NOVEMBER - DECEMBER 2023

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Journal & Bible Studies

Remembering Gardner Taylor

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CHURCH & CHANGE

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ENTERTAINED & FEASTED

How Thanksgiving as we know it came to be

LAST EDITORIAL

What I've been trying to say

A publication of Good Faith Media

Morning Conversations

A series by Jon R. Roebuck

Collect them all!

"Once in a while, in the middle of an ordinary life, love gives us a fairy tale."

Finding Love Later in Life

by Ron Crawford

It is possible to find vibrant love in the seventh decade of life. Two couples shared brunch and the joy of a surprise wedding at the Crooked Oak Restaurant.

Editor's Letter

A packed-away memory surfaced after earlier announcing my plans to retire as editor of this publication (and other assignments with Good Faith Media) at the end of this calendar year.

It came from the 1980s, when living in a part of northwest metro Atlanta that was quickly transitioning into suburbia.

A friend whose family had long farmed land in west Cobb County, Ga., told of a repeated experience when planting season neared each year. There were the same ongoing debates over the right time to plant.

Will there be another frost? Will we wait too late? Are the fields too wet?

Then over dinner one evening, the most experienced of the farming family would simply declare: "Tomorrow we're going to plant the fields."

There would be a chorus of "why's?" to which he would simply reply: "Because it's time."

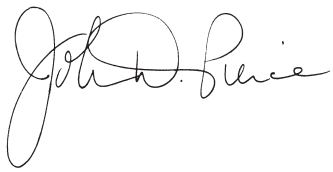
When asked about my retirement decision, there are well-reasoned responses to offer. For one, I want to focus on fewer things — whatever those turn out to be.

Also, my hands have been on the journal for nearly 24 years of its 40-year existence. New hands and fresh ideas will shape its future.

By providing nearly a year's notice, the leadership of Good Faith Media has been given sufficient time to determine the next steps without being in a big rush. But, most of all, my decision comes out of an internal sense that "it's time."

Since the next issue (dated January–February 2024) will be produced in late 2023, it will have my involvement too. It should address the editorship transition also.

My goal has been and remains until the end of the year to provide content — with my colleagues — that is interesting, inspiring and helpful. So, please, read on.



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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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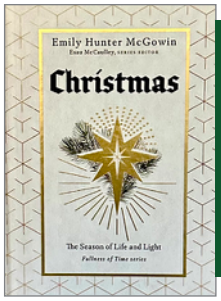

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'ENTERTAINED & FEASTED'

A recreated 17th-century village is part of Plimoth Patuxet Museums in Massachusetts. Photo by John D. Pierce.

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

They called themselves "reformers" — protesters against "the gross darkness of popery" — and searchers for the "Church of God" of "ancient purity."

In their native England, these reformers perceived the "work of God … manifest" in their lives — even as they were "scorned by the profane multitude" and persecuted for their views by the Church of England.

In time it was revealed unto these reformers that not only was "ceremonial" religion "unlawful," but also "the tryannous power of the prelates," which was "contrary to the freedom of the gospel and would burden men's conscience and thus profane the worship of God."

PILGRIMS

Thus did William Bradford, leader of the discontent Christian sect that emerged in the Old World and became known as Pilgrims, record in his *History of the Plymouth Settlement, 1608–1650.*

With these words Bradford sketched the Pilgrims' early setting apart of themselves as God's true followers arrayed against Satan's evils manifested in other Christians.

For the preservation of what they perceived as the one true faith, years later these believers searched for a faraway place where they could enjoy "liberty and comfortable conditions" and "better advantage and less danger" from Satan's wiles — "if any such could be found."

For other reasons too, they sought such a place, including the preservation of "their posterity" from degeneration and corruption.

"Last and not least," Bradford wrote, they "cherished a great hope and inward zeal of laying good foundations … for the propagation and advance of the gospel of the kingdom of Christ in the remote parts of the world."

Ultimately, they set their sights on the New World, "somewhere in those vast and unpeopled countries of America … devoid of all civilized inhabitants and given over to savages."

They determined to "separate" themselves from all others and petition the English Crown "to allow them freedom of liberty" in New England.

Freedom would be theirs alone; others would be subject to the Pilgrims' religious laws. Perhaps they could not perceive that they had now become the persecutors.

LAND!

Crossing the Atlantic, the 102 passengers aboard the *Mayflower* arrived off of Cape Cod in November 1620.

Scouting about, they found and took "several large baskets filled with corn, some in the ear of various colours, which was a

very goodly sight they having never seen any like it before."

The corn had been stored away by its owners for spring planting.

Continuing on, for weeks the newcomers searched for a suitable harbor in which to anchor, at one point skirmishing with Native peoples. Finally landing at what became known as Plymouth (originally spelled Plimoth), they praised God for their safe passage.

But there was fear, too. In a vast wilderness they were intruding on Native lands.

Surrounded by dangers, they sought to ensure their physical safety while creating a religiously pure community. Their initial efforts quickly faltered, as Bradford chronicled:

"In two or three months' time, half of their company died, partly owing to the severity of the winter," "especially during January and February, and the want of houses and other comforts; partly to scurvy and other diseases, which their long voyage and their incommodious quarters had brought upon them. Of all the hundred odd persons, scarcely fifty remained, and sometimes two or three persons died in a day."

Dwindling ever smaller, the Pilgrims lived aboard their ship, constructing a rudimentary gathering place nearby and refraining from venturing far into the nearby wilderness where "Indians" were "skulking about."

Occasionally stealing tools the Pilgrims left unguarded, nearby Natives otherwise kept their distance.

NATIVES

Eventually an English-speaking Indian approached the pale newcomers. He introduced himself as chief (Massasoit) of the Pokanoket.

The Pilgrims mistakenly believed Massasoit to be a name, not a title: his real name was Ousamequin. The Pokanoket were also fearful, their numbers greatly reduced from disease transmitted from earlier white colonists.

In fact, the Pilgrims had settled on land previously owned by the Patuxet, whose inhabitants had died of a plague just a few years earlier.

Fearful both, the Pokanoket and the Pilgrims each sensed the need for an ally: Other Native peoples with stronger numbers posed a threat to the Pokanoket and whites alike.

With the arrival of spring and their numbers greatly reduced, the remaining Pilgrims forged an alliance with the Pokanoket, after which Ousamequin's people moved nearby, cementing the partnership.

With local agricultural knowledge obtained from their Native friends, the Pilgrims set about planting and raising the stolen corn supplemented with barley and peas brought from England.

Soon "every family" had "a pretty garden plot," and the colonists turned to the business of constructing a permanent settlement, enclosing "their dwellings in a good strong stockade" and establishing "four squadrons … to which to repair at any sudden alarm" when hostile Natives drew close.

Alongside their gardens, colonists bolstered their food supplies by fishing, as Bradford wrote, for "cod, bass, and other fish, of which they caught a good quantity, every family having their portion. All the summer there was no want."

Corn was harvested in abundance, barley and peas producing but little. Altogether September arrived with the colony "well recovered in health and strength, and plentifully provisioned."

Days turned shorter and the weather cooler, and to the Pilgrims delight "wild fowl began to arrive," especially turkeys. Deer were also plentiful and good eating.

BOUNTY

Soon new settlers arrived from England, increasing the number of colonists to 53 and further elevating spirits. The abundance provided by the wilderness for all was such that, Bradford recorded, "Many wrote at length about their plenty to their friends in England — not feigned but true reports."

Governor Bradford's account of the bountiful harvest of 1621 ends with an "abundance" of which the Pilgrims gave thanks to God.

He made no mention of a harvest feast, however. If his were the only account, the modern holiday known as Thanksgiving may never have come about.

Edward Winslow, a *Mayflower* settler and a leader among the Pilgrims, filled in additional details of the one-year period between November 1620 and November 1621.

"And God be praised, we had a good increase …. Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling," Winslow wrote in a letter dated Dec. 11, 1621, "that so we might after a special manner rejoice together after we had gathered the fruit of our labors."

"They four in one day killed as much fowl as, with a little help beside, served the company almost a week," he continued.

"At which time, amongst other recreations, we exercised our arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and among the rest their greatest king Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five deer, which they brought to the plantation and bestowed on our governor, and upon the captain and others."

FEASTING

Winslow's account conveys an unusual relationship between whites and Natives. The colonists' harvest feast garnered the attention of the nearby Pokanoket, who for generations had held their own harvest feasts.

Joining their allies, the Pokanoket — including women and children, their numbers perhaps several hundred strong — contributed venison. Without the friendship of the Pokanoket, the Pilgrims, facing the hostility of other Native tribes, may have not survived at all.

Winslow's account of the 1621 harvest feast, although included in a book – *Mourt's Relation: A Journal of the Pilgrims at Plymouth* – published shortly thereafter in England, was soon forgotten.

Rediscovered in Philadelphia two centuries later in the 1820s, the lost book was republished in 1841, the editor of the volume — echoing some New Englanders who remembered the story of that first

Actors bring to life the ways of English settlers who established Plymouth (or Plimoth) Colony after arriving on the Mayflower. Photo by John D. Pierce.

harvest feast — referring to the 1621 event as "the First Thanksgiving."

In reality, the Pilgrims themselves did not describe the 1621 harvest feast as a time of "Thanksgiving." Earlier the word had been used among Spanish explorers in Florida and some English colonists in Virginia, both referencing religious ceremonies.

Not until 1623 did the Pilgrims first refer to the word "Thanksgiving," speaking of a religious day of prayer and fasting that had nothing to do with the fall harvest.

By this point the colony had become an enclave of religious purity governed by Old Testament law and punishing dissenters, their relations with Native peoples further deteriorating.

HOLIDAY

Regardless, the first proclamation of "Thanksgiving" in the United States occurred in 1777, "superintending the Providence of Almighty God" for battlefield victories during the Revolutionary War.

Several presidential proclamations of Thanksgiving occurred in the four decades following for various reasons, including the passage of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (1789) and victory in the War of 1812 (1814).

Meanwhile, a few states — Massachusetts, New Hampshire and New York — between 1813 and 1817 proclaimed statewide days of Thanksgiving in November.

In 1830 New York became the first state to make Thanksgiving an annual holiday. Celebratory meals sometimes marked the occasion.

In 1863 Pres. Abraham Lincoln proclaimed a Thanksgiving holiday on Thursday, Nov. 26 — the last Thursday of the month — attributing to Almighty God battlefield victories over the slaveocratic Confederate States of America.

In Union camps and in northern homes special meals were served. Annual national proclamations followed until 1870, when Pres. Ulysses S. Grant signed a bill making Thanksgiving a yearly "appointed or remembered" federal holiday — but only in the nation's capital.

Nonetheless, much of America celebrated the holiday year after year.

Here matters stood until Pres. Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1941 signed a bill making Thanksgiving a national holiday observed throughout the nation each fourth Thursday of November.

Today, Thanksgiving is widely celebrated by non-Native peoples throughout the U.S. at that designated time.

Family gatherings over bountiful meals, often featuring turkey, mark the occasion. Simplistic Thanksgiving imagery often depicts Pilgrims and Indians as good friends, the actual historical complexities glossed over.

Many Indigenous people, on the other hand, have their own Thanksgiving Day tradition that began in Plymouth in 1970. It is a "Day of Mourning" to bring awareness of how Native people have been marginalized in American history. NFJ

What I've been trying to say

By John D. Pierce

For nearly 24 years I have put many thoughts into words in this journal. How those ideas land is never known.

The best I have sought is to stimulate good thinking and constructive conversation. There's never been an assumption that I always hit the mark.

Some who've expressed gratitude with honesty have noted they "didn't always agree with" what I've written. Having reread some of my many opinion pieces, I can confirm, "Neither have I."

Opinion writing that attempts to be the definitive word on a subject puts too much weight in any one person's hands.

My hope has been to lob something into the court of consideration with ongoing engagement from those who read and interact with the presented ideas.

Some writings have addressed particular issues and events at the time. Others have had broader application.

For several years now I have echoed some of the same deep concerns about Americanized Christianity in particular.

They relate to the tragic reality that much of what is branded as "Christian" or "biblical" today is absent the life and teachings of Jesus.

Some ears may be tired of hearing these addressed — but I'm always delighted when such concerns are reflected back to me, enhanced by the insights of others and/or get passed on to a broader array of listeners.

I am also pleased that continuing to address these concerns — after a break — will receive more singular attention in my retirement stage.

In summary, here's what I've been trying to say:

First, for people who profess to be Christian, there is no religious and/or political ideology that is an adequate replacement for following Jesus.

Though poor substitutes abound, it is rightful to call these out as fraudulent — no matter how much religious language and text-proofing are offered in their defense.

Following Jesus is not a complicated concept — in that Jesus showed and taught how it is to be done. However, it is a very demanding response that goes against our tendencies toward security and self-interests.

Perhaps that is precisely why it is so popular to create false versions of "Christianity" that emphasize something else.

Yet there is no substitute approach — through well-crafted doctrinal and political positioning — that honestly defines one as a follower of Jesus.

Second, to defend and preserve power and self-interest, the emphasis of much institutionalized faith today has intentionally shifted from responding to the primary call to "follow Jesus" to rightly "believing the Bible" as the measurement of faithfulness.

Then great liberties are taken to define what so-called biblical beliefs are essentials — often affirming unloving positions at odds with what Jesus said and did.

It is impossible to conclude that Jesus would now require something less, more or different than what he called his first followers to be and do.

Yet, controlling add-on beliefs and watered-down demands have risen throughout Christian history and continue to do so — as if these substitute versions of faith are somehow an improvement on what Jesus offered.

At other times, especially in my feature writings, I've sought to amplify the important words of others. Some have been well-known persons such as Jimmy Carter, John Claypool, Barbara Brown Taylor, Will Campbell and many others.

One such conversation — with the highly-influential preacher Gardner Taylor — is replayed on page 52 of this journal issue.

At other times I've been able to raise the voices of those who have not been heard as widely but have something important to say. Two of many come to mind. Both have died since those conversations.

Vincent Harding came back to Atlanta in his later years. He had arranged the only meeting between civil rights activists Clarence Jordan and Martin Luther King Jr.

A friend in Americus, Ga., learned from Jordan's son of that meeting between the two in Albany, Ga., in December 1961. It was my honor to conduct the interview with Harding at Atlanta University Center's Woodruff Library so the story could be told.

One of the most memorable days of my editorship didn't involve a nationally or internationally, or even denominationally, well-known person. I simply drove over the state line to Wadley, Ala., to meet the Rev. Ruby Welsh Wilkins.

She quietly and effectively — despite resistance from some local Baptists with a smaller view of God — served as pastor of tiny Antioch Baptist Church where she is now buried.

"I was a woman, but God knew that when he called me," she said.

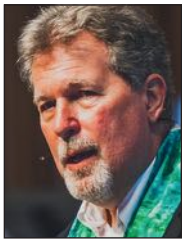
That afternoon sitting alone on the front pew is a time I'll never forget. Well, we weren't alone. It was clear the Spirit was present in and through her.

Words are always inadequate, it seems. But I'm glad to have them to seek to say something that might be fodder for better thinking and deeper faithfulness. NFJ

The seasons of life: part 2

BY KEITH HERRON

Without having a science called psychology, the ancients were still able to identify themselves as "I am." This is the beginning of an interior self.



It is widely known that we develop the main structure of our personality in our earliest stages of childhood. "I am" is the prelude to learning "You are."

The journey through adolescence is awkward at times and even perilous. In emotional terms, it is like learning to walk again — and the feeling of equilibrium is seldom experienced with confidence or assurance.

Adolescence is also a time of disruption in the parent-child bond developed in childhood, as the adolescent must learn to separate from parents in order to follow their own path.

Parents must allow enough flexibility to accept and recognize this is ultimately a healthy process, a necessary step to be taken for the child to become a self-guided, healthy adult.

Most of this process is not openly discussed, only acted out between parent and child.

Erik Erikson wrote of this age as being driven by the conflict between autonomy on the one hand, and shame/doubt on the other. He was focused on the concept of autonomy in contrast to heteronomy.

Autonomy, in Erikson's view, is about "functioning independently without control of others," meaning one is self-governing, relying on oneself or one's abilities. This stands in contradiction to heteronomy, or how one is controlled by others.

Erikson was no stranger to the challenge for both parents and child in this awkward tango of relationship with autonomy and heteronomy. The challenge for the parent is to guide their child to find the sweet spot between without sacrificing their self-esteem.

The result to be hoped for is a lasting sense of autonomy — having the tools to move forward through life with a sense of direction and assurance.

In parenting, the issue is identifiable: too much or too little? Too much suppression creates a sense of impotence and loss of self-control.

The goal is to find a good balance that includes firmness and support and yet enough wiggle room for the adolescent to know what it is like to hold the reins of their life. Children need the right balance in order to move with confidence through adolescence and on to the self-sufficiency of adulthood.

The biblical story of David is considered one of the sacred classics. It includes a story (1 Sam. 17:1-11) in which a young boy is the hero over a villain so threatening that even the adults are cowards.

David was just a shepherd boy when he arrived where his older brothers were camped as they awaited the battle they would fight with the Philistines. Instead of fighting, both armies stood waiting to see what would happen next as Goliath, "the destroyer," waged a psychological war of fear.

Frederick Buechner (in *Peculiar Treasures and Beyond Words*) adds a touch of mythological humor to the terror: "Goliath stood 10′ tall in his stocking feet, wore a size 20 collar, a 9½ hat, and a 52" belt. When he put his full armor on, he looked like a Sherman tank … (and when) the stone from David's slingshot caught him between the eyes, he hit the dirt, rattling windows in their frames as far away as Ashkelon."

In David's eyes, he couldn't believe there wasn't someone among Saul's troops who would immediately take on his blustery challenge. David was different from his kinsmen because he didn't live in his fear.

He had faced mighty challenges out in the fields, and knew he had a mighty ally watching over him in battle. So, David picked out five smooth stones he would carry with him onto the field of battle.

Rather than shrinking in the face of his fear, he lived in his faith in God and his confidence in his own skills.

How big is your fear? Do you find yourself standing on the field of battle frozen in a silence that consumes you, or are you down at the brook selecting five smooth stones and confident God will help you meet the challenge?

Sometimes we project our own fears onto our youth and don't recognize how capable they are. Perhaps in our efforts to shield them from failure, we don't give them room to try on their own.

It's a tough time for kids and their parents. Both boys and girls may suffer as though they are trapped in a stage of development that occasionally resembles a neurosis, although it is more kindly considered a passage.

This article on adolescence by Keith Herron is the second of five in a series on the seasons of life.

In a suggestive poetic metaphor, Stevie Smith metaphorically illustrates one's unspoken pain by imagining that someone swimming in the surf "(is) not waving, they are drowning." Adolescence is a season of storms every boy and girl must go through.

There aren't any shortcuts, and there aren't any real solutions to protect them from these storms — other than for those significant persons with access to them to ensure that love is offered in generosity, acceptance is offered in place of shame, and to hold in plenteous reserve ample stores of patience for the length and breadth of this season.

Teens are hatchlings forced to peck their way out of their shells, and those who don't find the energy to peck may perish in those same shells. We are challenged to give them wide berth, but we should not abandon them in their season of need.

While there are great moments of growth and exploration, this journey can be savage and despairing. The challenge for this stage is to find our way forward toward a calling, toward a purpose in life.

We grow toward fulfillment, each in our own way, and often we discover our direction (the life we are meant to live) as we follow the accidental invitations to life.

This is a map that's not foreordained but one that is discovered as one lives life. Through these happenstance occurrences, we may find ourselves drawn to a new direction.

After 30 years in prison, Nelson Mandela spoke eloquently of his fears. Not only had he defeated apartheid, the giant in his life, but he also had been elected the president of South Africa.

In his inaugural address in 1994, he said: "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us."

There is nothing smooth or easy about navigating these waters. The body is bursting into a new being.

The mind is thinking ever-more-complex thoughts with an exacting clarity about all it seeks to know. Children are moving into a new way of being in their attitudes and emotions.

Youth are philosophers and are examining the world of adults through the lens of ethics and logic. They are ever more skilled and if we're not paying attention, we will grossly underestimate their amazing capacities.

They are moving toward becoming voters and hold in their hands the power of change. Their withering examination will not be silenced.

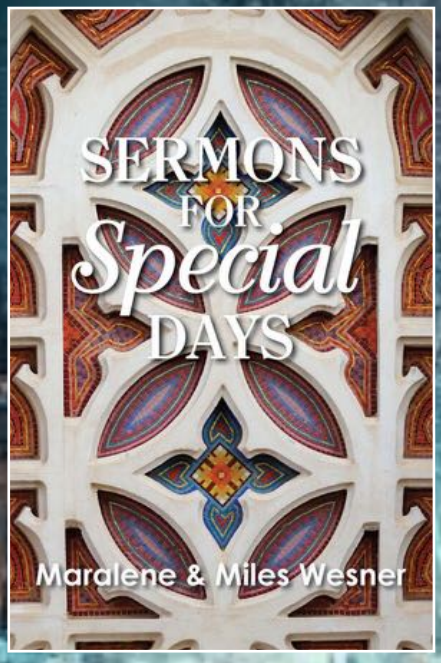
Adolescence is a slow, grinding, transitional process that occurs over months or years. We are persons in the making, on our way to somewhere, but where?

In our adolescent years, like David, we are capable and powerful. We live on the cusp of amazing accomplishments, but most of us at that age have no clue of what we're capable of doing.

The Bible recognizes there is a challenge for adolescents who are journeying from childhood to adulthood: "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; (but) when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways" (1 Cor. 13:11). NFJ

—Keith Herron is intentional interim minister at Countryside Community Church, Omaha, Neb.

'Tis the season to read more books



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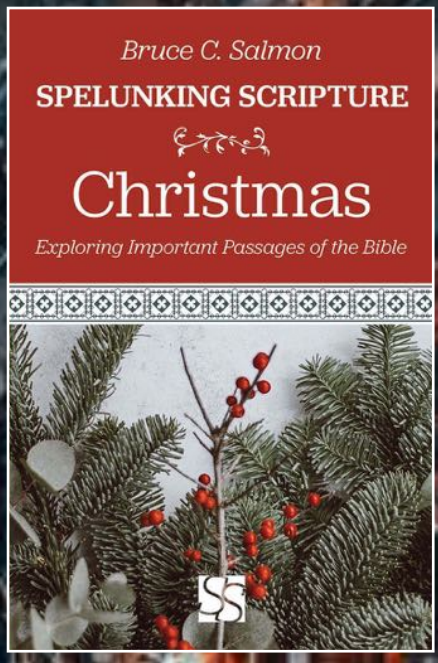

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BEYOND SENTIMENTALITY

Emily Hunter McGowin nudges readers toward the mystery of Christmas

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

The magic of Christmas takes on different forms as one ages. Its frequency of return seems set to the highest speed.

So how does the wonderment of Jesus coming into the world keep happening year after year for those who claim to follow him throughout the year?

Emily Hunter McGowin nudges followers of Jesus nearer to the mystery of the Incarnation in her book, *Christmas: The Season of Life and Light.*

The small, hardcover book is the fourth of six volumes in the "Fullness of Time" series, edited by Esau McCauley, from InterVarsity Press. The series follows the seasons of the church year.

"At the center of the mystery of Christmas is the astonishing fact that God has come to dwell with us," writes McGowin. "God has seen fit to grace our world with God's presence — not just once but for all time — in Jesus Christ."

Ministers know the challenge of elevating and clarifying this mystery of mysteries — year after year — in a season filled with distractions and busyness. And individual followers of Jesus must find intentional ways to keep a spiritual focus among social expectations.

McGowin, who grew up in a nonreligious home without a sense of the holiday's spiritual purpose, now teaches theology at Wheaton College and is a priest in the Anglican diocese of Churches for the Sake of Others. She calls for more than seasonal escapism.

"It is precisely the real stuff of daily life — even the heavily commercialized season of Christmas — that God means to redeem in Christ," she writes.

Seeing and experiencing the Christmas season within the cycle of the Christian year brings a fuller understanding of and encounter with God, she suggests.

"Each season reveals something more of God's truth, goodness and beauty — though the fullness of God we will never fully comprehend," she adds.

"Christmas reveals to us the God of the great exchange," she continues, "the God of the poor, the God of creation and re-creation, the God of life and light, the God of the creche and the cross."

She proposes the book's chapters as "an entryway into the liturgical season of Christmas … by meditating on what the Scriptures, practices and prayers of the season reveal about God."

Looking historically, McGowin notes how Christmas has long been "an embattled holiday." There is irony, of course.

The manufactured and nonsensical "war on Christmas" of recent years — seeking to portray Americanized Christians as victims of Starbucks cups — contrasts with how the season was previously viewed.

"Many Christians viewed Christmas as a thoroughly debauched and godless season," she observes.

She states how uncertainty over Jesus' birthdate, a pagan-holiday theory regarding December 25, and the absence of Christmas observance by the early church have impacted the season's celebration today.

