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Sunday, January 1, 2012

Scripture Reading: Luke 2:22-40

***THOUGHT: Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.*** —Psalm 119:105

The work began in another millennium and has taken about 13 years to complete.

I'm talking about St. John's Bible, a project to produce a handwritten and illustrated Bible *a la* the medieval tradition. Illustrated, or *illuminated*, Bibles are Scriptures with pages that have beautiful artwork that illustrates the content of the biblical page. The St. John's Bible is a project of the monks at St. John's Abbey and St. John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota. It was commissioned in 1998 as a way to celebrate the beginning of a new millennium.

Chances are, no such Bible has been produced (at least not by the Benedictines who did this one), in over 500 years, or since Gutenberg inked up his printing press.

*Every letter and illustration in this Bible is written or drawn by hand.* The first words were written on Ash Wednesday in 2000, and the final "Amen" — the last volume of seven volumes containing more than 1,100 pages — was written on May 9 of last year. The new Bible was on display in Minneapolis until a couple of months ago.

The copyists or scribes in the scriptorium worked under the supervision of chief calligrapher Donald Jackson who used quills cut from goose or swan feathers. The writers then wrote on huge sheets of calfskin or vellum, and paints were hand-ground from precious minerals or stones such as gold, silver or malachite. Gold or silver leaf gild was then used to illuminate or bring pages to light. And it's huge. The facing pages when open measure almost a yard wide!

Although the printing of this Bible by hand is now complete, the Bible that is written in the hearts and lives of each of us is *not* complete. It's still being written — and illuminated or illustrated. It's a crucial project, because it is *this* Bible, the one our own lives illustrate, that people around us are most likely to read.

—Timothy Merrill

***Prayer: O God, on this the first day of the year, may I be reminded that my life is an open Bible for all to read. Help me to reflect the mercy, grace and love that is found in its pages. In Jesus' name. Amen.***

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Sunday, January 8, 2012

Scripture Reading: Genesis 1:1-5

***THOUGHT: Bottom line is, if you do not use it or need it, it's clutter, and it needs to go.***

—Charisse Ward

To find a new place to keep my socks, I looked at the top two drawers of a bureau in the bedroom. These two small drawers are ideal. One can be for the white socks, and the other for the black socks.

Problem is: There's already stuff in these drawers. But then, I never open these drawers to get anything. Ever. These are drawers into which I throw stuff I don't want or need, but I don't want to get rid of entirely. So I decided to take a closer look. Here's a partial inventory of what I found:

Cell phone charger cords (2), cell phone, pills, coins, foreign currency, tie clasp, old travel itinerary, empty cuff link box, old blank checks, two black permanent markers, checkbook ledger, little silk bag, a wet wipe, a city map, a boarding pass, business cards (not mine), numerous scraps of paper, pads of memo paper, plastic baggie of coins, receipts, name tags, ID cards from school, clothing tags, postcards, two pair of sunglasses, a tiny seashell, paper clips, a lighter, reading glasses, paper napkin, rubber bands, chap stick.

That's just one drawer. All but a couple of items I tossed in the trash.

The drawer is a metaphor for my life. It tends to get cluttered with things I don't need, don't even want. I don't need to keep old resentments. Sure, maybe I don't think about them any more, but they're in my closets taking up emotional space I could use for other purposes. I don't need to feel badly about unrealized dreams, or unfulfilled potential, or unattainable goals. I can throw that garbage out, and be thankful for what I had and what I have. I don't need to hang on to a false self-image of myself. I'm not 19 anymore. My waist is never going to be 30 or 32 again — ever. I am not a spring chicken anyway. And that's fine with me. How about you?

It's a very cleansing exercise to go through a drawer and toss stuff out, and perhaps keep one or two things that are a treasure.

I did find a treasure in all that mess. I found a copy of the vows that I had written for my wedding years ago. I stopped amid all the mess I had around me, unfolded the paper and reread what I had written then. And I cried a little.

Cleaning is cathartic. It's good for the soul. I kept the copy of the vows, and threw everything else away. You have to know what to remember and what to forget.

—Timothy Merrill

***Prayer: Lord, help me to keep my mind and my soul clean and uncluttered with useless and harmful stuff. Amen.***

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Sunday, January 15, 2012

Scripture Reading: 1 Samuel 3:1-10 (11-20)

***THOUGHT: Volunteers don't get paid, not because they're worthless, but because they're priceless.*** —Sherry Anderson

There's no city in America that beats Minneapolis-St. Paul for volunteers. This metropolitan center in the heart of the Lutheran belt of America is giving back to their communities to a degree unknown by other cities in the country. More than 35 percent of the population report doing volunteer work at religious and non-profit organizations, schools and community centers — according to an annual report of *Volunteering in America*.

