

Jedediah Webb - Texas Circuit Rider

Chpt. 5

Winter 1877

It is now mid-November, and I am preparing to travel my circuit for what I call the "Thanksgiving and Christmas Trail." I have prepared the sermons for the trip, and the sequence of the travel was planned out a year ago. I have to plan at least a year ahead and let people know as to when I will next be in the area. Even with meticulous planning, it is difficult to predict the exact dates that I will arrive at each community because of the uncertainty of the weather, needs that arise, and trouble I might have on the trail. We determined together last year that I would spend the time around Thanksgiving at Stephenville, Jacksboro, and the Salt Creek area, and I would spend the time around Christmas at Breckenridge, Comanche, and then back in Dublin.

Planning needs to be done ahead of time because of the challenges in communicating with the numerous communities on the circuit. Telegraph and stagecoach travel are in their beginning stages, and these wonderful modes of transporting messages are mostly located in and among the bigger cities in Texas: Houston, San Antonio, Austin, and Dallas. They have not yet reached the most remote areas of Texas. There is also talk of railroad expansion throughout the state, but it will be a while before we see trains coming through our area. The U.S. Postal Service is getting established throughout Texas, but not many post offices have been established in our area. People will carry mail and messages on their commercial travels from town to town, and I am even asked to carry messages on my circuit. Getting messages from one community to another in a hurry is difficult. I look forward to the establishment of telegraph lines to all of the towns in my circuit. One day, being able to communicate with my people within minutes will truly be a blessing!

I loaded up Sadie and Rahab and I hit the trail. It is going to be a hard trip, not only because I am alone, but because this is predicted to be a cold winter. There are several indicators that this will be an especially cold winter. Cattle and horses look quite wooly. Many have put on a thick "winter coat" to prepare them for the cold. Apples, corn shucks, and nuts have thicker coatings than usual to help them survive the cold coming in. Trees have put up larger crops of nuts in anticipation of feeding the wild fauna in the area. I cannot help but marvel at God's wisdom and ordering of nature to take care of his creation. Last, but not least, my father has been complaining about his joint pains this fall. That is a tell-tale sign that a hard winter is coming.

The nice thing about traveling in winter is that most of the four-legged, two-legged, and no-legged varmints tend to go underground for a while. This tends to free up a lot of danger that I face on the trail. Without a doubt, the hardest part about traveling in the winter is the weather. I usually take Sadie with me in the colder months

because I have more necessities to pack for the trail such as extra blankets, tarps for protection, feed for Rahab and Sadie, and survival supplies in case we get stuck on the trail. Rahab, Sadie, and I do not like to pitch overnight camps in the winter because we do not favor the cold. I rely much more on my lay people during these months to put us up for the nights and protect us from the cold, the wind, and dampness of the ground and in the air. Precise planning of my travel timeline so that I can stay overnight with families on the road is crucial to our survival.

I feel more vulnerable in the winter because of slow travel in the cold, wet weather. Under those conditions, I do not feel prepared to make a run for it from bandits or Indians who would do me harm. In Stephenville, I connected with my friend, Texas Ranger Captain JMR (Jim Matt) Stephen. Captain Stephen is the nephew of John M. Stephen, a Methodist man, who donated land for the establishment of Stephenville. I was aware that several years ago John's son, Samuel, was killed in a skirmish with the Comanche Indians. It is reported that Samuel was a member of the "Erath County Rangers," a group that vowed to kill any Indians they found in the area who traveled south of Cedar Creek. They were paid by the community to protect them from "marauding" Indians. I asked Captain Stephen about Indian activity in the area between Stephenville and Jacksboro. He assured me that this area was becoming more and more civilized and that there had been no Indian attacks for the past several years. I was relieved to hear this until he cautioned that bandits can be a problem.

