

GREETINGS FROM THE PASTOR:

Ash Wednesday is coming. Yes, I know that we have just finished celebrating Christmas, and are still recovering from its cost as credit card bills arrive in the mail. But God is shifting our focus from the Babe born in the manger to the man crucified on the Cross. The contrast is stark, and the pace is bold; but perhaps there is no better time, and no better way, to force us to reflect on the reality of what's coming, namely, the cost of sin – for Christ and for us – than with the arrival of Ash Wednesday on February 17th. The Festival of the Transfiguration falls on Valentine's Day. While most calendars follow Hallmark in setting aside this day to celebrate a certain sort of romantic love, at Zion, and in churches all across this land, we will be saying *Farewell to Alleluia*, as we focus on the love God offers through the Cross of Christ.

The cost of sin for Christ was death on the Cross. The cost of sin for us is the condemnation of death and the curse of our mortality. While death can sometimes come as relief from a long illness or release from unrelenting suffering, death reminds us that all is not well with the world. God wills that life, not death, be the last word that determines the future of creation. Yet, all the evidence points to death having that say. If death were only at the end of things, then we might delay addressing these matters until then. Unfortunately, death has many servants, including the very process of aging, which reminds us daily of the fate that ultimately awaits us. Perhaps you have read Ecclesiastes 12, which talks about aging in a poetic way, with references to white hair as *almond blossoms*, our eyes as *windows growing dim*, and our slowing gate as *grasshoppers dragging*. On paper, the poetry of Ecclesiastes sounds so light-hearted. But I prefer the way a dear friend of mine – a retired pastor, now well into his seventies, and experiencing more than his share of health related challenges – recently put it: “Growing old ain't for sissies!”

That it is not! Growing old is the daily payment we must make as we pay the cost that sin has exacted from creation. It is a reminder of our mortality, and much more than that, because it is the reality of our mortality. Every Sunday, we begin our worship service with a prayer of confession, which makes it seem like it is *what we do* that is the key to what separates us from God. “We have sinned against Thee in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and failed to do.” Certainly, misdeeds display a wide gap between our lives and God's. However, it is not what we do, but what we are that displays the defining mark of sin, which is the curse of death. It is not morality, but mortality that defines the human condition as in bondage to sin. We cannot free ourselves from death's claims. We can try harder to do the right thing. We can make small and sustained improvements in the good that we do. But there is nothing we can do to become less mortal. It is a bondage from which we cannot free ourselves.

This is what we proclaim with Ash Wednesday. “From dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return.” And from the ashes we celebrate the Good News that God has done what we could not. In the body of Christ on the Cross, we see a Savior who died that death might die; and with His resurrection, God's will for life conquers the grave and all of death's claims. The body of Christ on the Cross, the body of Christ in Communion, the body of Christ alive in the Church: these form the content and context of the Good News that because He lives, we, too, shall live! The life of Christ alive in the church is the on-going sign of this decisive truth. It might not make growing old any less a burden; but it is certain to make our ultimate future a whole lot brighter.

CHURCH COUNCIL NEWS

We spent a good part of January's meeting celebrating Zion's faithfulness in 2009. We doubled our accumulated budget surplus, maintained a strong record of benevolence, showed great support for the HV/AC Fund, and ended the year with a very impressive commitment to the life of our church. We are resolved to hire a new Church Office Secretary as soon as we wade through the 150 applications we have thus far received. We welcomed Jim Dansizen to his first Church Council meeting, with his agreeing to finish the unexpired term of Steve Ross. We also decided that new carpet (Narthex, Main Hallway, and Church Offices) is in our near-term future, with a post-Easter date in view for bringing this project to closure. In short, the strong finish we enjoyed to 2009 provided confidence and optimism about what we can do in 2010.

The Treasurer's Report was nothing short of incredible, both for the numbers it reported and for the fact that Dave Palumbo was able to gather the data and prepare a year-end report in time for our January 5 Council Meeting. We benefited greatly from the new HV/AC system, which saved us almost \$10,000 in utility bills. We also benefited greatly from your generosity in sharing your treasures, as well as your time and your talents. All of the investments we have made with our property renovation projects have driven home the point time and again that we save a tremendous amount on the bottom line because of the volunteer time committed by so many of our members and friends. So, for your generosity in giving so much of yourselves, we thank you! Our Treasurer's December Report offered all the documentation any would need to praise God for all we are able to do because of you.