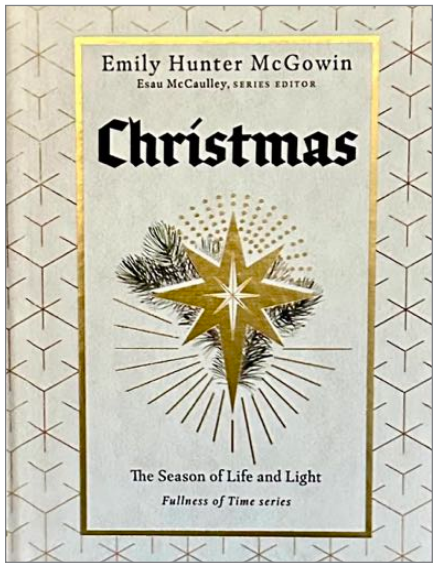
"From very early on, the church has felt compelled to celebrate the birth of God's son — and rightly so," she remarks. "It happens they chose a date sometime in the fourth century."

Christmastide evolved to include a longer season of celebrations, she notes, with an intentional spiritual purpose.

"Viewed in themselves, these holy days aren't pagan in orientation," she writes. "They were established to direct our hearts and minds to the story of Christ and his people — and to place our lives and communities within the sacred narrative."

McGowin moves readers from the background of Christmas to its practices today — where family and faith traditions take various shapes. Some aspects enhance the spiritual significance while others distract from it.

Gift giving, she notes, has been and is



a part of the Christmas season in just about anywhere Christ's birth is celebrated. Its inspiration is tied to the Magi bringing gifts to Jesus.

The theologian affirms that "the truth of the incarnation at the heart of Christmas requires a basic understanding of what Christians confess" about Jesus.

She frames the Incarnation in gift-giving terms — calling it "the great exchange" or "wonderful gift."

"The great exchange requires all of God to be united to all of humankind for all eternity," she writes. "That's why Christians confess that Jesus Christ is fully human and fully God, united in one person forever and ever."

As the book unfolds, McGowin provides both information and inspiration for readers to meet this season of significance better prepared for its fuller meaning. And indeed it is a season among seasons.

"Placing Christmas in this larger context helps us resist the cultural tendency to freeze the cherubic baby Jesus in time, romanticized and sentimentalized beyond recognition," she writes.

It is the "expansive, all-encompassing story" of Jesus, she notes, that is "truly good news for all humankind." NFJ

Five keys to maximizing clergy financial health

By Larry Hovis

Vocational ministry may reap eternal rewards. However, given the educational level many clergy attain, and the time commitment required, it is not usually the most lucrative profession. Therefore, clergy need to make the most of the salary and benefits they do receive.

Fortunately, clergy possess significant tax advantages that are not available to most other professions. It is vital that clergy understand and take advantage of every opportunity they can.

Beyond managing everyday finances well, the following five keys can enhance clergy financial health in the present and in planning for retirement.

Key 1: Participate in Social Security.

Ministers may apply to opt out of Social Security by filing Form 4361 with the IRS. For most Baptist ministers, this is not advisable for these reasons:

Ethical – Grounds for opting out may not be for economic or nonreligious reasons, but only because of one's sincere opposition to accepting public insurance with respect to services rendered as a minister. Most Baptist ministers cannot legitimately make such a claim.

Financial – Unless one has the rare discipline to invest every penny of Social Security savings over the course of a long career, the minister will be denied an important source of retirement income.

Other Benefits – Social Security not only includes retirement benefits, but also other benefits, including disability, survivor benefits (spouse, children), death benefit and Medicare.

Key 2: Maximize housing allowance.

Housing allowance is perhaps the most important benefit available to clergy. Subject to certain limits, clergy can exclude a portion of their ministerial income from federal and state taxes (but not Social Security taxes).

This benefit is available to clergy who own a home or live in a parsonage. Ministers who own a home can exclude from income the lesser of the following:

- the housing allowance officially designated by the church (up to 100% of compensation)
- actual housing expenses (e.g., mortgage, utilities, repairs, expenses, furnishings, appliances, real estate taxes, insurance, down payment)
- fair rental value of the house, furnished, plus utilities

In addition, because housing allowance is not counted in Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) on federal taxes, this benefit makes many ministers eligible to receive an Affordable Care Act (ACA) subsidy if they purchase health insurance through that program.

Key 3: Maximize 403(b)(9) contributions.

A 403(b)(9) defined contribution plan is similar to other 403(b) and 401(k) plans, but specifically designed for the unique needs of ministers. It contains several advantages, including these:

- Employer contributions and tax-sheltered participant contributions by ministers are not subject to income tax or Social Security tax.
- Retirees who are ministers may be able to designate distributions as tax-free housing allowance.

IRAs and other retirement plans do not have these specific benefits; therefore, most ministers should make a 403(b)(9) a primary element of their compensation and retirement strategy.

Key 4: Secure adequate insurance.

Like others with dependents, clergy should secure adequate protection coverage for their families. Such protection may include disability, life and long-term care insurance.

Term life insurance offers the most cost-effective way to protect a family in the event of the death of the primary income provider.

Employer-provided life insurance is usually this type and ends when employment ends. However, 99 percent of term life policies never pay a death benefit.

While more expensive than term life, permanent life insurance provides protection over the course of one's lifetime. It can be purchased more economically at a younger age, and the premium is locked in for the rest of one's life.

It also builds cash value over time, while term life does not. Some permanent life insurance policies provide "living benefits" that help pay for care when ill or disabled. Long-term care insurance is an important consideration also.

Key 5: Know your number.

A popular television commercial asks, "What's your number?" It refers to one's goal for retirement savings and assumes that, for most people, the number needs to be very high — possibly several million dollars.

The focus is on accumulation of a large nest egg. Once someone reaches retirement age, the focus should be on distribution — how to convert one's nest egg into retirement income.

The more important number is how much income one will need when full-time work ends. This calculation should consider all sources of income — Social Security, savings and investment earnings, part-time work, etc.

Thankfully, this number is less frightening and more attainable for most clergy.

Late in one's peak earning years, and in the early years of retirement, protection of assets is critical. Fortunately, there are safe investment vehicles that protect savings from market downturns and can maximize income while still providing an opportunity for growth.

Before investing in this way, be sure sufficient funds are housed within a 403(b)(9) plan for designation as housing allowance.

***

These are general guidelines for ordained clergy. Each person's family and financial situation is unique. Financial, tax and legal experts, familiar with ministers' benefits, can provide specific advice. NFJ

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Worth Repeating

"There are some things women shouldn't wear. Like the weight of other people's expectations and judgments."

—Human rights advocate Mohamad Safa (X)

"The doctrine of biblical inerrancy has been used to justify enslavement, ethnic cleansing, patriarchy and homophobia... The logic of inerrancy has been used to underwrite injustice for centuries and is resurgent."

—Alan Bean, executive director of Friends of Justice (BNG)

"The First Amendment is the best friend religion has ever had. It set up a free marketplace for religion where religious groups compete on an equal footing, thereby lending a vitality to religion in America unmatched anywhere in the world."

—Dartmouth College religion professor and author Randall Balmer (GFM)

"Reactionary autocrats worldwide are attacking women's rights as a means of entrenching their control and weakening political participation in democratic mass movements."

—Anna Lind-Guzik, in her article, "Why do so many men destroy what they can't control?" (*The Conversationalist*)

"People join partisan tribes in search of belonging — but they end up in a lonely mob of isolated belligerents who merely obey the same orthodoxy."

—David Brooks, in his column, "How America got mean" (*The Atlantic*)

"All I could do was wonder, why did they kill those girls. They were sweet girls, never did any harm to anyone."

—Sarah Collins Rudolph on her sister and three other girls killed by a Ku Klux Klan bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham 60 years ago (al.com)

"[A]s a social scientist, I'm convinced the greatest threat to Christianity in the United States is not outside forces. Instead, it is white Christian nationalism."

—Andrew Whitehead, author of *American Idolatry: How Christian Nationalism Betrays the Gospel and Threatens the Church* (2023, Brazos Press)

"The more fervently Americans support religious congregations with their time and money, the more likely they are to back cultural conservatives."

—Columnist Terry Mattingly on the "religious gap" noted in a recent Pew Research Center analysis (arkansasonline.com)

"There's a difference between seeking justice, recompense and vengeance... The third is morally fraught with danger to the self and to others."

—Aussie theologian Michael Bird (Word from the Bird)

"Bookstores are where I find what I wasn't looking for."

—*New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman (X)

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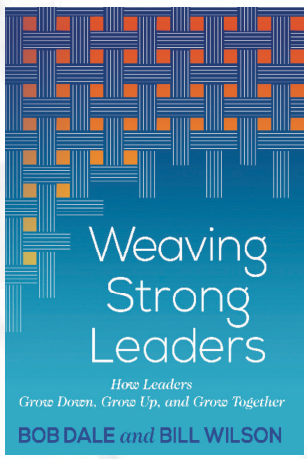

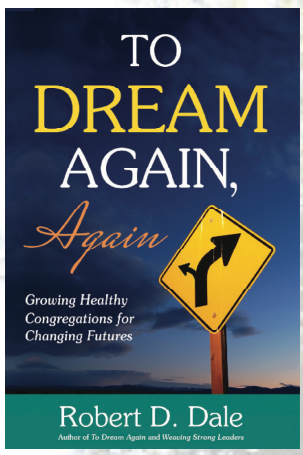

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Lessons learned while standing in line

By Mitch Randall

Apparently, the travel gods decided that my wife Missy and I needed more time together. While changing planes in St. Louis last summer, the clouds opened up and a hailstorm grounded our flight.

The airlines assured us we'd be rebooked on the next available flight. Looking at our phones, however, we realized the next available flight would be two days later.

We immediately began checking local rental car companies. The usual suspects had no availability.

Finally, we found a car. Well, a truck is more like it. Avis had a white Ram 1500 available.

Missy and I looked at each other, knowing the sight of two city kids driving this mammoth vehicle across Missouri and Oklahoma would provide great podcast fodder. Booked.

The following day, we woke up early to make our way to the rental car facility near the airport. Upon arrival, we noticed a few hundred of our fellow travel companions had made the same early morning choice.

We maneuvered our way to the end of the line, staring into the distance, barely able to see the front door to the lobby.

It was hot, even in the early hours. We fully anticipated the swelling line would grow more frustrated and agitated by the hour. Heat and lines are not a good combination.

However, that is what surprised us. Instead of complaining and stirring the pot, the crowd talked with one another, and people helped families with small children.

Couples shared their travel plans and patiently waited for a small step towards Paradise — the name of one of the sales associates working the counter.

Except for one minister, who got bent out of shape because he had to be at the church in 30 minutes, everyone waited patiently as the Avis staff fulfilled their responsibilities and tried to help the crowd as best as they could.

After three hours, we made it into the friendly confines of the lobby, where the rush of frigid air from the air conditioner felt like the Holy Spirit's cooler cousin.

Watching each customer with curiosity, we internally cheered as they made their way from the counter with a set of car keys in hand. They had escaped, and we were happy for our fellow line sojourners as they took the first few steps toward their intended destinations.

We were almost at the counter when something happened that reminded us about the generosity and kindness of most humans.

A young man made his way to the counter after the grueling line experience. He spoke with the salesperson, and obviously it could have gone better. Both looked distraught, and the young man lowered his head.

Then, in either a burst of inspiration or desperation, the sales associate lifted her voice for the entire lobby to hear:

"Excuse me. Excuse me. This man is too young to rent a car through Avis. Is there anyone going to Minneapolis who is willing to give him a ride? He just wants to get back home to his family."

A few spots ahead of us, another young man raised his hand. "I am heading that way," he began. "I'd be happy to give him a ride."

"Sir," the attendant beamed, "get yourself up here right now because you just got yourself an upgrade!"

The entire lobby broke into spontaneous applause. Those in line patted both young men on the backs, wishing them well on their journeys home. It was a wonderful reminder that humanity — well, most of us — still has decency and goodness at its core.

In addition, it solidified for Missy and me how great this younger generation can be during difficult times. In many instances, they are the ones thinking beyond their desires and working for a better community.

Often they are quick to lend a helping hand, while others — such as the reverend we encountered — only think about their own predicaments.

Pondering this encounter while driving home, the story of the Good Samaritan came to mind (Luke 10:25-37).

Was it the powerful, wealthy or religious who helped the man in need? Nope. It was the stranger. The foreigner went the extra mile to help his fellow human being in distress.

When Jesus asked the lawyer to identify the person showing more love, the lawyer answered, "The one showing mercy."

Just think what the world would look like if we acted more like the man in the car rental line when asked to help a stranger.

"Yes, yes, I will do it," should be our response. Only then can we say we are obedient to Jesus' teachings about loving our neighbors as we would love ourselves. And by loving our neighbor, we also love God.

While standing in long lines can be anxious and frustrating, if we open our eyes, ears and hearts enough, some of the best lessons in life might be learned. NFJ

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The struggle for peace

By John R. Franke

What image comes to your mind when you think of the word "peace"? What moments in your life do you remember when you enjoyed the experience of peace?

For some of us these moments are plentiful; for others they are scarce. For still others they are, for a variety of reasons, nearly non-existent.

One of the most peaceful moments I can remember occurred while standing on the California coast with a close friend watching the sunset over the most tranquil ocean I could imagine.

As the sun slowly melted into the sea on that amazing evening, I was filled with a deep, meaningful and fulfilling sense of peace — a sense of the orderliness, rightness and beauty of God's creation.

On that night I gave thanks to God for that sublime moment, and it almost always jumps to my mind when I think of an image that captures the deepest connotations of peace. Someday, I imagine (and hope) the world will be like this, and everyone will know peace.

That scene was on my mind several years ago when I read a small book by Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart titled, *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?*

What particularly struck me, in addition to his interesting answer to the question he posed, was Bentley's description of the sea on a calm day when "the water is a smooth, immeasurable, tremulous mirror of the tropical sky, gleaming like silver, furling with crystalline brilliancy, its waves sapphire blue at their crests and a deep glassy green in their inner folds."

However, Hart reminds us that far below the peaceful idyll on display above the surface of the water lies a "vast, convulsive, unpredictable, perennial, and destructive" elemental violence that enables the peaceful vista above.

"On good days," he observes, "it must be all but impossible to imagine the slow, constant, savage geological ferment so many fathoms down." That this raging ferment produces the beautiful tranquility of a still blue ocean caused me to consider the human struggle for peace.

On the one hand, peace is a gift to be received and cultivated, a place of comfort and rest from the often-challenging circumstances of life. On the other hand, the desire for peace is a summons to labor and struggle in solidarity with God and others on behalf of those who are marginalized and oppressed.

Peace is often described as the absence of conflict, but in the biblical tradition it means much more than this.

The Hebrew word for peace, *shalom*, points to a state of ordered tranquility that is the result of right relationships with God, neighbor and the whole of creation. It is the interconnectedness of all things for their mutual benefit.

The social dimension of *shalom* reminds us that the fullness of peace is never simply an individual matter. The prophet Isaiah describes the results of this shalom as a society in which children do not die in infancy, the elderly live productive and dignified lives, and those who build and plant enjoy the fruit of their labor.

This is in stark contrast to the domination societies of the ancient world that were politically oppressive, economically exploitative and chronically violent.

In contrast, the Hebrew prophetic tradition proclaimed by Jesus offers a vision of peaceful, harmonious existence in which everyone has enough and no one needs to be afraid.

Jesus knew that the proclamation of peace for all people would bring him into direct opposition to the principalities and powers of this world in the person of Roman magistrates.

Challenging the *status quo* for the sake of peace, justice and reconciliation inevitably leads to division and conflict with those who benefit from it. As it was in Jesus' day, so it is in ours.

The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati tells the tragic story of slavery in the Americas and the long, costly struggle for freedom and peace.

Near the end of the exhibit is a quote from Frederick Douglass regarding the process of social change: "If there is no struggle, there is no progress."

Those who desire peace and freedom for all but oppose agitation are those "who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters… Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will."

As we look at our own social and political circumstances, let those of us who would be disciples of Jesus commit ourselves to the struggle for peace and the hope of a world that more faithfully reflects God's love for all people. NFJ

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

Editor's note: This is the final column in a long-running series. Thanks to John Franke for his insights and inspiration through the years.

Always, Mother Moses and me

By Starlette Thomas

Last summer I visited memorials to Harriet Tubman in Harlem, N.Y, and Newark, N.J. Both tributes to the abolitionist are near public transportation, and I will never see buses and subway stations in the same way again.

The connection these artists and city agencies made was not only physical but also philosophical. These memorials are attuned to the broader understanding of what it means to live with history and to make the best of it.

Positioning Tubman alongside public transit brings the mystical tradition along for the daily grind: the transcendent meets the hustle and bustle of life.

Before my visit I went to Washington, D.C., for an exhibition, "Reckoning: Protest. Defiance. Resilience," and to admire Bisa Butler's "I Go To Prepare a Place for You," a quilted and appliquéd textile portrait of Tubman that currently hangs in the Visual Arts Gallery of the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Using cotton, silk and velvet, Butler worked some fabric magic, a spell that left me entranced for more than an hour. When I finally snapped out of it, I noticed beside the quilt a bronze maquette of "Swing Low: Harriet Tubman Memorial."

I needed to see the actual sculpture. Though a sculptor's model and only $22^{1/2}$ × 12 × 24 inches, Tubman in motion with a train of tree roots behind her was visually striking and empowering.

The bronze sculpture towers at the crossroads of St. Nicholas Avenue and West 122nd Street and Frederick Douglass Boulevard. It's known as the Harriet Tubman Triangle.

Then I remembered that a longstanding statue of Christopher Columbus had been replaced by a monument to Harriet Tubman nearby in downtown Newark. It sat on the unceded indigenous land of the Munsee Lunaape (Lenape) people.

Last year, in celebration of Juneteenth,

the park was renamed Harriet Tubman Square. It seemed fitting to do so on "Emancipation Day" since New Jersey was the last of the northern states to legally abolish slavery in 1866. Both statues hold space and memory but also perspective.

Art is not to be taken lightly. A painter's brush can point us in the direction of an unknown galaxy, and a writer's pen can sketch out our escape from a world too small and confining. Sculptors mold material into past, present and future realities. I stand in front of their works and see it all.

"Do the work your soul must have," the late Katie G. Cannon, an ethicist and theologian, told us. The mantra doubles as a means of catechizing, proselytizing those of us who would rather critique the world as it is. Art is not a means of escape but a meeting place for those in search of the world as it should be. It is the difference between creating and producing.

"Swing Low: Harriet Tubman Memorial" by Alison Saar sits above a train station in Harlem while "Shadow of a Face" by Nina Cooke John is mere feet away from a bus stop at Harriet Tubman Square Station.

The sound of the horn blowing to mark the train approaching and the bus braking to pick up passengers nearly overwhelmed me. I couldn't have planned for that moment, the sensory connection that was made. I thought, Tubman is still organizing, conducting, and moving people throughout these cities.

Get on board. Travel freely and all together now — parents with babies and laptop cases, young adults holding lattes and the latest iPhone, the elders with tote bags that double as purses and canes that offer the support their legs used to.

Architecture and artistry came together and made the Underground Railroad come alive that day for me. These were the sounds of people on the move in the name of Harriet Tubman and in my mind, to places where they could live, move and daydream freely.

I continue to be drawn to the woman born Araminta "Minty" Ross, who would come to be known as "Mother Moses." It was a natural connection to the Hebrew leader as she announced herself to those who wanted to escape by singing, "Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt's land. Tell old Pharoah, let my people go." It was recognized as a song of liberation by those forced to labor and slaveholders alike.

Tubman represented not only a new lens but a new law by which to govern their bodies and to move away from the "white gaze" and its hyper-surveillance.

I have traveled to multiple states to touch the ground where she elevated the conversation on human being and belonging. I am on freedom's trail with one of the most well-known liberators to have ever lived.

Deracializing Jesus' gospel requires the work and witness of abolitionists and of those with the North Star within them. Finding one's voice is one thing, but finding one's footing in a society that is founded on a color-coded hierarchy is another.

We can't do it alone, which is why it will always be Mother Moses and me. NFJ

—Starlette Thomas directs the Raceless Gospel Initiative for Good Faith Media.

Wouldn't you like to be a Pepper, too?

By Brett Younger

Coca-Cola requires no thought. Pepsi is for when there is no Coke available. Diet Coke and Diet Pepsi are pointless. People who drink Mountain Dew mistakenly believe they are free spirits.

Most soft drinks are nothing more than sugar and caffeine for the unbelieving masses. We do not often drink soft drinks, but when we do, people of faith drink Dr Pepper.

According to the scholars at the Dr Pepper Museum, Dr Pepper was invented in Waco, Texas, in 1885 — one year before Coca-Cola. Charles Alderton combined 23 (23!) flavors. (Is it just a coincidence that Psalm 23 is the most beloved psalm?) The Brooklyn-born pharmacist's drink was first called a Waco, but later took on the classic moniker of a spicy physician.

During the 1920s, Dr. Walter Eddy found that blood sugar fell to the lowest levels around 10:30 a.m., 2:30 p.m., and 4:30 p.m., which left people tired and hungry. This led to the inspiring slogan, "Drink a Bite to Eat at 10, 2, and 4."

Dr Pepper ads promised healing powers, suggesting DP "aids digestion and restores vim, vigor, and vitality," and that the potion cures "fever, scurvy, rheumatism, kidney trouble, and stress." The makers of DP shared a "partial list of life's big and little troubles that Dr Pepper will help" that included "alarm clock blues, boredom, dry throats, ennui, grouchiness, insomnia, long faces, and thirst."

When my father wanted us to get excited about visiting our grandparents he would promise, "We can drink Dr Pepper." Somehow the good doctor had not yet arrived in our small town in Mississippi, but DP ran from the faucets in Texas. Dr Pepper was a mysterious cocktail available only in holy places, champagne for people who usually drank water. My teetotaling mother suggested that at the wedding in Cana, Jesus should have changed the water into Dr Pepper.

In 1977, not-yet-in-the-Rock-'n-Roll-Hall-of-Fame singer David Naughton invited young people to "Be a Pepper." David made it clear that drinking Dr Pepper is a statement of independence. As the philosophers at the Dr Pepper Museum put it: "What is a maverick? A maverick is an independent person who does their own thing in their own way. They are not afraid of breaking new ground."

Dr Pepper drinkers are not afraid of doing "their own thing in their own way." Mr. Pibb is a pale imitation that no real maverick would drink. DP is the sweet, sacred spot between root beers and colas. Barry Manilow sang "I write the songs that make the whole world sing," but it will never be as popular as his "The Most Original Soft Drink Ever," because that song was true.

Blue Bell Creameries makes a Dr Pepper Float — creamy vanilla ice cream swirled together with Dr Pepper-flavored sherbet, the frozen nectar of the gods. People who have tasted God's goodness share recipes for Dr Pepper cupcakes, Dr Pepper pound cake, Dr Pepper meatballs, Dr Pepper spicy ribs, Dr Pepper bbq sauce, Dr Pepper pineapple ham, Dr Pepper chocolate chili, and pulled pork wonton cups with a Dr Pepper glaze.

Dr Pepper is shrouded in mystery. The formula is a closely guarded secret, but the 23 ingredients might be almond, amaretto, apricot, birch, blackberry, caramel, cherry, cinnamon, clove, coriander, ginger, grape, juniper, lemon, licorice, molasses, nutmeg, orange, plum, raspberry, sarsaparilla, spikenard, and vanilla. The recipe for Dr Pepper has been halved and kept in safety deposit boxes in two separate banks in Dallas.

When Carol and I attended an international dinner at a church in Chile, everyone was asked to bring something from their home country. We took Dr Pepper, which made us look enlightened. People from all over the world joined us in recognizing that Dr Pepper is a little different, a little better, and a little rebellious — like a good church.

My doctor (not a Pepper) is not pleased with my devotion to DP. I understand that at my age a Dr Pepper every day at 10, 2, and 4 would kill me in 10 days. Dr Pepper is not, as was once claimed, a cure for insomnia and obesity. DP is good for your soul, but for your body, not so much.

But every once in a while, pour Dr Pepper into a tall, deep wine glass. Swirl it around. Let it breathe. Close your eyes and let your nose tell you what you are tasting. Take a sip. Let it cover your tongue. Breathe in and breathe out. Try it again after a piece of bread. Ask, "If Dr Pepper had been around in the first century, would communion include this caramel-colored, cherry-flavored elixir?" We will never know for sure. NFJ

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

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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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Adult teaching plans by ***David Woody***, associate pastor of French Huguenot Church in Charleston, S.C.

Youth teaching plans by **Bobby Tackett-Evans**, a veteran youth minister now serving as pastor of three United Methodist congregations in Liberty, Ky.

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Psalm 22:19-31
Can I Be Confident?

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

November 5, 2023

Micah 3:1-12

Unfounded Assumptions

> *Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height. (Mic. 3:12)*

Anyone who's attended church for very long knows that we can't help liking some pastors more than others. Preachers have different styles and different interests. Some focus on comfort and hope, remembering that many people in the congregation are just hanging on.

