



## Looking Out My Window, September 9, 2022

This week, I am sharing with you a reflection written about my first pastoral charge as a college student in the rolling hills of north central Louisiana.

### “The Back Steps at Longstraw and Whip-poor-wills”

My first charge as a 20 year old Baptist "preacher boy" college student was the Longstraw Baptist Church, ten miles southeast of Ruston, Louisiana. The diminutive T shaped temple edges up against deep woods on a steep slope among the sharpest rolling hills in my native state. The cemetery spreads down the slope across the road, and the concrete back steps face the wooded bottom; those oaks, hickories, and pines reach out to you as you sit.

Roy Murphy and I retreated to the shade of those steps on a blistering July day in 1966 for a break from work on the building. He said, "David, you're too good a preacher for this little church." I didn't agree with him and said so (after all, I knew that I didn't know much, even if I didn't know how much I didn't know). But he persisted, that loving elf of a man with Effie, his spry, spitfire companion. Their house and barn nestled among embracing oaks on the next hilltop south of Longstraw. Now, only the trees and barn remain as cinders of their lingering presence.

I revisit those steps often, sitting there, reconnecting with Roy and Effie, Harold and Imogene Youngblood, Oda Lee Pesnell (the soul and driving force of that tiny family of saints and ain'ts.) and others. That little flock of forty proved their mettle, enduring my amateurish, prolonged orations in that unairconditioned, bare little sanctuary, where the coolest spot in summer was the concrete floor. (There was only one place that COULD have been any hotter, and we all had our doubts about its existence, at least in that form; so, we were convinced that no one on the planet was sweating like we were.)

Whip-poor-wills—a magical sound to me. They nest on the ground on those wooded knobs. Their remembered music calls me back often to those back steps of that little brick marker of God's presence on that slope (Since my departure, they have covered the white asbestos siding with brick, added air conditioning, a fellowship hall, running water, and rest rooms.). Those steps and trees welcome me and I settle into the deepening dusk to listen and remember. The Whip-poor-wills call to one another into the night. They sing in God and to God and I overhear. Peace soaks through my pores and reconfigures my soul.

The force and depth of my solitude surround me, like the feel of an empty, unfurnished room, as the whip-poor-wills' lilting notes ricochet off the leaves and bark and into me. Alone with the inner images of family and friends now dead. Alone with the voices, images, and remembered touches of those I love and who love me. Alone with myself and with God.

Eternity is a mist crawling from the creek in that bottom.

Roy and Effie and Oda Lee are across the road now, wrapped in north Louisiana red clay, their names like fingers feeling the mist.

God's peace,

David W. Perkins+, Interim Rector