

Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

by Cameron Jorgenson

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On the days when my dissertation is crawling along slowly, I daydream about producing stories for NPR. Sometimes I long to work for This American Life or go on tour with Prairie Home Companion, but most days I resign myself to the reality that my radio career may never go further than helping with pledge drives.

But those of you who know me well realize that my connection to public radio runs even deeper. My Norwegian dad was raised in northern Minnesota in a town just like Garrison Keller's fictional Lake Wobegon. Thief River Falls, Minnesota, is about as close as one can get to stepping into that storied place.

Every time I talk to my dad I hear tales begging to be retold, so this morning, if you don't mind, I'll share one with you.

It's been a quiet week in Thief River Falls, Minnesota, my father's home town, out there on the edge of the prairie...

There's a chill in the air and in a matter of days children will launch their assaults on the neighborhoods, dressed as ghouls, goblins, and other frightening creatures like Sponge Bob Squarepants. Like their Viking ancestors the children will pillage the town until they've extracted every last piece of candy, or at least until their war weary fathers, trailing an appropriate distance, wave the white flag to signal their surrender.

But none of that is on Nils Johnson's mind, Nils the respected farmer. "I'm a dying breed," he'd tell you, "what with the faceless corporate farms, and genetically modified seed, and machinery so terrible expensive anymore," then his voice would trail off and he'd shake his head, disgusted to see his way of life disappearing. It's a vulnerable way of life...one that ties you to the land and to nature. It is a life that requires faith-or at the very least it requires thick skin. Some years everything could be going right when suddenly-wham-disaster strikes...and that is just the way it is, you gotta get used to it.

Nils was a good man. He supported his farming habit by plumbing, taking out-of-town assignments for a week or so here and there. And because people knew this, when he was not out of town or in his field, he was often under someone else's sink unplugging a pipe and refusing payment. He did not have a sunny disposition, but he was no sourpuss. He was an emphatic realist. Once when his wife read a book on the power of positive thinking, she scolded him, saying "Come now. Every cloud has a silver lining" to which he replied, "yeah but, it's still a cloud, ya know."

But on this morning, he was preoccupied by *good* news from the farm report he had just heard on the radio. The price of wheat had reached a record high. Never had the demand been so strong, and this year farmers who planted wheat stood to win big if they could get their crops in. Nils hunched over his bowl of Cheerios and his Folgers chewing thoughtfully. Wheat. Who knew? After a couple years of soybeans this year he went with wheat for no particular reason, and now he had a bumper crop waiting to be harvested. Three years ago was the last time he broke even. Two years ago hail devastated his crop. Last year it started raining a week before harvest and didn't stop for four days. With water standing in the field he couldn't run his machinery, and it left him to watch his crops rot from a distance, only to plow it under and hope for better next time.

He crunched the numbers in his head. If he could get the whole crop in, he could stand to not only get caught up with the bank, but even to put some money away for the not-too-distant future when he wouldn't be able to farm anymore.

This was still on his mind as he and his wife, Donnae, drove to church. She said to him, "We have a guest preacher today, ya know." He let out a sigh. Pastor Dalquist claimed that it was his goal to train up another generation of preachers; Nils wondered if he just liked an extra week off every now and again. These training exercises had not always gone well. Not long ago the guest preacher was the pastor's 16-year-old grandson who was visiting from out of town and he unleashed an hour-long tirade on the text "Wives Submit Yourselves to your Husbands as Unto the Lord."

Not deterred by Nils' lack of enthusiasm, Donnae continued. "Well, I think it is going be nice. Pastor Dalquist's grandson is preaching."

"Well, I suppose this time he'll talk about how you are to keep silent in church?"

"No, no. Not that one. This is the grandson that has been in seminary." She said seminary with a reverent tone, not quite shared by Nils.

"Oh, good. A sermon straight out of the cemetery." He was pleased with his pun, but Donnae shot him an icy glance to make clear that was the end of that.

Not much was different in church, other than the new face beaming next to Pastor Dalquist on the platform. Once the hymns had been sung, the pastor shuffled up to the pulpit. Oozing pride, he introduced his grandson Brad, explaining that he had come to the Twin Cities for a conference, but was making a special trip this week and next all the way up to Thief River just to preach. A tear came to his eye as he spoke of watching his grandson mature into such a fine young man, the first of his family full of preachers to go to seminary, and despite all that schooling he still loved the Lord anyway.

