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Editor's Letter

Some say the priestly or pastoral role is to shepherd God's people to God, while the prophetic role represents God before God's people. Prophets tell the unvarnished truth. Priests and pastors present the truth with a spoonful of sugar. The priestly or pastoral role is that of a mediator, while the prophetic role is more one-sided. Priests and pastors "comfort the afflicted," while prophets "afflict the comfortable."

As a student at Tyler Junior College, I took a New Testament class from Bob Mayfield, the Baptist Student Union minister. Bob was very much a pastoral figure for many of us. He was winsome, funny and gentle. He brought God's comfort during the challenging years of young adulthood.

However, in the middle of the semester, Bob learned that some fellow students and I had formed a zealous clique devoted to "purity" and "holiness." Our devotion included refraining from anything we considered "secular": music, movies, books, etc. More importantly, it consisted of letting everyone else know they should follow our lead, as we had heard directly from God.

We walked into class one day to find Bob had moved a stereo into the room. He spent the first half of class playing songs from his favorite artists—The Rolling Stones, Elton John, Amy Grant, among others. He smiled, rocking to the music while watching my friends and me.

After that had gone on for a while, he stopped the music and said, "Now I don't know what it says about me, but God speaks to me through this music."

He deviated from the planned lecture and taught, instead, on Paul's sermon to the people of Athens at Mars Hill (Acts 17). In that sermon, Paul used images and words from pagan sources familiar to the people to preach about the majesty of Christ.

Bob ended the class with words from the passage: "The God who made the world and everything in it does not live in temples made by man." He never took his eyes off my friends and me.

Not everyone can be priestly and prophetic simultaneously. Bob pulled it off.

This issue of *Nurturing Faith Journal* comes from priests, prophets, and in-betweeners. Some words bring comfort, and others make me squirm. I hope they bring us all closer to the God who made the world and everything in it.

—Craig Nash, Senior Editor

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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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THOUGHTS

FEATURES

Cover design by Cally Chisholm

Worth Repeating

"One difficulty that people seeking to modernize hymnals and the language of worship inevitably run into is that contemporaries are never the best judges of what works and what doesn't. This is something all poets know; that language is a living thing, beyond our control, and it simply takes time for the trendy to reveal itself, to become so obviously dated that it falls by the way, and for the truly innovative to take hold."

—Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk*

"History demonstrates that racism never goes away; it just adapts."

—Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism*

"The nagging question for me as a Black pastor leading a predominantly Black congregation in a marginalized neighborhood with limited resources is how can I model what neither I nor my people can often afford?"

—Ralph Emerson, *Black Pastors, Socio-Economic Disparity, and Sabbath*

"Every creature on earth has approximately two billion heartbeats to spend in a lifetime. You can spend them slowly, like a tortoise and live to be two hundred years old, or you can spend them fast, like a hummingbird, and live to be two years old."

—Brian Doyle, *One Long River of Song: Notes on Wonder*

"There can be no Christian theology that is not social and political. If theology is to speak about the God of Jesus who is revealed in the struggle of the oppressed for freedom, then theology must also become political, speaking for the God of the poor and the oppressed"

—James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*

"We forget that when we see Christ dead upon the cross, we discover a God who would rather die than kill his enemies. We forget all of this because the disturbing truth is this—it's hard to believe in Jesus."

—Brian Zahnd, *A Farewell to Mars: An Evangelical Pastor's Journey Toward the Biblical Gospel of Peace*

"Jesus called us to a much more radical love than simply putting up with someone we don't understand."

—Kali Cawthon-Freels, *Tolerance Didn't Save Next Benedict– It Won't' Save You Either*

"Navigating the polarization of these Divided States of America at any time is a challenge to ministers and faith leaders. However, during an election year, the air in a sanctuary gets as thin as a Colorado mountain range."

— Justin Cox, *Preaching Politics in an Election Year*

"When you start with an understanding that God loves everyone, justice isn't very far behind."

—Dr. Emilie M. Townes, *Journey to Liberation: The Legacy of Womanist Theology*

The Arrogance of Modernity

By Craig Nash

When I was a teenager, I encountered an angel. I woke up in my bed and saw a cloud of light in a corner of my room, hovering near the ceiling. My response was like those of the characters in the Bible when they came face to face with one of God's messengers – *fear*. I had been taught their stories all my life – Hagar, Jacob, Mary, among many others – so I knew what was happening within me wasn't unusual.

Knowing these stories also helped me move past the fear and toward a sense of curiosity and wonder. I began praying, "God, what is going on here?" I can't remember the answer. What I remember is falling back to sleep after what felt like an eternity of staring at the cloud as it slowly dissipated.

That experience informed my evolving faith for several years. It was an Ebenezer, a marker I could refer to when I had struggles and doubts. Regardless of what I faced, I could always say that God had broken into my world to communicate love and peace. I had never seen the cloud of light before that moment and wouldn't see it again for several years.

When I was a young adult in my mid-20s, I returned home to visit my parents and slept in my childhood bed in the same room I had encountered the angel years before. I woke up and saw what I had seen before. But something had changed. I instantly knew that what I saw wasn't an angel but simply a cloud of light. I investigated, looking around for its source.

I pieced the puzzle together by looking outside. A full moon hung directly over the house. This wasn't out of the ordinary. Full moons happen. But on this particular night, the neighborhood had a spotty layer of fog, and the air was humid enough to make the moon hazy. The moonlight reflected onto a car in the street, sending its muted light into a corner of my room.

Who knows how often that particular set of events aligned to make me see what I saw? At least twice, but there were probably more I had slept through. Regardless, the discovery sent me on a journey to reinterpret my original experience.

I didn't stop believing in God. I had too much invested. But I did begin to doubt whether God still breaks into our world in the same ways as during the times of the Bible. Later, I would wonder whether God had even broken into our world during the times of the Bible.

This is the dilemma of modernity. Once we analyze the data and make new conclusions about the natural world, what do we do with God?

The answer for some is to ignore or refute the data. "The moon didn't do anything different those nights. You're just looking for a reason to not believe in God's work."

Others try to make the data and God fit together like puzzle pieces. I have heard some, in an attempt to hold onto a belief in a young earth, say that God placed dinosaur bones in particular layers of sediment to test our faith. The flip side of this, which is where I mostly find myself landing, is to say that God is revealed, not refuted, in the natural world.

If the dilemma of modernity is trying to reconcile God with science, the arrogance of modernity is claiming we have it figured out, and biblical figures like Jacob, Hagar, and Mary suffered from a form of intellectual infantilism. "If only they knew!"

As is often the case, the poets crack open a window to answers that scientists and preachers are too naive or prideful to explore. Their witness deserves a place on the panel. The bright moon reflecting through one of the most beautiful windows comes from Gerard Manley Hopkins: "The world is charged with the grandeur of God/ It will flame out like shining from shook oil/It gathers to greatness like the ooze of oil crushed…Because the Holy Ghost over the bent world broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings." NFJ

Doctrine of Christian Discovery Podcast

By Mitch Randall

Good Faith Media, in a momentous and highly regarded collaboration with Syracuse University and Indigenous Values Initiative, has recently produced and released the "Doctrine of Christian Discovery" podcast.

This series explores how a 15th-century Christian doctrine fostered the conquest and colonization of non-Christians and continues to significantly impact various lands and peoples, including the United States.

Pope Alexander VI issued the Doctrine of Christian Discovery, a theological and political edict, as a papal bull on May 4, 1493. Known as the "Inter Caetera," this edict justified the conquest, conversion, and control of inhabitants already living in "new" worlds "discovered" by Christian explorers.

The bull was a reaction to Christopher Columbus when he returned to Europe and reported on his encounters with the Indigenous peoples of North America, marking a significant turning point in history.

The podcast was produced at the "Religious Origins of White Supremacy" conference in December 2023 at Syracuse University in New York. The conference was organized by Professor Philip P. Arnold of Syracuse, Sandy Bigtree (Mohawk Nation,) and Adam DJ Brett.

The conference concentrated on Johnson v. M'Intosh, an 1823 U.S. Supreme Court case that gave the doctrine legal legs. According to the legal website Oyez, "In 1775, Thomas Johnson and other British citizens purchased land in Virginia from members of the Piankeshaw Indian tribe under a 1763 proclamation by the King of England."

"When he died, Thomas Johnson left this land to his heirs. In 1818, William M'Intosh purchased 11,000 acres of land from Congress, which Johnson had initially purchased. Johnson's heirs sued M'Intosh in the United States District Court to recover the land. Ruling that the Piankeshaw tribe did not have the right to convey the land, the federal district court held that Johnson's initial purchase and the chain of title stemming from it were invalid."

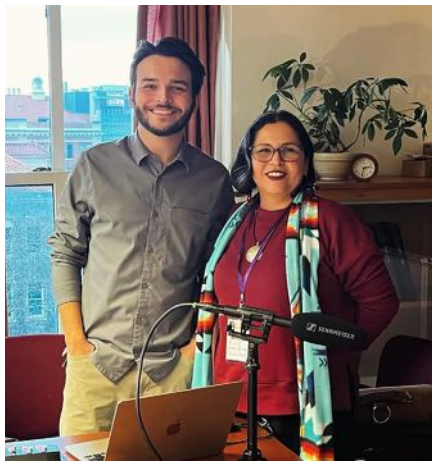
Thus, on February 28, 1823, "In a unanimous decision, the Court held M'Intosh's claim superior to Johnson's, affirming the district court. Chief Justice John Marshall established that the federal government had the sole negotiation right with the Native American nations. The Indians themselves did not have the right to sell property to individuals. M'Intosh's claim, derived from Congress, was superior to Johnson's, derived from the non-existent right of Indians to sell their land."

In summary, the U.S. Supreme Court told the Indigenous peoples of North America they had no rights under the Constitution. Under the law, they had no right to negotiate the sale of their ancestral lands based upon the notion that they were conquered people. The ruling did not state this outright, but the implications communicated that reality.

The results of the 1823 decision are still felt today, with Indigenous peoples nationwide still fighting for the rights to their ancestral lands. Cooperations and developers (foreign and domestic) continue to negotiate with the federal government without much input from Indigenous communities regarding their sacred sites and burial grounds.

The eight-episode podcast is for students and others beginning their exploration of the Doctrine of Christian Discovery. Tanner Randall, a recent Dartmouth College graduate and a Muscogee Creek Nation member, hosts.

- The eight episodes are as follows:
- Episode 1 – Betty Lyons: Understanding the Doctrine
- Episode 2 – Robert P. Jones: White Supremacy's Roots
- Episode 3 – Robert J. Miller: Property & Sovereignty



- Episode 4 – Gustavo Melo Cerqueira & Danielle N. Boaz: Religious Racism
- Episode 5 – Steven Newcomb & JoDe Goudy: U.S. Law
- Episode 6 – Eve Reyes-Aguirre: Environment & Creation
- Episode 7 – João Chaves: Influence in the Americas
- Episode 8 – Mitch Randall: Countering Conversion

Podcast sponsors include The Henry Luce Foundation, Syracuse University, Indigenous Values Initiative, American Indian Law Alliance, American Indian Community House, Good Faith Media, Tonatierra, and Toward Our Common Public Life.

The podcast's executive producers were Philip P. Arnold and Sandy Bigtree of Indigenous Values Initiative, Adam DJ Brett of Syracuse University and American Indian Law Alliance, and myself. It was produced by Cliff Vaughn and edited by David Pang. The American Indian Law Alliance provided production assistance.

You can listen to the podcast on Megaphone, Spotify or Apple. The QR Code provided in this article takes you straight to the podcast on Apple.

For more information about the Doctrine of Christian Discovery, please visit DoctrineOfDiscovery.org. NFJ

Scan the QR code to listen to the podcast on our website.

Finding Home in Godly Play

By Abby Richards

The children line up wiggly and excited to greet me before our weekly time of worship.

We breathe in through our noses and out through our mouths. I can't help but remember the four-year-old who, a few weeks ago, stuck his finger right up his nose instead of pointing to it while we breathed. I only see each child once a week. However, 400 children will worship God with their friends in this Godly Play classroom in the next five school days. I am deeply grateful.

I hope and pray this classroom will be a safe, welcoming, and peaceful place for children each week. I want them to know it is for them. The adults are guests in Godly Play, and the children decide how to approach God. We build the circle. They decide how to hold their hands when they pray. "*Like this…*" they say and show me hands folded, hands together or open. They always know how they want to hold their hands when we pray.

I ask if they are ready, and they always respond, "Yes." I ask if they are "*really* ready," as swinging arms and tapping feet tell me otherwise. We turn our attention to their name cards on the rug. We are building this sacred circle and learning to "protect the quiet." It is a constant challenge, but I want them to have the gift of shared silence and peace, deeply valued aspects of Godly Play, as we worship.

Once seated, I remind them we are learning to care for one another in this space. When sitting in a circle, everything we do affects someone else. We use signs for "connection" and "remember" so they can participate quietly instead of interrupting. In theory, they raise their hands if they have something to say. We try to sit criss-cross-applesauce so our friends next to us can see.

I click the slides on the wall to "Our Year About Jesus," a circle of different colored blocks representing the seasons of the Church year. Today, it is pointing to purple. They have been waiting for this. We discuss this circle every time we meet. What color is the arrow pointing to? What do we do when the arrow is pointing at this color? When it is purple, we "get ready!" How many weeks will we be in this season? I remind them I am talking about the Year About Jesus season, not the weather season. They love to yell out the colors and count with me and, when they are old enough, read the bigger words like "Advent" and "Lent."

In nearly every class, someone will ask what the red square is for. Someone will always reply, "*It's the red hot one!*" With a little more prompting, they will remember the red hot one, Pentecost, is the day we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is incredible how much they engage with the Circle of the Church Year, something so predictable in the midst of their ever-changing little lives.

We begin our worship with the electric candle that flickers like it is real.

"*We light the candle to remember that God is with us. In this place and in this time, in all places and in all times. And we light the candle to remember…*"

The children join, "*…that Jesus is the Light of the World.*"

"*The Lord be with you,*" I sign and say to them.

"*And also with you,*" they respond. The "you" goes up in inflection as they all point to their friends.

I pray a short prayer. Then we sing, sometimes in English, other times in Spanish. Most of the children are from Spanish-speaking homes. I want them to be able to worship in their heart language and be proud of being bilingual. I speak limited Spanish, but the children are gracious. One

of their classmates will always step in to translate.

After we sing, it is time to listen for God's voice in the quiet. The younger ones listen for five to ten seconds. The older ones will be up to two minutes by the end of the school year. They are confident they can do more.

Then, it is time to begin the story. They have learned to sit still-*ish* and quiet-*ish*, trying to control their impulse to respond after everything I say. After the story, we wonder together. We will soon move to our creative response time and share a "feast" together, but I try not to rush past the wondering. I will invite them to place their name card by the part of the story they liked best or have a connection to. They always want to do this. Some are careful about it. Some, less so.

Occasionally, a child will shake their head "no," which is perfectly fine. When we are in Godly Play, we don't have to share or even be able to articulate what is going on in our hearts and minds. That is between us and God. I will let God worry about that, and I will carry the burden of not being certain about all they are learning.

I would have loved Godly Play when I was a child. My faith was full of so much anxiety. I was always afraid of saying the "wrong" thing. I wanted to have correct answers and behave correctly so I would be saved and safe. In Godly Play, we don't ask that of the children. This walk with Jesus is a life-long journey. I want them always to know, deep in their hearts, that they are safe with God– no matter who they are, where they come from, what language they speak, what answers they have, what words they know the definitions for, whatever.

If we can give them a safe, loving and nurturing environment to encounter God and learn to love Jesus, it will be part of the rhythm of their hearts as they leave this place. And as they grow, if they find themselves in a gathering of Christians, and we desperately pray they do, they will feel and know they are home. This is the gift of Godly Play. NFJ

—Abby Richards teaches Godly Play to K4 through 3rd-grade students at Augustine Preparatory Academy in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

"We often pray when we don't know what's happening and what to do. It is our lifeline, meditation, and calling to communion with our creator."

Thoughts & Prayers

By Paige Agnew

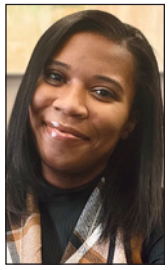
Last year, my mother and I found ourselves in a women's self-defense course run by an acquaintance looking for more participants. I don't know what I expected. Perhaps to learn techniques for not having your purse stolen or how to break a perpetrator's nose? It was a shock to show up to class and see the instructor holding a gun and telling us to examine safe places to hide before he fired the blanks.

The purpose of such a demonstration was terrifying yet simple. We needed to know what a gun looked like in person, what gunfire sounded like, and even what it smelled like to have the best chance of keeping ourselves alive in what feels like the impenetrable reality of living in the United States.

After the exercise, I learned that movies and TV shows had not prepared me for the close-range noise of actual gunfire or the smell tingling my nostrils. Subsequently, my body didn't know how to react — if I should stay in hiding, go into attack mode, or dare to find an exit.

Making the demonstration feel real allowed us to build a foundation for how we reacted before training and after — the result being that we each felt more equipped with what to do should we find ourselves in that situation. The odds of that seem to grow continually. In fact, I had already lived through one.

The instructor played videos from the deadliest shooting in U.S. history. In 2017, fifty-eight lives were stolen and hundreds more wounded at a concert in Las Vegas. We were given specific instructions for watching the video: Listen for the start of the gunfire and then count the seconds between the first and second rounds. I counted for almost a minute.



A minute for people to flee, call for help, find a place to hide, or do whatever they could to keep themselves and the people beside them alive. And yet, from the video's standpoint, barely anyone in that part of the audience had moved.

Others in the class were quick to judge the audience for their inaction. Having lived through a similar event, I could not.

I didn't have a clue what was going on. I was at a Fourth of July concert and couldn't hear anything over the music. I saw half the crowd disperse but couldn't see what sent them running through the streets. I rationalized what I was seeing. I told myself that my part of the crowd had stayed and the band was still playing, so maybe whatever was going on didn't involve me.

But the truth was that I didn't know what to do, so I did nothing. It was only the sight of cop cars, chalk outlines, and the sounds of phones ringing with panicked pleas from loved ones that made my friends and me run to the car.

We often pray when we don't know what's happening and what to do. It is our lifeline, meditation, and calling to communion with our creator. Despite what we may disagree on as Christians, we agree about prayer. We call to a higher power that controls all — our hearts, our government. In this communion, we observe our limitations and lend ourselves to stillness. Isn't that what God told us? To be still?

We should be still when we see those who are hungry? We should be still when we see the broken? We should be still when we see the homeless and the sick? We should be still because we are praying to a God who controls all?

We should be still at Super Bowl parades turned violent? We should be still about any matters that turn political? We should be still because there is no hope that anything will ever change? We should be still because we are not the ones making harmful decisions, whether they occur at a gun store or in the House or the Senate? We should be so still that when our master returns for our talents, we can dig them up, brush off the dirt, and present them just how he'd left them?

Most of us are like me on the Fourth of July or those concertgoers in Las Vegas in 2017. We don't know what to do. However, we forsake our God-given power and our earthly assignments when we equate prayer with taking action. If prayer is for the things we can't do, what are we doing with the things we can? NFJ

—Paige Agnew has served in the mental health industry for eleven years as the business operations officer of Adolescent & Family Behavioral Health Services in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

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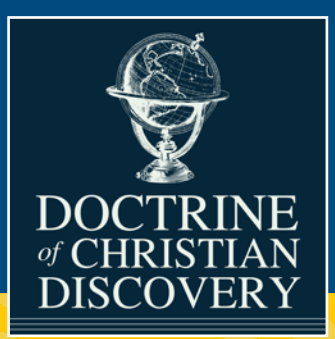

NOW AVAILABLE: *DOCTRINE OF CHRISTIAN DISCOVERY*

Explores how a centuries-old doctrine encouraged conquest and colonization of non-Christians — and how its legacies still affect lands and peoples. Produced during the "Doctrine of Christian Discovery" conference in December 2023 at Syracuse University in New York.

DEI in the CHURCH

By Katie Valenzuela

I read Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* in January after learning the novel begins in 2024. It took a lot of nerve to read the book at this point in my life.

Originally released in 1993, Butler imagined a dystopia that could exist in the next 30 years – our present. N.K. Jemisin adeptly notes that "as science fiction reflects its present, the same ugliness afflicts our society on the macro scale." Reading through Butler's work and noticing parallels between the world she created and today's world was heavy.

With all we continue to witness – bleak headlines, a devastating economy, political divisiveness, a pandemic, a genocide – people are looking for hope.

Of course, the church has a natural "in" when it comes to providing hope. But is the church – is *your* church – the *safest* place for all people? Without caveats?

I hope a church would not respond with "Yes, 100%!" But instead, "We hope to be. And we are working on that daily."

I am scared when communities think they have it all together – when they believe their place is the place to be.

Growing up in the church, I have been part of many congregations and experienced my share of church hurt, purity culture, and trauma within walls that are supposed to be "holy." But, honestly, it seems like all I ever came into contact with inside the church were *actual* walls – systems that didn't allow or approve of the entirety of my existence.

And I imagine if we long for our churches to reach their fullest potential – a potential where we caused less church hurt – then we would all admit there is much work to do. I hope our church leaders are committed to their congregations bringing peace instead of pain.

Butler's opening of *Parable of the Sower* was striking:

> *"All that you touch*
> *You Change.*
> *All that you Change*
> *Changes you.*
> *The only lasting truth*
> *Is Change.*
> *God is Change."*

What I know to be true – especially now – is that if churches want to live out the Gospel in their communities, they have a responsibility to create safe spaces for marginalized people. And to do that, change is not an option. It is a requirement. To be antiracist, anti-ableist, anti-ageist, to be an ally to the LGTBQIA+ community, and to combat sexism and xenophobia takes work. But what does that look like?

