JULY-AUGUST 2023

NURTURING FAITH

Journal & Bible Studies

Processing grief, professing faith

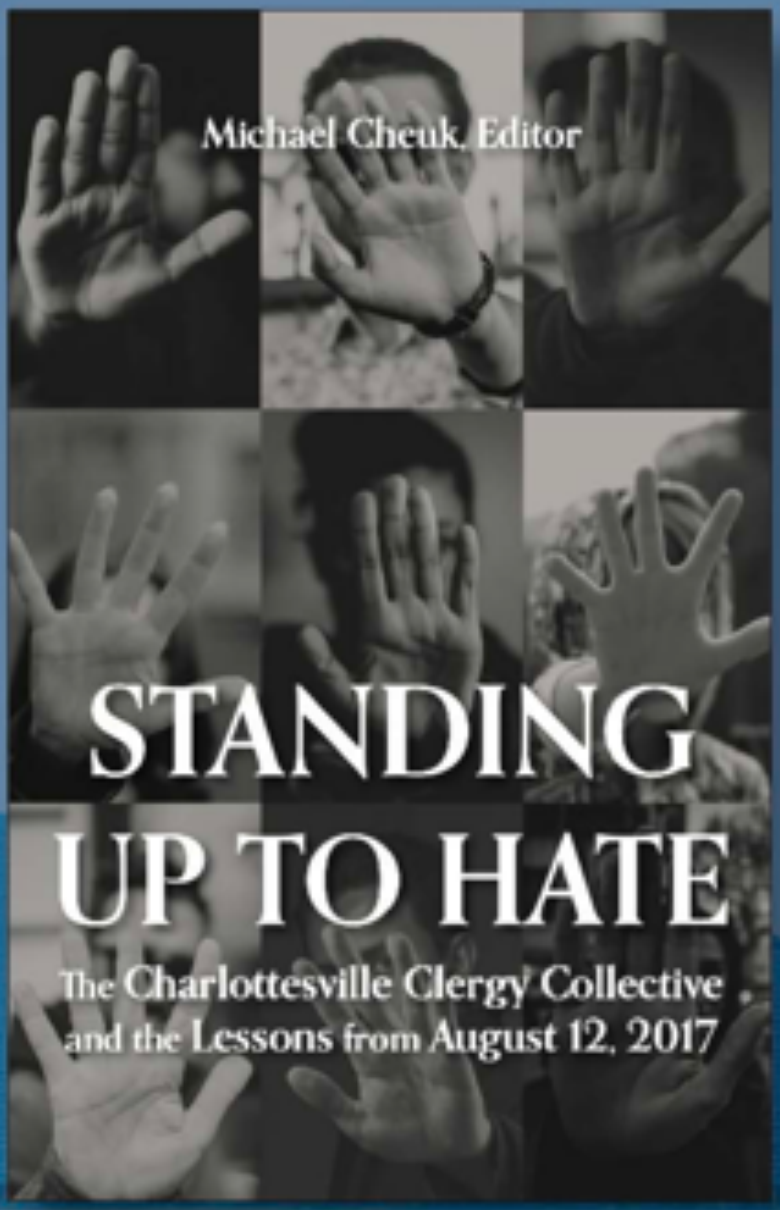
goodfaithmedia.org

MARBLE MAN:

Sculptor Frank Murphy reveals 'what's there'

A publication of Good Faith Media

AUGUST 12, 2017 IS A DATE CEMENTED IN HISTORY IN THE UNIVERSITY TOWN OF CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA.



The "Unite the Right" rally turned deadly when one extremist plowed his car into a crowd of counter-protesters.

Amid the chaos at the moment and in times that followed, the Charlottesville Clergy Collective was on hand. Their trusting relationships across various faith traditions served the community well in facing the tragic realities of racism.

Edited by Michael Cheuk, these clergy recall the experiences of that time and offer lessons on how preparation and collaboration are needed — especially in times of crisis.

Scan the QR code to visit the Good Faith Media bookstore or go to goodfaithmedia.org/bookstore to order your copy.

Editor's Letter

Going places was one of those things among many that we took for granted prior to the pandemic shutdown. We were used to being mobile people.

With the help of newer technology, we found a way to stay somewhat connected during those trying times. But nothing is a substitute for getting out there.

Writing feature stories, I've discovered over the decades, can be done from a distance. But only in-person visits give the perspectives and photo opportunities that make for better storytelling.

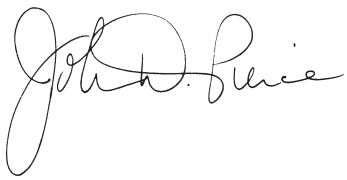
Three articles in particular reflect such efforts to be on site, to explore and to ask questions.

In-house historian Bruce Gourley spent time among the Gullah Geechee people along the Sea Islands and coastal plains of South Carolina and Georgia. What he saw and heard are reflected in his article beginning on page 48.

My travels included sitting down with veteran North Carolina pastor Ed Beddingfield — five years after a Christmas Eve house fire took his wife's life and injured one of his adult daughters. Ed reflects deeply and honestly about his grief and faith.

Sculptor Frank Murphy's impressive work led to my visiting two places. First, was to his home in Rome, Ga., where he was carving a massive block of marble into his largest and most detailed sculpture. Then I met up with Frank at the annual Marble Festival in his hometown of Sylacauga, Ala. Several of his finished pieces are on display at the local library.

There's much to read in this issue. In some cases, may you feel like you are traveling along with us.



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OUR MISSION

Nurturing Faith Journal provides relevant and trusted information, thoughtful analysis and inspiring features, rooted in the historic Baptist tradition of freedom of conscience, for Christians seeking to live out a mature faith in a fast-changing culture.

Nurturing Faith Bible Studies, found inside the journal with teaching resources online, provide weekly lessons by Tony Cartledge that are both scholarly and applicable to faithful living.

Good Faith Media (goodfaithmedia.org), our new and expanded parent organization, fulfills the larger mission of providing reflection and resources at the intersection of culture and faith through an inclusive Christian lens.

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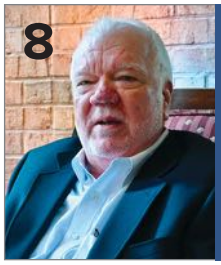


8

CARE MATTERS MOST

Ed Beddingfield on processing grief, professing faith

By John D. Pierce

INSIDE

VOL. 41, ISSUE 4
JULY/AUGUST 2023

THOUGHTS

Finding Faith in Fiction

A conversation with romance novelist Emily B. Riddle

By Cally Chisholm

42

FEATURES

On the cover: Frank Murphy carves details into a sculpture with the Emily Dickinson-inspired name "Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul."

Grateful for the kindness and generosity of Roy McCall

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Community respect for Roy McCall was obvious in Pam's Restaurant on the edge of Hartsville, S.C.

Warm greetings of "Hi, Mr. Roy" came from staff and patrons who served and consumed countrified cuisine.

The expansive farming land in and around his hometown had a friend in Roy as well. Unsurprisingly, he was often recruited to leadership roles.

He served as president of both the Agricultural Society and the Young Farmers Association in Darlington County, S.C.

Roy was a president and a director of Darlington County Farm Bureau and served as a director of a cotton farmers' research company.

He was a founding member of the South Carolina Cotton Board and a founding director of the local historical commission.

P.L. (Roy) McCall Jr. was a kind and generous man — exemplified in his life and legacy. Roy died last year, on March 4, 2022 at age 91.

His wife Margaret and twin brother Reeves preceded him in death. The close-knit brothers were both proud Clemson University graduates and faithful Christians who took on numerous church leadership roles.

They were the kind of Baptists who refused to give up the defining principles that have long marked Baptists — religious liberty, congregational autonomy, soul freedom and priesthood of the believer — when so many others considered those to be expendable.

When Reeves died in 2011, he left estate gifts to several causes including Baptists Today, Inc. (now part of Good Faith Media).

A small part of that gift supported the publication of the commemorative book, *Baptists Today at 30,* by Bruce Gourley. It was dedicated to Reeves' memory.

Likewise, Roy has now left a significant gift that will serve Good Faith Media very well. We are grateful for his kindness and generosity.

Whether sharing lunch at Pam's, chatting over the phone or swapping handwritten notes, I could always count on an affirming word and concrete support from Roy.

He asked for nothing but continuing good work. One such note — that accompanied a check — read:

"Johnny, thanks for the *Nurturing Faith Journal.* There are so many excellent articles in each journal. Blessings, Mr. Roy."

Once when his copy of the journal didn't arrive in his Society Hill mailbox, he called to request a replacement copy. "I'm lost without that book," he said.

For many well-rooted Baptists and others, the journal has been a connecting point with those of like mind and faith. Roy certainly conveyed that over many years.

Others, including Keithen Tucker, Ben McDade, and Drayton and Mary Etta Sanders visited Roy to get acquainted and communicate our appreciation for his ongoing support.

Following news of this recent gift, Mary Etta told me: "We are so happy to have known that interesting man."

Indeed Roy was a person of high character, exemplary leadership and a gracious personality. Staying in touch with him was a blessing, not a chore.

While those exchanges can no longer occur, it is pleasing to know that his legacy of kindness and generosity continues.

And it is a good reminder for all of us to think about how we use the slice of history we have been gifted.

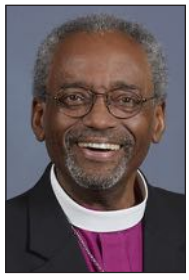
It is always a fitting question to ask how we want to be remembered and what we might do to continue our influence beyond our earthly living.

How nice to be remembered as someone who was genuinely kind, generous and faithful. Thanks, Mr. Roy! NFJ

Bishop Michael Curry conveys a Jesus worldview

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

"I'm here to suggest that Christianity goes astray when it does not look and talk like Jesus of Nazareth."



So said the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church Michael B. Curry to an ecumenical gathering of supporters of Day 1, a Protestant radio preaching ministry dating back to 1945.

"Look at the history of Christianity," said Curry. "We stray when Jesus — his teachings and his spirit — is not our way. Then we lose our way."

Whenever the church makes "the mistake of playing the grand inquisitor" and does "evangelism by persecution" it goes off track, Curry told the March 21 gathering at the Cathedral of St. Philip in Atlanta.

The first African-American Presiding Bishop of the American Episcopal Church is well known for delivering the stirring sermon at the 2018 royal wedding of Britain's Prince Harry to American actress Meghan Markle in St. George's Chapel at Windsor Castle.

Curry told the Atlanta gathering that the Archbishop of Canterbury negotiated for more time than the three minutes first allotted for the wedding sermon, adding: "Three minutes isn't enough time to wipe the sweat from your brow."

The sermon received widespread praise for its bold and impassioned call for justice, "the redemptive power of love" and a Christian faith that is focused on following Jesus as revealed by his life and teachings.

Curry said he chose to reference the traditional spiritual "There is a balm in Gilead," but first confirmed it would be familiar to many of his listeners across the pond.

However, the bishop said a stoic security person suddenly looked alarmed, apparently thinking he'd heard "There's a *bomb* in Gilead" coming from the preacher's mouth.

Curry said he quickly added: "It's a healing balm."

Curry told his Atlanta listeners that getting out a Jesus-centered message through broadcast sermons and other means is very important at a time when the faith is often misconstrued and lives seem expendable.

He noted the destructive forces that result in war, insurrection and other forms of violence. "I'm running out of dioceses in the United States where there hasn't been a mass shooting."

"Day 1 matters because we need to get the message of Jesus of Nazareth out in this world," he said. "I mean the message of the Sermon on the Mount — *that* Jesus."

Advancing the kind of love that heals brokenness, said Curry, is "the work of God in our time, and that love is the heart of Christianity."

"When that message is lost, so are we," he added. "And when it's found, it sets us free."

Curry said he was raised in a broader family with Episcopal, Baptist and Pentecostal roots. Attending family funerals took on different forms depending on the faith tradition.

He joked that the post-funeral meal from an Episcopal service was at 11 a.m. and at around 1 p.m. following a Baptist service. If a Pentecostal funeral, he learned to expect lunch at supper time.

More Baptists were in his family, and he recalled the Baptist pastor who often spoke about the "dash" that separates the dates of one's birth and death. The eulogist would ask the gathered living: "What are you going to do with the dash?"

Curry called for avoiding the "illusions of power" and focusing on matters of significance to faithful living. Jesus, he said, "has something to commend to this generation."

Recalling the Luke 10 account of Jesus being asked by a lawyer regarding what is required to inherit eternal life, Curry said the question was a search for the kind of life that makes a difference.

Jesus' life and teachings lead us to that kind of use of the "dash" over which we control unlike the dates of our beginnings and ends, he said.

Jesus' two-fold command to love God with all one's being and others as oneself not only answered the proposed question for this one person, he noted, but for all.

"What Jesus was getting at is that this is the key to life that not even death can take away."

In a time when so many voices are redefining Christianity in exclusive and unloving ways, it is heartening to hear this impassioned and influential church leader calling for a faith that is rooted in Jesus' clear call to "Follow me."

In a series of opening questions, Bishop Curry asked: "Is a little bit of the kingdom of heaven possible on this earth?"

He tipped his hand by adding, "I wouldn't be standing up here if I didn't believe it was."

Curry affirmed Jesus as "an equal opportunity lover" whose "way of love is the way of life."

It was refreshing and hopeful to hear the echoes of a Jesus worldview that resists the onslaught of fearful, exclusive and power-seeking misrepresentations of Christianity that often downplay what Jesus has always called his followers to be and to do.

NFJ

Worth Repeating:

"Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit.
Controlling others is not."

—Benjamin Cremer (Twitter)

"Narcissism ... is destroying many of the social and political norms that sustain a democratic nation, and especially those that guide public service."

—Writer Tom Nicols in *The Atlantic*

"Modernists were open about the changes they were implementing, but fundamentalists, too, dramatically altered how Christianity was done, but they did so under the guise of defending 'old-time religion.'"

—Author and historian Kristin Du Mez (DuMez Connections)

"Immanentizing faith for nationalist ends is a global virus... The United States, of course, is also not immune."

—Stephen Schneck, who serves on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (U.S. Catholic)

"I felt great pressure to force my kids to say the sinner's prayer, because it was their ticket to heaven. If the rapture happened, they had to say the sinner's prayer, but it had to be genuine enough so they wouldn't get left behind."

—April Sochia, who was deeply impacted by the Left Behind series while in college (RNS)

"Geez, we get so many Duke Energy bills.
We don't know what they're for."

—Lay leader Mike Munley of Charlotte's St. Francis United Methodist Church, after learning the church had paid $67,000 to power an adjacent county soccer facility (Yahoo News)

"WE ARE WALKING REVIEWS OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH."

— Pastor Jeremy Shoulta of First Baptist Church of Gainesville, Ga., in his sermon, "The power of a single story"

GIFTS to Good Faith Media — honoring the work of Zach Dawes Jr. (see story on page 64) — were received from: **Julie Strathe Baugh, Stephanie Brueggeman, Cynthia and Brad Mitchell, and Cliff and Mary Vaughn**.

Bill and Charlotte Ellis made a gift in memory of their parents.

Tom and Judy Ginn made a gift in honor of Editor John Pierce.

The evangelical pope wears leather

By John D. Pierce

Many forms of Christianity — especially the white Americanized version so close at hand — have shifted from a defining emphasis on professing Jesus as Lord and heeding his call to "Follow me."

In its stead is required compliance with a human-manufactured version of "believing the Bible."

Exactly when and how this evolution occurred is for historians and other observers to more fully map out. But it has clearly happened.

This latter and current expression has little to no interest in the life and teachings of Jesus — long taught in Sunday School as the model for faithful and fulfilling living.

Jesus' ways are drowned out by a loudly proclaimed ideology of fear and self-interest. All of which is propped up as somehow being "biblical" and "Christian."

During a recent conversation with church historian friend Walter B. Shurden, he referenced a sermon by Texas pastor Ryon Price in which Catholic priest and author Richard Rohr was quoted.

Price confirmed to me that Rohr, in a retreat session in Lubbock, Texas, conveyed an intriguing idea. It is that Catholics have an infallible pope — while Protestants, who reject papal authority, often do the same thing with the Bible.

Jumping off from there, I would affirm there is strong evidence of an infallible evangelical pope — one dressed in leather vestments. It has allowed for the shift from following Jesus to "believing the Bible" as it is construed for purposes other than reflecting the life and teachings of Jesus.

This observation or critique is pro-Jesus, not anti-Bible. However, those who push such self-serving ideologies as biblical truth are quick to dismiss those who point out their abuses as "not believing the Bible."

The difference is largely in how one views the Bible in relation to its culminating figure and fullest revelation.

And whether one goes searching for obscure, often non-contextual verses to support a favored position of exclusion and personal preference — or accepts Jesus' affirmation that all the laws and prophetic teachings are summed in the two-fold commandment he deemed the greatest.

The problem is not with the Bible itself. The center section of this journal is filled with insightful Bible studies. And we publish others including the 12-volume *Nurturing Faith Bible Commentary* that is in the works.

These studies by Tony Cartledge elevate and reflect the ways of Jesus rather than advancing attitudes and behaviors at odds with his teachings that are presented as "biblical."

Infallibility is often attributed to the Bible. Yet, it is not the Bible per se, but the narrow and often misguided interpretations of the Bible by evangelical authoritarians that get treated as error-free.

As such, the Bible, wrapped in genuine leather, is granted the same infallibility as a pope.

Allegiance is given to selectively and purposefully rendered "biblical truths"— treated as divine authority — even when such conclusions and convictions are substantially and morally at odds with the book's primary character: God draped in flesh.

Getting the masses to embrace this white, Americanized, book-bound pope allows wannabe preacher-politician popes to carry out all matters of dread-driven, falsified hostilities and discrimination in the name of an abused faith.

Often Jesus gets replaced by new authorities, whose primary commitments are best seen in a mirror.

That's why we find hostility and bigotry among those whose Bibles are dog-eared and highlighted with notes in the margin.

Sadly, for all of its intended good, the Bible can be a blunt object that is misused to support harmful causes especially toward the most vulnerable — or "the least of these" as Jesus called the powerless with whom he stood.

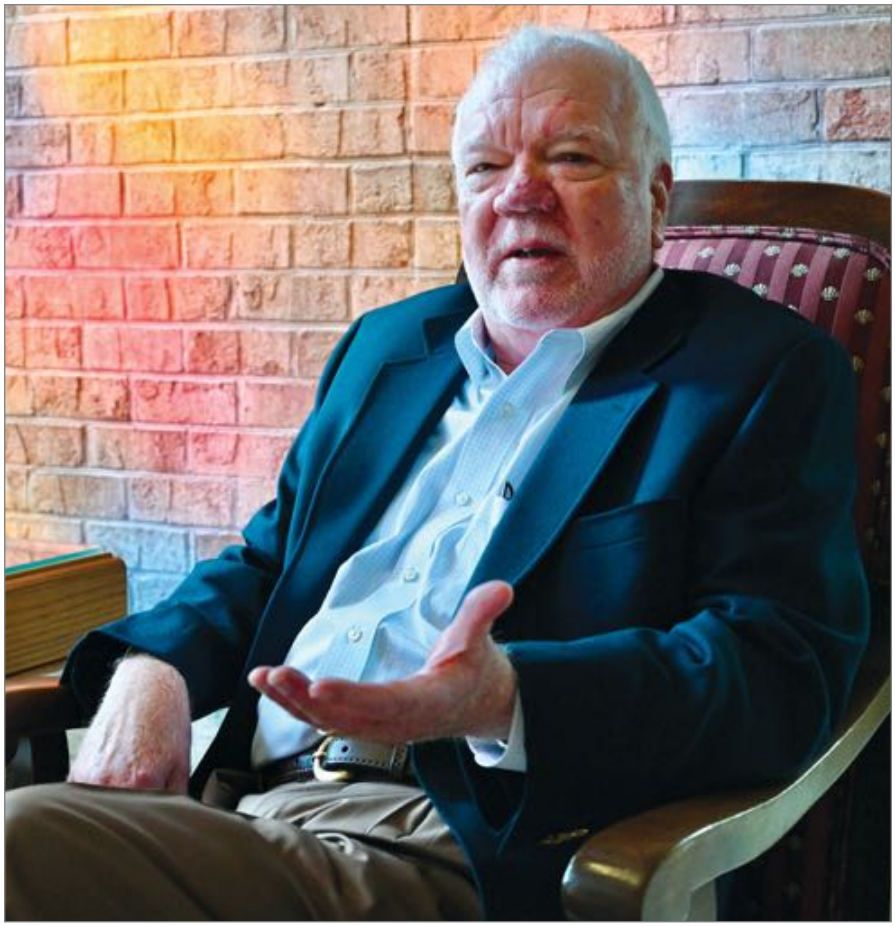
That's why many white Americanized Christians talk so much about what "the Bible says" (supposedly) rather than whether or not what one says and does actually aligns with the life and teachings of Jesus — the one to whom our fullest allegiance and emulation are due. NFJ

CARE MATTERS MOST

Pastor Ed Beddingfield on processing grief, professing faith

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Tragedy struck the Beddingfield family on Christmas Eve 2017.



Pastor Ed Beddingfield, his wife Sarah and their adult daughters, Shannon and Meghan, had returned home from the Christmas Eve service he led at Memorial Baptist Church — adjacent to Campbell University in Buies Creek, N.C.

A sudden house fire erupted, with Ed and Meghan escaping. Sarah died in the fire, and Shannon suffered burns and smoke inhalation.

She would spend weeks in recovery in the Burn Center at North Carolina Memorial Hospital in Chapel Hill.

A Raleigh native, Ed is a graduate of University of North Carolina and Yale Divinity School. He plays guitar, rides a big motorcycle, and expresses himself well in spoken and written words.

More than five years later, Ed continues to process the grief and painful lessons from that experience.

In this conversation with Editor John Pierce he shares some of those reflections.

NFJ: Ed, are there some identifiable stages you have moved through since this tremendous tragedy?

Ed: I grew up in the era when we memorized [Elizabeth] Kubler-Ross on the stages of grief. I don't know that they were so much clinically accurate as they were speculative. But I still hang my hat on those.

She starts with denial. But I can't start there because I couldn't deny it. Our house burned down, my wife died, and my daughter was in the burn unit at the hospital.

So there's no saying it didn't happen or pretending that God was going to swoop in and rescue everybody from it. It was too late.

Anger is another one of the stages. I was proud of myself that I did not get angry at God. I didn't get angry at the circumstances. Things just happen.

But in thinking about meeting with you, for five years I've been burying an anger against a couple of groups of people. It finally dawns on me that was just my grief anger.

It was not undeserved. I have borne that grudge because they trivialized what we were doing.

We were trying to interact with Shannon [in the burn center], and she was drugged up and all that stuff. The chaplains insisted that we stop interacting with her on a real level but instead to say what their books told them we were supposed to say.

I'm only a preacher with 40 years of experience and a fellow in the American Association of Pastoral Counselors (now ACPE) and have five quarters of Clinical Pastoral Education. But they were telling me what to do with my daughter.

I was not supposed to engage with her on what happened but instead whenever she would ask something, I was supposed to say you're in a safe place, everything's fine, you're going to be all right, just lie down and be calm.

"I don't come to the therapy sessions with an agenda. I just show up and see what happens, and it helps."

Because that's what their protocol said. And they said she wouldn't remember anything.

About 10 days in she woke up one night, looked me straight in the eyes and mouthed the words, "Did mom make it?"

And I'm supposed to say "don't worry about it, you're safe, you're in a good place, everything's going to be alright"? I couldn't.

But that was anger. Yes, they were not helpful. But part of getting through it is getting mad at somebody.

They thought I just had a father's need to pretend my daughter was smarter than any other daughter that came down the pike. And I knew she knew what was going on.

I was mad, and that was where my anger came out.

But honestly, I pat myself on the back for not getting mad at God about this. I've preached about that all my life. But I'm just like everybody else. I got mad at somebody.

Then there's bargaining. I did pray a few times for Shannon to pull through a tight spot. She had to go to the ICU and be on a heart/lung machine for four days because her lungs were damaged in the fire.

We had been up there for a week when my other daughter, Meghan, and I came home. The doctor called me at 6 o'clock on a Sunday morning and said they were going to have to put Shannon on the ECMO machine.

He said not to worry about it, that 60 percent of the people who go on that thing survive. I thought: *What the hell?*

But she did. And I prayed a couple of times, "Lord, help her to make it."

That's not usually my prayer. When I visit church people, that's the prayer they want, and I always give them that prayer. But I'll usually say something else like, "nevertheless, not our will but thine be done" or "help us to endure what we're going through."

So I said that prayer a few times, but don't recall attaching any promissory notes to it — like if you'll let her get through, then I'll do this. I don't remember bargaining very much.

Depression is another one of Kubler-Ross' stages. That's sort of my default position for life in general. I certainly feel that.

But, like the anger, just because you're depressed doesn't mean you don't have something to be sad about. I think psychologists have a term they call depressive realism, which means you just acknowledge life is tough.

Once you acknowledge that, you can't go back to pretending it's not. Once you walk through that door and realize how hard life is, you cannot erase that. Once you see it, you can't unsee that kind of thing.

So that's just a part of the baseline of my life. Sometimes I worry that I'm not a good-enough preacher because I'm not as perky as some folks think preachers ought to be.

But part of that is I just know what can happen. So that's a stage I've been through and that goes with me.