Others are more challenging, critiquing outward shortcomings as well as less obvious complicity in a privileged system that oppresses others.

Prophetic texts are upcoming this month, and many of us wouldn't have liked some of the prophets, including Micah, unless we count ourselves among the poor who struggle to get ahead with the cultural cards are stacked against them.

Wealthier people would have steered clear of the sharp-tongued prophet who skewered anyone who ignored God or who twisted theology to enrich themselves at the expense of the poor.

Greedy leaders (vv. 1-4)

Our text for today may weigh heavy: it's all about judgment. Yet, sometimes the best lessons come from recognizing mistakes and their repercussions.

Micah's audience had made mistakes aplenty. In the three oracles that make up this text, the prophet addressed a variety of people who used their power to advance their own interests at the expense of others. Each oracle begins with an imperative call to "listen" or to recognize that "Thus says Yahweh."

Micah first addressed the "heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel" (v. 1a). The prophesies of chapter three probably occurred after the northern kingdom fell. Many exiles from Israel had fled to the south, even though the Assyrian kings Sargon II (711 BCE) and Sennacherib (701 BCE) had extended their reach deep into Judah. If that is the case, "heads of Judah and rulers of the house of Israel" could refer to the leaders of Judah as well as any northern royals, priests, or wealthy persons who had escaped and taken up residence in Jerusalem.

It's likely that Micah's primary targets were elders or persons from wealthy families who held royal appointments as judges in Jerusalem and other fortified cities in the kingdom (Deut. 16:18-20; 2 Chron. 19:4-10). Their job was to hear cases and render justice to all people in keeping with Israel's covenant law.

One would expect persons in such authoritative positions to understand the law and to render just verdicts. Thus, Micah asks the obvious question: "Should you not know justice?" (v. 1b). The question is double-edged: the phrase "to know justice" could also be translated as "to experience judgment." Micah's question implied that those who fail to render justice could have a different type of justice rendered to them.

Micah had no doubt about the answer. Leaders/judges *should* know just ways and see them done, but Judah's leaders were on the wrong page. Micah charged that they "hate the good and love the evil" (v. 2a), reprising a similar theme from Amos and Isaiah's preaching.

Micah used a shockingly graphic metaphor to describe the degeneracy of Israel's powerful elite. Instead of helping the poor who sought justice, he said, they devoured them, ripping skin from flesh and flesh from bones, chopping them up "like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a caldron" (vv. 2b-3). The image of cannibalism is horrific, but not uncommon as a hyperbolic metaphor for oppression in the Hebrew Bible.

Psalm 14:4 speaks of evildoers who "eat up my people as they eat bread," and the author of Ps. 27:2 decried "evildoers who assail me to devour my flesh." Proverbs 30:14 speaks of wicked people with teeth like swords or knives, "to devour the poor from off the earth, the needy from among mortals." In similar fashion, the prophet Zephaniah spoke of officials and judges who were like roaring lions or evening wolves, leaving nothing until morning (Zeph. 3:3).

A day would come, Micah said, when those who took advantage of the poor would find themselves in need of help: "Then they will cry to the LORD," Micah said, "but he will not answer them; he will hide his face from

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them at that time, because they have acted wickedly" (v. 4).

Is injustice still a problem? When guilty of the same crime, wealthy people who can afford skilled lawyers are much less likely to go to jail than poor people. African American and Hispanic men are arrested and imprisoned at disproportionally higher rates than whites.

Extrapolating from information provided by the Federal Reserve, at the end of the first quarter in 2022, the richest *one percent* of Americans owned 31.8 percent of the country's wealth, and the top 10 percent together owned 69.1 percent, while those in the 50-90 percent bracket owned 28 percent, leaving the bottom 50 percent of the population to scramble over just 2.8 percent of the nation's wealth.

Looked at another way, an article on the Federal Reserve website notes that "Black and Hispanic or Latino households earn about half as much as the average White household and own only about 15 to 20 percent as much net wealth," even though they constitute almost half of the population, and the gap continues to widen. Meanwhile, powerful politicians and special interest groups demand more tax breaks for the wealthy. Is that just?

America does not live under a covenant with God, as did Israel. Yet, our laws are grounded in moral and ethical principles drawn from the Judeo-Christian heritage. Would Micah have something to say to our society? Are prophetic voices still needed in our time?

Phony prophets (vv. 5-8)

In the second oracle, Micah addresses others who claim to be prophets. The oracle begins, fittingly, with "Thus says Yahweh," a typical messenger formula. Some "prophets" had led God's people astray, Micah said, selling favorable prophesies of peace to those who paid them, but predicting war to those "who put nothing into their mouths" (v. 5).

The biblical prophets we know best tended to be loners, but there were shysters who claimed the gift of prophecy. Some were affiliated with the temple and others with the royal court. It was not uncommon for individuals to approach prophets with questions about their personal futures. Micah charges that his contemporaries based their prophesies, not on a word from God, but on the basis of what they were paid.

One might expect Micah to speak of such people as false prophets, but he did not. He seems to assume that the others may have experienced visions from God before: but no more. "It shall be night to you, without vision, and darkness to you, without revelation," he said (v. 6). Prophets who have no access to divine visions are no longer prophets, but disgraced and put to shame when God stops speaking to them (v. 7).

Micah, in contrast, insisted that "I am filled with power, with the spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin" (v. 8).

True prophets are those who are in tune with the Spirit, who understand the character of God, and who recognize injustice in the land. They are willing to speak truth to power, caring not for their own gain, but advancing the ideals of God's kingdom in which justice rules and oppression is a memory.

Do we know any prophets like that? Could any of us be among them?

Complicit priests (vv. 9-12)

The concluding oracle of chapter 3 again indicts the nation's chiefs and rulers "who abhor justice and pervert all equity" (v. 9), running roughshod over the people while building up Jerusalem – and their positions in it – through bloodshed and wrongdoing (v. 10).

Greed was a motivating factor, for Micah called out *rulers* who "give justice for a bribe," *priests* who "teach for a price," and *prophets* who "give oracles for money" (v. 11a). Despite their unethical and ungodly behavior, however, they dare to "lean upon the LORD and say 'Surely the LORD is with us! No harm shall come upon us!'" (v. 11b).

This appears to have been a common attitude: many people apparently believed that Yahweh's presence was so closely associated with the temple in Jerusalem that God would never allow Jerusalem to be defeated or the temple to be destroyed. While leaning away from God and toward their own selfish ambitions, Jerusalem's leaders thought they could lean on God for protection, no matter how great the enemy.

Micah insisted that they were wrong, proclaiming "Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height" (v. 12). The prophet's imagery is self-explanatory: the proud city was destined for destruction.

Micah thus became one of the first to predict the fall of Jerusalem, clearly blaming it on the sins of its powerful elites, both secular and religious. Later records indicate that Micah had some influence, at least on Hezekiah.

Are we, like the leaders of Jerusalem, more concerned with income than ethics? Do we claim to follow Jesus while ignoring "the least of these"? Or, do we work for good by aiding the oppressed and supporting candidates who believe in true justice for all?

Are there any prophetic bones in *our* bodies? NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

November 12, 2023

Amos 5:18-24

One Thing After Another

> *It is darkness, not light; as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. (Amos 5:18b-19)*

What do you expect out of life, and from other people? We all have certain expectations: some of them are reasonable, while others are not. We expect that if we do our jobs well, we will be paid. We expect that if we are loyal to our friends, they will be loyal to us. Even though job security is subject to economic trends and friends may not always prove faithful, those are reasonable expectations.

Other expectations have a shakier grounding. Students, for example, may overestimate their academic performance. They may be surprised when poorly researched and woefully written papers are returned with a much lower grade than they anticipated. Drivers who think they can safely exceed posted speed limits by ten or twenty miles per hour don't expect to see blue lights in the rear-view mirror – until they do.

Today's text concerns a people who thought they were good with God and in line for divine blessings. The prophet Amos saw things differently.

An unwelcome prophet

While prophets like Nathan, Elijah, and Elisha played a role in Israel's story prior to the eighth century, their stories are blended into narratives that focus on their relationships with kings or other individual characters. Amos was the first in a wave of prophets remembered for their preaching to the entire nation, and the first of those whose oracles were later compiled in written form and preserved as scripture.

Amos was said to have been from the small Judean town of Tekoa (1:1), about 11 miles south of Jerusalem, but his preaching took place primarily in the northern kingdom of Israel. Amos described himself as a shepherd and fig-tender who did not seek the prophetic office, but who felt called to leave his home and venture north to proclaim God's word in Israel (7:14-15).

Amos probably became active sometime near the end of Jeroboam II's reign, sometime between 760 and 750 BCE. The author of 2 Kings roundly criticized Jeroboam for maintaining rival temples in Dan and Bethel, but had to admit that Jeroboam was one of Israel's strongest and most durable kings (2 Kgs. 14:23-29). Under his rule, the northern kingdom of Israel recovered land that had previously been lost, enjoying its greatest power and widest influence.

Long periods of peace also foster prosperity, which may sound positive – but such times may also lead to a growing disparity in wealth, giving opportunity for the most affluent and powerful to take advantage of others to improve their own situation. Several of Amos' oracles targeted wealthy people who oppressed the poor in violation of God's covenant demands (2:6-7, 5:11-12, 6:4-6).

The book of Amos is an anthology of short oracles and vision accounts delivered at Bethel (one of two major temples in Israel) and in Samaria (the capital city of Israel), probably within a relatively short time. His preaching attacked the ruling elite, from the priests to the king (7:10-17). After a confrontation with the high priest Amaziah, he may have been forced out of the country to save his skin (7:12).

Amos called for justice and predicted judgment on those who flaunted God's law and abused God's people. His prophetic challenge has inspired many to a greater social consciousness and a deeper understanding of what constitutes true faith as opposed to empty religion.

A misguided hope (vv. 18-20)

Amos 5 consists of a collection of brief oracles that may have come from different contexts. Their message is consistent, however: many who think they are hunky-dory with God are in for a big surprise.

Verse 18 begins with the sharp word: "Woe!" The NRSV's "Alas for you …" fails to catch the depth of Amos' charge: a better translation is "Woe to you …" The Hebrew word *hôy* was commonly used when lamenting for the dead: Amos saw the nation's destruction as so certain that he mourned for the people in advance.

The saddest aspect of the approaching disaster was that the people didn't see it coming. Recalling past times when Yahweh had fought

for Israel, many in ancient Israel anticipated a "day of the LORD" when God would appear in power to judge the world, vindicate Israel, and destroy all its enemies, leading to a golden age of peace and prosperity for God's chosen people.

Amos believed they had it all wrong, crying "Woe to those who wish for the day of the LORD!" God's appearance would bring no bright future to them, but only darkness that they could not escape, he said (v. 18, NET2).

The people had evaded judgment before, but Amos believed their luck was running out: it would be "as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake" (v. 19).

When God's judgment came, Amos insisted, it would fall hardest on those who had turned their backs on Yahweh by ignoring God's covenant commands and separating religion from relationships. Those who anticipated a sunny future would find "darkness and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it" (v. 20).

A surprising charge (vv. 21-24)

How could the people and prophet have such divergent expectations? The people appear to have been quite religious, observing annual festivals and offering regular sacrifices. Was that not enough to ensure God's favor? As a word from God, Amos assailed their shallow theology and empty worship, saying "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies" (v. 21).

"Festivals" refers to the annual pilgrim feasts of Tabernacles, Passover, and Weeks. "Solemn assemblies" could refer to more frequent rituals such as the new moon, which was celebrated with feast days each month, and possibly Sabbaths, as well.

Festivals and feast days were occasions of ritual sacrifices that were intended to please God by sending the pleasant aroma of cooking meat into the heavens. But their sacrifices were not having their intended purpose, Amos said: "Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon" (v. 22).

Israel's celebrations also involved music, both vocal and instrumental. The intent of worship music was to offer praise and expressions of faith that would please God, but Israel's melodic offerings and daily living were at such cross purposes that God would not hear it: "Take away from me the noise of your songs," Amos said in God's behalf: "I will not listen to the melody of your harps" (v. 23).

Amos employed graphic means of portraying how God had rejected the people's worship. The phrase translated "take no delight" literally means "I will not smell." The people might think of themselves as sending up a pleasing aroma to God, but God refused to take a sniff of it (v. 21). Likewise, God declined to accept or even look at the offerings brought to the sanctuary (v. 22), or to hear the music that accompanied them (v. 23). Figuratively, God's nose, eyes, and ears were closed to Israel's worship.

Why would God reject Israel's ceremonial worship so completely? Because it was hollow, Amos believed. It was a liturgical exercise without relational ethics. It was not ritual that God wanted, Amos said, but righteousness revealed through just living: "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream" (v. 24).

The rain in Palestine is seasonal, and the land is marked by stream beds that can fill with water during the rainy season, but go dry during the summer months. Among God's people, justice and righteousness should consist of more than seasonal or periodic rituals. They require compassionate behavior as consistent as a life-giving river that runs throughout the year.

Justice (*mishpāt*) and righteousness (*tsedākâ*) often appear together in scripture. The words are near synonyms in that both call for ethical behavior, but they have a nuanced difference in that justice has to do with our behavior toward others, and righteousness speaks to our standing with God. One follows the other: the justice we show to others puts us in a right relationship with God.

The point is that how we relate to others directly affects how we relate to God. We cannot ignore, mistreat, or take advantage of fellow humans and still expect God to be pleased with us. What did Jesus name as the commandments of first importance? To love God, and to love others (Mark 12:28-31). Pious worship and callous behavior do not match up: we show our love for God through the love we show to others, and especially to the poor.

Such a truth would seem self-evident, but its meaning continues to be lost on those who seem to believe that sanctimonious speech and occasional church attendance is all it takes to keep them in good standing with God.

It doesn't matter how large our offerings, how beautiful our music, or how inspiring our worship if they don't prompt us to go back into the world with a desire to love our neighbors and practice justice in our daily lives.

So Amos believed. What do we believe? NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

November 19, 2023

Zephaniah 1:1–2:3

People, Get Ready

Hardly a day goes by without alarming news about the increasingly undeniable consequences of human-induced climate change. Wildfires have become rampant in summer months. Heat waves are hotter and longer than ever. Timeless ocean currents that govern much of the earth's weather are in danger of collapsing.

Science-based warnings over the past 30 years are like prophesies that the world has ignored for too long, and the repercussions grow day by day. Judgment is coming.

The prophet Zephaniah proclaimed an even more catastrophic message of judgment, one that would sweep away every living creature from the earth and the sea. The apocalyptic visions are tempered in chapters two and three with words of hope that God would preserve a faithful remnant, but chapter one is all about distress, devastation, and darkness.

Why would we want to study such a dark text? Won't it just make us depressed? It never hurts to be reminded that actions have consequences – or that hope still remains.

A time for judgment (1:1-6)

Zephaniah preached "in the days of Josiah son of Amon of Judah" (1:1b), a time when Jeremiah was also active. Josiah came to the throne around

> *Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, who do his commands; seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the LORD'S wrath. (Zeph. 1:3)*

641 BCE, when his father Amon was assassinated by his own servants after a two-year reign (2 Kgs. 22:19-26). Biblical accounts describe Amon as a wicked king who continued the idolatrous practices of his father Manasseh, who had ruled for more than 50 years.

Josiah was only eight when his reign began, ruling at first with the help of advisors. It is possible that Zephaniah had some personal influence on the young king, who grew up to lead a comprehensive religious reform: of all the kings of Israel and Judah, only Hezekiah and Josiah escaped criticism from the author of 1–2 Kings.

Zephaniah's name means "Yahweh has hidden," but there was nothing secretive about his preaching. He wa convinced that Judah's leaders had gone off the spiritual rails, and he believed they would pay a price for their selfish and syncretistic ways.

The prophet's oracles began with a hyperbolic declaration that God was about to destroy every living creature on the earth. Zephaniah used language that echoed Genesis 1, but in reverse. He pictured God destroying all living creatures in the reverse order of their creation: humans, animals, birds, and fish (1:2-3).

Was there any hope? Zephaniah's opening salvo was intended to get the people's attention through "shock and awe" before he offered a hopeful path to avoiding extinction. While the initial prophesy speaks of universal destruction (1:2-3), the following verses focus on Judah, a small nation caught in the middle of power struggles among its larger neighbors. Zephaniah insisted that God would "stretch out my hand against Judah, and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem," wiping out all those who worshiped Baal, including some of the priests (1:4).

Syncretistic practices had extended beyond Baal worship, however. God also pledged to destroy "those who bow down on their roofs to the host of heaven" – astral deities associated with the sun, moon, and stars – as well as those who openly called upon multiple gods when swearing oaths (1:5).

Evidence abounded that the people had "turned back from following the LORD," and had "not sought the LORD or inquired of him" (1:6). In times of need, they had turned to other gods rather than seeking Yahweh's guidance through priestly or prophetic oracles.

Zephaniah's words remain pertinent to those who claim to follow God's ways, but who put their real trust in the gods of wealth, security, and pleasure. What really directs our lives, and in whom (or what) do we trust?

A time for silence (1:7-9)

Zephaniah, like several other prophets, spoke of a coming "Day of the LORD" when God would intervene in history to judge the wicked and vindicate the righteous (compare Amos 5:18; Isa. 13:6, 9; 58:13; Jer. 46:10; Ezek. 13:5, 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14; and Mal. 4:5). Zephaniah introduced the concept with a call to quiet awe: "Be silent before the Lord GOD!" (1:7a).

The idea that God had prepared a sacrifice and "consecrated his guests" (1:7b) suggests that the prophecy was delivered during one of the annual festivals, when pilgrims gathered at the temple to offer sacrifices that were eaten mostly by the people but symbolically in fellowship with God. The possibility of consecrated guests implies the existence of a faithful remnant for whom the "day of the LORD" would be good news.

But not for all. Zephaniah pronounced punishment for "officials and the king's sons and all who dress themselves in foreign attire" (1:8), as well as those "who leap over the threshold" and those who practice "violence and fraud" (1:9).

Whether this refers mainly to affectations in fashion or to the adoption of pagan practices, the problem is clearly that many people, including some members of the royal family, had become too familiar with pagan ways.

Many ancient Near Eastern people associated evil spirits with doorways, and they avoided stepping on the threshold lest they rouse the demons. Had some Judeans adopted the same superstition? The practice of "violence and fraud" needs no explanation, whether they occur "in their master's house" or anywhere else.

The wicked might seek to make excuses, but Zephaniah insisted there would be nothing to say when the Day of the Lord came.

A time for crying (1:10-18)

Not speaking would not prevent crying, however, and further judgments described in 1:10-18 would have provoked much weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. Cries and noise would come from the "Fish Gate," the "Second Quarter," the "hills," and the "mortar," indicating the extent of destruction in and around Jerusalem (1:10-11).

Zephaniah said Yahweh would "search Jerusalem with lamps" to seek out those who sat complacently, thinking of Yahweh as irrelevant, saying: "The LORD will not do good, nor will he do harm." They were like wine that goes bad if not separated from the dregs after fermentation. They may have thought of God as a non-actor, but Zephaniah said they were in for a rude surprise: the homes they had built and vineyards they had planted would soon become useless (1:12-13).

The following verses speak poetically of the coming judgment as a day of distress, anguish, ruin, and devastation; a day of darkness, gloom, clouds and thick darkness; "a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements" (1:10-16).

Zephaniah saw judgment coming in the form of an invasion from a foreign power. Egypt, Assyria, and Babylonia were all vying for supremacy. King Josiah was killed in 609 BCE while fighting Egypt's Pharaoh Neco II while seeking to prevent the Egyptians from allying with the Assyrians (2 Kgs. 23:29). The Babylonians emerged victorious, and Judah was conquered within a decade of Josiah's death.

Zephaniah believed the invasion would have horrific consequences, declaring that those who "have sinned against the LORD" would find their blood poured on the ground and their flesh becoming "like dung." None of their riches could save them from the fire of God's passion when the whole earth (or land) came to a terrible end (1:17-18).

The universal aspects of destruction in vv. 17-18 echo similar thoughts in vv. 2-3, bracketing the specific prophecies against Judah within a forbidding frame. The threat of a total apocalypse appears to be used as an attention-getting device, for Zephaniah would have far more to say about a surviving remnant than about mass extermination: he did not expect creation to become undone, but he wanted his hearers to consider the possibility.

A time for turning (2:1-3)

The fearful threats of 1:2-18 set the stage for 2:1-3, where Zephaniah challenged the "shameless nation" to come together before it was too late and to "Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, who do his commands." If the people would "seek righteousness, seek humility," then *perhaps* they might "be hidden on the day of the LORD's wrath."

Zephaniah's description of the behavior that pleases God recalls themes from earlier prophets. In 2:3 he challenged them to "Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, who do his just commands; seek righteousness; seek humility; perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the anger of the LORD."

It was not enough to know or to affirm what God commands: they were to *do* God's commands, seeking righteousness and humility, if they wanted to be right with God.

Contemporary Christians are not in the same covenant boat as the people of Judah, but we are also on the water. We, too, are called to humility before God and to loving behavior that treats others justly. Like the people Zephaniah addressed, however, we are also tempted to become compromising and complacent. It is easy to adopt the values of the world around us and come to believe that God is irrelevant to our lives, trusting in our wealth or our social position to bring us security.

Does Zephaniah have a word for us? NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

November 26, 2023

Ezekiel 34:1-31

Bad Shepherd – Good Shepherd

Have you ever imagined the life of a sheep under the care of a good shepherd? Idyllic texts such as Psalm 23 suggest lazy days of foraging in green pastures and lounging by gurgling streams while a caring and tender person rubs our ears and doctors our bug bites.

Flocks aren't pets, however, and few of us would want to be a literal sheep, even under the best of circumstances. Still, the image of leaders as caring shepherds who look after their sheep has long been appealing, and it is at the heart of today's text.

Bad shepherds (vv. 1-10)

Ezekiel had been working as an active priest in Jerusalem before Nebuchadnezzar defeated the city in 597 BCE and deported many of its most influential people to Babylon. In the fifth year of his time in Babylon (1:2), Ezekiel was overwhelmed by a vision that changed his life and set him on a course of prophetic activity for at least the next twenty-two years (his last dated prophecy was in the 27th year, cf. 29:17).

Ezekiel differs in several ways from other prophets. His book is written in the first person, as an autobiography. The historical context of other prophets' preaching must often be deduced from the content of their prophecies, but

> *For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. (Ezek. 34:11)*

Ezekiel often included precise dates for his prophetic pronouncements.

Ezekiel's activity is more often portrayed in narrative reports of his encounters with God than in oracles spoken to the people. Some of his stories could have led others to question his sanity, but he persevered. Much of Ezekiel's preaching was done through symbolic metaphors in both words and actions. In chapter 34, which begins a section of the book promising restoration for Israel, he drew on the familiar image of Israel's people as sheep under the care of incompetent shepherds.

Ezekiel railed against the wicked "shepherds of Israel" who had been looking after themselves rather than the sheep (vv. 1-2). "You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them" (v. 4).

Kings of the ancient world often described themselves as shepherds precisely because they claimed to promote justice and to help all people prosper. The early Babylonian king Hammurabi, for example, claimed that the gods had appointed him to be shepherd of the people. He based his famous law code on the responsibility of a shepherd-king to ensure that "The strong may not oppress the weak, in order to give justice to the orphan and the widow."

But the "shepherds" of Israel had fattened themselves, abandoning the sheep to serve their own interests. They had allowed the sheep to become scattered, Ezekiel said, wandering in constant danger with no one to protect them or even to seek them out (vv. 5-6). Ezekiel looked for a day when God would rescue the sheep from the deprivations of their heartless shepherds (vv. 7-10).

Who were these self-serving shepherds? Some think Ezekiel was critiquing wealthy Israelite families as low-level shepherds who had exploited their fellow Hebrews. Others think he was pointing the finger at foreign kings who had oppressed Israel as a whole.

Fortunately, we don't need the shepherds' identity to appreciate the passage, which leads us to ask if there are "shepherds" in our society who fatten themselves at the expense of others. America's founding principles anticipate a united nation where everyone has the opportunity to prosper and all contribute to the common good.

We have become, however, a divided country in which powerful elites grow ever richer and more isolated from the poor. An entrenched economic system stacks the deck in favor of the wealthy, and a political scene dominated by lobbyists promotes it. Business executives rake in millions while many of their employees struggle to survive on an inadequate minimum wage.

Would Ezekiel have something to say to today's "shepherds" who have the resources and responsibility to treat

others justly, but who fleece the sheep to line their own pockets?

A good shepherd (vv. 11-16)

Ezekiel's condemnation of callous human shepherds gives way in vv. 11-16 to a hopeful assertion that Yahweh, the ultimate shepherd, will search out the lost and scattered sheep of Israel, bringing them home "into their own land." With imagery reminiscent of Psalm 23, Ezekiel declares that God will provide good pasture and fresh water on the safe mountain heights of Israel (v. 14).