MORE COUNCIL NEWS

Learning Ministry: Tina Beaber reported that the Youth of Zion will participate in the Souper Bowl of Caring this year.

Parish Life Ministry: Linda Lancashire confirmed that the Coed Softball League, of which husband Bob is the Commissioner, is planning for a healthy 2010 season.

Property Ministry: Chris Thomas reported that we're in pretty good shape in terms of regular maintenance, and it's time to look ahead to some new carpet at Zion.

Witness Ministry: Jim Dansizen welcomed the opportunity to serve, and looks forward to resuming regular Witness Team meetings.

Worship Ministry: Dale Jacobs offered thanks for the work of so many, especially our music leaders (Suzanne Walters, Fred Locker, Kelly Walters) in making our Advent and Christmas services so strong.

Resource Ministry: Mark Votaw thanked Dave on providing a thorough report of the great stewardship we experienced in 2009.

Social Outreach Ministry: Cathy Harvey offered thanks for a great year of service.

ZION'S FINANCIAL FACTS: DECEMBER

December Income	\$25,435.02
December Expenses	<u>\$21,593.05</u>
December Surplus	+ \$3,841.97
2009 Income for the year	\$236,447.52
2009 Expenses for the year	<u>\$228,471.38</u>
2009 Surplus for the Year	\$7,976.14
<i>Previous Years' Surpluses</i>	\$3,844.78
Giving for the HV/AC Fund	\$57,810.50
2009 Benevolence Support	\$37,535.00

We thank you for your generous support!

A WORD FROM THE ELCA ABOUT HAITI RELIEF

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

“If one member suffers, all suffer together with it;
if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”
(1st Corinthians 12:26)

More than two weeks have passed since the devastating earthquake in Haiti. The outpouring of gifts from members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to ELCA Disaster Response has enabled a swift response on behalf of this church.

Our initial pledge to assist with Haiti Relief was \$250,000 for sure, and another \$500,000 to be offered as gifts came in from all over the ELCA. Well, gifts surely came in. Thank you for your generous financial support which as of January 29 totaled more than \$2,511,000. Many gifts are still being counted. Over 16,000 individual gifts have been sent to the ELCA.

Our community-based partners are already providing two water purification systems to bring clean water to 25,000 people, emergency food and medical supplies to thousands, blankets and tents to shelter 10,000 people who are homeless, and funding distributed through three partners, which will increase as giving continues.

Additionally, \$300,000 has been sent to the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), a key responder and member of Action by Churches Together (ACT). The funds support LWF efforts to provide shelter to people left homeless by the quake. \$150,000 has been sent to Lutheran World Relief in Baltimore for material aid. \$150,000 has been sent to Church World Service (CWS) for construction of temporary water systems and distribution of water purification materials. Also, \$25,000 has been sent to Lutheran Services of Florida for initial support to refugees and Haitian Americans entering or returning to the United States.

Your generosity makes this life-saving work possible. As we celebrate this outpouring of gifts and prayers, we also know that we have a long road to travel together. There is so much more to be done. This church is committed to walking with our brothers and sisters in Haiti for years to come. Your continued support is needed to provide ongoing care.

General mission-support dollars and gifts to ELCA Vision for Mission make it possible for 100 percent of your gifts designated for HAITI RELIEF to be used entirely for this response effort.

Earthquake Relief!

In God's grace,
The Rev. Mark S. Hanson
Presiding Bishop
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

P.S. If you would like to view more photos of your gifts at work, you are invited to visit the ELCA website, which is www.elca.org, and more specifically, www.elca.org/bishopstatement.