Acceptance is one of [Kubler-Ross'] stages also. It doesn't mean that you get over it and move on. It just kind of means you come to terms with it, and you are willing to own up to the meaning of what happened in your life.

You know, I'm lonesome and I'm grateful and I cherish things that I didn't cherish before. Some things that I did cherish before I don't cherish anymore. Thank goodness. So that to me is what acceptance is.

Those are kind of the stages. It does not hurt as often now as it used to. But when it hurts, it still hurts just as much. So I guess that's kind of where I've been through it.

NFJ: Where did you turn internally and externally to deal with this at a personal level?

Ed: First of all, people turned to me. I was just dumbfounded at how much support our family received. This church treated me like I would want a church to treat somebody.

Derek Hogan, over at the [Campbell University] Divinity School, was our chairman of deacons and he just stepped up and filled in. He didn't do the preaching. Other people did all that.

I had just come out of major heart surgery in September before our fire in December. I had a heart valve replacement.

I thought that was the worst thing that was going to happen to me in my life. And I realized that was just the opening act. So people turned to me.

A former youth minister in a church where I was a pastor, Dock Hollingsworth, appeared the next day at the hospital. He is pastor of Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church in Atlanta.

Clay Warf from the North Carolina Baptist Foundation asked what I needed. I said would you go to Belk's and buy me a couple of pairs of khaki pants with pleats in them. We didn't have anything.

My nephew sent me a pair of his shoes. People drove us up to the hospital the night of the fire and stayed with us. Campbell University gave us a place to stay, a house.

A few months later we had a hurricane and a tree fell on the house. So they let us move into a dorm room.

There were so many wonderful things people did for us that I still get teary and just can hardly believe it. A church member bought and sent a winter jacket. A pastor in Chapel Hill would drive by every day or two with a milkshake from Ben and Jerry's.

I am amazed that I let people do that because pastors are pretty good at giving help but not real good at accepting it.

People rose up and helped me without me having to pay attention or asking for it. It was not just material help. It was emotional support. And some still do.

One of my CPE supervisors from 1978 still calls me every two or three months to see how I'm doing. And one of the guys

who was in our class still calls me up. Just personal support from people.

I didn't have any books that got me through or anything like that. I remembered scriptures. I would sit and think about verses I knew.

I see a therapist. I started that pretty soon, and I did it about every two or three weeks for a while. Now I'm seeing him about every two or three months.

I don't come to the therapy sessions with an agenda. I just show up and see what happens, and it helps.

I read a book one time called *Achilles in Vietnam* about posttraumatic stress and what really hurts people, what the pain is that they feel. One of the things that helps the most is telling your story to somebody who seems to understand and care.

I tend to be high-spirited sometimes, and Meghan does too. But we do it in opposite ways and at opposite times. So it was nice to have her there to help me through.

I was not intentional about getting help. I just let it come to me. I feel really good that I did that.

NFJ: All four of you were at home when the fire happened?

Ed: We were. We had finished church and gone home about 9 o'clock.

We had smelled something funny, but we could not locate it. I was sitting in the living room wrapping presents, and then all of the sudden the Christmas tree blew up. So it was probably some kind of electrical thing.

Meghan and I made it right out the back door. Shannon and Sarah tried to get out the front, but the pressure in the house had shut the front door and they couldn't get it open.

Shannon went to her bedroom, and fortunately one of her windows was unlocked and she just raised it up and fell out the window. Sarah headed out another direction but didn't make it — just passed out in the kitchen and died.

NFJ: How has Shannon's recovery gone?

"The trick to grief is not moving through it and coming out the other side. The trick is learning to stagger on while you're carrying these burdens."

Ed: Very well. She still has burn scars. I hope her lungs are OK. That was kind of the worst thing.

She inhaled smoke and was hurt far worse than it looked like while it was happening. When the ambulance people looked in her throat, they just put her in the ambulance and said let's go. She was in the hospital for about six weeks.

Shannon is an extremely stubborn and strong-willed person, and I'm glad of that. I'm proud she is my daughter.

NFJ: What did you learn about grief experientially that you had not learned educationally?

Ed: Well, I don't want to poo-poo the educational stuff because it's important. It just kind of shifts some of your perspective.

I had always conceived of grief as a swamp you walk into, and then you wade through the junk until you finally come out the other side. And I had approached it with church people like that.

When I was doing pastoral care, that was a common way to approach grief. But I have decided — with the help of my therapist — that grief piles up instead of you moving through it.

Every new grief piles up on the griefs you've already had. It brings them back up. It just gets heavier and heavier and heavier.

The trick to grief is not moving through it and coming out the other side. The trick is learning to stagger on while you're carrying these burdens.

It's not always bad. But you don't get over it.

That commercial about shingles says if you had chicken pox, the shingles virus is already inside you. Well, if you've had grief, the grief virus is already inside you and it's going to be there forever. And the next grief is just going to bring it up again.

Also, I learned that it's OK to say the wrong thing.

We've been through those classes where we learn the things you don't tell people. You don't say "God needed another flower in his heavenly garden." You don't say "God makes no mistakes."

Well, a lot of people do say those things. But we learned those are not helpful things to say. Those are hurtful.

What I learned was that it didn't matter what they said. They could say the stupidest stuff, and I didn't care. I was just glad they showed up.

I didn't need to correct them, and I did not judge them for what they said. I was just glad to have people there.

Folks would show up at the hospital. I had a woman from a church I served long ago who I thought didn't like me, and she showed up. It doesn't matter what you say. As a pastor, it does. I don't want to say hurtful stuff. I teach in Tony Cartledge's pastoral ministry class and tell them what to say and not say in grief.

But I will also tell them when it happens to you, you're just glad somebody came — or at least I was. Not everybody's that way.

Something I had learned in grief work that got validated is what I think Viktor Frankl said: It's normal to be crazy when you're in a crazy circumstance.

In grief, people do stupid and crazy things. They just do. You can't fix it. You don't need to change it. They're not going to do that forever. But during grief, they just do that.

And the opposite is also true. It's crazy to act normal when things are crazy.

NFJ: Sounds like we need to always give people in grief the space to act however they want.

Ed: That's right. People don't need to be corrected. They need to be cared for. At least that's what I think.

NFJ: In what ways has this experience changed or confirmed your theology?

Ed: I feel like mostly it has confirmed what I have preached and believed. Somewhere along the way I discarded the idea that God did everything.

I don't remember when that happened. But I don't think I have preached that very much during my 40-plus years as a minister.

I don't believe God causes bad things to happen. And I don't believe God intervenes and sets aside God's laws of physics that God created and made a part of the universe in order to do special favors for folks.

Now maybe God does do that, but I don't need God to do that for me. That didn't mean I didn't pray for Shannon to get well miraculously. But that's more of a cry of a desperate person than it is a statement of theological certainty.

In the King James Version, Rom. 8:28 says something like, "…all things work together for good to those that love God." But the Revised Standard Version translates it as: "in everything God works for good with those who love God."

There's a difference. One is "God makes all things work" and the other is, "*In* all things God works." Those are very different.

I like Harold Kushner's book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People.* This stuff is not God's fault. God is neither to be blamed nor exonerated. It just happened.

I preach that, and I felt like it was true when it happened to me. I also preach that the world is a dangerous place.

Often in the mornings I watch *How the Universe Works.* It always starts with something exploding on the screen.

A friend and I went through high school, college and divinity school together. Then we were both pastors in Warrenton, N.C. There was a hurricane, and he preached a sermon on the idea that it would be nice if we didn't have any hurricanes.

But in order not to, we would have to have a world without water, sunshine, atmosphere and a rotating earth. You put all those things together and they make hurricanes.

They also make a beautiful world. You can't have one without the other. I think that's just the way life is. It's dangerous.

I also preach that death is death. I heard Fred Craddock say you can't have a resurrection if nobody's dead.

Think about the NCAA basketball tournament. Every team goes out a loser except for one and that one loses next year.

I think that is the way death is for us. We're losers when it comes to death.

Jesus did not abolish death. Jesus conquered death. And those are different things.

NFJ: How has this overall experience impacted your work as a pastor?

Ed: I do not say as glibly as I used to that everything will work. My life and your life are different, and what works for me may not work for you; and how God helps me may not be how God helps you.

You just can't treat people's stuff glibly.

I used to say that driving down the road you can look at every house and know there's something wrong. Well, I knew that intellectually, but now I really know it.

You cannot drive by my house and not know that there are wounded people in there. I feel that way about church folks.

Somebody said the thing to remember on Sunday morning is that 90 percent of those people out there are just hanging on by their fingernails. And I think that's true.

"Jesus did not abolish death. Jesus conquered death. And those are different things."

I used to hear people say that something was the worst thing that could happen. And I'd start saying no, it's not. But you can't keep score on who's got the worst thing.

Everybody's thing is the worst for them. Every fear that a child has to the grownup looks trivial, but to the child it's absolutely real.

Cancer or appendicitis or my friend in her 80s who fell and broke her wrist and her femur: That's bad stuff, and it's not less worse than my wife dying and my daughter being hurt and my house burning down.

You just don't keep score. Everybody hurts. People need good loving more than they need good doctrine.

NFJ: What have you learned from this experience that you can share with others who go through such tragedy or seek to be helpful to those who do?

Ed: I don't have anything I can tell somebody that's going to be the magic bullet they need to be helped. What they need is to know that I care about them. That's the thing that matters most. NFJ

Considering the future of youth ministry

By Larry Hovis

Recently I spent a Sunday at a small town "first church" that is typical of many of the congregations related to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Church membership is smaller and older than in its heyday of the mid-to-late 20th century.

A repeated question concerned their desire to reach and minister to younger people — both teenagers and young adults.

They were frustrated not only by the lack of young people in the congregation, but also their inability to attract a paid youth minister. Many congregations are facing the same struggles.

Church leaders assume there is a connection here. They believe their problem with young people stems from the staffing challenge.

For decades, many churches depended on paid youth ministers. In the 1970s, '80s, '90s and early 2000s they were able to hire people to work with youth.

In some churches these youth groups functioned almost like parachurch ministries, operating with their own worship services and programs. That trend began to decline around the turn of the 20th century.

Today, many churches face the challenge of few young people participating in the church *and* no "professional" to lead them.

Is there a connection? If we were able to increase the supply of youth ministers would that solve the problem of fewer young people and aging congregations?

I suspect not. In fact, I wonder if the professionalization of youth ministry actually contributed to this problem.

In their groundbreaking, research-based work, *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (2016, Baker Books), Kara Powell, Jake Mulder and Brad Griffin argue that authentic, intergenerational relationships are essential to reaching, discipling and retaining young people.

Contrast that with the model many churches followed for decades: hiring one person from outside the congregation to serve as the primary connecting point for young people.

Might an unintended consequence of this approach have been that a whole generation (or two) of young people were never fully assimilated into the church? And now, as young-to-median adults, they are not active in the church, and therefore don't make it a priority for their families?

If so, we can't hire ourselves out of this problem (even if there was a steady supply of professional youth ministers, which there isn't). Maybe the future of youth ministry is to learn from our past.

I was a teenager in the 1970s when the modern youth ministry model emerged. But my church was too small to afford a paid youth minister.

Though we didn't have a large number of teenagers, we had a whole team of "youth ministers," lay leaders who taught us in Sunday School and on Sunday nights, who took us on weekend trips and to summer camp.

As high schoolers, we were invited to sing in the adult choir. We felt like full participants in our church family and there were many adults other than our parents we could depend upon.

I have no doubt that a key factor influencing my call to ministry was my experience as a teenager in my home church, surrounded by loving, caring adults. This approach to youth ministry was followed by the majority of churches for most of the 20th century and prior.

Please don't misconstrue my argument as a condemnation of professional youth ministry. I celebrate the churches that are still blessed with such a person on staff, whether they work exclusively with youth, or it is one of several responsibilities.

But there is a lesson here for two types of churches — both those that have a paid youth minister and those that don't. In both cases, the focus should be on intergenerational relationships.

Rather than putting most of the church's energy and resources into programs for youth, it could be placed on helping young people establish positive, healthy relationships with people of all ages throughout the congregation.

My father was a service station owner who worked long hours when I was a child and teenager. He wasn't active in church during those years. When he retired, he was recruited by his church's youth minister to go on their mission trips.

At his funeral, I was moved by the number of young adults who told me how much their relationship with my father meant to them. As they worked together on these trips, they explained, he patiently showed them how to do the assigned tasks, but more importantly he listened to them without judgment, and became a cherished adult friend.

On many days, I am frustrated by the difficulty we face in finding youth ministers for our churches. But on my better days, I think maybe God is showing us a future for youth ministry that lies in our past, as it becomes the responsibility of the whole congregation rather than just the professionals. NFJ

—Larry Hovis is executive coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina.

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Email CBFNC's Ministerial Transitions Team at transitions@cbfnc.org.

This column is provided in collaboration with the Center for Healthy Churches.

Breaking our addiction

By Bill Wilson

Recently I visited an impressive coffee shop in a southern city and noticed a sign above the counter that said simply: "We appreciate your addiction."

From the length of the line required to get my cup of coffee, they weren't kidding.

The historic home that housed this shop was full of trendy patrons; its ambiance warm and inviting. The coffee was superb, even addictive. Cute.

Later that day I heard that same word used in a different, more troubling context. I was talking with a minister whom I regard as one of the brightest, most insightful people I know.

As we talked about some of the challenges of creating a healthy culture in modern congregations, he lamented: "We have fostered an addiction to programs and activities among our people. Rather than invite them to engage in a life journey of faith, they have become addicted to coming here and letting us try and meet their expectations."

The church he serves is amazingly successful. Many people attend every week. However, he knows what too many of us know.

For many, the American church experience is akin to an addiction to a poor substitute for the gospel of Jesus. We've settled for activity over meaning, performance over worship, style over substance, and convenience over commitment.

It's intoxicating, really. For both providers and partakers, this culture of congregational life can easily resemble an addictive spiral that never fully satisfies.

Self-absorbed congregations enable each other to settle for far less than God intended. We may get an occasional glimpse of the beloved community Jesus longs for us to know, but more often than not we fight a sense of yearning for something more.

Addictive behavior is predictable. Left unchallenged, it will escalate and eventually destroy us. Sadly, we are seeing the effects of our untreated addiction play out in church after church.

To what are we addicted? Honestly, we are addicted to ourselves. At the heart of all of us is a craving for the world to revolve around us.

We come from a long line of addicts. James and John were devoted followers of Jesus. They knew first-hand his life-giving power.

They witnessed his transformation. They wrestled with difficult concepts. Jesus had just warned them of his impending death.

Yet, these close disciples come to Jesus in Mark 10:35 with the request of every self-addict who has ever lived: "*Teacher, we want you to do whatever we ask of you.*"

What a moment of audacious self-absorption. I find great hope for our churches in this story.

It reminds me that this addiction is not just the problem of our most obnoxiously narcissistic church members or ministers. This addiction is at the heart of every one of us.

All of us crave a church that will cater to us. We all secretly want our minister to pay special attention to us. Everyone on our pew longs for worship music that pleases them.

If others find our church enjoyable, fine. But in the end, we stand with James and John: We want you to do whatever we ask of you.

How do we break this addictive cycle? You know, don't you?

It all starts with confession. This addiction, this self-absorption, is called sin, and we must begin by admitting we have a problem.

"Hi, my name is Bill, and I'm an addict. I have spent my whole life creating God in my own image. I'm addicted to me."

There is no quick cure for this addiction; it can only be treated and managed.

Every week I can come to worship and be reminded that the universe does not revolve around me. In groups small and large, I can be prodded to find my life by losing it, not by clinging to it.

Along with a loyal community of fellow believers, I can discover real joy as I give myself away in service.

Gradually, we can help fellow addicts find a new way to live, freed from our hubris. Our church can turn its attention away from familiar patterns of self-gratification toward a community around us desperate for the hope of the Good News.

It is not going to be easy. We clergy have enabled and trained others well in their addiction.

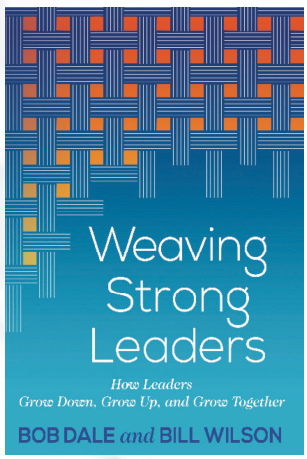
There will be relapses. But in the end, together, we can break the cycle and discover the abundant life Jesus intended for us.

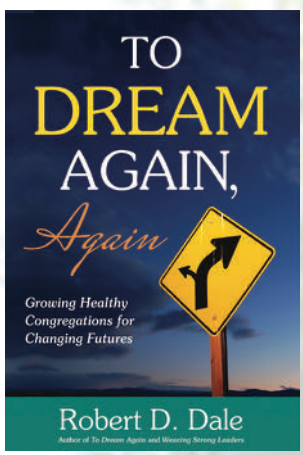
James and John did. Just a few weeks after uttering these shameful words, they were transformed into radically servant-minded leaders.

Healthy churches cannot afford to appreciate self-addiction. We must be challenged with the same words offered to those two disciples: "The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve." NFJ

—Bill Wilson is founding director of the Center for Healthy Churches.

HEALTHY CHURCH RESOURCES





Healthy Church Resources are a collaborative effort of the Center for Healthy Churches, the Eula Mae and John Baugh Foundation, and Good Faith Media.

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Following footsteps

By Mitch Randall

During the spring, Good Faith Media hosted a civil rights experience in Birmingham, Selma, and Montgomery, Ala. Starlette Thomas and Bruce Gourley guided participants through a difficult period in American history.

The group began in Birmingham, visiting Fred Suttlesworth's home that was bombed on Christmas Day 1956.

We mourned at the 16th Street Baptist Church, where another bomb killed four little girls in 1963.

Then we walked through Kelly Ingram Park, remembering the water hoses, dogs and clubs used against marchers demanding civil rights.

The next day, the group traveled to Selma — the site of Bloody Sunday in 1965. Hundreds of civil rights activists were clubbed, and tear-gassed by state and local police after they crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

As our group walked over the bridge, we could feel the sacredness beneath our feet where foot soldiers marched for freedom.

Finally, we made our way to Montgomery to Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, where Martin Luther King Jr. served as pastor during the 1955 bus boycott.

We stood at the front of the church, where centuries earlier slaves were auctioned off to the highest bidder. It was a somber reminder of how cruel humans can be to their fellow humans.

As moving and troubling as these experiences were for our group, I experienced another level of sadness. With each step on Alabama soil, I was reminded of my Indigenous ancestors.

Alabama was the ancestral land of my people, the Muscogee Creeks, before their removal by the U.S. government.

In those woods and on the rolling hills, my ancestors hunted, fished, and enjoyed life before the European invasion. I listened quietly to the winds, trying to hear the voices of brave warriors, women working, and children playing. Their voices echoed in my ears the entire time I was in Alabama.

Photo of the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Ala., courtesy of Starlette Thomas.

From the Muscogee Creeks to the civil rights activists, the experience in Alabama was life-changing. Following in the footsteps of my ancestors and civil rights icons. I could not help but feel a deep connection. Their memories and legacies must live on.

As people of good faith, we need to make certain their stories are told. Their lives before encountering white supremacy testify to thriving ancient cultures in North America and Africa.

The painful and terrifying encounters recalled in the U.S. offer evidence of what humans are capable of if they believe they are superior to others.

The struggles and battles for freedoms and rights are essential parts of the American story. Unfortunately, some people wish to gloss over these brutal truths of history.

Instead, they want to alter history, making it sound like Indigenous peoples and African descendants were fortunate to encounter their European counterparts.

While we should celebrate the incredible accomplishments of our country, we must also mourn and learn from those darker times. America continues to be a great experiment, but if we do not learn from our previous mistakes, we will never reach the goal of a more perfect union.

Therefore, let us move forward in love by being honest about our past while striving to do better in the future.

Standing in front of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, I could not help but hear the voice of MLK Jr. when he said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

May his words echo in our ears as we follow in the footsteps of saints. NFJ

—-Mitch Randall is CEO of Good Faith Media.

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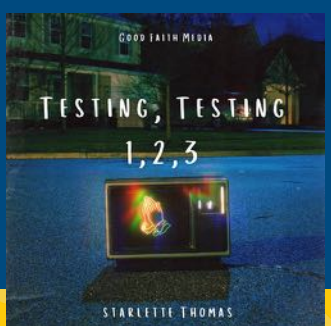


NOW AVAILABLE: *TESTING, TESTING 1,2,3*

"Testing, Testing, 1, 2, 3," is a limited series by Rev. Dr. Starlette Thomas and named for the three wilderness temptations of Jesus. Each episode reminds Christians that they must have "ears to hear" what the Spirit is saying, namely that one's calling comes with testing.

Hermeneutic of the gospel

By John R. Franke

As the designation *missio Dei* makes clear, the mission of God belongs to God, not the church. The followers of Jesus are dependent on the power and presence of God for its fulfillment.

Having said that, it is also important to understand that God has chosen us to share in this work. To be sure, it will not happen without God, but neither will it happen without our faithful participation.

We are called not just to believe the gospel, not just to believe in Jesus, but to *become* the gospel by being disciples of Jesus.

In this way we share in God's life: by sharing in God's work of bringing about the world God intends.

Hence, the mission of the church needs to reflect the scope and size of God's intentions for the world. What might this look like?

One helpful description is the "Five Marks of Mission," a kind of mission for the worldwide Anglican Communion. While these "marks" are not a complete definition of mission, they are rich with significance and point effectively to the holistic scope of God's work in the world. They are:

- Evangelism: to proclaim the good news of God's Kingdom
- Formation: to teach, baptize, and nurture new believers
- Compassion: to respond to human need by loving service
- Justice: to seek to transform unjust structures of society
- Creation Care: to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

All of these intrinsically flow from the commitment to the Lordship of Jesus and the establishment of the Kingdom of God, a world in which God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

The realization of this vision accounts for Jesus' commission to his followers at the end of Matthew's gospel to go and make disciples of the nations, teaching them to obey everything he commanded — the ways of the Kingdom.

The making of disciples is God's plan for creating a new world and establishing the Kingdom of God. In other words, it is an intrinsic part of the mission of God in the world.

Missionary theologian Lesslie Newbigin has articulated the centrality of Christian congregational formation for the work of God in the world, suggesting that the church is the primary reality that needs to be accounted for and developed if we are to see a demonstrable Christian impact on public life in an increasingly secular world.

In making this assertion, Newbigin does not discount the importance of the numerous activities Christians engage in public life with the claims and implications of the gospel such as special events, conferences, evangelistic work, the distribution of Bibles and Christian literature, etc.

While these are significant and worthwhile, he maintains they are ultimately of secondary importance and only have power to accomplish the purposes for which they are intended as they arise from, are firmly rooted in, and lead inextricably back to a believing community.

He writes: "How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it" (*The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 227).

Such a community makes sense of the claims of the gospel by demonstrating to the world what this lived reality looks like in a concrete, here-and-now fashion.

Such all-encompassing, interdependent individual and communal formation is precisely what is called for in the New Testament. It is genuine participation in the mission of God. It is discipleship in the way of Jesus that has the capacity to change the world and bring about God's intentions for creation.

David Bosch concludes that the comprehensive nature of the divine mission demands a more integral and holistic understanding of the character of salvation and therefore, the mission of the church, than has traditionally been the case.

"Salvation is as coherent, broad, and deep as the needs and exigencies of human existence. Mission therefore means being involved in the ongoing dialogue between God, who offers salvation, and the world, which — enmeshed in all kinds of evil — craves that salvation (*Transforming Mission*, p. 400).

It is this divine mission of salvation that shapes the vocation of the church sent into the world to continue the work of Jesus. As he was sent, so he sends the church.

As the church lives into its calling to participate in the divine mission as a sign, instrument and foretaste of God's reign, it functions as a hermeneutic of the gospel and bears witness to the good news of God's unceasing love for the world. NFJ

—John R. Franke is theologian in residence at Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis, and general coordinator for the Gospel and Our Culture Network.

THEOLOGY IN THE PEWS

Building a church, building community are different

By Starlette Thomas

"Here is the church. Here is the steeple. Open the doors and see all the people."

It was easier to explain the church and my decision to go to the building each week when I was a child. It is harder to explain the church now — and even harder to explain why people should go as an adult.

It is not so simple now. Building a church is hard, but building a community is even harder.

"I grew up in the church." It's what people who converted to Christianity as children say, when parents took them to church as children.

For many believers whose families practice Christianity, it is one of the first buildings we are introduced to. Before school buildings, we enter a church building and some of our first memories are there.

Here is the church and there I am in this picture, right there in the middle.

We were a church family. Church buildings were havens, community centers and second homes even. We spent our weekends and summers there.

But those days are long gone. Before the pandemic caused by COVID-19, people were already exiting, looking for the door.

While deconstructing my faith, I am sifting through my ecclesiology, what the church leaders taught me and rebuilding my belief system.

To my surprise, it does not include brick and mortar. Instead, I am looking for community.

Howard Thurman pins down my goal exactly in *The Search for Common Ground*: "I have been on the scent of the tie that binds life at a level so deep that the final privacy of the individual would be reinforced rather than threatened. I have always wanted to be *me* without making it difficult for you to be *you*."

