

“Letting Go”

Rev. Dr. Bill Ekhardt

The Psalmist reflects on a God who saved people in the midst of their distress - those parched in the desert. Apostle Paul, in a letter in the Philippians, shares about the peace that passes all understanding. He encourages his small church to be anxious about nothing. But, he starts it by talking about the conflict that is happening. Did you catch that? Please encourage these two leaders to get along with each other. In the midst of the conflict they are anxious about it, how do we get there? Being anxious about nothing has been a lot harder for me, than just reading the passage and doing it.

I want to share with you today a story from my life. Perhaps not my average sermon, it could be considered more of a testimony. I want to share with you today about anxiety – stress – that I felt almost felt crippled me. It took me to a place where I thought it was going to destroy me, and how I was saved from it.

This story takes place largely around a grounds. If you find your bulletin, [Bill holds up his bulletin] you will see on the front cover a picture. Laura, our communications person, asked me to give her this picture. This is a picture of the lake at Calvin Crest. Calvin Crest is a Presbyterian camp on a conference ground. I was there last weekend - that’s why I wasn’t here with you all. And, this story revolves around this place and what role it took in my life.

Calvin Crest is a camp where God worked in my life in a number of ways. I went there the first time when I was about seven years old. My dad was the Friar in Sherwood Forest. That means he was the speaker for the week at the 4th through 6th grade camp. So, before I was even old enough to go to camp, I stayed in the Friar’s hut, which was this very - no electricity – very, very dismal place; but it was magical. I loved this place. I loved being part of the grounds. We shot bows and arrows, we wore green tunics, and it was fantastic.

As I grew older, I became a camper and I stayed in the huts with my friends. They were these two-walled huts; cold air would blow in and we would sleep in our sleeping bags. And, I learned to meet the counselors, who were these people of faith. They were volunteers who were there to sleep in the huts with us and share stories with us. Our lead counselors were called our “Squires.” They led us in Bible lessons and they prayed with us.

The speaker at Sherwood Forest was my father. He got up in front of the camp fire and told stories, and he invited us to experience God. Year after year, I came back to Calvin Crest - every summer - and it was the highlight. We all looked forward to it. I was formed there in those conversations in the cabin, and in the talks in front of the camp fire, and the invitations I had to make new commitments in my life with God.

When I was in high school, I went to a two-week program called AIM, where we volunteered. We raked leaves and needles to keep the building safe from fires. We cut trails through the forest and we helped serve the other campers their meals.

The following summer I was received on the staff. I applied and went on the summer staff, and worked in the kitchen. Then they made me the dinner cook, because the dinner cook - I

think – quit. And, they said, “Bill, you know how to cook.” So, I started cooking for about 600 people, and I stayed on summer staff for 10 summers. I went my first summer out of high school and all through college. I took two years off after college and then I went into seminary. Every summer while I was in seminary I stayed, and spent 10 summers there.

In this place, I was formed. In this community, I was developed. I heard more clearly my call to ministry there in that community. I had opportunities to speak, and to teach, and to lead in worship, and I had a community around me affirming my gifts, saying, “Bill, this is something you are good at. I believe this is something God is calling you to.” Out of this community I understood what it meant to be in ministry - to trust God, to see God at work - and so I was formed there, it was like a crucible of my formation as a pastor.

At the end of my time - my last summer there - I began dating Tracy, my wife. We were on staff together. So, you can add to the things that I share in common with Calvin Crest: a place where my family was born.

I went off to Tokyo - my first call. Then I came back. Once I got married to Tracy, and had kids, we began to go back for family camp.

Calvin Crest was built in 1953 by 3,000 families from all over the San Joaquin valley in California. All of these farmers and small-town members got together and, in 1953, they pledged \$86,000 to build this place, and they formed it.

Then, by the 2000s, that same presbytery was struggling. It was arguing over theology. Churches were splitting down the middle, inside of themselves, and they were splitting one from another. This community of churches that created Calvin Crest split apart - split in half. In the course of six years, the number of members of the presbytery dropped by 50 percent.

Calvin Crest was no longer in a place where it could continue to survive serving the churches that still existed - the churches that gave it birth. It had to learn something new.

Around this time, I was a stay at home dad - staying home with these kids sitting up front, (Miles is holding up his hand.) And, as a way of preserving my mind and with the guidance of some other folks, I had gone to get an MBA. So, I would go one class at a time; it was protected time away from my children. I love my children. [Laughter] It is fantastic to have a class to go to.

I was finishing up my MBA in 2013. I was at family camp, and I experienced the strongest call of my life to the ministry. I felt as though something was bursting inside of me; that I needed to be helping Calvin Crest. I needed to be finding a way to bring the ministry I learned in my MBA program to Calvin Crest. So, I talked to the executive director and they brought me onto the board. That fall, in the midst of this turmoil and the loss of campers over the past six years - and unfortunately a change in the registration software that didn't report to the finance office, so no finance reports had been created for six months – I was about to step on as treasurer. The CPA's office finally got me a finance report. It was the first one we had seen in six months. Twenty-three hours before my first board meeting and we had a surprise \$100,000 loss.

We were clearly in deep turmoil. In the next couple of weeks, I began traveling to camp and I went right into an MBA marketing plan; developing a meeting with the key staff and stakeholders, trying to identify if there was a rationale for Calvin Crest to exist. We met, and we prayed, and we looked and wrote on the walls. We found the things that were at the heart of Calvin Crest, as it had always been - but it was still pertinent, it was still needed, and it was still something of value. So, we built a web site and a new pricing plan, and created a marketing plan that I described to the board there, that Calvin Crest was like an orangutan that had been raised by humans, and the humans couldn't take care of it anymore, so they had tossed it out in the jungle, and said, "OK, go find your own food."

Calvin Crest had to learn how to make new relationships with new churches. and we began doing that. It was an exciting time. It was an all-encompassing time in my life. I remember sitting next to Miles at the dining room table, and I was building a website while he was watching Netflix next to me, and we were turning it around.

Things were becoming good: we had a plan. Twenty-five percent growth in the summer. And then, for some reason, in the midst of all of this good, something happened that none of us had any control over: Two of the schools from our science camp - our outdoor education program - decided they couldn't afford to come anymore, so they dropped out. That was a \$60,000 loss, equivalent to staff positions.

I remember in January, coming to the board and saying, "In non-profits, we keep track of cash-on-hand in terms of days - like we have 30-days of cash-on-hand that would be enough to run the organization for 30 days." My assessment was that we had eight hours cash-on-hand: we had less than a day.

It was a \$1.2 million budget. We began the month with \$7000. We had no equity. Our line of credit was dead. I went to the board and said, "We have no reserves. We have a balanced budget, but I have no way of telling you if we will be able to meet payroll every month, between now and the end of March. Once March comes, I see cash coming in, but until then there is nothing I can do."

This spot was crippling for me. I was the CFO. I had already reduced the salaries of everybody on staff to the bare bones, and I looked around at families whose jobs would be lost at Calvin Crest. I felt the sense of ownership and this concern for both the camp and these people, and it crushed me. It was more than I could bear. In that place, I had to find out how not to be anxious.

I want to step back 20, or maybe 30 years. As I was graduating from high school, my parents - my father a pastor, my mother a therapist - opened a Christian psychotherapy office. She was struggling in her family business. She had over-extended in ways that were not profitable, then got sick and was in turmoil: debt facing bankruptcy. I was going off to college and I remember creditors calling, I remember having a check, that my parents had given me, and going to deposit it in my college town and there being nothing in their bank account - because creditors had seized all of the cash out of their accounts.

In the midst of that trauma, I had become someone who could project the future financially, felt I needed to hold it. I was only safe if I could see it, and make it happen myself. I had not learned to trust God in the midst of that and - in contrast - out of that trauma I had

become controlling and fearful. Now, looking back, the fact is that God brought me back, all through college debt free, was fantastic that it all worked, but the trauma of that experience damaged me.

I bring that to you to come back to this place. Here I was, having to trust that God would provide or not, and a mentor shared with me: “Bill, look, you have done what God has asked of you. You have developed a plan and you have executed it, and it is completely out of your hands. Either it is God’s will that Calvin Crest continues, or it is not.”

I realized that I was invited to do something like the sacrifice of Isaac: offer this to God. “This is yours [God]. If it is time for you to end, then it is OK.”

Let me tell you, that was not easy. I was unable to imagine my future without Calvin Crest. I was unable to imagine this place that had become a huge part of my Christian formation. I was unable to imagine what life would be like, if my kids didn’t have an opportunity to go there, or be on staff someday and be formed. I was not able to imagine this.

All I could deal with was this sense of dread - if I opened that door - to imagining what life would be like. And, I was invited to open that door. When I did, God gave me a vision of all of this beauty in my life – non-profits I could work with, like “Dance without Limits,” which provides special-needs participants instruction for ballet (which my daughter participates in), and other little start-ups. I was able to see how God would use me when I was willing to open that door, and God gave me the grace to let go.

What does it take to not be anxious? “Be anxious in nothing.” That is a nice command. What does it take?

In my life, it took being met by Christ the King - the one who we exalt and put on the throne. It took being given a vision that he was not going to let me fall; that he was going to stand by me and, in the midst of the storm - the rain that I saw - life would be good, with or without this camp that I had been asked to help.

After we turned it over, life was different. I was able to go to our registrar and say, “Look, you are working too hard. Your kids need you. Calvin Crest isn’t worth this. If it takes abandoning your children to save camp, it’s not worth it.”

I was able to be at peace and share that peace with those around me - and this is what happened:

You might notice from my story that the ending has already been revealed to you. I was there last week. It still exists.

A couple of months after that, there was a fire. As we were driving up, we saw a forest fire coming up upon Calvin Crest. We stopped in Oakhurst. All of the staff had been evacuated. We were standing at the chapel window in a Presbyterian church in Oakhurst looking up on the hill, watching the fire go up. I was listening in my earpiece to the fire-fighters calling for reinforcements: “I have this structure; I think I can defend. Can you send an engine?” and the call back: “Thank you for the information. All of our resources are exhausted.”

I looked at Tony, the executive director, and I said, "This doesn't look good. I think this is the end." He said, "I think so, too." But we had already given it up, so we kind of understood that every day was a day we hadn't been promised.

You may have heard, if you have been around my family, this fall - in September - there was another fire. This fire came right through it and burned half of Calvin Crest property. The fire-fighters encircled the main area of camp, and they fought off an oasis of beauty in the midst of a burned-out shell of a forest - and, it's still incredible. We had given it up for lost. By God's providence, it survived. There was nothing we could do when we gave it up. God preserved it. I don't know if God was testing me, or the camp, or us, or who or how, but I do know that God taught me to let it go.

What does it take to let go? What does it take to not be anxious about children who are struggling in school, or with emotional needs, or with their friends? What does it take to let go of our future concerns? I can tell you that in my life it took turning to Christ the King, and being given the grace to see that God would not let me go - and to trust.

Let us pray: Almighty God on this Christ the King Sunday, we exalt you. We crown you King. We offer prayer and bring this to you. But God, in the midst of our daily lives, in the midst of struggles and concerns, and in the midst of uncertainty about the future - things we care about - it is difficult to turn and trust. Lord, we ask for your grace. Grant us that peace that passes all understanding, as we learn to let go and give our concerns to you.

We offer this prayer in your son Jesus' name. Amen