

Jedediah Webb - Circuit Rider

Chpt. 8

Fall/Winter 1878

Immediately after Thanksgiving Day, Jeremiah and I loaded up to hit the Brownwood/Buffalo Gap Circuit for the pre-Christmas run. We plan to stop at all 5 communities and make it back to Coleman in time for Christmas. We will leave time to stop at some homesteads in between the towns to get to know people on the trail. One never knows when a homestead might turn into a settlement and then progress into a township. I will have a chance to introduce Jeremiah to the people on the circuit.

I loaded up Rahab and Sadie and headed over to Jeremiah's homestead. Jeremiah had loaded up Esther and was saying goodbye to his wife, Rachel, and his children. He had mixed feelings about leaving his family, but he understood the importance of getting to know the people on this new circuit. By the way, I asked Jeremiah why he named his horse Esther since he has a daughter of the same name. He said it was his daughter's idea - something about the connection would allow her to watch over him through the eyes of his horse while he was on the trail. I will have to ask Rahab if I can name my daughter after her. I suspect she will say, "No, of course not. I am your one and only Rahab." Oh yes, and Rustler insisted on going with us. When he was sure that Jeremiah's kids had no more treats to give him, he joined us on the trail.

I have come to believe that by leaving the Dublin circuit, I am now "jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire." The Dublin circuit was the roughest and most isolated circuit in Texas, but this new circuit further west will most likely take its place as the most dangerous. Although Indian attacks have subsided, bandits and thieves are thriving. It doesn't matter the background of a person, because evil comes in all colors, nationalities, cultures, religious beliefs, and economic backgrounds.

The worst of the worst evil doers seem to like the anonymity of the wilderness area around Abilene, Brownwood, and Turkey Creek. The Colorado River provides ample cover and easy passage for bandits to steal in one area and move quickly to

safety in another area. Therefore, I am running into many people who do not want to know God. They are happy with their world the way it is. I want to encourage these bandits to change their ways, but their hearts are quite dark, and they are not ready to listen to God's word much less obey it. Jesus told his disciples, *"If anyone does not receive you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet as you leave that house or that town"* (Matthew 10:14). This might be surprising advice from Jesus; but I know that with some people, it is wise to wait and try to communicate with them after time goes by. The Holy Spirit can work on a person in between contacts with a preacher.

The Holy Spirit tells me that my persistence in sharing God's love can open people's hearts as to what love is, and that prepares them to listen to God's word. Faith is a choice we each must make on our own. It is an act of personal will. If we choose to reject Jesus and His sacrifice for us, we must rely on our own deeds to get us into Heaven. And that is impossible as we can never be perfect. As much as I want to convert people to Christ immediately, I have learned to be patient and allow for the right time to occur.

Jeremiah and I determined that the sermon topic for each community on this trip would be "God's love and protection." Every community in this circuit knows what it is to be threatened at every moment by wild animals, wild people, and nature itself. It is an unofficial requirement to carry weapons everywhere one goes – even to church. Everyone carries a gun into church. Even the women carry wicked derringers in their purses. Most children will carry knives and slingshots with them. Even the smallest of children will carry wooden guns everywhere they go.

It is important that the people know that God is aware of their struggles against evil and that He will protect them. Paul tells us that our true enemy is evil forces, *"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. God will protect us from the 'evil one'"* (Ephesians 6:12). As destructive as Satan and his demons are, the Lord promises to protect us. Paul tells us, *"But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one"* (2 Thessalonians 3:3).

We see the strength that evil gives to people, but we also know that we are strengthened through the backing of the almighty God! *"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble"* (Psalm 46:1). Moses encouraged the Israelites by saying, *"Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the Lord your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you"* (Deuteronomy 31:6). God told us through the prophet Isaiah, *"Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand"* (Isaiah 41:10).

It seems that each community is having some unique difficulties handed to it by the evil in this world. As Jeremiah and I travelled through Brownwood, we found that there were bandits from Mexico marauding in the area. Often times, these bandits would round up cattle and take them down to Mexico and sell the beef to the Cuban market. As strapped as they were for manpower, the Texas Rangers from all over Texas would be moved to the Mexican border to deal with these cattle thieves. When the Texas Rangers from Brownwood were called down to the border, it would leave the Brownwood area unprotected.

