

Jedediah Webb - Texas Circuit Rider

Spring 1877

"Why don't people care more about their eternal existence? Why do they focus on the past and present with little concern for the future? After all, eternity is a long, long, time....is it not? Wouldn't people rather spend eternity in joyful bliss rather than in pain and suffering?" These thoughts consumed me once again as they rattled around in my brain keeping my attention from the trail that my horse, Rahab, and I were traveling. My brain was abruptly returned to present reality as Rahab shied from a rattlesnake that was sunning itself between the ruts on the road. It was not surprising that the snake was on the road as it was early in the month of May and the diamondback was seeking all the warmth of the sun it could find.

Rattlesnakes are certainly not my favorite of God's creatures. God set serpents and humankind as enemies to one another clear back to the Garden of Eden. We have been crushing snakes' heads and they have been striking our heels ever since (**Genesis 3:15**). Some preachers I heard of were quite enamored with rattlesnakes as they believed that handling snakes and drinking poisons were signs of faith supported by Jesus himself (**Mark 16:18**). I figure that passage falls under the category of "not being able to totally understand the mind of God." I believe that Jesus was just telling us that if we follow His will, we will be capable of doing extraordinary things. By the way, some of those preachers went to see Jesus sooner than expected courtesy of the fangs of those vipers. As a spiritual leader, I choose to stay away from snakes and poisons. I believe there are better ways to demonstrate my faith to Jesus Christ. Besides, I don't see a direct connection between poisonous snakes and bringing people to accept Christ.

I patted Rahab on her neck to thank her for doing all the work in getting me to my next destination. She threw her head back in my direction as if to say, "You are welcome, but let's take a break. I am hungry and thirsty." Fine with me, I thought. I needed some time to make plans about what to do when I arrive tomorrow at the community of Jacksboro.

Before I go further with my story, let me tell you who I am and where I came from. My name is Jedediah Webb. I was named after King Solomon's second name, Jedediah, which means "Beloved of the Lord." I was born on August 24, 1851 in Dublin, Texas. I was the first-born son to James William and Mary Margaret Webb. They had just moved to Texas from Arkansas in the quest to own some land and raise a family. Thank God for my parents. My father has always been a hard worker and a believer in Jesus Christ. Although he is not perfect, he taught me God's principles and models them in his own life. My mother, also a believer and a staunch Methodist, made sure that I was appropriately schooled in reading, writing, arithmetic, and in the Bible. As I grew to adulthood, I worked as an apprentice to the local blacksmith and worked with the local sheriff when the need for additional law enforcement arose.

I felt the call to ministry from God in 1868, and I began studies with local traveling ministers and took a few Bible courses from Southwestern University at Georgetown. Although I am only 25 years old, I am currently riding a preaching circuit for the Methodist Episcopal Church. I was commissioned into the traveling ministry for the Methodist Church in 1875. It seems that the West Texas Conference was in dire need of traveling preachers in my area of Texas due to the loss of many fine preachers (local and traveling) to the Yellow Fever. This circuit of mine currently consists of Dublin, Stephenville, Jacksboro, Graham, Breckenridge, and Comanche with many stops in between to minister to smaller communities. This circuit covers over 250 miles and I often hold 7-10 worship services a week. By horse, I can cover 25 or so miles a day. So, a 220-mile circuit covering a dozen or so communities can normally be covered by horse in 2-3 weeks unless there is a week-long camp meeting planned which could easily extend the circuit to last 3-4 weeks. Although I deeply desire to see these folks each week, it is not possible right now. I have also been charged by the conference leadership to look into the newly forming communities of Sweetwater, Abilene, and Brownwood to see if Methodist churches might be formed there. Needless to say, all of this requires a lot of time on the trail. Rahab and I have become best friends.

As I sat and rested, I was aware of how anxious I was to see those folks in Jacksboro - especially a few individuals who were working through some grief or disappointments. I love the people in this community. They often tell me, "We are bad enough to need a preacher and good enough to want one." They recognize that humankind is naturally sinful, but they don't want to be. They work hard to avoid sin, and it is refreshing to be around them. They know that it takes purposeful walking in the light of Jesus to avoid the darkness that so often tempts our souls. These folks recognize that our sins separate us from God (**Romans 3:23**) and that our sinful nature dates all the way back to Adam and Eve.

