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Editor's Letter

By the time you receive this edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal*, I will have been the senior editor at Good Faith Media for four months. I have spent much of my time finding a balance between the routine of publishing daily online content and staring down the barrel of deadlines associated with this, our print offering.

I have already learned much about the editorial process and the history and ethos of each institution that merged to form this vital organization. I also have enough of a healthy curiosity to know I have only scratched the surface of all there is to learn. What I am most curious about, though, is you, the *Nurturing Faith* reader.

As you may deduce from my article on Rosalynn Carter, Ethel Cain and the Growth of Global Christianity, I think about our audience a lot. But how I think about readers of our online daily content differs from how I think about subscribers to this journal.

For both, I am mindful of presenting content that nurtures faith and honors the truth. However, the reach of the internet is far too broad and impersonal to give much thought to individual readers of our daily online offerings.

But this is different with you. As I have solicited and pored through the articles that have made their way into this edition, I have thought about those of you who will sit down with a physical or digital copy in your hands or on your devices. I have imagined members of Sunday School classes using a pen to underline something profound or insightful that Tony Cartledge's excellent Bible studies have revealed.

I have also reflected on this fact– some of you have read this publication since it was unveiled in 1983, the year I turned 9. Its evolution from *SBC Today* to *Baptists Today* to *Nurturing Faith Journal* has, in some ways, mirrored your own evolving faith. I am humbled that you are still reading, and I look forward to learning from you.

—Craig Nash, senior editor

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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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Center for Healthy Churches:

Why the Church needs to fail

By Matt Cook

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THOUGHTS

FEATURES

Cover photo: Library of Congress, Carol M. Highsmith

WORTH REPEATING

"It is people who find themselves on the underside of religious and societal power structures–patriarchy, white supremacy, or otherwise–who see most clearly what needs to change so that all people can thrive together as equals."

—Writer and preacher Liz Cooledge Jenkins (Missio Alliance)

"Our scars and our sorrow will always be part of our story but they will never be the conclusion of our story. Which means that even when you feel trapped in your pain, trapped in your past, trapped in your own story like it is itself a tomb, know this — that there is no stone that God cannot roll away."

—Nadia Bolz-Weber (The Corners Newsletter)

"I can tell you from painful personal experience that it is not only arrogant but a good deal risky to assume other Christian denominations or institutions don't love Jesus or the Scriptures the way yours does. God who opposes the proud might let us test that theory the hard way."

—Beth Moore (From a post on X, formerly Twitter)

"A lot of Christians like to remind me that heaven is my true home, which makes me want to ask them if they would like to go home first."

— Kate Bowler (Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved)

"The width, length, height, and depth of God's love is not fearful or restrictive or small or dull. It is a wide-open, sharp love that sets us free."

—Sarah Bessey (Field Notes for the Wilderness)

"What can we do as the creaking elevators of age slowly descend? The main solution is not to Google new symptoms late at night. But I also try to get outside every day, ideally with friends. Old friends — even thoughts of them — are my ballast; all that love and loyalty, those delicious memories, the gossip."

—Anne Lamott

"We're also told that a new word, 'Christian,' arose among outsiders trying to name this new way to be human. To be clear, 'Christian' wasn't a self-description or a boast or, in any sense, a marketing term. It was instead a public verdict concerning demonstrably odd—radically odd—behavior. It named a social innovation in the ancient world, a diverse community of individuals casting aside titles, dividing identifiers, and social status to live as an embodied witness to God's healing of our sweet old world."

—David Dark (Dark Matter Newsletter)

"I suspect the next 10 years will be years of turmoil and hardship the globe over, and with that will come a surge in a certain kind of American patriotism. Therefore, American Christians will be challenged to remember where our true fealty lies. I'm not saying there's no place for patriotism. But Christians are people whose first allegiance cannot be to a nation-state, not to any nation-state. Increased geopolitical tension may tempt us to forget that."

—Lauren Winner, in 2007 after being asked by Relevant Magazine "What do you see as the greatest challenge for young Christians in the next 10 years?"

"People who already exist cannot be discovered. And even if they have not been seen by white eyes before, the Great Spirit has seen them."

—Good Faith Media CEO Mitch Randall, reporting on the Doctrine of Discovery conference in Syracuse, New York.

The New Deconstructors

By Craig Nash

When I was younger, I despised telling an older person about a new idea I was mulling over, only to hear some version of the response, "That's not new." How dare they use their experience and wisdom to disabuse me of the notion that I have thought thoughts that have never been thought by the brightest thinkers who have ever thought?

This annoyance was especially acute in the early 2000s when I was a young adult, knee-deep in what had become known as the "Emerging Church" movement. After reading the works of postmodern philosophers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty—but mostly of authors who interpreted such philosophers for mass audiences– some Christians concluded that the story of our faith was at an inflection point. They suggested the ground was about to shift under our feet, and we needed to be prepared.

Some of us prepared for the coming earthquake by questioning and picking apart all we once thought was essential for our faith, discarding what wasn't and repurposing what was. We called this "deconstruction" and were quite proud of ourselves for inventing such an edgy concept.

The church I belonged to (and still do) was at the epicenter of this movement. We sought to reimagine our approach to God, the Bible and how we should live our faith in the broader culture—a culture we once considered an adversary but now believed could be an ally. We leaned into a belief that the dividing line separating "sacred" from "secular" was a false division, one the powers of Christendom created to exercise control over its followers.

This freed us up to relax and to take a posture of curiosity and exploration. God could be found anywhere, and so we would look for God anywhere.

During this time, I ran into an acquaintance who asked how things were going with my church. (This is a very Texas thing to ask about when encountering an acquaintance.) I enthusiastically described to her everything about the Emerging Church movement and deconstruction and how we, as a church, were doing things differently. She graciously nodded her head and asked thoughtful questions. I thought to myself how impressed she must have been with my uncommon wisdom.

As the conversation began to wind down, she reflected on all I had been pontificating about and commented, "That sounds like church to me."

I couldn't tell if she intended to convey that this is how Christianity was always meant to be and that my church in Waco, Texas, had finally cracked the code, or that believers worldwide had been living this way forever and we were just now catching up. Either way, her words communicated the same dreaded message—nothing I had spoken to her was original or even very exciting.

She was kind and gentle and, I am confident, had no intention of bursting my idealistic bubble. But I received what she said poorly and vowed never to be like that. And, of course, you know what's coming next in this story: I got old.

In recent years, a new generation of Christians has begun to reconsider the essentials of their faith. For many of them, like many in my Generation X cohort, their evolving faith is the result of disillusionment with an evangelical church culture that sought to retain power and prominence through shame.

Some experienced how pastors and theologians could masterfully weave around and dismiss the numerous Bible verses that speak against wealth and privilege, but couldn't use the same interpretation skills when it came to the small handful of scriptures about ancient gender and sexuality norms.

For many of these young people, this dissonance was felt most acutely during two election cycles and a national reckoning over race. These events created a crisis of faith within them.

So they also began to pick apart their faith, keeping what was valuable and discarding what wasn't. And you know what they called this project? "Deconstruction." Even worse, they acted like they came up with the word. They made TikTok and Instagram videos about it. They discussed it on X (formerly Twitter) and created memes about it.

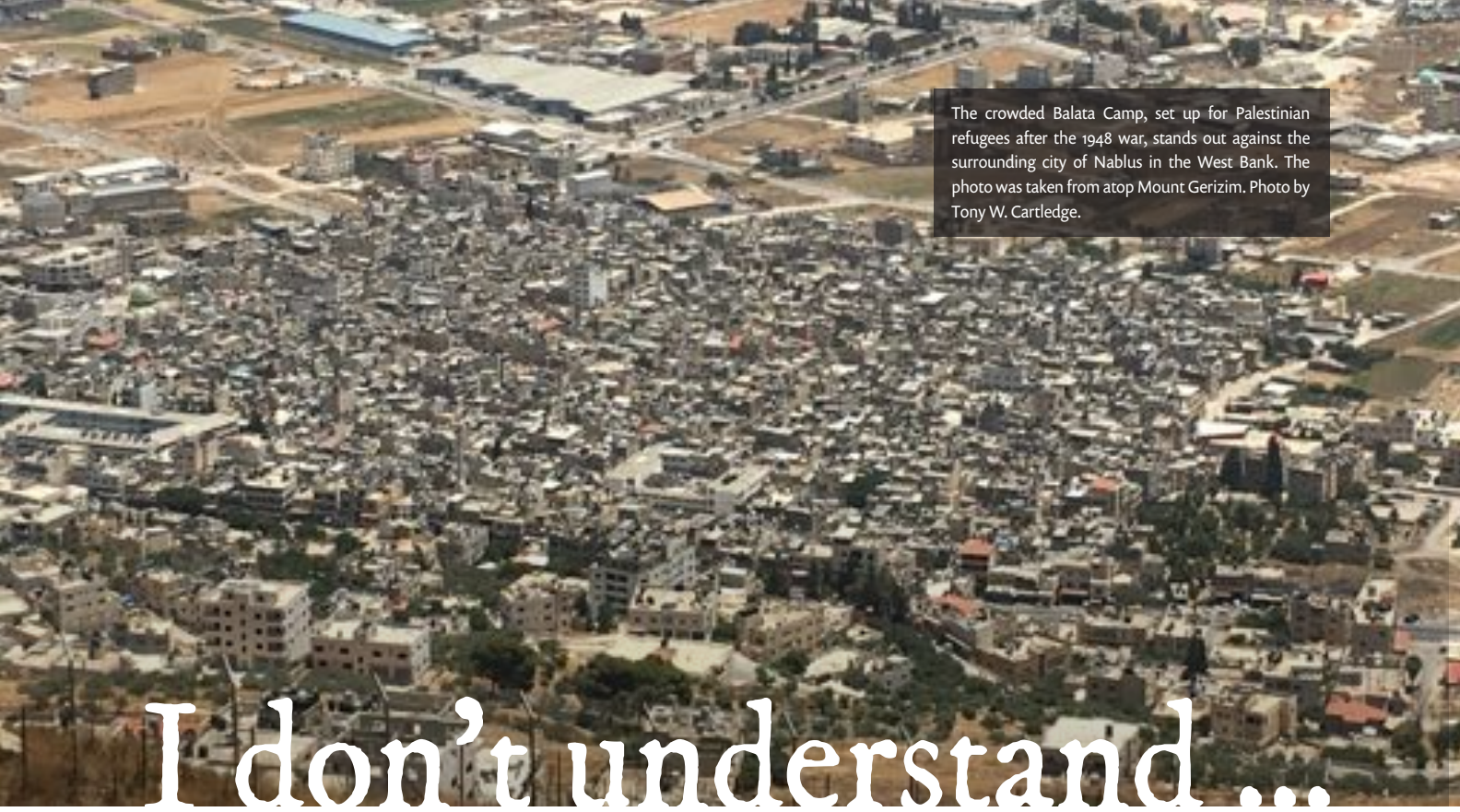
Recently, I have found myself resentful of this new generation of deconstructors. I have not been as gracious toward them as my older acquaintance was to me when I educated her on the contours of the Emerging Church. I've tried to reflect on why this is the case, and this is what I have come up with: My resentment is due to the fact that millennials and Generation Z are much better at deconstruction than we were.

They do it with a tenderness that many of us didn't have. They are light and humorous about deconstruction, less angry, more, well, constructive.

They are so good at it that Christian institutions that are called to nurture faith, justice and mercy in the world are on high alert. These institutions are scrambling to adapt, and the ones who survive will be those who enact more than just a cosmetic makeover. The new deconstructors have less institutional memory and even less institutional loyalty than we did. They aren't playing around.

They have one basic requirement for Christian institutions: they must take the person and teachings of Jesus seriously.

What a novel idea. NFJ



The crowded Balata Camp, set up for Palestinian refugees after the 1948 war, stands out against the surrounding city of Nablus in the West Bank. The photo was taken from atop Mount Gerizim. Photo by Tony W. Cartledge.

I don't understand...

By Tony W. Cartledge

Since the October 7, 2023 attack of Hamas militants in southern Israel and Israel's subsequent response of pounding Gaza with tons of bombs, I have often overheard relatives and others make the statement: "I don't understand how anyone can be pro-Palestinian."

The statement was never made directly to me, perhaps for fear that I would disturb their comfort level by explaining it to them. I have visited Israel and the West Bank more than a dozen times, leading tours or participating in archaeological digs. I have Israeli friends as well as Palestinian friends.

Many Americans have a skewed view of the current situation, primarily due to their misunderstandings of the relationship between biblical Israel and the modern State of Israel. The following are a series of talking points that might be helpful in our understanding of the conflict between the current Israeli government and the Palestinian residents of Gaza and the West Bank.

Jews and Palestinians have common roots.

First, it is important to understand terms properly. Biblical Israel, as described by authors of the Hebrew Bible, refers primarily to descendants of Abraham who were believed to be inheritors of a promise that God would grant Abraham a multitude of descendants and a land on which they could live (Genesis 12:1-3).

Hebrew tradition found in the "Table of the Nations" of Genesis 10 names all the various peoples, including different Canaanite groups, as common descendants of Noah (Gen. 10:15-18).

Not all Israelites were Abrahamic descendants: over the years, many other people married into Israelite families or chose to make common cause and become Hebrews through circumcising their males. Before the exile, Hebrews could also marry into different people groups without losing their Hebrew identity.

There was never a time when the people of biblical Israel did not share the land with other peoples. Hyperbolic language in Joshua claims they conquered the whole land and killed all its residents (Josh. 10:40-43, ll:16-20, 21:43-45), while more realistic language lists the many people groups they were unable to drive out (13:13; 15:63; 16:10; 17:11-13, 16-18; Judges 1:21, 27-36). Writing just before or during the exile, the authors often noted that other peoples lived among the Israelites "to this day."

The constant temptation to worship the gods of other people, which was a key message the prophets continually admonished against, attests to the continual presence of other peoples in the land. The "Canaanites" (a term used by the Hebrews but not by the people themselves) were an amalgam of many different groups: Amorites, Hittites, Hivites, Girgashites, Jebusites, and so forth. Many of their descendants have lived in the land ever since.

Multiple scientific studies have shown that even today, for most Jews, their closest genetic relatives are, notably, Palestinians.

"One can be pro-Israel without endorsing the current government's aggressive military actions. One can be pro-Palestinian without endorsing acts of violence on the part of a few militants."

Biblical Israel and the modern State of Israel are not the same.

Through much of its biblical history, based on texts in Exodus and Deuteronomy, the people of Israel believed they lived in a covenantal relationship in which God promised prosperity as a response to their obedience and punishment when they were unfaithful. The receipt of these promises was clearly conditional.

The authors of Israel's theological history from Joshua through Kings and its most prominent prophets believed that the people's unfaithfulness to the covenant God Yahweh led to a loss of the land. The Assyrians wiped out the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE. Many of its people were deported, and others were brought in to replace them. The southern kingdom of Judah fell to the Babylonians in 597 BCE. Waves of exiles were moved to Babylon in the years after, with only the poorest being left to farm the land.

After the land was lost, prophets often proclaimed the hope of a return to Jerusalem, with people from all over the world looking to a restored and newly righteous Israel for leadership. For the most part, these hopes anticipated a new world age for all people, not just the possession of a specific piece of geography by Israel alone.

Except for Hasmonean rule from 140 to 37 BCE, the area known as Canaan or Palestine has been ruled by others: first Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians; then Greeks, Romans and Byzantine Christians. From the mid-seventh century until World War I, a series of Islamic dynasties, including the Mamluks and Ottomans, ruled the land, with brief interruptions by European Crusaders. The Al Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock have stood on the temple mount for more than 1200 years – more than twice as long as any Jewish temple.

After World War I and the defeat of the Ottoman Turks, the League of Nations assigned control of Palestine and its primarily Arab population to Britain under what was known as the British Mandate. Jewish immigration to the land, which had begun in the late 19th century, increased by largely peaceful means through the purchase of land.

Bethlehem, in the West Bank, is surrounded by Israeli-built security walls and fences. The walls regularly sprout graffiti protesting the Israeli occupation. This photo was taken in 2009: the images were later painted over. Photo by Tony W. Cartledge.

Visitors entering and leaving Bethlehem must pass through Israeli checkpoints, where armed soldiers will often walk through buses to make sure no Palestinians are aboard. Residents of Bethlehem cannot leave without a special permit from Israeli authorities. Photo by Tony W. Cartledge.

In 1948, with Western nations fueled by guilt over the Holocaust, the British government persuaded the United Nations to partition the land, setting aside a large portion for the Palestinians and designating the remainder to create a Jewish homeland, even though the land was already populated by people who had lived there for hundreds or thousands of years. With conflict inevitable, many Arabs who could afford to relocate, including many Arab Christians, left the country.

Zionist leaders in Israel declared independence in 1948, leading to a civil war between Jews and Arabs. The partitioning of the land, along with the "War of Independence," drove more than 700,000 Palestinians from their homes. Today, more than 1.5 million Palestinians continue to live in 58 official UN-supported refugee camps in the West Bank, Gaza, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. The majority of residents in Gaza are refugees.

The original partition established a substantial portion of Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem,

"Many Americans have a skewed view of the current situation, primarily due to their misunderstandings of the relationship between biblical Israel and the modern State of Israel."

as a homeland for Palestinians, while apportioning the remainder of the land to Jews. But the agreement was never fully honored. Following the War of Independence in 1948, Israelis seized considerably more of the land apportioned to Palestine. In the Six-Day War of 1967 and later accords, the State of Israel gained control of significantly more land in the occupied territories, creating more refugees.

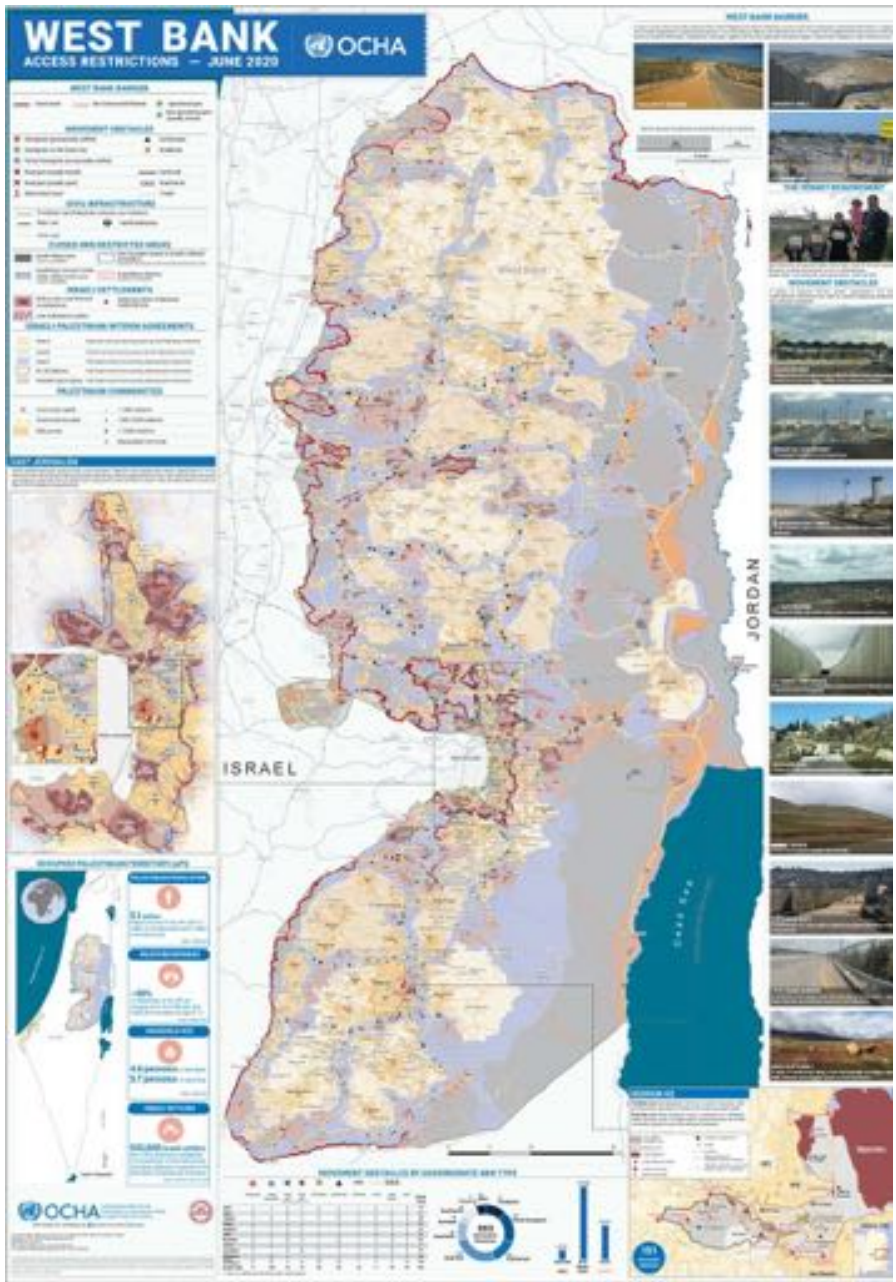
In the years since, in violation of international law, Israeli settlers, many emigrating from America, have continued to establish new settlements, towns and even major cities inside the West Bank. When settlements are established, the Israeli government takes over more Palestinian land to provide roads, infrastructure and security for the settlements, forcing even more Palestinians from their land and creating a territory that looks like Swiss cheese.

Today, only 11% of the West Bank, known as Area A, is under complete Palestinian control. It consists of non-contiguous enclaves, all of which are still subject to regular incursions by the Israeli army. Palestinians, even within the West Bank, are tightly restricted in their movement by Israeli walls, fences and checkpoints.

"Israelite" and "Israeli" are not equivalent terms.

"Israelite" refers to descendants of Abraham through the "Twelve Tribes" descended from Jacob, along with others who married into the people or made common cause with them. They were also known as Hebrews during the biblical period.

During the very late postexilic period and into the first century CE, rabbinic



West Bank access restrictions map by United Nations.

Judaism emerged, gradually morphing into modern Judaism. Modern Jews retain an intimate connection with the heritage, promises and some traditions portrayed in the Hebrew Bible, though current practices are far removed from them. From the time of the post-exilic period on, maintaining a clear ethnic identity as Jews became a primary focus, and it has helped the Jews survive through centuries of pogroms and persecution.

"Israeli" refers to citizens of the modern State of Israel. Among the nearly ten million Israelis, just over seven million are Jews and more than two million are Arabs. Most Arabs in Israel follow the Islamic faith, while some are Druze and a few are Christian. Other minorities make up 5.5% of the population.

Among Jewish Israelis, nearly half self-identify as "secular" and a third as "traditional." The areas around Jerusalem and the settlements are dominated by various strands of Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox Jews.

Most Israelis, especially in the large population center of Tel Aviv-Jaffo, do not support the current right-wing government.

"We can recognize that 'Palestinian,' 'Hamas' and 'terrorist' are not equivalent terms."

The country's dysfunctional political system makes it difficult for more moderate voices to gain control from hardliners of the far right and their Orthodox supporters, who receive funding from the government for the men to study Torah without being required to work or serve in the military.

Except for a few ex-pats and foreign church officials who control various Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, virtually all Christians remaining in Israel and the West Bank are Arabs.

Some deeply rooted beliefs are misguided.

A belief known as American exceptionalism, closely related to Christian nationalism (and to white supremacy), holds that God has a special covenant with America. Adherents of American exceptionalism believe that just as Israel left slavery in Egypt to reach the promised land, early settlers also left persecution in England to possess a new land of promise with God's blessing to displace the indigenous peoples who were already there.