Nationwide, more than 62 million Americans offer their skills and services at no charge to organizations which depend upon such support. Utah leads all states with almost 45 percent of its citizens doing some *pro bono* work in their spare time. The Midwestern Bible Belt states of Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska and South Dakota round out the top five. Utah was also tops in the number of hours volunteered per volunteer at almost 90 hours.

What motivates a volunteer? It doesn't take a rocket scientist to understand — looking at the data above — that religion must play a strong role. It probably doesn't matter which religion. Clearly, people who see themselves as related to a Power outside of themselves, and who see themselves as debtors to the largesse of an Almighty and Merciful God, are more likely than others to give of their time.

Volunteering is a time-honored American tradition. It's certainly encouraged by Scripture. Although doing volunteer work is not the exclusive domain of Christianity, it'd be hard to say we're Christians without being willing to serve others when and if we can. It's in our DNA. It's what we do.

It's possible that now, later in life, you have the *heart* of a volunteer, but not the *hands* of a volunteer. You just can't do what you used to do.

But it's also possible that you know some volunteers who make your life easier, or who help out where you live.

Why not give them a little thanks? They will appreciate it.

—Timothy Merrill

***Prayer: O God, thank you for all the people around the world who give of their time, knowledge and energy to help and serve others. When I have an opportunity, may I be reminded to express my appreciation. In Jesus' name. Amen.***

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Sunday, January 22, 2012

Scripture Reading: Jonah 3:1-5, 10

***THOUGHT: When you find peace within yourself, you become the kind of person who can live at peace with others.***

As I write this, Hurricane Irene is on a rampage along the eastern coast of the United States causing millions of dollars of damage.

Irene is a girl's name and comes from the Greek, and it means "peace." In fact, in Greek mythology, Irene is the goddess of peace. The adjectival form, "irenic," means "peaceful." It's ironic that Irene should be used oxymoronically as the name of the latest natural disaster to sweep up the East Coast. Hurricane ... Irene.

How can one be irenic during Hurricane Irene, or during any disaster, or when "sorrows like sea billows roll"?

Can it be "well with one's soul"? Can we find *irene*?

I was out on the beautiful and rocky Oregon coast recently, walking on a stretch of beach as the tide was coming in, crashing upon the rocks. Cormorants and oyster-catchers flitted about and sea-gulls screeched. Seals rested languidly on off-shore rocks. It was a scene both of unrelenting power and potential destruction as well as a scene of unconcerned peace. A seagull perched on a rock while waves crashed about it, and the seals, apparently unconcerned, were reminders that peace is not necessarily the absence of sound and thunder, danger or peril. It is rather a quiet confidence that, come what may, "it is well with my soul," or my life.

Of course this sounds glib. Right now, thousands are stranded without a flight to take them home. An equal number have experienced damage to their homes. Some have died; others have suffered injury. We cannot minimize the human toll of this hurricane. That's why, when disaster like this happens, we must remember to pray for those affected.

But we can also remember when everything is in an uproar around us, to be like the seagull, standing on a solid rock, totally unperturbed.

We, too, stand upon the Solid Rock that is Christ Jesus.

—Timothy Merrill

***Prayer: Lord Jesus, give me your peace that passes understanding that I may have serenity when the waves crash around me. Amen.***

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Sunday, January 29, 2012

Scripture Reading: Mark 1:21-28

***THOUGHT: What we are is God's gift to us; what we become is our gift to God.***

—Eleanor Powell

A new poll shows that more than half of Americans approve of God's job performance. The poll comes thanks to Public Policy Polling, a Democratic firm based in North Carolina.

The question asked of respondents was: "If God exists, do you approve or disapprove of its performance?" Notice the use of the impersonal pronoun. Isn't it odd to refer to God as an "it"?

Anyway, 52 percent said "Yes," while 40 percent were "unsure," and 9 percent said that they did not approve. This approval rating beats handily the 44 percent given for President Obama's job performance, and the 35 percent given for House Speaker John Boehner.

In case you're wondering what God's job description actually is, voters were asked to rate God's performance in terms of creating the universe, handling the animal kingdom and controlling natural disasters.

Of course, this is a silly question and the polling company admitted as much, saying they thought it would be "interesting" to see what respondents said.

Even more interesting might be a poll that posed the question, "If God exists, what approval rating do you think God would give to humankind in terms of: taking care of the planet and taking care of each other?"

