of spotter.

Unfortunately, the oxen stumble. The Ark begins to slide. Uzzah extends his hand to keep it from hitting the ground. At the very moment he touches the Ark, God strikes Uzzah dead. This is a frightening scene. What kind of mean and capricious God would kill a man who is doing something so innocent – trying to keep the Ark from splattering in the mud?

The answer is that God is not mean at all. As theologian Dallas Willard points out, neither is electricity or nuclear power. But electricity, nuclear power, and God are all dangerous. And what Uzzah does with his hand is not as innocent as it looks.

We know nothing more about Uzzah than what we learn from the few lines of this story. Commentators speculate that he had taken upon himself a kind of professional responsibility for managing the Ark. After all, for 30 years the Ark has been in his house. It may be that Uzzah has gradually gotten used to the presence of God. He has overlooked the fact that God had provided itemized safety precautions for moving the Ark.
God had specifically told the Israelites that whenever the Ark was to be moved, it should be carried. Priests should insert poles into the gold rings along its side. They would then walk at a slow pace. But here comes Uzzah, who, if anything, appears to be a practical man. Why not move the Ark in a more technologically savvy fashion? Let’s put it on an ox cart. Not only that, it’s a Philistine SRX 360 ox cart, with Wi-Fi and automatic dealer upgrades. Uzzah may well have concluded that he had improved upon God’s instructions.

This is always a fatal decision.

If Uzzah had obeyed God’s instructions in the first place and used the poles, he would never have been in the position of having to touch the Ark. As theologian R.C. Sproul puts it, Uzzah makes the mistake of thinking, at the instant the Ark is sliding off the cart, that his hand is more holy than God’s dirt. Bible scholars suggest that this isn’t just a mistake of the moment. It may be that Uzzah has gradually taken God’s presence for granted.

Many years ago I called upon a man who had been active at my church, but had gradually decided to stop coming. I asked if there was anything that I had done to cause his discomfort. There was a long pause. Then he told me something that was exceedingly hard to hear, and which I have never forgotten.

“Glenn, there have been moments in which it seems that you don’t take God very seriously in worship.” What did he mean by that, exactly? He went on, “Think about the last time you served me communion.” That morning we had invited our worshippers to come forward to receive the bread and the wine. As he walked to the spot where I was holding the cup, I remembered that he was on my list of things to do. I leaned forward and said, “Hey, that meeting on Tuesday night has been rescheduled.”

What was I doing? I was multi-tasking. I was being entirely practical. I was mediating the presence of God while getting a little administrative work done on the side. But God will not be multi-tasked. I had lost my sense of wonder at being in the presence of a God who refuses to be taken for granted.

Eugene Peterson has written these wise words: “Worship is the strategy by which we interrupt our preoccupation with ourselves and attend to the presence of God. Worship is the time and place that we assign for deliberate attentiveness to God – not because he’s confined to time and place, but because our self-importance is so insidiously relentless that if we don’t deliberately interrupt ourselves regularly, we have no chance of attending to him at all in other times and in other places.”

Worship services, in other words, are for the express purpose of teaching us, in one hour, how we should turn to God during every other hour of the week.

Uzzah’s story is not an easy read. But it’s a living reminder that life must include moments in which we do nothing else but stop.

Just so we can be still and know that God is God.
Where Was God?

A Scottish village of about 8,500 residents has been in the world’s spotlight twice in the past 20 years.

Dunblane has become famous as the hometown of Andy Murray, who at the beginning of 2017 ranked #1 in the world in men’s tennis. Dunblane is also where a deranged middle-aged man named Thomas Hamilton walked into the local Primary School in March 1996. He gunned down 16 children and a teacher before turning his revolver on himself.

One of the 8-year-olds in the school, hiding in terror under his desk, was Andy Murray.

The tennis player has been asked from time to time about the shootings. He has always been reticent to share his feelings. But after Murray won the Gold Medal for Men’s Tennis in the 2012 London Olympics – the first time a Brit had done so in over 100 years – and followed that up a month later by winning the U.S. Open, he didn’t stage a big party in London with his friends. He went home to Dunblane.

His grandmother told a sports reporter, “I think deep within him he wanted to do something, to put Dunblane on the map for the right reasons rather than the wrong reasons.” Thus the shy Scot presented himself for a day of celebration in which he was literally the one and only feature in a town parade.

It was a redemptive moment for a whole community.
What can we do in the face of overwhelming evil? Here’s what Charles Chaput, Archbishop of Philadelphia, said after the Newtown, Connecticut preschool massacre: “The only effective antidote to the wickedness around us is to live differently from this moment forward.” John Drane, a pastor who was ministering near Dunblane 20 years ago, recounts what happened shortly after the tragedy:

Once, on the way to the school gate, which had been turned into a place of quiet, I saw a group of youths between 17 and 20 years old. I saw them place 16 candles – one for each child who died – in a circle on the damp street and light them with a cigarette...

They saw me and realized that I was a pastor, and called me with the words, “You know what to say in situations like this.” As I stood there with tears streaming down my face, I had no idea what to say. So we just stood there, holding hands. After a moment, I spoke a short prayer. Then the teenagers also started to pray.

One said, “I must change!” and, glancing toward a group of policemen, pulled a knife out of his pocket. He knelt by the candles and said, “I don’t think I need this anymore,” then hid the knife under some flowers. Another pulled a piece of bicycle chain from his pocket and did the same.

After standing together for a moment longer, we went on our way.

Drane concludes: Was God in Dunblane? Of course. Was God in Orlando, Paris, Newtown, and the other communities where there have been tragedies in recent years? Of course.

We, too, must change. Hope, solidarity, graciousness, and ardent love must show the way. By God’s grace, may we seek to redeem our world. Even in the midst of unspeakable pain. •
When the year 1984 came and went, Americans had good reasons to feel good about themselves. After all, we had dodged the horrific prophecies of George Orwell’s book 1984. Orwell imagined a future in which a totalitarian Big Brother snatches away all forms of human freedom.

But as Neil Postman writes in his celebrated book Amusing Ourselves to Death, “We had forgotten there was another dark prophecy about the future, less well known, older, but equally chilling: Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World.”

Both 1984 and Brave New World predict a frightening future. But Orwell and Huxley imagined that future in dramatically different ways. Postman points out that while Orwell wrote of a world in which books would be banned, “what Huxley feared is that there would be no reason to ban books, because there would be no one who wanted to read one… Orwell feared we would be deprived of the truth. Huxley feared [truth] would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance… Orwell feared our being a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture.”

It’s a relief that 1984 hasn’t come true. But it’s hard to avoid the conclusion that day-to-day reality looks more and more like Brave New World.

Consider the wildly diverse questions that Americans are likely to be pondering today:

Who’s going to be eliminated next on “Dancing with the Stars”?  
Should there be limits to genetic engineering?  
Are Chip and Joanna on “Fixer Upper” really as nice as they seem?  
Is it morally acceptable to decide not to vote?  
Realistically, do the Colts have any shot at the Super Bowl this year?  
Is it OK to lie to spare someone’s feelings?  
When will the next “Call of Duty” update hit the market?

Do these questions have equal validity? Or are they equally trivial? How can we even know? Does anyone really care?

Postman concluded, “Orwell feared that what we hate would ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love would ruin us.” The bedrock teaching of Scripture is that one thing matters ultimately. God is worth paying attention to. God is not just another subject category for Trivial Pursuit.

And forming our lives around what matters may just end up saving us from our own culture. •
Deciding and Doing

Here’s a riddle:

Fifteen turtles are sunning themselves on an old log. Six of them decide to jump into the water. So how many turtles are still sunning themselves on the log? That’s easy. The correct answer is fifteen.

*Wait:* Didn’t we say that six of them decided to jump into the water?

We did.

But as leadership gurus Barry Kouzes and Barry Posner point out, deciding and doing are not the same thing.

Maybe you’ve decided that this is the week big things are going to happen.

You’re going to go back to the gym and start losing weight.
You’ve made up your mind to give church another try.
You’re going to keep your emotions in check when you end up in that same old argument.
You’re going to say no to temptation.
You’re going to say yes to listening more carefully.
You’re finally going to clean out your garage.
You’re going to spread your finances out on the table and initiate that uncomfortable conversation you’ve been procrastinating for months.
You’ve resolved to swallow your pride and reach out to that person who hurt you.

Those sound like great decisions.

But the odds are you have made those very same decisions before.

And little or nothing happened.

This week, cross the line from deciding to doing.

*Take the plunge.*
Having grown up in Indianapolis, I have always been fascinated with the “500.” I’ve attended one third of the 100 competitions held every Memorial Day weekend at the Speedway.

As a kid I fantasized about driving an open-wheel car around the two-and-a-half mile oval. My dream finally came true…sort of. I received the incredible gift of riding in one of the specially designed two-seater Indy cars.

I obediently signed the waiver indicating that my next of kin wouldn’t press charges if I was seriously injured or killed. I donned a bright red fire suit along with special gloves, shoes, and padded helmet. I looked and felt like an astronaut. I listened carefully to the safety instructions. “If you choose to wave your hand as you come down the main straight, don’t lift it above your cheek. Otherwise the wind might catch your arm and pull it out of socket.” Thanks, I’ll definitely remember that. “Whatever you do, don’t touch the driver.” No problem there.

I squeezed into the tiny space directly behind professional racer J.J. Yeley, who chauffeured me for three laps at speeds in the neighborhood of 180 mph. As we approached turn one for the first time, I was fairly certain we weren’t going to make it. The car was going far too fast and the pavement was far too flat.

Suddenly the car went left – my impression is that we were making a 90-degree turn on a dime – and all of my internal organs went right. After three laps I felt as if I had taken a high-speed ride in a dryer. What a rush.
What intrigued me is what happened shortly afterward, on the birthday of Dario Franchitti. Dario is a three-time winner of the Indianapolis “500.” His boss at the time, Michael Andretti, gave Franchitti a celebratory ride in the same two-seater car. Here’s the relevant information: Andretti is one of the most skilled drivers in the history of motor sports. The two-seater car is specially engineered so that it cannot come within 40-50 mph of a typical Indy racing machine.

