

Rachel Lynne Stark ~ Requiescat in Pace

Isaiah 43:1-7

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 10:1-15

Sometimes we don't know how good we have it. The fall of 2021 didn't seem like halcyon days. We were coping with a pandemic that wouldn't let go, measures that seemed overwrought, struggling to get back to normal. Rach was always in her element at REV, no matter what was going on. She was keenly aware of the mission of the school and what her role was in pursuit of that mission. The students' faces, the daily heartbeat of life on the office side, the team atmosphere – Rach was the quintessential admin lady, cheerfully employing her natural good humor and professional expertise for the benefit of the youngsters at Redlands East Valley. Rach saw the kids as they were. She understood them, loved them, served them. Outgoing, gregarious and maternal – the kids knew Rach as well. When you come across someone who knows how to give without looking for the gesture to be reciprocated, you take notice, you remember. When it happens over and over then your heart is drawn to that person.

April of this year brought a dark storm cloud. Blastoma; how can this be? What does this mean? What are we going to do? Unexpected questions poured out with no happy answers. Every single one of us has been taught, in one way or another, about fortitude. Fortitude is defined as exhibiting courage in the face of pain or adversity. It became clear that this malady that Rach suffered would end in death. A fog envelops the heart and mind as it first grasps a prognosis as grim as this. A beautiful confluence of attributes animated Rach's personality. She was both a care-giving woman and feisty, opinionated, tough. She was compassionate to those who needed her help and she possessed a stiff backbone, disinterested in making excuses for herself or others. In her heart, she knew that she was helpless. How does one show fortitude when one is incapable of action?

I don't want to die. So said Rachel Lynne to her sister. God has blessed us with a strong will to live. Love is in, with, and under that desire. We cultivate love, each of us, in our lives. Love is cultivated around us, by others, who extend to us the sweetness of their company, who sacrifice for us, who cry when we cry, who rejoice when we rejoice. Rach loved and was loved in return. Love has an origin, beyond us. Life has an origin. Sacrifice and fortitude and an unwavering defense of what is good – those critical realities all have an origin, a divine origin. In love, God extended Himself. Let us make man in our image. God shares His life, shares His holiness. Adam and Eve loved God above all things and loved their neighbor (each other) as themselves. And sin fractured what God had created holy. Death was the repercussion.

I'm not sure what it was like for Ed to sit there and hear the doctor pronounce the severity of Rach's diagnosis. I expect his heart sank. I suspect that his masculine nature wanted to spring into action, wanted to intervene, wanted to defend his bride. I suspect that a sense of powerlessness in the face of this menace gnawed at him. God knows. God is invested in Rach, invested in you. What He created He defends. Life is intrinsic to the Almighty and death is the enemy. Love intervenes. Love takes action. Love wins the day. In humility, the omnipotent Creator, the One who hung the planets, took up the form of a servant. God became man. Born not in some palatial sanctuary, Jesus was born in a barnyard and laid in a trough used to feed

barnyard animals. Love puts on our humanity. He came not to *observe* our circumstance; He came to be immersed in it. He came to bear our sin (all sin) and pay the price with His blood. Jesus' whole life was a defense of what He loves. Rach; every aspect of His life was for her.

God's solution for what ails us is not a temporary fix, not a half-measure, duct tape kind of approach to our predicament. Death; God came to confront death; all death. As a man, yet completely God, Jesus allowed death to hunt Him, but the converse is the deeper truth. He is enacting His eternal design. He said: "No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have the authority to lay it down and I have the authority to take it up again" (John 10:18). Death knows only one antecedent: Sin. What a wretched thing sin is! Vulgar and profane, hatred and violence and deceit and greed and lust and pride and selfishness – its manifestations are legion. Sin brings death and the Lord Christ came to conquer both. The sacrifice is enormous. Scripture puts it plainly. God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us. All that which is riddled with death was heaped on a solitary individual as He hung from a cross. God punished sin in Christ and Jesus took it, died bearing it. It is finished. Love gave His life unreservedly for Rach when the Son of God died.

There, in the dead body of Jesus, beneath our sin, was a holiness so radical that death could not hold Him. He is risen, just as He said. Death could not hold Him! O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? Easter is a victory of love and life. Heaven is our home. Jesus said: "I go to prepare a place for you." "Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also" (John 14:1-3). On July 5th, the Lord came to take Rach to Himself. Her place was prepared by His death and resurrection. Rach is alive in every sense of the word. Her place is in heaven. Death couldn't hold the crucified King. Death cannot hold a daughter of the resurrection, a daughter of the King.

When you come across someone who knows how to give without looking for the gesture to be reciprocated, you take notice, you remember. When it happens over and over then your heart is drawn to that person. That's one way to describe God's grace and the faith that is born from His love. Rach gave; brownies to the tennis team, encouragement from the sidelines, long hours at the chemo lab as Matthew received his treatments, and in countless other ways, Rach gave. She loved because she first received love from the One who gives without measure. Her love sprang into action on behalf of those whom she was compelled to defend, compelled to serve. It was the family that showed her fortitude. In her hour of need, the love that she cultivated by being a servant was showered upon her as she faced death. It was an epiphany in that home, the Stark home. It was an epiphany of the fidelity which finds its beginning and its end in Christ. He stood in that home, with that family, in the face of death.

From April 5th, when Rach was diagnosed, until July 5th when she slipped the bonds of this earth, she saw fortitude, love, and grace as her family rallied to her, giving her all that they had. What does Rach see now? She sees love's origin – the One who created her in His image. What does she see now? She sees the One who animates love in this domain, the One who hung on the cross for humanity's sin, giving His life as a sacrifice that we might not die but live. What does

Rach see now? She sees the Lord who is fortitude incarnate, who would let nothing stop Him from claiming her as His own, the One who redeemed her by His blood, who washed her in His holiness, who Shepherded her through the valley of the shadow of death and who prepared a place for her in His Father's house. When you come across someone who knows how to give without looking for the gesture to be reciprocated, you take notice, you remember. When it happens over and over then your heart is drawn to that person. For a great many of you, Rachel Stark was that person. Rach knows who it is that gave Himself to her. She lives in His heaven. Now she fully knows how good she has it.