I pitched camp the first night on the road to Jacksboro. The weather was pleasing, and I had a new tent to try out, so I staked out Rahab and Sadie, rubbed them down, built a roaring fire and laid back to do some reading before retiring for the night. I was drifting between the worlds of wakefulness and sleep when I heard Rahab's nickering turn into a series of snorts. I knew to listen carefully, and I heard a rustling sound in the bushes behind me. I slowly took hold of my revolver and ever so slowly turned around so as not to excite whoever or whatever was behind me. As my eyes accustomed to the darkness, I fixed my sight on two glowing eyes. Not knowing what it was, I took a couple of shots in the general direction to scare it away. I should have shot at it directly because it sprang toward me rather than away from me. It was a Catamount or what I often refer to as a Mountain Lion. I prefer to call this cat a Mountain Lion because I had seen the enormous teeth and claws of a huge Mountain Lion that had been killed after it attacked and killed an entire family of settlers. Those weapons are terrifying. I continued to shoot at the lion – missing it again and again. It stopped, looked at me in wonder, and calmly turned and strode away – probably thinking that the campfire and I were not worth dealing with at the time. Needless to say, I did not sleep well that night, but I was aware that Rahab had once again saved my life.

Halfway from Stephenville to Jacksboro is a newly established community founded by J.A. Lynch and his family. I stopped there and spent the night at the Lynch homestead. Mr. Lynch told me of an interesting discovery that he had made as he and his family were traveling through the area on their way to far West Texas. He discovered

an underground stream from which flowed a rather foul-tasting water. After drinking this water for a few days, he began to notice the pain from his rheumatism was beginning to subside. He staked a claim and dug several deep wells to bring more water to the surface. He established a local well from which sprang water that is becoming famous for its medicinal qualities. He told me of his plans to begin a community surrounding these wells he had dug. I told him that this area is part of my Methodist preaching circuit and that we should continue to visit about establishing a Methodist presence for the community. Mrs. Lynch was all for this as she had grown up in the Methodist Church. That night I slept well in spite of the somewhat foul taste left in my mouth from that miracle cure drinking water. The next morning Mr. Lynch and his wife packed me up with plenty of food and water for the trip to Jacksboro. I bid them goodbye and told them I would stop regularly on my circuit to preach for the new community.

Once in Jacksboro, I met with Chaplain Sherman. He is one of my sources of information for sharing the latest news with people on my circuit. He gives me newspapers that arrive from the Dallas/Fort Worth area every week. I shared the story of the Mountain Lion with Chaplain Sherman. He shook his head and said, "Follow me young man, I have something to give you." He took me to his quarters and dug out a double barrel side-by-side scattergun with a shortened barrel. He said, "This is known as a 'Riding Shotgun.' Since you missed that cat so many times, I am giving you this scattergun. Just point it in the general direction of anyone or anything that intends to kill you. The gun will do the rest. Not even you can miss the target." This little lesson from Chaplain Sherman stung a little because I am a good shot – at least when I am not rattled. I thanked him graciously and assured him that this would make a difference in my ability to survive on the trail.

I have already determined what I will speak on at the services in all of the communities for Thanksgiving and Christmas. Many people have expressed to me that they believe themselves to be Christians. They believe in Jesus and have dedicated their lives to doing their best to live as Jesus commands. However, they express that they sometimes wonder if they are truly saved, and they are afraid that they might find out they are not saved when they face God at the end. After all, Jesus says that some people who believe themselves to be saved find out too late that they really are not. As Jesus said, *"Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of My Father in heaven. On that day many will say to Me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and cast out demons in Your name, and do many deeds of power in Your name?' Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me you evil doers.'"* (Matthew 7:21-23).

John Wesley, founder of the Methodist Church, refers to the "Almost Christian" - a person with a desire to serve God and do His will and the "Altogether Christian" - a person who has trust and confidence of salvation. Wesley stated, "The right and true Christian faith is not only to believe that Holy Scripture and the articles of our faith are true, but also to have a sure trust and confidence to be saved from everlasting

damnation by Christ – it is a sure trust and confidence which a man hath in God that by the merits of Christ his sins are forgiven, and he reconciled to the favor of God – whereof doth follow a loving heart to obey his commandments.”

I want people to understand that in this world, we strive to be the “Altogether Christian.” We want the assurance that we truly are saved, and we can face God in heaven with confidence that we will be accepted into our eternal heaven to live with God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit and all the saints who have gone before us. I want everyone to understand that those who sincerely desire God’s forgiveness will receive it. All one needs to do is believe that Jesus died for their sins, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven. Salvation is being saved or rescued from the penalty of separation from God. To be saved from our sin, we take these three steps: We ask forgiveness for our sins; We are willing to turn from our sins; and We believe that Jesus Christ—our Lord and Savior—died for our sins and rose again.

