

A Poetic Celebration of the Life of Marjorie E. Dillon

March 4, 1921-April 6, 2021

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April 18, 2021

History is now and then punctuated with a life that, while it was being lived, seemed very ordinary, but when it ended was discovered to have housed a significance that brought it into the category of extraordinary. We could write such an epitaph over the life of Marjorie Dillon. Her presence graced the generations of this church from the time she was a little girl at the age of 8 or 9 until her death at age 100. The history of her century-long life is replete with stories of her love, her kindness, and her display of Christlike character to everyone around her. Everyone who knew Marjorie experienced the elegant touches of God's grace that came through her, whether the relationship with her was for a lifetime or only a passing season. The story of her life was neither bombastic nor pretentious. Marjorie was a woman of simple but deep faith that never sought to draw attention to itself. But there was also nothing counterfeit in it; it was tested and real. In the setting of all the ups and downs, the joys and the sorrows, the laughter and the tears, of life in this world, Marjorie brought an insightful and even clever and witty expression to her reading of life through her poetry, and always playing in the background was the music of her faith. I want to share with you this morning a sampling of how Marjorie looked at and experienced life in all its joys and pleasures, in all its hardships and sorrows, and through it all maintained a steady faith that found a resting place in a loving heavenly Father and a redeeming Savior.

The gift of poetry that the Father in heaven implanted deep in Marjorie's soul doubtless had many brief and poignant expressions in her early years, but they came into their full bloom in the second half of her life. Beginning in the early 80's, it seemed her poet's pen never ran dry. A vision of life with her family, her friends, and most of all, her Lord, had taken shape through the earlier and much busier seasons of her life. And about the time that her life experience had accumulated enough to impart a wisdom and depth perception regarding what truly matters, the Lord called into greater display the lilting expression of her poetic gift that has left its mark on everyone whose lives interfaced with hers from the 80's forward.

Marjorie penned a poem at exactly the two-thirds point of her long life when she was 67 years old. She entitled it "Drawing Near." As she began to feel the limitations and first effects of aging, she wrote these words:

Drawing Near

When the aches and pains
And the years of time,
Have taken their toll
On this body of mine.

When I strain to hear
And my eyes grow dim,
My steps get slow
And I've lost my vim.

When I tend to think
Of yesterday,
How fast those years
Have passed away,

Oh, help me, Lord
To not complain,
Or feel my life's
Been lived in vain.

But to count my
Blessings everyday,
And to help someone
Along their way.

For the time is short
And I soon will be,
Home with You,
For eternity.

She obviously did not know at that point that she had only lived two-thirds of the days God would grant her. Many years were still on the horizon, and for some of us, those were the years that her life touched ours! What

she wrote at age 67 reminds me of the story of Isaac at age 100 in Genesis 27. His eyesight had grown so dim that he was virtually blind, and he assumed from this one indicator alone that his days on earth were soon coming to an end. So there was an urgency in his spirit that he needed to impart his blessing to his firstborn son, Esau. Little did he know that he would live another 80 years, just as Marjorie, I'm sure, at age 67 would have found it hard to believe she would live another 33 years before the Lord called her home.

It is not an uncommon experience, when we begin to recognize the early signs of the diminishing of our capacities, our strength, and our energy, that we begin to wonder how many more years of life remain. Psalm 90 is the only psalm in the Psalter that is specifically attributed to Moses, and in it he reflects on the brevity of human life compared to God's eternity, and draws this conclusion from the fleeting nature of the time that we are granted in this life, "*So teach us to number our days, that we may bring in (harvest, gather in) a heart of wisdom.*" Here is what Moses says will redeem our life and bring it to its greatest sense of fulfillment! We **redeem the days** we have been given by using them **to bring in a harvest of God's wisdom** in the same way that a farmer gathers in his harvest from the annual planting of crops. Time like anything that is a precious resource can be either used to our benefit or wasted! So numbering our days is how we redeem time so that it is used to accumulate life-fulfilling blessings that will even have the reach of preparing us for eternity. Paul gives a similar exhortation when he writes, "*See that you walk circumspectly (carefully, with your eyes wide open), not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil*" (Eph 5:15-16). The one gift that we all have been given is time that comes in increments of 24 hours a day. The challenge is how to view that gift and value it as a preparation for eternity!

