

## **“Singing in the Rain”**

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*See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years. Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts. For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished.*

*Ever since the days of your ancestors you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, “How shall we return?” Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, “How are we robbing you?” In your tithes and offerings! You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me—the whole nation of you! Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. I will rebuke the locust for you, so that it will not destroy the produce of your soil; and your vine in the field shall not be barren, says the LORD of hosts. Then all nations will count you happy, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts. (Malachi 3:1-12)*

On the day that Reverend Peter Marshall was ordained as a minister in the Presbyterian Church, the United States was deep in crisis. It was May 15, 1931,<sup>1</sup> and the Great Depression was continuing to deepen. Historian William Leuchtenburg has described the depth of that crisis like this... Imagine a football stadium holding 100,000 fans was filled for a Saturday game, and when they left the game each of them was handed a pink slip saying they had lost their job. Now imagine a completely different crowd filling that stadium the following Saturday, and all of them being informed that they were now out of work. Now imagine this same thing happening for 52 weeks -- every Saturday of that year. And then imagine that happening for three straight years. If you can picture that, Leuchtenburg says, you understand how many people were unemployed during the Great Depression. 15 million Americans had no job – no source of income. Most of us have older relatives or friends who have shared bits and pieces of how bad it was... the hungry siblings... the threadbare clothes... the constant threat of foreclosing banks. It was in that world, amidst that kind of suffering, that a newly-ordained Peter Marshall began to preach in the rural south.

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Marshall. *A Man Called Peter*. New York: McGraw-Hill (1951), p. 33.



As we gather here today, our economy is much stronger than it was in 1931, but we are still in crisis. 732,000 have died in America from COVID-19; worldwide, the death toll stands at nearly five million. Millions in our country have struggled financially during the pandemic. Racial tensions continue to fester; political divisions continue to widen. As a society, I think we can all agree that we are – for lack of a better word -- depressed. We feel battered, pounded, beat down, and tired. At the same time, churches everywhere are reporting declining attendance, shrinking budgets, and fewer volunteers for key ministries. Many churches are reluctantly facing the end of their life cycle and the closing of their doors. A shrinking number of churches, like ours, are blessed with reserves that have been held for a rainy day. But even many of those churches have determined that, well, it is definitely raining.

In difficult times, I have found inspiration in the life of Peter Marshall, so I want to share some of his story with you today in the hope that you might find some comfort as well.

Peter Marshall was one of the most famous Presbyterian pastors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a pastor to well-known churches in Birmingham, Atlanta, and Washington D.C., but who may best be known as the chaplain of the U.S. Senate from 1947 until his sudden and untimely death in 1949. Interestingly, this great preacher did not start out wanting to preach. What he really wanted to be was a sailor. As a boy in Scotland, Peter Marshall dreamed of leaving behind what he called his “drab and uninteresting life” in exchange for the romance and glamour of a life at sea.

God, however, had other plans. As hard as he tried, Marshall never landed a steady job in the merchant marine or the navy. And with each closed door, with each disappointment, the young Scotsman became more and more convinced that God was trying to tell him something... that God had a plan for him that did not involve the navy. It took him a while to figure out what that other plan was, but it finally dawned on him one Sunday afternoon. He was walking in a park, and as his path turned around a lazy bend into some rhododendron bushes, he just knew. An epiphany hit him in the strong beams of light that were peeking through the leaves. “I was coming to the United States to enter the ministry,” he said, “because I believed, with all my heart that those were my orders from my Chief.”

So, at the age of 24, Peter Marshall bought a one-way ticket to America and boarded the sailing vessel *Cameronia*. From the stern, as he watched the green hills of Scotland drift away into the haze, his eyes filled with tears. He was alone and frightened. But he was also convicted of mind and purpose. He was, as he described it, “under sealed orders” from “the Chief.” He did not know where he was going or what he was being sent to do. He only knew that God was sending him. He trusted the word of God that we hear from Malachi: ***“Put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you...”***

Peter Marshall arrived at Ellis Island in the month of March, 1927. He had, in his hand, enough cash for two weeks of food and lodging. He did not know where he would work. He did not know where he would live. And he hadn’t the foggiest clue of how he would enter the ministry. So, he found any work he could get. He dug trenches, worked construction, and tended blast furnaces in a foundry. The jobs were awful for him, and he began to think that he’d made a terrible mistake. But just as he was considering tossing in

the towel, he got a letter out of the blue. It came from a friend from his youth, another young Scot who had immigrated to the United States a few years before Marshall. Word had come to him that Peter was getting discouraged and was thinking of going back to Scotland. "Before you do that," he wrote, "why not come on down to Birmingham and talk it over? You'll like the South," he said. "Better things might open up for you down here." That friend hoped to find Marshall a job with the local paper, The Birmingham News.

Marshall had no better option, so he went. He had to borrow \$40 to make the trip to Alabama, but he did end up getting a job at the Birmingham paper. He was a "galley slave," which meant he corrected proofs before they went to print. He made \$17 a week – barely enough to cover his weekly expenses.

