

A PENNY FOR YOUR THOUGHTS – 39

(MAY – AUGUST, 2015)

Saturday, May 2, 2015. Greetings to all of you who are reading this Penny essay. May you be blessed as you read it. Before continuing, I want to thank all of you who have contacted me by mail or email in the past few months. I read all your letters and emails and appreciate your encouragement, but cannot personally respond to each. As I said at the end of Penny 37, I am finding it increasingly difficult to write, and for the most part am answering by group communications such as this. I pray for you as I read your correspondence, and know you pray for me too. Thank you.

In Penny 38 I mentioned that from the beginning of this calendar year I have been primarily occupied with writing the monthly services that we present at Sky View and with the writing of 2 poems. If you wonder how I can do even that amount of writing, it's because my son George, my daughter Marty, and Cliff Cullum, who moderates our services, all help with typing as well. They also advise and encourage, especially as they watch my poems unfold over time. What fun!

Perhaps before you get this document, the poems, titled Barabbas and The Past, will have been posted on my website. Whether you have read them previously or not doesn't really matter, for the full text of both poems is within these pages, along with background material on poetry in general and these two in particular. They are both what I call narrative poems – that is, they tell a story that propels the reader along. Barabbas is the true story of a man who appears in all four gospels, while the man in The Past is entirely fictional.

ABOUT THE SUBTITLES. A few years ago one of my aides was a man from Rwanda named Innocent, who, as a believer, enjoyed reading my poems. "They are psalms," he said, sending my mind to the book of Psalms in the Bible, many of which have subtitles, a feature I like. At minimum, the subtitles tell who wrote the Psalm. Other information varies, and may include the following: where and when the poem was written (for the Psalms ARE poems); what prompted the writing; and if the poem was meant to be sung. If yes, a tune may be suggested, as well as what musical instruments to use. I find all this tremendously valuable in my understanding of the Psalms, yet I never thought to use subtitles on my own poems until Innocent made his remark. Since then I have made them a part of every poem I have written, and added them to many of my previous poems. Please read them! Thanks. For those who don't know: Sky View is the name of the nursing home where I have lived since late December, 2005. It is located in Croton-on-Hudson, New York.

Now here is the first of the two poems, written in March for the April 2 program of "Scripture and Prayer with Verna and Friends," which, although held on the Thursday before Easter, was structured as a Good Friday service:

BARABBAS

*By Verna Kwiatkowski. Based on stories in
Matthew 27, Mark 15, Luke 23, and John 18 –
plus my imagination. A Sky View poem.*

The purpose of Barabbas, as far as I can see,
Is to help each of us say, "Jesus died for me."

Barabbas was a notorious prisoner when Jesus was on trial.
Guilty of insurrection and murder, he pondered his fate a while –
At least in my mind that's what he did! How did he end up in jail?
No one to blame but himself! His choices set him up to fail.
Execution was now his doom. Capital crimes are hard to reprieve.
Meanwhile at the trial of Jesus came a twist that's hard to believe!

Pilate, the governor, came to a conclusion that had him satisfied:
Jesus was innocent! Then how did he end up flogged and crucified?
Pilate knew the chief priests envied Jesus and wished him dead,
So he used an annual Passover custom to get him freed instead.
"If I offer them a choice of Jesus or Barabbas," Pilate was thinking,
"Surely they'll choose Jesus!" But soon Pilate's spirits were sinking.

He had badly underestimated the power of the chief priests that day.
They had mingled with the crowd, persuading the people to say:
"Barabbas! We want Barabbas!" when they were given a choice.
"And Jesus?" Pilate asked. "Crucify him!" they said with unison voice.
"For what crime?" he demanded. "Crucify him!" was their only reply.
So Pilate washed his hands of the matter, turning Jesus over to die.

I enjoy imagining a stunned Barabbas when told that he was free!
Surely he wondered about the man more deserving of death than he!
I picture him next at the cross, reading the trilingual sign for a clue.
"Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews," it said. That's not a crime, true,
And the implications are staggering! That is truly a powerful name!
Introduced to my Savior by the cross, I will never again be the same!

Make no mistake – the death of Jesus was part of God's eternal plan,
For God so loved the world he died for each woman, child, and man:
Even Barabbas, even you, even me!

Thank you, Lord!