As part of each Thanksgiving and Christmas service, we will dedicate or rededicate ourselves to Christ by confessing and repenting of our sins. We will ask Jesus to enter our lives as our Lord and Savior. We are then saved by grace through faith. Together we will pray:

“Dear God, I know I am a sinner. I am sorry for the times I fail to follow Your will, and I want to turn from my sinful nature. I trust Christ alone as my Lord and Savior. From now on, I am Yours with my whole heart and soul. Lord, I ask you to

*“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me”
(Psalm 51:10).*

Jesus, today I hear you knocking at the door of my heart, and I accept you into my life. I believe that You are the Son of God, that You died for my sins, and You were raised from the dead to reign forever and ever in heaven and on Earth.”

Amen

In Jacksboro, we held a camp meeting to celebrate the Thanksgiving Holiday. We prayed and sang hymns of praise to God to show our thankfulness to Him for all of the blessings He bestows upon us. I conducted three baptisms, held Holy Communion, and even officiated two weddings. I cannot deny that one of my favorite blessings from God is the wonderful pecan crops that are harvested each November. I enjoy feasting on pecans and wild berries on the trail during the early winter months. Pecans are my absolute favorite tree nut. These nuts lovingly supply their heavenly taste to various pies, cakes, cobblers, and cookies. I must say there was no shortage of pecan pastries at our Thanksgiving celebration.

After some long goodbyes to the good people of Jacksboro, I hit the trail. Needless to say, I was overloaded with pecan pastries from the ladies in the community. It took two days to travel to the Graham and Salt Creek area. The weather was still mild, and I was really enjoying camping overnight in God’s beautiful creation. The second

morning I was traveling along the trail, and I kept hearing a rustling noise in the thickets to my right. Rahab sensed it as well and kept snorting a warning to me. I brought Rahab and Sadie to a stop, and I shouldered the scattergun and waited. I spotted a movement in the brush along with the rustling noise and I called out, "You had better show yourself before I let loose with this scattergun!" To my surprise, there was no response...just more rustling. I let loose a charge into the air, and I saw a wolf or a coyote turn tail and head deeper into the thicket. I then heard a yelp which sounded like a dog's holler. I followed the yelping and found a dog which looked more like a mangy wolf than a dog. He had tangled himself up good in a briar patch. He was quite tame and pitiful as I freed him from his spiny embrace. He demonstrated gratitude with plenty of licks, and he frolicked around the legs of Rahab and Sadie. They both showed their displeasure by kicking a little in his direction.

As I mounted Rahab to continue on my way, the dog nosed at my saddle bag full of food. I tossed him some pecan pastries supplied to me by my wonderful people in Jacksboro, and he gobbled them in mid-air before they hit the ground. I realized two things then. One, like me, he loved pecans, and two, I now most likely had a dog. I said, "Okay if you follow me, I will keep you. Your name, like it or not, will be 'Rustler' because of all that noise you make on the trail. Be sure to get along with Rahab and Sadie or you will regret it." Sure enough, he followed and adopted all of us as his new family. We were turning into quite a crowd. I wondered if some day Angela might join us on our circuit. What a crazy thought that was! Why on Earth would she want to live and travel in a rough wilderness?

In the Salt Creek area, we conducted our Thanksgiving services on the grounds of Fort Belknap which was abandoned about 10 years ago. The community still uses some of the buildings for meeting purposes. We used the parade ground area next to the grape arbor as the spot for a camp meeting. Along with the message on assurance of salvation, I talked to the people about being thankful. I said, "Brothers and Sisters, God wants us to be thankful for all that He does for us." I shared with them the parables of *The Lost Sheep and The Lost Coin* (Luke 15:1-10). "Jesus tells us through these parables that we must be thankful and joyful each time someone who was lost is found. God wants our highest level of thankfulness – our profound 'bottom-of-the-heart' thankfulness - our 'Thank you for saving me' thankfulness. We owe Jesus our highest level of thanks. He saved us. He pulled us from drowning in sin and granted us eternal life through believing in Him. Because of Jesus, we get to live forever with God and those saints who have gone before us."