In her best-seller *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*, Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum paints a picture that could be used to combat any system of oppression. She gives the example of "visualiz[ing] the ongoing cycle of racism as a moving walkway at the airport." To be *actively* racist, one must choose to walk in the direction the walkway is moving, choosing to follow the tide of racism. To be *passively* racist is to stand on the walkway, allowing it to carry you in the direction of racism. But to be anti-racist is to actively walk in the opposite direction the walkway is moving.

When the topic of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) is mentioned, I often notice people with power or status clutching their privilege a little tighter than before. I

get it. The self-preservation aspect of our brains tells us there is not enough to go around. Our brains are wired to protect ourselves. But the idea that we get less when we engage in DEI is a classic case of scarcity mentality.

The reality is that DEI benefits everyone and is something we desperately need, especially in our churches.

I like to think about DEI in terms of a communal table where you take a seat. It's not just any seat. It is a seat you desperately want because it is at an event that you want to actively participate in. The scarcity mindset says, "If I give up my seat, I will lose out." But there is plenty of room at the table for everyone. The table has no parameters – it is infinite, and we can constantly make room for others.

Furthermore, our communities are better when we invite people different from us to sit at our table. Studies repeatedly show that diversity and inclusion contribute to improving businesses and organizations. Think about it – when everyone can be the fullest version of themselves without judgment or persecution, they have the freedom to *show up*. People are more likely to share ideas, perspectives, concepts, and stories. Wouldn't the same be true for our faith communities?

At the heart of almost every faith tradition, community is essential. We were not made to be alone. If Christians hope to create communities where everyone knows, without a doubt, that their existence is not only valid but safe, then the church must engage in the ongoing work of DEI within their congregations.

Some faith leaders or congregations may be tempted to think, "Perhaps our congregation isn't the issue," or "We're doing good enough." I would remind them of Dr. Rev. Martin Luther King's words to his "Christian and Jewish brothers" in his Letter from Birmingham Jail, that he "reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice."

We cannot stand passively on the moving walkway. We must decide how we will undertake DEI within our communities. Not deciding is a decision.

The great news is you do not have to reinvent the wheel. There are already experts doing the work. Often, they gain expertise because of their own identities and life experiences.

But where to start?

There are plenty of resources. I invite you to consider:

- Layla F. Saad's *Me and White Supremacy*
- Ibram X. Kendi's *How to Be Antiracist*
- Isabel Wilkerson's *Caste*
- Emily Ladau's *Demystifying Disability*
- Sonya Renee Taylor's *The Body is Not an Apology*
- Julie Rodgers' *Outlove: A Queer Christian Survival Story*
- Alok Vaid-Menon's *Beyond the Gender Binary*

If you want to learn from the source, consider inviting experts into your congregations and your staff training to teach about these issues. And when you invite them, pay them. This is essential. Whether they are someone you know who specializes in DEI, disability, or trans inclusion, or if they are someone you learn from through their writing, podcasts, social media, or other work, it means something to literally invest in this learning.

Why? They are doing work, and paying people for their work is essential. When you consider all the systems of oppression in place in our country and around the world, not to mention the wage gap for marginalized people, it is the very least we can do to put our money where our mouth is.

There are plenty of resources. The question is, will you look for them? Will you consider venturing into a perspective, a life experience, different from your own? Will you turn against systems of oppression and listen to marginalized voices?

Isn't that the gospel?

I am reminded of how God shows up to outsiders. Consider Hagar, an enslaved pregnant woman of a different faith. And yet, she is the only woman in the Bible to give God a name. And wasn't it Jesus who sat with sex workers and tax collectors?

When Jesus sat down and shared meals or when God made God's self known to someone, there was no aim to "save" or "fix" them. Instead, there was a safe space – an opportunity to show up, listen, learn, and consider.

These resources are not to mend those on the margins. They are to mend those with privilege. There is work to be done by individuals who carry privileged identities. There are a myriad of intersections of privilege. It is our responsibility, in whatever ways we hold privilege, to dismantle these oppressive systems.

As N.K. Jemisin said in her forward to *Parable of the Sower*, "… most powerful science fiction novels offer not only accurate visions of the future, but also suggestions for coping with the resulting changes… It's our job to create change in fiction and in life." NFJ

—Katie Valenzuela lives her life by two values: kindness and curiosity. She is a marketing professional working toward an M.S. in Human Resources with an Emphasis in Diversity and Technology.

"The reality is that DEI benefits everyone and is something we desperately need, especially in our churches."


CHAPLAIN

Do We Need Fewer Eco-Prophets and More Eco-Chaplains?

By Zachary Helton

When it comes to the climate crisis, I once thought we needed more prophets.

I had in mind more Isaiahs to embody justice and speak truth to power and more Don Quixotes to inspire our imagination for how the world *could* be. Prophets were my rock stars, and with the stakes so high, I wanted to see more of them holding protest signs, engaging in nonviolent direct action, and speaking to the state of the world with holy anger.

Now, I'm not so sure.

There is an essential place for prophets, to be sure. But the more I learn about spirituality, transformation, and ecology, the more I suspect something may be missing.

I was ordained as a pastor in a progressive Christian tradition in 2018. If you don't remember, 2018 was a fantastic year. Just so mellow. Every headline was some variation of *Donald Trump Does Something Racist*, or CLIMATE CHANGE IS REAL AND IT'S GOING TO KILL ALL OF US! The U.S. Border Patrol had just begun separating migrants from their children. For the next two years, we would struggle with a global pandemic topped off by an attempted coup and a nationwide existential crisis.

Fond memories.

Practically, this meant I entered pastoral work with a near-constant internal pressure to make everything I said, planned, and preached in some way "prophetic." How could I not? Every day, the foundations were revealing more cracks. It seemed apparent that the church needed to take a more active role in calling for justice and equity. Accordingly, every sermon was a call to action. Every book study was about a justice issue. Every newsletter advertised a protest or highlighted ways the church could do more.

In retrospect, my strategy was to "anxiety" my congregation into change. As you might have guessed, the result was not fantastic. There was burnout, resentment from all sides, meetings called, emails sent, and a short-lived career in the pulpit. "We don't need a prophet right now," I remember someone trying to explain to my deaf ears. "We need a pastor!"

After I left the church world to recoup and reconfigure my life, I took refuge in the world of chaplaincy. What else does one do with a seminary degree and a desire to escape church for a while? I thought it would be temporary, something to do while I sorted out a more sustainable career in writing or teaching. However, the longer I spent in spiritual care, the more chaplaincy put my previous work into perspective.

For years, I had been exhausting myself trying to be a prophet. But in the hospital, where everyone is already neck-deep in crisis, I quickly learned they didn't need an angst-driven chaplain telling them what to do. That only ever made things worse. Instead, I realized they needed a companion to help re-construct meaning where their familiar stories were falling apart. They needed a safe space to feel the feelings threatening to overwhelm and paralyze them. They needed someone to remind them they had choices and could take agency. In short, I realized they needed the same thing my congregation had been asking for. They needed what I needed, although I didn't know it.

These may be the things we all need in a season of eco-anxiety and climate catastrophe.

~

Chaplains are trained to enter crisis and embody something larger than the immediate pain. They don't move away from suffering but directly into it, trusting that true healing waits on the other side. At their best, chaplains embody the two Buddhist practices of *shamatha* and *vipashyana*—stopping to calm ourselves and then looking deeply into our predicament. They empower

"Chaplains help people navigate life in the shadows of imminent catastrophe. Isn't this what we need in the era of ecological collapse?"

people to find the existential resources to navigate adversity.

Chaplains help people navigate life in the shadows of imminent catastrophe. Isn't this what we need in the era of ecological collapse? An era where death looms and systems of meaning fall apart?

As I have studied chaplaincy over the last two-and-a-half years, working to become a board-certified spiritual care practitioner, I have realized the field can offer a helpful paradigm of spiritual leadership in the face of the climate crisis. In contrast to the role of prophet, chaplaincy can be less romantic and may require about twelve times more patience. But the payoff is significant. There are ways chaplaincy can help us understand the kind of spiritual leaders we need to navigate life in light of our current environmental situation.

Confronting Suffering & Feeling Our Feelings

Our current situation is overwhelming. Scientific consensus suggests that even if we were to stop emitting greenhouse gasses tomorrow, we are already reeling towards tipping points with such momentum that it will take centuries to reverse the effects. Taken seriously, that is enough to push anyone towards despair. I felt panicked and paralyzed for months when someone told me this reality. I wasn't sure how to engage these feelings, so they remained stuck beneath the surface, coming out in unexpected and indirect ways.

On a much smaller scale, the same dynamic is at work in major health crises, personally or in our families. When we are confronted with dire medical realities, despair, panic, and paralysis set in. This is where chaplains step in. Chaplains aren't afraid to name complicated feelings and help create spaces to express these feelings. They walk in the time-tested wisdom of Mister Rogers (patron saint of chaplains), who said, "Anything that's human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable. When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting, and less scary." When we feel our feelings and move them into deeper awareness, they lose some of their power. Rather than living in fragility, we have the freedom to make choices.

"That pain is the process of consciousness in a threatened and suffering world," Joanna Macy writes in *Coming Back to Life*. "It is not only natural; it is an absolutely necessary component of our collective healing. As in all organisms, pain has a purpose: it is a warning signal designed to trigger remedial action. The problem, therefore, lies not in our pain for the world, but in our repression of it."

Spiritual leaders could learn from chaplains for whom fear and sadness in the face of crisis are not enemies but messengers who will not go away until we can meet them and hear their wisdom. "The truth that many people never understand until it is too late," wrote Thomas Merton, "is that the more you try to avoid suffering, the more you suffer." Through the lens of chaplaincy, our work isn't necessarily to heal the earth or become anxious truth-tellers, but to heal ourselves and embody healing for those around us. We allow healing to flow outwards into the interdependent web of planetary life, becoming people who bear the fruit of healing and truth. If more spiritual leaders helped us with this work, we would have more emotional resilience to cope with and take action against climate change.

Making Meaning of Suffering & Death

As much as we attempt to distract ourselves from their inevitability, suffering and death are unavoidable. One ancient Buddhist meditation reads that *I am of the nature to suffer and die*. Its purpose is to place this inescapable fact at the forefront of our awareness. *I cannot escape suffering and death.* Still, we distance ourselves from this reality by carefully crafting stories in which we are immune from suffering and death. We craft stories where some deity only lets bad things happen to bad people or where the goal is to surround ourselves with things to distract and please us. These stories can work well for a time, but when suffering and death break through, as they inevitably do, they begin to crack and fall apart. They leave us in spiritual crises of meaning—compounding our suffering and undermining our resilience.

"To navigate life in an age of ecological and social instability, we will need a new hybrid of spiritual leader..."

This is another place for chaplains. Chaplains are trained to work with people to process these crises of meaning, helping to bring greater awareness to how our stories drain or sustain life. They then help water the seeds of newer, healthier stories that can help us cope with adversity. What is climate despair but this same process unfolding on a global scale?

Culturally, many of us have constructed a narrative that our world is immortal. In this narrative, humanity exists as the permanent apex species on this planet forever and ever, amen. We enforce this story through national and religious narratives that centralize human experience at the expense of all else. However, the reality of climate change, like the reality of a health crisis, challenges that story head-on.

Climate change doesn't just challenge, but *decimates* such a story. The reality of climate change insists that humans are not the most powerful force on this planet and that, on our current trajectory, they could be entirely extinct in just a few generations. It pushes us past the unpleasant reality that each of us will die. It carries us to the

unavoidable truth that we, *as a species*, will one day meet our end. How is that for a crisis of meaning?

It is no wonder so many of us flat-out deny the existence of climate change.

Taking their lead from the field of chaplaincy, however, spiritual leaders can play critical roles in helping others to navigate this crisis. They can work with individuals and communities to process the grief of losing their meaning-making story and accompany them in discovering a larger, more durable story that centralizes life rather than humanity. Such a story can help us understand the existential resources necessary to accept our situation, navigate this cultural moment, and work for change.

Empowering Agency in The Face of Helplessness

Helplessness and victimhood are common responses to overwhelming crises. In hospitals, it is not unusual to see patients slip into a kind of numb despair in the face of disempowering and seemingly insurmountable prognoses. They begin to see their lives as something happening *to* them, not something they have any power to change. The result is often a self-fulfilling prophecy: patients and their loved ones become victims of circumstance with little hope anything will improve. Now, replace "overwhelming health crisis" with "overwhelming environmental crisis," and that sentence should read pretty much the same. The chaplain's role is to help empower the patient to step out of this mindset, directing them toward agency.

A tool some chaplains use to understand this phenomenon is called "the Karpman drama triangle." Since learning it, I see it in action everywhere I look. According to this model, there are three aspects of victimhood, each dependent on the other, each playing a role in sustaining the other. At one angle of the triangle is the victim, as it is classically understood. This is the "woe is me" individual who feels they have no agency in a situation. "They are doing this to me," they will say—whether "they" are a person, a disease, a social situation, etc.—" and there is nothing I can do." We are all familiar with this understanding of "victim."

On the next angle of the triangle, though, is "the rescuer." This is a less commonly recognized element of the victim dynamic. This person is bound and determined to solve the victim's problem, swooping in and saving them like a superhero, often avoiding their own issues. Of course, in doing this, the rescuer only enables and disempowers the victim, protecting them from any consequences of their actions while also keeping them comfortably in their victim role.

Then, on the last angle of the triangle, is "the persecutor," another less-commonly recognized part of the victim dynamic. The persecutor is the one who lashes out with blame and resentment, insisting it is all someone else's fault. A rescuer can easily become a persecutor if a victim fails to take their advice or exhibit enough gratitude, just as a victim can easily become a persecutor if the rescuer doesn't do a good enough job at the rescuing. It is a vicious triangle and faced with a crisis of any kind, we can jump onto the triangle through any of the three doorways, bouncing back and forth, sometimes in a matter of minutes.

This is where a chaplain can be helpful. Chaplains embody a counterpoint to the victim dynamic—an alternative, empowering triangle of responses. In this empowerment triangle, the three faces of the victim have corresponding faces of agency. Here, a victim is encouraged to become a "creator" who takes responsibility and agency toward a healthy outcome.

A rescuer is encouraged to become a "coach" who empowers victims to solve their own problems. A persecutor is encouraged to become a "challenger" who speaks kind, non-judgmental truth about a victim's situation. The chaplain enters as a "coach" or "challenger," helping patients and families take responsibility and find their own ramp off the triangle.

This model has as much to say about responses to climate change as it does responses to health crises. Faced with eco-catastrophe, we can slip into the roles of victims, crying out, "The problem is just too big! There's nothing I can do about it!" Or we look to rescuers like the scientific community or government agencies—those we expect to swoop in and solve the problems before they get too bad. Or, on the last angle of the triangle, we become persecutors, loudly blaming capitalism, corporations, and corruption for our dire situation.

This last one is my victimhood of choice, and, looking back, I can see how easy it was for me to act out the role of "persecutor" or "rescuer" under the guise of being righteously prophetic. The chaplain, however, shows us how to get *off* the triangle of madness, empowering us to free ourselves, take responsibility, and work towards genuine change.

I understand the line between "prophet" and "chaplain" isn't nearly as clean as I have made it out to be. There are plenty of spiritually healthy prophets, just as there are many unskillful chaplains. I have met both. Still, the distinction makes a point.

What we need is a healthy combination of the chaplain and the prophet. To navigate life in an age of ecological and social instability, we will need a new hybrid of spiritual leader: the prophet-chaplain and the chaplain-prophet. I hope spiritual leaders join others in the gentle work of facing pain and processing feelings. I hope we can find ways to make meaning in the face of suffering and death. I hope we can find ways to empower one another in the uncomfortably slow and courageous work of transformation. NFJ

— Zachary Helton is an author, interspiritual chaplain, and ordained pastor

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Sue Fitzgerald: A Reluctant Pioneer

By Wanda Kidd

In the fall of 1983, I arrived in western North Carolina to serve as an intern at the Baptist Student Union (BSU). Baptists all over the county were in a bruhaha over women in ministry. The local newspaper had carried an article about the Tuckaseigee Baptist Association meeting that listed Sue Fitzgerald, the representative from Mars Hill College, as a Reverend.

The irony was that Sue had been bringing greetings from Mars Hill College at associational meetings throughout the mountains of North Carolina without a problem for more than a decade. Pastors throughout the region valued and respected her. The issue was not Sue but the Rev. in front of her name.

I slid into the back row of the church to see if Rev. Fitzgerald was there and how it would all play out. I had been ordained for less than a year and was interested in how local pastors would respond to my role at the BSU.

When the presiding pastor introduced her, I held my breath. A guileless woman in her mid-fifties purposefully walked to the front of the church, stood before the communion table, and told about a free lending library program Mars Hill College offered to all churches in the region. She left out that she had designed the program and convinced the college's president to provide access to all the materials published by the Southern Baptist Convention to the small and often poor congregations throughout the mountains.

She could have defended her calling and extolled her ministry relationships with many present that day, but that was not her style. What she did say was spoken with confidence and humility, both of which have been hallmarks of her lifelong faith journey.

I shared an office with Sue when I worked at Mars Hill a decade later. Our paths had crossed before that, and my respect for her had only grown. When those interviewing me for the campus job asked what I thought about working with Sue, I replied that I had been able to serve in the mountains primarily because of the path she cut for other women. But Sue never saw herself as a pioneer. She was doing what she believed she was called to do.

After getting to know her, I asked if she knew about the controversy she was walking into that August day years before. She said she did. I also asked why she stood in front of the pulpit rather than in it, and she told me she knew she had the right to stand in the pulpit, but had she exercised that right, they would not have heard a word she had to say about the mission and ministry of "The College," as she always referred to Mars Hill. She chose to be heard.

Her father once told her, "Daughter, you stand like a tree planted by the water, but every once in a while, you may have to shake your leaves at them." That is how I saw her do ministry. She did not draw attention to herself, but she was no shrinking violet. She was persistent and consistent once she believed something needed to be done. She never started a church or a non-profit, but she taught many seminary extension classes to equip both men and women, striving to help them understand the Bible and how to equip the church.

She was the first to visit if someone in the area was sick or in need, regardless of the time or weather. She asked the young man who mowed her grass if he would take her car and fill it with gas. He told her it was three-quarters full. She said, "I know, but I never know when I am going to be called out and how far I may have to go." For as long as she could, that is how she lived her life.

Sue now lives in an assisted living facility in the middle of the state. Her stories and legacy live in the hundreds of students she mentored, pastors she shepherded, and multitudes she walked alongside in their joy and sorrow. She was given honorary doctorates and various awards, but the memories of the people she loves sustain her.

I went to see her at her new home. Finding her room was complicated. She walked me to the first set of doors when I was leaving. When we arrived, I told her I wasn't sure I could find my way out. She looked up and said, "You see those exit signs? I'd follow them." Still giving compassionate direction and guidance. That is Sue Fitzgerald. NFJ

A-I-T-A? *Am I the (Jerk)?*

By Brett Younger

Where do we go when we need help seeing from another's perspective? Who do we talk to when we want to know if we are wrong? Fifteen years ago, we might have asked a trusted friend. Now, however, Reddit has an online thread titled A-I-T-A, which stands for—and I am paraphrasing the last "A."

The forum began in 2013 when a man debated with female coworkers about the temperature in their office. The thread currently has two million subscribers and discusses the good, the bad, and everything in between. Participants explain their actions and ask, "Am I the jerk?" A jury of internet strangers discuss their conclusions.

For instance, a pregnant woman's fiancé baked a cake, told her she could have some, and left for the day. She had such a craving. She does not know how it happened. She says it was an "accident." When he came home that evening, she had eaten the entire cake. He was upset.

She asked, "Am I the jerk?"

Almost everyone said, "Yes, you are the jerk. You can't blame being pregnant. You are selfish, greedy, and entitled. This was no accident."

Here's another: "I got married last week. I'm Mexican, and she's American, but we both grew up in the United States, and our families know both languages. During the reception, I asked the band to play a song for me to sing to my new wife, *Te Amare*. My bride got angry. She said I was forcing my ethnicity on everyone. Am I the jerk?"

Most of the jurors said, "You're not the jerk, but you married a racist."

They asked, "Was she hoping no one noticed you are Mexican?"

The best response may have been, "*Ella es una idiota*."

Sometimes, it is not apparent who the jerk is. One guy got mad at his roommate for drinking his almond milk and denying it. The first roommate poured whole milk into an almond milk container, although his roommate was lactose intolerant. The thief got sick. Who's the jerk?

One reader helpfully pointed out, "If the roommate had died, that would have been going too far."

Another asked, "Who can't tell the difference between almond and dairy milk?"

A third respondent said, "Play stupid games and you win stupid prizes." The consensus was that both roommates were jerks, but the first one was the smarter of the two jerks.

- "AITA if I want to name my daughter after the *Star Wars* character Captain Phasma?"
- "AITA for pouring soda into a plant at a restaurant?"
- "AITA for not talking to my cousin?"
- "AITA for not hiding my happiness from my depressed roommate?"
- "AITA for making jokes about someone's religion?"
- "AITA for not wanting to call my stepfather's daughters my 'sisters'?"
- "AITA for not wanting to pitch in $100 to get my mom's hair done?"
- "AITA for ghosting a guy still in love with me after four years?"
- "AITA for telling my friend we won't be friends anymore if he doesn't get a therapist?"
- "AITA for wanting my mom to leave my dad?"

The thread is cathartic. The writers get credit for asking a hard question, "Am I in the wrong here?" They want to be held accountable.

AITA is a conflict resolution service that helps people do better. One of the rules is "Be civil,"— meaning you can "attack ideas, not people," and you have to "treat others with respect while helping them grow through outside perspectives." The forum differs from advice or therapy because the questions focus on right and wrong.

AITA has its share of problems. Not everyone knows how to follow the "Be Civil" rule, so some comments are cruel. A few like revenge, but most come to be helpful.

Church people should be pleased when people ask moral questions. We need to talk about what we think is right. We need to engage hard questions. We need to know how to make good decisions. We need to hear from people who have been through something similar.