I am not concerned about the appearance of the building. I have never been. With or without a steeple, it makes no difference to me.

I am looking at the people and for clear exits in case I need to leave. I am resisting religious activity, living into the rhythm of the Sabbath, and leaning into words such as those of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who wrote in *The Sabbath:*

> To set apart one day a week for freedom, a day on which we would not use the instruments which have been so easily turned into weapons of destruction, a day for being with ourselves, a day of detachment from the vulgar, of independence of external obligations, a day on which we stop worshipping idols of technical civilization, a day on which we use no money, a day of armistice in the economic struggle with our fellow men and the forces of nature — is there any institution that holds out a greater hope for (human) progress than the Sabbath?

This is so different from what I often see on Sunday mornings, a mere observance and timed worship of the God we claim to love with all our heart, soul and mind.

I want to practice the Sabbath. I don't want a weekly religious observation but a way of being and seeing the world. I want to live according to or through this time and space.

America is anti-sabbath with all its trappings and commercial distractions. Frankly, the North American church is too.

When I join a church, it is not because of the shiny doorknobs, stained glass windows or comfortable seating. I don't fall in love with the red carpet or the fellowship hall and the coffee there.

I'm not struck by the framed pictures of the previous male pastors that line the walls and imagine myself returning week after week to study their faces. I'm not chomping at the bit to join a committee or ministry.

No, it is because of the sense of community. It's the fellowship, *koinonia*. That's not something one can build but a connectedness that is intentionally cultivated.

That's not something one can schedule on a Sunday morning with a warm welcome or an opportunity to greet one's neighbor in the next pew. That "tie that binds life at a level so deep" takes time and is the difference between building a church and building community. NFJ

Your name is not in this column, and you should be okay with that!

By Brett Younger

If someone asked us to name 10 celebrities, we could do it in less than a minute: Beyoncé, Taylor Swift, Rihanna, Tom Cruise, Adam Sandler, Harrison Ford, Kanye West — is Kanye still a celebrity? What about Joe Biden, Donald Trump, and Hillary Clinton? Do they count as celebrities?

We can name celebrities who would enjoy being our friends. I feel certain that Stephen Colbert and I would have a great time hanging out together. We both grew up in the South, live in New York, and have taught Sunday School. (Stephen, if you're reading this, give me a call.)

If someone asked us to name our personal heroes — the people we admire and want to be more like — that would be harder. After a while, we would come up with a few people — parents, grandparents, teachers, mentors — we respect. Most of them are not famous.

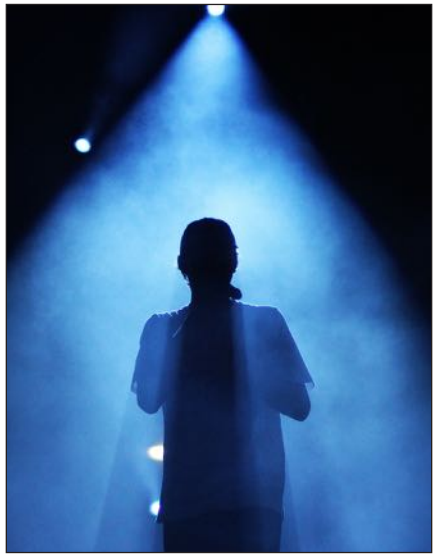
In Glittering Voices, Rebecca DeYoung writes: "When we compare what celebrities are renowned for and what our heroes are admired for, we typically find a chasm between the two — people whose glory far outstrips the value of the goods for which they receive it and people whose worth far outstrips any glory they will ever receive."

Even so, the longing for fame trickles down. Celebrities are not the only ones who love applause. We like the merit badges that come with our profession. We want the perks that come with being important.

We want to divide the world into us and those who are not as important as us.

We ask, "What do you do?" and make quick judgments on others' occupations. We say, "That's a great job" or think "That's not impressive."

We ask, "Where do you live?" and think, "That's an excellent neighborhood" or "That's a little shaky."



"Where did you go to school?" leads us to think "That is better than my school" or "That is not as good as my school."

"Where do your kids go to college?" either pleases us, as in "My kids win" or it's "I should've made them study more."

When we wear something new and attractive, someone needs to point out that we look good. Someone needs to notice when we have lost 10 pounds or washed the dishes. Our desire for approval leads to self-preoccupation. We either take too many selfies or feel superior to those who take too many selfies.

Today's peacock is tomorrow's feather duster. Rebecca DeYoung again: "Good looks and athleticism fade quickly with age, the fashions of the day have an arbitrariness that defies reason, career titles are pretentiously euphemistic, and a perfectly decorated, perfectly clean house does not make a home."

We don't need the fake "aw shucks, look how humble I am" humility. We need the humility that understands the emptiness of self-centeredness.

In *Wishful Thinking*, Frederick Buechner explains: "Humility is often confused with saying you're not much of a bridge player when you know perfectly well you are. Conscious or otherwise, this kind of humility is a form of gamesmanship. If you really aren't much of a bridge player, you're apt to be rather proud of yourself for admitting it so humbly. This kind of humility is a form of low comedy. True humility doesn't consist of thinking ill of yourself but of not thinking of yourself much differently from the way you would be apt to think of anybody else. Humility is the capacity for being no more and no less pleased when you play your own hand well than when your opponents do."

We can enjoy other people's well-played hands, gifts, and contributions. We can act in ways that would puzzle the paparazzi if we had any, by acting with kindness.

In *The Greatest Showman*, P.T. Barnum considers what remains when the fame fades way. After spending too many years chasing glory, he acknowledges the dark side of that pursuit. Returning to his senses and his family, he promises them "from now on, these eyes will not be blinded by the lights."

Some of the lights that blind us are not spotlights, but 40-watt bulbs. We can give up our place in the spotlight of our own attention. We can admit that it is not about us. We can appreciate genuine goodness wherever we find it.

Stephen Colbert writes: "If you love friends, you will serve your friends. If you love community, you will serve your community. If you love money, you will serve your money. And if you love only yourself, you will serve only yourself. And you will have only yourself."

My friend gets it. NFJ

—Brett Younger is the senior minister of Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, N.Y.

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JULY/ AUGUST 2023

The Bible Lessons that anchor the Nurturing Faith Bible Studies are written by Tony Cartledge in a scholarly, yet applicable, style from the wide range of Christian scriptures. A graduate of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (M.Div) and Duke University (Ph.D.), and with years of experience as a pastor, writer, and professor at Campbell University, he provides deep insight for Christian living without "dumbing down" the richness of the biblical texts for honest learners.

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Season After Pentecost
Lessons Old and New

IN THIS ISSUE

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

July 2, 2023

Genesis 22:1-19

Saved by the Bell

Some things are nearly unthinkable. No thought is more horrid than the idea of binding one's only child, laying them on an altar, slicing their throat, and lighting a sacrificial fire. Yet, the Bible insists that God asked Abraham to do that very thing to determine if he was truly faithful and worthy of the promised blessings.

As it has come down to us, the story is both warmly touching and deeply troubling. It speaks of confident faith on the part of Abraham and Isaac: Abraham trusts God, and Isaac trusts Abraham. Yet, such testing seems abusive. Would God really command a father who had waited 100 years for a son to take that beloved child and return him to God as a burnt sacrifice?

While modern readers may debate the question, the biblical writer did not, and we must deal with the story from his perspective. Note how the writer masterfully evokes deep emotion without using a single word of feeling. He never speaks of fear, or pain, or heartache, or conflicting emotions – and yet the artful and often repetitive arrangement of actions and words grabs the reader's heart, and squeezes it hard.

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He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me. (Gen. 22:12)

A Terrifying Test (vv. 1-8)

As the old story is told, the narrator knows it is a test, and the reader knows (v. 1), but Abraham knows only that God has told him to "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on the mountain that I shall show you" (v. 2).

How could Abraham not protest? Why was there no questioning? Could anyone conceivably trust God so ardently that they would slaughter a child with no word of complaint?

As alien as it seems to us, some ancient cults practiced child sacrifice, and Abraham would likely have known of the practice. Even when faced with an apparent command to follow suit with the son of the promise, Abraham is portrayed as an icon of trustfulness, and any recriminations or self-doubts he might have entertained remain hovering in the background.

Abraham's dilemma engages the reader deeply: we must imagine what was going on in Abraham's mind and heart and belly as he got up early the next morning, chopped wood for the sacrificial pyre, bound it onto his donkey, and gathered his son and two servants to begin a long journey fraught with uncertainty (v. 3).

Sarah does not appear in this story, though she had a prominent role in the previous chapter: the future lies in Abraham's hands alone. Will he follow through? If he does, what will happen to the promise? Will Sarah have yet another child somewhere past 110 years old?

The narrator portrays the three-day walk as passing in dreamlike silence. No words are reported until the third day, when Abraham saw the mountain ahead and told the servants to stay with the donkey while "the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you" (v. 5). "We will come back to you." Was Abraham convinced that God would let him escape the wrenching task ahead, or was he misleading the servants to keep them ignorant of his plans? Surely, they, like Isaac, would have known that everything needed was present except the sacrifice.

Tension builds as the author tells how Abraham laid the large bundle of wood on his son's back – indicating that Isaac would have been a young man of some size – while Abraham himself carried a smoldering pot of coals and a sharp knife (v. 6). The implication is that a boy might hurt himself if entrusted with such items, but both the danger and the items rest with Abraham.

As they walked, Isaac spoke for the first and only time, voicing the long-unspoken question: "Father! … The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" (v. 7).

Again, we do not know if Abraham's reply reveals exorbitant trust or careful dissimulation: "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son" (v. 8). Abraham knew that Isaac was the

intended victim, but God had also provided Isaac, so his response could be truthful without being specific.

For the second time, we are told that "the two of them walked on together" – a poignant picture that needs no further description.

A tension-filled climax (vv. 9-14)

Once they had arrived at the mountain – traditionally identified as Mt. Zion, the future home of Jerusalem and the temple – the narrative moves quickly, as if the author wants to resolve the tension quickly.

Abraham built an altar, no doubt with Isaac's help in gathering large stones and fitting them into a stable platform. He laid wood for the fire and "bound his son Isaac" with no reported resistance or protest from the boy, though it's hard to imagine such a thing could have been done in silence. He then took his beloved son and "laid him on the altar, on top of the wood" (v. 9).

The pivotal moment arrives with v. 10, as "Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son." The word for "kill" normally means "slaughter," as in slaughtering an animal by slitting its throat. Can you imagine Isaac lying with throat bared and terror in his eyes? Can you stand with Abraham as he took Isaac's hair in one hand and held the knife poised in the other, trying to work up the nerve to begin the downward slice?

At what point did the angel of Yahweh step in to stop Abraham's hand? Did he wait until Abraham had committed to the stroke, or call out as soon as he raised the knife? We don't know, but our stomachs twist at the thought. Finally, mercifully, God spoke: "Abraham, Abraham!" We can feel the hope in Abraham's heart as he replied "Here I am!" (v. 12).

And then there was relief: "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me" (v. 12).

"Now I know." Did God not know? Was the test really necessary? The author does not explain: his purpose is to magnify Abraham's trust rather than to question God's justice. As Abraham "lifted his eyes and saw" the mountain earlier that day (v. 4), now he "lifted his eyes and saw" a ram in a thicket of brush, held fast by his entangled horns but remaining silent until the crucial moment.

Abraham caught the ram and offered it as a sacrifice in place of his son, praising God by calling the place "*Yahweh Yireh*," usually translated as "the LORD will provide" (v. 14) What the traumatized young man thought of the whole scenario remains unexplored.

A renewed blessing (vv. 15-19)

With Abraham having passed the test, Yahweh uttered a surprising oath, repeating and expanding on previous promises to make Abraham's offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sand of the seashore, so prosperous that other nations would share in the blessing.

With no further fanfare or mention of Isaac, the text says Abraham returned to the servants he had left at the foot of the mountain, and they all returned to Abraham's camp in Beersheba, and life went on.

What might this story – and Jesus' story – say to modern believers who seek to please God? Hebrews 2:18, speaking of Jesus, reminds us that "Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested." Paul, in writing to the Corinthians, insisted that "God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it" (1 Cor. 10:13).

This dark story may seem troubling, but it is worth the stress it may cause us. It is a masterpiece of literature, written with a simple economy of style that points inexorably toward one single question: "Could you pass this test? Would you be willing to sacrifice your child for God?"

Before we respond with a blithe, "I don't think so," we must ask if the better question may be "To which god and on what altar will we sacrifice them?" Will we ignore our children and sacrifice them to the god of success or business or personal achievement? Will we fail to teach them the importance of love and ethical behavior, thus sacrificing them to the god of selfishness? Will we raise our children apart from the fellowship of God's people, without teaching them about the living God of the universe, sacrificing them on the altar of our own faithlessness?

There is a risk involved in teaching our children about the power of God and the love of Jesus. They may take us seriously. They may determine to love other people even when it is difficult, to serve others even when it is dangerous, or to give of themselves in manifold ways for the glory and the love of God. It's a risk we take when we carry them up the mountain of faith and introduce them to the wild and awesome God of Abraham.

We are not called to slaughter our children on a bloody altar. Yet, no faith, no ethic, no religion is worth having if it does not ask for sacrifice. Christianity makes no claim to be a religion without cost, a cuddle-blanket designed only to meet the needs of its adherents. What are we willing to sacrifice for God?

NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

July 9, 2023

Genesis 24:34-67

A Long Backstory

And they blessed Rebekah and said to her, "May you, our sister, become thousands of myriads; may your offspring gain possession of the gates of their foes." (Gen. 24:0)

All of us are on a journey as we go through life. When we meet someone else for the first time, much about them remains a mystery: we don't know where they have been, what they have experienced, what stories have shaped their lives.

Novelists, movie directors, and television producers often take advantage of this by utilizing flashback scenes designed to fill in parts of their stories.

For example, the movie version of *Forrest Gump* opens with a feather gently riding the soft currents of a warm Savannah breeze, then landing on the foot of a young man who sits at attention while waiting on a bench at a bus stop. We don't know who he is, why he is on the bench, or why he speaks so oddly – but we learn through a series of flashbacks what has brought Forrest to that point, and who he has come to see.

Biblical accounts may also have backstories that are important if we are to understand the characters involved. Today's text provides the background to a series of studies from the memorable life of the patriarch Jacob, one of the Bible's most colorful characters.

A servant's mission (vv. 34-38)

The lectionary text plops us down in the middle of an elongated narrative. A servant of Abraham is making a speech before dinner in the home of one of Abraham's relatives. He is 500 miles from Abraham's camp in the Negev, having traveled to the northern city of Haran, now in southern Turkey. Why was he there, and what did he hope to accomplish?

We need to know the backstory.

The tale began with Abraham, whom God had called to become the father of a great nation at a time when Abraham and his wife Sarah were childless, old, and unlikely to become parents (Gen. 12:1-9). After many years and several misadventures, the aged Sarah miraculously gave birth to a son, and they named him Isaac (Gen. 21:1-7).

Following the harrowing story in which Isaac survived a near-death experience when an angel cut short a test of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son on an altar (Genesis 22), the text fast-forwards through Isaac's adolescence and young adulthood. Our story begins when Isaac has reached 40 years of age and is grieving for his mother, who had recently died (Genesis 23).

Sarah's death prompted Abraham to seek a wife for Isaac. Astute readers may wonder why Isaac had not followed custom and married long before. Did he lack initiative? We can only speculate why Abraham waited until Sarah died to arrange his son's marriage.

Not wanting Isaac to marry among the Canaanites, Abraham sent a trusted servant on a long journey north to his extended family in Haran (Gen. 11:31). The servant is not named, but would likely have been his steward Eliezer, who would have been Abraham's heir if no children had been born (Gen. 15:2).

We enter the story after Abraham had assigned his servant the task, swearing him to fidelity through an oath that involved touching his genitals (24:1-9). With a caravan of 10 loaded camels, the story claims, the servant completed the long journey. On the outskirts of the city, he stopped by a well to pray for God to show him a suitable wife for Isaac by means of a test.

Drawing water was considered women's work, so Abraham's envoy knew that young women would be coming to the well. He proposed to God that whichever maiden offered to not only give him a drink, but also to draw water for his sizeable train of camels, would be the one chosen for Isaac (24:10-14). He was overjoyed when a vivacious young woman soon appeared and volunteered to do that very thing (24:15-21).

Convinced that his prayers had been answered, the servant presented the young woman a gold nose ring and two heavy gold bracelets before learning that she was Rebekah, the granddaughter of Abraham's brother Nahor, and thus a perfect match for Isaac (12:22-24). When Rebekah invited the servant to lodge at the family compound, he offered a heartfelt prayer of thanksgiving (24:25-28). Once there, he met the woman's brother, Laban, who took notice of Rebekah's new jewelry before

taking charge of the camels and inviting the servant to dinner.

Today's text picks up just as dinner is served, but the servant refused to be seated or to eat before announcing his mission. In short order, he described the backstory (24:29-33). He related how Abraham had amassed great wealth, how Isaac had been born, and how he had been sent to procure a wife for Abraham's heir. The servant noted how Abraham insisted that he choose a wife from his extended family, but tactfully omitted the patriarch's instruction that Isaac should under no circumstance travel to Haran (24:6).

An answered prayer (vv. 42-53)

Having explained his presence, the servant related how he had prayed for God to reveal the chosen woman by means of her willingness to water the camels, how Rebekah had met every requirement, and how he had thanked God for answered prayer.

The servant then put the wedding ball in his hosts' court: Would the family agree to a marriage between Rebekah and Isaac?

While Rebekah remained silent, her father Bethuel and brother Laban politely protested that there was little for them to say. Since Yahweh's will had been made known, they could hardly oppose a match made in heaven (vv. 50-51). Pleasantries aside, Rebekah's family could still expect the payment of a generous dowry and other gifts of hospitality. The servant did not disappoint them, giving thanks to God before distributing rich gifts to Rebekah and other family members (vv. 52-53).

A marriage made in Haran (vv. 54-67)

Rebekah's family sought to delay her departure for 10 days of farewells, but the steward insisted on leaving immediately (vv. 54-57). Finally, Rebekah was given a voice in the matter. We might expect a dramatic speech, but her only recorded words were "I will" (v. 58). Rebekah's willing attitude to travel far from home and marry a man she had never seen reminds us of Abraham's readiness to heed God's call and leave his family behind as he followed God's leadership to the land of promise.

Fittingly, Rebekah's family blessed her as she left – a literary pointer to the father's blessing that Rebekah would later help her son Jacob steal from his brother Esau. The blessing itself – a wish for many offspring who would prosper and "gain possession of the gates of their foes" – also foreshadows Israel's efforts to take possession of the "Promised Land" many years later, after the exodus from Egypt.

The long journey south to the Negev (a near-desert area in southern Israel) is passed over quickly, but the initial meeting between the two lovers-to-be plays out in almost cinematic style. From atop her camel, Rebekah saw Isaac at a distance, then slid to the ground and covered her face with a veil, as was the custom before a wedding.

The narrator passes over any mention of a marriage ceremony. He says only that Isaac "brought her into his mother Sarah's tent" where "he took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her" (24:67).

These few frames of action require some unpacking. The significance of Isaac taking Rebekah to his mother Sarah's tent is that she becomes the new matriarch of the family. Abraham had apparently remarried after Sarah's death (25:1), but his wife Keturah did not get Sarah's tent. That belonged to Rebekah, through whom the promised line would continue.

Although the new union was an arranged marriage, we are told that "Isaac loved her," and was comforted after his mother's death. The text says nothing about whether Rebekah loved Isaac, but her earlier eagerness to get on with the journey suggests that she was a willing partner in the marriage.

The story of Isaac and Rebekah's marriage seems far removed from courtship as known in Western culture, though arranged marriage is still the custom in some Eastern cultures.

What might Christians in a modern Western context learn from this account of a strange practice in a strange land?

We first consider how the story fits into the larger context. Genesis 12–50, often called the "Patriarchal History," focuses on themes of divine guidance and human obedience in the lives of the Hebrew ancestors, and of God's covenant promise to Abraham that he would become "a great nation" (Gen. 12:2). Each generation of patriarchs faced tests of faith and had to overcome obstacles before seeing the birth of children: Isaac himself is most famous for having been born, after all hope had failed, to a 100-year-old father and a 90-year-old mother.

For the line to continue and for Abraham's future people to grow, Isaac would also have to marry and have children. The servant's experience of answered prayer is replete with the theme of divine guidance, reminders that God desires to be at work in the lives of those who seek to follow God's way.

Our stories may not be as dramatic as this one, but we can trust that we are not alone in this world. We may recognize it more often in retrospect than prospect, but can we point to ways in which God has been at work in our lives? NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

July 16, 2023

Genesis 25:19-34

Birth Rights and Wrongs

One doesn't have to be particularly observant to note that our outcome in life has a lot to do with the family into which we are born. Children born to privilege in well-off families who value education and have connections are more likely to enjoy prosperity than those who grow up in poverty. Even in the same family, some children may have less than equal opportunity if one child is clearly favored over another.

Do any of those life scripts resonate with you? How we think of ourselves in relation to the world – as winners or losers, as competent or hopeless – can have a great impact on whether we find success in life, or whether we surrender to our own script of failure.

The book of Genesis contains the story of a man who seemed born to lose. His name was Esau. Esau's brother Jacob would have a different script. A look at the brothers might offer helpful insights as we imagine what lies ahead for us.

Esau was technically the eldest, having been born first, but his twin brother Jacob was the chosen one, destined to become the progenitor of the famous 12 tribes of Israel. Stories about Jacob also became a means through which Israel could see itself facing difficult obstacles (some self-inflicted), but surviving.

That, at least, is how the story is told.

> *And the LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two nations born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger." (Gen. 25:23)*

Both boys were born into a dysfunctional family. Isaac, their father, favored Esau. Jacob was his mother Rebekah's favorite, and it seemed obvious to all concerned.

A common motif in Genesis 12–50 is that all the various matriarchs had difficulty getting pregnant at some point. God had promised countless progeny to Abraham, but his wife Sarah remained childless until a miracle baby was born when she was 90 years old, according to the story.

We are not surprised, then, to learn that Isaac and Rebekah also had trouble conceiving a child (v. 21). This had apparently been the case for 20 years: Isaac is said to have been 40 years old when he married Rebekah (v. 20), but 60 years old when Jacob and Esau were born (v. 26). Many things had happened in the intervening years – probably including most of what takes place in chapter 26, where children are not mentioned. Ancient Hebrew writers cared far less than modern writers about following a careful chronological order: since the most important thing for us to know about Isaac is that he was Jacob's father, this story is told first.

Two prayers and an oracle (vv. 21-23)

We never read that Abraham prayed for Sarah to conceive, though we might presume that he did. Stories about Isaac are limited, but the text says that he prayed for an end to Rebekah's barrenness. Whether he had prayed during the previous 20 years we do not know, but on this occasion "the LORD granted his prayer, and Rebekah conceived" (v. 21). Not only did Rebekah conceive; she was bearing twins.

Rebekah also prayed, according to the story, not in order to get pregnant, but because her pregnancy proved to be exceedingly difficult. The twins "struggled together" in her womb, according to the text. Literally, "they crushed each other," a foreshadowing of things to come. The travails of carrying active twins made Rebekah so miserable that she sought refuge – if not answers – in prayer (v. 22a).

More specifically, the narrator says that "Rebekah went to inquire of the LORD" (v. 22b). This is the same terminology used in later years to describe a visit to a sanctuary or a conversation with a priest, in which one would seek a divine oracle.

In Rebekah's day, however, there was no sanctuary or priesthood dedicated to the God of Abraham, unless we are to presume something related to Melchizedek of Salem (possibly Jerusalem), who is called "priest of the God Most High (*El Elyôn*)" in Gen. 14:18. A tradition holds that he had blessed Abraham, who reportedly paid tithes to him (14:20). Melchizedek is not mentioned again in the patriarchal narratives, however, and we have no way of knowing where or how Rebekah went about "inquiring of the LORD," or who pronounced the oracle we find in v. 23.

Despite the technical language, perhaps the reader is to imagine that

Rebekah found a quiet place to pray, and God spoke directly to her.

The oracle speaks to the reason for Rebekah's difficult pregnancy (twins), and renders a prophecy of how the brothers' lives would play out. The cryptic oracle is couched in poetry, as shown in this rather literal translation, with suggested clarifications in parentheses:

Two nations (are) in your womb,

And two peoples from your belly will be separated.

And (one) people will be stronger than the (other) people,

And (the) great (older?) will serve the small (younger?).

The firstborn son, it seems, was born to lose.

Two births and a struggle (vv. 24-26)

The narrator's description of the twins' birth is awash in wordplay. Esau is described as "red" (*'admônî*) the same word translated as "Edomite." The land inhabited by the Edomites is characterized by reddish sandstone mountains, scrub, and deserts. Esau is also depicted as "hairy," using a word that sounds like "Seir," an alternate name for the Edomites' homeland. The name "Esau" also draws on some of the same sounds.

Jacob is said to have been born holding on to Esau's heel (*'aqav*), and thus he is called "*Ya'aqov*" which could mean something akin to "heel-grabber," "supplanter," "grasper," or "overreacher."

We note that the narrator describes Esau entirely in physical terms. We are told what he looked like (red and hairy), but not what he did. In contrast, the storyteller describes Jacob only in terms of action: we don't know what he looked like, but are told that he was grabbing at Esau's heel, as if trying to pull his twin brother back and beat him out of the womb. Jacob's competitive nature is clear from the beginning: he was determined to win.

