

CHAPTER 1 – ARTHUR BLAKE

The hymn straggled to its raggedy conclusion as Arthur Blake loosened his tie and took his first hesitant step toward the pulpit. He could feel his sweat kicking in. He noted disapproving glances as he lowered his hand from his tie, but he knew that he would be self-conscious preaching with that noose tightened around his neck. He pushed a lock of curly brown hair back from his right eye. They would have to accept him as he was. The droning of the portable fans in the aisles affirmed that he had every right to seek at least a pretense of comfort. The church was only about one quarter full, but people sat in widely scattered locations including the very last pew. Many had been conversing in low tones, but all talking ceased as Arthur stepped forward. Every adult eye was on him. The few children in the congregation played and fidgeted as though he wasn't even there. Six older women in the first two pews greeted him with defiant stares.

Arthur had arrived late for his first Sunday as pastor at Parkville United Methodist Church, and he was both nervous and fatigued because of it. He had mistakenly driven first to Villa Park instead of Parkville. Illinois had a habit of naming villages from various combinations of picturesque and natural features, and it was always “Newcomer, beware!” when navigating the Chicago suburbs because of the name similarities. He also had a strong sense of “Beware!” because he was replacing an older minister who had died suddenly two weeks earlier. He hadn't even had the chance to meet any of the church members prior to this service.

Arthur had looked forward to starting his first full-term appointment as the pastor of the United Methodist Church in Rochelle, Illinois, but once again he would not have a normal assignment. The District Superintendent had given Arthur an emergency change of appointment to replace the deceased pastor in Parkville, and she had told him that he had better improve member

unhappiness at Parkville if he wanted a full-term appointment anywhere. Even from a distance he had heard rumors that both the deceased minister and his death were unusual.

Most Methodist pastors serve in a different post every five to seven years. Arthur had been ordained only three years ago. Because of temporary replacement assignments, this was his third church already. His seniority was low because he had entered the ministry as his second career after having worked fifteen years as a NASA engineer, an occupation that had taken so much of his time that his wife Cindy had left him for a TV weatherman with a more stay-at-home job. Despite the long hours Arthur had devoted to work, he had barely avoided being laid off during two NASA budgetary squeezes and had been terminated when his job was eliminated in a third one. After leaving NASA, he had decided that it would be much more fulfilling to raise his eyes toward heaven instead of toward the stars. Faith had always been a basic part of Arthur's life, and his decision for the ministry had felt right. The ironic part of his new career was that now he would have even more home time than that weatherman.

Arthur was amazed by the stream of thoughts assaulting him during those few steps before his sermon.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...

...I hope I get to stay here for a while. I think I can help this church grow if they'll accept me...and if the District Superintendent will cut me some slack...

...The first Russian Cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin had looked around in orbit and said, "I don't see any god up here," but Yuri had been just a little bit too literal about that...

...Why had the District Superintendent said that old Pastor Middlemiss had been more than a bit strange and that some members had been afraid of him?...

...How did he die?

Arthur finally reached the pulpit with a carefully controlled expression on his face. He gripped the edges of its slanted desktop as he watched people in the pews tense in anticipation of his words. His eyes scanned the high sanctuary space, the organ and choir loft above the rear entrances, and the surrounding balconies on both sides.

“I am pleased to be joining you here in your impressive sanctuary. I appreciate the opportunity to become part of the Parkville Church family, even as I join you in mourning the passing of Pastor Middlemiss. I look forward to learning more about him from you during my service here.

“And now, gracious God, I pray that the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts will be acceptable to you, our Rock and our Redeemer.

“My message today is about stories and their heroes. The history of humanity from the very beginning is God’s story. The English language was so right in using the word, ‘history’, and I am sure that in its original form it would have been capitalized, for the story of the world is His story, God’s story. *A red-haired lady halfway back on the left side of the sanctuary stiffened, and he realized that he had not succeeded in slipping that capitalization remark past the English teacher.* From the very beginning, God was there, shepherding our waywardness through all of our past, as He will on into our future. God’s story is not just the progress of the world. *We* are God’s story, and history is our context. *Arthur saw a white-haired man in a brown suit starting to nod off halfway back on the right side, so he noticeably raised his voice and increased the tempo of his words.*

“As the history of the world is God’s story, so also your life is your story. The value of your life increases to the extent that you become the hero of that story. You may say that there is no heroism in you, but I say that if God made man (and hence you) in his image, then you must

have what it takes to be a hero. *Brown Suit abruptly woke up to see the preacher's eyes focused directly on him.* If you have bad times, aggravations, and conflicts in your life and you overcome them, then you are a hero. Overcoming conflict is what a hero does.

