

THE MESSENGER OF HOPE



The Newsletter of Hope Lutheran Church
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First through Fourth
Sundays in Lent

March 2006



WORDS OF HOPE

by *Pastor Curtis Aguirre*

Lent is about letting go. Lent is about liberation. When Jesus stood in the synagogue of his home town, he read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and proclaimed that he had come to set the captives free. We are those captives, prisoners to our habits, thoughts, and emotions, prisoners to social pressures, prisoners to economic needs, prisoners to biological processes, genetic propensities, and the laws of nature. Lent is about letting go and being set free.

Maybe the phrase "Lenten disciplines" is misleading. It makes it sound as though something difficult were being added to all the stuff we already "have to" do. Maybe we should call the traditional practices of Lent, "Lenten liberations."

Take fasting, for example. When you think of fasting as "giving up" some of your favourite culinary indulgences for weeks on end, it sounds like a terrible burden and sacrifice. With that mindset, it is easy for the "Lenten discipline" of fasting to turn into the "religious good work" which will give you "righteousness credits" with God. The very thing which Jesus was critiquing in the Pharisaic way of going about the religious life, echoed 1500 years later by Luther's and the reformers' critique of "religiosity" in their day.

But if you understand fasting as a "letting go" of things which have a hold over you, it takes on a different flavour. Food is such a basic requirement for life, that it is sometimes hard for us to disentangle the "necessary" part from the "addicted" part. Anyone who struggles with weight control knows the power of one's attachment to the sensation of eating over one's life, especially the attachment to eating certain kinds of foods. In our society of overabun-

dance, it is so easy for us to fill the nutritional needs of our bodies with nutritionally questionable foods, especially ones which trigger euphoric or stimulating feelings (sugars, fats, alcohol, caffeine). These foods soon control our behaviour. We are no longer in charge of ourselves. But Lent is liberation, a chance to let go and become free.

Another example is "alms giving," what today we might call, giving to charity. If you think of this as "giving more" during Lent, then again it sounds like a self imposed burden, which potentially becomes a religious work. But if you think of "alms giving" in terms of your relationship to money, possessions, and time, and letting go of your "need" (read "habit") to use them in a certain way, then this practice takes on a different feeling. Given that in our society there is an oversupply of entertainment and ways to "spend time (and money)", it is hard for many or most people to distinguish between living and entertainment. People find it "necessary" to amuse themselves with all manner of costly games, activities, and luxuries, so that these are taken as "essentials" of "the good life". These become the goal of living. The activities control us and control our use of money and time. We cannot imagine the "drudgery" and "boredom" that we would have to endure were we not to have all these. We really are prisoners and captives. We imagine ourselves to be free, but we are chained to the god Entertainment.

Lent is an opportunity to let go and be set free. Imagine if for this period of time, you let go of "entertainment" so that you could simply be with people who are important to you. Ah, but not to be together sharing a form of money consuming entertainment, but simply to be together, perhaps walking, or helping each other with a task. Then, all of that money which might have been spent can be given instead. You

have become free of something which sucks time and money out of your life, so that you can share your time and money with someone who might need it more.

The third of the “pillars” of Lenten practices is prayer. This one is tied closely with the others, in that it is often suggested that whatever time is freed up in not preparing a meal or eating one, or in not participating in this or that form of consumer activity, be used for prayer. However, there is another way to look at prayer as a liberating practice.

We are all, to various degrees, prisoners of our thoughts and memories, and our emotional responses to these. We tend to fall into the same patterns of mental images, logical (or illogical) mental sequences, and then into the same repetition of emotions associated with these thoughts. The act of prayer can become a letting go of all of those mental constructs that hold us hostage.

When people sit down to meditate (a catch-all term for various kinds of focused prayer) they usually experience the problem of “monkey brain”, that is, of thoughts jumping from “branch to branch”, so to speak. This is how our brains function in ordinary mode. Prayer becomes a time to be free from this. In the form of meditation I have come to practice (Centering Prayer), one learns to release thoughts, to let them float by, and not to cling or become immersed in them, and in this way to be totally present to God. The form doesn’t matter as much as the liberation that takes place from the mental slave drivers of our random thoughts.

It is easy to make a “religious good work” out of prayer by simply chalking up the hours spent praying, and perhaps even noting the physically uncomfortable postures taking while praying (kneeling for hours on end, standing with outstretched arms for long periods, crawling on a gravelly surface toward a shrine, etc.). But prayer need not be this. It can also be a liberation from the slavery of ordinary daily mental functioning.

So this Lent I invite you to consider some or all of these “Lenten disciplines” and to take them up as “Lenten liberations.” Who knows? Perhaps by Easter you will love your freedom so much you won’t want to stop!