In Copperas Creek, we discovered that Sam King, or "Red Lobo" as he was known, was harassing the settlers. Red Lobo was a White man controlling a gang of desperados. He and his gang would steal anything they could find. They would hit the people who were already destitute and steal whatever they had of value – even food and clothing. Although there was no record of them killing anyone, their presence in the area kept the settlers ever present at their homesteads to protect their property. The feeling of freedom to move around and socialize with others was gone.

On the trail to Turkey Creek, Jeremiah and I found a man hanging from a tree with a sign around his neck stating, *"This is a damn horse thief."* He looked like he had been hanging for several days, but fortunately the body had not been consumed by four-legged varmints and the cold temperatures preserved him quite well. We stopped and took the time to bury the body. I couldn't help but think that the shovel that I carry is used more often for burying people than for preparing camps for the night.

The people in the homesteads we passed through just east of Abilene were experiencing rustling of their horses and cattle. The cattle drivers passing through the area on the trail from Mexico to Abilene, Kansas were too well organized and too well armed to steal from, so these rustlers stole from the good folks who homesteaded this area. Thieves usually go for the easier targets. The Texas and Pacific Railroad will be coming through this area soon, and it looks like some of these communities will become townships. The people we visited with were extremely interested in a Methodist presence. We added them to our list of stops on the circuit.

Of course, Abilene was our most interesting stop. Although Buffalo Gap has been designated as the county seat of Taylor County, it looks like the Texas and Pacific Railroad will run through Abilene sometime next year. Abilene is now being touted as the "Future Great City of West Texas." With that said, there is a lot that needs to be done in this town to make it a good place to live for decent folks.

I introduced Jeremiah around the town, and he and Doc became good friends right away. Although there are few Black people in the area, there is not so much prejudice displayed by the White folks for the Black population here as I see in other areas of Texas. Now, Indians and Mexicans are another story. They are not so well accepted overall by the good folks of Abilene. I introduced Jeremiah to the Sheriff of Taylor County, Ray Crawford. Sheriff Crawford shared with us that it is hard to make people follow civic law here in Abilene. The county jail is filled to capacity every week. I couldn't help but think that it is just as hard for preachers to get people to follow God's laws.

Jeremiah and I held a "basket meeting" service for the Abilene community over a two-day period. Although basket meetings are usually for one denomination only, we invited everyone in the community who was interested in attending. The permanent settlers in the area were happy to come, but the transient population mostly preferred to stay drunk and worship their gods in the brothels, gambling houses, and saloons.

I do know that some of these "fallen angels" attended our services because we were met on Main street on our last day in Abilene by some unruly drunks who apparently did not like our messages about God's protection from the "evil one." I

believe that they admired the evil one's presence because they shouted at us, "We have the strength given to us by the devil, and we are going to show everyone here who can win a fight – God or Satan!" With that, six men came at us swinging fists, clubs, and knives.

It wasn't a fair fight as these men were so drunk they could hardly keep their balance. It was mostly a matter of sidestepping, ducking, and grabbing their weapons; however, some of the men needed a punch or two to persuade them to stop. Jeremiah and I fended off their assault and helped them fall helplessly to the ground. We got them back on their feet and brushed them off and sat them down to hear God's word. We talked to them about good vs. evil and how God will always prevail over Satan. From that day on, Jeremiah and I were dubbed "The Fighting Preachers."

We bid farewell to Abilene and headed south to Buffalo Gap. The trip to Buffalo Gap was uneventful except that Rustler disappeared. Just as we were entering Buffalo Gap, Rustler reappeared with a friend following him. She appeared to be some kind of shepherd dog, and she was quite friendly. My nose quickly told me that she desperately needed a bath. I asked Rustler to introduce her to us; and by the wagging of his tail, I could tell he was quite pleased to add her to our family.

We met up with Ranger Maloney who introduced us to Texas Ranger Henry Armstrong who will be stationed in Coleman. Henry is 30 years old, and he has been a Texas Ranger for almost 10 years. In that time, he hunted bandits in numerous places in the Buffalo Gap and Brownwood area. He has rooted out gang members from their numerous hole-in-the-wall hideouts. He told stories about sleeping in 2 inches of water under wet blankets, camping in freezing and scorching weather, Indian ambushes, fights with desperados, and riding horses until they were nearly "all done up." He described how he and his fellow rangers are often pulled from our area to handle problems in Lampasas County as well as Laredo and the Rio Grande. Jeremiah and I both became fast friends with Henry immediately. I predicted that we would have some adventures together in the future as we all are concerned with maintaining law and order in the Coleman area.