THE BOOK OF FAITH AT ZION: PEOPLE OF FAITH

The Adult Sunday School Class is beginning a new study from a Bible Study Series called the People of Faith. We will study *A Gardner, Two Travelers, and a Cheat*. This is one in a series designed to explore Bible characters in the belief that the stories of God's people that were preserved for us in the Bible are not just information about men and women who lived long ago: they are about us as we live our lives today. These stories tell us who we are . . . and who God is for us. As we read these stories, we learn not just what Adam, Abraham, Sarah, and Jacob did, but we learn something central about who we are and where God is in our stories. In other words, we open the pages of Scripture in order to discover more about ourselves.

The unit we will be studying considers the first major set of characters we encounter in the Bible – Adam, Abraham, Sarah and Jacob. The point of studying these stories isn't to peek under the dusty sandals of some people who died more than three thousand years ago. The point is to meet the living God we worship today. The Bible is not a book about the dead, but a living Word that is always about two things: learning more about the God we worship, and learning more about the world in which we live.

Through this Bible study we are invited to enter into the story of one of God's people. The way into this story is through a key verse. This verse functions as the window into each character's story. We are invited to look through this window and gaze at the character from the vantage point of the window offered by our key verse. For example, we look at Adam's story through the window of relationships, because the Bible reports that God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone." (Genesis 2:18) That verse is our key to understanding Adam. Our hope is that when we look at a character's story through such a window, we will start to see the broader sweep of that person's story in a different light.

Enjoy your chance to walk with Adam as he leaves Eden, or with Abraham and Sarah as they follow God to the promised land, or with Jacob as he flees away from the land to avoid coming face-to-face with the trouble he's made for himself. In the process may you learn – as Jacob did on his own journey – that "God is in the place (and in these stories) and I did not know it."

Chuck Danner and Carol Rossbach will be your guides through this sometimes humorous look at the stories of the first people we meet in the Bible. Walk with us as we find the windows from which to view each character. Take a fresh look at how Adam and Eve had it all, how they met the serpent, and how that snake affected their relationships – with God and each other. Was it really the serpent's fault? Was Eve the cause of our fall from grace, or was Adam a bigger part of the problem? Please plan to join us on Sunday mornings between our worship services in Luther Hall. We guarantee that you'll be glad you did, and so will we.

GREAT NEWS FROM ZION'S SUNDAY SCHOOL

UPCOMING EVENTS – MARK YOUR CALENDARS!

Sunday, February 7: Youth Souper Bowl of Caring Collection of money and food items

Sunday, February 14: Sunday School Children's Choir Sings at the 10:30 a.m. Service

Sunday, March 21: The Youth of Zion host our Lenten Dinner, which begins at 5:30 p.m.

Saturday, March 27: Children's Easter Program Dress Rehearsal in the morning at 10:30 a.m.

Palm Sunday, March 28: Children's Easter Program during the 10:30 a.m. Worship Service

Easter Sunday, April 4: Our Children's Easter Egg Hunt for all ages during Sunday School

PRE-KINDERGARTEN THROUGH GRADE 6:

Sunday School and children's choir rehearsal will continue on the normal schedule this month. Choir practice begins at 9:10 a.m. in the Choir Room and finishes at 9:30 a.m. Sunday School then follows from 9:30 a.m. to 10:20 a.m. The kids continue to learn great Bible stories during class. We will also be getting started with this year's Easter Program practice this month. The Easter Program will take place on Palm Sunday (March 28) during the 10:30 a.m. service, with Dress Rehearsal on Saturday, March 27th. Look for more information later this month!

ACME RECEIPTS DEADLINE APPROACHING:

Thank you for turning in your Acme receipts. The last date for receipts will be **February 20, 2010**. We will get credit for all receipts dated between September 27, 2009 and February 20, 2010 that show **COMMUNITY CASH BACK** at the bottom of the receipt. Please bring in all of your receipts no later than Sunday, February 28, 2010. Thank you for your interest and support.

