

August 2, 2015

THE HIGH PLAINS PREACHER

The Great Doghouse Fire

by Fr. Jim Schmitmeyer

Imagine a cold winter night in February somewhere in the Midwest. You and your wife are sound asleep in your bed when a loud knock sounds at the door. Someone is yelling. You shake head, you glance at the clock. Two 2 AM. You hear the word Fire! Your wife heads for the door. You grab your pants.

You soon discover that the heat-lamp you installed to warm some new-born pups has ignited the dog house. You fill a five-gallon bucket, put out the fire and rescue the mother dog and her pups.

Meanwhile, your wife has called the local fire department which is comprised of volunteers from your small town. As you cross the barnyard back to the house, you hear a siren in the distance. Before you reach the house, two fire trucks and a tanker pull into your yard. With no other choice available, you walk over and inform these men—at 2 AM on a winter night—that the blaze occurred inside a dog house and you already took care of the problem. They look at you with stares colder than the icy air and gather up the fire hose.

Then another siren sounds in the distance. In a few minutes trucks from the neighboring town pull into your barnyard and you need to trudge over and express your sincere appreciation for coming out on a winter night to put out a dog house fire. Just as you finish your heartfelt speech, you get to deliver it again when volunteers from yet another small town fire department pull up with lights flashing to rescue your hunting dog and her pups.

Later, your wife insists that you told her to call 911 and, when she did as you instructed, the dispatcher asked if they lived on a farm and if the barn was full of hay and she said yes and a barn fire—as opposed to a dog house fire—is always a three-alarm fire.

This event came to be known as The Great Doghouse Fire of Mercer County. Personally, I consider it the country version of the Irish saying, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

We can't control how things play out or where cards will fall but, what goes around, comes around. In this case, summertime Firemen's Picnics came around and, needless to say, my friend was given ample opportunity to pay back the local volunteers with plenty of volunteering of his own. Which reminds me of another saying: “Paybacks are....”

Well, you get the idea.

August 9, 2015

Clear as Mud

This spring, when sections of the Panhandle received high levels of rainfall, I proudly displayed layers of mud on the fenders of my truck. Since moving to the Diocese of Amarillo, I have come to love the sight of mud. After three years of drought, despair and handing out rolls of money for round bales of hay, I consider a muddy truck a beautiful sight to behold.

A certain county deputy does not share my aesthetic sensibilities. One night, on the way back to Amarillo from a meeting in Hereford, a deputy pulled me over. I glanced at my speedometer. I hadn't been speeding. I glanced at my windshield. My inspection stickers were up-to-date. I glanced at my rearview mirror. In the glow of my tail lights, I saw a deputy walk toward my pickup with a disgusted look on his face and I couldn't figure out why.

I rolled down my window, "Yes, sir," I said, making sure he saw my Roman collar. "What's up?"

He aimed the flashlight in my face, then he stepped back and swept the beam from the headlight to the tailgate.

"When was the last the time you wash this thing?" he asked.

I figured the guy was a Protestant. If he were Catholic, he'd know I do not have a wife and, therefore, no one to hound me about keeping my truck clean.

"Would you like to see my license?" I asked.

He held out his hand, shown the light on the picture, then back on my face, then back on the license.

"Insurance card?"

I located the card and handed it to him.

He glanced at the card, then looked at me with barely disguised contempt. "I can read your license number," he said. "And I can read your insurance number. But..." he pointed to the back of my truck. "I can't read your tag number.

"Too much mud?" I asked.

He nodded, told me to wash my truck like a decent citizen, then wrote me a warning ticket.

I thanked him and put the ticket in my pocket. When I got home, I taped the citation above my kitchen sink. If it works for mud on a truck, I told myself, it might just for pancake batter on a skillet as well.

August 16, 2015

Swallows and Pelicans

I was sitting in the kitchen of friends of mine who live on a ranch in Wheeler County. I'd climb the steps of the back porch and knocked on the kitchen door. Martha welcomed me inside but, before doing so, warned me not to step on a mother cat and a litter of kittens camped beside a pot of red geraniums.