I shared some scriptures with them on thankfulness, "King David said 'Oh give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, for His steadfast love endures forever!' (Psalm 107:1). The Apostle Paul tells us, 'Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.' (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). God rejoices with us, Brothers and Sisters, when we truly are thankful for his grace

and mercy!" At the end of the service, we sang, prayed, and shared news with one another. We held communion and conducted a few baptisms as well.

On the way to Breckenridge, I picked up some newspapers. I carry these newspapers to all of my communities to keep them knowledgeable of what is going on in Texas and in the country. I especially appreciated the November 10, 1877 issue of the *Graham Leader* that carried an article about the evils of living in the big city – where gambling, drinking and a thousand other evils are available to corrupt one's soul. However, a man who has a good farm, with a loving wife and cheerful children is certainly living the way God intended. I decided to incorporate those ideas into a sermon one day.

Continuing on the road to Breckenridge, I met someone who appeared to be a Comanche Warrior. He was on foot and waiting for me as I approached him on the trail. He was not dressed in a war-like fashion, and he lifted his hand to me in a sign of peace. He could not take his eyes off of Rahab. Now, I will admit that she is a beautiful horse. She is a blue roan blanket Appaloosa. She has the most beautiful white blanket with black spots. This breed is a mix between wild horses and the American Quarter horse. They are known for their speed, intelligence, and long-distance trail riding. They are coveted by many Indian tribes, and they are becoming more and more rare as the Indians struggle with the U.S. Government takeover of their lands. As a result, many of their prize horses have been stolen or killed. I think of this as I surveyed the Indian Brave. I couldn't help but think that he was probably looking to steal Rahab, so I kept my hand in the vicinity of my scattergun in case he made an aggressive move towards me.

What surprised me most about this man was that he spoke to me in the English language. He introduced himself to me, "I am known as Pallaton. However, my white friends call me Paul. I have friends who have told me about you – a man of God who travels to many villages and talks to people about his God." I introduced myself to him and explained that he was correct about my occupation, and that I was on my way to the village of Breckenridge.

He called to someone in the thicket and out came a woman and two children. He introduced them to me as his mate, Angeni, his son, Talako, and his daughter, Tanis. Talako and Tanis looked to be about 8-10 years old. I in turn introduced them to Rahab, Sadie, and Rustler. I staked out Rahab and Sadie, built a fire, and prepared something for us to eat. I gave them some of the water from Mr. Lynch's well, and they all made funny faces as they drank. I hoped that they didn't think that I was trying to poison them.

Paul shared with me that he was curious about our God and our Christmas celebration of God's son. He didn't understand our religion because it was so different from his. He explained to me that the Comanches believe in a creator spirit and its counterpart, the evil spirit. They also pray to the Sun, the Earth, the Moon, natural objects, and some animals as spirits who will listen and help them with what they need to survive. He described the Waterbird as a religious symbol to the Comanche people.

Its feathers, when used in a fan, may carry strong medicine of healing power. He explained that many Comanche have turned to the peyote religion as a giver of visions and a door to earthly paradise. He personally did not follow the smoking or ingesting of the peyote plant as he saw no lasting benefits from these out-of-body experiences.

I thanked him for sharing his religion with me, and I told him about our celebration of Jesus at Christmas time. I knew that I would have to explain this in very simple terms as Paul had no background whatsoever in our belief in God. I said, "At this time of year, we celebrate God who is the all-powerful creator of this world, the sun, the moon and all the stars in the sky. We celebrate Him because He loves us and provides for us all that we need. He wants us to love Him and to love the people around us. We don't always love Him and our fellow humans as we should, so we are disobedient to God. We ask God to forgive us, and He does if we are truly sorry. Many years ago, the Son of God, Jesus, came to our world in human form as a baby so He could grow up with us and be one of us. He gave us messages from God about how we should live. Jesus was put to death by His enemies, but after three days He came back to life proving that He was the Son of God. He told us that He gave His life for us as a sacrifice to God to atone for our disobedience and reunite us with God. Then He was lifted into the sky to be with God. After our bodies die here in this world, our spirits can go to be with God forever if we believe what Jesus did for us. So, this time of year is when we celebrate Jesus' birth and His life.

