

**June 29, 2016**

**TEXT: Psalm 98**

**TITLE: News from Pittsburgh – The Water is Wide**

It's been a quiet week in Pittsburgh, my adopted hometown. The weather this past week has been up and down, but you expect that for late June. The same could be said of the Pirates—up and down, but that's also expected for late June. As a team, they are imperfect yet ever hopeful—good Presbyterians like us. That's what makes baseball such a theologically rich sport. Interestingly, baseball games are one of the few places where we choose to sing together. Sure, we sing when a birthday cake appears with lit candles, and we sing in church. But at baseball games, the seventh-inning stretch comes along and we find ourselves singing with a group of strangers:

*Take me out to the ballgame, take me out with the crowd.  
Buy me some peanuts and Cracker Jack. I don't care if I never get back  
Let me root, root, root for the Pirates – if they don't win it's a shame.  
For it's one, two, three strikes you're out at the old ball game.*

You sound good. Let's try another one.

*This land is your land, this land is my land, from California to the New York island  
From the redwood forest to the gulfstream waters  
This land was made for you and me.*

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.*

We used to sing together a lot more. People would come to church for hymn fests and do nothing but sing—3 and 4 part harmony—singing to the Lord a new song, for God has done marvelous things, as the good book says. But now we don't sing much except at baseball games or when we're trying to get our children to go to sleep, so we sing them a lullaby. You may remember those bedtime rituals—a young toddler carrying a blanket, bringing over a favorite book, crawls up into your lap in a rocking chair. You get comfortable and start reading the book you've read a hundred times before: *Goodnight moon. Goodnight house, goodnight mouse. Goodnight mush and goodnight to the old lady whispering 'hush.'* I used to linger over those particular pages. What exactly was “mush” and was it safe to be left out all night? Shouldn't it be put in the fridge, especially if there was a mouse in the room? And that person sitting in the rocking chair - is it ever polite to call someone an “old lady”? What kind of morals are we teaching our children with this book?

At last you'd get to the book's final page—*goodnight stars, goodnight air, goodnight noises everywhere.* The child would be wrapped in the blanket and rocked for a bit, and just when you thought your work was done, one eye would

open and a small voice would say, “Twinkle.” So even though you hadn’t sung out loud since the last time you were in a ballpark, you did as commanded.

*Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are;  
Up above the world so high, like a diamond in the sky;  
Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are.*

You’d get softer and rock slower, and then the eye would open and the little voice would say, “ABC.” So you’d sing:

*ABCDEFGH – IJKLMNOP – QRSTUV – WXYZ  
Now I’ve sung my ABCs; next time won’t you sing with me.*

Then, as if on cue, the child nestled in your arms says, “Baa baa.” So you’d sing:

*Baa baa black sheep have you any wool? Yes sir, yes sir, three bags full.  
One for the master and one for the dame, and one for the little boy who lives  
down the lane.*

It took me about 6 months of this routine to realize that all three songs use the exact same tune. How did I miss that before? But there’s no time for philosophical pondering because the child is still awake. So you pull out your secret weapon. In our house, it was this song: *Winnie the Pooh, Winnie the Pooh, chubby little cubby all stuffed with fluff, He’s Winnie the Pooh, Winnie the Pooh, willy, nilly, silly old bear.* Ah, yes, sing that a few times, moving on the third time over to the crib and gently lay down the child on the mattress—then quickly wind up the mobile hanging overhead that coincidentally played “Winnie the Pooh.” Then sneak out of the room, praying that no goodnight noises come from that nursery for at least eight hours.

I told my friend Tom about our nighttime rituals. He said that his secret weapon was the old folk tune, “The Water is Wide.” It’s a great song and I admit it works well as a lullaby. *The water is wide, I cannot cross o’er; and neither have I wings to fly. Build me a boat that will carry two and both shall row my love and I.*

Tom insisted it was a lullaby that always put his kids to sleep, especially his son, William. Tom and I have had many a conversation about William over the years. Tom is a seminary professor teaching theology to scores of young adults every year. But talking to his own son William had always proved more difficult. Early in the high school years, William grew distant—and Tom and he had less to say to one another.

