

**The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush**  
**August 30, 2009**  
**Acts 9:17-22**  
**“News from Pittsburgh: Memorable Moments”**

It's been a quiet week in Pittsburgh, my adopted hometown. The weather's been good, the Pirates have occasionally won a few games, and we're finally able to talk again on the buses and sidewalks and in office break rooms about Big Ben and the Steelers. There's a lot of buzz in the air about the upcoming G-20 Summit, about which the city is excited in a schizophrenic sort of way. We have posters up around town saying "Pittsburgh Welcomes the World" while at the same time plans are being made to shut down every conceivable business. I'm afraid the visiting dignitaries will feel like mall-walkers doing morning laps in a giant outdoor shopping mall where nothing downtown is open for business.

It's been a sad week too. The city lost its only African-American owned bank, Dwelling House Savings & Loan, an institution that did a lot of good for folks unjustly turned away from other banks. And the nation lost one of its elder statesmen, Ted Kennedy, the Lion of the Senate. For children, it's a sad week as summer vacation finally comes to an end. Parents feel a bit differently about the start of the school year, pushing their shopping carts loaded with notebooks, lunchboxes and backpacks, yet glancing at the other parents as they pass in the aisles, offering a knowing smile and a sly wink behind their children's backs.

It's the time of year for reflecting on the future, for trying to make sense of it all. At least, that was true for Walter Jacobson, who found himself late one night just walking around his neighborhood, noticing which houses still had lights on, and thinking deep thoughts about life. Walter was a youngish man with an old man's name. He'd recently experienced an existential crisis, and in a real way he was seeing the houses and trees, the sidewalks, streetlights and starry sky from an entirely new perspective. What he didn't realize was that he was not alone in having a memorable moment that late August night.

One house Walter passed had a light on in a third floor window. Out of sight, inside the room, a young woman was lying on a twin bed, thinking about the fact that on the next day she was going to be married. Tomorrow it would all happen – the dress, the ceremony, the ring and vows, and then that exhilarating walk back up the aisle. Her older sister had stayed in that same room on that same bed the night before her wedding. And now it was her turn. It seemed hard to imagine. Bittersweet memories of childhood and single life washed over her, even as she strained to imagine what the future held for her as a married woman. She knew she'd always remember this night.

Further up the street, a car was parked on the driveway, loaded down with boxes, suitcases, furniture, and other evidence of a son or daughter about to head off to college. From a back bedroom, a bit of light shown out the window, while inside a young person lay on the bed, occasionally texting a friend as the hours slipped away before this college freshman would be heading off to university. In a few short hours, the threshold of adulthood would be crossed. At last! Although it still felt a bit too soon – a sentiment silently shared by both the youth on the bed and the parents down the hall.

A light went on in another house. A young, obviously pregnant woman sat up in bed. Was the cramping she felt just Braxton-Hicks false labor or was it the real thing? It didn't go away. It felt deep and insistent. She pushed her partner's shoulder and said, "It's time." As they got dressed, grabbed the already-packed overnight bag, and looked for the car keys, every detail of that starry night and the car trip to Magee's hospital was indelibly etched in her mind.

The 5<sup>th</sup> grader going into 6<sup>th</sup> grade stirred uneasily in his bunk bed. Tomorrow he was off to Junior High – a new school, lockers with locker combinations to remember, new teachers, and hulking 8<sup>th</sup> graders (some of them already shaving) to be avoided at all costs. And no more recess! Ever! He knew he'd not soon forget this night.

In another house, two women became totally alert in their bed as they heard the pitter-pat of little footsteps coming down the hallway. The adoption had been a great blessing, but also a huge change for them. Finally the months of formula and late-night feedings were over. But still the little one had trouble sleeping through the night. As they listened, they heard with joy that the footsteps did not come into their room, but instead went further down the hallway and into the bathroom – in which a light was switched on and the sound of a toilet lid being lifted came to their ears like music from heaven. They held their breath as soon the toilet was flushed, the light went off, and the little footsteps receded back into the far bedroom. Even in the twilight shadows, the two women beamed at one another, as one mouthed the prayer "Thank you, Jesus" before they nestled back into their respective pillows.