The cats weren't the only critters on the porch. Later, when I joined Martha and her husband Joe at table for supper, Martha pointed out the window to a bird's nest beneath the porch eave. In the nest five baby swallows cuddled close, cheek-to-cheek, their fuzzy heads looking like Eskimo children scrunched together for a selfie.

Then, all at once, their mother arrived and all the baby swallows, as if on cue, opened their beaks at the same instant to get their food. I turned to Joe and Martha and said, "Somehow, all those open mouths put me in mind of distributing Holy Communion on Sunday morning."

They laughed and so did I. But, if truth be told, there are ancient connections between our Catholic faith and our feathered, avian friends.

In Psalm 84, for instance, we hear about a sparrow who builds her nest near the altar in the great Temple of God. And, in the Acts of the Apostles, speaks of the arrival of the Holy Spirit in terms of a dove.

Years ago, when I served as pastor of Sacred Heart Church in Memphis, Texas, I was often struck with the beauty of one the stained glass windows in that beautiful country church. Up near the altar, in deep colors and elegant design, you'll find a window depicting a pelican impaling her breast to feed her fledglings with own blood. The image is based on an ancient myth and has long been used as a symbol of the Precious Blood of the Lord, a vivid image of the nourishing and sacrificial properties of the Eucharist.

So, the next time you happen to visit a farm or a ranch here in the Panhandle of Texas, be on the lookout for signs and wonders and reminders of God. For those with eyes to see, the mysteries we celebrate inside our churches each Sunday are mirrored in the mysteries of nature all around us.

Lilies of the fields, birds of the air, fish in the sea and donkeys with big ears. These creatures show up in the pages of the Gospel and they long to praise God in the world of today as well.

So, keep your eyes open. Don't overlook the swallows. And make sure you don't step on any kittens camped out on the porch.

August 23, 2015

Thorn-in-the-Flesh

Welcome to the High Plains Preacher, stories about the Bible, high wind, fast horses, lack of moisture and other elements of life in the Texas Panhandle. This is Fr. Jim. Thanks for tuning in.

In the course of our life, we get to know many different kinds of people. And some of those people turn out to be pains-in-the-neck. Let's be honest. We've all had to deal with people we consider pains-in-the-neck. And, if we cannot get away from such individuals, those pains-in-the-neck turn into thorns-in-the-side.

I bring this up because St. Paul once mentioned a thorn-in-the-flesh. In his Second Letter to the Corinthians, he writes: "Three times I begged the Lord about this (thorn in the flesh), that it might leave me."

Now, when I read this verse, I wonder *why only three times?* When I'm irked about something, I'll complain to God, not 3 times, but 300 times, sometimes more than that! Does this mean that St. Paul's thorn-in-the-flesh wasn't as serious as mine tend to be? I doubt it. It just means that Paul had a lot more fortitude than me...and a higher pain tolerance.

Most of the time, when I complain, God tells me—as he told St. Paul—to “buck up” and, eventually, with the help of God's grace, I get past the issue and move on.

But what about St. Paul and his “thorn in the flesh?” Ever wonder what it was?

There are many theories and no one knows for sure. Paul could be referring to opposition to his teaching or a personal problem or even a physical disability. Some verses in his writing, in fact, suggest that St. Paul had poor eye sight and, in the days before eye-glasses, contact lens or Lasik surgery, poor vision could well have been Paul's “thorn-in-the-flesh.”

If so, he refers to this poor vision “thorn-in-the-flesh” in the same paragraph in which he spoke of his excellent vision for things not of this world. “Because of the abundance of revelations,” he writes, “a thorn in the flesh was given to me...to keep me from being too elated.”

Maybe you can relate. Ever experience a problem that resulted in unexpected grace? It does happen, now then and, when it does, it puts the pains in the neck, the thorns-in-the-side and the aches-in-the-back in perspective. After all, it's over and above the thorns that you discover the roses.

In every problem, look for the grace. “My grace is sufficient,” said the Lord to St. Paul and today he conveys the same message to each of us. “My grace is sufficient,” he says. “It won't let you down. My grace will see you through.”

This is Fr. Jim, the High Planes Preacher.