

- Not like animals headed for the gutter, a traditional Christian word for this kind of loving response to our doubts and to our failures is the word grace. We are saved, we are supported, we find our security in God's grace, that grace is our only certainty and furthermore, we can't even prove that because God's grace can never be proven, it can only be accepted. In other words, the Christian faith doesn't offer security in any ordinary sense of the word. Christians are not guaranteed that everything will come out good from a human point of view. God's grace simply means that even though cruelty and confusion are abroad in the world, that even though prisons and slums and human sin distort the bodies and the souls of people that even though failure and sickness and death assail us, even those tragedies cannot separate us from God's love. In fact, it is in precisely such trying conditions that God's grace becomes most evident if we know how to look for it. There's a parable which has had some currency recently. I ran across it a number of years ago. It goes one night, I dreamed I was walking along the beach with the Lord and many scenes from my life flashed across the sky and at each scene I noticed a footprint in the sand, sometimes there were two sets of footprints, other times there was only one. And this bothered me because I noted that during the low periods of my life when I was suffering from anguish, sorrow and defeat, I could see only one set of footprints. So, I said to the Lord, you promised me, Lord that if I followed you, you would walk with me always. But I noticed that during the most trying periods of my life, there's only been one set of footprints in the sand. Why, Lord, why when I needed you most have you not been there for me? And the Lord replied, the times when you've seen only one set of footprints, my child, are the times when I was carrying you. It's often been charged that most protestants don't know their faith as some of our more conservative and authoritarian brethren know theirs. Now to the degree that such a charge correctly means that we've not been committed, that we've not been disciplined, that we've not been studious enough to learn our faith, it's to our shame. But we must also recognize that traditional Christianity doesn't consist solely in an intellectual grasp of doctrine nor in the memorization of a creed. At its best, the traditional Christian faith rests heavily on a living encounter with God through Jesus Christ and living relationships can never be formulated with exact finality. Again, to quote W.B.J. Martin. The essence of Protestantism is the willingness to be in uncertainty with God, the important thing is not to have correct information about God but to be susceptible to God's spirit, to be growingly aware of his pressures upon our lives. It was toward the end of World War II that a young Jewish girl in the Warsaw Ghetto managed to escape over the wall and hide out in a cave. She died there shortly before the Allied Army broke through and liberated that ghetto but before she died, she scratched on the wall three things. I believe in the sun even when it's not shining. I believe in love even when feeling it not. I believe in God even when he's silent. That young lady had grasped something of the necessary insecurity of life and yet had overcome through her faith. Now, if we will respond with our whole will to the gracious love of God, we will tend to gain some sense of assurance for in the power of the gift of God's grace, even though we're never really secure in the ordinary sense of that word, we will be enabled to walk from uncertainty to uncertainty with something of a sense of personal victory. Paul caught some of this in Romans 8. Let me paraphrase it for you. For I am persuaded that neither knowledge nor lack of it, neither faith or doubt, neither virtue nor sin, neither life nor death, that nothing in the universe has any power to separate us from God's love for us as shown in Jesus Christ our Lord. That then is our security.

(lively organ music) (congregation sings)

- Let us now affirm what we believe.

- We believe in God who has created and is creating, who has come in the truly human Jesus to reconcile and make new, who works in us and others by the spirit, we trust God who calls us to be the church, to celebrate life and its fullness, to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil, proclaim Jesus crucified and risen, our judge and our hope. In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us, we are not alone. Thanks be to God. The Lord be with you.

- And also with you.

- Let us pray. Oh Yahweh, we praise you for yourself in whom we live and by whom all things are sanctified and made for shining. We praise you for this day which proceeds from your graciousness and returns to your love. We praise you for every moment when the work of our hands and minds is blessed beyond our deserving and for every hour that our hearts are made glad by a wise and endless peace that we do not earn. Oh comforter, who from the other side of dark invades our despair, our loss and who overcomes for all the harried people, the disasters of nations, the defeats of flesh and soul. Now in the brimming days that hasten us towards Bethlehem, all life calls upon you for wholeness, let sickness be healed, the mind's terrors removed far from us, the heart's loneliness transformed unto joy. Teach the nations and those who lead the nations the things that make for peace. And as you are the creator and guardian of this universe, do keep this fragile planet from destruction. Oh Lord, our God, who by the light of a star dispels the night of our fears and makes us free to sing again, we give thanks that once more the weight of glory is pressed upon an inglorious world, that a stirring is in our midst, a hope rising to strive against the world's despair. Be active in our minds and hearts, that no distress will prevent our doing the works of life, no impatience keep us from the slow work of building a place where love is the mandate that we obey. Awaken us, redeem us, be archangel in us 'til we dare to soar and in all of the plodding times and places of the months ahead, be to us unicorn and dove and storm and star until our flesh becomes your wild, wise word. In the name of the Christ we have gathered and prayed and now we pray together this prayer which he teaches us.

- Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on Earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen. (tranquil music) (lively music) (lively organ music) (congregation sings) ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ (congregation sings) ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Amen ♪

- Be with us, oh God as we move into a new semester and a new sense of ministry and purpose within your church. Be with us now in the use of these offerings that what we accomplish may be according to your will, that justice and mercy and grace may pervade this Earth and your peoples. In the name of your Son, our Lord, amen. (lively organ music) (congregation sings) Let me remind you that our guest preacher of the morning, Reverend Hamilton will be at the foot of the Chancel Steps following this service to greet you and I

know that he would like to meet as many of you as he possibly can. So, I hope that you will come and meet the preacher of the morning. And now go out into the world in peace, have courage, hold on to what is good, return no person evil for evil, but rather strengthen the faint hearted, support the weak, give help to the suffering, honor all men and women, love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit and now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the strength and fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you this day and forever. (tranquil music) (clapping)