Many of Marjorie's poems in one way or another address the theme of time. For example, Margorie enjoyed the clear seasonal changes that are part of living in the Midwest. Surprisingly, however, her favorite season was the one that most of us would say we like the least—winter. We may even occasionally have entertained thoughts of one day moving to a warmer climate, especially as we get older. They call them "snowbirds" that migrate to South Florida for the winter! But contrary to the mindset of "snowbirds," listen to her poem entitled, "Winter," written in January, 1982, I suspect by a fireside!

Winter

It's cold outside, and the wind doth blow,
And the earth is covered with a blanket of snow.
Down in the ground so dark and deep,
Many little creatures sleep.

But they'll come forth so very soon,
And grass will grow and flowers bloom.
And the trees that look so very bare
Will wear green leaves for their hair.

Each season is special, and I love them all,
The spring, the summer, the winter and fall.
If you ask me my favorite, I'd be quick to reply
It's winter, and I'll tell you why.

In the spring I get busy with housecleaning chores,
The painting and fixing, outside and indoors.
Then there's the garden and planting of seeds.
The spraying and hoeing and chopping of weeds.

In summer the canning and freezing of food,
And I know that next winter it sure will taste good.
Then there's the mowing that seems never to end,
The weather gets hot, we complain to a friend.

Then comes the fall and we're so far behind,
Must get ready for winter while there is still time.
And when it gets here, I curl up by the fire
And read a good book until I tire.

That is why winter is special to me,
For I don't have to get out in the cold, you see.

Later that same month of January, 1982, Marjorie's winter reflections turned into a meditation on trusting the provisions of a loving and victorious Savior in the midst of life's difficult seasons. In a poem entitled "Victory" she wrote:

Victory

This life is not an easy road
As we live it day by day,
Sometimes we pack a heavy load
As we travel on our way.

But there is One who came to lead
And guide us everyday,
He knows our each and every need
He tells us He's the Way.

He wants to take our every care
And give us peace instead,
He wants to every burden bear
So we will have no dread.

Of what tomorrow has in store,
For He will see us through
And give us joy forevermore
His promises are true.

So put your faith and trust in Him,
And no matter what the test
The victory you'll always win
For He knows what is best.

We recently had the privilege of sharing with Marjorie her 100th birthday. She was moved to write a poem entitled "Birthday Reflections" shortly after her 61st birthday that ends on a note of the good news of our even better new birth in Christ. She wrote:

Birthday Reflections

The years go by so very fast
Another birthday's come and passed.
The mirror says I'm getting old,
Happens to all, I've been told.
Youth so quickly fades away
The wrinkles come and always stay.
The steps get slower, the eyes grow dim
We tend to say, "Remember, when?"
But I refuse to sit and pine,
Am just too busy, don't have time
To spend my day in sad lament
And wish for days that are already spent.
I thank the Lord for each new day,
The strength He gives me on my way,
Oh, help me, Lord, while I'm on earth
To tell others that **you give new birth.**

Marjorie rejoiced in her salvation in a poem she wrote in the summer of 1983 that I have taken the liberty of retitling “A Meditation on Saving Grace.” Two months later she wrote another poem that was a beautiful companion entitled “Jesus, and Heaven, Too.” Together these poems tell us she was both ready for and eagerly awaiting her heavenly home 38 years ago at age 62.

A Meditation on Saving Grace

I don't know why you saved me,
A sinner, such as I,
Why you left the realms of glory
To come to earth to die.

