
“Once Upon a Moment”

Adventist Students Experience the Great Disappointment

By Lydia Chiomenti

Although this particular fall morning had dawned as usual, it would become a memorable one for me and many of my students. It was October 21. As I watched the students enter the room for the first period, the idea struck me.

The author is currently Head Teacher of Galax SDA School, Galax, Virginia.

The bell rang. I quietly and solemnly closed the classroom door. I had begun my act. As I faced the class, I paused and took a deep breath. By now the students sensed something unusual.

In very measured tones I stated that I would not be at school the next day or any day thereafter. The students were silent as they awaited further explanation. After all, I

had taught in their school for nearly ten years and since I was the Bible teacher, I couldn't have done anything improper! (Sophisticated as children seem to be, there is still that naiveness—or is it their right?—that leads them to expect that a religion teacher is religious even if the math teacher is not a mathematician or the science teacher a scientist.)



The thrill that coursed through me as I pronounced the next words was worth the whole experience.

"Jesus is coming tomorrow."

They froze. Before they could recover I quietly continued, "This is what you might have heard if you had lived in 1844."

The thaw was immediate. All around you could hear breath released with a "Who-o-sh." Suddenly everyone seemed to be talking at once:

"For a moment I thought you had flipped out, but then I thought that surely you must know."

"I was scared."

"I'm not ready."

Most asked themselves, "Who shall be able to stand?"

For a moment it had been an awful reality.

All entered into a discussion of what had occurred many years ago and the unspeakable joy or dread that someday would come to each one of us.

The students left eager to talk further about the happenings of the day. One exclaimed, "Wait until I tell my sister what happened

in class!" However, as they filed out of the room I cautioned, "Please don't tell anyone about this until after school. I'd like to try it with every class." All promised to cooperate.

As the different classes came in turn to my room I was never sure I would be able to carry through with my plan, but time and again it worked just as effectively. In some classes students broke down and cried before I could let them know this was an enactment.

With each group there developed a great deal of empathy and understanding for the feelings of those pioneers who experienced that first disappointment 140 years ago. There was also much soul searching.

I always remembered to caution the students not to discuss what had transpired in class with my other students. That is, except for the next-to-last class.

"Oh, dear!" I cried as I realized that I had forgotten to caution this group. However, like the feathers of the proverbial pillow, they had already flown into the hallway,

anxious to communicate the happenings of that day. There was no gathering them back, no stopping the flow of information. I could have kicked myself!

But if I was at a loss, God was not. He had a lesson that was just as important for that class, too.

If there had been any question in my mind whether these students had gotten the message in those few minutes between classes, I had no doubt as I watched them enter. When class was to begin they sat and looked at me with high expectation.

"I can't do it, kids. You already know."

"Oh, please, Mrs. Chiomenti," they begged, "do it to us, too."

Their earnest pleas and expectations coupled with the merciless fact of their knowledge brought tears to my eyes. It reminded me of the experience of Isaac and Esau and the birthright ceremony, when the father and son came face to face with the reality that what was past could not be undone. The present must be accepted. However, love finds a way to retrieve some of the pieces. Esau was not to leave empty-handed or unblessed and neither were my children.

"Class, you have learned a lesson that the others did not learn. While there is still time you have experienced something of the awfulness of those cold, irreversible words, 'It is too late.'"

I had never done this before, nor have I done it since, even though the results were sensational. It had come in a moment's inspiration—unexpected, unplanned.

Because my lesson plans are not usually so detailed that I feel compelled to follow them doggedly, the Holy Spirit can help me seize the exact moment that might be needed by the class or a student.

This particular October 21 provided one of those moments. □

