

## God in West Texas....and Elsewhere

I must explain to visitors that on my first Sunday back from vacation I am expected to share some of what happened while this church was granting me a chance to slow down and think about things that are different from my usual routine. While we visited a son in Aspen we were visited in turn by a dear old college friend named A. C. Greene, whom some of you will remember from my roast of a few years ago, and others will remember from my references to his courageous battle with facial cancer. A. C. is a professional writer, author of more than 15 books and the acknowledged expert on Texas history. His finest book is this one, called *A Personal Country*, and the first four words of my sermon title this morning come from one of his chapters in that book, called "God in West Texas." I'll return to that chapter in a few minutes.

Most of our vacation was spent in Bellingham, Washington a few miles south of the Canadian border. Our daughter's home overlooks Pacific ocean water and the San Juan islands, so that the last thing we saw from our bedroom window at dusk and dawn was the marvel of sunset and sunrise over the sea and the hills of the islands. We woke up each morning to the cries of seagulls, a sound I like simply because it is linked in my memory with the oceans....and I am hopelessly fascinated by salt water and tidal rhythms. There are few things I like better than walking on an ocean beach or falling asleep to the sound of the surf, so I was surprised years ago when I noticed that in his description of heaven the author of the book of *Revelation* is careful to point out that in it there will be "no more sea." Those of us who would much prefer a walk on ocean sand to a walk on golden streets wonder why he so deliberately left the sea out of his geography of heaven.

There is, apparently, an interesting reason. An ancient Semitic myth, known to those who wrote the Old Testament, tells how the chaos monster had to be conquered before God could begin the work of creation....and that chaos monster is closely identified with the ocean. There may be two reasons for that old superstition. In the first place, because it is always restless, forever changing its shape, the ocean easily becomes a symbol for chaos, and the chaos monster God conquered and shut up in the depths of the sea was called by names like Rahab and Leviathan. And in the second place, the ocean could seem dangerous to primitive minds. Watching tidal waters roll steadily up the beach, and then mysteriously retreat, it was not hard to imagine some awesome force out in the deep that might destroy life if it were not kept in check. So the Semitic authors of the Bible often refer to how their god Yahweh conquered this chaos monster and imposed limits on what it could do.

Listen to these verses:

“As of old,” a Psalm says (74) “God....crushed the heads of Leviathan.” Another Hebrew song (89) says of God, “You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them. You crushed Rahab like a carcass.” “Was it not you,” says still another Psalm (51) “who [in days of old] cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon?” This primeval combat between God and chaos is echoed again in the book of Job (26) when Job speaks of how God “Stilled the Sea....struck down Rahab” and by his power “pierced the fleeing dragon,” and most vividly near the end of that great poetic book (38) when God is represented as the one who “prescribed boundaries for [the sea]....and said, ‘Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped.’”

So when the author of *Revelation* , steeped in ancient Hebrew legend, promised there would be no sea in heaven, he was probably trying to say that not only would chaos no longer pose a danger to human life but that the very ocean itself, to which the monster had been confined, would no longer exist. It was meant to be a consoling thought to early Jewish Christians, but as one who does not buy into the ancient myth, and who dearly loves the sea, any heaven I'd like to imagine has something in it like the shore at Malibu. Bellingham Bay is not Malibu, but surrounded by family and hours of good work and happy laughter, it was more than enough. And it got even better when my birthday present was a whale-watching trip on a boat called the *Island Caper*.

We found the Orcas, those beautiful black killer whales with the broad band of white, made known to many of us at the marine shows in Los Angeles and Orlando, and millions more in the film *Free Willy* . Sighting whales is not guaranteed. This ship had been out two days earlier and not seen a single whale, but we were lucky. Out past Lummi and Cypress and Whidby, to the southern ends of Lopez and San Juan Islands, we came after three hours of searching to one of the most wonderful sights I have ever seen: killer whales plunging up out of the water to “blow,” some of them leaping straight up and falling back with thunderous crashes in what is called “breaching,” one huge male passing beneath the boat right under my feet in the clear water. The Orcas move in family groups called “pods,” well known to the local marine biologists , and we had been lucky enough to come upon a joining of the K and L pods, an estimated 40 whales in all. I once saw eight of them out of the water at the same time, moving in a parallel line. We learned that if we saw a feeding frenzy ahead of us,

with hundreds of seabirds gathered in a big circle, it probably meant that a Minke whale would surface near them to get his share of the feast — and sure enough we saw that happen, too. What a day!