For I was the guilty one,
But you took all my shame,
I deserved the penalty,
But you bore all the pain.

You changed my life completely,
You've made me all brand new,
You said that you forgave me,
And promised Heaven, too.

I know I'm unworthy,
That you should love me so,
I wish I could repay you,
That's impossible, I know

But Jesus, I do love you,
You've done so much for me,
Just help me live my life, Lord,
To bring glory to Thee.

Jesus, and Heaven, Too

Jesus, and Heaven, too,
When this life on earth is past,
When I have made that final trip
At home with Him, at last.

Jesus, and Heaven, too,
How great will be that day,
When trials and sorrows are no more,
And I'm home with Him to stay.

Jesus, and Heaven, too,
How wonderful that will be,
To praise and thank Him evermore,
Throughout all eternity.

Just when, I cannot say,
But I'm ready, are you?
So we can share together,
Jesus and Heaven, too.

The joy of “Jesus and Heaven Too” reminds me of a story that Charles Spurgeon told in one of his sermons over a 150 years ago. He tells of an old man who was drawing close to death. He had made no secret during his life of his love for the Lord Jesus. One day, a young man engaged him in a conversation regarding his hope of heaven. The young man grew weary of hearing him describe his unswerving faith in Christ, so he challenged the old man. “But what if all your expectations are disappointed? What if you die and awake in hell instead of heaven?” The old man listened quietly to the question, but did not hesitate to answer. “If I die and awake in hell,” he said, “Jesus has promised that where I am, He will be also. He will be there with me. So I will throw my arms around Him and hold Him close! He will be with me—even in hell. And that, you see, will be heaven to me!” The point Spurgeon was making is that for all the lavish beauty and glories of heaven, they will still be no match for the glory and treasure of the deep bond and unbroken communion with our blessed Savior for all eternity. The One who prepared heaven for us will be more precious than all the beauty that will adorn the glorious City He has prepared for us. But thankfully, it also is not an either-or! Our lips will sing eternal praises that will come close to Marjorie’s poem, Jesus and Heaven Too.

One of the realities that characterized Marjorie was her never-ceasing thanksgiving to God. One of her favorite Psalms was Psalm 100, which summons us to, “*Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise: be thankful unto Him, and bless His name.*” Her poetic spinoff from the psalmist’s call to thanksgiving was written as her own exhortation to daily thanksgiving. This poem was written one year on the occasion of the annual “Thanksgiving” holiday that we celebrate on our national calendar.

Thanksgiving

I couldn't help but think
As I started on this rhyme,
Of the many, many blessings
We enjoy all the time.
Of the things we take for granted
Such as our ability to do
The cooking and the cleaning,
The washing and ironing, too.
Sometimes we complain
And think our road is rough,
But if we couldn't do these things
It really would be tough.
If we were confined
To a wheelchair or a bed,

If we couldn't walk about
Or even move our head.
If we couldn't even see
The blue sky up above
The colors of a rainbow
Or the faces of those we love.
If we couldn't even hear
The birds sing in the trees,
The gentle raindrops falling
Or the crackle of dried leaves.
All these are such simple things
Until they're taken away,
So let's thank God **all the time**
And not on just one day.

There are countless details of the story of God's grace in the long life that the Lord gave to Marjorie that will only be fully learned, appreciated, and celebrated with her in heaven's glory. I believe there will likely be many more to celebrate it with her as a result of the prayer that burned in Marjorie's heart reflected in this next poem. It is an untitled poem that gives expression to her deep longing and compassionate desire for the salvation of all the loved ones in her family.

Are all my loved ones saved, Lord?
I really wish I knew
About their salvation
And relationship to you.
Are they safe within the fold, Lord?
In the hollow of Your Hand,
Covered by the blood
Of the sacrificial Lamb?

The world sends out a message,
That all one needs to do,
Is obey the law, be kind and good,
And that will get them through.
But our righteousness is like filthy rags,
Your Word makes very plain,
Our good deeds cannot save us,
We're sinners just the same.

