



## Worship Resources for *Steeple's Ad Run* – Fall 2008

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**Hebrews 13:9-16**

**Luke 21:25-34**

### Outside the Camp

No one likes feeling like an outsider, but there are times when it is unavoidable—like on a new job, or in a new city, or going to a new church. You feel out of place, just a bit lost. You feel almost ashamed. And we've all been in conversations where we didn't have a clue what the others were talking about. Or someone told a joke we didn't get. Soon you begin to feel like a gay man at an auto-parts convention.

We all know being laughed at can be a painful experience. As kids, we used to say, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me," but, even then, I suspect we knew that wasn't really true. Words do wound, sometimes so deeply it takes a lifetime to heal.

It hurts to be ridiculed or teased. It hurts to be made to feel like you don't belong. Being an outsider terrified us as children, and, even today, we avoid it at all cost. We want to be "on the inside," "in style," "included." Loneliness is a major symptom of the life of an outsider. Do you remember how alone you felt when you thought you were the only one? Being outside is a frightening and lonely experience. That is why this reading from the book of Hebrews is so challenging.

The writer observed that Jesus was crucified *outside the camp*. In those days, when animals were sacrificed at the temple, the animal's carcass was burned on the garbage heap outside the city walls. This place of burning refuge was also where they executed criminals. You see, the hill we call Calvary was not a beautiful, soft, grassy knoll. It was a garbage heap. It was a place of death and decay. A place where the poor scavenged for food, a place of rejects, failures, the discarded. *Outside* was where proper society decided Jesus belonged. Now this writer of scripture suggests that we should join him there.

Could the scripture actually be suggesting that we should **choose** to be an outsider? That seems unthinkable when you've spent a lifetime trying to belong, to fit in, to be on the inside. Yet that is exactly what Jesus did! He was constantly eating with tax collectors and those labeled sinners. He didn't pal around with the pretty people or the rich and the powerful. Jesus made his life with fishers and women of questionable reputations. Jesus was poor and homeless. He died naked and alone. Jesus identified with those outside so fully that he said how we treated them was how we treated him: "*What you do to the least, you do to me.*"

The Gospel lesson tells us that we should be able to read the signs and know where the realm of God is breaking into our world. Funny thing is I suspect we look for it in all the wrong places. People claim a deep hunger for God. What Jesus said is that we will find God in the most unlikely place. We will find God outside the camp with those who are poor, hurting, aged, homeless, lonely and alone.

Nobel Prize-winning author Elie Wiesel is a survivor of a Nazi concentration Camp. In his novel *The Town Beyond the Wall*, a character named Michael has been in prison for a long, long time. At one point, Michael is talking to a new prisoner who has great faith. The new fellow asks Michael how he has been able to stay sane in prison despite such long and unrelenting abuse, and Michael begins to tell him about a friend who has helped him by listening to his fears and comforting him. As they talk, Michael, who is a confirmed atheist, sees a knowing gleam in the new prisoner's eye, and he screams, "Don't try and tell me that your God sent this friend to me in prison." "No," says the believer, "I wouldn't tell you that. My God doesn't send people to prison. **My God goes there in person.**"

That is what Jesus tried to tell us too. When life shuts you out, God doesn't send someone to help you, rather God comes to you in the skin of someone who cares. The problem today is heaven is suffering a serious shortage of skin. May God use yours?

Jenny grew up in a middle-class home in a middle-class neighborhood. Her family was not rich, but she never really went without much. Her parents used gifts as a way of rewarding Jenny and her brothers. When they were good they got a gift; if they were not gifts were withheld. Jenny bought things less because she needed them and more because they made her feel good about herself. She made a decent salary, dressed well, drove a nice car, lived in a nice home, and ate out whenever she wanted. That was how her friends also lived so she really didn't think much about it.

Then one year she went to a Christmas Eve service. The church was full. Jenny jokingly said they could get 100 more people in if it hadn't been for all the fur coats draped over the backs of the pews. Jenny's coat wasn't fur, but it was expensive leather.

That night, as she listened to the Christmas story, she suddenly heard, as if for the first time, how Jesus was born on the wrong side of town. A feeding trough for a cradle, a stable for a nursery. No fur or leather, or fine clothing to keep him warm. Something about that struck her very hard. In fact, that night she had the most vivid dream of her life. In it, as she walked home from Church, she ran into a poor old woman shivering in the cold. Jenny held her breath as she passed by, assuming the homeless woman probably smelled bad. Then, in her dream, Jenny suddenly turned around, took off her expensive leather coat and put it around the homeless woman's shoulders.

Then the dream changed, and the next image seemed to be in heaven. There, surrounded by all the angels, stood Jesus. Jenny was not quite sure how she knew it was Jesus. He wasn't dressed like she would imagine Jesus would dress. In fact, when she looked closely, she noticed Jesus was wearing her expensive leather coat.

Now, I would like to tell you that this dream changed Jenny's life and values, that it made her a compassionate and kind and accepting person, that she began to care about others and find ways to help those in need and include the outsider. But it was only a dream. I'd like to tell you that there was a congregation of women and men who became compassionate and including, a congregation that began to care about others and find ways to include the outsider. But this is only a sermon.