But when he settled in and settled down, things began to happen... and happen quickly. Somehow the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Birmingham heard about a young Scot who had just come to town. As a Welshman, he was intrigued that another son of Great Britain would have landed in Birmingham. The two hit it off immediately. Marshall joined the church and quickly invested himself in its ministry. He was president of the Young People's Society, Scoutmaster for the Boy Scout troop, and the regular teacher for the Men's Bible Class. He even helped lead worship from time to time. Within a few months, the presbytery had received Peter Marshall as a candidate for ministry and recommended him as a student to nearby Columbia Theological Seminary.

Lack of money, however, still nipped at Marshall's heels. As much as he ached to begin his studies at Columbia, he simply could not figure out how to make that happen. He couldn't even afford the six dollar bus ride to the seminary, let alone the tuition. Even so, whenever his newspaper colleagues would mock him about how he could ever make it as a seminary student, he always had the same answer. "That's the Lord's business," he would say. "[God] sent me to this country to enter the ministry, and it's His affair how He's going to get me there. All I have to do is to obey. He'll tend to the rest."

Again, he remembered the words of the prophet: ***"Put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you..."***

One night in the spring of 1928, when Peter Marshall had been in Birmingham less than eight months, he attended a Men's Bible Class event. During the course of the night, one of the members handed Marshall a sealed envelope and said that he should read it when he got home – that he would find it "very interesting reading." Marshall did not want to wait – he asked if he could read it right then. The class said yes, he could, and then they watched the tears fill his eyes as he read this letter silently to himself:

*"Dear Mr. Marshall: ... Knowing that you have dedicated your life to the Master and have chosen His ministry as your life's work, and learning of the expense involved in the realization of this worthy ambition, we have been asked to say to you that the Men's Class, which you have been teaching so acceptably, intends to stand behind you for the first year of your seminary work to whatever extent you may call upon them up to fifty dollars per month... We know you will find much to worry and harass you, and that you may sometimes grow discouraged, but let it hearten and cheer you to know that the men you have worked with are anxious to see you realize your dreams, and will follow you – not only with their money, but with their*

*prayers and best wishes... Yours sincerely, The Men's Bible Class of First Presbyterian Church"*

***"Put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you..."***

Peter Marshall treasured that letter for the rest of his life. He would often say that letter meant as much to him as any of the precious documents of American history, because that piece of paper was tangible proof that God really does open the windows of heaven, that God really does pour down and overflowing blessing on those who seek first the kingdom of God, and trust that God will take care of the rest.

As a newly ordained pastor, Marshall took these experiences of God's care on the road. Preaching across Georgia, he reminded people who were struggling under the weight of need and scarcity that God never leaves his people orphaned. His most popular sermon that year was called "Singing in the Rain" ...

"Of all the promises in the Bible," Marshall said in that sermon, "I think this is the least believed: seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all these things will be added unto you." Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all those things that are needed for life – food, clothing, money, shelter, security – all of those things will be provided for you. We hear it, Marshall said, "but we simply don't believe it."

And I think to myself, of course they didn't believe it. There was no money. There were no jobs. People were hungry and hopeless. But against this doubt, into the depths of that Great Depression, Peter Marshall preached these words from his own experience:

*"Christ made us a definite promise that if we make the seeking of God and His righteousness our primary aim in life... and if we trust God for our material needs... He will never let us down, but will supply what we need with "good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over..." That this method works, that God always keeps His promises when we fulfill the conditions, I can unhesitatingly testify, for this is the way I have lived ever since I was forced to begin earning my own way. Out of my own experience I can testify that, through faith in God, through prayer and trust in the promises written in the Old Book, my every need has been supplied. That has been true from the start, from the time I was receiving thirty-eight shillings in Scotland and seventeen dollars a week in Alabama.*

*In this sophisticated twentieth century, [however,] we simply don't believe it! We are inclined to say, 'Well, that was alright for simple peasants living in Palestine in the days when life was not nearly as complex as it is today. That's alright for Galilee, Lord, but you simply don't understand Birmingham, or Atlanta, or St. Louis, or Washington!'"*

*"Ah," Marshall concluded, "but He does understand!"*

In these days, there are so many doubts ... doubt that we are safe... doubts that we are secure. Regrettably, I fear that, even in the church, we still don't believe the promise of Jesus. In this sophisticated twenty-first century, we still don't believe that, if we will only put God first, God will actually take care of us. That may have been alright for a Scotsman

like Peter Marshall, we think, but that was when life was not nearly as complex as it is today. That's alright for Peter Marshall, Lord, but he didn't live in the world we live in.

Ah, but God does understand, even now. The prophet Malachi gives us a divine promise – a promise that, when we give ourselves totally to God, God can and will care for us... that God **does** understand what we are facing. The promise is so strong that it takes on the form of a dare: a hopeful, grace-filled, promise-laden dare for us to trust God – to really trust God with all of our mind, all of our heart and all of our body. God is daring us to listen to the call that God is making upon our lives, daring us to put aside our fears about money or security or anything else, daring us to trust that God will tend to the things that we need... trust that God has a plan for us... trust that God has everything lined up to make sure that this divine plan will succeed.

“If you will just trust me like that,” God says, “then I will show you blessings you’ve never imagined. I know you are scared, but let me show you what I can do for you... let me show you what I can do with Larchmont Avenue Church... let me show you what I can do with people who trust me with everything they have.

***“Put me to the test,” says the LORD of hosts; “see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing...”***

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**