We should ask, "What should we expect from one another? What does it mean to live in community? What rules can help us?"

The church should be a safe place to share embarrassing and challenging moments. We should be better at helping one another be better.

AITA? We might want to rephrase the question, but we need to ask. NFJ

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

Nurturing FAITH™ BIBLE STUDIES

LESSONS FOR
MAY/JUNE 2024

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

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Thanks, sponsors! *These Bible studies are sponsored through generous gifts from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Eula Mae and John Baugh Foundation. Thank you!*

IN THIS ISSUE

Scripture citations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) unless otherwise noted.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

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

May 5, 2024

Acts 10:44-48

Can Anyone Deny?

Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have? (Acts 10:47)

Do you feel at home or like a stranger when you go out in your community or church? Any number of things can leave us feeling like odd ducks: moving to a new area, changing jobs, or being in an ethnic or political minority may leave us on the outside looking in.

People of a certain age – or who listen to oldies music – may recall Dobie Gray's 1964 hit: "I'm in with the in crowd, I go where the in crowd goes, I'm in with the in crowd, I know what the in crowd knows…." We naturally yearn to be accepted and included by others. Today's text is a reminder that with God, everyone can be "in."

An act with seven scenes

The lectionary text is a snippet drawn from a longer account stretching from Acts 9:32-11:18, so an overview of the big picture will help clarify the small picture.

Acts 10:44-48 can be seen as one of several scenes in a two-act play featuring the temperamental Peter, a faithful Jew who had become a leader among Christ's disciples – the same Peter of whom Jesus said, "upon this rock I will build my church" (Matt. 16:18).

Additional information at goodfaithmedia.org

Luke, the author of Acts, wanted to emphasize how the young Christian movement grew to include Gentiles as well as Jews, and who better to endorse that idea than the influential Peter?

Act One (9:32-43) includes two scenes in which Peter leaves Jerusalem to work among Jewish believers in Lydda and Joppa, effecting miracles and drawing many to faith in Christ.

Act Two (10:1-11:18) moves into the Gentile world. *Scene One* (10:1-8) opens with Peter in Joppa, a port city just south of modern Tel-Aviv. Peter is staying in the home of a man identified as Simon the Tanner. Meanwhile, about 35 miles to the north, in the coastal city of Caesarea, a Roman centurion is moved by a vision from God.

Cornelius was 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. One afternoon, as he knelt for the regular Jewish prayer time, an angel instructed him to send messengers to find Peter and bring him to Caesarea.

The narrative shifts back to Joppa for *Scene Two* (10:9-16), about noon the following day. There, we find Peter praying alone on the flat roof of his host's home. Peter also has a vision from God, and he finds it troubling.

Luke says Peter was both prayerful and hungry when he saw a large sheet filled with four-footed animals, birds, and reptiles descend to the roof. A voice told Peter to "kill and eat," but the crusty disciple objected. None of the creatures in the sheet met the kosher requirements of the Jews (see Leviticus 11), and Peter insisted that he had never eaten any profane thing.

The heavenly voice, however, insisted that "What God has made clean, you must not call profane" (10:15). The vision was repeated three times, apparently to make sure Peter got the point.

Threefold repetitions are a theme in Peter's story. The gospels recount that he denied Jesus three times (e.g., Luke 22:34-61). John records a post-resurrection encounter in which Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" three times (John 21:15-17). Here, Peter experiences the same vision three times.

Peter may have needed some convincing. Old Testament law and Jewish custom drew a clear connection between eating unclean food and associating with unclean people (Lev. 20:24-26). Peter would soon be faced with doing both.

Three messengers from Cornelius appear in *Scene Three* (10:17-23a), and the Spirit instructs Peter to accompany them without hesitation. Employing a lesson learned from the vision, Peter invited the men to come in and rest overnight, something strictly observant Jews would not have done. But Peter was lodging with a tanner, whose work with hides from dead animals made him ritually unclean, so rules were already being stretched.

Scene Four (10:23b-33) relates Peter's journey to Caesarea and his

opening conversation with Cornelius and others gathered in his house. Recognizing that he wouldn't normally visit a Gentile's home, and being accompanied by other Jewish Christians, Peter sought to explain his behavior – and perhaps to convince himself that it was an acceptable thing: "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean" (10:28). Cornelius then described his own vision and asked Peter to proclaim to them "all that the Lord has commanded you to say" (10:33).

Peter's sermon (10:34-43) comprises *Scene Five*, in which he proclaimed the basics of the gospel message, the death and resurrection of Christ, and the command to proclaim the good news to all, calling for repentance and promising the forgiveness of sins.

The running theme of this section is emphasized in Peter's opening statement, something he has recently learned: "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" (10:34-35).

However, Peter's sermon was quickly interrupted, for *Scene Six* (10:44-48) relates how the Spirit of God was poured out on all who were gathered. The Gentile believers spoke in tongues and praised God, demonstrating the same evidence of the Spirit that Jewish believers had experienced in Acts 2. Some of those people had apparently accompanied Peter and "were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles," the text says (10:45). No one objected when Peter called for the Gentile believers to be baptized just as they had been.

Scene Seven of the lengthy story (11:1-18) relates Peter's recounting his experience when he returned to Jerusalem and spoke with other church leaders. Some criticized him for having lodged and presumably eaten with the Gentiles, but Peter's forthright defense silenced the critics: "If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" (11:17). Unfortunately, the silence did not last, and the issue would have to be revisited (Acts 15).

Scene six redux (10:44-48)

Now we can consider the chosen text more closely, and note that Peter didn't get to finish his sermon: Luke says he was still speaking when "the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word" (v. 44). Peter apparently had not invoked a formula or laid hands on anyone to prompt the Spirit's presence. The sending of the Spirit was entirely at God's initiative, and Peter was as surprised as anybody.

The new believers manifested the Spirit's presence by speaking in tongues, which "astounded" the Jews who had come along with Peter (vv. 45-46). Readers naturally wonder if the gift of tongues in Caesarea – where Cornelius' guests were Greek-speaking Gentiles – mirrored the Pentecost events in Jerusalem. There, people from many lands were gathered, and the gift of tongues appeared to reflect known languages, thus facilitating the spread of the gospel. Whether the tongues of Acts 10 refer to spoken languages or the unknown "tongues of angels" Paul later referenced (1 Cor. 13:1) is unclear, but also beside the point. Whatever their flavor, the gift of tongues was interpreted as clear evidence that the Spirit made no distinction between Jewish and Gentile believers.

Peter ordered the new believers to be baptized "in the name of Jesus Christ," just as Jewish believers had been baptized. Notably, he did not say they should be circumcised or restrict themselves to kosher food before fully entering the family of faith.

As we contemplate this passage, we rejoice in Peter's newfound knowledge and courageous obedience in listening to the Spirit and extending acceptance to the Gentiles.

The story is incomplete, however, without noting that Peter apparently drew back from his bold position later on. Paul charged that Peter ate with Gentile believers until "certain people who came from James" pressured him to stop, and he did (Gal. 2:1-14).

How accepting are we of others? Are there people who would not be welcome to join our church due to their ethnicity, background, or other aspect of their identity?

Even within our churches' membership, are there some who are considered "insiders" and "outsiders"? Do we earnestly welcome new attendees, or do we have our own set of friends and ignore those we don't know well when sitting in worship or at a church meal?

Some of us can relate stories of specific encounters that helped us overcome prejudice and become more inclusive, while for others, it is still a growing thing. Some of us may have a lot of growing to do.

Peter's experience reminds us of how hard it can be to accept Christ's command to show everyone inclusive love. It takes intentional work to overcome our cultural, institutional, and even supposedly biblical prejudices – but it is work worth doing, work God's Spirit will help us to accomplish.NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

May 12, 2024

Acts 1:15-26 (RCL 1:15-17, 21-26)

The Unknown Disciple

> *Then they prayed and said, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen ..." (Acts 1:24)*

The Old Order Amish in Pennsylvania organize their churches by groups of 20-30 families within a given geographical area. Each church has one or two ministers in addition to an area bishop. As the population grows, church districts may split and need additional leadership.

When a ministerial vacancy occurs due to a new church start or the incapacity of a current minister, new preachers are chosen from among male members of the congregation. As part of their baptismal vows, always as adults, men agree to serve as a minister if they are called.

On a given Sunday, members file by and whisper the name of someone they recommend to the bishop, who keeps track of the nominees. All men who receive more than a set number of nominations are then called to sit before the congregation.

The bishop selects an equal number of copies of the *Ausbund*, a hymn and prayer book written in the High German of Martin Luther's day. Into one of them, he has secretly inserted a slip of paper on which he has written the text of Prov. 16:33: "The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is the LORD's alone."

As the congregation prays, the books are laid on a table and the candidates, beginning with the oldest, come forward to choose an Ausbund. The first candidate flips through the pages to see if the slip is inside. If not, he sits down – often with a great sigh of relief – and the process continues with the next eldest. In time, the man who selects the *Ausbund* containing the verse is considered to have been chosen by God for the task.

Why would anyone choose ministers in this way? The Amish justification for the practice is found in Acts 1:15-26, the lectionary text for the day.

Apostle needed (vv. 15-20)

The Acts account locates the story shortly after Jesus' ascension. Following the resurrection, Jesus told the disciples to remain in Jerusalem while he continued to teach them. After 40 days, Luke says, Jesus led them to a place on the Mount of Olives, from which he ascended into heaven (vv. 1-11). Afterward, the awestruck disciples returned to Jerusalem and gathered in a large upstairs room.

Among those present, Luke identifies the eleven remaining disciples, minus Judas. Several women were also there, including Jesus' mother, "as well as his brothers." The gathered followers "were constantly devoting themselves to prayer" (vv. 12-14).

At some point, the group had swelled to about 120 "brothers." Whether Luke included women believers in the count is unclear. The number 120 may have reflected an actual count, or it may have emphasized that sufficient people were there to make an important decision. In Jewish custom, 120 men were the minimum required to establish a community that could appoint a full complement of local judges.

Whether the precise number was significant, Peter spoke as if the core group of Jesus' followers was present. He stood up to address the loss of Judas from their number and explained why he thought they should replace Judas, returning the leadership group to 12 (vv. 15-17).

Peter's speech began in a roundabout way, proclaiming that the Spirit had inspired David to render a prophecy concerning Judas (v. 16). Early exegetes, following a rabbinic pattern, did not hesitate to treat Old Testament verses that seemed to fit as prophecies of their current situation.

Luke interrupts the speech with a parenthetical statement regarding Judas' demise and his legacy of blood before returning to Peter's scriptural arguments for replacing Judas (vv. 18-20). Peter first quoted from Psalm 69, a lament traditionally associated with David that included an imprecation against enemies: "May their camp be a desolation; let no one live in their tents" (Ps. 69:25).

Peter adopted the imprecation as a Spirit-inspired reference to Judas' desolate end, and perhaps to his association with a pauper's cemetery known as the "Field of Blood."

Peter then jumped to Psalm 109 and plucked another imprecatory verse from a similar lament, citing v. 8: "May

his days be few; may another seize his position." Peter's quotations came from the Greek translation (LXX), and he adapted them to apply to Judas. Though Ps. 69:25 speaks of "their camp," Peter recited it as "his homestead," making it singular. While the Hebrew of Ps. 109:8 speaks of taking his "position" (NRSV) or "job" (NET2), the LXX had translated *pequddah* with *episkopos*, or "overseer," the same word the early church would use for "bishop" (1 Tim. 3:1, 2; Titus 1:7).

Modern exegetes would shudder at the proof-texting, but whether it was Peter or later interpreters who cited them, the two verses were regarded as scriptural justification for choosing a replacement for Judas.

Apostle chosen (vv. 21-26)

According to the narrative, Peter insisted that the candidate must be a man who had been among Jesus' followers from his baptism until his ascension and that he must also have witnessed the resurrection (vv. 21-22).

In keeping with the cultural expectations of the time, women were not considered, even though they were among the earliest and most faithful supporters. Surprisingly, Peter's statement indicates that many others had followed Jesus from the beginning, with the twelve who would later be known as apostles being chosen from among a larger pool of disciples. A casual reading of the gospels might lead one to think that the disciples were the first to follow Jesus, with others coming after.

Two candidates were put forward: "Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias" (v. 23). How the two were chosen was not stated, but having two candidates made it convenient to seek God's direction by casting lots between them. Following the Old Testament model of the High Priest's Urim and Thumim, the lots were probably two stones or bones with the same shape and weight, but different colors or markings. Each candidate would be identified with one of the lots, which were then put into a pouch.

Prayers would be offered for God to reveal the divine will, and then the person performing the ceremony would put a thumb over one lot and let the other one fall out, revealing which candidate had been chosen. The lot fell on Matthias, who was thus thought to have been chosen by God to join the eleven original disciples as primary leaders of the growing Jesus movement.

Despite the stated need for a twelfth disciple and the formal ceremony of choosing Matthias, he is never again mentioned in the New Testament.

Reading this text from our current perspective suggests both similarities and differences.

In first-century Jerusalem, only men were considered candidates for the leadership position, even though the gospels clearly point to the presence of devoted and capable women in the group. While many conservatives consider this a biblical mandate that church leaders must always be male, more progressive believers acknowledge that the disciples were living according to the cultural norms of their own time, which no longer need apply. Women, as well as men, should be able to express their gifts for church leadership.

The most crucial characteristic Peter cited was that the candidate must have been present with the group throughout Jesus' ministry, and a witness to the resurrection. No modern person can claim to have been present while Jesus was on earth. Still, we would likewise expect someone chosen for church leadership to be well acquainted with Jesus, a devoted follower who can bear witness to the resurrection through their personal experience with Christ through the Spirit.

A final thing to note is the importance of involving the faith community in making leadership decisions. Peter sought input from "about 120" of Jesus' closest followers gathered in Jerusalem. Some denominations have bishops or others who appoint pastors, but many prefer to involve the local congregation in seeking God's will in choosing ministers who will serve them well. That does not mean they will always select rightly: most of us know of churches that called an ineffective or poorly matched minister who damaged the church rather than building it up.

It is also common in our world for men or women, on their own, to believe God has chosen them for a leadership role, perhaps through founding a new church. Even in those cases, however, if a gathered congregation does not endorse or support such leaders, their efforts will come to naught.

Qualified candidates, earnest prayer, and community discernment all play essential roles in leadership choices within the church. Even among the Old Order Amish who still trust God to reveal the divine will through lots, the community puts the candidates forward, and the entire enterprise is bathed in prayer. Quaint though it may seem, the process calls out ministers who approach their work with great humility, zero salary, and no hope of retirement, convinced that their calling has come from God.

Perhaps the rest of us could learn from them, too. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

May 19, 2024

Romans 8:18-27 (RCL 8:22-27)

The Spirit Who Helps

> *Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. (Rom. 8:26)*

The epistle reading for Pentecost Sunday is a reminder that the Spirit's activity was not limited to the halcyon days following the initial influx of Spirit-empowered boldness and speech. Evidence of the Spirit's work continued throughout the book of Acts, and Paul often stressed the importance of believers looking to the Spirit as their primary connection to God.

The lectionary text for the day begins at Rom. 8:22, smack in the middle of a ponderous thought Paul sought to convey in vv. 18-25. We will benefit from incorporating the larger pericope.

Suffering and glory (vv. 18-22)

With v. 18, Paul enters a discourse on suffering and hope that takes its point of departure from the previous verse, where he had spoken of believers as joint heirs of Christ – "*if*, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him."

Suffering was par for the course in Paul's life and in the lives of many early believers. Day-to-day existence could be challenging. Conflict was common. Believers could be persecuted by government actors or by members of other faiths. The world seemed to be getting worse rather than better.

Paul knew suffering, but he understood it as a prelude to something far better: "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us" (v. 18). When suffering comes, we have options for dealing with it. One option is to let it control us, to get lost in it, and to spiral downward into an emotional abyss.

A better option is to look beyond present suffering to better days. Sometimes, the timeline may be short: recovery is usually a few days away when suffering from the flu. With broken bones, we may be back on our feet within weeks. Though it seems long, car payments or mortgage installments will eventually be paid in full, though years later.

Other conditions, however, may have no end in sight. Some diseases are not curable, some relationships may never be healed, and some people remain bound in poverty. Even those situations are not without hope, however. The hardships of this life will one day give way to "the glory about to be revealed to us."

That doesn't mean we should give up on this life and think only of "pie in the sky by and by." We don't just accept a troubling status quo while singing "I'll Fly Away" or "When We All Get to Heaven." Thoughts of paradise and renewed family ties may bring comfort, but that's not enough to get us through when the pain is visceral and the future uncertain. Days of trial must be dealt with: we find ways to push ahead and make the best of the life before us, even as we hope for a better world to come.

Sometimes, it helps to remember that we are not the only ones facing hard times. Paul urged his readers to look beyond themselves and even beyond other people: humans are not alone in suffering, he said, for all of creation longs with the children of God for the fulfillment of the divine purpose (v. 19). That good purpose, Paul believed, had been thwarted or "subjected to futility" and left to decay in bondage, "groaning in labor pains until now" (vv. 20-22).

Paul's language, as expansive as it is cryptic, has puzzled many commentators. He was likely looking back to the tradition of "the fall" from Genesis 3. Paul's fixation on Adam and Eve's sin is interesting because the Hebrew scriptures never mention them after Genesis 4, except for Adam's singular inclusion by name in a purported genealogy that introduces the work of the Chronicler (1 Chr. 1:1).

Hebrew writers were unconcerned with stories of primordial sin. They focused on whether Israel lived up to the covenant with God forged through Moses, whether they worshiped Yahweh alone, and whether they obeyed the law.

Paul, however, based several aspects of his theology on Genesis 3, a story that claims the world's first humans disobeyed God's command to avoid eating from a tree that promised knowledge of good and evil. According to the tradition, that act of defiance

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resulted in punishments for the woman, the man, and even the earth itself. "Cursed is the ground because of you," God reportedly said (Gen. 3:17). No longer would it be as naturally fruitful as before: the man would have to labor to weed out thorns and thistles to raise needed food.

Thus, Paul believed, the earth itself had suffered due to human sin. Speaking of creation as a conscious entity, Paul imagined it yearning for release from the curse and a return to its original fecundity. That would happen, Paul believed, when God brought about the redemption of all things.

Hope and redemption (vv. 23-27)

Like the earth, Paul taught that believers can also look to a complete redemption. They might "groan inwardly" due to present trials, but those who have tasted redemption through the "first fruits of the spirit" have the basis of hope for a better future (v. 23).

Modern believers may no longer attribute the world's state to primordial sin, but can any of us deny the detrimental effects of human arrogance on the earth? We've hunted animals to extinction, overfished the seas, and leveled rainforests crucial for global health. We have polluted both air and water. Rivers run with hazardous chemicals or toxic sludge, and the vast oceans are littered with plastic detritus. As we lay waste to natural resources and exhaust fossil fuels, we flood the atmosphere with chemicals that promote undeniable climate change. Storms grow stronger. Ice shelves shrink and weaken. Ocean levels rise, and deserts grow.

The earth may not be conscious, but it is groaning beneath us.

We are also aware of how the systemic evil of human selfishness has contributed to human misery on every level. As we may grieve broken relationships or hurts in our personal or family lives, powerful economic systems guarantee more wealth for the wealthy while leaving those with lower incomes to scramble for basic needs with little opportunity for their situation to improve.

Worldwide, there are countries where entire populations groan under the harsh rule of dictatorial regimes that rule with fear, ruthlessly eliminating all who oppose them.

All is not lost, however. We have the ability to make things better while we live and the responsibility to work for justice, whether economic or ecological, in every way we can.

As we work toward that end, we share in hope for a day when God sets things right and heals all creation. "For in hope we were saved," Paul said, looking toward a future we cannot yet see. Stating the obvious, he added, "Hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?" (v. 24).

We don't need to hope for something we already have or can see – but the ultimate redemption we long for is not yet. For this, we must wait with patience (v. 25).

The power of hope should never be underestimated. Victor Frankl, a survivor of the Holocaust, often spoke of how some people in the German concentration camps of World War II simply gave up and died before they went to the gas chambers. Others held firm and survived. The difference, he said, was hope.

We were saved in *hope*, and in hope, we await what lies ahead. We cannot prove the reality of faith or the truth of the gospel. We cannot see it with our eyes, but we can hope for it. Belief, in essence, means acting upon the hope we have in Christ, patiently awaiting the day when we can see.

Prayer and the Spirit (vv. 26-27)

Hope may come hard, but we do not hope alone. God has hopes for us, too. Paul referenced the "first fruits of the Spirit" in v. 23, and in vv. 26-27 he returned to the theme. We exercise hope through prayer, even when we don't know how to pray or for what we should pray, trusting that the Spirit "intercedes with sighs too deep for words." Through the Spirit, God knows our darkest thoughts, highest hopes, deepest pain, and best abilities.

Many of us, at some time, have probably experienced heartache or confusion or fears that we could not express in cogent thoughts. Even for the Spirit, Paul implies, some things are beyond words – but not beyond intercession and hope.

We often pray for others and ask others to pray for us. If it comforts us to know that friends are interceding on our behalf, how much more should it mean to know that the Spirit speaks up for us?

When we read this text on Pentecost Sunday, we recall how the Spirit was manifested in Acts 2 and Acts 10, inspiring both Jewish and Gentile believers to speak in tongues they hadn't previously known. We recall how Paul elaborated various gifts of the Spirit that empower us to serve in various ways, making the body whole (1 Cor. 12:4-11, Rom. 12:4-8, Eph. 4:11-16).

Too often, we do not lack ability but the motivating confidence that our actions matter. If we want to see better lives and a better world, we can trust God's Spirit to encourage, support, and empower us to do what needs to be done. When hope springs into action, good things happen. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

May 26, 2024

Romans 8:12-17

In the Flesh, of the Spirit

Children often bear a physical likeness to their parents: "She looks just like her mother," we say, or "He gets his height from his grandfather." Genetics plays a role in physical similarities among family members, but adopted children may also take after their parents. We may see similarities in their politeness (or lack thereof), and sometimes in their general approach to life, whether positive or negative.