I looked up to see dust rising in the distance - enough dust to be coming from a dozen or so horses. "Come on, girl...time to get out of here." I know that anytime we need to rest, we must do it near brushy areas and never in the open. It is easy enough to duck back into the trees and remain motionless. Even Rahab seems to know that silence is of the utmost importance. Sure enough, ten ponies appear each bearing a Comanche Buck. They are in no hurry and do not seem agitated. I never did like the term "Buck" to identify a Comanche male. It is meant to be demeaning and dehumanizing. After all, God created Comanche Indians just as he created all other races. They have as much of an opportunity to accept Christ and live eternally with God in heaven as anyone.

I held Rahab's nose to keep her from snorting from the unfamiliar smell of Indian ponies. It looked as if these Comanche men (actually boys who look to be teenage) were not looking for trouble. However, it is generally understood that if they outnumber another party, they will most likely steal horses or lift some hair especially if they are not in a good mood. This is what the native tribes have done to one another for years. Young braves gain prestige in their tribe through the number of horses they steal and the number of lifted scalps. I wanted to keep my horse and my hair, and I did not relish dying or being taken into captivity and torture. Comanche braves generally do not keep men alive to trade later with the white man. That fate is reserved for the girls and women if they are fortunate. So, I always ride with a loaded pistol and repeating rifle.

And as everyone knows, beyond carrying weapons for protection, it is better to have a really fast horse. Rahab meets that condition. Not only is she smart and wary of strangers, but she is also as fast as lightning when she needs to be.

Many good traveling preachers have been killed by Indians, thieves, and wild animals on the trail, and I do not wish to join them yet. I sat there with one hand on my pistol and one hand over Rahab's nose hoping not to be discovered. I was hopelessly outnumbered, but if evil forces try to stop me from spreading the word of God, I will fight to the death for the privilege to continue to follow Jesus' great commission – to make disciples throughout the world and teach them all of Jesus' commands. Fortunately, we were not seen or smelled by warriors or ponies, and we waited for over an hour to make sure we had not been spotted or that anyone was doubling back. As it was beginning to get dark, I turned to Rahab and said, "Sorry girl, it looks like you are to be staked out by a cold camp tonight." She acted disappointed because she knows that camps – especially cold camps – are rare these days as I have established many trusted family farmhouses or dugouts where we can count on sleeping in a bed in between communities. Rahab snorted and shook her head in anticipation that she would not have a nice warm shed with delicious oats and hay to feast upon that night.

Over these last three years, I have been able to establish a number of places with good people between the larger communities where I can stop for food and rest. I must admit that I have become quite spoiled by these good people. In appreciation for the bed and tasty food, I share the latest information from the world, and I conduct a worship service for these kind families and their neighbors. In reality there are very few nights that I am not "on duty" with pastoral obligations. I'm not complaining, but it would be nice once in a while to get a week, or even a night or two, off from work.

Early evening the next day, Rahab and I plodded into the town of Jacksboro quite exhausted from the journey. Jacksboro is a great place to have on the circuit – not just because the people are wonderful, but because Fort Richardson is located near the town. It is good to interact with the army chaplains and the military men and their families. Often the Chaplain will give me the pulpit or share the service with me. I looked up Chaplain Peter Sherman to see how things were progressing at the fort. Chaplain Sherman is an ex-Army Lieutenant who resigned his commission to take on the role as Chaplain. He tells me that the War Between the States had a lot to do with that decision. Chaplain Sherman is also a traveling preacher in the immediate area of Fort Richardson. Along with a theology degree from a Baptist Seminary, he has experience as a soldier in the U.S. Army. I have tremendous respect for him, and I have come to fully trust any advice he has to give to me.

Chaplain Sherman greeted me, and we talked of my recent experiences. He told me that morale is currently low at the fort among officers and enlisted alike. There had been an outbreak of Yellow Fever and Flu which took the lives of eight men. He also shared with me that although Indian attacks had slowed down since the 1850's, the soldiers were weary from recent fights with several Indian tribes. The last major skirmishes were known as the Battle of Salt Creek followed by the Red River War several years later. The Battle of Salt Creek involved ten teamsters with their wagons who were hauling supplies from Jacksboro to Fort Griffin. They were attacked by 90-100 Kiowa Indians. The teamsters were annihilated; and all supplies, horses, and mules

were stolen. This was the final straw for the U.S. Army. After that, it took years to clean up the area by running those braves and their families onto the reservations. The most alarming news from the Chaplain was that Fort Richardson was soon to be abandoned with the troops being moved to a new location. This decision was terrifying to the members of the Jacksboro community since they counted on the military to keep them safe from marauding warriors and bandits. Many were convinced that they would be slaughtered as soon as the soldiers left the area.

