

**Holy Name, January 1, 2012 St. Davids
Numbers 6:22-27, Psalm 8, Galatians 4:4-7, Luke 2: 15-21**

God grant us the serenity to accept the things we can not change, the courage to change the things we can and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other. Amen.

This time of year the days are short and the nights long. One of the advantages of that is getting to see the sunrise each morning usually about the time I am doing my morning devotions. Yet I have to admit, that I could never live in Alaska or one of the far northern climates where the sun does not shine at all during the winter months. Perhaps that is also why this story about candles written by Max Lucado spoke to me.

Lucado writes, a few nights ago an electrical storm caused a blackout in our neighborhood. When the lights went out, I felt my way through the darkness into the storage closet where we keep the candles. I took my match and lit four of them...

I was turning to leave with the large candle in my hand when I heard a voice, "Now hold it right there."

"Who said that?"

"I did." The voice was near my hand.

"Who are you? What are you?"

“I’m a candle.”

I lifted up the candle to take a closer look. Unbelievably there was a tiny face in the wax... a moving, functioning face full of expression and life.

“Don’t take me out of here!”

“What?”

“I said, don’t take me out of this room.”

“What do you mean? I have to take you out. You’re a candle. Your job is to give light. It’s dark out there.”

“But you can’t take me out. I’m not ready,” the candle explained with pleading eyes. “I need more preparation.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. “More preparation?”

“Yeah, I’ve decided I need to research this job of light-giving, so I won’t go out and make a bunch of mistakes. You’d be surprised how distorted the glow of an untrained candle can be...”

“All right then,” I said. “You’re not the only candle on the shelf. I’ll blow you out and take the others!”

“We aren’t going either!”

I turned around and looked at the other three candles..”You are candles and your job is to light dark places!”

“Well, that may be what you think,” said the candle on the left. “But I’m busy meditating on the importance of light. It’s really enlightening.”

“And you other two,” I asked.

The candle in the middle said, “I’m waiting until everything in my life is perfect so right now I can’t go.”

In disbelief I turned to the last candle on the shelf .The final candle answered in a very pleasant voice, “I’d like to help, but lighting the darkness is not my gift... I’m a singer. I sing to other candles to encourage them to burn more brightly.”

She began a rendition of “This Little Light of Mine” and the other three joined in, filling the room with singing. I took a step back and considered the absurdity of it all. Four perfectly healthy candles singing to each other about light but refusing to come out of the closet.

Perhaps another reason this story spoke to me is that Jan. 6th, marks the beginning of Epiphany, the season of light in the church. That can be light in the sense of the longer days as we move towards spring. Or it can be light in the spiritual sense of what some have called “ Ah ha!” moments. Those moments when we realize something important about our spiritual lives.

After the hustle and bustle of the holidays, I am ready to settle down to what passes for normal in my life, focusing more on the day to day aspects of my life. I am ready to welcome some “Ah Ha!” spiritual moments. And fortunately, God is always waiting and ready to lead us into “Ah Ha!” moments. The question becomes are we expectantly hopeful and open to that leading?

There are many answers to that question but, it seems to me that the biblical record and occasionally the news contain many possible answers to seeking divine leadership. Today I want to explore three of those possible answers: excuses, control and yes! And rather like the porridge in the story of “Goldilocks and the Three Bears,” two of the ways, excuses and control, lead to less than stellar results. For just as we have porridge that is too hot and too cold, we have choices that are too hot and too cold. But luckily there is a third choice, YES, and that is just right.

Too cold or an excuse driven spirituality is illustrated by the opening candle story. Too cold is a spiritual life that offers excuses rather than light. Because it is a spiritual life that lags behind where God has asked us to be. Too cold stays inwardly focused on maintaining what we have rather than outwardly focused on “sharing our abundance with others.”

Moses at the burning bush might be a biblical example of what I mean. God tells Moses that he has been chosen to lead the Israelites out of slavery. Moses' initial reaction is to offer a series of excuses. First Moses tries, "I can't speak very well." Then he has the audacity to ask God, "How do I know you are really God?" And finally Moses resorts to, "If I go to Egypt they will probably kill me." But God being God and because "all things are possible with God," Moses does somewhat reluctantly go to Egypt to deliver the Israelites. But the point is that the too cold spiritual choice is littered with excuses because it lags behind what God has gifted us to do.