While we were getting acquainted with Henry, we heard shooting over at the bank. We saw three fellows attempting to mount their horses and hurry out of town. The bank guard was shooting at them through the bank window. Everyone on the street either scattered or lay flat on the ground. Rangers Maloney and Armstrong and I ran toward the bank. Henry yelled to the men to drop their guns and lie down. The bank robbers certainly didn't count on two Texas Rangers being in town during their bank heist. Although they had little respect for the town marshals or local sheriffs, most desperados were deathly afraid of (or at least greatly respected) the Texas Rangers. People were aware of the fact that the Texas Rangers never backed down from a fight until it was over. They could not be bluffed or cowed. The men quickly dropped their guns and hit the ground. They must have figured it was better to go to jail than to die. As the sheriff led them away to jail, one of them yelled to us, "I will get all of you one day. You will be sorry you ever seen my face!" I could not help but think, "Yeah, I've heard that before....get in line."

We said goodbye to everyone in Buffalo Gap, and we hit the trail. We got back to Coleman just before Christmas. We discovered that Jeremiah's wife, Rachel, had taken ill with Yellow Fever, and Angela and Angel were taking care of her. Jeremiah and I settled in and prepared for the Christmas Eve and Christmas Day services for the Coleman Community. Angela's sisters fell in love with Rustler's friend. After they gave her a bath, a trimming, and doused her with perfume, she smelled like fresh flowers, hence her new name, "Violet."

Christmas celebrations were great that year. My family from Dublin came to stay with me and we had a huge celebration for Christmas. Our Christmas Day celebration included my family from Dublin, Angela's family, Jeremiah's family, Paul's family and some friends in the area. It was a huge celebration of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ's birthday. We were all thankful for God's love, mercy, and many blessings that He showers upon us even in this rough Texas wilderness.

Circuit in January and February 1879

When January arrived, I was hardly ready to hit the trail, but duty calls. Jeremiah passed on riding the circuit with me this round as he was helping nurse Rachel back to

health. So, I loaded up Rahab and Sadie and we hit the trail. Rustler's friend, Violet, decided to stay with Angela and her family, but Rustler was itching to hit the trail with me. We said goodbye and headed off into the cold.

I decided that the sermon topic would be about our fresh start once we accept Jesus Christ as our Savior. It is our responsibility to grow in Christian perfection. This is what the Methodists call "sanctifying grace." Jesus tells us how to grow in our Christianity. He said, *"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor' and 'Hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Do not even tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect"* **(Matthew 5:43-47)**. Once again, Jesus raises the bar and tells us to be perfect just as God is perfect. This is no small order, and something for us to work toward with our whole hearts for the remainder of our lives.

I will also talk to them about the Methodist General Rules for the United Societies written in 1743 that help lead us to grow in our Christian perfection. First, as Christians we are to Do No Harm. We are to refrain from hurting or doing damage to ourselves, others, and the world. We are to avoid sin of every kind including taking the Lord's name in vain, profaning on the Lord's Day, drunkenness, slaveholding, fighting and quarreling, dishonest advertising, wealthy display, charging high interest, violating the Golden Rule, and doing anything that does not glorify God. Second, we are to Do Good. We are to do good of every possibility sort, and as far as possible to all people. Acts of Mercy such as visitation of the poor and imprisoned, care for at-risk children, aid to the sick, comfort to the hurting, and relief to the oppressed are called for us to do. And Third, we are to Attend Upon the Ordinances of God. We are to cultivate practices that mature our relationship with God such as Public Worship, Preaching/Teaching the Word of God, Lord's Supper, Private and Family Prayer, Scripture Study, and Fasting/Abstinence.

Over 1800 years ago, Paul warned us to be careful about how we live our lives, *"So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed. That, however, is not the way of life you learned when you heard about Christ and were taught in Him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness"* **(Ephesians 4:17-24)**.

I will challenge each person to develop a personal, intimate relationship with Jesus. To do so, we must start by speaking to Jesus at least 3 times a day, and we must read or hear God's word from the Bible at least 30 minutes a day. From there, I will encourage each person to increase their Bible time and the number of conversations with Jesus as much as they can.