Two boys and a bad deal (vv. 27-34)

The story of the boys' disparate proclivities and their parents' dysfunctional partiality is familiar. Isaac was partial to Esau because he loved to eat wild game, and Esau was the ancient equivalent of a man who wears camouflage and drives a pickup truck with a gun rack in the back. Jacob, on the other hand, was a homeboy who enjoyed cooking, which pleased his mother.

As the narrator had telescoped Isaac and Rebekah's years of childlessness into a single verse, so Esau and Jacob are granted just one verse for childhood and adolescence. In vv. 25-26, they were born. In v. 27, they "grew up" and became men – men who lived out the prediction of the oracle that preceded their birth.

Wordplay is also important in the story of how Jacob persuaded Esau to sell his birthright for a bowl of stew. The story does not identify what Jacob was cooking when Esau came in from the field, only that he "was seething something seethed" (a literal translation of v. 29). Later we learn that it was a stew made with lentils.

The words for "cook," "hunter," and "game" in Hebrew have similar sounds, perhaps suggesting perhaps that the hunter would fall prey to the cook.

A second instance of wordplay is Esau's request for some of the "red stuff" that Jacob was cooking. The NET2 offers a rather literal translation: "Feed me some of the red stuff – yes, this red stuff – because I'm starving!" (v. 30). The word for "red stuff" is the same as the word for Edom. Later in the narrative, Esau will be named as the ancestor of the Edomites.

Note again how differently the characters are portrayed. Jacob is conniving, clever, and looking toward the future. He demands that Esau sell his birthright – the privileges of being firstborn – in return for a meal (v. 31). In contrast, Esau appears to be so shortsighted and impulsive that he thinks less of his birthright than a bowl of thick lentil soup. He claims to be dying of starvation, as if he would die without some of Jacob's stew, so the birthright would be of no use to him (v. 32). Jacob demands that Esau swear an oath before giving him bread and stew. Thus, the text says, Esau "despised his birthright" (vv. 33-34).

The story leaves us wondering what things we may have "despised" in service of self over God. Are there ways in which we, like Esau, have "despised" our birthrights as children of God, called to live and love in ways that honor God and better the world? Have we let physical desires or appetites eclipse our inclinations to obey God and serve others?

Although Esau is the one who seemed to care little for his birthright, the narrator shows no empathy for the conniving way in which Jacob obtained it. Are we ever inclined to use shady means to get ahead or take advantage of other people? If our success comes at the cost of cheating another, is it worth it?

The reader may wonder whether either Jacob or Esau knew about the oracle Rebekah had received, that the older son would serve the younger. Would Rebekah have kept that news from her favorite son? Given these thoughts, we likewise wonder if Jacob's actions were necessarily an indication of his personality, or if they were they shaped by what his mother believed to be his destiny.

What shapes our destinies? NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

July 23, 2023

Genesis 28:10-22

Climbing Jacob's Ladder

> *And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." (Gen. 28:17)*

Have you ever met anyone who claimed to have had a dream or a vision in which God spoke to them in some way? Have you wished, perhaps in a time of crisis or indecision, that you could catch a vision of glory and hear God speak a blessing directly to you?

If such a thing should happen, how do you think you would respond? With shock and awe? With humble gratitude? Most of us would likely be speechless.

What are the chances that any of us would write up a contract and ask God to sign on the dotted line to confirm that the promises would be fulfilled?

That is very close to what Jacob did when God showed up in a dream at Bethel. Although the lectionary text stops at Gen. 28:19a, the story is woefully incomplete if we do not continue through verse 22, so we will.

Two stories (vv. 10-15)

The familiar story of "Jacob's ladder" follows the memorable account of how Jacob had dressed in goatskin to disguise himself as Esau to deceive his aged father and receive the blessing Isaac had intended for the oldest son (27:1-40). When Esau angrily threatened to kill his conniving sibling, Rebekah urged Jacob to flee and find safe harbor with her brother Laban (27:41-45).

A related story reframes the narrative as a marriage quest initiated by Isaac. Esau had married local women who troubled Rebekah (27:46), but Isaac warned Jacob not to follow Esau's example. He instructed Jacob to travel to Paddan-Aram (the region around Haran, in northern Syria) and take a wife from the daughters of Rebekah's brother Laban (28:1-5).

Jacob gave no response other than to set out, apparently with little preparation. Later, he would claim that he had left with nothing but his staff (32:10), a far different picture than the train of camels bearing gifts and provisions that had accompanied Abraham's servant when he had gone in search of a wife for Isaac (24:1-10).

As Jacob journeyed north from the Negev and into the central hill country, he stopped for the night and made camp with no more than a slab of rock for his pillow and no idea what he was about to experience (vv. 10-11).

The story may seem a bit uneven because it's likely a well-edited composite of two ancient written traditions typically known as the "Yahwist" (J) and the "Elohist" (E).

While the older J source calls God "Yahweh" (usually translated LORD) and often portrays divine appearances in human form, the E source calls God "Elohim" and describes theophanies through the medium of dreams or angel messengers.

The larger frame of the story appears to be E, which speaks of a vivid dream in which Jacob saw a stairway or ramp leading from earth to heaven (v. 12). Influenced by the KJV and other translations, we commonly think of "Jacob's ladder," but angels were both ascending and descending upon the visionary structure, an unlikely scenario for a ladder. A staircase offers a more appropriate image, especially as a gateway to heaven.

In the middle of E's dream sequence, we find a theophany from the J source in which angels are absent. Suddenly Yahweh stands beside Jacob and speaks directly to him.

The editor/narrator effects a seamless transition at v. 13 by using a double-duty combination of a preposition that can mean "upon," "by," or "beside" with an attached pronoun that could indicate either "he" or "it." Thus, the resulting word can be translated to indicate either that Yahweh stood "upon it" (that is, upon the stairway, from the perspective of E's dream sequence) or "by him" (beside Jacob, from the perspective of J's theophany).

In J's account, Yahweh spoke audibly to Jacob, self-identifying as the God of his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac. Yahweh repeated to Jacob the basic promise of land and offspring that was previously made to Abraham and Isaac, then expanded it with a further promise to be with Jacob on his travels, to watch over him, and to return him safely to his homeland. Yahweh concluded with the ringing affirmation "I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (vv. 13-15).

Two responses (vv. 16-22)

When Jacob woke from his dream, he was convinced that he has stumbled upon a miraculous doorway to heaven. At first, he was overcome with surprise: "Surely the LORD is in this place – and I did not know it!" Jacob appeared afraid, as the narrator tells it, exclaiming "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven" (vv. 16-17).

Jacob quickly shifts from amazement to a more calculating approach. First, he carefully marked the spot by taking the stone he had used to bolster his head and standing it on end as a sacred pillar (*maśśebâ*), anointing it with oil to sanctify the place as a holy site. An etiology adds that he called the place "Bethel," from the Hebrew words for "house" (*beth*) and "god" (*el*). An editorial note says "the city" was first known as Luz, though the story has implied that Jacob was alone in the countryside (vv. 18-19).

Despite the apparent act of worship, Jacob did not erupt in grateful praise, but set out to get God under contract.

This was not out of character. When Esau had agreed to trade his birthright for a bowl of stew (25:29-34), Jacob required him to guarantee it with an oath. In this story, Jacob initiated a conditional vow designed to bind God to the previous promises: "*If* God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, *then* the LORD shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one tenth to you" (vv. 20-22, emphasis added).

Jacob was so self-focused that his vow did not mention God's pledge of land or progeny – central to the narrative – but centered instead on personal patronage and divine protection. Not satisfied with God's pledge to watch over him, Jacob asked specifically for food, clothing, and assurance that he would be brought back home in peace before he would affirm that "Yahweh shall be my God."

Though raised in a family of Yahweh worshipers, Jacob withheld full acceptance of Yahweh as God until he could see the promises fulfilled. In this way, the vow also serves as a framing device for much of the narrative that follows. The vow will be mentioned again in 31:13, when God reminds Jacob of it and tells him to return home, but it is not completed until 35:1-7, when Jacob finally returns to Bethel, builds an altar, and offers sacrifices following a peaceful reception by his brother Esau.

Two questions

Chances are that none of us have had an experience like Jacob's. We haven't slept in the wilderness with our head on a rock, nor have we awakened to a vision of God standing beside our bedroll, promising to make us the father of a nation.

So, why do we bother to study this text? What can we learn from it?

The story reminds us that we never know where we may meet God or encounter a sense of the divine. We cannot reach God on our own, but the story is a claim that God can reach us, that heaven may come down in the midst of our need and our fear and our running away.

Jacob learned that he could run from his brother, but he could not run from God. Yahweh came to Jacob in the middle of nowhere, bringing surprising words of grace and promise and a future. Even when Jacob responded with a guarded vow that showed his own lack of trust, God did not give up on him, and neither does God give up on us.

As we walk our common journeys, as we struggle with our fears, as we pursue our dreams, God comes to us. Sometimes, when we least expect it, God comes in the form of a person or a dream or a sudden conviction or even a sermon that touches the heart. When God comes, we may not respond with great maturity or faith – we may try to work the same kind of distrustful deal with God that Jacob did – but God accepts us where we are and continues to work with us, leading to other times when we may meet again and grow in our devotion.

A second thing to observe is that the text virtually shouts of blessing. Jacob had done nothing to deserve God's beneficence. Indeed, one would think that his conniving ways would have earned some sort of divine retribution. But the story suggests it was in God's mind to bless Jacob as the chosen one to become the head of a new nation. Although Jacob had to leave home and would gain wealth through his wits rather than an inheritance from Isaac, he was blessed in many ways.

We should note that Esau was also blessed. Although he did not receive his father's official blessing to the firstborn, with Jacob's departure he stood to inherit everything. Esau's behavior was no more commendable than Jacob's: he was roundly criticized for marrying pagan women who made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah (26:34-35). Yet, he was also blessed.

Can you think of ways in which God has blessed you, even though you can also think of ways in which you have fallen short of God's purposes for you? NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

July 30, 2023

Genesis 1:1–2:4a

Jacob Meets His Match(es)

> *So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her. (Gen. 29:20)*

We may enjoy surprises, but some surprises are more welcome than others. Have you ever hoped for a particular birthday or Christmas gift, only to be disappointed? Perhaps the size and weight were right for that blue sweater we'd been hinting about, or a new iPad. With keen anticipation, we peeled away the wrapping paper, only to discover that the blue sweater was a pink blouse, or that the iPad was a book.

It can be hard to hide our disappointment when reality doesn't meet our expectations. Try to imagine, though, the astonishment on Jacob's face when he awoke from his wedding night to discover that his new bride – veiled the night before – was not the woman he had planned to marry.

The text in context (vv. 1-14)

The backstory of today's text is Jacob's arrival in Haran, where he quickly proved himself a force to be reckoned with. The lectionary skips over vv. 1-14 and stops at v. 28, but we'll consider the larger story, vv. 1-30.

Sometime after his nighttime encounter with God at Bethel (ch. 28), Jacob completed his journey as a trek requiring weeks of walking is passed over in a single verse (v. 1). Near Haran, Jacob came upon a well, likely the same one at which his mother Rebekah had impressed Abraham's servant years before (24:15-27). As in that story, Jacob's appearance at the well fits the familiar betrothal type scene, with twists befitting Jacob's personality.

First, he alone moved the stone cover from the well, something ordinarily done by several men and then only after everyone had gathered, ensuring that all shared equally. Jacob's action suggests not only that he was strikingly strong, but also that he would happily violate customs in service to his own interests.

Second, Abraham's servant had stood by while Rebekah drew water for his caravan of camels, but Jacob stepped in and watered Rachel's flock (vv. 2-12). We assume his gallantry was not innate but intended to impress the captivating Rachel.

After his long and lonely sojourn in the wilderness, Jacob seemed overcome with emotion to learn that Rachel was his cousin: he kissed her "and wept aloud." With palpable joy he followed her home, where he received an enthusiastic embrace and a kiss from his uncle Laban (vv. 13-14). The warm greeting would soon give way to cold duplicity.

Two women, one love (vv. 15-20)

Even for family, hospitality can only last for so long without some sort of arrangement. After Jacob had stayed for a month with Laban's family, a time in which he apparently pitched in and worked with the rest of them, Laban sought to engage the industrious young man in a binding contract. His query, "Why do you serve me for nothing?" was an opening bid in negotiating the wages he would have to pay for Jacob's continued labor (v. 16).

Perhaps the narrator intentionally built irony into Laban's question about Jacob's desire to serve him for nothing. The reader knows that Jacob served no one, including God, for any purpose that did not serve himself – but he was willing to do what he needed to get what he wanted.

In this case, what Jacob wanted was Rachel, Laban's daughter, but he knew Laban would demand a steep price for her hand. Jacob had apparently left home with little in the way of money or other resources. His family's wealth was in livestock, which he could not conveniently transport while on the run.

With no money for a bride price, Jacob offered to indenture himself to Laban for seven years as payment for the woman he loved. The narrator was impressed by the depth of Jacob's desire for Rachel. How many men, if required, would pay seven years' wages for the bride of their choice?

As he negotiated, Jacob would have known that Laban had an older daughter (vv. 16-17), so he carefully specified that his lengthy labor would be in exchange "for your younger daughter, Rachel" (v. 18).

Rachel's older sister was named Leah, and the narrative suggests that she was less appealing than Rachel. The text mentions only her eyes, which are ambiguously described as "tender," "soft," or possibly "weak."

The NRSV charitably described Leah's eyes as "lovely," but she was no match for Rachel, who was portrayed as both shapely in form and beautiful in appearance. The NRSV muddles the translation, describing her as "graceful and beautiful," though the text clearly comments on both her figure (literally, "beautiful of form/outline") and her overall comeliness ("beautiful of appearance," v. 17).

The narrator says nothing about what other intangibles may have attracted Jacob to Rachel, but leaves no doubt that Jacob was deeply smitten with her. Laban agreed to the marriage, saying "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man" (v. 19). To Jacob, the seven years of labor seemed like a few days, we are told, "because of his love for her" (v. 20).

A honeymoon surprise (vv. 21-24)

When seven years had passed, Jacob insisted that Laban give him Rachel, whom he identified as his wife: since betrothals were binding, the term was not inappropriate. The manner of Jacob's request may strike modern readers as crude. "Give me my wife that I may go into her, for my time is completed," he said (v. 21). The Hebrew expression translated "go in" (or "go into her") was a graphic way of saying "have sex with her."

The crassness of Jacob's request may be the narrator's way of emphasizing Jacob's long period of waiting and his eagerness to consummate the marriage. After a day of wedding festivities in which men and women were largely separate, and after an evening banquet that probably involved heavy drinking, Laban brought a veiled Leah into Jacob's dark tent instead of Rachel (vv. 22-23).

The narrator says nothing about Rachel's whereabouts, only that Jacob spent the night with Leah, not realizing until morning's light that his bedmate was the older, unwanted sister.

Perceptive readers will note that the storyteller has skillfully portrayed Jacob as getting his comeuppance. Previously he had tricked his way into receiving the birthright and blessing that rightfully belonged to the older brother. Now, though he had bargained for the younger sister, he was tricked into wedding the older one. As Jacob had deceived his blind father who depended on touch, he in turn had been flummoxed by darkness and an over-reliance on feel. Perhaps Leah had spoken as if she were Rachel, even as Jacob had claimed to be Esau.

One bride, or two? (vv. 25-30)

When Jacob awoke to find Leah beside him, he immediately confronted Laban, who smugly claimed that he had no choice, for local custom dictated that the older sister must marry first, and Leah had remained unmarried (vv. 25-26).

Laban was not averse to having his hard-working son-in-law marry Rachel, too – something custom did allow – but it would cost Jacob an additional seven years of labor. "Complete the week of this one," he said, "and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years" (v. 27). The scenario played out, and within eight days Jacob had two wives and another seven years of debt to repay (vv. 28-30).

We note that neither woman is given a voice in the story. Today, we would judge that both women were mistreated by having the course of their lives determined for them. For Leah it appears worse, because she was clearly less favored: the narrator left no doubt of Jacob's preference for Rachel. On the other hand, if Leah's "weak eyes" had proven to be a permanent turn-off to potential suiters, the arrangement might ultimately have served her well.

Still, we are left to wonder what the women thought about the arrangement. Was Rachel as in love with Jacob as he was with her? Did she cooperate willingly with Laban's plan? Even though she also was allowed to marry Jacob, and even though Jacob "loved Rachel more than Leah," could she have been happy in the situation?

And how did Leah feel? Did she want to marry Jacob? Did she feel justified in participating in marriage by deceit?

We can only speculate about how members of the new family felt, but the issues raised may lead us to examine our own motives in dealing with other people. In our marriages, families, and friendships, do we seek others' good, or focus on our own needs? Do we relate to others with honesty, or harbor hidden agendas?

We may appreciate the underlying humor, but we must confess that the story of Jacob, Laban, Leah, and Rachel is not a pretty one. It can be hard for us to find redeeming qualities in the multiple layers of deceit and the ways in which people were cruelly manipulated by others.

Yet, the larger story holds that before all was said and done, something good emerged. As life went on through even more ups and downs, schemes and deceptions, Jacob and his collection of wives (including the servant women Bilhah and Zilpah) would produce children who would become known as progenitors of the 12 tribes of Israel.

Despite our failures and foibles, our manipulations and machinations, God still manages to work through us: imagine the thought. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

Reminder: the password for online teaching resources is ***loving***

August 6, 2023

Matthew 14:13-21

A Picnic to Remember

When you think of relatives or other acquaintances who have died, what do you remember most about them? Are the memories heartwarming, or troubling? Have you talked to others who knew the same person and did many of the same things together, but had very different memories?

Even when we share common experiences, we bring our own perspectives to them, and we may carry divergent memories away. In later conversations, people may describe the same occurrence in disparate ways.

We can be grateful for memories, however imperfect, and especially thankful that those who followed Jesus passed on their recollections of his impressive miracles and inspirational teachings. As with us, the people whose memories gave rise to the four gospels didn't report the details in the same way.

Surprisingly, only one of Jesus' "mighty works" (not counting the resurrection) is recorded in all four gospels. We usually call it the "Feeding of the Five Thousand," and it's found in Matt. 14:13-21, Mark 6:30-44, Luke 9:10-17, and John 6:1-14.

The story's appearance in all four gospels, along with an account of Jesus feeding more than 4,000 people in Gentile territory (Mark 8:1-9 and Matt. 15:32-39), tells us how significant Jesus' followers considered the event to be. Broken bread and fish not only fed thousands of people, but they also provided important lessons for those who would follow Jesus.

Additional information at goodfaithmedia.org

Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." (Matt. 15:16)

Pressing Needs (vv. 13-16)

Feeding a crowd can be a challenge, but many charitable organizations have become very good at meeting physical needs on a large scale. Through disaster relief units that are trained, well stocked, and ready to serve, dedicated volunteers have prepared and served literally millions of meals in the wake of earthquakes and hurricanes, tornadoes and terrorists, famines and wars. When people are hungry, the eager volunteers know what to do. They have trucks, equipment, and food supplies at the ready. Tell them you need 5,000 meals by dinnertime, and they won't blink an eye.

Tell a dozen weary disciples who have neither training nor resources, and you'll get a different response.

Jesus and his closest followers were already tired and in need of rest when this memorable story begins. They had faced a surprising rejection in Nazareth (13:54-58). Then, they learned that Jesus' cousin John had been arrested and beheaded (14:1-12). Physically and emotionally drained, Jesus set out to sail across the Sea of Galilee in search of a quiet place along the shore, but the word soon got out. By the time Jesus landed, he was greeted by a mass of people with a multitude of needs.

Jesus didn't have to look hard to see physical needs, emotional needs, and spiritual needs. Despite the number, he "was moved with compassion" for the people, Matthew said (v. 14).

For Jesus, compassion was not just something one feels, but something one does, even when tired. Jesus patiently worked among the people for hours, teaching them about the kingdom of God and healing many who were sick.

As the day grew long, with no refreshment stands or food trucks around, the people began to grow hungry, but didn't want to leave. Seeing the need, the disciples asked Jesus to call it a day and send everyone home for supper, but Jesus had other ideas. Maybe he wanted to show that the gospel has social as well as spiritual dimensions, or maybe he wanted a lot of people to witness an amazing act that they'd never forget.

Or maybe he just wanted to teach the disciples a lesson. "You give them something to eat," he said.

We can only imagine how their jaws would have dropped. Surely ours would have done the same if someone unexpectedly put us in charge of feeding 5,000 hungry men – not counting women and children – and we had neither food to give them nor money to call a caterer.

Preparing disciples (vv. 17-19)

Jesus' demand was shocking, was it not? If we didn't already know this

story, could we ever anticipate what happened next?

Matthew's gospel plays down the implicit criticism of the disciples that is often found in Mark. Perhaps that is why he does not include their dumbfounded response (Mark 6:37) that even 200 denarii wouldn't be enough to purchase sufficient bread. That was more than half a year's salary for someone earning an average wage. In John's version, it was Phillip who did the math (John 6:7) and said that six months of wages would hardly get them a mouthful apiece.

But Jesus had given the job to them. How could they feed such a crowd? If we had only Matthew's gospel, we'd assume the disciples themselves had some provisions, but not much: "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish" (v. 17).

Neither Matthew, Mark, nor Luke says anything about the small boy we know from the text in John, the boy Andrew found who was willing to share his meager lunch.

Five loaves and two fish really weren't very much when the "loaves" were probably small circles of flatbread, and the fish were salt-cured sardines.

Sometimes we might feel about as ill-equipped for other demands that come to hand, and we wonder how we can do what needs to be done. Jesus wanted the disciples to look beyond the normal human resources that came to mind. He wanted them to consider what could be done, not just on their own, but with God's help.

The story reminds us that serving Christ faithfully involves the willingness to obediently share what we have in assets or abilities, and to trust Jesus to make that enough.

Even so, Jesus' disciples must have been muttering to themselves as Jesus instructed the crowd to find a seat on the green grass. Though they had sought "a deserted place," it wasn't a desert.

All three synoptic gospels note that Jesus took the food in his hands and "looked up to heaven" before blessing and breaking the loaves (John says only that he gave thanks, John 6:11). This seems intended to remind readers in addition to those present that Jesus was never wholly apart from God, drawing his power from the fullness of the Godhead.

If you can imagine the disciples' surprise when Jesus first told them it was their job to feed the multitude, consider how flabbergasted they must have been to discover that, no matter how many times they passed the baskets among the people, they never came back empty.

The gospels are silent on the manner of the miracle, but it must have occurred at the "point of contact." Otherwise, Jesus would have been inundated by a pile of fish and bread, or it would have been too much for the disciples to carry. When Jesus broke the paltry provisions into fragments and put some in each disciple's basket, they probably expected nothing more than to offer an appetizer to two or three people each, but the food was somehow replenished, and everyone ate their fill.

How long did the disciples' initial excitement over the miraculous multiplication last before their task turned into mere labor? If it was up to the Twelve alone to serve the crowds, as the story implies, each would have been responsible for serving more than 500 people. And they thought they were tired before!

The job wasn't over when it was over, though. Whether by innate frugality or direct instruction, they returned to collect the leftovers and finished the day with 12 baskets of bread and fish – one for each of the disciples. Their weariness must have known no bounds, but witnessing such an act of grace and power must have been energizing, too.

We can't overlook an important aspect of discipleship here: the work was done when Jesus looked to heaven, broke the food, and then gave it to the disciples for distribution to the hungry crowd.

To this day, that's the way it works when we seek to live out the kingdom of God on earth. We receive the blessings of God that come through Christ, then share them with others. Whether God gives us material goods or spiritual wisdom, a love for children or joyful enthusiasm, we are called to share with a world that is hungry for more than bread and fish.

Discovering opportunities (vv. 20-21)

Jesus' miraculous multiplication of the bread and fish was a mighty witness to the multitude, but perhaps even more significant for the disciples. They learned from Jesus that deep compassion gives us energy to keep going, even when we're feeling drained. They also learned by experience that the most overwhelming situations are not without hope. As Christ's followers trust in Jesus, offer to him their abilities, and obey his commands to love, marvelous things can be done – even in the face of obstacles that may seem insurmountable to us.

When all was done and the people finally went home, the presence of a full basket for each disciple suggests that Jesus' power not only makes our service effective in helping others, but also provides for our own needs.

The purpose of Christ's miraculous lesson was not just inspirational, but motivational. What physical and spiritual needs do we see in the world around us? What gifts can we offer toward meeting those needs? And what are we doing with that basket in our hands? NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

August 13, 2023

Matthew 14:22-33

Skiing Without a Boat

How would you respond if someone should ask, "Who is Jesus?" We might recite what we can remember about Jesus from the gospels, or attempt to explain how Jesus came to save people from their sins. We might prefer to talk about what Jesus means to us in our daily lives.

Few questions are more important, and the gospel of Matthew focuses heavily on clarifying Jesus' identity, supporting a belief that Jesus should be recognized as the Son of God. Prior to today's text, the question had arisen in Matt. 7:28-29, 11:3, 13:54-56, and 14:2. Perhaps a closer study of these texts can help us gain a fresher notion of how the first disciples came to the gradual understanding of Jesus' identity: he was far more than an ordinary man.

