

"OTHER SHEEP"  
PSALM 23

April 25, 2010 - The Fourth Sunday of Easter  
University Church of Chicago  
Eugene H. Winkler, Pastor

I still remember what the preacher said at little Jimmy Beauchamp's funeral, what he said about why Jimmy drowned in that cave. He, the preacher, characterized himself as a "Calvinist," and at the time I didn't know what that meant. Now I know he knew about as much about John Calvin's theology as he knew about people.

At that funeral in that little clapboard church in Tallulah, Louisiana on that dripping, orange-colored summer day so long ago, that stupid excuse for a pastor said that God had planned Jimmy's death even before Jimmy was born. He was a skinny man in a black suit and thin black tie. He had huge ears that protruded from the side of his head like clapping bells and a huge Adam's apple that seemed to leap out of his throat. Sculpted cheekbones opened into caves out of which roared dark, brown eyes. "God," he said, "predestined James to die, because God wanted his life to be a harbinger of salvation for every lost sinner in Tallulah, Louisiana."

The preacher leafed through his Thompson Chain Reference Bible as if he knew all those verses by heart, all those pieces of Scripture taken out of context with which he wanted to overwhelm us, so that we would believe in the same kind of manipulative, punitive, uncaring God he believed in. I was fifteen years old and I didn't know much about church and the Bible, but I thought then--and I still think--that a God like the one that preacher depicted is not the God I know.

Over the years, I have learned that whenever somebody says, "The Bible says," somebody's going to get hurt. When you encounter one of those people who wants to prove that they're correct and you're not because they can lift a verse out of the Bible to prove what they already believed anyway, you had better duck. That kind of "fortune cookie theology" has done God and Jesus inestimable harm through the centuries, because it has helped create all those misguided people who give out these little bits of wisdom that are allegedly Biblical. It has also created people trying to base their lives on them. And it won't work.

When we pulled little Jimmy Beauchamp out that water in that pitch-black cave on that moss-covered night so long ago, I knew that it wasn't God's fault. God didn't plan Jimmy's death. He died because of our stupidity and bravado--and because Jimmy never had a chance in life. When we went into that cave, we didn't have a fear in the world. Or, at least Tom and Deacon and I didn't. We were so full of teenage, macho courage--not to mention craziness--that we had not a doubt in the world that we would conquer any demons that lurked in that cave and would emerge muddy but victorious on the other end.

Jimmy was fat, funny, and desperate to please Tom, Deacon and me. That's why we kept him with us. Every group, every family sooner or later chooses a scapegoat, somebody to blame, to make fun of, so that the others don't have to deal with their own insecurities. Jimmy was our foil. His daddy, like my daddy, was a drunk, but my daddy was higher up on the sociological ladder of Southern success, so his drinking was excused by the town gossips. If Jimmy had grown up, I suppose he would have had to fight very hard indeed to escape Tallulah, Louisiana. God knows the other three of us barely got out with our sanity. And not just because of the damned cave.

Some of the most dangerous people I know are those infected with nostalgia. Have you noticed that people who want things to be the way they used to be almost always become violent? Violent in the sense that they verbally beat up on others, or they manipulate and control people and circumstances in their effort to make things the way they used to be. The nostalgia mongers remember when everybody had a picket fence and the streets were safe and everybody knew their place (meaning women and Blacks and gays, among others). The people who live in the past want their church to be the way it used to be--although, like everything else in life, it is remembered through a kind of unrealistic mist.

One word the Bible does use over and over again is "Remember." And the church, when it's at its best uses the same word with beauty and alacrity. "Remember the God who led you out of bondage." "Remember the Sabbath Day." "Remember your father and mother..." "Do this in remembrance of me." "Remember your baptism and be thankful."

Memory is what both plagues me and gives my life meaning. But that's different from nostalgia. I don't want to go back to those days in Tallulah, but their memory has seared itself into my life and I live out of that terrible day when Jimmy died--and I always

will.

I think the problem most people have is that they are like the proverbial frog in the kettle. You know: if you drop a frog into a kettle of boiling water, the frog will immediately jump out. The water's heat is too much of a shock. But if you put a frog into a kettle of cold water and slowly increase the heat beneath it, the frog will sit there and boil to death. We're like that: we just sit there in the situation the way it's always been until we slowly die, until everything that once mattered to us has evaporated. And, too late, we wonder how it happened and what it all means.

I remember Jimmy's funeral, but the memory that I can never eradicate is the night he drowned. Tom Prewitt, my best friend and the preacher's kid, was the one who came up with the idea. He knew where the cave was, he knew that it supposedly flowed into the Mississippi River, and he knew how much I loved to explore caves. Tom and I had spelunked together many times, and it would have been a usual expedition if the two of us had gone alone.