SOME GREAT VALENTINE'S DAY GIFT IDEAS:

Have you been wondering what to give your kids for Valentine's Day? How about giving the gift of *acceptance*? Teach your children that you love them for who and what they are, and give them this gift with a kiss. How about *self-confidence*? Help your children understand that they can trust themselves, and give this gift with a hug. How about *a life without needless fear*? Don't let your children see you as a worrier, and give them this gift with laughter. How about *appreciation*? Help your children acquire a spark of gratitude with which to enjoy all of life, and give them this gift as they go out the door each and every day. How about *faith*? Introduce your children to God, the best friend they will ever have; and give them this gift by bringing them with you to church every Sunday. So, there you have it: five great gift ideas – acceptance, self-confidence, a life free of needless worry, filled with gratitude, and grounded in faith. These are the kind of gifts Saint Valentine would have encouraged. Happy Valentine's Day to all!

MORE GOOD NEWS FOR THE YOUTH OF ZION

OUR 2010 SOUPER BOWL OF CARING

Zion's youth are participating in the 2010 SOUPER BOWL OF CARING. This is a great project through which many youth groups across the nation help many charities and the people they serve. Last year over \$10 million was raised by over 16,000 young Lutherans in ELCA congregations across the country. What an amazing act of caring! Zion's youth will be collecting money and nonperishable food items through Sunday, February 7. There is a *collection can* located outside the Church Office, and our youth will be in the Narthex collecting money and food before and after both services on February 7th.

We appreciate all of your support, and look forward to everyone's generosity in helping Zion's youth help others. All the food collected at Zion for the 2010 Souper Bowl of Caring Campaign will go to Zion's Food Pantry. All the money raised will be used by our youth to shop for shoes and clothing, with Mark Votaw driving all of the items we buy to Cleveland, which is where *Shoes & Clothes for Kids* is located. Thank you to Tina Beaber and to our youth for all of their enthusiasm in organizing and carrying out this worthwhile project; and again, thanks to everyone at Zion for your support.

ZION'S YOUTH HOST LENTEN DINNER ON MARCH 21

Lent begins with Ash Wednesday on February 17th. As is our custom at Zion, each of the five Sunday evenings in Lent begins with a delicious dinner at 5:30 p.m., followed by Lenten devotions at 6:15 p.m. The Youth of Zion will host our Lenten dinner on the fifth Sunday of Lent, and then lead our devotions with their reading of the Passion Narrative from the Gospel of Luke. The entire Sunday School gets involved in the evening. So, mark the Sunday evening of March 21st on your calendar. Details will follow as we get closer to the evening of March 21st.

A BIG THANK YOU FOR ALL OF OUR CHRISTMAS COOKIES

When the original call went out, we were looking for 120 dozen Christmas cookies for the families we serve through our Food Pantry & Clothing Closet. We didn't quite reach that mark; but we did manage to bake and donate around 70 dozen, which figures out to be over eight hundred Christmas cookies. Wow! That is pretty impressive. As it turned out, those cookies did not go to our pantry families. Their day was filled with Christmas hams for all, along with all the trimmings for a great Christmas dinner. And, as many know, we also distributed presents and gift cards through your generous support of our Advent Giving Tree. The Christmas cookies were the main course at the *Sweet Dreams Dessert Buffet* for families who were blessed through the 2009 Christmas Celebration for LOVE THE CHILDREN MINISTRIES. Here's the note we received in appreciation for our excellence in baking and generosity in giving:

Dear Debbie and Zion Members,

Thank you so much for all of the dozens and dozens of Christmas cookies and baked goods donated to the Love the Children Ministries' Christmas Party! They were enjoyed by all.

Sincerely yours, Eva Foltz

THE WOMEN OF ZION

Trust has been the theme for both January and February with our women's **monthly Bible study**, which meets in Luther Hall on the third Tuesday, which this month is *February 16, at 9:30 a.m.* In January we looked at Romans 8:38-39 in celebrating the Good News that nothing can (or ever will) separate us from the love of God, which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord. In February, our special verse is Romans 11:29, which promises us that the gifts of God are irrevocable. Again, nothing can undo the Good News that we are claimed by God as children, empowered by the Spirit with gifts galore, and accompanied by Christ every step along the journey, both in this life and the next. In chapters 9—11 in Romans, Paul takes up the very difficult question of what happens to Israel now that the Church has become His people. Paul's answer is simple: God's Word is true. God is faithful to His promises. God's gifts, God's grace, God's love, God's promises: all are irrevocable. Please plan to join us on the morning of February 16, the day before Ash Wednesday, to help us discuss this month's lesson.