None of that is surprising, but we also know that children may rebel and try to be everything their parents are not: they may look like their parents, but not act like them. A well-behaved "model child" and a full-throated rebel can emerge from the same set of siblings.

Paul often spoke of God in various ways. Today's text references God as Father, Christ, and Spirit, so it is often read on Trinity Sunday. Paul had no systematic concept of the Trinity, a theological position that emerged in later centuries, but the doctrine was based in part on Paul's writings.

While Paul's language about God varies in this text, his purpose was not to explain the Trinity but to discuss what it means to be children of God.

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" ... for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live."

Children of flesh (vv. 12-13)

Paul's language may seem strange to us, for he begins with a discussion of "the flesh." We know the term but rarely use it to refer to our bodies or our lifestyles. The word Paul used is *sarx*. In the most basic sense, it was the graphic Greek term to describe bodily flesh, though it could be used for the body in general. Paul applied the term metaphorically by applying it to human nature, especially in its negative aspects.

In essence, Paul's argument is straightforward. He called on believers to live a righteous and holy life for the simple reason that they belonged to God, not to the flesh or the world.

It is easy for us to excuse all kinds of behavior by saying, "It's just human nature," or "I can't help myself," but Paul insisted that we are not obligated to follow the weaker or more salacious aspects of human nature. We are not "debtors" to our human condition, "to live according to the flesh" (v. 12). While we are by nature in the flesh, we are not obligated to be of the flesh by surrendering to every bodily temptation.

Instead, we have an option, and a much better one we would be wise to choose: "for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (v. 13).

Our translations say Paul spoke to his readers as "brothers and sisters" (NRSV, NIV11, NET). His literal word was "brothers," but he clearly had all church members in mind. Paul recognized that he was in the same boat as other believers, using the pronoun "we" to include himself in the conversation.

Paul knew, as we do, that all who live in human skin are destined to die, but he also knew there is more to life than flesh and bones. He had in mind more than the physical death of the body. Our physicality will not last, but Paul believed life continues for those who trust God's Spirit rather than in serving "the flesh" alone.

In a similar message to the Galatians, Paul had written: "If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit you will reap eternal life from the Spirit" (Gal. 6:8).

One could argue that the fulfilling and abundant life we can know in Christ is also qualitatively better than a life limited to what the world has to offer, but Paul is mainly focused on eternity.

As a former rabbi, Paul may have intentionally called upon the rhetoric of Deuteronomy, where a sermon attributed to Moses includes a similar challenge for the Israelites to choose life and prosperity over death and destruction by loving God and obeying the commandments (Deut. 30:15-20).

Both Paul's and Moses' admonitions move from a call to righteous living to the promise of an inheritance. Israel's idea of inheritance was a land to call their home, but Christ-followers are

promised that they will become "heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ" (v. 18).

What are the "deeds of the body" that concerned Paul so much? What is it that Christians must overcome by the Spirit? The word *praxis* simply means "actions" – things that we do. Here, Paul uses the word *sōma* for "body" rather than *sarx*, possibly for variety, since *sōma* doesn't usually carry a negative connotation.

Eating, drinking, sleeping, and working could all qualify as "deeds of the body," but Paul was speaking of actions that feed human desires without considering whether they are right or cause harm to others.

Only with the Spirit's help can we "put to death" selfish inclinations that threaten our lives now and in the future. It's important to remember that Paul's intent was not to warn unbelievers: he was writing to the church in Rome. Paul did not subscribe to the all-too-common notion that one can "accept Christ" and "join the church" like buying fire insurance and then continue to behave in any old way. Following Jesus is serious business, and overcoming sin is a task that endures as long as we inhabit our bodies.

Children of God (vv. 14-17)

While those who follow only human desires are doomed to experience only human life, Christ has made a better option possible: "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God," Paul said (v. 14).

It's hard to comprehend that name. *Children of God*. In keeping with the times, Paul used the word "sons," but it is clear that he had in mind all people, so "children" is an appropriate translation. Paul's readers would have been familiar with the concept of humans being related to gods. Greek royals and even renowned philosophers sometimes described themselves as favored sons of a patron god.

Sometimes, in reflecting on a belief about God's creative activity in the world, we speak of all people as "children of God," and that is true in a sense—especially for those who are still children. But Paul had a deeper relationship in mind, not determined by our generic humanity but by our specific choice to follow God's way, trusting in Jesus and being led by the Spirit.

Some ancient peoples taught that the gods had created humans to be their servants, but Paul believed we have a higher calling: "For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God …" (vv. 15-16).

Slaves are motivated by fear: the fear of punishment or starvation, the fear of being sold or separated from family, and even the fear of death. Christian believers do not relate to God as slaves to their master, but as children to a loving parent.

The Jews of Paul's day did not call God "Father," even in prayer, considering such a term far too familiar. In fact, they avoided using God's name altogether, preferring circumlocutions such as "the Holy One, blessed be he," or even "the Name."

It may be hard for us to imagine how radical-sounding it was for Paul to suggest that we can call God not only "Father," but "Abba," an Aramaic term equivalent to "Papa." Paul wanted to emphasize how close a relationship we can have with God when we choose to be Spirit-led rather than self-led.

If we are children of God, Paul went on, then we are also "heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ" (v. 17a). What does that even mean? In one sense, it could mean that we experience the glory of God that was lost through sin. Christ knew and experienced God's glory. In his farewell prayer with and for the disciples, Jesus prayed for the Father to restore to him the glory he had known before (John 17:1, 5).

Elsewhere, Paul often connected the believer's inheritance with participation in the kingdom of God, as in 1 Cor. 15:50, where he insisted that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (see also 1 Cor. 6:9-11, Gal. 5:21, Eph. 5:5).

Experiencing Christ's glory sounds amazing, but if we are to share Christ's glory, we must also share in his suffering. We are joint heirs, Paul said, "if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him" (v. 17b).

What? *Suffer*? If we are to live in Christ, we take the difficult as well as the delightful. Suffering was and is an inevitable part of God's purpose for Christ and the church. Paul told the Philippians, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death" (Phil. 3:10).

Suffering does not indicate defeat but takes on a positive theological meaning. Here, Paul may have in mind more than the persecutions he and others would suffer. He has urged his readers to "put to death" their human desires. Giving up a life dedicated to pleasure may seem like suffering to some, but if one is not willing to resist temptation, how will he or she respond to real trouble? NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

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

June 2, 2024

Mark 2:23-3:6

Future Fundamentalists

We all experience various "crisis points" in life that lead us to focus on who we are, where we came from, and where we are going. Graduations, whether from high school or with advanced degrees, come to mind. Each stage can open a new chapter.

Marriage and divorce are among those points. Choosing to remain single, relocating, beginning a new career, and facing sickness are all crisis points that challenge us in various ways, including the decision about what sort of fundamentalist we will be.

We may not like being associated with the word "fundamentalist," especially in the religious sense, but I still recall an old sermon by Leonard Sweet in which he insisted that "Everyone's a fundamentalist about something" (*Homiletics* 9 [April-June 1997], pp. 37-40).

We can be fundamentalists about our diet plan, our morning routine, or our political leanings. In seminary, I was a "make all A's if it kills me" fundamentalist. I am also a "toilet paper over the top" fundamentalist. You may know people who are "no pastel clothes until Easter" fundamentalists or "if my mother likes it, I won't wear it" fundamentalists.

You may know people who are fundamentalist about what time morning worship should end. Whatever our proclivities or peccadillos, we are all fundamentalists about something.

Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath." (Mark 2:27)

A fight over food (2:23-28)

Our studies for the next several weeks come from the gospel readings, and this one falls within a series of controversy stories that began with the healing of a man who couldn't walk (2:1-12) and culminated with the healing of a man who couldn't use his hand (3:1-6). Both stories speak to a conflict between two kinds of fundamentalism.

In the first of two conflict stories in today's reading, Jesus and his disciples were walking through a grain field on the Sabbath when some of the disciples grabbed a little grain from harvest-ready wheat or barley growing on either side of the path, rubbed it between their hands, and ate the chewy kernels (2:23). Custom allowed passersby to pick standing grain from the side of the road, even if it wasn't their field.

The Old Testament command to cease from labor on the sabbath (Exod. 20:8-11, Deut. 5:12-15) did not address such piddling tasks, but an elaborate system of oral law developed after the exile added hundreds of new rules. Proponents sought to build a "hedge about the law" to prevent people from unwittingly breaking a more central command.

Based on the oral law, the disciples had broken at least three rules: they were guilty of reaping, threshing, and preparing a meal. Their transgression did not go unnoticed by a group of Pharisees, who were the strictest of the strict.

The disciples' offenses were duly reported, and representatives soon questioned Jesus. They got to the point, as if afraid they might go over the speech limit for a sabbath.

"Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" they asked (2:24). Jesus' answer may have been expanded in the growth of biblical tradition, but the essence of it was, "Because they were hungry."

Jesus responded to the fundamentalism of the oral law by citing a story from scripture. He noted how the beloved hero David had once persuaded a priest to supply him with bread from the temple, even though it was considered sacred, because he and his men were hungry (2:25-26).

Jesus said people weren't made to serve the Sabbath, but the Sabbath was made for humankind (2:27). The Sabbath was a gift to people who get tired from working all week and who need a break. Jesus would not have disagreed that observing the Sabbath was important, but the added rules of the oral law weren't required for Sabbath-keeping.

In other words, Jesus saw no reason to be a fundamentalist about the Sabbath. Indeed, the gospel tradition claims he went on to say, "so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath" (2:28). In his apocalyptic role as the coming messiah, Jesus possessed an authority that surpassed rigid concepts of the Sabbath law.

Some of us have known people who were Sunday fundamentalists. They wouldn't play with "spotted cards" on Sunday (though Rook was okay). They wouldn't go to a store.

They cooked on Saturday and ate their food cold on Sunday. That's more fundamentalist than most of us want to be about Sunday.

A fight over healing (3:1-6)

The following conflict story also took place on a Sabbath. Jesus was in the synagogue when he noticed a man whose hand was paralyzed and drawn (3:1). According to the text, certain Pharisees were watching carefully to see if Jesus would heal the man (3:2). Were they hoping for an opportunity to criticize him?

Jesus recognized the ploy and even baited his critics. After calling the afflicted man to come forward, Jesus asked aloud: "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" The question assumes a qualifier – "Is it *more* lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" (3:3-4).

Once he put it that way, the Pharisees could say nothing, even though Jesus' question didn't follow the logic of the situation. The issue was not between doing good or harm, but whether to do something good or nothing at all.

We often jump to the account of healing without much attention to Mark's comment that the onlookers' hard silence had an effect on Jesus, who "looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart" (3:5a).

Self-righteous legalism that lacks compassion should make us angry. Politicians who want tax cuts for the rich while cutting benefits for the poor should make us angry. Corporate executives who earn lavish bonuses on the backs of employees who struggle on less than living wages should make us grieved.

Without further conversation, Jesus did what we would expect. He told the man to stretch out his hand. We might wonder if the patient might have considered that to be a crazy request: by definition, a crippled hand can't be stretched out. But he gave it a try, and there it was – all healed and straight, every finger bending and working just as it should (3:5b).

Knowing their cause was lost in the public arena, the Pharisees didn't bother to openly criticize Jesus further. Mark's series of controversy stories comes to an early crescendo here, for the Pharisees were no longer satisfied just to castigate Jesus: they "went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him." The word translated "destroy" (*apolesōsin*) means "to ruin," "to abolish," or "to put an end to." In this sense, it can mean "to kill." The NET2 translates it as "to assassinate him," NIV11 has "how they might kill Jesus," and NASB20 renders it as "how they might put him to death." Earlier, Jesus had alluded to his death with his remark about the bridegroom being taken away (2:20). Now, his critics were planning to make it happen.

In both stories, we acknowledge that Jesus was also acting out of his own kind of fundamentalism. The difference is that Jesus was a fundamentalist about loving people and helping others. Nothing made Jesus any angrier than when somebody used their own place of privilege to keep others down instead of helping them up. Nothing grieved him more than to see religion turned into a system of oppression.

In the synoptics, Jesus made it clear that the whole law was subsumed under two things: loving God and loving others (Matt. 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-28). In John's version of the gospel, Jesus forcefully said that the only law that really mattered was to love one another as he had loved us (John 15:12-17).

Jesus was a fundamentalist about loving people. That is what motivated him to heal the sick, comfort the hurting, and teach the curious. That is what moved him to reach out to children and beggars and tax collectors and prostitutes and fishermen. That is what led him to choose humility over power and self-sacrifice over self-preservation. The fundamentalism of love defines who Jesus was and is.

Future fundamentalists

Jesus' convictions led him to challenge others to become love fundamentalists, too. That doesn't happen easily: it needs to become a conviction solidly embedded in our being, and that's a challenge when we live in a self-centered society.

We may fear that truly loving as Jesus loved could cause inconvenience, limit our opportunities, or leave us poorer, but Sweet argued that it offers a new kind of freedom: "Instead of narrowing your vision, limiting your options, or scaling down your scope, love fundamentalism opens whole new worlds of possibilities and promise. The fundamentalism of love always offers one more chance, always goes one more mile, always trusts one more time, always believes one more possibility, always commits one more hour, always cries one more tear, always rejoices over one more soul" (cited above, p. 38).

What are some practical ways in which we can demonstrate that kind of love in our daily walk? Through people we can touch, service we can render, comfort we can share, a willingness to listen, to really listen?

What kind of fundamentalist will we be? NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

June 9, 2024

Mark 3:20-35

Real Family

What does it mean to be family? Many of us have biological brothers or sisters that we remain close to, either geographically, emotionally, or both. But we may also have friends and neighbors – especially if we live at some distance from our siblings – who are closer than our siblings. Proverbs 18:24 holds that some companions may be less than trustworthy, but "a true friend sticks closer than one's closest kin." The word translated "friend" means "one who loves."

Families are like that. Some of us have siblings who are close, while others may hardly speak at all. Even Jesus discovered that the people who were closest to him were not the ones who were kin to him.

When Jesus began the crucial years of his public ministry, did his family stand beside him? Did they support him? Did they cheer him on? It appears not – at least, not until later. Indeed, in the early stages of Jesus' ministry, Mark implies that his family thought he had lost his mind. Our text for today claims that they even tried to put him away. It is a troublesome but memorable story. In it, Jesus gives the word "family" an entirely new meaning.

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When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind." (Mark 3:21)

Misguided seekers (vv. 20-27)

The lectionary reading follows a series of controversy stories in 2:1-3:6, culminating in Jesus' opponents plotting his demise. After returning to the Sea of Galilee, Jesus taught and healed amid "a great multitude" who reportedly sought him out from as far away as Jerusalem, Judea, the Transjordan, Tyre, and Sidon (3:7-12). In Mark's itinerary, this was followed by Jesus leading his disciples to a mountain retreat, where he called out twelve of them as apostles, commissioned them to proclaim his message, and have authority to heal (3:13-19).

"Then he went home," Mark says, probably referring to a residence in Capernaum, which Jesus apparently adopted as his home base while in Galilee. It is often assumed that he lodged there in the home of Peter and Andrew. However, there was no rest for the weary as "the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat" (v. 20).

At the height of this frenzied popularity, two groups came looking for Jesus. The first was his family, who did not come to follow him but "to restrain him, for people were saying 'He has gone out of his mind'" (v. 21).

Families can accept only so much weirdness. Jesus' notoriety created enough discomfort and concern that Mary and her other sons apparently thought it would be good to take Jesus home and put him under wraps for a while.

Although post-resurrection stories count them among his followers, with his brother James becoming head of the Jerusalem church (Acts 1:14, Gal. 1:19), there seems to have been a period of relative estrangement.

The second group seeking Jesus consisted of "scribes who came down from Jerusalem," claiming "He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons" (v. 22).

Beelzebul was an alternate name for Satan in Jewish demonology of the period. Jesus responded flatly that the scribes' logic was flawed, for Satan could hardly cast himself out (vv. 23-26).

Using the forceful analogy of a robbery, which Mark describes broadly as a parable, Jesus said, "No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered" (v. 27).

The obvious message is that Jesus was the strong man who had tied up Satan and could, therefore, plunder his house by casting out the demons subservient to him.

Modern readers are not required to accept the ancients' belief that demons caused mental or emotional afflictions: Jesus spoke in the categories that were common to his day. His acts of healing are no less impressive or important if they deliver someone from a debilitating condition.

By combining these two stories, Mark points to a time when Jesus was

cut off from both of his families. Those who had the best chance to recognize Jesus' special identity first had failed to do so. His biological family feared he had lost his mind. Leaders of his Jewish family thought he was possessed. But Jesus had no intention of being left without a family. He discovered new sisters and brothers everywhere he went, a topic to which Mark returns in v. 31.

Hopeless sinners (vv. 28-30)

A casual reading might leave the reader puzzled and wondering what connection vv. 28-30 have with the previous account, for Mark has Jesus suddenly switch to the topic of sin and forgiveness. The connection is found in his opponents' charge that Jesus was empowered by Beelzebul/Satan.

"Truly I tell you," Jesus said, "people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin" (vv. 28-29).

The connection is here: "for they had said, He has an unclean spirit" (v. 30).

Jesus attributed the mighty works he did to the power of the Holy Spirit within him. The scribes' accusation that he cast out demons by the power of Satan reversed the order, attributing the Spirit's good work to an evil being. One who identifies God's saving power as the work of Satan can hardly expect forgiveness from God, for they can't tell the difference between the two.

That does not exclude the possibility of repentance and a change of heart. Jesus was not declaring that the scribes who accused him were forever damned because they had wrongly credited the Spirit's work to Satan. The point of a warning is to hold out the possibility of a better option.

The question of an "unpardonable sin" appears several times in the New Testament, and in different contexts (see also Luke 12:10, 1 John 5:16; Heb. 6:4-6, 10:6). Modern believers sometimes worry that they might have committed an unpardonable sin, but the only sin that can't be forgiven is one so consistent and ingrained that a person doesn't recognize it as sin and thus thinks there's no need for forgiveness.

The fact that someone is concerned about having committed "the unpardonable sin" is solid evidence that they have not.

True family (vv. 31-35)

Mark's gospel places vv. 31-35 here, but it apparently follows from the brief mention in v. 21 that Jesus' mother and brothers had come seeking to restrain him, thinking he might have lost his sanity. The same account appears in different contexts in Matt. 12:46-50 and Luke 8:19-21.

When someone told Jesus that "your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you," he responded with a question that must have surprised everyone: "Who are my mother and my brothers?" (vv. 31-33).

Jesus advised his listeners to look elsewhere if they were thinking of finding his real mother and brothers. Mark draws attention to Jesus' pause to look around at the followers – both male and female – who had crowded into the house. "Here are my mother and brothers!" he said: "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (vv. 34-35).

Jesus suggests that there is a higher plane of family life in which a common sense of obedience and loyalty to God is stronger than a shared genetic code. His observation contributes to a theology of the church as people who are called to be a "family of faith."

Those who belong to Jesus' family are not those born to Christian parents or a particular ethnic group but those who trust Jesus to guide their way. Our pedigree does not determine our relationship to Jesus; our practice does.

In a sense, Jesus came to create a new family of God by making possible a redeemed and renewed relationship with our common parent. He taught us what it means to live as family by loving God and loving one another, thus obeying the will of God. He demonstrated the lengths to which true love will go, laying down his life for us. The lessons learned by his earliest followers and the camaraderie they shared together were essential in the birth and growth of the church – and no less crucial for the church's health today.

This text offers a constant challenge for the church universal and for churches individually. We may claim to be the family of God, but does our walk back up our talk? Do we make the effort to become better acquainted with new family members and show them love? Do we support each other in bad times and good times? Do we live in ways that bring honor to our spiritual family? Do we commit time, talents, and treasure to the life and health of our family of faith?

Some people think it's crazy to care for people as Jesus did, to be generous with our time and money in caring for others, and to seek justice for all people. Some people may think it is insane to sacrifice resources and energy to minister in prisons and feed addicts and visit the lonely and help people who can't help us back.

From the world's self-centered perspective, it may seem irrational, but if loving people is bonkers, it's bonkers like Jesus. In a sense, within the church, we're all crazy relations. Jesus wouldn't have it any other way. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

June 16, 2024

Mark 4:26-34

Two Seedy Stories

Have you ever played the game called "*Taboo*"? The point of the game is to get a teammate to guess a particular concept or idea and say it out loud, but without using any of the best clue words as a prompt – they're taboo.

The game reminds me of times when we try to explain something but get frustrated—not because we are not allowed to use the best words, but because there are no words.

How would we describe an adrenaline rush, for instance? We know that queasy-quick feeling that squeezes our stomach and makes every cell in our bodies stand at attention, but how to explain it? We could mention that the brain signals the adrenal glands to squirt adrenaline into the bloodstream, sparking a series of chemical reactions that quicken the heart rate and dilate the blood vessels, but the *feeling* gets lost in the translation.

Resorting to an example may work better. Do you know that tingly hyper feeling when you look in the rear-view mirror and see a patrol car speeding up with blue lights flashing? If you've had that experience, you know precisely what an adrenaline rush feels like.

> *He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? (Mark 4:30)*

Sometimes, even when good words and comprehensible arguments are available, we communicate best by telling stories. Jesus knew that, which is why he often told stories when explaining complex concepts such as the kingdom of God.

We call these stories "parables." A timeworn definition says a parable is "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning."

Mark 4:26-32 finds Jesus was teaching his followers what He meant when he talked about the kingdom of God. It was hard, because his disciples thought they already knew, but they were wrong. So, Jesus searched for ways to help them "unlearn" some of their misguided ideas and comprehend the true meaning of the kingdom.

