

There's this church a few miles away from our house with a cross randomly standing on the side of it. Not too long ago, I saw a gentleman sitting on one of the stone seats around it, his head pointed to the ground, holding his frayed hat. I had no idea about his story, no clue as to why he was there. I could have drawn some un-informed assumptions based on his appearance, but in the end, it simply looked like he was dwelling in his holy abiding place. These last few weeks, we've traversed through the hymn that has been sung by countless many children of God not only during the season of Lent, but at various points throughout their journey of faith: the hymn "Beneath the Cross of Jesus," including the words, "I take, o cross, your shadow for my abiding place." That man, on a random weekday morning, seemed to bring those precious words to life: an image that will stick with me.

Now, come next week, we will see our fair share of seemingly random people stopping by our utmost holy sanctuaries. And, yet again, it will be the perfect opportunity for the rest of us die-hard midweek Lenters and Sunday frequenters to make our un-informed assumptions as to why they don't all commit to show up more often than a Holy Week or a Christmas Eve. And we will hastily draw our high-and-mighty conclusions under our breath, or perhaps not so much, and look down upon those Christmas-and-Easter-only people.

However, the problem is "beneath this cross of Jesus" is a space for absolutely everyone. The problem is the shadow cast down from that cross is not one of guilt or shame for not coming to public worship more often, or not turning to God in prayer more routinely, or studying Scripture more religiously, or living up to whatever standard the supposedly die-hard high-and-mighty Christians have unleashed upon the rest of the mere mortals. No, the shadow is meant to remind us that nothing can happen in this life that is beyond the embrace of a most gracious God. Nothing you can do can limit that cross from being your abiding place or for anyone else.

I don't know why that man was there that day. I don't know if he lost his job or a relationship fell through or family dynamics fizzled. I don't know if he worked at the church or was a complete stranger to the grounds. Maybe it was part of his daily routine or maybe it was the first time caving into prayer since some random Christmas Eve decades before. Maybe he was hoping for miracle, not knowing where else to turn. I have no idea what his story was, but regardless of the circumstances, regardless of the frequency, regardless of the reason, that cross was still going to stand as his steadfast abiding place.

And no matter what the die-hard midweek Lenters and Sunday frequenters may say under our breath, or not so much, about those who enter into our utmost holy sanctuaries next week, perhaps for the first time since the last Holy Week; God is still going to insist that beneath the cross of Jesus is more than enough space in the grace of our Lord to surround them with the love that has been with them from the very beginning. This hymn has been sung by countless children of God for well over a century. It has reassured us of God being a mighty rock in a weary land, a home within a wilderness, a rest upon the way, and even with the saddest of hearts for all that may happen to us in this life. Through it all, no matter what, the cross was always and will forever be our abiding place. Not only has the song survived to never let us forget it, but so has the very Gospel brought to life on the cross and out of a tomb, so that we may sing and live out the hope in Jesus Christ, our Lord. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!