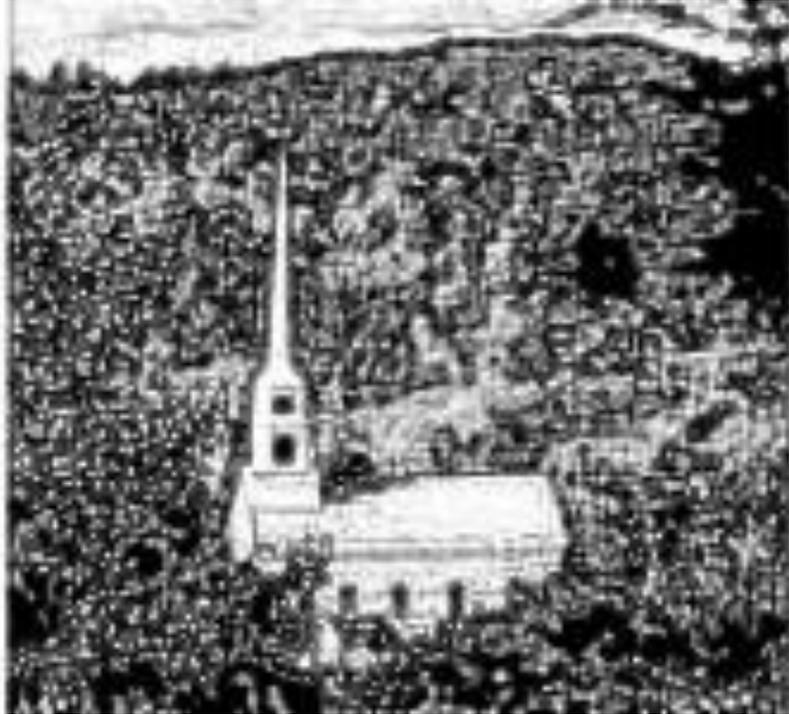


The Little Church In The Valley

A Novel By Ty Keenum



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Chapter 1

All Creatures of Our God and King

The sound waves increased and clarified as one approached the small frame church. A bass guitar, a keyboard of some description, and several tambourines could be heard distinctly from the gravel parking lot. From the steps of the church the words of the hymn were revealed, “***Just as I am Lord - without one plea, but that Thy blood was shed for me.***”

Inside, the service was reaching a crescendo. Reverend Daniel Hawker, a tall razor thin man with a shock of snow-white hair stood before the crowd exalting the Lord with his dance and his spirit filled speech. Raised above his head was a six-foot long timber rattlesnake. The serpent's fat gray body gave off hues of pink, yellow, and orange as it twisted in the hands of the pastor.

Reverend Daniel seemed to be oblivious to the gyrations of the snake. The preacher's face was frozen in a rapturous gaze of wonder. As the Reverend brought the snake low, and then high, this way to that, the large dark bands of the rattler were revealed.

From his spot on the aisle at the rear of the church, senior elder Buster Cheatle watched his former high school quarterback perform the Testament of Faith with the same ease of grace he had used to throw touchdown after touchdown into his waiting hands. Because of his size and his lightning like speed, Buster Cheatle had been given the opportunity to continue to play at the University of Georgia. The Elder stretched his right leg out into

the aisle giving some relief to the knee that had been destroyed in the opening game of 1964 against Alabama. Vince Dooley's first game as a head coach had been Buster Cheadle's last as a player. Buster returned home to lend his notoriety as a sports legend to a few business ventures before settling into a funeral home business with two former friends. Like the rattlesnake's gyrations, life was full of twists and turns.

Most of the congregation had pushed close enough to the pulpit to be able hear the snake's tail shaking violently back and forth. The warning was there for anything foolish enough to come closer. The rattle seemed to hum "painful death straight head, just keep coming". Caught in the siren's call, the crowd crushed closer. Elder Cheadle rose stiffly from his spot to join his friends and neighbors in the ceremony.

Reverend Hawker moved from side to side on the main floor. He handed the rattler to an acolyte and began passing out less venomous snakes to the crowd from the box in front of the altar. The Reverend handed out two copperheads. Their fat brown bodies were the perfect camouflage for the pine forest where they were typically found. Here in the Little Church, the copperheads stood out vividly against the backdrop of the handlers' white shirts.