Speaking in God's behalf, Ezekiel declared "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down" (v. 15). In contrast to the shepherds who had ignored the lost, the injured, and the weak, God would care for them while culling out those who had become strong and fat by bullying the weak and hogging the resources.

Few biblical images – if any – are more popular than that expressed in Psalm 23 and reflected here. We love the thought of having God as a loving shepherd who seeks and forgives us when we stray, comforts our wounded hearts, and keeps us secure.

We are not mindless sheep, however, constantly dependent and never contributing. God acts not only as shepherd, but also as judge. Ezekiel spoke for God, saying "I will feed them with justice" (v. 16b). Do we really want God's justice, especially if we find ourselves among those Ezekiel called "the fat and the strong"?

Judging sheep (vv. 17-31)

With v. 17, Ezekiel's message shifts its point of view from the shepherds to the sheep. While the shepherds who oversee the flock have primary responsibility – including the ongoing task of managing aggressive sheep and making sure that every animal gets to the water – the sheep themselves also have personalities and relationships.

Ancient shepherds typically kept mixed flocks of sheep and goats who shared scarce resources. Ezekiel spoke of "rams and goats" as bullies who would shoulder other animals out of the way or butt them with their horns, leaving them bruised and frightened as well as hungry and thirsty. They not only monopolized the best pasture and water, but also damaged or polluted what was left for the others.

"Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture," God asked, "but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet?" (v. 18).

Ezekiel promised judgment, not only for shepherds who treated the flock with contempt rather than care, but also for the dominant "rams and goats" who tyrannized weaker members of the flock.

God would rescue the scattered flock, Ezekiel said, and entrust them to the care of a single shepherd who would treat them rightly. He called the shepherd "David," remembering God's promise that David's descendants would rule over Israel "forever," even though sin could lead to temporary punishment along the way (2 Samuel 7). Descendants of David did rule in Judah until the exile, when king Jehoiachin was deported to Babylon. Prophesies like this one gave rise to a hope that God would restore Israel to its home under the leadership of a Davidic descendant who would rule as a new David.

Ezekiel did not expect David to return from the grave, but he trusted that God would raise up one of his scions to usher in a new age of prosperity and peace in which the people would live as happy sheep in a protected land of green meadows and clear waters where the rains never failed (vv. 25-29).

While God's promise of a new David was symbolic, the more important pledge was the assurance of a new covenant and a restored relationship with God. "I, the LORD, will be their God … I will make with them a covenant of peace" (vv. 24, 25). God would so care for them that "They shall know that I, the LORD their God, am with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, says the Lord GOD. You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God …" (vv. 30-31).

Echoes of Ezekiel abound for those who follow Jesus, who came as the fulfillment of Israel's messianic hope, a son of David who would introduce a new covenant and rule forever – not over an earthly kingdom, but in the kingdom of God.

During his ministry, Jesus told a story of God's desire to search out every lost sheep (Luke 15:3-7) and referred to himself as "the good shepherd" (John 10:10, 14) who cared so much that he was willing to give his life for the sheep. Jesus also spoke of a coming judgment, however, in which God would separate the sheep from the goats (Matt. 25:32-33).

Ezekiel's narrative challenges us to ask where we find ourselves in this story. Are we like shepherds who exploit others for personal advantage, or a strong ram that insists on being first to the water? Do we feel more like one of those sick or injured sheep so badly in need of a good shepherd's care?

It is possible that we could find ourselves taking on different roles as life circumstances change. Could the prospect of accountability for our actions affect how we treat other people this next week? NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

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

December 3, 2023

Isaiah 64:1-9

Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. (Isa. 64:8)

The Cry of the Clay

Our weeks-long dip into significant texts from Israel's prophets continues into the season of Advent, and appropriately so. Advent is a season of waiting and hoping, both of which were familiar themes among the prophets.

Waiting is hard, especially hard when we're trying to hold on through a difficult, unpleasant, or painful period of life. Many know the struggle of waiting until a loan is repaid, a military hitch is up, until recovery from surgery is complete, or until a broken heart finds solace.

Today's lesson reflects the annual season of anticipation in which the church awaits news of the coming of Christ. While we anticipate Jesus' birth in retrospect, already knowing the story from beginning to end, the prophet Isaiah lived among a people who did not know, and who had grown tired of waiting. They had hoped for much but found only disappointment. Perhaps the prophet's prayer can speak to our longings, too.

Longing for God's presence (vv. 1-4)

Isaiah 64 comes from the third main section of the book of Isaiah (chapters 56-66), and it probably originated in the early postexilic period, after the Israelites who had been exiled to Babylon in the sixth century BCE were allowed to return to Jerusalem. Many chose to stay in Babylon, which had become like home to them, but a substantial group returned to set up a small sub-province where they lived under Persian rule.

The exiles' return to Jerusalem was one of the great disappointments of all time. An earlier prophet, often called "Second Isaiah," had promised that Jerusalem would be rebuilt and enriched by the wealth of the nations (see 44:28, 45:14). His visionary oracles declared that Jerusalem would become so prosperous that the borders of the city would have to be expanded (49:22-23, 54:1-3).

Prophecies like those led many Hebrews to expect happy days when they returned to Jerusalem, but they were bitterly disappointed. Instead of a land flowing with milk and honey and foreign aid, they found a devastated city surrounded by a desolate countryside. Officials from neighboring provinces opposed their return and sought to derail their efforts at reconstruction (Ezra 4:1-5). The returnees faced years of famine and drought (Hag. 1:6, 9-11; 2:16-17), barely surviving while trying to rebuild and paying heavy taxes to support government officials and provide tribute to Persia (Neh. 5:15).

In the face of such hardship, many of the people concluded that God no longer loved them, and that temple worship was a waste of time (Mal. 1:2a; 3:14). How could God's spokesperson offer solace to a people such as this? Isaiah chose to pray for them.

Today's text is part of an intercessory prayer that begins at Isaiah 63:7 and continues through 64:12. The prophet prayed on behalf of the people, boldly expressing their pain, asking their questions, and pleading their case. Afterward, he declared to them God's mind-blowing response (65:1-25).

Most of us have faced major disappointments in life. We place high hopes on experiences such as marriage, parenting, careers, and even church fellowship. The higher our hopes, the greater the potential for disappointment if things don't work out as expected. Times of disillusionment may leave us crying out to God as Israel did.

Isaiah's prayer did not begin with the complaint we might expect, but with a burst of praise recounting God's great deeds in the past (63:7-14). Praise soon gave way, however, to a claim that God had abandoned Israel and intentionally hardened the people's hearts (63:15-19).

Reflecting their despair, the prophet prayed for God to stop hiding in the distant heavens and show up on earth: "Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" (64:1a). The prophet's challenge for God to *look down* and see Israel's trouble (63:15) becomes a plea for God to *come down* in person and reclaim them as chosen people.

The images in 64:1-2 are typical of a theophany, a physical manifestation of God's presence. The quaking of mountains, the presence of fire, and

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the awe-inspiring power of thunder and lightning were all typically associated with a divine appearance, as in Exod. 19:16-25; Deut. 32:22; Judg. 5:4-5; Mic. 1:3-4; Nah. 1:4-6; and Ps. 18:8-16.

Israel's traditional memory held that God had appeared in power before (v. 3), and that no one had ever seen anything like it (v. 4). The prophet's prayer asks God to intervene for the returning Babylonian exiles with the same power that delivered their ancestor-exiles from Egypt. Doing so, Isaiah declared, would reveal God's might to Israel's adversaries.

Many of us may also have wished for God to show up in some tangible way – preferably other than in fire and thunder – and pull us out of our emotional, financial, or physical stress.

Fearing God's anger (vv. 5-7)

Humans have a natural tendency to blame others for their own failures, and Isaiah's prayer brashly dares to blame God for contributing to the people's sin. Earlier, he had accused God of intentionally hardening the people's hearts. Now, he attributes Israel's sin to God's absence: "But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself, we transgressed" (v. 5b).

Did Isaiah really believe the people sinned because God was hiding from them?

The prophet who spoke these words probably lived more than 150 years after the original Isaiah died, but as a disciple of his teachings, he would have remembered how God instructed Isaiah of Jerusalem to "Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed" (Isa. 6:10).

It seems counterintuitive that God would not want the people to come under conviction and repent, so how are we to understand this? Perhaps Isaiah understood the message as temporary, and as the only condition under which the promised discipline could take place. God had promised to bless Israel when the people repented and lived justly, but if they turned wholeheartedly back to God as soon as the exile began, the punishment could be short-circuited.

By the time the exiles returned, the prophet believed enough was enough. The people had spent 40 to 50 years or more in Babylon as punishment for the nation's failures, and had returned to Jerusalem with great hope, but it seemed that God was still angry and the discipline continued: "There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity" (v. 7).

Surely the time for punishment must be over, Isaiah thought, and he prayed for God to come out and reveal to Israel the divine face of power, grace, and deliverance.

Pleading for God's mercy (vv. 8-9)

Returning to the parental theme of 63:16, the prophet raised a child's legitimate claim to their father's attention. Combining images of God as both father and creator, he pleaded "Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand" (v. 8).

We are familiar with the image of God as a potter from Jeremiah's analogy of God as an artisan who could break down a flawed pot and remake it (Jer. 18:1-11). The prophet behind Isaiah 64 may have known it, too. Seeing the divine potter as the father-creator of Israel, he pleaded for Yahweh to move past anger over Israel's sin to a place of grace and restoration. "Now consider," he implored, "we are your people" (v. 9).

The prophet's pleas on behalf of the people continue in a similar vein through v. 12, but they come up short against the divine claim that God had been there all along, waiting and "ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said 'Here I am, here I am,' to a nation that did not call on my name" (65:1).

Here is a quandary: the people accused God of remaining angry and hidden lest they repent and be forgiven, while God's position was "I've been here calling to you all along, but you ignored me and continued to follow your sinful ways" (see 65:2-5).

Could it be that we have sometimes accused God of disregarding our plight, when the truth is we are the ones who have paid no attention to God?

The intense longing for a revelation from God that we find in this text is an appropriate theme for the beginning of the Advent season. As we recall the anxious period of hope for a long-awaited messiah, we also yearn for Christ to be reborn with power in our own lives. The strong symbols of the Advent and Christmas seasons remind us year after year that God has not forgotten.

Believers old and new can easily fall into the trap of looking for God only in the wind and the fire, the loud and the obvious, an angelic choir parading across the sky. Perhaps that is why we often fail to hear the quiet voice of God's daily presence saying "Here I am, here I am." As we await the annual reminder of Christ's birth, may we do so with ears intentionally attuned to the Spirit. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

December 10, 2023

Isaiah 40:1-11

A Promise Like a Hug

As December 25 approaches, do you ever yearn for an "old-fashioned Christmas"? During the Christmas season, television programing often features favorite movies or cartoons that are decades old. Many people decorate their homes with miniature villages of yesteryear that feature humble homes, cherry-cheeked Santas, and 1940s-era pickup trucks making late-night deliveries.

Sometimes we may be less happy with the Bible's "old-fashioned testament," but in the season of Advent we often read prophetic texts thought to have some connection to the coming of Jesus.

We often hear or recite such texts in ways that include no reference to their original context or meaning. It's appropriate, then, that we take a closer look when we can. Our text for the day is one of the most familiar "Christmas" texts, but it takes a New Testament lens to read it that way.

Which Isaiah?

Isaiah 40:1-11 is a message of comfort from a prophet scholars refer to as "Second Isaiah," "Deutero-Isaiah," or "Isaiah of the Exile."

The original Isaiah, often called Isaiah of Jerusalem, lived in the Southern Kingdom during the eighth century

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" (Isa. 40:9)

BCE. His world knew both prosperity and injustice. Wealthy Hebrews oppressed their poorer neighbors, disobedience to the law was rampant, and the worship of Canaanite gods was common. Time and again, Isaiah's prophecies called for repentance and predicted judgment.

And judgment came: the Assyrians conquered Israel in 722 BCE, during Isaiah's ministry. Judah managed to survive for a century longer before falling to the Babylonians in a series of defeats culminating with the torching of Jerusalem in 587 BCE.

When we come to today's text, however, the prophecy of judgment had long come to pass. Jerusalem had lain in ruins for 40 years or more, and Judah's leading citizens, like their northern kin, had been living in exile for longer than many could remember.

Living in exile

The Hebrew captives, many of whom had been born in Babylon, no longer needed to hear words of judgment, for they already lived in exile. They no longer needed threats, but hope – not words of condemnation, but of comfort.

And so there came a day when one who still studied the words and works of Isaiah was called by God to carry on the work of his ancient teacher. Isaiah 8:16 suggests that Isaiah had a school of disciples, and it's likely that following generations would have maintained it. Like his mentor before him, this prophet believed he was privy to the very words of God, and that God had called him to proclaim them to the people of God.

Isaiah of the Exile is the first and only biblical prophet whose primary mission was to declare comfort and salvation, and he is arguably the most powerful poet of all the Hebrew Scriptures. Those who know what it is to live in exile know just how crucial a word of comfort can be.

Comfort my people (vv. 1-2)

We are familiar with the temple-shaking story of how God called Isaiah of Jerusalem to become his spokesperson "in the year that King Uzziah died" (about 740 BCE). Though it lacks the theatrics of Isa. 6:1-13, the exchange in Isaiah 40:1-11 could be understood as God's call and commissioning of a new prophet to proclaim a new message to Israel. Nearly 200 years after Isaiah of Jerusalem first heard God's voice, Isaiah of the Exile believed he also had been summoned to listen in on God's heavenly council, and he learned that God was preparing to do a new thing:

"Comfort, O comfort my people," the prophet heard God say. "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins" (40:1-2).

To a people who had lost their homes, their national identity, and their self-esteem, the prophet was called to speak tenderly (literally, "to the heart").

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Addressing the exiles as "Jerusalem," though their city lay in ruins, was a reminder of the exiles' heritage and an implicit promise that the people would once again inhabit their ancestral land.

The message may have been hard for Isaiah's audience to believe, however. Could it be true that God had forgiven their accumulated sins and said "Enough"? (cp. 43:25; 44:21-22). Those who remembered Jerusalem would not have argued with the prophet when he proclaimed that they had received a double share of sorrow.

Now, however, Isaiah declared that the time of suffering was over. The long trial had served its redemptive purpose. The time had come for God to express forgiveness and extend hope for a better future.

Prepare the way (vv. 3-5)

As the prophet experienced his "call to ministry," as it were, he heard a voice – presumably an angelic member of the heavenly council – crying out. As God said, "Speak to the heart of Jerusalem," the divine messenger called for the preparation of a pathway for God's coming revelation.

"A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken'" (40:3-5, NRSV).

The prophets often recalled Israel's wilderness wandering following the Exodus from Egypt as a time of both rebellion and purification. Wilderness terminology would have been familiar to both prophet and people.

The wilderness is not just a physical place, but a common Old Testament symbol for exile, wandering, and discipline (compare Ezek. 20:33-38 and Hos. 2:14). Some people arrive in the wilderness innocently, while for others, it is a choice – and it is difficult to escape from the wilderness of the heart.

The Hebrew people commonly believed that a special manifestation of God's glory had dwelt as a physical presence in the temple, closely connected to the Ark of the Covenant. They believed that the glory of Yahweh had departed from Jerusalem when the temple was destroyed (see Ezek. 1:28 and 3:23, for example). If the Ark had not already been taken when the temple was looted in previous defeats, it would surely have been seized by the Babylonians. Surprisingly, however, it was not named as part of the plunder when they razed the temple (2 Kgs. 25:13-17).

The belief that God had departed from the temple was an apt metaphor for the nation's personal relationship to God. Separation from God inevitably leads to wilderness living. But, the barren landscape of desert days was not intended as a permanent condition. The people of Israel could experience divine forgiveness, and their example could serve as a worldwide witness, a superhighway for God's self-revelation.

Thus, Isaiah declared that God's magnificent glory would return to God's people, but the prophetic picture was bigger than Israel. The exiles' return to Jerusalem would be just the prelude to a universal revelation of God's glory, for "all flesh shall see it together," he said. This adds a clearly eschatological context to the picture.

Looking at the text through a New Testament lens, believers have seen in Jesus' life, work, death and resurrection the fulfillment of Israel's task of "preparing the way" for God's ultimate revelation. Yet, we know that all is not done. In this season of Advent, we still look forward to the day when the full glory of Christ will be revealed to all (Phil. 2:9-11).

A firm promise (vv. 6-8)

As Isaiah's experience in the heavenly council continued, he heard yet another voice instructing him to cry that "All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field . . . the grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever" (vv. 6 and 8: v. 7 was not in the original text).

The word translated as "constancy" (NRSVue), "promises" (NET2), or "goodliness" (KJV) is significant. It is the covenant word often used in scripture to describe God's steadfast lovingkindness, a commitment that is sure. The loyalty of humans, like the beauty of a flower, is short-lived. But, the promise God makes to His people is never-ending.

And what was that promise, described as "the word of our God"?

The shepherd is coming (vv. 9-11)

Isaiah declared that *God was doing a new thing* – that there was good news – that God would come in strength to deliver and comfort God's people.

Isaiah could speak not only words of glad power, but also of tender compassion. The same God who would defeat Babylon with a strong and mighty arm would also lift up the exiled people in tender and loving arms. God would gather the scattered flock, carry them close, and bring them to a place of security and rest.

Is that not what we long to hear? For those who feel exiled within ourselves, is this not good news? In this Advent season, as we contemplate the promise of Christ, we may also hope that our own experiences of exile are coming to an end, so we may look to God's good future with trust and hope. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

December 17, 2023

Isaiah 61:1-11

Uplifting News for Downhearted People

Have you heard enough bad news lately? Can you remember times when you read or received surprisingly good news? Sometimes, news can seem particularly good because it comes in times that are particularly bad. Such was the situation when a prophet rose up in the wrecked city of Jerusalem to shout: "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me . . . he has sent me to bring good news!"

In the season of Advent, good news is what we await.

A New Call (vv. 1-3)

As God called Isaiah of Jerusalem (Isa. 6:1-13) and Isaiah of the Exile (Isa. 40:1-11), so God also called the great prophet of the return to take up the prophetic torch. Today's text (Isa. 61:1-11) may well reflect this prophet's call.

The prophet we call Second Isaiah arose during the exile when many people longed for a return to Jerusalem. The message of Isaiah 40 introduced a string of prophecies offering comfort and hope that God would blaze a highway of revelation through the desert and lead the people home.

Cyrus the Great, the king of Persia, conquered the Babylonians in 539 BCE, and soon decreed that foreign exiles could return to their homelands.

> *The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners ... (Isa. 61:1)*

Within a year, a contingent of former exiles from Judah made the long journey back to Jerusalem, living as a vassal state under Persian rule.

Emboldened by Isaiah of the Exile's preaching, perhaps, the returnees had high hopes of a glorious future, but reality delivered a hard blow to their expectations. They arrived to find that the city lay in ruins, neighboring people didn't want them around, and life was much harder than they had anticipated.

Yet, "Third Isaiah," or "Isaiah of the Exile," arose to proclaim that God had only just begun a new work: great things were on the horizon and what had been broken would yet be healed.

The opening verses are marked by repetitive thoughts common to Hebrew poetry. The people are portrayed as oppressed and brokenhearted, captive and imprisoned, filled with mourning (a word mentioned three times in vv. 1-3).

Still, the prophet promised that the "year of the Lord's favor" was dawning. That new era would bring good news to the oppressed and healing for the brokenhearted, liberty to captives and release to prisoners. The message of comfort echoed similar predictions from Isaiah of the Exile (compare Isa. 42:6-7).

The prophet promised joy: God would remove the ashes from the mourners' heads and replace them with resplendent turbans ("garland" is a forced translation). God would anoint them with oil as a sign of gladness and give them a "mantle of praise" to replace their blanket of depression.

In response, the people should stand tall and strong in their faith, like "oaks of righteousness" planted by the LORD: God's glory would be declared through the growth and prosperity of God's people (v. 3).

A new city (vv. 4-5)

The oracle's joyful introduction (vv. 1-3) is framed by a jubilant closing hymn (vv. 10-11), and in between are a series of poetic promises, each providing more detail of what Israel could hope for in the coming age. In reading, we note that the prophet occasionally shifts from third person ("they") to second person ("you"). This may suggest secondary insertions by a later writer, but it could also mark changes in emphasis.

The returning exiles saw the fulfillment of Micah's old prophecy against Jerusalem's sinful leaders: "Because of you, Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height" (Mic. 3:12).

Now, though, the new Isaiah said Israel would be empowered to "build up the ancient ruins" and "raise up the former devastations." They would "repair the ruined cities" of Israel, which had been crumbling for generations (v. 4). But the people were struggling just to find shelter and eke out a bare living. How could they rebuild the city in such a magnificent way?

They could do it, Isaiah said, because "Strangers shall stand and

feed your flocks, foreigners shall till your land and dress your vines" (v. 5). In the prophet's mind, Israel was embarking on a holy mission. He declared that the reconstruction of Jerusalem and the restoration of temple worship were so important that non-Israelites would tend the farms so Hebrews could focus on the rebuilding.

A new priesthood (vv. 6-7)

The sacred nature of the task is underscored by v. 6: "But you shall be called priests of the LORD, you shall be named ministers of our God; you shall enjoy the wealth of the nations, and in their riches you shall glory." Echoing the promise of v. 5, the prophet declared that other peoples would provide support while the Hebrews devoted themselves to God.

The image of Israel as a nation of priests reflects God's call to covenant from Exod. 19:6: "you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (NASB20). The same concept was renewed in the New Testament with a call for all believers to regard themselves as priests in God's kingdom (1 Pet. 2:9).

That other nations should support Israel with both work and wealth would have been an unexpected double blessing. They had experienced double shame, he said, an echo of Isa. 40:2, but would now receive a double portion of blessing: "everlasting joy shall be theirs" (v. 7).

A new covenant (vv. 8-9)

Why would God bestow such a blessing on Israel? Because "I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them" (v. 8).

Israel had suffered in exile, and their return to ruined Jerusalem was a reminder of how much they had lost. They believed that God had brought judgment because of their wrongdoing, but now, the prophet declared, God was about to reverse their fortunes and give them an opportunity to start anew. God would make a new and everlasting covenant with Israel.

God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had foundered on the failures of both the patriarchs and their descendants. God offered a new covenant to Israel at Sinai, but the biblical record suggests that the people were consistently unable or unwilling to keep their part of the arrangement. God had made an "everlasting covenant" with David (2 Samuel 7), but his descendants no longer ruled, and the promise didn't seem so permanent.

Even so, prophets declared that God still offered to renew an everlasting covenant (Isa. 54:10; 55:3; 59:21). They imagined a day when God and Israel would live in such joyous unity that "all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed" (v. 9).

A new song (vv. 10-11)

The last two verses of the joyful text echo the exuberant praise of the opening section. In vv. 10-11, the speaker sings on behalf of Jerusalem, from the perspective of the preceding prophecy's fulfillment.

The hymn of praise contains verbs in the perfect tense, which usually indicates past action. Prophets often used that tense to speak of good news to come as if it had already happened. Grammarians refer to this as the "prophetic perfect."

The hymn praises God for the promise of salvation, using metaphors of celebratory clothing: a robe of righteousness, a headdress, jewels (v. 10). We note how these reflect v. 3a's reference to a garland (headdress) of praise, oil of gladness, and a mantle of praise (see also Eph. 6:14-17). The joyous image of a bride and bridegroom in wedding garments emphasizes the mutual joy of God and Israel living in covenant together (cf. Isa. 62:5, Jer. 33:11, Rev. 21:2).

As v. 10 reflects v. 3a, so v. 11 echoes the agricultural metaphor of v. 3b, which describes Israel as "oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD." The prophet declares: "For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations" (v. 11). The poem opens and closes with *Adonāy Yahweh*, "the Lord GOD," a title preferred by several of the prophets.

Just as a garden brings forth fruit in the proper season, so God's planting would surely mature, Isaiah said. Israel would grow in righteousness and in praise to God (compare Isa. 55:10-11). And what is more, it would happen publicly, in the sight of the nations. Suffering Israel's final vindication would be known to all.

There is just one problem with this impressive prophetic promise. It didn't happen – at least, not in Isaiah's lifetime, or that of his hearers. Like other promises that have an eschatological character, however, the prophecy served to give the people hope, and to keep them going. They did not see it happen, but they could live in hope of its fulfillment.

Jesus would draw upon this promise when he read from Isaiah 61:1-2a in the synagogue at Nazareth and declared "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:18-21): "the year of the Lord's favor" had arrived. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

December 24, 2023

Psalm 89:1-52

Promises to Keep

We typically think of Christmas Eve as a joyful time. Christmas Eve services may offer quiet moments of anticipation, but they generally end with jubilant praise.

In contrast, the lectionary readings for this Sunday offer two optional texts from the Old Testament, and both of them are psalms of lament. We'll consider Psalm 89, a lengthy poem that opens with praise before turning to an accusation of divine betrayal. A question of how long God would remain hidden fits into the Advent theme of waiting and longing.