I know that was a lot for this family to absorb, so we continued to talk about the great creator God and how He loves us and wants us to be with Him forever in a perfect world. Paul certainly understood how both the White men and the Indian tribes fail to treat others around them in a good and kind way. We talked about what God wants for every person on Earth: happiness, peace, kindness, honorableness, truthfulness, and responsibility for what one does to others. He shared with me that he and his family had left the reservation with permission to seek out purchasing some land on which to farm and raise his family. I discovered later that the U.S. Government was experimenting to see if some Comanche families could be "civilized" and incorporated into American society by allowing them to transform from being hunters and warriors to farmers and stockmen. Paul did not know exactly where to seek a homestead, so I told him about the village of Coleman on my circuit that I knew would be at least somewhat welcoming to an Indian family. I will look for them in the future to see if I can help with their acclimation to the White man's world.

In Breckenridge, we stayed with the Williams family for the first night. I always thoroughly enjoy visiting with the children of this family. I had many stories to tell them including my run-in with the Catamount and how I almost shot Rustler. The older children took loving care of Rahab and Sadie while the younger children fawned over Rustler by pulling stickers from his fur, giving him a bath and brushing his long hair. I could tell Rustler was loving this kind attention - maybe for the first time ever. I estimate

that Rustler is about a year old and guess that he was somewhat ignored or abused previously.

A new family had moved into Breckenridge and was disputing that the visiting preacher should stay with them instead of the Williams or the Johnson families. I have seen this kind of competition before, and it is not healthy for the Church. It is best to quickly establish a "neutral" place for the preacher to stay when in town such as a room in the church building, a local parsonage, or even a boarding house room. It is also best to select or build a neutral meeting place in the community rather than holding services at a family's private homestead. Competing for the attention of a pastor is not a healthy way to build a church community.

The Christmas service was filled with Christmas carols, hymns, and scriptures about the birth of Christ. The children put on a Christmas pageant with songs and recitations as well as a recreation of the nativity. At one point the children got bored, the babies started crying, and the animals recruited for the pageant had enough and wandered off. We knew it was time to eat and socialize. We thanked God for the bounteous harvest and His many blessings and grace showered upon us all. We ate, told stories, shared news, and played hard. A great time was had by all. The next day we held a service with Holy Communion, and I conducted three baptisms and two funerals.

Of course in the tradition of Christmas, sleet and snow set in while we were in Breckenridge. We tried to wait out the inclement weather, but we needed to keep moving as we were behind on our expected arrival at Comanche. Two days later when we bid everyone goodbye and headed for Comanche, the sleet and snow had subsided, but it was very cold, and the wind just would not let up. The community of Breckenridge piled Sadie up high with extra blankets and tarps to protect us until we got to our overnight stopping place.

It was an all-day push, but we walked into Ranger Camp Valley just as it was getting dark. This newly established community derived its name from the Texas Rangers, who in the early 1870's had a camp in a valley about two miles northeast of Palo Pinto Creek. The Rangers moved on from this area, but others came to establish a community. This beautiful valley now housed a tent city with a tent church and school as well as tents for a store and a boarding house. This community is growing so much and so quickly that it will soon need to be added to the circuit as a regular stop. The community people very graciously found us places to put up for the night, and the next morning we held a Christmas service, Holy Communion, and five baptisms. I also presided over funerals for several recently dug graves.

By the afternoon, we were loaded up to continue the trail to Comanche. We pitched camp by the Leon River about a half a day's travel north of Comanche. Fortunately, the weather was improving, and we found a tight grove of Live Oak trees to provide shelter for us. The grove of trees shielded us from the wind, and once we had a

roaring fire going, it was toasty warm. Rustler proved himself to be a valuable asset as his guttural growls scared off anything that came within smelling distance of our camp. I must admit his growls scared me also. I could tell that the wolf in him was going to be a formidable force to deal with, and that he would be an excellent watch dog and protector.