CLOSINGS. The row of information above is the way I have been closing my poems and essays since my website became functional after I moved to Sky View. Before subtitles, I assumed people reading my material would look at the end, see my name, and know I wrote it, but it didn't always work out that way. Often a person would read a poem displayed on the door of my room, for example, and then ask, "Did you write this?" I seldom hear that now! To me, the date is also important, especially if I know something of the author's life as well. Generally I give the month and the year in which the writing was completed; a few times I am more specific. The web address is given so the readers may make use of it if they wish.

NOTHING WASTED! God can use anything to further his kingdom on earth, even a memory from the past. Such was the case when I was writing the poem Barabbas. For about 7 years, beginning in the late 1980s, I was Protestant Religious Educator in a boarding school for troubled children. During those years I was constantly looking for materials to use with my students, especially books. There was a series (with a name I can't remember) that published a number of Bible stories in verse, with vivid pictures on each page. My favorite of these was titled Barabbas. I was so impressed by that book that I kept it after my job ended, giving away the others. I even used the book a few times with adult classes! I haven't read that book in about 20 years and don't know where it is, yet in March of this year, when I wanted to write a new poem for the Good Friday service, Barabbas came to mind, bringing many warm thoughts from the boarding school era. I find it interesting that I didn't realize until I was writing this paragraph that both poems have something to do with my past. Yes, our memories are useful in God's hands! Now here is the second poem, followed by comments.

THE PAST

By Verna Kwiatkowski, who, when reading The Red Wheelbarrow by William Carlos Williams (© 1962), heard it more as an assignment than as a poem. "The Past is my answer to the supposed assignment: 'Write a poem that begins with these words.' The Red Wheelbarrow is quoted in its entirety in the first two lines," Verna says. The reference to the Rear Guard is in the Bible in Isaiah 52:12 and 58:8. A Sky View poem.

"So much depends upon a red wheelbarrow
Glazed with rain water beside the white chickens,"
He thought as he neared his childhood home,
Hoping to see again the white rooster and two hens
That served primarily as functional doorstops,
And secondarily as his playmates and friends.
What fun he'd had creating games for them!
His creative nature was on display even then!

The red wheelbarrow carried a different story.
On his eighth birthday, there it was! Oh, glory!
The greatest thing about it? It was NOT a toy,
But a piece of farm equipment, sized to fit a boy!

He felt so manly working with his daddy in the fields,
Wheeling home to Mother whatever the garden yields.
His family moved to the farm when he was seven.
It was a happy, healthy life – maybe a taste of heaven!

Then when he was only nine, his dear daddy died,
Killed in a tragic accident. Mother and son both cried,
Silently understanding that they'd have to sell the farm;
They couldn't run it without Daddy and his vital charm.
Soon they were packing, returning to their former life.
Maybe this time there would be less stress and strife!
"Only take what's necessary to our apartment in the city,"
Mother said. "No need for barrow or doorstops, what a pity!"

At once his mind devised a plan to keep them all together.
If they missed him, he thought, they'll comfort one another.
Clutching the chickens, he ran from house to barnyard
Where he got the barrow, wet with rain – this was hard! –
And tucked them into a corner of the barn out of sight,
Not knowing until later how much he'd grown that night!
In time the years on the farm took on a kind of magic,
Yet he never went back to the place that was also tragic.

Forty years had passed when he saw an advertisement
That filled him as he read, with increasing amazement,
About the farm and its contents, soon scheduled to be sold
At a public auction. "All invited!" it said, though, truth be told,
It felt like a personal invitation that he could no longer ignore.
That's why today, in keen anticipation, he shut the car door
And began a magical journey that was just about to end,
For he was sure the farm would appear just around the bend.

There it was! Following instructions about where to park,
He opened the car door behind the barn, anxious to embark
On the next phase of his adventure! This was feeling good –
A mature man standing where his younger self once stood!
He took a few deep, calming breaths, then started out at last
To learn from, appreciate, and maybe understand The Past.
But first things first! He wanted to meet the owners of the farm,
Which, while thoroughly modernized, still retained its charm!

He arrived early for just this purpose, and on the sidewalk
Outside the house, he found them! Easily they began to talk.
He told them about the chickens and the small wheelbarrow
He had hidden in the barn. "We found them in a place so narrow
We could hardly get them out! And it left us with a question –
Why did you hide the doorstops? Was it for their protection?"
They asked with genuine interest. They wouldn't have guessed
He saw them not as doorstops, but as friends, 'til he confessed!