But Deacon Lyons learned about it, and Deacon was crazy. We called him Deacon because he was the most irreverent person we had ever known. Tom's Dad was Pastor of First Methodist Church; a huge, imposing man with eyes like Bunsen burners, a man nobody defied or criticized or questioned. Nobody except Deacon--the most imperious, unflappable young man in the state. When Deacon learned about the cave, he insisted that the four of us go together. Somehow I knew it was a bad idea; a sense of dread, foreboding captured me, but I couldn't refuse Deacon and I felt pity for Jimmy. We were the only friends Jimmy had. Always a bit dirty and unkempt, the butt of most of the jokes in our school, Jimmy was our project. We had included him in our group of terrorists since sixth grade, and he reveled in the attention and acceptance. So, if Deacon went into the cave, Jimmy went, too.

It was mid-morning by the time we got into the cave itself. We followed a stream among the cliffs that hung over the river's bottom lands until it led into a small opening. After we had crawled in, we inflated a war surplus life raft Deacon had stolen from the Red Cross rescue unit. We ignited our carbide lamps, strapped them on our heads and started floating through the cave, into one magnificent room after another, each filled with stalagmites and stalagmites. We felt like primordial explorers as our raft meandered on the currents.

It was not long before I realized that this was going to be a much longer journey than Tom had described. After hours of wading, guiding the raft, going into deeper and deeper rooms of darkness, our carbide supply rapidly diminished. I began to implore the others to trust the darkness, to wait until we needed the lamps. But they wouldn't listen. My lack of insistence led us into total darkness. You don't know what it means to be completely without light until you get into the bowels of a cave and all the lights go out. The blackness envelops you. You lose all perspective, all sense of place. So, when our last ounce of carbide was exhausted, we had to cling to each other on the raft.

Until the raft hit a sharp rock and we heard the air begin to hiss out of it. It sank so rapidly in the total darkness that we had no way of knowing how to find something to cling to. I shouted for Tom and Deacon and Jimmy to stay close to me, to hold on but not to panic and pull anybody under the water. Just float. Just trust. I kept saying it over and over. We let the currents take us down into the deep darkness for a period of time that seemed like hours, but in truth we were able to see the first glimpse of light in about forty-five minutes. But by then we were so exhausted and wet and hungry that we had grown dizzy and frightened. We wondered if God ever answers prayers.

I shall never forget the moment Jimmy went under. We had just come to a bend in the river of the cave and could finally see full light. Just as we realized that it was the half-light of dusk and that we had better begin swimming toward the cave's exit, Jimmy's head disappeared. To this day, I don't know whether Deacon and Tom saw him or not, but I harbor the suspicion that they saw him and in their own quest for survival ignored him, that they hoped and prayed he would surface in a moment.

But he didn't. I shouted at the top of my lungs, but Jimmy couldn't hear. So, I dove beneath the water in what little light was available and began to flail out, trying to snag him. Again and again, I came to the surface, gasping for breath, then diving back into the murky waters. I don't know how many dives I made until finally I grabbed his arm in the darkness. But it was too late. By the time I got him to the top and pushed his body toward the light, he was gone. All breath was drowned by the waters. No amount of artificial respiration could save little Jimmy Beauchamp.

The funeral, as I say, was a disaster--at least for the three of us. We didn't believe the preacher's theology and by that time we

had answered the questions of the sheriff and our parents so many times that our answers had fashioned themselves into a story. The suffering that Jimmy's parents experienced was mirrored in our own perplexity and guilt and doubt.

I left Tallulah the day after I graduated from high school, and I have never been back. After college, after I came north, Tom and Deacon would call occasionally. But I haven't heard from them in years, and I haven't seen them since we recessed out of the high school auditorium on commencement night.

Poor little Jimmy. He was, like all of us, afraid of the dark. Afraid of the unknown. Afraid that he couldn't measure up to anybody else's expectations, much less God's. We sing "Amazing Grace," it's our favorite American hymn. But when we sing it, we really mean "amazing works." Because we don't really believe in free, unmerited grace. We believe that everything finally depends on us. The worst poem ever written is that one about God having no hands but our hands, no feet but our feet, to do God's work. If that's true, then the jig is up. Because unless there's something, some Power, some grace beyond what we're capable of, there is no hope.

Over all these decades I've learned that suffering is universal, that we're all afraid of the dark and that it is only God's light that can lead us home. If I had it to do all over again, I would have stood up in that little church that day and shouted to that so-called Calvinist preacher, "You're wrong! Dead wrong! God is light and God is good and God's grace is all that counts!"

No, if I had it to do over again, I would never have taken the trip into that cave in the first place. Regret, guilt, remorse are more than words--they are realities that haunt my every moment. It is only by grace that I can find any peace at all. Any peace at all.