We arrived in Comanche the next afternoon – just in time for Christmas Eve. The town of Comanche is well established. It was founded in 1858. The Post Office was established in 1860 and the newspaper, *The Comanche Chief*, began publication in 1873. The town has many businesses and is the main supplier for the ranches in the area. The major focus in this area of Texas is ranching and cattle. I visited with Sheriff John Thompson to see if there was any news on the three members of Wes Hardin's gang who I wounded on the trail a while back. He told me that there is some cattle rustling going on in the area and he wouldn't be surprised if those boys were involved. However, he did not know for certain of their whereabouts. He warned me to stay vigilant. I didn't need to be told that. I cannot help but think that one day I might feel a sharp pain in my back followed by the retort of a rifle shot. Jake Colter is a bushwhacker – no doubt.

We held a community-wide Christmas Eve service in the Baptist Church that evening. Brother Thomas Benson, the Baptist Preacher, presided over the service. He preached on the journey that Joseph and Mary took to Bethlehem to enroll for their taxation and how they couldn't find a place to stay that night. I wondered how Joseph felt about taking Mary on that long journey as pregnant as she was, and how guilty he must have felt that Mary had to deliver her first-born baby in a stable. We now know that was God's plan all along. Jesus was to be born in low circumstances. He was not to enter our world as a royal or a conquering general. I also wondered about how terrified the shepherds must have been when a million or more angels interrupted their boring night heralding the good news about the birth of the Messiah, "*And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men*" (Luke 2:13-14).

Brother Benson allowed me to preside over the candlelight service. This is my favorite part of the Christmas Eve celebration. We doused all of the lights but for one candle – the Christ Candle. Each person carried an unlit candle. By beginning with one lit candle and spreading the light throughout the sanctuary one person at a time, we see how the light of Jesus entered a very dark world, but His light quickly spread from one person to the next until all corners of the world were sharing His glorious light. This is how I see the Texas Wilderness. It is dark now, but each day we make it brighter and brighter by sharing the love of Jesus with everyone we meet.

The rest of that evening was filled with joy and laughter. We prayed, sang Christmas Carols, ate wonderful food (including pecan pastries), told stories, and shared news. I stayed that night with Brother Benson in his parsonage. Several of the Methodist boys took Rahab and Sadie to their barn and fed and rubbed them down.

Rustler stuck with me like glue. He wanted to keep me in his sight...or at least the pecan treats within his grasp.

On Christmas Day, the Methodist Church met in the schoolhouse and held services there. I conducted Holy Communion and three baptisms. No one wanted to get married on Christmas Day - for that I was very grateful. In my opinion, weddings should be performed on days other than Easter and Christmas. On these two occasions our focus should be on God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Funerals, however, in my opinion should be performed anywhere, anytime, and according to the wishes of the family. For the sermon, I focused on the birth of Jesus and who He is to us.

The sermon went something like this, "Brothers and Sisters, at Christmas time we focus on taking care of family, good friends, acquaintances and even strangers. It is a wonderful season of cheer, of tolerance, of forgiveness, of charity, of giving of gifts. On this day, we must remember above all else that we have been given the greatest gift that God could give us – His Son. *"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace"* (Isaiah 9:6). We must never forget that Jesus came to Earth in human form as a baby to grow up as one of us, to live with us, and teach us all we need to know about God's love. We must remember that God came down to dwell with us, *"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel which means 'God with us'"* (Matthew 1:23). If that wasn't enough, he acted as a perfect sacrifice by piling all of the sins of humanity on His shoulders and bore them to the cross where He died in our place. We deserve to die for our sins, but Jesus took that death for us so we could live with God forever. Jesus is many things to us, but most of all He is our savior. He gave himself up to die in our place so that we will not have to die a second death. This is the greatest gift we focus on today.

We celebrated into the night with one another and made plans for future sermons and visits, and we talked about the needs of the church and activities that will be coming up in the new year of 1878. I visited with Brother Benson well into the wee hours of the morning. It is not often I get a chance to visit with a preacher who has been serving a call from God for over 20 years. He is a good role model and counselor for me. I am grateful for him and all of my preacher friends who generously take the time to mentor me and act as my spiritual advisor. Many people think that a preacher is his own spiritual advisor, but that is not true. Preachers need spiritual guidance just as much as anyone. We preachers seek guidance from people of God as well as from the Holy Spirit.

