

# What We Do Not See

Acts 2:1-21; Romans 8:22-27

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Many of you haven't been in the church building for quite a while. Some of you might wonder what's going on here when so many ordinary church activities are not happening.

Well, today I want to tell you. It is, as you can imagine, pretty quiet around here.

There's a cat without a tail that walks by the window of my study every now and then. Occasionally a driver will slowly meander through our parking lot confusedly staring at their phone (Google sometimes leads people astray!). A family of deer has wandered through the parking lot a few times.

And this past Tuesday morning, there was a woman sitting on the lawn on the south side of the building. I'll call her Danielle.

She was middle-aged, her shoes were off, and her feet looked swollen. Her face was weather worn. As you may recall, there was a ferocious wind on Tuesday.

She was not in a good place. Bill and Kathy Wiebe had encountered her on Monday evening when they had come to pick something up from church. She had managed to get to Lethbridge from Medicine Hat for a short-term job but had quickly found herself in a violent and frightening situation.

So, she had simply fled on foot. She had been wandering around Lethbridge for two days. She had been filling up her water bottle from our church's outside tap. She had no money, little food, and no way home.

Kathy had given her some money for food and had tried to help her at least get to the highway where she wanted to try to get a ride back with a trucker. But she had declined.

On Tuesday morning she was just sitting on our church's lawn in the wind. She had spent the night over by the canal, she said. I shuddered to think of this. Monday was by far the warmest day of the week, but the night was still cold.

I asked her how we could help. She just broke down in tears. She had come to Lethbridge because she had no money, and she thought this job might help.

She was also so desperately lonely. She had hardly existed outside her apartment for the past fourteen months. She had wanted something, anything new to ease the crushing loneliness she felt during this pandemic. But now all she wanted was to go home.

We looked into various options to get her back to Medicine Hat. There are no more buses running. There was a shuttle that ran somewhat regularly, but that would have taken her through Calgary and would have taken her the better part of a day. She wouldn't have been able to leave until the following day. I knew the weather was about to turn very wintry and that she couldn't be outside much longer.

To make a longer story short, I decided to take her back to Medicine Hat.

At this point I'm going to pause the story to acknowledge that, yes, I am aware that my decision ran afoul of our province's COVID restrictions. Danielle and I both wore masks for the whole trip, and she sat in the back seat. But I know some would consider it an unwise move on my part.

All I can say is that in the moment I felt that the gospel had a higher call on me than Alberta Health Services. I'm aware that some of you might disagree. I thank you for your concern. But what's done is done. ☺

Ok, back to the story. As you might expect with someone who has had little contact with other human beings for the last fourteen months, Danielle was eager to talk. She talked pretty much non-stop for entire drive to Medicine Hat.

And her story was a predictably sad one. Born in northern BC, her parents split up when she was nine. Her dad was a drunk and prone to violence. She left home at 16 and bounced around from Edmonton to Grande Prairie and all around the north working as a cook on oil rigs.

"I was addicted to crack cocaine for eighteen years, but I been through rehab and kicked the habit," she said. She followed this up by telling me that she had been smoking meth to escape the loneliness of the pandemic.

She had nearly died giving birth to a stillborn child and had never been able to get pregnant again. She said this with no emotion whatsoever. "I've never been very good with men, she said. I never find the good ones and I don't put up with the bad ones."

She told me that she had multiple times been beaten to within an inch of her life, whether from domestic partners or in drug deals gone sideways. “God’s been looking out for me, though,” she said. “I’ve never gotten a criminal record.”

Given what she had shared about the contours of her life thus far, I marveled that this was the evidence that she cited for God’s care.

I asked her about her religious background. She was raised Roman Catholic, she said, but now she was “just a Christian.” “I got no use for that angry God that’s always zapping people when they make mistakes.” I told her I didn’t believe in that God either.

There was a brief lull in the conversation before she said, “You know, I’ve walked a lot of miles alone in my life. I’m tired of being so lonely. I was sitting by the canal by your church, talking to the geese, and praying to God... Send me an angel! And then someone came by and gave me their jacket because I was cold. And then you and that nice lady helped me. God’s looking out for me, I know it. God has a plan for me.”

“What’s God’s plan for you?” I asked her.

“I have this dream,” she said. “I want to build a city block full of mini houses where people can live who need second chances. People getting out of jail, people who have made mistakes, people who are trying to get cleaned up.”

“There would be a zero tolerance, she hastily added. “You’d have to stay clean to live there.” This last part felt like it was for my benefit. I wished she didn’t feel the need to say this, but I bit my tongue as she continued.

“It would be a real community; all the doors would open into a courtyard and there would be tables and barbecues lots of food and playgrounds for the kids. And everyone would be safe and nobody would have to be alone.”

I thought about John’s vision of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21, the city that no longer had need for “the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light,” the city whose gates would never be shut, for there will be no more night.”

“I don’t know if I’ll live long enough to make this happen,” she told me. “Maybe you’ll have to do it for me.” She laughed. I smiled and told her it was a beautiful vision.

As we were drawing closer to Medicine Hat, Danielle told me she was getting tired, but she didn't want to fall asleep until she got home. She told me that when she was a little girl her family used to sing songs and play traditional French music together (her dad was from Quebec).

"My favourite song was... I think it was called "The French Song. Do you mind if I sing it to stay awake?" "Not at all," I replied.

And so, she sang, this beaten down woman who kept apologizing for how bad she smelled and how dirty she was, this woman with a mask crookedly fixed on her face, this woman who had been sleeping outside and communing with the geese, sang and sang and sang. And it was beautiful.

I sat in the front and pondered the crazy directions life sometimes takes. Needless to say, when I woke up on Tuesday morning, I didn't think that I would be driving across the wind-blasted prairies listening to French folk music being belted out from the back of my Camry.

The Lord does indeed work in mysterious ways.

When I got home later on Tuesday afternoon, I googled "The French Song" and had the lyrics translated into English. The first stanza goes like this:

When the sun wakes up in the mountains,  
And the moon says goodbye to the earth,  
The shadows of the night flee from the morning.  
New light frees the world again.

I dropped off Danielle at a rundown looking apartment in Medicine Hat. She was overjoyed to be home and looked forward to a bath and a long sleep. She hadn't slept in three days, she said. The coyotes and other fears of the "shadows of night" had kept her awake.

But, for now at least, the shadows had fled.

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Why do I share this story on Pentecost Sunday of all days? Is this not the day for celebrating the birth of the church, the coming of the Spirit? Is this not a day for more triumphant stories?

Romans 8:22-23:

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

The Spirit came and comes still to a groaning world that still labours to become what it will be.

This has been a year of groaning, hasn't it? We may not have all experienced the same pain as Danielle, but we all groan at the ways in which the world is not as it should be.

From Romans 8, we learn that when we don't know what to pray, when we feel like we can't pray, when we don't even want to pray... When hope is difficult and patience is running out...

When we are weary and broken down... when the shadows of the night are all we see and new light seems a long way off... the Holy Spirit is there with us, alongside us, groaning along with us.

This is an enormous comfort. God is present in our pain because of Pentecost.

But God is not just present; God is also active.

My sermon is called "What we do not see" and is taken from Romans 8: "But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience."

There is much that we do not see in the life of faith.

We don't always see the kingdom of God advancing.

We don't always see love triumphing over fear.

We don't always see faith moving mountains.

We don't always see our prayers answered in the ways we hope.

We don't always see God as an active force in our world or in our lives.

So much of what we believe in and hope for takes place behind the veil.

But sometimes we get glimpses. Danielle cried out to God by the canal on Tuesday morning. And God sent her a warm jacket, a ride home, and someone to listen in the midst of her loneliness.

I confess that when I first encountered Danielle, I felt helpless to know how to help. And Kathy and I simply prayed for help. That God would show us what to do. And God did.

This is what I learned again this week. The Holy Spirit helps in our weakness.

When we don't know how to articulate what we are feeling, or how to process what is going on, or how to express our hopes and joys and fears, we can trust that the one who lives within us, the one who is always leading and guiding us and conforming us into the image of Christ, is searching our hearts, and understands us better than we understand ourselves.

Most importantly, we can be confident that the Holy Spirit's intercession for us when we are feeling weak is always in accordance with the will of God.

We don't always know how to pray or what to pray. But, as J.I. Packer once put it, "God corrects our prayers on the way up." God translates all our desire and our fear and our anxiety and our longing into a divine key.

On this Pentecost Sunday, I simply want to remind you of these two truths of the Spirit.

First, God is present. The Spirit is indeed our Divine Advocate. As Jesus promised, we are not left as orphans. Lonely as this last year has been for many, the good news of Pentecost is that we are never truly alone.

Second, God is active. God still listens. God still speaks. The Spirit blows where it will, sweeping across and through and within our lives and our circumstances, banishing the darkness and setting us free, bringing light and life in strange and unexpected ways, again and again.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

