

LOST AVENUE**Bruce Davis****Gettysburg Presbyterian Church****Gettysburg, Pennsylvania****December 29, 2019****Reading from the book of Proverbs, chapter 4, 10-27:**

Hear, my child, and accept my words, that the years of your life may be many. I have taught you the way of wisdom; I have led you in the paths of uprightness. When you walk, your step will not be hampered; and if you run you will not stumble. Keep hold of instruction; do not let go; guard her, for she is your life.

Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of evildoers. Avoid it; do not go on it; turn away from it and pass on. For they cannot sleep unless they have done wrong; they are robbed of sleep unless they have made someone stumble. For they eat the bread of wickedness and drink the wine of violence.

But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day. The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know what they stumble over.

My child, be attentive to my words; incline your ear to my saying. Do not let them escape from your sight; keep them within your heart. For they are life to those who find them, and healing to all their flesh.

Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life. Put away your crooked speech, and put devious talk far from you. Let your eyes look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you. Keep straight the path of your feet, and all your ways will be sure. Do no swerve to the right or to the left; turn your foot away from evil.

Thus ended the lesson.

Among my Gettysburg passions is monumental picture taking. When I was a kid, I collected baseball cards, organizing them by team; so it is with my Gettysburg Battlefield photo collection; the regimental monuments organized by Corps, Division, Brigade. My goal: Collect them all.

At the December gathering of the Gettysburg Civil War Round Table, presenter Ben Dixon, a Gettysburg native, now on the faculty of the State University of New York in Oneonta, went into an extended riff on the monuments--not to be confused with markers and memorial tablets. By Professor Dixon's count, there are 524 monuments proper.

My collection has grown well into the 400s, with plenty of repeats. I hardly ever leave the house without a camera, as you never know when the change of light and season will reveal something I've not seen before. Some are harder to access than others. Particularly challenging: the monuments at the summit of Big Round Top.

Given the fame of Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain and the 20th Maine, I had been a little surprised at the modesty of their much-visited monument on Little Round Top. But then I read this is, in fact, not the main Maine marker; the veterans had placed a larger memorial at the summit of the bigger top to the south, where they'd been ordered after the bayonet charge. Huh.

For any who've not been atop the Big Top, you park your car by the portable toilets below, and ascend a dirt pathway: up, up, up, which, at my age, translates to huff, huff, huff. I had not anticipated what would be involved in this climb. Thought at multiple points I might turn back and try again another day; only to remind the self that come "another day," I'll be even older and more out of shape. Finally reached the summit, glad I did, as my photo collection would have been the lesser without the several fine monuments found up here.

FYI: That is NOT the 20th Maine, but rather the 12th Pennsylvania Reserves. The dappled sunlight through the thick trees so obscured the Maine marker as to make for a less than projection worthy photo. Under other circumstances, I might have gone back for a reshoot, but one ascent to the summit of Big Round Top will likely be enough for these aging legs.

In case you're wondering, here's a stock photo of the 20th Maine at the summit. Kind of astonishing to think the veterans hauled these stones all the way to the top. But I figured my photo collecting would be all downhill from here, as these must surely be the least accessible monuments in Gettysburg. Then I saw a Facebook post about "Lost Avenue."

The proper name is Neill Avenue, so named for Brigadier General Thomas Neill, commander of the 3rd Brigade of the 2nd Division in the VI Corps of the Army of the Potomac. Thomas Neill was not lost. On the evening of July 1, 1863, VI Corps had gone into camp at Manchester, Maryland, when word was received the armies were engaged at Gettysburg.

Corps Commander John Sedgwick had his troops back on the road at 10:00 pm, marching non-stop through the night and the next day. Making 35 miles in eighteen hours, VI Corps reached the field in time to figure mightily in repulsing Longstreet's assault on the late afternoon of July 2, and for Sedgwick, who would be shot and killed at Spotsylvania, to be honored with an equestrian statue.

While the bulk of the corps had moved to the sound of the guns, Neill's regiments were ordered to what would be the far right of the Union line. The Federal position has long been described as a fish-hook; Neill's brigade was to extend the barb from Culp's Hill, south along Rock Creek. One of the worst days of the war had been at Chancellorsville, two months previous, when Stonewall Jackson came out of the woods to launch a massive attack on the unsuspecting Union right flank. O.O. Howard's men had been facing south; Jackson came at them from the west. 'Twas a disaster. At Gettysburg, Thomas Neill was giving responsibility for guarding against a Robert E. Lee repeat performance.

No such attack forthcoming, Neill's place on the field would be reduced to a footnote. But his troops, who had been through many a hard battle previous and would engage in many more before the war was through, had made that epic march to get here. In the late 1880s, the veterans returned to mark their place on this hallowed ground, dedicating what were said to be fine regimental monuments along an avenue since "lost"-- as in forgotten. If my Gettysburg monuments collection was to be complete, I needed to get my camera to Lost Avenue.

I am not going to give detailed directions. Neill Avenue is not in the military park itself, but on private property; more than that, I wouldn't want anyone going back there, getting lost yourself and blaming me.

