

“The Shadow of Your Wings”

by Glenn Woertz
Sunday, June 27, 2010

- Isaiah 55: 1-9
- Psalm 63: 1-8
- John 14:10-17, 25-26

I've always liked the story of the three sisters who lived together. One sister got up to go to bed, half way up the stairs she stopped and asked, "Was I going up or was I coming down?" One sister replied with hint of aggravation, "You were going up to bed."

A second sister headed into the kitchen to make herself a sandwich. Once in the kitchen she hollered back to her sister who was also still down stairs; "What did I come in here for?"

The sister responded again with a trace of irritation, "You went in to make yourself a sandwich." After which she said, "I'm so glad I am not as forgetful as the both of you are," as she knocked on the wooden end table.

And then she got up and walked over to the door and said "Who is it?"

Yes, we are a forgetful people. And from my vast experience I have concluded that forgetfulness does not discriminate with regard to age. And therefore we come up with all kinds of ways to help us remember; (string around finger; post it notes, day planners, memory courses). And most of us do need a little help to remember.

Music students help themselves learn to read music by learning the phrases “every good boy does fine” and “face” for the treble clef and “great big dogs fight animals” and “all cars eat gas” for the bass clef. I learned those by the age of 11—five decades ago—and haven't really needed to remember them for at least four and a half decades. But it would probably require advanced hypnosis to make me forget them. *Yet*, when some lawyer threatens to sue me for something wrong I didn't do at work, I have trouble remembering that *his* sins will be forgiven. Or when offering God unsolicited advice regarding the disposition of the soul of a particularly obnoxious fellow motorist, I can't seem to remember that God must surely love that other driver as much as He loves me.

So what makes my memory fail me at these prolonged periods or brief moments of stress or irritation? Well, for one thing, I get busy. We all can get busy. But when we get too busy with routine, with work, with minutiae of daily living, we on a very important level may stop paying attention, may become, as my Buddhist friends would say, *un-aware*. We can lose sight of some basic truths. *Our* basic, fundamental, reliable, unailing truths, if you will.

During Lent this year, I was privileged, along with many in our congregation, to take part in an ongoing study group working through Max Lucado's book, *Fearless*, in which we are challenged to imaging a life lived without fear. One of the questions we took on later in the

study was “Do you feel that God cares deeply about you as an individual?” That is a tough question, and brings to bear thoughts, and *feelings* relating to self-esteem, humility, faith, self-worth, our concept of our place in the cosmos and the greatness of the God we worship and esteem.

Many of the people in our group answered “no” to that question, they did not really feel that God cares deeply about them *as an individual*. It’s easy to feel that way, and probably most of us do, if only once in awhile. And very many people feel that way most of the time. I mean, let’s be honest, who of us has never been in a situation or condition, or even just observed a situation or condition, which caused us to ask “Where is God in all this?” But as the conversation in our study group continued, a second question arose, which is “If we say no, have we really been paying attention?” Or, how *aware* are we?

During the season of Lent, even more than usual, we are called upon to be aware. To increase our awareness of our faith, of God’s gift to us in Jesus Christ. Some Christians, depending upon their sect or denomination, are called upon to give something up for Lent, to remind them of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. I have to confess that while the symbolism is obvious, I’ve never fully grasped the value of the experience of giving something up for Lent. When I was growing up, my siblings and I had a bunch of cousins who were Roman Catholic. Well, we still have them, but at a much greater distance. And I’m not so sure they’re all quite as Catholic as they were then. Anyway, I remember sitting around the dinner table in late winter one year at my cousins’ house—this was way back when Meatless Fridays were still in—and listening to all those kids agonizing over what they would give up for Lent. They all came up with things they thought were significant, like hot lunch at school, soft drinks, *driving the car*, all things which, in close analysis, they could get along very well without. Somehow the observance seemed a little hollow, even to my 8-year-old mind. Later, I might have piped up and suggested they just give up Catholicism—let’s not go there—but at age 8 I already had the good sense to remain a silent observer. How I lost that sense is another sermon.

I want to share with you a some fairly recent developments of the past winter in our life (my wife Cheryl’s and mine) that have brought me to increased awareness this year, and which were still warm in my mind when we received the good news regarding Hank and Pat Hermo’s daughter a few week ago.