Don't forget that **Zion's Comfort Givers** continue to meet on the second and fourth Thursdays of the month, *February 11 & 25*, beginning at 9:30 a.m. in Luther Hall. We enjoy coffee, conversation, and being filled with the feeling of knowing that we are helping others through the good that we do.

The **Chancel Guild** will host our Lenten dinner on the evening of Sunday, February 28. Dinner is served at 5:30 p.m., with worship to follow at 6:15 p.m. As we look ahead to March, we will have a meeting on Tuesday, March 9, 6:30 p.m., to clean the communion ware, and to repair our green hymnals and blue songbooks as needed.

THE MEN OF ZION

The **Men of Zion** have a very busy month with the arrival of February. We will host the very **first Sunday Evening Lenten Dinner**, which is scheduled for **February 21st**. That means that we will need to use our regular monthly meeting on *Wednesday, February 3rd*, to begin thinking about how we can help the Singing Chef plan the delicious menu. Speaking about delicious menus, Linda Lancashire has agreed to prepare her home-made lasagna as the featured entrée at our Men of Zion meeting.

In addition to these activities, the Men of Zion have been invited by *Lutheran Men in Mission* of the Canton Massillon Conference to St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Massillon (127 Cherry Road NE), on the morning of **Saturday, February 20**, to attend the *Annual Men's Winter Breakfast*. Breakfast will be served at 8:00 a.m., with Pr. Bob Brigham opening our day with prayer, and Bishop Elizabeth Eaton leading our Bible study. St. Paul's Intern, Rhonda Gallagher, will be our Guest Speaker. Music will be provided by Bill and Barb Tuttle, and our freewill offering will support the good work done by the Total Living Center in Canton. Please contact Jamie Savarin at jsavarin@aol.com with any questions you might have, or call Jamie at 330-323-4212.

We haven't yet heard the details about the *Fifth Annual Great Chili Cook Off*, but you should know that Zion will be the host for the second annual edition of a Lutheran Men in Mission St. Patrick's Day fundraiser, the **Corned Beef & Cabbage Dinner** so many of us enjoyed last year. The day is March 17, a Wednesday, from 4:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. The dinners will cost \$7.00 for adults, and \$3.00 for children (ages 3 through 12). Invite your friends! Bring your family! All are welcome.

THANK YOU'S TO ZION

Dear Friends at Zion Lutheran Church,

Thank you for the wonderful donations you brought for our shelter residents. They had a wonderful holiday, thanks to the generosity and Christian outreach of folks like you. We have included a special note of thanks from some of the women who use our shelter:

“Thanks to all who made our holiday season happy and amazing. Thank you for bringing the holiday season back to us when we were down. Your caring brought us back with good cheer. Thank you for your generous hearts. Thank you in so many ways.”

*Thank you,
The YWCA Women*

To the Women of Zion, our Sisters in Christ,

Thank you for your year-end gift to the ministries of the Women of the ELCA. The churchwide women's organization is pleased to be a partner with you in supporting women at home and around the world.

As a community of women committed to supporting the personal gifts and spiritual growth of one another, the Women of the ELCA could not do its important work without your faithful financial contribution and your prayerful support. I hope that 2010 ushers in new ways for us to work together in mobilizing women to act boldly on our faith in Jesus Christ!

*Sincerely,
Linda Post Bushkofsky
Executive Director*

Dear Zion Lutheran Church,

From our hearts to yours: Thanks for thinking of us over the Christmas holiday season.

*The Lindy Lane Guys
Keith, Rick, Jason, and Joe*

THANK YOU'S AND MORE

Dear Pastor Sherwindt and Members of Zion:

Thank you for your prayers, cards, visits, and for the Chancel Flowers offered in Don's memory. Thank you, too, for the fine service. *Footprints* has always been a favorite of mine, and Don also liked it.