LENTEN SERVICES

Last year our Hope Lutheran midweek events for Lent were attended also by people from St. James Anglican Church. This year we will formalize this arrangement of sharing special Lent services, and will do so at St. James Anglican Church. By the time you get this issue, we will have had our joint Shrove Tuesday pancake supper and “Ash Tuesday” service (actually the Eve of Ash Wednesday, just like Christmas Eve is on the evening before - in the Bible the day begins at sundown). Our two congregations will then share three consecutive study and worship sessions on the Tuesdays March 21, 28, and April 4 beginning at 10:30 a.m. These sessions will take place at St. James. Deborah van der Goes (the Rector of St. James) and I will share the responsibilities for these.

MEN'S BREAKFAST

Don’t forget the monthly Men’s Breakfast on the second Saturday of the month (March 11) from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. We have a wonderful time of fellowship around the preparation and sharing of the breakfast. There is also always a time of discussion around a timely topic. See you there.

SEALED BID AUCTION FOR TECHNICS ORGAN

We are getting rid of the Technics organ which is currently being stored in the Narthex of the church. If you are interested in taking this organ home, or know of someone who would like to have it, sealed bids are being accepted until the end of March. The purchaser is responsible for transporting the instrument from the church.

The deadline for the April Messenger is Friday, March 24. Please send your submissions to the office at [hopeluth@nanaimo.ark.com](mailto:hoveluth@nanaimo.ark.com) or (250)758-1232. You can also speak to Olena directly or email at mind-body@telus.net.

This month, Canadian Lutheran World Relief (CLWR) celebrates 60 years of bringing hope to the world. Since 1946, when CLWR came into existence to address the issues of hunger and refugees in Europe following the end of the Second World War, its work has branched out to bring food relief, development and self-help projects, refugee help and resettlement to people from all over the world.

If you would like to help CLWR celebrate with your offering, please indicate this on the Charity of the Month line of your envelopes.

The Post-AGM Budget, and Related Items

For those of you who took the time to attend the AGM last Sunday, thank you. A budget was approved with the following highlights:

Total Budget is \$118,867, which translates to offerings of \$2,286 per week

Budget includes \$5,200 for a part-time youth worker, \$5,000 for a part-time secretary/office manager, increased giving to the BC Synod (\$600/mo), \$2,600 for the bulletin maker

The items for the youth worker and office staff person are maximums for positions that will be filled at Council's discretion.

So far, we are not meeting the minimum requirements for the budget, being about \$100 low per week on the average over the first 8 weeks of the year. However, this is not bad for this time of the year, and is consistent with previous years. I expect offerings will pick up as the year progresses.

For January, total attendance was 450 over 5 Sundays, or 90 worshipers per Sunday. Offerings totaled over \$17,000, of which about \$5,300 went to designated recipients. Special events this year include the BC Synod convention and the national ELCIC youth gathering. I fully expect us to support our youth with open hearts and hands.

God Bless! *Arnold Gill, Treasurer*

POWER

by Beth Paton

When Pastor Curtis introduced the singing of 'Lord, listen to your children praying' (at the 9.30 service), I was pleased. I felt it was an important part of our corporate prayer time. For me it helped focus on the Holy Spirit's participation when we pray to God. As it says in Romans 8:26: "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes [for us] with sighs too deep or words". But the last line bothered me - 'give us love, give us power, give us grace'. I had no problem asking to be given the ability to love as I should, nor a problem with being given grace; but POWER!! It didn't seem right to be asking for power. To be honest, on many occasions I sang, 'give us love, give us wisdom, give us grace' - quietly, of course!! Or I would sing, 'give us love', then be silent and join in with 'give us grace'

While away, I have been reading "Seeking the Kingdom: Thirty Daily Reflections to Transform Your Spiritual Life" by Richard Foster. I have found some of these reflections a great help in my spiritual journey. In one of them he discusses "spiritual power". Now I realise that most of you will have understood the meaning of 'give us power' as we have sung it week after week. However, there may be at least some among you who like me have puzzled over this and may welcome what I have to say, as I understand Foster to be explaining it. If not, then at least writing this will have reinforced it for me.

Foster mentions two types of power - spiritual power and human power. He points out that Paul talks about the 'flesh', by which Paul means "human-initiated activity without the aid of divine grace". Our 'pedigree', positions of status and connections to others who have worldly power are the 'flesh' or human power. But Paul sets his sights on a spiritual or a greater power. As Paul says in Philippians 3: 10,11 "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the

resurrection from the dead”.

Foster asks: “What, then, are the marks of [the power of his resurrection] that proceed from God?” He comes up with two: the spiritual power of love and the spiritual power of humility.