When the disciples and other Jews of the first century imagined the kingdom of God, they saw a vision of Jewish armies winning a decisive victory over Rome, led by a divine messiah who would come as a great warrior and rule as a mighty king – someone like David, only better.

Many people today imagine a similar concept, only they think of militant Christians taking over Congress, or Christ coming with conquering armies at the end of the age to set up a new kingdom on earth.

When Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God, he meant the eternal rule of God in the minds, hearts, and lives of those who followed him. It was not an external empire, but an internal allegiance, the spiritual realm in which God's work is done. The kingdom had begun in Jesus and was growing through the disciples and others who followed Jesus, but it was not yet all it would be. It was both a present reality and a promised result.

That description may still fall short of helping anyone understand the kingdom of God or the church's place in the world. For many people, a technical explanation goes right from one ear to the other and doesn't even stop for a hot dog.

But if we hear a story or envision a word picture, we're more likely to understand and remember it. That's why Jesus told so many parables about the kingdom. In Mark, these are the first two.

The Parable of the Automatic Seed (vv. 26-29)

The first story doesn't really clarify things as much as we might like. In fact, it is so hard to interpret that the other gospels did not repeat it: this is the only section of Mark that has no parallel in the other gospels.

Jesus said: "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself (*automátē*), first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his

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sickle, because the harvest has come." (vv. 26-29, NRSV).

The problem is deciding whether the main point of the parable is found in the seed growing by itself, in the soil nourishing its growth, or in the farmer who sows the seed and reaps the harvest. It also helps to know whether the farmer's sowing and reaping represents Jesus, who first planted the seed of the kingdom, or if it means the ongoing task of the church to sow the good seed of our witness, trusting that there will, in fact, be a harvest.

One could argue that Jesus' primary intention was to show his disciples that the kingdom was founded by God's initiative and would be brought to full fruition by God's own power in God's own time. The verse about the harvest is a rough quotation of Joel 3:13, an Old Testament prophecy regarding the surety of a coming judgment. From that perspective, the main point is that the seed grows by itself. We can't "bring in the kingdom" by making detailed eschatological predictions or by recruiting a Christian army to take over the government. We can't bring in the kingdom by recruiting converts from every nation.

God makes the seed grow in God's own way and time. We can't fully understand how the kingdom grows, but we can trust God that it will.

Our tendency is to try to explain everything. I remember how delighted I was in college biology to learn more about how plants grow—how the apical meristem of a shoot undergoes continual mitosis, rapidly producing cells that then differentiate into xylem, phloem, cambium, or epithelium—but none of that knowledge enabled me to make a seed grow. It grows by itself.

That is not to say that we have no place in the story. Followers of Jesus have seeds of the kingdom within them. Through the lives and witness of those who love as Jesus taught, Jesus continues to sow kingdom seeds, allowing us to work in partnership with Him.

The growth of the kingdom is a cooperative venture. God created and empowered the kingdom and rules the universe. We cannot make the kingdom any bigger than it is. But we have a part in the sowing and reaping as we encourage others to live in surrender to the king.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed (vv. 30-32)

The second story sounds more familiar. While the parable of the automatic seed is found only in Mark, the parable of the mustard seed also appears in Matt. 13:31-34 and Luke 13:18-19. It's a little more straightforward.

The black mustard plant known to Jesus' followers commonly grew to over six feet tall, and it could reach ten to twelve feet, with a stalk as thick as a person's arm. The plant was not raised for its leaves, but for the seeds, which grew in pods and were harvested for use as a food condiment and a source of oil (*Flora and Fauna of the Bible*, 2nd. Ed., [London: United Bible Societies, 1980]). Jesus' listeners would have known about this as surely as any boy or girl from the country knows how to shuck corn.

So, Jesus' listeners could relate to this parable: "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." (vv. 30-32, NRSV).

The primary point is fairly obvious. Just as the mustard plant began as a tiny seed but grew into a huge bush, so the kingdom of God had a small beginning in Jesus and his followers, but it was destined to grow into something much larger, and it has. Within a few years after Jesus' death and resurrection, it was said of Paul and other Christian missionaries that they "turned the world upside down." In its tangible sense, the kingdom, through the church, continues to grow many years later. Though declining in Europe and North America, Christianity is flourishing in the Global South.

The Kingdom seed is growing, not because we make it grow, but because it is God's work. It grows secretly and automatically. But we can do our part to sow the seed, cultivate the earth, and trust that God will be at work so that the church, the visible aspect of God's invisible kingdom, will grow in health and number.

Jesus emphasized the importance of bringing all persons into the kingdom by closing the parable with an allusion to birds resting in the branches of the mustard bush. This calls to mind stories from Dan. 4:10-12 and Ezek. 17:22-24, 31:6. In Jewish storytelling, birds commonly symbolized Gentiles. Jesus' comment about the birds nesting in the bush is a reminder that the kingdom would grow to encompass all kinds of people: persons of every race, nationality, and ethnic background, from every social, cultural, and economic level, persons of every age, and educational achievement.

Unfortunately, our churches remain some of the most segregated and homogeneous organizations in existence. Many people have a hard time celebrating or even tolerating diversity, but the gospel suggests that we'd better learn. If we are going to pray, "thy kingdom come," that's the way the kingdom is. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

June 23, 2024

Mark 4:35-41

The Weatherman

> *And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (Mark 4:41)*

Imagine sitting on the stern of a primitive fishing boat in a roiling sea. In the dark, a storm begins to stir. Dark clouds are carrying on a rumbling conversation, punctuated by lightning. Without warning, the muted discussion becomes a full-fledged argument. The clouds erupt, and the wind's low moan turns into a furious whistle as a traveling thunderstorm empties itself on thirteen men in an open fishing boat barely large enough to hold them.

Twelve men are crawling about, shouting, fighting for life in the churning waves. Rain blows into their eyes as they reef the sail and tie it down. They lean into bailing water, but the waves wash in faster than they can bail them out. Two men pull hard at the oars, trying desperately to make for shore.

Others are useless. Neither sailors nor fishermen, they are uncomfortable passengers even in the best of circumstances. They crouch against the gunwales with eyes clenched tight, one hand gripping the rail and the other clutching at their stomachs. All of the men shiver with fear and uncertainty.

All but one. The thirteenth man is asleep in the stern, his body on the rough planking, his head on a bolster. But his sleep would not last. "*Teacher*!" the other men cried. "*Teacher! Don't you care that we are perishing*?"

And Jesus awoke. Perhaps he stretched and rubbed his eyes. He looked at the men with a piercing glare that hinted at anger, disappointment, and compassion all at once, but they dared not say another word. They had already said enough. "Don't you care that we are perishing?"

Jesus pushed himself up, steadied himself, and mercifully released the hold of his eyes on the frightened men. Looking into the howling wind, he said, "*Quiet now. Be still*." And the wind died away. The rain disappeared into a gray mist. The waves settled into a slow chop, and then calm.

We might expect the disciples to cheer, and their mouths were open, but no sound emerged. Dumbstruck, all they could do was stare at the teacher looking across the sea, listening to the gentle sighing of the boat in the water. But when he turned around, they could see the storm in his eyes as if he had absorbed it.

The men stood speechless, all wanting Jesus to speak, all afraid that he would. And he did. "*Why*?" he said, with electricity in his voice rather than the sky. "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"

Twelve men trembled with a fear that had nothing to do with the storm. They were in the presence of divine power. No ordinary man could tell thunder to hush, but Jesus had commanded, and all was calm. All was calm except for twelve hearts thumping hard, twelve stomachs caught up in twelve throats, and twelve voices trying to say all at once, "*Who is this man that even the wind and the sea obey him*?"

And that is the question Mark wants us to ask, and why he has told this story. "Who is this man?" And what does he have to do with us?

Getting away (vv. 35-36)

This account follows a series of parables beginning at 4:1, when Jesus "began to teach beside the sea" near Capernaum, on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus apparently adopted Capernaum as a home base for a time, perhaps lodging in Peter and Andrew's home (3:20).

After a long day of teaching, some of it from a boat to put distance between him and the crowds (4:1), Jesus spent time with the twelve and "those who were around him," discussing the meaning of his parables (v. 10).

As evening approached, Jesus asked to get back in the boat and "go across to the other side" toward the southeastern shore, the home of the Gerasenes (v. 35). He apparently sought to get away from the pressing multitudes, so "… leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was" (v. 36a).

Their destination was Gentile territory, so perhaps Jesus thought it less likely that the Jewish crowds would follow him there. Mark adds, "Other boats were with him" (v. 36b) in a curious coda not found in the other gospels, as though some people would

not give up the chase. Surprisingly, he doesn't mention them again.

Getting swamped
vv. 37-38

Storms can be fierce on the Sea of Galilee. It is located deep in the Great Rift Valley, which extends from Lebanon to southern Africa. The surface of the sea is about 700 feet below sea level, and mountains on either side create a wind tunnel effect that can spawn tumultuous conditions. While we imagine thunder and pelting rain, Mark mentions only a windstorm that stirred up crashing waves that threatened to swamp the boat and even break it apart (v. 37).

The strangest aspect of the story is not the raging storm, but that Jesus was sleeping through it (v. 38a). Perhaps Mark wants to remind the reader of how exhausted Jesus was from a long day of teaching and being surrounded by people. More importantly, he wants to show that no matter how tired, Jesus remained master of sea and sky. His mighty works were never done without purpose, and there is a powerful purpose here.

The sea was a common metaphor for both fear and finitude in the ancient world. No one could control the sea, predict its behavior, or survive if it turned against them.

Getting amazed
vv. 39-41

The raging storm did not wake Jesus, but his friends' needs succeeded where the wind and waves had failed. Despite their impertinence, Jesus awoke to their plea and calmed the sea. As the waves grew smaller, the disciples' understanding began to grow larger. More and more clearly, they came to understand that Jesus was Lord.

Jesus seemed disappointed that they needed the lesson. "Why are you afraid?" he asked. "Have you still no faith?" (v. 40).

The disciples made no effort to respond or offer excuses. They could only look at each other, overcome with amazement, and ask, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (v. 41).

In reading and reliving the disciples' story, we can also learn. When storms assail our lives, we can also turn to Jesus with confidence that he cares and can bring calm to our hearts, whatever the circumstances.

Jesus is Lord, but we never fully experience his presence until he becomes a part of our story—our every story. It is easy to believe in Jesus when the seas are calm, but not all of life will be placid. Indeed, we come to know Jesus best when we find Him in the storms of our lives, when we learn to trust Him even when our stomachs are churning like a boat on the stormy sea.

One of the psalmists had learned how hard it can be to find God through the driving storm. "Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck," he prayed. "I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold. I have come into the deep waters; the floods engulf me. I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched. My eyes fail, looking for my God" (Ps. 69:1-3).

The psalmist's words were not unlike those of the impatient disciples, who asked, "Teacher, don't you care that we are perishing?" There may be times when we feel that we are sinking, when it's all we can do to get our heads above the water and gasp for air.

What do we do when our heart is raging, we pray for help, and it seems God is sleeping?

It may be hard to accept, but sometimes silence is God's best answer. We live in a world made imperfect by our own sins, and the sins of our forebears. God does not send every gale that blows against us, but God can help us bring something good out of them.

The tempests of life can become our teachers. We cannot mature and grow in faith without having the courage to enter the tempest of our own pain and deal with it, learning to believe that Jesus is with us, even when he remains silent, even when he doesn't still the storm, not yet.

We should never let a good storm go to waste.

Jesus knew the disciples would have to face the turbulent winds of his crucifixion, not knowing why He remained silent and refused to free himself. Their faith had to grow in the midst of the storm, and he had to remain silent for it to happen.

Sometimes silence can be God's most powerful message. We may not like it. We long for the calm, but we grow in the storm. And our storms do not last forever. Jesus does awake. God does speak. The turmoil will give way to calm. We can emerge from the storm bedraggled, beaten, or stronger and more confident. The difference is a matter of faith, for that is what the story is about. To the disciples, Jesus said, "Don't you have any faith yet?"

They were still learning, and their faith did grow. They grew confident that Jesus was with them even when they could not see, hear, or feel him. They learned to go into their storms with courage and come out of them with faith.

We will all face gales of discomfort and the electric taste of conflict. We will experience loss and face transitions that take us from one part of life to another. Walking and learning with Jesus through this ancient storm can help us to face tomorrow's tempests. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

June 30, 2024

Mark 5:21-43

Touching God

> *Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" (Mark 5:30)*

We all have known days that could be called long and hard. The gospels suggest that Jesus experienced many such days, and the stories in Mark 5 portray a particularly lengthy and challenging day for the increasingly popular teacher.

Mark 5 relates two stories in two places, and the second account has a story within a story. In each encounter, Jesus meets people in hopeless and helpless situations. They are a man, a woman, and a child. They represent us all, and they are three hard cases.

The first story concerns a certifiably insane individual named Legion – sometimes known as "the wild man of Gedara." Jesus encountered the man after a tumultuous night at sea when the disciples feared for their lives before Jesus calmed the storm, leaving the disciples to ask, "Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (Mark 4:35-41).

They disembarked the next morning on the eastern shore, a Gentile area known variously as Gerasa or Gedara. There, they were confronted by a man believed to have been infested with demons and beyond help. As Mark tells it, Jesus made him whole by casting out the demons – at the expense of a herd of pigs that happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Having demonstrated his authority over harmful spirits, but also negatively impacting the local economy, Jesus found it expedient to get back in the boat and put some distance between himself and the local swineherds, who were not pleased (vv. 1-20).

A dying daughter (vv. 21-24, 35-43)

Reversing course from the previous night, Jesus and company sailed back to his adopted home in Capernaum, a fishing town on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. There, Jesus met a local synagogue leader named Jairus, whose daughter was dying. Jairus was a respected leader, but willingly risked his standing with the Jews to call on Jesus for help. Jesus agreed to follow Jairus to his home (vv. 21-24).

Their journey was delayed, even though Capernaum was not a large town, because the narrow streets were crowded with people who had come to see the miracle worker. We recall that it was due to the crowds that he had sailed away the night before. And within the hustle and bustle of the teeming crowd was a woman who needed special attention: we will consider her story below.

Before Jesus could squeeze through the crowds and arrive at Jairus' home, Mark says, the young girl had died. The family sent someone to find her father, tell him the news, and suggest that he need not bother Jesus any longer (v. 35). Despite the sad report, Jesus told Jairus that he need not fear, but "only believe" (v. 36).

Jesus allowed only Peter, James, and John to accompany him as they came to the home, where full-scale mourning had begun, with "people weeping and wailing loudly" (vv. 37-38).

Again, Jesus encouraged faith over fear. "Why do you make a commotion and weep?" he asked. "The child is not dead, but sleeping" (v. 39).

Surprisingly, the gathered mourners – some of whom may have been professional keeners rather than grieving family members – stopped mourning and scoffed at the idea: "they laughed at him" (v. 40a). Jesus ignored their response and "put them all outside" before entering the room with only the girl's parents, Peter, James, and John (v. 40b).

In this story, Mark is careful to emphasize the role of faith. Jairus had asked Jesus to "lay hands on her" (v. 23), but Jesus had told him he need only believe (v. 36). Rather than engaging in an elaborate ceremony that might have had any magical overtones, Jesus simply took the girl's hand and spoke to her in Aramaic, "*Talitha cum*," which Mark helpfully translates as "Little girl, get up" (v. 40).

The 12-year-old not only sat up, but she stood up and began to walk around despite her weakened condition. Jesus instructed them to bring her some food: ordinary care would now be sufficient (vv. 42-43).

As we might expect, all but Jesus "were overcome with amazement," the kind of astonishment leading to many retellings of the event. Oddly, though, Jesus "strictly ordered them that no one should know this" (v. 43a).

How could they possibly keep it a secret when the house had been crowded

with people mourning the girl's death? It was known that Jesus had come to her side, and it would be known that the girl had regained her health. This would not be the only occasion in which Mark depicted Jesus commanding people to keep miraculous healings quiet, to little avail.

We recall now that one reason Jesus had arrived late was that he had met a singular woman on the way, one who interrupted his journey in memorable fashion.

A suffering woman (vv. 25-34)

As Jesus had pushed through the congested streets on the way to Jairus' home, he had been brought to a halt by the furtive touch of a woman who had hoped to remain unnoticed.

The woman had been sick for twelve years, Mark wrote, stricken with a flow of blood that would not stop despite her best efforts. She had seen many doctors, but their primitive brand of first-century medicine could not help her. She had spent all her money without results, leaving her destitute (vv. 25-27).

As Jairus had risked his position as a Jewish leader, the woman risked what little standing she had in the community by coming out at all. Her persistent hemorrhage made her ritually "unclean," and Jewish law insisted that she remain apart lest she contaminate others, too.

The woman's desperation overruled any worries about breaking the law: what worse could happen? An undefeated sense of hope pushed her into the crowd when she heard that Jesus was near.

The woman tried to remain anonymous, believing that if she could just get close enough to touch Jesus – maybe just to touch his tunic –his healing power might flow into her and stop the blood from flowing out.

Her wits and her faith were her friends that day. She did manage to get close, to reach out and brush her fingers against the dusty hem of Jesus' outer robe (vv. 27-28).

And something happened inside. A tightening. A feeling of strength. A sense of well-being. And a voice that stopped her cold. "Who touched my clothes?" And then there were the blundering disciples, wondering how Jesus could ask such a question with so many people around (vv. 29-31).

Mark writes as if everything stopped and a hush fell over the crowd. The woman fell to her knees and told him her story (vv. 32-33).

Surely, Jesus must have smiled, and perhaps he put out a hand to help the woman to her feet. "Daughter," he called her, though she was probably older, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease" (v. 34).

And she did.

Hundreds of people crowded against Jesus on that dusty day in Capernaum. Hundreds of arms may have reached for him, but only once did Jesus say, "Who touched me?" Only once did he sense that someone had tapped into his healing power, because only this unnamed woman reached out with the touch of faith.

There was nothing magical about seeing, hearing, or even touching Jesus. But where there is faith, something happens. A connection is made. Power flows, and souls are made whole. This woman had faith.

We note that Mark tells us Legion's and Jairus's names but not the woman's. When Jesus called her "Daughter," perhaps it was to reassure us that she was once again a true "daughter of Israel."

"Go in peace," he said.

Go in peace

At the end of the day, Jesus had healed a man, a woman, and a child. He had proven to be Lord over demons, disease, and death. That is the point of these stories. Jesus is Lord. Jesus is *Lord*.

Modern readers must remember that these stories come from a different time and special circumstances. They make no promises that we will always be healed of our diseases or relieved of our burdens. Many people cried out in the crowded streets of Capernaum who were not healed, even as many today pray frequently and fervently but remain ill.

If Christians had a guarantee that Jesus would always intervene to heal any sickness, prevent any tragedy, or halt death in its tracks, then everyone would want to be a Christian, and all for the wrong reason. Only fools would remain dry if following Jesus in baptism guaranteed prosperity and protection. But God is not in the business of offering bribes.

The way of Jesus is a way of unselfish service. The way of the cross is a way of sacrifice. The joy of the Christian is not found in an easy life, but in deeper living. The believer's trust is not in miracles but in the One who stands behind the miracles – even when prayers are not answered as we wish.

Mark brought these stories together to emphasize that Jesus is Lord. He is Lord over every demon we can imagine, every disease we can acquire, every death we can face. Jesus will not always deliver us from illness and trouble, but he will always be with us, guiding us through the depths, and leading us into the beyond. When Jesus is our guide, we can truly "go in peace." NFJ

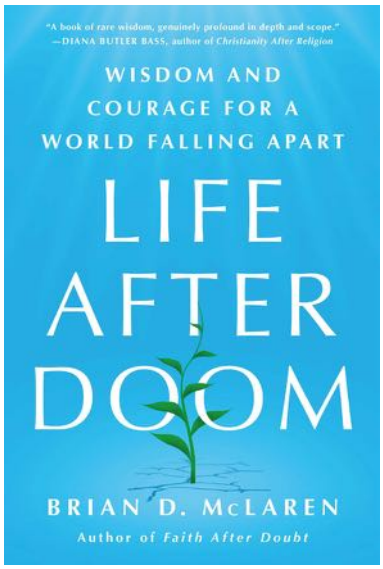
Life After Doom

By Craig Nash

The Jesus Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s in the United States produced people who went in myriad directions—theologically, philosophically, and politically—in the 1980s and beyond. The most significant of these adapted the countercultural spirit of the movement for established institutional churches and Christian organizations. This helped invigorate those older expressions of the faith, placing them in positions of influence within the broader culture. The result is referred to in the broad category of "American Evangelicalism."

Others, though, interpreted the Jesus Movement in a different light, which sent them in an entirely different direction. To these folks, historic Christian institutions didn't need a makeover or a reformation. They required, instead, a deconstruction. These prophets, far fewer in number than those ingratiating themselves within the very institutions they had rebelled against, began to warn about worldwide tremors on the horizon. To them, the radical, inclusive Jesus they discovered as hippies offered an alternative answer to what was coming. The institutional church could come along on the journey if it wanted, but these prophets didn't bank on it.

Brian McLaren has been one of the most influential figures in the latter group. As a pastor in the late 1990s, he began writing about looming cultural shifts and what they meant not just for institutional Christianity, but for the entire world. McLaren became an elder statesman in the Emerging Church movement, bringing hard-earned wisdom to cohorts of young pastors navigating the impending upheaval.



In recent years, McLaren has been a voice beyond the church to anyone seeking an understanding of what is happening in the world. In his latest book, *Life After Doom: Wisdom and Courage for a World Falling Apart*, he turns his attention to the global ecological crisis, collapsing civilizations, and their alternating effects on each other.

In the book, McLaren lays out four potential scenarios for the future of civilization in light of the current situation. These include avoiding collapse through decades of intentional intervention, a collapse with a small number of people regrouping in a destabilized ecosystem, a collapse with the ugliest elements of society emerging to rule the world, or a collapse with complete extinction of all life.

