

October 14, 2001

"WHERE THINGS REMAIN THE SAME..."

"Therefore we will not fear though the earth be removed; and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea." **Psalm 46:2**

Some friends of ours retired early, a year or two ago, and built a new, lovely home at One Hundred Land's End Lane, in the Village of Port Townsend in the state of Washington, far, far away. According to them it is near enough the most beautiful and secluded spot in the entire USA, just meant for retirees, overlooking the majestic Sound on one side and the towering mountains on the other, with a rustic flavor and so much privacy, that now and then they have to drive up to the top of Land's End Lane just to see how the rest of the world is managing. I jest a little; but Port Townsend is said to be a mini paradise on earth, surely a great place to get away from it all. They planned their retirement well, so far.

Washington is a far piece away. It takes a whole day to get there from here, even when all planes are all flying and all on schedule. But good friends need to stay in touch. We do not often travel that far much anymore, but thanks to the magic of e-mail, we can send notes, jokes, and even sermons to each other whenever we like. And we do. Ken's sense of humor is ever ready. Karen has helped me with many things.

When I arrived at my office early yesterday, I had a response from Ken to a joke, or rather a funny religious story. I sent him the one about a man who was down, depressed and thinking of ending it all. Then he prayed for help. Within minutes, he received a telephone call from the pastor of the local Church of Almighty God. (The Pastor had dialed the man's number by mistake, or so the story goes.) The name of the Church appeared in abbreviated form on his caller ID as "Almighty God" was calling. He was so impressed he was afraid to answer it. It sure changed his attitude.

Ken responded "This story reminded me of an idea I have for your website." (Everything you say to him elicits an idea or two.) He then shared the idea, which I did not fully understand, about hyper-links and tools options. (He is one of those brainy types. I am sending those to Peggy.) But I did understand his closing paragraph. He wrote, "Richard when will you ever give up on Southeast Florida? First dimpled chads, then terrorist training, then hurricanes, and now anthrax. I know it isn't funny but maybe God is trying to tell you something. If I were you, I'd take the hint and move out to Port Townsend in the Great State of Washington. Nothing ever happens here." (Paraphrase) Wouldn't it be wonderful to find a place where everything remains the same?

It reminds me of one of the first stories published long ago by the great popular novelist James Michener, now gone, which is included in his collected short stories called "Tales of the South Pacific", the book by the way on which the Broadway Musical "South Pacific" is based.

There Michener told of the extremely wealthy man from Baltimore who grew sick and tired of all the problems in the United States in the late 1930's. He decided he would investigate some other possibilities to live where he and his wife could be safe, snug, and free of worry. So, they and their advisors traveled widely covering many of the secluded spots on earth. In time, they narrowed it all down to a few choices. They asked everyone who knew anything, and they finally made their selection. Number one choice for an out of the way paradise. They loved the sunshine and the water, lush green forests and sand and native fruits. They loved islands!

In a little while, they proudly announce their choice to their friends and associates. They waved good bye to the busy hum of events in Baltimore, Maryland, and in early 1940, they moved lock stock and barrel to a perfectly delightful Island in the South Pacific, which bore the now familiar name to us, not then, of "Guadalcanal." Guadalcanal was the most private and peaceful spot on earth.

Perhaps it was in 1939...but you know the rest of the story. Before very long the one and the same became the center of the fighting in the Pacific theater between the Allies and the Japanese in World War II. It isn't funny, I know, but it does still seem to tickle my funny bone a little bit. Guadalcanal...

I think each and every one of us yearns for a place where things would remain the same. Some people have it in where they live, or at their summer homes, or somewhere they manage to visit from time to time, on vacation or family outings and reunions. We all need a little trysting place of the spirit, where we can stroll along unhurried, as in the days of yore, a quiet little rendezvous with the way things used to be, unhindered by the busy humdrum of change. (These days I often wish that things would settle down so I could catch my breath.) Bunyan once wrote, "Things are in the saddle and ride mankind." It seems that way sometimes and you don't know where to turn to get away from it. Ken was right about Southeast Florida. I am getting to feel a little fidgety these days.

However, Mrs. Cromie and I, and our children and now grandchildren have a little place of retreat and refuge of our own. It sits on a little string of land between the head of the Barnegat Bay and the Atlantic Ocean, going up to the Coast Guard station at the Manasquan Inlet in Central New Jersey. We first went there from Pennsylvania in 1962 when our eldest daughter was still in arms. The big old ocean houses are still there, mostly dating from the turn of the Twentieth Century. There are almost no tourist spots to this day. It originated as the summer home refuge for New Yorkers and northern Jersey folk and some from Pennsylvania who could afford it. It began about the same time as Palm Beach, by the way, one hundred to one hundred ten years ago; before air conditioning came down here or up there. It seemed a good idea to get the family out of the city in the hot summers. Father usually commuted to Bay Head on the weekends.

We have been there for a little vacation in the summer for most of the years since we were married. We do not own a home there; we stay in the Chapel's manse. We were there for a few weeks this past August - September. Things seldom ever change in Bay Head, New Jersey. The same is true with it's sister town to the south, Mantoloking. I adore the shops and quiet streets (except for Main Avenue!), Twilight Lake and the Bay itself. The Beach is still private, which is apparently against the law, but you still must wear a locally issued badge to get on the beach. I also adore the Bay Head Cheese shop; the Bay Head Gourmet Deli at 82 Bridge Avenue, where I get my papers in the mornings, and Mueller's Bakery is right next door, which still has the best crumb cake in America. Dorcas' Restaurant, which almost arrogantly serves lunch only, 11:00 AM to 3:00 PM, is up the block a little.