Yet when Franchitti the passenger stepped out of the car at the end of his birthday ride, he admitted that he was terrified. Why? For three laps he had not been able to put his hands on the wheel.

When most of us are afraid, we do not naturally say, “Lord, why don’t you take over for the next few laps?” We want to grab the wheel. We routinely bet our lives that we can do a better job than God of providing for our security. We are always wrong. Surrendering to God’s hidden presence – trusting that God is able and willing to hold on to us in the midst of all of life’s moments – is the cornerstone of a healthy spiritual life.

Every Memorial Day weekend, 33 racers hear those famous words: “Drivers, start your engines.”

On any given day we will hear a different command: “Disciples, get into the back seat.”

Then hang on for the ride of your life.
Free at Last

Daniel E. Sickles (1819-1914) considered himself one tough guy.

As a New York City politician in the 1850s he was involved in a number of public scandals. When he learned that his young bride was having an affair with Philip Barton Key II (the son of Francis Scott Key, who had penned the words to *The Star Spangled Banner*), Sickles didn’t hesitate. While both men happened to be in the nation’s capital, he confronted Key in the park across from the White House and shot him dead.

Sickles was acquitted when he pled temporary insanity – the first time such a defense had ever been used in the United States.

Even though he was singularly unqualified to lead men into battle, Sickles managed to secure for himself an appointment as a Union general during the Civil War. On July 2, 1863, while commanding the II Corps of the Army of the Potomac, Sickles was ordered to hold the center of the Northern line at Gettysburg.

But Sickles had ideas of his own.

He rashly ordered his troops to advance about one mile forward to a peach orchard – a site that would become one of the war’s most infamous battlefields. Unprotected, Sickles and his men were assaulted from multiple directions. They never had a chance. Only the heroism of other units, which rushed in to plug the hole left behind by the II Corps, saved the Union from disaster.

Years later every principal general who fought at Gettysburg was memorialized with a statue somewhere on the grounds. Except Sickles. When asked about the absence of a memorial with his name on it, he said, “The entire battlefield is a memorial to Dan Sickles.” OK, then.
The peach orchard did leave Sickles with an unusual souvenir. A cannonball shattered his right leg. It was amputated later that day in a field hospital. Ever the showman, Sickles had his leg pickled and displayed in his house so he could show it off to his party guests.

Unfortunately the leg got the last laugh.

Sickles suffered for the rest of his life with phantom limb syndrome – the sensation that his leg was still present. He had no way to scratch the itches and relieve the pains that his brain “felt” up and down his absent leg. The tough guy had finally met his match.

Something like that can happen with another kind of wound: the kind we inflict on our own souls when we fail. You blew it. You screwed up big time. You wonder how you ever could have been so stupid, so impulsive, so blind. Will you ever get past the shame?

Yet those you hurt have forgiven you. And most incredible of all, the God whose desires you ignored and laws you broke has declared that “as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our sins from us” (Psalm 103:12). It just doesn’t feel that way.

Sometimes, even though we know we are forgiven, the sensation lingers that we have made such a capital mess of things that we don’t deserve a fresh start. Our regrets can feel so real that we’re led to believe there’s still a debt to pay.

The Dutch author Corrie ten Boom was fond of saying, “When God forgives our sins he throws them into the deepest sea, then puts up a sign that says ‘No Fishing.’”

We will begin to live as those who are forgiven and free when, by God’s grace, we begin to grasp – and actually believe – we are truly forgiven and free. •
Almost 100 years after George Washington became the first president of the United States, a monument in his honor rose in the nation’s capital.

Now, more than 100 years later, the Washington Monument (at almost 555 feet) remains the tallest free-standing stone structure in the world.

The Monument’s designers wanted to honor Washington in the most extravagant way possible. Therefore the capstone, which is about nine inches tall, was composed of an exceedingly rare metal. No, not gold. Nor silver. Nor platinum. The capstone of the Washington Monument is pure aluminum.

That’s right: America’s most famous founding father is honored with the same material that helps keep your Budweiser and Diet Coke nicely chilled.

In the 1880s scientists were ignorant of two important realities concerning aluminum. First, no one knew how to produce it in large quantities. That made pure aluminum, ounce per ounce, more valuable than silver or gold. Visitors at the 1855 World’s Fair stared at a display of aluminum bars as if they were looking at England’s crown jewels. Napoleon III of France hosted a banquet where the most honored guests were given aluminum utensils, while everyone else had to settle for eating their soup with spoons of gold.

Second, scientists didn’t yet know that aluminum is almost literally as ordinary as dirt. It is the most widely distributed metal on our planet, bound up with 270 other minerals. After oxygen and silicon, it is earth’s third most common element.

A few years after the completion of the Washington Monument, metallurgists discovered how to turn an ordinary-looking rock called bauxite into all the aluminum the world would ever need. Aluminum’s value on the global market immediately collapsed, with little prospect that it will ever rise again. Today you can go to bed knowing there’s probably more aluminum guttering on your house than there is at the top of the Washington Monument.
One of life’s great dramas is discerning how much things are really worth.

You may find yourself thinking that your very future hangs on a meeting you’ll have before the end of the week. Or it crosses your mind that if only he would offer you some extra attention, you’d be happier than you could possibly stand. But meetings and romance and titles above your desk and awesome vacations and winning lottery tickets come and go.

According to the book of Revelation (21:21), heaven’s main street will be paved with gold. That may seem like an expression of opulence, but in truth it’s the Bible’s way of putting gold in its place. Think how many people have sacrificed everything in this world – including their own lives – trying to obtain as much of that shiny yellow metal as they possibly could. But in heaven we will walk on it. It’s worthy only for the soles of our feet.

In heaven it’s safe to say our chief preoccupation will be with God, who will be at the center of everything.

The definition of a rich life in the present world is grasping that, all appearances to the contrary, God is at the center of everything right here and right now, too. •
Sheep Among Wolves

Universities and professional sports franchises are famous for picking tough-sounding nicknames for their teams. That’s why during a typical football weekend, the Wolverines, Badgers, Jaguars, Tigers, Panthers, Diamondbacks, Bears, and Lions will all take the field. Those are some pretty fierce animals.

There will also be some angry birds: Eagles, Falcons, Ravens, Warhawks, Skyhawks, and Seahawks. Some nicknames feature tough people: Vikings, Giants, Buccaneers, Fighting Irish, and Boilermakers.

Then there are those college nicknames that defy categorization:

• The University of California / Santa Cruz Banana Slugs
• The University of Arkansas / Monticello Boll Weevils
• The Cal State / Fullerton Dirtbags
• The University of South Carolina / Sumter Fire Ants
• The Earlham College Hustlin’ Quakers (they aren’t fierce, but apparently they’re pretty fast)
• The University of Akron Zips

Salisbury University features the Sea Gulls. Years ago they called themselves the Salisbury Steaks, and their head cheerleader dressed like a bottle of A1 Sauce. Who needs to win a national championship when you have the best nickname ever?

There’s one animal that won’t be featured this weekend, or any time soon. No sports team – college or pro – has ever tried to intimidate its foes by calling themselves the Sheep. Sheep are dumb. They are skittish. They play Follow the Leader, even when the leader is leading the flock over a cliff. They have no claws, no threatening teeth, no wings, no breakaway speed, and no attitude. In short, sheep are fundamentally defenseless.

That’s why it ought to get our attention when Jesus tells his followers, “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves” (Matthew 10:16). Not many wolves are going to lose sleep over that.

Author John Ortberg reflects: “This assignment doesn’t sound very glamorous… It takes some courage for a sheep to be sent to the wolves. To be sent as a sheep means I don’t lead with how smart or strong or impressive I am. But it’s a funny thing. Doors get opened to sheep that would never be opened to wolves.”

Sheep are not heroic animals. Jesus appears to be saying that for God’s reign to come to Earth, it will take a different kind of hero – a sheep that hears and responds to the voice of the Shepherd. Maybe that’s why Jesus identified himself as the Lamb of God.

If on a given weekend we want to root for what God is doing in the world, we won’t find any sheep spirit wear. Then again, we can always cheer for the Saints. •
A Year to Remember

A number of years ago I invited five couples at my church to join me in a small group experiment. We would get together every week for one year. During our gatherings we would study the Bible, talk about things happening in our lives, and support each other in prayer.

It turned out to be quite a year.

One of the husbands died suddenly while playing racquetball. My five-year-old daughter had emergency surgery to remove a mass in her abdomen. One of the couples entered marriage counseling to try to resolve some serious relationship issues. Several members of the group revealed they had major doubts about the reality of their spiritual lives. All of us struggled as parents.

The following year I launched a second group with five new couples. The same thing happened again. Those twelve months were marked by marital squabbles, addictions, clinical depression, a lost job, and various medical crises.

What was going on here?

Around the church people began to say, “If you join one of Glenn’s groups you’ll have one of the worst years of your life!” The truth actually turned out to be much more fascinating. Those groups were experiencing the kinds of things that happen to a dozen people during the course of any given year. The only difference is that we were talking about them. We were bringing them out into the light and experiencing them together.

Our church would unquestionably have rallied around the woman who lost her husband. And Mary Sue and I know that people would have supported us, no matter what, during our daughter’s scary time in the hospital. But virtually everything else that happened might have been concealed – unless we had chosen to be part of a group that was trying, haltingly, to walk with each other through life’s most difficult realities.

The apostle Paul said it well in Romans 12:15: “Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.” That will only happen if we take a risk.

We have to risk getting close enough to each other to experience life as it really is.
The Egg Theory

In 1945 *Fortune* magazine named Eleanor Roosevelt the most popular woman in America. Who was the runner-up? That would be Betty Crocker, a woman who didn’t even exist.