Operating off vague internet directions, I drove east of town, took a couple of winding turns to where the pavement ended. Getting out of the car to hoof it, I was expecting some kind of path, some evidence of foot traffic. 'Twas none. Facebook Friend Chuck Teague, who was moving out of Gettysburg about the time Nancy and I were moving in, has described what was in front of me as a "trace"--which seems apt, as there's just a "trace" of any roadway left, covered over by rocks, roots, vines, crisscrossed by fallen trees. I hadn't anticipated this.

And there was another issue, the woods posted with No Trespassing signs. Posted on pretty much every other tree, it seemed: No Hunting, No Fishing, Use of Firearms Strictly Forbidden. No Trespassing. Leading me to digress.

My wife and I are both retired United Methodist pastors. We relocated to Gettysburg from the Midwest in June of 2018, first visited Gettysburg Presbyterian for the Lincoln connection, and decided we'd found a church home. We count ourselves blessed to be part of this great congregation; Nancy is teaching Bible study twice a week; I even paraded as Obi-Wan Kenobe with your Halloween float. That, friends, is commitment.

However, there was one issue that confused mightily when we first started attending—and, in truth, still sort of does. In saying the Lord's Prayer, one of your worship hours asks "Forgive us our *sins*," in another "Forgive us our *debts*." I know instructions are printed in the bulletin, as to what is to be said in what hour, but the Lord's Prayer is largely reflexive for me, and I seem to be saying sins when I ought to say debts and vice versa, when the right way, of course, is "Forgive us our *trespasses*."

I actually looked this up on the internet, and read a scholarly examination of the original Greek term Jesus himself surely never used, him being a Hebrew. As explained by Jon Bloom on desiringGod.org:

Those raised in Presbyterian or Reformed traditions are more likely to say 'debts.' Those who come from Anglican/Episcopal, Methodist or Roman Catholic traditions are more likely to say 'trespasses.' Those whose churches were influenced by ecumenical liturgical movements of the late twentieth century are probably more likely to say 'sins.'

The scholar is of the opinion that 'debts' in the most faithful rendering, as the original Greek carries financial nuance. No wonder Methodists went with trespass. Methodists operate out of a model of financial prudence. The best way to get out of debt is not to get into debt in the first place. I would add that if, like many Americans, you are engulfed in debt, there are common sense solutions out there, including Dave Ramsey's faith-based Financial Peace University.

Back to Lost Avenue: I had no intention of trespassing. But I'd read something about these signs on the Facebook post that started all this and noticed that none of the yellow signs with black print were actually facing me. They were affixed to trees to my left, affixed to trees to my right, all them facing inward, to the trace itself, leading downhill. From which I inferred that so long as I didn't go wandering off beyond the postings to my right nor to my left, but stayed in between, I would be guilty of neither trespass nor sin, and, not seeing any collection box, neither would I be incurring debt. Such was my reasoning at the time...

So it was that I began inching my way gingerly down Wolf Hill, hearing the voice of my wife, who takes a dim view of my solo expeditions anyway, saying as I had left the house, 'Don't fall'—a caution taken particularly seriously on this occasion.

Just days earlier, we'd been in New York City. It was my birthday, number 69, and Nancy had gotten us great seats to the highly acclaimed musical "Moulin Rouge." Crossing 8th street, my stride was interrupted by an unseen obstacle; thought for a millisecond I'd be able to keep my balance, but nope, this was a stumble unto fall, and while I was able to brace somewhat with my left hand, the right side of my face hit concrete to stunning effect. Nobody to blame but me. The pedestrian crossing was well-marked, but staying within the lines has never been my style, and in this instance, I had stumbled over one of these island curbs intended, I suppose, to deter vehicular terrorism.

I am not a person accustomed to falling, at least not physically. My fallings have been more of the moral kind; lower case echoes of the fall of man. I don't mind saying that face down on 8th Street I was in something approaching shock.

Say this: You hear about all these rude people in New York. That was not my experience here. With the help of some Big City Samaritans, I got back on my feet, collected myself; we'd been crossing to a restaurant, and it was only after we were seated that Nancy said I needed to go to the Men's Room, where the mirror revealed yet another unwelcome surprise, blood flowing down from a cut below my right eye socket. I was a mess.

I could laugh about it later, telling folks Nancy punched me when I got too chummy with one of the Moulin Rouge CanCan dancers; but there was nothing funny about it at the time. It hurt.

Of course, if I'd stayed in the designated pedestrian crossing lane, none of this would have happened. Recall the Proverb read earlier: "Hear, my child, and accept my words, that the years of your life may be many. I have taught you the way of wisdom; I have led you in the paths of uprightness. When you walk, your step will not be hampered; and if you run you will not stumble." Which I take to mean: The moral lines are marked, not for arbitrary purpose, but for our own good—that our step may *not* be hampered, that we may *not* stumble, and "the years of your life may be many."