But if that was unforgettable, so in its own different way is another experience I mentioned about this same time last year. When it comes to relatively short drives, I know of nothing more spectacular than “Going to the Sun Highway” through Glacier National Park, or the incredible hundred miles on Canadian Highway 93 from Lake Louise to Jasper. But for long drives, more than 700 miles in all, nothing I have ever experienced in a car can touch the long, slow continental fall down through Montana and Wyoming on Highway 90. I know there must be some who find it boring, but I have driven it three or four times now and each time it is as intense a religious experience for me as being in church on a good Sunday. And there was an added touch last week. For the first time I had a compact disc player in the car, and as that magnificent country fell away all around me while the music of Mozart and Handel, Bach and Grieg, Dvorak and Tchaikovsky filled the air, I thought *If heaven is anything like this, I hope I make it, ocean or no ocean!*

But there is always a mocking little elf of rationalism perched in a far corner of my mind to remind me that such ecstasy may be rather self-centered and unrealistic. So in the midst of all that joy I remembered how circumstances affect our moods, and how some others were traveling Highway 90 that day in grinding poverty, wondering how to pay the rent or get the kids in decent school clothes. They were not in a quiet, airconditioned car marveling at the digital recording of great symphonic music. They were in no mood to contemplate the glory of the great rolling hills or see them as proof of God’s grace. So I had to wake up occasionally and remind

myself that if I had not been lucky in so many ways I might not have the luxury of those high and thoughts that may, if we are not careful, feed our ego instead of making us humble.

All of which leads me, finally, to the chapter in my friend's book which points out how thoughts about God may be very different, depending on where people live, and how easy or hard their lives are. A. C. Greene grew up in arid West Texas where only the lowly mesquite tree and prickly pear manage to survive without help. He and I first met one morning in a literature class at Abilene Christian College when I, sitting typically on a front seat, heard him respond to something the teacher said by growling in his unique way from the back row: "Well, we all know that sin is a relative thing." I thought, *A guy who can say that in a very conservative Christian college might be worth knowing*, so I found him after class to talk about that comment, and although he bristled at first, thinking he was about to be scolded by a preacher-boy, we soon became the best of friends and spent endless hours in late-night talks about literature and religion. Since he and his bright and lovely wife Judy were a significant part of our travels, I thought you might enjoy a few sentences from a chapter he calls "God in West Texas." Some of you who were brought up in the church of his childhood, and mine, will find special meaning in his words.

"West Texas is like the Biblical lands, a hot, dry desert country with low, blue hills along its horizons which are nothing but hot rocks when you reach them. Perhaps it is this kinship with the land of the Bible which causes it to hold to fundamentalist religions, to cling to dry, feverish beliefs which demand more of [people] than [they are] capable of offering even [to] God....[who] loves the strong, the shrewd, the sure just as

He despises the weak, the lukewarm, the uncertain.....God still comes down and watches what [people] do in West Texas. He goes to the plain, cream-brick churches on Sunday mornings for Sunday school and the sermon, but He is back for evening worship and Wednesday night prayer meeting. He wears suits from J. C. Penneys, if He wears a suit, making note of who is not faithful in attendance, who remains steadfast to The Doctrine, and who has faltered....What [life does] to [the people] they accept as His will or their sin. Sometimes it is the drought, the hail, the cyclone; sometimes it is the inability to go to school, or marry for love, or to work for themselves instead of a boss....God doesn't like for His people to pick and pry, to seek answers beyond the Sacred Page, to say aloud or in their hearts, 'I wonder....'" God chastises those who think they know too much, who taunt Him with their knowledge, who refuse to accept their lives as His will.