Betty Crocker was a brand invented in 1921 by an executive of the Washburn Crosby Company, which was later absorbed by General Mills. “Betty” seemed like a wholesome, cheery name, while “Crocker” was a way to honor a beloved fellow executive who had recently died.

By the 1950s the Betty Crocker name was on at least 50 General Mills products. Many Americans believed she was real. An actress supplied her “voice” on her own radio show, and her loyal followers could even visit her “kitchen” at General Mills headquarters.

Interestingly, Betty Crocker cake mixes didn’t sell very well when they were introduced shortly after World War II. All you had to do was add water. That didn’t seem like cooking at all. American housewives shrugged.

Then, as Laura Shapiro details in her book *Something From the Oven*, General Mills began to leave out some of the ingredients. Notice the yellow cake advertisement: “Add 2 whole eggs!” Suddenly the cake mixes were flying off the shelves.

Today it’s called the Egg Theory. As long as I can add something – even a very humble something – the results somehow become mine. What’s the difference between buying a fully assembled bookshelf and a bookshelf kit from IKEA? Putting together the IKEA components – watching as the bookshelf takes shape through my very own efforts – leads me to some pride of ownership. If we cut up a tomato and add it to the Caesar
salad package, or slice a few mushrooms into what is otherwise nothing but a bottle of factory-made Ragu spaghetti sauce, we feel a strange attachment to what “we” have made.

As the ad proclaims: “Who makes the best yellow cakes? YOU!” You do the really hard part of cracking a couple of eggs. “You and Betty Crocker can bake someone happy.” That slogan helped homemakers believe they were culinary champions.

As Saundra Lee has observed, “A spoonful of ownership is a crucial ingredient in the psychological experience of cooking.” The same thing is true in almost everything else that is worth doing.

Do you believe in the transformation of your community? Don’t just watch things unfold from a distance. Become an activist. Do you care where the political process is taking our country this year? Don’t just vent on your Facebook page. Get involved. Do you believe that God is committed to healing this broken world? Don’t just nod your head respectfully. Live the mission.

When we add something to the mix, things change from “something other people are doing” to “something we are doing together.”

What exactly are we supposed to add? The unique ingredient that you bring to the recipe is yourself: your strong back, your good ideas, your checkbook, and your words of encouragement.

Yes, an all-powerful God can transform the world all by himself. But if we’re willing to get into the kitchen and break some eggs, we’ll discover that God has always yearned to transform us as we live out that recipe together.
Have you ever wondered how woodpeckers can slam their heads into trees all day long and not have to pop Tylenol? The answer is that a woodpecker’s body is essentially a giant shock absorber.

Check out the Pileated Woodpecker, which is the inspiration for the cartoon character Woody the Woodpecker. All of its angles, from beak to toes, help distribute the force of the incessant pounding.

Woodpecker craniums are also remarkably engineered. A “third eyelid” prevents a woodpecker’s eyes from popping out. There are special feathers whose only purpose is to cover the nostrils to prevent the inhalation of sawdust. But the real ornithological miracles are the woodpecker’s brain and tongue.

Studies show that the average woodpecker drills away at tree trunks, limbs, and the wood siding on your house about 12,000 times a day. The most powerful blows generate 1000 G’s. That would be 1000 times the force of gravity. Human beings cannot survive a mere 100 G’s. How does a woodpecker’s brain remain unscathed?

The answer appears to be the woodpecker’s unique tongue. The “business end” of the tongue – the part that can extend far beyond the beak, deep inside trees – is covered with tiny barbs that spear tasty insects and grubs that are hiding there.

Then there’s the other end of the tongue, which is one of the most remarkable features found anywhere in nature. A woodpecker’s tongue extends backwards inside the beak, deep into the cranium, then through the right nostril, and finally around the entire crown.
of the head. Researchers in Beijing have concluded that the tongue is like a safety belt for the brain, holding it snugly during the most violent pounding. The brain itself is engineered for a lifetime of experiencing stress.

So the next time somebody calls you a bird brain, just think of the woodpecker and say, “Thanks!”

Human brains, unfortunately, are considerably more vulnerable to the pounding stresses of modern life. That’s especially apparent in the widespread experience of worry. What’s the number one category of over-the-counter drugs in the United States? Headache remedies. And number two? Medications for gastric distress.

Every day we have two choices: We can worry or we can pray. We can surrender to feelings of angst or we can surrender our anxieties to God.

Jesus was blunt: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?” (Matthew 6:25-26)

God has given woodpeckers tongues and brains like no other. But he certainly hasn’t overlooked us.

We have the capacity to choose life’s ultimate shock absorber: trust.
See for Yourself

It all began 42 years ago in the choir loft of North Presbyterian Church in St. Paul, Minnesota. The paper bookmarks in Art Fry’s hymnbook kept falling out. Wouldn’t it be great to have a bookmark that stayed put?

That’s when it hit him. “I don’t know if it was a dull sermon or divine inspiration, but my mind began to wander.” Fry’s mind meandered to the crazy invention of one of his colleagues at 3M. Five years earlier, Spencer Silver, a chemist, had tried to concoct a super glue. Instead he came up with a sort-of glue. It was sticky but not too sticky. It couldn’t hold anything heavy in place. On the other hand, it never really dried. Silver strolled around 3M for years, showing everyone his invention. He called it “a solution without a problem.” Did anyone have any interesting ideas for using such a glue?

That’s when Fry showed up. What if Silver applied his weird glue to strips of paper to form semi-sticky notes? Thus was born the Post-It Note.

Their original color was yellow, for the simple reason that the only scrap paper currently on hand at 3M was yellow. As historian Rick Beyer reports, it was love at first sight for the execs at 3M. They played around with their Post-It Notes and quickly concluded this odd invention would be a smash.

But when test-marketers demonstrated the notes in Richmond, Virginia, the response was dismal. Who in their right mind would pay one dollar for a pad of sticky notepaper that didn’t seem to be good for anything? That’s when two members of the 3M leadership team got an idea. They loaded up thousands of Post-It Notes and headed for Richmond. They walked door to door through the business district of the Virginia capital, giving away the notes for free.

It was basically like giving away ice cream cones on a hot August day. Once people got a taste of Post-It’s at their homes and workplaces, they were hooked. You wouldn’t happen to have any more of those little sticky notes, would you? Today it’s hard to imagine a desk in America that doesn’t have a stack of Post-It Notes somewhere in a drawer.

At least two lessons emerge from this bit of history. The first is that choir practice sometimes yields more than just beautiful music.

The second is that until people experience something for themselves, even great ideas may not click. Perhaps that’s why the psalmist wrote, “Taste and see that the Lord is good” (Psalm 34:8). In other words, try it yourself. Don’t hitchhike on somebody else’s experience of God. Test-drive your own morning prayer: “Lord, I don’t know where you’re taking me today, but I’ll be looking for you wherever I go.”

Think of it as a no-risk, free sample opportunity to see if God is really God. Then keep your eyes and your heart open. If the psalmist was right, something just might end up sticking.
Life on the Edge

It’s disheartening to discover that walking with God isn’t a walk in the park. Every now and then we find ourselves hanging on for dear life at the edge of an abyss.

That was the experience of the prophet Habakkuk. He’s famous for having a name that’s hard to spell and hard to pronounce – and for writing poignantly about the hardest moment in his life. Israel was about to be invaded. Habakkuk’s world was caving in. Everything safe and predictable was vanishing.

Where was God in the middle of this disaster?

What Habakkuk came to understand is that God was, quite literally, in the middle of that disaster. God was working out the next chapter of Israel’s history, and working out the details of Habakkuk’s personal history as well. After three chapters of spiritual wrestling, Habakkuk closes his book with one of the Bible’s most powerful expressions of trust:

**Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.**

The Sovereign Lord is my strength;
He makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
He enables me to tread on the heights (3:17-19).

Several species of mammals are renowned for their aerobatics. The red deer that is common to the Middle East has astonishing sure-footedness, especially along ridgelines that would terrify most people.

The goats pictured here seem to have watched *Spiderman* a few times too many. Do they fall from time to time? They do. But they are stunningly resilient, and quickly resume their climbing.

Habakkuk came to trust that God was able and willing to give him a vital gift: the ability to journey to life-threatening, peace-shattering places, yet to come back alive and tell the story.

We weren’t made for walks in the park. Our call is to go up on the heights.

And to know that wherever we are being sent, God is walking before us.
According to the film industry, the future of humanity is going to be... just awful.

In an odd counterpoint to Hollywood's reputation for being the Dream Factory, most future-oriented movies of the past 50 years have depicted nightmares from which there is no escape.

The world of tomorrow will be:

- Seriously flooded (Waterworld)
- Seriously cold (The Day After Tomorrow)
- Dominated by machines that rebel against us (The Matrix; The Terminator)
- Ruled by primates that rebel against us (Planet of the Apes)
- Calorie-challenged (The Hunger Games)
- Overrun by aliens (The Edge of Tomorrow; War of the Worlds)
- Overrun by zombies (World War Z; Resident Evil; I Am Legend)
- Ecologically devastated (WALL-E; Blade Runner; Interstellar)
- Ravaged by nuclear war (The Road; Mad Max)
- Reserved for the young and genetically perfect (Logan’s Run; Gattaca)
- Tragically left in the hands of Sylvester Stallone (Dredd)

Can you think of a movie that depicts the future as a time in which human beings are experiencing greater peace, cooperation, stability, and prosperity? Hint: Think outer space.
No, not *Star Wars*. That’s looking backward. “A long, long time ago in a galaxy far, far away...”

The most positive cinematic depictions of the future are associated with the *Star Trek* franchise. Largely because of the euphoric vision of series originator, Gene Roddenberry, our planet not only survives but thrives. People will value peace. Our leaders will be open-minded and open-hearted toward new horizons and new opportunities.

