

Saint Jim

By Mark Edgemon

Marionville, Missouri 1955

I will never forget the day that God showed up in our town. It's been 5 years since he's been gone and I surely miss him. He did what no one else could do; he brought us all together.

It's a hard life here in Missouri. Dirt farming is about all a body can do to scratch out a living. Every since my husband died, I've been keeping house for Mr. Sam Johnson, doing the cooking and cleaning for him. Living in the servant's quarters and taking my meals on the back porch is not what you call quality living, but it's a living.

Most of the Negro population in our town was just dragging through life, trying to get by the best they knew how. Looking in the eyes of any black person, one could see their sadness and a depression that ran straight through to their soul. The black folks had to address white folk by saying Mr. or Miss that is if they weren't calling us by some racial slur.

But things began to change the day he got off the bus in town. Mr. Johnson had sent me to the store to buy groceries for his supper. As I was putting the bags of groceries into my pull cart outside, I saw a white stranger get off the bus and look around at the business going on around him. I felt there was something special about him that I couldn't quite explain.

Our minister had died suddenly one day from drinking from a polluted well. He was the only Negro pastor in our town and although we were grieved that he had died, we were also fearful of losing our church. It was the only Negro church within 25 miles. The closest one was in Springfield about 45 minutes North East. Most of us walked to church and had no way to get to Springfield.

After the funeral on a Saturday afternoon, we buried our pastor who had no family other than his congregation and talked about what we were going to do the next day on Sunday. We all agreed we should meet at least one more time and so we prayed and left as it was beginning to rain.

The next morning, I had showed up about 15 minutes late, because the streets were muddy and hard to walk on. When I walked through the door of the church and into the foyer, I heard singing like I ain't never heard before. As I walked down the aisle from the back of the church, I saw the black folks standing with their hands raised singing with all their might. Every seat was filled all the way down the aisle until I got toward the front, where there was a space free on the second pew. When I sat down and looked up, I was surprised and amazed at what I saw. The white man I saw get off the bus in town, was leading our congregation in song.

When the congregation had finished singing, the man lowered his hands and the congregation sat down. He just stood there smiling at us, not saying anything. When he finally spoke, everyone hushed and the congregation was silent.

He spoke of the truth that everything happens for a reason and if everything was always fine, no one would ever pray and seek the Lord. He said the unknown was to test our faith in order to help us get stronger in our trust in God and in ourselves.

While I listened to him, I felt something...something spiritual, something that I couldn't explain. It was like God was talking to us through this man in a powerful way, even though you could tell he was gentle in nature and soft spoken with a tenderhearted demeanor.

After the service, everyone went up front to shake his hand and get to know him. He said his name was Jim. He didn't give a last name.

He didn't seem like any white man I had ever met. There was a light in his eyes that could pierce through to your soul when he looked at you straight on. He seemed to care about all of God's folks, no matter what color of their skin. It had been almost a century since the civil war and the freeing of the slaves, but most white folk still looked at us like some sort of non-person. But this was not so with Jim. There was love in his eyes and you felt it. I needed it cause I was weak of spirit from all the difficulties I had endured since my dear husband went on to be with the Lord.

He made himself a home in the tool shack out behind the church. He didn't stay home much for he was always walkin' the countryside tryin' to get folks to come to church. He had all the Negroes in the area attending regularly. By word of mouth, they flocked to hear this new man from God minister to their hurt and beaten down souls. But the whites were prejudice against blacks and wouldn't be caught dead in a Negro church. We worshiped the same God, but we never thought of Him as white or black, just God Almighty!

One by one, the white folks slammed the door in Pastor Jim's face, calling him a niger lover and white trash and a traitor to his race, as he would walk away and down the road, heading toward the next stop. Nothing seemed to get to him. The light never left his eyes and his soft nature seemed impossible to contain the joy that radiated through him.

He happened upon a rancher who was breaking in a new mule that had throwed him twice in his attempt to tame the animal. When Pastor Jim walked up, the rancher was ready to hit the mule with a large piece of lumber, when Jim stepped in and interceded for the poor animal. The rancher had been yelling and cursing and drinkin' a little and so he was in no mood to listen to this preacher tryin' to get him to church.

And then, Pastor Jim said something to the rancher that completely surprised him. Jim told him that he would try to tame the animal for him and if he did, would the rancher come to service for a month of Sundays. The rancher thought this to be hilarious and an opportunity to have some fun at the reverend's expense. The rancher boasted that he would come to Sunday service in his Negro church for six months, if he could tame the high-spirited mule. But if the preacher couldn't break the mule, he had to leave their town and never come back.

The preacher agreed and mounted the animal without a moment's hesitation. Well, the rancher was over heard saying that it wasn't the prettiest ride he had ever seen, but the mule never

threw him. It was as if God Himself was holding on to him, until the mule got tired. After the ride, the mule and the reverend seemed to have an understanding, which further baffled the rancher who was watching this strange encounter.

After he dismounted the mule, the rancher shook his hand and promised to be at church on Sunday. The rancher was now the second white person in the congregation. He sat on the pew, with his arms folded like he had been roped and hog tied by the reverend and made to sit there, whether he wanted to be there or not.

In the next service, Jim spoke on creativity and how we were God's creation and His workmanship and like all great works, we were set free with a life of our own. But unlike works of clay that was without life, we could commune with our Creator, cause we had a part of Him in us.