The spiritual power of love is one that is used for the good of others. Jesus used his power for love as seen in his healing of many various illnesses or handicaps, e.g. healing the blind. We find in Luke 6:19, “And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them”. This is not an isolated case; in Mark 5:30, Jesus was “immediately aware that power had gone forth from him” (the healing of the woman with the haemorrhagic disease). In all of the cases where Jesus used his spiritual power for others, it was used to “destroy that which was evil so that love [could] redeem good”.

Power used to advance our positions of status or inflate our egos, “is not the power motivated by love”. Paul and Barnabus in Acts 14:8-14 were claimed as gods by the people of Lystra when they healed a man. Instead of being flattered by such treatment Paul and Barnabus “tore their clothes and rushed into the crowd, shouting; ‘Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you’”, (Acts 14:14,15). We will be discussing the effect of the spiritual power of humility later. The passage we will be using is in Acts 10, and, in the same chapter, we have Peter reacting the same way as Paul and Barnabus. When Peter arrived at Cornelius’ house, Cornelius fell at Peter’s feet and worshipped him, (v. 25). But Peter immediately said, “Stand up; I am only a mortal.” I wondered how I would have reacted?

“This,” says Foster, “leads us to the second mark of spiritual power, humility. Humility is power under control”. To exercise the spiritual power of humility we must learn to improve ourselves when we make mistakes. We have a good example of this in Acts 18:24-28, where Apollos, when corrected, eagerly changed his preaching. He had only known the teaching of John the Baptist. However, when the teachings and ministry of Jesus were taught to him by Priscilla and Aquila, he changed his preaching, to show “by the scriptures

that the Messiah is Jesus” (v. 28). We have Peter (and some of the other believers), also learning by his mistakes. In Acts 10:1-48, we find Peter coming to terms with the idea that Gentiles in the sight of God were ‘clean’ and “should not [be called] profane or unclean”, (v.28). As a result of Peter changing his view point, Cornelius and “his relatives and close friends” (v.24) were “baptized in the name of Jesus Christ”, (48), after “the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the Word”, (v.44). Again in Galatians 2:11-21 we have Peter being chastised by Paul for his two-faced behaviour. Once more Peter had a lesson to learn and he changed.

Jesus frequently showed us the way of humility, the most famous of these being when he washed his disciples feet at the Last Supper (John 13:4,5). Richard Foster ends the session with the following words: “Power without humility is anything but a blessing”. I found myself questioning my motives for why I do or say things, within my family, among my faith community or with my friends. Do I say or do some things to exercise my power over them, or do I do and say them for the love of the person, motivated by the love of God?

In John Woolman’s Journal he speaks of learning to control his tongue. In the course of doing so he talks about being “humbled and disciplined under the Cross”. In Philippians 2:3-5, Paul says: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility; regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus”. That is being humbled and disciplined under the Cross. Our chief mentor in the spiritual power of love and the spiritual power of humility, is Jesus. His whole public ministry is full of his use of power: both as the spiritual power of love and the spiritual power of humility; never the human power I had been associating with ‘give us power’. In future when we sing “Lord listen to your children praying”, I will be asking for love, power and grace. /*

You are exactly where you are supposed to be today ... and so is everyone else.

THE CONUNDRUM OF CUBA - PART 2

Some excerpts from a recent letter of reflections and observations by Rev. Brain Rude, our ELCIC's missionary to El Salvador -- he works as a prison chaplain in a youth detention centre

While Cubans are now allowed to possess foreign currency, and exchange it to "pesos convertibles", and then spend these on a wide range of items, commodity prices are generally high and selection is rather limited. Those working in the tourist trade, especially, have figured out ways to "privatize" a piece of the business, and earn a few dollars on the side, which multiplies their income, and their consumer "needs", many-fold. Many also receive heavily-taxed remittances from family members living in North America or Europe.

The media, while informative and educational, with many programs on history, culture, math, languages and grammar, etc., on radio and on the three national television channels, is rather limited when it comes to entertainment and a range of perspectives on the news. The news consists primarily of pro-revolution (Castro) and anti-imperial (Bush) themes. The recent inauguration of "Telesur" broadens coverage considerably. Some have figured out how to set up clandestine satellite service in their apartment buildings, to be able to watch especially Latino programming from the US or around Latin America. This is also a risk, since when the "social workers" come to fumigate, they are also checking for unnecessary cables.

I was curious about the freedom of religion and worship. My first Sunday in Cuba we visited the small house-church of some friends, independent but linked to the World Council of Churches. They worship in the pastor's comfortable home, with space for about 30-40 persons. The pastor drives a surprisingly new Mercedes, something difficult to explain in a country where everything is owned by the state, and where the roads are filled suspecting tourism services. Since the Pope's visit in 1998, celebration of

Christmas has been restored to legal status, a welcome change, especially for the older folk who remember Christmas celebrations from their earlier years...

