

Said the cowboy to his people: Changed by the journey

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If I close my eyes and become quiet, I can almost remember how I used to think of preachers long ago, when I sat in the pew myself. I didn't know how a person came to be a preacher in the first place. I didn't know where preachers came from or where they went when they were finished. There was a preacher in every church, so obviously they were coming from somewhere.

Sometimes I thought of the preacher as a giver of sacred knowledge. At times I would even take notes during the sermon, though I never remember looking at them after I left the service. Months or even years later I would come across these notes and stare at them in amazement, unable to make any sense of them.

Sometimes I thought of the preacher as an inspirational character. It was the way he said things that was most important. If he could tell a story with a certain flair or phrase things in a certain way, my heart would break a little and I would be afraid. I liked the feeling of being convicted or moved by the words of the preacher. It made me think that God was at work in my life.

Sometimes it was hard to think of the preacher as a person at all. He was just a part of the architecture of the place, just a piece of church. To do church properly, one needs a steeple, a bell perhaps, some hymnals, some pews, a preacher, a pulpit, a few candles and so on.

Sometimes I thought about the preacher, but mostly not. Mostly I just sat in the pew and watched the words fall upon the congregation like fertilizer on a lawn. The words fell about our heads and settled into our midst, ending up on the pews and on the floor. On a good day something might get under your skin or into your heart.

And now I'm one of those preachers. I'm up front looking out at you, looking out at rows and rows of faces. And though I have taken this mysterious journey myself, I

still can't tell you how a person becomes a preacher. And sometimes I wonder how you think of me or if you think of me at all.

If you're interested, I'll tell you how I think of myself. I think of myself as a cowboy. A cowboy in the saddle all week long, set against a lonely sky and moving along fence that goes on forever. The scripture is a wild stallion, or a raging bull, or even a stray calf. My brand is my own personal style, my way of seeing things, both the sin and the goodness in me. I hate the branding, but there is no other way. Any preacher who won't own up to his own personal brand is either a liar or a fool. So I stoke my fire, utter sacred prayers for forgiveness and press the iron home. Lord, how the gospel bawls and bellows. Father forgive me, for I know exactly what I am doing.

The tools of my trade are classic and simple. Leather gloves, chaps for protection, a hat, a rope of course, saddle bags and a simple bedroll. I acquired these things at a rustic mercantile with no address and no known location. This establishment cannot be found until the moment of desperation comes. You will find it when you must find it.

The wind on the prairie is the Spirit of God. We cowboys do not know where it comes from or where it goes. Sometimes it carries the heavy scent of rain and points us to dark clouds on the horizon. Other times it is a gentle breeze offering comfort from the blazing sun. Occasionally it is a whirling dust devil that stirs everything up and whips our faces with stinging sand. In these times, even the cowboys hunker down with their hats pulled low over their eyes, praying that this Spirit might pass them by.

There are bumps, bruises, cuts and wounds. Sometimes the rope burns right through your gloves. There is joy and sorrow and solitude and the loneliest kind of conviction. You awaken at night to the distant yipping of coyotes and wonder fills your soul. You are not worthy of this calling, but you are here, there is work to be done, and there is no easy way to turn back once you have set your face like flint for the horizon.

Many are the mornings when I come to the church in the darkness, dragging the tattered remnants of my soul behind me. And darkness weighs heavy over the deep.

But though it is dark when I arrive, the promise of dawn brings hope. I sing and I pray and I fall into a familiar rhythm. My gloves are on, my rope is slack and ready in my hands, and here is another mustang ready to burst from the pen. Sunday morning light brings the miracle. I see things new. Real belief is born again in the

manger of my unbelief. I become strong and ready, and by the time the music is done, I can't wait to stand before you and proclaim the good news. It is indeed a miracle, and it happens every Sunday.

Week by week, month by month, from one Advent to the next, and now 12 years have passed us by. I don't know where we are going with this. A part of me wishes every Sunday were my last, and another part of me lives in fear that one day someone will grab my elbow and say, "That's enough, Cowboy. Turn in your spurs and hand over your saddle. Let's give someone else a turn at this."

And indeed, the day will come when this weary cowboy will pack it in and return to the pew from which he came. But today is not that day.

You who know me best, look at my face. The prairie wind has toughened my skin and burned my lips. Do you see the lines and the grey hairs? Are my eyes deepening with wisdom even as the flesh above them sags?

This calling has changed me. I feel it in my bones and in my hide. My hands and face are calloused, but the skin beneath my shirt is still as soft as a baby's.

Do you see how I have changed? Do you see what this journey has done to me? Do you see me at all?