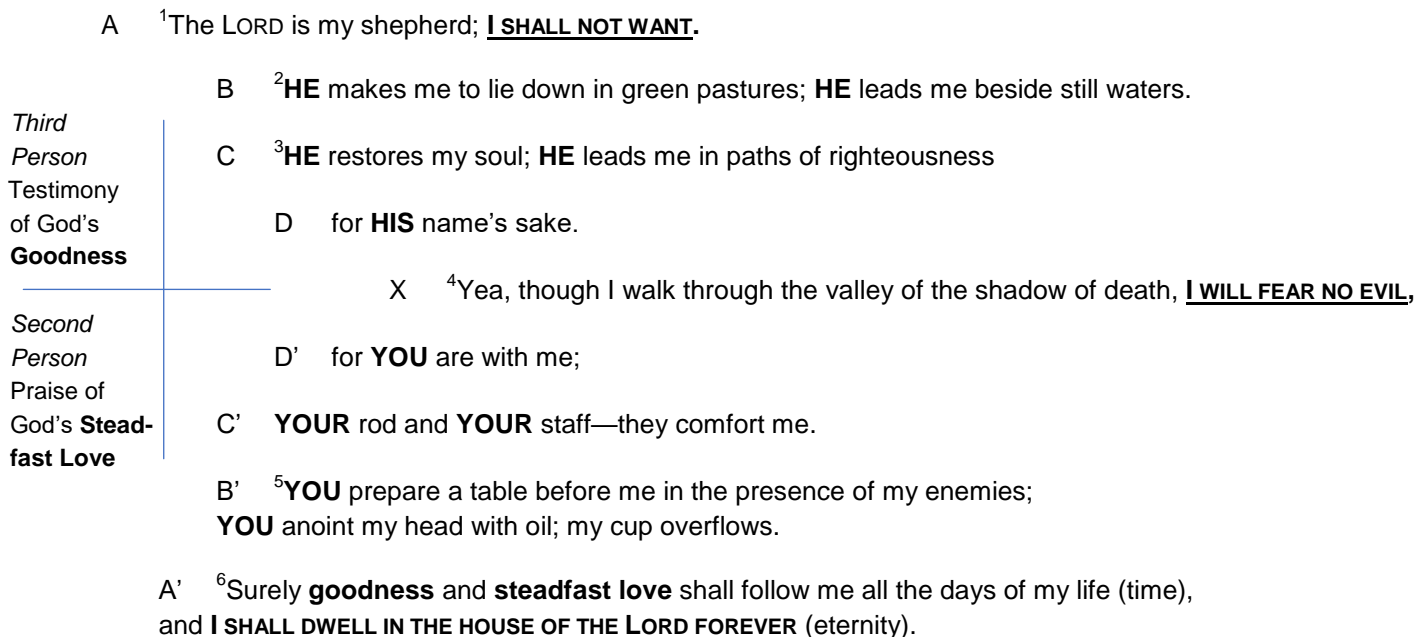
Or are they lost in sin, Lord?
I cannot bear to dwell,
Upon the thought that some of them
Might wind up in hell.
It's so hard to talk to loved ones, Lord,
They tend to turn away,
Don't really care to listen to
The things you have to say.

I know Christ will not die again,
The penalty's been paid,
He gave His life just once for all
Our sins on Him were laid.
Holy Spirit, work in their hearts,
This is my earnest plea,
That they'll surrender everything,
And give themselves to Thee.