On my own, I sought out some of the cultural aspects of life in Havana: a revealing play, the monologue of a street-cleaner, reflecting candidly on the realities of life in Cuba, especially the longing of many to head to the USA; a couple Cuban movies reflecting the culture and the exodus; the very musical groups entertaining in restaurants and bars everywhere; bookstores, with a surprisingly revealing selection of novels focussing on risqué themes such as prostitution and emigration (does Fidel know?); the huge and impressive national galleries, a modern one for exclusively Cuban artists... an ancient one for global art and sculpture, both diverse and classy. In the Cuban art gallery, there were several groups of cadets taking it all in, dutifully taking notes from the tour-guide's commentary... I [saw] many grand pianos in various halls and libraries, and was welcomed and encouraged to play them--unlike in El Salvador, where the very few pianos aren't to be touched by the likes of me...

...unfulfilled remains my dream of meeting Fidel Castro in person, or even of hearing him live. One hears him for hours on television or radio, of course. He is a tireless orator, impressive considering his 79 years of age. He has much intellectual and wise content with which to fill 3 or 4 hours of non-stop discourse, even, for example, as the "introductory" speech for the televised national graduation of teachers of art and culture. Even the child-dancers listened attentively from just after 7:00 p.m. until almost 10:30 p.m. before they got their chance to perform. George W's media team loves to focus on any slip of memory on Fidel's part, portraying him as being on the verge of dementia. Having just watched and read a series of Bush bloopers, it's evident who would lose such a contest...

The primary religious pilgrimage site in Cuba is the basilica "Nuestra Señora del Cobre", Cobre being a copper-mining town nestled into the mountains above Santiago de Cuba, in the eastern part of the country. While it could be a tourist site, it

seems to draw mostly Cubans, some of whom return regularly. Besides its religious significance, it also has political significance. A large room hosts a display protesting the incarceration of perhaps 100 political dissidents by the government of Cuba. Their names are pinned to a large map of Cuba, which is surrounded by many letters and personal artifacts from family, friends and supporters...

Communication with the rest of the world can be a challenge. Long-distance phone rates are high. Internet access was available in one of many homes I visited, but costly. Others have access just to e-mail from their home-computers. The state-run internet cafe in my neighbourhood meant a half-hour wait on the street, another half-hour wait in the waiting room, and a rate of about US\$6 per hour, for a very slow connection (up to 4 minutes to get into Yahoo!)...

On the other hand, perhaps this isolation is a blessing in disguise. Cubans, in many ways, seem much more human than in so many countries. Motorists stop for pedestrians at many crosswalks. Many are genuinely friendly, not necessarily trying to sell their wares to wary tourists. While there may be some robbery, it is not armed and life-threatening. The level and breadth of education is most impressive, and is available to all. Culture is a priority. History is another priority. While the basic food basket isn't luxurious, everybody gets it, no matter the remoteness of their dwelling, so malnutrition and death due to hunger or hunger-related diseases is absent. And Cuba offers so much to the rest of the needy world, in terms of education, health care and disaster relief... whether or not those offers are accepted or even acknowledged by countries such as El Salvador and the USA. While Cubans are eager to experience a range of freedoms enjoyed by much of the rest of the world, in terms of travel, business, private property, educational and professional options, etc., they are not looking to George W. Bush to provide this for them, much less for him to come and rescue them from Fidel Castro. While much is made of the heavy

burden of the US trade embargo, I wonder if it doesn't actually inspire Cubans to maintain the ideals and the enthusiasm of their revolution. Cuba is hardly isolated globally. It does a flourishing trade with many nations--Mexico, Venezuela, China, Canada, many in Europe, etc. It even does business with many states of, and companies from, the USA. The tourism industry of the past ten years continues to promote these global relationships.

During almost a half-century as president--or commandante or dictator, according to one's perspective--it has seemed that "Daddy knows best". Yet many in his family are yearning for further independence, preferably without having to leave home to obtain it... one is aware that not even Fidel's Cuba is forever. I am so glad that I had this opportunity to visit Cuba when I did--after much has already changed on that symbolic island, but before other inevitable changes alter the political and social landscape even further.

WORKSHOPS

JERUSALEM, GALILEE, AND SINAI: A LENTEN SPIRITUAL PILGRIMAGE

Harry Costerton: Video, text, and context
Wednesdays Mar 01 to Apr 12. 11:30-2:00
(includes lunch)
St. Anne & St. Edmund's, Parksville
\$5 per session (includes lunch) or \$25 for the series.

ON THIS JOURNEY WE CALL LIFE

Faye Schwab
Reading and facilitated group dialogue with the transformative work of James Hollis
St. Anne and St. Edmund's, Parksville
Mondays, 1:30-3:30 March-June
\$150 for 12 sessions.

To Register:
By phone: 250-248-3114
By email: sacredbalance@shaw.ca