



May 10, 2020

Grow into Salvation

The Reverend Dr. John A. Dalles

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; 1 Peter 2:2-10

Here is a Pittsburgh story, by author Guy Hogan.

Every weekend, Scott took the long bus ride to his childhood home in one of the suburbs of Pittsburgh to work on the front or back lawns, or on the hedges, or in the garden. On Saturdays, he brought out the portable radio and listened to the college football games as he worked. On Sundays, he would stop work to go inside and watch the Steelers on TV.

"Tell me about the Great Depression," Scott asked his mother. He and his mother were sitting at the kitchen table. She was dicing potatoes, already cooked and peeled and sliced, for potato salad.

"You know the story."

"Tell it to me again."

"I was a little girl. We were never cold or hungry. Your grandfather worked in a produce yard. And we kids would go down to the train tracks and pick up the coal that fell off the coal cars."

"Tell me about the war."

"Your father and I got married. We would see Hitler and Mussolini and Tojo on the news reels. Your father didn't have to go because he did defense work in the mill."

"And women couldn't buy stockings?"

"I couldn't afford to, but you could buy them on the black market. We would use makeup on our legs and draw a line down the back as a seam" †

Do you tell stories like that? Do you listen to stories like that? Do you find the time to hear memories, to evoke the past, to share authenticity with those who came before you? Do you provide yourself a link with the past, your past, and the large past that we call history?

Do you tell and listen to stories that make the past part of your present, and your future? Everyone likes a good story. Such stories are a way to define who you are, to help you grow into who God calls you to be. Not the "you" of your LinkedIn resume, fine as it is. But rather, the **real** you, the one who has deep feelings; who has a long memory; who has hopes and dreams — and who may sometimes feel that those hopes will not be fulfilled, that those dreams might never come to fruition.

If Scott were to define who he is, from what we know of the conversation with his mother in that Pittsburgh suburban kitchen, it might go something like this:

You are a Pittsburgher, a child of a child of the Depression, a son who cares about his parents — cares in ways that show: like spending the weekend doing chores around the house in which you grew up, even though you do not live there anymore. You are a person who grew up with family, and who listens to their stories because you want to.

† Guy Hogan, *Compressionism: The Pittsburgh Stories* (iUniverse, 2005), pp. 30-31.

That is what you might say about Scott. What would you say about yourself? If you are looking for a way to put those most important things in your life into perspective, then listen again to the ending passage of our Scripture lectionary reading for today:

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.”

You are **growing into salvation**. Ninety-five percent of us do not think about ourselves in that way. We know too much about ourselves. So we think of ourselves as too old or too tired, or too young or too busy. The Word of God invites you to think of yourself in a new way. The person you are is a person God made — into whom God breathed the breath of life. God knows you better than you know yourself. God’s desire for you is good. God wants to give you friendship, and God will do anything possible to make that happen. God will come to you, be with you — like a mom, sitting at the kitchen table. God likes to know all of the highs and lows of your personal life. God does that in the person of Jesus. In Jesus, God is always inviting you to be with Him, to follow Him on a faith pathway that He has built, into a today that has been crafted for truth, into a place that is the right setting for your skills and abilities.

God, in Jesus, has called you to this very moment. God has named you as part of a royal priesthood. God offers you a gift, to **grow into salvation**.

“Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

If you are looking for a sense of home, a sense of belonging, a sense that you are welcome, that you are significant in all the lasting ways that count, then find yourself at home in Jesus Christ — in the company of believers, in the house of the Lord. It is your home, your dwelling.

“Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people.”

What does it mean to be “a chosen people”? If we think of the entirety of salvation history, we see that God makes choices. God sets people apart for salvation and service. In the Old Testament, God selected the Jews, beginning with Abraham and Sarah, and down to the people who were prepared for receiving God’s promised Messiah. The Jewish people are our forebears. Their story is our story, just like Scott’s mother’s story was Scott’s story.

Sometimes God says: “You know the story.” And we reply, “Tell it again.” Tell us about the burning bush and the fiery furnace. Tell us of God’s love and care in challenging and unlikely situations. Tell us of the times when good triumphed over evil, and right prevailed over wrong.

These stories are like picking up those precious lumps of coal that fell from the coal car. These are the stories that keep us warm when it is cold. They inspire us because we are God’s chosen people. Once we were not a people, but now we are God’s people. We receive God’s grace and favor, God’s love and mercy.

We might think about how good it feels when we have been chosen for something — like getting homemade potato salad, made the way that only mom can make it. Multiply that exponentially, for how great it is when we are chosen to be part of God’s people.

“Tell me about the war,” Scott asked his mother.

She said: “... We would see Hitler and Mussolini and Tojo on the news reels. Your father didn’t have to go because he did defense work in the mill.”

A nation is drawn together when it has a clear and sure purpose. People are drawn together, who might not have known one another. And, when they are drawn together, they can do the defense work that needs to be done. How does 1 Peter put it? *“You are a holy nation.”*

The Greek word for “nation” (*ethnos*) is used here in the singular — a nation that is not many nations — but one nation, in Christ — drawn from all times and places, drawn together for one clear and sure purpose. A nation that will make do. A nation that will go without — like using makeup and painting lines down the back of one’s legs because stockings are out of reach. A nation that will value giving and self-sacrifice. A nation that will do what it takes. A nation that will stick with the task at hand. That is what sets Christians apart as God’s own possession.

We are distinct from those who do not see, do not understand, do not believe the truth about Jesus Christ. God has called us out of darkness (Colossians 1:12-14). God has brought us into the kingdom of light.

So, tell us about the Great Depression. And tell us about God's Great Salvation. Tell us about the war, and what it took to win it. Tell us about the war that Jesus waged for us, and how He won it. Tell us about the coronavirus pandemic. And tell us about the One who is the Great Physician. Tell us, so that we can make the story our own. Tell us that story. You know the story. Tell it again — so that we can tell it again. In Christ may it be so. Amen.