

Time with an Old Friend

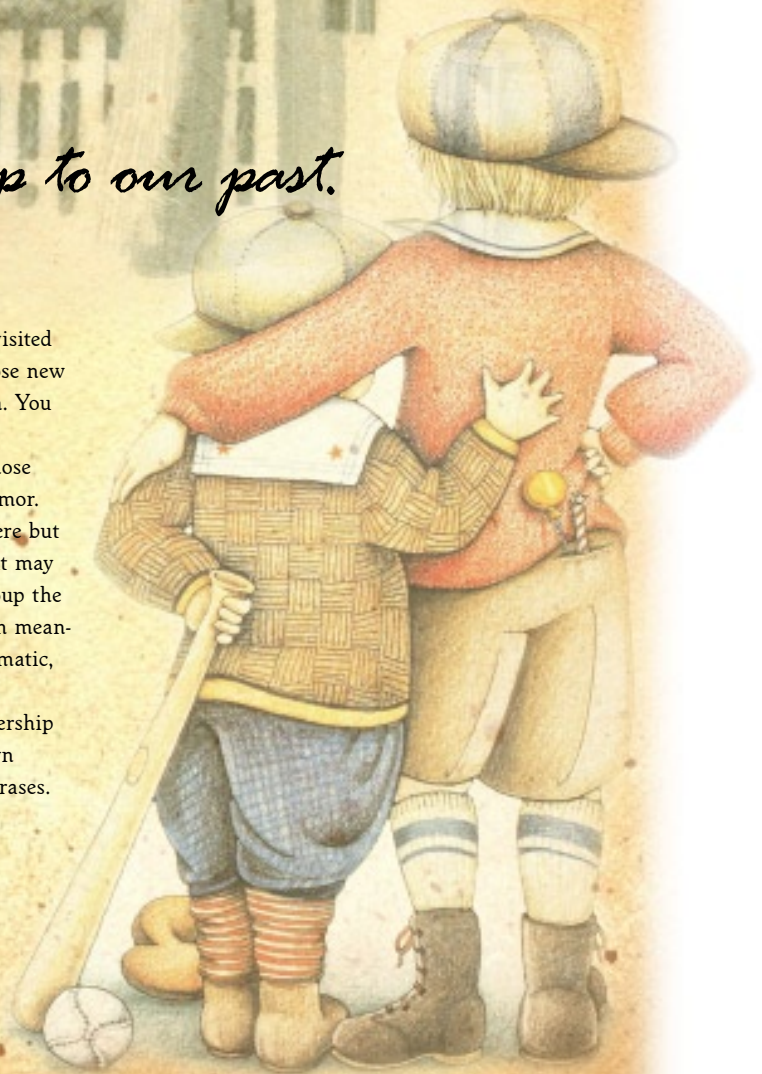
Come along with me on a trip to our past.

It will be a journey of rediscovery, one in which old familiar sites are revisited and seen as if through new eyes. Welcome on this trip, of course, are those new to faith, new to this life of sanctification through the blood of God's Son. You may see sights and learn things heretofore unimagined.

But the invitation is extended particularly to those *old* in the faith—those on whom the crust of religion has built up like a suit of heavy, rusted armor. This is the group to which I belong, a group whose members are of sincere but possibly calloused hearts, to whom religion has become so familiar that it may have become something monotonous—even trite. For members of this group the familiar lingua franca of the church now rolls trippingly, flawlessly, often meaninglessly off the tongue. Life in Christ may have become something automatic, performed without thought, and dull.

One need not be of advanced years to belong to this group. Its membership includes those who began so young that while still young they have grown inured to the habits of faith, its customs and practices, traditions and phrases. The church is as much in their bloodstream as if it had come as part of their DNA: natural, and familiar beyond the point of memory. It is a happy circumstance to begin so young in the ways of the Lord, but it is a circumstance fraught with the perils of eventual boredom, and ennui.

So come along with me, and together we will be revived from the river of life that flows from the throne. We will become reacquainted with our Savior, our friend—the one whose name we bear.



But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him...

Philippians 3:7-9a

He is quite a remarkable person, you know. Everything of God, yet the only member of the Godhead to have experienced the earthiness of flesh, Jesus can rightly be called a *person*. As such, He is our brother, our experienced advocate, our friend. More than that, however, Jesus is the one in whom we find all lessons for living. To take the name “Christian” means to be a “follower of Christ.” We do not go before Jesus, leading Him, for He has already paved the way; we do not walk alongside Jesus, shoulder-to-shoulder as an equal, for though He is our brother, He is still very God; but we follow *behind* Jesus, keeping Him in full view, observing His ways and—as much as flesh can, according to the condition of the heart—imitating His life.

So let us rediscover the essence of Christ. Let us return to our hometown, and find the street on which His family has always lived. The house will not be hard to find; the porch light will be on, since He has been expecting us. We will knock on their old screen door, and when He comes to the door and greets us with inviting affection (which He most certainly will), let us sit together and listen to Jesus tell us of His life, His ways, and His timeless ideas.

Best Friend

We turn down the street and immediately the memories come flooding back. The old oak and maple trees that grow between sidewalk and pavement are now taller and fatter, but their shapes and placement are familiar to us. In and around them we played tag, and we climbed in their lower branches to impress each other, and on them we hung our makeshift swings. Every autumn we helped our dads rake up the fallen leaves into huge piles—and then we scattered them back across the lawn as we took turns leaping into the fragrant, dusty piles.

Those were carefree days, days of unfettered joy and abandon, and we feel a sudden twinge of regret that those days now seem to be over. Our lives have become complicated and obtuse, pulled here and there by competing demands. As adults we have learned not only to be cautious, but suspicious; good humor has turned into dark irony, even ugly sarcasm. We have learned the art of the “firm handshake,” the “appropriate response,” the “diplomatic reply,” and we have forgotten what it was to be transparent and real with our friends.

And, especially, our *best* friend.

He lived right next door. In fact, our second-floor bedroom window faced his, and over the years that short distance was bridged by a succession of connections: first, two tin cans connected by taut string; then a pulley system for exchanging secret notes; then, later, wireless walkie-talkies, over which we talked with each other into

the late hours from under our bed covers. With our best friend we shared our loftiest aspirations, the most intimate details of our hopes and dreams, our darkest fears. There were times when we may have hesitated to share a most frightening thought, but only for a moment, for we loved our friend, and couldn't bear the thought of not sharing our life with him.

It was with our best friend that we explored the secret places in our small hometown—small tucked away places known only to children and the incurably curious. In company with our best friend the tiny creek that bordered the neighborhood playground became the mysterious Nile, filled with man-eating crocodiles. At other times it became the rough-and-tumble Caribbean, with threatening pirates hiding around every bend. With our friend we were free to let our imagination soar, to dream large dreams, and to dare to become something grand—even spectacular.

Now, of course, we have become too old for such things. Now our best friend is lost somewhere in the pages of our high school yearbook, and no one ever replaced him. Now we have many “friends,” but very few in whom we might confide our intimacies—and none with whom we would dare bare our soul. We have become sophisticated, self-reliant, and we suppose that we no longer need intimate friends as we did during our younger years. Tragedies are borne silently, alone, and infrequent joys embarrass us, for it would seem that only children enjoy the freedom of expressing uninhibited joy.

So we have returned to our old hometown, to the street on which we once lived. The daylight is dimming, and the overhanging trees dim further the ambient light, leaving a tranquil dusk. We, of course, go first

to the house in which we were born and raised. The front porch has been changed, and the house is now colored an odd green, instead of the white it once was. Familiar bushes are now gone or overgrown, and strange toys litter the front yard. But the exterior of the house is still recognizable as ours, and we wonder what our old bedroom looks like now.

The house next door stands in remarkable contrast to ours. A first glance reveals that it is unchanged, and even beyond the first glance it reveals that every detail is precisely as we have always remembered it. The color of its siding is the same; the location and shape of every shrub bordering its foundation are unchanged; even the darker colored trim is peeled and needing fresh paint in places we remember from childhood. It is as if we are looking at a decades-old image from a photograph album. Nothing—absolutely nothing has changed.

The porch light over the screen door is on—the only one in the entire neighborhood—like a small beacon leading us into safe harbor. dsf

To be continued...