I talked to Mom last night. She called me—it was her turn—and she had some news. She had called to ask about my sister-in-law, Susan—we’ll get to that—and then the conversation turned to developments back in my home town of Waukegan, Illinois. Mom is 87 now, and can pass for a dozen or so years younger. Typically for sons and mothers in our respective age groups, part of our regular phone conversation usually includes reports or bulletins from Mom on who in her wide circle of friends is sick or sicker, or has passed recently. Last night, she told me of the passing of someone from my old home church in Waukegan, Illinois, someone who I can barely remember, but whose daughter I remember from Youth Choir and confirmation class days. Elizabeth Dinger passed away recently, Mom said, at the age of 75. Then she told me something which kind of explained to me why I didn’t remember Elizabeth too well. It was because while we were both in church at First Presbyterian of Waukegan every

Sunday back then, I seldom saw Elizabeth. That was because while I was singing in the choir at first service, going to Sunday school or producing the worship service for the middle-school level kids in their Sunday school during the second service, Elizabeth and her partner were running the pre-school program for the Sunday schools. They were doing it when I began attending that church, and they were doing it when I left that church and Waukegan. Last year the church gave Elizabeth and her partner a big party and a plaque, because they'd been doing it for *50 years*. They just couldn't let go of it.

Why? It might be suggested that that pre-school kids' program was their mission, and they were aware of it in their bones. How else could they persist for 50 years in that low-recognition, fulfilling, exhausting, and fatigue-producing activity? Mind you, when I was in high school that church had 1500 members on its rolls, and an abundance of pre-school youngsters. Like many churches, First Presbyterian of Waukegan has found its congregation reducing in past decades, and I only hope the size of the pre-school crowd diminished at an even pace with Elizabeth's physical capacities. She had a weak heart, after all. While many things might be said about the longevity and endurance of Elizabeth's and her partner's enduring service, she must surely have been aware of where she belonged, and made many choices accordingly.

Speaking of heart conditions, here comes a tale of what has occupied much of the consciousness of this local branch of the Woertz family for the past three or four months. And this is about remembering and *paying attention* as much as about awareness.

As some of you know, Cheryl's sister, Susan, has been ill lately. I mean, *really*. At the age of 44, *and don't any of you let her know I revealed her age to you, it's just a significant part of the story*, Susan is facing heart surgery. That's the bad news. The good news is going to take me awhile to deliver.

We've all of us been a bit on edge for most of the first half of this year, because in late winter Susan was taken to a hospital in Westchester with severe back pain, and while there developed a fever. Now, fevers are kind of scary for Susan, because fever can mean infection, and 13 years ago Susan had something called bacterial endocarditis, which damaged a valve in her heart. She and her doctor have been watching this condition ever since. So when the fever showed up, Susan and her husband requested that the hospital in Westchester check her blood for that nasty past infection. They didn't. They just checked her white cell count, found it OK, and sent her home.

When she got home, and didn't get much better, Susan got in touch with her cardiologist. He's a pretty good man who also takes care of a guy from Westchester name of W. J. Clinton. Soon, the cardiologist tested Susan, found bacterial endocarditis again, and just before the really big snowfall in late February, he put her into Columbia Presbyterian, where she was soon in the care of a team of top-flight doctors. Then things got really scary. Test after test, consultation after consultation, talk with the surgeons about valve replacement, possible open-heart surgery, Susan terrified, Cheryl terrified, and all family and friends deeply, deeply concerned for Susan's health and future. Imagine what Susan, a mother of three young children with lots of plans for her future, saw she had at risk. No wonder she was afraid.

Now, a lot of praying had been going on for quite awhile, mostly for Susan, but for her husband (and by her husband) and kids as well. For days on end, I think Cheryl, consciously or unconsciously, was praying for Susan with every breath. Soon what might be described as a local and not-so-local all-star team of praying people were on the case. Extended family: a “double cousin” who has always been more of a sister to Susan, all Susan’s sisters, of course, A wide circle of cousins from here to North Carolina and beyond, an uncle who’s a dentist but has written books on spiritual concerns, a famous healer and spiritual reader from Bergen County, a whole circle of pray-ers associated with Guideposts magazine, members of our congregation in Cresskill. . . wow. And meanwhile the doctors are consulting and working over at Columbia Presbyterian and we’re having pained conversations about whether Susan will have a new mechanical heart valve or one collected from a pig, whether she’ll be on Coumadin for the rest of her life (another fear here, because she’s allergic to many antibiotics and medications), whether or not the surgery would have to be open-heart. . . . scarier and scarier. But Susan’s general condition and attitude was slowly improving.

After several weeks we learned that the bacteria did not appear to have gone to Susan’s heart, but was working on her back! And the damage to her heart valve which the doctors had thought had worsened so much over the past year was not so bad after all, and the damaged valve could be repaired laparoscopically, with a minor incision and the surgeon sneaking in from her side. That Susan was going home, to undergo a 5 or 6-week course of antibiotic treatment in preparation for this much lesser surgery, and could expect to live a normal life thereafter.

