

May 2006—The Bearing Tree

“Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set.” (Prov. 22:28)

“How’s it going?” I don’t ask as a casual, non-literal greeting. I ask in a very pointed way; how are you doing in your relationship with our Lord? I realize that in writing to those who minister, the temptation could be to assume that all is well in this area. We’ll not do that. Perhaps I can help us evaluate;

Near where I was raised, my brother Jack and I (with our wives) have 20 beautiful acres of forest land in South Western Montana on which we are building a cabin. It is a work in progress: the walls are up and the roof is on, and the wood stove makes it mighty comfortable on a cold winter night. At one corner of our property is a Department of Natural Resources (DNR) “bearing tree.” This tree was marked and scribed years before I was born, and provides a reference point for any surveying activity in the area.

The DNR explains that bearing trees are a special kind of witness tree which surveyors permanently inscribe so that they can accurately identify reference points on their survey maps, including property corners.

“Our” bearing tree is near where three crystal-clear creeks on the property flow together. The tree sits at an elevation of 6300 feet and looks up to the jagged peaks of the Anaconda-Pintlar Wilderness Area to the south and a half mile wall of majestic cliffs to the north. The timber is healthy Lodge Pole Pine as well as some stately 4-foot diameter Spruce.

I’ve stopped by to contemplate this bearing tree many times since I was a kid, in fact, I remember first discovering it. Maybe it’s a guy thing, maybe a mountain man thing; but I’ve always enjoyed that tree, musing about its significance and the men who marked it. Historically, bearing trees were used by the Public Land Survey (PLS) starting in Minnesota in 1847, and expanded during the “westward extension” of official maps. By 1908 the PLS had marked all lands available for public sale, using bearing trees as permanent and absolute records.

Last November, as I again stood at the bearing tree that identified my land, I couldn’t help but think of “spiritual bearings” that mark my Christian walk. It is important that we are able to evaluate, not in relative terms by comparing ourselves with others, but in absolute terms—using Biblical standards that do not change. Let me share a sampling of some of my “markers”:

1. **Time in the Word.** Is God's word a delightful adventure? Are you passionate - still learning, loving, and excited in the Word? Are you still digging in and discovering "gold nuggets" that cause you to exclaim, Eureka!
2. **What about prayer?** I'm not primarily referring to adequate time, although I trust that is the case. But in this process, are you adoring and enjoying Him? Is your prayer time precious? Does it go well beyond asking and receiving?
3. **Are you getting to know Jesus better?** (Obviously, these all work toward this end). We don't just follow the teachings of Jesus, we follow him! In this exciting adventure, are we actually growing in our relationship? It should be as good, aw come on- even better, than time spent with a good friend.

While you may not have the desire to sit in the woods at a bearing tree, may I challenge and encourage you to develop some measurable reference points and evaluate your spiritual bearings?

Bill