This was a hard trip on the trail for all of us. Sadie was hurt by a wild hog who charged at her. She tried to kick him with her hind legs and lost her balance. She fell to the ground spilling her whole load of camping gear. A starving Mountain Lion scared us all one night by approaching our camp. One charge from the scattergun cleared that right up. Rustler nearly got into it with a couple of wolves on another night. I was able to shoot the two wolves dead before Rustler got the worst end of the fight. But the worst thing was the weather. A Blue Norther blew in while we were travelling and nearly froze us all to death. Fortunately, we did not have to spend more than two nights in camp. We were generally able to make it to a settlement or a homestead for protection from the sleet and snow before nightfall.

I am painfully aware of why most circuit riders die or retire from circuit riding by the age of 30. I am not far from that, and the perils of the trail are taking its toll on me, Rahab, and Sadie. Rustler acts as though he is having the time of his life. He looks upon each day as a new adventure in a wonderful land. I pray to the Holy Spirit to give

me the same spirit as Rustler has and to guide me and keep a fire burning within me to bring others to Christ regardless of the hardships of the trail. However, I am beginning to think more about taking a pastorship of one church in one community. I will pray for that and talk to Angela about our future.

Back in Coleman, I checked in with Jeremiah, Paul, and Henry (I call us the 4 Musketeers because we are all itching for adventure all the time) to see how they and their families were doing. Jeremiah said that Rachel was recovering very well from the Yellow Fever. Paul was doing well with his Bible studies and was getting ready to minister to the growing Indian population in Coleman. Henry is single, but several of the girls in Coleman are chasing him. He is not running from them very quickly, but he realizes that the life of a Texas Ranger is not compatible with marriage.

Circuit in March and April 1879

In March, I was ready to hit the circuit again. The weather was much better, and the travel experience was more enjoyable. I was still on my own as Jeremiah was not ready to leave Rachel. I had orders from Angela to be more careful than usual and to return in one piece in time for the wedding the first week of May. I looked around for Willie to accompany me, but he was not to be found anywhere. No one had seen or heard from him in a long time.

With two full months to travel the circuit, I was able to spend an extended amount of time at each town in order to fully establish a of calendar events and sermon agendas for the coming year. At my first stop in Brownwood, I found that the Rangers stationed there had been summoned to Palo Pinto County to clean up some gang activity. The Brazos River in Palo Pinto County is a particular challenge due to all of the caves, hills, and gorges that provide many perfect hiding places for thieves on the run. Due to budget constraints, the Texas Governor was calling Texas Rangers from their normal stations to take care of "hot spots" around the state. My Texas Ranger friend, Henry Armstrong, had already been called away to help Texas Rangers Major Jones and Lt. Arrington clean up the thieving along the Texas Frontier. I must admit that I fantasize about enlisting as a chaplain for the Texas Rangers, but I would never share that thought with Angela.

After leaving Brownwood, I held a camp meeting for Turkey Creek and Copperas Creek. We had the best time with singing, praying, baptisms, weddings, preaching, and of course eating. There were almost 200 people in attendance, and everyone participated in an auction to raise money to build a chapel between the two towns to serve as a place for camp meetings to be shared by all churches. The women wanted to auction me off as a date with an eligible bachelor, but I reminded them that I was getting married in less than two months. I guess that they hoped I had called off the wedding. I wondered what Angela would think about this.

After a spiritually uplifting camp meeting, many of the church members returned to their homesteads to find that they had been robbed of possessions during the two-day camp meeting. It is disheartening to see things like this happening while we busy ourselves worshipping God. Evil is strong in the hearts of many people. I know that when Jesus Christ comes back to rule the Earth for 1,000 years after the Great Tribulation, the Fruits of the Spirit: joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (**Galatians 5:22-23**) will finally rule world-wide. Until then, we must deal with the evil that humankind commits.

In Abilene, I became acquainted with fighting between two groups over land and water rights. Open range trouble is common in this area of Texas. With the 1874 invention of barbed wire and the use of water wells and windmills, many ranchers are able to fence off their land to prevent trail drivers from moving their herds across their land. This leads to fence cutting and trespassing which ultimately can lead to gun battles. Some of the honest trail drivers will make deals with ranchers, but the evil ones just cut fences and destroy pastures.

There is currently a huge uproar in town over the trial and conviction of two men over recent murders that occurred on the open range. A hanging scheduled for the murderers was postponed due to civil unrest in the area. Appeals are being made, and in the meantime, men on both sides are ready to go to war. Texas Ranger Maloney was wounded as he took a stand to protect the two men in the jail. I visited him, and he showed me the bullet wound in his left arm. He told me, "Good thing my shooting arm is

still good...I will need it before this is all over." Thankfully, several more Texas Rangers were on the way to reinforce local authorities.