Brad stepped up to the pulpit, and Nils folded his arms across his chest and listened with one eyebrow arched, the same listening pose he adopted at meetings of the City Council or the School board. The young preacher read his text from Joel chapter 2: “Be glad and rejoice in the LORD your God; for he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before. The threshing floors shall be full of grain; the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter...”

The sermon was packed full of history...clearly Brad had read the commentaries, but it sounded as if he was reading the commentaries from the pulpit. There was talk of Hebrew participles, archeological insights, and a lengthy digression about the life cycle of locusts.

Meanwhile Nils’s attention drifted to his farm. He thought of the years of struggle, the years where no rain would fall and the land lay dead and cracked, followed by years where there were bucketfuls of rain at just the wrong time. He wondered to himself “Where is God in the middle of all that?” But he pushed the thought aside, returning to his credo “That’s just the way it goes. Some years are good, some years are bad. You just press on. That’s all you can do.”

The sermon wound down with a fizzle. Nils shot a glance around the church and saw every other farmer in the place tapping his toes, antsy to get back home and tend to business.

As soon as they got in the car Nils said to Donnae, “Well, he’s not outstanding in his field...but he made all of us wish that *we* were.” She replied coolly “I think he did a lovely job. He’s so intelligent. I think it is refreshing.” Nils figured he should keep the rest of his observations to himself.

He raced home, even though there was no way Donnae would stand for him to work on the Sabbath. After inhaling lunch he went out to the field to take a look. Everything was perfect. Heavy heads of grain sat atop the beautiful golden stalks, rippling in the breeze like the waves on a pond.

He stole a glance at the sky above, looking for a sign. There were no clouds. He sniffed and smelled nothing but crisp autumn air and a distant fireplace. He set his jaw, marched to the barn, climbed into the John Deere combine and cranked up the engine. He heard the familiar chugging purr, and grasped the steering wheel, and said aloud to his tractor, “This week. This week we clear a field.” He felt a steely resolve grow in him as if he were headed into battle, and he set off for the house to plan the week.

He awoke early Monday. He was a man on a mission. He reheated what was left of yesterday’s pot of coffee and poured it in his thermos, grabbing one of those nutrigain bars that Donnae was always after him to try. This morning he didn’t care that it tasted like dirt with a little jelly mixed in, he had to get out to the field. He figured that he could clear his 200 acres by the weekend, but there was not a moment to lose.

He fired up the combine and eased her out into the field. She ran like silk, and it thrilled him to lower the header and hear the blades swishing through the wheat. As he rounded the first corner he heard a heavy kerchunk and the sickening sound of twisting metal. In the early dawn light he did not realize that he had lowered the blades too far and he hit a big rock, one of the infernal rocks that were forever being spit up out of the cold dark soil. He climbed down to assess the damage and saw that he had really torn it up.

Nils went into town to the John Deere dealer to buy the parts he needed—and of course they did not have it in stock. So he drove to Grand Forks, North Dakota, an hour away. By the time he returned home there was little daylight left. He worked as long as he could before throwing in the towel and trudging back home.

Tuesday he made as heroic an attempt as Monday. By that evening he had repaired the mangled blades, and the combine was in fine working order. But he had lost two days of harvesting and now he was getting nervous. Nils was not a man given to much fidgeting, but for the rest of the night he paced the floor and when he got in bed he tossed and turned. The next morning, as soon as there was light enough to see what he was doing he was out in the field, hard at work.

He ran the combine around the field, being quick and thorough. There was fire in his eyes as he rounded the corners expertly, not missing a stock of wheat. A normal day of harvesting meant four trips to the grain bin, and today he reached his first load an hour ahead of schedule. He pulled the combine alongside his truck and with the flip of a switch, wheat poured out of the hopper and into the trailer. Soon he was ready to transport the first load. He roared across the field toward the bin with a knot of excitement in the pit of his stomach. He was going to make it after all! He pulled close and hooked up the auger which would spit his wheat up into the granary. But when he flipped the switch, nothing happened.

The augur wasn't auging. Nils scrambled, checking fuses and breakers, searching the control box for loose wires. Running back toward the truck Nils felt his ankle give way and he lurched forward. There he laid, face down in the dirt. He clutched his ankle and said "what on earth?" looking around to see what he tripped on. It was a gopher hole. Upon closer inspection, he realized that this gopher had not only twisted his ankle, but had dug through and chewed up the electrical cord he had buried...the electrical cord powering the augur.

