Have You Been Saved?

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I have always been in need of salvation and there have always been a variety of people trying to save me—Christians, both once born and born-again, Black Muslims, Buddhists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Amway salespersons. None have succeeded. I have been beset by racism, ignorance, asthma, jealousy, and all the “shocks that human flesh is heir to.” This is about a time that I was not even saved in church.

Once when I was six, it rained for three days and three nights. Or was I three and it rained for six days and six nights? At night, the black sky became as light as day as the lightning flashed and the windows rattled as the awesome thunder roared. Then, on the third day there was peace. And the night was still.

Anyway, the earth was wet and warm and renewed. On the third day the sun peered through the clouds and a rainbow arced the once gray sky. Raindrops danced on green tree leaves as a new day dawned.

My mother took me with her to visit my grandfather’s church. That morning we began our ablutions and grooming. She, of course, was beautiful as she combed her shoulder length, long brown, wavy hair which contrasted with her lemon-colored smooth skin.

Then, she brought in a small white enamel basin filled with hot water and began to bathe me with copious suds from the large white bar of Ivory Soap. Once my bath was finished, she started combing my short, kinky hair. After she made a part in the side, she brushed the rest back.

Smiling and happy, I put on a tan suit, white shirt, bow tie and white oxfords. Now, we were ready to go to Granddaddy’s church.

The small, white wooden church was on a side street near a lumberyard. On the sign in front of the church was written in big block letters: Crystal Creek Primitive Baptist Church. Under that was my grandfather’s name, Elder Cornelius Van Stafford. Under his name was a simple question: “Have You Been Saved?”

Inside the pews were of hewn wood—oak—solid and strong. These pews were straight and hard like the people’s faith; these folks were known as hard-shelled Baptist. I wondered what a soft-shelled Baptist was but I didn’t dare ask for fear of being slapped in the mouth. This was a time when children were seen and not heard. Back to my story. They were hell-fire and brimstone fearing Baptists.

It was a hot, humid day. The only ventilation came from two large electric fans at the front of the church and the breeze that occasionally drifted in through the open stained glass windows. Some of the woman fanned themselves with paper fans supplied compliments of a local undertaker. Although the service had just started, several women had large wet rings of sweat that soaked through their flowered dresses.

Elder Cornelius Van Stafford rose and stared at the rapt congregation through his rimless spectacles.

“Deacon Fitzhugh, lead us in prayer,” he said.

The six foot six deacon bent on one knee and commenced to pray. He prayed from slavery to freedom; he prayed from sin to salvation; he prayed from past to present. Deacon Fitzhugh articulated the people’s highs and their lows; their hills and their valleys, their joys and their sorrows.

“Lord, you know us when we were strangers in a strange land, and you knew us when we
worked from caint see to caint see, from sun up to sun down. You watched over us when we rose in darkness and returned to darkness, when we toiled in the sunlit darkness of bondage, when we retired in the cool evening of slavery. Your rod and your staff they comforted us; yea though we walked in the valley of evil and the shadow of death, we feared no evil....Amen.”

“A-men”, the congregation responded.

“Let us have a song, Sister Samuels,” Rev. Stafford said.

The fat brown pianist began to play the introduction while the cranberry robed choir swayed from side to side. A tall, chestnut brown man with hair slicked back with Murray’s Pomade began to sing:

“Master, the tempest is rag-ing! The bil-lows are tossing high!”

“The sky is o’er shad-owed with blackness. No shel-ter or help is nigh....”

The choir responded:

“Peace, be still
Peace, be still.”

Soon a large sweating woman with pop eyes screamed: “Jeee-sus” and fainted. Two women in starched white uniforms rushed to her aid. They fanned her and dabbed her temples with a wet handkerchief. She revived.

Meanwhile, the choir continued singin'. “Peace, be still. I hear Him say 'Peace, be still...'”

The people’s emotions ebbed and flowed, ebbed and flowed until their feelings burst forth like water crashing through a dam—years of pent-up hurt and heartbreak, hope and disappointment. The ushers and nurses' auxiliary ran to and fro fanning and holding sobbing sisters who were filled with the Spirit. Then, it burst forth.

I nervously looked at my mother, but she didn’t seem to notice me. I hoped she wouldn’t embarrass me and start shouting like some of the other women.

Then, it happened. Like a clap of thunder and a streak of lightning, Sister Lula Belle and her three hundred pounds were possessed by the Holy Ghost. She swung one of her ham-sized arms, but I wasn’t able to duck fast enough.

She hit me in the eye like Samson smiting the Philistines with the jawbone of an ass. I saw a flash of light and fell down hard.

When I awoke, two ladies in white were fanning me. Another large lady was holding smelling salts under my nose and my mother was holding an ice cube under my black eye.

“Are you alright, baby?” asked the lady with the smelling salts.

“Yes—er—yes mam,” I said.

“He’ll be alright now,” my mother said and led me out of the room.

When we re-entered the sanctuary, I heard my grandfather say: “Have you been saved?”

And I thought no, I haven’t been, not today.

After the benediction, my mother and I left the church and walked to the bus stop. Still nursing my injured eye, I took one last look back at the church. I was the sign: HAVE YOU BEEN SAVED. Suddenly, I ran toward the bus stop. I wanted to get as far away as possible from holy people like Sister Lula Belle, hellfire, brimstone, and religion. You might say that I have been running ever since.

So today whenever I am approached by anyone, male or female, with those terrifying words: Have you been saved? I break into a jog, then a trot, and finally I sprint as fast as my two legs will carry me.

And by the way: I still have not been saved.