Reverend Daniel retrieved the lone water moccasin from the snake box. "Moe", as he was called, was currently shedding. Reverend Daniel chose to keep the snake in his own hands for the balance of the Testament of Faith. The Reverend didn't want a temperamental snake to overshadow the announcement he planned to deliver at the close of the service.

Inside the church, it was nearly deafening. The makeshift band played a driving beat accentuated by the rhythmic banging of tambourines. The beat was almost like a pulse, racing at one hundred twenty beats per minute. The song, *“It’s Only A Test”*, seemed uniquely fit in both lyrics and melody for the situation. The shouts of “hallelujah”, “praise God”, coupled with the rhythmic stomping of feet produced a wall of noise that reverberated throughout the valley.

The faithful sang and danced and gave way to fits of glossolalia for the next ten minutes. The congregation had literally worked themselves into a lather. The internal temperature of the church had risen at least ten degrees from the activity and most of the followers were bathed in sweat. Many of the older members were gasping for breath. When the spirit had passed, the congregation returned to their seats in the wooden pews.

Reverend Daniel placed the last serpent back securely in the snake box. He returned once again to the pulpit and surveyed his flock. In a voice that made the sound of a rasp ripping against oak, the spiritual leader of the Little Church in the Valley announced his retirement. “We are reminded in Ecclesiastes 3:1 *“To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven”*, and so now it is my time to announce that my season is done.” A faint murmur passed among the congregants, but the pastor continued. “This year’s revival will be used as a tryout for a potential new pastor. I pray that each one of you will attend each and every day of the revival. This congregation, along with the oversight of the Pastor Selection Committee, will be looking for the most ‘spirit filled’ minister to take my place.”

As he caught his breath, the Reverend Daniel pressed on before emotion overtook him. “I can think of no better way to evaluate these candidate’s talents than to watch them in practice. Make sure you see everybody at least once.”

With a sigh he turned to the choir to begin the benediction hymn.

While there was suddenness to the announcement, most of the community knew that Reverend Daniel was winding down. Even though he was now into his seventieth year, outwardly he appeared as tough as a pine knot. Daniel was not giving up his calling easily, but he knew it was time. His health issues could no longer be ignored.

Daniel was the third generation of Hawkers to serve as minister to the people of the small mountain community. Granddaddy Hiram had started the church in the Hawker general store in 1902. The strength of Hiram’s message built the building where meetings were now held. The Little Church in the Valley experienced great growth under Hiram’s son Levi’s direction. Levi Hawker steered the flock toward a Pentecostal doctrine and introduced the concept of “laying hands” and glossolalia. It was Pastor Levi’s steady hand at the helm that guided his followers through the “dark days” when the church’s basic beliefs were challenged by the government.

In 1941, the state of Georgia made snake handling a felony punishable by death. Like the early Christians of Roman times, the Little Church In The Valley continued to courageously practice their faith. The church continued their Testament of Faith in spite of the threat of capital punishment, although a bit more surreptitiously. Perhaps regularly tempting the fates with death by venom made the potential of death by electrocution not as immediate. The

righteous were vindicated when the law was repealed in 1968, and the congregation moved their practice back out into the sunlight again.

Reverend Daniel took the reins of the church from his Daddy that same year. Unlike his father and grandfather, Reverend Daniel had attended seminary and was an ordained Pentecostal minister. Now, thirty-two years later, it was time for Daniel to pass leadership of the flock to a new shepherd. As the benediction hymn came to a close, Daniel looked out over his congregation, his friends. The thought of what could have been, what should have happened, filled him with an over-powering sadness. He cursed his first cigarette, his first drink of alcohol.

Daniel had one child, a son named Evan. Evan, or "Bubba" as he was called, had shown great promise in his own right as a preacher. It was felt that his voice would carry him to the heights of other singing evangelists like Jimmy Swaggart. That is until the accident. The father and son were returning from one of Reverend Daniel's "missionary trips" on the border of Georgia and North Carolina. Reverend Daniel lost control of his car and slammed into the guardrail separating the road from the valley far below. Bubba was ejected through the windshield at a high rate of speed. Had he not hit a tree head first on his way over the cliff he would have been lost forever. Reverend Daniel was unscathed, but his son's brains were scrambled. The promise of a fourth generation of Hawker preachers died that day. Bubba was twenty-five.

