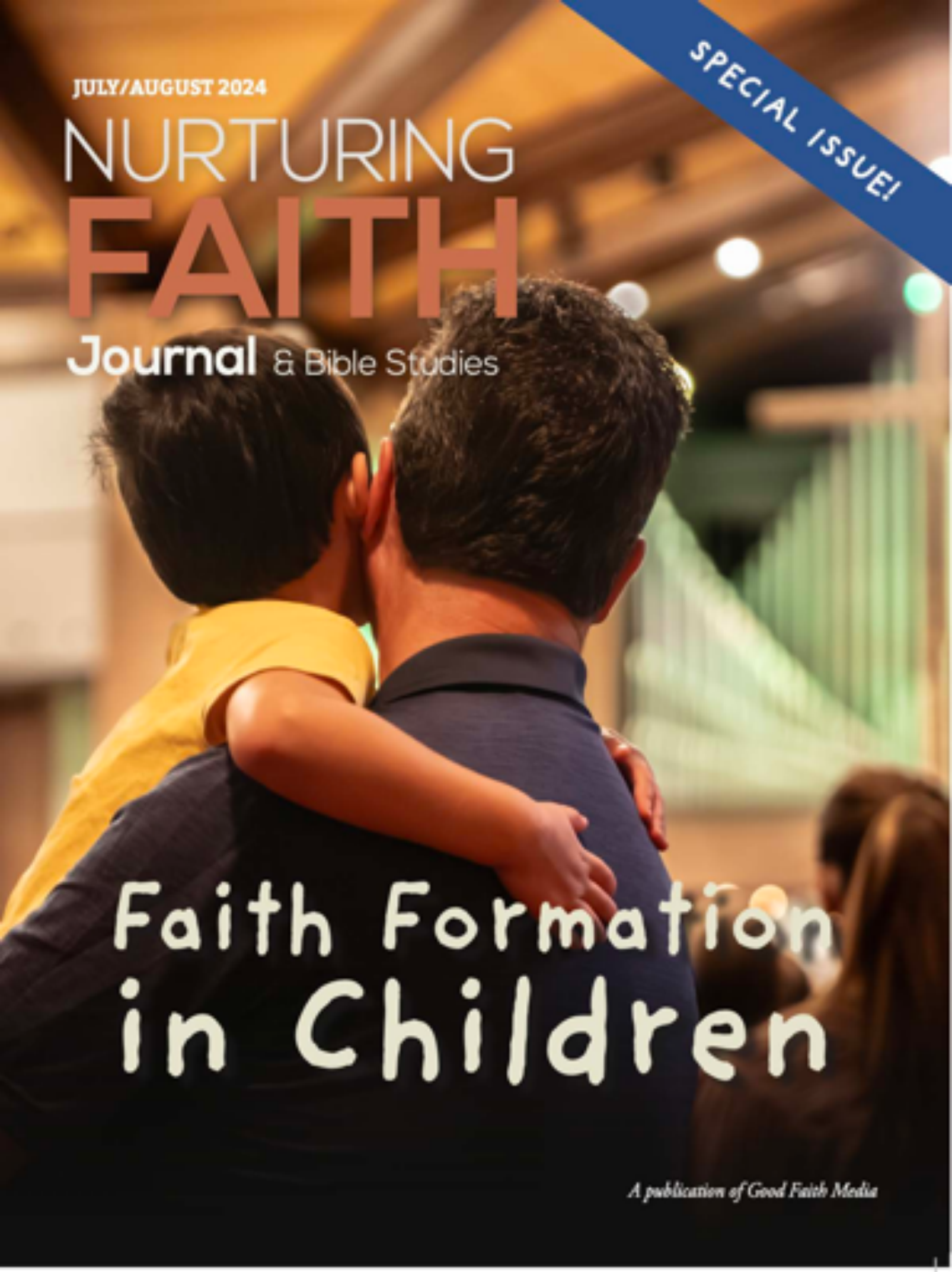
SPECIAL ISSUE!
JULY/AUGUST 2024
NURTURING
FAITH
Journal & Bible Studies
Faith Formation
in Children
A publication of Good Faith Media

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Editor's Letter

One of the many gifts of Christian mysticism is how it nudges us to see God and God's work everywhere, all around us. The contemplative tradition is the tradition of Jesus, who often seemed just to walk around, pointing at random things and telling his friends, "Would you look at that?"

Widows, containers for wine, lamps and lampstands, houses, soil, weeds, seeds, lost coins, lost sheep, lost sons, wedding feasts, fig trees, and so on – there was no end to the places Jesus pointed us to help us find God.

I should have mentioned the lilies. In a letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Emily Dickinson wrote, "Consider the lilies" (Matthew 6:28) was the only command she never broke.

I, on the other hand, have broken it many times. Legion are the lilies I have passed by without considering. Children are far more obedient to this admonition than adults. Let them loose in a field of lilies, and they will squat down, stare, smell, and pick. They will consider them for hours on end. We would do well to look to children to learn better consideration skills.

I'm reminded of the words of another poet, Mary Oliver, who asked, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" The quote feels like a call to action, one of those "Get busy! Don't waste your life!" warnings. But a popular internet meme making the rounds helps put Oliver's quote into perspective. It says, "Never forget that Mary Oliver's answer to her own question was simply to walk around her world slowly and notice things."

God is all around. I hope you notice.

—Craig Nash, Senior Editor

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Cover photo by Jeff McMorrough and courtesy of Chapelwood United Methodist Church – Houston

OUR MISSION

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

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

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

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Thank You,
Bruce and Jackie
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INSIDE

VOL. 42, ISSUE 4
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THOUGHTS

FEATURES

Worth Repeating

"Power, no matter how well-intentioned, tends to cause suffering. Love, being vulnerable, absorbs it. In a point of convergence on a hill called Calvary, God renounced the one for the sake of the other."

—Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*

"When we refer to 'the biblical approach to economics' or the 'biblical response to politics' or 'biblical womanhood,' we're using the Bible as a weapon disguised as an adjective."

—Rachel Held Evans, *Evolving in Monkey Town: How a Girl Who Knew All the Answers Learned to Ask the Questions*

"My first prayer was into a purple plastic toy megaphone. I even went into the closet to do it in case God was shy like me."

—Cole Arthur Riley, *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us*

"Our only chance at dismantling racial injustice is being more curious about its origins than we are worried about our comfort. It's not a comfortable conversation for any of us. It is risky and messy. It is haunting work to recall the sins of our past. But is this not the work we have been called to anyway? Is this not the work of the Holy Spirit to illuminate truth and inspire transformation? It's haunting. But it's also holy."

—Austin Channing Brown, *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness*

"With so much effort being poured into church growth, so much press being given to the benefits of faith, and so much flexing of religious muscle in the public square, the poor in spirit have no one but Jesus to call them blessed anymore."

—Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith*

War may sometimes be a necessary evil. But no matter how necessary, it is always an evil, never a good. We will not learn to live together in peace by killing each other's children.

—Jimmy Carter, The Nobel Peace Prize Lecture

"Parents are in a position to forgive when they remember two things. One, the child that I am rearing is God's child. God loved the child before I did; He will continue this love long after I am gone. Two, God's method of dealing with sin, even the most destructive kind, is forgiveness. I am not going to be able to improve on God's methods."

—Eugene H. Peterson, *Like Dew Your Youth: Growing Up with Your Teenager*

"We cannot pretend the Bible is secretly a feminist document. The women who show up in Scripture as strong and independent often do so in spite of the religion that would otherwise hold them down, not because of it. We have to own this harrowing part of our narrative, our history, our legacy, or we simply cannot heal. That which remains suppressed and obscured can never be tended, amended, or transformed."

— Kyndall Rae Rothaus, *Thy Queendom Come: Breaking Free from the Patriarchy to Save Your Soul*

"Love isn't a state of perfect caring. It is an active noun like 'struggle.' To love someone is to strive to accept that person exactly the way he or she is, right here and now."

—Fred Rogers, *The World According to Mister Rogers: Important Things to Remember*

Big Bibles of Pinewood

By Craig Nash

My rotating slate of remote workspaces includes the recliner in my TV room, a desk in the front room of my house, and coffee shops in and around Waco, Texas, or whatever city I happen to be in. Pinewood Roasters is the Waco area establishment I frequent most often. It is named in honor of the Piney Woods of East Texas, where both owners grew up. I also spent my childhood and early adult years in that region, so I have an emotional connection.

The decor at Pinewood is minimal. As you might expect, the coffee bar and tables are made of pine. The business is in a U-shaped building with a courtyard containing outdoor seating. The Pinewood Pub is on the opposite side of the coffee shop. Vinyl is constantly spinning on the record player, mostly with albums released decades before the average year most Pinewood patrons were born. Fleetwood Mac, James Taylor, Marvin Gay, Bonnie Raitt, and Dolly Parton are all in heavy rotation, with more contemporary artists thrown in for good measure.

The morning crowd, of which I am a member, consists mainly of remote workers and those on their way to the office. In the afternoons, more people read and visit with friends. At almost all times, however, individuals or groups enjoy their preferred cup of coffee over an open Bible.

Nearing my fifth decade, I have seen an evolution in the type of Bibles used in public spaces. During my adolescent years, Bibles were large and colorful. In the mid-1990s, miniature, thin-line Bibles were all the rage. In college, a friend of mine studying to be a preacher called the narrow, tiny Bible he kept in his back pocket his "dagger," a nod to Hebrews 4:12: "The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

With the turn of the millennium, the Bible landscape became the Wild West. Every niche personality, movement, and school of thought had its unique version of the Bible. If you want a humorous reflection on this, read A.J. Jacobs' *The Year of Living Biblically*. Jacobs, an agnostic and admittedly ignorant of all things related to the Bible, wanted to understand what it was about this bound collection of books that made so many Americans want to read and follow it. The book is his attempt to read and follow the Bible for a year.

While visiting a Christian bookstore in Manhattan, where he lived, Jacobs noted all the different versions and translations, not to mention covers and sizes. The salesperson eventually pointed him to a Bible-in-magazine form designed to look like *Seventeen* or other teen-girl publications, suggesting that this may be what Jacobs was looking for, as it is the type of Bible you can read on the subway without anyone thinking you are reading a Bible. Jacobs quipped, "You know you live in a secular city when it's considered more acceptable for a grown man to read a teen girl's magazine than the Bible."

Few at Pinewood are concerned about anyone knowing they are reading their Bibles. The current Bible trend is large—very large. In fact, an Instagram account marveling at the sizes of Bibles read at Pinewood has emerged with the handle @BigBiblesofPinewood. The account posts photos submitted by Pinewood regulars who get in-the-wild pictures of the large, primarily leatherbound Bibles scattered around the coffee shop.

It's tempting to assume this is only a trend in the Bible Belt or college towns with large Christian universities, but I have seen small Bible studies break out over large Bibles all over this country and even in European cities.

These highly visible displays of public devotion can irk me on my more cynical days. Jesus told his followers not to be like the hypocrites, who pray on street corners, but to pray, instead, behind closed doors, out of sight (Matthew 6). Though this teaching was primarily about prayer, it doesn't seem too much of a stretch to say it would also apply to people lugging a massive family Bible into a coffee shop and cracking it open for study while you enjoy their latte.

But then Jesus tells me in Matthew 7 not to judge, so I cower into my corner, appropriately chastised. (I also must admit that my knowledge of Scripture, however limited, is due mainly to the years I spent as a young adult reading the Bible in public places.)

I am mindful, though, that we live in a multicultural, multireligious country that extends the freedom to read large Bibles (or Korans, Vetas, Tao Te Chings, etc.) in public, provided we don't coerce others to do the same. We also protect people's right to have nothing to do with any of these sacred texts, and for this, I am thankful.

What would be helpful, however, is for Christians in Western nations to be aware of the immense level of privilege we have to practice our faith in public. In parts of this country, including my own, pulling out a large Bible to read in public will boost your social status among your neighbors far more than diminish it. Being seen reading a Koran, on the other hand, comes with a level of risk that we don't understand. This should cause us concern and spur us on to greater humility.

I'm not asking us to bring "daggers" back, but maybe we could return to more modest-sized Bibles to display at Pinewood.

NFJ

Good Faith Media is

With our core values, vision, and mission statement in place, we developed a strategy to fuel a thriving and sustainable future.

By Mitch Randall

Good Faith Media (GFM) has entered our fourth year, providing reflection and resources at the intersection of faith and culture through an inclusive lens.

Launched during the global health pandemic, we have covered issues around COVID-19, Black Lives Matter marches after George Floyd's death, the 2020 presidential election, an insurrection at the United States Capitol, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the repeal of Roe v. Wade, the ongoing climate crisis, the war in the Middle East, anti-LGBTQ legislation around the country, and Taylor Swift's attempt to rule the world by dominating the NFL.

We did not shy away from addressing the most critical issues facing people of faith. GFM became a trusted voice for people seeking thoughtful and engaging analysis and opinions through our digital and print platforms.

As we enter our fourth year, the GFM Governing Board challenged us to reimagine our vision and mission. While this seemed daunting initially, we eagerly dreamed about a future where inclusion, freedom, and justice prevail for all people.

Out of that effort, the staff and I proudly presented the "Thriving Towards the Future" strategy to guide us through Good Faith Media's next season. The Governing Board unanimously approved the new vision.

We began the process by outlining our core values and what we have learned about our work from our audience over the last four years. We heard from supporters nationwide that GFM is dependable, collaborative, flexible, inclusive, trustworthy, justice-driven, reliable, creative, and innovative.

Next, we crafted a vision to guide us toward an exciting future: GFM's vision is to be a reliable and positive resource contributing to conversations at the intersection of faith and culture using multiple media platforms.

Finally, we developed a mission statement to help us stay laser-focused: GFM's mission is to amplify freedom, inclusivity, and justice for people and partners, utilizing multiple media platforms as a catalyst to produce and publish thoughtful, engaging, and inspiring content.

With our core values, vision, and mission statement in place, we developed a strategy to fuel a thriving and sustainable future.

The work of Good Faith Media will center around four key offerings and services: (1) Digital News and Opinion at GoodFaithMedia.org, (2) Media Productions — videos and podcasts, (3) Journal and Bible Study, and (4) Book Publishing.

