



Simple Gifts

Words to Inspire the Spirit

IMMANUEL CHURCH-ON-THE-HILL

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Encountering God Outside the Beltway

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Driving on Farm Road 105 between Evadale and Vidor in deep East Texas, you pass a lot of churches. That's what you see in the Piney Woods Forests stretching across East Texas – churches and pine trees. This is the heavily forested part of Texas, the Big Thicket. Once home to some of the biggest lumber mills and paper plants in the country, those industries have mostly moved away. But the people have stayed. You'll see scattered houses and an occasional country store. And every few miles there is a church.

We're following the east bank of the Neches River as it meanders south into the Gulf of Mexico, about fifty miles from here. Along this stretch of road from Evadale to Vidor, I count at least a half dozen churches in the fifteen sparsely populated miles between these two towns that have seen better days.

Evadale once hosted the major paper mill for printing *Time-Life*. When people stopped reading *Time* magazine, there was no demand for their paper. The plant still functions, but makes cardboard these days,

presumably for all those Amazon boxes that appear on our doorsteps. The town was once in the news – a few years ago, it refused to take the Confederate battle flag out of its high school crest.

Vidor, on the other hand, has a long-standing notoriety in the state – it was the last segregated city in Texas and a “sundown town.” Until fairly recently, non-whites had to be out of town before sunset. Vidor is now more diverse, but the churches – at least the new ones – all seem to come from the same mold.

In these parts, the older-appearing churches have recognizable names – First Baptist Church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, even Four Square Gospel Church. The newer ones, and there are many, have names like New Beginnings and Turning Point. These are names I would normally associate with companies that offer mental health and substance abuse services, where you would go for your alcohol rehab program. I can’t tell for sure. It is still early on a Wednesday morning so I can’t visit.

A few days earlier I worshipped in a new, vibrant church in Dallas which meets in space rented from an older established and visibly dying, non-denominational group.

It was a wonderful and up-lifting service, full of the fervor you would expect from young evangelicals who are building their lives and a new community from the ground up in booming Dallas. That service, to my Anglican ear, was definitely in the self-help key: we sang songs, and listened to a sermon, and we prayed together – all things I would normally do on a Sunday morning. But we didn’t seem to be praying for the things I have come to expect – we didn’t pray for peace in the world or for the poor in distant lands. We didn’t pray for our president, or governor, or mayor. And we most certainly did not pray for a list of bishops.

What we did pray for was strength to make it through another week. We prayed for personal tranquility in the chaos of our own work and family lives. We praised God for walking along side us as individuals on this arduous journey. We declaimed in song with our hands held high that this week we were going to give up our darkest fears and let Jesus fill the void.

To me, it felt like twelve-step group therapy. And that's not bad. In fact, I think it is very good. Whenever I feel a little cynical about self-help therapies, I think back to medical school.

We had two requirements in the curriculum that have served me best in my career. One was the afternoon I spent sharing pizza and life stories with a group of pregnant teenagers from the projects on the west side of Chicago. The other was the AA meeting we had to attend. In fact, we didn't just attend. We were required to participate, to call out in a group setting our own weaknesses, fears, and failures.

I'm home now, safely back inside the Beltway. I'm back to kneeling and standing, to following the Book of Common Prayer, to thinking and praying about the state of the world, and to attending to the needs of the sick and the poor. I'm back to worshipping God in my familiar and comfortable way.

And that's all good. But still I wonder. What might I be missing? What would it be like to encounter God every Sunday morning on Farm Road 105?