"Are you sad to leave the farm?" he asked, and they both said No.
"We practice living in The Present, and this is the day we must go,"
She explained. "We are leaving on a high; this day is so exciting,
And the place where we are moving is tremendously inviting!
The farm was the scene of many highs, and yes, some lows, too,
But it is in The Past now, and our Rear Guard knows what to do
When The Past comes up to harm us. We heard a preacher say:
The Past is a good place to visit, but it's not a place for us to stay!"

The owners had to leave him then: the sale would soon be starting.
"Please feel free to look around," they said as they were parting.
He took them at their word, and went throughout the house and barn
Where memories swept over him like an expert storyteller's yarn!
On a table displayed with items for sale he found just one white hen,
Looking like a well-used doorstop, not a long-lost friend. And then
He spied the red wheelbarrow! That's funny, it was dry, and yet
Every time he had thought about it, the barrow was always wet!

At the start of his trip he had no idea what he'd be bringing back.
Would sentimentality cause him to buy more than he could pack
In the car? Now he knew he didn't need to buy ANY childhood relic
To remember the farm, which, in itself, was neither magic nor tragic!
This was proven at the sale, he thought, recalling how he'd smiled
When he saw the barrow, now barely red, being pushed by a child!
Something important had happened that day; later on he would see
That his childhood had been normal. The Past was setting him free!

EPILOGUE

In retrospect, he saw he HAD brought something back from the farm.
It was a fresh way of looking at life, one that he viewed without alarm
Because the owners, who taught it to him, also showed it was true!
At peace with the past; unafraid of the future; savoring this day, too –
He wanted to live as they did! So he created a picture in his mind
Of his Rear Guard standing close to his back, handling what's behind.
It was his Rear Guard who had sent him to the farm! It didn't seem odd
When he found out that Rear Guard is one of the many names for God!

© April, 2015 (March 28 - April 14, 2015)
Verna Kwiatkowski

www.vernakwiatkowski.com

COMMENTS. I must introduce you now to Les Von Losberg, a man who serves in Sky View as an ombudsman for the residents. Though he has a full-time job in addition to this volunteer position, Les spends a considerable amount of time here, talking with the residents, hearing our concerns, advocating for us. I knew who he was, mainly because he had been introduced to all of us, and always wears his volunteer nametag where it can easily be seen. Just as superficially, Les knew me. Early this year (2015) Les came into my room while my husband Leo was visiting, and we had a pleasant 3-way conversation which led to the discovery that Les and I both write poetry! A few days later

he returned with a book titled Hexagram, a compilation of the works of six poets, one of whom is Les.

My husband Leo read the book to me since I cannot handle books any more. It soon became evident that we write poems in different styles. Mine focus on rhythm and rhyme and follow the rules I learned in high school, such as: Every line begins with a capital letter, even if it is in the middle of a sentence. His poems may have rhythm, but they seldom rhyme and there is minimal capitalization. This made me wonder about a new set of questions, such as: What makes a piece of writing a poem? Is it the way the words are placed on the page? Is it a poem because the writer declares it to be a poem? What are the current rules used to teach prospective poets how to write today's poems? Without rhyme or form, how would you know if you were writing a poem or a piece of poetic prose?

Later on Les gave me 2 more collections of his poems, plus a sheaf of papers on poetry that he got from the Internet. The top sheet consisted of The Red Wheelbarrow, a poem I had read before. Likewise, I gave Les some of my own writings, including the poems in this Penny. All of this led to 2 stimulating conversations on our shared interest, with the promise of more to come! It's like an ongoing workshop where all the attendees share their knowledge and everyone is enlarged. What fun!

Diane, our social worker, once asked me if I could write a poem that was not about God. As I grappled with the unexpected question, she answered it herself: "No," she said, "you can't." The question in my head, which remained unspoken, was: "Why would I want to do that?" The words of Miss Schaeffer, my college speech teacher, still ring in my ears: "Speak about what you KNOW!" She would have said the same about writing, I'm sure, and that is my desire. As I look back over my long life, I can truly say in the words of one of my songs: "Oh, Lord God, you do all things well, and I praise your holy name!" Of COURSE I write about God!