“If you will at least temporarily grant my argument that you are the hero of your life story, then we should ask whether you see yourself as a hero in your imagination. Heroes tend to take action when circumstances require it, whether they encounter those situations through their own initiative or through unexpected events. *Surprise! The children were now concentrating on him and his words after hearing about heroes and imagination.*

“Jesus had another measure of an exceptional hero. In the Lord's Prayer he said that we should pray, “...lead us not into temptation.” This line is in the prayer because Jesus believed that most people cannot resist temptation when they face it. The Bible has many examples of people failing this test, from Adam and Eve, to King David, to Judas. However, Jesus was able to turn his back on the temptations of Satan and of everyday life. We have to learn to be good heroes by following the example of Jesus and resisting temptation. *In several parts of the congregation, people were shifting nervously, and Arthur suspected that they had personal experiences of wrestling with temptation.* I will discuss techniques for resisting temptation in the future. For now, I ask that you spend this week in prayerful contemplation of your situation as hero of your life. In closing let me assure you that I look forward to meeting and sharing with you individually in the weeks to come. With that prospect in mind, let us all say Amen.”

Arthur followed the sermon with pastoral prayers. He then announced the offertory collection and sat down. The ushers began their ritual of promenading up and down the aisles as they passed the collection plates from one end of each pew to the other. Arthur noticed how few of the people added to the plates as they passed them along. At the conclusion of the organ music, the

ushers marched forward with the proceeds for his blessing and dedication as the people rose and joined in singing the Doxology.

In keeping with his hero theme while trying to appear traditional, Arthur had chosen *Onward, Christian Soldiers* as the closing hymn. He followed that hymn with the final blessing and took his place in the narthex to greet members of his new flock as they left the sanctuary. Most of them appeared to be uncomfortable with his “hero” talk and with their new younger, taller pastor. They approached him uncertainly and failed to make eye contact as they mumbled their way back into the outer world.

CHAPTER 2 – BISHOP’S OFFICE

District Superintendent Angela King knocked on the office door and was surprised by how tentative her knock sounded. She sensed that the Bishop was not exactly happy with her. Rumors had started to spread that she would be a candidate for Bishop when the next slot opened up due to someone’s retirement. She had the qualifications on paper, but friction between her and Bishop Chandler would not help her cause. Bishops were members of an exclusive club and they could assert subtle influence on the process of choosing an Episcopal successor. She opened the door slowly, with a subservient expression on her face.

Bishop Howard Chandler rose from behind his desk and motioned her to one of the two wingback chairs near the decorative but nonfunctional fireplace.

“Good morning, Angela. Thank you for rearranging your schedule to meet with me. I wanted to discuss this business about the death of Middlemiss at the Parkville Church, and what you are doing about it. I see you have installed Blake there. Why did you move him from his planned appointment, and do you think he is the right person for that church?”

“I always had the feeling that Middlemiss had his own agenda. He was a loner and never volunteered his opinions at conferences. I had to drag information out of him, almost through an interrogation procedure. Blake has an engineering background. He’ll probably do as good a job as anyone at finding out what Middlemiss was up to at Parkville. Then we can replace Blake with a more qualified pastor for the long run.”

“What do you mean by more qualified, Angela? Blake’s engineering background gives him a modern outlook, and he’s personable enough. Are you bothered that he has only a few years of experience in the ministry?”

“Bishop, he’s an engineer, and they look at theology differently. They tend to be too precise and argumentative. We need people who will adhere to traditional approaches without quibbling. Besides, I was married to an engineer once, and I know they are apt to get interested in a career change whenever something interests them more. Blake is my responsibility, and I plan on watching him closely to be sure he doesn’t further degrade that church or make trouble for the Conference in some way.”

“You know your responsibilities, Angela. I won’t interfere. However, allow me to remind you that at the time of Jesus’ ministry, one of the closest professions we had to engineering was being a carpenter. You are right that when Jesus changed from being a carpenter to starting his ministry he was not traditional nor accepted by religious authorities; but you wouldn’t be here if he hadn’t done pretty well.”