So what does the Bible say about the future? About 100 years ago preachers and teachers were confident that the Bible described the approaching dawn of a wonderful new world – something like heaven on earth. But World War I demolished that utopian vision. More recently preachers have emphasized the nearness of Armageddon, a final earth-destroying military confrontation – a perspective embodied by the *Left Behind* series, and embraced at least in spirit by Hollywood.

One of the great future texts in Scripture is Jeremiah 29:11: “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’” That promise was given to the people of Judah in the context of their own Armageddon. They were exiles in Babylon. In 586 B.C. the Babylonians had burned down Jerusalem, destroyed their temple, and captured their king.

Their deepest impulse was to escape, to go back home, to start over. They longed for any situation that would give them a shot at a hopeful future. But here’s what God told the exiles: “Build houses and settle down. Plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters... Increase in number there. Do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper” (Jeremiah 29:5-7).

In other words, the place where God would bless his people was *where they already were*. Even though we may lament the crowdedness, crime, and hopelessness of many big cities, the “hope and a future” God promised his people was predicated on their being good citizens of Babylon – a city where none of them really wanted to live.

God’s in charge of the future. As citizens of a world that doesn’t always turn out as we expect, our call is to be faithful – in our relationships, in our work, and in our stewardship of creation.

And it’s probably wise not to watch too many Sylvester Stallone movies. •
Open the Drapes

Charles Dickens is hands down the most famous fiction writer in the history of the English language.

Recently he was cited as the author of the most memorable line in all of British literature: “God bless us, everyone!” (Tiny Tim, from *A Christmas Story*)

But that’s just the start. Dickens also wrote the second most famous line (“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times” – the opening words of *A Tale of Two Cities*) and the third, as well (“Please, sir, may I have some more?” – the heartrending cry of the orphan Oliver Twist).

Among other things, Dickens is credited with the invention of the paperback book, novels that were published in serial form, and a brand new idea called the cliffhanger – a dramatic plot twist of some sort that insured you would want to read the next chapter or tune in to the next episode.

Charles Dickens, in other words, invented the soap opera. His legacy is that 100 years after his death, Americans actually cared about who shot J.R. Ewing on *Dallas*.

The characters in Dickens’ books are almost always extreme. Their goodness, their wickedness, and their peculiarities tend to go off the charts. The most eccentric, and therefore the most memorable, of all his human inventions is Miss Havisham of *Great Expectations*.

Miss Havisham, a wealthy young woman, was preparing herself on the morning of her wedding for what she assumed would be the happiest day of her life. Then she received word that her fiancé had fled. *She was jilted.* It was exactly 8:40 am. She immediately stopped every clock in her house. She had already put on her wedding dress. She never
took it off again as long as she lived. She had just put on one of her wedding shoes. She ever after walked about wearing only one shoe. The clocks in her house never moved past 8:40, and her wedding cake sat on the table until it was eroded by the years. Miss Havisham closed the drapes in her house and never reopened them. For her, the light of life had disappeared both literally and figuratively.

Professor of literature Elliot Engel describes her as a “maddening, pathetic, unforgettable woman.” How could Dickens expect his readers to take seriously such an unrealistic portrait of a tortured human soul? The answer, according to Engel, is that while none of us would act like Miss Havisham on the outside, most of us at one time or another have felt something of her anguish on the inside.

It’s the agony of rejection.

Pushed away by someone we love, we feel devastated. We stop the clocks and shut out the light. The pain can feel so intense that we withdraw from the world and wonder if we can ever go on. According to Dickens, Miss Havisham was not chronologically an old woman. But her bitterness had aged her prematurely.

He had, no doubt, chosen her name carefully. “Havisham” was intended to make the reader think “have-a-sham.” Dickens did not believe she had to remain in her self-imposed exile. As the creator of Ebenezer Scrooge, who had experienced one of the most dramatic transformations in all of literature, he surely believed there is hope even for those who feel hopelessly crushed by life’s disappointments.

But where can we find such hope? Jesus says: “Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).

That verse is quoted most often as a remedy for stressed and exhausted people. But it’s also a promise for the emotionally wounded.

Do you feel overwhelmed by the weight of sadness, disappointment, betrayal, or regret? Come to Jesus. Open the drapes.

Choose to live again. •
What’s the happiest place in the solar system? Disney World notwithstanding, it appears to be the Galle Crater on the surface of Mars. This 134-mile wide impact zone seems to answer the age-old question: Does God communicate with emoji’s?

Of course, there might be another explanation: It’s called pareidolia. That’s the scientific term for the human tendency to see human faces in seemingly random places. For years people have seen the Man in the Moon. And smiley faces on the grilles of cars. And angels, demons, and religious figures in cloud patterns and tortillas.

A North Carolina woman discovered the face of Jesus on her grilled cheese sandwich. A homemaker from Glendale, Arizona, was shocked to see the Virgin Mary on a pancake. And a resident of Splendora, Texas, is certain that the head, hair, and cloak of Jesus appeared to her in a pattern of bathroom mold. “People say my house is blessed,” she told ABC News – perhaps the first time anyone has been truly grateful for bathroom mold.

People tend to see faces in the most interesting places. What’s going on here?

Scientists theorize that pattern recognition impulses like pareidolia are a key human survival mechanism. Babies are magnetically drawn to people who smile. From our earliest hours we yearn to look into human faces and be assured of safety, friendliness, and care. We’re hard-wired, in other words, to respond to images of grace, even if they’re in the splatter patterns of meteor impacts on the Red Planet.

The Bible’s first chapter makes a startling claim: Every human being is stamped with the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). There is something inherent in every person we see that should lead us to conclude that we’re encountering more than just a fellow human being. We’re looking at the indelible fingerprints of the Creator.

Sometimes we become blind to God’s image in other people. Our stubbornness, our biases, or our wounds may prompt us to look at others and see losers. Or competitors. Or outsiders. Or mortal enemies. Jonathan Sacks, the former chief rabbi of Great Britain, once observed: “The Hebrew Bible [the Old Testament] in one verse commands, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ but in no fewer than 36 places commands us to ‘love the stranger.’” He adds: “The supreme religious challenge is to see God’s image in one who is not in our image.”

If we ask God for the gift of fresh eyes – for the ability to see God’s own face in ourselves and in others – something wonderful can happen.

The places where we live and work can become the happiest places on earth.
The Twinkies Factor

Contemporary research continues to show that relationships are more powerful than we ever imagined. They are actually a matter of life and death.

Robert Putnam suggests that if you belong to no groups but decide to join one this year, “You cut your risk of dying over the next year in half.”

According to the celebrated Alameda County Study, in which a Harvard social scientist tracked the lives of 7,000 people over nine years, “isolated people were three times more likely to die than those with strong relational connections.”

Friendships appear to supersede even personal health habits in their power to predict the future. The study revealed that people who struggled with smoking, obesity, and alcohol use – but who had strong social ties – lived significantly longer than people with more positive health habits but who were going through life alone.

Thus, in the words of John Ortberg, “It is better to eat Twinkies with good friends than to eat broccoli alone.”

We have a long way to go, however. The Gallup organization has described Americans as among the loneliest people on earth. A startlingly high percentage of our time is spent indoors, staring at electronic screens, with our blinds closed and our privacy carefully guarded. If an alien culture were to watch nothing but our TV ads, they might conclude that the main activity of Americans is to drive off-road vehicles to places of stark isolation so we don’t have to endure the presence of the people who live next door.

Ortberg continues, “Of course, we all say that relationships are more important than money. But we constantly cheat relationships for the sake of work or money. There are no TV shows called Who Wants to Be a Great Friend? What we have come to call ‘reality’ shows are programs that deliberately pit one person against one. ‘Reality’ means having someone excluded or fired or voted off the show.”

Healthy human life is fundamentally social. It requires partnership. To win all by ourselves is to lose.

Choose to spend time with someone today – someone not on your appointment calendar or list of things to do. Give them the priceless gift of your attention.

And throw in a pack of Twinkies, of course.
Bob Ebeling felt tormented by guilt for 30 years. He was an engineer for Morton Thiokol, the contractor that built the solid rocket boosters for NASA’s space shuttles.

On the night of January 27, 1986, Ebeling contacted Allan McDonald, Morton Thiokol’s senior leader at Cape Canaveral, where the shuttle Columbia was scheduled for launch the next morning. He was convinced the launch should be scrubbed.

It was going to be 18 degrees overnight – exceedingly cold for Florida, even in the dead of winter. Ebeling thought the chill might damage the rubber O-rings that prevented the escape of hot gasses from the boosters. Morton Thiokol had never tested for launch conditions below 53 degrees. It seemed insane to give Challenger the green light.

NASA’s leaders, unfortunately, had come down with a serious case of Go Fever. The flight had already been delayed on multiple occasions. The public was paying close attention, especially since schoolteacher Christa McAuliffe was one of the astronauts. NASA insisted on the launch. McDonald was stunned. “This was the first time that NASA personnel ever challenged a recommendation that was made that said it was unsafe to fly. For some strange reason, we found ourselves being challenged to prove quantitatively that it would definitely fail, and we couldn’t do that.”

When asked to sign off on the decision to launch, McDonald refused. His boss signed instead. Bob Ebeling trudged home that night, feeling devastated. “It’s going to blow up,” he said to his wife Darlene. Seventy-three seconds into the launch the following morning, the O-rings failed. Challenger and its seven astronauts were lost.
Ebeling spent the last three decades of his life haunted by the thought that he could have done more. He should have done more. In an interview shortly before his death, he lamented to NPR reporter Howard Berkes: “That was one of the mistakes God made. He shouldn’t have picked me for that job. But next time I talk to him, I’m gonna ask him, ‘Why me? You picked a loser.’”

What Ebeling never saw coming was the avalanche of letters that poured forth from NPR listeners who had heard the interview. One of them was written by Jim Sides, an engineer from Jacksonville, NC. “When I heard he carried a burden of guilt for 30 years, it broke my heart. And I just sat there in the car in the parking lot and cried.” In his letter Sides pointed out that the Challenger disaster had become a celebrated case study in ethical decision-making for engineers everywhere. “You and your colleagues did all that you could do,” he assured Ebeling.