Most of the folk who listened had never thought according to that line of thinking before and were silent, while they soaked it in.

After the service, all the black folks lined up and shook the hand of the rancher, which surprised him that he was so warmly received.

The next day, the preacher headed out toward farmer Ross's place, which was quite a distance to walk, about 5 miles or so. The farmer had heard about the deal the preacher had made with the rancher and had one of his own he was going to put to him.

Before pastor Jim had said anything, the farmer said, "I heard about the deal you made with the rancher and so I have one of my own."

Times are tough and it's hard to find buyers for our crops. I have 47 baskets of apples that I need to sell fast. If you will find a buyer at \$2 a basket, I will go to your Negro church for as long as you want me. Farmer Ross smiled, cause he knew the preacher probably didn't know anyone who would be in a market for that quantity of fresh orchid apples and certainly believed that the poor reverend, who lived in a tool shack in back of the church, wouldn't have that kind of money either.

Jim reached into his pocket and pulled out some bills that were waded up and started counting out \$94 dollars, which surprised farmer Ross. Since Pastor Jim didn't have a way to convey the apples, the farmer loaded the baskets onto his old rusted out truck and delivered them to the pastor's shack. While on the way, Jim spoke to him about the more we showed God appreciation for what we have the more we would receive from Him. When they got to the shack and unloaded the baskets of apples, Jim shook his hand and told him he will be looking forward to seeing him in church. Farmer Ross didn't want to go to church, but the money he got for his apple crop was a Godsend and he wasn't going to be known as a man who didn't keep his word.

As Jim went visiting, he would take a couple of baskets of apples and pass them out as gifts to the people he met. He gave a lot of them to hungry children, who would come up to him in town or on the farms that he had visited.

Over the next few months, slowly but surely, the white folk began to come to our Negro church. We knew something was happening here in the town of Marionville, Missouri. Others in our town knew this to and wasn't all too happy about it.

There were folks in our town whose parents had lynched black folks some time earlier in our town's history and come hell or high water, they were not going to let their town be known as a place where the negroes didn't know their place.

On one Saturday night, a few of these folk paid a visit to the reverend dressed in white hoods and robes. They took him out and began to beat him cruelly without any resistance from the reverend. These men were known to beat people to death and several murders were attributed to their group of hating racist. But this time was different.

As they hit this man of God, he just stood there and took every punch without flinching. This made the men who were beating him feel bad. With each blow to the man of God, they felt an even greater wounding to their own spirits until...they just stopped. They looked at this man that they had wounded and began to grieve inside for what they had done.

One of the men could be heard crying bitterly for what he had done. The reverend walked over to him, putting his arm around him and told him it was alright. The racist man took off his hood and hugged Jim's neck. The others just left with their heads bowed, ashamed for what they had done.

The next service, the man who had removed his hood went down front and fell at the alter and wept bitterly. The man stood up after having repented and told the congregation what he had done and begged Jim's forgiveness. Jim smiled with the light we had come to know in his eyes as he looked at the man and said, "Forget it."

Six months later, we had an equal number of whites and blacks in our service, but they were divided with blacks on the left and whites on the right. This continued until the tornado hit one Sunday morning, destroying half of the homes and businesses in Marionville, while we huddled close together inside the church, praying for God to protect us. He did.

When it was over, the congregation walked outside to see the damage. There was a lot of it, but for the first time, the town was united. We worked side by side, folks of both colors working together to rebuild each other's homes, restore water and clearing away the debris. Weeks later, most of the major problems were resolved, faster than anyone could imagine. For the first time, whites looked the blacks in the eyes and treated them with respect. I had never seen that before.

When we went to service the next Sunday, he was gone. In his place, was a black minister from Springfield who told the congregation that Jim had paid him a year's salary in advance to take over ministering to the congregation of Marionville. When we asked him would Jim be coming back, he said he didn't know, just that he said he had other work to do and that he knew this congregation was in good hands. I thought he must have meant this new preacher, but later on, I knew he meant God.

Years later, I read of race riots in Mississippi and saw a picture in the newspaper of an angry mob trying to lynch a black teacher, who was falsely accused of speaking improper things to one of his female students. The photo with the story was blurry and hard to make out, but I believe I saw Jim standing between the mob and the teacher. If it was him, it would be like him to put himself in the middle of an injustice.

I continued to see Jim's face in the paper or on the television news, putting himself in harm's way to help heal racial divisions.

In 1963, I watched Martin Luther King lead a massive march on Washington D. C. and give a speech afterwards. Right behind Reverend King and to the left was Jim standing behind him, giving support to his cause. When Dr. King was shot in 1968, while standing on his hotel balcony in Memphis, Tennessee, I cried. When they put him into the ambulance, I thought I saw Jim with his hand on Dr. King's shoulder.

Ever so often, Jim's face would pop up in the news, which made me glad to see him.

In August of 2005, I celebrated my 90th birthday, with friends and family. The television was on and the station's programs were interrupted by news of Hurricane Katrina hitting the coast of Gulf States. The residents were being evacuated from their homes as the levees failed and flooding had begun.

An elderly black man was trapped on his rooftop with waters rising fast. A motorboat stopped by and a young white man helped the trapped resident into the boat. When they got a close enough shot, I could clearly see it was Jim, helping this man to safety. What was so surprising, Jim looked the same as he did, 50 years earlier when he preached at our church in Marionville.

I know he has to go where the Lord directs him, but I still worry about him so.