The next morning, I packed up my group and headed home to Dublin. It will be good to get home. We have been on the circuit trail for over five weeks. We are all exhausted and ready for some time off. Generally we are allowed to take several weeks off when needed. I believe that time off has now come for me, Rahab, Sadie....and even Rustler.

Once back in Dublin I visited with family and friends. I spent a lot of time with my best friend, Jeremiah, to hear what he has been up to. I told him about the possibility of a new circuit further west of Dublin. He is also thinking about a change of scenery, so we talked about future possibilities. Sadly, I received a message from Copperas Creek that Jonathan Walters killed himself. He was never able to function successfully after the massacre of his family. His neighbors and the whole community surrounded him with love and prayer, but to no avail. He wrote a letter to the members of the community thanking them for their concern, but he told them he could not go on without his family. He ended his life with a gun. This reinforced to me how desperately this section of Texas, where I have proposed a new circuit, needs the spiritual guidance of a pastor.

The next day as I was stepping out of the general store in Dublin, a shot rang out and a bullet thudded into the wall behind me right next to my head. I ducked behind a wagon and laid out for a minute to see if another shot was coming. It did not. People surrounded me and wanted to know who would want to kill me. I said, "I don't know who would want me dead. Perhaps someone disagrees with some of my theological views." I tried to laugh it off, but no one would let me. "You need to go to the sheriff right now." The crowd took me by the hand and led me to the sheriff.

The Sheriff of Erath County happened to be in town, and he was concerned. He warned me to be careful around town and even at my father's ranch. "People are often murdered in the strangest places," he said. "In the past five years, I have witnessed several people shot dead in their own outhouses." He told me a story of the bushwhacking of an outlaw in an outhouse by a town posse. The posse saw the outlaw enter the outhouse, and they called for him to "Come out with your hands empty and raised high." When he refused, they shot the outhouse full of holes – over two hundred was the final count. Outhouses are not well-built and certainly not built to repel bullets. The outlaw had over thirty bullet holes in his body – he was pronounced dead right there in the privy.

Willie heard about what happened and looked me up at my father's ranch. He told me to take a sidearm with me everywhere I go – even to church. He warned, "Someone is definitely out to get you, and we need to get him first." Filled with frustration, I asked, "How do I get someone first if I have no clue who it is?" Willie shook his head, "You know exactly who it is, and so do I." With that said, Willie turned and left.

The next day, someone came into town and announced that the local vigilantes had been at it again. A man was spotted hanging from a tree just north of the Leon River. It turned out to be Jake Colter. There were numerous horse tracks, so it looked like the work of the vigilantes. There was a note pinned to his shirt which read, "This is what happens to horse thieves and bushwhackers." Everyone figured that Jake had it coming, and the case was closed. I wondered if Willie was behind chasing Jake down and stringing him up. Later that day I asked Willie if he was involved, and he said, "I don't recall." I let it go, but I had high hopes that it indeed was Jake behind the shooting, so I could now put my worries to rest.

I had been thinking about possibly seeing Angela during the New Year's Break from the circuit. I could not quit thinking about her. I desperately wanted to get to know her better, so I packed up Rahab, Sadie, and Rustler; and I headed out for Coleman. We spent one night on the trail, and we walked into Coleman the next evening. I checked the Cooper homestead to see if Angela was there. Mrs. Cooper said that she was at the Fuller homestead taking care of Mr. Fuller. He was down with consumption and was not doing well at all. I said hello to Ruth and Judith. They couldn't stop giggling and saying that I must really be in love with Angela because I had come so far in cold weather just to look at her! I said, "Not true, I came to see you two. I will be back in two shakes of a lamb's tail." This seemed to thrill them even more. I am beginning to realize that I will be courting not just Angela but the whole family.