I want to close our celebration of Marjorie's life on a more personal note that occurred on a Sunday in early 2017. I had only recently by Lloyd's invitation taken over the teaching of our adult Sunday school class. I was following the lesson plan laid out in our Sunday school quarterly, and it turned out that on this particular Sunday the lesson was Psalm 23, easily the most familiar and beloved of all the psalms in the Psalter. I had already learned and seen that Marjorie was an attentive listener in church. I never once remember her struggling to stay awake, which I know is unusual with my preaching! She was always engaged and loved God's Word. On this particular Sunday morning, there were only 6-7 who were present for the Sunday school hour, and I remember on this morning that Marjorie was more than just attentive; there was an accompanying joy in her attentiveness. Her face beamed as we worked our way through the 23rd Psalm. ***It was as if the faith journey that David was describing as he discovered that the Lord***

was his Shepherd was the same experience that she had discovered and had come to know in her own faith journey with the Lord. She knew the same goodness and steadfast love that David joyfully described in the Psalm.

I want to close our time this Sunday morning with a quick review of what I shared on that winter morning in 2017 that seemed to deeply touch Marjorie’s heart. It was for me as I look back on her response to that lesson a very special moment in the brief years that I have been here as Pastor of Strasburg Union Church. Psalm 23 lays out beautifully in an inverted pattern of mirrored elements arranged around a central pivot.



I want to quickly note a few things about this Psalm.

- As you can see, Psalm 23 divides into **two halves** arranged as **reversed images of each other** around a **central pivot**: ABCD X DCBA
- In the last verse of the Psalm, David rejoices in two of God’s attributes—His **goodness** and His **steadfast love**. These attributes are showcased consecutively in the two halves of the Psalm.
- In the **first half** of the psalm (vss. 1-3), **God is described indirectly** in the *third person* (the LORD, he, his). David is speaking about God, *publicly testifying* to His **goodness** that has provided for every need that he has had in life. Viewed through the provisions of a shepherd for his sheep, he recounts the abundance of green pastures and still waters that restores his soul and prepares him for what he will learn as he is led on paths of righteousness. His third person testimony in the first half of the psalm points to the **goodness of God** expressed in His *provisions and direction*.
- In the **second half** of the psalm (vss. 4-6), **God is described directly** in the *second person* (you, your). David celebrates the refuge of God’s invisible but powerful presence that quiets his heart in the face of the dark threats of evil that seek to take his life. That celebration is continued in a direct comparison of the green pastures and still waters in **B** with the sumptuous banqueting table that is served even while enemies look on in **B’**. And then he adds that at that banquet the Lord Himself renews His favor toward the one he is shepherding by anointing his head with oil.
- The divide in the Psalm comes in the **X** in the diagram, which is the turning point in moving into the second half of the Psalm.
- The breakdown of the Psalm into two halves that mirror each other arranged around a central pivot gives the Psalm a clear **beginning, middle, and end**. In each of these locations (beginning, middle, and end), there are strong affirmations of faith that are detailed in three confessions revealing the substance of David’s faith in the

Lord as Shepherd. ***These are the storyline of what faith in Israel's covenant God as his Shepherd means summed up in three firm propositions:***

1. I shall not want.
2. I will fear no evil.
3. I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

This is how true faith in our covenant God is characterized! Because He is a Shepherd overseeing and caring for our lives, faith in the Lord God as our Shepherd means:

(1) I am confident that I will lack nothing that I need in the faith journey on which my Shepherd is leading me;

(2) He will be with me in the darkest and most difficult seasons when evil casts its dark shadows over my life in an attempt to assault my faith and riddle it with fear;

(3) I am unshakably certain that in the end my eternal victory and home will be in heavenly dwellings with the Great Shepherd who has loved me with an everlasting love!

All of these firm, faith-founded realities are the product of knowing the Lord as my Shepherd.

To appreciate David's image of the deep bond that he had with the LORD as his Shepherd, we are assisted by the vivid and poignant picture painted of a Middle Eastern shepherd provided by the early 19th century minister and author, F. W. Robertson. He writes,

Beneath the burning skies and clear starry nights of Palestine, there grows up between the shepherd and his flock a union of attachment and tenderness. It is the country where, at any moment, sheep are liable to be swept away by some mountain torrent, or carried off by hill-robbers, or torn by wolves. At any moment their protector may have to save them by personal hazard.