Digital News and Opinion will continue to publish daily content addressing critical issues at the intersection of faith and culture. Contributors will come from the GFM staff, our Contributing Correspondents program, and our world-wide network of volunteer writers.

Media Productions will continue to create and release free video content from exciting events, inspiring interviews, and informative series. The current incredible lineup of podcasts — including new shows — will be available wherever you listen to podcasts.

In addition to the free content, Media Productions will continue collaborating with partner organizations to develop promotional materials through strategic partnerships and contracts. The number of inquiries seeking to utilize our media production expertise continues to escalate

Thriving Towards the Future

as organizations use GFM's media production team to produce professional-quality promotional and educational videos.

The Journal and Bible Studies will undergo a new look and strategy beginning in January 2025. After significant retirements and hiring GFM's new Senior Editor, Craig Nash, the time to update the journal makes perfect sense.

We are excited to continue delivering inspiring stories, educational columns, and informative Bible studies to your mailboxes. Instead of publishing the journal six times annually, we are moving to a seasonal publication with four editions each year.

After years of publishing challenging Bible studies connected to the Revised Common Lectionary, we will move to a hybrid approach that combines topical and passage-based studies. The studies will continue as a weekly lesson for those in Sunday School classes and small groups. We will maintain the high quality of scholarship coupled with relevant applications.

Our book publishing arm will strengthen our professional partnership with FaithLab as a more targeted and strategic approach to book publishing. As GFM increases our media footprint at the intersection of faith and culture, we receive more inquiries from thoughtful and insightful authors. We are excited to offer the same great books with new writers added to our pool of great authors.

In addition to our four core offerings, two initiatives will permeate our work across all of GFM's platforms. The Raceless Gospel and Faith and Democracy Initiatives will be ever present in the content we publish and produce. These two exciting initiatives will assist our followers in examining race as a human construct and champion faith and democracy as core beliefs we all cherish.

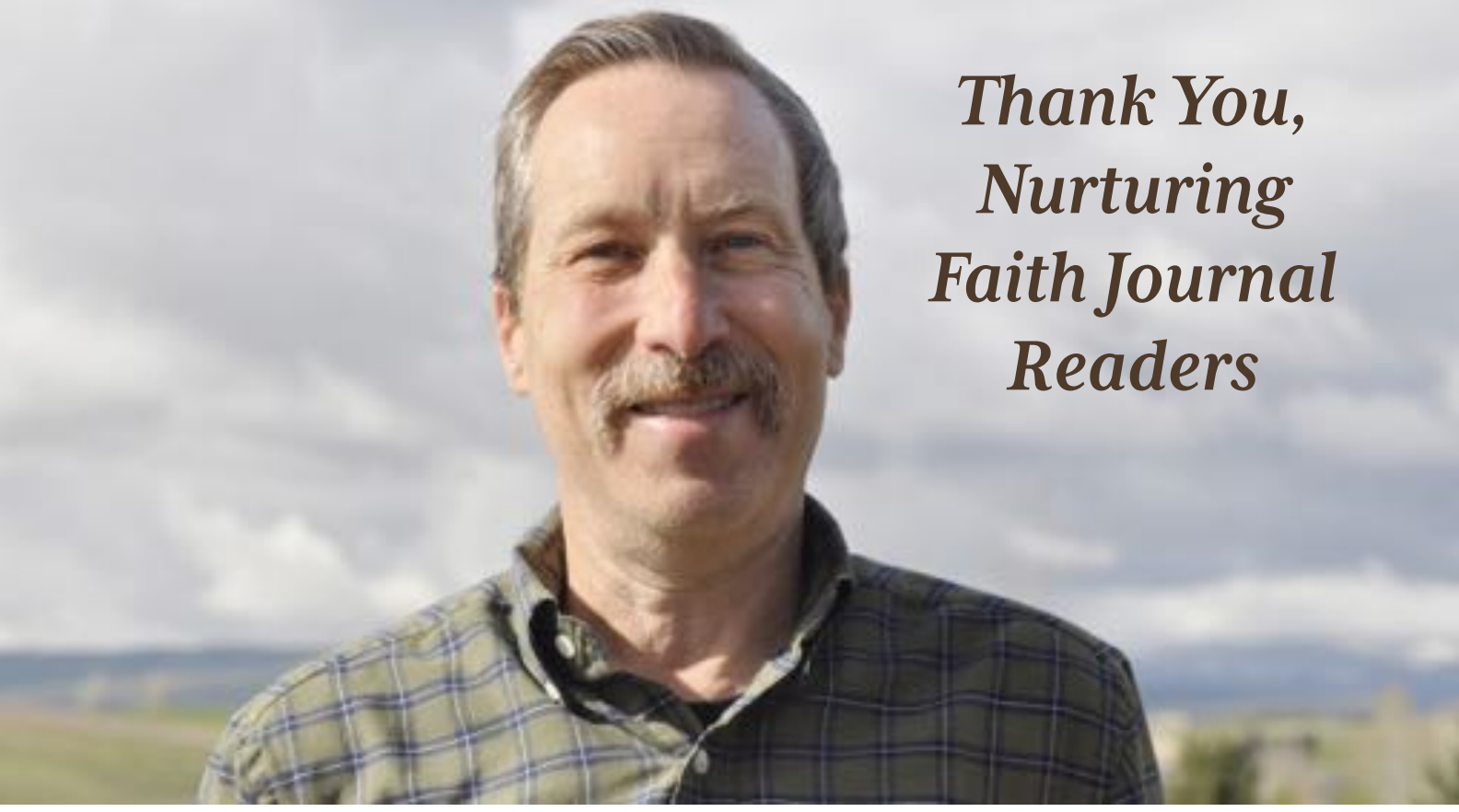
Finally, next year will be Good Faith Media's fifth anniversary. During the year of celebration, we will offer more surprises to our readers, listeners, viewers, and supporters. We plan to launch a newly designed logo and website and more free resources for our friends and partners to enjoy.

Good Faith Media generates a wealth of excellent content because we believe in our mission and the movement we are helping to create. We can only continue providing you with the same quantity and quality content through the generosity of people like you. As a 501(c)3 nonprofit origination, we depend on individual donors, congregations, denominational organizations, institutional partners, and foundations to financially support our work.

We are grateful to each of you. There is much work to do in the next two years, but the GFM staff eagerly awaits the challenge. We believe in our vision and mission and invite you to be part of this exciting time. Please consider becoming a monthly donor by scanning the QR code. Your generosity will make a difference in more ways than you can imagine.

Thank you for the support, as together we thrive towards the future! NFJ

20 Years of Gratitude



Thank You, Nurturing Faith Journal Readers

By Bruce Gourley

By the time you read this, I will have begun a new job as the editor of *Church & State Magazine*, the publication of Washington, D.C.-based Americans United for Separation of Church and State (AU). AU is the leading non-profit in America advocating for church and state separation and working to defeat Christian nationalism.

This new chapter in my life would not have been possible without my two decades-long tenure of writing for and working in various editorial and managerial roles with *Baptists Today*, Nurturing Faith, and now Good Faith Media. Those years were a time of challenging and rewarding work, professional and personal growth and enrichment, and wonderful friendships too numerous to count.

In writing hundreds of articles published in *Baptists Today* and *Nurturing Faith Journal*, I learned much, benefited from your feedback, and became a better writer. Thank you, each and every one, for the privilege of channeling research and history and your ever-expanding thirst for knowledge and understanding in so many articles for so many years.

Yet writing for you is but the beginning of my gratitude for you. I have been enriched by ongoing correspondence with many of you over the years. In-person at conferences, in seminars, around dinner tables, in amazing places during a decade of adventuresome and inspiring Nurturing Faith/Good Faith Media Experiences that collectively spanned half the globe, and often one-on-one, I have been very blessed to spend meaningful time and learn much from many of you. In those times and spaces we've shared thoughts, joys, concerns, sorrows, hopes, and laughs. In conversations, we've explored the past and pondered the future. And in many instances, with our actual eyes, we've stood together in magnificent moments, quietly sharing awe and wonder at the marvels of creation.

I am forever grateful that you and the written word have sustained and shaped me these past two decades.

But this is not a time of goodbye. We remain readers all, and if *Church & State Magazine* is among your periodical subscriptions, we'll carry on our writer-reader relationship. And if you love national parks as do I, come and visit me in Montana, and we'll explore Yellowstone or Glacier.

I look forward to staying in touch. Thanks to our modern world of technology, I remain nearby. I am available by email at mail@brucegourley.com.

I hope to hear from you. NFJ

Thank you, Bruce and Jackie

By Mitch Randall

Bruce Gourley and Jackie Riley recently resigned from their positions at Good Faith Media after illustrious and productive careers.

Bruce accepted a position as editor of *Church & State Magazine* at Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

Jackie, after a remarkable career editing *Nurturing Faith Journal* and books, has decided to retire. Her departure marks the end of an era, but her legacy will continue to inspire us.

While we will miss both Bruce and Jackie immensely, we are overjoyed for their new stages and opportunities in life. Bruce has been an incredible resource as an impeccable historian and writer. His expertise in the history of Christian nationalism is unparalleled. He will be great as the new editor for AU's magazine.

Jackie spent decades editing and helping writers develop their writing projects. Authors often told us that Jackie made them better writers and elevated their projects to a higher level. Her legacy will live on through the journal and the many books we published under her guidance.

Good Faith Media is exceptionally grateful to Bruce and Jackie. We will miss their expertise and professionalism. We all wish them the best in retirement and new endeavors.

With Bruce and Jackie transitioning into new phases of their lives, Good Faith Media is taking this opportunity to restructure our staff. This will enable us to better serve the needs of our valued readers, listeners, and viewers. You will be hearing more about these exciting changes in the coming months.

The Second American Revolution

Part 3 of a Series on Religious Liberty

By Bruce T. Gourley

As July 1776 dawned, many Baptists in Virginia pondered whether to support the growing war against Great Britain.

In June, Virginia legislators passed the Virginia Declaration of Rights. At James Madison's insistence, the Declaration promised to respect the rights of religious dissenters, yet theocratic-minded legislators ensured the document took no steps toward separating church from state. This upheld the Anglican-turned-Episcopalian Church as Virginia's establishment religion.

Madison, along with Baptists and Presbyterians, understood that actual religious freedom remained distant. Baptist pastor John Alderson sat in prison "for celebrating the rites of matrimony" without having paid a legally required fee to the local Episcopalian parish. To obtain release, Alderson eventually paid "three pounds five shillings, being the amount of ten marriage fees," for having married multiple couples in his church without government approval. Court records noted that the fee was paid to "Alex. Balmain," county clerk and "Curate of Augusta Parish" at Trinity Episcopal Church.

Balmain was a study in contrasts. Having immigrated from Scotland as a Presbyterian, he converted to the theocratic-minded Episcopal Church. A year before collecting Alderson's fine and releasing him from prison, Balmain had penned the Augusta Resolves, rallying local patriots to the cause of political freedom from Great Britain and the "free exercise of the rights of conscience and human nature," of which only Episcopalians fully enjoyed in Virginia.

Fellow Virginian Thomas Jefferson, on the other hand, remained steadfast in his commitment to securing colonists' religious and political freedom. For the moment, though, independence from Great Britain remained the priority.

On July 2, 1776, the Second Continental Congress, meeting in Philadelphia, approved a Virginia resolution calling for separation from Great Britain. The resolution was added to the Declaration of Independence that Jefferson penned. Formally adopted on July 4, the Declaration formed "the United States of America." To the dismay of religious dissenters, religious freedom was not mentioned, nor did the document refute the tyranny of church-state alliances.

In the wake of the Virginia-influenced Declaration of Independence, New York remained the focal point of wartime battlefield activity. There, the new nation's hopes hinged on the leadership of Virginian George Washington, commander of the Continental Army. Any further assaults on state religion fell to Madison, Jefferson, and their Baptist and Presbyterian allies in the ongoing battle for religious freedom in Virginia, where the British had a minimal presence.

Would political freedom from Great Britain matter without religious liberty? Dissenters thought not, dampening their enthusiasm for the American Revolution.

In August, a Baptist association in Virginia voiced their members' frustrations in a letter to Patrick Henry, the state's first governor. In response to the Baptists' praise–and reminder–of Henry's former "zeal and activity" for "the glorious cause of liberty and the rights of conscience," the governor, well aware that he needed their help against Great Britain, quickly responded.

Promising to "guard the rights of all my fellow citizens, from every encroachment," Henry inaccurately deemed the "heats" of religious discrimination resolved. With that said, he pivoted to a plea. The remaining question "among us, at this most critical period, is, who shall be foremost to preserve our religious and civil liberties." Now, he continued, was the moment in which Virginians must "perish or triumph together."

If Patrick Henry thought he could mollify dissenters, he was deceiving himself. Persecutions of Baptists continued as Virginia's General Assembly convened in early October, a mere three months after the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Immediately, a group of Presbyterians from Prince Edwards County took their turn, using both praise and warning to remind the Assembly that equal freedom of religion and conscience had yet to be achieved.

The Presbyterian petitioners "heartily" expressed appreciation for the support from Virginia's Episcopalian political leaders for the earlier-enacted Declaration of Rights that would "relieve us from a long Night of ecclesiastic Bondage." They continued by noting that they expected the Assembly "without Delay" to "pull down" the state's establishment Church.

Days later, another petition from "the Dissenters from the Ecclesiastic establishment" landed in the Assembly. John Ragosta, a Virginia historian and professor at the University of Virginia School of Law, has deeply researched dissenter petitions and concludes that "over 10 percent of the adult white male population [of Virginia] apparently signed" the "10,000 name" petition.

With the signatures consisting primarily of Baptists, but also some of other religious persuasions, the petition made one particular demand: the end of establishment-levied taxation without representation. This was a clear reminder that unjust taxes levied by Britain had led to

The Dunking of David Barrow and Edward Mintz in the Nansemond River 1787 (Encyclopedia of Virginia)

revolution. Why should dissenters be paying taxes that only benefited the Episcopalian establishment? A second revolution, this time against religious discrimination and persecution, was gathering steam.

