

October 23, 1966, Durham, NC

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ADVICE FROM A CATERPILAR

Is it true that very few want advice? At least it's true that very few like it.

When you say to a friend, "Sit down, old fellow, and let me give you a bit of advice," he's on guard at once, and already not nearly so friendly. And by the time you've finished saying things like, "for your own good, you shouldn't tell so many lies, you know," – or "my dear, try not to be such a terrible bore" – or – "don't you know, old friend, sins like yours are a dangerous pastime" – or – "after living with you 20 years, honey, I think you'll be interested to hear this little list I've drawn up of your 100 worst faults" – as I was saying, by the time you've finished giving such kindly advice, so well-intentioned on your part, you are going to be calling after your hurriedly departing friend or relative,

Come back! I've something (else) important to say!" At least, that's what happened to the caterpillar when he tried to give Alice in Wonderland a bit of advice. She started to leave – at once.

For people in general don't like advice, especially when they need it, and especially on Sunday when it comes from a caterpillar, especially a caterpillar who is preaching from the not very impressive height of his mushroom pulpit and thinks everybody ought to listen to him just because he's there.

"Advice from a Caterpillar" may not be a good title for a sermon – but many people, including Lewis Carroll, think it an accurate definition of one! Q: "What is a sermon?" A: "Advice from a caterpillar."

Alice, like most people, thought advice was bad enough, but advice from a caterpillar was worse. Though this insect preacher was perched high on his toad-stool pulpit, making her feel even tinier and a lot worse than better, and even though he took himself very seriously, and was very self-righteous and short-tempered with everybody's faults, especially hers, and though he looked all-wise, tiny Alice thought he wasn't really very wise about much. He wasn't exactly an authority on politics, or economics or the social revolution. In fact, just how much did he know about morals and religion? So who wants to listen to a sermon when it is only "advice from a caterpillar?" After all, they are only three inches high, which means they don't stand very

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tall in the world, do they? Besides they appear spineless, and in a pinch, so to say, squash easily.
In short, there's something queasy about a caterpillar – so why listen to one preach? Especially
when they keep getting after you

Well, the reason Alice kept listening to him in spite of his shortcomings was, "...she had
nothing else to do, and perhaps after all it might tell her something worth hearing."

Nowadays, people do not come to church because they have "nothing else to do." There
is TV, for example, even as bad as that may be. No, we do not listen to sermons anymore
because there is nothing else to do on Sunday mornings. And that's just as well, I think, don't
you? The reason we still occasionally listen to sermons is that "perhaps after all it might tell (us)
something worth hearing" – even this caterpillar. And anyway, we realize we are so far down,
"low down," "underground (you might say) and actually do need help.

So, with a certain amount of skepticism, we stay, with the hope the church will say
something worth hearing that will get us back up where we ought to be.

And in church, it isn't the advice we listen to. It isn't the advice that we really need.

Alice had listened to advice all her life but it didn't keep her from falling down that
rabbit-hole into rather original sin. Before she knew it, she was a very fallen girl. Advice hadn't
helped her a bit. She had fallen, you remember, so gradually, so gracefully, so pleasantly even,
she could hardly believe she had hit bottom until she was there. That's New Testament. I think.
No one falls all at once. It's after a lovely, leisurely, even luxurious decline. Going down –
morally and otherwise – is often such fun, a fun-fall until it's too late – and "ker-plunk." One is
trapped on the bottom, and not a little afraid.

One reason advice is so little help in preventing a fall is that we hear it the way we want to. For
example, did not Alice's mother advise her, "If you drink poison, dear, you will die"? I expect
so. But the way Alice heard it was like this: "...if you drink much from a bottle marked
'poison,' it is almost certain to disagree with you, sooner or later." No wonder advice didn't help
her; she remembered it all wrong. In the same way, did someone once say to us, "lying and
stealing and adulterating are deadly," and did we hear it as: "if you indulge in it much, it is
almost certain to disagree with you, sooner or later."?

Advice is also ineffectual for us, because not only do we hear it wrong to suit us, or turn
it around to please us, or temper it to our taste – so that we fall headlong down the first rabbit-
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hold that comes along, following after some foolish bunny – but also, like Alice, we don't take
advice well because we don't think the people who give it take it themselves.