Bubba's physical recovery was long and arduous. While Bubba remembered every sermon and hymn he'd ever heard, he was hard pressed to name the current President. Fortunately, he was grounded in the church and Bubba always knew where he was supposed to be. The only

question was if it was Sunday service, Monday Men's Bible Study, or Wednesday Night Prayer meeting. Bubba's beautiful bass voice rang out on Sunday and he could always be counted on to recite Scripture on Monday and Wednesday.

Over the gentle murmuring of the congregation, Buster Cheatle could hear the distinct voice of Reverend Daniel's only son crying "No, no, no!" from his spot in the choir. Buster wondered if Daniel had even discussed his plans with Bubba before making his announcement to the rest of the world. Buster watched Bubba push his way through the other choir members and exit the church through the back door. A cursory search found Bubba crying inconsolably under the crawl space of the sanctuary. Buster enticed Bubba back into the world by a promise of a ride in his new Cadillac to the Dairy Queen in Blairsville. They could get "Blizzards or whatever Bubba wanted."

On the ride back to Nunsuch, the incident seemed to have been forgotten. Bubba was back to his perpetually grinning self. The fact that the grin was toothless was unnerving, but at least he was grinning.

Buster glanced at the man-child seated next to him and thought to himself, "My God, what could he have been, what could he have done."

Chapter 2

Jesus Paid It All

Reverend Daniel had gone the extra mile to ensure a bumper turnout for the revival. The retiring Reverend had sent the Ladies Auxiliary into Blairsville to place revival announcements under the windshield wipers of all of the cars parked at Walmart. The ladies had about a twenty percent rejection rate. Undaunted, they un-crumpled the rejected circulars and reused them. The Ladies reasoned that the rejected missives had at least two chances to bring someone into the fold. Recycling the advertisement also helped them keep in good graces with the Walmart management. People wearing the familiar blue vest had approached the Ladies Auxiliary on their first day in the parking lot. The Ladies had disarmed the blue clad army with one question. "Do you love Jesus?" they asked. No one in Blairsville, Georgia would ever admit publicly to not loving Jesus. The Ladies Auxiliary was allowed to stay, as long as they kept the area clean. To show their service to the community, the Ladies Auxiliary picked up all of the trash as they went, not just the discarded circulars. They even returned the shopping carts back to the buggy holders.

While the Ladies Auxiliary worked the Walmart parking lot for attendees, they also worked the local businesses for goods or services to be donated. Their cause was the cause of bringing "Jesus into the soul of some poor lost sinner". Back at the Little Church in the Valley, the men folk of the church were pitching tents and building concession booths. The booths were spread about the church parking lot to gain maximum exposure

for their items. The week of events that would set the course for the Little Church in the Valley's future was taking shape. All that was missing was the revival ministers.

There were six revivalists scheduled for the week, one headliner and five hopefuls. Two of the hopefuls were fresh out of the seminary. The other preachers were employed at small churches similar in size to the Little Church in the Valley. Each of the applicants would open in the big tent for the headliner, the Right Reverend Hap Johnstone. After the last hopeful preached on Friday night, the pastor selection team would vote to determine if they had a viable candidate. If so, the candidate would then be asked to preach again on the sixth and final night. If the hopeful contender filled the pastor selection committee with the same enthusiasm in his second sermon as he did in his first, the group was charged to make an offer.

The selectors consisted of Reverend Daniel, the senior Elders and Treasurer Mulva Lyte. The selection committee had at its disposal a robust set of perks to attract a young minister to their remote location in the mountains. First, was the fully furnished Craftsman styled parsonage with three bedrooms and two and a half baths, all utilities paid. Next was a late model four-wheel drive vehicle suitable for reaching the flock in the most remote of locations. The Hawker General Store would provide gasoline for the vehicle and a generous grocery stipend. The only thing the new minister would be out of pocket for would be clothing and any personal items he didn't want to run by the cashier at the Hawker General Store.

The parsonage was now the command post for "all things Revival" for the coming week. To make way for the new potential new minister, Reverend Daniel and Bubba had began

moving their belongings to their new home. The little cabin that would give shelter to the father and son abutted the church cemetery and was the original dwelling on Hawker property. It was a short walk to the church and would provide a serviceable nest for the men until the next mission was revealed.

