

Warrior Princess

Good morning and Happy Grandparents Day to everyone! ☺ Each one of you present today is either a great-grandparent, a grandparent, is going to be a grandparent, or has a grandparent ... a Granddaddy, a Nana, a MeMa or PawPaw ... the list of affectionate names is endless. Today I am speaking to anyone here that has, or ever has had, a grandpa or grandma. When you leave, I hope that the next time you see them (or remember them) you might forget WHAT you see, and instead think about WHO you see ... WHO God sees.

To do that, I'd like to tell you a story ... it may not be chronologically precise, but it is a true story ... about a Warrior Princess disguised as a "sweet little old lady". ☺ A lady she was – and a beautiful lady. But she was also strong, stubborn, and occasionally down-right ornery. ☺ She was "strong" in her family, "stubborn" in her faith, and "down-right ornery" about her prayer-life. She was a mighty woman of God – His "Warrior Princess".

So the story begins ...

Once upon a time in 1911, a princess, Frances Elizabeth Derden, was born in a land far away called Waco, TX to a family with a mom and dad she adored, three half-brothers and two beloved sisters. Her family was happy but poor – as most farmers were in the early 1900's. Though she loved their little farm, Frances determined early that she did not want to be poor her whole life and that education would be her ticket out ... So much so, that when her high school sweetheart and first real love begged her to follow him to the University of Texas, she declined, opting to follow her own dream of an Ivy League school. In a time when women did not go to college (except perhaps to meet young men ☺) Frances attended Baylor University. It was a high price to pay for a dream, for the separation was too difficult for him and he broke her heart. He was not to be her prince, but God had a better plan in mind.

At that time, no degree was required for smaller schools, so in order to pay her expenses for Baylor, Frances became the Principal of a one-room school house at only 18 years of age. Early on, a wayward teenage boy, not much younger than herself and much larger, decided to challenge her authority ... *big mistake!* Frances was small but mighty. So, after gathering her courage - with paddle in hand - she stood up to this young man securing both his respect for her, and a diploma for him.

Frances went on to graduate, continued in her teaching career, and at around age 25, she met a handsome man six years her senior – a Baylor Law School graduate named Albert Derden. Legend tells of how this man once saw Frances at a distance, falling in love with her at first sight. He searched for her for some weeks – perhaps even months - to no avail. Finally he told the Lord that he would try only once last time before giving up to find his heart's desire. The Lord must have smiled on Albert, for it was then that he finally met, courted and married the love of his life.

Once a poor farm girl, Frances might have thought marrying an educated up and coming young attorney would certainly provide the financial security she longed for. But the Roaring 20's were long

over. This was the 1930's and the early years of their marriage clashed with the harsh realities of the Great Depression. Many today closely compare the days that we are now in to that time ... I seriously doubt any surviving child or adult of that dark time would agree!

But life goes on ... and the greatest joys and heartbreaks of Frances' life were still to come. The 1940's brought the end of World War II ... new hope, and new life– a beautiful daughter, Zoe Ann and lovable son, Albert Jr. ☺ Even above her undeniable call to teach, motherhood was her passion! It was a happy time.

Albert and Frances were both dedicated, tithing church-going Believers -- founding members of a new church plant just down their street. Life seemed to be looking up, even financially ... so much so that her Deacon husband decided that he wanted to pursue his life-long dream of owning his own business. Great! His own law practice, right?! Not quite. He wanted to set aside his law degree and become a plumber. Don't get me wrong – it's a great profession – if you ARE a plumber and a business man – not a lawyer. To her dismay, and to her credit, Frances joined her husband, investing all their life's savings to follow his dream of becoming self-employed. To support her husband (literally) Frances returned to her first love – teaching. The children were now in school, and so was Frances. It was back to a life of teaching which would span over 40 years.

The 1950's began a prosperous decade for the country, but not for the Derdens. After about 6-7 years of long hours and hard work with little reward and much debt ... Albert closed his plumbing business and said goodbye to his dream. Many of us here have experienced the pain of losing a business. It goes so much deeper than finances and debt – it's letting go of a dream that God only meant for a season. In the years to follow Albert went through what some might label a mid-life crisis, others would call it depression. He went back to practicing law, but he must have felt lost. Frances' once strong deacon husband began to disappear with little or no notice for weeks, sometimes months at a time. Zoe Ann remembers tears in her daddy's eyes as he would kiss her goodbye to go "fishing", and then vanish. He had many excuses including company business, but truthfully he left for reasons that even he did not fully understand. Albert had much yet to learn of God's unfailing grace ...

Resilience, stubbornness, faith – perhaps all three – gave Frances strength to steer the drifting ship. God was her captain now. During those lonely days of single-motherhood, she stepped into action, not despair. She taught school during the day, came home to cook supper, left again for work as a salesclerk at Penny's, and then returned home only to begin her third job of sewing a wardrobe for her family. You see, Frances was a woman of faith, but she was also a practical woman ... there were braces, sports uniforms, band instruments, piano lessons, and stylish party dresses to make... all of which cost money ...and of course in the back of her mind, college for her children was always looming around the corner.

