

“LEAVING DAD BEHIND”

A Story-Sermon
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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Thomas threw off the heavy winter covers. Swinging his legs aloft like a bucket crane, he wheeled and sat up on the edge of the bed. He unbuckled the clips on his CPAP mask and tossed it to hiss on the bed until in a few seconds it shut off. Squinting in the dim light, he took a moment to consider where he was. Ah, yes: Libby's house. The guest bedroom. After Christmas.

He took a deep breath and those dream images came flooding back. His brain was full of bells from the depths of his sleep. He couldn't remember whether he actually heard the bells in his dream. Perhaps that's what woke him up. But he could still see them: The tinkling bells swinging in the wind on the outdoor market stall before Christmas. The bells of the bell choir from the Christmas Eve service at Libby and Tony's church. The bell of the church sounding high in the lighted tower as they left worship together on a snowy night. Somehow, oddly, the image of the Liberty Bell with its distinctive crack. And the haunting deep sound of the Pagoda bells in Vietnam during the war. If there were more bells, he couldn't remember them now. The bell images slowly faded. Any sound of their ringing disappeared. All was quiet in the bedroom and in the house.

Thomas put his feet on the cold floor and padded down the hall to the bathroom. When he returned, he sat on the edge of the bed once more. He tapped his cell phone: 6:05. No need to get up yet. The others would be in bed for some time.

What gradually replaced the dream images in his head were the words of the pastor from that Christmas Eve service. Why had he resonated so much with that message? It had been months since he had darkened the door of a church. Yet the preacher's words stuck with him. Something about how *Immanuel*, “God with us,” meant that God was with all of us, not just some. And that the baby in the manger

wouldn't stay a baby, but would soon grow to be a man who would turn the popular understanding of power and glory on its head. A man who would feel anointed to bring good news to the poor and release to captives, to promote recovery of sight to the blind and freedom for the oppressed, to announce the year of God's favor. A man who would surround himself with disciples who would abandon everything to follow him, leave their families behind, even leave their father behind, standing by the nets with which they had once made their living together.

Leaving dad behind. That was it! That was how that preacher got a hook in him! He couldn't shake it. And it was because that's what he had done so many decades ago. He could still see the scene as he had packed the car, his father standing by the porch steps, angry and fuming, hands balled into fists. It had been different when Thomas went off to Vietnam. That's what you did in that farm town in Western New York. And it had been different when Thomas went to college after the war. He was bettering himself. But this departure was like a dramatic crack in the world. Thomas was packing the car to leave and in doing so, he was destroying his father's unspoken plans. Thomas was supposed to take over the farm for his dad. Work together with his dad, yes, but then take over. Not leave for a distant city, for a job teaching special education students. And, it turned out, Thomas was leaving for good. His career would keep him in that distant city until he retired. Long after the family farm was sold to a neighbor, and his father went to the nursing home and then was gone. Thomas had come home from time to time over those years, of course, but never to stay.

Thomas failed to understand why he couldn't shake whatever it was that tied him to that sullen scene as he left the farm. Was it guilt that he had departed from his father and ruined his dad's plans? Was it the hardness in himself after the war that had not only kept him at arm's length from his dad but also had ruined his marriage and kept him crosswise with Libby's mom for so long? Was it his own loneliness over those years ever since? Why was he hanging onto the feelings of so many decades ago?

The light had brightened in the bedroom. Thomas had been sitting for too long in one spot, and it was time to make a break from all these regrets. He stood and stretched a little, turned off the CPAP machine, and limped a bit as he headed downstairs, trying not to make any noise as he went. Let them sleep.

The steam and scent of the coffee was like a blessing. It was nice, after some years of awkwardness, that he now felt at home in Libby's house – at home enough to make the coffee before Libby and Tony came down from upstairs. As he stood by the kitchen window and sipped the coffee slowly, the regrets receded from his mind. And they were replaced by one of the images from his dream: the cracked Liberty Bell. Why would that odd image arise again?

Thomas let his mind go, just to see where it would take him. And as he did, the hair began to stand up on the back of his head. A song came flooding into his consciousness, words and music all complete, in one glorious wave. He recognized it immediately. Something about that Liberty Bell image with its crack had triggered it. And there it was, as if it bore a special meaning for him and for him alone, at this very moment of his life. It was "Anthem" by Leonard Cohen:

The birds they sang
At the break of day
Start again
I heard them say
Don't dwell on what
Has passed away
Or what is yet to be

Yeah, the wars
They will be fought again
The holy dove
She will be caught again
Bought and sold
And bought again
The dove is never free

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in

We asked for signs
The signs were sent

The birth betrayed
The marriage spent
Yeah, the widowhood
Of every government
Signs for all to see

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in

Thomas sat down hard in a kitchen chair. What a gift! A gift from his dream, a gift from that pastor, a gift perhaps from God? He sat very still. He could feel the regrets of decades peeling away. He need not dwell on what has passed away. He indeed had no perfect offering. Yet he had lived a life worth living. Cracked, yes, but worth living. Cracked, but that's how the light gets in! And he let the song roll on in his head:

You can add up the parts
You won't have the sum
You can strike up the march
On your little broken drum
Every heart
Every heart to love will come
But like a refugee

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in
That's how the light gets in
That's how the light gets in

The light was full now in the kitchen. Thomas could hear the sounds of movement upstairs. Soon his quiet time would be over. That was OK. He was content. He set his empty coffee cup down, and took a long slow breath. "That's how the light gets in," he thought.