One of our friends who joined us for the service said, “If I didn't know Don before I came, I know him now.” All of our friends commented on what a fine service it was. Thank you again for your visits in the hospital, at Manor Care, and to our home.

*Sincerely,
Barb Achauer*

*You Are Invited to Celebrate
the 100th Birthday of
ATLEE FALL*

Sunday, February 21, 2010
2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.
Right here in Luther Hall
at Zion Lutheran Church!

IN LOVING MEMORY OF DONALD ACHAUER

May 13, 1932 – January 18, 2010

Let me begin by simply saying that Don was a good man, honest with himself, and straight-forward with others. I enjoyed his refreshing candor, and his company, too. There was one time when he shared with me that while his faith in God was strong and important to him, he wasn't the biggest fan of institutional religion, which, as it turns out, I represent, and encourage all of you to support! But, in truth, Don was in good company. A modern martyr of our faith, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a defining voice in the Confessing Church that challenged Hitler and the Nazis during World War II, envisioned (and advocated) what he called a *religionless* Christianity, where the simplicity of faith active in service freely makes the connection between the grace God gives and the love we live. Like I said, faith in God was important to Don, touching the very core of his being and the whole of his life. It was always very clear to me that he knew what was important, and he lived what he knew. He didn't need to make it overly complicated.

As a Pastor, you live for those moments when friends and members want to talk about issues of life and death, faith in God and peace within, the truth of God's love and the comfort that gives. With Don, you knew that he was familiar with the lay of that land, invariably getting right to the heart of the matter, and knowing where the firmest ground was found. That's what happened when Don and I spoke about these things in November. We had just celebrated a baptism at Zion. Lutherans baptize babies *as the norm* to make a very adult theological point about the absolute priority of God's grace as the key to all things related to salvation. Babies surely are beautiful. What can be more inviting than a God who embraces babies with the promise of a love that will never let us go? But Lutherans don't baptize babies because they're adorable.

Theologically speaking, we baptize babies because they bring nothing to the table except their complete dependence on God. There's no record of good works or great deeds. There's nothing to suggest they've earned God's respect or deserve God's love. Yet, God loves them completely and promises His faithfulness as He embraces each one of us with a love that flows from His gracious decision and unwavering commitment to claim us as His own and bless us with His love. It's all about God's grace as the key to the promises God makes and the salvation He offers. Baptism is for babies; but it's really not kids' stuff. Baptism lifts up the fully-formed adult conviction that if God were waiting for us to earn His favor, to prove worthy of His attention, and to deserve the love He so freely gives, then we'd be waiting for a very long time, forever really, because the notion that we can impress God with who we are or what we've done is a combination of arrogance and ignorance.

Don knew that, not in the sense that he wrote down the right answer for a pop quiz, but in the sense that when the two of us talked about this a light went on that lit up his eyes with his telltale gleam, and lit up his spirit with heartfelt joy. *Saved by grace through faith*: Luther regarded this as the defining dogma that should organize the Church's life and thought, its mission and ministry. Don saw it as a first step we never outgrow. We never outgrow our need for God's grace. Baptism lifts up the secret of salvation: it is a journey that begins and continues with our learning to trust the Good News that God really is gracious, that God really does love us with a love that will never let us go because that's who God is. That's what God does.

“FOOTPRINTS IN THE SAND”: POSTSCRIPT AND CONCLUSION

Don certainly knew his share of struggle over the course of these last two decades or so. It could cause a man to wonder whether God remembered His promise. But struggles like those that Don endured seem to have had the opposite effect on his faith and trust. His experiences deepened his faith in God and strengthened his resolve to trust in God above all else. It is precisely this side of the Don I knew through the conversations we enjoyed that led me to lift up the words that were featured on our bulletin cover. I can hear Don asking the questions, and I can see the gleam in his eyes shining with God’s final response.

One night a man had a dream. He dreamed he was walking along the beach with the Lord. Across the sky flashed scenes from his life. For each scene, he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand; one belonged to him, and the other to the Lord.

When the last scene of his life flashed before him, he looked back at the footprints in the sand. He noticed that many times along the path of his life there was only one set of footprints. He also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times in his life. This really bothered him and he questioned the Lord about it.

