

HALLOWEEN: ONLY HOLDING THE BAG

When I was writing the section of my essay “My Lord and My God” about the ability of God to see and hear, two incidents from my childhood came to mind as illustrations. I wrote about both almost ten years ago as part of the family history gift we give our children for Christmas. After rereading the stories, I decided to adapt them into my collection of essays. I hope they bring you a smile as well the intended lessons: that God sees and hears. (The other essay is called “The Telephone.”)

This is the anniversary of the incident I am about to recount, for it took place in the days before Halloween, at least sixty years ago. At that time in Annville, Pennsylvania, Halloween was a season rather than just a day. Any time during the last week of October children would begin going from house to house in costumes, collecting their treats after chatting a while and revealing their identities. Others began doing mischievous stunts in the neighborhood – nothing really damaging, usually, just annoying to property owners. The thrill, of course, was in getting away with a prank that you had carefully planned and anxiously awaited the proper time to execute.

Our most common stunt was to throw dried corn kernels onto people’s front porches and then run and hide. As I write, I can still hear how it sounded when we were inside the house and suddenly corn hit our wooden porch. That was not damaging at all, but it did require someone to sweep the porch the next day. We swept ours many times around Halloween!

Two doors from my childhood home lived Mrs. Miller, a mysterious woman who did not like to be seen by others. She stayed inside her house as much as possible. On Monday mornings she did the family laundry very early so that she could hang it on the clothes lines in the back yard while it was still dark. She was the shadowy figure behind the lace curtains on the front window, the unknown person who was watching us as we passed by. What did she see? Who – and what – did she know? What might she do? The mystery of it all made her a bit frightening to me. One thing was certain: we skipped the Miller house when doing our Halloween pranks! ... that is, until I was eleven or twelve years old.

That year several of us girls from the neighborhood decided to see if we could throw corn on Mrs. Miller’s porch and get away with it. For some reason we decided to carry out our “attack” in broad daylight! Holding a bag full of dried kernels, I joined the others in creeping up to Mrs. Miller’s porch. And then – wham! Corn rained down all over the porch with its delicious sound! Just as quickly we all ran off in different directions to our homes.

I entered our back door and hid in the out kitchen – the utility room between the back door and the kitchen – hoping fervently that we had not been seen. But I hoped in vain! Soon my mother was standing at the out kitchen door bearing the dreaded news. “Verna,” she said, “Mrs. Miller called and said she saw you throwing corn on her porch. Is that true?”

“Oh, Mom,” I pleaded, “I was only holding the bag!”

“That doesn’t matter,” she said. “Get the broom and go sweep Mrs. Miller’s porch!”

I was devastated! How humiliating! But, of course, I did sweep the porch; Mom said I had to. I knew that Mrs. Miller was probably watching from behind the curtains. All the other girls got away with their deeds. I knew from attending church that the Bible says “Be sure your sin will find you out.” “That’s for sure,” I thought. “Others get away with ‘murder.’ I can’t even get away with throwing corn!”

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One of the benefits of growing older is being able to glance through the years at the incidents of our lives from new perspectives and to draw lessons from them. Looking back, I'm glad Mom did not excuse me by explaining to Mrs. Miller that I was only the bag holder. Character is developed by obedience and by taking care of small matters as they come up. I grew up a great deal while standing on Mrs. Miller's porch with broom in hand!

I am enjoying now, more fully than before, the thought of comparing the unseen, mysterious, rather frightening Mrs. Miller with our unseen, mysterious, awe-inspiring (rather frightening) God. I found out through the Halloween incident that Mrs. Miller did know who I was. I never saw her face, yet she knew my name, my family, my grandma's name and her telephone number, for it was through Grandma's phone that she reached my mother. I wonder what else she knew? I wonder if she had any idea that I would some day be glad that she had reported me to Mom? It is not a far leap for me, then, to think of God as knowing every detail about me, even the number of hairs on my head! And God knows exactly how to shape and mold me through the experiences of my life into the person he wants me to be. It may have been God who lead Mrs. Miller to notice me rather than the others!

When I was hiding after the corn throwing incident, I was only trying to hide from Mom, not from God. By hiding, though, I was acknowledging that I had done something wrong and felt guilty. I don't remember if I knew at that age that it is futile to try to hide from God, but I certainly know it now. I agree with David who wrote in Psalm 139:

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me," even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.

While we cannot hide from God, we can – and should – hide in God, for it is there that we are safe. This thought is expressed so well in an old hymn by Augustus M. Toplady:

Rock of Ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in Thee;
Let the water and the blood, From Thy wounded side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure, Save from wrath and make me pure.

Could my tears forever flow, Could my zeal no languor know,
These for sin could not atone – Thou must save, and Thou alone;
In my hand no price I bring, Simply to Thy cross I cling.

While I draw this final breath, When my eyes shall close in death,
When I rise to worlds unknown, And behold Thee on Thy throne,
Rock of Ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in Thee.

I learned an interesting lesson in a dramatic way in April, 1980. That month my daughter Marty and I set out for a big adventure: we took a train ride from New York City to Sebring, Florida and spent several days with relatives there. I had lived in Sebring during my freshman year in high school and had never been back since our return in 1948. Thirty-two years later, I was anxious to see if I could locate fourteen-year-old Verna somewhere in Sebring; in particular, might she be sitting on a bench in the circle at the center of the town where she sat all those years ago?

Marty and I located the house where I had lived, the church I attended, and my school (which had been demolished two weeks before our arrival, though the yellow bricks were still there). And then we went to the center of town. The benches were there, but young Verna was not. I don't know what I was expecting to find, but to find nothing surprised me. And then I understood. Fourteen-year-old Verna – the one who loved the adventure of living in a totally different place, who enjoyed life in general, including making new

friends – was within me, not outside on a park bench somewhere. Also inside me were two-year-old Verna, critically ill with pneumonia; adolescent Verna, standing on Mrs. Miller's porch; the college student, the factory worker, the school teacher, the new bride, the musician, the mother taking care of five children – all were inside because I chose to embrace them. Thus I was – and continue to be – whole. I am content with the variety that has gone into this patch-work quilt, this hearty stew that is my life. I am content with who I am.

Halloween customs have changed through the years. Vandalism often replaces the mischief of my childhood. Trick or treating can be dangerous for children now. We give out candy without taking the time to socialize with our visitors. God has not changed, however. He never does! God is still interested in character building. Remember that and don't try to excuse yourself as "only having held the bag." And stay away from activities where you have to run away and hide, hoping no one saw you or knows where you are. God can find you, even in an out kitchen! Be glad our God can see. It feels so much better when things are out in the open and handled. David thought so, too. Let's pray with him the conclusion to Psalm 139:

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

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