God is so great and wonderful, I'd be nervous about presuming to approve or disapprove of how God chooses to work in the world and with me. I'd be much more concerned about *whether I have God's approval of my performance!*

—Timothy Merrill

***Prayer: O great God, it is not for me to evaluate or grade your work. Your ways and your thoughts are above mine. How can I presume to know you in your ineffable fullness? Help me only to be faithful in those things you have given me to do. In Jesus' name. Amen.***

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Sunday, February 5, 2012

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 40:21-31

***THOUGHT: Getting lost is just another way of saying “Going exploring.”***

Ever get confused about what’s going on in your life? I have.

I was reminded of this while driving in a westerly direction across Maine. Not an easy thing to do. Maine’s only interstate runs north and south. The roads going east and west are narrow and winding, former horse-and-buggy paths.

I turned on one such small, paved road — no shoulders — an undulating narrow strip of asphalt which meandered under a canopy of maples, oaks and Eastern pines, through glen and vale, down hills and over small mountains. Then I noticed the highway sign: **South 100, West 2, North 7!**

I laughed out loud! Whoa! I’m on a road that’s taking me south, west and north — and all at the same time? How is that possible! Yet, I knew that sometimes my life is so busy that I really feel like I’m going off in three directions at once!

I motored on for a while until I came upon another sign. It was a DETOUR sign! So now, not only am I going south, west and north — I AM ON A SOUTH, WEST AND NORTH **DETOUR!**

Oh, how funny!

A lesser person would have become anxious. Me, I just keep trucking, see what’s around the bend. If the signs are saying I’m going in three different directions at once, and that I’m on a detour to boot, who am I to argue?

So don’t despair if you don’t know which end is up, which way is south, west or north, whether you’re inside out or outside in, whether you’re coming or going. Just start humming the old hymn:

*Precious Lord, take my hand/ Lead me on, let me stand.*

*I am tired, I am weak, I am worn/ Through the storm, through the night,*

*Lead me on to the light/ Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home.*

—Timothy Merrill

***Prayer: Dear God, I have total confidence that you will lead me where I need to go. I know that even when it seems like so much is going on, I can rest knowing that you are walking ahead of me. In Jesus’ name. Amen.***

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Sunday, February 12, 2012

Scripture Reading: Mark 1:40-45

**THOUGHT: Who, being loved, is poor?** —Oscar Wilde

“Will you be my Valentine?”

So read millions of little cards that schoolchildren across America will be exchanging in their classrooms on Tuesday. For these little children, the question is simply an invitation to be a friend. It’s a way to say “I like you, I want to be friends with you.”

When these little children get to be teenagers, the giving of a valentine card becomes a highly selective process. Teens have now discovered romantic love. Valentine’s Day is now fraught with emotional angst; these adolescents ponder how best to express their feelings for the cherished one. Should it be a card, a gift, a red rose, a bouquet of flowers, chocolates, a dinner out or some combination thereof? Whatever choice is made, the message that is sent is that the recipient is loved.

It’s a great feeling to know that you are loved. Fortunately, we need not depend on a Valentine’s Day card or a box of chocolates to know that we are loved, or even to express our love to others.

Every day, small little mercies and ordinary expressions of kindness remind us that we are loved and cared for.

It’s easy to forget this because our families can get very busy with their lives, and sometimes when we need a phone call it doesn’t come, and the day we’d really love to have a visit, no visitor appears.

When we have those days when it seems as though love is running thin, we must be sure to pick up the world’s largest valentine card, the Bible itself. God’s Word is nothing if it is not a declaration of love — of steadfast and abiding care and kindness.

—Timothy Merrill

***Prayer: Dear God, this week please be with those whom I love and those who love me. But be especially near those who are not loved. In Jesus’ name. Amen.***

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Sunday, February 19, 2012

Scripture Reading: Mark 9:2-9

***THOUGHT: There is no great achievement that is not the result of patient working and waiting.*** —J.G. Holland

Full disclosure. I love IKEA — a store that sells household goods and furniture that have an attractive, upscale, Scandinavian look. In my hometown, we have an IKEA store, and we enjoy making periodic runs to purchase cabinets, rugs, kitchenware and lamps. We have been pretty satisfied with everything.

But right now, I'm in a city in the western United States, and for the first time IKEA is coming to town. The grand opening is just days away. The whole town is abuzz. It sits right off the interstate near a large mall. Local authorities have been cautioning local residents about pedestrian and motor traffic this weekend when the store opens.

Already, people have started camping out 72 hours in advance of the opening. They hope to be one of the first couple hundred shoppers so that they can win a sofa, or a set of chairs, or some other prize.