However, the petitioners noted a simple solution: Should the state's political leaders cease favoring religion of any kind, Virginia's lingering theocratic vestiges would be wiped away, religious equality to all would finally arrive, and Baptists and other dissenters' "animosities" toward the state would "cease." This was a not-so-subtle hint that dissenter loyalties were not fully on the patriot side of the Revolutionary War.

Two days later, a third petition from religious dissenters arrived. This time, the petitioners were primarily discontented Presbyterians, many of whom were members of the militia of Augusta County. Warning that "unanimity" for the patriot cause could only be preserved by "giving equal liberty" to all Virginians, they perceived the future of the United States to primarily pivot on the matter of freedom of religion and conscience. This was, in effect, a warning that some Presbyterians might not bear arms against Britain if Virginia continued to withhold their freedom.

Yet another petition arrived shortly after that, this time from the Hanover Presbytery. Feeling besieged, the General Assembly's Committee for Religion reeled all the more over the dire words voiced by the Hanover signatories. Noting their continuing desire "to conduct themselves as peaceable members of the civil Government" had thus far been expressed in submission "to several ecclesiastical [burdens] and restrictions inconsistent with equal liberty," Hanover Presbyterians were near a breaking point.

The petitioners communicated that they wanted to believe "that we shall be freed from all the encumbrances" levied by "a spirit of Domination, prejudice, or bigotry." Desiring "to be free" from discrimination and persecution, "we hope and expect that our Representatives will cheerfully concur in removing every species of religious, as well as civil bondage."

Other petitions arrived, calling for an end to unjust taxation on religious dissenters and warning of consequences if the Virginia General Assembly refused. Some petitioners declared they would shed their own blood before submitting "to any form of Government, that may be subversive" of equal religious liberty for all. One group of dissenters, noting the "Vast Number of Dissenters from the Established Church in this Colony," warned that Virginia's establishment Church made bitter "the Hearts of every Virtuous American now Struggling in Defence of the Common Rights of Mankind."

Despite the warnings, Episcopalian political leaders across the state dug in all the more. The General Assembly's Committee on Religion resisted mounting calls for separating Church from State.

For weeks, the debate careened back and forth. Jefferson's appeals on behalf of religious dissenters were especially influential and eventually made some progress. On November 9, 1776, Virginia's politicians, acutely aware of the need to maintain dissenters' support for the political war against Great Britain, momentarily suspended (but failed to eliminate) establishment taxes and penalties for not attending Episcopalian church services.

Jefferson bemoaned the partial, begrudging steps as merely nodding toward equal freedom of religion and conscience. He was right to worry. Ten days after suspending establishment taxes, Jefferson wrote, "our opponents" in the Assembly passed "a declaration that religious assemblies ought to be regulated," indicative of ongoing resistance to religious freedom.

Meanwhile, religious dissenters, in response to minimal progress toward equal religious freedom, pledged loyalty to the patriot cause, hoping more progress would eventually arrive. But their hopes required

yet more patience. As 1777 dawned, Virginia's Episcopalian establishment had relented only a little. Most theocratic-like political policies remained firmly in place, and equal religious liberty was far from being achieved.

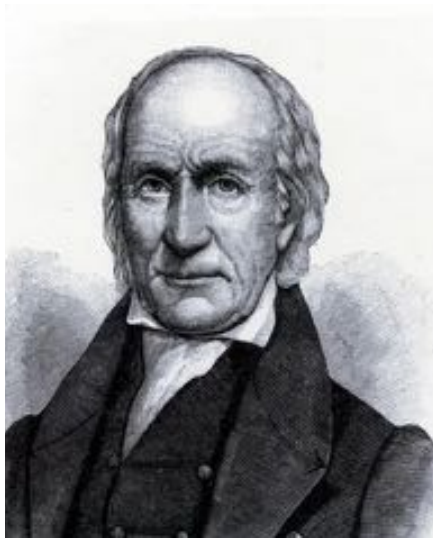
At loggerheads, dissenters continued to petition for more progress toward freedom during the war years, even as Episcopalians remained determined to restrict further liberties. The American Revolution raged on, as did several discriminatory laws and sporadic persecutions targeting Virginia's religious dissenters.

In 1778, in the Isle of Wight County, two Baptist ministers, David Barrow and Edward Mintz, were seized and terrorized by a mock drowning, an early form of waterboarding. Their perpetrators were apprehended–unlike in past days–but got off lightly.

Soon, the Revolutionary War ground to a seeming standoff in 1779, emboldening an increasingly re-assertive Episcopal Church. On behalf of dissenters, Thomas Jefferson, newly elected as the state's second governor, sought to regain freedom's momentum by introducing his forward-looking Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom. The legislation would enact equal freedom of religion and conscience for all, eradicating establishment religion. Episcopalian legislators shot it down.

Nevertheless, unending pressure by Baptists and Presbyterians eventually contributed to the General Assembly's decision to repeal the establishment tax that had supported the Episcopal Church. Even so, the Committee for Religion struck down George Mason's preamble to the repeal bill–which voiced approval for de-establishing the Episcopalian Church. State religion remained.

The following year, the Revolutionary War spilled into Virginia. This tamped down much of the conflict between dissenters and Episcopalian political leaders. Nevertheless, Spotsylvania County Baptists called for further religious liberty measures. Praising the repeal of the establishment tax, they renewed the call for "equal Religious, as well as civil Liberty."



John Leland (American Baptist Historical Society)

Sandy Creek Baptists also called for settling the matter of religious liberty, seeking an end to their "contending with those who endeavor to tyrannize over us." By the end of the year, as the war still raged in the state, Virginia's Episcopalian leaders somewhat relented. They allowed dissenting ministers to perform marriage ceremonies legally, but only upon obtaining a license to do so, and only in their home counties.

By 1781, battlefield momentum had swung toward the Americans in Virginia and elsewhere, even as the contest for religious liberty–the second American Revolution–remained unsettled. In October, the decisive battle of Yorktown fell in favor of the Americans, ending British rule in the colonies.

With the war winding down, Baptists were no longer needed in the Continental Army. Yet Episcopalians still clung to political power, refusing to separate church from state. One month after Yorktown, a Presbyterian petition to the General Assembly demanded the end of Episcopalian vestries' control of local laws. This included the administration of the "poor tax," monies collected by the state to provide for the needs of the impoverished. Legislators refused. The following year, they also ignored additional requests of the same nature from other Baptist groups.

As the war came to a formal close in the 1783 Treaty of Paris, various Baptist groups petitioned to end lingering discriminatory marriage and vestry laws. Reminding the Episcopalian-controlled General Assembly that "we have joined with our brethren in the same cause of Liberty," Baptists of Essex County observed that no obstacles remained to "disappoint our Expectation" of full religious liberty. Other Baptist petitions also noted that they expected legislators to embrace religious freedom. Episcopalian political leaders remained unmoved.

Angered that political freedom from Great Britain had not brought religious freedom, many dissenters abandoned a strategy of coaxing change. Hanover Presbyterians made their displeasure plain, demanding "entire and everlasting freedom from every species of ecclesiastical domination, a full & permanent security of the unalienable right of Conscience and private judgment." Presbyterians and Baptists alike complained louder about vestry laws and marriage restrictions.

In 1784, Episcopalian political and clergy leaders pushed back all the harder against dissenters. They no longer had any need to give in to the Baptists, as the Revolutionary War was over.

In the absence of an Episcopalian state tax, many politicians pressed for a general tax to support Protestant churches at large. In practice, this would primarily benefit the Episcopal establishment. Many Episcopal clergy rallied to the effort through petitions. One such missive from Warwick County to the state General Assembly in the spring of 1784 eloquently argued the talking points of Establishment Christianity.

Declaring "that it is essentially necessary for the good Government of all free states, that some legislative attention should be paid to religious Duties," the Warwick missive dismissed calls for the separation of church and state. An establishment petition from Powhatan County followed suit. Calling for a stronger state-church union, the petition insisted that "Encouragement & Support of Piety, true Religion and Learning" was "one of the great Bulwarks of Liberty."

Patrick Henry, the most influential of Virginia's legislators, agreed with the call for state religion in the General Assembly's Committee for Religion by noting that

other states taxed citizens to support Christianity. Henry's push for continued church-state union angered James Madison, who had never forgotten his failed efforts to disestablish church from state in 1776. Although Madison argued against Henry, he didn't prevail: Episcopalians still controlled state politics, and their majority in the legislative body moved forward toward advancing their establishment faith.

Meeting again in October 1784, the General Assembly returned to religious liberty issues and the relationship between church and state. With a stronger hand, Episcopal assemblymen, led by Patrick Henry, quickly moved to bolster Virginia's identity as a Christian state. Revolutionary heroes Richard Henry Lee and George Washington supported a religious tax assessment to fund Christianity.

Lee insisted to Madison that the "experience of all time shows Religion to be the guardian of morals" as he called for the state to fund Christianity. In less enthusiastic words, Washington offered qualified support of taxation to benefit "the denominations of Christians," as long as "Jews, Mahomitans [Muslims]," and other non-Christians also benefited in some "proper" manner.

Henry and Washington, in short, were willing to keep Christianity–or at least religion–on the law books by forcing citizens to pay religious taxes in a way that would benefit only, or mostly, Christianity, and primarily the establishment Episcopal Church. Seemingly declining to oppose the wishes of two of the United States' most powerful and influential men, some dissenters who were previously opposed to religious taxes backtracked. This included the clergy of the Presbytery of Hanover. Retracting their earlier demands of total church-state separation, they merely insisted that the Assembly avoid legislating religious articles of faith or modes of worship.

Madison responded in disgust. He deemed the Hanover Presbyterian clergy "as ready to set up an establishment which is to take them in [as beneficiaries of the tax], as they were to put down that which shut them out." Several Presbyterian laity, too, took a stance against their own clergy.

Baptists, meanwhile, largely remained steadfast in opposition. Additionally, religious taxes weren't their only church-state concern. As printed in the 1784 *Journal of the House of Delegates of the Commonwealth of Virginia*, on November 11, in Richmond, a "memorial of a committee of sundry Baptist Associations, assembled at Dover meeting-house, was presented to the House, and read; setting forth, that they have still reason to complain of several acts now in force, which they conceive are oppressive and repugnant to the equal rights of religious liberty, particularly the marriage and vestry law; and praying that the same may be amended."

The petition from the Dover Baptists did no good. Madison and his Assembly allies, as well as the distant Thomas Jefferson serving as U.S. Minister to France, also seemed powerless against the Episcopal resurgence.

On the offensive, the majority of legislators on the Religion Committee voted to proceed with religious taxation. "That the people of this Commonwealth, according to their respectful abilities," they resolved, "ought to pay a moderate tax or contribution, annually, for the support of the christian religion, or of some christian church, denomination or communion of christians, or of some form of christian worship. That the people of this Commonwealth, according to their respectful abilities, ought to pay a moderate tax or contribution, annually, for the support of the christian religion, or of some christian church, denomination or communion of christians, or of some form of christian worship."

The resolution passed in the House 47 to 32. It was not even close. Nevertheless, Madison sensed an opening.

Episcopalians were driving hard toward "a much greater evil," Madison wrote to Jefferson. An earlier request by Episcopalians to remove governance of the Church from the state to the Church–a request honored weeks earlier by the legislature–had been a red herring. In practice, the state-approved incorporation of the Church continued to allow Episcopalian politicians to create new parishes, set parish boundaries, and oversee vestry elections, with county leaders controlling tax distributions.

Madison now realized that the incorporation bill had been the opening act in the scheme to "a general assessment," subsequently passed by the Virginia House and requiring all citizens to pay taxes to support Christianity, especially the Episcopalian Church. And the "the father of the Scheme" was none other than the state's foremost politician, Patrick Henry.

The House's initial approval of the general assessment, however, was only the first step toward the bill becoming law. There was still time to stop the scheme. Madison quickly hatched a counterintuitive plan of his own. Rather than criticize Henry, Madison, and his religious liberty political allies openly supported him for the governorship. It was a symbolic move; Henry was unopposed in his second run.

Soon after resigning from the legislature to fulfill his new duties, Governor Henry focused on new responsibilities rooted in his accountability to all citizens. Quickly, he perceived–as Madison had already known–that public sentiment had turned against the union of church and state.

More importantly, Henry, previously the driving force in retaining the Episcopalian establishment, was now removed from the legislature where such decisions were made. With Henry absent from the legislative playing field, Madison made his second move. Deploying a tri-fold strategy, he slow-walked the legislative process regarding religious taxation, intentionally forced public transparency of legislative proceedings, and channeled anti-establishment public sentiment into action.

Within months, the prospect of continued church-state union was on the ropes.

In March 1785, the shifting sands of the religious debate blew across Virginia's editorial landscape. Several prominent newspapers ran letters opposing the religious assessment bill and calling for voters to elect representatives "most favorable to the religious, as well as the civil rights of their constituents." Other newspapers defended state Christianity.

By then, anti-establishment Baptists and Presbyterians, allied with Madison, were making their voices known through mass petitions unparalleled since the early years of the American Revolution. Baptist leaders John Leland–the Billy Graham of his time and the foremost Baptist voice for religious liberty–and David Barrow–having survived his 1778 waterboarding–led the way in rallying Baptists en masse to resist state Christianity once again.

A rising tide of Presbyterian petitions voiced sentiments condemning efforts to make "the Legislature a judge of Religious truth–the Assembly have a right to determine the preference between Christianity & the other systems of Religion that prevail in the world, they may also, at a convenient time, give a preference to favoured sect among Christians."

By the summer of 1785, opposition to state Christianity had been enjoined by Methodists, Quakers, and an increasing number of Episcopalians. Madison joyfully wrote Jefferson: "The steps taken throughout the Country [Virginia] to defeat the Genl. [Religious] Assessment, had produced all the effect that could have been wished. The table was loaded with petitions & remonstrances from all parts against the interposition of the Legislature in matters of Religion."

Most of the "petitions & remonstrances" on the legislative "table" were from Baptists and Presbyterians. Many supported a document, *Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments*, penned by a young upstart politician in the heated summer of 1776 as a rebuttal to George Mason's call for mere tolerance of dissenters. That young upstart was James Madison, who, in 1785, was among the most influential Virginians and finally revealed his authorship of *Memorial and Remonstrance*.

