Sunday, January 9, 2000
PERHAPS, PERHAPS NOT
Mark 1:4-13

Before I begin the main subject of the sermon, I want to quote from a brief essay by Robert Fulghum because it's a good way to begin the new year and also because the scripture reading talks about repentance. He said that sometimes when his grown children confess to him what they did behind his back when they were youngsters, it doesn't occur to them that he was also doing a few things behind their backs. So in the spirit of fairness to his wife and children, he made these confessions.

"I used the wok once to change the oil in the car. And I used the sewing scissors to cut canvas. I used the kitchen-sink sponge to clean my shoes. Sometimes I said the coffee I made was decaf when it wasn't. Yes, it was me who ate the baking chocolate. The hamsters didn't die of old age. I deliberately left price tags on presents sometimes. Even raised them. I always took a private cut of the money Grandmother sent for Christmas. I lied when I said you looked beautiful when you were a teenager. When I did the cooking, what I said wasn't leftovers often was. I know who sent you anonymous cards for Valentine's Day. I know who took money out of my wallet. But I know you know who took money out of the piggy banks. At times I said I missed you when, in fact, I was glad to be alone for a while. I always said I was proud of you — even when I knew you could do better. I let you lie to me sometimes because the truth was too hard for all of us. Sometimes I said, 'I love you,' when I didn't love anyone, not even me. Your mother and I both played Santa Claus on Christmas Eve. But I was always the Easter Bunny."

Now for the main subject of the sermon. Life is filled with contrasts, highs and lows, ups and downs, and ambiguities. Some days it seems as if God is close, and then on other days, God seems to be far away. One day you are sure that you are loved and appreciated, and then on the next day, you are certain that no one understands you. One week I think maybe I'm okay and everything in the world looks bright and hopeful, and then the next week maybe not.

Sometimes the good old days of the past look pretty good, but on more reflection, they were not so good after all. Whenever I have that notion about the old days being good, I try to imagine what life was like in the good old days. Here's what it was like for the overwhelming majority of people 1000 years ago.

It is January in the year 1000. The only illumination was sun, moon, lightning, fire, and starlight. The only source of power was human or animal muscle and falling water. It is likely that I would have spent the night sleeping on the floor on filthy straw, wrapped in lice-ridden cloaks, in the same room with my wife, nine children, three brothers, one sister, my mother-in-law, and several orphaned children.

I live in a connected series of mud-and-wattle huts, also occupied by several cows, pigs, some ducks, chickens, and maybe dogs. I have been awakened by a chicken pecking vermin off the rags wrapped around my head.

After a breakfast of hard, stale, dirt-colored bread and a gray gruel, I will go out in the same clothes I slept in to the fields of the lord of the domain and push a board plow all day. Every day I worry that at any moment I will be swept up in some little war that is going on in the neighborhood, or that armed outlaws will carry away my livestock or my wife and children.

I work until dark, six days a week, fifty-two weeks a year with no vacation or sick leave. At night, I and my family huddle around the smoldering fire of wet wood, scratch flea bites, pick lice, eat gruel, and wonder why everyone in the huts across the river died last week.

On Sunday, because it is required, I trudge off to the small chapel several miles away to hear a sermon of hellfire and damnation. I can believe in the wrath of an angry God — my daily life is a continual reminder that I must have fallen from grace. Famine, flood, drought, plague, pestilence, taxes, war, filth, and an early death are as constant as the coming of another day.

After holy services, I might find a friend who has a hogshead of sour beer, get drunk, and brawl with sticks until I get knocked into a ditch, am fined, and dragged home by the bailiff to awake to another day with a chicken pecking at my head.

This life is a struggle for daily existence, with all my human energies used in the mere attempt to stay alive. Things are fairly simple and uncomplicated if that's any use. I do not have to worry about the meaning of life or the events of the world beyond what I can see from my front door. The church seems to have explanations for every question that might arise in my simple mind. And I believe it's true that someday I will go to heaven, where everything will be quite wonderful. There are no chickens in heaven, or so I am told and so I am glad to believe.

I will not have long to wait until heaven. Forty years is a very long life in the year 1000. Most likely I will be gone before that — from starvation, infection, plague, war, or just the wear and tear of life itself. Perhaps the good old days were good. Perhaps not.

Life is filled with contrasts.

As one person said, "I've discovered that my mind is filled with contradictory notions, and much of the folk wisdom I hear confirms this." I agree with her. Here are a few examples: Look before you leap. He who hesitates is lost. Two heads are better than one. If you want something done right, do it yourself. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Better safe than sorry. Out of sight, out of mind. Absence makes the heart grow fonder. You can't tell a book by its cover. Clothes make the man. Many hands make light work. Too many cooks spoil the broth. You can't teach an old dog new tricks. It's never too late to learn. Never sweat the small stuff. God is in the details.

The list goes on and on. One person who was a teacher said she got so caught up in this kind of thinking that she wore two buttons on her coat in class one day. One said, "Trust me, I'm a teacher." The other said, "Question authority."

We live in a bipolar world of wet and dry, love and hate, peace and war, light and dark, hard and soft, faith and doubt, yes and no, perhaps and perhaps not.