Modern devotees of this idea believe that America's prosperity is tied to its unwavering support for Israel. The belief is often connected to a literal interpretation of Genesis 12:3, where God reportedly promised Abraham, "I will bless those who bless you, and those who curse you I will curse."

Believing that the promise of Gen. 12:3 remains in effect – and that the modern State of Israel is equivalent to the people and land promised to Abraham – prominent televangelists like Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Jimmy Swaggert, John Hagee, along with a host of conservative pastors, have long promoted the belief that America must always support the modern nation-state of Israel in order to receive God's blessings.

Coming at the issue from a slightly different angle, many other Christians hold to an apocalyptic, dispensationalist view of history. They are not troubled by war in the Middle East (or other earth-destroying phenomena such as climate change) because they believe the end times are coming soon. Multiple YouTube videos by self-proclaimed experts on prophecy connect Israel's war in Gaza to their interpretation of biblical end-times prophecies. They support Israel, but only as an end to bringing on Armageddon – a different type of anti-Semitism.

What can we do?

While the Hebrew Bible attests that ancient Israel violated the covenant and thus lost the land, that does not mean the covenant was wholly annulled or that God no longer has a special relationship with the descendants of Israel. We can argue that the promise of land as an eternal possession no longer holds without adopting a wholly supersessionist view that God has written off the Jews.

We should recognize that the Jews have suffered greatly through the years and understand why having a homeland is important to them. We also can support the people of Israel without supporting the actions of the current government, including the massive bombing of Gaza and the continued inhumane treatment of Palestinians in the West Bank. Israel currently holds about 4,500 Palestinians in prison, many without recourse to legal defense or a trial – and many of them women and children.

We can recognize that "Palestinian," "Hamas" and "terrorist" are not equivalent terms. Most Palestinians want to live in peace without further loss of land and rights. All Palestinians have abundant reasons to be highly resentful over both past and present oppression. If we were in their shoes, we would be angry, too.

We must acknowledge that the October 7, 2023 massacre of 1,200 Israeli citizens, visitors and workers – along with the abduction of more than 200 hostages – by Hamas militants was horrific and inexcusable. Random missile fire into Israel is also unacceptable.

We must also question whether those actions justify the indiscriminate weeks of bombing that leveled much of Gaza, and which the UN believes killed more than 20,000 residents, including as many as 14,000 women and children between October and December 2023 – and the subjection of many thousands of residents of Gaza to starvation, thirst and disease through withholding aid and fuel. Some estimate that famine and disease may kill more than the bombs.

One can be pro-Israel without endorsing the current government's aggressive military actions.

One can be pro-Palestinian without endorsing acts of violence on the part of a few militants.

All of us can focus more on being pro-humanity, earnestly praying for and promoting approaches that foster peace and justice for all.

More personally, we can seek to follow Jesus in loving our neighbors, engaging in conversation and acts of friendship with Jewish and Muslim people who live or work near us.

But will we? NFJ

"We should recognize that the Jews have suffered greatly through the years and understand why having a homeland is important to them."

Female Influences Upon My Life:

Dr. Karen Bullock

By Mitch Randall

Growing up in the Southern Baptist tradition, I encountered few female clergy or church leaders. Instead, I was constantly inundated with theological arguments for why women could not hold leadership over men – especially when it came to teaching Scripture or developing young male leaders.

All that changed in 1993 when I attended, of all places, Southwest Baptist Theological Seminary, the largest Southern Baptist seminary in the world at the time.

It began with the convocation address of Dr. Boo Heflin, an Old Testament professor at the seminary. Dr. Heflin started his remarks by presenting all the familiar scriptural arguments for downgrading female leadership in the church. But then, remarkably, he began to cite passage upon passage as to why those arguments were inconsistent with the universal truth of the Bible.

Needless to say, this little fundamentalist misogynist was devastated but intrigued. If my former pastors and leaders misled me on this issue, what else did they get wrong?

I found no greater evidence for the preeminence of female leadership than when I sat down in my Baptist history class taught by Dr. Karen Bullock. Dr. Bullock was one of the kindest, most gentle and intelligent professors I have ever encountered.

Each class began with a call to prayer, as Dr. Bullock would open the floor for prayer requests. This was a risky venture for wayward students who could hijack the time to push our lessons to the next class period. However, we had too much respect for Dr. Bullock and didn't want to miss a word of her lectures.

This ten-minute prayer time became a highlight for the course, as we were given an open window into the lives of our classmates. While learning history together was enjoyable, this relational component of a history class provided a "flesh-and-blood" reality to the church for us aspiring ministers.

After we concluded with the opening prayer, Dr. Bullock began her historical narratives, bringing to life the stories of church mothers and fathers for whom I had little knowledge. Her lessons were filled with conviction and commitment, weaving a deep loyalty to a transformative Gospel that always seemed to be on the side of the oppressed.

I was so impressed with Dr. Bullock that, before graduation, I had taken Baptist History, Church History I, and Church History II with her. More than any professor I have sat under, Dr. Bullock shaped my theology and life, placing me on a journey towards self-discovery and a faith seeking to impact the world from the perspective of the oppressed.

One moment, though, stood out above all others. As a student enrolled at Southwestern from 1993 to 1997, I experienced the firing of the beloved seminary president, Dr. Russell H. Dilday, and misplaced attempts by right-wing fundamentalists to "purify" the doctrines taught at the seminary.

One such doctrine the fundamentalists wanted to enshrine was the prohibition of women teaching men. In my final year at Southwestern, Dr. Bullock and her history colleague, Dr. Stephen Stookey, were slated to be considered for full-professorships. Both professors were beloved by students and admired by colleagues. Nothing should have stood in the way of their ascension to full professorship.

Nothing, except for misogynist fundamentalists trying to make a point.

Both professors were denied full professorships, bringing their days at Southwestern to a close.

I will always remember the day of the vote when Dr. Bullock came to class. In our opening prayer time, one of the students asked if we could pray for Dr. Bullock and Dr. Stookey. Dr. Bullock was grateful, but what she said next remains with me today.

"Thank you," she began, "for such a thoughtful gesture. I've been accused of trying to push an agenda at Southwestern, but I am not. All I want to do is fulfill God's calling for my life to teach seminary students about their history and heritage."

Did you catch her words? "All I want to do is fulfill God's calling for my life."

While Dr. Bullock and I may differ on some issues now – she's a tad bit more conservative than me – I will never forget when I learned there are people willing to think less of someone because of how they were born.

More so, I will always remember the graceful power with which Dr. Bullock responded. She did not rant or demand justice. She responded in humility. She knew her calling and would seek other ways to fulfill it. She was, and is, pure class.

History will condemn the exclusionary theology of Southern Baptists, but the world is a much better place because of Christians like Dr. Karen Bullock. I, for one, know I am a much better person and minister because I had the privilege of being her student.

After training ministers at Dallas Baptist University and B.H. Carroll Seminary for decades, Dr. Bullock recently retired from teaching. The church is better because she followed her calling. And as sad as I am she is retiring, I am thankful that a new generation of female clergy and leaders are following her lead. NFJ

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Harriet Tubman Takes Me to the Water

STORY AND PHOTOS BY STARLETTE THOMAS

It didn't begin as a pilgrimage, a soul trek aimed to cover an internal distance. I only packed for a day trip to Dorchester County, Maryland, to celebrate the 200th birthday of Araminta "Minty" Ross. Ross would later become the most famous conductor of the Underground Railroad and rename herself Harriet Tubman. Also known by her passengers as Mother Moses, she couldn't read or write but had the eyesight of a visionary. A narcoleptic prophet who never lost a passenger or her place in between sentences, this "earthly emancipator" guided souls to freedom.

However, despite all her accomplishments, not everyone is sold on the importance of Tubman's work and witness. Just mention putting her face on the front of the $20 bill and wait for the reaction. Though she would replace President Andrew Jackson, who ironically enslaved Africans and forcibly removed those indigenous to what would become the United States of America, it seems people don't know enough about her to make this change. More than a capitalist exchange, it was a suggestion made by 9-year-old Sofia in a letter to then-President Barack Obama that a woman be featured on U.S. currency. If we let this child lead us, then it might suggest a change in America's values.

It had to be the Spirit's leading. Before visiting the Harriet Tubman Memorial Garden, I pulled over to see the Harriet Tubman Museum & Education Center. It's a small museum in Cambridge, Maryland, that features cardboard cutouts, busts, paintings and pictures of the iconic liberator. I would also bear witness to Michael Rosato's mural "Take My Hand," located on an exterior wall behind the museum. Just a few steps around the corner, Tubman's hand is outstretched to those who would travel with her. But my decision to take her hand was the moment this day trip turned a corner. A week before, I had visited the Johnson House, a Quaker home in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, that hosted the freedom fighter, but this was different. Or, maybe it was just an extension of the same invitation that led me there in the first place.

"The inspiration comes from that moment when a slave has to make a decision to go," Rosato said in an interview. "This incredibly strong and compassionate woman is about to offer that hand for that freedom. And I thought, how do I capture that moment where it all happens, when the risk was taken to run from the slave owner, to a woman taking a risk to bring you through to the other side. This is that special moment when the hand is being offered. She has to be compassionate, but has to assert a certain authority."

I parked across the street and had only taken a few steps. But now I was being pulled in, and in all directions. I wanted to be wherever Tubman was, and I can't explain the compulsion. More than paying my respects, I felt I needed to honor her abolitionist witness by walking in her footsteps. Looking back at her, I gave Tubman my hand, and somehow, she began to tug on my heart. This makes sense given the insight of Abraham Joshua Heschel, a Polish American rabbi, who said, "Faith is not the clinging to a shrine but an endless pilgrimage of the heart."

Tubman now had mine, and I would return the next day to visit the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Historic Park and the Malone Methodist

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Episcopal Church on White Marsh Road in Madison, Maryland. Founded in 1864, it was here that she married her first husband, John. According to oral tradition, Tubman lived and worked nearby. It is also believed that Tubman was born on Anthony Thompson's farm, now private property on nearby Harrisville Road.

Next, I traveled to the Tubman- Garrett Riverfront Park in Wilmington, Delaware, and looked out across the Christina River. The park honors Thomas Garrett, a Quaker and native of Pennsylvania, and Harriet Tubman with a statue. Mario Chioda's "Unwavering Courage in the Pursuit of Freedom" depicts a headstrong Tubman with a baby in her hands and a pistol on her waist. A partially nude man and a fully clothed woman reach for freedom just below her skirt. Dressed in a top hat, suit and cape, Garrett holds a lantern to ensure she can see the way. The monument communicates the relationship between these two collaborators, with Garrett saying of Tubman that he "never met with any person of any color who had more confidence in the voice of God, as spoken directly to her soul."

Two weeks later, I was in Auburn, New York, standing outside Thompson Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church, where Tubman had attended. The church had also assisted the abolitionist movement, though it didn't look like much now. It was being renovated, but the construction workers didn't let that stop me. They took a break and allowed me to walk around the exterior of the building. I stood just outside the doors and imagined the crowd of people who gathered at her funeral. I remembered her final words, a quote from the gospel of John: "I go away to prepare a place for you, and where I am ye may be also" (14:3).

Later that same day, I bowed before the traveling nine-foot statue "Journey to Freedom" at the Harriet Tubman National Historical Park, installed there for a summer stint. Less than 100 yards away was her home, and I peeked inside a history being renovated, a heritage shored up with new plywood and bricks for future freedom workers. I paced along the wraparound

"It is Harriet Tubman, and it is her abolitionist spirit that I need for the raceless gospel and the deconstruction of white supremacy."

porch of "The Tubman Home for Aged and Indigent Negroes." I tried to take it all in but knew this wouldn't be the end or enough for what was clearly soul work.

Ta-Nehisi Coates, a Maryland native and author of a fantastical novel, *The Water Dancer*, that features Tubman, talked about her almost impossible presence during her time in a 2019 NPR interview. "It just seemed wild," he says. "Who is this person who has fainting spells and yet has never lost a passenger? Who is this black woman in the 19th century who, when somebody is scared and wants to turn back pulls out a gun and made threats, 'You ain't turning back!'? Who is this person who just strides through history?"

It is Harriet Tubman, and it is her abolitionist spirit that I need for the raceless gospel and the deconstruction of white supremacy. It is her sight-unseen conviction of freedom. "She went only where the Lord told her to, and since He never sent her into danger, she never worried about getting caught. And didn't," (not even with a $100 bounty on her head), wrote Beverly Lowry in *Harriet Tubman: Imagining a Life.*

Afterward, I knelt at her grave covered in coins and pine cones and sang, "Happy Birthday to You" in the rain. Before leaving the Empire State, I visited the Equal Rights Heritage Center, and just outside its doors was the Harriet Tubman Statue. Sculptor Brian P. Hanlon captured her holding a lantern with a hand reaching behind her, so I reached out for her again. I didn't want to miss a single invitation to journey with her and reaffirm my commitment to this abolitionist work.

In the fall, I would return to Cambridge, Maryland, for the unveiling of "Beacon of Hope." The 13-foot bronze

sculpture by Wesley Wofford is located at the courthouse and former site of slave auctions. It is also where Tubman orchestrated her first freedom journey for her niece, Kessiah Bowley. Shackles at her feet and with a star above her head, Tubman grabs a girl's hand, her future self, while facing truth north. Artist Wesley Wofford explained, "She is giving her the strength to say this is the strong woman you need to become, because you're going to need me now – and 200 years from now they're still going to need us. So reach within yourself and become that woman."

He's right because I need her.

Last year, I sought her face in the work of Bisa Butler's "I Go To Prepare A Place for You," which is featured in the Visual Arts Gallery and a part of the "Reckoning: Protest. Defiance. Resilience." exhibition at the African American Museum of History & Culture in Washington, D.C. Next to it is a maquette, a model of "Swing Low: Harriet Tubman Memorial." The bronze sculpture is in Manhattan. I had to see it along with the "Shadow of a Face" monument in Newark, New Jersey, in the renamed Harriet Tubman Square, designed by architect Nina Cooke John.

But it didn't stop there. This past October, I found Tubman at "The Aunties: From the North Star to the Poplar" film release on Mt. Pleasant Acres Farm in Preston, Maryland. After the film screening and a soul food feast, we followed Tubman's footsteps to the "Witness Tree." According to oral history, those seeking safe passage North, including Tubman's family, would pray and rest at its trunk. I stretched out my hand again and prayed for guidance, unsure of where she would lead me next.

Then, Bruce Gourley, managing editor of publications at Good Faith Media, mentioned the Penn Center's Annual Heritage Days Celebration on St. Helena Island in November. We would debut my book, *Take Me to the Water: The Raceless Gospel as Baptismal Pedagogy for a Desegregated Church*, here. The island is interlaced with meaning like sweetgrass basket weaving, as Charleston, South Carolina served as one of the first ports for enslaved Africans. The Gullah/Geechee people have managed to preserve their culture, language and native tongue. Queen Quet, Chieftess of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, says, "The land is our family, and the waterways are our bloodline." Soil, soul, and Sea Islands are intertwined.

Speaking the creole language is an act of defiance to American assimilation and colonization. Queen Quet called us all in, adults and children, as I set up my vendor table. She called us back to the beginning, the arrival of African ancestors from their respective countries, as I unboxed my books, arranged placards and put out candy. She called forth what Howard Thurman calls the "sound of the genuine" within and was joined with drumming, dancing and singing. In the midst of commerce, there was an exchange that could not be capitalized on, and this continued for days as we ate home-cooked food and traded stories of the way things were and what would not remain if the developers got their way.

And so, I rushed to see all the buildings out of fear that they would not be here next time, replaced with golf courses, vacation rentals and waterfront properties. "Look! Here is where Martin Luther King Jr. was to reside and write in between demonstrations. But he was assassinated and never got to use it. So, we use his cottage for storage now." Still, it needs to take up this space and hold on to the possibility of respite for revolutionary workers. Even if it now only gives space for cobwebs and insects, let it collect dust while we wait to collect our thoughts about "how (we) got over," as the African American spiritual says.

Within walking distance is Brick Baptist Church. It is the first church on the island and was built by enslaved Africans for their oppressors. It now holds a 10 a.m. worship service for African Americans. It is proof of a world turned upside down.

I then ran to the St. Helena Branch Library and entered the Gullah/Geechee room to flip through as many books as the small break between the "low country dinner" and "Sam Doyle: A World Within Worlds" art show would allow. I read about hoodoo, traditional medicine in Sierra Leone and Africanisms in the Gullah dialect. I tried to squeeze it all in and make it fit into frames in my camera's lens, snapping pictures of pages to reference later. Would the Gullah/Geechee people ever get back to this?

Like a quick trip home with the impossible task of seeing every relative, I visited the stately home and grave of Robert Smalls, who secured his and his family's freedom by pretending to be captain of a ship, the Planter. A bust of the Civil War hero and political leader is between Tabernacle Baptist Church and the future site of the Harriet Tubman monument. It will memorialize the Combahee River Raid of 1863 with her positioned on top with a staff in hand and men, women, and children flanked on both sides.

As if someone knew it was too much to take in, there is a bench that is themed "The Black Church." I take in the water, a baptism scene centered with three people robed in white against the flaking paint of the blue water. Traditional African religions and Christianity are represented between a praise house and a church building. The bench was painted by Reverend Johnnie Simmons. I read the name on the sign again and then realized it was the vendor sitting next to me during the festival. He passed me a $20 bill and asked for a signed copy of my book. Stunned, I sat on the bench for a while before traveling to Beaufort.

As I drove, I wondered if I heard enough from him. Did I have sufficient memory of our exchange? Was there a lesson that I had missed? I only had three miles to consider my answer before reaching the Harriet Tubman Bridge.

Here, Tubman led 150 African American Union soldiers in the Combahee River raid on June 2, 1863, freeing some 700 souls from chattel slavery. I stood on the bridge, looked out at the water, and remembered those who waded in it.

At that moment, I knew my steps were ordered. I couldn't have planned this leg of the journey or a better beginning for my book. Situated in resistance and resilience, a full circle moment or a labyrinth, Harriet Tubman had taken me to the water. NFJ

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Why the Church Needs to Fail

By Matt Cook

In 1845, two British naval vessels weighed anchor with much pomp and circumstance.

A marching band and a crowd of thousands were there to send them off. Reporters were present to capture the story for newspapers throughout the world. The ships were part of the Franklin Expedition, an attempt to explore what is now known as the Arctic Ocean.

Each vessel was impressively equipped. In addition to three years' worth of food, each carried more than 2,000 gallons of rum, 500 barrels of ale, 100 gallons of French brandy and 100 gallons of wine. Both ships had fine china and sterling silver place settings for dining, an onboard theater for entertainment and a library with more than a thousand books.

But if this makes you think you would have volunteered for the Expedition, you should know that after the crew of a British whaling vessel saw them in passing a few days later, no one on the expedition was ever seen or heard from again.

One of the great ironies of the Franklin Expedition was that it was considered the "best equipped naval expedition in history," which, believe it or not, brings us to why I am writing – your church.

Most churches in North America are in a period of re-examination brought about by the end of Christendom. The average congregation in North America is smaller than a generation ago, with fewer people, smaller staffs and limited budgets.

But when a church invites someone from our team at the Center for Healthy Churches to come help them, the message we typically lead with isn't, "suck it up, buttercup." We know that people are anxious because they love God and their church, and the numbers indicate fewer people sharing those loves. Honestly, we should all share those concerns.

But wringing our hands doesn't accomplish much. What does is learning to see this moment through a different lens. For instance, what if I told you North American congregations in the 21st Century are among the best equipped in history? Yes, the decline is real. But ask Christians in Central Asia or West Africa if they'd like to have our seminaries, facilities or financial resources. Even if we could go back in time and ask the North American churches in the 18th century if they'd like to have what we often take for granted, what do you think they would say?

American congregations in the 18th

"So much of our congregational life is tied to old cultural assumptions."

century were small, poor and scattered. Many only met once a month because they couldn't afford a full-time minister and, therefore, shared a one with other congregations. And yet, with such limited resources, those churches would soon contribute to one of the most significant periods of growth in Christian history. In short, a lack of resources, even human resources, is not our problem.

But if you could ask the members of the Franklin expedition, they would probably tell you that not all "equipment" is of equal value. In addition to their sails, each ship was equipped with an auxiliary steam engine. However, they only took a twelve-day coal supply along to make room for the library, theater and china. Notably, the only cold-weather clothing provided to the sailors were naval greatcoats, a standard issue for every sailor, including those in tropical ports.

However, the most crucial thing they neglected to take was humility. At that time, the British Navy was the largest maritime force in the world, with demonstrated superiority in training, tactics and logistics, as well as in the number and design of their ships. They ruled the seas and expected to succeed wherever their ships sailed. Unfortunately for them, the Arctic was ruthlessly indifferent to the flags they flew or their advanced maritime skills.

Many churches we advise find themselves in a similarly harsh climate. The post-Christendom world of 21st Century North America isn't out to get us. But it is ruthlessly indifferent to the successes we once took for granted and the loyalties we still hold. According to a recent study by the Pew Research Center, the most realistic estimates suggest there will be as many "Nones," those claiming no religious affiliation, as Christians in the next thirty years.

Which brings me to what may sound like a slightly apocalyptic suggestion: North American congregations need to "fail." That is not cynicism on my part. Failure often has much to teach us that success doesn't, or won't.

A well-established body of analysis indicates that the largest congregations in North America get that way by pulling in people from other congregations. Furthermore, the church growth methodologies of the last few decades are built upon a homogeneity principle. This principle includes marketing to an increasingly narrow demographic.

It would be simplistic and unfair to assume that all megachurches are identical. But I am becoming more convinced that the megachurch era of North American Christianity doesn't just correlate with, but has caused our most significant statistical decline. At the very least, megachurch types of success aren't teaching us the critical skills our current climate demands.

Failure, on the other hand, might. I say "might" because it's important to recognize that being ineffective isn't the goal. I am not suggesting we make a virtue out of failure. But we can use failure as a helpful means to a better end. There is a kind of failure that is fatalistic, that says there is nothing we can do to change things. That kind of closed-minded failure is unhelpful and, worse, unfaithful. It ignores the power of God for renewal.

Curious failure, on the other hand, can be a powerful tool in God's hands for teaching us new lessons and opening doors to new life. The Franklin Expedition was a monumental failure by all estimations. It was foolishly conceived and carried out. It accomplished absolutely nothing by itself.

Yet one of the great ironies of history is that it is also considered the turning point in Artic exploration. The mystery of the expedition's disappearance attracted so much attention in Europe and the United States that no less than thirty ships made extended journeys to discover what happened. Along the way, those who followed accomplished everything the Franklin Expedition had planned to do.

What might failure teach us amidst such a harsh climate for North American congregations? Here are a few possible lessons to consider.

Failure can help us learn how to think and act when we are not the center of the world.

So much of our congregational life is tied to old cultural assumptions. For instance, one of our most enduring metrics for success is counting how many people are in our buildings on Sundays, the day of the week when one-third of the American population is at work, according to the U.S. Department of Labor.

What if, instead of beating ourselves up for how small our Sunday attendance is compared to a generation ago, we let our failure teach us? What kinds of questions might emerge?

Where is everyone?

What are they doing on Sundays?

Why do we assume that worship is the thing that we do that is most interesting for newcomers? Should we assume that? If we do, then should we practice worship differently to make it more relational and missional?

Don't get me wrong, worship and sabbath rest are essential, but those two enduring commands do not necessarily mean that our most important definition of success should be how many people are in the sanctuary each Sunday. And that is just one of the things that failure might teach us if we let it spark our curiosity.

Failure might teach us solidarity with the people God most often uses to foster renewal.

A few years ago, I had the privilege of teaching a doctoral seminar at Central Seminary. The class comprised equal parts ministers born and raised in the U.S. and those from an international context. Both sets of students were impressive, but in very different ways.

