

**Devotions – May 17-23, 2020**

By Jackie Lehto

Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Florence, WI

**Sunday, May 17, 2020**

Close Encounters of the “Godly” Kind  
Quiet Moments

Today’s verse: Psalm 46:10

***“Be still and know that I am God.”***

The summer of 2004 I took a solo 1800- mile bicycle ride across America (Wisconsin to Texas and back). I was a somewhat out-of-shape woman of 51 years of age at the time. Because I was a teacher and had the summer off, I was not in a hurry and planned to ride about 50 miles a day. At the end of a ride on most days, I stopped at Women’s Shelters and shared my story. All the while giving praise for God’s wonderful mercy and grace by sharing what God accomplished in my life in the midst of and through some very bad times. The quietness afforded by sitting on a bike for four or more hours every day for three months gave me time to reflect, pray and listen to God. Consequently, I was humbled as I experienced several close encounters with God and want to share some of those quiet moments with you this week.

In our busy work-a-day world, we are rarely able to take a few minutes of quiet time (let alone an hour of prayer) to just listen to God’s quiet whispers, yet it is often in the quiet stillness that God speaks to us. While we can be in prayer throughout the day and listen to the Spirit’s guidance throughout the day, the Psalmist encourages us to be still and know God. As believers in Jesus Christ, we can be secure in our environments no matter what turmoil is going on at any time, even a pandemic, because we know God and have encountered God’s promises and peace that passes all understanding. May you find quietness during our social distancing as you are given this gift to be more still than usual. May you know God and be in awe of God’s goodness amidst the wiles of our broken world.



**Monday, May 18, 2020**

Close Encounters of the “Godly” Kind  
Thoughts of Earthly vs Everlasting

Today's verses: Genesis 3:19 (NRSV)

***“By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return. “***

Psalm 103:15-18

***“As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.”***

Romans 6:23

***“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”***

On my cross-country bike ride, I encountered many creatures along the road such as dogs, cats, birds, rodents, squirrels, deer, coyotes, a bear, and maybe a cougar to mention a few. Some scared me, dogs chased me, and others amused. There were also a lot of dead creatures ranging from the freshly killed and squashed to nothing but a mound of black ooze.

The continuous and daily barrage of lively and decomposing creature ooze brought encounters with God of a different nature. What I found amazing was how so many different Bible verses darted through my consciousness every time I came upon another creature. God was using the creatures and their remaining ooze to remind me of the many promises the Bible gives us about the temporary nature of life on earth versus the everlasting fact of eternity. We know we came from the dust and to the dust we shall return even as grass withers, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.



**Tuesday, May 19, 2020**

Close Encounters of the “Godly” Kind  
From the Mountaintop to the Stinky Refinery

Today's Verses: Exodus 34:29-32 (NIV)

***“When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them; so Aaron and all the leaders of the community came***

***back to him, and he spoke to them. Afterward all the Israelites came near him, and he gave them all the commands the Lord had given him on Mount Sinai.”***

Early one morning in Southern Oklahoma I had to bike over the Arbuckle Mountains, which most of us would call big “hills”. As I drew nearer and nearer to them, I dreaded the thought of having to bike up the hills I was seeing. It was not an easy task by any means. When I got to the top of that hill, I was so disappointed because there was no view. For all that work, I should at least get to look out and see something. Not the case. I followed the road a bit farther around a corner and another hill appeared in front of me, “Oh, boy!” Up and up I went until I found myself at the top of the mountain, it was about 7:30 am. Finally, the view worth all of the work was before me. I stayed there for a long while, had a snack, watched hawks circling over the valley below and thanked God for putting me in that spot at that moment in time. It was indeed a blessing and a close encounter with God. After I rested and continued on my way, I rode down and down eventually ending up in the valley below on a very straight and very flat road biking by an extremely stinky oil refinery. How I missed the mountaintop already.

Isn't that the way it always is? We have a mountaintop experience with God, it disappears all too quickly and we wish we could go back to the way that felt. Why can't I be on that mountaintop all the time or least more of the time? Even Moses had to come down from the mountaintop. Why? Because that is where we live, in the stinky throws of everyday life. The valley is where God works with us, leads us, and guides us to minister to those who live there in community with us. As we go along in our valley life, God sustains us and helps on our journey and yes, eventually, we do get back to another mountaintop, but we live in the valley. It is where we learn we need God.



