

Walking in His Path

Isaiah 2:1-5

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What do you love about this earth? Is it the changing colors and the crisp cool air of the fall? Do you love looking out and seeing a fresh dusting of snow? Is it the flowers coming to life after the long winter? Is it the warm sun on your face on a summer day? Why would it surprise us that Jesus might have loved those very things when he came to earth? I imagine him taking his sandals off and walking barefoot on the shores of a lake or ocean, wiggling his toes in the warm sand. Or sleeping out under the night sky and gazing affectionately at all of those stars and planets and galaxies and solar systems that he knew by name...and as he closed his eyes to sleep in peace it might have been like an episode of the Walton's as he called out, "Good night Jupiter. Good night Saturn. Good night Pleiades and Orion, ah, and yes, I see you having fun out there you old Bear and your cubs. Good night sun. Good night moon." And even though we might end our days by praying to our Father in Heaven, when he says good night to his Father in Heaven, well, those two have a pretty tight bond.

What do you love about this earth? Do you like to swim in the salty sea? How about getting out on a boat on the open waters and feeling the wind in your face and the sun on your back? Are you one who climbs a mountain and exults in conquering a summit? Do you like to sneak away to a quiet place and spend your day in rest and reflection?

Why would it surprise us when Jesus looked at that Jordan River, with everyone else jumping in and getting baptized, thrashing around in the water, why would it surprise us that he decided to jump right in with the rest of us? If he loved this earth, don't you think he would not only jump in, he might have even shouted out, "Cannonball!" If you like being out on the sea, can you even imagine the fun he had as the winds and the waves and the thunder and lightning tossed the boat around like anxious little children crying out to the one who made them and saying, "Jesus, you are asleep in the boat. Wake up and come play with us." His legs felt the strain and his lungs the burn as he climbed the hills of Galilee to preach a sermon or to meet his old buddies Moses and Elijah. And maybe his friends the birds told each other to hush when Jesus would sneak off to a quiet place to rest, to pray, to be alone with his Heavenly Father.

When Jesus came down to earth, he loved it. He loved it in all its beauty, and he loved it in all its brokenness. When God came down to earth he loved us. He loved us? Of course, he knew what he was getting into. Of course, he knew about our sin and our sadness and our sorrow. He didn't ignore it. He didn't wink at sin. He didn't give it an ok and say it didn't really matter anyway. No, he had a plan to address that sin and that brokenness and that sadness and sorrow and the deep separation that exists because of sin. Jesus came and he came to reconcile this world. He came to show us this incredible plan God had so that instead of counting our sins against us he would forgive those sins and bring us back into a right relationship with the one who created us and loved us from the beginning.

This first Sunday of Advent reveals God's ultimate intention for creation. It is not very different, if it is different at all, from God's initial intention in creation. When God surveyed the heavens and earth, he had created in Genesis chapter one God said it is good. God said it is good again and again and again. And when human beings like you and me were created in the image of God the verdict that came down was stunning and magnificent. God said, "It is very good." Now we read that the God of creation is the God of new creation, and one day, when this whole story called human life is wrapped up it will be good. Indeed, it will be very good. "In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as the highest of the mountains...and on that mountain they will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks...every tear will be dried...every stomach will be filled...every heart will overflow with love...and God, our God, will be with us.

So the psalm that we heard earlier this morning, the psalm for the first Sunday of Advent, has an important phrase for us not only to hold onto, it is a phrase for us to grab onto, it a phrase for us to embrace wholeheartedly...with all our heart, and it is a verse for us to cling to with all our might. The verse is this: "I was glad..." I was glad. We are in the time between the times, the time between the goodness of creation and the time of new creation. It is very tempting to see what is bad in this time between the times. But remember Jesus, who not only stands smack dab in the middle of the creation and the new creation, Jesus unites the creation and the new creation, and in Jesus the creation and the new creation will find their fulfillment. Jesus, who entered this world that exists in this time between the times, Jesus loved this world. I don't think it would be a stretch to say Jesus was glad he came to this world, our world. Jesus said, "I have come that you might have life, and to have life abundantly."