Jesus was no stranger to this kind of existence. We know very little about his childhood and growing up. The only reference for that period of his life is the one story in Luke's gospel where his parents take him and the rest of the family to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. He is said to have been 12 years old. When the festival was ended and they were on their return trip to Nazareth, he stayed behind in Jerusalem and did not tell his parents. Assuming he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey before they missed him. Returning to Jerusalem and after three days of searching, they found him in the temple listening to the teachers and asking questions. After this, there's nothing written about his life until he is about

age 30. Then he is baptized by John the Baptist. As part of the baptism, he experienced a reassurance of God's blessing in his life. It could easily be that before this he had been going through a period of doubt. It is described not as an earth-shaking event, but as the "Spirit of God descending like a dove on him." It was God saying to him, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." But then came the opposite experience. We are told in Mark's gospel, "The Spirit immediately drove him into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan: and he was with the wild beasts and the angels waited on him." Two of the other gospels give us more details about the temptations, but the chronology, the contrast is the same.

Like the experience of Jesus, our lives are uneven. Maintaining a strong belief in God and God's goodness does not always come easy. Not very long ago, a young man from the community called me at home and said he was having a difficult time with his belief in God and especially God's goodness. He said he wanted very much to believe, and some of the time he did, but when he thought of all the pain and suffering in the world and in his own life, he concluded that believing in God and God's goodness didn't always make sense. I told him I was familiar with his experience. But then I asked him, "Does not believing in God and God's goodness make any more sense?" After thinking about it, he agreed that it didn't.

What we all want to discover and experience, like the young man who spoke to me on the phone, is "deep down" believing. We want to be conscious of the spirit and power of God in our lives. We want the assurance that in spite of the inconsistencies in life, we are good, that God is good, and that life is good.

I remember a young woman saying to me one day, "I want to know and feel that I am loved even when everything around me seems to indicate that I am unlovable." She went on to say, "I know it is the testimony of our Christian faith that God's Spirit is always in and around us, but why does it seem to come and go?"

What then can we learn from the experience of Jesus that will help us deal with the "perhaps and perhaps not" of life?

First, accept the fact that life is uneven, good and bad, light and dark, laughter and tears, joy and sorrow, loss and gain, sickness and health, or as Calvin Coolidge said, "Business will be better or worse." That in itself helps. Or as someone else said, "We experience moments absolutely free from worry. Those respites are called panic."

We cannot gain "deep down" believing by trying harder. In order to experience God's Spirit in our lives and in the world at large, it's mostly a matter of being open to the Spirit, allowing it to work in our lives and being prepared to discover it in some surprising places.

Second, it is the testimony of the life and teachings of Jesus that God is with us in both the ups and downs of life. Jesus encountered the Spirit of God in his baptism, and he also found the Spirit of God in the wilderness. Remember too, we can often discover God in the commonplace. The shepherds and the wise men found God in a baby in a manger.

I always remember Elijah, who in the most depressing time of his life was hiding in a cave and thought God had completely forsaken and deserted him, rediscovered God not in the earthquake or the fire or the howling wind, but in a "still small voice," or as a more accurate translation may be — in a "still small silence." It came to Elijah at the lowest point in his life.

Third, frequently God's affirmation of us comes through the experience of another person affirming and accepting us, especially when we think we are unacceptable.

In all of these instances, I am not talking about some kind of magic which automatically makes everything all right in an instant. The experience of God's Spirit does not immediately cure all cancers, transform our children into winners, or send us all soaring into success. It often comes in bits and pieces, a nudge of power here and a ray of hope there. It may happen in one segment of your life at a time; do not look for the whole story to be told in one chapter.

As was the case with Jesus, you may experience the Spirit of God, and then it might seem to disappear and then reappear.

God's Spirit is an amazing power to look earthly reality full in the face, see its sad and tragic edges, life's unfairness, and yet know in our deepest selves that life is meant to be good, and it is right for us to be alive and to enjoy God's creation. It is to live with the hope that tomorrow can be better than today.

During these past weeks, I've been thinking a lot about what our Christian faith has contributed to our civilization over the past 2000 years. Not everything, of course, has been positive. Horrible wars have been fought in the name of Christ. Worthy human endeavors have been repressed in the name of Christ — music, dancing, and other joyful aspects of life.

On the positive side, because of the life of Jesus and God's revelation to us through him, we can face even death with hope. The interpreters vary about heaven and hell, about what resurrection means, and about the immortality of the individual soul. Nevertheless, those of us who experience the Spirit of God through Jesus, participate in the hope that death is neither final nor hopeless. Our faith is real and powerful for brokenhearted people at the graveside.

In addition to hope, our Christian faith has helped us to appreciate transcendence. Transcendence has many meanings, but I mean transcendence as a reality beyond immediate appearances. The sacraments illustrate transcendence. Marriage has meaning beyond the union of two people. Baptism has meaning in terms of the promise of love for each person. Holy Communion points toward our continuing relationship with God as revealed in Jesus.

The very important concept of stewardship comes from our Christian faith. In its highest terms, it means that we humans are caretakers of that which ultimately belongs to God. We have life as a gift from God.

Connected to this is the fact that the simplest and best of our ethics comes from our Christian faith with its roots in the Jewish tradition. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." The genius of that ethic is that our own self-interest is also the interest of another. We know how to treat one another.

What holds all of these things together is the fact that God is love. The story of Jesus is the story of how Divine Love is manifest in human ways. Even injustice, death, and torture are not greater than Divine Love. Amen.