But let's turn our attention to the text at hand, and what we might learn from it. Have you ever felt emotionally at sea on a stormy night, tossed by waves and frightened by darkness? The metaphor comes easily to mind. We all know what it is like to endure the tempests of life. The gospel reminds us that those who follow Jesus also know how to find hope even in the darkest night and the fiercest storm.

The biblical account of Jesus' famous hike across the Sea of Galilee is found in Matt. 14:22-33, Mark 6:45-51, and John 6:15-21. The parallels are marked by significant differences, most notably Matthew's solo inclusion of the episode with Peter. This story would have had special significance to the early church, which faced hard times and would have preserved this account as a reminder that Jesus offers hope and calm for even the worst of our dark and stormy nights.

> *Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Matt. 14:31)*

A quiet prayer (vv. 22-23)

All accounts agree that the story of Jesus walking on the water followed the exciting and tumultuous event in which he fed thousands of people with a single lunch of bread and fish. The natural uproar caused by the long day of teaching and miracle-working left Jesus exhausted and in need of quiet. So, the master sent the crowds away and told his disciples to set sail without him while he slipped away to an isolated spot in the mountains.

In Matthew and Mark, Jesus seems to be motivated primarily by the need for quiet reflection. Jesus' popularity had skyrocketed, and people were clamoring for him to become king. John, in fact, says the crowds intended to seize Jesus and make him king by force (John 6:15). John also locates the miracle during the Passover season, which celebrated Israel's deliverance from Egypt and often gave rise to messianic fever.

Jesus' meteoric rise in fame must have tempted him to choose the route of popular political power. He needed a time of reflection and prayer to reaffirm his commitment to the servant role he had come to fulfill.

Jesus' actions offer a helpful lesson for modern disciples – especially those who experience some kind of public success. When we are lauded for our speaking, teaching, or unselfish service, we may be tempted to seek even loftier heights in hopes of increasing praise. Jesus saw the danger of trusting in outward acclaim. As the potential appeal of a larger and more powerful stage drew near, Jesus pulled back to center himself on his true mission.

A noisy sea (vv. 24-27)

While Jesus prayed on the slumbering mountain, the disciples found themselves caught in one of the severe and sudden squalls that often plague the Sea of Galilee. The "sea," is really a lake known to the Hebrews as Kinneret and to the Romans as the Sea of Tiberius. It is about eight miles long and five miles wide, nearly 700 feet below sea level, and largely surrounded by mountainous terrain that can have a wind tunnel effect. Storms can be fierce.

Jesus came to meet the disciples "early in the morning" (NRSV), a non-specific translation of the Greek text's "in the fourth watch of the night." The Greeks divided the night into four watches, the last of which extended from 3:00 to 6:00 a.m. Jesus had prayed far into the night, giving the disciples time to venture far out from shore – likely more than two miles.

Additional information at goodfaithmedia.org

As the 12 tired men battled the howling wind, they must have been astonished to see Jesus coming toward them, striding confidently across the waves with the wind whipping his robe and hair. Is it any wonder they were terrified? Seeing such a thing in the dead of night, they assumed that the advancing apparition must be a ghost, perhaps of some fisherman who had drowned.

The disciples may have screamed as loudly as men allow themselves to do, but Jesus quickly quieted their fears, if not their curiosity. When he was close enough so they could hear him over the wind and waves, he said "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Scholars have often noted that the Greek words "it is I" (*ego eimí*) are equivalent to the self-revelation of Yahweh to Moses: "I am" (Exod. 3:14; Hebrew *ehyeh*, translated as *ego eimí* in the Septuagint, an early Greek version).

Matthew's gospel was likely written for a primarily Jewish audience, so his readers would have seen the connection. God had self-identified as "I am" to Moses from a burning bush, and now Jesus uses the same words from a roiling sea. Neither Moses nor the disciples expected to meet God in such circumstances, but both were confronted by the great "I am."

A stammering disciple (vv. 28-33)

As mentioned above, only Matthew includes the story about Peter's attempt to join Jesus in walking on the water. Emboldened by the moment, but not entirely convinced that it was Jesus, Peter devised a thrill-seeking test: "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water" (v. 28). Note that Peter was not ready to jump in of his own accord, but he was ready to attempt anything at Christ's command.

Jesus' answer was simple: "Come." And, according to Matthew, Peter stepped out of the boat and began to walk firmly upon the water. But then – as countless preachers and teachers have pointed out through the years – "when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened." Peter, "the Rock," began to sink like a stone. Preachers often insist that Peter began to sink "when he took his eyes off Jesus," but the story itself is concerned with Peter's faith in addition to his focus.

There was a problem with Peter's faith, as Jesus indicated (v. 31). Malcolm Tolbert once opined that Peter had enough faith to begin, but not enough to finish (*Good News from Matthew* [Broadman Press, 1975], 133). When Peter began to sink, he looked to Jesus as his only hope for salvation, and true faith was born. As Eduard Schweizer put it, "This, then, is true faith: not the sublime achievement of an especially religious individual, but 'single minded' devotion to the Lord, to his biding and to his help" (*The Good News According to Matthew*, trans. David E. Green [John Knox Press, 1975], 323).

Despite his impulsive nature and very human weakness, Peter alone got out of the boat to go to Jesus. Through the episode, the disciples moved from abject fear to faith and worship (v. 33). Peter's role as a catalyst in this transformation recalls his crucial place in leading the early church in the stormy days after Pentecost.

When Jesus entered the boat, the storm ceased, and the disciples began to worship him as the Son of God. Note again the progression from unchecked fear to unequivocal faith: from Jesus' "I am" to Peter's "if it is you" to the disciples' "truly you are the Son of God." If they remembered their synagogue lessons, they would know that only God could walk on water (Job 9:8, Ps. 77:19).

Matthew's ending gives the disciples more credit than Mark's story, in which they remain confused. Mark concludes with the observation that "they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened" (Mark 6:51-52).

Who is Jesus? The disciples' conviction is stated clearly: "truly you are the Son of God."

The disciples' experience of growing in their faith and understanding of Jesus offers comfort to contemporary followers if we find our faith faltering and our assurance in need of assistance. All the disciples were uncertain about Jesus' identity. Even the great Simon Peter had doubts and fears, stumbling in the face of turbulent weather. But, as Peter extended his hand to Jesus as the only source of hope and salvation, Jesus was able to take Peter's "little faith" and nourish it so that Peter grew – through further fits and starts – to become the prime pillar of the early church.

Ben Witherington III put it nicely: "Peter then has become the poster child of both faith and too little faith, of faith giving way to doubt and fear but also of faith overcoming one's initial fears" (*Matthew*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary [Smyth & Helwys, 2006], 293).

God does not expect our faith to emerge full-blown. We must grow in faith even as our bodies grow, even as we grow intellectually and in maturity. We may also face severe trials and battering storms, but we can trust that Jesus is always there, looking upon our fear and doubt with grace unmeasured, ready to lift us up unto life. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

August 20, 2023

Matthew 15:21-28

When Crumbs Are Enough

> *She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." (Matt. 15:27)*

How do you feel about people who are rude? Standup comedians can get away with supercilious banter peppered with insults and put-downs, and friends can occasionally get away with good-natured joshing about our appearance or habits, but we prefer to be treated with kindness, right?

No one wants to be rudely treated or given the cold shoulder. That's why today's text is both surprising and troubling. Can you imagine Jesus being hard or cold, turning a deaf ear to someone in need, or even stooping to insult a woman? That is not the image of Jesus we cherish, but it is precisely the picture we find in Matt. 15:21-28. When reading such an alarming text, we can't help but ask "What's up with that?"

Matthew 15:21-28 is apparently drawn from a similar text in Mark 7:24-30, though Matthew makes significant changes and adds new material to the story, which does not appear in either Luke or John.

A foiled vacation (vv. 21-22)

As the narrative begins, Jesus had been teaching and preaching, healing the sick and feeding the hungry non-stop for some time, and he was tired. Seeking time away from the crowds, Jesus took a long hike, traveling north and east to the region of Tyre and Sidon, important cities along the scenic Phoenician coast (Mark mentions only Tyre; Matthew adds Sidon).

Jesus had little luck finding solitude, however. People from that region had traveled to hear Jesus in Galilee before, so the miracle worker's reputation had gone before him. Mark insists "he could not escape notice" (Mark 7:24). Matthew omits that part of the story, going immediately to a sharp confrontation with a woman who recognized Jesus and latched onto him.

Mark identifies the woman as "a Greek, of Syrophoenician origin" (Mark 7:26). Matthew, however, calls her a Canaanite, which brings up pejorative Old Testament images of indigenous people whose idolatry was a constant threat to the Israelites. What matters most is that she is not Jewish. When Jesus had sent his disciples on their first preaching mission (Matt. 10:5-6), he had instructed them to avoid Gentiles and Samaritans, "but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

How would Jesus respond to this Gentile woman who kept following him, loudly pleading for him to interrupt his getaway and heal her troubled daughter?

The woman must have been familiar with Jewish language and customs: Her plea "have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David" is identical to the cry of blind supplicants (presumably Jewish) whom Jesus had previously encountered in 9:27 and 20:30-31. "Son of David" was sometimes used in Jewish circles as a title for the Messiah (1:1, 12:23, 21:9, 22:42).

Demon possession is mentioned frequently in the gospels. In the first century, without insights from modern medicine and psychology, all types of mental illness were attributed to possession by demons. Jesus naturally used the language common to his culture in speaking of people who were so afflicted.

But would Jesus, who was tired and didn't want to be bothered, take the time to heal a Gentile child?

Hard words (vv. 23-24)

Matthew omits Mark's observation that Jesus had gone into a house and wanted to be left alone, adding an observation in vv. 23-24 that suggests he intended to ignore her. If the common argument that Matthew's gospel was directed mainly to Jewish Christians is correct, his intent appears to be one of stressing Jesus' mission to the Jews while acknowledging his compassion for all.

In Matthew's version, neither Jesus nor the Twelve come across particularly well. Though the woman had cried pitifully for help, Matthew says "he did not answer her at all" (v. 23). How could Jesus turn a deaf ear to her need? It seems uncharacteristic, to be sure, but neither Jesus nor the gospel writer seem apologetic.

Why would Jesus act in this way? Struggling to make sense of it, commentators have often suggested that Jesus was testing the woman, first ignoring and then insulting her to see if her faith was true, if she would persist

in seeking a blessing. Even if that is the case, however, it seems harsh.

As Jesus turned a deaf ear to the woman, his disciples – who may have been trying to shield him – took the brunt of her cries and pleaded with Jesus to send her away before she nagged them to death.

Jesus' response still seems callous: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." We might expect Jesus to say he was sent *first* to the Jews, but the words Matthew reported are far more exclusive: "I was sent *only* to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

This does not mean that Jesus did not care for other peoples. Matthew's gospel concludes with Jesus commanding his disciples to expand their ministry of preaching, baptizing, and teaching to all nations (Matt. 28:19-20). His words to the woman centered on his primary mission to the Jews, but that does not diminish his followers' mission to all peoples.

A persistent woman (vv. 25-28)

We have to admire this woman's spunkiness. She would not be put off by Jesus' cold shoulder. Instead, she pushed her way forward and fell to her knees before him. The Greek word translated as "knelt" can also mean "worship," but here it probably means simply that she prostrated herself before Jesus as she continued to plead. For the second time, she addressed him as "Lord," this time adding "Help me."

Jesus' reply didn't sound like the Jesus we think we know. "It is not fair," he said, "to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (v. 26).

Three words are of particular importance here. "Food" (literally "bread") could possibly refer to the messianic fulfillment of promises to Israel, to which previous signs had been pointing: a careful reader will observe that this story is sandwiched between two stories in which Jesus fed the multitudes (14:15-21, 15:32-39).

"Children" was commonly used by rabbis in reference to the Jews, and "dogs" could be a dismissive epithet for Gentiles.

Some commentators have sought to soften Jesus' response by noting that the word used (kunarion) is a diminutive form used for "house dogs" or "puppies" rather than wild dogs, but that doesn't remove the sting. In more graphic fashion, Jesus was repeating his contention that his concern lay with the Jews, not with Gentiles.

Despite Jesus' use of hard and exclusive language, I like to imagine that he winked as he spoke, suggesting a willingness to go beyond normal boundaries.

In any case, the woman persevered, searching for a way through Jesus' defenses. Thinking quickly, she shot back: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table" (v. 27).

Again, she calls Jesus "Lord," and she appears to accept her status as a Gentile who is outside the boundaries of Jesus' primary mission. Still, she did not consider herself or her child unworthy of care. She hoped that Jesus' compassion would extend beyond his own ethnic allegiance and extend the overflow of his blessing to her, even as humans may give food scraps to household pets or scatter breadcrumbs for the birds.

Surely Jesus must have smiled at her retort, even if it was a tired grin. The determined woman's perseverance and wit cut through Jesus' weariness, and we may wonder if it became a catalyst for the future shape of his ministry. We can imagine a twinkle in Jesus' eyes as he said to her "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish!" Matthew notes "And her daughter was healed instantly" (v. 28).

A persistent question

What do we do with a story such as this? For one thing, the story reminds us that Jesus truly was human. Like us, he could grow tired and weary, and perhaps even cranky. There were times when he didn't want to be bothered, when he had to step away from his active ministry to seek some alone time.

Some of us could learn from Jesus. It is easy to get so caught up in work and family demands and even good deeds that we ignore our own need for rest and relaxation. When that happens, we become like batteries that have been so depleted that they are worthless until they are recharged.

A second thing we note is that, though Jesus stuck with the script of having been sent to the Jews, he still stretched beyond cultural borders to offer blessing and healing to an outsider who some thought had no official right to God's beneficence.

By far, most Christian believers through history were born into the same "outsider" status as the Canaanite woman: we have no claim to Abraham's inheritance. Nor can we claim to inherently deserve the forgiveness and promise of life that Jesus brought. Like the woman in this story, we rely entirely on grace for any kind of relationship with God.

We can see a final lesson in the woman's persistence. The message is not that we should nag God until our prayers are answered, but the story could serve as a reminder that in those hard times when the heavens seem like brass, we should persist in prayer and in faith that God hears, even when we do not sense an immediate response. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

August 27, 2023

Matthew 16:13-20

Know, but Don't Tell

Pete knew that something was up with Jesse. They had been friends for years, and like most men, they didn't talk a lot about deep or personal things. Still, Pete could see something bubbling beneath the surface of Jesse's otherwise calm exterior.

A day finally came when Jesse allowed his inner thoughts to surface. Unable to contain a grin, he looked at Pete and asked, "Who do you think might become the next CEO of my company?"

Pete slapped Jesse on the back before congratulating him with a man-hug. "Thanks," Jesse said, "but don't get carried away. You can't tell anybody."

Have you ever received a happy or exciting bit of news that you had to keep secret … a pregnancy, perhaps, or an impending retirement? Jesus' disciples learned how puzzling that situation could be.

What do others think? (16:13-14)

In today's text, Matt. 16:13-16 draws on Mark 8:27-30, along with additional material regarding Peter that is unique to Matthew (vv. 17-19).

Last week's passage found Jesus and his disciples in the north coastal region of Tyre and Sidon, after which

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." (Matt. 16:16)

they returned to the region near the Sea of Galilee (15:29–16:12). Then, according to the account, Jesus led his followers about 25 miles due north, to Caesarea Philippi. Herod Philip, who ruled northern Galilee, had built a fine city there and named it in honor of himself and the Roman emperor.

The city was built adjacent to the ancient cultic site called Panyas (now commonly pronounced as Banyas). Set in the foothills of Mount Hermon and named for the nature god Pan, the site features a dark grotto carved inside a sharp cliff face. In those days, a large spring gushed from within the cave and formed a tributary to the Jordan River.

Local tradition considered the grotto and the spring to be a connector to the fabled River Styx and the underground world of the dead. Some people may have thought of it as the "gates of hell."

In this verdant setting, with shrines to pagan gods and the emperor nearby, Jesus voiced a question that his disciples had no doubt been debating for some time: "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" (v. 13).

Matthew's version has Jesus call himself the "Son of Man," a self-appellation common to his gospel. Mark's account has Jesus asking simply "Who do people say that I am?"

The disciples' response in v. 14 suggests that popular opinion considered Jesus to be someone special – perhaps even John the Baptist returned from the dead, or a famed prophet such as Elijah or Jeremiah who had been sent back to earth. Most, apparently, had not yet thought of Jesus as the long-awaited messiah. Despite his impressive displays of power, Jesus' lack of interest in leading a revolution against Rome made him a poor match for common expectations.

What do *you* think? (16:15-17)

Had the disciples thought otherwise? Jesus intended to find out, so he asked, "But who do you say that I am?" Both "you" and "I" are emphatic, spelled out with a pronoun even though person is included in Greek verbs: literally, "But *you* (plural), who do you say concerning me that I am?" (v. 15).

Peter, the most outspoken of the Twelve, provided the answer Jesus was looking for: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (v. 16).

Peter's confession probably reflected a common thought among the disciples, who had no doubt discussed the matter. The word translated "messiah" is *christos*, the Greek term used for Hebrew word we transliterate as "messiah." Both mean "anointed one."

Peter's confession goes beyond acknowledging Jesus as messiah, for he adds "the Son of the living God." The word "Son" is not capitalized in the Greek text, but English translations typically use the upper case to indicate that the term is a title, and to reflect later Trinitarian thinking, as in "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit"

We cannot assume that Peter was reflecting a full-blown understanding of Jesus as "Son of God," but at the very least he believed there was a close and unique relationship between them.

Additional information at goodfaithmedia.org

References to "the living God" appear in various Old Testament texts (Deut. 5:26; Josh. 3:10; 1 Sam. 17:26, 36; 2 Kgs. 19:4, 16; Ps. 42:2, 84:2; Jer. 10:10, 23:36; Dan. 6:26; Hos. 1:10), and in the apocryphal literature. Its usual intent is to distinguish Israel's "living God" from the false (and therefore non-living) gods of their neighbors. The title would have been particularly appropriate as Jesus discussed these matters in the setting at Banyas, where several niches carved in the rocky cliff face held images of various gods.

Jesus pronounced a blessing on Peter – notably using a variation on his full name that seems to connect him with the prophet Jonah – declaring that such knowledge of his nature could come only by divine revelation. Note that Jesus' remark appears to claim full kinship with God. Peter had called him "the Son of the living God." Now Jesus insists that "my Father in heaven" had revealed that truth.

What happens next? (16:18-20)

The next three verses have troubled Protestants for hundreds of years, because Roman Catholics find in them justification for the notion that Peter was designated as the first pope and imbued with authority over the church.

To tease out what Jesus did and didn't say here, we'll consider several important words.

First, Jesus used a play on words to speak of Peter as the firm foundation upon which "I will build my church." Peter's given name was Simon, but "Cephas" (pronounced "Kephas"), from an Aramaic word meaning "rock" or "rock shelf," was apparently his nickname. Jesus used both masculine and feminine forms of the Greek word for "rock" in saying "You are Peter (*petros*), and upon this rock (*petra*) I will build my church."

The word we translate as "church" (*ekklesía*) is used commonly in the epistles, but appears only here and in Matt. 18:17 in the gospels.

Many scholars think the word originated with Matthew rather than Jesus, since the church did not yet exist. In any case, the term "*my ekklesía*" is posed as a future reality. Old Testament references to the gathered people of Israel spoke of them as the community of God's people –Jesus' work would lead to a new community of *his* followers.

That community, built on the foundation of Peter and the other disciples, would be built to last – so strong that even the "gates of Hades" could not defeat it: the nearby grotto at Banyas would have reinforced the image. We should not read the popular concept of hell into this verse, however, or assume that Jesus had in mind some sort of impending spiritual warfare: he was talking about death, which could not prevail against him or his community of followers.

The idea that Jesus' reference to building the church "upon this rock" means that Peter was given charge of the early church is problematic, though he appears to have been the most prominent spokesman at first. Later, James, whom Paul identified as "the Lord's brother" (Gal. 1:19, cf. Mark 6:3), became the most visible leader of the Jerusalem church (see Acts 15). In Gal. 2:9, Paul referred to "James and Cephas and John" as the "acknowledged pillars" of the church.

One might possibly interpret the statement in light of Peter's revelation and mission to the Gentiles in Acts 10 as being the catalyst for the expansion of the church to Gentiles, since most of the church was ultimately composed of Gentiles.

Jesus' reference to giving Peter the "keys of the kingdom of heaven" (v. 19) lies behind the traditional image of Peter as the man in charge at the pearly gates of heaven, but that is not what Jesus had in mind. Though Jesus addresses Peter here, he is a representative of the other disciples: later he gives some of the same commands to the disciples as a group (see Matt. 18:1, 18).

Was Peter's possession of the "keys to the kingdom of heaven" to be interpreted temporally or eschatologically? While the popular notion of Peter as the doorkeeper in heaven assumes the eschatological view, Jesus was clearly speaking of a community of followers to be established on earth.

The "keys" appear to be a symbol of the authority given Peter and the other disciples to "bind and loose." They were to determine what behavior is appropriate for Christ-followers in the same manner that the rabbis acted to delimit what was and was not permitted to Jews. The importance and difficulty of such determinations can be seen in the Acts 15 debate, and in Paul's criticism of Peter's inconsistent behavior in Galatians 1–2.

This text deals with weighty matters, and it is the climax of the first part of Matthew: with the next verse, Jesus will turn toward Jerusalem and his coming passion. In the meantime, his followers were expected to keep their knowledge of Jesus as the Christ close to the vest, for "he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah" (v. 20).

That was just as well, for they had yet to understand that Jesus' concept of what it meant to be the Messiah was far different than anything they had yet imagined. What does it mean to us? NFJ

Mentoring as an important role in the ministry of the gospel

BY BRUCE SALMON

The word "mentor" does not occur in any translation of the New Testament that I am aware of. But that's what the apostle Paul was to many: he was a mentor.

He was an adviser, a guide, an instructor, a teacher, a role model. He imparted wisdom, knowledge, experience, example and advice.

His pastoral letters to Timothy and Titus are cases in point. It's clear Paul had a close, personal relationship with both men.

In 2 Tim. 1:2 Paul wrote, "To Timothy, *my beloved child*, Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord."

In 2 Tim. 2:1 he wrote, "You then, *my* child, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well."

From the beginning of the Christian movement, mentors such as Paul taught about Jesus and modeled Christian behavior to their "children" in the faith.

Of course, Timothy was not Paul's biological child. As Paul said, Timothy's sincere faith lived first in his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice (2 Tim. 1:5).

In the Acts of the Apostles we read that Timothy was the son of a Greek father and a Jewish mother who had become a Christian (Acts 16:1).

So, Timothy was not related to Paul in a physical sense. But Timothy was Paul's child in a spiritual sense.

Likewise, Paul considered Titus to be one of his spiritual children.

In Titus 1:1a, 4a Paul wrote, "Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ…To Titus, *my loyal child* in the faith we share."

Although Titus is not mentioned by name in Acts, we know from Galatians and 2 Corinthians that he also was a companion of Paul.

From Gal. 2:1-3, we learn that Titus was a Greek follower of Jesus who was not compelled to be circumcised when he accompanied Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem. Resisting the demand from Judaizers that non-Jews be circumcised, the leaders of the Jerusalem church endorsed Paul's ministry among the Gentiles (Acts 15).

Before there was a New Testament, and long before the advent of formal theological training, most church leaders were trained by mentors like Paul. No doubt, Timothy and Titus became mentors themselves who trained others that came alongside them.

For centuries most Christians did not have access to a Bible. They learned about the Christian life from other Christians. It still works that way.

I began to learn about the Christian faith at an early age, even before I could read. I went to Sunday School as a young child and heard stories from the Bible and teachings of the Christian faith.

I was mentored by adults who volunteered to teach me. As I grew older, I learned to read and interpret the Bible for myself, but I was guided by teachers and youth leaders and pastors and other mentors.

In college I had the opportunity to take some religion courses that introduced me to an academic study of the Bible, and in seminary that academic study intensified.

Not only did I learn to study the Bible, but I also studied church history and systematic theology and psychology and other disciplines designed to prepare me for pastoral ministry.

I graduated with the Master of Divinity degree, and later the Doctor of Ministry degree, but after serving for more than 41 years as a full-time pastor, I have come to realize that seminary was not my only preparation for ministry.

"From the beginning of the Christian movement, mentors such as Paul taught about Jesus and modeled Christian behavior to their 'children' in the faith."

Looking back, I count a few seminary professors as mentors. But my primary role models were experienced pastors and others who guided me from my youth and along the way.

For example, I took one homiletics course during my M.Div. program. The homiletics professor was George Buttrick, one of the most esteemed preachers of the 20th century.

I learned a lot from sitting in class and taking notes while he lectured. But I did not learn to preach from that one homiletics course in seminary.

In fact, while students were required to write a sermon and submit it to Buttrick for his evaluation, we were not required to deliver a sermon in class, or anywhere else. It was an academic exercise, not a practical experience.

I learned to preach from years of listening to my pastors, most of whom were outstanding preachers: especially J.P. Allen, John Claypool and David Matthews.

I tell about my relationship with Allen and Claypool in my book, *Spelunking Scripture: The Letters of Paul.*

During my college years I preached a total of five sermons: one while serving as a summer missionary in Washington State after my freshman year; two while serving as a youth minister at a church in Memphis, Tenn., the summer after my sophomore year; and two sermons my senior year while serving as the youth minister at my college church.

