

Keepers of the Springs by Peter Marshall

Peter Marshall was an amazing Presbyterian minister who was the U.S. Senate Chaplain from 1946-48 during the presidency of Harry Truman, and died in 1949. He was born in Scotland and was known for his passionate preaching and deep conviction. All of his sermons were written out so that we have the original texts he created and can appreciate and once again be stirred by his intense love of God. This sermon was preached in the late 1930's and it is timeless.

Once upon a time, a certain town grew up at the foot of a mountain range. It was sheltered in the lee of the protecting heights, so that the wind that shuddered at the doors and flung handfuls of sleet against the window panes was a wind whose fury was spent.

High up in the hills, a strange and quiet forest dweller took it upon himself to be the Keeper of the Springs. He patrolled the hills and wherever he found a spring, he cleaned its brown pool of silt and fallen leaves, of mud and mold and took away from the spring all foreign matter, so that the water which bubbled up through the sand ran down clean and cold and pure. It leaped sparkling over rocks and dropped joyously in crystal cascades until, swollen by other streams, it became a river of life to the busy town. Millwheels were whirled by its rush. Gardens were refreshed by its waters. Fountains threw it like diamonds into the air. Swans sailed on its limpid surface, and children laughed as they played on its banks in the sunshine.

But the City Council was a group of hard-headed, hard-boiled businessmen. They scanned the civic budget and found in it the salary of a Keeper of the Springs. Said the Keeper of the Purse: "Why should we pay this romance ranger? We never see him; he is not necessary to our town's work life. If we build a reservoir just above the town, we can dispense with his services and save his salary." Therefore, the City Council voted to dispense with the unnecessary cost of a Keeper of the Springs, and to build a cement reservoir.

So, the Keeper of the Springs no longer visited the brown pools but watched from the heights while they built the reservoir. When it was finished, it soon filled up with water, to be sure, but the water did not seem to be the same. It did not seem to be as clean, and a green scum soon befouled its stagnant surface. There were constant troubles with the delicate machinery of the mills, for it was often clogged with slime, and the swans found another home above the town. At last, an epidemic raged, and the clammy, yellow fingers of sickness reached into every home in every street and lane.

The City Council met again. Sorrowfully, it faced the city's plight, and frankly it acknowledged the mistake of the dismissal of the Keeper of the Springs. They sought him out of his hermit hut high in the hills, and begged him to return to his former joyous labor. Gladly he agreed, and began once more to make his rounds. It was not long until pure water came lilted down under tunnels of ferns and mosses and to sparkle in the cleansed reservoir. Millwheels turned again as of old. Stenches disappeared. Sickness waned and convalescent children playing in the sun laughed again because the swans had come back.

Do not think me fanciful, too imaginative or too extravagant in my language when I say that I think of women, and particularly of our mothers, as Keepers of the Springs. The phrase, while poetic, is true and descriptive. We feel its warmth...its softening influence...and however forgetful we have been...however much we have taken for granted life's precious gifts, we are conscious of wistful memories that surge out of the past—the sweet, tender, poignant fragrances of love. Nothing that has been said, nothing that could be said, or that ever will be said, would be eloquent enough, expressive enough, or adequate to make articulate that peculiar emotion we feel to our mothers. So, I shall make my tribute a plea for Keepers of the Springs, who will be faithful to their tasks.

There never has been a time when there was a greater need for Keepers of the Springs, or when there were more polluted springs to be cleansed. If the home fails, the country is doomed. The breakdown of homelife and influence will mark the breakdown of the nation. If the Keepers of the Springs desert their posts or are unfaithful to their responsibilities, the future outlook of this country is black, indeed. This generation needs Keepers of the Springs who will be courageous enough to cleanse the springs that have been polluted. It is not an easy task—nor is it a popular one, but it must be done for the sake of the children, and the young women of today must do it.

The emancipation of womanhood began with Christianity, and it ends with Christianity. It had its beginning one night nineteen hundred years ago when there came to a woman named Mary a vision and a message from heaven. She saw the rifted clouds of glory and the hidden battlements of heaven. She heard an angelic annunciation of the almost incredible news that she, of all the women on earth...of all the Marys in history...was to be the only one who should ever wear entwined the red rose of maternity and the white rose of virginity. It was told her—and all Keepers of the Springs know how such messages come—that she should be the mother of the Savior of the world.

It was nineteen hundred years ago “when Jesus Himself a baby deigned to be and bathed in baby tears His deity” ...and on that night, when that tiny Child lay in the straw of Bethlehem, began the emancipation of womanhood.

When He grew up and began to teach the way of life, He ushered woman into a new place in human relations. He accorded her a new dignity and crowned her with a new glory, so that wherever the Christian evangel has gone for nineteen centuries, the daughters of Mary have been respected, revered, remembered, and loved, for men have recognized that womanhood is a sacred and a noble thing, that women are of finer clay...are more in touch with the angels of God and have the noblest function that life affords. Wherever Christianity has spread, for nineteen hundred years men have bowed and adored.

It remained for the twentieth century, in the name of progress, in the name of tolerance, in the name of broadmindedness, in the name of freedom, to pull her down from her throne and try to make her like a man.

She wanted equality. For nineteen hundred years she had not been equal—she had been superior. But now, they said, she wanted equality, and in order to obtain it, she had to step down. And so it is, that in the name of broadminded tolerance, a man’s vices have now become a woman’s.

Twentieth-century tolerance has won for woman the right to become intoxicated, the right to have an alcoholic breath, the right to smoke, to work like a man to act like a man—for is she not man’s equal? Today they call it “progress”...but tomorrow, oh, you Keepers of the Springs, they must be made to see that it is not progress.

