



(“Old Woman with a Lantern” by Nikolai Astrup, 1880-1928)

Living Epistles

2 Corinthians 3: 2-3

You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men; clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart.
(KJV)



Dear Opal,

On a cold winter's night during the latter part of the 1800's the poignant painting above by Nikolai Astrup, "Old Woman with a Lantern" literally came to life in Fairview, Missouri, when a tall stately woman named Cora, carrying a lantern, struggled as she doggedly climbed over a mile of rough terrain all alone toward the little white country church so dear to her heart; behavior motivated by her deep enduring love for God. Wearing a scarf that protected her salt and pepper hair that had been braided and twisted on top of her head, the only sounds emanating from the frozen landscape were that of the old rubber boots she wore as her feet clomped along the deep ruts, accompanied by her own labored breath that appeared in the frigid air as a grayish frozen vapor.

Then, upon arrival, she would quietly sit down on the last pew at the back of the church, remove her outer protective coverings, and then reverently make her way to a chosen spot where she anxiously waited for what was to transpire. Always having the reputation of being shy, she would sweetly smile at those around but was not known for being outspoken, that is, until it was time to testify about her love and devotion for the Lord.

Thus, after hearing the preacher extend an invitation for the congregation to speak about Jesus, without hesitation she would eagerly make her way to the front and face those gathered wearing a glowing radiance that exuded her Savior's love.

Even though her beloved husband had passed away at the early age of 37, leaving her to raise a young lad on her own, her cup was still full to overflowing with passion for God because she believed he was her help in time of trouble, a Source that never ran dry throughout her entire life. *Isaiah 41: 10, "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand"*, had to be a promise she held dear.

Therefore, when witnessing about her dearest Friend, scriptures from the Word she loved so dearly would pour forth from her lips with such grace and power that they would betray her usual shyness, causing it to disappear until her testimony was completed.

Always ending with the same statement, she would proclaim full of emotion, **“We are living epistles, read by men.”** Then, her shy personality would once again emerge prompting her to return with a hushed reverence to the quiet place where she had chosen to sit. Still brimming with the presence of the Holy Spirit, Cora would bow her head and softly giggle while tears of joy continued to weave salty trails down her cheeks.

Then, after the service had ended, Cora’s lantern could be seen from a distance as she navigated her way down the rugged craggy slope toward home unaware of how deeply the epistle Christ had written on her heart penetrated souls of those gathered in that little white church. In short, her peaceful surrender to the Lord had filled her heart with such enormous compassion and kindness that those worshipping Jesus in that humble space had comprehended the missive Christ had written on her heart with such clarity that it immeasurably changed their lives forever, and especially that of a little girl who witnessed the passionate testimony repeatedly throughout her childhood.

Given this familiar happening, without Cora’s knowledge, this little girl named Arlene was carefully scrutinizing her behavior soaking in the message like a sponge; all because the Holy Spirit had imprinted on a woman’s heart the epistle of the amazing victory alive only in Christ with such a sweet smelling fragrance that it literally drew a shy lady out of her shell, motivating her to be moved in a manner that not only impacted those within the sanctuary, but illuminated dark places in the hearts of man throughout the community and beyond.

Opal, today, that same little girl now in the winter season of her own earthly walk was so touched by Cora’s love for the Lord, albeit long ago, its memory still claims a cherished place in her own heart. Just think, although three generations removed, Christ continues to write missives on the hearts of man that are as timely today as then.

You see, the old woman with the lantern that had been a living epistle had been read by the young eyes of one of God’s little children who was so inspired that she continues to bring the message in the Scripture from 2 Corinthians to fruition through a humble walk with Christ, all because Cora’s actions spoke louder than words. Reflecting back on that experience, that little girl, who today is a living witness for the Lord, summarized the impact Cora had on her life by saying, **“She**

had, I am sure, a tough life but my memory is of her great faith. She was a true saint in my eyes."

Given this demonstration of constant devotion for God that Cora reflected throughout her earthly walk, no matter the burdensome terrain on which she trod, that behavior alone would prompt bystanders to contemplate from whence she obtained that level of strength and courage.

Certainly, one can ascertain that Cora had internalized the Scripture from **Psalm 46: 10**, that directs man to, ***"Be still and know that I am God"***, and fully comprehended the definition as not being anxious, fretting, complaining or boasting about her circumstances in life. Instead, in her mind, nothing was truly solid, trustworthy, or lasting but God the Father. She believed exactly what **Romans 8: 38-39** stated: ***"For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."***

Consequently, the glow from the light of her Savior gave her the power to overcome her shyness and let his love beam from her soul with such a magnificent radiance that her usual shyness dissipated when proclaiming the good news of the cross to others.

As Timothy Keller stated, ***"There is no more proper response to really seeing God as he is—transcendent beyond all imagination—than to be still and adore."***

Opal, it is my belief that God has bestowed on each of us a special gift that we are to use as Christians to proclaim the good news of salvation to others, no matter our age. However, journeying down the road called life trying to develop that gift on our own will fade in comparison to what it can become if we use it for his glory. Since there is nothing or anyone that can thwart him, the blessings he showers down on our actions when allowing him to lead will be nothing short of extraordinary. Although the hills and valleys will still appear on our road home, our work will be used by him for his redemptive purposes, but only if we allow his light to be shed on all the dark places in our lives. As a result, ominous shadows and worries will dissipate into the air like the morning mist as we, like Cora, become living epistles for men to read. Amen!

As our time together reaches its conclusion, feel God's hand upon your forehead as the following prayer is read:

Dear Lord,

Today, as we bow in the presence of your throne, we ask that your Spirit writes on each of our beings what you desire us to become as living epistles that all mankind will read. Give us the wisdom to always be still and know that you are in charge so that our actions will become a sweet aroma of truth to those who do not know about the good news of the kingdom.

As the Great Potter who formed each one of us with your tender and loving hands, we pray that we are always willing to submit to your leadership and listen intently for the urgings that come from your still small voice.

Please help us with great clarity to internalize that the gift you lovingly bestowed on us, even before we were born, is to be used for your glory and not our own self gain.

Even though the aging process presents enormous challenges resembling gigantic boulders that try to block the road on which we travel toward home, we submit to your desires and ask that you make us vessels of your love until you transport us on the wings of glory to our eternal abode.

All these things we pray in Christ's name and for his sake.

Amen!



*Love,
Colene*