In seminary, my pastor was John Howell, and I learned not just from listening to his sermons but from getting to know him on a more personal level.

Primarily, I learned to preach by listening to sermons, and then by doing it. In my last semester as an M.Div. student I became a supply preacher, traveling on Sunday mornings to mostly rural churches in Kentucky and Indiana to preach fill-in sermons.

After I graduated, I was called as associate pastor to a church in Silver Spring, Md. The church already had two ministers on staff: Pastor Donnell Harris, and a part-time pastor of visitation, Menter German, who had served previously as a pastor.

I learned by watching them do church pastoral ministry. And it wasn't long before the pastor gave me opportunities to preach, make hospital visits, and conduct weddings, funerals, baptisms and infant dedications.

I had received little training in seminary to do any of those things. It's not that my seminary training was wasted. I learned a great deal about understanding and interpreting the Bible, and about historical and theological contexts that have shaped church practices and Christian life today.

But in terms of practical preparation for ministry, most of it came from mentors who guided and encouraged me along the way.

In thinking back over those who were mentors to me, I came up with a list of 18 men, all of whom are now gone. When growing up and beginning in pastoral ministry, only men were my pastors in Southern Baptist churches. Sadly, it is still that way today.

Thankfully, other Baptist churches — such as Progressive Baptists, Alliance Baptists, American Baptists, and Cooperative Fellowship Baptists — encourage women in ministry.

My current pastor at The First Baptist Church of the City of Washington, D.C., is Julie Pennington-Russell. The church where I served for 33 years, Village Baptist in Bowie, Md., has Emily Holladay as its pastor. No doubt, Julie and Emily are mentors, not just for women in ministry, but for men too.

Menter German, the pastor of visitation in Silver Spring, was 80 years old when I began to serve with him. Earlier, he had served for 33 years as pastor of Bethany Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., until he retired.

But he didn't stay retired. He served as interim pastor of various churches before he was called to Montgomery Hills at age 73 to a part-time pastoral role. He was not just named Menter; he was a mentor.

So, I learned to be a pastor, not just from seminary, but from the many mentors who were role models for me through the years. Perhaps every Christian is called to be a mentor in some way.

One day we too will be gone, but the influence of our Christian witness can live on in those who come after us. Jesus commissioned his followers to go and make disciples, teaching them (Matt. 28:19-20). He didn't say, "Go and be mentors," but that is part of making and teaching disciples. Jesus commissions us to be mentors too. NFJ

"So, I learned to be a pastor, not just from seminary, but from the many mentors who were role models for me through the years. Perhaps every Christian is called to be a mentor in some way."

—Bruce Salmon is a retired pastor living in Bowie, Md., and the author of numerous Nurturing Faith books including "*Preaching for the Long Haul* and *The Barefoot Eulogist.*

finding faith in FICTION

A conversation with romance novelist Emily B. Riddle

BY CALLY CHISHOLM

Author Emily B. Riddle set up a table at the cozy new bookstore, Cork & Cover, in downtown Clinton, Tenn., to sign copies of her new book *First Comes Love.*

After visiting with those in attendance, she read a scene from the new novel to a supportive and engaged audience.

First Comes Love was independently published in November of last year. The romance novel follows a 38-year-old woman named Andie who is living her best life as a single business owner with her beloved pet corgis.

Her life is upended when she meets the handsome Dr. Joe — a kind man with three kids. The problem? Andie absolutely does not want children.

What makes this romance novel stand apart from the genre is the main character's openness to sharing her faith and attending a progressive church.

Riddle talked candidly with *Nurturing Faith Journal* about her writing process, becoming a Christian in her 30s, and connecting with readers on social media. The conversation below is adapted from that interview.

NFJ: Can you give us a little background about yourself?

EBR: I grew up in Knoxville, Tenn., but lived in a few other places like Chicago and in North Carolina, and moved back home to Knoxville while I was pregnant with my daughter to be close to family.

NFJ: How long have you been a writer? What is your "origin story"?

EBR: I remember being in elementary school and we were getting into fiction. I would suddenly be writing a volume when it was supposed to be a nice, short story.

I've wanted to be a writer for as long as I can remember. I've written a few books, but none have been published until this one.

I never took it very seriously… that I would put something out in the world that people would want to read. That kept me from putting something out sooner.

NFJ: Your first published novel is a romance. What inspires you to write love stories?

EBR: They are my favorite thing to read and have been for as long as I can remember. People falling in love is such a hopeful act. I want to write hopeful stories that leave people optimistic. Love stories do that.

It makes sense for me to write the thing I love to read and try to share the feeling I get when I read these hopeful stories.

NFJ: What authors have most influenced your writing?

EBR: Growing up, I read everything! You can go all the way back to *Sweet Valley Twins* and *The Babysitter's Club*. When I got older, I would read anything from thrillers to classics.

Now I focus more on what I think of as women's fiction or rom-coms. One of the few authors that I know for sure I am going to go out and pick up her books is Katherine Center. It has been a delight to watch her career flourish and to think, "I knew you when you only had a couple of books out."

I also enjoy British writers like Sophie Kinsella. She does a series called *Shopaholic*, but also a lot of standalones.

They are very lighthearted and usually have a heroine I can identify with.

NFJ: Your book, *First Comes Love*, is a romance novel that follows the main character Andie and her love interest Dr. Joe. He is a divorced dad with three children, and Andie is living her best single life as a boutique owner. How did this story come together?

EBR: I love the idea of a woman who knew herself well enough to say, "I don't want this," and what she didn't want was children. That goes against most societal norms.

That is shifting a little bit now, but it has been pretty typical for people to reach adulthood and the expectation is to want to have children.

Having two myself, I love it. I would easily say it was the best decision I ever made. But it is incredibly demanding, and I don't think it is for everyone.

I applaud people who can look at the situation and say: "I know that is what's expected of me, but that is not my strength. This is not how I want to contribute to the world."

The idea was to create a woman who had made a really good life for herself, but the one thing she felt was missing was being in love. Yet, every time she approached it, she got tangled up with the kids question.

So, how can she be true to herself, but also flexible? How do we honor what we know to be true about ourselves, but also be open to the fact that sometimes life is going to give us something other than what we expect? It might end up being a perfect fit for us.

NFJ: What aspects of the book came first in the writing process: the plot or characters?

EBR: Definitely characters.

As a relational person, it feels like characters walk into my brain and show themselves to me. And I go, "Oh, that is an interesting idea. I wonder what would happen if you were put in this situation."

I see myself as only writing female leading characters. Maybe at some point I would try to do a dual point-of-view story. I

Author Emily B. Riddle reads portions of her book to an audience at Cork & Cover, a local bookstore in downtown Clinton, Tenn. Photo by Taylor Martin.

really feel most comfortable right now in the female mind.

Andie sort of popped up in my brain and went: "What if there was this lady with a cute car and she loves her life and has a good business, but she doesn't want children?"

And she is not that young! That is a really important piece of the story, too. We are not talking about a 20-something year old. We are talking about a 38-year-old heroine who hasn't been married.

NFJ: In your author's note you state that "this novel might be too mainstream for most Christians, and too Christian for the mainstream." Can you talk about your decision to include faith in the novel?

EBR: Honestly, it was the most complicated piece for me, because I don't see this as Christian fiction. I have read some really good Christian fiction, and it's a great genre. But I knew I wasn't writing to call people to the Lord. It is not the purpose of this book.

I always knew this character was going to be a Christian. I want you to see her living her life, and part of that is that she goes to church. She sings at her church. There is a nativity pageant at one point, because that is just a part of who she is.

I also knew that was going to be a tough sell for a lot of people, because a lot of folks don't identify as Christian. Or maybe they do, and some of the pieces of the story wouldn't necessarily fit within their beliefs.

So, it felt like I was writing a mainstream novel, but putting these tricky pieces into it. It is important to me even though it is very niche, right?

You hear all the time to write what you know. Write the book you want to read.

I did want to see more women like myself reflected in fiction, which were people who believe in the Lord and sometimes cuss; someone who goes to church and also has an eclectic group of friends and maybe doesn't live a life that looks like what we think of as the typical, traditional Christian life.

NFJ: This is not an aspect of life that many mainstream authors write about or reflect through their characters. It is very cool that you left that in there.

EBR: Thank you! I am glad you felt that way. There have to be other people who feel like I do.

I was divorced and then remarried, but had a whole period of life where I was a grown woman 35 and older who was dating and had a daughter trying to navigate that world.

NFJ: You identify as a "progressive Christian who loves Jesus and pop culture." What values propel you in your writing and as a person in general?

EBR: I follow Jesus. I don't want to hide that under a bushel. Yet, I don't want to exclude people who don't have the same beliefs that I have.

The prayer I say with my toddler is: "Please help us to be the people that you know we are."

Not everything we watch or listen to is based on faith, but there is still beauty in those things. We need to be open to seeing what is out there in the world.

I am a "baby Christian." I didn't come to the faith until I was in my mid-30s. I am 42 now. I wasn't raised into any faith.

I was one of two kids in my class who was like: "Easter? I am only here for the eggs." That world was comfortable for me.

As an adult, I felt the call to find out more. It has been the best gift other than my children and my family. As someone who came into it as a fully formed adult, I had a whole life that I lived that didn't involve any of this.

I had great friends, good work, and things that mattered to me. It is important that I can hold both worlds in my hands. One part of my life didn't have to die because I started living under a new belief system. It is something I feel so deeply.

NFJ: It is very refreshing to hear your story. You are showing people that you can be a part of the faith while retaining important parts of yourself that were already there.

EBR: That is perfectly said. I have been following people who have been in the church and are leaving it. And I am really curious to see what they have to say about it.

But I still feel like Jesus is the way. I get frustrated with some parts of what I see, and that is why I haven't labeled my book as Christian fiction. The closest I come is using this "progressive Christian" terminology.

I am very new to all of this, but I know what is in my heart and what is shaping my life. The most I can do is share that.

> We all want to have a bunch of people read our book. But, if you write *the* book that the one person really needs, then you've done something. I had to get out of my own way.

NFJ: Is writing a spiritual practice for you?

EBR: It is. I've been a fan of journaling for many years, way before I came into the faith. I see it more as a spiritual practice now than I did before.

I use a journal to process the relationship between God and myself and write about things happening around me. As far as my fiction, I have a prayer that goes: "Please, Lord, let this serve you."

I want to be shaped by the Lord and want my words to reflect him, even though they don't fall into that Christian fiction genre.

NFJ: Without spoilers, what scenes were the hardest to write? What were the easiest?

EBR: The fight scenes were really hard. There were times I could not bring myself to sit down and write because I did not want to think about a fight. Those scenes feel experimental.

There are two pivotal arguments in this book that happen between two of the most important characters. I would get all sweaty and stressed out, and I would have to sit myself down and say things like: "If you would just write for 20 minutes, then you can get up and eat some chocolate. The argument needs to happen, or there will be no book."

The scenes I most enjoyed writing were with the kids. Kids are weird, funny, delightful, stressful, and truth-tellers. I feel kind of guilty because I have this woman who has said that she doesn't want children, and yet I surround her with children.

Andie is able to say in her thoughts and out loud the things we want to say about kids but can't say because it seems wrong. But it is all true — they are a tough lot!

NFJ: What hurdles or challenges did you have to overcome in order to publish the book?

EBR: As someone who has been writing her whole life but didn't publish anything until recently—that is a long time to go knowing you want to do something but being too afraid to take steps towards that goal.

There was a lot of insecurity and self-doubt. I had to remind myself that this was just about putting the words out there and creating the best thing you can produce at this point in your life.

We all want to have a bunch of people read our book. But, if you write the book that the one person really needs, then you've done something. I had to get out of my own way.

Externally, learning this whole process takes a lot. Everything from marketing to publishing requires a lot of education. It took about two years from when I started writing this to it being out in the world for people to read.

NFJ: You have an excellent presence on Instagram as @emilyriddlewrites. How do

you engage with readers on the platform? Also, would you speak to the growing role of social media as a newly published author?

EBR: Social media is a gift and curse. It requires us to learn a skill we don't know, which is marketing. We want to show up as ourselves but also be open to what readers want to see. Of course, I am trying to sell my book. But it is also important to engage *with* readers *as* readers.

I try to be aware of what else is out there that might appeal to readers in my niche. What am I currently reading? What is it like being a new writer? What is indie publishing like? It is helpful to talk to readers about the things that matter to me.

[Social media is] also here for the community. That is one of [its] gifts.

If I had wanted to write to someone 20 years ago to say I loved their book, the odds of connecting with that author might be pretty slim. Now, I can share Katherine Center's Instagram story from her account to tell my followers that I read her book. Then suddenly she is in my DMs thanking me.

What a thrill to have a connection with someone who wrote something that spoke to me.

It is the same thrill when someone sends me a message and says, "I just read your book and I didn't know I needed it until I read it." What a gift! The odds of someone being able to do that with a fan letter is so much slimmer and takes longer to respond to.

NFJ: What advice would you give someone wanting to publish their first book?

EBR: It sounds so simple, but just doing the writing is the number-one thing. As much as you can, take the critique off of it and keep writing.

There is nothing to critique until you have a first draft. Even when you know it is the worst thing that has ever been written on this planet, move on to the next paragraph.

When you come back to your manuscript after writing the first draft, you can scrap things that were not good or rewrite scenes. It is so easy to get caught up in trying to make it look really good right from the start. Once you have all the writing done, then you can go back and start deciding what to keep, change, or throw away.

My next thought would be: You are playing the long game. It is rare for someone to be an overnight success.

As readers, we sometimes discover an author on their third or sixth book. And then we can be excited because they have a back catalog that we can go back to for more. It looks like there are so many writers who put out their first book and go big. But it is really not that common.

If you feel like one of your calls in life is to be a writer, then plan on doing it for a while. That is a good thing. Put your head down and keep writing.

NFJ: When can readers expect your second novel?

EBR: I expect to release a second book over the summer of 2023. While I was resting the manuscript for *First Comes Love* — leaving it alone and waiting to come back to it with fresh eyes — I jumped into book two.

Doing it this way is great for exercising my writing muscles. I had half of book two done when my first one went out into the world.

I see Andie's story as part of a trilogy. They will be considered interconnected standalones. This means the next book is not about Andie and Joe, but you will see them again as minor characters in the story and not the focus. There will be two new characters, and you've already heard one of their names in the first book.

Currently, I am working on the exact wording of the title, but I have been inspired by the nursery rhyme that starts off, "First comes love, then comes marriage."

In the next book, our main character and her love interest get married fairly

quickly. And you will get to see what life is like for two people who have not been together for very long.

What you will continue to see in my books is that they are older. This new character will be 35 and has been divorced and has two children. The man she marries is also divorced.

That is a piece I like to see — late bloomers, second chances, and people who are entering their best phase of life at an older age. You are going to see characters who have already had great challenges in life get a second chance at love.

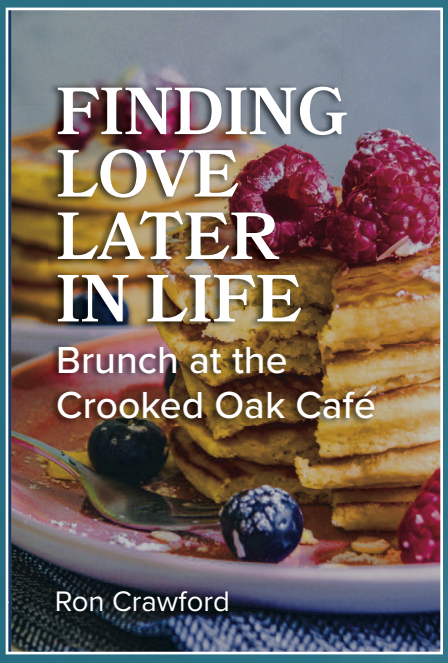
NFJ: I love that you are writing interconnected stories, because you can really play with readers and create inside jokes so that when they read your books, they can point out callbacks to previous stories. It makes reading more fun and engaging.

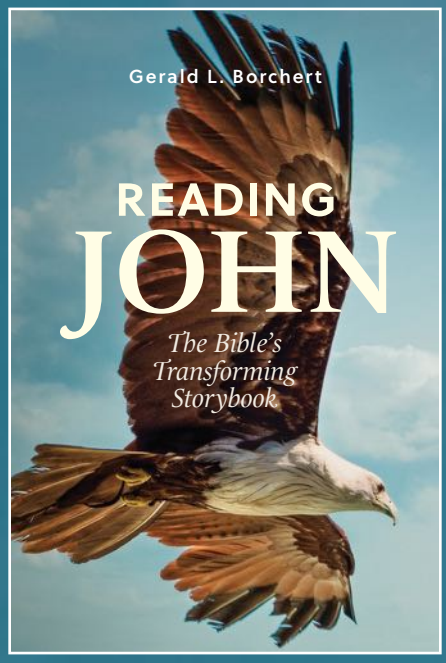
EBR: I will say one of the neat things that has happened in this next book is that Andie suddenly popped up before I thought you were going to see her. This new character finds herself in a meeting with Andie and receives advice.

I got to see how much Andie has grown. Our girl is doing well and helping others, and that made me really happy.

The third book won't come out until late 2023 or early 2024. [It has] a character that was also in *First Comes Love*. It is funny that these women have lived in my head, and it all fell into place where they would belong. NFJ

First Comes Love by Emily B. Riddle is available on Amazon as a paperback, e-book, and on Kindle Unlimited. Copies are also available in some Knoxville-area bookstores.





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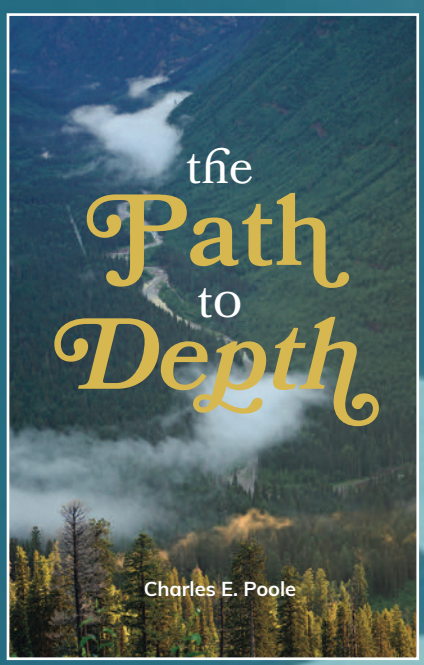

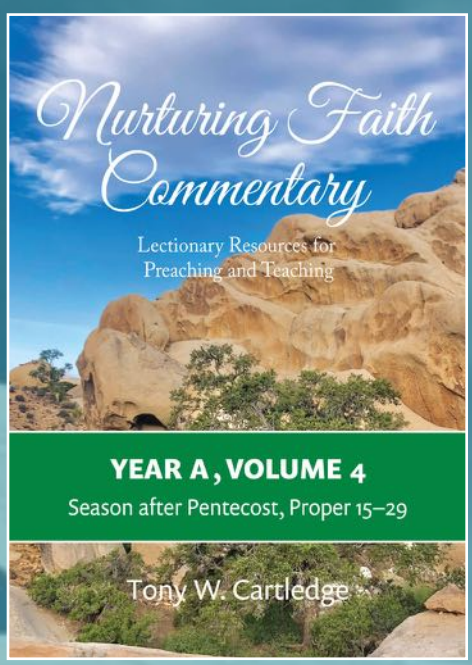

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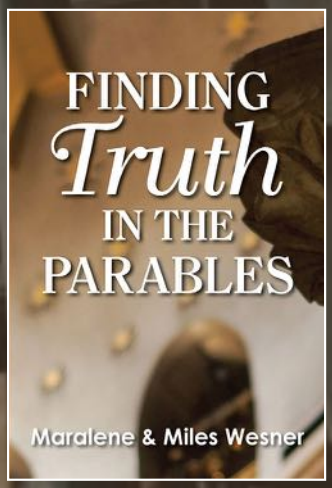

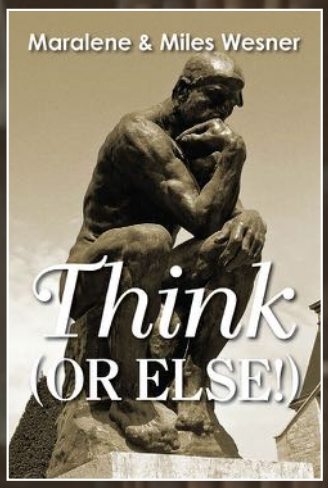

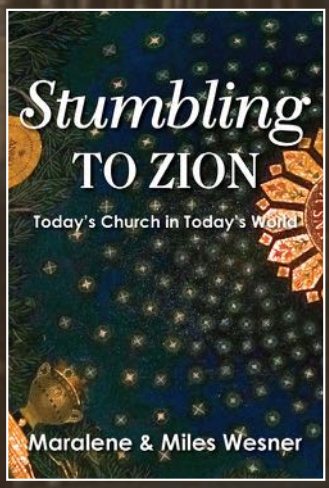

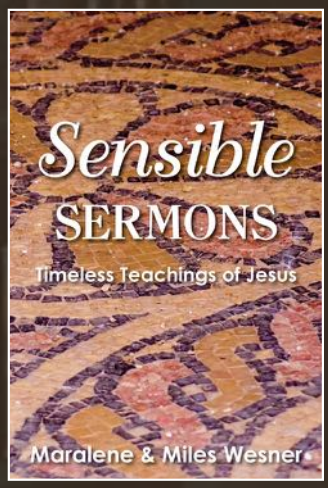

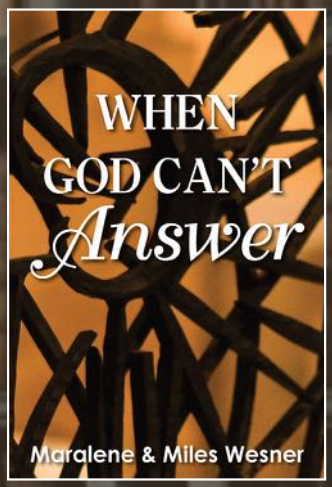

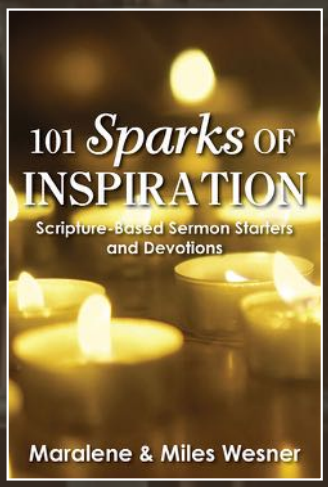

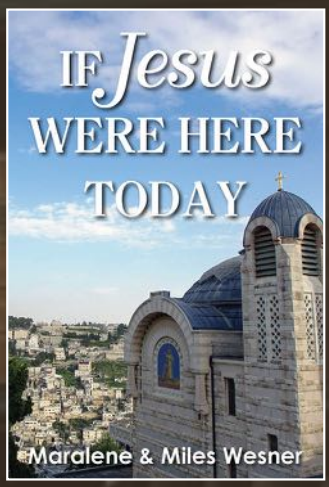

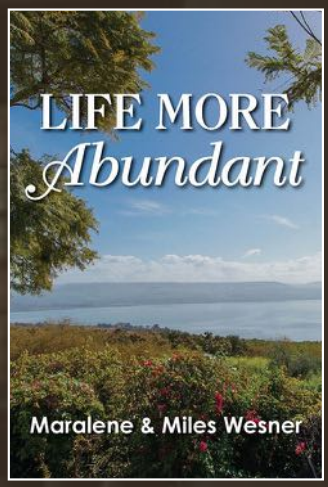

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LONG-AWAITED MOMENT

The will and ways that shaped America's fuller future of freedom

PHOTOS AND STORY BY BRUCE GOURLEY

As the largely Baptist inhabitants on St. Helena Island contested with northern military forces, educators, and missionaries for control of their own destiny — and Baptist-centric Mitchelville on Hilton Head Island emerged as the first self-governed Black community in the U.S. — the Sea Islands of South Carolina expanded their role as the southern administrative seat of the federal government.

In the town of Beaufort, the U.S. Army's Department of the South transformed former slaveowners' mansions into officers' quarters, administrative offices, and hospitals.

Harriet Tubman, former slave, famed abolitionist, and heroine of the Underground Railroad, moved to Beaufort to help out in any way she could.

There she served as a scout and spy for the Army and operated an "eating house" and "wash house," the latter teaching newly freed women how to wash, sew and bake for Union soldiers, and thus become financially self-sufficient.

Soon, too, a local newspaper arrived. *The New South*, its office in the community of Port Royal, debuted on March 15, 1862.

"[A]ddressed mostly to soldiers at the seat of war," the inaugural edition voiced unequivocal support for "the one great object of us all, the suppression of the [Southern] Rebellion," with a "due share of attention" to the occupied Sea Islands. "And if an occasional copy of a Union paper should find its way to the deluded and unfortunate [white Southern] people with whom we are contending, some idea of the hopelessness of their effort may be afforded them."

"Occasional" also characterized the sporadically-published newspaper, of which the third edition rolled off the presses on Aug. 23, 1862.

