

From the Pastor's Desk: A Very Merry Turbulent Christmas (Flight)

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My college experience was divided between two schools. At age 18 in 1975, after graduation, I attended St. Gregory College for two years (which later became St. Gregory University and is now closed). St Gregory's was a two-year junior college at that time. In 1977, at age 20, I transferred to the University of Dayton, Ohio to finish college. Both college campus experiences were great and I have lots of stories to tell, but that is not the purpose of this article, maybe one down the road. When I first arrived at the University of Dayton, I was without a car. I relied on my friends and public transportation to get around. As the holidays approached, my parents, to save money, bought me a roundtrip plane fare from Dayton to Little Rock, but only for the Christmas break. Since Christmas and Thanksgiving break were only separated by 12 days, I stayed in Dayton for Thanksgiving. In 1977, I went to one of my suitemate's family home for Thanksgiving. In 1978, I actually went a friend's pig farm for Thanksgiving. That was some experience! Look for the story in some Christmas in the future.

My flight was a late afternoon flight on a Tuesday of the second week of December. I finished my last exam that morning and went directly to the campus candy store to buy some candy for the flights. I loved dark chocolate nonpareils and wanted to treat myself to something to snack on for the flights home. My flights were on TWA airlines with a connection in St Louis. The first leg went off without a hitch. I arrived in St Louis in plenty of time to get to the gate for my flight to Little Rock. I still did not eat my candies. I wanted to wait until I was on my final leg. Like trains, I knew a little about airline equipment. My first flight was on a Boeing 727. While sitting at the gate area for the second flight to arrive, I noticed a DC-8 pull up to the gate. This was probably the last flight into Little Rock in the evening so this plane would be the first out in the morning and more seats would be needed. The DC-8 was like a flying cigar. There are two engines on each wing and the configuration on this flight was 3 seats on one side, two on the other. The plane had 3 sections inside. First Class, followed by a very long economy section and then a third economy section behind the galley with perhaps 10 to 15 more rows. My seat was near the end of first economy section near the galley on the side with only two seats. I had the window seat and a man probably in his mid to late 40's was sitting next to me. He had obviously had a few drinks while waiting in the airport and had the flight attendant get him another while the flight was loading. I did not have a good feeling about this. Loading this plane took a long time. Since it was mid-December it seemed that every passenger was carrying wrapped Christmas packages either loose or in shopping bags. For those not alive in the 70's, the planes had plenty of overhead storage and the cloth seats (usually an ugly orange or blue) were large and there was plenty of space between rows. Normally most passengers did not bring much with them other than a briefcase or pocketbook. But it was Christmas time and getting those packages above the seats took some time. The flying time from St Louis to Little Rock was not more than an hour. So, as passengers took their seats, I dug into my candies while the gentlemen next to me asked for a second drink. Dear Lord, help me!

We departed only a few minutes late. The sky was black as could be and it allowed me to look at all the lights of the city below. The flight attendants came around to offer us a coke and pretzels. And of course, the guy next to me wanted another drink. Soon the landscape changed and lights became more elusive as we continued to climb into the night sky. Within a few minutes, I noticed a few clouds building around us. Off in the distance, on my side of the plane, I noticed lightning in the clouds and they seemed to build higher and higher. At first it seemed the plane was moving away from the clouds with the lightning, but then it seemed the storm was on both sides of the planes and we were getting closer.

The pilot came on and asked everyone to fasten their seatbelts and flight attendants to be seated. He told us because Little Rock was not that far off, we would be going into the storm. The flight attendants took rapid action and tried to get everyone's drink from them. Of course, the dude next to me kept his drink to his side so he could hold on to his scotch on the rocks for the duration of the flight.

Within seconds, the turbulence started without warning. The plane rocked back and forth and up and down. Because the lights were turned on the wings, I could see the torrential rain storm and that we were moving as fast as

the clouds passed us by. The bouncing action of the plane was relentless and the motion from one side to the other and the up and down started to cause an uneasiness in my stomach. A drink cart flew by our row from the galley and stopped a few rows in front of us. The man next to me looked really sick as he held his drink close to his mouth and his eyes were shut with fear. In an instant, we hit an air pocket which dropped the plane rapidly and then it moved up just as quickly, the plane then jerked from left to right with such force that almost every overhead storage bin opened, and Christmas packages started flying in the cabin. One came right at me and hit my arm and landed between my legs. My stomach was really feeling awful now. A flight attendant came on and asked if there was a doctor on board because apparently something happened in the section behind me. I never found out what happened to that person. With one more rapid up and down, right and left, the plane shook as though it was having the chills. At the moment, I grabbed the bag in front of me and threw up all my candies. The guy next to me was forced over in my direction and his drink went all over all my lap and he threw up, too. I noticed that lots of people were getting sick. It was not just me.

Within a moment, the turbulence stopped and we were out of the storm. The captain got on the intercom and apologized for the rough ride and said that the storm was now over Little Rock and unable to land so we would be diverted to Memphis. He instructed us that there would be a bus in Memphis that would take anyone who did not want to fly back to Little Rock. When we arrived in Memphis, I used a payphone to call my parents at home, but they had already left for Little Rock. (Remember, this is a time before cellular phones, in which we existed and actually thrived!) Coming into Memphis, the plane was packed with passengers, but only 15 to 20 of us were willing to wait and fly back to Little Rock once the plane was cleaned and readied. We were able to sit where we wanted. Most of us sat in first class.

The flight from Memphis was calm and uneventful. We landed in Little Rock and we all applauded the pilots and flight attendants. My parents and siblings were at the gate waiting for me. I was only 2 hours late. They said that a storm came in from Oklahoma. All the cars in the airport parking lot were covered with brown dirt from Oklahoma. On the way home from Little Rock, we said the rosary as a family and then I shared my story about my flight. When I entered the house, I noticed that my parent's Christmas tree was not decorated. My mom said that she wanted me to share in the joy of decorating. I was glad to be home for Christmas.

[The holidays can be a hectic time. Sometimes, things go wrong and are out of our control. We can't control the weather, airline flights, train schedules or interstate traffic. Sit back and let the moment speak to you when things don't go as planned. My lesson from my turbulent flight: never eat a pound of nonpareils before flying! 😊]

Prayer: May the Lord bless your travels this Christmas season. May your flights be smooth and uneventful and your time on the highways and byways be safe from any dangers. May our Lord fill you with peace this holiday season, on the road, in your homes and any place you make merry!

Father John