Sides also insisted that Ebeling was wrong about God. “God didn’t pick a loser,” he says. “He picked Bob Ebeling.”

The greatest surprise was a note that came from NASA itself – the first time he had ever heard from the space agency. NASA’s statement declared that the Challenger crew members were honored by the reminder to “listen to those like Mr. Ebeling who have the courage to speak up so that our astronauts can safely carry out their missions.” After three decades, Bob Ebeling finally began to experience peace of mind.

In the case of Challenger, the very people who were supposed to know what was going on did in fact know what was going on, and accurately predicted what would happen next. It’s hard to be the dissenting voice, however, when a leader gets Go Fever. It’s hard to take a stand. Politics, ego needs, and the pressure to just go along so we can all get along can feel crushing.

Wherever you are – at work, at home, in your community, at a town hall meeting – the need of the hour is courage. Do your best thinking. Then speak up.

Let your voice be heard.
It’s possible that the two most poignant words in the Bible appear in Mark’s account of the resurrection.

Early on Sunday morning, a group of women have come to put spices on Jesus’ body. It is a Jewish tradition. It’s a lovely thing to do. Jesus was buried so quickly the previous Friday that they had missed the opportunity to provide this final kindness.

Their chief concern is a practical one: How are we going to get inside the tomb? A heavy stone stands between them and Jesus.

As the tomb comes into view, they immediately begin to come to terms with three things that in a million lifetimes they never expected to see: The stone has been pushed aside. Jesus’ body has vanished. An angel is sitting there in plain sight.

The angel says what almost every angel says in biblical encounters: “Don’t be alarmed.” Don’t freak out. Don’t be afraid. Just breathe. “You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified,” the angel goes on. “He has risen!”

While the women attempt to process this cosmos-shifting bit of information, the angel adds an important job assignment: “Go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you’” (Mark 16:9). “Go, tell his disciples” – that would be the 11 remaining apprentices of Jesus, since Judas is now out of the picture – “and Peter…”
And those words are almost enough to make us cry.

Peter was obviously one of the disciples. So why the special invitation? No one in the world that morning needed a word of reassurance more than Peter. No one stood in greater need of a personal invitation to meet the risen Christ than the guy who had crashed and burned in the most dramatic way possible.

Peter had promised so much: “Lord, even if everyone else turns tail and runs, you can count on me.” Then, in short order, he had said aloud three times that he didn’t even know who Jesus was. The very man whom Jesus had said would be the Rock on which he would build his church had crumbled like a sand castle on the beach when hit by the first wave.

The words “and Peter” appear only in the Gospel of Mark. According to a well-founded tradition, Mark had been the amanuensis or personal secretary of Peter during his later years of ministry. His Gospel is quite likely a “Peter’s eye view” of Jesus’ life and death. It’s possible that Peter alone remembered that small detail of the angel’s message to the women at the empty tomb. For him, those two words had changed everything.

*And Peter:* You’re still one of the disciples. You’re still invited. God isn’t finished with you yet.

God isn’t finished with us yet, either. Even if we cannot imagine recovering from the messes we have made of our lives, we’re still on God’s invitation list.

God is, after all, in the business of raising the dead. •
You are somebody's disciple. Somebody helped you reach the place where you are today.

Actually, you are the disciple of a great many somebodies. There are some people, no doubt, from whom you consciously chose to learn. Other people taught you key life lessons (both healthy and unhealthy) even while you hardly suspected what was happening.

My parents, for instance, taught me that it is more important to be honest than to come in first. I don't know how they did this exactly (they never led a seminar called Integrity 101), but the message got through.

My dad also taught me that money is so scarce that I should almost never spend it or give it away, and that buying dessert at a restaurant is an option reserved for the insane.

My piano teacher taught me that when you merely pretend to practice you might fool your mom or your dad, and maybe even yourself, but you can never fool your piano teacher. My scoutmaster taught me how to light a fire on a rainy day with a single match, and how to pluck a chicken – skills I rarely use in ministry these days. My middle school classmates taught me that a single anonymous note is able to make almost anybody break down and cry.

My college professors taught me that “God” is a failed hypothesis. My wife taught me that God could be trusted more than anyone. My children taught me that investing in relationships is more important than attending church committee meetings, and that buying dessert in a restaurant is one of the coolest things anybody can do.

All of those somebodies had a role in teaching me how to live. Not every lesson is one that I prize.

One of life’s transforming moments, in fact, is the instant we realize that we have the power to evaluate what we have learned – to pick through the folk wisdom and truisms and prejudices and principles that make up our rules for existing in this universe – and to ask ourselves if it might not be time to learn from a new teacher, to place ourselves deliberately at the feet of a new master.

We aren’t, in other words, helplessly imprisoned by who and what we have already become. We can start life over again.

Which is why Jesus’ invitation to “come, follow me,” is such a word of hope.
The Equation of Hope

So, how’s your algebra these days?

Most of us grow up thinking there’s only one equation that really matters: \( E = O \). An event of some kind happens, and that leads directly to a particular outcome.

My parents fail to connect with me emotionally, and the outcome is that I am crippled with insecurity. Someone I trusted with my financial interests cheats me, and now I’m broke. A friend spreads a rumor about me, and now my reputation is trashed. \( E = O \) is the equation of helplessness. It is the algebra of victimhood.

She cheated on me. He fired me. They broke their promises. Something happens and I have to pick up the pieces. If you believe this is the way life works, you will always be battling fear, worry, and despair.

But the Good News changes the equation. It turns out that life really works like this: \( E + R = O' \). An event of some kind happens. But I am empowered by God to respond to it. Therefore I get a different outcome. Just because we entrust ourselves to God, by the way, doesn’t mean the \( E \) changes. But where our stories are taking us depends entirely on whether we choose to respond as God calls us to respond.

So, how does God call us to respond? Here’s what the apostle Paul has to say:

“Don’t hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you’ve got it in you, get along with everybody. Don’t insist on getting even; that’s not for you to do. ‘I’ll do the judging;’ says God. ‘I’ll take care of it.’ Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he’s thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don’t let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good” (Romans 12:17-21, The Message).

Is this easy? Not in the least.

We may find ourselves screaming that someone has stolen our security and robbed us of our happiness. We ought to hate them for it and do everything we can to strike back. But if our wellbeing and our joy are rooted not in whatever “\( E \)” might come our way this week, but in the undeserved, unconditional love of God, we can never lose our security. And God graciously grants us the power to respond with a love that is not our own.

Just do the math. If you change the equation, you change your life. •
Do all dogs go to heaven?

What we know for sure is that all dogs may go to church in St. Johnsbury, Vermont. That’s where a wood carving artist named Stephen Huneck, after suffering a life-threatening illness in 1998, decided to build the Dog Chapel, a place of worship dedicated to his favorite canines.

Carved wooden dogs line the pews. Dogs are featured in every stained glass window. There are human-sized doors as well as a small door crafted especially for mutts. The walls are covered, from floor to ceiling, with notes and pictures that commemorate the cherished pets of chapel visitors. Many of them no doubt express the hope that an old friend with a wagging tail will be waiting to greet them in heaven.

The Dog Chapel has a great slogan: *All Creeds, All Breeds – No Dogmas Allowed.*

So what’s a dogma?

A dogma (from the Greek verb *dokeo*) is a principle or a teaching that is incontrovertibly true. According to religious authorities, it cannot be doubted. No matter what you happen to think or feel, a dogma simply *must* not be doubted or rejected. Therein lies the current unpopularity of dogmas. The spirit of our age is that being absolutely right about any religious idea is just flat-out *wrong.* In the spirit of the Dog Chapel: No dogmas allowed.
The problem with that statement, of course, is that it’s highly dogmatic. “There’s no such thing as absolute truth!” That seems like a bold and liberating declaration until you realize you just proposed an absolute truth.

In reality, Christian dogmas become exasperating when followers of Jesus become dogmatic about things that don’t really matter, at the expense of things that genuinely do. Does it really matter how much water is used for baptism? Or how many pairs of animals could fit onto Noah’s Ark? Or whether Christians should dance, shop on Sundays, wear jeans to worship, or enjoy a cold beer?

All too often, congregations have turned such peripheral issues into spiritual litmus tests – dogmas that determine who’s in and who’s out, and which behaviors merit God’s sternest disapproval.

Father Richard Rohr points out that there isn’t a single text in the four New Testament biographies of Jesus (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) where Jesus denies people access to God because of their sins or failures. He is unfailingly inclusive. That’s not to say that Jesus is apathetic about human behavior. No one ever set the spiritual bar higher: “Therefore be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48).

But Jesus’ expectations of Maximum Holiness are accompanied by the promise of Maximum Grace. And tellingly, he reserves his fiercest rebukes for those who would deny other people such grace, who would even slam heaven’s door in their faces. Ironically, those are the very people most in danger of losing their life with God (see Matthew 23).

So is there a dogma we can all agree upon?

Rohr suggests it might be Jesus’ teaching that we should always pray for our enemies and always forgive those who hurt us. What would church history look like if that had been at the heart of every congregation’s life?

Few people would ever conclude that the church has gone to the dogs.
The Opportune Moment

How can we know if we’re making wise decisions and heading down the best possible path? A nautical term gives us an excellent shot at getting things right.

The Latin word *portus* means harbor, port, or place of refuge. When the prefix *ob* ("towards") is placed in front of *portus*, we get a word that means “going towards a safe place.”

That word is *opportunity*. Good guidance may be defined as acting confidently at the opportune moment.

Historically, bringing a boat into a particular harbor is not always simple or easy. Hidden rocks and shoals can tear a hull to pieces. Lighthouses and foghorns play a crucial role in providing safe passage. So do smaller lights that indicate hidden hazards. Sea captains must memorize the “codes” of particular ports. When the lights align, the way forward is clear. Only then is it safe to head towards harbor.