He encourages readers to let go of their illusions and accept the reality of what is occurring. Part of accepting this bigger picture includes being open to indigenous wisdom across the globe and rediscovering a revolutionary ecological vision found in the Bible.

McLaren draws part of this vision from Jesus' parable of the rich fool in Luke 12. In the rich man's attempt to ignore the earth's limits, he says to himself that he can just build bigger barns. McLaren writes that this man "epitomizes the confidence and narcissism" of a civilization hell-bent on exploiting the earth for profits. This narcissism leads to the rich man's downfall. What is important to know, McLaren shares, is that Luke wrote this story in his gospel during a time of impending societal collapse.

As is his style, McLaren always ends his warnings with hope. He doesn't claim to know which potential scenario will unfold but offers a path forward for whatever transpires. This path includes reclaiming interdependence on one another and embracing the beauty of a world with God's fingerprints everywhere.

McLaren serves on the board of the Wild Goose Festival, a 2024 partner of Good Faith Media. At last year's gathering, he offered alternative visions for how to respond to impending doom. He asked the crowd, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if every time evil, injustice, wickedness, and sin abound, that a desire for something better would abound all the more in us?"

He added, "Listen, I'm angry, weary, and sometimes I'm depressed." He joked that when he gets this way, he tells himself that "things will probably get worse." But what he meant by this was that "things weren't so good before, and they may have to get worse before they get better. And so I will let a desire grow in me for something better."

Life After Doom will be available wherever books are sold on May 9, 2024. Brian McLaren will be a co-presenter at the Wild Goose Festival from July 11-14 in Union Grove, North Carolina. . NFJ

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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The seasons of life: part 5

By Keith Herron

Forty years before his death, David magnificently responded to Saul and Jonathan's deaths by howling painfully and poetically to God about the beauty that was lost in their violent deaths. But notice that no lament was uttered when David died. The mighty king of Israel died amid a long-held and public family squabble, and people were tired of it all.

According to 1 Kings 2:5-9, his last words were filled with ugly rancor, unbefitting how his reign is generally regarded as the man God loved. Betrayed by his sons and generals, his last bitter words are of revenge. What happened? How did David, the most extraordinary figure in Hebrew history, become so bitter in the end?

He had traveled so far. Life had taken him from his father's pastures to the highest heights as Israel's king. By sheer force of will, he had brought together the independent tribes of Israel into a powerful political and military force in the Middle East.

Israel was at the zenith of its history, wielding power and sustaining itself as mighty in battle and worthy of ruling its fate. Yet there is meager word of King David's death, as though the king's historian had nothing else to say.

The border between Middle and Older Adulthood is blurry. There are obvious work, family, energy, and well-being markers to help one know a crossing is being made. Paul Tournier observed that one of those markers is an awareness of the diminishing of time. The window of opportunity slowly begins to close on dreams. Tournier was a pragmatist, remarking, "That which I have been able to do, to learn, or to acquire is gradually losing its value. The doing and the having are giving way to the being."

This is an age of seeking and accepting wisdom, coming to terms with all that has been, and making peace with how life has been spent. "To everything, there is a season," the wisdom poet writes. But before death, what life is being lived? How do we embrace this last stage for the richness it holds as a possibility?

When do we "cross the divide"? This issue is one we face from stage to stage, but it is never more pertinent than when we transition from middle to older age. Where is that line? Will we know with certainty when we reach it? Will we recognize this shift, or can it only be seen in the rearview mirror?

Children face a series of "firsts" at the beginning of life. "There's a first time for everything," we say. In the beginning, everything is a first. But eventually, we become aware of a series of "lasts": driving a car, cooking our own meal, a last round of golf, a last time to make love. These "lasts" mirror a child's firsts in almost every detail.

As we approach the end of the arc of life, we begin to see the interconnectedness permeating all of life. We see childhood weaving into adolescence, adolescence weaving into adulthood, and so on. We see that life is a seamless whole rather than a series of disjointed parts. Charles Dickens observed, "As I draw closer and closer to the end, I travel in a circle nearer and nearer to the beginning."

Psychiatrist Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's studies on the stages of grief produced the book *On Death and Dying*. That work brought the topic of terminal illness into public discourse and helped develop hospice care to walk patients through death with dignity. Just a few years ago, Kübler-Ross died from cancer. She had moved to Arizona in the mid-1990s after a series of strokes left her partially paralyzed. She lived ready for death.

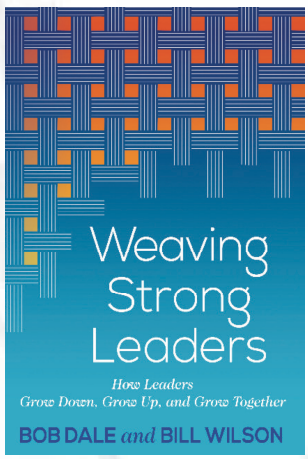
In a 2002 interview with *The Arizona Republic*, she said she was ready to die: "I told God last night he's a damned procrastinator." As she grew ever closer to her death, she continued to enjoy her few satisfying habits of smoking cigarettes, eating Swiss chocolates, and shopping. Toward the end, she described her impending death, "Death is simply a shedding of the physical body like the butterfly shedding its cocoon. It is a transition to a higher state of consciousness where you continue to perceive, to understand, to laugh, and to be able to grow."

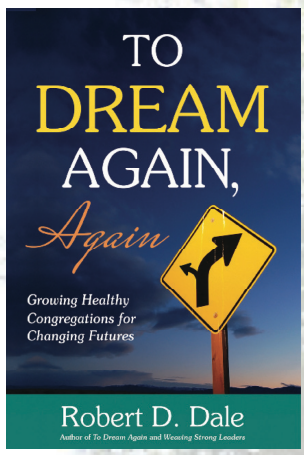
Awaiting death, according to Dennis Klass, her former research assistant, was not such a challenge for her. "Her only problem with facing death was patience. She was looking forward to dancing with the stars."

NFJ

This is the final installment of a five-part series on the seasons of life

HEALTHY CHURCH RESOURCES





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

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Beyond A Land Acknowledgement

By Jana Peterson

The memory of past and present colonization is all around us. The desk in my home office in Gallatin County, Montana, overlooks the Spanish Peaks. To the Northeast, my backyard looks out toward the Bridger Mountain range. To drive through the Bridgers, I would have to cross Bozeman Pass.

Each landmark is named after an early settler instrumental in Montana's formation as a state. But the land where I live was beloved to many Indigenous tribes long before it was "discovered" by European explorers. The Gallatin Valley is known to the Blackfeet as "the valley of the flowers." It was historically a gathering place for many tribal nations. To disregard this history is to overlook the full story of the place I now call home.

Because one of colonization's fundamental impacts is people's disconnection from their native land and, by extension, from their culture, one of the most important aspects of decolonization is the return of the land to its traditional stewards. With this in mind, land acknowledgments are important first steps toward the reconciliation needed for forming meaningful relationships between settlers and our Indigenous neighbors.

When we recognize the traditional stewards of this land during our communal gatherings, we play a small part in telling the whole truth about our collective story. Often, a land acknowledgment is one of the first ways settlers encounter the real history of our nation's founding. This is essential.

However, land acknowledgments are only the first steps on a lifelong journey toward reconciliation. They can be merely performative if we name the land we inhabit and then proceed with business as usual. If a land acknowledgment is simply a tool used to dress up our intent to make amends without accompanying it with action, then it would be more honest not to bother to make a land acknowledgment at all.

A journey toward living a more wholehearted and honest story will take courage. One cannot tell a story of stolen land and culture without grief. To grieve well, we must listen to our Indigenous neighbors who have experienced harm and let them teach us what it means to break free from the colonial paradigms we are most familiar with. Only then can we begin to live in right relationship with the land, our Indigenous neighbors, and the community of creation.

There are many ways we can better understand the story of the land we inhabit.

- Learn whose land you are living on now. Visit native-land.ca to learn who the traditional stewards of your land are and what their stories are.
- Read. I recommend picking up a copy of *Becoming Rooted: One Hundred Days of Reconnecting with Sacred Earth* by Randy Woodley to begin reframing your relationship with the land.
- Get involved. Find out what issues are facing the Native communities in your area and how your vote can enable these communities to thrive. A simple Google search can connect you with groups doing good work in this way.
- Learn your heritage. As settlers, we have also been disconnected from our land, history, and culture. Part of the work is grieving this loss and reclaiming our own indigeneity.
- Visit landback.org to learn more about the Land Back movement and how you can support it.
- Show up. Attend your local pow-wow. Shop Native. Attend local Native-led events where you can build new friendships.

The invitation to move beyond a superficial land acknowledgment is one of hope. Our lives will become more abundant when we open our hearts to repentance and relationships and tell a more complete and honest story about our collective history. In doing so, we may build a different kind of future together where we can all thrive. This is my dream. NFJ

—Now studying in the Doctoral program at NAIITS, Jana Peterson holds a Master of Divinity degree from the Seattle School of Theology and Psychology. She was an Ernest C. Hynds Jr. intern at Good Faith Media during the spring 2021 semester.

"Whenever I am afraid, I will trust in You." — Psalm 56:3

What are you afraid of?

By Constance McNeill

What are you afraid of? Have you ever been asked this? Your answer may change from time to time. Life is more like a flowing river than a confined and stagnant pond. What fear I have today might not be a fear tomorrow. It may be resolved, addressed, or forgotten because something more looming and sinister has taken its place.

Fear is not altogether a bad thing. After all, we learn to fear things that are dangerous or harmful to us. Fear can keep us safe and prevent us from being self-destructive. Fear is sometimes an intuitive response to a situation or setting that causes us to withdraw to a safer position. Fear is an intense emotion born in us when we anticipate or are aware of real or imagined danger. We sometimes need a fear response to protect ourselves.

For many, fear has grown so large in their hearts and minds that it is the foundation for most of what they do, say, think, and believe. We see it in the media. We see it in films, music, and all forms of entertainment. We hear it from political and business leaders.

Why is this the case? What has changed in the last few decades to make so many so fearful? Fear, as the primary driver in one's life, is not a good thing.

You could argue there are things to fear now that supersede past generations' reasons for fear. Really? There were diseases people died from that they didn't understand. Today, those diseases are defeated with a pill or injection. There were things in nature that frightened people to commit crimes against each other and even suicide. Today, we photograph these from outer space and think phenomena such as eclipses are beautiful and fascinating. There have always been wars and rumors of wars that loved ones were sent off to win.

Yet fear is increasingly a central and primary driver for many people. Why? What has happened? Maybe it isn't what is happening but what is happening less.

Could the prominence of fear in so many be an unintended consequence of a diminishing belief in a personal, incarnated God who knows all the reasons humans might be afraid? We live in a world where people refer to themselves as increasingly spiritual but not religious. Does that mean people are oriented toward a solitary spiritual life rather than a spiritual life lived in community?

For the first time in American history, more people don't attend church than those who do. The rising generations certainly reflect the increasing lack of church participation, as they are increasingly absent with each generation. This is not to say you will have no fears if you attend church. But may I suggest the best, although not the only, place to hear about the relationship between fear and faith is at church?

At church, we learn how God loves us and wants us to be closer to God. In a very real sense, God just can't get us close enough. Church is the most consistent place to learn scriptures to help us better understand and grow closer to God, and that helps us know that our faith can help keep our fears at bay.

When I was a young child, I was afraid of many things. I also had a vivid and creative imagination that could fuel a tiny fear into an unbeatable monster. My mother told me one day that I should trust God is with me and not let fear drive my decisions. She told me to memorize Psalm 56:3, "Whenever I am afraid, I will trust in You."

She taught me to say that verse repeatedly until my fear decreased. That was the beginning of learning to pray scripture and be less afraid. Since that day, I have learned many scriptures that diminish my fear by reminding me of God's faithfulness. It is one of the very few scriptures I memorized, but I continue to pray it to this day.

It has helped. NFJ

—Constance McNeill is the Associate Pastor for Administration and Discipleship at Second Baptist Church in Liberty, Missouri.

GEM on the go

Good Faith Media was launched during the COVID-19 Pandemic. This has shaped us in many ways, chief of which is how adept we are in the digital landscape. Our team operates in various locations throughout the country and does so relatively seamlessly. You could say "the cloud" is our home base.

At the same time, there is no replacement for physical presence. Although much of our world exists online, ideas are shared, decisions are made, and community thrives "out in the streets." Our ability to be where the action is, reporting and offering commentary on the crucial issues of our day, sets us apart. NFJ

Good Faith Media Staff Retreat – Dallas, TX

Ravensworth Baptist Church
— Annandale, VA
Jan. 14—Feb. 1

Feb. 12. — **Bruce Gourley gives a presentation titled, "The Forgotten Path to Church State Separation in America's Founding" at the Ellen Theatre — Bozeman, MT**

Invested Faith Partnership
— St. Louis, MO
Jan. 21—27

Oasis: A Spiritual Retreat
— Montreat, NC
Feb. 5-9

Riverside Baptist Church
— Washington, D.C.
Feb. 25

Together for Democracy
— Washington, D.C.
Feb. 26-28

SXSW — Austin, TX
March 11-15

Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference — Chicago, IL
Feb. 19-22

"I follow Mother Moses around to ensure I live freely and far away from words that would keep me tied down."

Mother Moses and Me: My Abolitionist Streak

By Starlette Thomas

Freedom is underground. It is dirty work, unseen and not often talked about. Hear these words as if I am whispering in your ear. It may be dangerous to say aloud.

You must burrow your way through your story, family history, social and spiritual framing to discover what you mean when you say, "I am." Or, better yet, "Who am I *really*?" Howard Thurman asks this question of those quieting themselves to listen for "the sound of the genuine" within.

Hush now. It is better that I hear myself clearly. Small talk, celebrity news gossip and capitalist-inspired exchanges on what is trending will only slow me down. American singer James Brown summarizes the speeches of most leaders today, "Talking loud and saying nothing"—nothing new, especially. More us-versus-them campaign promises, I am not interested in four more years of going back and forth. It is best, then, that I plug my ears and dig deeper.

On a regular day of excavation, Araminta Ross came to me—not in a dream but in a series of steps, unplanned. Of course, she got ahead of me, and now I am being led by her spirit. Frankly, I could use the company as I've gone as far as I know the way. But I wouldn't have heard the invitation if I had not turned down the volume on the world around me, which started early.

I was born in the South and with the belief that children should be "seen and not heard." But then I heard what the adults talked about once they put us to bed. Ear pressed against the door or quietly paused in the hallway during a midnight bathroom break from my slumber, only to discover they were also "talking loud and saying nothing." I had to listen a few more times, but by then, I was convinced they wouldn't have to worry about me forgetting my place or finding my voice in their conversations.

There was nothing to add and no point in staying in my mother's house past eighteen. That was all that was promised anyway. Afterward, you were out and out on your own—though I attempted to break this contract early on. The decision to run away at 12 years old set me on a path of making my own way rather than subjecting myself to the limiting realities of others. In fact, I have been leaving toxic environments my entire life. Self-emancipated, I have never had enough time to wait on a savior, for someone to do the right thing or for the truth to come to light. Instead, I have delivered myself from times and places where people are not free of violence and all manner of violation, who are prevented from telling the truth, self-actualizing, or using their gifts creatively.

The fullness of their human being is tied to someone else's pride or insecurities, an addiction to substances or power, to socially color-coded and caste-supporting alliances or an unexamined allegiance to patriarchy. With that in mind, I have left immediately, in the middle of the conversation, in the middle of the night, in silence and with two weeks' notice. Somatic sovereignty is that important to me.

So, I follow Mother Moses around to ensure I live freely and far away from words that would keep me tied down. She is my North Star, my heart's compass and my travel companion on this spiritual sojourn. Her work and witness comfort me. I am also confident in the way of abolition. You could say it is a streak that runs in me.

Race had me tongue-tied, which only prompted me to start digging. I had to get to the root of it. Abolishing race wasn't the goal in the beginning. But I quickly realized I didn't know what to say for myself or about her—apart from its prepackaged vocabulary.

My therapist said, "Tell me about your childhood." However, my adolescent environment didn't offer many clues regarding my individuality: firstborn, girl, Southern, black. That last one was explained to me as the supreme adjective. Above all others, it had already defined my beginning and would describe me even after death.

I would never be able to rid myself of it or its social position on the margin, just another face at the bottom of the well like Derrick Bell said. I would be another face pressed to the ground with the "white man's foot on my neck." Those words rolled off my elders' tongues as a matter of fact, but they, too, were "talking loud and saying nothing" about what I could do to change this power dynamic. Instead, I was expected just to lie there and take it. Get used to the pressure and the discomfort. Learn to work with it and "twice as hard" despite it.

But I wouldn't do it. I had to get up and walk away from this place, where the head has been pushed down so long that it now bows in reverence. If not, how would I ever look up to myself? I had to prepare a place for me—free from white supremacy. Only there could I say, "I am raceless." NFJ

The Second American Revolution

By Bruce Gourley

Part 2 of a Series on Religious Liberty

"This country was a part of England," Andy Griffith's character, Sheriff Taylor, says to young Opie, played by Ron Howard, recounting the story of the American Revolution. He added, "and we wasn't getting' along with em too good."

For that matter, many colonial Americans did not get along very well with each other. Political freedom from Great Britain was only one of two major contentious currents of freedom flowing in the Revolutionary era.

For all the talk of freedom from Great Britain in 1776, in Virginia, many Baptists and some Presbyterians experienced more persecution than ever. Their refusal to obey certain laws and a growing religious alliance with enslaved Blacks angered planters—the Anglican ruling class who controlled the Church and government alike. Their anger led many county jails to be seemingly full of Baptists.

Those worst of times first flared up in 1768, the year the British levied yet more taxes on the colonies. British warships sailed into Boston Harbor and disgorged redcoats into the city. In Virginia, Baptists had become plentiful enough that their disdain for the law disturbed Anglicans. While Bostonians quietly began arming themselves against aggressive British troops, Virginia's authorities brandished their weapons at Baptists.

What ingrates, those Baptists! The Church had kept them out of Virginia for more than a century, only for the heretics to eventually sneak into the state's rural reaches and increase in number. Anglican authorities, more or less, tolerated the religious dissenters' unwanted presence. All that was required in return was that the non-conformists pay taxes to support the Anglican Church, get married by an Anglican minister, have their infant children baptized into the Anglican Church, and obtain a license from Anglican authorities to preach and hold religious meetings.

Weren't those "godly laws" reasonable enough? By the 1760s, the state Church was more lenient on religious dissenters than it had been in earlier generations, when disobedience to the Mosaic law could be punished to the point of death. The Church believed it had reformed itself to the benefit of all. Some planters even made efforts to treat their slaves less harshly. That was, as long as the slaves obeyed their masters' orders and remained docile.

But those pesky Baptists didn't seem to appreciate their "good fortune." Faithful Presbyterians, even those in opposition to Virginia's theocracy, were more respectable than the poor water baptizers wading into rivers to dunk their converts into a peculiar faith. Just a step above Black slaves, lower-class Baptists should have been grateful that good Christian Anglicans accepted them in the least. And yet, Virginia's jails were crowded with Baptist preachers who chose imprisonment rather than obey the colony's religious laws.

Weary of the defiant dissenters, exasperated county sheriffs and justices often resorted to colorful language during arrest and court proceedings. Baptist preachers foolishly caught up in illegal "new-fangled conceits of their own heretical inventions" were their own worst enemies. Why, in God's name, did they refuse to "carry their child to a lawful minister" for baptism or obtain a license to preach? And why did they choose jail rather than pay a fine?

Many Baptists stayed in prison for weeks on end. With nothing else to do, they read their Bibles daily and preached loudly through their cell windows, attracting curious crowds straining to hear their sermons. That daily routine became so tiresome for county officials that they often hired drummers to drown out the preaching or henchmen on horseback to disperse the crowds.

As time passed, some ever more exasperated county officials turned to harsher measures against religious dissenters. The cycle of suppression, often accompanied by violence, became common, even as calls for political freedom from Great Britain grew louder.

"Time grew such there appeared no probability of escaping prison without a license" to preach. This was even as county officials "resolved to discountenance the baptist, and decreed to license but one place in a county." And that was but the beginning. Officials also forced "the neighborhood where the meeting-house stood, or was to be built" to submit a "petition … signed by twenty free persons, with the addition of two acting justices of the peace, certifying that the above signers were inhabitants of the place; and this was difficult to obtain at all times." (Quoted from William Fristo's *History of the Ketocton Association*.)

Yet still, Baptists multiplied in small towns and outlying areas, welcoming enslaved persons into their congregations. This angered planters even more. The denomination grew so fast that many laymen took up the call to preach, vexing county authorities.

In Caroline County in 1771, "three men, who were not even preachers," were "apprehended and confined in the gaol [jail] of that county." When brought to trial, the court "ordered they be remanded back to the gaol." According to court records:

"Bartholomew Choning, James Goolrich and Edward Herndon being brought before the court for teaching and preaching the Gospel without having Episcopal Ordination or a license from the General Court; ordered they be remanded to the gaol of this county, &

By the late 1770s Baptist evangelists were attracting large crowds in Virginia. In some instances a preacher would position a table part way in one county and part way in the adjacent county. If the sheriff of one county approached with intent to arrest the preacher, he would step to the other side of the table and into the adjacent country, and continue preaching.

there remain till they give security … Each in the sum of two pounds…"

In the same county, around the same time, an "unordained preacher … named John Burrus," though he had a court license to preach, was convicted for "preaching the Gospel without Episcopal Ordination." Many other Baptists met the same fate that summer, some jailed repeatedly.

In Middlesex County, unlicensed Baptist preachers were so persuasive that from 1771-73, "numerous" former Episcopalians appeared before "the grand jury" to account for "having learned a new way … to absent themselves from the parish church." County officials, deeming Baptist preachers "false prophets," for some time fined them for failing "to go to [the Anglican] church several times a year," as required by law.