With great hesitation I left my friend, Robert, and headed to Buffalo Gap. I found that this community was dealing with the murder of one of its citizens by a band of horse thieves. The citizen and his son trailed the horse thieves after they stole six of his horses. The thieves were waiting for him on the trail in ambush, and they shot him dead. His son was severely wounded, and barely made it back home. A vigilante group is out looking for the thieves. More than likely these thieves will decorate a hanging tree soon.

It was getting to be late in April, and I was in a hurry to get home. I dare not be late for the wedding. In my haste, I decided to take a shortcut to Coleman. The short cut took me from the well-defined trail and into tall grass. Sure enough, Rahab stepped into a gopher hole and fell. With that fall, I was thrown off of her. I was awakened by the wet tongue of Rustler. As I lay there, I knew that my left arm was broken. My ribs were mighty sore, and my head hurt something awful. Rabab was limping, and I could tell that she had a badly sprained leg.

I felt so guilty about getting Rahab hurt over my foolish decision. I was also worried about Angela's reaction. She told me to be extra careful. She was not going to be happy to marry a one-armed foolish preacher. This shortcut turned out to be the longest way home as we had to limp the rest of the way in.

Angela greeted me with love, compassion...and frustration. She was relieved that I was okay. I had a broken arm, bruised ribs and a head contusion. I was relieved that Rahab's sprain was minor, and she would be okay. I am sure that Rahab was pleased to finally get an extended rest while she healed up. I couldn't help but think that the joy of the circuit riding life within me was running thin. I am not sure how much longer I can keep this up. Was full-time pastoral work calling my name?

Now, it is well known that few preachers riding the circuit "lead about a wife." The life of a traveling preacher is not well-suited for a woman. It is mostly thought that a woman's duty is to create a stable family life for her husband and her children, and that is difficult if not impossible for a woman to do for a traveling preacher. Women are

required to meet certain criteria to be a preacher's wife. They must be women of God and have indisputable personal character and integrity. They must be willing to serve their husband as well as the people of the church. In a way, the wife of a preacher answers a calling from God to love and support His people just as much as the preacher does. I know that Angela will be a great preacher's wife, but also I know she will break some molds of thinking about a woman's role in serving God. I am excited to see that happen in our future.

On May 6th, Angela and I found ourselves standing in front of Jeremiah with a Bible in his hand reading to us the vows of marriage. God makes it clear as to what the relationship between a man and a woman is all about, *"Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.' So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air and brought them to the man to see what he would call them, and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle and to the birds of the air and to every animal of the field, but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.' Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed"* (**Genesis 2:18-25**). I am certain that Angela and I have already "become as one." The closer we both get to God, the closer we come together with each other. That is a simple fact that God is the tie that holds together the bond between a man and woman.

I am excited to help create the next generation that will love and serve God. The Bible tells us that He directed humankind to populate the Earth, *"And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth"* (**Genesis 1:28**).

I am also excited about the beautiful loving relationship that God has created for a man and woman. As King Solomon wrote in his love song, *"How sweet is your love, my sister, my bride! How much better is your love than wine and the fragrance of your oils than any spice! Your lips distill nectar, my bride; honey and milk are under your tongue; the scent of your garments is like the scent of Lebanon."* **(Song of Solomon 4:10-11)**. My love for Angela truly is the best thing in my life next to my love for God. I understand now why Solomon got so "sappy" over his bride who was the love of his life.

After what seemed to be a county-wide, several-day celebration after the wedding, Angela and I borrowed a carriage and headed to our honeymoon in San Antonio. I told the people on the circuit not to expect me for at least a month; and if a preacher was desperately needed, they could contact Jeremiah for his assistance. We preachers just have to do this sometimes. Rahab was still recovering, so she did not get to go. Sadie was content to stay and take a sabbatical. Rustler and Violet were having too much fun with Angela's sisters to want to go, so we were alone for the first time ever!

We enjoyed the extravagant food and lodgings in San Antonio. It truly was an experience to live the life of the privileged for a week, but we knew that level of luxury was not for us. The money it took to pay for this trip would be spent more excitedly if it were helping those who were truly in need. God wants us to spend our time, energy, and money to help others around us. On the way home, Angela talked to me about occasionally riding the circuit with me so she can help people with their medical needs.

I believe this a promising idea, but I cannot help but think of what measures

I will have to take to ensure her safety on the trail.

Matt Stephen

June 2024