Then there is the too hot choice. Another way to think of this is the choice where we don't wait for God to lead but try to control the outcome ourselves. We can see this in the disciples. James and John in the Gospel of Mark are way out in front of our Lord when they demand positions of power and prestige or to sit on Jesus right and left in heaven. They are out in front of Jesus because the events of Holy Week had not even happened yet when they try to control the outcome by asking for positions of influence.

The too hot choice is rather like stepping off the curb before checking to see if the traffic has stopped. Let me give you a simple example of trying to control the outcome of an event with the understanding that the principles that it embodies can be applied to much more spiritual aspects of our lives.

As most of you know, I just returned from a visit with my son, David, daughter-in-law, Karen, and granddaughter, Taylor, who live in Orange County, Calif. I attempted to fly home early on New Year's Eve. Unexpectedly, however, the weather had a different idea as the Orange County airport was closed to incoming air traffic because of very heavy fog. So I arrived at the airport at 5 a.m. to discover that our flight had been cancelled. I had been rebooked on a different airline that wouldn't leave for three hours and that instead of flying through Phoenix, I would get home through Dallas.

It was interesting to watch how people dealt with the news. Many of them tried to book themselves on another airline, forgetting that with no airplanes landing, there were none to fly on. Others schemed to rent a car and drive to another airport that wasn't socked in with fog. Others simply sat in the terminal and glared at everyone.

I simply waited. I have flown enough to know that sometimes connections are out of our control. Also, after living in Nebraska for almost eight years, I have learned that weather is something that is out of our control.

So a time that could have been stressful, if I were trying to control the outcome, became a time to people-watch and to read. Obviously, I eventually got on a plane to come back to Omaha, even though I took off four hours late.

There are two words for time in Greek, *chronos* and *kairos*. The word *chronos* is like chronological or linear time. Interestingly both the too hot controlling choice and too cold excusing choice are made in *chronos* as one is ahead of God and one lags behind. Whereas the just right or YES choice can be seen as doing things in God's time or moving from linear time to God's time called *kairos*.

In the gospel of Matthew there is an illustration of what happens when we stay in God's time, when we say YES to our Lord's leading. After the visit of the Magi to the Christ Child, Joseph waits for God tell him clearly what to do. The scripture says, "When the wise men who had come from the East had departed, an angel of the Lord appeared

to Joseph.” Joseph could have taken the controlling choice and said to the wise men please leave, you know this is an important baby, we’ve got to run away before Herod catches us. But Joseph says YES to God’s time by waiting until he is told to act and then unlike the candles of the opening story, doing something. Jesus’s earthly father does not offer excuses or try to hurry things along and thus he, Mary, and Jesus arrive safely in a kairos timely fashion in Egypt.

In the newspaper several Christmases ago there was a wonderful football story of Jake Porter . The story illustrates a modern example of being in kairos time, of being in YES time. Jake is developmentally delayed, suffering from a form of genetic mental retardation. He lives in a small town in southern Ohio. Jake, in his senior year of high school was well liked and had never missed a football game or practice. Unfortunately in all that time, for safety reasons, he had only been allowed to play in a game once. And that was during his sophomore year, when the outcome had already been determined, Jake was allowed to take a knee or intentionally ground the ball.

But in the last game of his senior year, his coach and his

teammates wanted Jake to be able to participate and take another knee. His coach talked to the opposing team's coaches and the officials and it was agreed that Jake could play a down if the score allowed. By the 4th quarter that night, the outcome of the game had already been determined. Jake's team was losing 42-0 in the last 3 minutes of the game when as agreed by both coaches and the officials, Jake was substituted in to take a knee.

Before the play both coaches had a conference on the field. Later the coach of the opposing team said, "In that moment, God used me as a tool. because just after I agreed to let Jake in the game, I realized that he should be allowed to score a touchdown." And with the urging of all 21 players on the field and the people in the stands, that is what happened. Jake ran unopposed down the field and score a touchdown. Kairos time.. YES time, not too cold, not too hot but just right.

Today as we return once more to January to regular life, I wish for all of us just right choices, Epiphany choices that lead to "Ah Ha or YES moments of spiritual growth. Or as today's opening collect says, "Plant in every heart, we pray, the love of him who is the Savior

of the world.”

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen