



PARABLES FROM THE FARM

REAL-LIFE EXPERIENCES GROWING UP IN SOUTHEAST MISSOURI

a devotional

Greg Weeks, Senior Pastor, Manchester UMC

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INTRODUCTION

Many years ago, I ran across a book of Fred Craddock’s stories.

Fred was a professor of preaching, and had a unique style. He wasn’t just a good storyteller, but a great parable teller. The difference is that a story is a self-contained entity, with a lesson spelled out. A parable is an open-ended story that allows the reader to come up with her/his own interpretation. That understanding may or may not have anything to do with what the writer intended, but that’s OK. A parable succeeds when it invites the reader to reflect critically.

I loved Fred’s writing, so I decided to try my hand at writing parables. The following pages contain twenty-eight of them. Before embarking upon this journey, though, there are four important things to note:

1. For a preacher, it’s not easy writing parables. Sometimes we underestimate our audience and feel we have to explain everything. I’ve tried my best to resist this urge. It’s my goal to leave it up to you to draw out your own meaning from what you’re about to read. I apologize in advance for the places where the preacher, instead of the parable teller, took over.
2. These parables are from real-life experiences of growing up in southeast Missouri. I can best “parable-ize” something that I encountered first-hand and have already pondered. I apologize if “I” appears too often. It’s simply the best source for these tales that “I” could come up with.
3. Please read these in order. If you skip around, there will be things I refer to that won’t make much sense.
4. You should read only one devotion per day. (That’s why there are twenty-eight of them, to get you through a month.) Linger with the story and the accompanying Scripture(s). What might be the link between the two? More importantly, what in your life resonates with what you’ve read? Maybe think of this as less a devotional and more a journal-writing exercise.

These were written as part of a renewal leave. I appreciate the congregation of Manchester UMC for their support in this endeavor. Also, I could not have taken those weeks away from church without our great staff taking on more tasks to cover for me. I am deeply grateful for their thoughtfulness.

Appreciation also goes to my wife, Barbara. Not only is she a great partner, but she has a keen editorial eye. In the midst of a busy summer herself, she took time to take out the red pen, to help sharpen and clarify things.

Finally, appreciation and dedication go to my father, James Clinton Weeks, 1904-1994. As you’ll see, many of these devotions feature him as a key character. Without his love, understanding, and (especially) patience, none of what you’re about to read would have been possible. Nor, ultimately, would I have survived.



Pastor Greg
Rev. Greg Weeks

WEEK ONE

#1 / Why Water Is Scary

The earliest memory of my mother is a frightening one.

It is a very hot day, and we are in a swimming pool. I am around three years old, and riding on her shoulders. She's taking me toward the deep end. The water comes up higher and higher, on my feet and legs. I start fidgeting and screaming. As I do so, some people laugh, because I must have appeared comical.

Looking back on that memory psychologically, it was an issue of having no control. Most toddlers demand to be in charge, right? They are tiny generals in training pants. Cute, to be sure, but still a bit bossy. They demand what they want, when they want it, delivered by whom they want. So, to be riding on someone's shoulders going someplace I didn't want to go...well, that was an affront to my toddler rights.

Also psychologically, it was a matter of trust. If you're going to be out of control, like boarding an airplane that will cruise at thirty-five thousand feet while averaging four hundred fifty miles per hour, you'd like to know the track record of the pilot. Three years with Mother didn't seem enough for her to earn her license to carry me to the deep end. So, I screamed.

This toddler trauma had repercussions later in life.

To this day, I don't swim. The wife and kids will romp in the waves while I read a book and smell like sunscreen. Also, it is perhaps why I became United Methodist, which believes in sprinkling you with a few drops instead of plunging you deep into the baptismal waters. (I'm not joking.)

Unfortunately, this earliest memory of Mother is my only one. She died just after I had turned four.

Perhaps had she lived, I would have asked her about this watery near-death experience. She would have said that she loved frolicking with her adorable (of course) toddler. She would have said that there was no way she would have intentionally scared me, nor would she have let anything happen to me. She would have said that the laughter I heard was from people around the pool simply having fun, and was not at my expense.

She did, though, leave me a wonderful gift.

In my teen years, Dad gave me a letter. Opening it, I read:

Dear Greg:

I hope you never read this but if you should I want to tell you how very much I love you and how I wanted and waited for you. I would have treasured every smile and cute saying. You were all I wanted in a son.

You probably won't remember too much about me as the years go by, but I want you to grow into a fine young man, be always mindful of God, and ask for his direction.

Remember mother loved you with all her heart, and will always be with you in spirit.

Love, Momma

Had I known this was the type of woman carrying me to the deep end, I wouldn't have cried.

SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 49:8-16



WEEK ONE

#2 / Rug Races

Compared to today's standards, kindergarten in the late 50's appears absolutely barbaric. State certifications? Inspections? Curriculum based on the latest childhood developmental theories?

Not exactly.

For example, I went to kindergarten in the basement of a Baptist church. Naptime consisted of us bringing small rugs from home and placing them, and ourselves, upon the concrete basement floor. This prompted a game us boys played that would never be allowed today.

For some reason, we decided it would be fun to see who could slide the farthest while putting down their rug.

It wasn't exactly a game you'd find on ESPN, if it had existed back then. It also wasn't a game the girls, separated safely from us, played. They simply put down their carpets and fell sweetly asleep, as girls do. Us guys, though, would not go so gently into that good nap. We had to compete and see who was the best.

I came up with a strategy that would win, hands down.

The ordinary way of rug-racing was simply kneeling, stretching out the rug in front of you, and sliding onto it. On concrete, and with the backing they put on carpets, the record distance attained was something like two inches.

The problem with this, according to laws of physics deduced by my five year old brain, was there wasn't enough speed to begin with. What if I got a running start then dove, like a flying Superman, head first onto the concrete floor?

It seemed good in theory. In practice, though, I discovered there really isn't that much cushion on a thin carpet. Actually, you don't feel much cushion at all when you lead with your face into concrete. Your head dribbles like a basketball.

I lay face down, pretending to nap, and feeling immensely dumb (not to mention feeling a lot of pain, too). I didn't let on to anyone that I had, in an effort to win the rug race, learned a lesson of competition and pride gone wild.

As luck would have it, our activity after napping that day was decorating paper bags, cutting out holes for eyes, and putting them over our heads. Not exactly high art, but on this day it served its purpose. It covered the fact that the right side of my face was swelling and turning different shades of purple.

Dad picked me up. Dad took me to the store. Dad took the bag off my head. Dad almost fainted.

An x-ray revealed no fracture. To this day, though, there's a slight knot on the right side of my forehead. It's a mark of what happens when you do try to win at all costs, even in kindergarten.

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 11:1-9

WEEK ONE

#3 / How Your Life Can Accidentally Change Forever

From the first devotion, you may have deduced I never said, “Hey, let’s go to the swimming pool and jump into the deep end!”

From the last devotion, you will have remembered that my early church experience was rooted in the Southern Baptist tradition.

Mix a water phobia with a denomination that believes that dunking you in a mini-swimming pool is a way to meet Jesus, and it’s only a matter of time.

That time came at eight years of age. That’s when we were expected to profess Jesus as savior. Such a profession was the easy part. The hard part was dressing up in a thin white robe and letting some man lower you, in front of the entire congregation, down into that pool.

No way. Besides, I was afraid my underwear would show. (Again, this isn’t a joke.)

It just so happened that Dad had remarried by now. My step-mom was a member in good standing at the First Methodist Church. We had split time between the two churches, and I had seen enough sprinklings in the Methodist fold to know that they had it right. Profess Jesus, then have a few drops placed atop your head, was much more in keeping with what it meant to be a Christian.

When the pressure grew too great, and it was expected of me to join my band of brothers and sisters in the baptismal pool, I bolted to Methodism.

Dad called up George Poe, the Methodist preacher, on a Saturday night and asked if he’d baptize me the next day. He agreed. When it was time in the service to go forward, Dad went with me. I solemnly affirmed those vows of faith, knelt, and felt the drops.

Upon returning to the pew with Dad, I said, “Daddy, that was fun. Can we do it again next Sunday?”

Maybe I didn’t fully grasp the meaning of baptism. I was spot on, though, about the effectiveness of sprinkling.

Interesting, isn’t it, how one incident can change your life and determine your future. I would not have joined the Methodist church had I not feared water and Dad hadn’t remarried a Methodist. That ultimately determined my vocational calling, directed my college and graduate studies, let me meet great people from a vast variety of backgrounds and life experiences, and gave me an opportunity to meet my wife and have two wonderful kids. And ultimately, you wouldn’t be reading these words, because I wouldn’t be here in the capacity you know me.

We may think we are in control of our lives and determine our destiny. Could it be that really our lives are shaped by random, seemingly inconsequential, events? Could it be that life really consists of how we react to those things that happen to us?

And could it be that, ultimately, those random events that shape us aren’t really random at all?

SCRIPTURE: Jeremiah 29:5-14



WEEK ONE

#4 / A Painful Alternate Reality

Kids are most open, and vulnerable, to media that blur the distinction between fantasy and reality. Whenever kids see something portrayed on a small or big screen, there seems to be a natural suspension of disbelief.

Just about the age of my baptism was my first experience of this.

My older sister and her friends went to see the movie, Psycho. For some unknown reason, they took me, all of eight years old, with them. Big mistake. There's that famous shower scene where the woman is knifed to death. You see blood running down the drain. Since this was shot in black and white, it was actually chocolate syrup running down the drain. But to me it looked like blood, and that was enough.

Combined with that fear of water, it would be years before I took another shower. It was tub baths from then on, and only after I made sure the bathroom door was locked and deadbolted, with a chair propped up against it for good measure.

About this same time, spy shows were becoming popular. They fascinated me, and I fantasized about doing what spies did. The most interesting thing of all was when a spy crept up behind another person and delivered a karate chop to the back of the head. The stricken person would simply fall asleep. Amazing!

So, I decided to try this on Dad.

One night he was sitting on the sofa, relaxing after a day at the store, and watching TV.

Good. He'd never suspect what was about to happen.

He wore size eleven shoes.

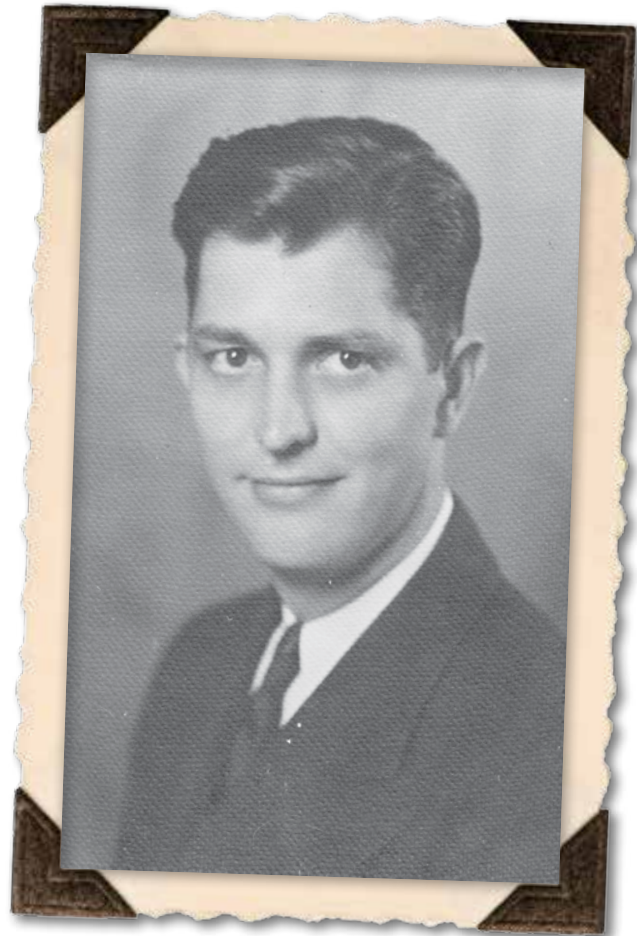
Good. One of those would be a perfect tool for this experiment.

I tip-toed behind him, a size eleven in hand. I reared back and, with all the might that I could muster, WHAP! I slammed the sole of that shoe into the back of Dad's head.

I learned several new words that night.

I also learned that you can't really believe everything you see on TV or in the movies. Maybe, to broaden it a bit, you can't believe everything you see, period.

SCRIPTURE: 1 John 4:1-6



WEEK ONE

#5 / A Matter of Perspective

Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History is an amazing place. One of its most interesting exhibits is a depiction of the floor of a forest from an insect's perspective. Things that are small to us are huge and terrifying (if that's in a bug's emotional bag) to a beetle or ant.

For a child, everything is big as well.

The front yard of our house had a sloping hill. The boys and me, if we survived nap time at kindergarten, would roll down the hill. The soft and aromatic green grass was our playground. It seemed that we would roll forever. Then we'd laugh, run up the hill, and do it all again. By the time it was over, like human lint rollers, we'd accumulated an assortment of lawn debris on our skin and clothes. This activity was a joy to our mothers.

When we were old enough to walk to nearby Bacon Park, we'd spend summer afternoons playing a version of baseball called "Indian" ball (at least we didn't call it "Redskins" ball). The field we played on seemed as big to us as Busch Stadium. Only if you really got into it could you hit a ball into the left field ditch, which we designated as a home run.

In fall and winter the sport would turn to sandlot football. Actually, the sandlot was the front lawn of Ken Swain's home. We'd crash into each other as hard as we could. Remarkably, without wearing protection, we only sustained minor cuts, bruises, and sprains. If there had been broken bones, we didn't know about them. When a kid would occasionally break through the defensive line, he could run for what seemed forever, with all the defenders running after him, forever as well.

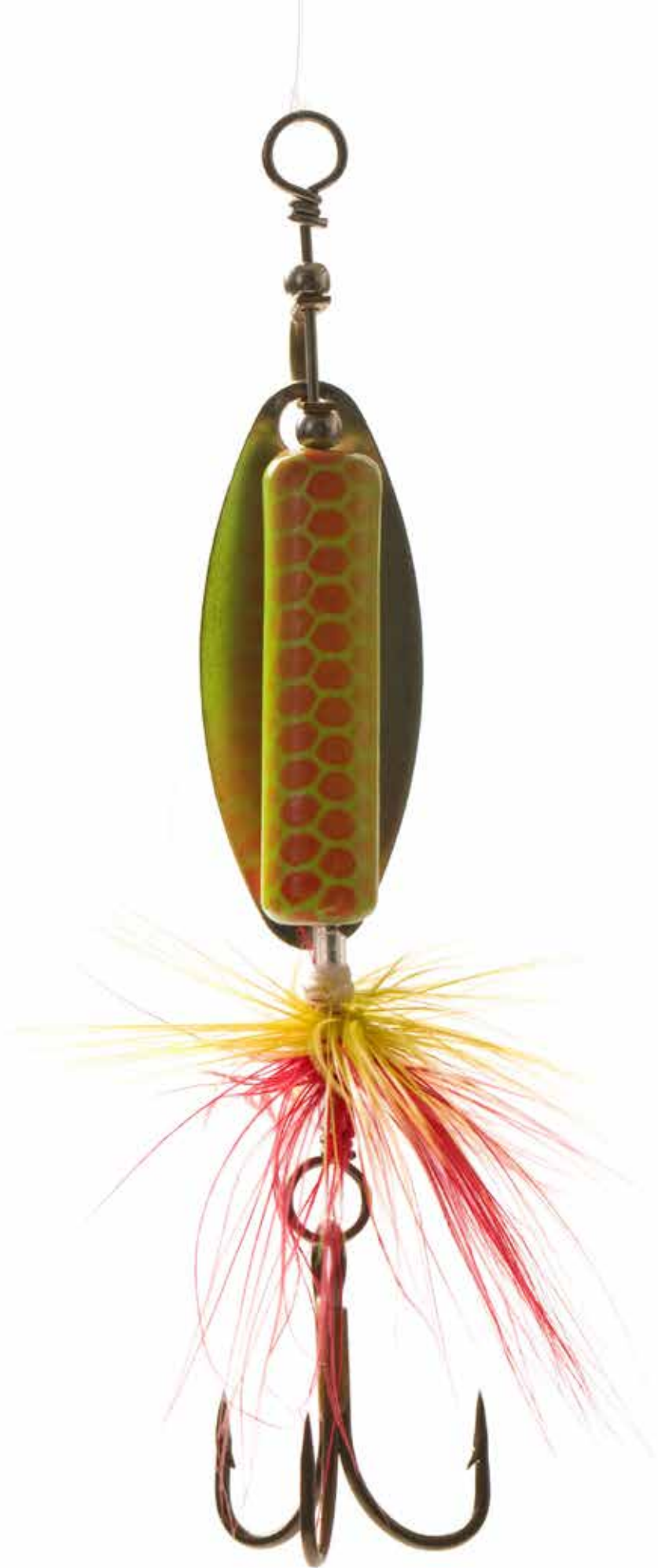
On return trips to Poplar Bluff as an adult, I would occasionally visit these childhood haunts. The front yard of my home wasn't nearly as long as I'd remembered it. The Bacon Park field could probably stretch just past the infield of Busch. Kenny's front lawn couldn't have been more than thirty yards long.

For us kids, though, we knew what we saw. The world was huge, and that was our reality.

But what is real, really?

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 8. 1 Corinthians 13:8-13





WEEK ONE

#6 / High Tech Fishing

I was around ten when we moved to a one hundred-twenty acre farm a few miles from town.

It was mostly in rolling hills, but had some acreage in fields and pastures.

It also had a “stock pond,” about a mile from our house. It was for cattle, but also for a boy. That’s because it had some big fish in it.

As I was introduced to the joys of fishing, I had to have the best equipment and bait. That’s the equivalent of today’s technology lust. If you hear something has the latest technology, there’s a natural urge to get it and be cutting edge. This just seems to be the human condition.

Where to find the latest fishing gear in town? Right off Vine street, at a store called Otasco. It stood for “Oklahoma Tire and Supply Company.” Upon entering, you’d smell all that tire fragrance, which was really neat. Somehow you felt more like a man in such an aromatic place.

But Otasco also carried fishing equipment, which is why I went in. And one day, scouting the artificial lures, I found it. It was a crank bait about three inches long. Based on the latest scientific research, it had a huge spinner, fluffy feathers, and the assurance that this had been proven to catch bass. It would be irresistible to them, sort of like fish cocaine.

It was also irresistible to me. I had to have it. It cost the outrageous sum of \$3.50, but I got a loan from Dad for this fish-drug lure.

I walked to the fishing hole the next morning brimming with excitement about using this secret weapon. The bass would be helpless, probably standing (swimming) in line to hook themselves. My stringer would be full of lunkers.

I tied the marvel bait onto my line with great anticipation. I got ready to cast this mother of all lures. I depressed the button on the Zebco 33 reel, then made the perfect toss.

It was at that precise moment I discovered my mistake.

This advanced lure was heavy, too heavy for the line I was using. I was so caught up in the plug’s bells and whistles that I forgot to use common sense. No sooner was the bait in mid-air than the line broke. I saw \$3.50 sail over the water, over the bank, and into the woods.

A \$5 modern wonder that never touched the water, nor was ever found. After a futile search, I looked at the other lures in my tackle box, and thought: “Maybe I should just go and dig up some worms.”

SCRIPTURE: 1 Samuel 8:4-9, 19-22

WEEK ONE

#7 / The Five Pound Bass

One of the absolutely infuriating things about golf is that you can work on your game by studying, taking lessons, and practicing. Then, when you tee off, your drive follows a trajectory that defies the laws of physics.

Unfortunately, the same was true about my fishing prowess, or lack thereof.

I fished that stock pond repeatedly, and failed. Losing the expensive lure was a sign of things to come. Despite my efforts, the humongous fish eluded me. All the tips I got from Outdoor Life magazine, all the hints from the arm-chair fishermen in Otasco, all the fancy baits I bought, did no good. My casts might have been straighter than my golf shots, but the result was the same.

Frustration.

Sometimes, Dad would invite people to come out and fish. One of these guys was Al Looper. I accompanied Al in his expedition to the pond, serving as guide.

He rigged up a minnow with a sinker and a float. I directed him to cast it near a big bush that was growing out of the water. I knew that looked like the best spot, even though I'd fished it repeatedly and had come up empty.

He cast it by the bush.

The float went down like an anchor.

He'd hooked a monster.

"&#@!" I thought.

The beast took the line every which way, but couldn't escape. Al played him well, tired him out. It was a five pound bass.

Then, inexplicably, he did something no experienced fisherman should do.

He lifted the fish out of the water by the line.

You're supposed to extract the fish with a net, or reach down into its mouth and clamp on its lower jaw. If you lift it up by the line, the line could break.

Which it did.

Have you ever seen a horrible accident of some sort? Things play out in slow motion. That's the way the scene unfolded before me.

As the prized catch flicked its head breaking the line, and as it started plummeting back into the water, I instinctively reacted. Like a wide receiver lunging for a football, I dove after the bassy-beast. Just before it hit the water, I did. I caught it with both arms, cradling it securely, as I sank.

I had caught a monster fish...the hard way.

Al might have taken the lunker home, showed it off, then had it for supper.

He wouldn't have been able to have done it without me, though.

It's good to have a partner.

SCRIPTURE: 1 Corinthians 12:14-26





WEEK TWO

#8 / Floating

The stock pond wasn't the only body of water on our land. Just before we moved, Dad had a small lake created down the hill from our house. A guy bull-dozed some trees in the valley and built an earthen dam. Once the lake filled, Dad stocked it with bass, bluegill, and channel cat. For ambiance, he even imported some bull frogs.

This would be a playground for years to come.

We kept a johnboat, a flat, square-ended boat, turned upside down on the lakeshore. Sometimes I'd go down to the lake and carefully turn it over. Usually a bullfrog, irate at being disturbed, would grunt angrily and jump into the water. Sometimes a snake would slither out. Hence the word, "carefully."

Pushing the boat into its preferred medium, you'd hear a cacophony of scraping sounds made by the rocks underneath. Amidst this noise, at just the right time, I would push off from the bank. Suddenly, all the scraping stopped. All the friction between earth and metal disappeared.

You were floating—effortlessly, quietly, gently.

Sometimes I'd stretch out between the two seats in the boat and look up into the sky, sorting out shapes in the clouds.

If fishing were in order, I'd quietly stroke the water with the paddle and watch tiny whirlpools swirl away in the process.

If it were afternoon, I would close my eyes and feel the warmth of the sun as the boat drifted.

If it were near evening, I'd gaze at the water. The lake's surface was still that time of day, and mirrored perfectly the darkening swatches of pink and crimson in the sky. The air grew cooler, enticing whippoorwills to begin their evening hunt for moths and mosquitoes.

The ancient Celts coined a curious phrase: "thin place." It refers to a sacred spot where the distance between the physical and the spiritual, the distance between the sacred and us, has grown very fine.

Floating on the lake was my thin spot. Any teenage angst I was experiencing seemed to simply drift away, like those tiny whirlpools in the water.

Today I drove Manchester Road at rush hour. The noise and the frantic pace were oppressive.

It would sure be nice to be back on that lake.

Is there a thin place around here?

SCRIPTURE: Mark 6:30-52

WEEK TWO

#9 / The Big Freeze

The playground behind our house, in the winter time, took on a special character.

After a few days of a near-zero weather, the lake would freeze over. I'd get bundled up and, with tennis shoes on, tentatively step onto the hard surface. It was such an odd feeling stepping onto something like that. You knew that under you was icy water, about ten to fifteen feet at the deepest. But here you were, walking on the same water you'd boated and fished upon a few weeks before.

Once you got used to imitating Jesus in this manner, you began to cut loose. Your walking turned into running, then sliding and laughing.

Occasionally, I'd hear the ice starting to creak and moan. That wasn't scary, though. I would just avoid that area. I was having too much fun to be bothered by creaks or moans at one end of the playground.

Finally, at sunset, cold and exhausted, I'd make my way back up the hill. The warmth of the house embraced me. Mom had ready a cup of REAL hot chocolate: thick, rich, warm, and sweet.

What a wonderful experience.

And if I had the opportunity to do this again now that I'm older...there's not a ghost of a chance I'd do it.

I've grown more sensible, cautious, and responsible. In the ice rink of life, I've slid to the thin end of the ice, and have fallen through. It's an awful feeling. It makes you scared, timid. Maybe growing older is synonymous with growing more fearful, more concerned about the risk instead of the reward. Maybe growing older is synonymous with replacing the child-like ability to play and laugh with the adult-like propensity to work and worry.

If someone invited me out on a frozen pond, I'd respectfully decline.

And if my two kids wanted to venture out and slip/slide on creaking ice, do you think I'd let them? Of course not. Thinking of all the bad things that could happen, I would ground them indoors and tell them to read a book.

But my folks were caring and anxious parents, too. So why did they let me out there? Was my Dad trying to get even for me whacking him with a shoe?

I think they knew it was important for a kid to play. And it was important for them to keep their eyes glued on me from the kitchen window, ready to run out there if anything happened.

Maybe I sensed this.

Maybe that's why I could jump and slide and laugh, worry-free.

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 139:1-18





WEEK TWO

#10 / Throwing Out the Small Ones

For the first few years, this lake was fishing Mecca. The fish grew large and, since they weren't educated as to fishermen's ways, they were fairly easy to catch.

The easiest fish to catch, because they are the most mentally-challenged, were the bluegill. These are beautiful fish (Google "YouTube bluegill fishing"). When healthy and large, they are a deep blue-black color with a splash of orange underneath. They are also good eating when deep-fried and served with slaw, baked beans, and hushpuppies.

Based on a tip from Outdoor Life, I bought a salty jar of Uncle Josh's pork rind bait. Cutting a rind into a one-inch piece, sticking a small hook through it, and casting it into the lake's cove: for the bluegill population, this was the equivalent of the sound of an ice cream truck musically entering a subdivision of preschoolers.

Catching "slabbers," as big panfish are called, was easy. You could have a stringer full within a half-hour.

Occasionally, though, you'd hook a smaller bluegill. I knew what you were supposed to do when you caught those. Throw them onto the bank and let them die. If you didn't do that, the theory went, you would "stunt" the fish population. That meant that, since bluegill reproduce prolifically, there would be so many fish that natural food sources couldn't handle them. None would grow big if there were a food shortage.

Yes, throw out the small ones. But, looking at how cute the little ones were, I couldn't talk myself into doing that. I'd release them back into the water. Wasn't that more humane than letting them suffocate and become raccoon food?

I continued fishing the cove. The next year, there weren't quite as many slabbers. The following year, I don't remember catching any.

I sure did catch lots and lots of little ones, though.

By then it was too late.

SCRIPTURE: John 15:1-17

WEEK TWO

#11 / Weeds

Underbrush and weeds grew in abundance around our house and down the hill towards the lake. It was my duty to take a sickle-type implement, a pole that had a blade attached at the end, and swing it side to side. This mowed down the offensive vegetation until it grew back the next week (it seemed).

It wasn't fun work. It was time-consuming, tedious, and made you a target for ticks and jiggers. So, I approached this work with the same aversion a kid has towards Brussels sprouts.

One evening over supper, Dad said, "Greggie, I planted some silver poplars along the driveway. When you're cutting down weeds, be sure to look out for them. I want them to grow and be a nice entranceway for us."

This is roughly what he said.

As a fifteen year old, this is what I heard: "Greggie..."

A short time later I'm doing my duty with the sickle, hoping the pain of work would end. As I approached the driveway, I noticed a funny looking weed. Then I spotted several of them, growing in a straight line on either side of the road.

"Why, that's funny," I noted dully to myself. And with that, I whacked them all to the ground.

Time passed.

Dad came home.

He called out, "Greggie?"

"Yes?"

"Did you cut down the silver poplars I had planted along the driveway?"

"Silver poplars? No. I cut down some weird looking weeds around there, but not any silver poplars." (I had no idea what a silver poplar looked like, but denial is the first line of defense.)

He just stared at me. Perhaps he was combining this episode with the time I womped him with a shoe, and thus questioning the wisdom of electing to have another child.

After holding that gaze for a few seconds, he just turned and walked away. Obviously there were a few words he wanted to say, but he didn't. Obviously there was some punishment he wanted to dole out, but he didn't. He just turned and walked away.

This is called grace.

It was a lesson I learned that day, along with another one:

When you're in the business of weed whacking, you're bound to make mistakes.

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 13:24-30





WEEK TWO

#12 / The Cow in the Trough

Another delightful farm chore was feeding our small herd of white-faced cattle.

In the winter time this meant getting up at five in the morning, hooking up a trailer to the tractor, and hauling a bale of hay to them, about a mile away. The image, and smell, of the steel-blue smoke chugging out of the tractor will remain with me as a symbol of utter coldness.

In the summer, without school, I could sleep in a little before doing this chore. Sometimes, since the cattle could graze, I would just dump grain in a feeding trough for them.

One morning an unusual scene greeted me. As the cattle anticipated their feeding and milled around the barnyard, a cow had been bumped into one of the troughs. She was flat on her back, with legs sticking straight up in the air.

I thought, “Hmm, that’s interesting.” Then I proceeded to put feed in the other trough, got back on the tractor, and went home.

That evening, around supper, Dad asked me how the day went. I told him about how unusual it was to find a cow, on her back, legs up, in a trough. He asked, “Well, they do that from time to time. How did you get her out?”

“Get her out?”

“Yeah, did you knock off one of the sides of the trough?”

“Get her out?”

He looked at me.

“You mean you left her there?”

“Well, yeah, didn’t know what else to do.”

He continued looking at me.

“Greggie, she could die! She might be dead already!”

With that, he got up quickly from his unfinished supper and hurried out the door, hoping it wasn’t too late to save her.

I’ve often wondered why I didn’t rescue the cow in the trough when I saw her plight.

Maybe I thought she could get up and out on her own, perhaps learning a lesson from the ordeal.

Maybe I didn’t think I could do anything to help her.

The most likely reason, though, was that I simply didn’t think about it. I just wanted to get the chore over with so I could get on with whatever I’d dreamed up for the day.

In other words, I didn’t have the time to be bothered by a dumb cow that had gotten herself into such a predicament.

Good thing there are dads.

SCRIPTURE: Luke 10:25-37

WEEK TWO

#13 / Corn and Skunks

As long as we're compiling a list of enjoyable farm-chores, allow me to describe the most detestable one of all.

Topping corn.

This delightful experience entailed taking a long, machete-like knife, walking down a row of corn, and cutting off the stalk just above the ear. You would then take the tops, bundle and tie them together, and store them in the barn. They would dry out and become food, "fodder," for the cattle during the winter.

There are many things wrong with this scenario.

One, there was an unwritten rule that this work could only be performed mid-day, when both temperature and humidity were at the one-hundred degree/percent mark.

Two, at the end of the day, after bundling those tops together, you'd break out in a rash around your neck, itching even after a long shower. I have no idea why this happened. Maybe it was some weird defense mechanism the corn had. Maybe it was related to the corn silk (the stuff that's at the top of an ear of corn). Maybe it was just my delicate constitution. Regardless, there was no defense against it.

Three, there were the wildcards you couldn't anticipate, such as when a skunk paid a visit. It had run through the middle of the field, evidently being chased by dogs. Its scent effectively bi-sected the area. So, in the tropical jungle-like conditions, this stench greeted you midway through every row, all morning long.

The above description, at least for most teenagers I know, would sound torturous. That's for good reason. It was.

Perhaps a case could be made that such hard labor was punishment for the shoe incident. However, in retrospect, retribution wasn't behind this persecution. The work had to be done, and Dad asked me to do it. I did it without complaint.

Why? Any adolescent worth the label should have resisted.

I wasn't virtuous by any stretch, but there was one thing that prompted me to withstand the heat, mosquitoes, flies, skunks, etc., without much complaint. I began sensing, as I grew older, the sacrifice Dad went through to provide for us.

After Mother died, he had to manage a store by himself for a few years, while at the same time raising two young children. It was terrible stress, and he cracked from time to time. Somehow, though, he pulled through, doing the tough things he had to do. Because of that, we could live what I felt was a privileged life.

My topping corn without complaint was an expression of gratitude to him.

It helped me cope with the pain.

Just a little bit, though.

SCRIPTURE: Luke 17:7-10





WEEK TWO

#14 / Nothing Personal About Blue Jays

In addition to whacking weeds, taking care of cattle, and topping corn, there was yet another chore that fell upon my duties list. This was a lot more fun.

It was shooting blue jays.

That may sound strange, but it was for a purpose. These birds had a taste for our corn, which we fed our cattle. They perched atop a stalk and masterfully stripped an ear of its kernels.

This was a source of irritation for Dad. Hence, he supplied me with ample .410 shotgun shells, which I used to dispatch this aviary species.

I don't understand why, as a twelve year old boy, I liked this task. Was it some developmental need of an adolescent male to assert his power and authority? Did it feed some need to be violent? Was it the game of drawing down on the target, enjoying the bang, and feeling proud of your skill?

Or, was it some genetic twist that ordained this? My wife and I had tried, like most parents, to keep our son "gun free" from the very beginning. We monitored the cartoons he watched. We were careful with the toys we purchased. And we watched him, at the age of three, run after his playmates pointing his finger and going, "Bang!"

Regardless of the reason, though: for your father to bless your shooting, and to supply you with shells, was a pretty good gig.

In going about this task, I occasionally felt some twinges of conscience. I knew deep down these were living creatures. I was causing them pain and death. I rationalized things. I thought of the "justness" of my cause. I thought of what Dad told me, that blue jays were "mean" birds. I tried to think of things like that, and not the fact that some of the birds I killed were mother birds, and their little ones would now starve.

If you tell yourself what you want to hear, you can justify just about anything.

My eyes started changing about this time. The blue jays didn't seem so sharp and defined as they used to. I'd be wearing glasses before too long.

One day, patrolling the cornfields, I heard that distinctive blue jay call. I saw a bird atop one of the corn stalks. I slowly turned, aimed, and fired. Bullseye.

I went up to the fallen bird. It wasn't a blue jay. Instead, it was a mockingbird, a beautiful bird that graced the world with music. I couldn't come up with a good excuse for what I'd done. I felt horrible.

That's what happens sometimes. You get into the habit of being the right arm of God, executing righteous judgment, and you might fire at the wrong target.

SCRIPTURE: John 8:2-11

WEEK THREE

#15 / Fences

We like fences. They define our turf and our identity. They promote our sense of fairness and justice.

A three-rowed strand of barbed wired fence encased most of our property. At regular distances along this line, we posted yellow signs with black letters that read, “NO TRESPASSING.” I don’t recall if we ever hung another variation of this which read, “KEEP OUT.”

Regardless of the wording, the intent was the same. What’s inside this fence is ours, not yours. Stay away. We don’t want you. Call if you want to fish or hunt, and we’ll see.

Within the confines of our property roamed several elusive deer. Only occasionally would you spot them. We knew they existed because of their tracks around the stock pond.

A burning passion of mine as a teenager was to bag one of them. Today, I could no more draw down on one of these white-tails than I could a blue jay. But back then, nailing a big buck was the reflection that I was a bigger buck.

One hot Ozark summer, I built a deer stand that overlooked the pond with the hoof prints. This entailed nailing steps about fifteen feet up the side of a tree. It was followed by hauling up planks of lumber by rope, and making a nice platform upon which to sit. Couldn’t wait for the beginning of the season.

Finally, opening day arrived. Tossing and turning with anticipation, I finally got up around four. Taking the necessary extras, such as Jon-E handwarmers and beef jerky, I headed off.

I sat there, shivering in the dark on the cold boards of that stand, waiting. (Although I had worn a thick coat, I had forgotten to put any insulation between me and the cold lumber I was sitting upon. We learn from experience.)

I’d been waiting a while when, far off in the distance, I saw a light. It was moving in my direction, getting bigger. At one point it moved up, then down. Someone was carrying a flashlight, had climbed over our fence, and was heading toward my deer stand.

He was almost under my tree. Not knowing what else to do, I called down, “Hello.”

The light darted all over the place, as if he’d heard the voice of God, albeit a fourteen year old voice.

“Up here,” I said. Then he shone the light briefly in my face, and turned it away.

We had a conversation. He said how I’d picked a prime spot to get one. He wished me good luck, and left. The light went away, slowly disappearing into the distance.

It was sort of frightening, this trespasser coming right up to my deer stand. And then it made me a little angry. After all, I was the one who put in the work, and I should be the one getting the rewards. And who did he think he was, to come onto our property?

However...he did seem like a nice guy.

SCRIPTURE: Colossians 3:5-17





WEEK ONE

#16 / The Missouri Cobra

It was a hot Sunday afternoon in July. I remember the day and time because that’s what you do when you have a near-death experience.

I was mindlessly whacking the weeds. Being the era before iPods, MP3’s, and even Walkmans, I was humming to myself while swinging the sickle and dispatching underbrush. Suddenly, without any warning, a dark red and blue banded snake rose up in front of me. It flattened and spread out its throat, looking like a cobra, and made a loud hissing sound.

My humming stopped.

I screamed, tossed the sickle into the air, and set a land speed record running for home. Making the back porch in a blink, and with heart thumping in my throat, I did what I always did when I was scared. “DAD! DAD!”

Dad seemed to know everything about living in the country. He had grown up in the backwoods of Mississippi at the turn of the last century, and was at home in nature.

He hurried out at my alarm. I told him what’d happened, and then he relaxed.

“Oh, Greggie, that’s just a puff adder. Show me where it’s at.”

So, bravely, I gingerly crept back to the spot.

We found the hole it’d crawled into; you could see the end of its tail.

Dad grabbed hold and pulled it out. The snake reared up, spreading its head and hissing. With one swing of the sickle, Dad made sure that was the last time it ever did that.

It turns out that this terrifying looking creature is also known as a hognose snake. This species has an interesting way of defending itself. It will rise up and look threatening. It might even strike, but will do so with its mouth closed. If its enemy doesn’t run away screaming for Dad, it will turn belly up, open its mouth, and pretend to be dead. Google “YouTube hognose snake” and check the videos.

Maybe it’s a natural thing for creatures that are basically harmless to make themselves appear mean and dangerous. In reality, they’re just trying to protect themselves from harm.

Maybe other species do the same thing. If we knew that, we probably wouldn’t be so fast to dispatch them with a sickle.

SCRIPTURE: Luke 8:26-39

WEEK THREE

#17 / More Snakes

One of the most beautiful scenes on the farm was dawn breaking over the stock pond. It was nestled in woods. Just after dawn, mist would linger over water that reflected a brightening sky. Songs of birds greeting the day replaced the chirps and chatter of the night creatures. Occasionally, a raccoon would amble up a tree to rest from its travels.

One summer morning, I'd been fishing at that Norman Rockwell ("YouTube Norman Rockwell") scene. Time to go back. I had to cross a three-row barbed wire fence to do so. I put one foot on the lower strand, crossed my other leg over, and was just about to land on the other side when, with foot in mid-air, I saw a snake. It was in the very place I was going to step, and was curled up, ready to strike. The serpent was probably a harmless black snake. In my mind, though, it was a five-foot long water moccasin, with glowing red coals for eyes.

The tackle box went one way, the fishing pole another. Don't believe it when they say there's nothing faster than the speed of light. At the precise moment I saw that snake, I didn't even blink before I was on the other side of the pond, panting and sweating. So pumped with adrenaline, I don't remember how I got there.

Some time later, in late afternoon, I was fishing another picturesque scene, on Wappapello, a big lake in southeast Missouri. I had motored to the entrance of a quiet cove. Lined with stately trees, some of the branches reached over the water, which was a sign of a good fishing hole.

I reached into a big bush growing out of the water and tied up the boat. After a few minutes, another boat trolled by with a couple of guys in it. As fishermen do, we started chatting. We talked about the latest geo-political situation, then exchanged views on the laws of quantum mechanics in theoretical physics. Finally, one of the guys said casually, "You must be pretty brave."

"What do you mean?"

"Where you're fishing?"

"Where I'm fishing?"

"Yeah. You tied your boat up to cottonmouth point. That bush is where their den is."

And I thought to myself, "That's just great." Cottonmouth is another name for a water moccasin. No matter what you called it, it was a pit viper with fangs.

I became a surgeon that day, untying the boat.

Isn't it interesting?

For every beautiful sunrise, there's a water moccasin coiled up.

For every beautiful sunset, there's a cottonmouth point.

SCRIPTURE: Ecclesiastes 9:7-12





WEEK ONE

#18 / Japanese Destroyers

Mom and Dad were busy tending the store in town, and my older sister had married and moved away. So, I spent summers alone on the farm, which was great.

After finishing chores, I had the whole day to play. That meant: hunting and fishing; swinging on grapevines; blowing up ant mounds; throwing a super ball against the house and catching it; catching grasshoppers and throwing them into the lake, waiting for bluegill to snag them; and biking.

Food was important to sustain such a busy schedule. My lunchtime menu, which never varied, consisted of two boiled hotdogs, potato chips, and a package of Suzy Q's, all washed down with a Coke. This was fare impossible to grow tired of. It was consumed in front of a black and white TV while watching early variations of Let's Make a Deal, Jeopardy, the Match Game, and Hollywood Squares.

Then came the early afternoon ritual.

World War Two had ended only about twenty years before. Hollywood was still cranking out movies commemorating it. The bravery of the Allies confronting the evil of the Axis was played out in movies that were sure-fire moneymakers.

I engaged this WW2 saga down by the lake. I'd throw a stick as far as I could onto the water, and pretend it was a hated Japanese destroyer. Then, taking rocks, I'd throw them high into the air, imagining they were bombs. They'd land around the ship, while it was desperately trying to shoot down my B-25 Mitchell. Finally, after many bombs, I'd score a direct hit. Billowing black smoke floated upward as the frantic Japanese, those who survived the blast, shouted and cried, jumping into the water.

This action continued until a sizable fleet was destroyed, and victory secured.

Throughout this game, I never saw a Japanese face. I never considered that each sailor I killed was a beloved son and/or brother. I never considered that he probably didn't enlist but had been drafted and ordered to fight. I never considered the dreams he'd never realize, nor the grief his death would cause.

Nope, never considered any of this. I just thought of the glory of victory. The cause was more important than the pain.

Not so long ago my son asked if he could get Call of Duty for the X-Box. Up until then, his games consisted of shooting monsters. Since monsters have neither souls nor families (this is common knowledge), I hadn't minded him blowing them up using a variety of weapons.

Call of Duty, though, was combat against other soldiers, like the ones serving on the destroyers I destroyed. I hadn't wanted him to play a game like this because of the human price paid in war, whether those humans were Japanese, German, British, American, Palestinian, Jewish, Muslim, Korean, Vietnamese, Irish, Nigerian, South African, Kenyan, Libyan...

I relented, though, and gave him permission to buy the game.

After all, every friend he had was playing it.

SCRIPTURE: Micah 4:1-5

WEEK THREE

#19 / Cold Water

In the days of playing sandlot baseball, a sweltering sun would make you do desperate things. The only source for a drink at the ball diamond was a spigot used for watering the field. Often there was a hose attached to it. On ninety-five degree days, you didn't care if the first blast through it was warm. Nor did you care if the water had a faint, strange, warm-hose flavor. You only knew that you needed it, and you didn't care where it came from. You drank it seemingly by the gallons. Thus replenished, you had a lot of fun exhausting the supply by hitting, fielding, throwing, running, and thus sweating profusely. That enabled you to return to the spigot where the hose had heated up the water once again.

The water we had on the farm was different.

When Dad bought the place, he was intentional about improving the supply. He had a guy drill a well. He didn't stop at twenty or thirty feet. He continued going deeper. Fifty...seventy-five...one hundred. Finally, at one hundred and twenty feet, he'd gone deep enough. The driller sunk a line into that underground stream and installed a pump. Thereafter, all we had to do was to turn on a tap, and water from deep below greeted us.

I wondered a bit where this underground stream came from. Evidently it was the result of a long process of surface water slowly drifting past soil and through cracks in limestone and other types of rock.

That rock-filtration process, especially when the drilling goes down over one-hundred feet, produces clear, clean water. When you have water of that quality, it's almost sweet. Coming from so far down, it's naturally chilled as well. To this day, I can close my eyes and remember how that cold water refreshed me after coming in from an afternoon of whacking weeds or roaming the back hills.

What a contrast to the warm, hose-flavored city water. It was recycled from a treatment plant, and improved by pumping fluoride and other chemicals into it.

Maybe this is why bottled water today is a mega-billion dollar industry. It's as if people have a yearning for water that is pure and sweet. That's why marketers tout their product by using such descriptions as natural spring, purified, artesian, and Fiji. Just tapping these adjectives out on a keyboard makes me thirsty.

Yet, isn't it curious that manufacturers are profiting off of something that came freely and naturally from the earth?

Several years ago I went back to the farm. At that time the fellow who had bought it was still living there, in the house where I grew up. Many things had changed on that old homestead in the course of thirty-five years. But I asked that old farmer if I could have a glass of water. He smiled, because he knew what I was really wanting. He got me a glass. It was just as cold and sweet as I remember.

Some things will never change.

SCRIPTURE: John 4:7-30





WEEK ONE

#20 / Nature's Candy

Fall was one of the most beautiful times in the country. It signaled that somehow you survived the blistering heat of summer. It also signaled that a winter of unknown severity lay ahead. In this in-between time, though, the air took on a relaxing, cool feel. The later fall grew, the brisker that air became, and the deeper blue, the skies.

The trees, of course, reflected this shift. The more their variety, the more color on nature's palette. Brilliant reds. Fire-oranges. Golden yellows. Deep crimsons.

It was my favorite time to hike. This wasn't just because of the beauty. It was because one of those colorful trees held a secret.

Bordering one of our pastures was a stand of persimmon trees. Persimmons are round fruit about the size of a silver dollar. They start off green, and gradually mature into shades of orange. After the first hard frost, you would find them taking on a burnt-orange hue, along with a squishy texture.

Hiking after such a frost, I'd look for these tell-tale signs that the persimmons were ripe. It was at such a time that you didn't really care about cleanliness. Pick them off the branch, or off the ground, it didn't matter: these things were so sweet that you ate them, regardless.

It's hard to describe the taste of nature's candy. Wine connoisseurs describe their samples in terms of aroma, flavor on the palate, and the finish. I only knew that persimmons had a natural sweetness that lingered with you a while and, after you consumed one, you wanted more. Some people even made persimmon pies; I never had one but presumed that, if you put a scoop of vanilla on it, you couldn't leave the table.

There is an important caveat, however.

You had to be sure, REALLY sure, that the fruit was ripe.

Innocent and ignorant, I once grew impatient for the ripening process. After the first frost, I journeyed to this candy store. The persimmons appeared ripe, all deep orange. I plucked one that was the softest and hungrily bit into it.

This I will never do again until I am sure that it's ready.

The reason you have to wait until a long, lingering frost is that the coldness produces an important chemical reaction. The end product of that reaction is sweetness. The beginning ingredient, though, is some astringent ingredient the fruit possesses. An astringent is something that "contracts the tissues or canals of the body" (dictionary.com).

Or, in other words, it makes you pucker like you never puckered before. Every milli-drop of moisture in your mouth seems to evaporate. Your cheeks are drawn in, and your lips feel like they're superglued together. If you tried to talk, you'd only mumble something unintelligible.

Things just have to be perfect, the timing just right, to discover the treasure in the field. Rush things, and you'll be sorely, astringently, disappointed.

SCRIPTURE: Romans 8:18-25

WEEK THREE

#21 / Turkey and Girls

Thanksgiving Day was always special on our farm.

That's because THEY were coming.

My stepmother's son and his family from Indiana would drive down that day for a visit. That family included him, his wife, and three girls, who were around my age.

Let me repeat that.

“Three girls, who were around my age.”

As a 14 year old boy, I thought this was heaven.

I spent Thanksgiving mornings squirrel hunting. It was cold, sitting on some fallen tree trunk, and waiting for the sound of a squirrel rustling through the leaves. Yet, that was OK. The November sun was starting to warm up life around you. There was the crisp air, carrying the musty scent of late fall. It was an aroma that signaled nature going into its replenishing sleep mode, before awaking with spring energy.

Sometime near noon, a car would honk three times. That could only mean one thing. My stepbrother and his family (with “three girls, who were around my age”) were here!

I'd go down the valley, across the dam, then scurry up the hill to home.

Going inside was a treat.

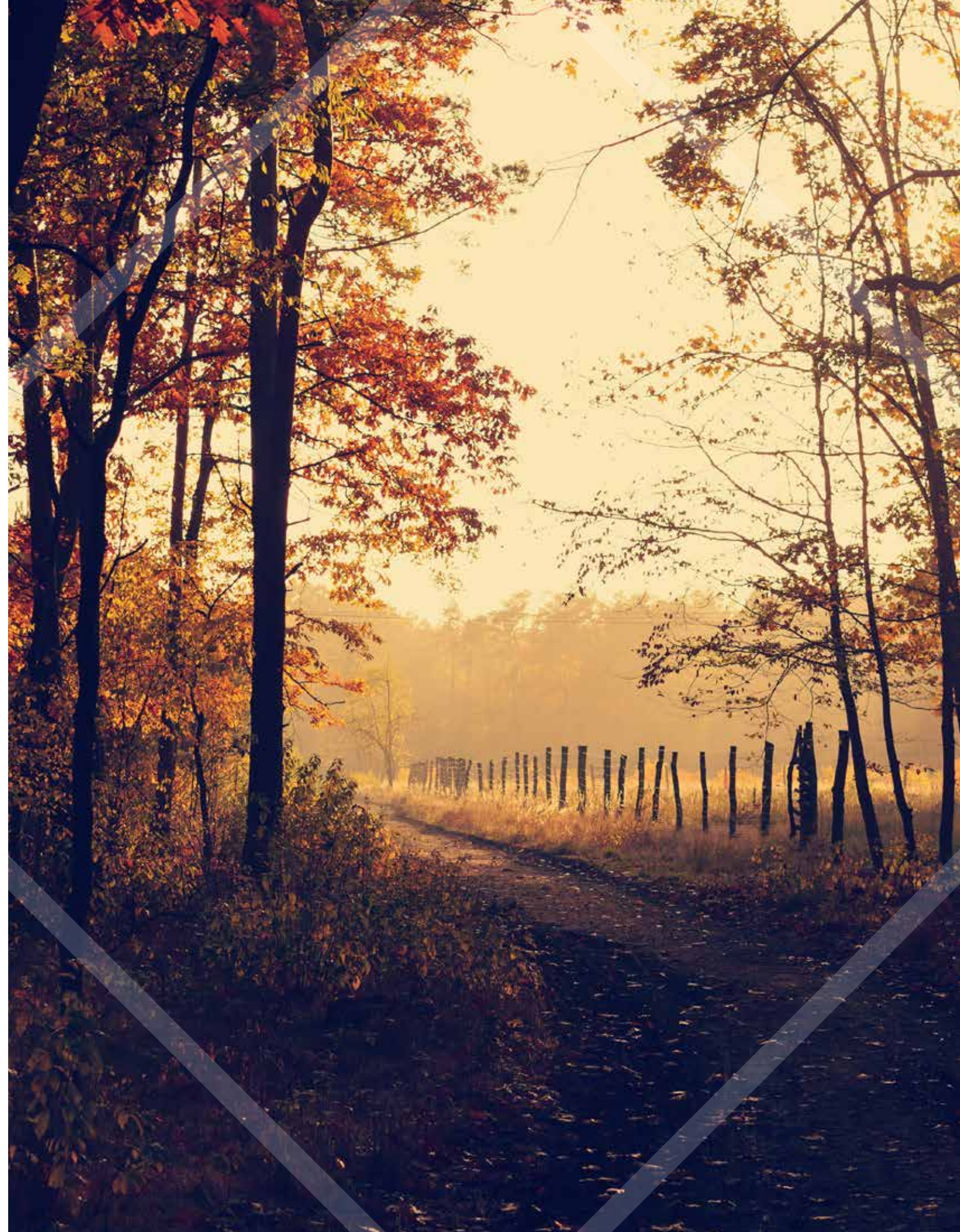
The warmth embraced you, as did the smiles and hugs. The smell of the Thanksgiving feast overwhelmed you: a huge turkey, straight from the oven; stuffing, sweet potatoes, green bean casserole, homemade rolls, pumpkin pie. The laughter and excited stories were exchanged as easily as passing the potatoes.

After the meal, things slowed down a bit. Maybe a tractor ride through the fields. A card game or two of Crazy Eights. More stories. Intermittent naps. Leftovers.

This all took place in the 60's. We had a TV, but on Thanksgiving we didn't turn it on. We had Rodgers' theater in town, showing the latest movies, but we didn't go. We didn't have a computer or the internet, obviously, but even if we had, we wouldn't have done any “surfing.”

No, on Thanksgiving, we “only” had the abundance of the land, the beauty of nature, and the rich company of family and friends.

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 1:26-31 and Ecclesiastes 3:10-15





WEEK ONE

#22 / Above It All

A few miles from our farm was a place I loved to go in the summer and fall.

I'd get on my red, one-speed, Western-Auto bike and pedal up Highway W to get there. There were a couple of German Shepherds I'd have to pedal past. They'd run at me from a nearby farm, and I'd hear their teeth clicking together as they nipped at my feet. What a great incentive to make your legs pump faster.

But that was a danger I'd face in order to get to this very special place.

It was a place you don't see much anymore. Satellites and technology have changed things.

It was a lookout tower.

Such towers were placed in strategic points in National Forests, "looking out" for fires. The one near our house was one hundred and fifty feet tall. After my heart stopped racing from the dash past the canines, I'd start the climb up the steps. There were platforms where you could pause on your ascent. At each stop, the scenery changed. You were soon above the trees. The air grew cooler, and everything seemed quieter. When you finally arrived at the top, it was a blanket of forest as far as you could see. You could make out some landmarks, but everything appeared so different. It was an eerily peaceful scene.

Once, when I had climbed as high as I could go, the door to the office on top opened. The ranger who staffed the tower had heard me climbing, and invited me in. How amazing it was to go into that room! There were gadgets, and a crackling CB radio. There was this friendly man, who calmly explained things, and even let me look through his binoculars.

Going back down the stairs was an odd feeling as well. Things grew a little warmer, a little noisier. Finally, you were back in your comfortable surroundings, where you'd look up to see the trees, instead of looking down upon them.

Now, we couldn't see the lookout tower from our house. It was miles away. But just because we couldn't see it, didn't mean it wasn't there. And it didn't mean there wasn't someone in that room, skilled and trained, looking after us.

It's easy to see only the walls of our homes, the boundaries of our lawns.

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 104:5-33

WEEK FOUR

#23 / Bulls and Kites

In the days of paper kites, you had little variety other than color. You'd assemble them in the shape of a cross, tie on a knotted line of rags, and off you'd go.

Since we had a large pasture, I thought it a perfect location to set loose my *red* kite. The cattle grazing there ignored me as I put it together. Then I took off running, hand held high, trying to get my kite to catch the wind. Time after time it would get about ten feet off the ground, gyrate wildly, and tumble down.

As this went on with my *red* kite, the cattle started paying attention, especially the bull. It was gazing intently at me as I kept running in front of it with my *red* kite, which kept going up and down and all around.

Finally, the bull charged. Luckily I caught its movement out the corner of my eye. Dropping the string and the stubborn kite, I ran toward the fence, hurdling it to safety.

From that vantage point I saw the bull standing on my kite, doing sort of a two-step. It was a sad death for something meant for the skies.

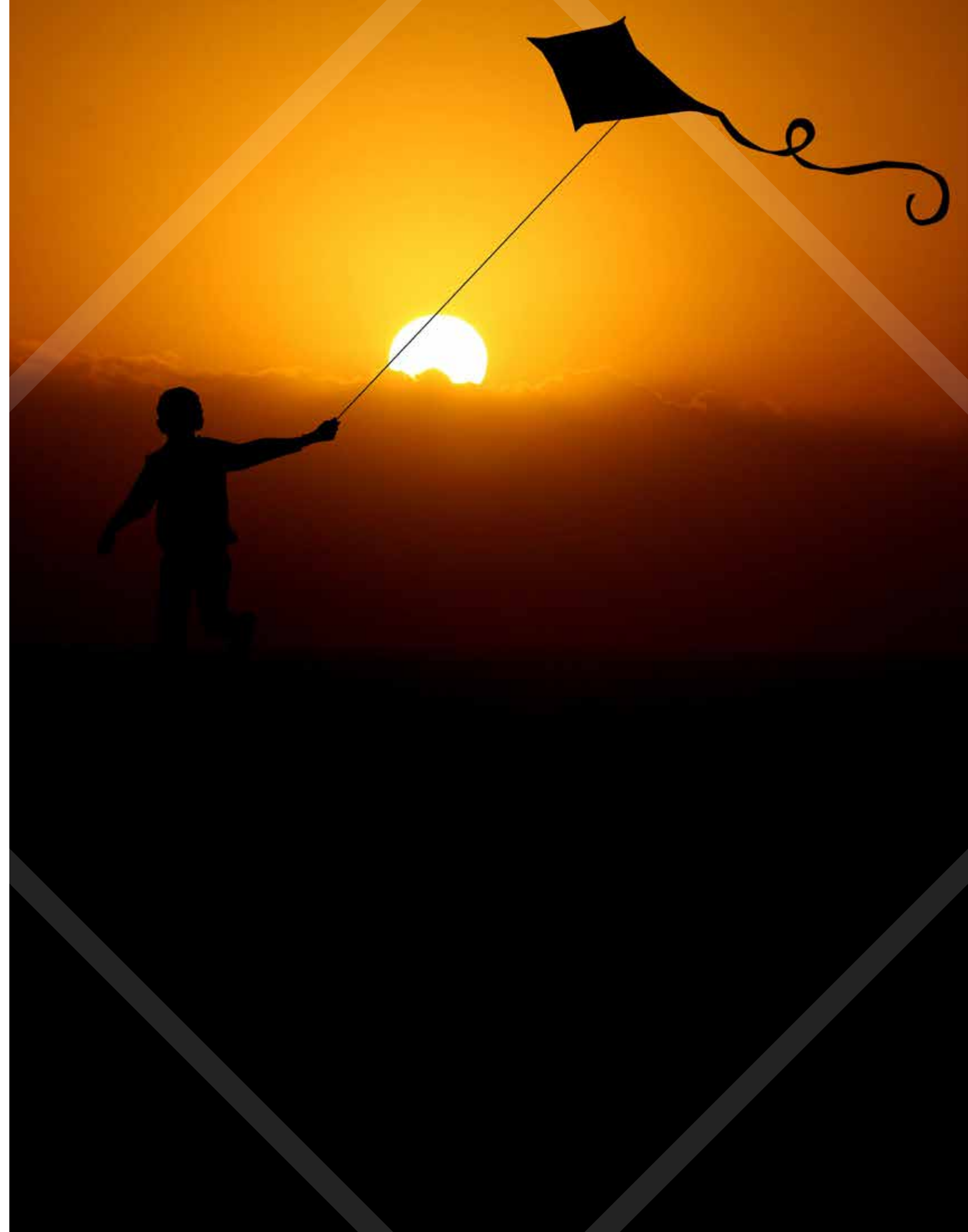
On another occasion, though, my kite did take flight. This one was green (you learn your lesson), and I made sure there were no bovine around.

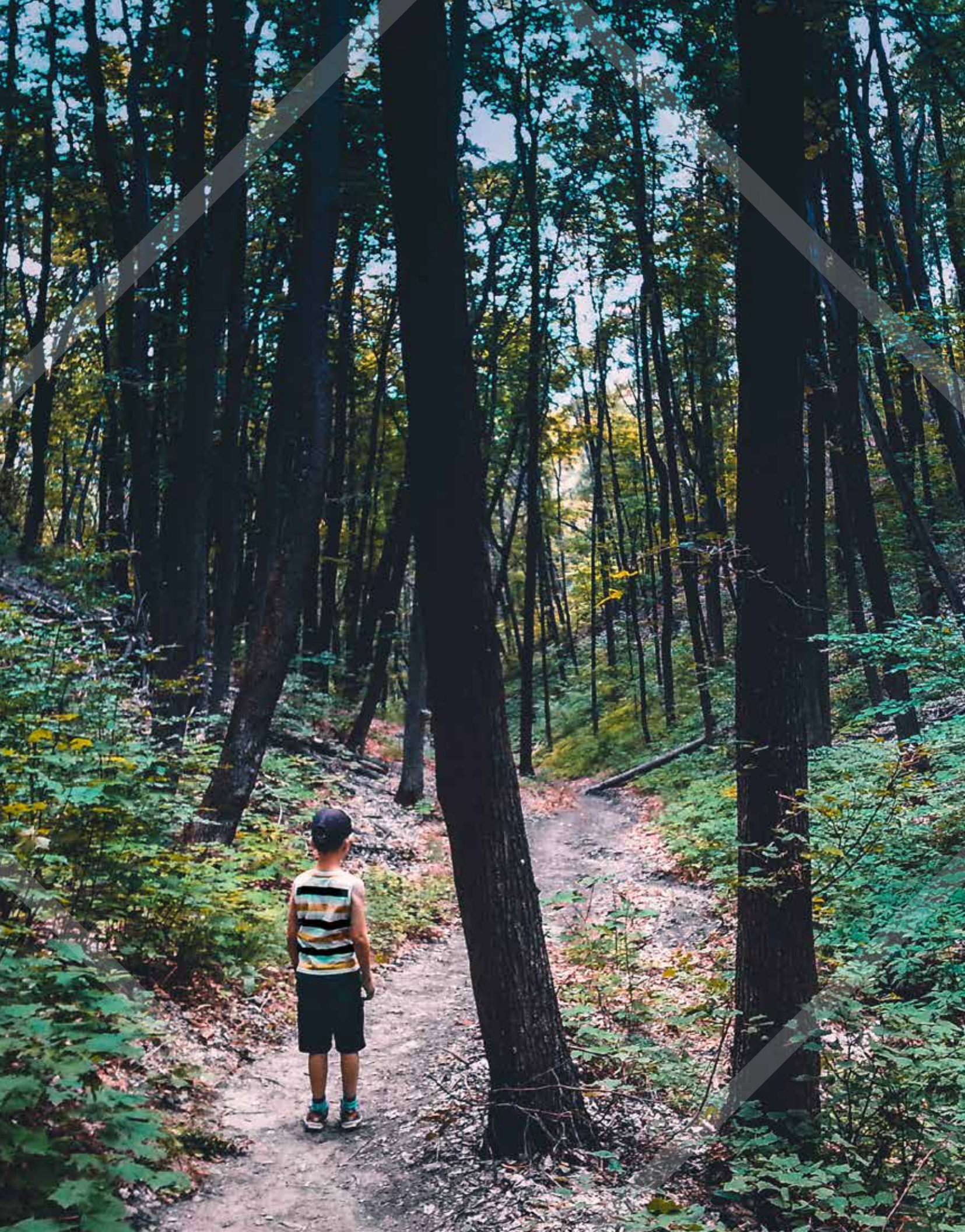
If you've ever successfully flown a kite, you experience a thrill that you can't really explain. It's as if you project yourself onto the kite, that's dancing maybe two or three hundred feet across the face of a deep blue sky. You feel its tug, wanting to go even higher. You imagine the panoramic view from that dazzling height, and you wish you could somehow see what that kite sees.

There's freedom and beauty when it sails into the air.

You just have to pick the right place and time, hope there's a strong wind, and be aware of bulls.

Scripture: John 3:4-8 and Acts 2:1-4, 43-47





WEEK FOUR

#24 / Going Too Far

After a while, you get tired of what you're accustomed to.

A farm of one hundred twenty acres seems big to a boy. But living on it daily, fishing the same holes, hunting the same woods, working the same fields...well, you get tired.

I began thinking of what the woods looked like beyond our property. There was government-owned land bordering ours. You could hunt on it. I'd heard there were also old paths made from loggers in the 1930's that you could follow, to see where they went.

So, one day I set out to discover what lay beyond the last valley on our property.

This was a huge mistake.

It wouldn't have been had I had even an average sense of direction. I don't. My older sister doesn't, either. It runs in our family. We can get lost in a parking lot. My sister has lived in San Antonio for years and still has trouble finding her way home. I have developed the philosophy in driving that if I think I should turn to the right, I'll turn left; ninety percent of the time this works. GPS's were made for my sister and me.

But as a teenager, this sad self-discovery was unknown. I had visions of being related more to Daniel Boone than to my sister.

Walking past the boundary of our land was exciting. What lay beyond the next hill, the next valley? The mysterious logging trails? Squirrel dens? Deer by the flock-fulls?

The excitement of the unknown, and my ignorance of my own navigational ability, propelled me forward.

After walking a good distance, I paused to get my bearings.

There were no bearings to get.

Looking back whence I came, nothing looked familiar. Actually, there was no "whence" to look back to. Everything, EVERYTHING, looked the same. I was totally turned around, and had no idea which direction would lead home.

I did what any explorer would do at this point. I panicked, and ran. I had three-hundred sixty degrees to choose from, and I picked one that I hoped would be right.

It was a horrible feeling. When you're lost and panicking, you breathe rapidly, sweat, and stumble all over yourself. You have visions of running in the wrong direction, taking you deeper into the woods, deeper into lost-ness. You imagine spending the night in the dark outside, surrounded by sounds and creatures you don't want to get familiar with. You hope more than anything else that something, anything, would look familiar.

Only by the grace of God did I begin recognizing some landmarks. Cresting a hill, the lake behind our house became visible. More importantly, home became visible, and it never looked so good.

If you're going exploring, you should know yourself. You should reflect on why you're venturing out in the first place. You should prepare, accordingly.

I shouldn't have been so foolish.

SCRIPTURE: Luke 15:11-32

WEEK FOUR

#25 / Not in a Million Years

Dad hired a guy to help manage the farm. He had a small four room house built for him on our property, about a mile up from us.

Scotty was his name, and he did not look like the engineer on Star Trek. This Scotty was straight from the back hills of the Ozarks. Flush plumbing would have been a luxury. Any creature that roamed the woods would have been familiar.

He also liked milk, but he wouldn't buy it at a store. He got it directly from the cow. He squeezed/pulled it straight from old Bessie (we didn't really name our cattle, but this would have been an appropriate one if we had), and into a glass milk bottle. He then put the bottle in the refrigerator. No processing. No pasteurization.

One day, while taking a break from topping corn, he asked if I wanted to try some.

I hesitated for a very long time, having to think it over.

I knew cows. I knew what they ate and how they smelled. I had to mush through muck around the barn consisting of mud, poop, and urine.

And now I was supposed to drink a fluid that came straight from them?

Yes, it was a long hesitation...

...but I said yes.

To this day, I've never tasted better milk. It was sweet and cold, and resembled a milk shake. I had two glasses, and wanted more.

Still, I remember the long hesitation. When there's a new opportunity presented to you, but it comes with a risk, how do you decide to take it or not? Does it have to do with trust in someone who's offering it? Does it have to do with your personality, if you're someone who is optimistic and assumes the best, or if you're a person who expects a thunderstorm to follow a white cloud on the horizon?

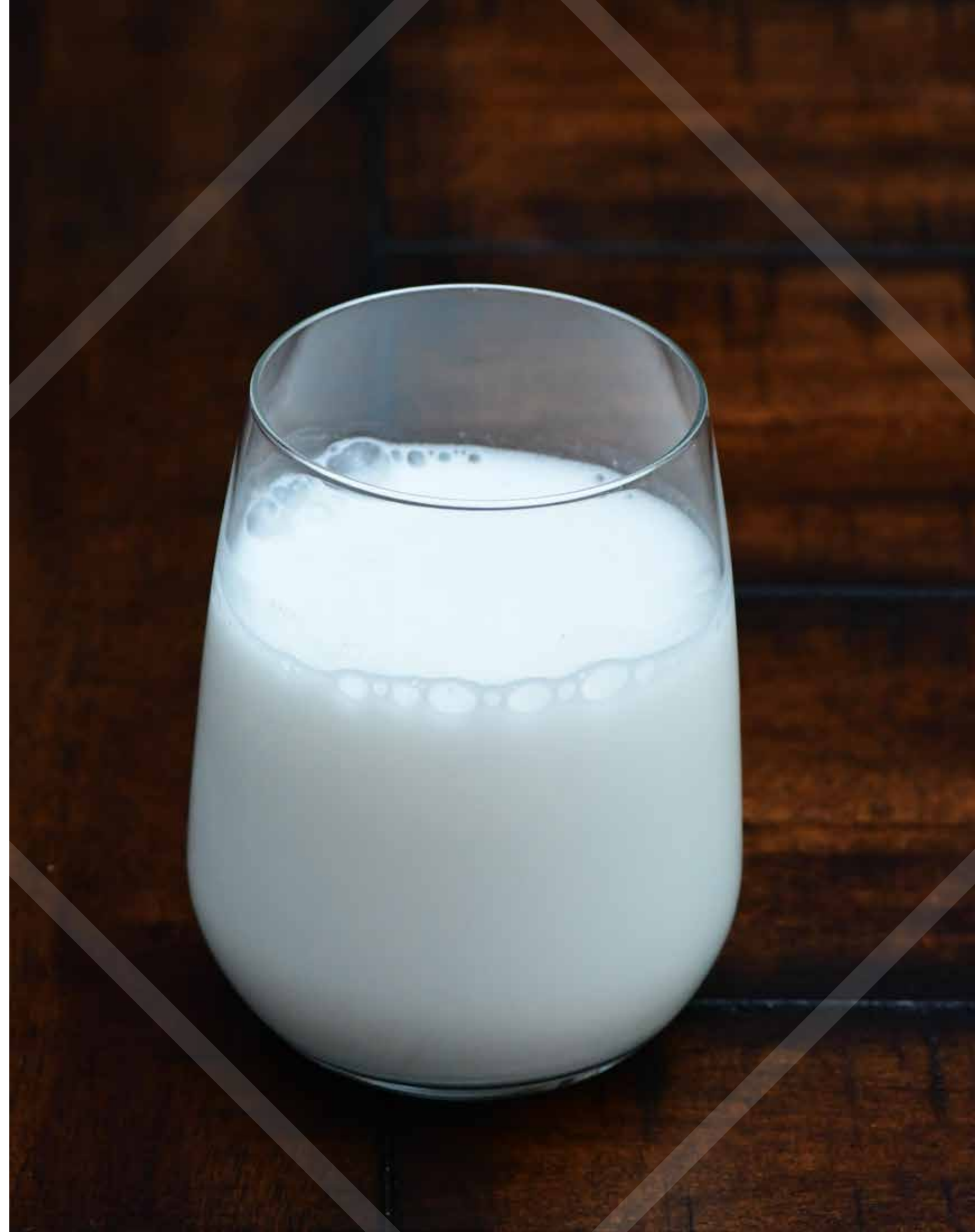
Maybe it's determined by how old you are. The younger you are, the more you're willing to see what's out there. The older you are, the more you want to make sure people wipe their feet before they enter your house.

I don't know if Dad would have been mad if he knew Scotty had given me such a straight-from-the cow, microbe-laden, libation. Probably not, though. He no doubt survived on such milk when he was a kid. And knowing that I was growing up in a germ-phobia age, he probably would have saluted the risk I took to take a chance on something so sweet.

Given the opportunity today to have milk straight-up like this, would I do it?

Not in a million years.

SCRIPTURE: Luke 18:18-25 and Matthew 13:44-46





WEEK FOUR

#26 / Nature's Easter

It was the beginning of the year that would be our last on the farm. I was a high school sophomore.

The pastor of the 1st United Methodist church at that time, Brad Powell, had preached a sermon that got my attention. His words prompted me to dust off the Bible and start reading. For the first time ever, I prayed a prayer that I meant, and hadn't memorized. The result was a personal experience/encounter with Christ. I felt as if he had forgiven me (probably not the least of which was for the unintentional pain I caused Dad), and that he loved me and was present with me.

The above testimony is a sermon for another time. What was striking to me was how springtime on the farm seemed to be applauding that conversion.

The first Easter that had meant anything of substance to me (Easters before were mainly about finding colorful eggs and enjoying those hollow chocolate bunnies) happened that spring. The Easter hymns pointed to why I could experience him so personally: "Death cannot keep its prey, Jesus, my savior; He tore the bars away, Jesus, my Lord."

That Easter afternoon, which was a beautiful spring day, I walked our property with new eyes.

There was a dogwood tree that seemed to point to Jesus. Its blossoms were in the shape of a cross, with red at the ends of the petals and a crown in the middle.

There were May apples, a flock of green plants that seemed to come up overnight, springing from the earth.

The robins, mockingbirds, and the remaining blue jays chirped songs that were more beautiful than I'd ever noticed before.

Everything just seemed so striking, fresh, and hopeful. They were the exact feelings I felt that afternoon I first prayed to Jesus.

Since that first Easter-spring, decades have passed.

Jesus, while remaining a friend, became more than that. He also became a subject, someone to be studied, defended, and debated.

The Bible wasn't just words from and about my friend. It also became a textbook that had to be analyzed and critiqued.

The church wasn't just the place where people shared stories about their encounter with him. It also became a place that had to be managed, administrated, and budgeted.

Living in the midst of all that has happened since that memorable Easter on the farm, I yearn for the simplicity and magic experienced amidst the dogwoods and May apples.

It would be nice to immerse myself again in that simple wonder.

Is there any way to do it?

SCRIPTURE: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 and Hebrews 10:32-39

WEEK FOUR

#27 / Abandonment

It was the first time I ever saw Dad cry.

That burly Mississippi ex-farmer, the guy who supported his family through the Depression by working in the machine shop at International Harvester, never believed in overly-outward emotional expressions. He was friendly and approachable, but he was not going to be the life of the party. The last thing he would ever do would be to cry.

The days of farm life had come to an end, and I was beginning college at Central Methodist. My folks had just moved me in. Steamer trunk of stuff. Clothes with my name written on the label, including underwear. Bedding for a twin bed, and a big box fan for the window “air conditioning.”

You could tell that Dad didn’t want to go, leaving me in that dorm domicile. He, Mom, and I walked slowly to their 1967 Monaco. Mom hugged me. Dad did, too, but he was shaking. Without saying a word, he turned and walked away. With one hand he covered the side of his face to hide his tears, and with the other he waved goodbye.

They got into the car and pulled away.

Thus began a new phase of life devoid of frozen lake skating and early morning fishing. I knew no one, nor did they know me. The future was exciting yet scary and unknown. It was so much easier to remember and mourn the past instead of getting psyched for the future.

It was hard on me. However, now that my son has recently gone off to college, I know it was doubly hard on Dad.

He would have returned home and saw my fishing pole and tackle box. My room with school portraits and artifacts. Old shoes and a ballglove and bat. The small transistor radio that I used to listen to Jack Buck announce Cardinals games on.

That room would now remain empty and silent. I imagine he spent some time there in the days after they dropped me off. And I imagine he wiped away more tears with that big old farmer’s hand. He would have also wondered what he would do next in life, since now he would have felt that he completed his last big job.

For the next few years, he filled his time taking care of Mom, whose health was declining. After she died, he spent several years living alone. He filled his days by going out to eat, talking to old acquaintances, playing solitaire, and watching reruns on TV (his favorite were the Westerns).

Eventually his mind started slipping. The diagnosis was Alzheimers. He became a resident in an assisted living home. Two days after his ninetieth birthday, he died.

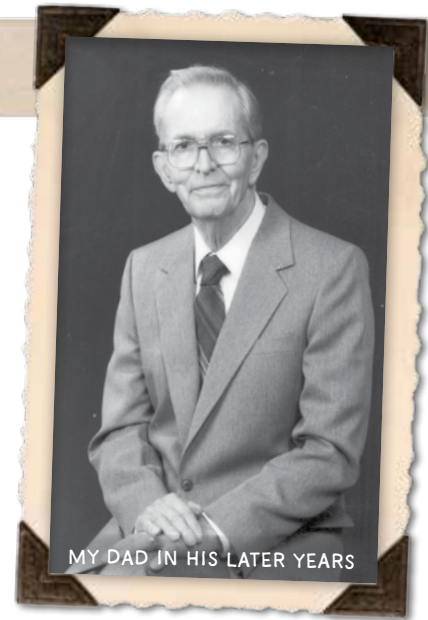
Even though he had dementia, and his short-term memory eroded to the point of non-existence, he still recognized me to the very end. Actually, within the span of an afternoon visit, he would introduce me to the same nurse at least four times. Each time, he did so with obvious love and pride. “Have you met my son, Greg? He’s my son,” he’d say, repeating what was most important. “He’s my son.”

I guess he finally forgave me for the shoe incident.

I also guess that goodbyes might not be the final chapter to the book.

Without winter, there’s no spring; without dark, there can be no appreciation for light. Without goodbyes, there can never be new hello’s.

“Have you met...?”



WEEK FOUR

#28 / You Can’t Really Go Back

I had a very vivid dream during my first semester at Central.

I was standing on the shoreline of Lake Wappapello, at the cove where the custodian of the First Methodist Church and I used to fly fish while trolling in a johnboat.

His name was John Gilbreath, and he’d grown up in that area. There had once been a town there, picturesquely called, “Shook.” John and I would take his tarred up boat and, while drinking Mountain Dew and munching on Snickers, fish deep into the evening.

Slowly trolling back to the landing was a sacred time. The stars reflected their twinkling light on the mirror of still water. The breeze cooled and relaxed. A night chorus of nature warmed up.

It was such a scene of serenity. All was right with the world...

...except this time, in my dream.

A huge oil slick covered the cove, suffocating it. A bass tried to break the surface to catch a bug, but couldn’t. This sacred space, this thin place, had been irreparably ruined.

It would be decades later that I would link this dream to another experience.

I took our daughter Emma back to Poplar Bluff, to visit the places she’d heard me talk about so much. Our first stop, of course, was the old farm. Getting out of the car, I was stunned. Nothing appeared as I had remembered. The house was in disrepair. Trees had been so thinned out that you could see the next property. The lake had been reduced to just a large watering hole, and its shoreline was overgrown. There were no cornfields with blue jays, nor cows with farm-fresh milk, nor dogwood trees, nor May apples.

“Was this where all the stuff you talked about happened, Daddy?” Emma asked.

“Yes,” I replied, “and no.”

All that I have written about in these devotions now exists only in memory. I can visit them only in my mind.

But looking down at Emma, I realized that, special as these sacred places were, they were no substitute for the joys and challenges of the present, along with the hope for the future.

There are always new fishing holes to discover.

They might even be more beautiful than the old ones.

SCRIPTURE: Philippians 3:12-16



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129 Woods Mill Road | Manchester, MO 63011 | manchesterumc.org | 636.394.7506