In 1773, Bostonians vividly protested the tyranny of the Tea Act by throwing an entire shipment of tea overboard into Boston Harbor. During that same year, Virginia officials continued exercising tyranny over freedom-demanding Baptists and Presbyterians. In 1774, when Virginians convened their "First Convention" independent of a British presence, religious dissenters were absent, and many were being persecuted. Months later, skirmishes between colonists and British forces in Boston also escalated, leading to the assembling of the First Continental Congress amid growing cries of "Liberty!" Still, Anglican ministers and officials in Virginia treated Baptists as if they were traitors.

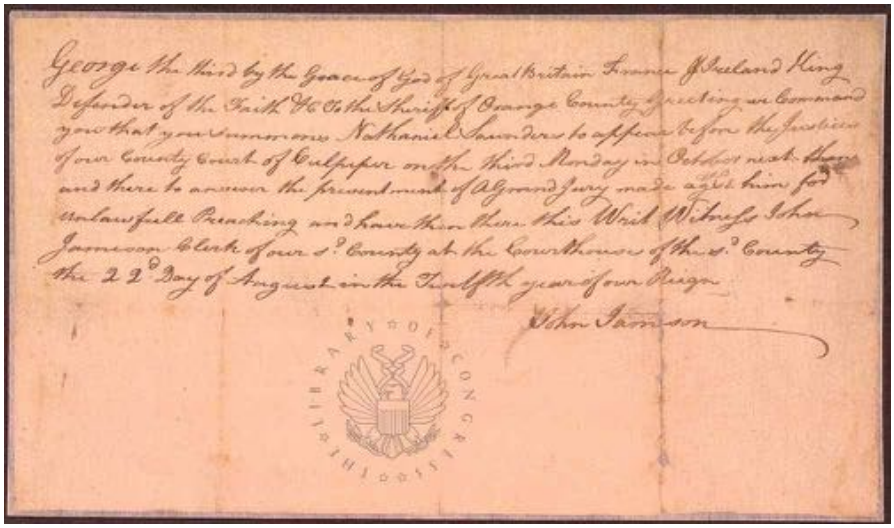
In that first of the 13 English colonies, many Baptists continued to be "severely whipped" by the authorities. While standing behind their pulpits, Baptist preachers were often interrupted by "mob violence" before being hauled off to jail.

Virginians George Washington and George Mason composed the Fairfax County Resolves in 1774 as ever louder calls for freedom from Britain careened toward all-out war. Criticizing the injustices visited upon the colonies by the British, the Resolves voiced the colonists' desire to be governed by "Representatives freely chosen by themselves; who are affected by the Laws they enact equally with their Constituents."

However, not all colonials were allowed to be equal. Injustices continued unabated against religious dissenters under Virginia's theocratic laws. Washington, Mason, and Thomas Jefferson were aware of the persecution. All three had been baptized in the Anglican Church, but as adults, they embraced Enlightenment thought and became Deists, leading them to disapprove of their colony's theocratic laws.

According to some accounts, Jefferson became acquainted with the Albemarle Baptist Church near his Monticello home. Though he infrequently attended church by this stage of his life, he visited the nearby Baptist congregation on occasion, concerned that Baptists and other dissenters remained objects of persecution.

The other vocal dissenters were mostly Presbyterians. In 1774, the Hanover Presbytery, speaking on behalf of "all the Presbyterians in Virginia in particular; and all Protestant Dissenters in general," warned Anglican authorities that "the interest of American liberty" was tied to improved religious toleration. For their part, Presbyterians were willing to take an "oath of


George the third by the Grace of God of Great Britain France & Ireland King Defender of the Faith &c. To the Sheriff of Orange County Greeting. We Command you that you Summon Nathaniel Saunders to appear before the Justices of our County Court of Culpeper on the third Monday in October next there and there to answer the present mind of a Grand Jury made against him for unlawfull Preaching and have then there this Writ Witness John Jameson Clerk of our s.d County at the Courthouse of the s.d County the 22.d Day of August in the Fortieth year of our Reign
John Jameson

allegiance" testifying to their orthodox faith and registering their houses of worship with public officials if Anglican authorities would cease the harsh measures against them.

Demanding freedom rather than mere toleration, many of Virginia's Baptists doubled down on defying the colony's theocratic laws, even as war with Great Britain began in 1775. They were not alone. There were fears among patriot leaders in the North and South that the Baptists would "leave the general Defence of American liberty to the Congregationalists in the Northward and the Episcopalians [Anglicans] to the Southward [both regional Establishment Churches]" and "complain to England of persecution."

That summer the Baptist General Association of Virginia petitioned the Second Virginia Convention with concerns. Some Baptists were willing "to make a Military resistance against Great Britain" in the name of political freedom, but they also wanted freedom to preach to soldiers. Virginia's Anglican gentry, needing more men to take up arms, agreed to the demand. This was the first, albeit small, step forward in a second American Revolution—for religious freedom—that dissenters were stirring up.

Virginia's Anglicans slightly released their iron grip on religion and conscience in the South. Meanwhile, in the North, Continental victories in the battles of Lexington and Concord signaled that political freedom-demanding colonists would not back down to the British in the least. With war arriving, the Second Continental Congress convened, appointing Virginian George Washington as commanding general of the newly-created Continental Army.

Departing to serve his country in the service of political freedom, Washington left Virginia. He did so even as his colony—despite allowing Baptists to preach to soldiers—still denied freedom of conscience and religion to dissenters on the home front. The colony also often persecuted, sometimes violently, those who dared demand such freedoms.

Apart from Virginia's harsh war *against* freedom of religion and conscience, the parallel war for freedom from Great Britain seesawed back and forth in the early months. The great conflict on the last day of 1775 brought bad news of substantial American losses in the Battle of Quebec. As part of a larger attempt to dislodge British forces to the north in English-controlled Canada, the Continental Army's defeat at Quebec reminded colonists that victory over Great Britain would not come easily.

On January 1, 1776, British forces to the South burned and evacuated Virginia's coastal town of Newport. This marked the beginning of the British military's retreat from the southern colony. English forces finally departed to British-controlled New York City late that summer. January also marked the beginning of the establishment of colonial civil governments supplanting British rule, beginning with New Hampshire.

Some Virginia dissenters, meanwhile, grew increasingly concerned about their continued persecution at the hands of Anglicans. One anonymous dissenter voiced these concerns in an April letter to the *Virginia Gazette*. Continued persecutions meant "the dissenters (equally attached to America's liberty) ought to petition their rulers for the removal of that yoke" of "paying the establishment clergy, and being still obliged to have the solemnization of matrimony performed by them." Without exactly saying that dissenters might back off support for the Patriot cause, the writer closed his missive by noting, "A word to the wise is enough."

Some prominent Virginians took notice of the warning. One month later, they proclaimed freedom from Great Britain and began to draft a Declaration of Rights. The man tasked with spearheading the project had his eye trained on the growing discontent of dissenters.

George Mason, a neighbor of George Washington, an opponent of slavery, leader of Virginia's patriotic movement, and a contrary Episcopalian, placed reason above religion. Displeased at his colony's and religion's persecution of religious dissenters, Mason's "first draught" of the 1776 Virginia Declaration of Rights included a paragraph about religion:

> *"That as Religion, or the Duty which we owe to our divine and omnipotent Creator, and the Manner of discharging*

"Demanding freedom rather than mere toleration, many of Virginia's Baptists doubled down on defying the colony's theocratic laws, even as war with Great Britain began in 1775."

it, can be governed only by Reason and Conviction, not by Force or Violence; and therefore that all Men shou'd enjoy the fullest Toleration in the Exercise of Religion, according to the Dictates of Conscience, unpunished and unrestrained by the Magistrate, unless, under Colour of Religion, any Man disturb the Peace, the Happiness, or Safety of Society, or of Individuals. And that it is the mutual Duty of all, to practice Christian forbearance, Love and Charity towards Each other."

Revealing his own "colours," Mason advocated for mere "toleration" of dissenters' religion and conscience, not "freedom." His words encouraged Virginia's civil and religious Anglican authorities to treat dissenters more kindly. Still, they left an exception for those whose actions disturbed "the Peace, the Happiness, or Safety of Society." Authorities had long charged Baptists, in particular, of violating these precepts.

Young James Madison, though, would hear none of Mason's talk of mere "toleration."

Madison—baptized at birth into the Anglican Church, evolving as an adult into a Deist, and emerging as one of Virginia's best thinkers—had witnessed firsthand the "diabolical Hell conceived principle of persecution" directed at religious dissenters. "This vexes me the most of anything whatever," he wrote. "There are at this [time] in the adjacent County not less than 5 or 6 well meaning men in close Gaol for publishing their religious Sentiments which in the main are very orthodox."

That same year, Madison noted that "incredible and extravagant stories were told in the House [of Burgesses] of the monstrous effects" of persecution of dissenters. But those reports had been ignored. In June 1776, Madison, incensed rather than merely displeased at Virginia's continued harsh treatment of religious dissenters, demanded more than mere toleration.

Mason's statement did not call for an end to Virginia's theocracy; Madison was intent on ending the Establishment Church. Now, he led the way in boldly revising Mason's resolution to read:

"That Religion or the duty we owe to our Creator, and the manner of discharging it, being under the direction of reason and conviction only, not of violence or compulsion ***all men are equally entitled to the full and free exercise of it accord'g to the dictates of Conscience;*** *and therefore that no man or class of men ought,* ***on account of religion to be invested with peculiar emoluments or privileges; nor subjected to any penalties or disabilities, unless, under & etc.*** *" (Emphases added.)*

This proved a bridge too far, garnering fierce opposition from the delegates of Virginia's Constitutional Convention, with Madison's friends Washington and Jefferson not attending. Equal freedom of religion and conscience for all was controversial enough, but for Virginia's Anglican gentry, disestablishing Church from State [see "on account of religion…" above in bold] was a complete non-starter.

No religious dissenters were among the Convention delegates, but on both controversial accounts, Baptists in particular were nearby advocates and cheerleaders. Determined to move freedom of religion and conscience forward as much as feasible at that moment in time, Madison tried again. Dropping his demand of separating Church from State, for a second time, he revised Mason's original statement:

"That religion, or the duty which we owe to our CREATOR, and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence; and therefore ***all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience;*** *and that it is the mutual duty of all to practise Christian forbearance, love, and charity toward each other." (Emphasis added.)*

Leaving Virginia's theocracy in place while simultaneously affirming that "all men" were "equally" entitled to religious freedom and conscience, Madison's revision created enough ambiguity to please no one entirely, yet allowed each delegate to interpret as he wished. With no indication that the colony's Anglican leaders would put the words into action, convention delegates, on June 12, 1776, passed the Virginia Declaration of Rights.

A century earlier, in 1663, Rhode Island had granted full freedom of religion and conscience. Now Virginia, on paper, gave a nod in that direction. Yet theocracy remained, Church and State still wedded. In the words of historian Carl H. Esbeck, "Madison stood virtually alone in Virginia's Assembly in support of anything resembling a desire to disestablish the [Anglican] Church of England."

Eight days later, Convention delegates received a petition from Baptists of Prince William County. It had been written weeks before the passage of the Virginia Declaration of Rights. "This colony with others is now contending for … liberties of mankind against the enslaving schemes of a powerful enemy," the missive noted. "We being convinced that the strictest uniformity among ourselves is very necessary in this most critical junction of public affairs" hope "every remaining cause of animosity and division may if possible be removed."

The petitioners perceived it "their duty as peaceable Christians, to petition for several religious privileges … we have not been indulged with."

The Virginia Declaration of Rights had done nothing to meet the petitioners' demands. Their words were a stark warning that many Baptists of Virginia, still denied freedom of religion and conscience, remained non-committal to the cause of lesser political freedom from Great Britain.

Two distinct revolutionary freedoms were at stake. Yet Virginia authorities only embraced one.

With independence on the horizon, upon which of these two contested freedoms would the persecuted Baptists of Virginia—and perhaps of other states—choose to take their stand? NFJ

"While casting your vote is important,
the real work happens in the years between trips to the ballot box."

Advocacy Beyond Election Years

By Natalie Webb

I park in the Texas Capitol visitor's parking garage and walk toward the south steps. On the way, I snap a selfie with my coffee for my church's social media page, with the towering pink dome in the background. I dig out my rainbow stole - the one with buttons attached proclaiming, "Y'all Means ALL," "Black Lives are Sacred," and "Protect Trans Kids." I unfurl the stole and throw it over my shoulders as I arrive at the rally for Black maternal health—or the protest against gun violence, march for reproductive justice, or legislative hearing about discriminatory laws harming queer and trans communities. I offer a prayer, hold a sign, or stand with other clergy in the background, showing support for those who are speaking, the ones most impacted.

I take off the stole and fold it neatly in my purse when it's over. I put on my red lipstick, pearls, and blazer and pull up the list of conservative legislators I am tasked with visiting that day. I walk into the office of a rural West Texas representative and almost immediately start raking up kinfolk.

I'm here to thank the representative and encourage him to continue his fierce support for public education in Texas. I tell the woman running his office the same and let her know that, while I may be a big city pastor, I grew up in West Texas and still have family in her district. It turns out she used to babysit my cousins. We snap a selfie to send to my aunt, and I ask her to thank the representative again.

Or, I walk into a less friendly office, where even without the rainbow stole, the combination of my gender and vocation clearly set off the young male assistant's raging feminist-liberal alarm bells. I'm not

given the time of day, but now I know to send my retired Baptist pastor father next time. Noted.

Wash, rinse, and repeat weekly throughout the biennial Texas legislative session. For better or worse, as a pastor in Texas' capital city of Austin, I get a front-row seat to see how the sausage is made. If I have learned anything, it is this: While casting your vote is important, the real work happens in the years between trips to the ballot box.

Change-making advocacy extends beyond election years. In my experience, it falls into two distinct but equally important forms: public witness and strategic change. The swap between my rainbow stole and my strand of pearls exemplifies the delicate dance between the two. (You'll have to find your own appropriate accessories.)

Public Witness

Public witness includes showing up to protests, marches, rallies, and hearings to support the causes and people your faith compels you to support. Being present in my rainbow stole is one way I can provide an embodied witness to the inclusive and expansive grace of God, a picture of another way to be Christian. In a state like Texas, where 140 discriminatory bills targeting the LGBTQIA+ community were filed last session alone, this work can seem futile.

The difficult reality is that our public witness often does not lead to meaningful policy change in the short term. Despite the incredible work of so many advocacy organizations and grassroots movements in our state last year, I watched families of transgender kids flee the state that is no longer safe for them. I heard from women who had to gain access to reproductive care in another state and whose lives have been put at risk in our home state because our leaders do not recognize women's autonomy over their own bodies.

I watched as desperate families were turned away from our border, children pushed back into a river laced with razor wire. If the only goal of our public witness is policy change, we are destined for disappointment and burnout. However, policy is not our only avenue for impact.

For some, public witness is a prophetic act—a voice speaking truth to power, often unheard, unheeded, ignored in the moment, but recognized and vindicated in the long term. To sustain that kind of prophetic work, it is important to recognize that underneath the urgency of our moral demands, public witness requires patience and commitment for the long haul. We can trust and hope that our prophetic action is moving the needle in the direction of justice, however subtly.

For me, even more than the prophetic, public witness is about pastoral care. Whether

or not anyone in power hears or heeds our message, the people in our pews and communities do. I engage in public witness so that queer kids in Austin know there are pastors who support them. I engage in public witness so that the women in my congregation know I see them as full human beings, powerful, trustworthy, and capable of moral making. I engage in public witness as one form of care for all those who feel abandoned by religious leaders and institutions.

Whether political change is on the table or not, public witness through protest, prayer, speaking out, and showing up has the important pastoral impact of letting our neighbors know they aren't alone. Providing solidarity, hope, and safe communities for one another is a crucial part of our advocacy efforts that has an immediate impact, whether we see it reflected in policy and elections or not.

Strategic Change

The second kind of advocacy, as I see it, is less about taking a public stand and more about enacting strategic change. This kind of work requires us to get off our moral high horse and get our hands dirty in the muck of government. It demands us to be realistic about what we can do with what we've got. When I put on my lipstick, pearls, and West Texas drawl, the signals I'm sending may change, but my justice-driven priorities remain the same. In this form of advocacy, I ask, where can I get a win? What can I compromise? Whose interests are aligned with mine? What coalition can I build?

The greatest political impact I had in this last legislative session was in the fight to save public education. This may seem like an issue unrelated to the public witness efforts I described above, but it is intricately intertwined. Public education is especially important for queer, trans, impoverished, undocumented, black and brown, disabled, and neurodivergent kids who would not be accepted in many private religious schools - schools that can choose to exclude applicants based on religion, culture, and perceived contribution to their community, not to mention wealth, or lack thereof.

Injustice in our world is all connected. The best thing I could do for the queer community, the most impact I could have against racism and segregation, and the clearest way I could support the 20% of Texas kids who live in poverty, was supporting public education and fighting against proponents of school vouchers. This meant sending thank-you notes to lawmakers that I disagree with on almost everything else. It meant sitting in tedious meetings comparing notes and counting votes. It meant strategizing about whose voice needed to be centered in which conversation to have the most impact. It meant biting my tongue when legislative staffers made sexist comments and assumptions.

It also meant finding common ground with people I once thought of as opponents. Even if our priorities were not identical, they were aligned for the good of all Texas children. In a world filled with so much

polarization, it was truly beautiful to find ways to work together across differences. Some of my favorite moments were working side by side with those from the BGCT's Christian Life Commission and CBF's Fellowship Southwest as a flaming liberal Alliance of Baptists lady pastor.

And guess what? We actually won. Compromise, calculation, and coalition building are not always comfortable. I feel much better when I'm holding a sign, taking a stand, and speaking truth to power– all important activities. However, willingness to engage in strategic change is effective in a different way. It had a major impact in Texas, where our work led to a hard NO to vouchers despite the governor's bullying and multiple attempts to push them through. This was an intersectional win for so many beloved children of God.

The Long Game

Elections are decided in a day, and we live with the results for years. Whether we are disappointed or pleased by the outcome, it can be tempting to think we have done all we can until the next round. The reality, though, is that the work of governing happens between election cycles. You can have an impact on that work and in your community beyond election years, no matter who is in office or where you live.

Regardless of what happens this November, I hope you will claim your voice and strategic power in your communities in the days and months after. Lift up your voice in public witness, even if it doesn't change policy. Politicians are not the only ones watching. You can care for your community by showing up and speaking out - whether at your state capitol, city hall, church prayer group, or social media platform. Public witness is not just about getting our people in office, but about sustaining our communities regardless of election outcomes.

Speak the truth God has given you, then be flexible enough to come back down to earth and work for strategic change. This might mean loosening your grip on the moral high ground and building relationships with those with whom you disagree. See what common ground might emerge. See what movement you can create by approaching issues you care about from a different angle. Follow the lead of trusted organizations like Pastors for Texas Children, the Poor People's Campaign, or the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty. Watch for action alerts and follow through on them. A call or letter to your representative at a crucial moment can make a difference in how they vote on a bill that impacts you and your neighbors.

Knowing the difference between public witness and strategic change can help us figure out how and when to engage for the greatest impact. And that will be different for each of us. You can't do everything, and you certainly can't do everything all at once. Pick your priorities, do what you can with what you have, and know your goals in each interaction - when to wear rainbows and when to wear pearls. NFJ

—Rev. Natalie Webb is the pastor at University Baptist Church in Austin, Texas.

James Talarico On the Biblical Idea of Covenant

By Craig Nash

Texas House Representative James Talarico is a rising star on the political scene.

Clips of his responses to Christian Nationalist agendas in committee hearings have gone viral. But Talarico is more than just a politician. He is an aspiring minister studying at Austin Seminary just a mile north of the Texas Capitol.

Good Faith Media's senior editor, Craig Nash, recently sat down with Talarico for a wide-ranging conversation about politics, theology, and what it is like working with fellow believers who come to vastly different conclusions than he does about the Christian witness in politics. We shared much of that conversation in our daily online content on February 12, 2024. Due to space constraints, much of what we talked about had to be omitted.

Below is a response Talarico gave to a question about his studies.

Craig Nash: Is there a story from the Bible that animates your work?

James Talarico: I talked earlier about Covenant. Growing up, the New Testament was the center of our church community. I honestly didn't have as great a knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures, which our entire religion is based on and grows out of. They were what Jesus referenced when he talked about "scripture." So, I was lucky that Austin Seminary takes the Hebrew scriptures seriously.

I have gained an appreciation for God's covenant, the Exodus story, where God tries to create this new story with the chosen people and does that with an agreement that they would share this religion, culture, and land among equals.

To me, this is exactly what democracy is in 21st-century America. It is much more than a sort of legalistic agreement or contract; it is a promise we make together that we are going to share this country, regardless of our background or beliefs. We have decided that we don't need a king, pharaoh, or emperor but that we can do this together as equals, and that can sustain us.

I take great inspiration from those stories and the struggle of the Jewish people to live up to that promise. As Americans, we struggle all the time. We are constantly facing constant threats to this democratic project and covenant. The Hebrew scriptures have given me great inspiration and comfort that this human covenant can ultimately survive despite all the human failings that go along with it. NFJ

Scan the QR code to read the full interview at goodfaithmedia.org

Centering Bathsheba in the Story of David

By Delaney Metcalf

In the past, churches were seen as places of safety. Yet, in recent years, this reality has been challenged. Sexual assault survivors are coming forward in every denomination and context. Their stories and testimonies call for a church-wide response. The Old Testament story of Bathsheba can be instructive for us in this endeavor.

Bathsheba's story is surrounded by mystery. The majority of her life is unknown. She has little to no agency in the text, reduced to her role in a man's story. When she does speak, the authors of Second Samuel and First Kings use her voice to advocate for a man's needs.

Scholars and pastors often speculate about Bathsheba only in relation to the men around her. Some see her as a seductress intentionally "sleeping with" David (2 Sam 11:4). Others recognize her as a victim because of the power dynamic that prevented her from giving consent. Both interpretations, Bathsheba as "seductress" and Bathsheba as "victim," will affect how Christians interact with these passages.

