

The Day I Met Jesus

(This is the sermon I preached for Christmas Eve at St. Anne's)

By Ken Woodley

What child is this, away in the manger on this silent, holy night?

Let me tell you about the time I believe I met him. I've shared a small snapshot version of this story in *Forward Day By Day* and mentioned it once in a *Gleaning*, but I've never told the full story.

First, I was always a spiritual kid. I was baptized in the Catholic Church and cried when Pope John the 23rd died in 1963 when I was six years old. I thought it meant that something bad had happened to God. In fact, I had to leave a birthday party, and all that ice cream and cake, because I was so distraught.

Secondly, like many people, I've been deeply wounded by life and I've been on a journey of healing for decades.

George Harrison came out with one of the best albums ever recorded, *All Things Must Pass*, in 1971. One of the songs, "Hear Me, Lord," ends with the former Beatle pleading, "Hear me, Lord, won't you please hear me, Lord," over and over.

There were times, as a teenager and alone in the house, when I would play that song very loud and sing along at the top of my lungs. But I never seemed to get an answer. It never seemed that the Lord was listening.

I still believed in God. I still believed in Jesus. But they seemed so distant, absolutely unknowable in any kind of personal way.

I knew them only in an academic sense. Like I knew George Washington was the first president of the United States.

But there were also moments when it seemed as if a spiritual breeze was touching my skin, hoping to get my attention.

In college, I studied the Old and New Testaments, as well as the religions of India and the Far East. I was still on a spiritual journey and still feeling that wound.

On Wednesday, July 2, 1980, fourteen months after I'd graduated from Hampden-Sydney College, I was 23-years-old and driving home from a Buckingham County School Board meeting, which I'd covered as a reporter with the Farmville Herald.

I was feeling the heavy gravity of that wound when I heard a voice. It was about 3:30 in the afternoon. I hadn't been drinking. And I'd given up smoking in college.

The voice spoke two words: "Be happy." And though the verbal message was brief it was accompanied by an overwhelming feeling of deepest pure love that filled my Volkswagen Bug, oddly enough, a VW Love Bug edition.

I burst into tears. My emotions were so overflowing that I had to pull off to the side of the road just south of Sprouses Corner.

When I say Love, I mean the thing itself. The presence of the Being that is LOVE—all capital letters. I was sure it was God and I was blubbering and blabbering my thanks, a thunderstorm of tears raining down my face.

Eventually, I drove home to the trailer I rented on the Five Forks Road in Prince Edward County, about a mile from the site where this church was built 150 years ago. That loving presence still filled my car and had been palpable for the entire 40-mile journey.

I was filled with a happiness that went beyond joy, went beyond any word or description. It was the air I was breathing. LOVE was loving me. It hadn't spoken two words and departed.

Not only did that loving presence fill my VW bug but it filled the entire world around me. I was literally "in love"—inside it—as if I were a fish in water.

The experience was very much like this description in the Gospel of John, the 20th verse of the 14th chapter: "On that day," Jesus states in the New International Version, "you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you."

At the trailer, I collected my dirty laundry and drove the 20 or so miles to Hampden-Sydney College where I still stuck quarters in the washing machines and driers.

I was surrounded by my dirty socks and underwear and still LOVE persisted in filling me with an intimate holy ecstasy that found every centimeter of my mind, my heart, my soul.

And its resonating presence covered the entire campus. Love had become the world around me.

Only in the morning did I awake to find that it had gone. But ripples lingered. My entire life had been transformed. Jesus taught that God is love and Jesus told the truth. On July 2, 1980, I experienced the truth of that love firsthand. Up close and personal.

Through the years, however, I often wondered about the two words spoken to me: "Be happy." They seemed trite and simplistic. A T-shirt phrase.

And there had been no accompanying advice. Be happy? How? And what is true happiness, anyway?

Meeting and marrying Kim was absolutely pivotal. Becoming a father, and now grandfather, still feels like a miracle. I have been learning the pathways and contours of true happiness, though I don't always get there and when I do it's not always so easy to stay there as long as I'd like.

But signs declaring the loving redemption of my life are all around me. I'm with some of them now in this sanctuary.

But I still wondered: Did I hear God on July 2, 1980, or had I heard Jesus? I was never quite sure, though I knew I might have experienced the Trinity and so the distinction wouldn't matter.

Recently, however, thanks to a book first owned by Evelyn Ford's mom, Willeta Heising, I have concluded that the voice which spoke to me with such transcendent love 41 years ago must have belonged to Jesus.

Kim read the book, entitled, "The Sermon On The Mount," and then passed it on to me last month. Reading it, I learned about a crucial word Jesus used over and over in the Beatitudes. A word I'd heard before.

He did not use the word "blessed." Instead, Jesus chose the word "happy," which conveys deep good fortune in Christ's language. "Happy are the poor in spirit. Happy are those who mourn..."

Clearly, "happy" was Jesus' word of choice by the Sea of Galilee, just as it was, I believe, on Rt. 15, south of Sprouses Corner, 2,000 years later. And it was anything but trite.

And why are they happy, why are they fortunate, even though they still suffer?

The book's author Pinchas Lapide, who has a doctorate in Judaic Studies, writes that all nine beatitudes "give eloquent evidence of that ... divine love, directed not simply toward humanity in general but

especially toward the victims of human unkindness ... who especially need comfort and affection.”

That would have been me driving through Buckingham County on July 2, 1980. And I believe it was Jesus speaking to me.

“Pay attention,” Lapidé imagines an Old Testament psalmist imploring us—and I have felt the truth of these words—“for there is a secret good fortune, hidden by the hands of life, itself, which counterbalances and outbalances all misfortune. You do not see it, but it is the true, indeed the only good fortune.”

As the French translation of the Beatitudes has Jesus declaring: “Happy are those who cry because God will console them.”

No, my wound has not been cured—I think only heaven will be able to do that—but I can see where the Lord has turned the muddy water of my life into wine to be poured out and shared with others.

And that is a consolation, though not a cure, which brings healing to the deepest wound.

I’m still a torn page but the Lord’s love has taped me back together. For over four decades, I’ve been trying to fill that page with words that shine a light into the darkness, a darkness where I once was and where too many others remain.

But only the totality of my life experience—and that very much includes my deep wound—has provided me with the tools to try and do that.

Just as each of you work so hard through so much to shine your own light into the darkness.

I have never heard the voice of Jesus for a second time, but there has been an ongoing series of experiences where the Holy Spirit has reached

out and continued the personal relationship begun on that summer's day 41 years ago.

Clearly, my wound tuned me into a different frequency and that frequency has made all the difference in my life.

I am no wise man, and have no gold, frankincense or myrrh, but I am desperately thankful that we are here tonight celebrating the birth of someone who is very real and loves us very much.

Hallelujah, Merry Christmas and Amen.