Back to 8th Avenue. Concerned that I might be seriously injured, Nancy suggested we skip the theatre. I wouldn't hear of it. Both the show and ourselves went on—and we had a great evening! Leading me to say to any who have taken hard falls yourself this year: My advice, shared with plenty of folks over 44 years of pastoral ministry: Don't just lie there like so much roadkill. Pick yourself up, wipe off the metaphorical blood, learn from the experience, and get on with your life.

There was this to consider in my quest for Lost Avenue. In New York, I'd been surrounded by people, who helped me when I fell, none more helpful, of course, than my sweetie. In contrast, there wasn't another soul out here. I would be entirely on my own. Did I really want to go proceed? Sure.

It was the slowest of slow going, one cautious step at a time, over the brambles, rocks, and branches, under and over the felled trees. I knew Rock Creek was down there somewhere, telling myself it was surely just beyond the next twist of the obscure trail. No. So, I continued to plod. Down, down, down...

Yea! I'm at Rock Creek! Beautiful. But...where's "Lost Avenue"? I had seen photos of the substantial monuments; they ought to be plenty visible. Alas and alack, I could see nothing remotely encouraging. This was a heck of a thing: I'm lost trying to find "Lost Avenue."

This was taking a lot longer than I'd anticipated. And the sun was beginning to go down. At Rock Creek, my mind had uploaded unwanted images of Coffin Rock from "The Blair Witch Project." The low budget film, set in nearby Burkittsville, Maryland, told a story as old as story-telling itself: kids lost in the woods, unable to find their way out. I was beginning to feel like I was in the movie....

Let me clear: I do not believe in witches, at least until it starts getting dark in the woods. It was high time now to get out of here. So I began the reverse uphill trek--but, wait! Unnoticed on my way down, I now saw another string of No Trespassing signs, these branching off to the right. Same as before, facing inward, on either side, as if indicating an otherwise indiscernible path. Might this be the way to "Lost Avenue"? Only one way to find out. This turned out to be no small hike its own right, me halfway expecting to come upon an abandoned, graffiti-strewn house with a compelling need to face a wall. You had to see the movie...

Comes a clearing. Praise the Lord, here they are! The monuments of the Neill brigade. They once were lost, but now were found! Whee! Better still, the setting sun struck the Stone Sentinels at an angle making for optimal picture taking. Mission accomplished.

There was still the matter of getting out of here before dark. Happily, I had a guide: the No Trespassing signs on either side of what passed for a trail. Per the wisdom of Proverbs 4, "Do not swerve to the right or to the left," follow these out, I ought to be okay. I know this: without the signs, I would have been as lost in these woods as those kids in the movie.

And it occurred to me there might be a sermon here. If I trespassed to the left, I would be lost. If I trespassed to the right, I would be lost. And I suppose this is why Moses brought the original No Trespassing signs down Mount Sinai, that we who would otherwise be lost in trespass/sin/debt, might have a way through the wilderness.

Not that the way out was easy. Far from it. The return trip was every bit as treacherous as the original descent, with the added challenge of negotiating an uphill climb. Multiple stops would be required to catch my breath; always gauging what was left of the sun. But unlike when I'd gone down this hill, I had a pretty good idea of where I was going to come out now. And I was, in fact, home for supper. It was good to be home.

One last thing: Nancy and I are just back from a Christmas Markets tour along the Rhine River. Among the ports of call was the German city of Cologne. Cologne Cathedral, aka Kolner Dom, aka Cathedral Church of St. Peter, is a masterpiece of Gothic architecture, its spire the third highest in the world.

Checking the city out in advance, I had found this photo on the internet, an aerial view from a British bomber, dated 1942. Cologne had been the target of hundreds of bombing raids by then, the medieval town leveled, the bridge destroyed. About all that's left was the cathedral, still standing tall, towering over the otherwise ruined city.

How was this to be explained? Had the British spared the place out of some kind of religious devotion? Nah. Was it a miracle? Maybe. As explained by the guide, there was strategic purpose for not leveling this and others of the great cathedrals on Rhine. In the absence of modern navigational instruments, the spires served as a visual guide for pilots trying to making their way back to England.

Not that the cathedral didn't take some hits. Bombing was an inexact science; the bombs, in many instances, literally rolled out of the planes. But these monuments to God Almighty had been built to last, the exterior walls reinforced by what were called "Flying Buttresses"; and a bomb might explode in the vicinity, even fall through the roof, but the House of God stood and the House of God stands—a monument to things eternal.

Like I said, when Nancy and I first came to Gettysburg Presbyterian, it was mostly to check out the Lincoln connection and Civil War history. But that's not what brought us back. In a culture that gets louder and angrier all the time, spun by the partisan passions of the 24 hour news cycle, where even the concept of truth is up for grabs, I have come to deeply appreciate the solidity of the congregation. Gettysburg Presbyterian has itself survived war, preached to presidents and, in a new century, quietly goes about the timeless work of the Lord, serving, singing, praying, encouraging. I count myself blessed to be part of this.

To any who may yourselves feel like you're living on Lost Avenue, let me commend this congregation as a way to navigate perilous times. There are people here who care. We all stumble at times. But, when I fall, perhaps you'll help me up. And when you fall, I'll try to help you up. And together, we'll get to where God wants us to be.