"The religion then of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man; and it is the right of every man to exercise it as these may dictate," Madison insisted in the near decade-old missive. "This right is in its nature an unalienable right." Demanding an end to church and state union, he observed that religious liberty was necessary for "all our other rights."

Madison's demand for equal freedom of religion and conscience, on a firmer political footing than in 1776, could no longer be brushed aside. Widely distributed statewide and enthusiastically embraced by Baptists and Presbyterians, *Memorial and Remonstrance* pressured Virginia's politicians to finally vote down the Episcopal Church's desperate attempt to salvage a remnant of 178 years of state Christianity.

The renewed, multi-pronged push-back against the Episcopal establishment, in turn, allowed Madison to reintroduce, with slight modifications, Thomas Jefferson's earlier failed religious liberty bill. Presented as a revision of Virginia's laws, the [now named] Statute for Establishing Religious Freedom, if finally enacted, would grant all persons equal freedom of religion and conscience by fully separating church from state.

After six years of waiting, Jefferson's Statute for Religious Freedom bill calling for the creation of a secular state had finally arrived at the center of political discourse. Filed as Bill No. 82 and enthusiastically backed by the state's Baptists and Presbyterians, the Statute was trusted to James Madison's able mind and political skills.

From France, Jefferson anxiously awaited as Madison skillfully negotiated passage of the bill, making only minor concessions to win enough votes. After passing the House on January 16, 1786, the Statute passed the Virginia Senate and was signed into law three days later. Quickly, Madison penned a letter of congratulations to Jefferson and dispatched it across the Atlantic. Upon receiving the good news, Jefferson translated his statute into French and Italian and distributed it far and wide.

Virginia's religious dissenters, too, spread the good news. Persecuted by Christian theocracies since the early 1600s, Baptists, in particular, were especially ecstatic. Having led the way in founding Rhode Island upon church-state separation long ago, they had now played an indispensable role in doing the same in Virginia.

At their annual gathering in the fall of 1786, Episcopal leaders made a last-ditch effort to convince state legislators to maintain their denomination as the state's favored church. They failed. Five years later, on December 15, 1791, influenced by Virginia's journey to religious freedom, the First Amendment to the United States Constitution became law. "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," began the First Amendment. These simple but earth-shattering words signaled the arrival of secular government on the world scene.

The Establishment and Free Exercise clauses of the United States Constitution summarized both Madison's *Memorial and Remonstrance* and Jefferson's Statute for Religious Freedom. Alongside the earlier No Religious Test Clause (Article VI, Clause 3 of the Constitution) forbidding any religious test for serving in federal public office, the First Amendment created a "wall of separation" [words coined by Rhode Island founder Roger Williams in 1644, and later echoed by Jefferson in 1802] between church and state.

The creation of the first secular Western nation marked a dividing line in history. Baptists, Presbyterians, and other dissenters, long persecuted in the theocratic colonial era, praised America's secular government. Many clergy of formerly establishment churches, accustomed to government funding of their churches and salaries, were dejected and resentful.

Embraced, reviled, or, in some cases, unknown in our present day, the constitutional separation of church and state provides equal religious freedom and conscience for all persons, whether religious or not. These are America's first freedoms upon which all other freedoms are grounded.

Should constitutional equal religious freedom and conscience for all be toppled by courts or insurrectionists longing for the return of theocracy, all of our other freedoms will crumble and fall. NFJ

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Mother Moses and Me: North Star as a Working Synonym for Hope

By Starlette Thomas

She got away. Araminta Ross, also known as Harriet Tubman, pried herself from the hands of European colonizers, saving herself for herself. Considered theft, she was stolen property in those days. Still, she looked beyond her present condition and saw freedom up above her head; North Star turned guiding light. She is a breathtaking testament to otherworldly courage, strength, and wisdom.

Tubman didn't accept enslavement as an answer to the human condition of Africans in America, colonized and racialized as black. Instead, she lifted herself and hundreds of others up from what Harriet Jacobs called a "deep and dark and foul…pit of abominations."

Freedom made flesh, Tubman managed to retain her *humanum*, her humanness—despite a dehumanizing system that sought to make her synonymous with livestock: horses, cows, goats, sheep, Harriet, chickens, and pigs. In *My Folks Don't Want Me to Talk About Slavery*, edited by Belinda Hurmence, "Sarah Debro, once a slave in Orange County, North Carolina, put it bluntly, 'My folks don't want me to talk about slavery. They's shame n----- ever was slaves.'"

But historian Nell Irvin Painter rightly points out the importance of examining the system of oppression: Slavery "calibrated the values in core [American] institutions," which include the family, religion, government, and education. She also says, "the implications of slavery [did not] stop at the color-line; slavery's theory and praxis" and is part of America's capitalist society.

This is evidenced by low hourly wages and a position voiced by Nikki Haley, the former governor of South Carolina and, at the time of her statement, a Republican presidential candidate, who said that younger Americans, now in their twenties, need to work longer, extending the age of retirement "so that it matches life expectancy." In short, work yourself to death—property, not persons.

"Chattel slavery not only critiqued freedom but also raised fateful questions about being human," M. Shawn Copeland wrote in *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*. Tubman challenged the totalizing identities of slavery and race: master/oppressor, black/white, free/enslaved. She challenged and interrupted the narrative of "body commerce, body exchange [and] body value."

I say her name because she embodied self-mastery. Mother Moses didn't wait for legislation; she wrote her own freedom papers. Tubman is important to my work and witness, namely The Raceless Gospel Initiative, and as a theologian, researcher, and race abolitionist because she got away. And I talk about slavery for the reason Copeland names: "We, Christian theologians in the United States, work in a house haunted by the ghosts of slavery."

Tubman's free feet double as my heartbeat, giving life and rhythm to the raceless gospel. Those mystical tracks on the Underground Railroad are my lifeline and my source of direction. Because there is a place for self-recovery and rediscovery of myself, free from this racialized reality. She decentered whiteness, decolonized her mind, and put hundreds of miles between her and the dehumanizing and oppressive system of American slavery.

William Still, a historian of the Underground Railroad, said: "While many sympathize with the slave in his chains and freely weep over his destiny, or gave money to help him buy his freedom, but few could be found who were willing to take the risk of going into the South, and standing face to face with Slavery, in order to conduct a panting slave to freedom. The undertaking was too fearful to think of in most cases. But there were instances when men and women too, moved by the love of freedom, would take their lives in their hands, beard the lion in his dean, and nobly rescue the oppressed."

Because of a lead weight hurled by an overseer, which caused a severe head injury, Tubman had crippling seizures but still had her mind "stayed on freedom." Despite the risk of death, she self-emancipated. Tubman would later give fugitives two options: "You'll be free or die." There was no turning back once they were on the tracks of the Underground Railroad. Time traveler was she, moving between time past and future possibilities.

Two hundred years after her birth, Harriet Tubman still excites me. Why do I continue to center her? Because "Harriet Tubman's work to dismantle the institution of slavery in the United States resounds forever," Alexis Pauline Gumbs wrote. "What people may not know as much about is the counter-institution building work Tubman engaged in throughout her life. Tubman was a strategic genius and she knew that the freedom [of] her people required alternative structures during and after the dominance of slavery as an economic form in the United States."

Because her autobiography is theology. "Christianity turns upon the character of Christ. But that character must continually find fresh exemplars if it is not to be consigned to the realm of mere antiquarian lore," James William McClendon Jr. wrote in *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology*. "That is one good reason—there have been other reasons

as well— why in Christianity there have been 'the saints,' not merely in the original, biblical sense of all members of the Spirit-filled community (cf. 1 Cor. 1:2), but in the historic sense of striking and exemplary members of that same community."

Harriet Tubman said, "My people are free" as a wanted woman with a bounty on her head, while the Fugitive Slave Act was in effect and during American chattel slavery. "Freedom was in [her] bones" as my elders would say. Empowered by her sense of somebodiness and fueled by the North Star, she walked and then lived into a larger reality–beyond the American South. Then she turned around and went back to ensure that others did too.

Her religious experience and practice of faith continue to shape my own as well as my understanding of what it means to be human. Also, the piety passed down to me is no longer sufficient–aesthetic righteousness largely devoid of embodiment that affects structural and systemic inequalities. My relationship with the infallible church has changed and the credibility of American Christianity continues to decline.

I wonder if it is a kind of nihilism as defined by Lewis Brogdon in *Hope on the Brink: Understanding the Emergence of Nihilism in Black America*: "At its core, nihilism is a rejection of a set of beliefs that fail to give meaning and hope to lived realities." I believe, but Harriet Tubman helps my unbelief. Then, there is the North Star, which acts as a working synonym for hope.

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Polaris, "the star toward which the northern end of the earth's axis very nearly points," the North Star symbolizes guidance. Hopeful steps forward, I move my feet, fully assured that I am headed in the right direction. Its presence says that there is something better up ahead; I only need to keep going. So, I follow this shining star's lead and its bright beams map my steps.

Working against an inner resentment for my socially assigned position and internal apathy, while walking away from a racialized worldview to forge a new path, I need this light and an inner authority. I, too, journey mostly at night when it's quiet and I can enter the pages of books unnoticed. The raceless gospel first begins as an internal work of finding oneself apart from the hierarchy and categories of race. I need the songs and stories of my ancestors who have journeyed before me.

I mark pages that double as pathways to soul trajectories beyond capitalist musings and alternate meanings for my body and others racialized as black. I also create psychological defenses against the forced dehumanization and subjugation of bodies racialized as black through violence and unjust laws. The North Star is the hope of bodies held down; look up and nearly levitate to new ground and firmly plant yourself in somebodiness.

Located at the handle's end of the Little Dipper, it gives me a sense of direction and purpose. It says to me, "Walk this way." It encourages me as I work toward the world I hope for, a world free of race and its progeny. Toni Morrison teaches us that this is a part of the writer's life and journey: "I am a writer and my faith in the world of art is intense but not irrational or naïve. Art invites us to take the journey beyond price into bearing witness to the world as it is and as it should be. Art reminds us that we belong here. And if we serve, we last."

"Which way do you want me to go? Just give me a sign." Burning bush in the sky, the North Star both coaxes and coaches me. Because bridge-building can be disorienting. "Which side are you on?"

Because race coerces us to take sides. It requires oppositional ways of being to survive– supreme and inferior, majoritized and minoritized, centered and marginalized. Racialized as colored people, everybody is categorized: socially colored beige, that is mixed race and black, brown and red, yellow, and white. I coined the term socially colored because these are not the physical colors of our bodies. Instead, these are ways we have agreed to see each other, a kind of "racial contract," to employ the words of Charles W. Mills.

More than a decade ago, I ripped it up and began working towards what is now the raceless gospel. But I haven't gone far enough. In fact, the North Star tells me to keep going, to keep writing, and in turn, to keep pushing the boundaries of human being and belonging. Freedom is not only possible but present. The proof is just above me and so I hope.

The brightest star in the constellation of Ursa Minor symbolized freedom for Harriet Tubman and other early African Americans who were enslaved. From the woods to the railroad station to the safe house, the night sky conspired with them and aided in their deliverance. A compass to true north, their salvation was written in the stars, evidenced by a once popular African American folk song, "Follow the Drinking Gourd." They looked up to it, and so do I.

"Who lives and steers by the Pole Star does well, Thought I," Kimball Flaccus wrote in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* in 1934. I tend to agree. The North Star puts distance between me and the resistance against the fullest expression of my humanity. Light shining down on me, it ensures that I perform well, that I can see my way clear past this color-coded caste system called race. I look up and it gives me strength for the journey. I take solar-powered steps towards a new humanity and a new "kin-dom" that is coming.

Written for *The North Star* newspaper, the last stanza of James Monroe Whitfield's poem "The North Star" is a fitting benediction:

> So may that other bright North Star,
> Beaming with truth and freedom's light,
> Pierce with its cheering ray afar,
> The shades of slavery's gloomy night;
> And may it never cease to be
> The guard of truth and liberty.

Yes, "And may it never cease to be/ The guard of truth and liberty." This is my hope.

NFJ

Romero and Gaza: A Theological Reflection on Colonialism in Gaza

By JD McDonald

I have felt a certain dissonance around the war in Gaza. As a Christian who has been raised with confusing and sometimes conflicting views about the nature of the modern nation of Israel and its relationship to the church, I am unsure whether I am even allowed to question her.

The legacy of violence and oppression committed against Jewish people makes me hesitant to critique Israel, the nation designed as a safe homeland for Jews. Simultaneously, I hear of and am horrified by the abuses and oppression the Palestinian people are experiencing. I must quickly add that the history of Israel and Palestine is one over which I have much to learn. For all these reasons and more, I am conflicted.

Maybe I feel dissonance because, as a Christian, I know I am compelled to speak the truth and prophetically denounce injustice. But again, at first glance, this crisis lacks moral clarity. It is unclear because of my Christian tradition and need to learn more of the Palestinian-Israeli history, but also because I don't have the sort of experiences of oppression and violence that are justifiably informing Jewish and Palestinian actions and which influence international reactions to the war.

The state of Israel is responding to attacks made on its territory and its citizens by Hamas operatives on October 7, 2023. These attacks were heinous and cruel. The challenge in identifying a just way forward is that Israel's response is characterized by cruelty and incredible violence, too. After years of perpetuating violence, the children of Gaza and Israel both have their own firsthand experiences of war to feed animosity and foster hatred.

For the Christian attempting to offer a faithful reflection on the current political situation, one that takes Jesus' mandate to "turn the other cheek" seriously and who believes in God's equal favor and love for both the Palestinian and Jewish peoples, navigating the current moment seems to be impossible.

Many have claimed that Israel is within its rights as a sovereign state to maintain its national defense. Many others argue that the efforts of Israel in Gaza, particularly in its impending plans for Rafah, are nothing short of genocidal. Others call out for a Palestine restored from the "river to the sea," which to many feel to be its own call for ethnic cleansing of the Jews.