“Nothing can change that, for there the sun is, His eye, and it is so brassy it seems to be a mirror, following you with a blinding shaft no matter which way you turn. But there are things and thoughts which lie like the low, blue mesas on the horizon or high like the distant clouds, remote but pleasant: things which never are exposed because if you do not let yourself know they are there they can be kept hidden, and when God moves away to look a moment at some other place, when the searing sun is removed from the sky, as it is on a summer evening, and suddenly the moonlight rolls up from the earth, these soft, hidden things can be taken out and held tightly in the palms, the eyes denying their presence, the lips never speaking their names, but the heart feeling them lovingly. For a moment it is safe to love, under the lovely, soft shadow of the moon-time.”

A. C. describes the “massively ugly First Baptist churches in towns like Ranger, Breckenridge, and Sweetwater.....usually matched in size and ugliness,” he says, “by the First Methodist churches” and then he comes to his own church, which was mine too when we were kids in college. “Situated in new parts of town,” he says, “will be seen a newer, brisker kind of God’s house, stripped of all forms or ornateness, having not even a cross to top it, or stained glass windows showing Christ the Good Shepherd. This will be the Church of Christ, never called ‘First,’ like the Baptist, or ‘St. Paul’ or ‘Westminster’ like the Methodist, but only a *place* name such as Highland, North Side, College, or Riverside.....This is a severely fundamentalist and plain-worshipping church....It denies it is a denomination [like the others], [it] does not allow the use of choirs in its services, or instrumental music (except pitchpipes, used by the congregational song leader), and [it] holds itself....literally to the Holy Bible for practices and beliefs. [On their bumperstickers] NO BOOK BUT THE BIBLE; NO CREED BUT CHRIST .....” Some of us remember.

A hard land, West Texas, with a demanding God, rigid creeds and not much talk about love and compassion — talk that might after all suggest that religion is too soft and easy. A. C. Greene’s mother broke from that church one day over a matter of prayer. As he puts it: “She longed for an electric refrigerator and one day, at a women’s prayer meeting, she voiced this desire in her petition to God. After the meeting one of the leaders chided my mother for asking such a selfish thing....If my mother had *earned* an electric refrigerator by the way she lived, this woman pointed out, then God would already have anticipated her need and would have seen to it that virtue earned an icebox. It seems hardly necessary to note that the other woman, a good deal

wealthier than the Greenes, had long owned an electric refrigerator as well as other material blessings denied my mother. So, facing a bleak future if it had no miraculous God in it to answer personal prayers (for by then she could see that my earthly father would always be a well-liked rather than a well-paid man), my mother began attending what she considered a more understanding church. Some time in that latter period the family came into possession of a Frigidaire with the motor on top, and although my grandmother, my great-grandmother, and my Aunt Gerty remained faithful to the Church of Christ, my mother and father, pulling away when I was entering my teens, never returned.”

Things often fail to work out as one would wish, and A. C.’s mother and father did not live to see him become one a widely read author and frequent guest on the McNeill-Lehrer News Hour. He was a rebel in school, and I remember vividly the day of our graduation and how, as we were all leaving to go our separate ways in life, I noticed the car in which his mother and father sat waiting to pick him up. They knew about our friendship, and when I stepped over to tell them goodbye his mother— fearful that his fierce independence would keep him in trouble — told me through her tears that she was afraid he might never amount to much. I said I knew he would, and that someday she would be immensely proud of him. She and her husband died together, instantly, in an automobile accident and never knew the multitude of honors that came to their son.

Life is strange, both terrible and wondrous and quite unpredictable, and within a matter of days one moves from re-reading a dear old friend’s words about God in West Texas, to watching majestic whales roll and splash as if they knew some strange, wild joy in living, and on to a daylong symphonic descent through the

hills of Montana to this place, from which my heart never wandered very far, anyway. I will use this pulpit a little more conventionally next Sunday, but for now....it's good to be home.

Bless all who are still traveling homeward on this day, Eternal God, and bring them safely to those who wait in love for their return. Amen.