**Wednesday, May 20, 2020**

### Close Encounters of the “Godly” Kind

Today's Verse: Psalm 94:19

***“When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought me joy.”***

Along the road I experienced a variety of breakdowns, flat tires, chain derailments, and broken wires to name a few. All frustrating and disappointing. I wanted to keep moving and keep on schedule. The day I started out to leave Miami, Oklahoma from the northeast corner of the state, I rode about two blocks and had a flat tire. I made a call for assistance and sat down on a

concrete retaining wall and said a prayer. “Well, Lord, as much as I try to control what happens on this ride, I realize that I control nothing. I know today that you are in the details of what is happening, not me. Thank you for this blessing of guiding my days.” This encounter with God, this surrender, flooded my soul with peace. If we daily surrender our days to God, give up our need to control everything that we have planned and surrender our plans to God, allowing God to direct our paths, we will find the consolation of joy the Psalmist speaks of in today’s verse.



Thursday, May 21, 2020

Close Encounters of the “Godly” Kind  
The Road to Joplin, Missouri

Today’s verses: Matthew 25:31-42

*When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, and then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’*

At the other end of my trip that I discussed yesterday from Miami, Oklahoma was Joplin, Missouri. Remember, this is a day of surrender. A few days prior I had the quiet whisper in my head to give someone \$5.00 and I said, “No. I need this \$5.00!” In Miami, Oklahoma, before I broke down, someone handed me \$5.00. It was given as a gift by a lady who said to me, “You might need that today.” I found it curious that it was the exact amount that I was supposed to give away and didn’t. Next up that day was my flat tire story I shared with you in yesterday’s devotion and then onto Joplin.

As I traveled along the road there was a man selling cantaloupes. Then, the whisper as I whizzed by, “Buy a cantaloupe.” Okay, I can buy a cantaloupe as I surrendered the details to God. So I turned around to go back to the cantaloupe stand and bought a cantaloupe with the \$5.00 the gal had given me. The gentleman gave me a second one for free.

I was just getting into Joplin when I saw a man on a busy corner with a sign: “Will work for food.” Right away, I thought I’d find some money for him; I need to give him \$5.00, but I could not find my wallet. Then I remembered the two cantaloupes. So, I said to the man, “I don’t have any money, but here is a cantaloupe for you.” The man looked in my eyes and simply replied, “Thank you, ma’am.” And, in his eyes in that very brief encounter, I saw a genuine humbleness, lovingkindness, and welcoming unlike anything I had ever experienced before. I believe beyond any question that I saw Jesus in that man’s eyes. As I rode away from there a dozen Bible verses flooded my head; joy filled my soul as I thanked God for another amazing encounter. It was a mountaintop experience that thrills me to this day.



**Friday, May 22, 2020**

Close Encounters of the “Godly” Kind  
Humbled

Today’s Verse: Isaiah 41:10

***“Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.”***

I was gone from my home and family on this cross-country bike ride for about 60 days. I realized my vulnerability on the road and was scared from time to time, not because of anything or anyone, but perhaps just because I was alone. Every day I played a game in my head and that was to imagine every white car/van/truck that passed me by were angels watching over me, checking on me, keeping me safe from harm. When I felt most vulnerable, I prayed more, recited Bible verses, pedaled faster, counted the white “angel” vehicles, and looked forward to being done for the day. Every day I had to rely on strangers to assist me in a wide variety of ways. They provided food, housed me, gave me directions, helped me fix my bike, etc. And all of the folks who did these things for me were so very kind and generous. These folks are forever etched into my memory and some I consider “angels” that God sent to keep me safe; they were where I encountered God. Being alone, being vulnerable, having to rely on others for so many needs, having to rely on God for safety, all brought me to a place of humbleness. Letting go of our self-reliance is difficult to say the least. However, the need for God and others is not always as evident as it was on my bike ride, but nonetheless, it is always there.



Saturday, May 23, 2020

Close Encounters of the “Godly” Kind  
Enough is Enough!

Today’s Verse: Psalm 23

*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.  
He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.  
Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil;  
for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me.  
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

As I pedaled my way home toward home, I found myself in Streator, IL, a small community in north central Illinois. I did the usual things and the folks there were exceptionally welcoming, over the top in hospitality and showed total good will toward me. I thought about some points north and lining up some more talks but decided against it. I had had enough. This community had celebrated my bike ride accomplishments with me, and I felt it was the perfect ending to an amazing trip. So I packed my bike in a trailer and rode home in a car. It was good.

A few years later, my 85-year-old neighbor lady told me, “I’ve had enough; I just want the Lord to take me home. I’ve lived a good life, I know the Lord, and I am ready. Enough is enough!” Most of us are not to the point in life where enough is enough and we are ready to go to our heavenly home forever. It is difficult for us to even think that way. Her statement, while sad to me, also provided an encounter with God. To know that she had an unshakeable faith in God’s promises encouraged, for we are just passing through this world and it is not our home at all; we are meant to be with God forever. Amen.