The psalm is a reminder that we are not the first to feel disappointed in God, that God has let us down or failed to keep certain promises, whether God made those promises or not.

No matter how sophisticated our theology, we may still maintain a tenuous hold on the expectation that God should always protect us and provide for us. When trouble comes, we may feel let down or think that God has been sleeping on the job.

Psalm 89 offers a case study for asking two important questions. First, *can* we realistically expect God to protect us from trouble? And, if God *doesn't* keep a shield about us, what can we expect when trouble comes?

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I will sing of your steadfast love, O LORD, forever; with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations. (Ps. 89:1)

Ethan's opinion? (vv. 1-37)

A superscription to Psalm 89 claims that it was written by Ethan the Ezrahite, a rarely mentioned character who was legendary for his wisdom. When the author of 1 Kings 4:31 wanted to impress his readers with the extent of Solomon's great wisdom, he said that Solomon was wiser even than Ethan the Ezrahite, someone who would have been known to readers in the sixth century BCE. Unfortunately, he is otherwise unknown to us.

Some suppose that Ethan was one of David's advisors, but the psalm had to have been composed many years later, at least in its final form. It was probably attributed to Ethan in hopes that his wise reputation would add stature to the psalm.

Psalm 89 is a long and unusual song. It begins with powerful praise to the God who was faithful to David (vv. 1-4), the One who created the heavens and the earth (vv. 5-12), and who rules over all with righteousness, justice, and loving kindness (vv. 13-18).

Having celebrated God's power and faithfulness, the psalmist moves on to reprise a memorable oracle recorded in 2 Samuel 7, in which God had made certain promises to David (vv. 19-37). According to the story, David had offered to build a house for Yahweh, but God turned the tables and insisted that no earthly house was necessary. Instead, God would build for David a dynastic house. The promise appears to be unconditional and unending, an assertion that David's descendants would rule upon the throne of Israel for all time. That would not exempt future kings from punishment if they turned away from God, but the promise was understood as an eternal commitment to Davidic rule.

The psalmist had first mentioned God's promise to David in vv. 3-4, and in vv. 19-37 he returns to the promise and elaborates on it. Indeed, the entire psalm is built around the promise and its implications, as the poet understood them.

As he celebrates God's pledge to David, however, the psalmist adds promises not included in 2 Samuel 7, and elevates David to near the level of divinity. David was Yahweh's "firstborn, the highest of the kings of all the earth," he claimed (v. 27). More than once, he recalls the promise that God's covenant with David would last *forever*.

In vv. 31-32, the psalmist remembers the proviso that rebellion would be punished, but glosses over it with an assertion that God would never break the covenant (vv. 33-34). He attributes to God a promise that David's line "shall continue forever, and his throne endure before me like the sun. It shall be established forever like the moon, an enduring witness in the skies" (vv. 35-37).

Scripture contains no other record of such an elaborate promise: it's not included in 2 Samuel 7 or the parallel account in 1 Chronicles 17, but it did reflect a popular belief. Late in the seventh century, BCE, when the empire-minded Babylonians threatened

and prophets like Jeremiah called on the people to repent or be destroyed, many scoffed at the idea that anything bad could happen to Jerusalem. God had promised to make David's descendants rule forever, they believed, and they ruled from Jerusalem, where God was also enthroned in the temple (see Mic. 3:9-12, Jer. 7:1-15). How could Jerusalem ever fall? Surely God would protect it.

Whining Time (vv. 38-51)

But the kingdom did fall to the Babylonians, and the person who wrote this psalm in Ethan the Ezrahite's name was devastated over its demise. In vv. 38-51 he accused God of breaking promises that the Judahites had thought were inviolable. God had "spurned and rejected" David's line, he claimed, "renounced the covenant," and "defiled his crown in the dust" (vv. 38-39).

He recalled how the walls of Jerusalem had been broken down and the capital city lay in ruins, plundered by passersby and scorned by neighbors as enemies exulted over the broken scepter and fallen throne (vv. 40-45).

We note the progression: the psalmist moves from praising God's creation to celebrating God's promise to crying over God's perceived betrayal. Two celebratory movements gave way to a mournful requiem as praise turned to lament: in vv. 46-51 he accuses God of hiding and withholding the divine "steadfast love of old," allowing enemies to defeat and taunt those who had trusted in the promise to David.

Any of us are subject to whining if we believe God has disappointed us. Some people, like the psalmist, let it all hang out. When they get frustrated or angry, God hears about it.

Others may express their disappointment by trying to gloss over it. They think it's inappropriate to get mad at God, so they pretend they are not. They still attribute their trials to God, but try to explain them away as lessons designed to teach them something.

Many people, however, respond to disappointment in God by simply giving up. If God isn't going to take any better care of them, they think, what's the use of being faithful? If God hasn't solved my financial woes or taken care of a loved one's drinking problem, why keep praying? If God wouldn't cure my mother's cancer or keep my marriage together, why should I bother going to church?

There is no shortage of people who tried to live a faithful Christian life for a while, but when God didn't live up to their expectations, they gave up.

The problem is not with God's promises, but with our expectations. The psalmist believed that God had promised to keep David's son and David's city and David's country on top of the world, no matter what.

He was wrong, even if his song is in scripture. He ignored his own words, for he quoted the proviso that sinful behavior would lead to troublesome consequences (vv. 30-32) – and the Old Testament writers believed that is why the nation fell – but he gave it no more attention. All he could see was the image of Jerusalem in ruins and no son of David on the throne and the perceived promises of God laying broken all over the ground.

Bigger Pictures

The psalmist's limited perspective could not see that God was not through with Israel. In keeping with 2 Sam. 7:14-15, God was not breaking a promise, but acting on the condition that David's descendants who turned away from God would face consequences. They would be "punished with the rods of men," but not abandoned.

"Ethan the Ezrahite" had no way of knowing that God's promise ultimately would transcend the concept of a physical king on a throne in Jerusalem, and that it would reveal a spiritual king on a heavenly throne.

In time, the prophets began to foresee a day when God would raise up a "shoot out of the stump of Jesse," a descendant of David, who would usher in a new age of deliverance. New Testament writers saw those prophetic hopes fulfilled when Jesus came into the world as a scion of David who was destined to become all that David was not, as one who would reign forever on an eternal throne within a whole new concept of what "kingdom" means.

This is why we can be patient with the frustrated author of Psalm 89. He couldn't back up far enough to see the big picture, and much of the picture had yet to be painted. Today we can see what he could not see: the part of the picture that includes the coming of Christ as the true and eternal son of David. We can see how God's promise did prove to be true, even though the psalmist thought he had been forsaken.

But what about the parts of the picture that we can't see because they haven't been painted yet? What about the ways in which we think God has let us down?

God has promised many things. The scriptures speak of divine promises to grant forgiveness and life both abundant and eternal to those who trust in Christ (Rom. 6:23, John 3:16, John 10:10). God has promised to be present in the Spirit through all our trials (John 16:13).

But God never promised us all flowers and fun. Indeed, God could not offer us perfect protection and human freedom at the same time. Given the choice, wouldn't we choose freedom?

NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

December 31, 2023

Psalm 148

Praise upon Praise

Do you ever feel overwhelmed by the amazing world in which we live, or the blessings God has given? Our daily outlook is often tinged with busyness related to work or home, with frustration over some aspect of life, or with sorrow that leaves us feeling vaguely disappointed. Moments of pure praise are likely rare – but for those moments, Psalm 148 is a perfect text.

Israel's praise was commonly mixed with lament, because that's the way life is. No one stays on top all the time. Occasionally, though, a poet was moved to declare unadulterated thanksgiving to God, pure praise such as that echoed in hymns like Charles Wesley's "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling." The chorus ends with the redeemed standing before God, "lost in wonder, love, and praise."

A hallelujah hymn

Psalm 148 is one of five "*Hallel*" or "hallelujah psalms" that conclude the book of Psalms. All of them focus purely on praise, beginning and ending with the words "*hallelu-yah*." The term is a combination of two Hebrew words: *hallelu* is a plural imperative form of the verb *hll*, meaning "Praise!"

Additional information at goodfaithmedia.org

Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens; Praise him in the heights! (Ps. 148:1)

and the object "*yah*" is an abbreviation of the divine name Yahweh – so "hallelujah" literally means "Praise the Lord!"

The composite expression came to be used, not only as an exhortation to energetic praise, but also as an exclamation of praise itself. The early translation known as the Septuagint often simply transliterated the Hebrew phrase into Greek letters as allelouia. We continue that practice: whether we exclaim "Hallelujah!" in praise or sing "Alleluia" in a more formal hymn, we are saying "Praise the LORD" even as we exhort others to do the same.

The church father Augustine took note of this when he wrote that when people say "Praise the Lord," they are doing precisely what they are telling others to do (Expositions on the Psalms 121–150 [Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2004], 6:477).

While the classic form hallelu-yah appears only at the beginning and the end of Psalm 148, the verb hallelu appears 10 more times, encouraging worshipers to "praise the LORD" (spelled differently), to "praise the name of the LORD," or simply to "praise him!" This gives a sense of continuity to the psalm, leaving no doubt about its central theme.

Heavenly praise (vv. 1-6)

Psalm 148 has a distinctive structure: the first six verses call on all aspects of the heavens to pay tribute to God, while vv. 7-14 issue the same challenge to every attribute and inhabitant of the earth. Can we find ourselves in this psalm?

The first verse utilizes the verb for "praise" no less than three times: "Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights!" The psalmist then begins an inventory of heavenly inhabitants that owe praise to God, beginning with "all his angels … all his host" (v. 2).

Anyone who claims to understand either the number or hierarchies of heavenly beings overestimates his or her abilities. The Hebrew word translated as "angels" is *mal'achim*, which means "messengers" (the prophet Malachi's name means "my messenger"). The word for "hosts" is sometimes used in the sense of heavenly armies in the expression "LORD of hosts" (1 Sam. 17:45). It can also refer to heavenly attendants (Ps. 103:20-21), or with reference to stars that accompany the sun and moon (Deut. 17:3, 5). The term "hosts of heaven" were associated with pagan deities and Israel was forbidden to worship them, but sometimes did, leading to judgment (2 Kgs. 23:4-5, Jer. 19:13, Zeph. 1:5). Verse 2 of our text clearly addresses heavenly beings thought to attend God in various ways, for heavenly bodies come next.

"Praise him, sun and moon; praise him all you shining stars," shouted the poet (v. 3). The author of the creation story in Genesis 1 refused to use the words "sun" and "moon" because neighboring nations worshiped the heavenly bodies as gods, with similar

names ("sun" is *shemesh* in Hebrew, *shamash* in Babylonian/Assyrian). Here the writer happily names the "sun, moon, and shining stars," but in a category that is clearly a step down from "God's heaven" to the visible "heavens above the earth," where they inhabit the sky. They are God's creation, not gods in themselves.

The Hebrews' pre-scientific view of the universe held that a cosmic ocean existed above the "firmament" that defined the limits of the heavens above the earth, and that windows opened to allow rains to fall (Gen. 1:6-8, 7:11, 8:2; Mal. 3:10). This explains the expression "waters above the heavens" (v. 4). Atmospheric clouds appear in the next section.

Calls to praise often conclude with a rationale. Why should heavenly beings and bodies "praise the name of the LORD"? Because "he commanded, and they were created. He established them forever and ever; he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed" (vv. 5-6). Through their very existence and fulfillment of their divinely ordained function, the heavenly hosts and cosmic luminaries reflect praise to their creator.

My wife owns a beautiful "lazy Susan" turntable that her grandfather handcrafted with an inlaid checkerboard on the top. The checkered squares are made from sycamore and mahogany wood, while the border is from red oak. The quality of the craftsmanship reflects honor due to the crafter. In a similar way, the majesty of the universe speaks to the power of its creator and the glory that is due.

Earthly praise (vv. 7-14)

With v. 7, the psalmist turns from the heavens to the earth, along with its oceans and atmosphere. He begins with the sea: "Praise the LORD from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps." Here "sea monsters" may call to mind whales or other large sea creatures that had been seen or imagined by sailors. The word is *tannīnīm*, a loan word from Aramaic. It is variously translated as "serpent," "dragon," or "monster," related both to land and water, and may have been inspired by sightings of whales, crocodiles, or other imposing creatures. In most cases its use is metaphorical, and not intended to describe a specific animal. Both sea monsters and the depths of the sea they inhabit are personified as capable of voicing praise.

The atmosphere takes the stage in v. 8, where the psalmist calls for praise from "fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command!" The imagery suggests powerful storms. "Fire" in this context calls to mind lightning, which often accompanies hail-producing storms. The NRSV's "frost" would be better rendered as "clouds" (as in NIV11, NET2, and HCSB): the word more commonly describes thick smoke, which clouds resemble. Israel's Canaanite neighbors depicted Baal as the storm god, but the psalmist believed Yahweh alone reigned over all the earth, from ocean depths to highest heaven.

In vv. 9-10, the psalmist shifts to the earth's surface with an intentional movement from geological features ("mountains and hills") to prized vegetation ("fruit trees and cedars"), then to animal life ("wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds"). The list does not distinguish between "clean" and "unclean" animals: every creature that lives and moves is a part of God's good creation and owes praise to the Lord.

We are not surprised that humans make up the final category called to praise God (vv. 11-12). Once again we see a purposeful progression, this time from royalty ("kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth") to common folk ("young men and women alike, old and young together").

How can cosmic bodies, ocean depths, land formations, standing trees, and living creatures join human beings in giving praise to God? Even unconscious entities give praise to exalt God's glory "above earth and heaven" precisely by existing and fulfilling the function God designed for them (v. 13).

On one hand, then, the psalm pictures humans as one part of the larger web of creation. We, like stars, clouds, trees, and animals, give praise to God by being and doing what we have been called to be and do. That is an important lesson, but there is more.

Why should people praise God? The final verse turns to Israel as God's covenant people, especially blessed by God and thus even more obliged to offer abject praise: "He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him. Praise the LORD!"

"Horn" in this instance is probably a metaphor for a special position of dignity or privilege. The psalmist believed Israel had been chosen as God's special people, to live in a covenant relationship that would serve as a shining example and draw other peoples to God. The mark of Israel's honor was seen in their praise to God.

Christians are not Israelites – but we also claim to live in a special relationship with God, a new covenant made available to all through the salvific work of Christ. We also are called to live in such a way that our attitudes and behaviors reflect the goodness of God and attract others to have faith. There is no better way – or greater reason – to praise the Lord.

Hallelujah? NFJ

MARCHING ONWARD

Beyond the Sea Islands, the trek toward freedom continues

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

Within the walls of the stately First Baptist Church of Columbia, S.C., a self-styled revolution had begun on Dec. 20, 1861. A new nation had been envisioned, one chosen by God to preserve and advance white supremacy and Black slavery.

That imaginary nation — the Confederate States of America — then committed treason by firing upon the United States. For two years the Confederacy held its ground, but with one exception.

Some 100 miles to the southeast the U.S. forces had, within months of the South's treason, captured South Carolina's Sea Islands, liberated thousands of Black slaves, seized hundreds of slave labor camps (plantations), and set about grafting former slaves into America's constitutional freedoms.

This revolution of humanity became known as the Port Royal Experiment, a model for the future freedom of all Black Americans.

EXPANSION

As freedom expanded on the Sea Islands, Confederate fortunes peaked and plummeted. The slaveholder rebellion collapsed upon itself.

With the South reeling from battlefield losses, soldier desertions and slave escapes, U.S. military forces pressed southward, besieging Atlanta in the summer of 1864.

Insulated from the flailing Confederacy, Beaufort prospered under protection of the U.S. military. With Atlanta under siege a "first-rate Ice Cream saloon" opened in Beaufort, serving "cream and sherbet ices" and "rich coffees and light confectionary" to all comers, white or Black.

Editor's note: This is the sixth and final article in a series carrying on the legacy of the Whitsitt Historical and Heritage Society.

In the nearby islands' rich fields, freedmen celebrated a good cotton crop.

"[W]ith due regard to the interest of the Freedmen and to the market value of the crop," Union General Rufus Saxton — commander of the Sea Islands — decreed that white purchasers must pay fair prices.

From an abundance of produce, freedmen gifted a "steamer loaded with a thousand water melons" to the nearby 54th Massachusetts and the 55th Massachusetts, and to their own regiment, the 33rd United States Colored Troops.

Indisputably, the heroism of Black Union soldiers — freeborn from the North and former slaves from the South — based in the Sea Islands had changed the trajectory of the war, enlarging the ranks of U.S. regiments and heroically engaging Confederate armies on numerous battlefields.

Triumphing in Atlanta, Gen. William T. Sherman set his sights on the coastal city of Savannah near the Sea Islands and in the heart of the Confederacy.

Marching through Georgia to the coast in the waning months of the year, Sherman's army — living off of the land in order to move quickly, and liberating slaves along the way — met no significant resistance.

Reaching the coast, Sherman's army connected with nearby Union naval forces, the U.S. military overpowering token Confederate resistance and occupying Savannah on Dec. 21, 1864.

FINALLY

Throughout the city, Black Americans — both newly freed and previously free — were overwhelmed with joy, celebrating in their churches. Freedom was theirs, finally!

Within days Black citizens turned their attention forward. Celebrations and visioning marked Jan. 1, 1865 — the second anniversary of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation.

Black leaders, mostly Baptists, in response to overwhelming public sentiment formulated a plan for educating the city's freedmen. The rural Sea Islands' educational successes, scaled city-wide, offered a model.

The next day an overflowing crowd at the First African Baptist Church — the meeting house long serving as the public center of Black life in Savannah — gathered in expectation. Garrison Frazier, a retired black Baptist minister recognized as the leader of Savannah's Black community, sensed the electricity in the sanctuary and called the crowd to order.

A white Northerner from the American Missionary Association that had assisted in the Sea Islands recorded the scene. Proceedings began with a hymn, "Blow ye the trumpet blow," celebrating freedom.

Prayer followed, and another hymn, "My country 'tis of thee." Although composed in 1831, 12 years later abolitionists had penned a racially inclusive version of the hymn, and quite likely this latter version lifted the church rafters on this day.

A parade of white speakers followed — abolitionists and missionaries encouraging the newly freed to use their liberty wisely. Mansfield French, a missionary among Sea Island freedmen and the main speaker, pointed to the Port Royal Experiment as a proven way to move forward as free citizens.

BUSINESS

These speakers were but a prelude to important business at hand. A benediction brought their exhortations to a close and gave the reins to the city's Black citizens, as reported:

"Officers of the various colored churches" gathered, with Rev. Garrison "in the chair." The churches were four of the five "very large colored churches" — mostly Baptist congregations — and able to "seat one thousand persons each."

A fellow pastor spoke "to the importance of commencing schools immediately and perfecting an organization for that purpose," after which those gathered in the church building resolved "that the

Official Boards of the colored Churches of this city with their Pastor's constitute" the Savannah Educational Association.

A constitution having been prepared in advance, it "was presented as the basis of the proposed ass. and after some discussion was unanimously adopted."

Two of the articles garnered particular attention: "art 8 — Any person may become a yearly member of this ass. by paying the sum of three dollars and a monthly tribute of twenty five cents, a life member by the payment of ten dollars, and the same amount monthly." "Art. 13th – This association may cooperate with any ass. organized in the Loyal States, for the education of freedmen."

An account of that day notes that the crowd quickly came "forward with their names and money. The scene was novel and intensely interesting. Men and women came to the table with a grand rush much like the charge of Union soldiers on a rebel battery. Fast as their names could be written by a swift penman, the Greenbacks were laid upon the table in sums from one to ten dollars, until the pile footed up the round sum of seven hundred and thirty dollars as the cash receipt of the meeting."

EDUCATION

Anticipating this moment, James D. Lynch, a Black African Methodist Episcopal missionary from Illinois, announced the securing "from the [U.S.] Government the use of three large buildings."

First of the three, Rev. Lynch explained, is "'A. Bryan's Negro Mart' (thus read the sign over the door). It is a large three-story brick building. In this place slaves had been bought and sold for many years. We have found many 'gems' such as handcuffs, whips and staples for tying, etc. Bills of sales of slaves by the hundreds all giving a faithful description of the hellish business."

This pit of hell, where generational evils mere days prior had been a stench before God and nation, would now be used "for school purposes." A second building, a house "formerly used as a rebel hospital," would be used for a second school.

A "Grand rally of the children ... some five hundred of them in the lecture room of the [First African Baptist] church" assembled the following day prior to marching "through the streets of the city to the buildings assigned for schools."

"This army of colored children moving through the streets seemed to excite feeling and interest," observed an onlooker, "second only to that of Gen Shermans army. Such a gathering of Freedman's sons and daughters that proud City had never seen before. Many of the people rushed to the doors and windows of their houses, wondering what these things could mean. This they were told is the onward march of Freedom."

The old slave mart became the Bryan Free School, the second public school in Georgia [the first a school "for the education of poor" white children having been earlier established in Savannah in 1855]. Within a year six public schools collectively educated the city's Black children.

Freedom from southern bondage had begun on the nearby Sea Islands, formerly home to hundreds of forced labor camps. With freedom quickly came the next step: education.

Now those efforts had expanded to Savannah, where the urban Black community — led by Baptists also — had more resources at hand.

Not that the Sea Islands were now taking a backseat. Quite the opposite, in fact: In the Black community of Mitchelville on Hilton Head Island, a public school for young children thrived, the first compulsory school system in South Carolina.

Across the sound, St. Helena Island's public school — the first school for Negroes in the South — formerly housed in the Brick Baptist Church, boasted its own building adjacent to the church.

Initially consisting of three rooms, the Penn School — named in honor of Quaker William Penn, founder of Pennsylvania, from which many of the island's educators and missionaries had come — prepared former slaves for meaningful lives as free people.

Innovative from the beginning, in time the Penn School would expand to include collegiate courses and technical training, long remaining one of the nation's leading Black educational institutions.

Elsewhere in the Sea Islands other public schools for Black children also prospered as the Savannah Educational Association rapidly expanded.

LAND

Black Savannahians next turned their attention to land ownership. Again the Sea Islands had provided a model, and again Rev. Frazier led the way.

The Baptist minister headed a contingent that met with General Sherman and Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton. "What do you want for yourselves?" Sherman quizzed the city's Black leaders.

"The way we can best take care of ourselves," Frazier answered, "is to have land, and turn it and till it by our own labor … and we can soon maintain ourselves and have something to spare … We want to be placed on land until we are able to buy it and make it our own."

Finding the request reasonable and just, Sherman on behalf of the War Department and Lincoln administration granted freedmen their wish, issuing Special Field Order No. 15.

From Charleston southward to the St. John's River in north Florida, the military order decreed, "the abandoned rice fields along the rivers for thirty miles back from the sea [400,000 acres] … are reserved and set apart for the settlement of the negroes now made free by the acts of war and the proclamation of the President of the United States."

On the Sea Islands many freedmen already owned land, and on the newly abandoned and fertile coastal lands "each family shall have a plot of not more than (40) forty acres of tillable ground" to which deeds will be issued, decreed Sherman.

The transfer of former slave labor camps to former slaves — in total numbering nearly 4 million — was a truly revolutionary idea. Property meant

wealth, and in fact former slaves had more than earned the rights to the land.

Effective immediately, Sherman's sweeping order created — on paper — a racially inclusive South.

HOPEFUL SIGNS

Quickly Savannah Baptist minister Ulysses L. Houston, having been among the pastors who had met with Sherman, assembled some 1,000 freedmen and led them to nearby Skidaway Island. There they established a Black settlement with Houston as governor.

The community was modeled after the self-founded town of Mitchelville on Hilton Head. By the month of June some "40,000 freedmen had been settled on 400,000 acres of 'Sherman Land.'"

Black freedom had reached a critical mass. Committed to assisting freedmen in fully exercising their newfound liberty, in March 1865 the Lincoln administration transitioned its smaller-scale Port Royal Experiment to the Freedmen's Bureau.

Carryovers from the Sea Islands included assistance in negotiating labor contracts, management of lands abandoned by white slaveowners, and the establishment of educational opportunities.

A new charge — legal assistance to protect freedmen from discrimination and violence — reflected the ongoing reality of white supremacy in the mainland South.

A final charge of the Bureau — assisting white people destitute in the post-war South — came about from hopes that freedmen and poor whites would form a bulwark against troublesome former slaveowners.

Confederate General Robert E. Lee's surrender on April 9 to U.S. General Ulysses S. Grant — effectively ending the War of the Rebellion — also pointed to a hopeful future. Five days later the U.S. flag was again raised at Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, exactly four years after it had been replaced with the flag of slavery.

Celebrations marked the flag raising, capped by an address from Henry Ward Beecher, a northern minister of no parallel in the reunited nation. The Sea Islands' *New South* newspaper printed a portion of the message:

"On this solemn and joyful day we again Gift to the breeze our fathers' flag, now again, the banner of the United States, with the fervent prayer that God would crown it with honor, protect it from treason and send it down to our children with all the blessings of civilization, liberty and religion …".

