

REFLECTIONS

July 23, 2017

Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Psalm 139

Perry Jamieson

A few weeks ago, Stephanie and I traveled to Detroit, Michigan for the wedding of the daughter of some longtime friends of ours. It was a joyous occasion and a wonderful trip. We saw a Detroit that, finally, after decades, is getting back on its feet. I enjoyed a nostalgic look at the campus of Wayne State University, where, many years ago, I was graduate student in history. My return visit to Detroit led me to some reflections about where I've been, how I got here, and what the future may hold.

The recent trip to Detroit reminded me of one particular episode in my life. During the summer of 1979 I packed some luggage and left the apartment where Stephanie and I were living in the northern suburbs of Detroit. Stephanie had to continue her work as a nurse for a few months longer, and then she later followed me from Michigan. But I left and began the journey on my own.

It was a life-changing event for me. I had lived all of my childhood and young-adult years in metropolitan Detroit. It was the only part of the country I knew. It was the only life I knew. I left that familiar, comfortable existence behind because I was given a marvelous opportunity, as a newly-minted PhD, to teach history courses at the University of Texas at El Paso, in El Paso, Texas. Taking my life into a sharply new direction required making a long move, at first on my own, to a very different part of the country. It presented a challenge, but I jumped at the chance: in those days, there weren't a lot of university jobs for historians; I guess there still aren't many.

Early one August morning, before dawn, I left our apartment, with the trunk and the backseat of my car filled with luggage and boxes of books. I drove down Interstate 75—the Chrysler Freeway—through Detroit. It seemed to me like just any other drive in my car—until I reached the communities below the city that Detroiters call “Downriver.” As I reached that area, the sun started coming up in my rearview mirror and I got the largest lump in my throat I've ever had.

Why do I have a lump in my throat?, I wondered. And as soon as I asked myself this question, the Spirit gently tapped me on the shoulder and said, You're pretty out of touch with yourself. Let me help you understand what is happening: You've got a big, big lump in your throat because you *aren't* taking just another drive in your car. You are leaving—probably for good—the city where you were born, the neighborhoods of your childhood, the schools you attended. You are leaving your friends, your family, the only life you've known.

Almost forty years later, I can still recall the Spirit helping me to get in touch with my own feelings. I remember recognizing that the Spirit knew me better than I knew myself.

The trip that Stephanie and I recently made to Detroit reminded me of this episode, and it connected me to Psalm 139. Long, long years ago, the Psalmist wrote: “O Lord, you have searched me and known me... You discern my thoughts from far away. You... are acquainted with all my ways.”

The Spirit knows us better than we know ourselves. “Such knowledge,” the Psalmist wrote, “is too wonderful for me.” The Spirit helps us arrive at an understanding of where we are in our lives.

It knows us better than we know ourselves, and the work of the Spirit doesn't stop there: the Spirit also leads us. The Psalmist wrote: "If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me." Wherever we go, the Spirit finds us, and leads us.

How did the Spirit lead me to Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church? During the 1980s, Stephanie and I moved every three years—three times within nine years. During that period of relocating and new-church shopping, we made it a rule to hear a pastor preach at least three times before we decided about joining a congregation. We visited SPC for the first time in the late spring of 2009 and—about half way through Randy's sermon—he announced that he was going on sabbatical. Our strategy of listening to three sermons was thrown out the window.

But things turned around pretty quickly. The next two worship services were led by Rie Wilson and Ethel Hornbeck, so we learned right away that SPC had, in addition to its pastor, strong church leaders. We soon decided that SPC would be a good fit for us.

Stephanie and I live in Sharpsburg. It has some good things going for it. Sharpsburg is an old canal town with a fine sense of its own history—and it has Nutter's ice cream parlor. But it doesn't have a church where Stephanie and I would feel at home. I once told Richard Womeldorf that as much as Stephanie and I like living in Sharpsburg, there's no church like SPC in Sharpsburg. Richard said to me, Perry, there's no church like SPC anywhere in the *world*.

Where is the Spirit leading SPC next? I think an exciting future is ahead of us. We can begin with our commitment that "We choose welcome," and continue to grow. We can build on SPC's astounding mix of respect for the intellect and openness to the spirit. I see an exciting future. What possibilities do you see?