I found Angela at Jim Fuller's place, and she was administering to Jim as best she knew how. She was glad to see me, but she did not turn her attention away from Mr. Fuller. She continued to swab him down with cool cloths and constantly checked his pulse and breathing rate. She was also administering the pain killers that the doctor prescribed for him. Mrs. Fuller had taken her children to the neighbor's tent and asked them to keep them for a few days. It seemed that was all Mr. Fuller had left. Mrs. Fuller was at her husband's side, and she was grief stricken. She asked me, "Why doesn't God intervene every time we pray? I have been asking Him for months to cure Jim. Not only has God not healed Jim, but He has also not relieved his pain the slightest bit. He is suffering more than ever. I don't think that God even cares a little bit!

I hear Mrs. Fuller's words of grief. I, too, struggle with the concept of why some of us die long, painful deaths; and some of us die peaceful, pain-free deaths. We all die. Even Jesus Christ died. Jesus' death was especially painful and cruel. Those Romans were masters at making death torturous and cruel. Sometimes we pray for healing of a body, and it is not granted. Sometimes we pray to God for relief of pain, and it is not granted. So where is God in all of this? Why doesn't He offer healing every time we ask for it? Does God grieve for us when we grieve?

I think to myself that we all know to pray God's will to be done even when we want God to do what we believe is the best thing for us. We are told that we should trust God and have faith that God in His infinite wisdom knows what is best for us. God tells us, *"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways," declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8-9).* I believe that one of God's greatest concerns is that we are made whole. When Jesus was confronted with the paraplegic, He did not immediately heal him. He first forgave him of his sins (**Mark 2:1-5**). As some people say, "It is better to have no legs than to walk straight to hell on two good legs."

Does God grieve when we grieve? Yes. Jesus grieved for us on numerous occasions. When his friend Lazarus died, Jesus wept. *"When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. 'Where*

have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" (John 11:32-37).

Is God willing to heal us? Yes. *"When Jesus came down from the mountain, large crowds followed Him. Suddenly a leper came and knelt before Him, saying, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean. Jesus reached out His hand and touched the man. "I am willing," He said. "Be clean!" And immediately his leprosy was cleansed" (Matthew 8:1-3).* Jesus is always willing to heal - sometimes in ways we do not understand. We can be confident that God will always work to make us whole. He knows how to do that better than we do.

Will God get us through our grieving? Yes. As Peter told us, *"And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you" (1 Peter 5:10).*

I did my best to comfort Mrs. Fuller and tell her these thoughts on God's grace and mercy even in the hardest of times. She seemed to be comforted by hearing God's word, and she continued to hold her best friend's hand. I told her that she has one of Jim's hands ... and Jesus is holding the other... ready to take him to paradise when it is time. I also reminded her that she and her family are surrounded by people who love them and will care for them throughout this stressful time. I stayed and prayed with the Fuller family and talked to them about the love of God. I did my best to comfort them

That night I stayed with a friend of the Cooper family as it would not be appropriate for me to stay in the Cooper's tent. I stayed several more days and met with more people in Coleman to talk to them about a Methodist presence in the community. I also talked with Angela about our pursuing a relationship with each other, and she said, "I would like that, but you had better come see me often. I don't know how well a long-distance relationship will work out." Believe me when I say I didn't want to be a long distance from her either. I asked Mrs. Cooper for permission to see Angela, and she agreed. So Angela and I made a pact to see each other exclusively and explore the possibility of marriage. We talked about the training that Angela would need to become a doctor and also about building a house for her family. I checked with local carpenters and got the planning on that task started. I also talked to the community leaders about Paul, my new Indian friend, and his family should they appear in Coleman.

It was hard to say goodbye, but duty calls. On the road back to Dublin, I ponder whether or not Angela and I will marry...if a new circuit including Coleman will be approved...whether or not I would be granted that circuit...will I be okay to leave my Dublin family...what will happen to Paul and his family...what Jeremiah might decide to do? My head was swimming and starting to hurt, so the Holy Spirit brought to my memory a passage from Jesus' own mouth, *"Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble" (Matthew 6:34).*

I shook my head and smiled a little at my own folly. I said to the Holy Spirit, "Thank you for reminding me. I will let go of trying to control things through worry and hand everything over to God." I turned my attention back to the trail and readied myself for all the joys and challenges that this day would bring. I didn't want to miss a thing!

Matt Stephen

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