However, if the story centers on Bathsheba, another image emerges– Bathsheba as a "survivor." Centering Bathsheba, rather than the men around her, raises important questions about sexual assault and how to respond within the church.

Bathsheba in the Text

Bathsheba's story begins in Second Samuel 11, where David "remained in Jerusalem" (v. 1) during a time of war. One night, David walked outside and saw the beautiful Bathsheba from the roof of his palace. Someone reported back to him that this was Uriah, the Hittite's wife. Then, "David sent messengers to her. She came to him, and he slept with her" (v. 4). Bathsheba became pregnant from the encounter and alerted David of this news.

In response, David attempted to convince Uriah to come home, where he would presumably sleep with Bathsheba. Out of solidarity with his fellow soldiers at war, Uriah refused, leading David to plot Uriah's murder on the battlefield. David's plan was successful.

After a period of mourning over Uriah's death, "David had her [Bathsheba] brought to his house, and she became his wife and bore him a son. But the thing David had done displeased the Lord" (v. 27).

In Second Samuel 12, God sent Nathan to confront David. After this confrontation, David recognized his sin against God and was forgiven. However, the child of Bathsheba and David ended up dying (v. 18). Later, David went to Bathsheba and "made love to her. She gave birth to a son, and they named him Solomon" (v. 24).

It should be noted that Bathsheba does not stand alone in her own story. Second Samuel 13 tells the story of David's son

"We can choose, instead, to see Bathsheba as a survivor in her own story."

Ammon sexually assaulting his own sister and the ensuing consequences.

Bathsheba reappears in First Kings as an advocate for Solomon to become king. If this didn't occur, both Solomon and Bathsheba would be at risk. David relented, and Solomon eventually ascended to the throne. Bathsheba would fade into the background, only to reappear in Matthew as part of the genealogy of Jesus.

In Bathsheba's time, sexual assault was not an idea as it exists today. We consider it an assault on someone's body and personhood. Yet, this is not how the original audience would have interpreted the story of Bathsheba. They lived in a collectivistic, not individualistic world. The thought of individual consequences towards Bathsheba would not have been considered.

Instead, sexual assault carried cultural and long-term social consequences. When it did occur, it was seen as an offense to the victim's male family members. The offense was the "taking" something that belonged to another man.

In this context, a woman's survival depended upon a husband or a male relative. The traumatic effects of sexual assault were nothing compared to shame in society. Sexual assault and domestic violence might have even been accepted as a part of marriage, yet having no male guardian meant losing everything, including your life.

The author of Second Samuel centers Bathsheba's story on David, making Bathsheba a secondary character. Her first encounter is brief. She has no agency, becoming whoever the reader imagines her to be. From the narrator's point of view, David carries the blame. He brought the problems to his family and negatively impacted his reign. However, the author of First Kings illustrates a new image of Bathsheba. She is no longer passive but active. She contributes to her son's ascendance to power.

The Seductress and the Victim

Historically, Bathsheba's story has focused on David. His actions are seen as a model between God and the church or a cautionary tale of what not to do. Church fathers find various meanings for David's actions. Irenaeus blamed lust and excused David. Ambrose believed David just made a simple mistake. His accomplishments outweigh his sins. Augustine and Jerome focused on David's repentance.

These theologians attempted to reason away David's actions, but they left interpreting Bathsheba. She is simply "the woman," an object to move the story along.

Some view Bathsheba as one of the "bad girls in the Bible," and is envisioned, according to Lynn Japinga in her book *From Widows to Warriors,* as "wealthy, naked, voluptuous, and seductive." In this view, she knowingly bathed naked so David could see her, and they began a romantic relationship.

Scholars have blamed Bathsheba for the actions that occurred. To advocate for masculinity, they portray David as a "manly man" whom women could not help but fawn over. So, Bathsheba becomes the scapegoat for David's sin. According to this interpretation, David's sin was Bathsheba's fault. Presuming that victims would speak out when attacked (Deut. 22:24), sexual assault did not occur because Bathsheba remains silent in the text. Silence is conflated with guilt.

More modern interpretations focus on the power dynamic between Bathsheba and David. From our standards in today's society, this would be considered sexual assault. Japinga argues, "The sin in this story is much worse [than adultery]. David misused his power to force Bathsheba to have sex with him. That is not adultery, but rape."

Seeking help was not an option for Bathsheba. She had no choice in the type of relationship she had with David. The author also does not share any affection on Bathsheba's end. She had no sense of agency. Bathsheba only spoke when her words further developed the plans of men: David, Nathan, Adonijah, and Solomon.

Yet simply defining Bathsheba as a "victim" eliminates her agency and humanity. As a victim, Bathsheba is nothing more than the action forced upon her. She will never leave this "victim" role. Labeling her a victim clarifies she was "asking for it" or too beautiful for her own good. Neither seductress nor victim archetypes help us understand Bathsheba fully.

"Bathsheba receiving a letter from king David" by Jan Steen (1625/1626–1679)

The Survivor

There is another option. We can choose, instead, to see Bathsheba as a survivor in her own story. Bathsheba's entire story can be considered a comedy and a tragedy. It contains irony, reversal, and trickery.

At the height of his power, David should be out fighting with his soldiers and creating glory stories. Instead, he stays home and "sleeps with" Bathsheba. He created his downfall. When David tried to cover his actions, Uriah chose to sleep with the soldiers instead of his wife. David's actions sharply contrast with Uriah's integrity. At the end of the comedy/tragedy, this toxic relationship leads to the next king of Israel, Solomon.

Besides her first interaction with David, Bathsheba later appeared in First Kings 1 with Nathan, putting Solomon on the throne. She also played a role in the death of Adonijah, one of Solomon's competitors. Nevertheless, with no power in the first part of her story, she can finally act in the end. Her trickery convinced David to make Solomon king instead of his oldest living son.

Bathsheba shares her experience with survivors across all people, races, genders, social statuses, and ages. Sexual assault and abuse take place throughout our society in all contexts and institutions. Socially, we dislike discussing this reality because it challenges our perspectives. It is easier to assume Bathsheba was a seductress or remained a victim instead of realizing sexual assault can happen to anyone. By dismissing and ignoring sexual assault, myths around it are created. These can include sexual assault being beyond the perpetrator's control, sex appeal being what causes someone to be targeted, sexual assault being an act of passion, no person will be attacked against their control, it only happens to children and women, sexual assault can never be done by a spouse, and the survivor wanting to be sexually assaulted.

"A healthy church will act proactively to prevent clergy sexual misconduct."

The Call for the Church

We need to hear the stories of sexual assault survivors in whatever century and context. Bathsheba's story cannot be overlooked. As Christians, we will encounter sexual assault survivors. After reporting to the proper authorities and making sure the survivor is safe, one of the best things we can do is empower them with empathy, respect, and warmth.

To create a safer environment, Christians must seek preventative measures, expand theology, and further education on sex.

A healthy church will act proactively to prevent clergy sexual misconduct. Positions with power allow for opportunities for sexual assault and abuse. The pastoral role, especially head pastors, holds influence and power over people's lives. From respecting the calling, congregations trust and believe in their ministers. A pastor should never be above personal accountability and being questioned.

Screening is essential when hiring a pastor. A person who has abused others in the past is at a high risk for future abuse. A congregation cannot predict future misconduct, but it can screen for past behaviors through background checks and references. Once a pastor is hired, congregations can train the congregation and the new pastor yearly. They should never rely on previous training.

Preventing sexual violence also requires education on sexuality and the human body. To prevent further abuse and to encourage survivors to come forward, they must know about their own bodies, sexual terminology, and what crosses boundaries. To report to proper authorities and seek medical help, survivors need language for sexual assault. This is where churches can step in. At an early age, we can start providing adequate sex education. Using the word "privates" is not enough. All ages need language and an understanding of their anatomy. Language, according to Katia Moles, "lays a foundation for ongoing communication, bodily respect, a positive self-image, and relationships."

We can turn away from teaching abstinence-focused education for congregations. This mindset creates shame, blame, and humiliation when an assault occurs. Humans are naturally sexual creatures. Christians need to be taught their bodies and sexualities are good. If a culture of protection and shame remains prevalent in a church, "Boys [might] learn early on they are entitled to women's bodies, and girls [might] learn that their bodies are objects for others." Instead, young Christians can be taught "about healthy sexual development and relationships." Autonomy allows children to make choices, including saying "no." This "no" becomes even more important when someone wants something from them, especially in a sexual way. Children need to learn what consent looks like from an early age. The ability to choose teaches children to understand and to communicate their "embodied needs and desires as well as to respect those of others."

Bathsheba's story remains complex. Yet when the focus centers on Bathsheba, she becomes a survivor. This interpretation calls for a response from the church. Sexual assault still appears among congregations. Preventive actions and education help navigate power dynamics and sexual abuse. It holds perpetrators accountable for their actions and offers something to sexual assault survivors that Bathsheba was denied – agency. NFJ

— Delnaey Metcalf is Good Faith Media's Spring 2024 Ernest C. Hynds Jr. intern

"By dismissing and ignoring sexual assault, myths around it are created."

"I had read enough about Jesus to understand that being accused of throwing wild parties wasn't the worst thing a church could be known for."

Opening the Floodgates: Reflections on Alcohol

By Craig Nash

In my experience, few people are as annoying about sobriety as an adult convert to evangelical Christianity. Conversely, I have yet to find anyone more obnoxious about their love for drinking than someone who grew up and moved away from a religious environment that viewed alcohol consumption as a grave sin. I have experienced the latter, both as an observer and a perpetrator.

I had my first taste of alcohol when I was 23 years old and didn't begin regularly drinking until I was 25. When I started, it felt like I was making up for lost time.

My church, which I joined when I moved to my current city, had a bit of a reputation when it came to drinking. When I told a coworker where I attended, he replied, "Oh, that's the church that throws keg parties."

I was too new to know this wasn't true and too intrigued to let it scare me away. I had read enough about Jesus to understand that being accused of throwing wild parties wasn't the worst thing a church could be known for.

It turned out that the "Keg Party Church" was an urban legend. College students founded our congregation, and for many years, the church consisted almost exclusively of 18 to 22-year-olds. On top of that, several fraternities and sororities would attend en masse, which is likely where the myth originated.

When you see the same large group of people at church that you saw at a keg party just a few hours before, it is not difficult to see how the party could get conflated with the church. This is especially true when some of those people are on stage or teaching Sunday School.

Many of us had grown up in religious environments that presumed total abstinence from alcohol was the only way to please God. This was either because of verses suggesting its prohibition or that encouraged being mindful of "weaker brothers." When we discovered this wasn't a biblical mandate but rather another way for our elders to exercise control over us, we decided to open the floodgates.

Most of us now, over two decades later, are either casual social drinkers or completely sober. But when we were deconstructing the teachings that had been handed to us about alcohol, we were evangelists for being "Christians who drink."

I can only now see how annoying that was in retrospect, and by observing others who are going through now what we went through then.

Something interesting I have also observed, though, is that as the stigma around alcohol has declined, so has its use among younger people. A 2020 study found that 28% of Gen Zers abstained from alcohol, up 8% from 2002. The numbers are higher for those who don't attend college.

I recently compiled a list of my favorite albums and artists of the past few years and noticed something that intrigued me. More than half of the list consists of solo artists or members of bands that are now sober after struggles with unhealthy substance use, misuse, or addiction. They included names like BJ Barham of American Aquarium, Waylon Payne, Morgan Wade, Julien Baker, and Jason Isbell.

I have attended over a dozen Jason Isbell concerts across the country. Each show is unique except for one constant element. In what is arguably Isbell's most acclaimed song, "Cover Me Up," there is a line where he declares his sobriety by singing, "But I sobered up/ I swore off that stuff/ Forever this time."

After he delivers the line tucked into an obscure corner of the love song, the crowd roars with approval. Many of those cheering are drunk and holding up beer cups or bottles to toast Isbell's decade of recovery. It is a riveting scene to behold every time.

Isbell has stated that he appreciates the moment but recognizes the dissonance involved in the act. In a recent interview, he said, "I don't see that as ironic at all…Out of all those people raising their glass, there's probably a couple of them that don't need that glass in their hand. And there may be one day when that's one of the straws that breaks that particular camel's back."

Isbell has said elsewhere that there are some who don't drink but might should start.

In those moments during the concert, I am mindful that we are all part of a community. We don't belong to ourselves, and our decisions about things like alcohol are not made in a vacuum. (To wit, "Cover Me Up" is a love song to Isbell's ex-wife, who was the driving force behind his sobriety.)

This is neither a call to total sobriety nor an encouragement to throw church keg parties. It is a reminder that both can have their place among those who follow Jesus. It is a call to humility and being mindful of the neighbors we are called to love. NFJ

Editor's Note: A version of the following appeared at GoodFaithMedia.org on January 24, 2024

save the date!

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Finding inspiration, sharing ideas

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Your retreat leaders will be North Carolinian **Tony Cartledge**, author of the acclaimed Nurturing Faith Commentary series; Tennessean **Cally Chishom**, Creative Coordinator at Good Faith Media; and Montanan **Bruce Gourley**, historian, Good Faith Media's publication manager, and author of nine books.

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LOCATION: www.stfrancissprings.com

Pull Yourself Up By Your Book-straps: Finding a Writing Community

By Cally Chisholm

On Saturday, Feb. 25, I had the opportunity to moderate an event I organized with my author friend, Emily B. Riddle, called "Bookstraps Writers Workshop" at Bear Den Books in Knoxville, Tennessee.

It was a rewarding experience, not only because of the successful outcome but because of all the work behind the scenes.

To make a big splash, Emily and I spent the last couple of months planning and plotting fun surprises, strategizing a marketing plan, connecting with the community and recruiting local authors to participate in our project. We also have been maintaining an Instagram page that continues to grow as we grow.

The event was so well attended that the bookstore didn't have enough chairs.

An incredible lineup of panelists, including Lauren Morrill, Morgan Hubbard, Brian Canever and Emily B. Riddle, came together in a vibrant conversation, sharing wisdom about the various stages of publishing, including writing, editing, design, printing and marketing. Each author had a unique perspective representing different genres, backgrounds and writing styles.

We organized "Bookstraps" to be a digital and physical presence in the community for local writers to gather and grow together.

Our Instagram page keeps us connected to other writers and is a place to find resources and information about upcoming events. When we gather at various bookstores in Knoxville, we provide a physical space for people to come and interact, learn new skills, ask questions, check in and network.

Left to Right: Brian Canever, Morgan Hubbard, Cally Chisholm, Emily B. Riddle, and Lauren Morrill

We accomplished what we set out to do on our first try and hope to build this out more in the future.

Throughout this process, I have learned that the writing journey can be isolating and overwhelming. This is especially true for independent authors who are essentially the project managers for their own books. They must perform many non-writing tasks, such as wading through Google searches and YouTube tutorials to locate editors and cover designers.

It felt good to bring experienced authors together to offer answers and solutions to issues that new writers face. We hope to see those same attendees come to our next event and report back on how far they have come.

In addition to this ongoing project, I am excited to participate in another reading and writing event through Good Faith Media. We are offering a retreat for those in our orbit who want to be inspired and motivated in their writing journey.

You don't have to be a published author to join in, although we would love to have some of those with us as well. Attendees can be new writers, curious individuals wanting to learn more about publishing or just someone wanting to get away from the busyness of life to accomplish a reading goal.

Bruce Gourley, Tony Cartledge and I will host the Good Faith Media Writers & Readers Retreat at St. Francis Springs Retreat Center in North Carolina on October 9-11. This will be a wonderful time of fellowship with friends.

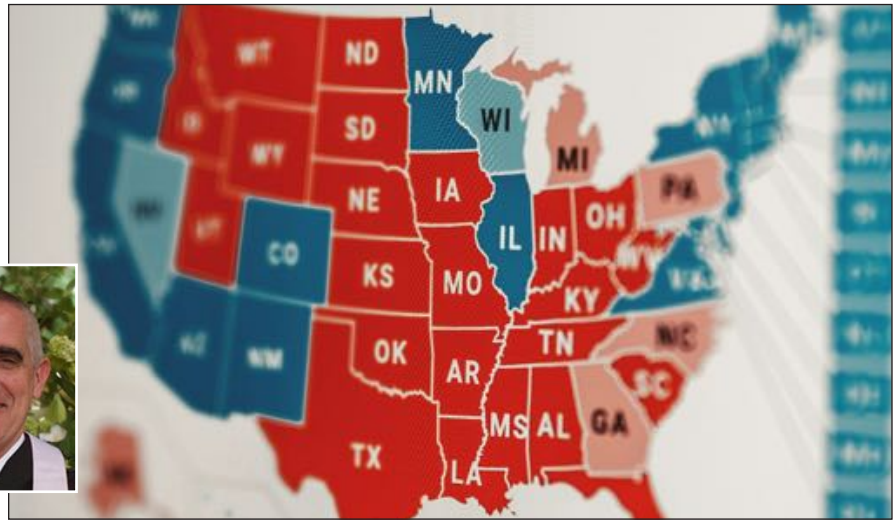
Writing a book, navigating the publishing world, and growing in your skills do not have to be lonely or isolating experiences. Finding the right community can help you accomplish your goals.

I look forward to sharing more about what I learned in Knoxville and what I have learned on the Good Faith Media team with our Nurturing Faith friends in the fall. NFJ

"Our life begins to end the day we fall silent about things that matter."
— Martin Luther King, Jr.

Up to God, Out to All

By Chuck Poole



In his epilogue to Peter Storey's collection of sermons, *With God in the Crucible,* William Willimon quotes the prophetic counsel that Storey's father once gave the younger Pastor Storey, "Everything begins in theology and ends in politics."

For those of us who grew up on the old Baptist mantra that "The church must be a politics-free zone," the elder Storey's counsel is nearly as unsettling as Richard Rohr's similar declaration, "There is no such thing as non-political Christianity."

If by "*politics*-free zone," my Baptist mentors meant "*partisanship*-free zone," then their caution was wise. Many who come to our churches wade all week in the polarizing, partisan vitriol of cable news and social media, both of which need to be left at the curb when we gather for the worship of God and the welcome of all.

However, if my Baptist forebears meant that the church should "stay out of politics" by avoiding the moral justice issues of the day, then that would constitute a failure on the part of the church—the kind of failure Martin Luther King, Jr. so memorably captured in that surgical sentence: "Our life begins to end the day we fall silent about things that matter." This is true for institutions as well as individuals.

The pressing social justice issues of our time call us to speak the truth concerning where Jesus would stand on those issues if Jesus were here. In most cases, this is not a mystery. To read the four gospels prayerfully and mindfully is to come to clarity concerning where Jesus would stand on many social justice issues of our time.

I don't have the policy answers to all social justice issues. But it isn't hard to know where Jesus would stand on many of them. If the four gospels are a trustworthy record of the words and works of Jesus, then it seems clear that Jesus would confront the sins of white supremacy and xenophobia, find a way to welcome migrants with compassion, stand up for the dignity of all persons without regard for any human difference, and work for equal access to healthcare for all.

I'm not saying Jesus would be a Democrat or a Republican. Jesus would be Jesus– the same Jesus who said that nothing matters more than treating everyone as we wish to be treated (Matthew 7:12) and that what matters most is to love God with all we have and love others as we love ourselves (Matthew 22:34-40).

Advocating for others as we would want them to advocate for us is not partisan or political. It is righteous and just. Contending for more equitable policy for the most marginalized is not "red" or "blue," but moral, right, and true.

In my work in Alabama with *Together for Hope*, we advocate for healthcare access and equity, hoping to close the healthcare coverage gap for more than 200,000 working Alabamians. We don't do this because we are ideologically progressive, but because we have made a spiritual decision to follow Jesus.

Across the centuries, institutional Christianity has made Jesus primarily about a problem–*condemnation*, and a solution–*atonement*. But the Jesus of the four gospels was primarily concerned with life, how to live it, and love and how to give it. This is at the heart of Richard Rohr's and the elder Storey's words about politics.

In Mr. Storey's words, "the theology where everything begins" is vertical–loving God with everything. "Politics where everything ends" is horizontal–loving all others as you wish to be loved."

This is the up-to-God, out-to-all, cross-shaped life we were baptized into. NFJ

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By Tony W. Cartledge

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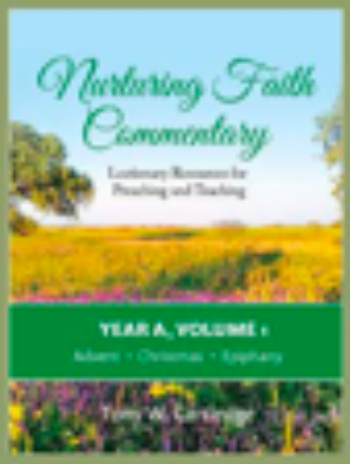

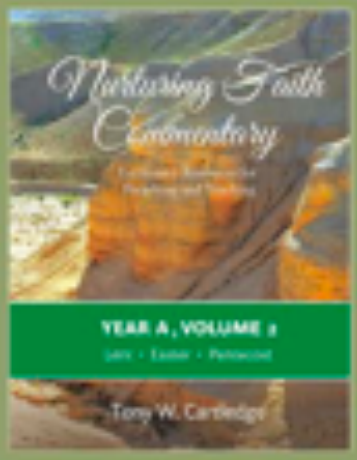

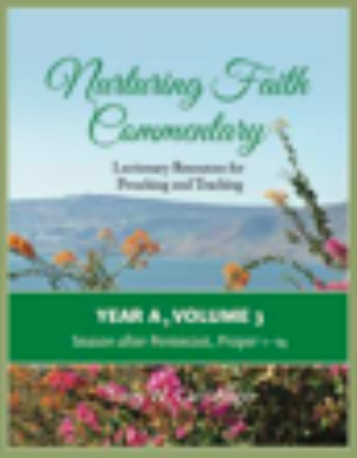

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