How can Christians seek to speak faithfully and prophetically when culpability is one of the few things many Israelis' and Palestinians have in common? How can Christians condemn all forms of violence and oppression, all genocidal ideologies, and all military powers contributing to the militarization of the region, while also offering a theological vision that can have the pragmatic applications needed to bring real peace on the ground and not simply adjudicate in the abstract? Gratefully, some resources within Christian history speak to this modern catastrophe. One such resource can be found in the theology preached and lived by the martyred St. Oscar Romero of El Salvador.

A long and complex history of violence contributed to the country's crisis during Romero's Archbishopric. Poor *campesinos* (farmers) had long been disinherited from their native lands and were forced to live within a hyper-capitalistic system. This made mere survival their only possibility. The poor and largely indigenous population of Romero's day was robbed of the potential for a flourishing life.

Capital (and capitalist) forces backed by the US government were put at odds against

Editor's Note: *As with all Nurturing Faith articles that speak to contemporary issues, as of the print date of this issue, the war in Gaza is still unfolding. By the time you read this, there will almost certainly be new geopolitical realities that make this article seem like ancient history. Regardless, the witness of Oscar Romero is for all times and all people.*

Russian-supported rebellious factions scattered throughout the country. Both sides committed atrocities–soldiers against soldiers and soldiers against civilians.

In this chaos, Romero was selected as Archbishop because he was expected to be passive and quiet. He led in no such way.

Romero condemned violence in all its forms, but he had an intense focus on the causes of violence, something he termed "institutionalized violence." In his third pastoral letter, Romero stated that "it is easy to put forward the ideal of peace, it is much less easy to deal with the reality of violence, which, historically, seems inevitable so long as its true causes are not eliminated."

For Romero, the true causes of the violence of his day were forms of structural oppression that disenfranchised and dispossessed the poor *campesinos* of El Salvador. This violence was wielded for the advantage of a privileged minority and did not consider the "common good" of the country. It commodified those who were experiencing poverty for the economic benefit of that minority. The lack of access to land ownership was a primary form of institutional violence.

He condemned violence on all sides. But following the Catholic Church's teaching that all violence is a sign of "the

imperfection that is part of human nature anywhere and under any system," he also took a dramatic stance of naming one form of violence as more severe. For him, there was a responsibility to be placed on the "powerful minority [which] persists in its intransigence and refuses to accept even the smallest of changes." Because of this stubbornness to dismantle *institutional* violence, *enacted* violence with guns and machetes continued and escalated throughout the country. For this, Romero taught that he regarded "as a most urgent task the establishment of social justice."

Perhaps the war in Gaza is even more complex than Romero's crisis and subsequent civil war in El Salvador. What is clear is that the ongoing oppression, the "institutional violence" that Gaza has experienced for decades, precipitated the "enacted violence" on October 7.

Violence begets violence. To reduce the enacted violence of bombings, rape, and murder, the structural violence that has become ordinary in Israel and Palestine must be corrected.

The right to have food is universal. The right to go to school cannot be infringed upon. The right to life is God-given and irrevocable. The right to land, your own land, and the self-determination to make a living with your land is for all people. Any nation that violates these rights is in danger of losing its soul.

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, as of this writing, more than 33,000 Palestinians have been killed, with 70,000 homes destroyed and 1.7 million people displaced. The Palestinians are landless, without resources and hope. The ongoing occupation of Palestine, although perhaps done with legitimate security concerns of Israel, likely contributed to the attacks of October 7.

The institutionalized violence that has oppressed the Palestinian people for decades led to the enacted violence perpetrated by Hamas, which has resulted in the Israeli war on all of Palestine and, in recent days, even on those who would offer aid.

I don't know how Romero remained an advocate for peace and justice in his moment of history. The government's oppression of the citizenry and *campesino* attempts to counterattack the government were not in a far-off corner of El Salvador from which Romero was detached. He did not preach from some ivory tower. The church he shepherded was itself being targeted. Priests were regularly kidnapped and killed, churches were bombed, and Bible studies were interrupted by gunfire. His own life was endangered many times before he was assassinated. He lost one of his dearest friends, Rutilio Grande, to the conflict, and those who died were like his own children. Romero's entire world was being torn apart by enacted violence, and no one was pursuing peace or even imagining the possibility of it.

Somehow, though, Romero held on to the long-sighted vision that there will be no peace unless one chooses peace. Peace for Romero was not simply the absence of enacted violence. It required the presence of justice. By God's grace and with a stubbornness to see the world through the lens of salvation, Romero preached good news even as he died.

Christians should join him and speak against violence in all its forms, but especially against the institutional violence that precedes other forms of violence. Romero looked at the poorest and the most vulnerable. He contemplated the ones suffering and chose solidarity with them because, for Romero, the poor are an icon of Christ, an incarnation of the living God. The suffering ones reveal the one who suffers with and for all.

Did Christ not say, "Inasmuch as you have done unto the least of these, you have done unto me?" We need the theological vision to see Jesus where he taught us to look for his presence. Romero encourages us to recognize that the most vulnerable are those in whom Christ appears.

I am convinced that while anyone who harms another human being is in the wrong, our wrong as a nation is in funding an Israeli Defense Force (IDF) that is haphazardly pursuing Hamas, with no apparent remorse or course correction for the citizens killed. The U.S. government has failed to condemn these actions, at most, giving a meager abstention during the UN Security Council's recent meeting as each other member nation unanimously votes to call for a ceasefire in Gaza.

More than failing to condemn, the U.S. continues to fund Netanyahu's war machine. The Israeli Defense Force has made its profile one of indiscriminate slaughter, bombing schools, apartments, hospitals, and humanitarian aid caravans. What do we do? We choose to see Jesus alongside the women and men forced from their homes and then bombed in the areas the IDF sent them into. We recognize Christ's blood intermingled with the dead and dying within bullet-torn hospital rooms. We recognize the tears of our own Lord in the faces of children who cry out for bread and water and a parent's embrace never to be felt again.

Solidarity feels like a cheap offer for the church to give to the people of Palestine. For Romero, solidarity was very costly. On his final day, officiating a funeral mass, Romero said of the eucharist: "May this body...nourish us so that we can give our bodies and our blood to suffering and pain, as Christ did, not for our own sake but to bring justice and peace to our people." It was in his next breath that an assassin shot Romero, and his body fell alongside the host and blood spilled, mixing with the wine of Love's new covenant.

Romero's legacy teaches us that it would be better to die faithfully in the fight against an unjust system than to live in cooperation with one, even the mere participation of silence. May we have such fortitude. May God hear the cries of all who are oppressed. May the Palestinian people become for us an icon of Christ, and may we choose him over all–over our national aspirations and security concerns, over our need for amicability with other Americans, and over our apathy toward all who appear falsely to be removed from our lives and our own salvation. Amen. NFJ

—JD McDonald is the Associate Pastor for Children, Youth, and Families at Park Road Baptist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Looking at Someone Else's Plate

By Brett Younger

I sort of hate the Dekalb Market Hall, a unique, delightful, underground food court in downtown Brooklyn. I can't deal with it, and I'm usually the one who suggests it. There are 35 vendors with so many mouthwatering options–soul food, Indian curries, potato pierogis–a whole world of flavors. Breathing the air is fattening. Foodies want to live there.

My problem with Dekalb Market Hall is that it is designed to make you want everything, and it works. Diners share picnic tables in the aisles, so Pakistani lamb chops are right next to Japanese rice crepes.

Most people don't have a problem deciding what they want. They look at the choices, say, "Katz's Deli, pastrami," and never look back, never question their decision, and never glance at another's plate.

Some of us find that hard. I wander around, looking at other people's food. Do I want something new or go with something I know I like? I've never had a Colombian cornmeal cake or a fried chicken scallion pancake. The Ecuadoran breakfast looks interesting, as do the Italian sandwiches, Cuban sandwiches, and chopped brisket sandwiches.

In my experience, food looks most delicious on someone else's plate. I walk around in circles, feeling overwhelmed. I get hungrier, "That looks good, but so does that." (In my defense, I don't covet the salads.)

When I finally do pick, I still can't let it go. I like what I get, but not as much as I would have liked what the people at the table to my left are eating. Why didn't I order that? My Chinese noodles are fine, but wanting the street tacos makes me enjoy my lo mein just a little less. Spending our lives looking at what's on someone else's plate is tempting, easy, and sinful.

Our nation's economy runs on the knowledge that we want what everyone else has. Marketers persuade us that we can finally be happy if we just buy what they are selling. They convince us they have packaged contentment in a bottle, box, or barrel. Amazon.com fills screen after screen with products that no one needs, making us feel our lives will be painfully incomplete until we order their stuff.

We get caught in a cycle of acquisition that never satisfies. How much do we need before we can be content? If the advertisers do their job, we will always want more.

In the last few years, advertisers have learned insidious ways to target us every time we open our laptops. We think we are too smart to fall for it. We know that things won't make us happy, but that does not keep us from acting as if we believe the lie.

We don't think of ourselves as materialistic because we don't want much, but we do want more. Wanting more is so American; not wanting more is un-American. Coveting does not seem that bad, so we quietly nurture our desires for what is not ours.

You decide to spend a week at a nearby national park this summer. You are looking forward to taking leisurely hikes. You tell your brother, who says, "That sounds great. We're going to Beijing—the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, and Tiananmen Square. It's going to be amazing."

Suddenly, sadly, walking around in the woods does not seem quite as exciting. Isn't it disappointing how much better something looks when someone else has it? Our angst about what we don't have overwhelms our joy at what we do have.

Coveting leaves us blind to our own wealth and the beauty that surrounds us. Many don't enjoy their homes because their eyes are fixed on their neighbors' houses. They don't celebrate the friendships available to them because they want more glamorous friends. Coveting robs us of what's already ours. What we need to see is that most of us have more than we need.

We are not consumers who always need more. We are the children of God, given more grace than we imagine. If we are going to be happy, we must learn to live in a world where people have more than we have, are brighter than we are, and are better looking. Wanting what isn't ours keeps us from seeing what is ours.

When we covet, our lives are small and petty, but when we open our eyes to God's goodness, we see a big, wide world. The antidote for envy is gratitude. God wants us to stop looking at what's on everyone else's plate and be thankful for the love we have been given. NFJ

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

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

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Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

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

July 7, 2024

Mark 6:1-13

Home and Away

Sports teams on all levels prefer playing before friendly fans in their home stadiums to the challenge of facing hostile crowds on the road: it's not unusual for college basketball teams to go undefeated at home while having a much worse record when they travel.

Jesus had the opposite experience. He taught with authority, displayed many acts of power, and became immensely popular while preaching in the villages of Galilee, and even on the eastern side of the sea.

At home in Nazareth, it was a different story.

A prophet without honor (vv. 1-6)

All three synoptic gospels note that the people who knew Jesus as a child and young man had difficulty accepting his role as the fulfillment of prophecy. In addition to Mark 6:1-6, Matthew 13:53-58 provides an expanded version of Jesus' experience in Nazareth, and Luke 4:16-30 adds some of the content from Jesus' sermon as well as asserting that the people of the town grew angry and sought unsuccessfully to throw Jesus from a cliff before he left the area.

Additional information at goodfaithmedia.org

On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. (Mark 6:2a)

Early in his ministry, Jesus had apparently adopted Capernaum as a base of operations while teaching, preaching, and healing people throughout Galilee. Mark does not say why Jesus decided to visit his hometown, only that his disciples followed him there (v. 1).

When Jesus showed up for the synagogue service, he was apparently invited to teach, but with mixed effects. The people were "astounded" at Jesus' teaching, wondering, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!" (v. 3).

Instead of being proud of how accomplished Jesus had become, they appear to have thought Jesus had developed an over-inflated ego. "Is not this the carpenter?" they asked, "the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" Mark adds, "And they took offense at him" (v. 3).

The people's reference to Jesus as the son of Mary rather than Joseph should probably be read as an insult. Joseph was likely dead by this time, but under normal circumstances, he would still have been named as the father.

Even so, they were "astounded" at Jesus' teaching: Mark uses a word that could also be translated as "amazed" (NIV11) or "astonished" (NET2). They recognized the wisdom in his words, and they had heard or seen evidence of the mighty works he could perform, and yet they still struggled to believe that a local carpenter of dubious birth could have become such a powerful man of God, however that was to be understood.

Jesus did not seek to defend himself or win them over, citing what was likely a proverbial statement that "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house" (v. 4). Though the hometown crowd is portrayed in a negative fashion, we can empathize with their difficulty in believing. "I knew you when" can be a powerful detractor when it comes to fully appreciating the accomplishments of others.

The negativity of his hometown put a damper on Jesus' ministry among the people. "He could do no deed of power there," Mark wrote, "except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them" (v. 5).

Whether Mark contradicted himself is unclear. Perhaps he did not consider curing a few sick people to be a "deed of power" on the order of feeding thousands of people or commanding the sea to be still. The sense appears clear, however: Jesus would have been less inclined to do miraculous works among people who did not welcome his presence. Matthew softens the apparent contradiction. He does not say Jesus *could not* work deeds of power in Nazareth, but that "he *did not* do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief" (Matt. 13:58).

As the people of Nazareth had been "astounded" at Jesus' teaching, he was equally amazed by their unbelief (v. 6). The word for "amazed" (NRSV, NET2,

NIV11) could also mean "marvel" or "wonder." "He marveled because of their unbelief" (ESV) might be a more apt translation.

Jesus' rejection by his own siblings and the neighbors who had known him through much of his life may be seen as a foreshadowing of his later rejection by the religious leaders of his own tradition. If we envision the cross as the end of a long road, a significant stop on that road was in Nazareth.

A mission with purpose (vv. 7-13)

Commentators often see Mark 6:7-13 as the beginning of a new section in Mark, but the lectionary combines the end of one section and the beginning of another for good reason: they both deal with rejection.

The sending of the disciples on mission indicates a new stage in Jesus' ministry, as he empowered his followers to carry on his work. Mark indicated the missionary task of the disciples when he first related their selection: "And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons" (Mark 3:14-15).

The word "apostle" comes directly from the Greek *apostolos*, derived from the verb *apostellō*, meaning "to send out." They were called to be sent, and the present text describes their first official mission. After leaving Nazareth and teaching in several other villages (v. 7), Jesus "called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over unclean spirits" (v. 7).

