

Happy Birthday in a Parking Lot

Hugo Neufeld

The season of tinsel and shopping, of Christmas trees and carols and pageants, of turkey and feasting and stress—and beauty—was approaching. In the children’s story time at church we could easily talk about an upcoming birthday party with a huge, scrumptious cake displaying 2019 candles. Such a picture of the birth of Jesus might well spark the free-flowing imagination of children, and maybe some of us adults. How, in 2019, do we prepare to celebrate the birthday of Jesus?

After a compelling worship service, my wife, Doreen, and I feel a tug to invite our friend Joyce to go out for lunch with us at a new country market. Aptly named the Granary, this enterprise hosts many quaint eating places. Enjoying the food in a country atmosphere, Joyce, who had earlier hinted that she was dealing with a serious issue, shares with us her shocking news: it is cancer; yes, there will be surgery; yes, there will be chemotherapy. We gasp and share some quiet tears. But there is hope for a complete recovery. We assure Joyce of our prayers and support, and thank her for letting us know. Christian community has moved from the

somewhat formal worship time into a more intimate experience.

Feeling the need for more time together, we leave the Granary, driving in contemplation and closeness through the rolling foothills toward the mountains. Beckoning us now is Elbow Falls. Here the pure mountain water comes swirling down the river, then plunges into a partial horseshoe canyon. What a magnificent sight! We savor the beauty and drink in the wholeness of life.

As we near the top of the observation trail, we notice two women somewhat clumsily trying to take a selfie with the falls in the background. They gratefully accept Joyce’s offer to take their picture. Soon the five of us are immersed in some healthy get-acquainted conversation in God’s charming sacred outdoor space, the thundering falls offering their applause. Jennifer explains that she lives several hours away and has come to celebrate her daughter’s 21st birthday. Her daughter, Lianne, is attending university in the city. Refreshed with the pleasant interactions, we soon wander off on our own, exploring other areas.

With the sun receding and the sharp, cool wind picking up, we quickly make our way back to the



AnnaCrossan/Getty Images/Stockphoto

parking lot. I have already pressed the door opener when I notice beside me a pickup truck with the tailgate open. An interesting sight catches my attention. Our new friend Jennifer is trying to light the candles on a large chocolate cheesecake that graces the tailgate of the truck. Every time she has most of the candles lit, the mountain air rushes in with a swoop and blows them out. Then she starts all over again. Somewhat apologetically we join Lianne in her amusement at the frustrating spectacle.

Recognizing us from our earlier encounter, Jennifer asks, “Why don’t you join us for the birthday party?”

Right there in the public parking lot, with meandering vehicles and people passing by, we celebrate a very special birthday. Making use of the plastic cake pan cover, we shelter the flames until all the candles are aglow, and the spirit of the festive occasion gains momentum.

With a makeshift Elbow Falls ensemble, we heartily sing out, “Happy birthday, dear Lianne!” With a burst of joyful energy, Lianne blows out all 21 candles in one huge breath. We breathe in the beauty of the relationship between mother and daughter and the relationship extended now to us, even though we are strangers. Filled with generous slices of cake and goodwill, we take photos, give each other goodbye hugs, and wish one another the blessing of the Holy One.

Retreating into the car, Joyce, Doreen, and I travel back to the city with 2019 birthday joy in our hearts. God has spoken. We are confident and ready to face the future. Like the shepherds who couldn’t stop talking about what they had heard and seen, we find ourselves eagerly telling and retelling this surprising, God-inspired adventure.

HUGO NEUFELD is committed to integrating social work, ministry, and down-to-earth friendship gifts into daily life.