

“Growing Faith”
 by Anna Pinckney Straight
 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia
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Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

1 In you, O LORD, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me. 2 Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily. Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me. 3 You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name’s sake lead me and guide me, 4 take me out of the net that is hidden for me, for you are my refuge. 5 Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God

15 My times are in your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors. 16 Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love.

1 Peter 2:2-10

2 Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation — 3 if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

4 Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and 5 like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 For it stands in scripture:

“See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious;
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”

7 To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe,

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,”

8 and “A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.”

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

10 Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people;
once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Dwight McCarter has a gift.¹ An-honest-to-goodness-unique specialty. He can find people. A ranger with the National Park Service for decades, now retired, he worked in the Great Smoky Mountains. And for thirty years he was the go-to ranger to call when someone went missing.

¹ Daniel Wallace, “Dwight McCarter: The Tracker” *Garden & Gun Magazine*, December/January 2105.

“During his thirty years tracking lost souls through the Smokies and beyond McCarter rescued twenty-six people, many of them children. These days he’s still in the mountains, often thinking about those he found—and the few he didn’t.”

What made him so good? His gift wasn't a psychic ability or a sixth sense, it was seeing. Seeing what was already there, for everyone to see, but nobody else did see. Bent leaves. Broken twigs. Shifted dirt. Dwight McCarter sees even the most minute detail, and knows what it means. And he follows that path.

One child that he found, in 1994, was Philip Roman.

Philip Roman. 10 years old, in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park with his family. He wandered away for just a few minutes and was gone. Disappeared.

He had been gone for three days when Dwight McCarter was called in. And from where the trail started, McCarter was immediately able to follow where Phillip had gone, for he could see Philip's bath in the branches and twigs

A twig, Dwight told a journalist. "Slate gray, but where it's broken is white. A dot of white, no bigger than a bread crumb. 'This is how I find the children,' he says. 'I look for the white. This tells me where they went.'"

Following Philip's path, they came to a waterfall, and McCarter was able to see where the tracks emerged on the other side. So they continued up the ridge, with a plan to make multiple sweeps, "the plan was to make multiple sweeps, but it didn't take long for one of the men to holler, "Dwight, over here! Someone's talking to me from a bush!"

They had been searching for days, and Dwight accomplished their goal in a matter of hours. Phillip was found. Injured. Hungry. Frightened. But fine.

Because Dwight McCarter had learned to see little white spots.

The writer of 1 Peter is telling us that this is what it means to be a Christian. As professor David Bartlett writes, "The difference between Christians and non-Christians is not that we see different things but that we see the same things differently."²

Using images from Isaiah, Hosea, the Psalms and Exodus³, images that would have been significant and familiar to the recipients of the letter, the writer of 1st Peter gives them a new twist, a new flavor, a new vision, for these people who are God's people, charting a new path in their world.

Taking the name of Peter to give credibility, an ethical and encouraged practice of the day, this is a letter written by an elder in Rome to beginning churches- the churches still young in their faith, not yet spiritually mature. These new Christian communities are not sure how to integrate their new faith into their current lives. Should they only associate, live, and be with other Christians?

² Leander E. Keck, New Testament Editor, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, Vol. XII, "1 Peter" by David Bartlett, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998, page 268.

³ *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, pages 266-267 Isaiah 43: 20-21, Exodus 19:4-6a, Psalm 18:22, Hosea 2:23

This letter tells them that not only **can** they be with others, they must. Being a Christian doesn't mean seeing new things, it means seeing the same things in new ways.

To rejoice with those who rejoice.
 To weep with those who weep.
 Where there is hurt, to seek forgiveness rather than revenge.
 When someone is injured to step in and help,
 rather than walking around to stay on schedule.
 Meeting anger with love,
 Inequality with justice.
 Drawing the circle of inclusion ever wider.

“Draw the circle wide, draw the circle wide. No one stands alone, we'll stand side by side. Draw the circle wide; draw it wider still. Let this be our song! No one stands alone. Standing side by side, draw the circle, draw the circle wide!” writes Gordon Light.⁴

Like firefighters who don't run away from a burning building, these Christians are told that where the world is at its worst, that's where we are called to be.

Not because we have superhero strength or wisdom, but because we have faith, and know salvation.

And... 1st Peter doesn't stop with this. The writer reminds us that when we do these things. When we welcome God's kingdom into the world, not only does the world change. We change.

Our faith grows up. It matures.

The beliefs that support us when we are in elementary school are different from when we go to church camp and sing campfire songs, and are different still when we have jobs and responsibilities and know grief and loss.