So what are the “lights” that need to align in our own processes of personal and corporate discernment?
Scripture. What does the Word say? There is a thread that runs through every major religion. It is sometimes called the Tao or the Way – an acknowledgement of a widely shared understanding of what it means to live wisely. We can see this in the global consensus concerning numerous ethical decisions. For instance, should I tell a lie in today’s meeting? In every major faith tradition, lying is ruled out from the get-go. Distorting reality is never the route to a safe harbor.

Circumstances. Are doors swinging open? Is the way becoming clear? Those may be compelling prompters to go forward. On the other hand, is the tide running away from the shore? That’s circumstantial evidence that it’s time to wait.

Significant others. What are we hearing from the people who know us best, and who have our best interests at heart? Choose to listen carefully to family members, friends, mentors, and colleagues.

Homework. There’s a cartoon in which two men, dressed in rags and half crazed from thirst, happen upon a table in the middle of the desert. Four individuals in lab coats are sitting there. “We’re saved!” exclaims one of the men. “It’s a panel of experts!” We must not make the Western mistake of listening only to those with multiple letters behind their names. Nor should we overlook the treasures of insight and information available from those who have wrestled with crucial questions before us.

Intuition. What is your gut telling you? Very often our “knower” already knows the right path to take. We simply need to acknowledge it.

Ask. Set aside a specific period of time, perhaps a week. Then choose to pray. “Lord, I’m listening. I truly want you to guide me. Speak to me during the next seven days through whatever means you think best: perhaps a book that I’m reading, a conversation, a magazine article, or a speaker that I hear.” Give the Holy Spirit space to work, and pay attention to what happens next.

Your own voice. Author Dallas Willard makes the extraordinary observation that sometimes the word of guidance we most need comes from our own lips. We might be sharing barbecue with a friend and make a statement, seemingly from nowhere, that shines light on a vexing issue we didn’t even seem to be thinking about. More often than we might imagine, the counselor in a counseling session learns and grows more than the one being counseled.

Those are a few of the most important lights. Are they coming into alignment as you wrestle with an important decision?

Read the Word. Listen to others. Do your homework. Consider the circumstances. Earnestly pray. Speak aloud what you already know. When the lights line up, you’ve arrived at an opportune moment.

Then it’s full speed ahead. •
Decidophobia

“Excellent choice!”
“Oh, that’s my favorite dish here.”
“Perfect!”

Have you ever noticed that restaurant servers seem to go out of their way to affirm their customers’ menu selections? That’s not an accident. A number of restaurants equip their servers with specific words and phrases to help people feel affirmed when ordering. That’s because a great many of us feel intimidated when making decisions. Even when choosing between pasta and fish.

Princeton philosopher Walter Kaufmann calls it decidophobia. We’re freaked out by the possibility of making a mistake, missing an opportunity, or looking foolish in front of others.

A sociologist named Sheena Iyengar has run the numbers. Most of us make about 70 conscious decisions every day. That adds up to 25,550 decisions per year. If you live 70 years, you’re responsible for making 1,788,500 decisions. You’d better not blow it.

Most of us sense the deep truth of Albert Camus’ assertion: “Life is the sum of all your choices.” We make lots and lots of decisions. But it’s just as true that our decisions make us.

So what goes into the making of a great life? Should I pursue an amazing lover, a jaw-dropping paycheck, grateful and happy children (good luck with that), an HGTV-worthy vacation home, or a resume that impresses everyone at my high school reunion?

The ancient Hebrews would say: “Don’t waste your time.” Life is all about wisdom, as evidenced by the fact that a huge chunk of the Bible (almost 15%) is known as Wisdom Literature. Wisdom, according to those Hebrew authors, is the art of making great decisions. That’s because making great decisions is the essence of making a great life. “Getting wisdom is the wisest thing you can do! And whatever else you do, develop good judgment” (Proverbs 4:7).

Are you facing an important decision, one that has far greater ramifications than what you might have for dinner? Think of at least one person whose wisdom you esteem. Approach that person, share what you’re struggling with, and ask them to speak into your life – openly, honestly, and directly.

John Ortberg has it just right: “Almost all train-wreck decisions people make (and we all make them) could be prevented just by asking one wise person to speak seriously into our lives and then listening.”

Don’t be paralyzed by decidophobia. Be wise. Go with the fish.
Life on the Links

Golf has been played in Scotland for more than 500 years. The earliest courses were built on “links land” – soil-covered sand dunes lying directly inland from beaches.

Links golf is not easy. The ground is often dry and brown and hard. Bunkers can be cavernous. Balls that appear to be perfectly stroked can bounce at odd angles and disappear into the rough. And the rough is really rough. Links courses are often bordered by gorse, an almost mythical vegetation that can seemingly cause balls to disappear.

Then there’s the weather. Meteorology in Scotland can change in a matter of minutes. Cold rain may descend in the morning, followed by delightful sunshine at noon, blustery winds all afternoon, then a horizontal gale the following day. Traditionalists exult in the agonies of playing the ancient courses. “This is the way golf is supposed to be played!” they harrumph.

U.S. course designers have by and large disagreed. American golf courses tend to be neatly manicured. Bunkers are more like sandy depressions. The “rough” may look identical to your front yard right after you finish mowing. Golf courses in the United States reward good play. If you hit the ball well, things will generally turn out well for you.

It can truly be said that a round of golf in the U.S. is an exercise in fairness. A round of golf on a Scottish course, however, is more like a round of life.

Life is unfair. It’s not easy. You can do everything right and circumstances may still seem to be arrayed against you. The ball doesn’t always bounce cleanly in marriages, in parenting, in workplaces, and in international affairs. That’s why the opening salvo of the little New Testament book of James is so compelling:

“Consider it pure joy, brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:2-4).

Obstacles are required courses in the grad school of life. They are the core curricula for human growth. We can face them knowing that God is bigger than any of the circumstances we will face today. His love is deeper than the most precipitous bunker.

And he definitely knows how to answer this prayer: “God, get me out of this gorse.”
In the summer of 1995, 26-year-old Cheryl Strayed solo hiked 1,100 miles of the Pacific Crest Trail.

The PCT traverses some of America’s most daunting wilderness areas. Cheryl strode from the Mohave Desert through the Sierra Nevada Mountains to the Cascades of the Pacific Northwest.

Her adventures are documented in her best-selling memoir Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail. Reese Witherspoon received a Best Actress Oscar nomination for her portrayal of Strayed in Wild, the 2014 film adaptation of the book.

By her own admission, her life was a mess. She felt crushed by the cancer death of her mother two years earlier. Within the previous 12 months, she had essentially sabotaged her marriage. “I broke my own heart,” she wrote.

Her divorce papers included this question: What name do you plan to use in the future? “That blank line stuck in my heart. I would choose a new name for myself.” Ultimately she felt drawn to “strayed.” “The layered definitions spoke directly to my life: To wander from the proper path, to deviate from the direct course, to be lost, to become wild, to be without a mother or father, to be without a home, to move about aimlessly in search of something, to diverge or digress.”
She felt like a stray. A stray who had strayed. So she would be Cheryl Strayed.

She was woefully unprepared to tackle one of the world’s toughest trails. She had no training and little understanding of the perils she would be facing. She began her hike in the California desert with so much stuff that she could barely lift her own pack, a back-breaking burden that she decided to call Monster. Her brand new boots were a size too small. Halfway through her trek, her feet hurt so badly she could barely walk.

Another PCT hiker glanced at her shoes and observed that they were from REI (Recreational Equipment, Inc., the outdoors superstore). “Why don’t you exchange them?” he suggested. Right. As if that could happen in the middle of nowhere. Strayed didn’t even have enough money to cover shipping. Just call them, the other hiker persisted.

With no expectations, Strayed dialed REI’s number from a pay phone at the next PCT rest area. “We’d be delighted to send you a new pair of boots, one size larger,” said the REI rep. No questions asked. No need to beg or plead. No need to turn in the old ones. Free of charge. Free shipping. “Look for them at the mailroom at the next PCT rest stop.”

Her new boots did indeed arrive, just as promised. And they carried Strayed and her sore feet all the way to the state of Washington.

God’s exchange policy is a bit like REI’s. We may be going through life crippled. Self-crippled, for that matter. We’re spiritual strays who may have no clue that amazing grace has always been available.

It’s free. Just call.
Knowing Where to Operate

Electrical engineers aren’t usually considered to be public celebrities who inspire deep affection. Charles Proteus Steinmetz (1865 – 1923) was the exception.

At barely four feet tall, he was instantly recognizable. He suffered from kyphosis, an abnormal curvature of the spine which rendered him a hunchback. When he came to the U.S. from his native Prussia (present-day Germany), he Americanized his name. Steinmetz chose “Proteus” because his professors had likened him to that character in Homer’s Odyssey – the wise, cave-dwelling, hunchbacked prophet. He felt it suited him well.

Steinmetz devoted most of his career to the General Electric Company in Schenectady, NY, the “House of Magic” that birthed myriad GE inventions.

It’s all too easy to toss around a word like “genius.” But Charlie Steinmetz was a genius. By the end of his career, he held over 200 patents. Steinmetz was a bit like Liam Neeson’s character in Taken. He had “a unique set of skills” that kept him in demand long after his 1902 retirement.

Jack B. Scott, whose father worked at Henry Ford’s River Rouge plant in Dearborn, Michigan, remembers that Ford’s engineers were stymied by a gigantic, malfunctioning generator. The call went out to the Wizard of Schenectady. Would Steinmetz be willing to come to Michigan and see what he could do?

Upon arriving in Dearborn, Steinmetz rejected all offers of assistance. He asked only for a notepad, a pencil, and a cot. For two days and two nights he listened to the generator and scribbled computations. Then he asked for a ladder. He climbed up the
massive generator and made a single chalk mark on its side. Then he instructed Ford’s disbelieving engineers to remove a plate beside the mark and replace 16 windings from the field coil. When they did so and hit the power switch, the generator returned to full function.