They tell us to be like Isaac Watts' "Busy Bees" – to improve ourselves by virtuous life –
while they are nothing but lazy, voracious, murderous "crocodiles" getting their unfair share
preying on the unsuspecting while they pretend to be praying for them. Alice also finds old
"Father Williams" unctuous and shallow moral advice in the poem hard to take when he himself
is foolish, mercenary, garrulous and insouciant.

Advice, therefore, has trouble, all the way around. Who is qualified to give it? And once
given, who really hears it? Or who doesn't twist it? Or forget it? Poor, poor advice.

As a matter of fact, like Alice, most of us have had our share of it – and for one reason or
another can't make any profitable use out of any more of it. Also, like Alice again, most of us
are already in such trouble, we've fallen so far and so flat, our surroundings seem so suddenly so
peculiar, and are feeling so strange, and so unlike what we think of as our "old selves" we are so
far underground – that we need help that's a lot more radical, more heroic than mere advice.
When you're not certain where you are, when you are not certain where you are going, when
you're not even certain who you are (and poor little Alice was certainly not certain of any of
these certainties) – then whatever it is you need to straighten you out, and straighten you up, and
start you all over again, it's not a lecture.

After her fall, little Alice was really mixed up. Everything had changed, including her
size, several times. She had been through so much she wasn't the same person. She wondered if
she had the same name. Therefore when that preaching caterpillar was cross with her, and was
contemptuous of her, looking down on her, and kept asking her who she was and to explain
herself, poor, frightened, confused Alice kept telling him, "I can't explain myself, I'm afraid, Sir,
because I'm not myself, you see." "I don't see," said the caterpillar, and he really couldn't see
why she couldn't take his simple advice and be happy again.

But what she needed was not any more advice from him. What she needed was a
miracle, nothing short of a miracle; to get her out of the mess she had fallen in and get her back
to herself again. She needed to be as she was before the fall – and no amount of advice, however
good, could accomplish that.

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Now that old preaching caterpillar had it in his power to point her the miracle. And he finally did. He finally left off giving advice and told her where the miracle lay. But he did it sort of under his breath and off-handedly, as though he hardly believed in miracles himself, as though he had no intention of trying it himself, but if Alice needed a miracle to save her, well, go ahead, though he much preferred simple advice like, “don’t lose your temper, love your neighbor, don’t panic, use your head, etc. etc. etc.

Now, Jesus of Nazareth was not such a preaching caterpillar. He never once mounted his pulpit and talked down to fallen sinners, and in a cross, critical, _____ way said, “Sit down! Listen to me. Heathen, take my advice!” No, to people who felt underground, who hardly knew who they were, they had lost so much meaning, to people who simply could not explain themselves out of their predicament, he did not say, “I am come that ye might have the following advice.” No, he knew they had advice enough: from the philosophers, and the prophets, and from the Pharisees too. So what he said to them was: “I am come that you might have Life.” (Spelled with a capitol “L”). What he said was, “He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live, and he that lived and believeth in me shall never die.”

What he offered them was not advice – but a miracle. And not off-handedly, as though he hardly believes it himself. No. For him, the miracle was the central thing. It’s perfectly true that God will never do for us what we can do for ourselves. But, it’s also true, that what we certainly cannot do for ourselves, namely love ourselves, God certainly will do for us – if we let him.

If I have trouble explaining the miracle of suddenly coming back to life after a long fall, of waking up as myself again after a bad dream, or getting myself in proper size once more, of knowing who I am and where I belong and what I am supposed to do – why shouldn’t I have difficulty explain it: it is a miracle, nothing less.

The truth is – I’ll never find myself listening to lectures; only by the grace of God.

And this is a very practical miracle.

For example, your folks will spend a good deal of time giving you advice, and they should. But they know, and I know, and its time you should know that all the advice in the work is not going to make you good –

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That if you do become a wise, good man someday, it's going to be a miracle – you're having a sense of who you are and what you are supposed to do – that's really up to God – and you – and if after many falls – you finally end up being something in the world, doing something really worthwhile – it is nothing short of a miracle. It is the grace of God. So after doing their best by you through the years – if they are good Christians – they will then trust you to the miracle of God – and not be afraid.

Let us pray

And now unto him who (alone) is able to keep us from falling, unto the only wise God, our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, now and always.