‘Lord, you said that once I followed you – and even before that when you claimed me in Baptism – that you would walk with me all the way. But I’ve noticed that during the most trouble-some times in my life, there’s only one set of footprints. I don’t understand why when I needed you most you would leave me.’

The Lord replied, ‘My precious, precious child, I love you and would never, ever leave you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.’”

I can say with perfect confidence that Don knew the strength of those arms that carried him through life; and he knows the strength of those loving arms embracing him right now. They sustained him with faith during the journey, and they are extended now to welcome him home at his journey’s end ... which is in many ways just another beginning. That is what Jesus was telling us in John: “Let not your hearts be troubled, you believe in God. Believe also in me. In my father’s house there are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go, I will return that where I am there you may be also. And you know where I am going.” Thomas then asked, “Lord, we don’t have the slightest idea where you’re going. How could we possibly know the way?” Jesus responds, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” I am the way to God, the truth about God’s love, and the life that God’s love promises. That love claimed Don in Baptism, and promises each of us a share in the life and love that never ends, God’s love and God’s life, which are ours, here and now, and forever in heaven, as we trust God’s word and live God’s love ... in Jesus’ name. Amen

WHAT'S IN THE NAME BEHIND SAINT VALENTINE'S DAY

Valentine lived in Rome during the third century. At that time, Rome was ruled by an emperor named Claudius, whose nickname was Claudius the Cruel. Here's why. Claudius wanted to have a big army. He expected men to volunteer to join. Many men tired of leaving their wives and families to fight in wars. As you might have guessed, not many men signed up. This made Claudius furious. So what happened? He had a crazy idea. He thought that if men were not married, they wouldn't mind joining the army. So Claudius decided not to allow any more marriages. Young people thought his new law was cruel. Valentine thought it was preposterous, and he chose not to support that law!

Valentine was a pastor in the church. One of his favorite activities was presiding at marriage services. Even after Emperor Claudius passed his law, he kept on performing marriage ceremonies — secretly, of course. Imagine a small candlelit room with only the bride and groom and the priest. All were committed to whispering the words of the ceremony, listening all the while for the steps of soldiers. One night, the footsteps of soldiers approached. The couple escaped; but Valentine was caught, and thrown in jail with a punishment of death. As it turned out, wonderful things happened. Young people came to the jail to visit Valentine. They threw flowers and notes up to his window. They wanted him to know that they, too, believed in love.

One of those young people was the daughter of the prison guard. Her father allowed her to visit Valentine in the cell. Sometimes the two of them would sit and talk for hours. They lifted each other's spirits, and both agreed that Valentine did the right thing by ignoring the Emperor and going ahead with the secret marriages. His friend was blind, and over the course of many visits, God cured her of her blindness. When news of that miracle got out, Claudius the Cruel worried that news of Valentine's power might spread. So, he moved up the execution. On the day Valentine was to die, he left his friend a little note thanking her for her friendship and loyalty. It was signed, *from your Valentine*.

It was this note that started the custom of exchanging love messages on Valentine's Day. This first *Valentine* was written on the day that Valentine died, February 14, one thousand, seven hundred and forty years ago. Now, every year on that day, people remember. But most importantly, they think about love and friendship. And when they think of Emperor Claudius, they remember how he tried to stand in the way of love, and they laugh — because they know that love cannot be beaten, not God's love for us, and not our love for one another!

Moving forward from 269CE, the first modern valentines date from the fifteenth century. The young French duke of Orleans, captured at the battle of Agincourt, was kept a prisoner in the Tower of London for many years. To his wife he wrote poem after poem, real valentines. About sixty of them remain, and can be seen among the royal papers in the British Museum. Flowers as valentines appear nearly two hundred years later. A daughter of Henry IV of France gave a party in honor of St. Valentine. Each lady received a beautiful bouquet of flowers from the man chosen as her valentine. Thus from Italy and France and England has come the pretty custom of sending our friends loving messages on this day. Flowers, heart-shaped candies, lacy valentines: all honor the good priest who disobeyed Claudius the Cruel.