It still amazes me that my international

students were taking a doctoral seminar in a language that most had only recently learned to speak and read. I must also admit I learned as much from them as I taught. About halfway through the semester, one of the students lingered after class to visit with me about the text from the classroom discussion, a book written to address the anxieties and challenges of the decline of the American Church.

I will always remember what he taught me that day:

"Dr. Cook, thank you for asking us to read this book. It is helping me learn something I did not know. In my country, we often saw the American Church as being the best and having the most to teach us. Your missionaries trained some of our most capable pastors; your scholars taught us what we needed to know about the Bible. I am grateful for those lessons. What I am realizing, however, is that your challenges are different than ours."

His words were humble, but I realized, without him saying it, that I had been myopic in how I approached the class. I needed to find a way for both groups of students to contribute the best of their own experiences. Those contributions from my international students were often lessons on prayer, devotion and humility. There was still much they wanted and needed to learn, but they were always powerfully aware of their need and incredibly grateful for the opportunity.

Amidst all the recent political rhetoric related to the challenges of illegal immigration, I will be curious to hear the voices of prominent Christian ministers. My work is in congregational renewal, not politics. However, while I'm not advocating for open borders, any notion that immigrants are "poisoning our blood" is not only unchristian, but also ignores the hard work and devotion that so often accompany immigrant populations. The American Church could use such an infusion of sacrificial spirit and devotion, especially devotion to prayer.

Global Christianity is thriving in many places. While immigration is more complex than how it might benefit the American Church, it is short-sighted not to recognize how much we might learn from our failures. God might be providing the very people best equipped to teach us. Our brothers and sisters who were not native to this country are integral to this potential learning experience.

Scripture repeatedly teaches that the instruments of God's power and revelation arrive not from the center but from the margins. Failure tends to make us far more open than success does to fostering relationships in such places. These relationships pave the way for the power of God to be revealed and unleashed.

Finally, one lesson the North American Church needs that failure might teach is that failure is often the precursor to our most powerful innovations.

Part of what has inspired me in this work has been Andrew Root's recent series on the Church in a Secular Age. Root, a professor at Luther Seminary, is a sharp and comprehensive thinker. It was our privilege for him to present to our Changing Church Webinar series last year. I highly recommend his work.

Among his key insights is that congregations have approached this anxious and challenging moment with an uncritical attempt to innovate their way out of decline. The problem, according to Root, is that we often take a secular approach to innovation. This approach is usually the result of fear – fear of losing power, status and influence. From a secular standpoint, the goal of innovation is to regain the lost power, status and influence. His critique is perceptive and accurate. His alternative, however, is where he and I slightly diverge.

Root suggests the Church in North America should focus on waiting rather than innovating. I do not have space here to detail the full breadth of Root's suggestion, but I can say, in many ways, it is helpful. It is grounded in deep biblical and theological insights recognizing God's enduring power and presence. Root aims to remind us that God is with us, so we do not have to anxiously fight tooth and claw for status and influence, afraid of what we might be losing with the death of Christendom. Instead, he argues, we should wait on God and enjoy the community that is the Church in the meantime. The underlying idea is that waiting quietly for God will best position us to listen for God's voice and act when God speaks.

If innovation is fueled by fear and focused on status, Root is correct. But what if innovation is fueled by love and focused on mission? What if we could see our failures not as a sign of God's absence in our endeavors but as opportunities God is using to help us grow our capacity to know and serve those outside the Church?

This is certainly not to say there is no room for stillness, silence or listening in the Church. It simply acknowledges that trusting God's presence in our failures is an active form of listening.

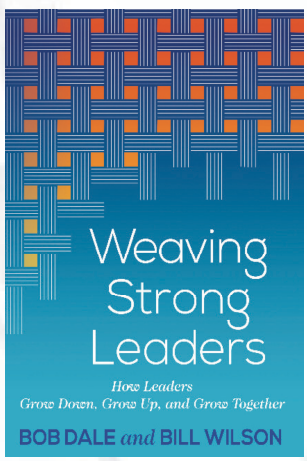
Because of the failure of the Franklin Expedition, the thirty ships following in its wake mapped the Arctic, discovered the Northwest Passage and developed technologies suitable to Arctic rigor. None of the vessels embarked with much fanfare, and none were as "well-equipped," but they all ventured forth with a requisite amount of humility. This humility is what made the difference in their success.

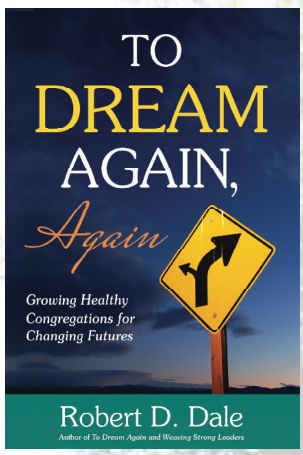
The same can be true for our congregations. North American churches would do well to acknowledge our struggles, challenges and even our failures. These days require humility and courage. The Church needs a culture where failure can be a tool for our development.

Indeed, few things are more courageous than learning to work through failure rather than fear it. We need pastors and lay leaders who will recognize how harsh the climate is, not so we will look along in despair but so that we can get busy learning what God is trying to teach us about being faithful and effective in this context. NFJ

—Matt Cook is director of the Center for Healthy Churches

HEALTHY CHURCH RESOURCES





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Waiting in Line for Communion

By Brett Younger

L'Appartement 4F, photograph, *Brooklyn Eagle*

Two years ago, *L'Appartement 4F*, a French bakery, opened a few blocks from my house in Brooklyn. The lines have stretched around the block ever since. Moms with strollers, couples with dogs and people in Birkenstocks line up before the bakery opens each day. When you see a long line, you figure it must be incredible.

One of their best sellers is the miniature croissant cereal, *Petite Croissant Céréale*, which is $50 a box—more than I have ever paid for a box of cereal.

Jeanette Settembre writes: "They require a lot of time and work. They roll them out, shape them into this teeny, tiny triangle and roll it like a regular croissant. After being shaped, the diminutive croissants, weighing about a gram apiece, are dehydrated, rolled in cinnamon-sugar and baked fresh. Each box contains around 250 mini croissants, each around half an inch in length. They are not only adorable, they also remain remarkably crunchy in milk and have a shelf life of two to three weeks" (*New York Post*, 9/1/22).

They must be good. They sell out every day. The cashier told me I should get in line early on a weekday if I wanted one—and she made it clear I would only be allowed one.

The tiny croissants get most of the attention, but the almond croissant stuffed with raspberry ganache is delicious. When people line up for baked bread, they wait because it is good.

For most of us, bread is a mystery. We buy it at the grocery store in loaves that come in plastic bags. If, on occasion, we bake it at home, we often use a bread machine, which feels like cheating.

Jesus knew it is hard to make good bread. Imagine Jesus as a 6-year-old child in the kitchen, standing at his mother's elbow, watching her hands slip yeast into flour, kneading the dough and shaping the loaf. The miracle happens daily, with a timing only his mother can decipher. The moment she hands him the finished loaf to take to the table where the family is gathered is Jesus' first vision of heaven.

Imagine Jesus as a 30-year-old trying to help his students understand God's love. He thinks, "What if every time we smelled freshly baked bread, we remembered that God's love permeates the world like the smell of baked bread fills a kitchen?"

Jesus says, "The kingdom of God is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened. Then she waits while the dough rises, on its way to being bread."

According to Jewish tradition, when the Messiah comes, he will feed all Israel. In the Gospels, Jesus feeds Israel and the Gentiles, too. A significant part of Jesus' life was giving away bread. The kingdom is about sharing bread.

Imagine Jesus as a 33-year-old, sitting at the table with his friends. The end is near. Jesus wants to give them something memorable, concrete and holy. As they eat, he takes and blesses the bread, breaks it and passes it to disciples who will deny and betray him.

Jesus says, "Take, eat. Whenever you smell bread baking, remember how much I love you. Remember how much God loves you. Remember how much you love one another."

Waiting in line for the bread at communion is different than waiting in line at a bakery. We do not talk in line at the Lord's Supper. We stand solemnly. We step forward when a gap opens in front of us. We are not sure where to put our hands. At our sides, maybe? We look around, but not too much. Mostly, we look straight ahead.

We think about what it means. We think about God welcoming everyone in a line that stretches back 2000 years, churches through 20 centuries, countries all over the world and Christians of every stripe, all lining up to receive God's grace.

The bread must be good if people stand in line for it.

We think about forgiveness, the forgiveness we have been given and the forgiveness we share. We think about the people in line with us, the ones we love and those we do not know. The line moves slowly, but, finally, we are handed a tiny piece of bread that tastes like God's love. NFJ

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

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

March 3, 2024

Psalm 19

Can I Be Good?

> *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. (Ps. 19:14)*

March is hardly the most beautiful time of the year, but it is an apt time for remembering. When and where in creation have you sensed God's presence most closely? Perhaps you were on a mountain or beside the ocean, and the sky was breathtaking. Maybe the heavens were brilliant blue and populated with towering clouds like mounds of cotton candy. Or, perhaps you fell silent before the brilliant light show of a colorful sunset or watching the dawning sun crack the horizon and leap into view – and it was as if you heard God's own voice saying to you: "I'm here."

The psalmist knew what that was like. He had seen thunderclouds stream in from the Mediterranean Sea and drop their payloads across the hills of Judah. Like images on a movie screen, he had watched the constellations march proudly across the sky.

And he had heard God speak without words.

Words without sound (vv. 1-6)

Psalm 19 is a favorite psalm for many people, but also a curious one: it appears to consist of two different psalms combined into one. The first six verses of the psalm, which are labeled as part of the Davidic collection, comprise a hymn of praise that speaks in majestic terms of God's self-revelation in the glory of the sky and the sun's daily movements. The latter part shifts to the style of a wisdom teaching, with shorter lines and a more repetitive rhythm while giving praise for God's commandments.

We also note that the first six verses speak of God (*Elohim*) while the remainder of the text uses the word LORD, our translation of the Hebrew name Yahweh.

The differences are sharp, but the two parts are connected. They speak of God's self-revelation through the heavens in vv. 1-6, and through the law in vv. 7-14. The style, vocabulary, cadence and content of the two sections are quite different. Still, the psalmist's conjunction of the poems effectively demonstrates that God's message can be revealed either with words or without them.

The psalm begins with a poetic celebration of God's splendor as revealed in the expansive beauty of the sky: "The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork" (v. 1). The first and second lines of the verse follow a common pattern in Hebrew poetry in which the second line repeats or expands upon the thought expressed in the first line.

"The heavens" and "the firmament" both refer to what we would call the sky. The ancient Hebrews did not understand, as we do, that the earth is round, with an atmosphere held in place by gravity, providing air to breathe and guarding against the vacuum of space. They thought of the earth as flat and topped by a solid dome (the firmament), making room for a bubble of air and keeping out cosmic waters above and below the earth.

The ancients imagined that the sun, moon, and stars followed set patterns or tracks set into the dome-like firmament while clouds floated in the space beneath. Imagine what the psalmist would have said if he had been able to grasp the place of our earth as a tiny dot near the edge of one galaxy among millions of galaxies. For those who believe God is the creator of all things, the wonder of God's creation becomes far more expansive than the psalmist could ever comprehend.

The heavens speak constantly, the psalmist says, through both day and night (v. 2). The astounding beauty of clouds and sun shout glory during the day, and the unfettered glow of the stars in a land with no electricity to fuel competing ground-light puts on a nightly show that would have been awe-inspiring to dwellers of the ancient world.

While v. 2 speaks of the heavens gushing forth speech and declaring knowledge, vv. 3-4a clarify that the heavens can communicate without speaking: "There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth and their words to the end of the world." The plural verbs refer to the heavens, which speak both day and night.

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In vv. 4b-6, the psalmist focuses on the sun as a particular witness of divine glory. God has set up a heavenly tent for the sun, he says, from which it emerges each day like a proud bridegroom on his wedding day, or like a strong runner eager to begin his course. As the personified sun runs its circuit from one end of the heavens to the other, "nothing is hidden from its heat," a reminder that nothing hides from God, either.

What would you write about if you should ever feel inspired to write a poem or devotional thought about hearing God's voice through the wonder of creation? Would you echo the psalmist's fascination with the heavens, or speak of God's presence in a mountain vista, a majestic waterfall, or a tropical beach? Have you sensed God's glory in the bright blue of glacier melt or the colorful fish of a coral reef?

Can you think of other ways in which God speaks without words?

Sweetness without sugar (vv. 7-10)

As noted above, Psalm 19 makes an abrupt shift from praise to wisdom in v. 7. The cadence is less musical and more pedantic, and the theme turns from vistas of the sky to matters of law.

Many readers would consider the move from heavenly heights to legal tenets to be a major comedown, but faithful Hebrews saw the law as the basis of their life with God, and thus a source of daily inspiration. The law was no collection of moribund rules, but a set of principles that could "revive the soul" and "make wise the simple" (v. 7), bringing joy to the heart and enlightenment to the eyes (v. 8).

Note the series of synonyms in vv. 7-9: laws, decrees, precepts, commandments, and ordinances all relate to the covenant between God and Israel. They bring such spiritual profit because all are "of the LORD." The "fear of the LORD" in v. 9 is not another synonym for God's laws, but points to the mindset that motivates one to find inspiration in divine guidelines for life that are pure, lasting, true, and "righteous altogether" (v. 9).

God's law in all its manifestations is more appealing than the finest gold or the sweetest honey, the psalmist insists (v. 10). Note the repetition for emphasis: the law is more desirable than gold – "even much fine gold." It is sweeter than honey – even "drippings of the honeycomb."

Have you ever considered the law more desirable than gold or more delicious than the sweetest baklava? Probably not – but can you imagine living in a world without laws, where everyone can do as they please and get away with it, where property rights are not respected, where no system exists to provide services for the common good?

The societal laws that bring order to the world may not excite us, but life would be very different and much less pleasant without them. For Israel, the source of the law was God, and it served not only to maintain societal order, but to ensure a proper relationship with God. The psalmist recognized the law as a source of daily encouragement and revelation from God.

Devotion without guile (vv. 11-14)

With v. 11, the psalmist turns from celebrating God's law to praying for the ability to keep every precept and avoid every fault, even those of which he was unaware (vv. 11-12). Most of us have more than enough known failures to confess, so the psalmist's worries about being forgiven of hidden faults may seem over the top, but it illustrates the depth of his commitment to keeping God's teachings.

The translation of v. 13 can go in one of two directions. Literally, it begins, "Also keep your servant from proud (ones) …" The Hebrew word translated as "proud" or "presumptuous" is a plural adjective, but what does it modify? The NRSV assumes that it describes bad company – insolent people whose harmful influence the psalmist hopes to avoid.

Most translations, however, see "proud" or "presumptuous" as referring back to the word for "sins" or "errors" in the previous verse. As the psalmist sought to avoid unknown faults, he also asked God to keep him from more obvious sins. Thus, the NIV11 has "Keep your servant also from willful sins," and the NET2 has "Moreover, keep me from committing flagrant sins."

Thus, the psalmist fears falling under the sway of willful sins, not presumptuous people, as he seeks a blameless life, free of "great transgression" (v. 13).

The psalm concludes with a verse that has been widely memorized: "Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer" (v. 14).

The psalmist began his prayer by applauding God's ability to speak through heavenly wonders, even without words. He continued by praising God's gift of the law – revealed through words – that taught him to live rightly. He then closed the prayer with a plea that his words and thoughts might please the God who empowered and delivered him.

What are some ways you believe God has spoken to you? What kind of words do you use in speaking of yourself to God, or in speaking of God to others? Revelation can work in many ways. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

March 10, 2024

Psalm 107 (RCL:1-3, 17-22)

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever. (Ps. 107:1)

Can I Be Grateful?

Have you ever found yourself in such a difficult or dangerous situation that you felt there was no recourse but to pray for divine aid? Have you ever felt so burdened by guilt that you knew there was no way forward without praying for forgiveness?

Most believers have been there. Once you emerged from the troubled times and regained a level footing, did you express appreciation to God for helping you through the traumatic time?

Have you ever thanked God publicly?

The psalmist understood the importance of recognizing the ways in which God has provided forgiveness, encouragement, or deliverance in our lives – and the importance of thanking God for it.

Let the redeemed say so (vv. 1-3)

Psalm 107 begins with a familiar appeal: "O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever" (v. 1). The call to thanksgiving rings a bell because we also find those exact words or similar ones in 1 Chr. 16:34, 41; 2 Chr. 5:13, 7:3, 6, 20:21; Jer. 33:11, as well as in Ps. 106:1, 118:1, and repeated throughout Psalm 136.

The brief credo is grounded in God's self-revelation to Moses from Exod. 34:6-7: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." Echoes or quotations appear frequently in the Old Testament, including in diverse texts such as Neh. 9:17 and Jon. 4:2; Joel 2:13; and Ps. 86:5, 15, 103:8-14, and 145:8.

The people of Israel believed many things about God, known by the personal name Yahweh, with whom they had been called to live in a covenant relationship. When thinking of Yahweh's various attributes, divine goodness and steadfast love were preeminent. Such love did not preclude divine discipline, but it also prompted God to remain faithful to the Hebrews even when they were not faithful in return.

The history of God and Israel was bound up in stories of deliverance: God had saved Israel from captivity in Egypt, from starvation in the wilderness, from defeat in battles, from various oppressors in the land, and from the time of exile in Babylon.

What God could not do was deliver the people of Israel from their proclivity to worship other gods and to choose selfish behavior over love for their neighbor. Israel's prophets believed that God had sent other nations to punish them before delivering them from their power.

The Assyrians devastated the kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE, scattering its inhabitants across the empire. The Babylonians later conquered the southern kingdom of Judah, beginning a period of exile that would see waves of Hebrews sent to Babylon in 597, 587, and 582. God's steadfast love endured, however. The Persian king Cyrus – whom Isaiah referred to as God's anointed (Isa. 45:1) – defeated the Babylonians and allowed the exiles to return, giving the Hebrews another chance to live in Jerusalem, albeit as a sub-province of Persia.

Psalm 107 appears to celebrate a return, for vv. 2-3 celebrate how God had redeemed the Hebrews and gathered them from north, south, east, and west. Such deliverance called for public praise: "Let the redeemed of the LORD say so!"

It's possible that Psalm 107 originally consisted of v. 1 and vv. 4-32. In this form, it could have been used in the Jerusalem temple before the exile, serving as a means of praising God for deliverance from various situations. Verses 2-3 and 33-43 may have been added after many Hebrews returned from exile, with the psalm reinterpreted as a means of thanksgiving for their deliverance from captivity.

Let the redeemed say why (vv. 4-32)

Generic praise is one thing, but thanksgiving tied to specific acts of divine benevolence can be more meaningful, constituting the psalm's main body. It falls into four obvious sections (vv. 4–9, 10–16, 17–22, 23–32), each an image of potential trials from which people could be delivered. For each situation, the psalmist

describes a crisis that led to a prayer for deliverance, an account of God's redeeming acts, and a concluding call to thank God for what has been done.

The first picture is of travelers lost in the wilderness, perhaps a caravan of merchants who have run out of food and water, not knowing where to find an inhabited town (vv. 4-5). When they cried out to Yahweh, God delivered them from their distress and led them safely to a town (vv. 6-7). Echoing the initial call for the "redeemed of the LORD" to declare it openly, the psalmist calls such travelers to give public thanks for God's steadfast love that replaced their need with goodness (vv. 8-9).

This picture calls to mind Israel's wandering in the wilderness after leaving Egypt, when God provided food and water before ultimately leading them to the land of promise. It may also recall the long and dangerous trek required for the exiles who chose to leave Babylon and return to their homeland. The term translated as "inhabited town" in vv. 4 and 7 carries the literal sense of "a city (for) dwelling." Thus, NET2 speaks of seeking "a city in which to live." Yahweh, however, led them to the best city they could imagine, Jerusalem.

The second image is that of imprisonment or exile itself. While individuals might have experienced the misery of life in chains for ordinary crimes, leading families of the entire nation had suffered the dark gloom of life in exile. In the spirit of the prophets, the psalmist attributed their plight to having "rebelled against the words of God, and spurned the counsel of the Most High" (vv. 10-11). With no one else to help, they prayed for deliverance, and Yahweh "broke their bonds asunder," saving them from their distress (vv. 13-14). Such deliverance calls for praise to Yahweh "for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind" (vv. 15-16).

Sickness is the subject of the third picture, which describes a group of people who have suffered illness that they brought upon themselves "through their sinful ways" (vv. 17-18). The NRSV obscures the harshness of the description in v. 17, which describes such people as fools for behaving unwisely: "They acted like fools in their rebellious ways, and suffered because of their sins" (NET2). But even foolish people can pray to God for deliverance, and these find healing in God's mercy (vv. 19-20). No less than any other, they should give thanks and offer sacrifices in praise of God's steadfast love, "and tell of his deeds with songs of joy" (vv. 21-22).

In a culture where many people habitually poison their bodies by smoking cigarettes, sicken themselves through poor food choices, and weaken their bodies by avoiding exercise, these verses are sobering. Lung diseases, cardiovascular ailments, and Type II diabetes are leading causes of death that shorten many lives – but are largely preventable.

The final image of people in need of deliverance describes a perilous journey by sea, something few Israelites would have experienced, but which would have been the subject of popular stories, such as the harrowing account of Jonah being lost in a stormy sea stirred up by Yahweh. Seafaring merchants would have told tales of surviving storms that they also credited to divine activity (vv. 23-26). Knowing there was nothing left to do but pray, they sought God's help and found deliverance, for "he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed" (vv. 27-30). Like others whom God had saved, they were urged to offer public praise for God's steadfast love and wonderful works (vv. 31-32).

Let the redeemed not forget (vv. 33-42)

The last section of the psalm contains elements of wisdom teaching, and it was probably added as a way of summing up the lessons taught through the various examples. These verses are reminders that God has power over land and sea. Yahweh can turn rivers into a desert if the people follow sinful ways, but the Lord can also transform a parched wilderness into fertile and well-watered land for those who turn their lives toward God (vv. 33-38).

Whatever troubling situation God's people might face – whether oppression, disappointment, or sorrow (v. 39) – the psalmist believed that God could help, overthrowing repressive rulers and redeeming the downtrodden from their distress (vv. 40-41). Those who are wise will take note of such truths, the psalmist says, and should learn from them as they "consider the steadfast love of the LORD" (vv. 42-43).

What kinds of trouble have been most common in our lives? Very few of us have been held as a captive, but we may have felt exiled or excluded, put down, or unappreciated by others. We may have experienced sickness that we brought on ourselves or faced trouble that seemed to come out of nowhere.

And yet … and yet God's steadfast love endures forever, the psalmist says. We can trust God to hear our prayers and give glad testimony for God's wonderful deeds, for they are indeed wonderful. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

March 17, 2024

Psalm 119:9-16

Can I Be Whole-Hearted?

Have you ever used mnemonic devices to help you remember a sequence of events? In elementary algebra, I learned that "My Dear Aunt Sally" could help me remember the order of operations in solving equations: Multiply, Divide, Add, and Subtract. In band class, we learned that on the treble clef, notes on the lines from bottom to top represented E, G, B, D, and F, remembered by "Every Good Boy Does Fine." Notes represented by spaces between the lines spelled FACE.

Easy peasy.

Ancient Hebrew poets sometimes made their work easier to memorize by beginning each line, couplet, or stanza with sequential letters of the alphabet – or *alefbet*.

The longest and most complex of these is Psalm 119. Its 176 verses encompass 22 stanzas of eight couplets each, one for each of the 22 Hebrew letters. The Revised Common Lectionary assigns readings from seven of the 22 sections during its three-year cycle.