Afterward the "singing of the Doxology and the Benediction concluded the ceremonies of the day. Hearty cheers were given for President Lincoln, the old Flag, the Union, Generals Grant, Sherman and others, when the audience separated."

White supremacy was defeated, the confinement of millions of Americans to brutal forced toil and bodily assault ended. There were even some indications that many former slaveowners, their slaveocracy soundly whipped and in ruins, were ready to accept defeat and embrace — even if reluctantly — a new future of Black rights in Lincoln's second administration… Or so it may have seemed.

MOURNING

Mere hours after the flag raising and in one of the most pivotal and astonishing moments in U.S. history, an enraged Confederate sympathizer — John Wilkes Booth — fired a bullet that ended Lincoln's life.

Suddenly, all bets for a reunified and racially equitable nation were off. It was widely sensed that Lincoln's stunning demise meant post-war America was up for grabs.

Black Americans wept, mourning their "Moses" and nervously eyeing a now uncertain future. Most white northerners responded with tears and anger of their own, while most white southerners had no remorse.

Among the Sea Islands the shocking and disorienting news of Lincoln's assassination threw the "community into the deepest gloom, Black and white alike, Port Royal's *New South* editor mourned. "The flags all over the islands and on the shipping were instantly placed at half-mast."

Our "affliction is deeper than can be expressed," mourned an official order issued by the military.

Three and-a-half years earlier enslaved islanders had celebrated freedom's arrival in the form of U.S. warships. Lincoln and the federal government had been their earthly savior.

Now with the news of the president's sudden death, "business of all kinds was suspended, guns were fired every half hour during the day ... all the flags were at half mast and nearly every private and some of the Government buildings were draped in deep mourning.

"A meeting was called by officers and citizens ... Long before the opening, every seat was filled and crowds could not find even standing room in-side. The house was hastily but very appropriately decorated for the occasion, by the citizens and others …

"On either side of the stage were the Mottos: 'Washington—Father of his Country.' 'Lincoln—Father of Liberty.' 'He gave his life that the nation might live.' 'The body is gone that the Spirit may shine.'"

REKINDLED

Lincoln's shining spirit of freedom on the Sea Islands notwithstanding, the president's lifeless body — and the living body of the man who replaced him — rekindled southern white supremacist hopes.

Previously the Democratic governor of Tennessee whom Lincoln had chosen as his vice president on a proclaimed "National Union" political ticket in hopes of easing southern Reconstruction — conditional re-admittance of the 11 Confederate states into the Union — Andrew Johnson had been drunk the day of the pair's inauguration a mere six weeks before Lincoln's assassination.

In retrospect that day had portended even worse: Sworn in as the new president, Johnson, a man of vast vanity and all along a racist, determined to maintain white supremacy in the South, contrary to Lincoln's earlier plan of bringing former slaves into freedom's fold as a requirement of southern Reconstruction.

Four years of political warfare between President Johnson and a Republican Congress ensued. Johnson disagreed with Lincoln's goal of containing white supremacy and granting freedoms to Blacks.

Content to let elite former slaveholders do whatever they pleased short of re-enslaving Blacks, Johnson turned a blind eye as white terrorist organizations — including the Ku Klux Klan, formed in the president's home state of Tennessee — and white supremacist legislation ("Black Codes") collectively tortured, murdered, stole lands from, and returned former slaves to forced labor.

Congress fought back, equipping the Freedmen's Bureau to help protect former slaves and their land; passing the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments (1865–1870) collectively abolishing slavery and granting citizenship and voting rights to African Americans; enacting Congressional Civil Rights Acts (1866 and 1875) protecting Black rights; and maintaining a military presence in the South to ensure compliance.

Altogether Congress neutered Johnson's policy of leniency, then worked closely with General Grant who, as a Republican, won the presidential elections of 1868 and 1872, his administration favoring African Americans' rights.

During the years 1865–1877 that spanned Reconstruction and despite daily white supremacist violence, congressional action and Black Americans' involvement in politics at all levels made for the greatest era of progressivism in southern history to date.

No state surpassed South Carolina in this matter. Having been forced to grant majority Black citizens' voting rights, South Carolina by 1868 became the only state in which African Americans controlled the legislature.

Black legislators in Columbia set to work bolstering civil rights, land reform, and the suppression of white terrorism. Over time more than 300 Black South Carolinians in the post-war years won election at the federal, state and/or local levels, more than any other state.

Beaufort's Robert Smalls — as a slave having gained renown for his bold capture of a Confederate steamer and subsequent service as the first Black military naval captain in U.S. history — was the most prominent of all Black politicians.

His political career began with election to a local office, then as a state representative and senator respectively, followed by election — thrice — to the U.S. House of Representatives in the 1880s.

By the time Smalls retired from politics, however, white supremacists had regained control of the state legislature and were ruthlessly stealing lands from Black citizens as they implemented apartheid in the Palmetto State, as well as in other southern states.

Apart from the Sea Islands, the progressivism of southern Reconstruction largely faded to a memory only, no state since having had a majority Black legislature.

REMINDERS

Today South Carolina's Sea Islands remain a testament to freedom's triumph, and what might have been if Reconstruction had produced the desired results of robust civil and equal rights for African Americans.

In the town of Beaufort, many historic homes appropriated by the U.S. Military during the Civil War remain, including officer headquarters, hospital sites, and Robert Smalls' boyhood home (which he later purchased). Most, however, are now – as they were pre-Civil War – owned by white residents.

Several period Black churches remain intact and thriving, including First African Baptist Church and Tabernacle Baptist Church — both claiming Smalls, a Baptist deacon.

During a 2022 visit with First African Baptist's current pastor, Alexander McBride, I was ushered into the church's history room where records of Smalls' financial contributions are displayed. Smalls remained the pride of the congregation. Here Smalls was baptized.

A few blocks away at Tabernacle Baptist, where Smalls also attended church, a large bust of him is prominently positioned in the yard adjacent to his grave. There is pride here, too: This is where most visitors come in search of South Carolina's most famous Black historical figure.

On St. Helena Island the Brick Baptist Church remains an active congregation. The adjacent Penn Center, a cultural and educational center and Civil War and Reconstruction era museum, is the successor to the Penn School. In the 1960s the Center hosted Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference staff as they prepared for the March on Washington and the Poor People's Campaign.

The Museum's then director, Marie Gibbs, revealed feelings of both pride and regret. Penn Center rightly remains a bright shining reminder of the remarkable story of the Sea Islands' freedom history, and a beacon pointing to the future. Unfortunately, a lack of robust funding is painfully obvious.

Many, but not all, buildings are in good shape. Tragically, the house where King worked on his "I Have a Dream" speech is in disrepair.

Although St. Helena Island remains largely Black-owned, Hilton Head Island's Black self-governed Mitchellville, an early blueprint for Black autonomy, is long gone. So, too, are most of the island's other historic Black communities.

Camp Saxton on Port Royal Island, home to the 1st South Carolina Volunteer Infantry (later renamed the 33rd United States Colored Troops) and the South's first reading of the Emancipation Proclamation on Jan. 1, 1863, offers period interpretive exhibits but is only partially available to the public.

Boding well for the historic Sea Islands' future, most of these historic sites and others are now preserved and protected in the Reconstruction Era National Park, established by President Barack Obama in 2017 to preserve and commemorate the story of Black freedom during the Civil War and Reconstruction era. NFJ

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Here's what's coming in 2024 — based on texts from the Revised Common Lectionary.

Epiphany

Getting Off to a Good Start

January 7
Acts 19:1-10
A Gospel Quartet to Remember

January 14
1 Corinthians 6
Getting It Straight

January 21
1 Corinthians 7:25-40
Considering the Time

January 28
1 Corinthians 8:1-13
Practicing Flexible Faith

February 4
1 Corinthians 9:16-27
Getting It Right about Rights

February 11
Psalm 50
Learning What God Wants

Lent

Questions to Ponder

February 18
Psalm 25:1-10
Can I Be Forgiven?

February 25
Psalm 22:19-31
Can I Be Confident?

March 3
Psalm 19
Can I Be Good?

March 10
Psalm 107
Can I Be Grateful?

March 17
Psalm 119:9-16
Can I Be Whole-Hearted?

March 24
Psalm 31
Can I Be Safe?

Easter

Acts to Remember

March 31 (Easter)
Acts 10:34-43
Good News for Everyone

April 7
Acts 4:32-35
True Community

April 14
Acts 3
Why the Suprise?

April 21
Acts 4:1-12
This Is the Way

April 28
Acts 8:26-40
What Hinders Me?

May 5
Acts 10:44-48
Can Anyone Deny?

May 12
Acts 1:15-26
The Unknown Disciple

May 19 (Pentecost)
Romans 8:18-27
The Spirit Who Helps

After Pentecost

May 26 (Trinity Sunday)
Romans 8:12-17
In the Flesh, of the Spirit

Mark My Words:

June 2
Mark 2:23-3:6
Future Fundamentalists

June 9
Mark 3:20-35
Real Family

June 16
Mark 4:26-34
Two Seedy Stories

June 23
Mark 4:35-41
The Weatherman

June 30
Mark 5: 21-43
Touching God

July 7
Mark 6: 1-13
Home and Away

July 14
Mark 6: 14-29
The Death of the Party

July 21
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56
No Rest for the Weary

Some Things Never Change:

July 28
2 Kings 4:42-44
The Miracle Man

August 4
Exodus 16
What Is It?

Aug. 20, 2023
Matthew 15:1-28
When Crumbs Are Enough

August 11
Psalm 34
Call and Response

August 18
Proverbs 9
Listen to Lady Wisdom

August 25
Joshua 24: 1-25
Make Your Choice

September 1
Psalm 15
Who Gets Close to God?

September 8
Psalm 125
Presuppositions and Prayer

September 15
Psalm 116
When the Answer is Yes

September 22
Psalm 54
Same Old Same Old?

September 29
Esther 7:1-10, 9:20-22
Celebrating Vengeance?

Hard Sayings:

October 6
Mark 10:1-16
Hard Words and a Soft Heart

October 13
Mark 10: 17-31
The Trouble with Treasure

October 20
Mark 10: 32-45
First and Last

October 27
Mark 10: 46-52
What Do You Want?

Looking Ahead:

November 3
Ruth 1:1-2:23
From Tears to Action

November 10
Ruth 3:1-4:21
From Empty to Full

November 17
Daniel 12:1-3
Future Dreams

November 24
1 Samuel 1:1-28
Longing for a Son

Advent

Someone's Coming

December 1
1 Thessalonians 3:6-13
Anticipating

December 8
Philippians 1:1-11
Longing

December 15
Philippians 4:1-7
Rejoicing

December 22
Hebrews 10:1-10
Out of the Shadows

Christmas

December 29
Colossians 3:12-17
Resolution Clothes

CONCORD'S INFLUENCE

Writers shaped thinking about God and nature — and God's nature

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

CONCORD, Mass. — Just 20 miles northwest of bustling Boston, this quaint town's pace and mindset seem faraway. If any place should call for taking time to think, it is here.

Many know of Concord for giving its name to a popular variety of grapes and its significance to the American Revolutionary War.

For the literary minded, it is home to an amazing array of well-known thinkers and writers who helped shape America's philosophical framings.

Some of these literary giants were drawn to Concord in the 19th century by that very stimulating environment.

Henry David Thoreau, however, was born in Concord in 1817 and died there in 1862. His only departure was to attend Harvard.

Thoreau is best known for isolating himself for two years in a small lakeside cabin of his own making to experience nature more intimately and to reflect upon its significance. This resulted in his classic, *Walden; or Life in the Woods*, published in 1854.

Visitors to Walden Pond are sometimes surprised by its large size and recreational offerings — as well as its close proximity to town. A replica of Thoreau's tiny cabin has been erected and the footprint of the original structure was found and marked.

Most everyone knows the names if not their writings of Concord's famous authors, while others dig more deeply into what were revolutionary ideas.

ALCOTTS

Loosely based on her own experiences, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* has inspired generations of girls and young women. It speaks to social pressures and expectations related to womanhood.

Marc Jolley beside the Thoreau statue at Walden Pond in Concord, Mass. Contributed photo.

Her father, Bronson Alcott was a poet and author who contributed to community dialogue as an abolitionist and reformer. He also shaped the rising philosophy called Transcendentalism.

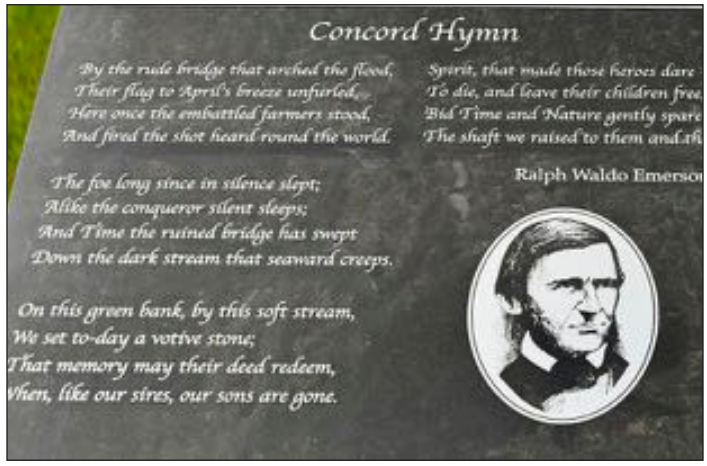
"[Bronson] Alcott was a brilliant man in the field of education," said Marc Jolley, director of Mercer University Press, who visits Concord as often as possible.

"He introduced the Socratic dialogue as a practice in the classroom, he did away with physical punishment of students, he encouraged students to think instead of doing all rote memorization, he thought boys and girls should be educated in the same way."

Bronson Alcott, like Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, was vehemently against slavery and worked toward emancipation, said Jolley. He added that all three men were very active in the underground railroad that provided safety to those leaving slavery.

"Louisa May is critical in many ways," said Jolley. "She was allowed by her father to be an independent woman."

While her formal education was limited, Louisa May and one of her three sisters had Thoreau as their teacher for a



Photos by John D. Pierce.

time. He would take them on nature walks and taught them to see what others might miss in the natural setting.

"Louisa's writing opened the world of the minds of many young girls who were denied formal education," said Jolley. "Her books, including the *Little Women* trilogy (*Little Women*, *Little Men*, and *Jo's Boys*), are full of morality."

Her stories often emphasize individual autonomy — a hallmark of Transcendental individualism, he added.

OTHER WRITERS

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *House of Seven Gables* dons many bookshelves. And his novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, gets retold again and again.

"Hawthorne was not as political in his writing, but what his fiction did was simple: he set the standard for all future fiction writing," said Jolley.

While Thoreau, Bronson Alcott, and Emerson were less interested in fiction, Hawthorne "saw it as a way to reach larger numbers of people," said Jolley.

His stories were steeped in morality, Jolley added, and "established the genre of fiction in a more advanced way than earlier American writers like Washington Irving."

Some Concord writers attended churches — usually with a unitarian bent. Others did not.

"Emerson left the organized church and claimed that God was in all of nature, including each and every human," said Jolley. That orientation was the basis of his view of morality.

"As such, if God is in every person, then it is wrong to mistreat, harm or own other people," Jolley explained.

Some modern-day "nones" — identifying as religiously unaffiliated — might consider Emerson to be their undeclared saint, he added.

"He did not believe in the divinity of Jesus, but that Jesus taught that the kingdom is within us," said Jolley.

This perspective, he added, aligns with Eastern religions that teach that the divine is within each person.

Revisionists today often portray America as a nation founded and shaped by those holding the same beliefs as contemporary evangelicals. That is not the case.

Deism — the belief that God is creator but not personal — was widely accepted among shapers of the American experience over a long period of time.

Transcendentalism — which Jolley has taught a course on — did not align the faith with the Christian experience but did bring God to earth in one sense, he said.

"Transcendentalism brought God back down from the heavens and claimed that God is in all of nature, and in every person," said Jolley. "People are a part of nature, not above it or superior to it."

GOD & NATURE

Theological debates never cease over the relationship of God and nature.

Environmentalism is often undercut by hyper-conservative Christians who claim the earth was given for human dominion and benefit. An emphasis on the expected soon return of Christ excuses any concern for preserving earth's resources and overall health for future generations.

A familiar warning is that Christians are to worship the God of creation, not creation itself.

Other Christians take quite the opposite approach, emphasizing the stewardship of natural resources rather than human dominion.

Experiencing God in nature is not easily divided for many Christians who find the spiritual and the natural to be as entwined as the roots of a towering sequoia tree.

Likewise, there is much debate over the nature of God — though "God is love" rises from the biblical text and is often among the first verses memorized.

Some Christians emphasize personal salvation, evangelism and creating a culture of shared — even imposed — values. Others point to the life and teachings of Jesus that call followers to be exceedingly forgiving, serving and merciful.

Whether discussing the nature of God — or the relationship between God and nature — opinions are as plentiful as the distant heavenly bodies.

Steps to a shop in Concord, Mass. Photo by John D. Pierce.

THOREAU

Jolley, who is also a lecturer in philosophy at Mercer University, presented a paper last summer in Concord. The annual gathering on July 12 marked the 206th birthday of the writer, philosopher and naturalist Henry David Thoreau.

Jolley titled the presentation, "Thoreau and the Existentialist crisis of extinction." He raised and responded to the question, "How does one live a life in the face of extinction?"

He contrasted Thoreau's *Walden* with Elizabeth Kolbert's "pessimistic" book, *Field Notes from a Catastrophe.* Both writings he had previously assigned to a class of first-year students.

Jolley confessed to being in the grips of darkness and fear after receiving a cancer diagnosis in 2007, soon after his own reading of Kolbert.

The growing results of climate change — rising temperatures, lower water supplies and animal populations moving toward extinction — added to his concerns about the future, he said.

A two-year period of darkness marked primarily by fear was nearly consuming, he said. But on an early spring walk in 2009, he told fellow Thoreau enthusiasts, "It all changed."

"The following words came to me suddenly, like a bolt of lightning, a smack in the face, or perhaps my very soul whispered it in a still small voice: 'The sun is but a morning star.'"

Those words that liberated Jolley's fear are how Thoreau concluded *Walden*.

THE TOWN

Concord has much to offer visitors today — from lovely homes, shops and churches to tasty restaurants and coffee shops. Bookstores, as one might expect, are plentiful.

Short drives to Walden Pond and Minute Man National Historical Park provide a broader understanding of the area's impact on American life.

The latest iteration of the North Bridge — where the opening battle of the American Revolution occurred in 1775 — echoes the words of Emerson's famous descriptor: "the shot heard 'round the world."

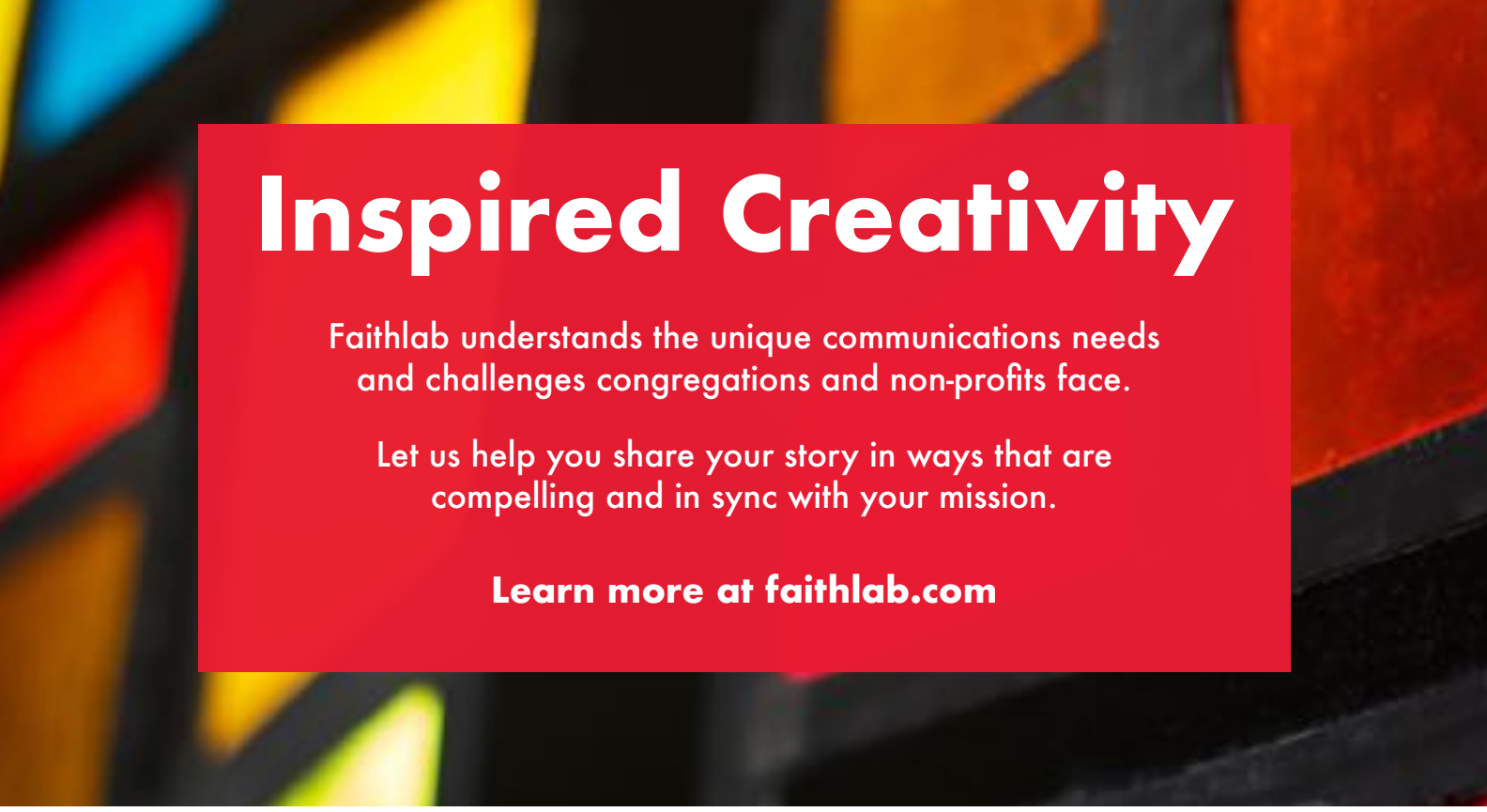
Settled in 1635, Concord offers much in modern amenities while honoring its deeply impactful past.

Visitors often make pilgrimages to the gravesites of the town's famous authors. Subtle signs in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery point the way to Authors Ridge.

Other stops include places these writers called home — such as The Wayside, the Old Manse and Orchard House.

Freedom from tyranny is a hallmark of the American ideal — whether it's the independence of a nation or the liberty of ideas, convictions and expressions.

Concord seems to bring all of that understanding together within a matter of a few square miles. NFJ



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SUPPORTER SPOTLIGHT

A conversation with Randy Brantley

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

Randy Brantley of Concord, N.C., is an active churchman, willing volunteer and professional fundraiser who serves on the Strategic Advisory Board of Good Faith Media. He was interviewed by Managing Editor Bruce Gourley.

BG: In your formative years, who had a lasting influence on your life?

RB: My parents had the greatest influence on my life. I am 11 years younger than my siblings, so I had lots of one-on-one time with my parents.

My father was a small farmer in northeastern North Carolina and my mother was a homemaker, except for a brief time as an elementary school teacher's aide. My mother earned a high school diploma, but my father did not.

I often reflect in amazement at their knowledge and wisdom in terms of teaching me about the fundamentals of life, especially living with integrity. They were people of deep faith who demonstrated devotion to the church and spiritual disciplines, such as prayer and daily Bible reading.

Although my parents were not wealthy, they provided me with a good quality of life in so many other respects. I always knew they loved and cared for me.

Apart from my parents, I was influenced by many enthusiastic and encouraging educators throughout my public-school experience.

BG. Were there any turning points in your life that ultimately steered you toward where you are today in your career, community involvement and worldview?

Randy Brantley stands on two continents during a Good Faith Experience to Iceland last summer.

RB: I was involved in extracurricular organizations, one of which was student government. During my junior year, Valarie Hardy, a guidance counselor, encouraged me to apply for the United States Senate Youth Program.

It was created by U.S. Senate Resolution in 1962 and funded privately by the William Randolph Hearst Foundation. Each state sends two student delegates to Washington, D.C., each year for a one-week unique educational experience, which includes meeting high-level government, military, nonprofit and media leaders.

When I participated in 1981, the Hearst Foundation awarded each delegate a $2,500 scholarship; today the scholarship is $10,000. A few delegates and I became acquaintances with Rosalie Hearst. With her encouragement and financial support, we established an alumni association that today includes leaders from those fields I mentioned previously.