For the next few days we held a basket meeting. A basket meeting consists of a long day or two days of preaching – usually Saturday and/or Sunday – where everyone brings a basket of food to sustain the family through the time of worship service. There is a lot of singing, preaching, testifying, Bible studying, confessing, baptizing, and purging of the soul going on during these meetings. A basket meeting is different from a camp meeting in that a camp meeting can last an entire week and often includes multiple denominations joining in; whereas, a basket meeting usually consists of only one congregation in attendance.

This particular basket meeting was a mixture of the two. Since so many people were worried about Fort Richardson being relocated, there was a dire need to get closer to God! People from all over the area came to listen, to speak, to pray, and to confess their sins to God just in case the end was near. We held this service in the Mess Hall of Fort Richardson the following afternoon as the Mess Hall was big enough to accommodate the crowd of over 100 people. We sang hymns, prayed over important issues, and made announcements from the different churches and the community. The people were clamoring to hear more about the relocation of the Fort. Chaplain Sherman attended and spoke to the people. He tried to assure them that they would be okay and that the soldiers would still be within a day's ride. "Not good enough," yelled Mr. Jacobs, "It won't take a full day for them savages to lift my hair and kill or capture my family. What good will a day's ride do us then?" With that, Mrs. Jacobs swooned in her chair and their two little girls began to cry. We continued to hear from the army officers and Chaplain Sherman as to the plan to gradually move personnel away from Fort Richardson to the new facility. They further addressed a plan to train local men and women in ways to protect the community from those who would do them harm. This seemed to alleviate many fears.

It was time for me to step up to the pulpit and talk about the importance of salvation. I prayed to the Holy Spirit to speak to us and began the sermon.

#1 Our sins separate us from God (Romans 3:23)

"We are all sinners. We all fall short of the glory of God (**Romans 3:23**). This means all of us, no matter how hard we try not to sin, we do. Even the Apostle Paul confessed that often times he knew what the right thing was to do, but he didn't do it; instead, he would do the very thing he knew was wrong (**Romans 7:15-20**). Everyone falls short of God's expectations due to their sinful nature. We all have our favorite sins. My favorite sin that I just cannot seem to avoid is cursing. Yes, cursing – not using God's name in vain, but using language that would prompt my dear, sweet mother to wash my mouth out with a big bar of lye soap."

This statement from me opened up the flood gates and led to a general confession of favorite sins. I am telling you that many of the congregation members let it all out of their systems. There were sideways glances going on as well as some hand slapping and shoulder punching. People were purging their consciences of the heavy burdens that they had been carrying around for years. Congregants admitted to favorite sins such as drinking whisky, gambling, cursing, lying, smoking, and dipping (mostly women), killing Indians and bandits, stealing, cheating, coveting their neighbors' goods, and yes, even fornication. I did not mean for my confession to open up the flood gates...but it did!

After the self-bloodletting ended, everyone took a few minutes to get some cool lemonade or hot coffee. Many wiped their brows and took a breather. I witnessed many conversations going on among couples as well as between kids and parents, so I knew I had more work to do later on using my counseling skills to help people to forgive. I imagine that some folks had convinced themselves that there would never be salvation for them.

After the break, I stepped up to the pulpit and asked God to speak to us all. I took a deep breath and told them the following:

#2 Jesus died on the cross for our sins (Romans 5:8)

"In spite of our sins, there is salvation waiting for each one of us. We all have walked away from God and not loved Him as we should. God created the world and made us in His image. He requires that we love Him and one another. Humankind refused to do so over and over again. God set it up so that we could receive forgiveness of sins through sacrifices, so we sacrificed animals and crops all day every day to atone for our sins. Yet, we continued to sin and walk further and further away from God. Thankfully, God never gave up on us. God spoke to us through Moses, judges, kings, and prophets to bring us back to loving Him, but we continued to follow the ways of the sinful world. The prophet Micah told us that the Lord simply requires us to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God (**Micah 6:8**). God also required that we love Him with all our heart, soul, and might (**Deuteronomy 6:5**) and to love our neighbors as ourselves (**Leviticus 19:18**). We just would not listen and obey, and we doomed ourselves to eternity without Him - an eternity of misery, suffering, and torment."