No nation has ever made any progress in a downward direction. No people ever became great by lowering their standards. No people ever became good by adopting a looser morality. It is not progress when the moral tone is lower than it was. It is not progress when purity is not as sweet. It is not progress when womanhood has lost its fragrance. Whatever else it is, it is not progress

We need Keepers of the Springs who will realize that what is socially correct may not be morally right. Our country needs today women who will lead us back to an old-fashioned morality, to an old fashioned decency, to an old fashioned purity and sweetness for the sake of the next generation, if for no other reason.

The challenge of the twentieth-century motherhood is as old as motherhood itself. Although the average American mother has advantages that pioneer women never knew—material advantages: education, culture,

advances made by science and medicine; although the modern mother knows a great deal more about sterilization, diets, health, calories, germs, drugs, medicines and vitamins, than her mother did, there is one subject about which she does not know as much—and that is God.

The modern challenge to motherhood is the eternal challenge—that of being a godly woman. The very phrase sounds strange in our ears. We never hear it now. We hear about every other kind of women—beautiful women, smart women, sophisticated women, career woman, talented women, divorced women, but so seldom do we hear of a godly woman—or of a godly man either, for that matter.

I believe women come nearer fulfilling their God-given function in the home than anywhere else. It is a much nobler thing to be a good wife than to be Miss America. It is a greater achievement to establish a Christian home than it is to produce a second-rate novel filled with filth. It is a far, far better thing in the realm of morals to be old-fashioned than to be ultramodern. The world has enough women who know how to hold their cocktails, who have lost all their illusions and their faith. The world has enough women who know how to be smart. It needs women who are willing to be simple. The world has enough women who know how to be brilliant. It needs some who will be brave. The world has enough women who are popular. It needs more who are pure. We need woman, and men, too, who would rather be morally right than socially correct.

Let us not fool ourselves—without Christianity, without Christian education, without the principles of Christ inculcated into young life, we are simply rearing pagans. Physically, they will be perfect. Intellectually, they will be brilliant. But spiritually, they will be pagan. Let us not fool ourselves. The school is making no attempt to teach the principles of Christ. The Church alone cannot do it. They can never be taught to a child unless the mother herself knows them and practices them every day.

If you have no prayer life yourself, it is rather a useless gesture to make your child say his prayers every night. If you never enter a church it is rather futile to send your child to Sunday school. If you make a practice of telling social lies, it will be difficult to teach your child to be truthful. If you say cutting things about your neighbors and about fellow members in the church, it will be hard for your child to learn the meaning of kindness.

The twentieth-century challenge to motherhood—when it is all boiled down—is that mothers will have an experience of God...a reality which they can pass on to their children. For the newest of the sciences is beginning to realize, after a study of the teachings of Christ from the standpoint of psychology, that only as human beings discover and follow these inexorable spiritual laws will they find the happiness and contentment which we all seek.

A minister tells of going to a hospital to visit a mother whose first child had been born. She was a distinctly modern girl. Her home was about average for young married people. "When I came into the room she was propped up in bed writing. 'Come in,' she said, smiling. 'I'm in the midst of housecleaning, and I want your help.' I had never heard of a woman housecleaning while in a hospital bed. Her smile was contagious—she seemed to have found a new and jolly idea. "'I've had a wonderful chance to think here,' she began, 'and it may help me to get things straightened out in my mind if I can talk to you.' She put down her pencil and pad, and folded her hands. Then she took a long breath and started: 'Ever since I was a little girl, I hated any sort of restraint. I always wanted to be free. When I finished high school, I took a business course and got a job—not because I needed the money—but because I wanted to be on my own. Before Joe and I were married, we used to say that we would not be slaves to each other. And after we married, our apartment became headquarters for a crowd just like us. We weren't really bad—but we did just what we pleased.' She stopped for a minute and smiled ruefully. 'God didn't mean much to us—we ignored Him. None of us wanted children—or we thought we didn't. And when I knew I was going to have a baby, I was afraid.' She stopped again and looked puzzled. 'Isn't it funny, the things you used to think? She had almost forgotten I was there—she was

speaking to the old girl she had been before her great adventure. Then remembering me suddenly—she went on: ‘Where was I? Oh, yes, well, things are different now. I’m not free anymore and I don’t want to be. And the first thing I must do is to clean house.’ Here she picked up the sheet of paper lying on the counterpane. ‘That’s my housecleaning list. You see, when I take Betty home from the hospital with me—our apartment will be her home—not just mine and Joe’s. And it isn’t fit for her now. Certain things will have to go—for Betty’s sake. And I’ve got to houseclean my heart and mind. I’m not just myself—I’m Betty’s mother. And that means I need God. I can’t do my job without Him. Won’t you pray for Betty and me and Joe, and for our new home?’ And I saw in her all the mothers of today—mothers in tiny apartments and on lonely farms...Mothers in great houses and in suburban cottages, who are meeting the age-old challenge—‘that of bringing up their children to the love and knowledge of God.’ And I seemed to see our Savior—with His arms full of children of far-away Judea—saying to that mother and to all mothers—the old invitation so much needed in these times: ‘Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of God.’”

I believe that this generation of young people has courage enough to face the challenging future. I believe that their idealism is not dead. I believe that they have the same bravery and the same devotion to the things worthwhile that their grandmothers had. I have every confidence that they are anxious to preserve the best of our heritage, and God knows if we lose it here in this country, it is forever gone. I believe that the women of today will not be unmindful of their responsibilities; that is why I have dared to speak so honestly.

Keepers of the Springs, we salute you!

Our Father, remove from us the sophistication of our age and the skepticism that has come, like frost, to blight our faith and to make it weak. We pray for a return of that simple faith, that old fashioned trust in God, that made strong and great the homes of our ancestors who built this good land and who in building left us our heritage. In the strong name of Jesus, our Lord, we make this prayer, Amen.