Within each stanza, each couplet begins with the same letter. For example, each of the first eight verses begins with the letter *alef*, the next eight with *bet*, the next eight with *gimel*, and so on to the final eight verses, which begin with *tav*.

With my whole heart I seek you; do not let me stray from your commandments. (Ps. 119:10)

As the poet built his prolonged prayer on the scaffold of the Hebrew *alefbet*, he also utilized the theme of God's Torah, or teaching, as building material. Eight different synonyms for the concept appear repeatedly. Some stanzas contain all eight terms, and all stanzas include at least six.

The poet believed that rules were important. The thought of life without restrictions may be appealing, but the lack of guidelines could lead to personal or societal chaos. The psalmist recognized the value of holding to certain standards of behavior in individual or corporate life. He encouraged readers to take comfort in knowing basic and acceptable guidelines for living, and to follow them.

In the psalm, he wrote lovingly of God's *tōrah*, God's word and way, and God's laws, statutes, decrees, commands, precepts, and ordinances. He firmly believed in the value of studying and following the written law.

Psalms like this point to a shift in Israel's worship from a religion centered on temple sacrifices to one based on obedience to the law. In this sense, Psalm 119 has much in common with the book of Deuteronomy, and likely reflects a post-exilic setting when the Pentateuch had been completed.

The psalm contains elements of both wisdom and lament. The author repeatedly professes a love for God's law, or teaching. He earnestly desires to follow God's way and hopes his obedience will motivate God to save him from distress and preserve him from his enemies.

A question
vv. 9-11

Today's reading is from the second section of the psalm, one in which each verse starts with the letter *bet*. This one also begins with a question: "How can young people keep their way pure?" (v. 9a).

The translation is appropriate, as young men and women alike should aspire to just living that honors God. The literal text includes the surprising word "lad" (*na'ar*): "How can a lad keep his way pure?"

The word choice probably derives from the heavy wisdom influence in the psalm. Formal wisdom teachers expected to have only male students. Wisdom texts like the book of Proverbs routinely addressed young men, referring to their readers with words like "my son." The teachers warned them to avoid the wiles of women who might tempt them to go astray, and to follow the righteous teaching of "Lady Wisdom" instead.

How can young people (or older people, for that matter) keep their way pure? "By guarding it according to your word" (v. 9b), according to the psalmist. Like a guardrail beside a steep mountain road, God's teaching protects devoted followers from falling into danger and keeps them on the right path.

Repeated references to God's "word" (*dābar*) are used in Psalm 119 to magnify God's good teaching. Readers should be careful not to

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confuse the expression with the Bible, often described as "God's word." The Bible is a witness to God's teaching and revelation, but only the most ardent literalist would claim that God spoke every word in scripture.

When the psalmist wrote, the Bible did not yet exist, though it's likely that the Torah, or Pentateuch, had been completed. The author knew of many laws, commands, precepts, statutes, decrees, or ordinances traditionally attributed to God. Such teachings could be thought of as aspects of "God's word," but God's word could not be confined to a written document.

In scripture, the notion of a direct word from God was typically associated with the prophets, who often claimed to have received revelations from God, often beginning their oracles with expressions such as "Thus says the LORD," or "The LORD said." They sometimes conclude with the "word of the LORD."

The poet was committed to the narrow path of God's way: "With my whole heart I seek you; do not let me stray from your commandments. I treasure your word in my heart, so that I may not sin against you" (vv. 10-11).

It was the heart, not the head, that the Hebrews identified with volition and decision-making. Note how two consecutive verses draw upon the image of the heart, first as the active desire to seek God's way, then as the repository of God's teachings. Devotion to God's way in both memory and action, he believed, would keep the devout away from sin and on the right path.

When the familiar challenge of Deut. 6:5 to "Love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" was quoted in the New Testament, writers added "and all your mind," because Greek thought associated volition with the mind (Matt. 22:37, Mark 12:30, Luke 10:27). For the Hebrews, it was in the heart.

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A blessing
vv. 12-13

The Hebrew verb meaning "to bless" is *bārak*, so it is not surprising that the poet chose to begin the fourth verse of this section with "Blessed are you, O LORD; teach me your statutes" (v. 12).

The psalmist was so determined to grow in faith and knowledge that even his praises included a prayer for divine help in absorbing whatever teaching God had to offer. The words of blessing are likewise conjoined with his desire to pass on what he had learned: "With my lips I declare all the ordinances of your mouth" (v. 13).

The psalmist was not content to limit his efforts to personal righteousness. He also saw himself as a teacher who was called to point others in the right direction so they also could live productive lives and experience God's blessings.

The writer understood, as we should, that we can hardly influence others for good unless we set a positive example through our own living. We know how the cause of Christ suffers when pastors or other Christian leaders get caught up in scandal – or when politicians set oppressive policies or impinge on human rights in the name of "Christian values." God's teaching has an inherent focus on justice, and God's followers are called to pursue it.

A promise
vv. 14-16

The rest of the *bet* section of Psalm 119 is devoted to further asseverations of devotion, prayerful statements designed to please God and challenge others who would hear or read his prayer.

Following God's way was not a burden or an obligation for the poet, but a joy: "I delight in the way of your decrees as much as in all riches" (v. 14). Those of us who are deeply ensconced in our materialistic society would do well to ponder that thought. We can imagine the delight that accompanies wealth and the good things it can bring, but can we join the psalmist in celebrating God's teaching as a treasure trove of resources to promote a truly good life?

Growing closer to God and learning from God takes both time and intention. "I will meditate on your precepts," the psalmist said, "and fix my eyes on your ways" (v. 15). The poet claimed to have a one-track mind, one devoted only to God and God's way.

We think that kind of devotion might lead to a convent or monastery, but even there, nuns or monks must attend to everyday business such as cooking, cleaning, and relationships. The psalmist, no doubt, also had other things to think about. He probably had a family to love and would have spent time earning income. He would have had friends to care for and errands to run. Still, amid the busyness of daily life, he never forgot his overarching desire to know and serve God rightly.

The closing verse recalls earlier imagery as the *bet* section comes to an end: "I will delight in your statues; I will not forget your word" (v. 16).

Most of us know how easy it is to turn our focus away from God's way, if not to forget it altogether. Other things and other people demand our attention. As we seek both pleasure and profit in life, however, we may realize that they mean little without a deeper sense of connection to the life God wants us to live.

God calls people of every age to live in a way that honors God and cares for others. It may not be as easy as ABC, but we have to start somewhere.

NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

March 24, 2024

Acts 10:34-43

Can I Be Safe?

Troubled people often find comfort in the Psalms, where poems that testify of distress and redemption gave voice to the cares and inspired the hopes of the ancient Hebrews. Embodied in the evolving Hebrew scriptures, the psalms were also familiar to first-century Jews and early followers of Christ.

Despite our very different historical and cultural settings, the same psalms remain meaningful to Christians today, as evidenced by their frequent appearance in the lectionary and pocket copies of "The New Testament and Psalms."

Psalm 31 evokes images of the passion of Christ, including the phrase "Into your hand I commit my spirit," so it is no surprise that portions of the psalm would be read during Holy Week.

Four different excerpts from Psalm 31 appear in the lectionary, and those that exclude vv. 6-16 could make one think it is entirely a psalm of thanksgiving. When read in full, however, the psalm is primarily a lament, albeit studded with elements of both trust and praise. This is surprisingly common in the psalms of lament. For study purposes, it's best to consider the whole.

A rock and a refuge (vv. 1-8)

The psalm relies heavily on formulaic language common to the poetry of lament, providing little in the way of specifics that might help us identify a particular situation of distress. This can be good, as it allows modern readers to imagine themselves in the psalmist's sandals.

> *Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also. (Ps. 31:9)*

The author speaks of enemies who would entrap him (vv. 4, 7, 8), physical illness (vv. 9-10), community ostracism (vv. 11-13), and persecution from those who would lie to cause him shame (vv. 15-18). We cannot know whether to read these as literal challenges or metaphorical expressions, but the distress was clearly genuine.

Verses 1-5 constitute a prayer for God to protect the psalmist from shame, deliver him, and become a "rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me" (vv. 1-2). An editorial superscription associates the psalm with David, who fled to the "fortress of Adullam" and found refuge in the rocky cliffs and caves of southern Judea when Saul sought to kill him (1 Samuel 22-26). A psalm attributed to David in 2 Samuel 22, repeated as Psalm 18 and associated with that period begins: "The LORD is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold and my refuge, my savior; you save me from violence (2 Sam. 22:2-3, Ps. 18:2).

The author of Psalm 31 likewise turns to God as a strong refuge, expressing trust that God will come through: "You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name's sake lead me and guide me" (v. 3). In v. 5 we find the words of trust later quoted by Jesus, "Into your hand I commit my spirit," though the context is quite different. The psalmist spoke of committing his spirit to God in hopes of being saved from whatever threatened him. Jesus committed his spirit to God without expecting deliverance, trusting God in death rather than seeking to escape it.

The poet turns to an expression of trust in vv. 6-8, suggesting a sense of assurance that God would preserve him. Compared to those who worshiped "worthless idols," he trusted in the famed steadfast love of Yahweh (Exod. 34:6), and he believed that God would save him from the unnamed enemy. In words reminiscent of Psa. 118:5, he declared, "You have set my feet in a broad place."

However, the deliverance he asked for and trusted God for was not yet a reality. God had not delivered him "*into* the hand of the enemy," but had not fully delivered him from his predicament, either.

A cry in distress (vv. 9-18)

The poet lapses into lament in v. 9, beseeching God's help in his precarious situation: "Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress." His difficulties, whatever they were, had begun to affect his health: "My eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also."

The troubles were not a recent experience, but a lengthy affliction: "For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away" (v. 10).

This sounds less like David in a tight spot, and more like someone facing depression or a long-term illness. The psalmist's trials had left him feeling constant sadness. We know that depression and stress can contribute to serious health issues, and it is widespread. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, between 2015 and 2018, more than 13% of Americans over 18 took antidepressant medications at some point, including nearly a fourth of all women over 60.

The psalmist had no drugs to increase the levels of dopamine or serotonin in his brain chemistry, no cognitive therapy to aid in dealing with his prolonged sadness. His neighbors offered no comfort, but avoided being around him, leaving him isolated (vv. 11-13). He felt "terror all around" as he imagined how others whispered about him and hatched plots to do him in. Whether real or imagined, the psalmist pictured himself as surrounded by enemies.

From the depths of his misery, however, the poet took comfort in putting himself in God's hands: "But I trust in you, O LORD; I say, 'You are my God.'" (v. 14). On the one hand, he could say "My times are in your hand," as if being resigned to whatever might happen. Still, he never stopped appealing for a good outcome: "Deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors" (v. 15).

In words that recall the Aaronic blessing of Num. 6:24-26, he prayed, "Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love" (v. 16).

The petitioner appeared to fear the words of his enemies more than their knives. Perhaps they spoke evil of him, so he prayed that God would not let him "be put to shame," but instead cause "the wicked" to be shamed and sent "dumbfounded" – or perhaps "wailing" – to Sheol (v. 17). Surprisingly, the same word *damam* can mean both "to grow silent," and "to groan or wail."

Whether the psalmist wanted his opponents to die in silence or crying with pain is less certain than that he wished them an early demise. He thought it was no less than their "lying lips," insolent accusations, and contemptuous attitudes deserved.

A testimony of trust (vv. 19-24)

Even casual readers will note what appears to be a strong disconnect between vv. 18 and 19, for the cry of distress suddenly shifts to happy praise. This is not unusual in biblical laments, and we can't help but wonder why. Some have suggested that the words of praise were added later, after the psalmist had experienced the deliverance he or she had requested. Others see it as a proleptic expression of trust, not unlike modern believers who talk about "claiming the promise" as if it has already happened.

In a practical sense, when we think of how the psalm might have been used in worship, some have suggested that it could have been read on behalf of all who felt oppressed, with a break after v. 18, during which a cultic prophet or priest may have promised that God had heard the prayer and deliverance was sure.

In any case, vv. 19-24 take on a new tone of confidence and testimony. Echoing themes from his earlier appeals, the psalmist sings the praise of God's goodness toward those who find refuge in God from "human plots" and "contentious tongues" (vv. 19-20).

He prays as if deliverance has already come: "Blessed be the LORD, for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me when I was beset as a city under siege" (v. 21). He appears to be speaking of past sorrow when he adds "I had said in my alarm, 'I am driven far from your sight,' but you heard my supplications when I cried out to you for help" (v. 22).

With these words of testimony, the psalmist emerges from depression to become a witness, indeed an evangelist of sorts. The final two verses no longer address God, but those gathered for worship: "Love the LORD, all you his saints," he called, testifying that "The LORD preserves the faithful, but abundantly repays the one who acts haughtily" (v. 23).

Encouragement means the most when it comes from someone who knows how we feel, has been in our shoes, and has lived to tell the story. When this psalm was read, other worshipers in attendance could have been facing their own difficulties, feeling put upon or threatened by others, isolated from the community, and wondering if God still cared. To them, the happy poet offered heartening words to motivate faith: "Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the LORD" (v. 24).

We may have found ourselves in the psalmist's situation – discouraged and depressed, lonely and fearful. We may have prayed for some time, as the psalmist had done, with no apparent result. Yet, as long as we live, there is hope. We may not always get the kind of deliverance we hope for, or see others get the comeuppance we think they deserve, but we can find strength and renewed courage as we trust – and wait – for LORD.

The waiting is where real trust is found. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

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

March 31, 2024

Acts 10:34-43

Good News for Everyone

Have you ever changed your mind about a social custom or belief you once held dear? Many of us who have reached our sixth decade or more grew up in an environment steeped in racism. Getting used to the idea that black and white people could – and should! – share the same spaces took some adjustment for many people. But now, most of us think little of it. We have learned to embrace new attitudes toward people of different ethnic backgrounds.

Our journey to acceptance may have begun with a friendship with someone different. We may have been influenced by a powerful book or a prophetic sermon. Or, we may have learned from a new environment, such as a college campus or military unit, where acceptance was easier, and friendship opportunities were more abundant.

Prejudice is nothing new. Peter, one of Jesus' closest disciples, had grown up in an environment of suspicion and distrust between Jews and Gentiles that went back hundreds of years. As Hebrew exiles began returning to Jerusalem after Cyrus the Persian conquered Babylon, they lived under Persian rule and had no national identity. As a means of self-preservation and an attempt to please God in hopes of future blessing, religious leaders began a campaign of ethnic uniformity that promoted purity and pedigree.

> *I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. (Acts 10:34b-35)*

Ezra and Nehemiah enforced new policies that outlawed marriage to anyone outside of the Jewish community while also calling for closer adherence to purity laws and more faithful support of the temple. The conscious effort to cement a stronger ethnic identity proved successful in preserving the Jews as a people. Still, it also drove a wedge between them and their neighbors, including other Jews whose pedigrees were deemed lacking.

The isolationist worldview prescribed by his inherited faith was all Peter knew, so he had to learn that Christ's saving work was not restricted to the Jews. While in Joppa on a preaching mission, a hungry Peter was praying on a rooftop patio when he had a vision in which God showed him a large sheet containing animals that were edible, but ritually unclean by Jewish law. A voice told Peter, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane" (10:9-16).

The Lord of all (vv. 34-36)

As Peter tried to make sense of the vision, three messengers from a Roman centurion named Cornelius arrived, asking Peter to accompany them to Caesarea and meet with their commanding officer. Cornelius was described as a "God-fearer," a Gentile who worshiped the God of the Jews but had not fully converted through circumcision. The text emphasizes his piety as a man who prayed constantly and gave generous alms to the poor.

Still thinking about his vision, Peter felt led by the Spirit to go with them. When he arrived in Caesarea after a long journey up the coast, he found not only Cornelius but a large group of Gentile God-fearers, all eager to hear a word from God (10:17-33).

Peter knew he was violating Jewish custom by meeting in that setting and acknowledged some awkwardness about it. But when he learned that the Gentiles sought eagerly to hear a message from God, he had little choice but to preach.

Peter began by relating what he himself had only recently learned by connecting his vision of "unclean" but edible animals to his audience of "unclean" Gentiles who also feared God and who wanted to know God better. "I truly understand that God shows no partiality," he said, "but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (10:34b-35).

Overcoming partiality would be an ongoing challenge, not just between Jews and Gentiles, but between classes, genders, and other ethnicities, as well. As the gospel spread and churches blossomed, Paul and others urged believers to treat all people as equal in God's sight (Rom. 2:11, Eph. 2:11-22, Col. 3:25, James 2:1, 1 Pet. 1:17).

Like other Hebrews, Peter had grown up believing that while God was Lord of all nations or ethnic groups, Israel was chosen to be a special people, to live in a unique and potentially rewarding relationship with God.

Exodus 19:5-6 preserves a tradition that "all the earth" was God's, but Israel would be regarded as different:

"Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation."

Peter was now ready to declare, in preaching about Jesus, that "he is Lord of all" (v. 36b).

God's love is universal, reaching out to all people, encouraging them to do what is right and pleasing to God.

A savior for all (vv. 37-41)

After referring twice to God's message (literally, "word") through Christ, Peter got to the point and explained that God had "anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and with power," which Jesus demonstrated by traveling about, doing good deeds and healing people, proving that God was with him and that he had power over evil (v. 38).

Peter spoke as a witness of what happened next, of how "they" put Jesus to death by "hanging him on a tree" (an idiom for crucifixion), and how God had raised him from the dead on the third day (vv. 39-41).

Note Peter's tact in describing Jesus' death. Charges had been brought against Jesus by the Jewish authorities, but Roman soldiers had carried it out. Peter was a Jew in the home of a Roman soldier and surrounded, no doubt, by other soldiers. Instead of assigning blame for the death of Jesus, he says only that an indefinite "they" had killed Jesus.

Peter had already come to believe that Jesus' death was a necessary part of his message and work in the world. When God raised Jesus from the dead and caused him to appear before witnesses, eating and drinking in their company, the disciples became fully convinced that Jesus' message and God's message were one and the same.

Even as he spoke, Peter was learning in practical terms that the good news was intended for all people. Peter would have been present when Jesus ascended to heaven and would have heard his parting words, which Luke described as a promise to the disciples that they would be empowered by the Spirit to "be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Now Peter found himself at the northwestern corner of Judea, beyond Samaria, speaking to a cosmopolitan group of people who may have come from "the ends of the earth" as far as he was concerned. Peter's status as an outsider was clear, but he plunged ahead.

A message for all (vv. 42-43)

Peter recalled how Jesus had "commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead" (v. 42).

What "command" did Peter have in mind? We may think of Matt. 28:19-20, commonly known as "the great commission," or of Luke's version in Acts 1:8.

Luke also had written in his gospel of a post-resurrection occasion when Jesus appeared to the disciples and "opened their minds to understand the scriptures" that taught of him, declaring "that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:45a, 47).

Peter was beginning to understand in practical terms what he had previously known in theory: the gospel really was for all people, and Jesus' disciples were to proclaim it in all places.

Peter's speech suggests that he still may have been uncomfortable with the notion, for he proclaimed the gospel more as a warning than as good news. When he said the disciples were "to preach to the people and to testify," he used a word that can also describe a solemn warning. Since the context involves the prospect of judgment, a better translation might be "to preach to the people and to warn them …," as in NET2 (v. 42).

All would be judged, Peter said, both living and dead – and the criteria of judgment would be one's response to Jesus.

Peter concluded his speech with a claim that "all the prophets" had testified that "everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness through his name" (v. 43). The statement cannot be read literally: not all the prophets spoke of a coming Messiah, and none of them spoke in the specific terms that Peter described.

There was a belief, however, that the prophets had envisioned a coming age in which all peoples would come to worship God. In his speech on the day of Pentecost, Peter quoted Joel 2:32a, saying, "Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2:21).

Thoughts of Pentecost immediately arise when we read of what happened next: while Peter was still speaking and, thus, before his audience made any outward response, "the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word" so that the Gentiles spoke in tongues and praised God, astounding the Jews who had come with Peter (vv. 44-46).

The evidence was clear: the gospel truly was – and is – for all people. Peter was just beginning to accept the radically inclusive nature of God's grace. Have we gotten on board? NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

April 7, 2024

Acts 4:32-35

True Community

> *Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. (Acts 4:32)*

When we read Luke's account of the early Christian community coming together and holding all things "in common," we may find it hard to believe. Are there any circumstances under which we would be willing to adopt a similar lifestyle?

We may gladly share produce from our gardens or buy groceries to help restock a church food pantry. We may contribute to local shelters by writing a check to help people without housing have a good Thanksgiving or Christmas meal, but our generosity is limited.

We are familiar with nuns or monks who foreswear marriage and earthly possessions to live communally in convents or monasteries. Still, few of us have any desire to go that far.

We may have heard of cult-like groups who have become so convinced that Christ is returning soon that they dispose of personal property and live in community as they await the day, but that also has little appeal.

However, a similar belief may have fueled the earliest Christian community's desire for common living. The gospels portray Jesus as implying that he would return within a generation and call his followers to heaven. Those who expected a quick departure would have little incentive to hold onto personal property.

In addition, the times were fraught with danger. If the authorities had seen to Jesus' death, they might come after his followers, too. A sense of foreboding and the possibility of martyrdom could leave people feeling less attached to physical possessions.

Finally, we recall that Luke's account depicts the early days following Pentecost, when the community was Spirit-filled and still rejoicing in their shared experience. The close harmony of the early believers would not last, but Luke portrays it as a thing of beauty while it endured.

A church's reality (v. 32-33)

Twice, following Pentecost, Luke describes the early Christian community as characterized by unity, generosity, and mutual care. The first summary statement is in Acts 2:42-47, where he says, "All who believed were together and had all things in common," selling their possessions and distributing the proceeds "to all, as any had need" (2:42-43).

Luke describes the new Jesus-followers as spending their days together at the temple while eating at home "with glad and generous hearts, praising God having the goodwill of all the people." Apparently, their faith and new lifestyles attracted others, for "day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved" (2:44-47).

The second picture of the early church describes a community that seems too good to be true: "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul," Luke said, as the NRSV translates v. 32a. The word rendered as "soul" is *psuche*, the root of English terms including "psyche" and "psychology." While the KJV, NAS20, and ESV translations also use "soul," the NIV11 and NET2 translate it as "mind." Like the Hebrew *nefesh*, the word *psuche* refers to one's interior life, the conscious awareness of who we are and what we think.

The terms "heart and soul" are metaphorical, describing how the early believers joined in common cause to love and serve Christ and each other. To truly love is to serve.

The newfound spirit of unity and loving service inspired such generous sharing that Luke could say, "No one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common" (v. 32b), a statement that echoes his earlier claim that "All who believed were together and had all things in common" (2:44).

On the surface, this suggests wholesale communal living, where everyone pooled their possessions and lived from a common fund. Does Acts, then, teach a socialist ideology in which no one owns private property or personal wealth?

We must be careful not to draw too many inferences from Luke's summary statement. If, in fact, he intends to

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reflect an entirely communal system, it apparently didn't work very well or last very long. While v. 34 insists there was not a needy person among them in those early days, the church in Jerusalem later became so impoverished that Paul took up a collection to assist it (Rom. 15:25-28, 1 Cor. 16:1-4, 2 Cor. 8:1-15).

Luke's purpose, in any case, is not to make political statements or endorse an economic ideology but to show how the Spirit-infused believers were living out Christ's call to care for one another.

Luke's account assumes that Christian witnesses of word and deed are inseparable. Thus, sandwiched between three verses about social concern, he observes, "With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all" (v. 33).

This statement does three things. First, it injects the apostles into the story. They had not been mentioned in v. 32, but they became significant players in the stories that followed.