This whole experience had a profound influence on my life, especially my perspectives on legacy and philanthropy. While a graduate student at Baylor University, I observed the advancement team at work — which led me to believe that I might eventually find a place in the world of philanthropy.

In terms of worldview, international travel has played a significant role. I have traveled primarily to developing countries. Thanks to the Murfreesboro, N.C., Rotary Club, I participated in a one-month group study exchange program in Delhi, India.

When I served as a major gift officer with Habitat for Humanity International, I traveled to Guatemala, Nicaragua and the Philippines. Both nonprofit organizations further shaped my perspectives on legacy and philanthropy.

Most important, I realized that people the world over desire much the same things in life: family and friends, economic security, a decent home in a safe location, etc. I also grew to respect the different ways people strive to live in relationship with God.

My chosen path is through Jesus Christ, but I must respect other faith journeys. I occasionally am reminded of the words that I sang in high-school chorus, "Many the ways all of us pray to one God…."

BG. What interests or hobbies or activities do you enjoy?

RB: As someone who works in the demanding and constantly churning field of healthcare philanthropy, my free time is limited. Thanks to Good Faith Experiences, I try to squeeze in at least one week-long trip each year, along with an additional brief excursion at some point.

When I was much younger, I was bitten by the acting bug and participated in school and church theater productions. Today, I enjoy attending community theater and some of the professional touring companies that pass through Charlotte.

I enjoy the outdoors a great deal, whether working in my yard or simply taking a long walk in my neighborhood. I have a growing list of additional hobbies and activities that I plan to pursue in retirement.

BG. As a Christian, where do you find yourself on your own faith journey, and how did you arrive where you are now?

RB: I was one of those Baptist kids in the South whose parents made clear that I would attend church while I lived under their roof. That approach was never an issue for me.

Our rural community revolved around small Center Grove Baptist Church. The faith journey was something I quickly claimed for myself.

The first minister I recall, Dr. W.D. Morris, wore Coke-bottom glasses, had silver-white hair and spoke with a soft, melodic voice. He baptized me at the age of eight.

My religion professors at Louisburg College and Campbell University were influential. I will never forget the shock of hearing my freshman religion professor mention that manna may have been an insect secretion!

In graduate school at Baylor, I had the privilege of studying with Dr. James Wood, former executive director of what was then the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs.

After graduate school, I returned to my hometown and joined First Baptist Church of Ahoskie, N.C., where Dr. Jesse Croom was senior minister.

He led the congregation in conversations about Baptist history, identity and tenets. They became the first North Carolina Baptist church to sever ties with the Southern Baptist Convention and become fully aligned with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

These people, places and experiences shaped my faith journey. Today, I live with more questions and doubt than ever before, which I consider a healthy aspect of spiritual maturity because I lean into God more.

I am more honest in my prayer life, even sometimes praying, "God forgive me for the ways in which I attempt to manipulate you." I try to be deliberate about listening more and talking less.

One of the most valuable gifts God provides is hindsight. When I struggle, I look back on my life and recognize what I believe to be the presence of the Spirit.

Reflecting gives me a sense of reassurance and peace like nothing else, recognizing the mysterious ways in which the Spirit has been present and active in my life.

BG: You have been a part of several Nurturing Faith (now Good Faith) Experiences. What have those been like for you?

RB: I am grateful that you and Johnny Pierce recognized the wisdom of bringing together *Nurturing Faith Journal* readers and supporters in some of the most interesting and beautiful places on the planet.

I participated in trips to Hawaii, Glacier National Park, and, most recently, Iceland. In addition to experiencing God's creative handiwork in these special places, I have had the privilege of making new friends with whom I share similar spiritual beliefs and experiences.

In Iceland, our guide noted that our participants seemed to warm up to each other more quickly than most groups. That is not surprising.

During the Iceland trip, I met Susan and Dr. Tony Cartledge, who is a professor at Campbell University Divinity School. I am hoping to travel to Israel with them and Campbell divinity students next May.

I simply cannot say enough good things about Good Faith Experiences, and I encourage *Nurturing Faith Journal* readers to join a future excursion.

BG: How does your involvement with Good Faith Media fit into your calling as a follower of Jesus?

RB: In the nonprofit world, board service carries considerable weight and responsibility regarding the integrity and sustainability of an organization. I am new to the GFM advisory board, so I continue to learn and survey the landscape.

Good Faith Experiences are structured in such a way as to produce net revenue for GFM, but that's only one small piece of the sustainability equation. Attracting and cultivating significant donors is vitally important and takes time and effort on the part of leadership and board members.

GFM continues to be a critically important voice in American Christianity that speaks truth to power. I have always been impressed by the way in which Johnny Pierce's editorials and articles can shine a white-hot light on a controversial subject while doing so couched in the love of Jesus Christ.

His critiques are not intended to exclude but instead encourage repentance, forgiveness and redemption. Our society needs Jesus' message and example of humility, kindness and generosity now more than ever.

I have grown tired of all the labels we use to divide people. Instead of applying labels, we all need to do a better job of emulating the inclusive nature of Jesus Christ.

BG: What kind of unexpected moments in life make you smile or give you hope?

RB: In my work life, being unexpectedly presented with a promising opportunity to apply to a grant funder that wishes to expand or enhance health care, especially around health care access and equity, brings me joy.

In my private life, encounters with strangers who share a smile and a kind word bring joy, sometimes even a chill down my spine when I feel as though I have encountered someone who radiates the light of Christ.

Growing up, my gaze often would be drawn upward, especially at night when the moon and hundreds of stars were visible due to the lack of light pollution. I experienced the vastness of God's creation and God's presence.

Today, when I walk through my neighborhood and suddenly am aware of the full periphery of my vision that includes wildlife, massive old trees and the sky above, again I am keenly aware of the gift of creation and God's presence in it. I also am reminded of humanity's responsibility to be better stewards of this fragile gift.

In terms of hope, I am increasingly intrigued by what I experience in many of today's high school and college students. They often demonstrate a social consciousness that gives me hope. May they prove to be a generation that calls us to a better way. NFJ

WORTH REMEMBERING

Revisiting a conversation with Gardner Taylor

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

RICHMOND, Va. — A Louisiana native, Gardner C. Taylor served as pastor of Concord Baptist Church of Christ in Brooklyn, N.Y., for 42 years. *Time* magazine called him the "dean of the nation's Black preachers," and *Christian Century* deemed him "poet laureate of the pulpit."

In May 2006, the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond hosted Taylor for the Chester Brown-Hampton Baptist Church Preaching and Worship Conference.

"I was born some 50 years after slavery," Taylor said in one address. "I knew people who passed through that dark night."

Deliverance, he said, noting Israel under Moses' guidance as an example, leads us out of one difficulty into another.

Throughout his ministry Taylor has used pastoral sensitivity, spiritual insight and an extraordinary gift of proclamation to help listeners move from difficulties to deliverance again and again.

"I feel the spray of the Jordan in my face," said Taylor, noting his 88th birthday. His giftedness, faithfulness and longevity of his life and ministry have touched many.

During the conference Taylor responded to questions submitted by participants and posed by Charles Smith, pastor of Hampton Baptist Church in Virginia, and Len Keever, pastor of First Baptist Church of Dunn, N.C.

The following conversation is adapted from that session and an interview with editor John Pierce.

Will you share about your calling to ministry?

GCT: I wanted to be a lawyer, though no person of color had ever been admitted to law school in Louisiana. But I got sidetracked into this business.

I was in a horrible accident as a senior in college in 1947 in which a white man was killed. There were two white witnesses including a Southern Baptist minister named Rev. Shockley.

They told the exact truth. That impacted my call.

I came to look upon myself as the Lord's lawyer… I have not represented him well all the time, but I make his case.

How do you develop a sermon?

GCT: Well, in retirement, I'm reworking material and seeing how inadequate the first working was. I loosely, not slavishly, follow the lectionary.

I believe pastors are to be open to the reception of things all around — engaged in the human situation. God does not come to us frontally.

In Black life there's been a misinterpretation, largely by Blacks themselves, that Blacks are [more spiritual than others]. But there's always been a strain of anti-faith in Black life.

So I've had to come at the gospel from the skeptic side — because we are surrounded by believers and non-believers.

The best of Black preaching comes out of a theodicy of wrestling with why God would allow a people to be in an untold situation. But we are all tenting [on earth]; we don't have houses.

Preaching has to come out of that temporality, impermanence. The preacher's job is to remind us we are strangers and pilgrims — and, yet, with an almost paradoxical sense of creating common unity.

How do you care for your private spiritual life?

GCT: I learned too late in my ministry the importance of sitting in silence before God.

Editor's note: This article appeared in the July 2006 issue of *Baptists Today* (now *Nurturing Faith Journal*). Taylor was 88 at the time. He died in 2015 at age 96.

"I learned too late in my ministry the importance of sitting in silence before God."

I got the idea [of spending 20 minutes in silence at the beginning of each day] from Alexander McClaren, the greatest expositor of scripture. However, I must add that McClaren had a serious flaw in not addressing the social concerns in England at the time.

Will you tell us about your relationship with Martin Luther King Jr. and your part in forming the Progressive National Baptist Convention?

GCT: Martin King was my friend, but I don't use his name often. Everyone claims to have been his close friend, so I refrain from talking about him publicly.

Dr. King and I talked about the need for the new convention over and over. But L.B. Booth called the people together in Cincinnati (in 1961). Neither Martin nor I attended.

More recently I've urged upon Black Baptists to come together. And, thank God, we did come together in Nashville last year (2005).

What is the present state of civil rights in the U.S.?

GCT: The Civil Rights Movement lifted from this nation an awful pall of shame and hypocrisy. It not only freed Black people; it delivered the nation to be free from shame.

It's been a mixed kind of results... The greatest hazard, I think, is to see individual recognition as group advancement.

Color in not enough; you only have to look at the Supreme Court to see that. All of us, Black and white, have to keep moving against the grain.

You've said that Sunday morning worship is the most segregated hour of the week. Is the church improving on that?

GCT: I got that from a Presbyterian preacher in Albany, N.Y. I repeated it at a Baptist World Alliance meeting.

We are coming closer together in our worship. And these preachers — I hate to call them preachers — but these performers, Black and white, on television are pretty much merged.

What is your impression of Billy Graham's ministry?

GCT: I've known Mr. Graham since 1956 when he came to Madison Square Garden. To his credit, he was the first to open his audience to people of all color.

It's been a tremendous ministry … partly conditioned by culture. I have great regard for him. We are of the same vintage [88 at the time].

How has your preaching changed over the years?

GCT: It has softened from the harsh rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement. I have come to see much more that we are social/solitary beings….

"I" is the slenderest pronoun. I think a preacher should not try to hide behind it.

You became pastor of Concord at age 30. What was it like?

GCT: It was intoxicating, but highly stimulating. I've never known a congregation more anxious to hear the gospel.

I never lost the excitement of that congregation and New York City, the crossroads of the world.

There's a joke about three ministers being together. One confesses that he sometimes takes a little money from the offering. Another said he occasionally drinks too much.

The third preacher applauds their honesty and then admits his own problem: "I can't help but tell everything I hear."

I don't think a normal person does this work. Preachers have to be a little angular.

I believe — in fact demographics show — that the pulpits of America will be filled partly, and perhaps largely, by women.

You credited Phil Strickland and Foy Valentine with "opening before Southern Baptists and others… what faith is all about." You noted they "came out of the inspired teaching of T.B. Maston." How important was Maston and his students to race relations among Baptists?

GCT: I went to Southwestern Seminary for some lecture series that allowed me to meet Dr. Maston. I went to his home for dinner.

I had learned something of the enormous influence this man had in a very difficult time in the South in sending forth — somehow out of his own spirit — young men who had a vision of what the South might become in the name of Jesus Christ.

I was privileged to meet him but didn't know him well after that. He gave me several of his books, and I went through them.

I have never stopped marveling at how in the '30s and '40s he could have such a vision, and who could by the magic of personality and the grace of God communicate that to young men.

"The Civil Rights Movement... not only freed Black people; it delivered the nation to be free from shame."

"'I' is the slenderest pronoun. I think a preacher should not try to hide behind it."

That was a tremendous thing. And Foy was one of my most cherished and dearest friends.

There's a renewed effort to find more cooperation among what you call "non-creedal Baptists." Is that a worthy and realistic effort?

GCT: Yes, yes, yes. That may be the most hopeful possibility for Baptists in this country. Because Baptists, like all other Christian communities, are under a grave threat.

The new heresies … of the motivational speakers — all of which is a bastardization of the faith — take hold of people's fantasy and imagination.

The New Testament speaks about itching ears. Somehow, the Christian faith has been susceptible to heresies.

All of our Christian communities are under grave threat. While Southern Baptists have been protected by an iron curtain of region, they are susceptible too.

American Baptists are feeling it more strongly. Black Baptists are feeling it.

A part of the problem is that our separateness and alienation are a good talking point for those who don't want to have anything to do with organized Christianity.

So I think it's very important that we come together. But, of course, the faith has always been done better as a minority undertaking. It doesn't do well in a majority position.

Do you see the Baptist World Alliance as a vehicle for bringing Baptists closer together?

GCT: The Baptist World Alliance was begun with Alexander McClaren as its first president. He had been a tremendous influence.

Now Southern Baptists have come out of BWA. This separation, this withdrawal, will do no more good for Southern Baptists than the old Elijah Muhammad movement did for Blacks. It just does not wash.

The strangest thing is the kind of meanness that can accompany supposed orthodoxy. The worst part of all of this is that it is not about orthodoxy; it is about power.

Pulling together various groups requires giving up some turf, power and control.

GCT: That's the problem. Not only giving up power but the lust for power.

How hard is it to balance the priestly-pastoral and prophetic-preaching roles of a pastor?

GCT: The balance occurs when the preacher or the congregation recognizes that it is both societal and solitary.

We are in a community of believers, a civic community. But we are ultimately individuals with all the gifts and hazards of individuality. Preaching that forgets either one is in a bad fix.

I had an invitation from one of Southern Baptist seminaries to come preach in chapel in the fall. The man who sent the invitation said, "Now we want you to be sure and present an expository sermon."

I think I know what he meant. He wanted me to stay inside the Bible.

So I've created a word: "inpository."

"The strangest thing is the kind of meanest that can accompany supposed orthodoxy."

Because there is a kind of preaching that can be an escape from reality. And there is a kind of preaching that can be all flat — horizontal — without the vertical aspect.

I think our job is to put together "Thou shall love the Lord thy God *and* thy neighbor."

Did you agree to give that seminary chapel sermon?

GCT: Yes, I penciled in my poor writing at the end of the letter to please call and let me know what you mean by an expository sermon so I will not transgress.

I've not heard from him, but I think I know what he meant. He wanted me to stay internal.

If you did that kind of internal preaching Sunday in and Sunday out, would you fail the church?

GCT: I'd fail the church and my Lord because the Word became flesh.

Preaching about the Word without what it became is an obscurity-style preaching. And preaching that is all flesh doesn't go back to the Word.

Is it important to you to be Baptist?

GCT: Yes and no. Yes, in the sense that — let me go at it in this way:

My friend Felton Clark, president of Southern University, said he was proud to be a Baptist because it meant you are really free.

I think one of the reasons so many Blacks became Baptists — apart from the sociological reasons — was that they found in the Baptist church a lack of an ecclesiastical system, a kind of looseness. NFJ

Authoritarian seduction reaches pews and polls

By John D. Pierce

White Americanized Christians are easily seduced. They are drawn in large numbers to authoritarian personalities like squirrels to a freshly-filled bird feeder.

Some slick-talking autocrat can stir up fear — and then offer himself as the one to save them from it. And they'll dutifully join that two-step dance of alarm and allure.

This faith-professing yet emotionally swayed mass is doing in the political realm as they've long done in their religious lives. That is, to give uncritical support to a self-appointed human savior whose hostile rhetoric assuages their grievances and insecurities.

Derogative labels help stir escalating wrath at imagined enemies and increase devotion to the authoritarian leader.

Southern Baptists have revealed this strong tendency. While shaped as a theological debate, it was the desire for control that drove (and still drives) the fundamentalist dominance of the denomination. The cost to reputations, livelihoods and the truth was considered to be a fair price.

This social movement was instigated and led by authoritative men who created enemies out of fellow Christians, manufactured alarm and promoted themselves as messianic liberators. In exchange they were given free reign of the denominational machinery and lots of offering plate money to be abused and misused.

Therefore, nothing is less surprising than the current gullibility and culpability of these same professing Christians who so deeply and lastingly embrace political figures with the same characteristics.

Morality — long heralded as a Christian distinction — suddenly matters not. Abuses are excused. King David is resurrected as an example of how an imperfect hero should be granted unlimited power over others deemed the enemy.

The most basic Christian ethics are sacrificed on the altar of myopic, emotional, oversimplified, and hostile ideological commitments sloganized as "Save the Bible" or "Save the babies."

They avoid dealing with complexities and realities surrounding issues related to poverty, health care, immigration, violence, causes and results of climate change, racism, and other important matters.

Marching orders drown out the cries of those slandered and abused. Retaining or gaining personal and corporate privilege is preferred over "Do unto others."

They seek messiahs in the same way as those who wanted Jesus to mount up a mighty army rather than reveal the kingdom of God through love, service, and acceptance.

Jesus works fine as a crucified savior who blots out sins — but disappoints as lord. A demagogue is preferred over God made flesh.

White nationalist pastor Robert Jeffress of First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, spoke that out loud: "I want the meanest, toughest SOB I can find to protect America."

As well-documented by Christian historian Kristin Kobes Du Mez in her book, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*, toxic masculinity is highly prevalent in American evangelicalism and feeds this cultish proclivity.

Unquestioned, authoritative male leadership has created an environment in which devastating abuse of vulnerable persons has repeatedly occurred in churches and denominations with strategic coverups. Even when finally revealed, some perpetrators have sought quick, cheap redemption that would keep them on top of the authoritarian heap.

Accountability is not something dictatorial leaders — religious and political — expect or are willing to accept for themselves. Excuses abound.

And those who've thrown themselves into full alliance with such figures continue their support either through blind allegiance or an unwillingness to admit being snookered.

Basic ethical traits of honesty, equality, fairness, truth-telling, and compassion are dismissed with ease. Jesus' life and teachings are largely irrelevant to what it means when these persons employ the word "Christian."

Therefore, nothing is less shocking than the reality that some of our most damaging national, state, and local leadership is empowered by those who most strongly (and sometime exclusively) claim to live in God's favor.

Finding oneself ignoring or excusing repeated attitudes and behaviors — that otherwise would be considered repulsive — is a sure sign of being caught in the web of authoritarianism.

"We're enmeshed in some sort of emotional, relational and spiritual crisis," writes David Brooks in *The Atlantic*, "and it undergirds our political dysfunction and the general crisis of our democracy." In his piece titled, "How America got mean," the conservative columnist focuses on the absence of systems that instill and affirm basic tenets of morality.

Even a casual observer has seen how kindness, truthfulness and serving the common good have been shelved in favor of winning at any cost and protecting one's sense of privilege and security.

The once-expected and widespread Christian encouragement to reflect such basic attributes — identified in scripture as fruit of the Spirit — has faded.

One would think attraction to the schoolyard bully would end somewhere around the eighth grade. Yet an uncritical embrace of authoritarianism is a consistent mark of way too many who claim to follow Jesus but are more quickly drawn to those who reflect so little of his life and teachings.

Therefore, authoritarians know precisely where to turn to find those who'll so eagerly get in line. NFJ

CHURCH & CHANGE

Congregations are adapting to new realities

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JOHN D. PIERCE

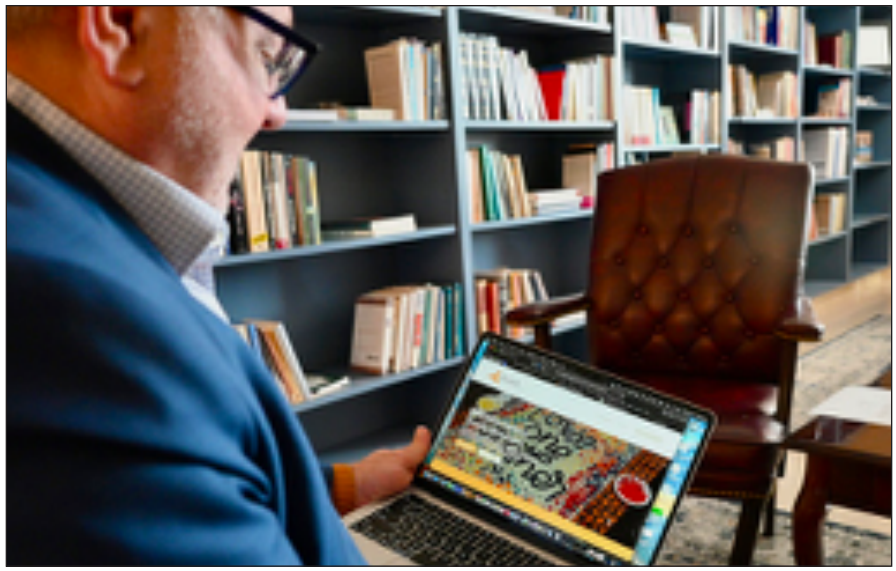
Fads come and go. Trends do not.

Resisting longer lasting changes does not produce the best results. Reality-based revisioning does.

Drawing from theologian Paul Tillich, the late preacher of note John Claypool would often say, "Reality is what you adjust to because it's not going to adjust to you."

This writing looks at how some congregations are adjusting to the realities of changing demographics, increased competition, technological advancements, political hardening, greater mobility and less social pressure to identify as a person of faith and be engaged in Christian community.

Many aspects of congregational life are impacted by current and likely long-lasting trends. This feature will look, in particular, at staffing, training, facilities and mission.



President David Cassady of newly-renamed Broadtable Theological Seminary shows the "stackable" options for those seeking ministerial training at non-credit, certificate and graduate degree levels.

'HOMEGROWN'

One reality many churches are facing comes when seeking to replace a minister. Those who assist congregations in such matters are delivering a clear and long-projected message:

The pool is shallow. The delivery system of the past is gone.

"Some old models don't work anymore," said David Cassady, president of Broadtable Theological Seminary — the recent renaming of Baptist Seminary of Kentucky.

He identified the presenting issue as being two-fold: churches in transition and a shortage of ministerial students.

Adding to the challenge, he noted, is that those undertaking theological studies are doing so in a different way than most seminarians of the past.

"We have no one to send them," said Cassady, referring to calls from churches seeking a student to fill a part-time ministry role — usually related to children, youth or music ministry.

"Our students work full-time and have to," he added. "They go to school part-time."

Churches that contact theology schools expecting to receive a file folder of résumés of potential ministers for an open position must face the reality: "That's gone," said Cassady.

Factors Cassady identified include student debt and church budgeting declines that combine jobs.

"That leaves churches without leaders in those ministries," he said. "Even churches that have had full-time ministers are having a hard time filling those spots."

Cassady, however, is not delivering gloom and doom but inviting congregations to rethink congregational leadership and is providing innovative training.

"How do we fill those spots?" Cassady asked, then answered. "They can turn to someone in their church or community."

"Homegrown" is a term given to those locally-recruited congregational leaders — who fill ministerial roles previously held by a seminary student or graduate brought into the church.

Cassady cited congregations where this approach has proven to be a positive. He is not alone.

There are distinct advantages, many church leaders say. A person giving many hours of volunteer service might eagerly assume a paid staff ministry position in that area.

There are no moving expenses or adaptation. The staff minister and the congregation already know each other — and how well they fit.

As a seminary president, Cassady said the next question they are facing up to is: "If that's the trend, then how do we offer theological education and some kind of formation?"

His colleagues at other theology or divinity schools said they are adjusting the delivery of classes to match the needs of students who no longer pack up and move

away to a campus to complete a three-year Master of Divinity degree.

A variety of remote or hybrid courses are offered along with other degree programs requiring fewer hours.

The Kentucky-based seminary's "Homegrown Ministry Initiative" has three aspects: Cultivate, Form and Sustain.

Cultivating next-generation church leaders from within is happening organically, said Cassady. He sees the seminary's role as resourcing this "different way of thinking."

On the front end, the seminary assists congregations in identifying and cultivating localized leaders.

Since homegrown ministers often come from other educational and career backgrounds, the training must be offered in a nontraditional way, said Cassady.

Under the second aspect, "Form," resources and classes are offered with flexibility to meet the individual needs of those serving churches in this way.

"We are enhancing what we're already offering," said Cassady — identifying new training options. These are in addition to degree programs taught by the faculty though "synchronous, live classes via in-place learning" that currently has students from 19 states enrolled.

"Flourish" courses are short-term, non-credit offerings that provide basic training for church leaders. The seminary also offers a certificate program in various areas including rural church ministry, Black church studies and more general ministerial training.

The "sustain" aspect of the initiative, said Cassady, is a work-in-progress as the seminary partners with others to provide peer groups and additional training resources for homegrown ministry leaders.

"Expectations have to be different," he said of everyone involved in congregation life.