Over the years, Tom had given William lots of advice. But by and large it had been doled out in typical fatherly one-sentence commands: *Comb your hair. Look people in the eye when you speak to them. If you’re on a date, remember “no” means “no.” Don’t play your music in your headphones so loud; you’ll go deaf. If the toilet’s clogged, flushing it a second time won’t help. If you insist on wearing your pants that low, someone is definitely going to drop an ice cube down your shorts.* All of that was good advice, but Tom wondered was it enough? Had he

taught William the important stuff about life, about faith, about how God's love is always with him?

At the seminary, Tom gave excellent lectures. He could talk without notes about the seven "I Am" sayings of Jesus. How Jesus said "I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the gate that leads to salvation, the good Shepherd who protects his flock, the vine, the way you should follow, the resurrection and the life." He had taught hundreds of future preachers to share those words of faith joyfully, lovingly, like a precious gift you were handing on to your child. Because in a crazy and often tragic world, those words could be the foundation others need when all else falls away. Those words are a lifeline that could pull you back to safety. They were the way, the truth, and the life.

Tom really believed that. We awaken each day into a world we didn't make, but whose love and potential welcomes us. Yet sometimes the darkness seems to overpower the light. Lies drown out truth. Guns erase lives in a Charleston church or an Orlando gay nightclub. The words from the cross are still being spoken: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Father, forgive them; they know not what they're doing." But because we still speak and preach and share those words, there is always light. Always resurrection. Always Easter sunrises.

But had his son William learned the same lesson Tom had taught his students? He didn't know exactly what William believed, what had sunk in over the years. They had gone to church faithfully. Hopefully he knew the words of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm (*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want*)—or the comforting promise of John 14 (*Peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled; neither let them be afraid.*) Perhaps William negatively associated those words of faith with a father who was always off in his study grading papers for someone else's faith development. Tom wasn't sure.

When William went off to State college, Tom did his best to stay in touch through notes and text messages. But the chances for a big, meaningful talk became rarer and rarer. Now it was more important for Tom to listen rather than to give advice. William would come home from college and occasionally in the car would share about classes that excited him and the plans he had for after school—to which Tom would simply listen and nod his head in encouragement. At one point, William told about a special friend he'd met. And when he brought this friend home for a visit, Tom knew it was important not to pry, not to ask too many questions, not to risk his wife kicking him under the table as the young couple talked and laughed and lived out their love, which was clearly evident.

Soon college was over, a career was launched, a wedding was planned, and a child was welcomed—the first grandchild. Along the way, there had been a few moments of heartfelt words shared between father and son: a card taped on top of a graduation present, a toast spoken at William's wedding, a phone call

offering love and congratulations after the baby arrived. But now, William was on his way—with a partner and a son of his own to raise as best he could. When Tom and his wife visited the young parents, they would smile to themselves seeing the sleep-deprivation in the couple's eyes and recognize the familiar chaos associated with life with a young toddler: The smell of talcum powder in the air. The tiny lids of baby food scattered on kitchen counters. The jokes about when the diaper says "8-10 pounds" that refers to the weight of the baby, not how much the diaper can hold.

During one visit, the grandchild was having trouble getting to sleep. Both parents had been up the stairs to the nursery at least once, tucking the boy back in, tiptoeing out of the room, only to have their conversation broken a few minutes later by the child's persistent cries. This time William got up to see to the boy, and after a bit Tom quietly followed him and leaned on the wall outside the nursery at the top of the stairs. Tom remembered what it had felt like to do this with his own son. He wondered how William was dealing with all this and worried again that he should have taught his son more. Tom's heart was heavy as the old self-doubts crept their way into the corners of his mind. But as he leaned there, he heard the creak of the rocking chair and a voice softly singing:  
*The water is wide, I cannot get o'er, and neither have I wings to fly.  
Build me a boat that will carry two and both shall row, my love and I.*

And in that moment Tom knew William had learned from him all he needed to know. All the theology and scripture are simply ways to tell us that we're not alone, that God's grace is as wide as the sea upon which we row all the days of our lives. All we need to know is that we are held. We are forgiven. We are loved.

O sing to the Lord a new song, for God has done marvelous things. In time, we are all rocked to sleep, but God's song never ends.  
*A ship there is and she sails to sea. She's loaded deep as deep can be;  
But not so deep as the love I'm in. I know not if I sink or swim.*

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.