

Genesis 5:21-24
Colossians 4:2-6

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CONVERSATIONS WITH GOD

Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him. *Genesis 5:24*

“Enoch walked with God.”

Some of the most memorable conversations I can recall happened on long, leisurely walks: with Jane in the high piney mountains of western North Carolina, talking about family memories among those sacred hills. With my mother in northwest England, when she was a bit more ambulatory, and could drive her three wheeled walker with particular determination on the sidewalks around our small village. With our girls and Michael on long walks around Valley Forge Park, talking about the future, or simply catching up with each others' lives in the present. With either of my two brothers in England, with crunching steps on cindered paths around the nearby “bricky,” an old clay pit from which red bricks were formed, now a lake and nature preserve, where conversation beside hundred year old hedgerows comes as easily as that motley crew of ducks and geese and swans share their common habitat.

There's something about walking and conversation that stimulates the best in us. Aristotle, 330 years before Jesus, founded an institute for learning in Athens known as the Peripatetic School (from the root meaning to “walk about), apparently after Aristotle's mode of teaching disciples, as Jesus would later, on he road or on long walks. Perhaps walking and conversation are so well married because of walking's particular cadence, or maybe it's the open air, and because stretching the mind becomes more important than the destination.

“Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him.” That's all we know about Enoch, beyond that he was the father to the oldest man recorded in the Bible, Methuselah who lived, supposedly 969 years. (These extreme ages, incidentally, turn out to be mathematically proportioned products of the sums of other sacred or important numbers in Hebrew numerology, each age at death assigning a certain sacred credential to its owner.) “God took him”, as if death came in the middle of a long walk with God, and Enoch didn't even notice, like passing through an open door from this realm to another. What a gift. What a

way to transition! Like walking through an open doorway in the middle of a conversation.

Enoch *walked with God*, our text says, for 300 years (3 stands for certainty or truthfulness). Isn't that a lovely, companionable image! Like two old, lifelong friends taking their morning constitutional, coming to know each other over the decades like a well worn shoe curls to each turn and stretch of its owners' foot. In China recently, I made the challenging climb to the highest point on the Great wall—discovering on our return that Libby and Charlie Dalrymple made the same climb a year earlier. But when, after an hour of intense climbing (it's all steps of every changing height) I was within a couple of hundred steps of the summit, gasping like an abused locomotive and questioning my sanity—if with a certain flush of pride, two Chinese gentlemen passed me coming down. Each was 85 if they were a day, weaving like mountain goats among the now trickle of climbers nearing the summit. They were dressed alike, in black Mao jackets and cotton pants with cloth caps like a train engineer's, chatting and laughing having expended no more energy than two old friends walking out of the movies. I bet they'd been doing this climb daily for years.

Enoch walked with God. I love that image. Conversation with God as easy as with a treasured friend. Peter Marshall, the one time Chaplain to the U.S. Senate, used to say of prayer, "Let not your prayers be the sending of night messages, but conversations with God." Conversations, like two friends who've come to know and care for each other, listening equally as much as talking.

I must confess, when I pray, I believe I do more talking than listening. Does that sound familiar? Prayer as a litany of wants needs, even if half or more are interceding for others. I find myself in conversations like that sometimes. Conversations where I've found myself giving advice when it wasn't asked for—when the other simply wanted to be heard and have their soul embraced by the hearer.

The other half of prayer is listening. Not something we do naturally because God speaks often in the silences, which takes a practiced form of discernment. Again, in China a couple of weeks ago, Dr. Iain Torrance the seminary President, gathered our group of 19 a number of times in his room for some wonderful, brief devotionals. At one he prayed:

"When we take the lives of our fellow mortals, you were silent.
" When we destroy the land that nourishes us, you were silent.
"When we sinned against you, you were silent,
"And we took your silence for disinterest . . ."

Confirmands, you recall on our last session together, how we talked about what makes a memorable conversation. How some, perhaps most conversations are really only exchanges of information. The one says what's on his or her mind, then the other does the same, not really engaging or probing the other's thoughts, or asking questions to clarify and better understand, but telling primarily "what I know," what experiences I have. Nothing much happens beyond exchanging data. But once in a while, when you feel the other really connecting with your thoughts or concerns, an intimacy of the soul begins—a sense of having been heard, valued, and listened to. A real friendship emerges.

This is what I sense is meant when Genesis tells us that for a perfect period of time Enoch walked with God, and the spirit of each engaged the other with a lovely intimacy, a perfect respect and search for truth. Isn't that, after all, what we want from any relationship: to resonate with the soul of the other, and to feel honored in ourselves, and listened to.

This is what becoming a committed Christian calls us to. To walk with God as with a wise and loving friend. To speak, yes, but most importantly, to *listen* as to a wise and loving friend. And here is the great mystery: in putting the other first we find ourselves beautifully fulfilled, nourished, and loved. Each gaining the heart's desire by giving oneself away. Paul put it this way, "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone." As Peter Marshall put it—"Conversations with God, not merely the sending of night messages."

And the peace of god be with you all, always.

Amen.