However, when I began writing The Past, I thought maybe I was writing a secular poem after all, just a story about a middle-aged man confronting his childhood. But it was not to be. At the start, when I began thinking about the chickens, a voice within my head said, "They were doorstops." Inwardly I responded: "Oh! Doorstops!" – and a whole scenario opened up before me. I saw that a boy playing games with doorstops shaped and painted to look like white chickens was not so different from a girl playing with her dolls. After that I welcomed God's involvement in the writing of this poem.

I didn't know the title of the poem until I wrote the words "The Past" in stanza 6. Much more than a title, the same words gave the poem both a focus and a purpose. You see, in MY past, I used to teach a seminar called "Set Free!" One of the subjects in this course, along with bondages such as Fear, Legalism, and Sin, was The Past. It was here that I developed the biblical image of God as Rear Guard, which I have liberally applied to my life in critical times. For example: I say "Lord, be my Rear Guard!" when memories from the past (including the recent past) threaten to disturb my inner peace, and the destructive emotions abate as I see the past through God. This is a wonderful way to practice the presence of God in your life, similar to squeezing your right hand to remind yourself that God is with you; you needn't be afraid (Isaiah 41:13).

ATTACHMENT #1 – The Gift of God. When I finished writing *The Past*, I thought I was through being influenced by *The Red Wheelbarrow*. Not so! This summer, while I was working on another project, a new idea came to mind – see the subtitle!

ATTACHMENT #2 – The Farm. Yes, there was a farm in my childhood and yes, that's the farm I visualized as I wrote *The Past*. See photos and comments attached.

CONCLUSION. I was wondering how to conclude this Penny, and then at 2:00 this morning (September 5) I knew. At that time my aide on the night shift came into my room to attend to me. Wanting to put my feeding machine on hold, she reached across my chest and pressed the correct button on the other side of my bed. As she was returning to an upright position, her elbow struck my nose! We both were startled momentarily, and then, since I wasn't hurt, we both began to laugh. Soon another aide and then a nurse came to see what was going on. What a joy it was for me to hear such therapeutic laughter from the 4 of us, fueled by humorous comments from my visitors, plus my extra loud PLS laugh! Many people know the Bible says laughter is good medicine, and so it is. Some Bible versions use the phrase "a merry heart" in place of "laughter," and that's what I wish for you, my friends. May all of you have merry hearts, ready to burst into laughter no matter what your situation. God bless all of you.

Love, Verna

THE GIFT OF GOD

By Verna Kwiatkowski. Sky View. Patterned after poet William Carlos Williams' The Red Wheelbarrow, which consists of 16 words arranged 3 words over 1, then a space, looking to me like 4 stanzas, though it reads as one thought. I used his first 4 words as a starting point; the rest are mine, generously sprinkled with Bible verses. The period at the end of Williams' poem "allowed" me to use punctuation. I added capital letters and captions. The overall title comes from Romans 6:23 – "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord."

1. The Situation

So much depends
upon

what we believe
about

the birth, death,
and

resurrection of Christ
Jesus.

3. The Crucifixion

God made him
Who

had no sin
to

be sin for
us –

what deep, deep
love!

5. The Affirmation

Do you believe
this?

That is the
question

we all must
answer.

Believe, and receive –
LIFE!

2. The Incarnation

Jesus – son of
God

born of virgin
Mary

lying in a
manger –

the Word become
flesh!

4. The Resurrection

The tomb is
empty!

Christ Jesus has
risen!

We needn't fear
death –

it's lost its
sting!

© July, 2015
Verna Kwiatkowski

www.vernakwiatkowski.com

THE FARM

Childhood memories during the writing of The Past.

In March, 1942, my father bought a 40-acre farm about 25 miles from the town of Annville, Pennsylvania (Lebanon County), where we lived in half of a double house that he also owned. We were a family of 4: my parents, my brother Harold (age 6), and me (almost 9). After renting out our side of the house, a moving truck and Dad's car lifted us out of Annville and placed us not only in a new location, but also back in time, when not all houses had running water or bathrooms inside. Ours at least had electricity! Eleven months later the process was reversed: Dad sold the farm and we were back in Annville!

I find such pleasure in "catching" God at work, and this is a prime example. Here are the only photos we have of the farm when we lived there. Isn't it fun to see Harold and me surrounded by white chickens? I see God, not limited by time or space, bringing together the farm (where I wrote my first poems!); William Carlos Williams; Les; Sky View; The Red Wheelbarrow; white chickens; and me – for God's purpose and glory! I may not know the purpose, but I enjoy the adventure!