It is a country of long, scorching summer days, and intense and parching drought, when green pastures and living streams become an ever-present challenge taxing the shepherd's care and skill. A bond forms between the shepherd and his sheep that becomes a kind of friendship. They are together all alone in an extended solitude. There are no human beings nearby, and a unique inexplicable connection forms between the shepherd and his sheep. One is the care of the protector, and the other is the need of a following and trusting flock. Over time a union is woven through night and day, through summer suns and winter frosts. The shepherd and the sheep become one, and are uniquely co-mingled. They come to know each other and feel each other. "The shepherd knows his sheep, and is known by them."

This is exactly the bond that Jesus describes in His relationship to His sheep (Jn 10:11-14, 27-29). It is hard to imagine the sacrifice of a true shepherd. The loneliness that he must feel because his only contact is with these helpless creatures which are his daily companions, whose lives are utterly dependent on the shepherd. He stands in daily jeopardy with the challenge of keeping them safe. Their value is measured by his own jeopardy, and then we have reached some notion of the love which Jesus meant to represent under the image of a shepherd. His eternal tenderness that bends over us who are infinite lower than he is, and yet he knows each of our names, each of our trials, and thinks of each of us separately and uniquely, and gave Himself for each of us with a sacrifice as special, and a love as person, as if the whole world's wilderness were none other but that one who is the object of His love.

The single overarching personal outcome that grows out of that title is this: "I shall not want." No provision is missing in the care of the shepherd. David is speaking out of the fullness of his own experience. As he watched over, and provided for, and tended his flock, leading them to the greenest pastures, and finding for them the water which in that country was so scarce, and guarding them by night from beasts of prey, so he felt his God would provide for and watch over him—provision and protection that leaves him with no want!

As I shared these thoughts on that Sunday morning, I watched Marjorie's face swell with joy. She knew what I was talking about. It was almost as if she was saying through the joy on her face, "That's the Shepherd I know!" I knew from the joy radiating from her countenance that morning that her relationship with the Lord Jesus had been, through all the trials and tests of time, made rich and deep—the Lord was truly her Shepherd. She knew Him as the "Good Shepherd" of John 10:11, 14. She knew Him as the "Chief Shepherd

and Guardian of her soul” that Peter describes in I Peter 2:25, and she knew Him as the “*Great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the everlasting covenant*” extolled in Hebrews 13:20.

I don’t know that I ever had a more attentive listener than Marjorie, even despite having messages that were and are regularly *too lengthy* and *too heavy*. I can only apologize for that; my efforts to correct it have not been very successful! *But the one thing I know is that the Word of God always seemed to find a welcome home in Marjorie’s heart.* I know it wasn’t because of me. It was purely the Spirit of God at work directing Marjorie’s very active and beautiful imagination that took words and multiplied pictures and images from them of her Savior and then put them back into words through her gift of poetry. Her Spirit-formed images, I believe, were what God used in her heart to stir up worship and deep devotion to her Lord. I was given the privilege of watching in Marjorie Dillon what God does in taking His spoken Word and miraculously creating a worshipper!

I have personally deeply missed her presence in our congregation these past two years. My conversations with Marjorie were never long, but even in their brevity, they were enriching, encouraging, poignant, and deeply rewarding! It has been a joy to look back over the life that is discoverable from her poetry, and though I arrived late, only, in fact, in time to be a footnote near the end of her life, it will make the joy of getting to know her in the courts of heaven just that much more precious and fulfilling. Our church has crossed a milestone in Marjorie’s passing. Terry was the first to notify me in a text that Marjorie had passed away. I could only think of one thing to say in reply—our great loss has become heaven’s greater gain!

*Precious in the sight of the Lord
Is the death of His saints.
Psalm 116:15*