Henry Ford was impressed. He was less excited, however, when Steinmetz submitted a bill for $10,000, which a century ago was a staggering sum. The notoriously stingy Ford, miffed that Steinmetz had done nothing more than make a single scrawl with a piece of chalk, demanded an itemized invoice. Here is Steinmetz’s response:

(1) Making a chalk mark: $1.00
(2) Knowing where to place it: $9,999.00

Ford paid the bill.

The Holy Spirit is like Charlie Steinmetz. The Spirit knows precisely where your life is breaking down. Therefore the Spirit knows what truth you need to embrace; what relationship needs to be repaired; what habit you need to abandon; what tipping point will bring you to your knees.

If you ask for the Spirit’s help, don’t be surprised when the Spirit fingers the very place that scares you the most, yet has the power to transform you to the uttermost.

How much does such expert spiritual consultation cost? The bad news is that you can’t afford it.

The good news is that Someone has already paid the bill. •
Surrender

Lt. Hiroo Onada did not give up without a fight.

When the Japanese withdrew from the Philippine island of Lubang in December 1944, they left behind four soldiers. Their orders were to “carry on the mission even if Japan surrenders.”

One of the soldiers gave up after six years. Another was killed in a skirmish with local police in 1954.

The 22-year-old Onada remained hidden in the island’s mountainous interior and dug in for the long haul. He kept himself alive by raiding the fields and gardens of local citizens. He killed some of them in violent clashes.

A national manhunt was organized. More than 13,000 soldiers and volunteers tried, in vain, to capture him. The search cost almost half a million dollars. The authorities pleaded with him to surrender. He ignored the loudspeakers that blared the news of his nation’s defeat, believing it was a plot designed to draw him into the open. He studied the leaflets that rained down on the jungle announcing that Japan and America had actually become allies, and even looked at pictures and letters from his own family urging him to give up.

But he decided it was all a trick.

Finally, Onada’s former superior officer, Major Yoshimi Taniguchi, flew to Lubang and personally ordered him to surrender. He did so on March 10, 1974, almost 29 years after the formal end of World War II. Onada handed his sword to Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos, who pardoned him on the spot.

His war was finally over.

When asked about what he had endured, Onada was blunt: “Nothing pleasant happened in the 29 years in the jungle.”

Before we dismiss this Japanese soldier as hopelessly stubborn, it’s worth remembering that all too many people are acquainted with waging an Onada-like personal war. They do all they can to resist God, refusing to trust his relentless offers of peace and reconciliation.

Don’t be one of them. Put down your sword.

Accept God’s offer to surrender. •
Sir Winston Churchill lived what was arguably the most remarkable life of the twentieth century.

He was an unrivalled public speaker
A skilled oil painter and celebrated author
Britain’s leader during his nation’s darkest yet finest hours in World War II
A mediocre student, yet a first-rate historian
Notoriously vain and impetuous
Addicted to cigars, booze, and afternoon naps
A master of clever one-liners and social repartee
Fearless in the face of daunting odds
Voted out of office as Prime Minister just months after his leadership almost single-handedly won the war
Yet acclaimed overwhelmingly, in 2000, as England’s most important figure of the previous 100 years

Churchill was all that and more.

He could be glum. He once groused, “We are worms. All worms.” Then with a smile and a wink he added, “But I do believe I am a glowworm.”

Churchill died in 1965. His service, which was held in St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, was the largest state funeral in history up to that time. Representatives of 112 nations attended, and it’s estimated that 10% of the world’s population watched the event live on TV.

At the end of the service, a lone bugler, perched high in the dome of the cathedral, played Taps. The mournful tune – “day is done, day is done” – signifies the end of activity in a military camp. The day is finished. It’s over.

Just as the mourners concluded that the service was finished, another bugler began to play from the other side of the dome – an exuberant tune that Churchill himself had chosen. It was Reveille: “You’ve got to get up, you’ve got to get up, you’ve got to get up in the morning…”

Churchill was convinced that life isn’t over, even when it’s over.

Jesus’ empty tomb is God’s assurance that Prime Minister Glowworm wasn’t just blowing his own horn.
Transformers: More Than Meets the Eye

Do you ever find your eyes drawn to those ugly gray canisters hanging near the tops of utility poles? Those are transformers – not to be confused with the Autobots and Decepticons who wage war in exceedingly loud movies.

A transformer is a specialized device that converts electricity of one voltage into another voltage. Voltage, as we learned back in high school science, is a measure of the electric force that “pushes” electrons around a circuit.

Power plants send out electricity at extremely high “pressure” – up to 765,000 volts – so it can travel hundreds of miles along wires. But that’s way too “hot” for your coffee maker, which would quickly be dispatched to Appliance Heaven if you plugged it into such a raging stream of power.

Therefore the voltage needs to be “stepped-down” through a series of transformers. At a power substation, the current travels through coils wrapped around an iron core. Magnetic force drops the energy to about 7,200 volts.

By the time the current reaches your neighborhood, it needs to be stepped-down again. Up on a pole in one of those gray boxes – or now more typically in a big box on the ground – the electricity is transformed to 220 volts for major appliances or 110 volts for almost everything else. In short, a transformer takes a dangerous torrent of energy and converts it into something helpful and productive.

Which is the very reason God calls all of us to be transformers. Relying on our own strength and wits, we’re no better than bare electric wires. Whatever comes into us is what pours out of us. Someone snipes at me; I snipe back. Someone calls me a name; I call them a more clever name. Someone hits me with a wall of anger; I push it right back into their face. Or worse: I pass it on to the next client or to my family members when I get home.
Father Richard Rohr points out that if we do not transform our pain, we will always transmit it. We will pass on whatever level of negative energy has been thrust upon us. Whenever you feel a surge of irritation welling up inside you, or experience the overwhelming need to judge someone or put them in their place, it’s likely you’re being a transmitter of pain and not a transformer.

So what does relational transforming look like?

You’re on the receiving end of a client’s high-voltage anger; you internalize it and respond with kindness. You live in the hearing of a co-worker’s endless complaining; you refuse to let it unhinge your day and offer encouragement instead. God’s call is that we “step-down” the anxiety that comes our way and transform it into grace.

Easy to say. Hard to do. In fact, the only way we can become transformers is if we ourselves are transformed. And the only way that will happen is if we yield our hearts to ongoing renovation by the primary Transformer.

Christians believe that Jesus of Nazareth has embodied that role like no one else in history. Jesus took everything thrown at him – misunderstanding, betrayal, abandonment, torture, and execution – and transformed it. “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29). The high voltage of our anger, hatred, and sin were stepped-down into the grace and forgiveness that are at the heart of the Good News.

That’s something to remember the next time you catch sight of one of those transformers. And notice that the utility pole supporting it sure looks like a cross.
Clearing the Ledger

More than 200 years ago, during the presidency of James Madison, the U.S. Treasury received an unusual gift: an anonymous donation of $5 from someone who admitted he had defrauded the government.

Thus was born the Conscience Fund, the official financial depository for those who wish to contribute guilt money. Since that original gift of $5 in 1811, the Conscience Fund has received almost $10 million.

Some of the gifts seem absurdly small. “Please accept this money for a postage stamp I re-used,” said a donor from Massachusetts, who admitted to peeling off and resending a three-cent stamp that hadn’t been canceled the first time. Nine cents were enclosed. Other gifts have been substantial. The Fund received a check in 1990 for $155,502, without any clue as to what it represented.

A donor wrote: “About eight years ago I took from a railroad station an item worth about $25, and this has been on my conscience since. So I’m enclosing $50 to clear my conscience.” Another person sent the government a dime. “This afternoon I found the enclosed coin on the pavement.”

Some of the notes are head-scratchers: “Enclosed is $210 for some letters I read many years ago, and some food I didn’t pay for.” Another donor sent some handmade quilts in the hope this might settle her tax bill. Almost all of the notes that accompany financial donations are anonymous. Some of the gifts are forwarded by clergy who have received deathbed confessions.

Perhaps the most famous letter is this one: “Dear Internal Revenue Service, I have not been able to sleep at night because I cheated on last year’s income tax. Enclosed find a cashier’s check for $1,000. If I still can’t sleep, I’ll send you the balance.” The note was unsigned.

Human beings are wired in such a way that if we break the law – God’s laws or civic laws – we will be driven, inexorably, to one of three strategies:

(1) Denial
(2) Evasion
(3) Confession and restitution
All three strategies cost something.

Denial costs us our mental health. “I’m a good person, I haven’t done anything wrong.” But a violated conscience has a way of subverting our inner happiness, no matter how many years have gone by and how many rationalizations we have believed.

Evasion costs us our integrity. “No one knows what I’ve done.” Even if you don’t believe in a God who is halfway paying attention to the world, you in fact know that you know, and compromised character is always predisposed toward the next compromise.

Confession and restitution cost us our pride. “I’ve done wrong. No excuses. I will do whatever it takes to make things right.” The wonderful thing about the third option is that it resets both our inner and outer worlds – restoring our peace and reconnecting us with God and others.

The Bible adds an interesting twist. From a spiritual perspective, we’re all in debt to God: serious, jaw-dropping, not-a-chance-in-a-million-lifetimes-to-pay-it-all-off debt. But there’s good news: God is the ultimate debt eraser. On the cross God offered a Gift that more than outweighs the world’s cumulative sin debt.

There is, of course, a cost we have to bear. We have to give up the hope of ever buying our own way to heaven.

Which, when you think about it, is a small price to pay for a clear conscience. •
Riding Fence

Cattle are not the brightest lights in the barnyard chandelier. As Winnie the Pooh might describe them, they are creatures “of little brain.”

But in one regard they are absolutely brilliant – the idiot savants of all livestock, as one cattle owner describes them. If there’s a weak place or hole of any kind in a fence or enclosure, they will find it and exploit it.