Hoffman's Donut shop is up in Point Pleasant Beach on American Legion Way, not to be confused with Bob Hoffman's Ice Cream store down a little closer to Bay Head Borough, where you have to stand in line just to get a number then wait to be served each summer evening. Spike's Fishery Restaurant is still there on Channel Drive, as is Jack Baker's famous Lobster House and Wharfside Restaurant. You can still catch a Brielle Basin boat for a four hour outing to catch Bluefish in the Atlantic, or what ever else is running. And if all else fails Jenkinson's Amusement Park on the Board Walk, will keep you out of trouble.

The Bluffs' Hotel, once the young folk's favorite gathering place, is gone. But almost all of the homes on the Atlantic Ocean and Barnegat Bay and the Manasquan River and the Metedeconk have been there almost forever. East Avenue is still one of the finest addresses in America. Bay Head Gables is on the Main Avenue. The Fables of Bay Head (no relations to The Gables) sells antiques. Young Innocent Children's Clothing Store on Bridge Street still caters to grandmothers who can go broke trying to please the kiddies. Mark, Fore and Strike is next store where everyone can go broke.

The Old Motion Picture Show is gone too, where they used to show one single movie a night. It was converted to a mini mall some years ago. But that's ok; it currently features a candy shop with Octopus Gummy bears. The Ark Pub and Eatery is up at the corner. The prestigious Greenville Hotel and Restaurant sits proudly, newly painted on Main. The trusty Fire House, with its Annual Clam Bake on the third Saturday in August, rain or shine, is a local gathering place. Harpoon Willie's over on the Manasquan River is still worth the visit. The Bay Head Chapel is still a seasonal Church, and features fine music and preaching, and original Tiffany windows.

The Makers' Mark closed its doors last year on Route 35; but you can still buy Kate's unique, hand fashioned jewelry over in the back room at the Jolly Tar Gift Shop. Curtis' Central Market has been family owned since 1910, a delightful place. Billy and Stevie Curtis are now in charge. The same with Applegate's Hardware on Lake Avenue. And don't forget a visit to The Anchor and Palate, owned by Dick Labonte and his famous Jersey Shore prints, now run by his daughter Anne.

I said it is all peaceful, the same as ever. That's true. But, I should tell you before we go, we were packing up to leave early on the morning of September 11, 2001, when everything in the New York City area changed for good. A small town so close to the Big City will never be the same again. A friend wrote me last week to say that 300 people in little Monmouth County had died or were missing. "It's hard to find peace here these days," she wrote, "all I do is go to funerals for the parents of my students. Please pray for us." I do.

The Bible knows all about the search for solitude and peace, and how difficult it is to find and keep it. For example, the book of Genesis is the Word of God, inspired by revelation. But from a human point of view, I think the author was trying to figure out why the world is the way it is, and what went wrong.

He knows two things for sure: One, God made the world. Genesis 1:1 settles the question of how it all came to be: "In the beginning God made the Heavens and the Earth." It sounds sacred and final, but actually it was settling an argument of the day. The reigning Persian religion, Zoroastrianism, taught that the universe was created and ruled by two equally powerful forces: Good and Evil. The Monotheistic Jewish author could not abide by a power equal to Jehovah God, the Creator. He settled it in one opening sentence: "No, there are not two equal powers. There is One: The God of Heaven and Earth."

The second thing he knew was that when God made the world, He made it good, once he even writes "Very good!" Each of us has to affirm or deny that Goodness. The point is that God did not cause the trouble. Man (and Woman) did. (Are you listening Falwell and Robertson?)

The story behind the flood with Noah and his Ark is also a question of Evil vs. Good, Change vs. Continuity. Things got so bad; it says God was sorry he had made the earth.

When they went into the Promised Land, cities of refuge were established, for people to hide and get away. Later Elijah hid in a cave, but God spoke to him in a still small voice. Jeremiah wanted to stay in Anathoth, his little hometown. God said I have a job for you in Jerusalem. When David was a mighty warrior, up on the hillside, he still longed to go back down to Bethlehem, his childhood home, when things were easier and were the way they used to be.

Job 29:2 says: "Oh, that I was as in the months of old, as in the days when God watched over me; when his lamp shone upon my head, and by his light I walked through darkness. As I was in my autumn days, when the friendship of God was upon my tent..." Oh that I was as in the days of old.

Psalms 46, a favorite Psalm, says: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof. There is a river, the streams whereof make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the most High. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved: God shall help her, and that right early. The heathen raged, the kingdoms were moved; he uttered his voice, the earth melted. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Come, behold the works of the Lord, what desolations he hath made in the earth. He maketh wars to cease unto the end of the earth; he breaketh the bow, and cutteth the spear in sunder; he burneth the chariot in the fire. Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge."

With the Twenty Third, Psalm 46 is near enough the best-loved of all the Psalms. No one knows what inspired it: the threat of some great catastrophe, the siege of Jerusalem, perhaps a natural disaster. The author wants you and me to get our bearings. In 1529, when Luther wrote his magnificent Hymn "A Mighty Fortress is our God," based on the Psalm, Vienna had just been released from the Turkish Siege. Scholars argue whether the Psalm is a worship song, a prophetic lyric, or an eschatological hymn. Some say it was written for the New Years' festival. But whatever, in their time or ours, we need His present help in time of trouble.

One commentator wrote that "An honest appraisal of man's life on the earth must make a place for his sense of insecurity and loneliness." (Interpreters Bible, Psalms, Vol.4, P.241) It has always been that way, and probably always will. In recent years, for the most part, the United States of America has been spared major warfare on its own lands. But now fear and uncertainty and confusion prevail. In these recent days our Nation's confidence is shifting.

So, what better time to reintroduce the Psalm? "Therefore we will not fear though the earth be removed and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea...God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved. God shall help her and that right early. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge." In Jesus Christ our Lord, for now and forever more. Amen.

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