Writer's note: This is the fourth article in a series made possible by legacy funding from the former Whitsitt Society. These writings resulted from traveling along the Sea Islands and coastal plains of South Carolina and Georgia, listening to voices and memories in a region now recognized as the Gullah Geechee corridor.

'Gullah Geechee' refers to the centuries-old culture of west and central Africans kidnapped from their native homeland, transported across the Atlantic Ocean, and sold into slavery in the southeastern U.S. In slavery they retained much of their African spirituality, while most by the Civil War era also laid claim to the Baptist faith. Their enduring stories during slavery, the Civil War and Reconstruction speak uniquely and prophetically to the important issues of freedom of conscience and soul liberty to which the Whitsitt Society was dedicated.

STRONG CONVICTIONS

Military efforts to "win" back the "allegiance" of white South Carolinians to the Union had fallen on deaf ears; they "scarcely design to listen," the editors observed.

"But the most important experiment of the Department of the South," the editorial continued, "has been purely of a moral significance" achieved "under Gen. [David] Hunter's administration."

No one had done more than Hunter in setting "the mind of the country seriously at work, considering the true issues of the war, than all the agencies of journalism, both Houses of Congress, and all the executive branches of our country combined."

Hunter had "marked" himself "a man of strong convictions" by advocating for formal freedom for liberated slaves and for "arming a regiment of blacks." The general's actions had been revoked by a cautious President Abraham Lincoln, but the *Free South's* editors presciently enthused that his "ideas" were "a great fountain of motive power, radiating its influences, far and wide, though the public mind."

Soon the controversial Hunter would be reassigned to administrative duties in Washington, only in January 1863 to return as commander of the Sea Islands, his once-too-early ideas by then implemented by a resolute Lincoln.

ROBERT SMALLS

General David Hunter was not the only one with strong convictions. Some 50 miles northeastward on Charleston's riverfront, Beaufort native Robert Smalls took a step that thousands of enslaved people before him had taken: he fled for freedom, knowing he would be harshly punished, as so many before him had been, if caught.

Statue of Beaufort native and Civil War hero Robert Smalls in the churchyard of the Tabernacle Baptist Church.

A slave laborer working as a deckhand, Smalls had quietly observed how to pilot ships. Before dawn on May 13, 1862, he made his move.

Dressed as the captain, Smalls and a crew of eight — all Black, accompanied by their families — under the cover of darkness daringly seized and sailed the Confederate steamer *Planter* into Charleston harbor. Passing harbor lookouts and Confederate cannons without drawing attention, the escapees found safety behind nearby Union naval lines.

Thereafter the Beaufort native became the toast of America, celebrated as a great hero. Touring the North, in August he visited President Lincoln at the White House, voicing support for General Hunter's plan to recruit Blacks to fight in the U.S. Army.

Small's heroism and request convinced Lincoln that Black men in uniform would be essential to winning the war. Soon Smalls received a naval commission as a second lieutenant, a first for a Black American.

Piloting his own ship, he fought in 17 battles during the War of the Rebellion. In time the Beaufort native, a Baptist, would become one of the most accomplished Black men in the nation. But that time would have to wait until after the war.

COURSE OF ACTION

Finally settling on his own course of action, Lincoln on Sept. 22 announced that if the southern rebels did not lay down their arms and rejoin the Union by Jan. 1, 1863, he would, by virtue of congressionally-granted war powers, officially decree as free all slaves in the rebellious states.

Slaveowners scoffed, wrongly dismissing Lincoln's threat as inconsequential and — correctly — observing that it could not be enforced.

Sea Islanders, on the other hand, understood the revolution that Lincoln's coming Emancipation Proclamation would unleash.

Port Royal's *New South* newspaper gushed: "Now glory to the Lord of Hosts, from whom all glories are! We cannot, if we would repress our exaltation at one of the grandest victories of this or any other time over the Selfishness forever in armed opposition to the progress of Society."

Black Sea Islanders cheered. Their early freedom experiences in the federally named Port Royal Experiment, buttressed by the national heroism and advocacy of Robert Smalls, one of their own, had led a previously reluctant President Lincoln to embrace freedom for all Black Americans.

Eagerly they used their networks to spread the word of coming Emancipation to slaves inland, knowing the news would encourage more to flee from bondage.

Fingering the pulse of Sea Islanders, Methodist missionary Mansfield French envisioned the advancing Port Royal Experiment as the path to national freedom.

"God's programme" when fully obtained would be "freedom in its largest sense — Free soil, free schools, free ballot boxes, free representation in state and national" governments. "No power on earth save a *wicked* one can prevent it," he wrote prophetically.

Seemingly everywhere in the Sea Islands, the God of freedom had indeed conquered and repurposed old houses of worship of the God of slavery. St. Helena's Brick Church — the island's formerly white Baptist church — had been transformed into the Penn School.

There the island's Black residents were being educated, an illegal activity in South Carolina prior to the war. But there were twists and turns in freedom's advance.

TWISTS & TURNS

Despite expressing great appreciation for northern white educators, many Black Baptist islanders grew increasingly suspicious of the less religiously minded Unitarians among educators' ranks. Were these northerners really Christians, some wondered?

Determining Unitarianism to be unacceptable, the newly formed Black congregation meeting in the Brick Church instituted closed communion, allowing only Baptists to participate in the congregational ritual of observing the Lord's Supper.

Upriver the formerly white Baptist Church of Beaufort — earlier led by pastor Richard Fuller, a Beaufort native, wealthy slaveowner, and then-president of the fiercely pro-slavery Southern Baptist Convention — experienced a dramatic conversion of a different kind.

Transformed into the U.S. military's Hospital #14, the church building housed

wounded "coloured soldiers," with hospital beds replacing pews.

Camped at nearby Port Royal, the Black First South Carolina Voluntary Infantry Regiment yet served in an unofficial if nonetheless dangerous capacity, conducting local patrols and rescuing runaway slaves from the interior.

Even more structurally redemptive was the story of Fuller's expansive Beaufort mansion, known both as the Fuller House and the Tabby Manse. Fuller had grown up in and inherited the mansion from his wealthy slave-owning father.

Following his move to a pastorate in Baltimore, Fuller kept the title to the house. None other than the military governor of the Department of the South, Gen. Rufus Saxton, had set up his headquarters in Fuller's abandoned mansion, a house that the prestigious white Baptist pastor had officially forfeited to the U.S. government by failing to pay federal taxes levied on the property.

With the year 1862 drawing to a close and Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation drawing near, a second church building in Beaufort — once owned by the white Baptist church and known simply as the Tabernacle — served as a religious, cultural, educational and political center for many hundreds of former slaves.

During the fall months many of Beaufort's Black Baptists, formerly members of the town's white Baptist Church of Beaufort, held prayer meetings and worship in anticipation of freedom.

ANTICIPATION

An informal congregation, members referred to themselves as the Baptist Church of Christ in Beaufort — the word "Christ" emphasizing their belief in the inclusive teachings of Jesus that the white slaveholders' church had refused to accept.

Meeting in the Tabernacle building, the congregation in time would be formally known as the Tabernacle Baptist Church.

More than 2,000 children attending Black schools scattered across four of the Sea Islands also prepared for Emancipation Day. "I never before saw children so eager to learn," missionary and educator Charlotte Forten wrote, "although I had had several years' experience in New England schools. Coming to school is a constant and recreation for them."

In the classroom they rapidly advanced in reading, writing, history and math — their education preparation for emancipation.

Finally the long-anticipated moment dawned beneath a warm sun on a bright winter's day. The Smith Plantation on Port Royal Island, now home to the islands' Black military regiment, hosted official Emancipation Day festivities.

Decked out in military attire, soldiers encircled the speakers' platform. Food was plentiful: "great stores of molasses, hard bread, tobacco, and sweetened water, plus a barbeque of a dozen oxen, each standing whole and roasting in its pit."

Forten thrilled at the "eager, wondering crowd of freed people in their holiday attire with the gayest of head-handkerchiefs, the whitest of aprons, and the happiest of faces. The band was playing, the flags streaming, everybody talking merrily."

Thousands, mostly Black freed persons, were on hand for the formal celebration consisting of prayers, poetry, hymns and a series of speeches.

EMANCIPATION

The reading of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation brought rousing cheers. A silk regimental flag bearing the words "The Year of the Jubilee Has Come!" was presented to the First South Carolina regiment.

A spontaneous rendition of "My Country 'Tis of Thee" began, first a few Black voices "very sweet and low," then other Black voices joining in, whites standing silent in honor of the newly free Americans.

The same day the pastor and lay leaders of the Baptist Church of Christ in Beaufort composed a letter to President Lincoln. Their Emancipation Day letter consisted of two resolutions:

1. Resolved, That we all unite, with our hearts & minds & souls, to give thanks to God for, this great thing that He has done for us; that He has put it into his [Mr. Lincoln's] mind — that all should come to this very stand, according to the will of God, in freeing all the colored people. We believe that Jesus Christ will now see of the travail of his soul, in what he has done for us.

2. Resolved, That we all unite together to give Mr. President Lincoln our hearty thanks for the Proclamation. We are more than thankful to him & to God, & pray for him & for ourselves. May the blessing of God rest upon you. May grace, mercy & peace sustain you. May you go on conquering & to conquer this rebellion. We have gathered together two or three times a week for the last five months, to pray that the Lord might help you & all your soldiers, hoping that the Almighty would bless you in all your goings, & crown you with a crown of glory & a palm of victory. We never expect to meet your face on earth; but may we meet in a better world than this; — this is our humble prayer.

Some members of the Baptist Church of Christ in Beaufort also constructed a Praise House — a slavery-era traditional place of uncensored religious praise, song and prayer — in which to celebrate emancipation.

Two years thereafter, from the Praise House celebrations and due to the Tabernacle building's incapacity to house all of the city's Black Baptists, the First African Baptist Church of Beaufort would be born, the city's second Black Baptist congregation.

Following Emancipation Day festivities, celebrations continued throughout the Sea Islands. One week after emancipation, 900 freed persons crammed into and around St. Helena Island's Brick Baptist Church for "a day of jubilee."

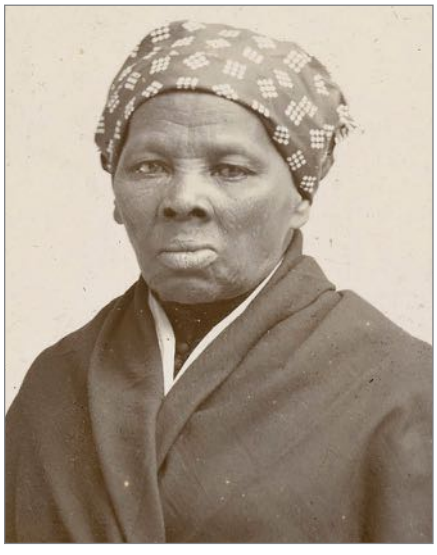
From South Carolina's Sea Islands the U.S. had been dramatically transformed by the blessed freedom that arrived to those who for generations had known only a life of brutal, dehumanizing slavery.

Their sweat and blood had too long spilled upon the islands' soils with nothing but despair and death to show for it. Now it was time to transform the soil of slavery into the land of freedom.

LAND

Former slaves had more than proven their ability to grow large food crops of corn and potatoes and a cash crop of cotton. If allowed

Emancipation Day in South Carolina's Sea Islands, January 1, 1863. Library of Congress.



Harriet Tubman: Famed abolitionist, Underground Railroad conductor, women's rights advocate and military hero.

to do so, they could settle down and live off the plantation lands that had been deserted by their former slaveowners.

But there was a big problem: the only land the freedmen had known was being put up for public auction, and wealthy northern speculators were hoping to purchase the acreage.

Still, hope remained. With the prodding of freedmen and key northern missionaries, educators and officers, General Saxton from his headquarters in Beaufort in the weeks prior to the Emancipation Proclamation had made a critical decision: some of the lands upon which freedmen had been previously held in bondage would be set aside for them to bid upon.

Busily Sea Islanders worked to pull together what little money they owned, some pooling their meager resources.

When the initial land auctions began in March 1863, eager Sea Islanders — individually, in families and collectively — purchased what land they could afford.

Other auctions followed, some one-third of the approximately 300,000 acres of plantation lands auctioned off by the federal government eventually purchased by freedmen. Bringing full circle his life from slavery to freedom, Robert Smalls purchased the Beaufort mansion of his former owner.

With a stated goal of helping freedmen, a number of white northern abolitionists also purchased plantation lands. Complementing Black wage labor opportunities in Beaufort, Boston's Edward S. Philbrick established a free labor capitalistic enterprise in the Sea Islands, paying freedmen good wages for growing cotton.

Whether owning their own land or earning income by growing others' cotton, both models controverted the white South's economic system of slavery. Land ownership, however, was viewed much more favorably by Black Sea Islanders.

THREE WORLDS

Lucretia Heyward experienced all three worlds: slavery, wage labor and, finally, land ownership. As recalled years later in an interview for the 1930s' Works Progress Administration Slave Narrative project, Heyward was born into slavery in a house "by de [white] Baptist chu'ch" in Beaufort.

A house slave, she cleaned, cooked and mended clothes for her mistress, sleeping on the floor and eating "food left ober from table." In this demeaning capacity she was spared the harshest of labor, faring much better than field slaves, the spectrum of slavery nonetheless altogether evil.

First African Baptist Church of Beaufort began as a Praise House in celebration of Emancipation Day.

Like all slaves in South Carolina, Heyward was forbidden from learning to read or write. Forced to attend the "white Baptis' chu'ch," sitting in the slave section "up stair," she listened to the white preacher extol the godliness of Black slavery.

She could not read of Jesus' inclusive life and ministry, of his love for all. But that was the point: slaveowners tried to hide Jesus' teachings from slaves.

Even so, some slaves quietly learned to read and discreetly spread the word of Jesus' liberating message.

When "Yankee be come" and captured the Sea Islands from slaveowners, Heyward's master and mistress "leab Beaufort." Afterward Heyward found wage "wuk in [Beaufort's] cotton house [gin]" for which "de Yankee pay we for wuk."

Learning that some plantation lands would be sold to freedmen, she diligently saved her earnings and then "I tek my money and buy 20 acre ob land on Parri[s] Islandt [a nearby island on which her mother's family lived]."

Finally, true freedom had arrived for Lucretia Heyward.

FREEDOM'S BATTLES

Religious liberty, educational opportunities, the Black-founded and governed town of Mitchelville, and now sustenance and wealth-generating land being purchased by freedmen: within a year-and-a-half slavery in South Carolina's Sea Islands had been supplanted by substantial freedom for a growing number of freedmen.

But would it last? Could freedom's rapid advance along the southeastern coast endure and spread throughout all of the South?

In early 1863 the prospects were anything but certain as the Confederate Army, although stretched thin, continued racking up victories where they most mattered: on the battlefield.

With many northern soldiers dead or mustering out of service, new recruits were needed.

In January the First South Carolina Infantry Regiment officially mustered into service, the first among a handful of other local-raised Black regiments on the distant western frontier and along the Mississippi Delta.

One month later came the first official government call for Black troops to sign up for the U.S. Army. More than one thousand responded right away, forming the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment, the first Black regiment in the North.

Not to be outdone, the ranks of South Carolina's Black soldiers dramatically increased in numbers, forming multiple regiments. General David Hunter's earlier, but thwarted, efforts to enlist Black soldiers on the Sea Islands had finally been vindicated.

As Black regiments north and south trained in preparation for freedom's battles, Sea Island youngsters were preparing for freedom's future.

One beautiful, cloudless day in April soldiers and children converged in Beaufort's Baptist Church of Christ/Tabernacle Baptist Church.

"[S]oldiers of the South Carolina Regiments" stood watch in the church sanctuary "crowded full" and the "galleries jammed full" as "neatly dressed" children

"walked in regular procession, and sat with perfect decorum."

In "the space in front of the pulpit" generals Hunter and Saxton sat, other white officers and soldiers "crowded gently to such places as afforded them a chance of observation." "Every nook and corner of the spacious edifice was full."

Sixty educators had been busy teaching some 2,500 children, of which "some three hundred or more scholars" from various freedmen schools and with their teachers had gathered for a hastily called celebration that "opened with the hymn 'All hail the power of Jesus' name,'" sung by the whole congregation.

Song and recitation poured forth in the Sunday School assembly, the young scholars' "little voices … rising, swelling, pouring forth volumes of sweet, rich melody, making the heart, if not the church roof, quake."

Several Black soldiers delivered "excellent addresses," followed by "that most touching song" voicing their wishes for the success of coming deployments:

"I have a father in slavery land, My father calls me, I must go To bring him from the slavery land. I'll away, I'll away To the slavery land; My father calls, I must go To bring him from the slavery land." [additional verses substituting mother, child, etc. in place of "father"]

"Tears … the brave, the wise, the old, the young, could no longer repress!" an observer enthused. God had willed freedom, and it would come to those yet enslaved.

A woman whose suffering under slavery had been made worse "as the slave of her own father" — a white man who had raped her mother, an everyday occurrence on slave plantations — sang "the 'Song of Freedom.'"

The entire congregation "joined in the chorus" with "the highest pitch of enthusiasm" — "We must fight for our liberty" and "We're not afraid to die."

CASTING HOPE

A day of celebration and determination alike, that sunny April Sunday in Beaufort both praised the early days of freedom and steeled Black islanders for the next step of expanding freedom to those yet imprisoned in slavery.

Land ownership alongside education, the two first paired in the Sea Islands, provided a basic model for how the U.S. government could help formerly enslaved Black Americans to sustainable freedom.

A second question — how could freedmen help the U.S.? — also occupied the minds of white and Black Americans alike in Beaufort and beyond. Increasingly, the latter question pointed to the service of Black men in the U.S. military as a much-needed answer to defeating the rebellious South.

Increasingly, too, the eyes of the North, white and Black alike, cast their hopeful gaze southward toward freedom's spring on the South Carolina coast. As if on cue, all the worlds of freedom and slavery, peace and war, hopes and fears, North and South soon converged in the town of Beaufort.

Having for months prepared for battle, the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment set sail in late May for the Sea Islands, their designated base of operations.

With the Massachusetts regiment in transit, federal gunboats carrying Black South Carolina regiments departed from St. Helena Island on their own mission. Sailing inland up the Combahee River some 20 miles, they rendezvoused with runaway slaves secretly hiding by the river.

Harriet Tubman, having discreetly organized the slaves' escapes through intermediaries, guided the boats.

By the end of their stealth mission Tubman and the South Carolina soldiers had rescued 727 slaves, torched plantations, and "completely destroyed" "large and extensive rice mills and store houses, and cotton warehouses."

It was a humiliating defeat for the Confederacy. Within months Tubman's role would be widely known, her heroic service with the Union military yet another remarkable accomplishment of an already remarkable woman.

FIRM RELIANCE

Brought to Beaufort, the newly freed men, women and children disembarked. A celebration ensued in the town's Black Baptist church, during which Tubman addressed the crowd.

Temporarily housed in several of Beaufort's church buildings, the new freedmen within days were re-settled in the Sea Islands. Many able-bodied men among the newly freed enrolled in South Carolina's colored regiments.

In fitting fashion the Massachusetts 54th arrived in Beaufort in tandem with the successful conclusion of the Combahee raid. Docking in Beaufort the 3rd of June they were "ready for immediate duty."

Led by Col. Robert Shaw of Boston, a prominent abolitionist and war hero, they paraded before a large crowd of local onlookers. With "soldiery bearing" the 54th "marched through the streets of Beaufort, which were never before trod by as many free-born colored people."

In the days and weeks following, the South Carolina regiments and the Massachusetts 54th sailed and marched along the coast of Georgia and up rivers, collectively freeing thousands more slaves and torching Rebel plantations. As the month of July arrived, freedom's victories were legion.

An anonymously penned poem titled "Independence Day" celebrated the Black islanders' first July 4 following their emancipation:

We come, in firm reliance on The God of Truth and Right, / To show the haughty slavelords' hosts, How freeborn men can fight.

For generations white southerners had incessantly repeated the lie that their slaves had no interest in freedom.

Then along the southeastern coast and up coastal rivers came United States Black military regiments in the spring and summer of 1863, sailing and marching, their bravery undeniable, their numbers overwhelming.

Upon their approach, slaves by the thousands between Charleston, S.C., and St. Augustine, Fla., fled from bondage and to liberty behind Union lines — while petrified white slaveowners fled in fear and wonder of freedom's march. NFJ

CONFESSIONS OF A JESUS FREAK POSER

By John D. Pierce

The Jesus Movement of the late-'60s and '70s hit the big screen and wider public awareness recently.

Movie theaters became expensive nap spots for me about six or so years ago. But *Jesus Revolution* intrigued me enough to venture into the unfamiliar land of senior rates and assigned seating.

Those of us who lived through some Jesus Movement experiences are getting a dose of nostalgia and a chance to reflect upon those influences on our lives, then and now.

It was a time when formalities of institutional faith were loosened up. It was a way to be Christian and cool, at least in our minds.

One-way signs were flashed, ΙΧΘΥΣ medallions were worn. Songs from beyond the hymnal were sung to acoustic guitars. Many are still lodged in our minds.

Some hymns were abused. Yes, we sang "Amazing Grace" to the tune of "House of the Rising Sun."

To be a real Jesus freak, however, seemed to require first being a real hippie — having bought into Timothy Leary's mantra, "Tune in, turn on, drop out."

Mostly, I was a poser who didn't drop out of family or school — just skipped a few haircuts.

This movement with a hippie vibe and a Jesus focus — that swept west to east across the nation — did, however, impact even the hills and hollers of north Georgia.

My friends and I took some of that vibe to church with us.

A classroom painted Sunday School pale green could be made cool with tabletop candles and acoustic music — often proclaiming the near-certain return of Jesus before we reached the fullness of adulthood.

Youth Vacation Bible School, at our traditional Southern Baptist church, transformed from familiar civil religion pledges and grape Kool-Aid to a groovy, dimly-lit space with floor seating that we called The Whale's Belly. (And we did that without mind-altering substances.)

Encounters with real Jesus freaks took place at the Yellow Deli (or its downtown hangout at the time, The Areopagus) in Chattanooga. There we found a delicious mix of hot sandwiches, chilled papaya juice and Jesus-themed music, all set in a soothing hippie décor.

The controversial (deservingly so, we'd later learned) Vine Street Community ran the delis. They were a Christian community in the sense of dropping out and sharing life in common.

We were live-at-home, school-enrolled, go-to-church teenagers who loved the music, the food and the hippie vibe of the Jesus freaks.

We mimicked their fashion style of bell-bottom jeans, colorful shirts and longer hair — a look that had the clean-cut fundamentalist students at Tennessee Temple continually seeking to save our souls.

It's easy to look back and laugh at ourselves and others a bit. And that's a healthy thing to do.

But despite some bad theology served with good carrot cake, there were some positive influences from that movement on many of our lives.

We learned to think beyond the constraints of our inherited religious structures. And, if observant and critical enough, one could see the dangers and benefits of a social movement that called for more inclusive and radical love while failing to erect guardrails to avoid authoritarian abuse.

Reflected in both traditional and innovative Americanized Christianity, the call to "accept Jesus" rather than "follow Jesus" doesn't necessarily lead to the latter. Today, we see the tragic, self-serving results of a primarily get-out-of-hell-card faith.

My interest is not in critiquing the movie, but a couple of helpful church leadership tips can be found in the script.

When confronted by inflexible lay leaders about their discomfort with the hippie-types coming into the church, pastor Chuck Smith (Kelsey Grammer) confessed: "Perhaps I haven't made us uncomfortable enough."

Indeed, the gospel should disrupt our comfort.

In a moment of struggle, Chuck offers yet another confession: "With so many voices, it's hard to hear the truth."

His wife, Kay (Julia Campbell), replies that the truth is often quiet: "It's the lies that are loud."

The Jesus Revolution era taught us some important lessons if we will just stick with them.

For one, there is no single cultural context to which Jesus solely belongs. His calling is too radical and counter-cultural to be fully institutionalized.

Two, Jesus crosses generations and other demarcations as boldly as he walked across Samaria with his confused and fearful first disciples — and engaged and affirmed a woman considered out of bounds by reputation, ethnicity, religion and gender.

In other words, the life to which Jesus invites us to follow is wide open and readily available.

As Cathe, in the movie, said to her father: "It's not just for hippies." NFJ

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MARBLE MAN

Sculptor Frank Murphy reveals 'what's there'

PHOTOS AND STORY BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Most of Frank Murphy's masterful marble sculptures come straight from his imagination — sizing up an available block of stone.

"You just have to look in and see what's there," said Murphy who does most of his carving in front of his Rome, Ga., home, much to the interest and delight of his neighbors.

Occasionally someone will commission a work with either a basic theme or a more detailed description. Artists prefer the freedom and creativity that come from the former.

But the latter works just fine when carving and painting is one's livelihood and not just a hobby.

FOUR FIGURES

One commissioning came from a woman who asked for a larger piece than Murphy had previously done. It was to be placed at a family cemetery plot.

"She wanted two male and two female figures," which represented her grandchildren, said Murphy. So, he got busy.

Murphy made a model of the sculpture in clay, which was enthusiastically received. Then he went to the quarry and selected a large slab of marble — two by four feet, and 11 inches thick.

His friendly neighbors were enlisted to help unload and set the marble in place.

"Then she changed her mind," said Murphy, of the woman who commissioned the piece. So, he moved on to doing something different with another piece of marble for her.

