



# The Pilgrim

*“All the trumpets sounded for him on the other side”*

—PILGRIM’S PROGRESS

O. P. Kretzmann

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*Minor Anniversary*

May, 1969

Forty-eight years ago last Christmas I, a callow youth from the ghetto of New York, went to Perry County, Missouri, to spend Christmas with Grandpa Hueschen, pastor of a parish twenty miles in each direction from the white church on the hill where he had served for forty years. Grandpa had not really invited me, but Perry County was nearer the Seminary than New York by 1100 miles and my total cash was what was left over from Dad’s salary of \$125.00 a month (plus heat, light, one dollar for baptisms, two dollars for weddings, and for funerals whatever the survivors would shell out, hand-me-down clothes for a burgeoning number of kids, and an occasional nickel or dime from a penitent Vorsteher.) I had to go to Perry County or celebrate Christmas on South Jefferson Avenue in St. Louis. I always knew that the singing angels would never get that far.

So there I was — a hick from New York and my first glimpse of what we call a “rural congregation.” I shall never forget it — the short dark days of a Missouri winter — Grandpa putting on his boots to visit Deacon Schweinestall (who only had a cold but was trying to cure it with Missouri corn liquor which in turn was hard on his ulcers) — Grandpa at the desk near the stove writing his sermon for Christmas Eve — the annual meeting of the congregation on New Year’s afternoon (a preview of Armageddon) — the slow cadence of life and death — “Grossmutter Himmelhoch kann nicht mehr lange leben — hoffenlich gibt’s nicht Schnee.”

From those days I have retained my respect and affection for the brother who has what we call a “rural congregation.” The difference is not nearly so great now and there are cars and paved roads and — God help us — radio and television. Even today, however, I envy the brother whose white church is on a hill, whose parking lot is loose gravel, and whose Christmas Eve services are guarded by a white star whose course is no longer wandering over the grey hills of Bethlehem.

What interests me today, after all these years, so long ago and far away,

## THE CRESSET

was that Grandpa seemed to be uniquely aware of this nearness to ultimate things and final realities. When he came out of the sacristy on Christmas Eve (in a worn black robe and spotless Baeffchen) he would cast a special kindly look at the deacons who sat solemnly beside buckets of water militantly ready to douse the first candle that showed signs of collapsing or expiring. These — from the starry eyed kids to the Kirchendiener who was pumping the organ — were his people, his mysterious souls clothed in glory and honor, come to bend a willing knee to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords who had known the smell of the stable and the lowing of oxen calling for warmth from the cold of the night.

Perhaps I shall return there again — Grandpa at baptisms holding his new lamb with a steady hand — Grandpa in confirmation classes trying hard to translate the German theologians into acceptable English — Grandpa being thoroughly Lutheran, in act and thought, from his beautiful ecumenicity (he went to see Mike, the Irish drunk in the village, regularly for almost a year) to his great compassion for all the strange ways the hearts of men go crying down. Just now, I confess, all these memories are brought to life by an article in the *Lutheran Standard* that congregations and pastors like Grandpa are not yet gone: “The ALC has a particular stake in these areas. One district, S. W. Minnesota, reported in 1966 that it had 176 churches in open country or in towns under 500. It had an additional 77 churches in towns of 500-2499 population, 33 in the 2500-10,000 bracket, and only 10 churches in cities of 10,000 and over. The urban Illinois District reported 70 congregations in open country or in towns under 500; 37 in towns 500-2499, 32 in towns 2500-10,000, and 111 in cities of 10,000 or more (53 of these in cities 100,000 or more population.”

So — a deep affectionate bow and a warm Ave to the brother whose church is on a high hill among the fields of corn and wheat growing to the glory of God. A sympathetic salute to the brother in an urban setting — with two secretaries, a social worker, and a youth ministry — a brother who deserves our desperate prayers — a brother who has become an executive (an administrator like me). But let there be now an equally warm Ave to Grandpa Hueschen’s successors whose quiet understanding work will be known — gloriously known — in the final harvest. They are — bless them — closer to the great Amen to the anguished riddle of life. ✠