Some second- or third-career ministers start with a little training and find they want more. Therefore, Broadtable has designed its offerings to be "stackable."

This allows students to move — with class credits — from certificate training to a graduate degree.

Flexibility that allows students to receive the training they want at their own pace is the key, said Cassady. He noted that most of Broadtable's students are over age 40 and have more than one responsibility.

"I think there's great value in persons being a part of theological process," he said.

It will take churches and those who assist them to think — and act — in new ways.

Bill Wilson, founder and senior advisor for the Center for Healthy Churches, concurs.

"It isn't hard to imagine a day in the near future when most churches will have only one or two theologically trained clergy, and the rest of their leadership will be laity living into their call as an avocation rather than a vocation…," he said. "One way to manage that redemptively will be to provide ongoing theological education as a steady diet for bi-vocational or laity staff members."

MISSION

Suzanne Hooie is a homegrown minister at the First Baptist Church of Dalton, Ga. She was a church member for 21 years before becoming minister of missions and spiritual formation.

Her career change has coincided with significant cultural changes in the "carpet capital of the world."

The city where carpet — or more broadly now, flooring — is king once claimed to have more millionaires per capita than any other in the U.S.

In more recent decades the industry's labor pool has drawn a significant population of Latinos to the area. And the trend continues.

"We are seeing an influx of Latinos who don't speak English," said Hooie, "coming because they have families here and jobs."

She noted 32 such families arriving in the community at that time. More than one-third of Whitfield County, with Dalton as its seat, is Latino now and growing.

Hooie knows the patterns so she and others from the congregation can respond.

"Immigrants get sent to the Chattanooga airport at night," she said. Many have family connections in Dalton, just 30 miles south on I-75.

Beyond the influx of Latinos is the greater overall housing challenge in the area, she said.

The church maintains eight apartments used to help mostly those experiencing second- or third-generation poverty to find stability. Most of these persons are white, not Latinos who are often taken in by family members.

"We teach them budgeting — how to prioritize paying bills," she said. "It's a lot of education."

While seeking to move homeless families toward stability, Hooie said they find the hopeful six-month period to not always be enough.

"We spend a ton of time with city government and other agencies trying to get a [homeless] shelter built," she said. "We have to get families into a stable situation."

She smilingly admits to seeing the mayor change his walking direction to avoid her.

Affordable housing is a big obstacle. Pastor Jonathan Barlow noted that city officials did not accept HUD funding available two decades ago.

Extended-stay motels become rotating bases for many families, said Hooie. The noontime "put out" leaves many families and their meager belongings in the parking lot.

"It takes about $1,500 to get into an apartment," said Hooie. And that is if one is available.

Acquiring the deposit and first month rent while paying ongoing living costs is insurmountable for many families.

"There is a lot of hopelessness," she said. "We do a lot of social work I don't think we've done before."

Hooie said she spends a lot of time quoting statistics to church members and community leaders to show the scope of needs.

"We've got 500 homeless children in city schools and almost 300 in county schools," she said.

Facing these realities has been an awakening for the congregation that once thought of missions primarily in terms of generous offerings for others to carry out the task.

"We've doubled our benevolence budget and it's still not enough," said Hooie, noting she receives 10-15 calls daily seeking assistance.

Barlow said both financial support and hands-on ministry are growing.

"Our people have become more plugged into service," he said. "And we've seen an increase in giving."

Her telling church members about the needs is just a starting point, said Hooie. "They need to hear the stories firsthand for themselves."

"If I can get our church members to Beechland and hear the stories, it doesn't take many of those encounters to get them involved," said Hooie.

That large public housing community is filled with needs that the church tackles along with others.

Hooie and church members, wearing their First Baptist shirts, will go door to door to get to know families. They build trust that leads to participation without fear — overcoming a "level of distrust."

When families weren't coming out for a cookout hosted by the church, Hooie noticed a police car parked nearby. She asked the officer to move it to another location and then join the event.

The projects are numerous — including the church gutting a dilapidated community building and then "inviting" the housing authority to rehab it since they own it.

"The Community Building has been a big success," said Hooie.

Cookouts, egg hunts and other seasonal celebrations are sponsored by the church along with more practical assistance with summer lunches, cleaning products and school supplies.

The ministerial staff showing up in their Halloween costumes and with candy each year is a hit with the children.

The church partners with nearby Dalton State College where social work interns get hands-on experience two days per week under Hooie's guidance.

"We're in relationship with social workers like we've never been before."

Joining the church staff was a timely move — not just for Hooie but for the changing community.

But if you don't want to know exactly what changes are occurring or how you can help, it might be wise to sidestep this lay leader turned minister.

FACILITIES

Huntersville, N.C., 14 miles north of Charlotte, has witnessed cultural shifts also. And the First Baptist Church there is adapting in ways members of its storied past could have never imagined.

Stacy Nowell has been pastor since 2015 and led the church to revisioning its mission.

"In 2018 the church declared that we want to be builders of bridges," she said.

That vision included a commitment to greater inclusion concerning race, gender and socio-economic status — as well as being intently intergenerational and multi-language as needed.

"I got a lot of backlash," Nowell confessed. But she responded that being that kind of congregation "isn't political, it's gospel."

A smaller membership than in its heyday, the church has an expansive campus with many buildings. About one-quarter of the congregation speaks Spanish.

Nowell identifies the church as "two languages, one congregation."

A more diverse congregation and previously untapped resources for missions have grown out of community relationships.

A huge yard sale is held at the church on the last Saturday in September each year. More than $1 million has been raised for alleviating hunger locally and globally.

A community breakfast is held at the church every Saturday from June through August, drawing 200-300 people each week.

"It's the most diverse, eclectic setting in Huntersville," said Nowell. "It's just everyone hanging out, and it's beautiful."

These experiences led the church to the tagline: "where Huntersville community happens."

But what about the buildings — erected over the years for specific purposes?

"The Family Life Center is the only building built with possible dual purposes," said Nowell.

The congregation had to think about its facilities in new ways, she added.

"We had to consider how to be stewards of our space, not just use it on Sunday morning and Wednesday night."

Some of that fresh thinking led to ministries that the church does directly or in collaboration with others. In other cases, it's simply offering space to others who need it.

The overarching question was, "What do we do with this space?"

Nowell, however, framed it in a more focused way: "How can we connect with the community — and wouldn't it be good if we could make some money too?"

Acquiring needed income for operational costs along with meeting community needs while building meaningful relationships became a new lens for facilities that were getting limited use.

The result is an array of daily activity on the church campus.

For the 13th year, Lydia's Prom Closet — housed in former educational space — provided donated formal wear at no cost to young people who otherwise wouldn't attend their school's annual event. The space filled with colorful garments is open each Saturday in the spring.

Three houses on the church property have been re-envisioned. Two were leased to other organizations with the third housing Lydia's Loft, the church's clothing ministry.

Not everything started on the campus is done continuously — such as a community garden and a miniature golf course.

That's right, when the local mini-golf business closed they gave the holes and equipment to the congregation.

"It ran for years at the church," said Nowell, adding that "a bunch" of young people who came to play ended up being baptized.

It was one of many attractions to the campus beyond traditional church programming times.

"We have more square footage than the White House," said Nowell. And there is a greater sense of stewardship of space than ever before.

When a new public charter school inquired about using the church's modern, expansive Family Life Center, church leaders

Pastor Stacy Nowell of First Baptist Church of Huntersville, N.C., in the congregation's Lydia's Prom Closet that provides donated formal wear at no cost to young people in the community

hesitated. There was concern about how the nice facility and furnishings would fare.

What was intended to be a three-month lease turned into six months. "It was a mixed bag, and we learned a lot," said Nowell.

One of those lessons was to see the benefits of having more people on the church campus more often.

The Family Life Center — that houses the church offices and hosts various church activities — is now the leased campus of Lake Norman Christian School.

Students aren't the only ones learning new lessons. So is a congregation that is flexible and faithful enough to try things not done before.

"It's been a really good experience," said Nowell. "Pretty much every inch of our campus — except the sanctuary — is used Monday through Friday."

"Facility usage is on the minds of nearly every established church, especially those with buildings constructed for a 20th-century ministry model," said Wilson, the church consultant.

He added that congregations don't have to do this alone.

"An emerging network of architects and planning groups are available to help imagine alternative uses for religious spaces if a church wants to go that route," he said.

NEW DREAMS

Wilson identified some other issues that many congregations are addressing or will need to address in the very near future.

"Denominational identity will be less and less a way that churches define themselves," he said. "In fact, many will deliberately pull back from those associations."

Then, of course, there are matters of money.

"Finances will continue to decline for most congregations as their heavy donors pass off the scene," said Wilson. "Doing more with less or even the same with less will be a continuous challenge."

Churches, such as the one in Huntersville, N.C., will increasingly seek alternative income streams including leasing space and conducting revenue-producing projects.

He also pointed to the need for many churches to diversify their worship opportunities — in terms of format, location and times. And don't expect traditional Sunday School to be the only or primary way churches provide spiritual formation and community.

"The embrace of a wide array of weekday 'small group ministry' options as a primary means of engagement will initially augment and gradually replace traditional Sunday morning as our primary approach for small group Bible study and/or affinity groups," he predicted.

And not everyone is coming or coming back to the church buildings, he said.

"Online ministry is here to stay," he said, encouraging churches to move those offerings "from a spectator tool toward an engagement tool."

While some old models of evangelism seem outdated or manipulative, the absence of outreach speeds many churches in their decline.

"Re-imagining outreach to non-believers and the formerly churched," said Wilson, "must emerge as a high priority if you are going to avoid your demise."

Churches should not assume that inertia will keep them going. The statistical realities are sometimes harsh — but can be instructive and motivational.

"One in three congregations in America will find themselves unsustainable in the next decade, as the aging and shrinking of the local church accelerates," said Wilson.

For those congregations, there can be a positive though painful way to reach an end.

"Preparing for a 'good death' will be a high priority for many congregations," he said. "Thinking carefully about your legacy ministry — utilizing facilities or funds — will enable you to see this as a death/resurrection drama that is both painful and redemptive."

That possibility, however, may well be the motivation needed to avoid such a situation. Some congregations wait until change is forced upon them by cultural shifts, financial realities or unmet, unrealistic expectations.

Others approach the future with what has been deemed "hopeful imagination" — doing bold and sometimes risky things not previously considered.

Whether addressing ministerial staffing, theological training, facility needs, mission focus or other matters, the cultural shifts impacting congregational life today are plentiful.

They provide both challenges and opportunities. NFJ

A Baptist dog tale

By John D. Pierce

It would be impossible to calculate how much of my life has been spent in Baptist churches — and in how many different ones of all shapes, sizes and locations. Some of those experiences have been as a member of a faith community.

Other countless hours were spent as a hit-and-run substitute preacher — or as a fill-in for several Sundays. Then there were the longer-term interim pastorates that ranged from about five to 15 months of service.

At times, I've gotten into (or closely observed) the sausage making of institutional church life — either serving as a lay person or as a consultant in my role as interim pastor.

So, there have been ample opportunities to observe some of the patterns — particularly in churches that would deem themselves "moderate Baptists" and therefore invite a suspect like me into their spaces.

One of the really big issues, I've observed — particularly during a time of transition — relates to congregational identity.

The concern is less that these congregations lack a rather clear identity — one formed by intent or evolution — but more that they show such hesitation in fully embracing, articulating and advocating for that worthy identity. In these churches, the tail tends to wag the dog.

Fundamentalist churches and institutions (to which I'm not invited but on whom I keep a watchful eye from a relatively safe distance) take their exclusionary practices very seriously.

If they can rally (and they're good at rallying) 50 percent of the vote — plus one — they will cheerfully kick to the curb anyone not in full agreement. (Then, of course, turn in suspicion on those within their ever-narrowing circle.)

There are absolutely no concerns for minority opinions — even if only the slimmest majority is gained. Everyone is either all in or all out.

The possibility of another perspective being right, and theirs being wrong is unconsidered.

Conversely, more moderate churches think in completely different terms.

They want to be liked at all costs — staying hung up on some idealized vision of pleasing everyone. That includes even a handful or fewer (often disgruntled) members who do not share the church's overwhelming beliefs, priorities and values.

While there are dozens of like-minded churches all around them, these few but loud members will often stay in more moderate congregations where they have outsized power to be disruptive.

And, in turn, these churches continually allow — and even empower — such high-maintenance tails to keep wagging the dog.

When engaging with churches where there is a distinguishing (though often downplayed) affinity, I encourage them to clarify and confirm their solidly based identity.

Then, since this identity often differs from neighboring congregations, it is important for the church to communicate their unique identity — clearly and publicly — to those who might be seeking such a welcoming community of faith.

These church leaders will listen appreciatively and even concur. But, most often, they will waffle on taking the needed steps and continue to hide who they really are.

Their familiar excuses are: "We don't want to lose anybody else." "Let's not disrupt the fellowship." "We will get criticized."

Or they will say, "Now's not the time," when, in fact, a transition is precisely the best time to clarify and communicate the church's identity and mission.

As a result, in moderate Baptist congregations the tail just keeps wagging the dog.

This expresses itself in the ways churches keep trying in vain to pacify the perennial unhappy few (sometimes merely one) who will never be pacified unless they always get their way but won't go elsewhere.

And, by doing so, the church keeps missing out on its attraction to those who might be looking for exactly what is being concealed.

Likewise, these churches continue funding — to some degree — the very denominational organizations that reject them and don't share their values.

It is not rude or insensitive for a congregation to reach a clear consensus on who they are as a community of faith and to affiliate and collaborate with like-minded organizations — or at least ones that respect their autonomy and don't belittle them or demand uniformity.

A healthy position for such churches is to be clear that while all are welcome to participate, no one is welcome to exert outsized power over the many. The tail doesn't get to wag the dog.

That is not the only dog tale (or tail) that fits this dynamic of congregational identity and action. There is another to be considered in light of recent denominational overreach.

Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. is credited with saying, "Even a dog knows the difference in being kicked and being stumbled over."

Churches that respect women — but are still even minimally connected to and therefore identified with the Southern Baptist Convention — were not stumbled over accidentally by Southern Baptist leaders.

These churches have been kicked. And the best response is to get up and move on. NFJ

In case of emergency

By Tony Cartledge

Church above the Icelandic town of Vik. Photo by John D. Pierce.

A summer visit to Iceland with Good Faith Experiences was a real treat, and not just because daytime temperatures were in the 50s.

Quality time with colleagues and supportive friends was special, and then there's Iceland.

The tiny nation lived up to its billing as the land of fire and ice. A volcanic eruption on a mountain called Litli Hrútur was very active while we were there.

We could see the smoke from Rekjavik, and many members of our group took helicopter rides to see the incandescent lava bubbling into long red streams of molten rock that gushed from the crater before growing sluggish as it cooled.

On the other extreme, we strapped pointed crampons to our boots for an hour-long hike on a glacier. Our guide pointed to marks on a cliff to show how much the ice had melted due to global warming in just the past decade – well over 100 feet.

We visited geysers and sulfurous boiling springs one day and watched calving icebergs float in a clear blue lagoon on the next. We marveled at tall mountains, steep canyons and waterfalls too majestic for words.

Picturesque churches dotted the landscape, most of them Lutheran, which was formerly the state religion. In the town of Vik (pronounced "Veek"), we stopped by a hilltop church to take in the stunning view overlooking the town and the ocean beyond, where weathered basalt cliffs gave way to rocky columns standing in the surf beyond a black sand beach.

The town is downhill from Katla, one of Iceland's mightiest volcanoes, now covered with snow. Katla has a history of erupting about every 50 years, and it's long overdue for the next big blow.

The townspeople have taken steps to be prepared when that happens, including an evacuation plan: "In case of emergency, go to the church."

High on a hill, the church is a natural gathering point for taking a head count and evacuating people by helicopter as needed.

The mantra had metaphor written all over it. How many people treat the church in that way?

In case of emergency, we go to church. If trouble comes, we start praying. When all else fails, we turn to God.

So many people see faith as little more than fire insurance that can be ignored until it's time to cash it in for a ticket to heaven.

The metaphor expanded when we drove by another small seaside community centered around the "Strandarkirkja" – which means something akin to "Shore Church."

It is the richest church in Iceland because, through the years, when sailors were in danger of shipwreck or drowning off the treacherous coasts, they would often pray and promise to give an offering to the Strandarkirkja if they made it safely to shore.

The practice isn't limited to sailors. Our guide told of hosting a winter tour group eager see the Northern Lights. After nearly a week of cloudy weather, they were on the verge of returning home without a glimpse of the atmospheric phenomenon.

He too promised to give an offering to the Strandarkirkja if his guests could see the Northern Lights. The next night, he said, the skies cleared just enough for them to get their wish.

My primary Ph.D. research was on vows in the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East. The Old Testament contains several examples of people who, when facing trouble, asked God for help and promised to give something valuable in return.

Their stories are in places such as Genesis 28 (Jacob), Numbers 21 (Israel), Judges 11 (Jephthah), and 1 Samuel 1 (Hannah). Psalmists often promised an extra dose of public praise if God would deliver them from trouble.

We don't call that "making a vow" these days, but the practice remains common. Prayers are rare until trouble comes.

In case of emergency we go to church, or we pray for God to get us out of whatever unhappy situation has arisen.

Sometimes, we promise that if God will come through, we'll be more faithful in some way. Whether we keep our promises or not, the practice portrays a commercial approach to faith, an attempt to buy God's favor.

One doesn't have to spend much time in the gospels to know that's a far cry from a Jesus-centered call to a life of love and self-sacrifice, not seeking what we get out of it, but living for the sake of the world because it's the right thing to do.

When taking that approach, we won't need to go to the church in case of emergency. We'll be the church. NFJ

Questions Christians ask scientists

What happened before the Big Bang?

BY PAUL WALLACE

A few years ago, I spoke to a congregation in St. Louis. The presentation featured a timeline that stretched from the Big Bang to the present moment — and included both cosmic and biological evolution.

After the talk, a woman in the front row raised her hand. "I enjoyed your presentation," she said, and then worked her way around to one of the more popular of these far-out but fair questions: "What happened before the Big Bang?"

Usually when people ask this question, they're picturing *something* existing before all the stars and galaxies showed up, even if it's just empty space waiting around for the great boom. So I explain that empty space is not empty.

Even space containing zero normal matter and set to a temperature of absolute zero — a condition known as the *quantum vacuum* — simmers with short-lived electromagnetic fields and particle-antiparticle pairs popping into and out of existence.

This weird fact has been demonstrated experimentally through a phenomenon called the Casimir effect.

Another problem arises. Einstein taught us many things, but one of his most mind-blowing lessons is this: space is not a fixed and static cosmic backdrop.

Space itself has the capacity to flex and stretch and twist and compress and

expand. You might think of it like a vast and infinitely elastic piece of fabric, but in three dimensions. Space plays an active role in the evolution of the universe; it does not sit passively in the background.

You have heard scientists say that the universe is expanding. This is true. But you may not know that it is the stretching of space that accounts for the expansion.

If you were to run the cosmic movie backwards you would see space *contracting*, drawing all galaxies closer together. And if you were to take the movie all the way back to the moment of the Big Bang you would see all galaxies *and all of space* contract to a point.

In other words, space as we know it did not exist before the Big Bang; it was brought into being along with everything else at the time cosmologists call t = 0.

Space *did not exist* before the Big Bang. It was not waiting around for the big explosion.

Where did the Big Bang happen? It happened *everywhere* because at t = 0 *everywhere* was concentrated at a single point.

Nevertheless, the woman in St. Louis asked a fine question. And the answer is that no one knows what happened before the Big Bang.

Some say nothing at all happened because there was no time for anything to happen *in*, since time, like space, was *produced* by the cosmic kaboom, along with light and electrons and galaxies and coral and frogs and you and me.

Others believe something must have existed before t = 0, but we probably can't know the answer. The conditions at the time of the bang prevent us from knowing what, if anything, happened before it.

Currently scientists believe that this ignorance is absolute; we believe there are physical reasons we cannot know what happened before. The laws of nature have constructed a barrier in time, and there's no seeing through it or around it.

So I usually tell my audience that, as sensible as the question sounds, asking what happened before the Big Bang is a little like asking what's south of the South Pole. The question is out of bounds by definition.

St. Augustine, one of the chief architects of Christian theology, might nod in agreement.

To the question, "What was God doing before he made heaven and earth?" Augustine preferred the reply, "I do not

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know what I do not know," though he seemed to favor the nothing-at-all option.

(It is sometimes claimed that Augustine's answer to the question was, "Preparing hell for people who asked such questions." This is false.)

Which brings me to my point. The woman's question, I suspect, was not prompted by simple scientific curiosity. Theology often lurks in the background of such questions, especially when it's asked inside a church.

Behind her question I heard, "Yes, all this evolution business is fine, but it's really God who wound it all up and let it rip, right?" She wanted to make sure I haven't pushed God out of the picture, that there's a place for the Creator in an evolving cosmos.

No one can blame her for wanting to make sure of this, but a faulty assumption is at work here, a fallacy called the "God of the gaps."

It says God acts in those places that science hasn't or can't reach, such as before the Big Bang. But the history of science shows that, time after time, science has advanced into quarters previously thought beyond its scope.

For centuries the heavens were considered to be unreachable by science. No one knew why the planets never stopped moving, so they chalked it up to divine agents: God's wisdom, or intelligences, or angels kept them going.

But in the late 17th century, Isaac Newton worked it all out in a spectacular theory called gravity. He wasn't vague about it either; he was mathematically precise, and he was right.

His theory not only described the motion of the planets, but also of the moon, and of comets, and of apples falling from trees, and *in detail.*

There was no fuzz on Newton's solutions. With astounding accuracy and precision, he predicted that the earth bulges at its equator, that the sun wobbles in a complex pattern as the planets move around it, and, thanks to the surprising motion of Uranus, that the planet Neptune exists.

Newton's fabulous success suggested God's wisdom or angels didn't keep the moon in motion; gravity did. So God was shuffled off to someplace science hadn't yet reached: biology. (Newton predated Darwin by nearly two centuries).

This kind of thinking results in God shrinking, because whenever science advances, God retreats. As the scientifically uncharted reaches of the universe diminish, so does God.

This has been going on for hundreds of years, and today God has been squeezed into a number of dark corners including the human brain, a weird phenomenon known as *quantum uncertainty*, something called *chaos*, and whatever was happening before the Big Bang.

But God belongs in the light as well as the dark. We must release God (really, our idea of God) from such cramped quarters.

We must allow our ideas *about* the Creator to be as free and imaginative *as* the Creator. Yes, God is a mystery, and we see through a glass darkly, etc., but it is central to Christianity that God is revealed in what is seen and known.

"The heavens are telling of the glory of God," writes the psalmist, "Day to day [they] pour forth speech, and night to night declare knowledge" (Ps. 19.1a, 2).

Paul writes in the book of Romans that "ever since the creation of the world [God's] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things God has made" (1:20).

God was present and active before the Big Bang, and God is present and active today, right in front of us, moving in plain sight.

God is present and active in places science has not yet ventured, and God is present and active in the most well-worn of the laws of physics.

It is for us to perceive the truth of this, and to see that God may be found not only in what we do not know, but also in what we so clearly do. NFJ

THE WORD BECAME FLESH AND DWELLS

among us.

JOHN 1:14

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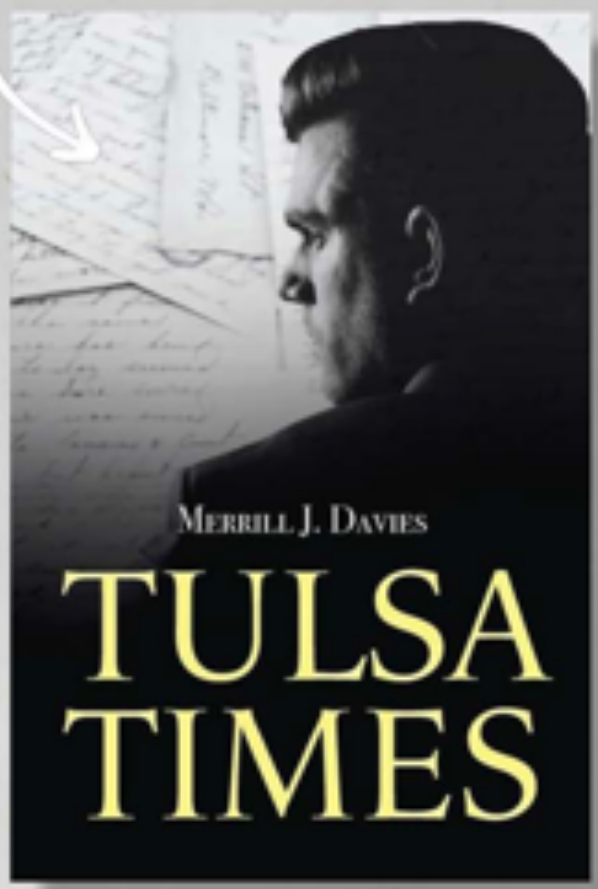

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