Secondly, it describes a characteristic practice of the newly bold apostles, who spoke "with great power" as they testified to the resurrection of Christ. The word "their" is supplied in the NRSV translation: the text says literally, "they gave testimony." The testimony they proclaimed, however, grew from their experience as witnesses of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. The "great power" that emboldened the apostles, the reader assumes, derives from the Holy Spirit, which had come upon them at Pentecost (Acts 2, cf. 1:8, 3:12).

Thirdly, Luke describes the result: "great grace was upon them all." Members of the church had not only experienced grace, but they had learned to express it. Luke's intent is not simply to remind us that the believers had been saved by grace, but to assert that their lives were now characterized by grace.

A spirit of community (vv. 34-35)

Now, Luke returns to the theme of communally shared resources. Acts 2:44 and 4:32 make no mention of the apostles or the method by which economic aid was shared. Still, in v. 35, Luke says that when people sold property for the benefit of the community, they brought the money and "laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as they had need."

This adds a layer of administration to the mix, along with the element of apostolic authority: to put oneself or one's possessions at the feet of another indicated submission to the other's leadership.

These verses offer more insight into the practice of mutual support. Though v. 32 might seem to imply that early believers contributed all their property or funds to a common pool, the verbal tenses in v. 34 suggest that property was sold piecemeal to provide contributions as needs arose or the common fund grew dry.

The verb for "selling" is a present active participle, and the word for "bringing" is in the imperfect tense. Both suggest a type of continual or progressive action. Thus, instead of "they sold and brought," as in NRSV, the phrase could be translated "they were selling and bringing." The NIV11 gets the same point across by introducing the phrase with "From time to time," though those words are not in the text: "From time to time those who owned land or houses sold them and brought the proceeds …"

The text suggests that the ownership of private property or wealth continued, but church members were so filled with grace that they were willing to dispose of it as needed for the common good. As J. Bradley Chance puts it, "the early community can best be described not so much as practicing communal *ownership*, as generous *sharing*" (emphasis by Chance, *Acts* [Smyth & Helwys, 2007], 81).

A community with no needy persons reflects a longstanding ideal for Israel (see Deut. 15:1-11). With the advent of Christ and the power of the Spirit, Luke says the ideal became reality … at least for a time. Evidence suggests that it didn't last. Some members lied about their contributions (Acts 5:1-11). The distribution of goods was unequal at times: Hebrew widows apparently received preferential treatment over those who spoke Greek. This led to the appointment of the prototype deacons, seven men designated to oversee food distribution so the apostles could give more attention to preaching (6:1-6).

In time, the congregation in Jerusalem became so impoverished that Paul solicited an offering for them from the churches in Asia Minor (Rom. 15:25-29). Had an avalanche of poor members joined the community so they could sponge off the generosity of others? Had wealthier members run out of property to donate? Were early believers so sure of Christ's impending return that they had stopped working?

We can't be sure of the answer, but it appears that the early church – like the modern church – experienced periods of both generosity and self-interest. The ideal of a loving community so rich in the Spirit and grace that it leaves no one in need remains a great hope in need of fulfillment.

Nevertheless, the ideal remains, and we should ask ourselves: how does our faith community measure up? NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

April 14, 2024

Acts 3 (RCL 3:12-19)

Why the Surprise?

When Peter saw it, he addressed the people, "You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk?" (Acts 3:12)

Can you think of a single memorable event that led to a major change in your life? Noting how significant such experiences can be, *Smith Magazine* founder Larry Smith collected and published a book of short essays in which contributors were asked to reflect on an experience that had significant impact. In *The Moment: Wild, Poignant, Life-Changing Stories from 125 Writers and Artists Famous and Obscure* (Harper Perennial, 2012), writers speak of a kiss, a fire, a serendipitous meeting, an unexpected epiphany – moments that opened their lives to something new.

Today's reading from Acts speaks of moments that changed not just individual lives, but potentially all peoples' lives. Still in the shadow of Easter's bright sun, we remember how Jesus' predicted but unexpected resurrection had the power to touch the entire world. The impact of the resurrection was especially evident in the first days and weeks after Christ's followers saw him with their own eyes and came to believe that Jesus was indeed all that he had claimed to be.

For many, the moment that changed their lives happened at Pentecost (Acts 2), when a gathered multitude was overcome by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, and no one exhibited a more remarkable change than Peter.

A lame man is healed (vv. 1-11)

In the hours after Jesus' arrest, Peter had been filled with doubt and fear. After Easter, however, and especially after Pentecost, the stalwart apostle was a changed man. Today's text showcases the newly committed Peter.

Luke tells the story with attention to detail. Acts 3 begins with the account of a man well-known to the community for his inability to walk. Every afternoon, as Jews gathered for afternoon prayers, his family parked him in a prime panhandling spot near a temple gate that Luke calls "Beautiful." Showing kindness to the poor was a trademark of Jewish piety, and daily visitors to the temple were among the most devout.

Luke wrote that early followers of Jesus continued to worship at the temple and "were continually in the temple praising God" (Luke 24:53). Prayers were typically offered in the morning, afternoon, and evening. Luke locates the account in Acts 3 as occurring "about the ninth hour," or 3:00 p.m., near the time for the afternoon prayer.

On this day, Luke writes, Peter and John paused beside the beggar as they arrived for afternoon prayers. The man may have hoped they were checking their pockets for pennies, but instead, they were searching their hearts for just the right response.

People seeking alms would often sit with hands outstretched and heads bowed, but Peter would not have it. The text uses an emphatic construction to indicate that he looked closely at the man, caught his attention, and instructed him to look up at them as he spoke. "I have no silver or gold," Peter said, "but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk" (v. 6).

Instead of money, Peter filled the supplicant's hand with his own hand, then tugged him to his feet. Suddenly healed and whole, the man began leaping, dancing, and praising God.

The man's happy antics naturally attracted a very curious crowd, and Peter saw it as a perfect opportunity to be a witness for Christ.

A crowd is surprised (vv. 12-18)

As a spontaneous crowd gathered, Peter delivered an extemporaneous sermon. Like all good preachers, he noted who was listening and tailored his remarks to them. Gathered near the temple gate, most people in the crowd would have been pious Jews on their way to afternoon prayers, so Peter addressed them as "Fellow Israelites." He asked, "Why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk?" (v. 12).

Peter did not want people to misinterpret or think he was responsible for the miraculous healing. Peter wanted his Jewish audience to understand

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Jesus' life and work within the context of their own religious heritage and as the fulfillment of Israel's hopes. Thus, he insists, "The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus" (v. 13a).

The fiery apostle could not resist reminding his hearers that they had turned against Jesus, asserting that Pilate would have released Jesus if not for the influence of certain Jewish leaders. As a result, Peter declared them corporately responsible for Christ's death: "But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead" (vv. 14-15).

When Peter said "His name itself has made this man strong" (v. 16a), he was referring to Jesus. This does not suggest that Jesus' name can be used as a magic word, like "Abracadabra," or that prayers are more effective if we close with "in Jesus' name." Rather, it is the person of Jesus, made effective through faith in Jesus, who brings healing (v. 16b).

After charging his curious listeners with murder (vv. 14-15), Peter softened his approach, speaking to them as "friends" who "acted in ignorance" (v. 17).

Perhaps Peter's awareness of his own failures and denial of Jesus helped him understand the difficulty that devoted Jews would have in accepting the revolutionary way that Christ would remake their faith. In one sense, Peter seems to suggest, they were only fulfilling earlier prophecies that the messiah would suffer. Thus, even their rejection had played a role in God's plan (v. 18, compare 2:22-24).

A challenge is delivered (vv. 19-26)

Even so, Peter believed that repentance was needed. Fulfilling Jesus' prediction of Peter's denial did not make the apostle less guilty. He had needed to repent, as did all who had contributed to Jesus' death (v. 19).

Peter called on his hearers to turn from rejection to acceptance, again putting the message into context, promising "times of refreshing" associated with the coming of the Messiah. Knowing that most Hebrews had expected the Messiah to come as an earthly deliverer, Peter emphasized that, though Jesus had returned to heaven, he would return at "the time of universal restoration" announced by the prophets (vv. 20-21). Calling on Old Testament tradition, Peter spoke of Moses' prediction that God would raise up another prophet like him (Deut. 18:15-18). The author of Deut. 34:10, probably writing just before or during the exile, insisted that no prophet like Moses had arisen in his time. Now, however, Peter names Jesus as the one who came to fulfill the prophecy, and he insists that those who want to be God's chosen must obey him (vv. 23, cf. Gen. 17:14).

Recalling God's promise to Abraham that all the peoples of the earth would be blessed through him and his descendants (Gen. 12:1-3), Peter challenged his audience to recognize that Christ was the fulfillment of the promised blessing. As descendants of Abraham, they were privileged to hear the message first, Peter argued, for "When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you, to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways" (v. 26).

The text presents a similar challenge to contemporary readers. Will we be like Peter and John, boldly proclaiming our faith in Christ, confidently reaching out to bring health and hope to the downtrodden?

Or do we stand in the sandals of those with little expectation of being visited by God's Spirit and the "times of refreshing" God wants us to experience? Do we need to repent?

The resurrection does not necessarily "prove" the existence or deity of Jesus – faith will always be required – but the disciples' changed lives provide encouraging evidence for the truth of such belief.

The apostles had experienced, and continued to live into, a renewed relationship with Christ through the presence of the Spirit, a personal relationship that we can also know. As we await the ultimate "times of refreshing" that will accompany Christ's return, we can believe that Christ lives in us, renews us, strengthens us, and guides us through a continuing process of self-revelation.

Peter's example also reminds us that the natural expression of Christ-in-us is a concern for physical well-being as well as spiritual hope. The disciples followed Jesus' example by combining evangelistic zeal with social ministry, offering present help and eternal hope. People are sometimes surprised to see Christians act this way: delivering groceries to the hungry, building a house for the homeless, and mentoring those who lack jobs or life skills.

But the real surprise should be that many who claim the name of Christ *do not* act this way: they devote their time and resources almost entirely to themselves and their families, with little thought for others. Churches may also fall into this trap, expending significant sums of energy and money to "grow the church" while neglecting the community.

May we live so that others will wonder about our loving lives, and may we reply, "Why are you surprised?" NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

April 21, 2024

Acts 4:1-12 (RCL 4:5-12)

This Is the Way

There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12)

Have you seen the musical or movie version of *Hairspray*? Characters in the drama face struggles on several levels, but the central issue grows from cultural change played out against racial tensions in Baltimore during the 1960s. The story illustrates how powerful and relentless change can be: the notion of racial integration and the emergence of Rhythm & Blues music faced strong resistance from the entrenched and powerful white establishment. However, those who embraced the new order could not be deterred, as illustrated by the high-energy musical finale "You Can't Stop the Beat."

Our text reflects another powerful cultural shift, as the first-century religious establishment tried to squelch the message of Jesus, both before and after his death and resurrection. The temple leaders sought to silence the newly invigorated apostles, but nothing they tried could stop the gospel beat.

A rude interruption (vv. 1-4)

Today's text is a story of conflict that continues the narrative trajectory that began in the previous chapter. Peter and John met a man with paralyzed legs begging outside the temple. Instead of giving him money, they offered him healing in the name of Christ. When the man started dancing and praising God, a crowd of curious onlookers gathered, giving Peter a perfect opportunity to preach.

Peter's sermon challenged his Jewish audience to recognize Christ as the fulfillment of the messianic hopes arising from the Hebrew Scriptures. That message was not music to the ears of the religious authorities in charge of the temple, so they came out to stop it.

Luke names three individuals or groups of people who sought to silence Peter's preaching: "the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees" (v. 1). The priests were in charge of religious teaching and administration. The "captain of the temple," roughly analogous to the "head usher" in some contemporary churches, was responsible for overseeing the daily collections and maintaining order on the temple grounds.

The Sadducees were an influential organization of leaders, both priests and laity, who sought to keep the Jews in line under Roman rule. There was no "Sadducee" position in the temple, but in the first half of the first century, the High Priest was always a member of the Sadducees.

Theologically, the Sadducees were very conservative, accepting only the Torah as Scripture and opposing the emerging belief, popular among the Pharisees, in the resurrection of the dead. It was only natural that Sadducees would be "much annoyed" with Peter and John, "because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead" (v. 2).

Angered by Peter's preaching, the temple leaders arrested him and John (v. 3), continuing the contentious relationship with Jesus' followers that they had developed with Jesus, who had also taught in the temple, had spoken about resurrection (Luke 19:47-48, 20:27-40, 21:37-38), and had been arrested by "chief priests and officers of the temple" (Luke 22:52).

The temple leaders had sufficient authority to arrest and hold other Jews accused of violating religious laws, so they were within their power when they commanded Peter to desist and led them off to a holding cell, "for it was already evening."

But they didn't stop the beat. Luke relates that as the authorities sought to silence the resurrection message, many who had heard their message came to believe it, so that the number of believers reached about 5,000 men, apparently not counting women and children (v. 4).

A loaded question (vv. 5-7)

At some point the next day, their captors marched them before a gathering of "rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem" (v. 5), an apparent reference to the Supreme Sanhedrin, the official ruling body of the Jews. Individual towns had local Sanhedrins, but the one in Jerusalem had supreme authority.

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The head of the Supreme Sanhedrin was the High Priest, whom Luke names as Annas, even though Annas' son-in-law Caiaphas held the position at the time (Matt. 26:3, 57; John 18:13). Some commentators suggest that Annas remained the real "power behind the throne" even though Caiaphas officially held the seat.

Luke also names two men, "John and Alexander," as being present. They must have been notables among "all who were related to the high priestly family" (v. 6). Luke intends to emphasize that the highest officials in early first-century Judaism were all arrayed against Peter and John, who were set in their midst and called to account for daring to teach something contrary to the official position of the temple.

One might have expected the questioning to begin with the disciples' teaching about the resurrection. Instead, their accusers brought out the man whose healing had drawn the crowd to whom Peter had preached on the previous day. They asked, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" (v. 7).

A bold answer (vv. 8-12)

Peter could have given a straightforward answer: he had told the man to rise up and walk "in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth" (3:6). But the apostle, filled with the Holy Spirit, began by reframing the complaints against them. Politely addressing the "rulers of the people and elders," he asked if they were being charged with doing good, with bringing a sick man to health (v. 9). The clear implication would have been, "Is it wrong to do good by healing someone?"

Peter's reference to the man's healing is double-edged: the word translated "healed" is the same verb that can mean "saved" (*sōzō*). Whether the religious authorities caught it or not, Peter's phrasing suggested that the man had been healed spiritually as well as physically.

Having thus turned the question in a more positive direction, Peter gave his accusers the name they wanted: "this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth …" (v. 10a).

Without pausing, Peter then gave them more than they wanted, identifying Jesus Christ as the one "whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead" (v. 10b). In these few words, Peter proclaimed the heart of the gospel: though rejected and killed by humans, Christ was accepted and raised from the dead by God.

Peter called on scripture to shore up his claim, quoting Ps. 118:22 as a foreshadowing of Jesus as a stone rejected by builders before later becoming the cornerstone upon which the remainder of the building rests.

In citing this text, Peter was following the example of Jesus, who had quoted the exact words when the same authorities had questioned him about teaching on the temple grounds (Luke 20:2). Jesus had responded with a parable in which the greedy tenants of a vineyard beat the messengers sent to collect the owner's share and then killed his son in hopes that they could take ownership of the vineyard.

Jesus declared that the owner would take the vineyard away from the unworthy tenants and give it to others, then concluded the parable with the same reference to the rejected stone that became the cornerstone (Luke 20:17).

With remarkable boldness for a village fisherman called before the highest court in Judaism, Peter drew out the double meaning of the word he had used earlier for healing/salvation. "There is salvation in no one else," he said, "for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" (4:12).

Peter believed that with the coming of Christ, the old way of relating to God through temple ritual and keeping the law belonged to the past: any who sought the healing of salvation and the hope of resurrection would find it upon the cornerstone of Christ alone.

Our text stops here, though the story continues. With the well-known and newly healed paralytic standing strong and happy before them, members of the Sanhedrin knew they could not afford to punish the disciples, who had become profoundly popular with the people. So, they discussed the matter among themselves and rather lamely instructed Peter and John to stop preaching or teaching in the name of Jesus (vv. 13-18).

Peter, of course, refused to promise any such thing, despite further threats (vv. 19-22). "We cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard," he proclaimed (v. 20).

On one level, we may think this story no longer applies to us. Do we know anyone who feels threatened by the religious authorities of Judaism? No – but there is always the possibility of confrontation between those who trust the rule-bound religion of former days, and those whose experience with the fresh wind of Christ's Spirit leads them to push for a more relevant understanding of both faith and practice.

Have you ever had such an experience with Christ that you could not keep from speaking about what you had seen and heard? NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

April 28, 2024

Acts 8:26-40

What Hinders Me?

> *As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" (Acts 8:36)*

What do we do with the resurrection story? It can be easy to find inspiration on Easter Sunday, but harder to carry that Easter excitement onward. This was not an issue for the earliest believers. Lectionary texts from Acts in the weeks after Easter explore their growing engagement with the resurrected Christ and a world in need of renewal. The memorable stories emphasize the truth that God's love, Christ's work, and the Spirit's blessing are for all people.

The aftermath of Christ's post-resurrection appearances turned the disciples' lives upside down. No longer plagued by doubt but confident in their call, they proclaimed the gospel not only in Jerusalem, but on into Judea and Samaria. Encounters like the one in today's text propelled the gospel even into faraway lands. The message of salvation through Christ is a borderless gospel offered to all who need the Savior's grace, and no one exhibited that belief more clearly than Philip, an early believer and a powerful witness for Christ.

The Philip of this story is probably not Philip the apostle. Acts 8:1 says that all the apostles remained in Jerusalem, but this Philip was in Samaria when the angel led him to the Ethiopian. He is probably the Philip who was one of the seven prototype "deacons" appointed in Acts 6:1-6 to assist with distributing food to the poor. He may have been among those filled with the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2). A further reading of Acts 6 reveals that people like Stephen and Phillip could also be powerful preachers and evangelists.

Hearing God's call (vv. 26-29)

Luke, who wrote the Book of Acts, reports that God led Philip to go into the countryside and meet an Ethiopian eunuch who was returning home after a pilgrimage to Jerusalem (v. 26). The story is told so matter-of-factly that the appearance of an angel garners little attention.

As Philip went about his business, the angel popped into view and instructed him to go south to the lonesome road leading from Jerusalem to Gaza. As the story is told, that was the extent of the message, not unlike God's command for Abraham to go "to the land that I will show you" (Gen. 12:1).

Philip obeyed, even without knowing his mission. The road from Jerusalem to Gaza connected with the coastal highway that led to Egypt and points south, and somewhere along the way, Philip met the chariot of an official in service to the queen of Ethiopia. The unnamed administrator oversaw the royal treasury, Luke wrote, which would make him a person of considerable prestige (v. 27).

Surprisingly, the official had not come to Jerusalem on diplomatic business, but on a personal pilgrimage to worship at the temple. This indicates that he was a "God-fearer," a term used to describe Gentiles who worshiped Yahweh, the God of the Jews. Having completed his mission, the man was returning home in a stately chariot large enough to include a bench where he could sit and read (v. 28) while a driver handled the horses.

An angel had reportedly sent Philip to meet the Ethiopian, but Luke says "the Spirit" prompted him to run alongside the chariot (v. 29). It must have seemed odd for the official to see a man running beside him, asking questions about what he was reading, but the story suggests that he eagerly invited Philip to join him in the chariot.

Explaining God's message (vv. 30-40)

The traveler was reading from the prophet Isaiah, and the text clearly puzzled him. He could tell that it spoke of a suffering servant of God, but he did not understand the significance of the prophet's words.

The official may have felt like a plumber reading a book on quantum mechanics: he was plenty bright but without the appropriate background. He was probably reading from a Greek translation of Isaiah, for Greek was the language of commerce and politics, and a Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures was in common use. Reading the words of his scroll was one thing; understanding their intent was another.

Isaiah 53:7-8 speaks of one who "was led like a sheep to the slaughter,

and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth." The suffering one was humiliated and deprived of justice, the prophet said, and "his life was taken from the earth" (see also vv. 32-33).

The eunuch had learned much about the law, and apparently he loved the teachings, even though they pointedly excluded him from full acceptance within Judaism (Deut. 23:1). But this text from the prophets was beyond him.

Seeing his confusion, Philip asked the man if he understood what he was reading, and the eunuch admitted he had no hope of comprehending without someone to guide him (vv. 30-31).

Isaiah 53:1-8 is from one of four texts that are often called "Servant Songs" (generally identified as Isaiah 42:1-4, 49:1-6, 50:1-11, and 52:13-53:12). They are found in Second Isaiah chapters 40-55. These prophecies were written during the exile, long after the original Isaiah died. The song speaks of a servant of the Lord who would willingly suffer and die on behalf of others. The whole concept was so far removed from the law with which the eunuch was familiar that he was rightly puzzled.

Not long before, Philip would not have understood, either. But Philip had met Jesus. And, like other early Christians, Philip soon interpreted the puzzling texts as prophecies pointing to the suffering and resurrection of Christ. Based on this new understanding, "Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus" (v. 35).

And, because the official could understand the story of faith that Philip declared – the welcome news that he could be fully accepted into Christ's family despite his ethnic background and altered gender – the eunuch believed. He believed, and he wanted to act on his new belief. So, when they came upon a small body of water, he asked Philip a question that preachers have highlighted ever since: "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" (v. 37). He ordered the chariot to stop, and Philip – believing the gospel was for all people – baptized him (vv. 36-38).

Living as God's example (vv. 39-40)

Once the evangelist had accomplished his purpose, Luke wrote, "the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away," leaving the official to continue homeward, rejoicing in his newfound faith (v. 39). The word for "snatch" is quite emphatic, suggesting the speed with which Philip was removed and set down in a place called Azotus, from which he went on throughout the region and "proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea" (v. 40).

Azotus is the New Testament name for the city known in the Old Testament as Ashdod, one of the five major strongholds of the Philistines. It was located in the coastal plain of southern Palestine. To get from there to Caesarea, on the northern shore, Philip's preaching tour would have followed the main coastal highway and brought him into potential contact with several large population centers.

Reflecting on this story, which clearly portrays Philip as a model for evangelistic emulation, suggests several behavior patterns worthy of a second look.

First, Philip was a faithful follower of Jesus, likely one of the seven appointed in Acts 6 to lead the church's social ministries in Jerusalem. If so, he would have been a man of compassion who shared the characteristic of being "filled with the Holy Spirit and with wisdom" (6:3).

Secondly, Philip listened for God, and paid attention when God spoke. Perhaps it was because he was filled with the Spirit that Philip was so spiritually perceptive. We don't know how he recognized the angel of God in v. 26, or how he sensed the message of God's Spirit in v. 29. But, because Philip was apparently open and listening for divine guidance, he understood when God was speaking to him.

Third, Philip obeyed God, even when it was not convenient. God's call sent Philip well out of his way. He had been in Samaria, in northern Israel, but God's call put him on a road that led southwest from Jerusalem and through the desert to Gaza, where it met the main north-south trade route.

It would have required a long hike for Philip to get to the place of his appointment, and even more effort to keep it. He was told to "Go over to this chariot and join it" (v. 29). The chariot, of course, would have been moving. Philip would have had to run to keep up.

Fourth, Philip responded without prejudice. God called Philip to relate one-on-one to a total stranger who was very different. The Ethiopian had darker skin and wore distinctive clothing. He came from a foreign land with different customs. Greek would have been a second or third language to him, and his altered gender would have been offensive to observant Jews. But none of that hindered Philip from reaching out to him or baptizing him.

