

Where in the World Is God?

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Devotions compiled by Beverly K. Yahnke

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To all who hear and do the Word
at
Elm Grove Ev. Lutheran Church
Elm Grove, Wisconsin

**To him who is able to keep you from falling
and to present you before his glorious presence
without fault and with great joy—
to the only God our Savior
be glory, majesty, power and authority,
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
before all ages,
now and forevermore! Amen.**

(Jude 24,25)

About these meditations—

As the twentieth century draws to a close and the dawning of a new millennium is upon us, Christians face a future bright with promise, yet darkened by uncertainty and fear. In this time of frenzied change, the church is called to faithfulness to her Lord and his unchanging Word. Those called to the preaching office in our day face a task humanly impossible—to proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ in an increasingly jaded world to an increasingly uneasy church. But with God all things are possible. For 27 years now he has been teaching me the two-pronged art of preaching: faithfulness to his Word and sensitivity to his flock.

This book represents a distillation of some of my sermons in devotional form. Dr. Beverly Yahnke, parishioner and Christian psychologist, first outlined the project and guided it to completion, suggesting that these sermons may be helpful to Christians searching for hope and healing in the rubble of their lives. It is my hope and fervent prayer that some of the words which follow may be helpful for those who preach in the church and those who hear as well, that we all may capture anew the living voice of the gospel for our chaotic times.

Luther once supposedly advised that preachers pray the “Our Father” on the way up into the pulpit, but not coming down. By this he meant to say that the preacher

should humbly seek forgiveness for his human preparation before the sermon, but afterwards boldly leave the results to God.

As long as sermon manuscripts remain filed safely away in obscurity, such faith is comparatively easy. When Dr. Yahnke suggested the present project, however, I was faced with weighing my words again according to the Word of God. My thanks to her for wading through my sermons to reduce them to devotional readings; much chaff had to be discarded. In sorting through such wheat as still remains, I pray once more that what belongs to my human weakness may be forgotten—so that those words that serve faithfully to echo the eternal Word of God may linger in your ear and on your heart.

Rev. Harold L. Senkbeil, STM
First Sunday in Advent
30 November, 1998

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1. Backwards and Upside Down

Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets. (Luke 6:22,26)

It's clear that Jesus never took a Dale Carnegie course. By accepted standards he didn't know much about how to win friends and influence people. He probably wouldn't have been a very appealing after-dinner speaker either. Provocative he was; entertaining he was not. For there's nothing entertaining about the kingdom of God. Satisfying? Yes! Life-giving? Yes! But entertaining? No. Jesus did not come to make us feel good. He came to make us over again, into something entirely new.

Ordinary thinking cannot grasp what Jesus is preaching here. It seems backwards and upside down to us, but that's just the point. Our lives must be turned upside down if we are to be saved. In our world the rich are blessed, and the poor are pitied. Jesus goes to the innermost sanctum of our hearts. "What's most important to you?" he asks. "Is your heart fixed on the possessions of this world or on God himself?" If the most important things in life are our glorious God and the gracious gifts he gives us—the forgiveness of our sins for the sake of Jesus Christ, the life and the salvation he brings—then we have a grip on life that endures to all eternity. "Blessed are the poor," says Jesus, and he means you.

Our world is upside down, you see. Death has gained the upper hand. In Adam, all have died. But in Jesus Christ, life is restored, and God sets us right again. So

you are not to fear or be dismayed as a Christian. Should you sense some emptiness and longing deep inside, God is beginning to turn you right side up. It is a sign of grace. Blessed are those who hunger, for those who hunger will be satisfied now with the good things of God's own house. Do not be dismayed if your hearts are gripped with sorrow; those tears of yours are good. Those who weep are blessed if they belong to Christ. Do not be surprised if life isn't always rosy. "Blessed are you when men hate you," Jesus says. It's a bad sign if everybody always speaks well of you in this world of sin. False prophets are always popular, but God's true servants are not.

When you live, act, and speak as a child of God through faith in Jesus Christ, you will be swimming against the stream; you may not always be admired. Sometimes people will mock you and insult you. But remember, God works in ways upside down and backwards; in heaven things will be right side up again. Until then we wait, confident and full of hope, trusting the Word preached in Jesus' name, being fed with his life-giving body and blood. We believe what we cannot see with our eyes. And believing, we rejoice.

Thanks be to you, my Lord Jesus Christ, for all the benefits you have won for me, for all the pains and insults you have borne for me. Most merciful Redeemer, friend, and brother, may I know you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly, for ever and ever. Amen.

Richard of Chichester

2. *Bad Things and Good People*

Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. (Luke 13:2,3)

If there's anything in life that turns us all into philosophers, it is the age-old problem of evil. If God is good, why is there evil? What can a good and gracious God intend by allowing calamities to fall upon his children? We can understand why the bad guys get theirs, but when tragedy strikes the good and upright, we get a bit uptight. "Why can't God be fair?" we wonder. "Where is the justice in this?" You know the questions; they pop up whenever the plot thickens in anyone's life: "Why did my mother have to die? Why did I lose my job? Why did my spouse leave me?" The people in the text had the same sort of questions. "Why did Pilate kill the Galileans while they were worshiping in God's temple?"

We keep thinking that we ought to be rewarded for good behavior and punished for bad behavior. Only bad people ought to suffer. But that's not the way it works in the kingdom of God. If you want to see how God operates, just take a look at the cross. There God meted out the just penalty for sin. But he punished the wrong guy! Jesus Christ, God's Son, was without sin. He had done nothing wrong. But there God balanced the scale of justice. All the weight of all the sins of all the people in all the world was placed on him. The weight of that guilt killed him. The only innocent man who ever lived was offered as the stand-in victim for the sins of the whole world. Bad things happened to a good man. In the death and resurrection of Jesus

Christ, the good things of God were passed on to all the bad people of the world.

“Unless you repent,” says Jesus, “you too will all perish.” Now that’s pretty straight talk. In our world we measure worth and status by our accomplishments. So it’s only natural that we carry that attitude over to our relationship with God. We think that what matters is that we’re above average, and we have the idea that God must be fairly well-satisfied with us. Yet each of us, in his or her own way, stands guilty before God. Despite our good reputations and the admiration of our peers, we are all as guilty as sin. We stand condemned by the evil things we have done and by the good things we have left undone.

Thanks be to God that there is only one thing that really matters: Jesus Christ and his cross—his redeeming blood, shed for us. The forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation earned for us long ago are conveyed in the washing of his Baptism, in the eating of his Holy Supper, and in the word of his gospel absolution. Despite the evil in our world, “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). It’s not fair! It’s grace. This is God’s own solution to the problem of evil.

O Lord Jesus Christ, as you discipline those you love: grant us grace, we pray, to see your love in whatever suffering you send us; support us in patient thankfulness under pain, anxiety, or loss; and move us with pity and tenderness for our suffering neighbors; for your mercy’s sake. Amen.

Christina Rossetti