I am going to share with you this morning a story that made me glad. The story not only made me glad, it makes me glad. I hope it will make you glad. Even if it does not achieve that aim, I hope it will help you reflect on your own life and ask, “What is it that makes me glad? And maybe by the end of our time this morning, a time that will include breaking the bread and sharing the cup of our Lord Jesus Christ, who loved this world so much he gave his life for us, hopefully by the end of our time this morning, we will all be able to say, “I was glad.” Or better yet, “I am glad.”

The story I want to share with you is about a farmer named Burley Coulter who went out one night. The year is set in 1948, not long after the end of World War II. The story is titled, “The Dark Country”. **(All references are to “The Dark Country”, by Wendell Berry, found in *A Place in Time*).** Burley was a farmer and he had just completed bringing in his harvest in. It was too soon to begin preparing for the next planting, his work was all done, he loved to go out and hunt for some pelts, his hunting dogs were barking up a storm, so one night when the harvest was safely in he packed up his gun, a few cold biscuits, let his dogs loose, and he went out in the fields and forests to do a little hunting. And yet on that long and wonderful night, Burley did more than just hunt for some pelts.

As Burley walks, he remembers. As he walks, he reflects. As he walks, he reminisces. Burley thinks about those two fine dogs hunting with him, how they are part of his life, when he got them, who he got them from, their characteristics and habits, and how they have been mighty fine companions for him. Have you ever had a dog that just became a part of your life, a cat, another pet, one of God’s creatures who helped you feel a little closer to life, a little closer to love, a little closer to God?

As Burley walks, he passes places that have names. This is familiar country to him. These are familiar places to him. Burley has lived here all his life. He crosses Willow Run and follows the woods along Katy’s Branch round about the Stepstone Hollow. Places that are named, places that are known, places that have marked days and seasons in your life, well, those are special places. Do you have some places that are named? Going back to the camp where my dad took us every summer is to encounter named places that are sacred now, names like Happy Gap, the Lagoon River, Ella Falls, Sequoia Lake, and a little pool fed by the

smallest of waterfalls that my mom named as Bubble Pool. To sit beside Bubble Pool is to be five years old with my mom as she lifts a branch to get a better look at a flower or holding a ladybug and calling us all to come and see what God has done.

Some of the named places belong to people. Burley passes the Proudfoot place, “Where big old Tol Proudfoot, hero of many a good story, and his little wife, Miss Minnie, had passed their years together.” Tol had been dead five years and Miss Minnie died last summer, and their farm had begun to show signs of being run down. “Miss Minnie had been Burley’s teacher in all eight grades of his schooling. In that old long time he and Miss Minnie had been, we might say, philosophically opposed. Miss Minnie believed that learning was desirable; she thought that students should love to learn. Burley, on the contrary, believed in not learning a speck of anything until he absolutely had to.” She taught him until he learned, but he never found joy in learning, and that was the way it went for “eight long years, in which it seemed to him he experienced eight good days: the last day of school in every one of those years.”

Now as Burley thinks of Miss Minnie these many years later, “By her persistence and her undiscourageable belief in the possibility of ‘human improvement’ and the ‘goodness in every human heart,’ she taught him a great deal that he was unwilling to learn. He still remembers all she taught him, and now, as she often prophesied, he is grateful. After their long struggle was over, she had the grace, to his surprise, to remain interested in him and to be nice to him, and he finally found the grace in himself, also to his surprise, to respect her and to look for ways to be kind to her.” Have you had people like Miss Minnie in your life, people it took a while to understand just what a blessing they were in your life, people who pushed you and believed in you and one day you look up and not only are they your friends but you have become protective of them? And Burley kept walking.

From friends he moves to family, to his own son, and to his nephews Tom and Nathan. Remember this story is set in 1948, and the days of war are not far removed. Burley has worried about his own son Danny, but, “The boys Burley had really worried about had been Tom and Nathan when they were in the war. He had worried about Tom until Tom was killed, which is a bad way to stop worrying about somebody. He had worried about Nathan until the war ended and Nathan got home, and then he kept worrying about him. Nathan came home and

went to work, went right back into it...as if there had been no interruption. But when he wasn't at work, it appeared like he couldn't come to rest, couldn't find a place to stop. And he was god-awful quiet about whatever had happened to him. He was like his daddy and had never had a big amount to say, but you couldn't get a peep out of him about the war.