What hinders us from reaching out to all people, including those who are different? NFJ

Embracing Paradigm Shifts & Possibilities at the Wild Goose Festival

BY JEFF CLARK

Headlines that once shocked us are becoming less surprising. Faith communities are producing more divisive boundaries."Us-versus-them" thinking is so dominant that significant conflicts are perpetually unresolved, making enemies of us all.

Is this the end? Or could it be the end of the beginning? Perhaps we are experiencing the dying gasps of entrenched social constructions refusing to let go. Maybe what we are feeling are enticements to systemic level change.

A seismic, pervasive paradigm shift is upsetting convention, challenging values and inviting the complete restructuring of social systems. Responding to these dramatic changes requires extraordinary imagination and deeply invested innovation to increase human flourishing and expand social justice.

The Wild Goose Festival: Spirit | Justice | Music | Art is a transformational, experiential gathering and a hopeful place for working together toward these ends.

The festival emerges from a Celtic tradition that sees the Holy Spirit as untamed, disruptive and surprising. This Spirit upsets the status quo, fans the flames of hope and creates space for imagination, like a *WILD Goose*.

Wild Goose participants visit with many of today's most creative, thought-provoking authors, artists and status-quo disrupters. They dive into lively conversations with dreamers, social justice activists and peace-makers. Some of these folks are on the official program. Most are not.

Author Brian McLaren sums it up this way: "At Wild Goose, people flock together to celebrate a way of life rooted in faith, justice, creativity, and beauty. It's like a family reunion where you meet relatives you never knew you had. There's nothing like it, and I look forward to it as one of the best weeks of my year."

Wild Goose gathers over a long weekend in July, from Thursday evening until a powerful closing gathering on Sunday around noon. In addition to sessions, intentional and serendipitous conversations occur in tents, under shade trees, around discussion circles and at campsites. There are celebrations with nightly Beer and Hymn gatherings, as well as incredible music. And there is dance – silent disco, honky-tonk, contra dancing – so much dancing. And creation and encouragement.

Many people camp, which is included in the cost. Hundreds of others stay in RVs or at hotels nearby. There are several options for campers to rent camping gear on-site, ranging from basic accommodations to air-conditioned tents.

Wild Goose Pre-Festival: Summer Faith & Democracy Summit

In addition to sessions from Thursday evening through Sunday, Wild Goose offers day-long, cohort-based pre-festival gatherings on Thursday. Led by high-impact thought leaders, these gatherings present a creative, drill-down opportunity for a closer look at important issues.

In this defining election year, Christian nationalism will be a Wild Goose focus. A renowned leadership team headed by Jim Wallis, Obery Hendricks and Jacqui Lewis will anchor the pre-festival "Summer Faith & Democracy Summit."

The Summit will build on a series led by Wallis, New York Times bestselling author of *The False White Gospel: Rejecting Christian Nationalism, Reclaiming True Faith, and Refounding Democracy.* For decades, Wallis, founder of *Sojourners* and now the Georgetown University Center on Faith and Justice director, has been a cutting-edge leader helping create the lexicon of social justice conversations.

Cornell West calls Obery Hendricks "one of the last few grand prophetic intellectuals." As a seminary president, professor, scholar, author and more, Hendricks is known as one of the foremost commentators on the intersection of religion and political economy.

Dr. Hendricks' book, *The Politics of Jesus: Rediscovering the True Revolutionary Nature of Jesus' Teaching and How They Have Been Corrupted*, is considered by many to be a classic. His most recent work, *Christians Against Christianity: How Right-Wing Evangelicals Are Destroying Our Nation and Our Faith*, challenges right-wing evangelicals on their own terrain.

Jacqui Lewis, pastor of NYC's Middle Collegiate Church, is a widely regarded public theologian, author, conference curator and sought-after media personality. Her Ph.D. in Psychology and Religion gives her a unique understanding of the world. Her years of on-the-ground social justice engagement lend remarkable insight and credibility.

Other 2024 co-creators will include David Gushee, author of *Defending Democracy from its Christian Enemies* and Doug Pagitt, executive director of Vote Common Good. Both Gushee and Pagitt are leading voices in calling people of faith to help advance principles of good faith in the public square. NFJ

– Jeff Clark is the President/Producer of Wild Goose Festival

Editor's Note: Good Faith Media is partnering with Wild Goose Festival in 2024 to provide content and amplify the message of this exciting gathering. In addition to coverage and reflections from the festival in Nurturing Faith Journal, our online daily content at goodfaithmedia.org will feature articles from Wild Goose co-creators. Wild Goose Festival will take place from July 11-14 in Union Grove, North Carolina.

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"A Most Flourishing Civil State"

How One Tiny New England Colony Defied Theocracy and Introduced Freedom to the New World

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

Still in its infancy, God's Kingdom in the New World was in trouble. "Heretics" bearing tidings of actual freedom were knocking at the door of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Return of Roger Williams from New England with 1644 Patent

However, these were no ordinary heretics. They included John Cotton, the most eminent clergyman in the colony, and Anne Hutchinson, an uppity, self-educated midwife. Hutchinson was a follower of Cotton but more charismatic than the Cambridge-educated minister. Both arrived in the colonies in 1633 after fleeing the authoritarian Church of England in the Old World, seeking refuge with fellow Puritans in New England.

Cotton and Hutchinson declared that faith in Jesus was the way to God. Some Puritans opened their hearts to the idea, while others responded with a "not so fast." They believed freedom and the primary requirement for salvation and citizenship was obedience to Old Testament biblical law. To believe otherwise, they proclaimed, was heresy.

Hutchinson said this was nonsense, that faith was the only way. Unimpressed with her conviction or what they considered her heresy, New England's authoritarian Puritans would not relent. Soon, the fiery preacher found herself excommunicated and banished from the colony. In time, she would find a new home in the tiny, fledgling colony of Rhode Island, the singular place in New England where freedom of conscience and religion was respected and protected for all citizens.

First in a series on religious liberty in the New World

Recognizing that the Puritan leaders of New England were every bit as authoritarian as the Church of England, John Cotton had a decision to make. He had hoped to find a more generous Christianity in the New World. But he also loved high positions and loathed the prospect of being an outsider. Setting aside his principles, he made up with fellow Puritan ministers and wholeheartedly embraced authoritarian New England.

THE LAW OF MOSES

John Cotton, now obedient, maintained his prominence and influence on both sides of the ocean, swiftly securing his position as a leading defender of theocracy in the New World. Cotton and his new authoritarian colleagues determined that "strict discipline" in civil and family affairs was necessary "to the honor and safety of the gospel."

He was chosen to set forth "a body of fundamentals … laws agreeable to the Word of God," as followed by Puritans. Cotton eagerly began the task and, in mere months, penned *How Far Moses Judicialls Bind Massachusetts*, a reiteration of mosaic biblical law preached and mandated by New England divines, but detached from the gospel.

"The more any law smells of man, the more unprofitable" it would be, Cotton decreed. In modern terminology, he summarily dismissed human rights as ungodly. According to Cotton, Mosaic law was God's law, and God's law was the foundation of the New World, binding "all" to "moral equity."

Next, in compiling *An Abstract of the Laws of New England*, Cotton extensively noted the biblical scriptures from which the laws of New England were authorized and derived. Nineteen biblical passages prescribed the civil duties of magistrates, including preserving the true faith. All but two of these passages were from the Old

Boston First Meeting House Site. Photo by Bruce Gourley.

Testament. Those from the New Testament were from non-gospel texts.

Even New England's laws regarding "Inheritance," "Commerce" and "Trespasses" were based on the Old Testament, with a few non-gospel New Testament passages thrown in here and there for good measure. No section of laws, however, garnered more biblical support than that labeled "Crimes."

As prescribed in the Torah, 32 biblical criminal offenses were deemed deserving of severe punishment. Crimes worthy of death, according to Mosaic law, included blasphemy, witchcraft, heresy, worship of graven images, sabbath breaking and sexual deviation of many kinds, including sodomy (homosexuality) and bestiality. Rebellious children who refused to obey their parents could also be executed.

Lesser biblical crimes were also punishable. These included consequences such as "stripes" (flogging), a "hot iron" (branding), or even "boring through the tongue" (much worse, presumably, than ear piercing).

An Abstract of the Laws of New England's theocracies ended with these words: "The Lord is our Judge, the Lord is our Law-giver, The Lord is our King, He will favor us. Isaiah 33:22".

However, not everyone was favored by the Old Testament God of New England.

SEX, BAPTISTS, QUAKER'S AND WITCHES

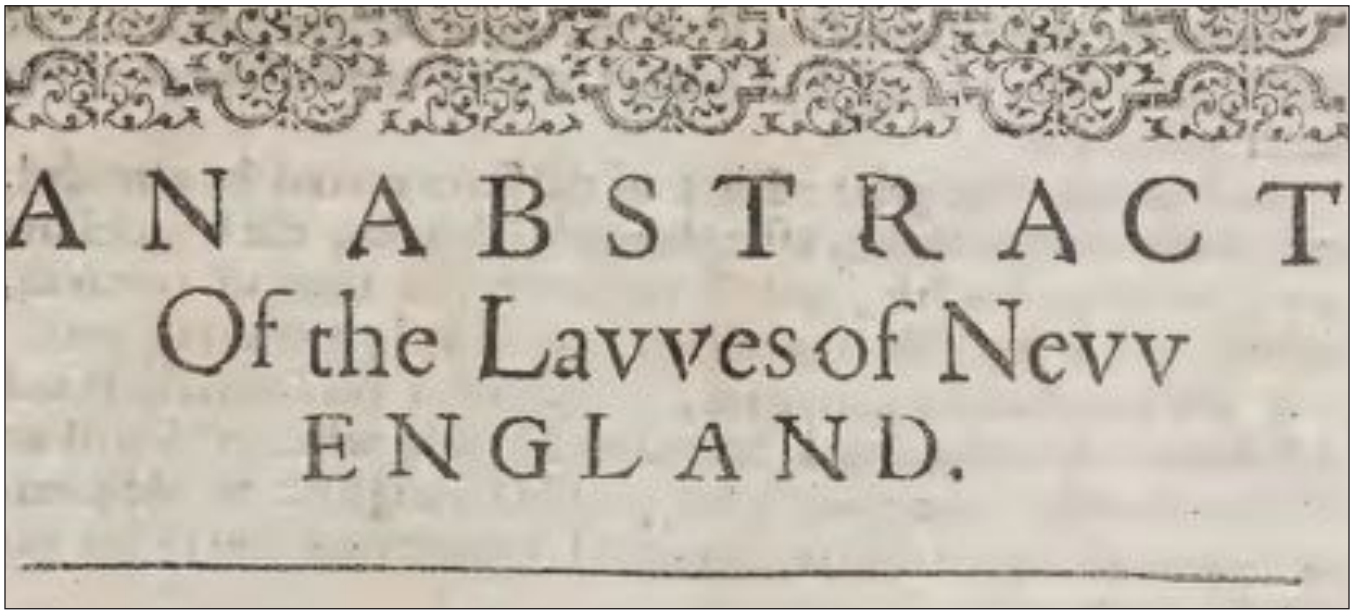
With New England's laws now in plain writing, the Puritan ministers of Massachusetts Bay were often called upon by civil authorities to appropriately clarify how to punish the most egregious crimes. These almost inevitably involved sexual acts forbidden by Mosaic law.

The ink had barely dried on *An Abstract of the Laws of New England* when, in 1642, the Governor of Massachusetts, Richard Bellingham, posed a series of questions to Puritan ministers, seeking to ascertain precisely what penalties should be applied for various iterations of sodomy, bestiality and adultery.

The debate over the specific possible variations of a range of sexual acts was so intense that one is left wondering if there were any Puritans actually interested in traditional "morality." From their readings of Mosaic law, the clergy recommended death for many sexual offenses and leniency for others whose sexual explorations were deemed of a less sinful nature.

Confident of their calling by God to maintain biblical law and order, Puritan ministers and magistrates in New England perceived themselves to be exercising their religious freedom to punish sin. It didn't seem to bother them that their perception was at odds with the teachings of Jesus, who had confounded the puritanical religious leaders of his day by being dismissive of harsh Old Testament punishments.

Setting the example of Jesus aside, from the 1640s into the early 1660s in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Puritans routinely lashed, jailed, banished and, in some cases, executed a long list of "heretics." These included Baptists, Quakers and accused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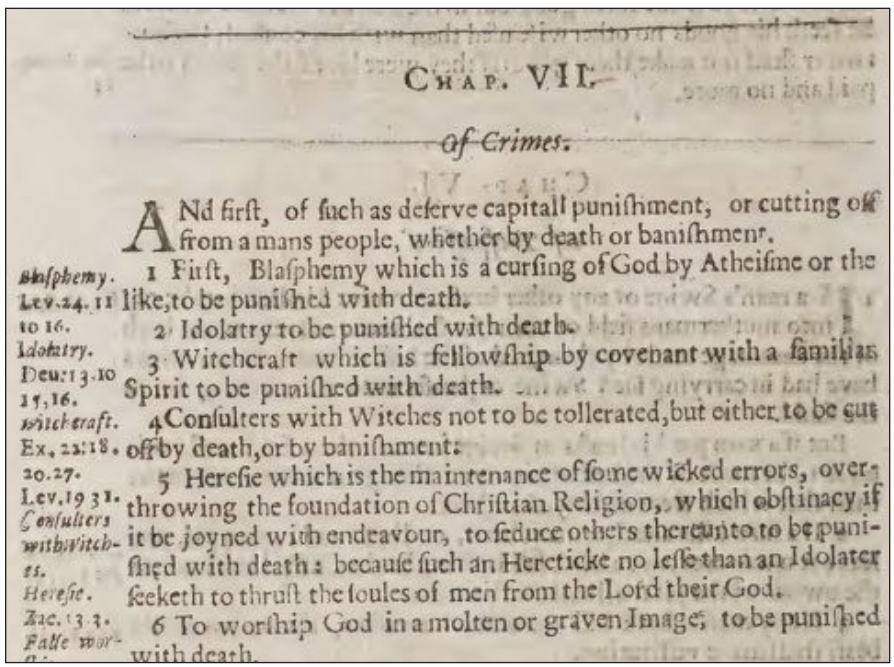
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of Crimes.

AND first, of such as deserve capitall punishment, or cutting off from a mans people, whether by death or banishment.

Blasphemy. Lev.24.11 to 16. 1 First, Blasphemy which is a cursing of God by Atheisme or the like, to be punished with death.

Idolatry. Deu:13.10 15,16. 2 Idolatry to be punished with death.

Witchcraft. Ex.22:18. 20.27. Lev.19 31. 3 Witchcraft which is fellowship by covenant with a familiar Spirit to be punished with death.

Consulters with Witches. 4 Consulters with Witches not to be tollerated, but either to be cut off by death, or by banishment.

Heresie. Zac.13.3. False wor- 5 Heresie which is the maintenance of some wicked errors, overthrowing the foundation of Christian Religion, which obstinacy if it be joyned with endeavour, to seduce others thereunto to be punished with death: because such an Hereticke no lesse than an Idolater seeketh to thrust the soules of men from the Lord their God.

6 To worship God in a molten or graven Image, to be punished with death.

Abstract Crimes

witches, among others. The Puritans justified these actions in the name of their religious freedom to impose biblical law on civic life.

It wasn't until a public backlash against a series of brutal public hangings of Quakers from 1659-1661 that the harshest of persecutions showed any signs of moderating. Even so, the biblical theocracies of the Puritans remained intolerant of non-conformity and always alert of devilish schemes. This progressed to the point where, in 1692, clergy and civil authorities in Salem began attributing odd illnesses to witchcraft. In a mass hysteria in which people perceived seeing the devil at every turn, the Puritans accused more than 200 people of witchcraft. Over the next two years, 20 of the accused were executed.

"NEW AND DANGEROUS OPINIONS"

Among the heretics banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony was Roger Williams, an unorthodox clergyman from the Old World. He was summoned, tried, convicted and sent packing in 1635 for his opposition to theocracy and advocacy for the heresy of universal freedom of conscience and religion – "new and dangerous opinions," according to the Puritans.

Equal freedom of conscience and religion for *everyone*? Williams, according to the opinion of Bible-minded Puritan clergy and theologians throughout all of New England, was a madman, an emissary of the devil and they were glad to be rid of him. Or so they thought.

Determined more than ever to bring freedom to the New World, the convicted and banished Roger Williams transformed himself into Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island and the first Baptist Church on the soil of what would become the United States of America.

A friend to the Native Narragansett people, Williams, in 1636, obtained land from the tribe on which he established his new colony – initially known as "Providence Plantations." The colony was founded on universal freedom of conscience and religion. Two years later, Williams gathered into a church several Baptists who had migrated from theocratic colonies to Providence Plantations in search of freedom. That church still exists today and is known as the First Baptist Church of America.

In almost all the colonies, only properly-believing Christians had full rights as citizens. Not so in Rhode Island. A patent from Parliamentary England obtained in

1643 decreed that "by the voluntary consent of all, or the greater part of them, they shall find most suitable to their Estate and Condition; and, for that End, to make and ordain such Civil Laws and Constitutions" as desired. Three years later, Rhode Islanders did just that, to the horror of the rest of New England, establishing a secular democracy.

"Scandalous" cannot begin to describe the 1647 "Acts and Orders" of Rhode Island that followed. Not only did Rhode Island's diverse citizenry fail to crib their laws from the Old Testament – as did the rest of New England – but they also ignored religion altogether. To Puritans, civil laws not based on the Bible were inconceivable; to Rhode Islanders, a secular government was necessary to protect freedom and rights for all. They were the first to take such a bold step.

Threatened by the arrival of actual freedom in the New World, the theocratic colonies doubled their efforts to dissolve Rhode Island. The following 15 years saw extraordinary unrest in England, including a Civil War, the dissolution of the monarchy, the declaration of an English Commonwealth and then the return of the monarchy. Against this backdrop, leading biblical theocrats and opposing advocates for freedom worked their connections in the Old World.

Progressively, more seekers of true freedom deserted puritanical theocracies and poured into Rhode Island. This led to Roger Williams and his fellow citizens securing a permanent charter from England's King Charles II in 1663 for their outlier colony, enshrining into law their "new and dangerous opinions."

"A LIVELY EXPERIMENT"

Rhode Island was created to "hold forth a lively experiment, that a most flourishing civil state may stand and best be maintained, and that among our English subjects, with a full liberty in religious concernments … secure … free exercise and enjoyment of all their civil and religious rights." This established the colony as the one place in New England founded upon actual freedom.

Charles II, though, had granted the charter with doubts. "Our subjects," he noted of the petitioners, "with so much travail" have sought their own "liberty" to "preserve … true Christian faith and worship of God."

But "some of the people and inhabitants" of the colony, he observed gravely, "cannot, in their private opinions, conform to the public exercise of religion, according to the liturgy, forms and ceremonies of the Church of England, or take or subscribe the oaths and articles made and established in that behalf."

Previously inconceivable to the king, persons of other persuasions would now be officially allowed to follow their consciences in Rhode Island.

Although he granted the charter, Charles II nevertheless understood the problem that Rhode Island posed. Nowhere else in New England were his subjects exempted from obedience to the Church of England. Thus, the outlier colony angered the Church and other New World colonies. Charles II's approval for the charter was testimony to the determination and influence of Roger Williams and his allies.

But trouble was bound to follow with the arrival of actual freedom in the New World.

Hopefully, the "lively experiment" would not infect Old England. "By reason of the remote distances" between the Old and New worlds, the charter spelled out on the King's behalf, there "will (as we hope) be no breach of the unity and uniformity established in this nation."

Maybe.

THE DEMON IN THE HOUSE

Begrudgingly, the theocratic colonies accepted the reality that they could not eradicate the poison of freedom that infected the Rhode Island colony. "Full liberty" was an affront to their God, a demon at the door of proper Christianity. Keeping the door barred against human rights would now be more difficult in the Puritan colonies.

Until, that is, more troubles with nearby Indians surfaced.

Theocratic New England had long resented Rhode Island's coddling of Native peoples. Williams and his inclusive colony appeared to have little interest in converting them to Christianity. For this, there was no excuse. In the name of Christianity, Indians required subjugation.

Increasingly, the theocrats made life more and more difficult for their Native neighbors. Eventually, though, the victims of their hostilities, oppression and violence had enough.

An uneasy decade had passed since Rhode Island's official charter was granted. During this time, Roger Williams tried to calm rising tensions between the Natives and theocratic colonies. He failed, however, as the First Indian War broke out when enraged Native tribes declared war on Puritan New England.

The theocratic colonies seized on the war as an opportunity to punish Rhode Island.

Under the pretext of war, the three most oppressive colonies – Massachusetts, Connecticut and Plymouth – illegally invaded Rhode Island for its insistence on remaining friendly with the Natives. Roger Williams tried to stay neutral during the war, but his efforts to broker peace failed. The battle raged all over. Colonial forces prevailed, although at the price of much devastation, including in Rhode Island.

In its victory, New England enslaved many of the Native men and sold them to enslavers in Bermuda, Barbados, Jamaica, Spain, Portugal, Madeira and the Azores. Numerous Native women and children left behind were forced into indentured servitude or slavery. Williams himself purchased several, a stain upon his legacy.

Two decades later, the first slave ship from Africa arrived in Rhode Island. Many more would follow. In the colony founded upon freedom for all, the enslavement of non-whites was a disgrace that would remain for generations, a stain that could not be whitewashed, a demon lurking in the house of conscience and Christianity alike.

Nevertheless, the revolution of freedom had begun in Rhode Island. In time, it would reach greater heights. NFJ

II Samuel 15:5-12

A Second Chance at Adulthood

BY KEITH HERRON

Undoubtedly, the second half of life is different than the first. At the mid-point of adulthood, a curiosity begins to take shape by connecting dots, as if life is a puzzle to be solved. Middle adulthood is when the seeds of the past are in a delicate dance with the seeds of the future. We have worked diligently to make something of ourselves through education and vocation. We have forged our most intimate relationships.

Returning to the story of David can be instructive.

Since there had been no announcement of a successor, David's sons jockeyed with one another over who would seize the throne when the time was right.

David's sons and daughters exhibited all the excesses children of monarchies are known to hold. They were rich and surrounded by servants whose only jobs were to supply the lavish needs of the children of the great king of Israel. They were well-educated but foolishly raised.

David had not set the normal boundaries that most parents put around their children to help them learn the lessons he undoubtedly learned from his father and mother as a poor shepherd boy in Bethlehem.

One of David's sons, Amnon, was so filled with his own arrogant, self-serving sexual appetite that he raped his half-sister, Tamar. When word of his violent abuse reached the king's ears, David refused to do anything about it. "What can one do?" he asked himself. This was just one in a long line of less severe offenses that had been ignored. The prior incidents had been swept under the carpets of the king's quarters and forgotten, or so Amnon thought.

But this crime would not disappear. The offense against Amnon's sister boiled under the surface of her brother Absalom's heart. Absalom plotted the punishment his father refused to carry out, killing Amnon for his sin.

David winked at that as well.

The sins of David's children continued unchecked until Absalom gathered his loyal forces and waged war against his father in an attempt to take over the throne. David found himself challenged by his son and caught in a quandary of what to do. In waging war against Absalom, David made it clear to all his soldiers that there was one person they did not have the power to kill on the field of battle. They were to spare Absalom's life, or they would face David's anger.

But the men who served David faithfully were also charged to protect him to the point of death. They were trapped under conflicting commands and faced with the choice of honoring their king's command to spare Absalom's life or allowing the threat of Absalom against David to continue. The death of Absalom was like a knife piercing David's heart, and the news of his son's murder overwhelmed him with grief.