Nils was not a man prone to strong language, but this tested his mettle. He hobbled and fumed, and shook his fist, and right about then he remembered the smart-alec, know it all, seminarian who preached on Sunday. All that talk about God repaying what the grasshopper had stolen. He couldn't shout at God, but he could let the preacher have it, so he yelled, "So there's a locust subsidy, eh? You suppose there's a gopher policy too? And tell me, wise guy, if you know so much about farm life, what do you do with a chewed up electrical wire when you've got a crop in the field that's gotta come in right now?" He had gotten it off his chest, but he didn't feel any better. Even though there was no one there to hear it, he felt sorta bad.

He was able to rig up the augur to an extension cord, and finally it began to spit grain into the bin. Despite the delay, Nils managed to get four full loads in. But he couldn't shake that unsettled feeling, having chewed out the preacher that wasn't there.

Thursday he was up early with renewed resolve. He took time for a bowl of cereal and a fresh pot of coffee thinking, there's no use jinxing a good day with a nutrigrain bar. He listened to the farm market report and the announcer said, "The price of wheat has climbed even higher. There were major shortfalls in European production. France is mandating that farmers begin to produce more wheat to support regional demand. Times have never been so good for American wheat." Nils's pulse quickened a bit. The thought of having a bumper crop of the most valuable grain on the market—while getting to stick it to the French—it was almost more good news than he could take. The announcer continued, "But there's also bad news. Rain is coming; a major storm front is moving our way. If you have crops in the field, you'd better act quick." A cheerio nearly went down the wrong pipe. Nils sputtered and pulled on his coat as quickly as he could, sprinting to the barn.

All day long he worked his heart out. And much to his surprise, *nothing went wrong*. He managed to pull in five loads, a full load more than usual and he was beginning to see real progress. And, so far, there was no rain.

It was dark when he walked back to the house, but with flashlight in hand he took a detour through his field, wading through the chest high wheat, the most beautiful crop of his life. He let his fingers run through the ripe heads of grain and he was nearly overcome with a sense of gratitude. But he stopped himself, saying, "Don't count your chickens just yet. Still plenty of harvest to go and rain on the way. There will be time enough for celebrating." So he furrowed his brow and purposefully walked back home.

Friday he worked like a man possessed. He raced through the field, to the trailer, to the grain bin, and back again. All the while he kept one eye on the thick clouds gathering overhead, muttering threats at them, all but daring them to break open. Somehow they didn't. In the face of great peril Nils had accomplished a heroic feat: that day, single-handedly, he harvested more grain than he had in his life—six full loads. He was now a day's work from finishing the field, and he allowed himself a brief celebration, which amounted to a self-satisfied grin, followed by a smirk directed at the clouds above.

The next morning he awoke with a look of solemn determination and he donned his baseball cap, stained with sweat and field dust. Even if the rains came and the field grew soupy he planned to arm himself with a sickle like the grim reaper and take that grain down by hand like they did in the old country. Nothing was going to stop him.

And nothing did. The work was fairly easy. He managed to clear the rest of the field in three loads, wrapping up by one o'clock. After the last of the grain had been deposited in the granary, which was now nearly full to overflowing, Nils took a deep breath, exhausted by the week's exploits. And then he started to laugh. It was the dark laughter of one who had cheated fate. Through hard work and determination he cleared that field without losing a stalk.

When he walked in the house he found Donnae, already working on dinner. "Never mind with all of that. Tonight I'm taking you to dinner." He walked to her and planted a big playful kiss on her forehead and then headed off to shower. Donnae was shocked, "What in the world was that for? And since when do we go out to dinner?"

At the restaurant Nils didn't even look at the prices on the menu. Instead he found the largest steak listed and announced to Donnae, "I think I am having the porterhouse. What are you going to have? Get anything you want." These are words she had never heard cross his lips. Cautiously she said "Well, then, I think I will have the veal parmesan." Veal parmesan? "When did she take a liking to Italian food? Does she even know what it is?" he thought. His first instinct was to say, "My aren't we getting fancy?" but he caught himself, and instead he took her hand and said, "That sounds good. I hope you'll let me have a bite." But before long, conversation turned to how the money would be

spent, what bills would be paid, and what would be socked away for retirement. The celebration was nearly over before it started, and a cloud of anxiety descended on the table. They decided to skip dessert, drove home in silence, and with nothing else to do, they went to bed early.