‘I reckon it got pretty bad over yonder.’ ‘Yep’. That is all he will say.’”

As Burley thinks of his son and his nephews, one dead and one trying to find himself in a difficult time, he simply says out loud and to himself, ‘Well, bless him.’ And then he said, ‘Bless ‘em all.’ And a tremor of love for the three boys, the dead and the living, had passed through him and shaken him.” Do you have people you worry about because they are people you love? Do you have people where after you have worried you are shaken by a tremor of love and you simply say, “Bless ‘em all.”

Burley has more than serious thoughts and more than tender thoughts as he takes that long walk. He is thinking about his dogs out there trying to tree a raccoon and he starts to think about getting himself some pelts. The combination of his dogs and the thought of pelts reminds him of “the fellow who had an extra smart little hunting dog. Whenever this fellow wanted a pelt, he would show a stretching board of whatever size to the little dog. The little dog would look at the board, tear out for the woods, and pretty soon come back with a possum or raccoon whose hide would just fit that board perfectly. Everything went fine with this fellow, he was the envy of everybody, until the day he made the mistake of letting the little dog into the kitchen where he caught sight of the wife’s ironing board. The little dog took a careful look, tore out for the woods, and nobody ever saw hide nor hair of him again. Burley used to tell that story to his nephews, and then to his own son, until they got too old to believe that story. But Burley still thinks it’s a pretty good story, and now and again he tells it to himself.” Every time he tells it he laughs, even if it just to himself. Have you ever had some stories that you loved so much you told them over and over again, until your family got past being tired of them and they became part of the silliness and the happiness of a life well lived. Do you have some stories that make you glad?

Now it is late at night. Really, it is early in the morning. Burley finds a barn, set way off all by itself. There is a well and he pumps some fresh water and takes a drink. He is tired and thirsty and the clean, cold, pure water washes down his

throat and he feels refreshed. Have you ever had a drink of clear cold water, and can you remember how it refreshes your body and your soul. He pulls out the cold biscuits he packed the night before. Just simple biscuits, but it is the recipe his momma taught him, and she learned it from her momma, and her momma before that. When is a biscuit more than a biscuit? Just one bite into one of those cold biscuits and Burley is seated at the table with loved ones from near and far. This whole story has been about a world that God loves, a world where there are faithful dogs and faithful teachers and struggles with loved ones and laughter and a deep and rich appreciation for life. Now the story comes to an end, as Burley settles down in that barn.

“When he has eaten all the biscuits and again pumped himself a drink, he goes into the barn, taking great care with the lantern. It is a feed barn, an old one well kept up, with a hayloft, a small corn crib, four horse stalls, and a large pen for feeding cattle. The cattle have been sold, or moved nearer home, where maybe, so far into the winter, there is more hay. Everywhere in that barn are the signs and traces of a good farmer, a farmer who knows what he is doing and a farmer who likes doing it.” This whole story leads up to a barn where everywhere are the signs and traces of a good farmer who knows what he is doing and likes doing it.

I wonder if the life of faith isn't a long journey for us where we reflect on our lives and the world, the broken and the beautiful, and we finally realize God really does love this world, that in Jesus Christ God came down into this world, and everywhere around us, if we just look, are signs and traces of a good God who knows what he is doing and likes doing it. Anyway, in that old barn, Burley decides to lay down and sleep. He goes over where the feeding pen is for the cows and he climbs in. Burley climbs into the feeding pen for the cows. And the story ends by telling us that feeding trough he has climbed into is a manger. The story ends with a manger. This Sunday we enter Advent. I hope during the journey of Advent you will believe the good news. There is a God who loves this earth. There is a God who has come to this earth. Look closely. Everywhere around us, if we just look, are signs and traces of a good God, who knows what he is doing, and he likes doing it. And maybe at the end of our journey in Advent we will see a manger, holding the greatest treasure God could have given. Maybe like Burley we will climb into that manger. And when we do may we sleep in heavenly peace. And when we do, may we say, “I am glad. So glad. So very glad.”