I continued, "Praise the Lord God that He never gave up on us. God's redemptive plan never stopped. He sent His son Jesus to us. Jesus Christ, God Himself, came to Earth in the form of human flesh to walk the world with us and bring us the truth, show us the light, and model the holy way to live. He interpreted God's laws to us and provided us a way to reunite with God. Jesus died for our sins. To fulfill God's redemptive plan, Jesus acted as the perfect sacrifice to die the death that we all deserved so we wouldn't have to face a second death - an eternal death of separation from God forever. Because Jesus died in our place, we are able to live forever in joy with the Heavenly Father."

After taking a swig of cool water, I continued the sermon focusing on the crucial role of Jesus in the story of our salvation.

#3 Believe in Jesus and what He did for us, and you will be saved (John 3:16)

"We cannot possibly earn our way to heaven through good behavior (**Ephesians 2:8-9**). God gave us the gift of salvation through His Son, Jesus Christ. We owe Jesus a debt we can never repay. We must believe in Jesus Christ, our savior. We must accept the gift of life Jesus gave us, and we must accept Jesus as our savior and forge a relationship with him. We can have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. As Jesus told us, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me' (**John 14:6**). As followers of Christ we are changed. We are eternally grateful that He saved us and we in turn give our lives over to Him to live our lives as He taught us to live.

We must have a relationship with Jesus to be saved.

We must truly know Jesus before we die.

This is the truth, and we can accept it or deny it. The decision is ours.

Praise God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen."

After the sermon, I told them the topics for the services on my next trip would be "In salvation, we are forgiven and made New" (**2 Corinthians 5:17**) and that "We should make every effort to continue to grow in God's love" (**2 Peter 3:18**). We closed with more hymns and a few solos from the people of the choir. We even had a few confessions of faith and rededications of lives to the Lord. The service ended with much rejoicing and fellowship....and good, delicious food!

As I prepared to leave the next day heading for Graham, I visited with a friend by the name of Willie Lockhart. Willie is an avowed Atheist and Indian hater, a Mexican hater, and a hater of too many people to list. Actually, I believe he was just a hater in general. Except for me. For some reason he took a shine to me and was always ready to provide me advice on hatred, revenge, peril, and any kind of worldly evil. Willie shared with me the current movement of some local Indians, "I hear them Lipan Indians are getting restless - not to mention the Comanches and Kiowas. You know those Lipans pretend to be our friend by helpin' us fight the Comanch.' But we know better. They are a conivin' bunch, wily and dishonest, ready to turn on the white man at any moment. Watch out for your hair! They are roaming the area between here and Salt Creek. You know I think all Indians should be exterminated, so don't hesitate to kill a few of them devils."

I know there is a difference between murdering and killing. The 6th of the Ten Commandments from God is "Thou shalt not kill" (**Exodus 20:13**). The Hebrew word for kill in this case is "ratsach" meaning to take a life without legal or moral justification. In other words to kill someone out of jealousy, anger, or just plain evil; and murder involves premeditation. In fact, God is so against murder that He told us, "Whoever strikes a person mortally (murder) shall be put to death" (**Exodus 21:12**). Killing in self-defense is justifiable in my mind although I hope never to have to do so.

I loaded up supplies given to me for the trip to Graham from the people of Jacksboro. God bless them for the way they take care of me. The truth is I eat better than ever on the trail for the first day or so after I leave one of my pastoral communities. The women gave me several heavy bags of pastries, bread, jellies and jams, meats, coffee, and various other goodies along with new clothing and books to read. The men

supply me with ammunition and popular items I can trade with people on the trail such as tobacco and whisky. No, I do not use them personally, but I know that these trading items can get me what I might need from good people and can get me out of scrapes with some unscrupulous varmint-types. Rahab rebelled somewhat against the extra weight I threw on her back. Maybe I should get a mule to accompany us to help with the load. Rahab would thank me for that.

On the way out of Jacksboro, I was hailed one last time by Chaplain Shermon. He shook my hand, handed me an extra Bible and writing implements, and gave me a warning. He said, "I just want you to know that one of my soldiers who is from Dublin told me that while he was home visiting he heard a man named Dirk Briggs say, 'I'm gonna kill that kid-preacher one day.' I believe that he was referring to you." I replied, "Yes, I am not surprised. I figured something like that was going through his head after what happened before I left a couple of weeks ago. Thanks for the warning."

As I wave goodbye to my good friend, I wonder if God will forgive me when the time comes when I am forced to kill someone. I may find that out sooner than I expect.

Matt Stephen

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