The next morning on the way to church Donnae reminded Nils that Brad, Pastor Dalquist's grandson would be preaching again. "Oh good" he said. "Perhaps this week I'll learn more about the locusts or what color uniforms the Babylonians wore." But he was in for a surprise.

During the hymn singing Nils looked up on the platform. The young man at the pastor's side seemed different. It was Brad, all right, but this morning he was not beaming with confidence, he was white as a sheet. After the hymns, Pastor Dalquist again introduced his grandson, but this time there was no mention of seminary or his grandson's brilliance, he simply welcomed him to share what the Lord had laid on his heart.

Brad stepped into the pulpit pale and trembling. He began by saying, "I have to say, I think I have no business being up here." Nils thought, "Well, the kid is off to a good start, anyway." Brad continued, "You see, last week I had a realization. Preaching is a lot harder than I thought it was. It's not about regurgitating a Bible commentary, and it's not about being positive or motivational. And I have to confess to you, that I don't really know what I am doing. But this week I came across a passage that just seemed like it needed to be heard..."

He read the parable of the Persistent Widow...the little old lady who had been treated unjustly, who would not give up complaining to a judge that she knew to be a bad man, until he relented. Brad admitted it was an odd story, a little confusing, but he pointed out that, unlike many parables, Luke actually tells you how to read it when it says, "Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up." Nils uncrossed his arms and looked over at Donnae's bible. "Well," he thought "I hadn't noticed that before." Brad went on to point out that we completely miss the point if we conclude that God is uncaring like the unjust judge, or that the moral of the story is that we need to wear God out before he'll answer a prayer. He said, "The point is really simple. Pray. Don't give up. Pray. Remember that we are a dependant people. Pray. No matter how hard we work, at the end of the day it is about God's grace. Pray!" Nils shifted in the pew.

Brad went on preaching, now with a bit of color in his cheeks "You know, I've been visiting my grandpa up here since I was a kid. And over the years I've noticed something. We are a stoic people. We are pious, we read the Bible and we pray, but if we don't watch it, we run the risk of resigning ourselves to fate, saying, 'Well, that's just the way it goes.' If we just resign ourselves like that, we *might* keep praying because we ought to, but then again, we might stop praying all together."

"And do you know what's really bad about us stoics? We can't celebrate. Not really. There can be no real festivity, because there's no real grace. There can be no thanksgiving because there's no sense of blessing. There's just good times and bad...some days you're the pigeon some days you are the statue. When we live like that there's no hope, and with no hope, we lose faith and love. We stoics are on the doorstep of despair. That's why when Jesus finishes his parable, he wraps it up by saying 'when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?' It's a good question, friends. Will you be a stoic, or a Christian?"

And with that, Brad wrapped up his sermon and sat down. The piano player sensing a holy moment of decision began to play "Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling, calling for you and for me, see on the portals he's waiting and watching, calling for you and for me. Come home, come home ye who are weary come home" Brad had no idea how to do an altar call, it was not something they covered in seminary, so his grandfather came to the pulpit with a quiver in his voice and said "We have heard from God today. If you need to pray—to repent—as I do, come...come..."

As a stalwart member of the church, a deacon, a Sunday school teacher, he had not been down to the altar in many years. He figured that he went so often as a kid that surely one of those trips had to take. But this was a different moment of decision. He realized that he no longer prayed. Not really. He was trying to pull himself up by his own bootstraps, but now he wasn't sure he even had boots. This week he had been blessed beyond measure, but he nearly missed it. He nearly didn't say thanks. So there at the altar with several others, he prayed.

When they made it back to their seats, Pastor Dalquist reminded the congregation that it was communion Sunday. He called deacons forward, Nils and the rest, and they took the brass trays and distributed the little crackers and little plastic cups of Welch's grape juice to the congregation, while they sang Great is Thy Faithfulness. Nils sat by his wife, overcome with gratitude. Pastor Dalquist said "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me..." "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." And they did.

His words were nearly drowned out by the storm that had finally broken overhead, pelting the church roof with heavy drops, softening the furrows of the fields, and making all things new.