So we get this news in mid-March, just before the next big storm which closed the Alpine Community Church one Sunday, keeping me from preaching a certain scheduled sermon there, and Cheryl rode with me on Friday as I set out in the car to take care of some busy-ness. Now, believe it or not, I’d been preparing for this certain sermon for awhile, and as Cheryl and I reflected on recent events and what possibly lay ahead, I kept thinking over and over of today’s Psalm: *read Ps. 63, 5-7*. I thought of Susan lying alone in the noisy hospital through the night, lying there with only her fear and her faith for company. And thanked God for his presence in her life and ours. I also thought of Isaiah’s food imagery in relation to the stuff they served Susan at the hospital, but couldn’t do that for very long.

We all have had our long nights. It ain’t fair, but it seems most people can’t live very long without running into them, not if you’re really living, not if you have a life. Most of my longest nights have been spent in hospitals (not as a patient) with medical professionals. I’ve had them with Cheryl, with Brendan and Matt. We started Brendan’s life that way, with me begging God to let Cheryl and Brendan stick around with me. As you know, God said, “Yes.”

Now the Scientific community has many explanations for what I see as God’s presence and working in our troubles and emergencies. And the cynics and best-selling atheists dismiss faith in God as childish, benighted, weak, unreasonable, and so on and so on. I remember, while in seminary and also taking a course in psychotherapy for granola heads, reading a fascinating work which purported to explain how we could manipulate little bitty quantum particles with our thoughts and thereby affect or even determine reality. It sounded a lot like prayer, but the author kind of left God out of the conversation.

There has been at least one double-blind study, conducted in association with the medical community, which has concluded that prayer can indeed influence medical outcomes (that's another sermon, too, and my research skills for today were limited by time and thick thumbs). And there are myriad scientific God-free explanations that many could supply for the observations in that study. But what ties me up with this no-God idea is that no matter how far science goes, whether outward into the universe or inward into the structure of the atom, there always remain questions which lie beyond our explanation or comprehension. This is the territory in which that fellow from Europe and Princeton, what was his name?—Einstein!—found God. He wrote about it (that, too is another sermon. Now I have 3 more).

All this brings us back to *remembering*, and today's Old Testament readings. Now for Cheryl and me, and Cheryl's family, the past few months have put our lesser problems and concerns into perspective and really snapped us back to *attention*. To how far we can go with skills and efforting, and where we need to, *have to*, allow the presence of God right beside us, caring for us as individuals. Jesus and a favorite hymn tell us His eye is on the sparrow, and we are more valuable than that sparrow. That the very hairs on our heads are numbered. We don't count the hairs on our head, but Jesus says God keeps track. I can tell you that in my long nights, I have been aware of the presence of God and his presence in guiding those miracle-working doctors.

Is my awareness induced by delusion? It's sad, but most psychotherapists, who often happen to be secular humanists, write down a partial diagnosis as soon as a patient/client talks about God, or even intuition. Yet we know what we know. And we *need* to remember. A favorite fantasy of mine is to try to imagine a meeting of Jesus (and maybe, say, Buddha and Mahomet thrown in) with the likes of Freud, Einstein, Jung, Newton, and that crowd. Sort of a theological Celebrity Death Match. No doubt there have been many books on the subject, I'll keep looking.

What I know is while wondering in Englewood hospital whether my wife and not-yet-born son were to be taken away, I did not feel the presence of Alexander Fleming, Dr. Jenner, Boynton, or Einstein. Certainly not Freud or Adler. And conversation with them would doubtless have been futile and comfortless in that time. But the presence of a loving and caring God was almost palpable. And I also know that I've just been watching the strength and calm service of Susan's husband, Ian, through her ordeal. Ian is a man of great faith (he was Born Again about 15 years ago, and for awhile was pretty hard to take, but that was as much about the rest of us as much as it was about him). He's also an engineer, a man of science, and a nonpareil critical thinker. And he has not faltered.

Our family and Susan may yet have very trying times ahead, even if Susan has a straight and easy path to recovery. There's always something. So we pray. We pray to remain aware. We pray to remember. The prophet says,

So are my ways higher than your ways, and my thought than your thoughts.

And we say,

. . . *And in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.*

If you haven't yet, you're welcome to join the singing.

So what's in the shadow of *your* wings?

As they like to say over at St. Cecilia's, "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen."