

“Lasting Legacy”

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Based upon Psalm 5:1-12; John 6:24-35

Good morning since this is my first time preaching I figured I'd warm up the audience with a joke. A Pastor was out hunting bears and as he was nearing the end of his day he was growing frustrated because he hadn't seen even one single track belonging to a bear. He threw down his rifle in disgust near a river and bent down to scoop up some water and splash it on his face. As he opened his eyes he saw the biggest bear he's ever seen at full speed charging right for him, immediately he bowed his head and prayed please God make this bear a Christian. Miraculously the bear stopped raised his paws to the sky and said "Thank you Lord for this meal I'm about to eat."

Now please indulge me, close your eyes now imagine yourself in 1996. Do you remember what you were doing, where you lived, maybe some of the big events in your life that year. Okay now that you have a clear picture open your eyes and I'll tell you a little bit about my 1996.

I was 22 in my last year at Penn State and wondering what I was going to do with my life. Throughout my four years I had continued to go to Catholic Mass even without the standard dose of guilt from my mother. I would often pray before exams to ask for God's help in remembering what I had or sometimes had not studied. I had designs on going to medical school but near the end of undergrad I was feeling burnt out but I sent in a few applications hoping to proceed to the next step, the in-person interview.

In March of that year that I realized I had not heard from my Mom in about a week, which was unusual, so I called home to check in and found out that my Dad had a pretty significant stroke at age 48. My brother and I rushed home to see him and found him in surprisingly good spirits in the hospital. His left side was weak and he would get a little bit of vertigo but he was lucky and the doctor said he would make a full recovery with physical therapy and some hard work. I think we all hoped and prayed it would serve as a wake-up call and he would start making better choices with his diet, try to exercise, and finally quit smoking for good.

While this is going on my older sister was pregnant with her first child. They found out it was going to be a boy and that they would name him Alexander. Once she entered the third trimester the doctor determined that Alexander had a rare birth defect that would not allow his lungs to properly form and that even if my sister carried him to full term he would not survive. Alexander lived outside the womb for about 15 minutes before he passed. This event challenged my faith and had some of my family asking God why and laying the blame at his feet. I just saw it as a sad and unfortunate event and I just prayed for my sister and Alex, and that the whole family would get through the grieving process quick as possible.

I graduated in early May and shortly afterwards we buried Alex with my father's mother who had passed away in 1991. It was a quiet ceremony, again I prayed for God to bring the family peace.

Two weeks after my graduation I got up early to go to 8am Mass with my Dad. I got in the car and the first thing he asked me was how my brother was dealing with Alex's death. I told my Dad that I think he blamed God and wasn't really interested in church right now. My father turned to me and said "Well you know Jim God's never going to be on my bench and always will be in my starting lineup." Now that was a classic line from my Dad. One thing we could always talk about even when I was a teenager with my own opinions and attitudes was sports. I think that is why I still get choked up at the end of Field of Dreams. It always seemed like he would try to make his point with some sort of sports analogy. Now if he was more of biblical scholar I think he would have referred to today's lesson from John. My Dad believed that all good things come from God and Jesus and that even in the tough times Jesus would always provide for our family for as we heard Jesus is the Bread of Life and the faithful will never go hungry or thirsty. You see for my Dad to continually reaffirm his faith while enduring poverty and tragedy in his childhood really spoke to what he valued and hoped to pass on to his children. The specific statement about his starting lineup has played a large role in my life ever since and even eclipsed the other events that day.

As we sat in mass that morning my Dad started to sweat and get short of breath. He told me we had to leave as he wasn't feeling well and so we went to the car and he handed me the keys which he had never done before. I got in the driver seat and started to drive towards home. I reached a T in the road where I could go left to take him home and right to take him to the hospital because I think I knew in the back of my mind that he was in serious trouble. I asked him if he wanted me to take him to the hospital and he said desperately just take me home and I'll be okay. So, in a decision that I would later regret and have trouble dealing with I took him home as the dutiful son I had always been. He died later that day on the operating table as doctors tried to perform a triple bypass and couldn't get his heart restarted. During this procedure me and my family prayed with all our might and asked for God's help so that he would survive. In the end 1996 became the year that I began to lose my faith. It wasn't right away but as I left for OCS and moved around for the next three years I found less and less time for Church. This practice would linger off and on for quite some time.

Now this practice of missing church was not something that sat well with my Grandfather and Grandmother. They were Catholics in western PA, like my Dad, and rarely missed a Sunday for as long as I can remember. When I would spend weekends at their summer home growing up everyone went to church. Often traveling rough back roads to find the small church on the side of a hill in Ligonier. I look back on those times fondly as I would ride in the front seat of their Buick station wagon and listen to my Pap pontificate about one thing or another. He was a World War II veteran, serving a few ears in the Army working as a mechanic on B-17's in England. As you can imagine he and my Grandmother were two of my biggest supporters when I decided to join the Navy. As I was getting ready to leave for a three-year tour in Japan he gave me the medal that is on the cover of the bulletin. The picture just shows the front side and as

some of you may know it is the sacred heart of Jesus, which is one of the most widely practiced and well-known Roman Catholic devotions, taking Jesus Christ's physical heart as the representation of his divine love for humanity. The back side has a picture of Mary and baby Jesus and says our Lady of Mount Carmel pray for us. Our Lady of Mount Carmel is the title given to the Mary in her role as patroness of the Carmelite Order. The first Carmelites were Christian hermits living on Mount Carmel in the Holy Land during the late 12th and early to mid-13th century. Our Lady of Mount Carmel was also adopted in the 19th century as the patron saint of Chile, in South America.

This was the first time I can remember seeing this medal and Pap said to me that this is what he wore throughout his time in the Army and it kept him safe and he believed that it would do the same for me. Yet again this was strong statement about faith from someone I loved and admired. Now nearly 20 years later, I never leave home without it. Much like my Father my Grandfather had to make due with very little throughout his life but seemed to never doubt that God would see him and his family through. I even recently found out that they lived for five plus years in the foundation of the home they would later finish. My Pap, Gram, and their children used to shower standing over the drain that is near the center of their one room basement. Even in the midst of that when the family would sit down to simple meals of corn, bread, and milk they were always faithful.

Now I believe that I have benefited from both my Father's and my Grandfather's faith. Their examples were always in the back and sometimes the front of my mind. Over the years I made my way back to church. I never felt right missing it on Sundays. I know early on in our relationship I said those exact words to Erica. I just felt better when I made it to church. I would say that is still true today. I would like to think we are working hard to make sure this is a Lasting Legacy as Erica and I try to emphasize the importance of church and the community associated with it to Caroline and Paige. I would like to think that when we encounter the next storms of life that we can weather them through faith and as the Psalm said

“... let all who take refuge in you be glad;
let them ever sing for joy.
Spread your protection over them,
that those who love your name may rejoice in you.
¹² Surely, LORD, you bless the righteous;
you surround them with your favor as with a shield.”

I like to believe our “shield” started some time ago and God has given me hints and nudges when I strayed from that protection. Maybe you have seen the same things and can look back at those who came before you and see the examples of God's love and goodness for the faithful. These beliefs even made me change the way that I pray as I try to thank God for all the good things in my life first and petition him after. And although I would have preferred to have both of them live to see my daughters I can now be happy and grateful for the time I had with them and what they showed me through their actions and devotion to God. Thanks be to God. Amen.