

Morning by Morning New Mercies I See

Bette Moore
Easter Morning April 1996

I wonder if anybody else remembers the chapel services we were able to have at Westmont College during the Montecito fire of 1964? I can't say that I recall much about the services – but one line from "Great is thy Faithfulness" haunts me every time I remember those days. The phrase "... morning by morning new mercies I see" seemed to underscore how we were all feeling each time the fire subsided enough for us to return to campus.

The fire went on for several days, maybe even for a week. Those days were pretty scary for an 18-year-old away from her family for the first time. After dreaming about college life at Westmont for over ten years, I was finally there; my parents had left me safe at Page Hall, with a nice roommate from a family much like ours. Life was wonderful.

Then it happened. I was studying in the Kerrwood Library late one afternoon when a senior in their "grubbies" came running through telling us to return to our dorms, pack one bag, and meet at Van Kampen Hall. We would all be evacuated to various locations in Santa Barbara that had been set up by the Red Cross. How could this be happening? I remembered the little brush fire we had seen across the ravine from the old biology lab that afternoon, but we had watched the fire department put that out. Hadn't we?

That little brush fire in no way prepared me for the wall of flames I saw behind Page Hall as I ran through the parking lot from Kerrwood. I never knew that fire crackled so loudly, or that the hot winds carried sparks which could burn my skin and threaten my eyes.

The next few hours, even days, are a blur. But as I have looked back at that experience over the past 32 years, it was always those morning chapel services that came to mind first. The words "... morning by morning new mercies I see . . ." have bubbled to the surface and rung through my mind at the most unexpected times.

We kept thinking that the fire was contained. Each day the winds would shift, and the news would sound hopeful. But at night, the flames would return and destroy more of Montecito, and even of Westmont.

Then the morning would come. Again, the winds would have shifted and we knew that any Westmont students who could would try to make Chapel. How many mornings? Maybe only three or four – maybe not even that many – but the symbol was so strong that those words have surfaced and moved me profoundly when life's firestorms were so scary and the nights were so long that I couldn't even imagine a "merciful morning."

My life – and the lives of those I love – has been touched by issues unthinkable during those chapel services in 1964. If I made a list, it would look more like themes of a steamy soap opera than something anyone would ever expect in the life of a Westmont alum: alcoholism, divorce, mental illness, infidelity, abortion, emotional, physical, even sexual abuse, and now, the night which does not seem to have a morning, the drug addiction of my beautiful, 18-year-old daughter.

A great deal of anger has accompanied me on this journey. That anger, though, has sometimes given me the strength to keep going. Now, however, I am finally arriving at the core of my anger – and I realize that much of it was directed at one of my primary misconceptions of God: Didn't God promise that if we played by His rules, we would be spared pain in life? I may not have been taught that directly as I was growing up – but it was certainly one of the anchors of my life when I was a young woman. And I honestly believed it when I arrived at Westmont in September of 1964.

I didn't let go of that most comfortable, though most dangerous, of Christian misconceptions easily. It felt so safe to believe that way. It seems as if God had to literally rip it away from me! When terrible things happened which I perceived to be beyond my control, I would spend a great deal of energy asking God "Why?" And I was one who was even arrogant enough to expect God to give me an answer!

So, if not always there with answers, where was God through all of this?

I now have the answer to that one: God was with me. Not leading, not guiding, not directing. Just silently waiting long enough for me to give up on any and all of my own solutions. *And could I ever come up with solutions!* One more church will be the right place for me. One more retreat. One more self-help course or book. Just the right therapist, or Bible teacher, or minister. A new singles group, maybe a secular one . . . or perhaps a husband.

After total exhaustion on any one problem, I would just give up and let go. Not, mind you, in any particularly spiritual way. I would just have to give up and move on.

And then it would happen! The “ordinary miracle.” A phrase in a book. An old friend in an unexpected encounter. A sunrise. A dream. A thought that had never occurred to me before. The answer. Never showy or observed by anyone else, but strangely enough, usually in the early morning hours – and often accompanied by that line from “Great is thy Faithfulness.”

“ . . . all I have needed Thy hand hath provided. Great is Thy Faithfulness, Lord unto me.”

Bette Moore
Easter Sunday 1996