Sending the disciples in pairs would make them accountable to one another as well as providing mutual support. Ministry can be a lonely affair: while most churches don't have co-pastors, healthy churches understand that ministers need the support of fellow staff members and colleagues as well as that of church leaders.

Even though Mark only mentions that Jesus gave the disciples authority over unclean spirits, Matthew adds "and to cure every disease and every sickness" (Matt. 10:1). Luke expands their mission to say "he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal" (Luke 9:2). The call to proclamation is implicit in Mark, which reports that "they went out and proclaimed that all should repent" before adding that, "They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them" (vv. 12-13).

What connects this text with the previous verses, however, is what comes in the middle, where Jesus offered instructions for the mission, including how they should respond to rejection.

As they traveled, the disciples were to rely entirely on the hospitality of others.

Few of us can imagine setting out for even a few days without adequate cash, credit cards, and a sizeable suitcase, but the disciples were to take nothing but a staff to aid in their walking or in defending themselves against wild animals. They were not to pack a lunch or take a bag or stuff any coins into their belts. Even an extra tunic was forbidden. Sandals they could wear, and the clothes on their backs, but that was it (vv. 8-9).

The disciples would need the humility to ask for lodging as they traveled. Furthermore, they were to remain at the first home that invited them in, rather than looking for better accommodations or finer food (v. 10).

They were not guaranteed any lodging at all, however. There might be villages where no one listened to their message, and no one invited them to dinner. Jesus wanted them to be prepared for that, too. "If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them" (v. 11).

The act of shaking dust off one's feet was to be "a testimony against them," as if the dust itself was an unfriendly contaminant that should not be carried beyond the borders of the town.

Contemporary Christians often think of "mission" and "evangelism" as two different things, as doing social or relief ministry on the one hand or seeking to convert people on the other. The disciples learned that both were important, even when they were rejected. We might find social ministry to be easier because there is less fear of rejection, but sharing the gospel message of salvation through Christ is likewise important, whether others accept it or not.

Mark says nothing about the length of the journey or the number of towns that accepted the disciples versus those that rejected them. He notes only that the disciples followed Jesus with positive results: "So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them" (vv. 12-13).

When we ponder the two stories in today's text, we would do well to ask in what ways we believers – who claim to be the family of Christ – may also reject him. Do we really take his teachings seriously? Do we take offense at his claim on our lives, on his call to love others, to live without extravagance, and to give our lives in service to others?

If Jesus himself should show up in our churches with his radical call to sacrifice, would we repent of our selfishness, or show him the door? NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

July 14, 2024

Mark 6:14-29

But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." Mark 6:16

The Death of the Party

Do you find some things hard to talk about? Some topics make us uncomfortable, so we avoid them. Others might make us so mad that we talk too much and have to watch our tongues. Occasionally, we might hear about something so strange that we just don't know what to say.

Bible stories can be that way. Some texts lend themselves to preaching or profitable Bible study quite easily, while others are much more difficult to approach. Today's reading is one of the more problematic texts. How do we find anything positive to say about a troubled king, an angry queen, a pawn-like princess, and a headless prophet?

Let's give it a try.

Herod, Jesus, and John (vv. 14-16)

The largest part of the text is a flashback prompted by the notice that when Jesus sent the disciples out on mission to preach and to heal (vv. 7-13), "King Herod heard of it for Jesus' name had become known," and some were saying "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him' (v. 14). Mark's back-story explains how John had died: would Jesus also be in danger?

The Herod in question was Herod Antipas, a son of Herod the Great. He had hoped to succeed his father as king over Palestine, but he was given control of Galilee and Perea only. Herod ruled the disjointed areas from 4 BCE until 39 CE, with the official title of "tetrarch," but he fancied himself to be a king, and the gospel writers used the title.

Herod Antipas's royal yearnings were egged on by his wife Herodias, who had formerly been married to his brother Herod Philip, commonly thought to be Philip the Tetrarch, who ruled Iturea and Tracheonitis. In a memorable first-century scandal, especially for a Jewish family, Herodias left her husband and married his brother Antipas, encouraging his royal aspirations.

As a client ruler under the Roman Emperor Tiberius, it was important for Herod to curry favor with the emperor, in part by maintaining order within his territory. Thus, when John the Baptizer took up residence near Bethany Beyond the Jordan – in Herod's territory of Perea – Antipas feared that John's growing popularity and avid following might lay the groundwork for a potential rebellion.

Herod had John arrested and imprisoned, most likely at Machaerus, a ridgetop fortress near the southern border of Perea that served as both military outpost and royal retreat.

The Jewish-turned-Roman historian Josephus wrote that Herod feared John and had him executed on charges of rebellion. Mark's account, as we shall see, told a different story.

In either case, Herod was responsible for John's death. So, when word came to the ruler that someone named Jesus was not only following in John's prophetic footsteps but doing mighty works, preaching and attracting large crowds, he was naturally concerned.

The message that came to Antipas was mixed: some people believed Jesus was John the Baptizer *redivivus*, "and for this reason these powers are at work in him" (v. 14). Others thought of Jesus as Elijah, who many expected to return and pave the way for the Messiah. Yet others weren't ready to identify Jesus as Elijah, but were convinced that he was a prophet, "like one of the prophets of old" (v. 15).

As Mark tells it, Herod feared the worst: "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised" (v. 16). If John had been troubled in his first appearance, how much more powerful would he be if resurrected from the dead? Matthew's parallel attributes Herod's belief to a connection between resurrection and the display of power (Matt. 14:2).

Luke's version of the story suggests that Herod was more skeptical about the situation, saying, "John I beheaded; but who is this about whom I hear such things?" Luke added that Herod, apparently curious, "tried to see him" (Luke 9:9).

Truth can hurt (vv. 17-29)

Mark had reported John's arrest early in his gospel, connecting it to the beginning of Jesus' active ministry

(1:14). Herod's reaction to Jesus in 6:14 led him to elaborate on the baptizer's death and the seriousness of crossing Herod.

The gospel account does not attribute John's arrest to charges of rebellion, as Josephus does, but to the preacher's criticism of Herod's marriage. John had condemned Antipas' decision to marry his brother Philip's wife, arguing that it was unlawful (vv. 17-18).

The narrative suggests that the criticism may not have been a public bashing but a personal conversation, as if John had appeared in Herod's court. Direct conversations between prophets and kings were known from the Old Testament period (1 Kgs. 17:1, Jer. 38:14-26).

John's criticism was based on an explicit command forbidding marriage between a man and his brother's wife while he was still living (Lev. 18:16, 20:21). The practice of levirate marriage called for a man to marry his brother's wife if he had died childless (as in Gen. 38:1-11), but Philip was very much alive.

The woman in question was Herodias – who was also descended from Herod the Great. Josephus' genealogy suggests that she was Herod Antipas's niece as well as his wife. She would have known that John's criticism was directed mainly at her behavior, and took such offense that she "had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and protected him" (vv. 19-20a).

Indeed, Antipas was strangely drawn to the troublesome prophet: "When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him" (v. 20b).

The dramatic quality of the story – which has been fancifully elaborated and turned into dramatic operas and movies through the years – came to a climax when Herod's birthday arrived, and he celebrated by throwing himself a party with invited guests from among the "officers and leaders of Galilee" (v. 21).

As unlikely as it may seem for a princess to entertain guests with a dance routine, the story relates that "his daughter Herodias came in and danced," pleasing Herod and his guests so much that he, in a manner not unlike the foolish king in the book of Esther, promised to give the young woman anything she wanted, up to half the kingdom (vv. 22-23).

The dancing daughter consulted with her mother concerning what she should ask for, according to Mark. When Herodias heard opportunity knocking, she instructed her daughter to ask for John's head to be brought to her on a platter (vv. 24-25). Her vindictive plan not only arranged for John's death, but for the disgraceful treatment of John's body.

Mark adds urgency and emphasis to the bloody act by saying, "Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, 'I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter" (v. 25, emphasis added). The demand that it be done "at once" suggests that she expected it to be presented during the party, like a grisly birthday cake.

The request caught Herod by surprise. He "was deeply grieved," Mark writes, "yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her" (v. 26). Pride can have painful consequences. For Herod to save face, John lost his head.

"Immediately," Mark says, again using one of his favorite words, Herod dispatched a soldier to relieve John of his head and deliver it on a platter to the girl. "Then the girl gave it to her mother," while John's disciples "took his body and laid it in a tomb" (vv. 28-29).

Whether John's head was ever reunited with his body, or whether Herodias kept it as a trophy, is left to the reader's imagination.

Is there inspiration or instruction to be found in such a text as this?

Mark's purpose in telling the story was to set the stage for Jesus' own coming death. As Herod was coerced into killing John by his conniving and vengeful wife, Pilate caved to the calculating designs of fearful officials who wanted Jesus dead. According to Luke, Herod also had an audience with Jesus, treating him with contempt before sending him back to Pilate (Luke 23:7-15).

The disciples, whose preaching mission had apparently triggered Herod's interest, would, in time face dangers of their own, including martyrdom. Thus, Mark alerts readers that following Jesus is serious business: when powerful people feel threatened, they will make every attempt to protect their positions.

None of us are in the position of a king or even a tetrarch. Few of us hold elected positions. But, like Herod, we can either work to promote justice – or to look out for selfish interests at the cost of injustice that harms or demeans others.

Most of us, especially if we are white, possess the power of privilege. Through the post-Civil War and Jim Crow eras and into today, insidious practices of economic oppression and voter suppression have served to protect the status quo of white male dominance – often under the guise of protecting a "Christian America."

Even without consciously oppressing others, we have been part of the system and thus are complicit. In this and other areas, will we do what we can to oppose injustice or just look after ourselves? NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

July 21, 2024

Mark 6:30-56 (RCL 6:30-34, 53-56)

No Rest for the Weary

> *And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed. (Mark 6:56)*

When you think of Jesus' miraculous works, other than the resurrection, what first comes to mind? Among all the "mighty works" attributed to Jesus, only one is recorded in all four gospels. The "Feeding of the Five Thousand" appears in Matt. 14:13-21, Mark 6:30-44, Luke 9:10-17, and John 6:1-14.

The story's popularity, along with an account of Jesus feeding more than 4,000 people in Gentile territory (Mark 8:1-9 and Matt. 15:32-39), suggests how significant Jesus' followers considered the event to be. The miracle food fed more than their bellies.

An attempted getaway (vv. 30-32)

Mark's version begins with an attempt to avoid doing any miracles at all. The story opens with Jesus' disciples returning from a mission of preaching and healing on which he had dispatched them earlier (vv. 7-13). After a lengthy excursus on the death of John the Baptizer (vv. 14-29), Mark resumes the narrative. With apparent excitement, the Twelve gathered around Jesus "and told him all that they had done and taught" (v. 30).

Knowing they were weary, Jesus told them to "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." They all needed respite, for Mark adds that "many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat" (v. 31).

The attempt proved to be fruitless: though "they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves," many people ran around the lake, spreading the word, so that when their boat came ashore, a "great crowd" was waiting for them (vv. 32-34a).

Despite his weariness, Jesus "had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things" (v. 34b).

A hungry crowd (vv. 33-44)

The hour grew late, and the people grew hungry, but they didn't want to leave. With no restaurants or food trucks around, the disciples asked Jesus to call it a day and send everyone home, but Jesus had other ideas. Maybe he wanted to show that the gospel has social as well as spiritual dimensions, or perhaps he wanted a large crowd to witness an amazing act that they'd never forget.

Or could it be that Jesus wanted to teach the disciples a lesson? "You give them something to eat," he said (vv. 35-37a).

Can you imagine being put in charge of feeding 5,000 hungry men – not counting women and children – with neither food to give them nor money to call a caterer, even if one had been available?

Mark's unvarnished portrayal of the disciples has them dismayed, exclaiming that even 200 denarii wouldn't be enough to buy sufficient bread (v. 37b). John's gospel says it was Phillip who did the math and said that six months of wages would hardly get them a mouthful apiece (John 6:7).

Jesus told the disciples to see how many pieces of bread they had, as if checking their own resources, and "When they had found out, they said, 'Five, and two fish'" (v. 38). Only John says that the food was obtained from a young boy that Andrew had found (John 6:9).

Five loaves and two fish aren't very much when the "loaves" are small circles of flatbread and the fish are salt-cured sardines.

Sometimes, we might feel similarly ill-equipped when faced with overwhelming tasks, and we wonder how we can do what needs to be done. Jesus wanted the disciples to look beyond the normal human resources that came to mind, to be willing to share what they had, and to trust Jesus to make that enough.

Even so, Jesus' disciples must have been muttering to themselves as Jesus instructed the crowd to sit down. Mark sharpens the image by saying they sat "on the green grass" in groups of fifties and hundreds (vv. 39-40).

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

his power from the fullness of the Godhead.

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

The gospels offer no detail about how the miracle took place, relating only that Jesus broke the paltry provisions into pieces and gave them to the disciples to distribute. To everyone's amazement, everyone ate their fill (vv. 41-42).

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

Whether by innate frugality or direct instruction, the disciples returned to collect the leftovers, and they ended up with twelve baskets of surplus bread and fish, one for each of the disciples (vv. 43-44). Their weariness must have known no bounds, but witnessing such an act of grace and power must have been energizing, too.

The presence of a full basket for each disciple suggests that Jesus' power not only makes our service effective in helping others, but provides for our own needs, as well.

Jesus' miraculous lesson was not just inspirational, but motivational.

Another attempted escape (vv. 45-52)

Having tried and failed to find respite, Jesus made another attempt. This time, he sent the disciples ahead in the boat while he remained and somehow "dismissed the crowd" (v. 45) before slipping away to find solitude on a mountain for a time of prayer before rejoining the disciples.

Mark's account is a bit confusing. "When evening came," indicating the dusky period before dark, Jesus could see that the disciples were pulling hard at the oars, straining because the wind was against them. When Jesus went out to meet them, however, it was "early in the morning." If they had been struggling in the evening, why wait until early morning to go to them? Mark does not say.

