

ON EAGLE'S WINGS SEPTEMBER 30, 2007

Everywhere you look these days you see a panorama of colour around you. The leaves, especially in the County, are turning bright red and yellow with many hues in between. We can say with certainty that autumn is here and we need to be ready to greet autumn with open hearts and minds.

How do you view Autumn? Does it make you sad as you see your once beautiful garden filled with drying, spindly flowers and vegetation? The flowers are fewer and seed pods replace the once glorious colours of the blooms. The community has revved up and all activities for all ages are once again in full swing after the summer hiatus.

Growing up on the prairies, I always dreaded the coming of winter. To me the falling leaves heralded the bleak season. Some classmates of mine loved to see the leaves fall so that winter skating, skiing and tobogganing might begin. However, the one task of fall I did enjoy was the burning of the straw left behind in the fields by the threshing machines. We would light the fires in a pattern that my father had designated as safe and then watch the fields light up the night and see the fires in the distance as other farmers burned their straw.

Very quickly we learned the power of fire and the need to handle it with care. Father's lessons included the need to ensure the fire did not encircle around us putting us in a trap. Smoke billowed from the fields and choked the air. We got back home to a relieved mother who even forgave us for being black from tip to toe with soot and dirt.

I remember one time in the field of fire thinking about a radio program I had heard on the radio from Alberta: Earnest Manning and the Back to the Bible Hour. This particular program was on the fires of hell awaiting people who did not repent and seek personal salvation through Jesus Christ. Manning had a good command of the English language and was very capable of weaving a vivid story through his words which were laced with adjectives and colour. Standing in that field, watching the sparks ignite yet another swath of straw, feeling the searing wall of heat generated by the fires, I could vividly imagine what the fires of hell must be like if indeed there were fires in hell awaiting men and women who did not turn away from their sins.

In discussions with my grandmother later on, we spoke of the fires and the forewarning of possible doom and destruction in that burning pit known as hell. She commented that there were two ways to read the bible, possibly more. You could read all the scary parts and think of God as being tough, demanding and unbending or you could read the parts where God had bent over backwards to show us how much he loved us, including his gift of his Son Jesus Christ.

The Christian faith journey is not one intended to be laced with fear and despair. I believe God has never made the decision that men and women will only come to him and worship out of fear and therefore, God must by necessity be distant, angry and threatening at all times. Quite the contrary!

The story of the Old Testament journey of the Israelites as the people of God, is a story of the dawning upon the followers that God had indeed given freedom of choice to his creation. Therefore, God, the great respecter of what he had done, worked in other ways to draw close to his people.

You remember the story of the vision of Isaiah, when as a young man, before his call to prophetic work, he stood in the temple surrounded by the incense wafting to the ceiling. Here he experienced a vision of God. Terrified, he spoke out and said he would be dead soon as he was a sinner and had stood in the very presence of God. Surely he would die before such holy goodness.

However, he then envisioned an angel who takes a coal from the altar fire and touches Isaiah's lips. Isaiah is so overwhelmed by the mercy and forgiving nature of Almighty God, that he responds readily to God's call for someone to be his prophet.

This response of wonder and joy and relief has been the seekers response through the ages. Think again of Martin Luther, the brilliant professor and preacher who had tried everything to feel accepted by and at one with God. He fasted, tried to wear sack cloth and horsehair, denied himself worldly pleasures, etc. and still he could not feel worthy to be before God. Then one day he reread a passage of scripture that he had read and preached on many times. This time it jumped out to him and its powerful implications hit him as the truth he had been seeking. It was very simple – you are justified by faith. In other words there is nothing we ourselves can do which in itself will give us the right to stand before God. Rather, God himself has acted and our faith enables us to be there before the throne of God.

Luther became a new man and his theology challenged the status quo within the Christian Church and the rest is history as they say. Our works, no matter how good, by themselves can not justify us before God. Once again, it is God's gift of reaching out to us as he had to Isaiah.

Jesus had sympathy with the Pharisees and the Sadducees in their attempts to rigidly follow the faith laws in order to be acceptable before God. However, he reminded them that none of this would get them to their goal. God, through their very creation, was with them. So much of what they were doing merely separated them from others. The cause of their separation from God was as much due to their arrogance, sense of self-righteousness and cold heartedness towards others they deemed less worthy than anything else.

I can recall one of my Sunday School teachers in the little rural church I attended saying some thing like this: "In an attempt to be perfect, they became perfectly awful". Our actions alone can not bring about perfection and acceptance before God. We have to reach out and accept the gracious actions of love and forgiveness of our Creator God.

The Psalmist in Psalm 91 speaks these words of God's graciousness and mercy. "And I will raise you up on eagle's wings, bear you on the breath of dawn, make you to shine like the sun, and hold you in the palm of my hand".

This passage has caught the imagination of believers through the centuries. Eagles and buzzards were in the Holy Land and were well known to everyone. People believed then that when the mother eagle felt the little one should begin to learn to fly, they would pick up the eaglet, fly very high and let it go. Then the belief was of the mother watching the chick falling, swooping down under it and catching it on its wings, taking the little one for a ride to experience the rush of the air and the sense of wonder of flight. Science today states this is not accurate but the picture is powerful for a number of reasons.

First, the mother eagle knows that sooner or later the chick must leave the safety and warmth of the nest and venture forth. This image is not of a parent pushing the chick out but of deciding that the excitement of living will never be experienced if the chick never leaves the nest.

Secondly, this picture is of a parent who knows they have to let go and risk if the chick is to experience the thrill and fullness of flight.

It is not easy to drop the chick in mid air and see it tumble as it flaps its just developed wings. Unless the parent lets it go, none of this can be experienced. The first frantic movements made by the falling eaglet supplied the first lesson in how to fly.

The gravitational pull was thwarted and overcome as the young bird began to exercise its inherent gift. Yet, while all this was happening, the parent bird watched and was ready to catch her baby on strong supporting wings. Whatever the emergency, whether in or out of nest, the parent eagle was equal to the demands made upon it.

Thirdly, the mother hovers by and in time flies to give the chick a safe landing place on her wings. But it does not end there. The mother flies off with the eaglet on its wings, to give a glimpse to the youngster of the wonders out there when they take the risk to fly alone.

Fourthly, how decisive are these intentions. The young eaglets could never understand the motives of their mother. Inexperienced, they would interpret her behaviour as thoughtless, irresponsible, and unkind. Only later, as they experience the thrill of flying, will they see the wise and caring nature of the parent.

In Exodus 19:4 we have this verse of God declaring: "You have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bear you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself." Have you forgotten, God asks, how I brought you out of slavery, through the years in the desert and brought you into the promised land? I have been there always even when you assumed I was not.

In Isaiah 40:31 we read of God's unchanging loyalty to his creation: "But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up on wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint."

These biblical passages of the history of God's people, highlights the need to walk always with God in our life's journey. A poet once penned these words:

I tell Him all my sorrows;
I tell Him all my joys:
I tell Him all that pleases me;
I tell him what annoys.

He tells me what I ought to do;
He shows me how to try:
And so we walk together,
My Lord and I.

As we worry about how we are doing as it relates to our relationship with God, let us never forget these images of being on eagles' wings, safe in the protection of a God who has never changed, never abandoned us and eagerly waits to be welcomed in walking at our side.

God is not terrifying, cruel, vindictive or unreasonable. Rather, he is closer to the image of the mother eagle and the eaglets.

Thanks be to God for his wondrous love and redeeming forgiveness.

Rev. Gary Magarrell