And that's why I am writing. Waiting for 72 hours is not something I can do. In fact waiting for anything is hard for me. How about you?

What do you wait for? Think about the times during your day when you need to wait — for dinner, for a staff person, for pills, for an appointment, for a visitor. Let's face it: Waiting is a part of everyone's life. You are no exception.

Did you know that *waiting* is a theological, or biblical theme? Jesus, nearing his death, frequently asked the disciples to *wait*. In the Old Testament, the saints *waited* for the fulfillment of a promised Messiah. Jesus asked the disciples to “*wait* for power from on high.” They met in an upper room and waited.

The psalmist said that they who *wait* upon the Lord shall inherit the earth. (37:9). In Isaiah, we read: “But those who *wait* upon the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, and they shall walk and not faint” (Isaiah 40:31). And the psalmist again: “Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!” (27:14).

—Timothy Merrill

***Prayer: Dear Lord, waiting is not always easy. Help me to remember that even in my waiting moments, you are present with me. Amen.***

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**First Sunday of Lent, February 26, 2012**

**Scripture Reading: Mark 1:9-15**

***THOUGHT: It is not repentance that saves me; repentance is the sign that I realize what God has done in Christ Jesus.*** —Oswald Chambers

“Believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15).

Jesus began his ministry immediately after his baptism by inviting people to simply “believe the good news.”

Isn't it exciting to get good news? Think about those moments in your life when you got good news. Perhaps it was the news that your family would be growing. Or it was news that you got the job. Or that you were accepted into college. Or that you were to become a grandparent.

Think about the good news you have received *this week*. Perhaps you got the good news that you would have a visitor. Perhaps you heard that a loved one arrived safe at some distant location on the other side of the world. Perhaps you learned that your favorite meal is going to be served.

Think about the good news that *others* have received this week. Think of the parents who learned that their child is safe. Think of those who are receiving life-giving surgery. Think of those who learned today that someone loves them. Think of those who were in court today and heard the judge say “Not guilty!” Think of those who have had a second chance at life.

This is good news. Jesus began his ministry with good news. And that news is that God's presence is near. The “kingdom of God,” as he called it, has come. And that is good news because it means that we're delivered from our sins, that we are the objects of God's love and mercy and that we need not live in fear any longer.

Today is the First Sunday of Lent. Today we begin a journey that will take us to the Cross and on to the Empty Tomb. It is a six-week journey in which we are reminded of the good news that Jesus brought to us.

—Timothy Merrill

***Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for coming to us. Thank you for bringing to me the good news that my sins are forgiven and that you love me. This is good news indeed! Amen.***

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**Second Sunday of Lent, March 4, 2012**

**Scripture Reading: Mark 8:31-38**

***THOUGHT: If you would live your life with ease; do what you ought, not what you please.*** —Anonymous

Last summer I went to a major-league baseball game. After the game, I walked back to our temporary home in a downtown hotel in the city where we were visiting. The homeless and drug users and pushers are not uncommon in this part of town through which I walked, and I encountered a few of them.

One young fellow insisted he'd sold me some drugs just a few days ago, and he was looking for another score. A few others wanted to know if I was "cool." I said I was really cool. As I continued my journey, I was passing another guy seated on the stoop of a warehouse. He called out to me, "Hey, are you a 'Jesus Saves' person?"

I stopped and asked him to repeat the question. "Are you one of those 'Jesus Saves' people?"

I gathered that he was referring to the rescue mission which has a large, pink JESUS SAVES sign in the shape of a cross above the entrance at its location not too far away — although right now the bulbs in JESUS are burnt out, as well as the S in SAVES, so it reads AVES. I asked, "Do I *look* like a 'Jesus Saves' person?"

He lifted his bloodshot eyes and looked me over. "Well, now that I get a closer look at you, I guess you don't." I was wearing jeans and a T-shirt. We gabbed for a few more minutes about how Jesus saves — but he wasn't interested in being saved by Jesus right then — so I went on my way.

I was glad that even though to this fellow I didn't "look" like a "Jesus saves" person, I am a person whom Jesus has saved, and I am a person who can tell others all about it.

And so are you!

—Timothy Merrill

***Prayer: Thank you, Lord Jesus, for bringing us forgiveness through your name. Thank you for your gift of salvation. Help us to always be ready to share the good news that your salvation comes to all people. In your name. Amen.***

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**Third Sunday of Lent, March 11, 2012**

**Scripture Reading: John 2:13-22**

***THOUGHT: We are not human beings on a spiritual journey.  
We are spiritual beings on a human journey. —Unknown***

According to an article by Zachary Roth there's this guy who lost his job, was in pain, and desperate for medical attention. Here's Roth: "Some people who need medical care but can't afford it go to the emergency room. Others just hope they'll get better. James Richard Verone robbed a bank. Earlier this month, Verone, a 59-year-old convenience store clerk, walked into a Gaston, North Carolina, bank and handed the cashier a note demanding \$1 and medical attention. Then he waited calmly for police to show up. He's now in jail and has an appointment with a doctor this week."