Walter kept walking, largely ignorant of the various dramas being enacted behind so many windows that very night. He had had an amazing day, a day of spiritual awakening that transformed the way he saw everything. And he needed to walk around in the night air, past the houses, past the people sleeping in their beds or going about their lives, knowing full well that somehow, on some deep level, he was intimately connected with all of them. And with all of life. It just boggled his mind.

He couldn't really put it into words. He truly believed in Jesus Christ, in the story of the resurrection and the gospel of heavenly, illogical, overwhelmingly-generous love. Walter had read other conversion stories. He knew about the apostle Paul being knocked from his horse on the road to Damascus and getting up a totally changed man. He also knew about C.S. Lewis, who one fall evening in 1931 had a long talk with fellow professors J.R.R. Tolkien and Hugo Dyson, in which Tolkien made the passing comment that Christianity was a myth that happened to be true. A few days later, Lewis was still pondering that conversation when he got into the sidecar of a friend's motorcycle for a trip to the zoo. As he put it, "When we set out I did not believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo, I did."

Walter worried that his encounter with Christ was not as dramatic as Paul's conversion or as literate as C. S. Lewis' account. But it was real none the less. Like getting glasses for the first time and having everything you see come into focus. Like having a plaster cast cut off and suddenly your leg feels light and fully alive again. Or like that line from Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, when Emily, the poor deceased girl looks down on her little town and says, "Do any human beings ever realize life as they live it? – every, every minute?"

It had happened during a moment of quiet, during a moment of sincerely asking himself questions about life and faith. He had been feeling some tension and anxiety, and then suddenly it was gone. Walter had been trying to imagine Jesus' face when suddenly the face of Jesus had turned and looked right at him. In that moment, he felt fully alive, aware of his muscles and breathing and the miracle of life itself. It was Christmas Eve and Easter and candles and grace and Pentecost all rolled into one moment. Even afterwards, when he called up the memory, he still felt bits of that experience all over again and fully pictured the details of that special moment of revelation.

It was memorable, but not in the way that a bride feels on the eve of her wedding. It was different from the memory of a young mother who recalls when labor pains first began for her, or the memories you have just before you go off to college or move to another city. Walter knew this was hard to explain, but this is how he made sense of his experience. He said to himself that we have many special, horizontal memories – memorable moments from the horizontal plane of our life, from our connection with other people as we move forward on the walkway of time. Those moments include things like surprise parties and graduations, wedding days and anniversaries. But faith moments are vertical memories – memorable times from the vertical plane of our life, when we sense, even for just a brief moment, the height and depth and breadth of what it means to be a child of God. It is like glimpsing eternity. It is like flying and swimming and dancing combined. It is like knowing deep in your bones that at its heart, life is good and love is real and God is... well, God.

Walter walked and looked some more at the houses along his neighborhood streets. Did everyone have this feeling? He wasn't sure. If they did, they certainly didn't all talk about it. And if they did, lots of folks didn't live as if they had taken the experience seriously. But how was that possible? How could you feel your soul stir and not live like that revelation mattered? Can you will yourself to forget something as fundamental as the fact that you are known and loved by the eternal Creator of heaven and earth?

In that moment, Walter felt another chill go down his spine. He sensed again how life has horizontal and vertical planes to it, and that what makes the horizontal moments so memorable – the weddings, graduations, births, deaths – was because of the meaning given to them by the vertical reality – holiness, eternity, resurrection life, grace and heavenly wisdom focused lovingly upon each of us. Maybe what happens is when we live so intent on the horizontal stuff, making those events memorable, we risk deadening ourselves to the vertical stuff, the things of faith, of Jesus Christ, of the Holy Spirit.

Walter kept walking. For a moment his thoughts made him feel sad, thinking about so many houses, so many people, who were living lives indifferent to the call of faith. But then he realized that while it is possible to live totally focused on the horizontal walk of life, God never gives up on us. The shower of grace continues unabated every day. Christ's love is real and unrelenting. Suddenly Walter knew it was okay to turn around and head back home. The point of it all isn't to live as if it is all up to us. God has already taken that job. The point is to live horizontally fully open to the prior grace of the vertical. That makes all of life truly memorable. And when that happens, we come to know the truth of the ancient mystic: With God, all will be well. All will be well. And all manner of things will be well. (quote from Julian of Norwich)

That's the news from Pittsburgh, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the Presbyterians are above average.