CHAPTER 3 – PARKVILLE UMC

Parkville United Methodist Church had a long and unremarkable history. It had its origins 140 years earlier. The name of the village then was Bemis, the same as its founding family. The village trustees renamed it Parkville after World War II, in the hope that it would soon be part of

Chicago's expanding suburbs and that newcomers would be attracted by the bucolic sound of the village's name.

The first white wooden church building had been constructed upon the foundation and basement of an even older church that had burned and been abandoned some years earlier. The lot was triangular and located at the X-shaped intersection of Main and Jeffers Streets. The unusually shaped intersection was sandwiched between Swanson Hill, the neighborhood of the few rich people in the village, and Mallard Lake, to which residents turned for fishing and swimming in the summer, and ice-skating in the winter.

The entrance to the original building was at the point of the triangle, convenient for early residents who walked to church from any of the clustered dwellings within the small village. Farmers and others who came from a distance could hitch their horses and rigs to railings in the ample space at the rear of the triangular lot. As time passed, a gravel parking lot took the place of the field with the hitching rails, and much later a small white, purely decorative, steeple adorned the peak of the roof. Not long after the village changed its name from Bemis to Parkville, the Methodist Church congregation had embarked on a fund-raising drive in expectation of a population boom as people moved outward from the city of Chicago. The result was a new red brick church building attached to the rear of the original structure and filling most of the available space behind it. Because of the lot's triangular shape, its location on the lower slope of Swanson Hill, and the large size of the new building, there were two parking lots. One lot served the entrance to the upper level and the sanctuary on Main Street, and a second lot served the entrance to the lower level and Sunday school rooms on Jeffers Street. For simplicity, people referred to the two areas as the upper and lower parking lots. Passage from the new building to the old building was possible only on the upper level. The attic and the basement of the old building were

completely separate from those of the new building due to architectural considerations. After completing the new structure, the contractors had modified the old church building for its new functions. They converted the old sanctuary to be a multi-purpose room for fund-raising events, meetings, and basketball. They combined the single Sunday school room and the old church office to be the pastor's study and office. This arrangement kept the pastor very distant from the main church office and meeting rooms, an arrangement that pleased most of the subsequent pastors.

The addition of the new building and the reworking of the old building had been examples of excellent planning except for one thing, the migration of Chicago people to Parkville had never happened.

CHAPTER 4 – PASTOR'S STUDY

The first time Arthur had walked into his combination office and study, he felt that he was either in a garage sale or in the aftermath of an avalanche. The room was big and bright enough, with its two windows on each of the corner walls. The paneling on all of the walls was oak, which kept the place from being too dark. He thought that he saw brown carpeting on the floor through tiny gaps among the many piles of stuff and miscellany that filled the room, touching every wall and reaching depths of two to four feet.

The anarchy of Pastor Middlemiss' study reminded Arthur of the time he had helped investigate a test rocket crash for NASA. In that case, the errant missile had disintegrated upon impact with the side of a thickly wooded mountain. The only hope of determining the cause of the accident had been to find every piece of the vehicle, map its current location and condition, and then reconstruct its original configuration in a large hangar. It had been a jigsaw puzzle effort, required to determine whether they had found all of the parts, the way the missile had fractured,

and the cause of the guidance error. He knew that he would have to apply the same principles to taking inventory of this room.

Arthur wanted to learn as much as possible about his deceased predecessor. He had to discover what had happened to drive off members and discourage those who remained. He wanted to identify church leaders and learn how to improve the ways they worked together. He had to determine the relative values of the many books, documents, and objects that filled the room. His engineering background prodded him toward being very careful to avoid discarding something important.

Arthur had decided to tackle this mess as his first major project. He started the cleanup after an early supper on his first Monday, his normal day off. He felt that he had to grasp the existing structure of relationships in this church before ongoing matters and congregational crises kept him from setting his own agenda and schedule. He also knew that he would have trouble concentrating on anything new and major while he sat in the midst of chaos and disorder. He had always been unable to do his best work while loose ends of old projects pulled his thoughts in multiple directions.

