

The Inlook-Outlook Letter
Of the Prison Ministry of the St. Lawrence Valley Friends Meeting
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)
Potsdam, NY (December 2010)

This 'Inlook-Outlook Letter' is for you, to let you know you are in our hearts and prayers.
When we *look into* our hearts we see God and this benefits our *outlook*

Incarceration: My Desert and Cave of Refuge

For God has not given us a spirit of fear; but of power and of love, peace and sound mind
(2 Timothy 1:7)

This past weekend's Friends meeting at Cape Vincent C. F. brought about a transformation of spiritual meaning and purpose for me to the verse from 2 Timothy above. I've decided to put this epiphany into words, not only as a reiteration for myself, but also to share with others. My personal struggle throughout life has been plagued with fear, a condition that caused me to stagnate and turn away from God's purpose.

I realized my prison was manifested in more ways than one. I had subtly become institutionalized and was a prisoner of fear without being held in physical bondage. It would puzzle me how I could be so focused on doing the right thing while incarcerated, but upon release I would loose my grip. How could I walk in the path of righteousness in faith and hope ever so great while incarcerated, but enter into a dark world so easily once I was released? The trust and belief that God would provide sufficiently comforted me in a cell, but that would be distorted by the vices of carnal pleasure in the world, once released. Unfortunately, institutions had become my desert and cave of refuge. It was a brutal and humbling experience to realize I had been a prisoner even before I entered an actual prison.

Fear was reinforced by those with whom I shared emotional interests, family and friends, conditioned to dealing with me as they had remembered me in the past. This energy of fear that coexisted between myself and loved ones, developed into a predisposition that took effect immediately upon our reuniting. That my family and friends feared I would soon leave them again, and that I feared I would not live up to their expectations, often became self-fulfilling prophesies. The dynamics were stifling, so without the help of God there was no protection from ungodly desires. The greater the abscess became, so would the likelihood of relapse into the dis-ease of addiction.

The separation between myself and God would happen quietly and be coated over with me trying to fulfill the lusts of the flesh. The purpose and goal of living according to God's plan was often missed by my own objective of being husband, father, brother and friend to those not walking in the spirit of God. When left to my own understanding, I became double-minded, forgetting to retain the knowledge that God had given me, which was to trust and lean on him. Instead I relied on my own understanding. Our own understanding is about self, the enemy's target, so without the leave of God, we are motivated by our fleshy desires.

Let me clearly point out, I do not fault anyone but the sin that dwells within me for all my shortcomings. Every human being has the need and the right to belong, but often times we can become blind-sided when we fail to put God first, before any need or want, even for the love of other persons. Reintegrating into society after incarceration, no matter how long, can be difficult, even crippling.

This is especially true for someone who was blind to the self-created prison they were in before entering the physical prison. Often times we find ourselves overcome with fear prior to leaving a correctional facility, leaving us afraid to ask for help.

The Bible instructs us to keep our focus heavenward. It is not a once-in-a-while duty, but one we must do constantly. Yes, we have to possess the essentials to living a daily life, but we must do so trusting in the Lord. Often we want others to trust us before we even learn how to trust in God. For Ephesians 6: 12-13, gives the whole outlook and the nature of our struggle, while at the same time giving us the instructions on tools to be used: *[For it is not against human enemies that that we have to struggle, but against the principalities and powers that are masters of the darkness in this world, the spirits of evil in the heavens. That is why you must take up all God's armor, or you will not be able to put up any resistance on the evil day, or stand your ground even though you exert yourselves to the full].*

Thanks to Friends for being there to give perspective and validation when I needed it. I have come to realize that I need to surround myself with people who can identify with the dis-ease from which I suffer, people who are in places doing the things I need to do. Whenever fear shows its face, I will resist it, trusting it will flee from me, one day at a time.

A Merry Christmas and Very happy New Year to You!

We are grateful for the above gift of an inmate member's writing. Our brother describes his incarceration as "my desert and cave of refuge". A desert is an inhospitable place, often pictured in biblical stories as something to go through to get to a better place God has promised us, and often associated with it is a cave in which those seeking God find refuge (1 Kings 19: 9). A funny thing happened when I first read it: I misunderstood and thought that he meant "dessert" (something sweet that tops off a satisfying meal) instead of "desert"! Following on this thought, it occurred to me baby Jesus would be a sweet vision of a "dessert and cave of refuge".

The story of Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem is often envisioned as the pair having to spend the night in a cave behind an inn for *there was no room for them in the inn* (Luke 2: 7). Farmers often made use of caves to shelter their animals and the animals whose owners stayed at nearby inns. The cave gave the pair a refuge from the weather, and was heated by the most elemental heating of God's creation: The warm bodies of cattle and sheep gathered there, occasionally lowing and quietly munching their straw.

Then something *sweet*, a gift freely given, is born during the night. When Mary next day thrusts the infant Jesus into the arms of the innkeeper, who has come to tell them they must move on, the innkeeper's eyes meet those of the infant who cannot speak. There the innkeeper sees the *real light that gives light to everyone* (John 1: 9) who would be a cave and refuge from our loneliness and helplessness against *the principalities and powers of darkness in this world*, and he is transformed. He agrees to let Joseph and Mary stay on for as long as they like, till Mary is recovered and ready to travel again (See more of this wonderful story in Friends Journal, December 2010, p. 6).

May God bless you. **Anybody who wishes to receive the 'Inlook-Outlook Letter' may request a subscription by writing to the address below.** Be sure to let us know your complete address. You will be put on our mailing list and receive a monthly copy at no cost. Also, please feel free to write us with your comments, suggestions and contributions to the Letter: **St. Lawrence Valley Friends Meeting, P.O. Box 292 , Canton, NY 13617**

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