As an early teen, college was the last thing on young Albert's mind! Without a dad consistently around, Albert Jr. decided that he was bigger and stronger than his mom, and he really didn't need to listen to her anymore. He was hanging out with the wrong crowd and headed down a dangerous

road. That was not wise ... for “little” Frances realized that it was now or never to pull her wayward son back onto the ship. Legend says ... one night when young Albert was long asleep, Frances took a belt from her husband’s closet. She quietly snuck into his room, crawled on top of him in his bed, pinned him down, and began the longest whooping of his young life! All the while that that big teenage boy was begging for mercy, Frances did what she does best – TEACH! With every swat she began to teach one lesson after another! If you ask her son – now a retired Vice President of Texaco – what he thinks of his mom, he’ll tell you with a serious smile ... “my mother saved my life!”

Somewhere along her teaching journey, Frances realized that her payscale would only rise so far, and if her kids were going to go to college, that just wouldn’t do. She decided what she needed was a Masters Degree! But what about her husband, Albert? ... just where was her wayward (*though still handsome*) husband during this time? ... *He was back right by her side!* ... typing research and thesis papers, pitching in, and supporting her until she graduated. You see, the positive side of stubbornness is patience. Her faith, her prayers, and forgiveness (*though difficult*) carried both of them, and they were a family once again. In turn, with her support, Albert successfully entered Texas State politics as a congressman, even at one time running for a shot as governor of this great state. He didn’t win the election, but to this day Frances is proud to show anyone his picture in the LBJ Library of Congress!

The 1960’s brought with it new challenges ... while the country was suddenly fighting a new war no one understood, so was Frances. Without warning ... heart attack and stroke! Paralyzed temporarily on half of her body and for a longer time one side of her face, this school teacher could not speak or write. In her early life with God’s help she had faced and beat polio; so Frances determined that this would be no different! Day by day through therapy and prayer, she regained her strength -- soon she would be teaching again. The slight crook in her smile was now there to remind of God’s miraculous hand.

Another quieter challenge of the 60’s -- but perhaps more difficult – was adjusting to the silence of an empty nest. Zoe Ann & Albert Jr. were now grown with families of their own. What joy Frances’ students brought her as she adjusted to this new season in her life. Long before there were Resource classes for ESL and dyslexic students, Frances stayed day after day for hours working with her 4th grade students – many of them in poverty – having them read to her or recite their times tables ... *over & over* ... urging them to graduate high school and look beyond to college. It was her practice in the Austin Public Schools to read Bible stories to her students every day ... David & Goliath, Moses, Daniel and the Lions Den ... teaching values and morals, as well as reading ... instilling self-confidence in her young learners. One year, a young new Principal out to make a name for herself demanded that Frances stop her Bible Stories. Nearing retirement, Frances refused. She could not be the successful teacher that she was without them, even if it meant getting fired. So many parents came to her defense; that Principal had to concede -- as long as no one complained ... no one did. ☺ See what I mean – *stubborn!*

The 1970’s began a decade of no responsibility and “free love”. But love costs ... when you give your heart, it costs. Just ask Jesus. Her strong, handsome husband lost his strength and battle to lung

cancer. Frances stayed by his side to the end. A few years later, her only daughter and best friend also was diagnosed with cancer ... A battle for Zoe Ann that would last three and a half years, but for her mother, many more. *How could a God that had brought Frances through so much, seem so far away?* What this Warrior Princess had yet to learn, even at this Fall Season of her life was that the war was not over for "Death is swallowed up in victory!" – *the enemy has not won!* At 41 years of age, only two weeks before her death, Zoe Ann stood before 700 ladies at the Dallas Christian Women's Club, testifying of the God's unfailing mercies. God's seed of faith was planted in those women ... as well as in Zoe Ann's two young teenage daughters. Both Zoe Ann and her father Albert had run their race as if to win ... *and they did!*

It took some time, but slowly the healing process began. In his last days, her devoted husband had urged Frances to travel the world as they had planned. So during the prosperous 1980's, with the Lord now at the helm, Frances set sail on her own ... an escape at first, perhaps, but soon that gave way to a new season of adventure ... *Hawaii, Austria, Russia, China!*

The 1990's brought her ship back home but seldom at home. Deep into her 80's, Frances was still mowing her own lawn, walking two miles a day for exercise, then walking many more miles raising money for Aids Patients. She sang in a city-wide multi-church choir and once a week served soup at a homeless shelter. And, as grandchildren married and great-grandchildren came, she became a teacher to yet another generation.

Like David, Frances did not live a perfect life, but she lived a faithful one. She learned early in her life that it is not strong-will but God's will that wins out. It's not stubbornness of might but stubbornness of God's Spirit that endures. With the sword of the Word and her shield of faith, Frances faced every new challenge head on. And as the world seemed to be growing more uncertain, her prayers became more unyielding. Of all her triumphs and answered prayer, her greatest is the one that only the Lord truly sees ... her desire that each of her descendents until the Day of Christ's return was that they would know Him, love Him and trust Him as their Lord and Savior. She knew that life is hard, but all things are possible with Him. (*Perhaps with an exasperated smile ☺*), God has answered that stubborn, faithful prayer.

The next time you see your sweet grandpa or grandma, ask yourself ... what stories does his or her life have to tell? It's not WHAT you see; it's WHO God sees. Today – September 13th, 2009 – in Austin, Texas, sitting in the pew where she and her strong handsome Prince Albert once sat together long ago, is a beautiful woman of 98 years young. Some look at her and think "what a sweet little ol' lady", but to her family she is so much more ... to her King she is a mighty woman of faith – His Warrior Princess ... and to me, she is Frances Elizabeth Darden – strong, stubborn, sometimes down-right ornery – she is "Munny" ... my amazing, beautiful, cherished grandmother.

And as for her story, it will live on ... **happily ever after.**