Time spent with the Bible, and in the faith community, and taking what we believe our into the world, years after years, deepens our understandings.

Stages of faith, rarely linear, but always fluid.

How has your faith changed over the past few years?

If it hasn't, what are you missing?

⁴Music by Mark Miller, text by Gordon Light
<https://www.jwpepper.com/Draw-the-Circle-Wide/10061177.item>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TpK1zwKNols>

Sometimes the task of maturing in our faith means letting go of our skepticism and cynicism and embracing the wonder of a child, seeing with hope and possibility. Like in the movie, “Hook,” when Peter Pan, so very hungry, can’t see what the lost boys are so vigorously eating until he is able to imagine what they are eating, and then the feast appears, fully of smells and flavors and colors– it’s wondrous.

Sometimes the task of maturing in our faith means letting go of the need to be right, or a single solution where everything else is wrong. That Bible passages can have more than one meaning, and that communities of faith can be both places of healing and hurt, and sticking with them anyway.

There’s not a thing wrong with any of the stages of faith, the only fault would be in failing to grow and follow where God leads.

And all of this. All of this. The seeing what others don’t see. The growing and maturing in faith, has at its beginnings an embracing of that fundamental truth of God’s love.

“Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people;” 1st Peter says.

The same truth we acknowledge in Baptism. A truth that is proclaimed on that day and the truth we carry with us each day after that.

“Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people;”
Or... remember your baptism.

Ted Wardlaw, the president of Austin Presbyterian Seminary has two daughters.

Many years ago, he preached about these daughters and said:⁵

I decided, early in their lives, that it wouldn’t hurt them any to be reminded, from time to time, of their baptismal identity.

And so, in our household, before we might be separated for awhile—before a trip when they, or we, would be going away somewhere, or before one or the other of them would just go out, or before, even, something like their daily departure off the school—I would often trace the sign of the cross on their foreheads...that sign that they each received on their foreheads at baptism...and I would say, “Remember that you are baptized.” I would go away, or they would go away, and I would sign their foreheads and say, “Remember your baptism and be glad.”

[You get the idea. First days of school. First dates. Trips away. The same refrain. “Remember your baptism and be glad”]

⁵ The Rev. Dr. Theodore J. Wardlaw, “A Homily of Hope,” Preached at Evensong, October 15, 2010 Trinity Episcopal Church in Columbus, Ohio. <http://trinitycolumbus.org/e-chimes%20updates/2011%20Annual%20meeting%20booklet.pdf>

Looking back [Ted reflects], I know now that I might have overdone it from time to time.

Several years ago, our younger daughter Claire, who's now a sophomore in college, was going out one Friday night with her high school friends—she and her little entourage of teenaged girls. And as they were going out the kitchen door to her car, she shouted over her shoulder: “Bye, Mom and Dad! Devon and Zoey and Zephyr and I are going to a movie at the mall, and then to a coffee house. I'll be in early, I'll turn the lights off, I'll lock the doors, I'll make sure the dog is in, and I'll remember my baptism!”

Four years ago last month [Ted continues], we took [our older daughter Shelby] up to college in upstate New York, and in late-May of this year, she graduated. But when we took her there as a first-year student, we did all the stuff that parents do on that awful weekend. Trips to Target to buy the extra stuff that the dormitory room needs—the coat-hangers, the trash can, the desk lamp, the rug. Unpack the luggage, set up the room, make the bed. And we did this, of course, with huge lumps in our throat. On that fateful weekend, college administrators put up with parents like us until about Sunday, and then, in their wisdom (some of you know this drill), they gather all the new students in one big space and they gather all the parents in another big space. And they're nice enough about it, but their essential message to the parents is, “It's time for you to leave.” And so this sad assembly of parents and children march off to the parking lot, and the carloads of parents line up to leave the campus. That Sunday afternoon, four Falls ago, we hugged Shelby one last time—both of us stoic—and we got into the car and watched as she walked purposefully toward her residence hall. And right before she turned a corner which would obstruct our view of one another, she turned back and she fixed her eyes upon me as I sat there behind the wheel. And, looking at me, she signed her forehead with the cross of Jesus Christ.

“Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people;”
 “Remember your Baptism and be glad”

Remembering, that we are called by a God who both loves us exactly who we are, where we are and a God who loves us so much he refuses to let us stay exactly who we are, where we are.

Remembering, we are capable. Of seeing the little white spots on the twigs that we lead us to the one who is in need of help. And sometimes as the one who is lost, waiting to be found.

“in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Remember your Baptism and be glad.

Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people;
 once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.