Verone had a plan. He tried to relieve the bank of only one dollar. That's why he's being charged with larceny, not bank robbery. He's thinking he'll do his time in jail for a few years, get the back and foot surgery he needs, then get released from jail in time to collect Social Security and go live on a beach somewhere. Verone's story is that of a person moved by desperation. And sometimes, desperation causes us to act and react in creative, if not harmful, ways.

We get desperate for a lot of reasons. Sometimes the reasons are *financial*, or *medical*, or the *heavy burden of responsibility*. Sometimes, the desperation is *romantic*: The bloom of love fades, or a thorn draws blood. A sense of *spiritual desperation* is rare, but not unheard of.

Perhaps *all* desperation is at the core *spiritual*. That's why, back in the day, the doors of a church were often left open so that people could step inside a safe place to pray and pour out their hearts. Walking into a sanctuary, kneeling at an altar, praying beneath a cross was not only therapeutic, but perhaps a step on a journey to wholeness and healing.

Verone hatched a creative plan to get what he needed. But he's not the only desperate soul in our cities, towns and hamlets. The New England writer Henry David Thoreau believed that many people live lives of "quiet desperation."

If you are feeling this way, remember the Bible says to "Cast all your anxiety upon him, for he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7 NIV). If you know of someone who is at their wits end, remind them gently that Jesus said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28 NIV).

—Timothy Merrill

***Prayer: O God, help me to turn my cares over to you. You are much stronger than I! In Jesus' name. Amen.***

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**Fourth Sunday of Lent, March 18, 2012**

**Scripture Reading: Ephesians 2:1-10**

***THOUGHT: Our extremity is God's opportunity. Unshakable faith is faith that has been shaken.***

—Unknown

## **A Prayer of St. Francis**

Our Father, each day is a little life,  
each night a tiny death;  
help us to live with faith and hope and love.  
Lift our duty above drudgery;  
let not our strength fail, or the vision fade, in the heat and burden of the day.  
O God, make us patient and pitiful one with another in the fret and jar of life,  
remembering that each of us fights a hard fight and walks a lonely way.  
Forgive us, Lord, if we hurt our fellow souls;  
teach us a gentler tone,  
a sweeter charity of words,  
and a more healing touch.  
Sustain us, O God, when we must face sorrow;  
give us courage for the day and hope for the morrow.  
Day unto day may we lay hold of thy hand  
and look up into thy face, whatever befall,  
until our work is finished and the day is done.  
Amen.

—Francis of Assisi, 1181-1226

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**Fifth Sunday of Lent, March 25, 2012**

**Scripture Reading: John 12:20-33**

***THOUGHT: Small deeds done are better than great deeds planned.*** —Peter Marshall

Last year, when yet another season of “American Idol” on television came to a dizzying and breathless conclusion, there was a problem in the home of some friends of ours.

“American Idol” is a popular talent show which has been running every year for the past 10 years. The new season is airing now. Voters call in to vote for their favorite singers and at the end of the season, usually in the month of May, the WINNER emerges.

On the final show last year, the contestants had been narrowed to two people. Our neighbors have two little girls who sat up to watch with rapt attention as the winner was announced. Little Tasha, 8, was fervently hoping that Lauren Alaina would be exalted to the realm of Idol-dom and was so very disappointed when Scott McCreery won instead. She burst into tears and fled into her bedroom.

It was not long before her sister, Tracy, age 5, was likewise a blubbering, quivering ball of tears and crying loudly in *her* bedroom.

The mother sighed and then went to the bedroom of the second and younger child first. She sat down on the bed to comfort the child. Stroking the little girl’s hair and caressing her forehead, she asked her, “Honey, why are you crying?”

Tracy stopped shuddering for a moment, and then between her sobs, she said, “I don’t [sob] know. [sob] Ask [sob] Tasha.” [sob]

True story. That is weeping with those who weep! Even if we don’t know *why* they’re weeping, we weep anyway.

As followers of Jesus, it’s what we do.

—Timothy Merrill

***Prayer: Lord, help me to be someone who can empathize with the sorrows of others, and may I also have the grace to rejoice with them in their good fortune. Amen.***