The painful lesson is that we can't always protect our children from committing destructive acts. We are ultimately powerless to protect them from the world's harsh realities. Kids eventually grow into adults who make wise and foolish choices, and we can't be there to guide them. But we can still struggle with them, and like David, our hearts may break, and we may weep because of what happens to them.

We have built a life from the bits and pieces. But something is missing. In this Middle Passage, we must ask ourselves what we want to do or be.

The idea that "nothing is wasted" is a hopeful lifeline as we recalibrate the direction of our lives. Some come to this wisdom easier than others. Some wait too long to make changes. How do you move forward in a new direction when you have a life partner, children, coworkers and others who depend on you to stay the course? The window of opportunity may close quickly, and you may need to make peace with the path you have taken.

Survival requires change. Yet, in the interconnected world of family, we often see others resist our essential impulse to change, even as we rethink and recalibrate our lives and chart new paths.

The first task of middle adulthood is to recover personal authority. As children, we were naïve and dependent, so much so that narcissism was considered normal. In childhood and adolescence, we resisted the need to own our own lives, make our own choices and take responsibility for those choices.

This article on **middle adulthood** is the fourth in a five-part series on the seasons of life.

We have built a life from the bits and pieces. But something is missing. In this Middle Passage, we must ask ourselves what we want to do or be.

We incorporated the values and demands of others but may have given away too much of ourselves to please others.

In maturity, we must make our own assessment of this issue. We must determine whether a course correction can help us find our original selves. We must make room for our personal needs, be true to ourselves and conform less to how others would alter our core selves for their own needs.

Carl Jung noted humorously that most of us live in shoes that are too small for us. Walking in shoes too small for us is far easier than stepping into the largeness of life the soul expects and demands.

Many of us experience religious systems as fixed thinking. Some may resist the urge to face their childhood beliefs, feeling that doing so is a mark of unfaithfulness. If we don't do the hard work of finding a personal spirituality befitting the challenge of our lives, we will live a faith trapped in concrete thinking rather than one captivated by the profound mysteries we wish to explore.

A mature spirituality seldom provides certainty but will stimulate the honesty to ask increasingly significant questions. Many experience this crisis of change in their middle years after reawakening an awareness of their lives through deep reflection. All the grinding to create a life without reflection must give way to the courage to go in new directions to recover ourselves and fulfill our calling.

We may experience this as an itch, a twitch, a subtle demand or a deep inner yearning. No matter what it feels like, we must make the necessary changes or die. How we accept the challenge of change will vary from person to person.

Some will choose symbolic actions pointing to an inner shift, such as acquiring a tattoo of some deep meaning. Some will accept a challenge they have put off, like hiking the Appalachian Trail. Others will make a pilgrimage, such as walking the Camino de Santiago in Spain. Some will go back to school. Others may leave the work that has consumed them for the last several decades and do something different, such as attending law school or opening a soup kitchen or bike shop. Some will grow their hair long or cut it all off, take up a time-consuming hobby or write a book.

The point is not so much the thing itself but what it means. Listen again to the wisdom of Mary Oliver, who asks, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" NFJ

— Rev. Dr. Keith D. Herron, Lawrence, KS

Remembering Baptist Giants

BY LARRY HOVIS

In recent years, we have experienced the loss of several notable public figures in American culture. The same is true of our Baptist family. I would like to pay tribute to two of them – Randall Lolley and Jack Causey.

Randall died on March 21, 2022. Jack passed away the following year, on November 28, 2023. These two men were of the same generation. Each had a significant impact on Baptists in North Carolina and beyond. They had much in common.

A Great Generation for Baptists

Though neither fought in World War II, they were part of a "greatest generation" for Baptists, particularly moderate Baptists in the South, alongside luminaries such as Jimmy Carter, Jimmy Allen and Cecil Sherman. They were nurtured, formed and shaped in what was, many believe, the most significant period of Southern Baptist history – the mid-twentieth century. Yet when the fundamentalist takeover occurred in the Southern Baptist Convention, they gave up power and stepped out in faith, first to oppose fundamentalism, then to offer courageous leadership in the fledgling Cooperative Baptist movement.

Pastors to Pastors

Both Randall and Jack were pastors to pastors. Each began his congregational ministry as a pastoral intern at First Baptist Church of Greensboro, North Carolina. Each served as pastor of significant congregations in the Carolinas.

Randall helped shape a generation of pastors as a theological educator through his Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary presidency. Many of us consider the "Lolley years" the best in that institution's history.

Jack served as a "matchmaker" for pastors and congregations, informally through his vast network and formally through his work at the Center for Congregational Health and CBF of North Carolina. Ministers and congregational lay leaders alike looked to Jack for advice and support, especially during times of transition.

Leading Wives

It is impossible to think of these men without also thinking of their wives. Lou Lolley and Mary Lib Causey were almost as well-known as their husbands. Neither man would have been as accomplished or well-respected without his wife.

Lou and Mary Lib followed the traditional pathway of devoting their lives to their family and their husband's career. Yet each was a "modern woman" who exercised leadership in their families, churches, communities and husbands' careers. Neither were quiet or retiring. Both had strong personalities and spoke their minds. Their husbands depended on them for support, strategic advice and counsel.

The impact of these women can be seen in the fact that the only named scholarship funds for CBF North Carolina pay tribute to each couple – the Randall and Lou Lolley Endowment for Theological Education and the Jack and Mary Lib Causey Scholarship Fund. The legacy of these men and their equally accomplished wives lives on in the preparation and support of women and men for congregational leadership.

Deep South Transplants

Randall and Jack were both from the Deep South. Jack was born and raised in Mississippi. Randall often said he hailed from "L.A. – lower Alabama"! Yet each man exercised his ministry in the Carolinas. Randall served exclusively in North Carolina, and Jack served in both North and South Carolina.

Although the communities where they were raised and those where they served were in the South, the cultures were quite different. The Carolinas provided fertile soil for the maximum use of their gifts. We will be forever grateful to God for lending us the significant pastoral and leadership skills of these "adopted sons" for their long and distinguished careers.

Pioneer Cooperative Baptists

Jack and Randall were born, nurtured, educated, formed by and ministered for many years in Southern Baptist churches and institutions. Randall led a Southern Baptist seminary. Jack pastored prominent Southern Baptist churches and was president of the General Board of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina. However, they were instrumental in the founding and leadership of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

They refused to go along with what they perceived to be a betrayal of genuine Baptist ideals in the Southern Baptist Convention, gave up positions of influence and power and cast their lots with the fledging CBF movement. Each man served in important volunteer leadership roles in CBF life at the state and national levels. Jack served on the staff of CBF North Carolina for almost a decade after he retired from pastoral ministry. It is not an overstatement that the CBF movement would be diminished today without their contributions, influence and leadership.

The world in general, and the Baptist world in particular, changed dramatically during the nine decades Randall and Jack lived and served their Lord and Baptist family. I doubt we will view anyone of my generation, or those who come after me, with the same kind of admiration we do these men and others like them. They were called to ministry and leadership at a unique moment in history. May we strive to be good stewards of their legacy, realizing we truly stand on the shoulders of Baptist giants. NFJ

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

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For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations. -Psalm 100:5

What Rosalynn Carter, Ethel Cain, and the Rise of Global Christianity Says About Us

Good Faith Media Online: An Analysis of Top Daily Stories

BY CRAIG NASH

Readers of this journal come by its stories and resources intentionally. Whether by individual subscription or through a church, deliberate steps were taken to place a physical or digital copy in your hands or on your device. This is one of the timeless aspects of publications designed for print—you have to want it to get it.

An advantage this provides Good Faith Media (GFM) in crafting content for *Nurturing Faith Journal* is that we can discern, over time, whether what we create and the services we provide are helpful and well-received. Our value to you and your churches can be measured by new subscriptions and renewals, as well as written and vocal feedback.

However, how readers come across and interact with the daily online content we provide on goodfaithmedia.org is far more varied and challenging to predict. We can measure it, of course. There are sophisticated digital tools that show us how a reader finds a particular article, where they are in the world when they click on it, how long they keep their computer's browser on the story and on which type of device they are reading it, among other data.

But the questions these analytical tools cannot answer for us are "why?" With more information released online on a given day than was available for thousands of combined years of human history, why would a reader choose a particular article over another to read? Why does a story a writer worked on for months get a handful of clicks and another thrown together in a few hours go viral? Why do some readers spend a few seconds on an article while others linger and return to it repeatedly?

There are ways to uncover this qualitative data, such as surveys and personal contacts, which we will utilize more frequently in the coming months. In the meantime, reflecting on the possible answers to these "why" questions can be an enjoyable and helpful practice.

Good Faith Media creates, curates and shares around a thousand original opinion pieces, news items, and book, film and music reviews that appear online each year. These emanate from our mission statement to "provide reflection and resources at the intersection of faith and culture through an inclusive Christian lens." While the value of a given article can't be measured by the number of people who read it, a blurry picture of who we are as a community of writers and readers can emerge by looking at the most widely accessed content.

The three most widely read articles released between January and early December last year help clarify this picture.

Growth of Global Christianity

In January 2023, the Center for Global Christianity at Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary released a report estimating the worldwide Christian population to be 3.3 billion by 2050, up from 2.6 billion in 2023. This represents a slight uptick from previous estimates. In February 2023, Zach Dawes Jr., who was GFM's managing editor at the time, wrote a news brief breaking down some of the specific findings from the report.

Some of the findings Dawes highlighted in the brief include that the percentage of Christians around the world, compared with the total population, will remain steady between 2023 and 2050 after a 2% decrease between 1900 and 2000. Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians are experiencing the highest levels of increase, while Roman Catholics are projected to remain the most populous Christian tradition. The African continent is witnessing the highest growth rate in Christianity, with North America and Europe experiencing the lowest. Additionally, the global Muslim population is growing at rates higher than any other religious tradition.

News briefs like the one Dawes wrote on the growth of global Christianity have been a consistent resource GFM has provided over the years. They are part of the legacy of Robert Parham's work with the Baptist Center for Ethics and help break down and demystify academic research for a broad audience. Most news briefs are read by a smaller audience than opinion pieces but have a slow, steady burn over time as pastors, students and general readers seek tools to help them understand a topic they may be stumped on. Dawes' piece wasn't only the most-read article throughout most of 2023; it was also read more than any other article on most days.

The Life and Death of Ethel Cain

In 2022, Ethel Cain released "Preachers Daughter," a southern gothic concept album that tells the story of a young woman who escapes her abusive Southern Baptist community and begins a journey that leads her into a series of precarious situations. The songs spoke to abuse, drug use and death. But there was also hope sprinkled in. The album was praised by critics and received a boost in notoriety when Barack Obama

Scan the QR code to read "Global Christian Population Projected to Reach 3.3 Billion by 2050" by Zach Dawes Jr. Published February 13, 2023.

Scan the QR code to read "Rosalynn Carter Showed Quiet Leadership and Deep Compassion" by John D. Pierce. Published November 20, 2023.

included "American Teenager," an anti-war single from the project, on his end-of-the-year favorites list.

More than a year after its release, Cally Chisholm, GFM's creative coordinator for publishing and marketing, wrote a description and reflection on the album. Her article was published against the backdrop of the long fallout from a 2022 report uncovering a two-decade history of the Southern Baptist Convention covering up and protecting ministers who had been credibly accused of sexual assault. Chisholm noted that by immersing ourselves in Ethel Cain's story, "we can explore what it means to live in a community overrun with Christian nationalist ideologies and how this shapes and impacts young women living in small southern communities."

There is a moment in the album where, as Chisholm notes, "Ethel longs for the familiar comfort of church hymns sung by choirs—an aspect of life she so desperately wanted to escape in the beginning." This mirrors an ambivalence Hayden Silas Anhedönia, who goes by the stage name Ethel Cain, has expressed in interviews about her experience with the church.

Whether it was due to Ethel Cain's devoted fanbase, her elevated profile after Obama's recommendation or other various reasons, thousands of readers sought Chisholm's well-crafted review of the article from the moment it was published in August 2023.

Rosalynn Carter

On November 19, 2023, former First Lady Rosalynn Carter passed away at age 96. She had spent several months in hospice care after a dementia diagnosis. Rosalynn Carter grew up Methodist but became a Baptist after marrying her husband, Jimmy Carter, who would become the 39th President of the United States. After their Southern Baptist Church refused to accept a black man for membership, they, along with others, left to form Maranatha Baptist Church, where they remained active members. The Carters would later disassociate altogether from the SBC over the issue of women in ministry.

After Carter's death, the soon-to-be-retired executive editor of this publication, John D. Pierce wrote a news piece for GFM that reflected on Carter's extraordinary life and service. In the article, Pierce drew from interviews Mrs. Carter gave him for "*Baptists Today*" (now "*Nurturing Faith Journal*"). He shared quotes about her joy at being ordained a deacon at Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Georgia, and her decades-long advocacy for people who experience mental illness.

Pierce also wrote of the Carters' longstanding service to Habitat for Humanity and their annual work projects, which enlisted thousands of volunteers to help build homes for the unhoused.

The *Baptists Today/Nurturing Faith* connections to Georgia are strong. Pierce is from the Peach State and had several opportunities over the years to meet with the Carters for interviews.

The Good Faith Community

In the current digital environment, stories on the internet can be passed around for many reasons that have nothing to do with their value. "Bots," which are software applications created to mimic human behavior, can cause stories to appear on a large number of devices for no discernible reason. This is usually to stir up anger and discord and is often heightened during election years.

Also, the timing of a story's release can result in it going viral. Social media influencers pay a lot of money to companies who track internet usage to determine the best time to post something. Timing can also result in a story going nowhere, which is

"The reception of Pierce's reflection on the life of Rosalynn Carter reminds us that we stand on the shoulders of giants."

why powerful institutions often release bad news late at night on Fridays.

But neither of these scenarios, internet bots or strategic timing, appear to be why our top stories take off. We don't use bots, and our stories are released on a predictable, steady timeline. There seems to be something else at work. What is at work is the story of a community of readers. A narrative about the Good Faith community emerges when setting these three stories side by side. The narrative is about the future, present and past.

Although we occasionally share stories about the three Abrahamic faith traditions (Christianity, Islam and Judaism) and from other broad categories of spirituality, our "home base" is Christianity. The various approaches followers of the "Jesus way" take to faith and action animate the content we put into the world. This includes practices that have historically been referred to as "missions" and "evangelism."

Among some in the Christian community, there has been a reconsideration of missions and evangelism because of historic entanglements of these practices with imperialism and colonialism. At the same time, many Christians remain passionate about sharing their faith and expanding the reach of the gospel. At minimum, most of our readers are interested about the future of Christianity, and Dawes' news item explaining its future was informative content.

The reflection on Ethel Cain's "Preacher's Daughter" represents an emerging generation of Christians who refuse to allow abusive religious leaders and systems or to remain in the shadows. Speaking to the article's reception, Cally Chisholm said "Ethel Cain's album was released at a time when headlines were dominated by sexual abuse scandals. The world was learning the uncomfortable truth that religious institutions and churches were safe havens for predators and abusers."

Scan the QR code to read "The Life and Death of Ethel Cain" by Cally Chisholm. Published August 14, 2023.

She added that the album highlights "how intergenerational trauma, sexual abuse and intimate-partner violence breaks down and destroys communities." The present reality is that anyone interested in the future of Global Christianity must also be interested in breaking the cycles and systems of violence and abuse that have been allowed to go unchecked for so long.

The reception of Pierce's reflection on the life of Rosalynn Carter reminds us that we stand on the shoulders of giants. It reveals to emerging cohorts of truth-tellers that they aren't the first generation to be passionate about justice, and they won't be the last.

To this point, it should also be noted that the articles on Global Christianity, Ethel Cain and Carter were not the only ones that were widely read throughout most of 2023. They are only highlighted here because they were published during that timeframe. Many other stories that remain on our website from decades of valuable work by the Baptist Center for Ethics (ethicsdaily.com) continue to garner significant traffic.

Both Rosalynn and her equally impressive husband gave us a roadmap to follow in our journey toward Jesus. It was a roadmap they received from those that came before them. It allows for detours and creative reimaginings of the adventure, but all its roads are marked with the signpost from Micah 6:8 to "do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God."

As we are guided by our mission to "provide resources and reflection at the intersection of faith and culture through an inclusive Christian lens," we are thankful for the Good Faith community on this journey with us. NFJ

"The present reality is that anyone interested in the future of Global Christianity must also be interested in breaking the cycles and systems of violence and abuse that have been allowed to go unchecked for so long."

The Other Evangelicals

BY ISAAC B. SHARP

Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1935, Letha Dawson Scanzoni grew up believing that girls could do anything that boys could.

A prodigiously talented trombonist by the time she was in middle school, in 1951 the sixteen-year-old Scanzoni earned admission to the prestigious Eastman School of Music. During her first year at the Rochester, New York, school, she learned more than just music, however.

While at Eastman, Scanzoni also started attending local Youth for Christ meetings, began learning what it meant to live a separated life, and soon discovered that there was a place called Moody Bible Institute, which had a sacred music program. Having grown up in a Lutheran church, in her own later telling, this period in her life represented Scanzoni's first involvement with real fundamentalism.

Scanzoni had already begun wrestling with deep questions about how her faith should impact her life prior to her move to Rochester. As a teenager, she had been struck by one of the main characters in Charles M. Sheldon's novel *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do*, a woman who sang in rescue missions as a way of using her musical talents to serve God.

Unable to shake the conviction that she should do the same, during her first year and a half at Eastman, Scanzoni played trombone for numerous religious rallies and church gatherings. Somewhere along the way, she also began developing a different set of skills. In some of the churches where she played, Scanzoni occasionally led adult Sunday school classes as well. In some of those classes in certain churches, some of the members occasionally suggested that she should consider becoming a minister. Other times and in other venues, Scanzoni received a decidedly different message.

When she played trombone for a local Billy Graham rally, for instance, she was told that women should not teach classes with men in them. When a local minister later invited her to give her testimony before a trombone performance for an all-male group of prison inmates, Scanzoni dutifully pointed out that this would seem to violate prohibitions against women teaching men. Assuring her that in certain cases it was perfectly all right, the minister clarified. Women could not teach or preach to men, he told her, but giving a testimony was fine.

After three semesters at Eastman, in 1954 Scanzoni matriculated at Moody Bible Institute's Sacred Music Department. As she later recounted, however, "like so many women following the societal expectations and prescriptions of the 1950s," Scanzoni married young, eventually cutting her degree short to focus on being a wife and mother. But even that didn't slow her down.

During the late 1950s, she worked for a time with a rural missionary organization, and in the early 1960s, she continued teaching Sunday school classes, leading Bible studies for college students, and eventually began a career as a prolific freelance writer. All the while, Scanzoni was simultaneously studying, researching, and rethinking what had become the unofficial orthodoxy among evangelicals on the question of biblical

Editor's Note: Letha Dawson Scanzoni passed away on January 9, 2024.

teaching about "women's and men's roles in home, church, and society."

In Christian organizations that kept telling her things like, "If you have a new idea, let the man think it's his idea," and in evangelical circles where she was constantly reminded that "a woman's role and goal was to get married, have children, and make a lovely home for her family," Scanzoni later explained, she simply could not help but wonder, "Is that all there is in terms of God's will for our lives? What about our gifts, our talents?"

The tipping point came in the form of the November 1963 edition of her favorite evangelical periodical, *Eternity*, which featured a pair of point-counterpoint articles discussing "women in the church." In the first article, Canadian minister H. H. Kent argued that the Bible was rife with precedents of women exercising their considerable gifts for leadership. In the second article, Dallas Theological Seminary professor Charles C. Ryrie stressed that "a woman may not do a man's job in the church any more than a man can do a woman's job in the home."

Scanzoni was thrilled by Kent's emphasis on some of the biblical passages that she had long treasured and appalled at Ryrie's bombastic misogyny. After reading the reactions to both articles in the following month's Letters to the Editor section, she immediately sat down to compose one of her own, detailing what she believed were the many biases and inconsistencies in Ryrie's argument. When the letter became far too long, she decided to shelve the draft for the time being, however, filing it in a folder labeled "The Woman Issue" as potential material for a longer- form article later on.

By the time Scanzoni was finally ready to revisit the draft, she had already published

Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty." Used with permission of *Christian Feminism Today*.

her first book and finished a second. But neither of those books would cause nearly as much controversy as the finalized version of the article she had been waiting years to write. In mid-1965, Scanzoni submitted a finished draft of her article, "Women's Place, Silence or Service?" to the editors of *Eternity*. With a bit of editorial revision, it first appeared in the magazine's February 1966 issue.

Citing historical examples ranging from Tertullian to Augustine of Christian men demonizing women, highlighting the various textual debates over what the apostle Paul really meant in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy, and pointing to the many practical implications that would result if women were truly silenced in churches, Scanzoni's article challenged the magazine's evangelical readership to openly reckon with some of the troubling inconsistencies associated with the idea that women were spiritually inferior to men.

Recognizing that many male pastors believed the question was already settled, Scanzoni nonetheless pressed the matter. "If it's permissible to teach children," she queried, "how does one determine at what point a teen-age boy ceases to be a child? May a woman lead youth groups? Serve as Christian education director? . . . And what about writing? Is it all right for a woman to write Bible study materials, yet not permissible to teach them in the local church? ... In all of this, aren't we overlooking the sovereign distribution of gifts by the Holy Spirit?"

Even though the editors had actually excised some of her potentially most controversial statements, reactions to the article were swift and fierce. "Mrs. Scanzoni's article," one letter to the editor judged, "is a perfect example of why a woman is admonished to be silent in the church."

Whether in spite or because of the controversy the first article inspired, *Eternity* invited Scanzoni to submit another article on "some aspect of 'the woman problem'" the following year. Having already outlined her next book, which was slated to consider the role of women in the home, the church, and the world, Scanzoni was happy to oblige.

In mid-1967, she submitted an article titled "Christian Marriage: Patriarchy or Partnership?" to the magazine's editors. That October, she received a response from the editors thanking her for the draft, paying her the fifty dollars they owed her, and asking her to add a section on "male headship" so that the article might "communicate more clearly" with *Eternity's* readers.

Scanzoni was torn. On the one hand, such an addition might dilute the article's argument that "egalitarian marriage could be biblical," and its suggestion that Christian marriages need not succumb to the inevitable master-slave dynamic associated with the idea of "wifely submission." On the other hand, if she could at least show evangelicals that when the Bible spoke of "the husband's leadership," it was not thereby mandating a "'caste system' with vested privileges for the male sex," then it might be worth including a caveat about instances of "marginal disagreement" in which the husband might serve as "the final court of appeals."

Ultimately deciding that the caveat was not too large a price, Scanzoni revised the article accordingly. In May 1968, she finally received word on the status of her revisions when a letter from *Eternity's* newly hired assistant editor, Nancy Hardesty, arrived in her mailbox. Assuring Scanzoni that her article would run in the July issue, Hardesty explained that "some members of the staff" nonetheless had one additional request: could she send them "a picture of you and your husband" to run along with the article?