Inside the parsonage there was a sense of history and quiet resolve exhibited by the committee as they sat around the kitchen table preparing their final checklist. Outside, the concessionaires had made their last minute preparations and the lights strung about the parking lot were burning brightly. Revivalists began to arrive around 4PM and jockeyed for the best parking spots. From all indications, it was going to be a memorable revival.

The first sermons were set to begin at 7PM, with the Right Reverend Hap Johnstone scheduled for the main tent for all six nights. His motorcade arrived promptly at 5PM. When the cavalcade arrived it was obvious to the Elders why the Right Reverend commanded a thousand dollars a day. There was one large tour bus and two Cadillac Escalades in the convoy. One Escalade held security and the other held the backup singers, "The Heavenly Hummingbirds". The tour bus held the Right Reverend and the lucky chosen who were blessed enough to have the Right Reverend's favor. The giant bus included a master bedroom with separate bath, and a very efficient kitchen facility. Once the bus was hooked to electrical and water, it was a home away from home.

In addition to the guaranteed fee, the contract provided that the Ladies Auxiliary would provide three meals a day for the Right Reverend's support staff for the duration of the

stay. The purchase of groceries for the Right Reverend's personal chef also fell on the female volunteers of the Little Church. The personal chef was an attractive woman in her early thirties, Crystal Leer, who traveled with the preacher everywhere he went. She was officially described as the Right Reverend's scheduler and secretary. Some people presumed that there were other duties that the young lady performed, but, there are always those who want to spread scandal and rumors.

Upon arrival, the Right Reverend and his chef/scheduler/secretary sought out their liaison for the week. Buster Cheatle, they had been told, was their connection for all revival related issues. The Elder was found rocking on the front porch of the rectory. As the visitors approached, Buster unfolded himself from his rocker and reached into his front pants pocket. He handed the Right Reverend Johnstone ten crisp one hundred dollar bills from a stack of bills that would have easily choked a horse. Elder Cheatle looked down at the Right Reverend and said, "I'm going to need you to sign my ledger book that you've received payment for the first day".

"Glad to, glad to", replied the Reverend Hapstone as he flourished his initials in the ledger book.

Elder Cheatle then directed the Right Reverend and Ms. Leer to the Ladies Auxiliary booth to get further details about meals and accommodations for the rest of the entourage.

Elder Cheatle was greatly relieved that his headliner was on site. While it was true he was getting the other five preachers for the price of one Hap T. Johnstone; it was Hap T. Johnstone that was going to be bringing in the crowds. People who hadn't darkened a

church house door in years would be coming to hear the Right Reverend Johnstone mix fire and brimstone and repackage it as salvation. The Right Reverend's healing powers were legendary, and the afflicted would be coming from far and wide to get in line for healing. While it was rumored that the Right Reverend's serpent skills were sub-par, his skills as an orator and healer were top shelf. Like a major league baseball player, it was rare to find a player that could hit forty home runs, average over three hundred and steal ninety bases. If you got two out of three, then you had all-star player, and so it was with Hap T. Johnstone.

The two revival preachers fresh from seminary had what could be best referred to as “a slugger's chance” of winning the job. The Little Church needed a younger membership, and perhaps youth beget youth. It was worth a look. The other three Evangelists were on vacation from their churches and trying to supplement their incomes. If while on vacation a better situation opened up, who could argue that it wasn't God's will that created the opportunity for advancement? Predestination was a handy tool to have in your back pocket when one needed to explain one's actions.

The opening ministers were assigned their nights to deliver their message alphabetically. Reverend Daniel felt it was as fair a way to do it as any other. Each of the senior Elders had been assigned a tent to manage. The group of “Elders in Training” would assist with collections and any other issues that might arise. The Elders were confident they had everything under control. This was not their first rodeo, as they say.

A “Revival Rulebook” had been printed to familiarize the visiting ministers with how the Little Church In The Valley expected things to go. There would be no “handling of fire”

or drinking of poison as performed at some Pentecostal churches. The Elders recognized the truth of Mark 16:18, "***they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well***". The Elders felt that keeping the serpents in control was a strong enough test of faith for the Revival without exposing the church to the potential liability of drinking poison or flambeating a parishioner.

The "Rulebook" included a schedule of meal times and the warning that the Ladies Auxiliary did not tolerate tardiness. A map of the surrounding area showing the location of drug stores, etc. was also included. Local points of interest had been highlighted in yellow on the map. The planning committee felt like they had thought of everything.