Moreover, Mark says that Jesus "intended to pass them by" (v. 48). Some interpreters posit that Jesus intended to pass close by as an encouragement to let them know he was near, while others compare it to the Old Testament account of God "passing by" Moses in a theophany (Exod. 33:19-22).

Either meaning was lost on the disciples, "for they all saw him and were terrified," thinking he was a ghost. Jesus soon quieted their fears, if not their curiosity: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid" (vv. 49-50). We often note that the Greek words "It is I" (*ego eimí*) are equivalent to the self-revelation of Yahweh to Moses: "I am" (Exod. 3:14).

Mark's version does not portray a severe rainstorm, as Matthew does, but speaks only of a strong wind. Once Jesus got in the boat with them, however, "the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded" (v. 51).

Of course they were.

Mark adds that the disciples "did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened" (v. 52). The implication is not that they intentionally refused to believe, like the pharaoh hardening his heart in the Exodus narratives, but that they were obtuse, not yet capable of understanding the magnitude of Jesus' lordship.

This seems odd, given that– according to Mark's chronology – the Twelve had not only witnessed mighty works, but had also been given authority to heal and cast out demons. Comprehending the full meaning of Jesus' identity could never have been easy, however.

Another attempted escape (vv. 45-52)

Although Jesus had instructed the disciples to set sail for Bethsaida, near the northeast edge of the Sea of Galilee, Mark reports that they crossed over to Gennesaret, which was on the northwestern shore (vv. 45, 53). Was the adverse wind to blame? Mark doesn't say.

The crowds had not followed Jesus through the stormy night, but people soon recognized him "and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was" (v. 55). As Jesus moved about, "wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed" (v. 56).

The gospels suggest that most people failed to understand Jesus' true identity and purpose, seeing him only as a traveling healer.

Stories such as this should challenge modern readers to ask who Jesus is in our imagination. Do we follow him only in hopes of attaining heaven or having someone to pray to when facing illness or trouble? Is our view of Jesus as shallow as those who saw him only as a means to an end? Is it as muddled as the disciples, who couldn't quite make out what Jesus was about?

Too often we choose too much rest and not enough challenge. What physical and spiritual needs do we see in the world about us? What gifts can we offer toward meeting those needs? And what are we doing with that basket in our hands? NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

July 28, 2024

2 Kings 4:42-44

The Miracle Man

Have you ever known someone who constantly sought to one-up other people? If a friend bragged about catching an impressive fish, he'd landed a bigger or more unusual one. If someone complained of the flu, she had a worse case. If someone else was grieving a loss … well, you get the drift.

When we think of early prophets in Israel, Elijah comes to mind. His fame was considerable despite his rough exterior, frequent despondency, and at least one attempt to quit prophecy altogether. By New Testament times, fueled by the tradition that he had been taken to heaven in a whirlwind and a prophecy in Malachi 4:5, many Hebrews expected Elijah to return "before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes."

Though Elijah was better known, a careful reading of 2 Kings shows that the narrator portrays Elisha, Elijah's successor, as an even more powerful prophet: whatever Elijah could do, Elisha could do better.

Elisha's amplified actions may stem from a story about Elijah's departure. Before his mentor ascended to heaven without dying (something Elisha failed to achieve), he offered Elisha a parting blessing. Elisha asked for a "double portion" of Elijah's spirit, and Elijah said the wish would be granted if Elisha watched him being taken away (2 Kgs. 2:9-12). Afterward, Elisha picked up Elijah's fallen mantle and used it to smite the Jordan River as his former master had done, and it parted so he could cross (2 Kgs. 2:8, 13-14).

> *He set it before them, they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the LORD. (2 Kings 4:44)*

In the ensuing chapters, the narrator relates a series of miracles that Elisha accomplished, many of them echoing actions from Elijah's ministry, including raising a child from the dead (1 Kgs. 17:17-24, 2 Kgs. 4:18-37).

By the narrator's account, Elisha served as an active prophet more than three times longer than Elijah and performed twice as many recorded miracles: fourteen to seven by some counts. While this may have been an intentional indication of the "double portion" of Elijah's spirit that he received, Elisha never got the respect Elijah did. He was mentioned just once in the New Testament, and then in company with Elijah.

Luke portrayed Jesus as defending himself for not healing everyone by noting that many people were hungry in the time of Elijah, but he was sent only to a widow of Zarephath, and that many lepers lived in the time of Elisha, but only Naaman the Syrian was healed (Luke 4:23-27).

Elisha even fails to get a mention when the clearest echo of his ministry occurs in the New Testament, when Jesus fed the multitudes. He also had a reputation for feeding many people with meager resources.

An impressive prelude

Our text follows a series of miracle stories attributed to Elisha, at least one of which shows that he could also be more irascible than Elijah. While in Jericho – an oasis city that had existed for thousands of years because of its abundant spring – he was told that the water had gone bad. Elisha threw salt into the spring, and its quality was restored (2:19-22).

Later, while traveling from Jericho to Bethel, what must have been a considerable crowd of small boys made fun of his bald head. The narrator claims that Elisha cursed the children, and two she-bears came out of the woods and mauled 42 of the boys (2:23-24).

A more extensive passage has Elisha advising a coalition of kings from Israel, Judah, and Edom, all of whom were fighting against Moab. A servant introduced Elisha in demeaning terms as the one "who used to pour water on the hands of Elijah," but Elisha was no longer Elijah's servant. Elisha boldly criticized the fearful kings, and then asked for a musician to play. As he listened to the music, "the power of the LORD came on him," and Elisha predicted that pools would rise from the earth to provide the armies and their horses with water, and that they would defeat the Moabites. The narrator reports that the prophecy was fulfilled (3:1-27).

In an unnamed place, the wife of a deceased member of a prophetic band complained of poverty, with a creditor demanding to take her children in payment of her debt. Elisha told her to borrow as many vessels as she could, then pour from the one jar of oil she had into the other vessels. Miraculously, the oil flowed until she ran out of jars, then

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she sold the excess oil to pay her debts (4:1-7).

Elisha, like Elijah, knew a supportive couple who provided a room for him on occasion. Finding them childless, Elisha predicted that they would have a son, and it happened (4:8-17). Later, the son had a sudden headache and died. The mother sent immediately for Elisha, who tried sending his servant Gehazi ahead to lay his staff on the child and cure him. When that did not work, Elisha came and warmed the child with his own body, gave him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, and raised the boy to life (4:18-37).

Two food-related miracles then follow. In Gilgal, remembered as a cultic site, Elisha was visiting with a group of prophets who were facing a time of famine. Elisha commanded them to make a pot of stew, apparently from foraged food. One of them added wild gourds that were apparently poisonous. When the men complained that there was "death in the pot," Elisha threw some flour into the stew and made it edible (4:38-41).

An impressive meal (vv. 42-44)

That brings us to today's text, in which Elisha miraculously fed 100 men with paltry supplies. Though feeding 100 men hardly compares to feeding 5,000, the miracle can be read as a foreshadowing of Jesus providing food for thousands.

While Elisha remained with the prophets in Gilgal, presumably, "a man came from Baal-shalishah, bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God" (v. 42a). Gilgal was near the Jordan River, a few miles north of Jericho.

Why the man brought an offering "from the first fruits" to Elisha is unclear: perhaps it was deemed acceptable to give the offering to a prophet rather than carrying it all the way to the temple in Jerusalem. The food was not specifically called an offering, however, only "bread from the first fruits" (NET2). The gift included 20 loaves of barley bread as well as "fresh ears of grain."

The "loaves" in question, as in Jesus' day, would have borne no resemblance to loaves of bread we would buy at the grocery store: they would have been small rounds of flat bread made from ground wheat or barley and water, baked quickly on the surface of an earthen oven.

Twenty pieces of rough pita bread would not go far among 100 men, as attested by Elisha's servant. When Elisha told him to distribute the food, he said "How can I set this before a hundred people?" (vv. 42b-43b). Confronted with meager rations and many hungry mouths, the servant could see only scarcity. Perhaps he feared that a fight would break out as people struggled for a portion of the food.

The prophet, however, saw a potential witness to the power of God. Supremely confident as always, Elisha responded, "Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the LORD, 'They shall eat and have some left" (v. 43).

We can guess what happened: "He set it before them, they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the LORD" (v. 44).

An important opportunity

We may be tempted to pass over this brief narrative as nothing more than a miracle story designed to bolster Elisha's resume, or as a quick stepping-stone to the story of Jesus' even-greater works, but there are lessons to be learned.

The story – like others around it – arises from a time of need. People were poor. People were dying. Many were hungry. In the midst of this, an unnamed man from a little-known town showed remarkable generosity, choosing to share a portion of his crop with the prophet. He and his wife (no doubt) had also gone to the considerable trouble of grinding enough of it into flour to make and bake 20 rounds of bread.

Elisha accepted the bread and could have kept it for himself, but he gave it to the band of hungry prophets around him.

The rations, generous as they would have been for Elisha, were insufficient for the many bellies that needed food. But Elisha, with prophetic insight, saw abundance rather than scarcity, and the people were fed, at least for a day.

Have we ever focused on shortages rather than sufficiency? We also live in a world of inequity, where many are poor even though resources are plentiful. We may fear that we don't have enough money or resources or time to make a difference, and so we often choose to do nothing.

Yet, when we have faith enough to be generous with what we have and to show practical hospitality to others, our actions accomplish more than we know. The money or food we provide may not be multiplied as in our text, but the blessing of it will touch other lives with a testimony of Christ's love.

Sometimes, prying resources loose from insecure or selfish hands may seem as great a miracle as multiplying food that is freely given.

We don't have to be miracle workers to be life changers. The generous hospitality shown through caring for and sharing with people in need can transform our lives as well as theirs. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

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

August 4, 2024

Exodus 16 (RCL 16:2-4, 9-15)

What Is It?

Have you ever enjoyed a time of success or happiness, only to find yourself disappointed soon after? Imagine a group of mountain climbers who celebrate when reaching a summit, only to discover that they've crested a ridge, and the trail will lead back downhill before another steep ascent to the actual peak.

Today's lesson finds Israel dropping like a rock from the mountain top experience of being delivered from Egypt (Exodus 14) to the ugly depths of running out of food in the wilderness. Exodus 15 is a memorable song of praise: the following chapter is a cry of complaint.

A short-lived celebration (16:1-3)

Yahweh's sea-parting act of deliverance was so impressive that one imagines the people of Israel walking on air as they sang and danced while watching the Egyptians drown (Exodus 14-15). As their journey continued, however, food ran short and feet grew tired. Both sandals and tempers began to wear thin. In the space of six weeks (16:1), the people of Israel were ripe for rebellion against Moses.

Israel had camped for a time at an oasis called Elim (15:27) before Moses led them on and into the "Wilderness of Sin." No doubt many sermons have been preached on the dangers of wandering into the "Wilderness of Sin," but *sîn* is not one of the Hebrew words for human wrongdoing: it is probably related to "Sinai."

> *I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, "At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God." (Exod. 16:12)*

Little is said of the time between Israel's dramatic deliverance at the sea and their arrival in the Wilderness of Sin. By then, however, the excitement surrounding Yahweh's act of deliverance had begun to fade. Israel again began to complain, resurfacing themes that had appeared in 14:11-12, where they claimed they would rather have died as slaves than be killed in the wilderness.

In the present text, their complaint relates to food. With exaggeration born of distorted memories, they fondly recalled pots of spicy meat and piles of bread in Egypt, where they claimed to have eaten their fill, as if slavery had been a holiday (vv. 2-3). The people complained to Moses (and suddenly, to Aaron, too) that they would have preferred to die as well-fed slaves than to starve as liberated beggars.

Neither Moses nor Aaron had asked for their job as leaders of Israel. Moses had tried to avoid the heavy responsibility. Yet, they were accused of guiding Israel into the wilderness for their own perverse pleasure in watching the people famish.

The phrase "grumble against" occurs no less than seven times in five verses (vv. 2, 7, 8, 9, 12). Careful studies have shown that in the Pentateuch, a murmuring motif usually precedes a memorably miraculous event, and this text is no exception.

It's easy to criticize those who complained against Moses, but after six weeks in the desert with little food, wouldn't we also be complaining? The people seemed slow to learn, unconvinced that Yahweh had their best interests at heart. Perhaps we may remember times when a parent, teacher, or mentor led us through a difficult experience of personal growth that we could not appreciate or understand until later.

A long-running complaint (16:4-8)

The people complained to Moses and Aaron, but *Yahweh* heard and responded to Moses, who apparently relayed everything to Aaron. God promised to rain bread from heaven (vv. 4-5) and to give the Israelites their fill.

The people were instructed to gather one day's supply of food for five days, and a two-day supply on the sixth day, so that it would last them through the Sabbath. Rules for Sabbath-keeping don't appear until chapter 20, but the narrator assumes they were already practiced among the Israelites.

Although only bread (which came in the morning) was included in Yahweh's promise of vv. 4-5, Moses and Aaron declared to Israel that they would be given meat in the evening as well as bread in the morning. A second account of Yahweh making the promise also includes meat (vv. 11-12).

The narrator believed this method of providing food was done with divine purpose, as Yahweh

explained to Moses that it was a test to see if Israel would obey the simple instructions regarding the amount of food they should gather. The practice would require a daily exercise of trust. Gathering one day's worth for five days implied confidence that Yahweh would provide more manna on the following day. Gathering a double provision on the sixth day, when leftovers had putrefied on previous days, required trust that Yahweh would not allow the Sabbath provisions to rot overnight.

In one way or another, most stories in Exodus relate to trust in God. Yahweh's mighty acts of deliverance made a great impression on Israel, but the people also needed a faith sufficient for every day, not just in times of crisis. The gift of manna on the first six days of every week, and the specific instructions for handling it, were a daily lesson in dependence upon God's beneficent provision.

We note an interesting use of vocabulary in vv. 6 and 7. In 14:4 and in 14:17-18, Yahweh declared that the miraculous works would gain God glory (*kabôd*) in the eyes of the Egyptians, so that Pharaoh and his band would know (*yāda*') that Yahweh was Lord. In their message to Israel, Moses and Aaron insisted that through the evening provision of food, *Israel* would know (*yāda*') that Yahweh had delivered them, and through the morning harvest of bread, they would see the glory (*kabôd*) of God.