Romans 8:22-28

Betty Snyder

Ethel gives a good sermon so when she said we needed to step up and say yes, I volunteered. Almost immediately I had volunteer remorse. What bit of wisdom could I pass on, I wondered. When I got the assigned scriptures, I was even more sure that I was out of my league. Then I read Romans 8:22-28 and it spoke to me. Verse 22 goes like this—"we know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now." I could relate to that.

There have been many times in our long history when the universe groaned in labor and delivered greatness like Jesus for us; for others it was Buddha or Mohammed or sometimes ordinary people like Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi, or my favorite Mother Teresa.

Then the scripture gets personal..."and not only the creation but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies."

I love the modern word adoption in that passage. Used as it is, it is not something we do for ourselves, so who is adopting us. In our religion we believe it to be Jesus and in this church that translates to love.

It goes on to say "in hope we are saved and what we hope for is not seen but waited for with patience." Which brings me to my own life and a story some of you have heard.

My granny raised me on a 40 acre truck farm near Keyser, WV. Actually, we didn't have a truck and would walk to town to sell our dairy and produce.

More than anything, my granny wanted me to be saved and I wanted that too. I knew granny was saved because on the few times we made it to church, she could talk in tongues which always scared me a little and embarrassed me a bit too. She read her bible every night and I never heard her swear or caught her in a lie. There were times I thought a white lie might have been a good thing.

Once while buying groceries in the A and P, a well dressed, portly woman approached granny and said "I bet you don't recognize me." "No, I don't" granny admitted. "Well I'm Mrs. X and I'm married now and doing well and that's probably why you didn't recognize me." "No," said granny, "I didn't recognize you because you got fat." One should never give granny an opportunity to tell the truth.

But back to the story of me being saved. It was an exciting time in the country when camp meeting came around. Neil Diamond had a song that described it so well when I heard it I was almost there. Brother Love's traveling salvation show, pack up the babies and grab the old ladies and everyone goes.

Granny and I set out walking, her carrying a platter of country ham and homemade biscuits and me a pitcher of lemonade to be shared after the the service. We never had potato salad cause everyone knew that if you left potato salad in the sun for even five minutes and ate it you would die. Now I never knew of anyone dying but we weren't taking any chances.

We were all crowded into the tent and seated on long benches when the young preacher walked in and begin to preach. You knew that more than anything he wanted to save us all. When the altar call came granny practically pushed me off the end of the bench and I joined the other sinners making my way to the makeshift altar singing "Just as I am without one plea but that his blood was shed for me and that thou biddest me come to thee o lamb of god I come I come." I knelt at the altar and prayed with all my ten year old heart but nothing happened even when the preacher laid hands on me.

Later granny would say what she always said about that time of day. Betty Ann them cows won't milk themselves. As we walked home in the twilight, granny asked me if I was saved and I lied and said yes. She then asked me how I knew and I told her I felt the spirit move me. Granny who knew me too well just shuck her head and said uh huh.

Fast forward with me through career, marriage, children, divorce, remarriage and ending up here in Shepherdstown. Hal and I both loved this town and were enjoying life here when I was diagnosed with breast cancer—stage 2B and I'd need Chemo. I had a lot of side effects and there were times I wondered if I'd make it.

This town and this church took very good care of me and I felt God's love all around me. Then one night lying in bed, you know that time before sleep when you contemplate what might happen. A feeling came slowly and I heard no words but I knew that it was going to be ok. Don't get me wrong it was not assurance that I would be healed, it was a feeling that no matter what happened, it would be ok. That feeling stayed with me in the weeks ahead until I was back on my feet. The last time I saw my granny she told me that her old body was worn out and she was ready to be bathed in glory. I believe that was what my granny meant by being saved.

I would like to tell you that I still have that sense of peace, but I still get scared when something threatens me or the people I love but I believe from the bottom of my soul that when of if I need that feeling again it will be there.

My final thought goes back to the scripture. "In hope we are saved and we wait for it with patience." We can't demand or strive for love and serenity but it's there waiting for us when we need it. We just need to open our minds and our hearts and and accept the grace that's offered to us.

I believe that if my granny were here today and asked me if I were saved and I said yes; now instead of saying uh huh, she would say halleluia.