"I guess to show that he approves of your writing such 'radical' stuff," Hardesty added parenthetically, before closing the letter with a personal admission. "I've just finished editing your article and I'm really impressed by it—and I don't think it's radical or provocative at all. It's just right and true and like it should be," she noted. "But then I'm only a woman!" NFJ

Isaac B. Sharp is the director of online and part-time programs and visiting assistant professor at Union The following is an excerpt from his 2023 book, "The Other Evangelicals: A Story of Liberal, Black, Progressive, Feminist, and Gay Christians – and the Movement that Pushed Them Out." Excerpted from *The Other Evangelicals: A Story of Liberal, Black, Progressive, Feminist, and Gay Christians—and the Movement That Pushed Them Out* by Isaac B. Sharp ©2023 (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.). Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

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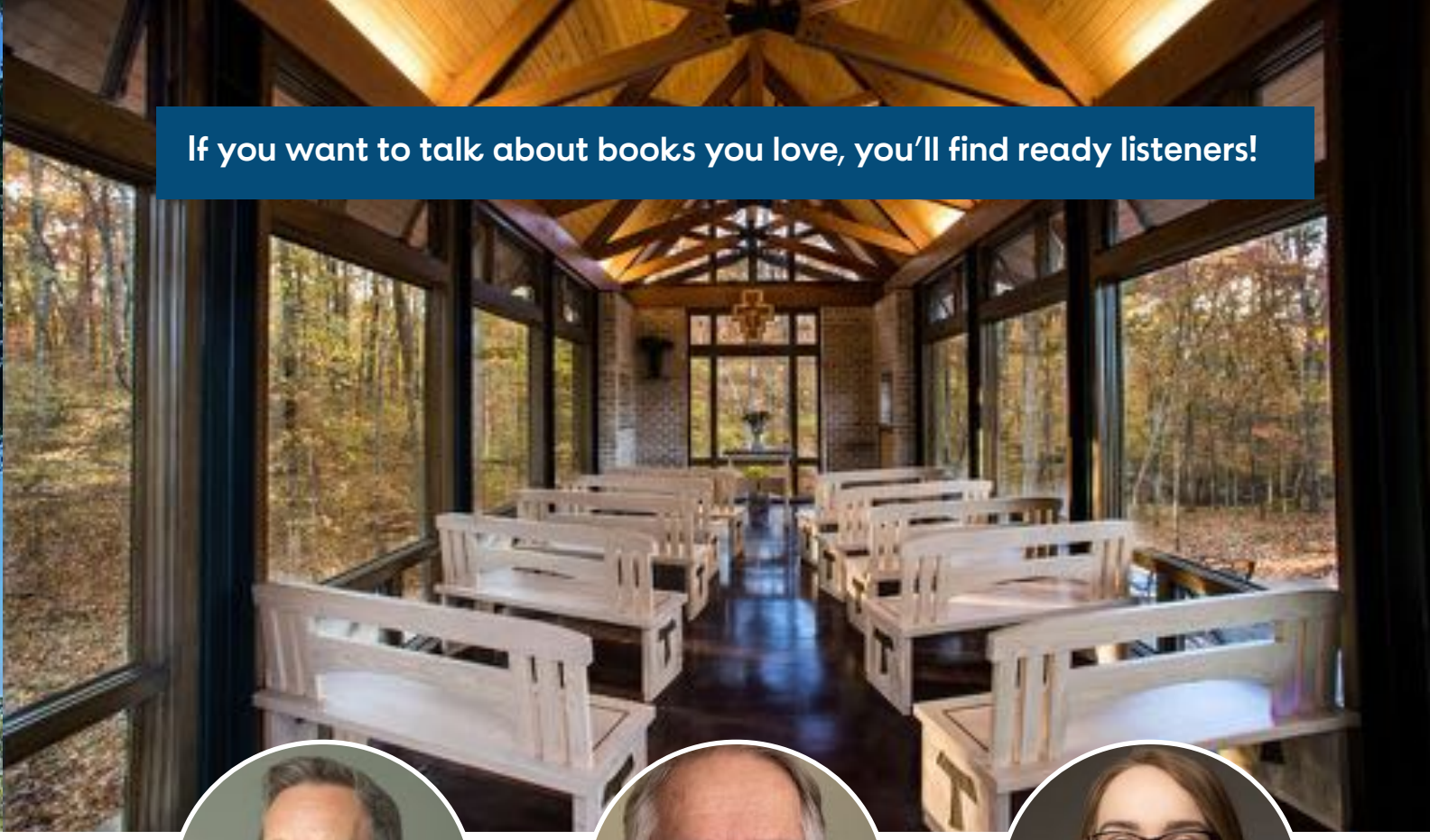

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Fish, Plastic Rubbish and the Lord's Table

BY HELLE LIHT

My story: How I was hugging the fish

I grew up in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia. With only 450,000 inhabitants, it is a small town compared to other capitals around the world. Tallinn was marked by numerous Soviet-built concrete blockhouses towering over a few trees.

In secondary school, I had biology classes where I learned about the general principles of nature and a little about the local biodiversity. Estonia has numerous forests, the sea borders half the country and the population of bears is one of the highest in Europe. But as far as I remember, our learning experience was restricted to listening to the teacher and reading the textbooks with black-and-white schematic illustrations.

We never left the classroom to smell the forest, identify and compare different plant species or trace the tracks of foxes and deer. Believe me, it was difficult to get excited about nature!

Why so? Maybe because the purpose of nature-related education during Soviet times was to learn how to master, domesticate and conquer nature, not how to live in harmony with or to understand it.

As theologian Alister McGrath has shown, under Marxist ideology, nature was viewed in opposition to human society; it was an "anti-socialist force" that had to be tamed and conquered so it could "serve the needs of the Soviet people." This idea was adopted by many, beginning with school children.

Although today's understanding has changed, two generations in the Soviet Union were brought up with Marxist ideology. The results were visible in everyday life. For example, during that time, it was normal to find a leaking oil tank in the forest left by military personnel, and no one wondered why or what had happened. In the area where my grandmother lived, very close to a prominent Soviet military base, the wells were burning for several years because the oil had reached the groundwater, leaving people with no fresh water.

Around 90% of my generation's Estonian grandparents were farmers who measured their days according to the sun and cared for their fields and animals. Today, more than two-thirds of our population lives in cities with their children who have lost touch with nature, similar to my childhood growing up in a stone city. Urbanization has happened for several reasons, but the result is the same – a disconnection from nature.

Many years ago, I found my passion for nature when I began working for the Ministry of Environment in Estonia. There, I worked as an administrator for European Union nature conservation projects. Our job was to help Estonia align its legislative and application measures with EU requirements. In this role, I traveled with conservation experts to different natural habitats to measure, assess and observe numerous species and environmental conditions.

Once, we went to mark fish in a river to observe their breeding habits and monitor their migration trajectory to ensure their protection. My task during this expedition was to hold the fish while we were standing in a shaky boat, as the experts placed tags through the fish's fins. Some fish were about 60-70 cm long (24-27 inches) and very slippery! I will never forget the experience of hugging the fish and using all my skills while holding them close to my heart. I am not so sure they enjoyed this.

A discovery: All relationships matter.

During this time, something in my life changed. I had known that life is about relationships, but I began to understand that the circle of our essential relationships is more expansive than I had considered. I learned that, in addition to our relationship with God and other people, our relationship with nature – the ability to observe, listen and interpret – can be life-giving and open up new understandings of our existence, God and the world around us.

I also discovered our relationship with nature can be ignored and life-killing. This period was the first time I opened my ears to the stories of the damage done to nature in different parts of the world and its impact on human communities. Why was I just now beginning to hear this?

Being raised in a Baptist church, our faith and life focused on our relationship with God, brothers and sisters in Christ and saving souls from eternal death. There were good reasons for this focus. But my ears, eyes and heart were closed to the groaning of Creation. Paying attention to nature was not part of my faith tradition or secular education. I had not been taught to see, listen to and care for nature.

I saw no connection between my life as a Christian and caring for Creation. I needed to hug the fish – to have a meaningful experience with nature – to grasp the relationship between God, myself and the natural world.

A story from Hawaii: Surrounded by plastic rubbish.

This ignorant and life-killing relationship with nature is why there is so much news about the environmental crisis, even about fish.

Kathy Marks has written about the "plastic soup" of waste floating in the Pacific Ocean near the Hawaiian Islands, where I first shared these thoughts at a conference celebrating Baptist life. Some scientists say the rubbish area is twice as large as the continental United States.

According to Marks, this "plastic soup" is held together by spinning underwater currents and "stretches about 500 nautical miles off the California coast, across the northern Pacific, past Hawaii and almost as far as Japan. … About one-fifth of the junk – which includes everything from footballs and kayaks to Lego blocks and carrier bags – is thrown off ships or oil platforms. The rest comes from land."

A sailor shared his experience of being surrounded by rubbish daily for thousands of miles as he traveled home from a yacht race: "Every time I came on deck, there was trash floating by. How could we have fouled such a huge area? How could this go on for a week?" The same sailor became an environmental activist and started campaigning against the growing use of plastic.

But the problem is much bigger than simply an aesthetic outlook of the sea. It has a great impact on marine ecosystems. Seabirds and marine mammals mistake floating plastic bags, cigarette lighters and toothbrushes for food and eat them. In most cases, it causes their death. According to the UN Environment Programme, every year, plastic rubbish causes the death of more than a million seabirds and 100,000 marine mammals.

Modern plastic manufactured in the past 50 years is so durable that when it ends up in the sea, it will stay there for a very long period, exposing a constant threat to marine life.

Humans are not safe either, especially in areas where the primary source of income is fishing. Marcus Eriksen describes the process of chemical pollution that begins with the plastic rubbish in the sea and says: "What goes into the ocean goes into these animals and onto your dinner plate. It's that simple."

A Question: Is it important to become involved in caring for Creation?

For several years now, when the media covers subjects such as climate change, industrial and consumer pollution, deforestation, overfishing, drought and other environmental disaster stories, the Evangelical wing of Christianity in several places around the world has responded. In some countries, churches have developed so-called "good stewardship" programs. These programs offer worship ideas, Bible studies and practical exercises focusing on Creation care.

But are these environmental initiatives only for those who are interested? Or for some enthusiastic people who have time to take a bike instead of a car, recycle or volunteer to clean the sea coasts from rubbish and leaked oil? Or those who are wealthy enough to buy recycled and fair-trade items instead of much cheaper "regular" goods?

We often believe that getting involved in Creation care is an optional program for those with time, money and interest. But is this the case?

Baptist theologian Paul S. Fiddes writes about the "Covenant-making God" and draws our attention to the Old Testament story of the flood and subsequent renewal of relationships. He says that three relational dimensions characterize God's covenant. Two of these are widely acknowledged and linked to humankind—relationship with God and relationship with fellow believers.

The third dimension, however, is often overlooked by contemporary Christians. Fiddes says that "according to the Old Testament, God makes covenant not only with human beings but with "every living creature – the birds, the cattle, the beasts of the earth" (Gen. 9:8). God relates to all creatures in their own way, and not only humans but the world of nature sings praises.

The Old Testament depicts the heavens telling the glory of God and proclaiming his handiwork—ants teaching humans and springs giving fresh water to every wild animal. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul tells how the whole creation is groaning and waiting to be set free to share the "freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom 8:21). Fiddes argues that although "these are poetic images, ... they surely bear testimony to some kind of response which the natural world can make or fail to make to the purposes of God, a response which in some way is connected to the human response."

The story of the plastic rubbish in the Pacific Ocean is only one example of the natural world failing to respond to God's purposes because of human mismanagement.

Douglas J. Hall builds on this "threefold relatedness" between God, human beings and the natural world and argues that the whole of the Judeo-Christian tradition must be understood as "being-with." The ultimate meaning of "being-with" is drawn from God's nature of love, which, in its completeness, is expressed by "God-with-us" (Emmanuel).

In this "threefold relatedness," the faith community is beckoned into relationships that embody God's bonds with the whole creation. Even if "being-with" takes various forms when entering into different relationships with fellow human beings and the natural world, the very purpose of those relations is to express God's love.

James Wm. McClendon shows that the opposite of "being-with" is avoidance or alienation. There is no middle way. In humanity's fundamental "threefold relatedness," there is no possibility of "not-being-with," not without a negative impact on life and relationships. "Not-being-with" creates alienation, hostility and death. It ultimately separates from God.

Or as Douglas J. Hall puts it, "It is, therefore, impossible for us to be in a relationship with God without...being turned toward the others called neighbours... and toward the inarticulate creation."

Being God's people requires us to see and acknowledge God's love for his creation and his promise to sustain and redeem it. Being God's people, we must also recognize our responsibility to act as his stewards, applying the same principles of love and care as he does, bringing the whole of creation to fullness.

An encouragement and a reminder: Participation in the Lord's Table

The relational character of our life and faith, which is only one argument for Creation care, is embodied, expressed and encouraged in the Lord's Supper, a central practice in Christ's church. As his people, we gather at the Lord's Table and share the wine and the bread.

In addition to being a sign of Christ's death and resurrection – the source of salvation for his people – the Lord's Supper carries other signs of God's Kingdom of which we are reminded when we participate. It draws on the rich heritage of Israel's journey with God and the life and work of Jesus.

The Lord's Supper is about sharing. When we come together as Christ's church and share the wine and the bread, all are invited to participate, all are included and all receive equally. Everyone is treated equally, irrespective of social status, academic degree or wealth.

When we gather around the Lord's Table, Christ himself is sharing his life with us through the bread and the wine, and he wants to continue sharing his life through his people in the suffering world. When we share the bread and the wine, we are called to share our lives and resources with each other and those suffering because of injustice, environmental pollution and the carelessness of fellow humans.

The Lord's Supper brings together the gifts of the earth and the work of human hands for God's purpose. According to Lukas Fischer, the bread and the wine – the basic food for Israel – remind us of God's care for us through the fertility of the land. It also reminds us of our fundamental dependence on God's grace.

God's grace and care become visible and tangible through the natural world. Yet environmental pollution cuts so many off from God's grace and care, like the families in the fishing village who have lost their daily bread and source of life because of sea pollution. As God's disciples, the impact of our daily life and the work of our hands need to enable the gifts of the earth to come forth, flourish and bear fruit for the glory of God and the blessing of people.

The Lord's Supper points us toward the New Creation. Christ's suffering and death open the door to new life. The Passover meal Jesus shared with his disciples was not his last meal with them. He renewed his relationship with his disciples as a risen Lord when he had a meal with them in Emmaus (Luke 24:28-31) and Galilee, where he blessed their harvest (another different kind of story about the fish!) and shared bread and fish with them (John 21:1-14).

Fischer reminds us that those meals were celebrating the coming of God's Kingdom, the new life in the middle of current suffering. As we share the bread and the wine as a contemporary Christian community, we are called to participate in God's renewal of life within the entire created order as he did and is doing continuously.

Maximus the Confessor (580-662) said: "He gives goodness and wisdom in order that what He is by essence the creature might become by participation." As a church, we are invited to participate in his redemptive work in the world. Our everyday life is a witness to what we, as individuals and faith communities, do and say around the Lord's Table.

What kind of disciples are we? What kind of witness do we bear? NFJ

—Helle Liht is the assistant general secretary of the European Baptist Federation. This reflection is an adaptation of a presentation she gave to the 2010 Baptist World Congress in Hawaii.

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Baptist Women in Ministry

An Interview with Meredith Stone

BY CRAIG NASH

Although most Christian traditions claim to value women for their unique perspectives and roles within society, there is significant variation in how each of them understands and lives out that claim. This is especially true regarding matters of vocational and ministerial calling. For those in the Baptist tradition, the variation extends to the numerous individual Baptist denominations, churches and individual believers.

In the controversies regarding identity and control over Baptist institutions from the 1970s through today, conversations about women in ministry have echoed through denominational gatherings, seminary and Sunday school classes and the dinner tables of family and friends.

Yet even among those who have fallen on the side of complete acceptance of women in all pastoral and ministerial roles within churches and institutions, more work must be done before the promise of equality becomes reality.

Enter Baptist Women in Ministry (BWIM), an organization devoted to supporting women in their ministerial calling and advocating for a greater menu of opportunities to be available to them. In August 2020, Meredith Stone assumed the position of BWIM executive director.

"Deconstructing a limited definition of calling is a way to remove human-constructed barriers to the Spirit's creative work in people's lives."

The following is adapted from a recent interview with Stone about the importance and work of BWIM. It has been edited for length.

NFJ: Meredith, would you describe how you discerned your personal call to ministry?

MS: I appreciate that you asked that question. However, it can be a very complicated one for women to answer.

From the moment I could articulate a sense of divine stirring and name it a calling, I equated it with the occupation toward which I felt God leading me. I was taught being called meant having a ministry job. But while there were no limits to how the Spirit was moving in my life, there were severe limitations on the number and variety of occupations I had seen women working in.

Without the images to help create a vocational imagination of ministry at 17, and even at 25, it would have been impossible to say with any sense of reality or certainty that I felt called to any particular job. And yet, people continued to ask me, "What do you feel called to do?"

Because of this, my vocational discernment has included paying attention to how my passions and gifts intersected with the doors that opened—even if those doors were not occupations with which I would have equated my calling.

The famous Frederick Buechner quote that has guided so many of us is, "The place God calls you to is where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." But that "place" doesn't always exist in job form for women. Sometimes, it becomes what we make of the job we do have, how we choose to spend our time outside of work or, most often, who we decide to be in all aspects of our lives.

I think it is important to recognize how equating calling with ministry occupations has been informed by the assumptions embedded within the patriarchal privilege of clergy structures.

At the beginning of our journeys, women may be unable to articulate a sense of calling to a particular clergy occupation (though some might). Still, the Spirit can

work just as strongly through paying attention to one's circumstances as it can through a burning bush.

Deconstructing a limited definition of calling is a way to remove human-constructed barriers to the Spirit's creative work in people's lives.

NFJ: Could you describe how you and other women find ways to live into your calling outside the parameters of a ministry "job"?

MS: Amy Sherman's *Kingdom Calling* (InterVarsity Press, 2011) describes an integration of occupation and communal justice based on Proverbs 11:10, "When the righteous prosper, the city rejoices. When the wicked perish, there are shouts of joy."

Sherman illustrates ways in which every vocation can be centered around seeking the good of our communities, rather than materialistic or personal gain. So, any occupation can become a "kingdom calling" in which the cultivation of beloved community is the aim.

As I began to recognize I could live into my ministry calling in any job, not only the ones that were seemingly off-limits to me in the church, I was able to discern my calling as what I hoped to add to the beloved community instead of only focusing on the job I wanted to have in the beloved community.

Ultimately, my discernment led to a sense of calling to help people see things in new ways and create larger perspectives on God and God's work in the world. I have lived into that calling in congregational ministry, but also working in a denominational setting, serving as a faculty member and administrator in a university and seminary, and leading a non-profit.

But I can also see how I seek to live into that calling when I volunteer at the local community theater, in conversations with friends and people I meet, in my parenting and even during my years as a florist, bookkeeper and golf shop manager.

NFJ: Once vocational opportunities in ministry careers did begin to open up, could you describe some of the challenges and joys associated with moving into those roles?

MS: Even though I strongly feel that calling is more expansive than particular "clergy" occupations, sometimes it has been hard to shake the pain associated with believing my gifts would be well-suited for the church even though the church has not welcomed my gifts with open arms.

I will always remember the first time I preached a sermon in a congregational setting. I was 27 years old. Most of my male colleagues had preached their first sermons before they turned 18. But in that moment of my first preaching experience, I had an overwhelming Spirit-inspired experience of fulfillment—a sense that I was doing something I was created, gifted and equipped to do.

So, in the ten years that followed, I prepared myself and sought an opportunity to lean into that fulfillment in a senior pastor role. But the weight of the piles of rejection I experienced in those years pointed me back to see how God was using my calling in the jobs I did have for the good of the communities I was a part of, as Proverbs 11:10 might direct me to do.

While I can see the ways my gender limited the abilities of search committees and congregations to see the gifts I had to offer the church, which needs to change, I can simultaneously see the ways I had the opportunity to participate in the transformative work of God in the work I have been privileged to do outside of the church.

NFJ: The mission of BWIM is two-pronged and can be condensed into two words, "support and advocate." How is the organization supporting women called to ministry, from those in the early stages of discerning a calling to those already active in church leadership?

MS: The ways BWIM supports women in ministry include offering programs and resources and seeking to help facilitate opportunities for developing community.

Perhaps the program that best exemplifies our work in this area is our mentoring program. Women in the early stages of their ministry careers need mentors to learn from and peers they can lean on. Research on the flourishing of ministers has revealed how devastating isolation can be for ministers and the difference having a community of support can make.

Our mentoring program seeks to provide this type of support for women who are starting in ministry or new ministry roles. In the next few years, we plan to expand this type of program and increase our offerings in other areas.

Besides the more formal and defined programs and resources, our staff spends a good deal of time supporting women in ministry one-on-one as they face challenges, navigate transitions and celebrate successes. Our role in these conversations and interactions is to see, hear and believe women. Too often, women in ministry do not experience any other place where they are seen, heard and believed. BWIM can play an important role in providing a listening ear and safe space for the hard realities women face.

Meredith Stone on CNN

"BWIM provides churches with the resources they need to make the first move toward believing in women's equality in church leadership and resources to help them see that belief fully embodied in practice."

NFJ: Regarding advocacy—This is an oversimplification since churches, especially Baptist churches, consist of members with a wide range of beliefs. But there is a spectrum that most churches fall on regarding women in ministry. On one end are those churches that will likely never believe God calls women to any kind of vocational ministry. On the other end are churches that believe God calls women to all levels of vocational ministry and have taken active steps to affirm their calling through support and vocational placement. How is BWIM speaking to and working with the churches that fall somewhere in the middle of that spectrum?

MS: Most churches we work with fall somewhere on the middle of a spectrum between full, unlimited, equitable affirmation of women in ministry and disavowal of women's roles in any leadership capacity.

Many congregations have done the difficult work of opening themselves to the Spirit's guidance in discerning how to interpret biblical passages related to women's roles in church leadership. They have concluded that God does not discriminate in who is equipped and gifted for ministry leadership based on gender. This work, in itself, is difficult and worthy of celebration. However, moving from changing one's mind about women in ministry to seeing women's equality in every aspect of the church's ministry is quite challenging.

BWIM provides churches with the resources they need to make the first move toward believing in women's equality in church leadership and resources to help them see that belief fully embodied in practice. This type of work includes illuminating the unconscious ways in which our church structures, policies and practices have disadvantaged women and reinforced notions that women's value is limited to traditional gender roles.

By elucidating the unseen ways women are told their voices are not as valuable to God, it provides an opportunity for congregations to create new structures to intentionally value, affirm and uplift women's gifts and leadership.

BWIM works with search committees, congregations and congregational leaders who might want to begin assessing how their beliefs and practices align or are misaligned regarding women's equality.

The most notable way we approach this work is through our BWIM Month of Advocacy initiative. Each March, we encourage churches to invite women to preach (if women do not preach regularly) and engage in additional forms of advocacy for women in ministry.

This might include examining personnel and lay leadership policies and procedures, reviewing curricula for overt or covert messages that diminish women's value, assessing committee leadership for appropriate women's representation, and evaluating sermons, songs and artwork in the church to ensure that the perspectives, stories and bodies of women are present as exemplars of the Christian life.

NFJ: What gives you hope in this work?

MS: There are many reasons to be discouraged in this work. Some of the stories women tell are extremely painful and hard to hear. Unfortunately, I often hear similar accounts from different women, revealing the widespread nature of difficult experiences.

However, sometimes, the calls or emails I get are to tell me encouraging stories—ones where congregations rally to support female leadership and make bold moves to demonstrate their affirmation of women's full value to God's beloved community.

I hear many of these stories in the nominations for our awards—the Distinguished Mentor Award and the Church of Excellence Award. In those nominations, we hear how women's lives have been changed and how they have found a new sense of knowing that they are truly created in God's image and can experience the unlimited love and empowerment found in Christ.

We hear how churches have been enlivened and enriched by women's leadership. It is those stories that give me hope, and it is for this reason that one of BWIM's organizational values is celebration. For every story of affirmation, bravery, and transformation, we celebrate and give thanks for the hope that other similar stories might soon be written. NFJ

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