And every other cow or bull is sure to follow. It’s what they do.

The result is that these huge creatures walk into a world where they are singularly defenseless and ill-equipped to meet their own needs. And it might take days to round them up.

Cattle owners must therefore be committed to “riding fence.” That means sitting atop a horse for hours on end, monitoring the condition of every foot of fencing, which on the biggest ranches out West can mean miles and miles of barbed wire. Twenty-first century ranchers are discovering that this might be an excellent job for drones. You find the weak places in the fence and fix them. It’s a mission of love: protecting creatures who don’t know how to take care of themselves.

Human beings are spiritual idiot savants. We are brilliantly gifted at figuring out how to screw up our own lives.

This is not an issue of intelligence. People with high IQs and advanced degrees and worlds of experience – men and women we presume should know better – have a wonderful knack for finding escape clauses in God’s commandments and loopholes in the creeds of common sense. It’s what we do.

We walk away from the security of community – “coloring outside the lines” is how we like to put it – and end up having to be rescued from circumstances that once looked so promising when we were standing on the other side of the fence.

Sometimes people chafe at the restrictions and boundaries on human behavior that are part and parcel of spiritual life. Think of it this way: That’s just God riding fence.

His goal is to ensure that at day’s end we’re thriving in the right pasture. •
Learning from Each Other

Hospitals can be forbidding places. That’s true even for caregivers who usually feel at ease with others, no matter what the circumstances.

People requiring hospitalization are generally not at their best. It can be uncomfortable walking in on somebody who is struggling physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

When I was 25 years old, I didn’t know the first thing about bringing encouragement to hospitalized individuals. But I was blessed to have a mentor.

Howard Lindquist, who was the head of the pastoral staff of the church I was serving, knew how to turn hospital visits into moments of grace. I had been out of seminary for two months when Howard said, “Why don’t you take a ride with me this afternoon? Let’s go make some hospital visits together.”

Howard showed me how to walk into a room. He modeled how to pray for a seriously ill person. He pointed out the best parking spots at the Indianapolis area hospitals, which is not trivial information. He showed me the side doors and back doors that would ultimately spare me who knows how many steps over the next quarter century. Even though I had once taken class notes on hospital visitation, I never needed to reference them again. Howard let me walk beside him one afternoon. He showed me how to care.

There’s a classic pattern to mentoring that can be expressed by the following sequence:

1. I do and you watch.
2. I do and you help.
4. You do and I watch.
5. You and I both repeat this pattern with someone else.

Mentoring, in other words, is reproducible. I learn so I can teach someone else.

Think of all the things worth knowing that are best absorbed not in a book but at the elbow of someone who is willing to share: how to make great gravy, how to garden, how to ask for forgiveness, how to stay calm when the world seems to be falling apart.

Want to change the world, one life at a time? Pass along something worth knowing. Choose to be a mentor.
Born to Be Wild

Be afraid. Be very afraid. At least, that’s how your local Canada goose wants you to feel.

First things first: that beast with the long black neck and white “ chinstrap” – the bird that tries to scare you out of the parking lot – is a Canada goose, not a Canadian goose. It would be Canadian only if it has a valid passport representing our neighbors to the north.

It’s hard to believe, but Canada geese were almost on the endangered species list 100 years ago. Aggressively hunted for their lean meat (think “Christmas goose”), they had to be re-introduced to the state of Ohio in 1956. Twenty mated pairs of geese were released into the Buckeye State in the hope they might survive and thrive. That they did. Today naturalists estimate there are more than a half million Canada geese that call Ohio home.

The startling part is that a great many of them never leave. What happened to those magnificent V formations of geese flying south every fall, only to return the following spring?

The simple truth is that it’s become all too easy for geese to spend their winters here in the north instead of packing up and heading for the Gulf. Humans have conveniently fashioned thousands of retention ponds, like beautiful Lake Costco outside our windows. The food is plentiful, and the predators are few. No wonder Canada geese act as if they own the place.

It doesn’t take much to push their territorial buttons. When threatened, geese might flap their wings, lower their heads, stick out their tongues a la Gene Simmons of KISS, make hissing sounds, and, when all else fails, charge. Geese aren’t particularly dangerous. But as they settle into their new year-round habitats, they can undeniably be annoying. That’s what can happen when wild animals become semi-domesticated.

And that’s something that can happen to us, too.

Followers of Jesus are supposed to be wild. “Follow me” was never intended to be a promise of comfort. It’s a summons to engage a world where evil and injustice really exist. We’re called to advocate for the poor, the powerless, and those on the margins. We’re to invest our resources in world-changing projects instead of easing ourselves
into lifestyles that are all about us. God boldly beckons us to risk our reputations, our social standing, and even our safety for the sake of God’s kingdom. And at every step our call is not to judge others, but to love courageously.

But it’s easy to grow deaf to the call of the wild. We start hanging out at churches that protect the status quo instead of challenging it. We write checks to help others go change the world instead of asking God to show us how we can change the parts of the world where we already live and work. The Good Life becomes safe, easy, and semi-domesticated – a religiously motivated effort to avoid ruffling anyone’s feathers. As one bishop lamented, “Everywhere the apostle Paul went, people rioted. Everywhere I go, they serve tea.”

It’s time to reclaim our natural state.

As frontline ambassadors for God’s purposes in the world, we’re supposed to be wild. Which means, as we walk gingerly past any Canada geese today, we might even consider dusting off that old bumper sticker:

Honk If You Love Jesus. •
Child’s Play

During the course of a single year (1905), a young man named Albert Einstein submitted several papers to a German physics journal. This was surprising, since Einstein had no scientific pedigree, no university affiliation, and no laboratory to conduct experiments.

He was employed at the time in the Swiss national patent office in Bern, where he was a technical examiner third class. He had recently sought a promotion to technical examiner second class, but his application had been rejected.

Social historian Bill Bryson, in his book A Short History of Nearly Everything, summarizes the impact of three of the papers that Einstein submitted to Annalen der Physik: “The first won its author a Nobel Prize and explained the nature of light (and also helped to make television possible, among other things). The second provided proof that atoms do exist – a fact that had, surprisingly, been in some doubt. The third merely changed the world.”

Einstein’s theory of special relativity, the subject of the third paper, transformed humanity’s understanding of the cosmos. It was an extraordinary article in that it had no footnotes, no citations, no previous sources, and contained virtually no math. It’s almost as if he “had reached the conclusions by pure thought, unaided, without listening to the opinions of others,” writes historian C.P. Snow. “To a surprisingly large extent, that is precisely what he had done.”

As Einstein became internationally famous, the New York Times decided to run a story. Unfortunately they sent their golf correspondent, Henry Crouch, to do the interview. Crouch knew considerably more about fairways and bunkers than theoretical physics.
The story was laughably inaccurate, and included the journalist’s conjecture that only 12 people “in all the world could comprehend” the theory of relativity.

With the passing of time, that number got smaller and smaller in the public imagination. Bryson recounts: “When a journalist asked the British astronomer Sir Arthur Eddington if it was true that he was one of only three people in the world who could understand Einstein’s relativity theories, Eddington considered deeply for a moment and replied, ‘I am trying to think who the third person is.’”

The theory of relativity is so remarkable and so far-reaching it just has to be impossible for ordinary people to comprehend. Right?

Something similar happens when ordinary people try to wrap their heads around the essence of the Christian message. There are so many Bible verses. And so many theories about what really happened on the cross. And so many different churches with all their different views of baptism, worship, and sacred rituals.

Who can make sense of it all? Karl Barth, one of the 20th century’s most celebrated theologians – who also happened to be a citizen of Switzerland – was a guest speaker at the University of Chicago in 1962. During the closing Q&A time, a student asked Barth if he could summarize his whole life’s work of theological reflection in a single sentence. He replied, “Yes, I can. In the words of a song I learned at my mother’s knee: Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”

We may think that only the brightest people on earth can comprehend the meaning of the universe. But you don’t have to be an Einstein to grasp what really matters.

God has ensured that even a child can get it right.
What Time Is It?

There once was a man who, on his way to work every morning, walked past a clock shop. It was part of his daily ritual to pause long enough to gaze at the big grandfather clock standing in the shop window.

One day the clockmaker, who had noticed this behavior, stepped outside and struck up a conversation. “This one’s a real beauty, isn’t she?” he said, pointing to the clock in the window. “I’ll say,” said the man on the street. “To tell you the truth, I actually have another motive for stopping here every day. I’m the timekeeper at the local factory. It’s my job to blow the whistle at precisely five o’clock. This wristwatch of mine is notoriously unreliable, so every day I stop and recalibrate it according to this magnificent timepiece of yours.”

“Is that so?” said the clockmaker, who was beginning to feel a bit uneasy. “I hate to tell you this, but the reason this grandfather clock doesn’t sell is that I’ve never been able to make it work precisely right. In fact I readjust it every day – right at five o’clock, when I hear the whistle go off at your factory!”

Life’s most important questions are pretty simple: What time is it right now, and who has the authority to say so? Our culture has answered resoundingly: There is no Greenwich Mean Time when it comes to the meaning of life. There is no final authority. Everyone winds his own watch and marches to his own schedule.

A couple of years ago, I came up behind a car driven by a teenage girl. I noticed its bumper sticker: Galileo was wrong: the world revolves around ME. After first checking to make sure that wasn’t my daughter behind the wheel, it occurred to me that in the 21st century that bumper sticker makes perfect sense. If there is nothing outside myself that is eternally valid or true, then the question of where I get my rules for living is a no-brainer: The world revolves around me.

Unsurprisingly, God’s speaks a contrary word in Scripture: “I am the Lord, and there is no other. I have not spoken in secret, from somewhere in a land of darkness… I, the Lord, speak the truth. I declare what is right” (Isaiah 45:18-19).

So what time is it?

From God’s perspective, it’s always the right time to recalibrate our hearts and minds to the heart and mind of God.  ●