To be fair to the late pastor, part of the mess in the study resulted from Middlemiss having lived in a small rental apartment in the basement of a house on the other side of the lower parking lot. The old pastor had set up this living arrangement because he lived alone and did not need nor want to dwell in the large, two-story white parsonage four blocks down Jeffers. His choice of living quarters had been a windfall for the church, allowing it to gain substantial income by renting out the vacant parsonage. Following the memorial service for Pastor Middlemiss, the trustees had moved all of his personal belongings from his apartment to his study at the church. They had put his furniture into an unused room on the Sunday school level to await the next rummage sale. Now

Arthur Blake faced two problems. He had to analyze the bloated and haphazard contents of the study; he also had to negotiate his way into the parsonage. Those living quarters had been included in his contract without any mention of the current temporary tenants. Until the end of the month, Arthur would live in a small office at the rear of the church's Sunday school level. Then he would be able to move to the parsonage, assuming the tenants departed as scheduled.

Arthur rolled up his sleeves with double cuffs and cleared a small space in the far left corner of the study by adding the stuff there to the adjacent pile. He figured that the logical approach to sorting the overall mess would be to proceed in the manner of solving a magic square puzzle, moving items he had checked from their original location into the small open space. This would empty their original space so that he could transfer items from another area into it. If he worked his way back and forth in strips of small areas, he would know where to resume the task after any break by locating the single empty space.

He decided to start with the books in each pile because they would be the easiest things to examine and put away. There were shelves on one wall of the study filled with stacks of papers and old church mail, most of it unopened. He decided that he would exchange books for batches of papers on the shelves so that the books would end up neatly shelved. He would defer the papers for later study.

As he sorted through the first bunch of books, Arthur realized that Pastor Middlemiss had not been a reader of fiction. He looked at fifteen books and saw that they were all nonfiction and usually serious in nature. There were books on interpretation of the Bible, a few on the subject of counseling people with problems or a death in the family, and some on the history and geography of the United States and Britain. There were also several books on the history of World War II.

Arthur wanted to learn more about the WWII period, so he set those books aside for future examination.

After he had sorted through the books in his first section of the floor, Arthur gathered the papers in that section into a neat stack and scanned through them, flipping them with his thumb. Most of them appeared to be drafts of sermons, but he also saw meeting notes, receipts, mail, sales brochures, museum catalogs, and lists of things to do. He could tell that these papers would take a long time to review, so he separated out the mail and brochures as most likely to be unimportant and then set the remainder aside for future study. Removal of the books and papers from the first examination area left a small pile of miscellaneous items. There were odd pieces of hardware, a pair of slippers, eyeglasses with one lens missing, a single bookend, ninety-seven cents in change, a cross on a chain, and several unlabeled keys, two of which looked very old. Being a good engineer, Arthur gathered the miscellaneous bits of hardware into a small junk box. He had always found such collections to have at least one valuable item. He put the other items into a carton that had contained only a water glass. Then he moved on to the second section of floor and repeated his sorting and scanning procedure.

The second pile of stuff was similar to the first, except for its inclusion of several items of clothing. There was an old spy-style raincoat, a red scarf, three brown sweaters, and a red-and-yellow striped necktie. Arthur sorted the books and papers as he had with the first pile, put the clothing into a laundry bag that he had spotted across the room, and reviewed the miscellaneous items. These included a long steel bar with a pair of wheels attached to it at one end. He set the steel bar aside, put the hardware into his junk box, added the smaller miscellaneous items to the carton he had started for them, and moved on to the next pile on the third section of floor.

Arthur worked his way around the room, floor section by floor section, pile by pile, until he had covered the entire study. This took him about five hours. It was getting to be a lot later than he had intended. He realized that it would take several more sessions in the future to complete his investigation of the room's contents. When he had finished what he could handle for tonight, he sorted through the boxes of miscellaneous items and set aside the most interesting ones. The resulting *treasure box* contained a pair of binoculars, an old camera with a half-finished roll of film, a wedding ring, two old keys, a family picture of a young man with his pregnant wife, and a prosthetic left leg. He had definitely found something unexpected in the latter item. Arthur hoped that his review of the papers would reveal the story behind the artificial leg, but he realized that he had a huge mass of papers to examine. Even after perusing them, would he know anything significant about the old pastor? At least he had made a start, and he had about half of the study emptied enough for him to use it.