Afterward, other sculpture and painting projects drew his attention for a while.

"So, this piece just set out here for two years," said Murphy — who was putting final touches on the large sculpture he tentatively titled "four angels" in late February.

He was getting it ready — along with other sculptures — for the annual two-week Marble Festival held in his hometown of Sylacauga, Ala., each spring.

With fine details from the halo atop to the feathering of wings and the formation of fingers, Murphy contemplated a more fitting name for the piece he hopes will draw a buyer.

He heard a song based on the Emily Dickinson poem that begins, "Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul." Therein he found a better name for this expression of hope in marble.

Describing his piece first envisioned for a burial site, Murphy said, "The whole idea is receiving the soul into glory."

He pointed to the figures within the sculpture and noted: "Their hands are open, welcoming souls into heaven."

NEW TOOLS

Long before becoming a sculptor, Murphy was surrounded by marble. Three large quarries operated in his hometown. A vein of marble there extends for 33 miles, he said. "It's some of the purest white marble in the world," he said. "As a kid, I was around this stuff all the time."

His father would sometimes pick up small pieces of marble from the roadside to bring home. At age 9, Frank started hammering on one rather flat piece.

With the help of some paint, he created a crude rendering of Abraham Lincoln to give to his father as a Christmas gift.

"So, there was an interest in it," he said of the art form, "but I never saw anyone carve marble until I was in college."

After moving to Rome, Ga., following seminary, Murphy worked as a youth minister and then campus minister. Meanwhile, his oil paintings — many of which were large depictions of biblical scenes — graced the walls of churches, homes and other places.

Marble, however, never completely left his mind.

"One day I'm in Birmingham and go by an art store," Murphy recalled. "They had a five-piece carving set for $45."

He bought it, thinking: "I know where I can get marble." In fact, Murphy worked at one of the quarries the summer between high school and college.

He assumed the pointed chisel was for detailed work, but learned he was completely wrong. "It was for knocking the big stuff off."

A book in the Berry College library, where he served as Baptist campus minister for several years, described the various tools he now owned.

"Then I went to see my folks," he said of the two-hour trip back to Sylacauga, "and got a piece of marble."

DIMENSION

"What was attractive to me was the physicality of it," said Murphy, a former college baseball pitcher. "It was different from sitting at a table and painting."

"It was challenging because I was used to seeing from one point of view," he added. "Seeing something from multiple viewpoints, rather than one angle, was something I had to learn."

Murphy values and continues to enjoy both art forms while noting their different approaches.

"Painting is more about shadow, light and color," said Murphy. "Sculpture is more about shape and form."

The Marble Festival gives Murphy both a dedicated two-week period to carve and a chance to spend time with more than 30 other sculptors who come from various places.

Murphy's sculpture of a woman's head with a long strand of hair was begun at the 2015 festival. To do a "portrait" of a young woman in marble, he said, required taking

Feathering and other details on the back of Frank Murphy's recent "Hope is the thing with feathers" piece (left) makes it suitable for viewing from all angles. Right: The Comer Library in Sylacauga, Ala., has several of Murphy's sculptures on permanent exhibit including Rapunzel and Don Quixote.

photos of the model from all around her head.

He's done a rendering of Jacob wrestling with the angel — and others that are biblically based.

An upward extending arm with a pointing finger is Murphy's three-dimensional take on Michelangelo's 16th-century fresco painting, "The Creation of Adam," on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

Such intricate work can be challenging, as marble has both harder and softer spots along with veining.

"You're always breaking stuff off," he said of the art form that requires hammers and chisels. "The key is breaking off the right stuff."

STILL PAINTING

"I haven't stopped painting; I just carve more now," said Murphy. But the multiple paintings that fill his home belie any idea that the brushes have much time to rest.

One is his massive portrayal of Joseph of the Old Testament, who was sold into slavery by his brothers only to rise to prominence.

"I was trying to capture their initial reactions when learning his identity," he said. "It's the moment Joseph tells them, 'I'm your brother.'"

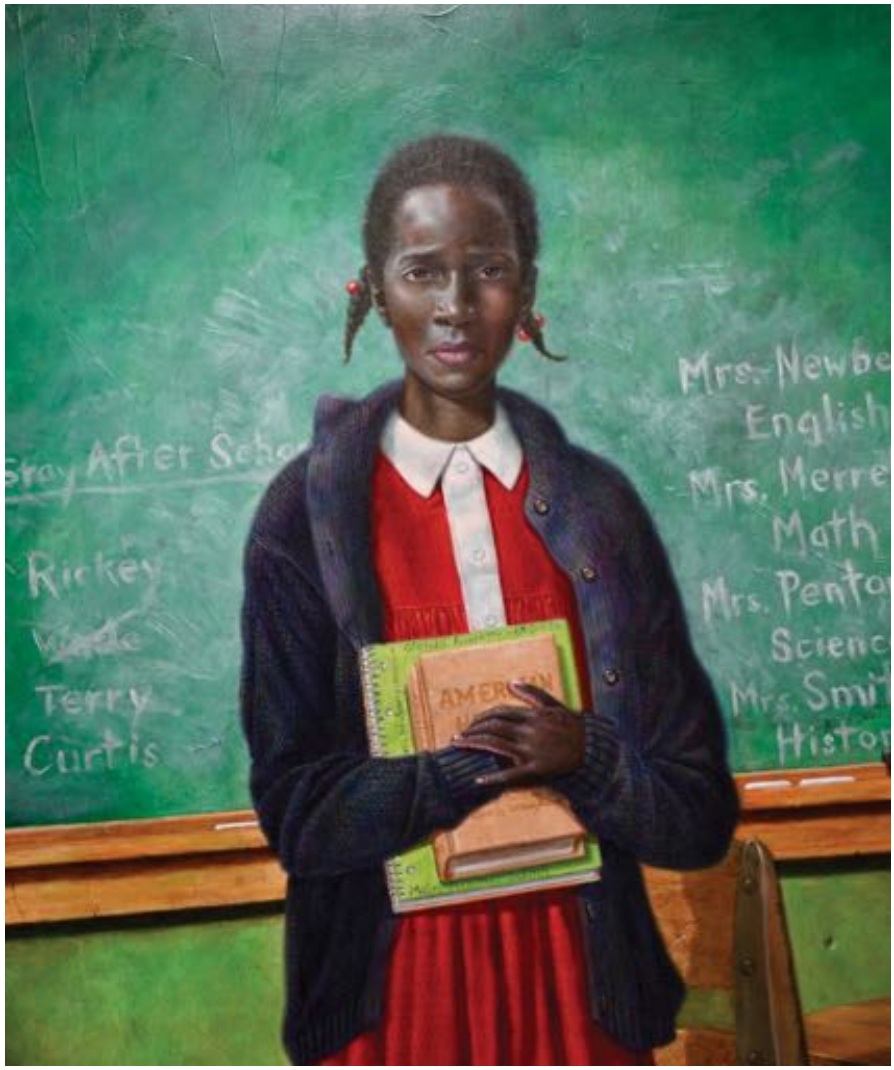
Murphy noted that the brothers were shocked except for the youngest Benjamin, "who didn't know the story."

Another recent painting is titled, "Glenda Averett goes to Main Avenue School." It depicts an African-American girl who attended the sixth grade with Frank when racial integration finally reached Alabama.

"I've not seen her since the sixth grade," said Murphy, saying she moved on somewhere following the school year that began in fall of 1966. But he felt the need to paint the scene as an apology.

Four boys had been ugly to her, said Murphy. He lists them on the chalkboard in his painting to shame them and perhaps provide a bit of punishment they avoided.

But Murphy has his own guilt: "I could have stopped it," he said. Instead, he just told Glenda that the boy leading the mean effort was crazy.



"Glenda Averett goes to Main Avenue School."

Frank Murphy describes his nearly completed painting, based on an Old Testament story, that shows the shock of those who just discovered the identity of their brother Joseph.

"I don't write. I paint a story."

Murphy said as an artist he expresses himself in ways other than words. "I don't write; I paint a story."

INSPIRATION

Such personal experiences in addition to biblical stories often find expression in Murphy's art forms.

He credits Rembrandt for influencing his paintings the most. Italian sculptors Michelangelo and Bernini inspire his marble carvings.

Over the decades Murphy has developed his own style — whether working with brushes or chisels.

Some works are on permanent display in museums and churches. Others may be seen at art exhibits in various locations.

Murphy also visits churches and other groups to "show and tell" how his thoughts, feelings and faith are expressed in such creative and often bold ways.

For more on his art, or to contact Frank, visit frankmurphyfineart.com. NFJ

"Drawing Moses out of the water"

SYLACAUGA

Marble chips and white dust were flying at the 2023 Sylacauga Marble Festival. Frank Murphy, who will return again to his hometown for his 50th high school reunion this year, was among the sculptors creating messes that lead to masterpieces.

Each year a guest Italian sculptor participates — with the resulting work on permanent display at the Comer Library in Alabama's "Marble City." Several of Murphy's pieces have been acquired for exhibit there, too.

There is Rapunzel with her flowing hair and Don Quixote in his familiar helmet. Another is titled "Resurrection."

"It's Jesus pulling the veil from his face," said Murphy.

One titled "Drawing Moses out of the water" shows Pharoah's daughter face-to-face with the infant. So close, in fact, that Murphy said he had to use a mirror and carve the baby's face in reverse.

The polished and well-presented sculptures in the library started in much rougher forms. Chunks of marble from a nearby quarry are brought into town on a long-bed trailer.

"Resurrection" shows Jesus pulling the burial veil from his face.

Sculptors choose what fits the images in minds or gives them an idea for their carving. Selected marble pieces are hoisted and placed on the workspaces under white tents.

"First you cut off enough to make the bottom," said Murphy, whose chosen piece met his idea of creating two people embracing.

While some knock out their work more quickly, Murphy prefers talking with the many visitors who attend the festival — and then crossing the street for a big, one-dollar cup of ice cream at the Blue Bell plant.

"I'm not in a hurry," said Murphy, who completes his projects in front of his house in Rome, Ga. "The process is fun and I'm outside."

Murphy starts his designs with the heads and faces — and uses those dimensions to ensure the other body parts are proportionate. Leaving enough marble to create those parts is important.

"I mark places to remind me: Don't go any further than that; there might be something I need."

He describes the muscles of the shoulders and arms in technical terms, noting: "Anatomy is a good thing to know."

Murphy started out as an art major at the University of Montevallo, where he pitched for the baseball team, but changed his major to physical education.

"So, I had to take anatomy and memorize all of those muscles." NFJ

Don't jump the gun

By Tony Cartledge

In early March, on the eve of Purim, the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) announced with some fanfare that an inscription from the time of the Persian king Darius I had been found at Lachish, once a major city in southern Israel.

During the Persian period, following the Babylonian exile, a major administrative center was built in Lachish atop a former Judean building. What's not to like about finding a pottery shard with the Aramaic inscription "Year 24 of Darius" scratched into it?

Pottery sherds can commonly be found lying on the surface at ancient sites, and the IAA initially announced that the ostracon was found in December by Eylon Levy, a media adviser to Israeli President Isaac Herzog.

An excited Levy, who had been climbing around the ruins of a monumental building usually identified as a Judean palace, brought the sherd to Sa'ar Ganor of the IAA. Ganar showed it to epigrapher Haggai Misgav, who had no trouble reading the inscription, as all the letters were clear.

Tests were run, the authenticity of the pottery and the inscription was confirmed, and the artifact was prepared for publication. Since the Jewish festival of Purim grows from the story of Esther, which claims to have occurred near the time of Darius, the eve of Purim must have seemed a good time to announce the find.

Reporters gushed and excited posts hit the internet. Fortunately, one person who saw the news was an unnamed expert in ancient Aramaic who had worked at the site the previous year. As a demonstration to students, she had picked up a Persian period pottery sherd and scratched "year 24 of Darius" in Aramaic letters into its surface.

Then she tossed it aside, where it remained face down for the next six

Credit: Shai Halevi / Israel Antiquities Authority

months. The ground was muddy for part of the time, and the incised letters picked up a patina that made them appear old enough to fool a variety of experts.

She contacted officials to explain, and the IAA owned up to the mistake, walking it back in a press release that focused mainly on criticizing the professor for altering the ancient sherd and then leaving it on site. Meanwhile, various scholars found fault with the IAA for failing to vet the inscription carefully enough.

And why should we care about an arcane kerfuffle over a tiny inscription that wasn't what it appeared to be?

The lesson I take home isn't about a bunch of specialists misjudging an artifact, but our tendency to misjudge other people and the stories we hear about them.

We like to believe what we want to believe. That's why so many people are eager to lap up conspiracy theories, no matter how ridiculous they are, and spread them like butter despite their total speciousness. Many refuse to back away from the lies despite clear and abundant evidence to the contrary.

That's easy to criticize, but now for the hard part: all too often, I find myself guilty of prejudging other people based on their appearance, their background, or their actions in the moment.

When a speeding driver pulls a NASCAR move weaving in and out of traffic, some immediate thoughts about their character come to mind, but it's possible that a passenger is having a medical emergency.

When a bearded dude wearing leather and tattoos dismounts his Harley and swaggers into a restaurant, I may think I know something about his approach to life, but I don't.

When a student habitually fails to turn in assignments on time, I may assume they are unfocused or undisciplined, but they may be working two jobs and caring for an ailing parent or child on top of their schoolwork.

I sometimes remind students — mainly because I need to remind myself so often — that we never know what someone else has gone through in life, or what they're dealing with now. It's better to keep an open mind than to put others in a stereotyped pigeonhole.

I can't assume someone is a racist or a homophobe based on their looks or their age or the place that they live. I can't assume someone is lacking intelligence because their political views are different from mine — or lacking in compassion because we're on opposite sides of various social issues.

We all are products of our childhood, our life experiences, and how carefully we think about them. I know my attitudes are very different now than they were 30-40 years ago, or even 10-20 years ago.

Cultural influences that shaped my early years are alien to people born in the 1980s or 1990s, and the digital world to which they are native is often unfamiliar to me.

We can't assume that someone has a particular attitude because they're white or Black, male or female, Gen-X or Boomer.

We can't surmise that people who happen to have been born in Russia or China agree with their government leaders, any more than we always agree with ours.

It's an old saw, I know, but we are better followers of Jesus when we forgo our prejudgments and take a closer look at where others' shoes have taken them. NFJ

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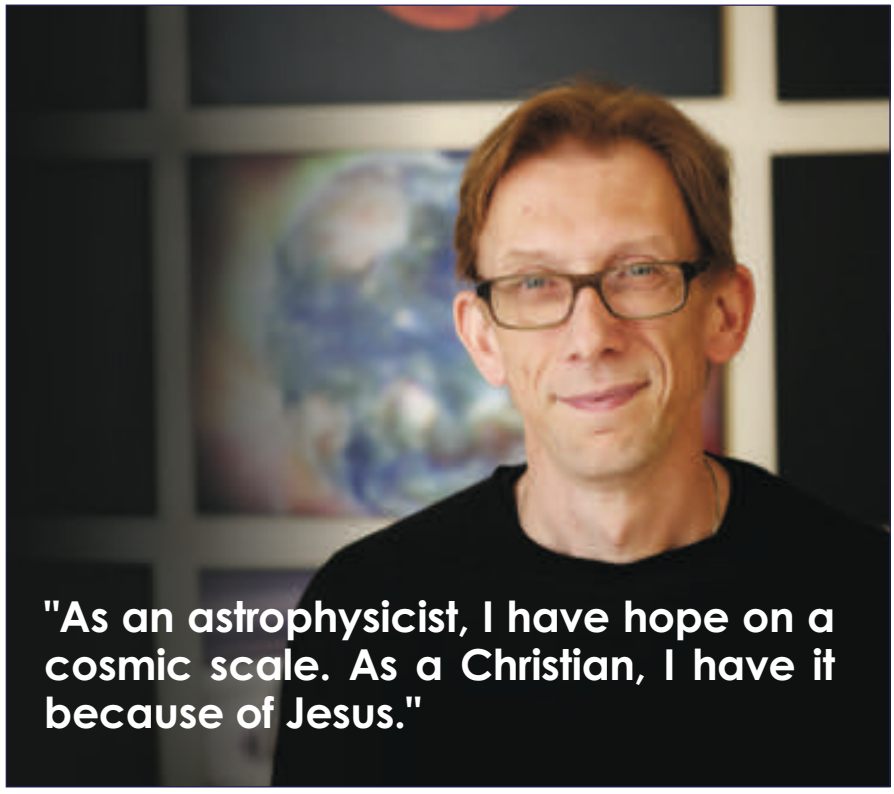
Questions Christians ask scientists

Why do you have kids?

BY PAUL WALLACE



I teach physics to undergraduates. Last year one of my students and I got into a lot of friendly arguments.

The first was about the virtues of physics. Her position was that there are none.

She was one of the strongest students in my class, yet she disliked math and also forces and energy and magnetism and photons and everything else to do with physics.

She held a special contempt for geometric optics with its ray diagrams and weird plus-minus sign conventions.

I regarded her with amused bewilderment. She had a great love and capacity for memorization, a skill I abhor, for it is worse than useless in physics.

But it served her well in her biology classes, and she is surely exercising it with great diligence these days in veterinary school.

Later in the year our friendly squabbles started to range beyond the scientific. For example, one day I mentioned my children and she asked, "Why do you have kids?"

I explained that it wasn't just me who had three children; my wife also had them. She smiled and pressed on:

"Kids are such a pain. The world is so violent. Plus you know about death and how evolution ends. Why bother?"

After asking how she felt about her own parents not sharing her low opinion of human reproduction, I admitted the obvious: it was an excellent question.

Why *do* people have children?

They're physically, emotionally and financially taxing; they keep you awake at night when they're babies *and* when they're teenagers; they don't work the farm (there is no farm); they smell funny; they dress and act like space aliens.

And the world is indeed a violent place. As a scientist and fan of natural history, I often think of the bloodiness not only of our particular species, but also of all life throughout time.

Death drives evolution. We live on the leading edge of a great red tsunami that has been building for a billion years.

"Nature red in tooth and claw," wrote Tennyson. Why add to the slaughter?

During the final week of class I was preparing to start a lecture, getting out my chalk, chatting with the students. Somehow the question came up and she said it again: "Why bother having kids?"

"Ok. Do you *really* want to know why I have kids?" I said, louder than I intended. The classroom grew suddenly quiet, and I got a little nervous. I sensed the approach of a sermon.

"Yes."

"It's because, despite all the crap of the world, all the trouble and suffering, *I have hope*."

And that's all I said about that. I wanted to say more but didn't. I preached on the virtues of particle-wave duality instead.

It's true: I really *do* have hope. As an astrophysicist, I have hope on a cosmic scale. As a Christian, I have it because of Jesus.

There is a connection, and this is how it works:

It starts, as do so many things, with evolution, which (you will recall) says that if you trace your ancestry back far enough you will see that you're related — in a literal, material way — to me, to Albert Einstein, to Cleopatra, to Neanderthals, to *T. rex*, and to all life.

Now, whatever your opinion of the virgin birth, you will probably agree that Jesus was fully human. He was born into

evolution's great stream and is intimately bound up not only with Mary but also with every single creature that has ever lived and will ever live, no matter how strange or insignificant.

There is more. Jesus, like us, is also deeply connected to creation *as a whole,* and everything in it, with no exceptions.

This is because biological evolution is part of a much larger and older *cosmic* evolution that got started long before life showed up on earth. Life's raw materials did not exist at the moment of the big bang but were assembled over the ages inside stars and dying stars.

In Jesus the divine is expressed in atoms that were formed billions of years ago, in molecules that predate life itself, in the DNA common to thousands of non-human and human generations.

When we accept the basic tenets of evolution, we see in a new way that God did not become only human in Jesus. God did not reach out to us alone.

Instead, God became woven into the very fabric of material existence. God grew intimate with all creation, not just the human or even the conscious part of it. And so Jesus' life, death and resurrection are not just about God's reconciliation with us, but with all life, all creatures, and all things.

God became one of us, lived as one of us, and died as one of us. He stood in brotherly relation to us. But this relation transcends the merely human, just as I am brother and cousin to all creatures.

The incarnation means God not only knows what it is like to be human, but also what it is like to be *created*, to live among the elements of this brilliant and brutal cosmos.

So the suffering felt by God is no less than the suffering of all creatures in all times, past, present and future. And his resurrection is a sign of a new life that stands available to every being and even to the cosmos itself.

In Jesus all things meet: God, humanity, and all creation. His birth, life, death and resurrection therefore have the capacity to heal all wounds, fill all gaps, and restore the possibility of intimacy for all creatures.

It is not possible to know how many creatures have lived and died on this planet. Many trillions at least, and there are billions and probably trillions of other planets out there.

The truth of the Jesus story is that, in all the cosmos, one life transcended death. One life returned anew.

They say that this one homeless teacher in first-century Palestine was seen, carrying his wounds and eating with his friends, after he had been executed and sealed underground.

This is a sign pointing to a truth hard to see from the dark trenches of human existence: the balance of life and death is not perfect; the coin is weighted toward life; the whole universe tips, gently but surely and finally, in favor of life.

One resurrection is sufficient. It is promise enough, a sign of a deep and abiding reality.

It turns our own lives — so full of alternating brightness and shadow, and the lives of all creatures — once and for all in the direction of hope.

I couldn't say all this in class that day, but boy I wanted to.

Anyway, that's why I have kids. NFJ

Paul Wallace is a Baptist minister with a doctorate in experimental nuclear physics from Duke University and post-doctoral work in gamma ray astronomy, along with a theology degree from Emory University. He teaches at Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Ga. Faith-science questions for consideration may be submitted to john@goodfaithmedia.org.

Saying thanks and goodbye to Zach Dawes

Zach Dawes Jr., managing editor for news and opinion at Good Faith Media (GFM), is leaving in July to become a public school teacher in Texas.

He began working at EthicsDaily.com in January 2013. The organization merged with Nurturing Faith in 2020 to form Good Faith Media.

Dawes has written hundreds of news and opinion pieces and edited thousands more. Under his leadership, the pool of GFM columnists has grown – and grown more diverse.

In addition to his editing duties, he has overseen GFM's website development, including the massive tasks of website overhauls and data migration. Other duties have involved copy editing books, managing social media, and marketing initiatives.

"In almost 30 years of ministry, I have never encountered a harder worker than Zach Dawes," said Mitch Randall, GFM's CEO. "Countless columnists have benefited from Zach's keen editorial eyes and compassionate spirit."

Dawes served in Baptist churches from 2008–2012 after earning a B.A. from Baylor University and an M.Div. from Baylor's George W. Truett Theological Seminary.

"In addition to his obvious skills as a writer and editor, it was also evident that he was trustworthy, reliable, and thorough," said Cliff Vaughn, GFM's media producer, who worked with Dawes in the early days. "Day in, day out, year in, year out, Zach gets it done."

During their spring meeting in Birmingham, Ala., GFM's directors, advisors and staff recognized Dawes for his good work. NFJ

Mitch Randall and Zach Dawes Jr. at the Good Faith Media Spring 2023 Board meetings.

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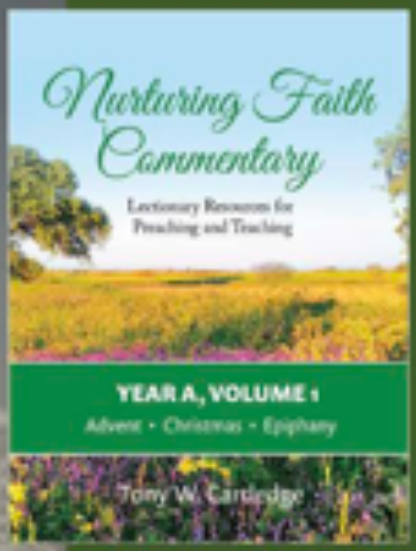

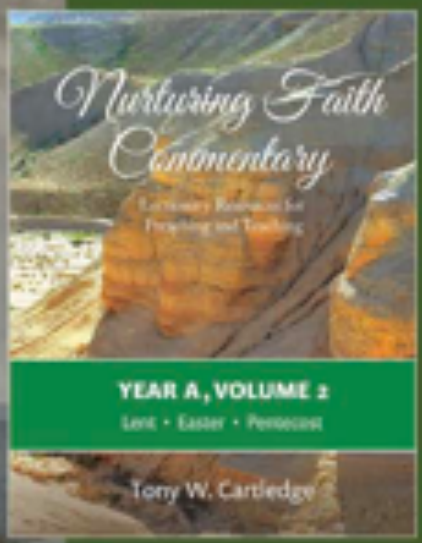

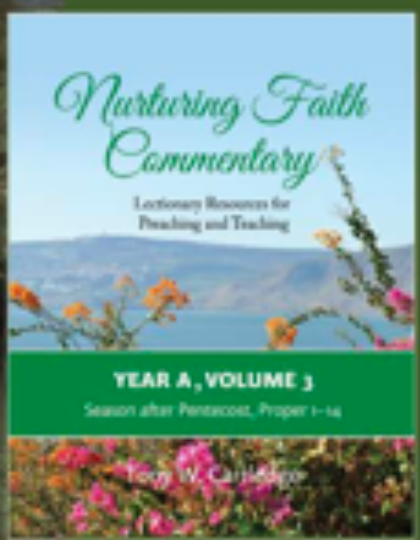

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