

“A Friend In High Places”

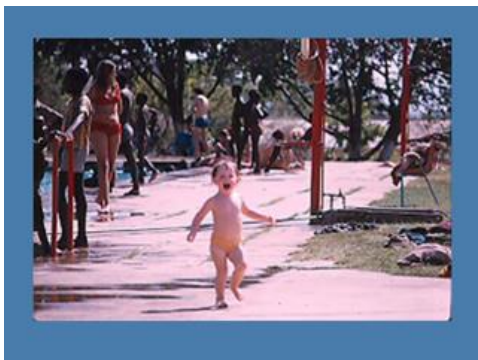
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Mark 4:30-32 & Matthew 7:7-11

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Confession — I preached this sermon from this very pulpit 12 years ago. So if any of you are sitting here thinking “Oh no, not this again!” Feel free to let me know (nicely!) after the service.

Now I want you all to relax and get comfy, because this really isn't a sermon, it's a story, and it isn't just a story, it's a trip. So fasten your seatbelts —(or not,) because we're flying to Central Africa, to Zambia — a beautiful country that has both jungle and savannah, flowing rivers and Victoria Falls. We're also flying back in time to a mission station on the Kafue River in December of 1972, where my husband Alan and I were United Church missionaries at a boarding school for boys. He taught geography & history, and I taught English & French. Besides the secondary school, our little mission station included a chapel, a small clinic and houses for the teachers and other workers. It was out in the bush, isolated from any village; it was a village on its own, really.

Our son Mark was 4 years old, and our daughter Kim, who was born in Zambia, was almost one. Here are some photos from that time.



Here we see pictures of our home & family in Kafue.

No one in our family back in Canada had ever seen little Kim, so Al's parents decided to fly to Africa and visit us for Christmas. We were so excited! But shortly before they were due to arrive, and after they'd started their journey and couldn't be reached, Al got really sick. We thought it was just malaria, and began a 10-day course of a quinine drug. But he kept getting worse. Still, I was encouraged by his stamina and determination. He kept repeating, "I'll meet my parents at the airport even if you have to tie me to the roof rack of the car!"

The big day arrived — Gertrude and Gordon Bennett walked into Lusaka International Airport. A tiny red-headed girl in a dress like a miniature parachute ran up to greet her grandparents. Mark wasn't far behind. Then I hugged them both, dreading the inevitable question. "Where's Al?"

(He wasn't on the roof rack, okay) —So I answered bravely, "Al couldn't come to the airport." "Why not?" "He's in a hospital, but don't worry, he's going to be fine. It's just hepatitis. We'll go and visit him tomorrow."

It sunk in. "Tomorrow? Why not today?" "Well, uh, he's not here in the city hospital, he's at a bush hospital in the southern province. It's a three-hour drive from our house."

Try to imagine the mood in the car as we drove back to the mission station. For a long time nobody spoke. I was remembering another drive — a three-hour drive home from the remote bush hospital a few days before where I had abandoned Al in the middle of nowhere. How could this have happened just a few days before his parents' arrival? Driving home alone from that hospital, I wondered 'Will he even be alive by the time they get here?' I was crying, and it was raining, so I could barely see the road. I had never felt such hopelessness. Then, as I came over the crest of a hill, the sun came out, and there, right in front of me, glowing above the vast expanse of African savannah, was the fullest and most glorious rainbow I have ever seen. Words from the old hymn, "O love that will not let me go" just flooded my mind.

*O joy that seekest me through pain, I cannot close my heart to thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain, and feel the promise is not vain
That morn shall tearless be.*

I was overwhelmed by the presence of God and by this sign of God's promise, and knew that everything would be alright and work out according to God's plan — whatever it might turn out to be.

So back to the trip home from the airport with two of the most exhausted and upset in-laws you could imagine, my only comfort being that things couldn't possibly get any worse. They did. As we approached our house, we saw at the entrance of the driveway a group of men with guns shooting into a large tree. I hit the brakes. A snake fell from the tree. One guy came over to the car and explained helpfully to my already traumatized in-laws that they'd just killed a boomslang. He went on to explain that the boomslang is also known as the four-second snake -- "It's brown, it hangs from a tree branch, and disguises itself as a twig. If it bites you in the neck, you have four seconds, then you die."

That certainly cheered up Al's parents. Then, as I steered past the group and into the driveway, one of the tires on the car chose that exact moment to go flat.

Kids, in-laws, suitcases, and I all dragged into the house, which was only slightly cooler than outside, which was probably about 38 degrees in the shade. Al's father -- I'll never know how -- kept his cool. All he said was "I'll fix the tire later, dear. I believe I need a little rest first."

So, two hours later, not knowing where the tools were or how we were going to manage it, Al's dad and I grimly approached the car. We stared in disbelief. The tire had been repaired.

Words cannot describe the gratitude we felt for this anonymous act of kindness. God really does work in mysterious ways. "For your thoughts are not my thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," says the Lord. God can take the smallest thing, as small as a mustard seed, an act of kindness, like the changing of a flat tire, and use it to change lives.

That's how God works. And if we weren't so blind, we'd be able to see the Kingdom of God active, and growing, in the midst of us, all the time.

Father wanted to meet & thank whoever had fixed the flat tire. A little detective work turned up Chris Whittaker, one of the teachers on our mission station. He and his wife Jean, who was pregnant at the time, were from England. Wonderful couple, and Chris was sincerely thanked.

The next day we set out for the bush hospital at Chikankata, a sprawling series of low, round, thatched-roof buildings that also housed the families of patients and a leper colony. The windows had no glass -- they were just holes in the wall.

We found Al lying on an old iron bed under a mosquito net. His eyes and skin were the colour of mustard. His mother was beyond shock. She kept repeating, and I can still hear her voice -- "I would rather die. I would rather die than spend one night in a place like this!" All she could see was

the primitive surroundings. She could not be convinced that this was one of the best hospitals in central Africa. It was being run and staffed by the Salvation Army. Different Salvation Army families took turns bringing meals to Al and caring for him. His doctor, after he left Africa, became the head of Pediatrics at Sick Kids Hospital in Toronto. Looking back, I know that this Chikankata hospital was a humble outpost of the Kingdom of God, and that there were angels all around. But we couldn't see them at the time.

Al was so despondent that the doctor took the risk of letting him come home for two days over Christmas. And slowly, Al recovered, as you may have guessed.

A year later, we were back in Canada. A letter arrived from Zambia from Chris & Jean Whittaker, saying that they would be emigrating to Canada. They truly saw this country as a land of opportunity and promise. We were delighted. Shortly after another letter – very disturbing – arrived from them. The Canadian High Commission, located in Tanzania, which had at first accepted their application, had reversed its decision. Chris and Jean were refused entry into Canada because their baby boy had Down's Syndrome. Chris had included this information on his application, and thought they knew. But they'd missed it at first, and when someone at the High Commission spotted it, the door slammed shut. No appeal, no entry into Canada.

Al was upset and angry. With Chris's letter in front of him, Al picked up the phone and called what was then the Department of Customs and Excise in Ottawa. He was put through to the Deputy Minister. But what could a mere United Church minister say to a Deputy Minister to persuade him to reverse this ruling? Here's what he said:

"Hi, Dad, it's Al calling. Do you remember the guy who fixed the flat tire when you visited us in Zambia?" He remembered. Two days later, at the mission station in Zambia, Chris received a message to return to the Canadian High Commission in Tanzania. He was puzzled, but went. He couldn't believe the reception he got, so different from the last time.

"Mr. Whittaker, we apologize. There's been a terrible mistake. We are **so** sorry! Here are your new entry papers — just sign on the dotted line. Welcome to Canada, Mr. Whittaker!" Chris could not believe what was happening. As he left, still having no idea why they'd changed their minds, an official whispered in his ear, "You sure have a friend in very high places." Which left Chris even more astonished.

The Whittakers moved to Didsbury, Alberta where they established a small industry that makes playground equipment. Half of their employees are developmentally challenged, and Chris considers them his hardest and

most enthusiastic workers. Chris and Jean and their three sons serve their community and their church in many different ways.



About 14 years ago, Kim returned to Zambia with her husband Alex. Here she is on a bench at the hospital in Lusaka (the capital) where she was born; and this one shows her at a restaurant with our former headmaster at the school, (our boss!) a wonderful man, Lawrence Chibutu, who remembered Kim well as a 1-year old with red hair!



Just a month ago, Chris and Jean, with two grandchildren, came from Alberta to tour the 1000 Islands and to visit us here.

Remember what the embassy official said to Chris: “You have a friend in very high places!”

That message is for all of us. We all have a friend in very high places. In the Highest of places. Higher even than the federal government, if you can believe it.

Jesus said, “So don’t be afraid, little flock, for it gives your Father great happiness to give you the Kingdom.” All that Al had to say was “Hi, Dad, it’s me calling.” And it’s all we have to say. Our Father in heaven says to you, and to me, and to each one of us, “Don’t be afraid, for I am with you. I have called you by name; you are mine.”

It’s who you know. And who knows you. Don’t be afraid to use your connections. God wants you to be part of his kingdom now and always. Your heavenly Father loves you, and He’s waiting for your call.

Especially now. Especially now in these crazy, troubled times, people of faith everywhere need to call on God, who has far more power than all the presidents and leaders of the world combined, whether they’re crazy or

not. And what do we pray? We simply pray as we did earlier... O Father in heaven, your name is Holy; may your kingdom come, and may your will be done, on earth, as it already is in Heaven.

Thanks be to God! Amen.