

*3I thank my God every time I remember you, 4constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, 5because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. 6I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.*

*7It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. 8For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.*

*9And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight 10to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, 11having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.*

I will carry a face in my heart this Christmas. I was in Chicago last Monday – I flew into Midway Monday morning, had lunch with my daughter, Beth, did some shopping while I waited for Beth to finish her afternoon's work, then rode the bus to Beth's neighborhood and met her there. We shared supper, a walk to see her church, I had a night's rest and flew home on Tuesday morning.

It was on the L train on my way back to Midway airport that I saw the face I carry. The train was passing through a neighborhood where every flat surface was sprayed in colorful words I could not quite read. But I know the wavy letters were announcing that these streets belong to the gangs that are holding them through violence and intimidation. The train stopped, five teenagers got on. They scattered to seats spread throughout the nearly empty car. They were black – I guessed they were on their way to school. Almost across from me sat the young man. An earring pierced his eyebrow, another his ear lobe. But it was his eyes that have fixed his face in my heart – weary eyes, empty eyes. At his age those eyes should have been dancing with mischief, but they looked an old man's eyes, nearing the end. I thought how distant his world from this world you and I and our children share.

Sometimes I have seen eyes like that here. A child's eyes once dancing and bright but then prematurely aged by harshness. Love is missing, and hope.

But there whole neighborhoods and streets foster children with weary eyes. How sad it makes our God.

*Prepare the way of the Lord - cried the prophet – make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.*

All flesh.

So often when I go to a party I worry about what I am going to wear. I want to look right, fit in. I take a shower, put on clean clothes, comb what little hair I have left. But of course the party is not about me – it's about we.

*Prepare the way of the Lord.*

How easy it is to hear that word and think God wants us to take a spiritual shower, washing away all the grease and grime of our sin, and put on God's word and prayer, and be ready for celebrating our Lord's birth, our Lord's coming again.

But do you know what? – Christ has already taken care of that for you. He has washed you in his blood, dressed you in his righteousness and goodness and life. In Christ you are all ready for the party - you are perfectly clothed for greeting your Lord. You are prepared for the feast of his birth – in Christ ready for the great feast he offers this morning, ready for the endless feast he will share with you when he comes again.

But what of that young man with the weary eyes? What of the others who boarded that train with him? What of them?

Paul, in writing to the Philippians says, *“I thank my God every time I remember you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.”*

I thank God because of your sharing in the gospel. Now that word sharing has also been translated fellowship, communion, partnership. The Philippians were supporting Paul; they gave him money that enabled him to offer the gospel free of charge to others. The Philippians supported Paul through their prayers. They were

his partners in his ministry. Paul refers to this in writing: *“It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart for all of you share in God’s grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.”* In all that happened to Paul, in all he accomplished, in all he suffered the Philippians were partners.

How might we think of this? Listen to Indians’ fans during the season. We won last night, we lost last night. We traded for a new pitcher. They, the players, the team have become a “we”. Just by their support the fans know themselves to be partners.

You and I are partners in many ministries in many places. When Carol Aufdenkampe is visiting at Good Samaritan Nursing home or Howard Helmink at Bradley Bay you are partners with them. When Frank Lee visits at Grafton Correctional Institution you are partners with him. When Pastor Eileen visits a patient at the Cleveland Clinic you are partners with her. When members of this congregation wrap gifts at the hunger center we are all partners with them. And when you are the one witnessing to Christ, pounding nails at a Habitat project, holding the hand of one who grieves, know that we are all partners with you.

But what of the face that I carry in my heart? How will Christ put light in his eyes once more?

In his city, in his neighborhood Christ is at work. I hope that on his street is a congregation like St. James our mission partner. I hope Christ is reaching out to him through them. I know that the way of the Lord will not be prepared until all flesh sees the salvation of our God.

For me it is a joy to be a partner with Love In The Name Of Christ and St. James and the Lorain Free Clinic. I thank God that I am privileged to give money to the benevolences that our congregation supports. I have heard a woman who was once imprisoned tell of the love that came to her through Community Re-Entry and how she knows that Jesus is the one who reached out to her through them. You and I are privileged to give money to make that outreach possible, to pray prayers that hold these ministries before the eyes of God.

God has given you salvation in Jesus Christ. God has called us together into one body of Christ in the world today. Christ in his body is preparing all flesh to see the salvation of God.

Rejoice that the child who was born of Mary remains in this world in you. Thank God for the partnership we have with all his church.