Vocabulary related to God's delivering and sustaining presence is found six times in vv. 6-12.

Though the people complained to Moses and Aaron, who they could see, the issue was really between them and Yahweh. Moses and Aaron responded: "For what are we, that you complain against us? . . . Your complaining is not against us but against the Lord" (vv. 7-8).

Most of us have little worry about whether we can find and afford food for today or the near future. On the other hand, some persons are so poor that sustenance is a daily concern. Which group will feel more of a need to trust in God? Could Jesus' model prayer, which includes "give us this day our daily bread," have some connection with the lesson that Yahweh wanted to teach Israel?

A daily provision (16:9-36)

The remainder of the chapter may derive from a different source, but in context, it appears to be a more detailed account of how the promised provisions came to pass. First, Yahweh called out to the people from the cloud, instructing them in much the same manner as Moses and Aaron (vv. 9-12). A specific reference to a visitation of quails as the source of evening meat appears in v. 13 (a similar story in Num. 11:31-32 is more extensive), followed by a detailed account of the manna's first appearance (vv. 14-15).

The people's first response to the manna was a question: "What is it?" The Hebrew phrase for "What is it?" is *mān-hû*', an apparent attempt to explain the source of the name first given in v. 31: "The house of Israel called it manna" (Hebrew *mân*). Our word "manna" is a rough transliteration of the Hebrew term.

The next verse provides instructions for gathering the divinely provided foodstuff (v. 16), which appeared with or in the dew each morning, drying to a flaky substance that appears to have been more like grain than bread, for it could reportedly be ground, baked, or boiled. Each person was to gather an "omer," just enough for one person to have enough, but no more.

An editorial note defines an omer as a tenth of an ephah (v. 36). Neither measure is known with certainty, but evidence suggests that an omer was about two quarts.

This is followed by an account of Israel's experience with harvesting and cooking the manna (vv. 17-30). Once collected, whether cooked or not, the manna would become infested with maggots and would be foul-smelling if kept overnight – except on the sixth day. Here, the consequence for failing to follow instructions was built in: those who tried storing it up were unlikely to do it a second time. Likewise, the uselessness of going out to gather on the seventh day reinforced the command to observe Sabbath rest (v. 23).

Knowing that readers who had no experience with manna would be curious, the narrator attempted to describe its appearance and taste, saying it was the size and shape of coriander seeds (small, round, and brown to gray), but white in color, tasting like crisp flatbread made with honey.

The theological significance of manna is seen in the need for daily trust in God and in the instruction that a representative omer should be kept as a tangible reminder to future generations of how Yahweh had provided for their ancestors in the wilderness (vv. 32-35)

We no longer anticipate manna in the morning or quail in the evening, but the story reminds us to remember that such daily blessings as we have – including our ability to work and earn a living – are gifts of God that should not be forgotten or accumulated in a greedy fashion. As the memorial pot of manna spoke to Israel, symbols such as the cross remind Christians that both deliverance and provision remain available to those who put their trust in God. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

August 11, 2024

Psalm 34 (RCL 34:1-8)

Call and Response

> *The LORD redeems the life of his servants; None of those who take refuge in him will be condemned. (Ps. 34:22)*

Try to remember a time when you were in deep trouble, or at least it felt that way. Perhaps you had done something wrong and gotten caught, or perhaps you found yourself in a dangerous situation. Maybe it was a health scare or the fear of losing someone close to you.

Trouble or danger has a way of prompting prayer, doesn't it? Nothing inspires a heartfelt prayer like finding ourselves in a dark or difficult situation from which we cannot extricate ourselves. When we realize that God is the only help available, prayer is a natural recourse.

Psalm 34 reflects a situation like that: it is the testimony of someone who personally experienced trouble, cried out to God for help, and experienced deliverance. His response was to praise God first, then to testify and teach others who could learn from his experience.

Like several other psalms, Psalm 34 is an acrostic poem in which each verse begins with a consecutive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It has similarities to Psalm 25 in that both are acrostics, and both skip the letter vav, but add an additional verse beginning with *pe* at the end, so there would be 22 verses. Psalm 25 is primarily a plea for help, and Psalm 34 is mainly a song of thanksgiving for help that has been received. Both incorporate elements of instruction or wisdom teaching.

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An invitation to praise (vv. 1-3)

The psalm begins with a declaration of personal praise to Yahweh (vv. 1-2), followed by an invitation for others to join in celebrating God's work (v. 3). The poet professed to a life in which he praised Yahweh constantly: "I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth" (v. 1). Humans are incapable of blessing God in the same way we hope for God to bless us, but the Hebrews believed that God desires human praise, and that God would regard public thanksgiving as a blessing.

The poet not only praised God persistently, but from the very depths of his being: "My soul makes its boast in the LORD; let the humble hear and be glad" (v. 2). The word translated "soul" is *nefesh*, a Hebrew term that does not imply the dualistic, disembodied soul of Greek thought, but speaks of the deepest essence of being that makes one alive and human.

The psalmist identified with others who were oppressed, using the word *'ănavîm*. The term describes people who are poor, needy, or bent over by the difficulties of life. His experience held the prospect that other troubled people might find encouragement in his testimony and join him in praise: "O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together" (v. 3).

The word for "magnify" means "to make great," and the word for "exalt" means "to make high." Humans cannot make Yahweh any greater or higher than God already is, but they can lift up or magnify God's name and reputation before others

An invitation to taste (vv. 4-10)

By their nature, acrostic poems don't lend themselves to larger literary structures, but with v. 4, there is a shift from praise to testimony and further invitation. Why was the poet so invested in perpetually praising Yahweh? Because "I sought the LORD, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears."

Who would not rejoice if they had earnestly prayed for deliverance and found their prayers answered in a positive way? Other people in need could have the same experience, the poet believed: "Look to him, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed" (v. 5). Their faces might not glow like that of Moses after his close communion with God (Exod. 34:29-35), but they could also radiate the joy of one who has personally experienced God's delivering presence, rather than the red cheeks of someone who is ashamed.

Verse 6 shifts back to a testimony that "this poor soul" had cried out to Yahweh and had been heard with salvific results. Verse 7 may imply a military setting ("the angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him"), but it is more likely intended as metaphorical. The "angel of the LORD"

appears in a variety of settings in the Hebrew Bible, both as a representative of Yahweh and as an indicator of God's own presence: the angel of Yahweh speaks as God (to Hagar (Gen. 16:9-11), to Moses (Exod. 3:2-6), to Balaam (Num. 22:34-35), and to Israel (Judg. 2:1-5).

The poet's stated desire was that others share his experience. He erupted with enthusiasm in v. 8, perhaps the most memorable line from the psalm: "O taste and see that the LORD is good; happy are those who take refuge in him." The imagery of taste speaks of a personal and intimate experience of knowing God, which the psalmist equated with a life of blessed happiness.

Verse 9 introduces an instruction to be amplified later: "O fear the LORD, you his holy ones, for those who fear him have no want." To fear Yahweh is not to shake in our boots with apprehension that God might harm us, but to stand in awe before both the power and the compassion of a God who not only hears our pleas, but who can answer them.

The psalmist spoke in obvious hyperbole when claiming that those who fear God have no want or need. He had experienced want and knew that we would always have needs for food, shelter, or aid in times of crisis. He was confident, however, arguing that young lions (stronger hunters than old lions) may go hungry, "but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing" (v. 9).

Out of context, vv. 8-10 provides a popular text for prosperity preachers, but the psalmist did not expect his faithfulness or prayerfulness to win him a perfect life with no trouble, as we shall see in v. 19. He did, however, believe that the presence of God could bring satisfaction in life, no matter what the circumstances might be.

Having begun the shift to instruction with v. 9, the poet took on the persona of a wisdom teacher through the remainder of the psalm. The sages who taught younger people typically addressed them as "sons," because any formal schooling that Israel's elites may have had would have been an all-male enterprise. The psalmist adopted the same language, though modern versions appropriately translate "sons" as "children."

An invitation to learn (vv. 11-22)

In v. 11, the poet picked up the theme of fearing God from v. 9: "Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD."

Wisdom teachers believed their teachings held the key to a long and good life, so it is not surprising that the psalmist asked, "Which of you desires life, and covets many days to enjoy good?" (v. 12).

Having raised the question, the teacher offered the answer. To have a good life and many days, one should practice ethical behavior by avoiding evil in both speech and practice "Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit. Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it" (vv. 13-14).

A good and meaningful life not only eschews evil, but seeks the welfare of others and actively works for peace. The prophet Isaiah offered similar advice: "… cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (Isa. 1:16b-17).

The poet reinforced the call to ethical living with the assurance that "The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their cry" (v. 15). In contrast, God's face was against those who did evil (v. 16). "When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears, and rescues them from their troubles," the psalmist claimed: "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit" (vv. 17-18).

These familiar verses, often recited by people in need of comfort, may seem to promise that the righteous will have a life free of trouble, but that is not the case. The verses acknowledge that it is the righteous who are facing trouble. The people who are brokenhearted and crushed in spirit are also God-fearers.

The theme continues in v. 19: "Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD rescues them from them all." The assurance that no bones will be broken and that the wicked will be condemned (vv. 20-21) doesn't take away from the acknowledgement that the righteous are afflicted.

God does not deliver us from all troubles but offers a way for us to endure trials as we trust in God's presence. God may bring healing to our broken hearts, but doesn't stop them from being broken in the first place.

The key, perhaps, is in what we do with the repeated word "fear." If we allow our troubles to overwhelm us with fear and anxiety, we may enter a downward spiral that leaves us feeling defeated. But, if we "fear" God by trusting that we are not alone in our trials, by choosing to live ethically, and by investing ourselves in others' good, we can rise above our adversities and join the psalmist in praising the Lord who "redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned" (v. 22).

Do we fear the stress and difficulties of life, or do we fear/trust that God is present with us, enabling us not only to persevere, but to praise?

That, for the psalmist, is the question. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

August 18, 2024

Proverbs 9 (RCL 9:1-6)

Listen to Lady Wisdom

> *Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight. (Prov. 9:6)*

Who was your first teacher, the one who taught you how to eat with a spoon, use the toilet, and tie your shoes? We love it when fathers are involved, but most people probably learn these things from their mothers.

Children in ancient Israel also learned first from their mothers. They may not have seen women in positions of public leadership, but they knew that women were repositories of wisdom and willing to share it.

Perhaps that is one reason the book of Proverbs personifies wisdom as a woman who teaches others the right way of life and who calls them to follow it.

Woman Wisdom's invitation (vv. 1-6)

The first nine chapters of Proverbs serve as an extended introduction and invitation to gain wisdom from the remainder of the book, culminating in the competing calls of Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly in chapter nine.

The chapter has a clear three-part structure consisting of appeals from both Wisdom and Folly (vv. 1-6, 13-18), with a collection of sayings between them (vv. 7-12).

The contrast between Wisdom and Folly begins in chapter 7, with a challenge to choose the way of wisdom (as female) and avoid adulterous temptations: "Say to wisdom, 'You are my sister,' and call insight your intimate friend, that they may keep you from the loose woman, from the adulteress with her smooth words" (7:4-5). The remainder of the chapter is a warning against falling into the temptress's trap, for "Her house is the way to Sheol, going down to the chambers of death" (7:27).

Chapter 8 portrays Wisdom as a powerful woman who calls from every corner of the city, challenging all to follow her teachings and live, emphasizing the many benefits of choosing wisdom over folly (8:1-22).

Woman Wisdom's reputation grows in 8:22-31, where she describes herself as God's first act of creation and God's partner in the formation of heaven and earth: "Then I was beside him as a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race" (8:30-31).

Wisdom's concern for humans, then, is portrayed as coincident with their creation, so that Wisdom can address humans as "my children" and urge them to keep her ways, "For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the LORD; but those who miss me injure themselves; all who hate me love death" (8:35).

When we come to chapter 9, then, the stage is set, the competitors for human attention have been identified, and the stakes have been made clear. There is a shift, however, in approach: Wisdom is now described in the third person. Her speech consists of quotations from the narrator.

This section describes Wisdom's careful preparations for a feast, which is symbolic of the life-giving sustenance her teachings offer. The preparations begin with a house that Wisdom has built, so substantial that it features seven pillars (v. 1). The odd number of pillars may seem asymmetrical, but perhaps the intention is to suggest completion, something the number seven often does.

For the feast, Wisdom has slaughtered animals, "mixed her wine" (probably with additives of honey or other spices), and set the table so that all is in readiness (v. 2). She has not only sent out servant girls with invitations, but also calls "from the highest places in the town, 'You that are simple, turn in here!'" (vv. 3-4).

Repeating the invitation, she invites those "without sense" to "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed" (v. 5). Eating and drinking of Wisdom's feast leads one to "Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight" (v. 6).

Second Isaiah also used food and drink as metaphors for choosing to follow God's way: "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price" (Isa. 55:1).

Third Isaiah likewise bemoaned those who forsook God's way and "who set a table for Fortune and fill cups of mixed wine for Destiny" (Isa. 65:11, 13-14). The anguish and

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wailing of those who ignore the offered sustenance call to mind those who cast their lot with Folly and end up in Sheol.

In a more familiar text, the author of the beloved 23rd psalm shifted from the metaphor of God as shepherd to God as host in saying, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows" (Ps. 23:5).

New Testament readers are likewise familiar with banquet scenes. Jesus attended meals hosted by tax collectors like Levi (Mark 2:13-17) as well as friends like Mary and Martha (John 12:1-8). Some may see a foreshadowing of Jesus' parable of a banquet in which invitations were sent out, but some refused to come, with unhappy consequences (Matt. 22:1-14, Luke 14:15-24).

Others may see in Wisdom's invitation a prefiguring of the Lord's Supper, and it comes as no surprise that the companion gospel reading is John 6:51-58, where Jesus boldly promised life to those who eat the bread of his body and drink his blood.

Lessons on learning (vv. 7-12)

Verses 7-12 have long troubled interpreters, for they interrupt the paired sections presenting the competing calls of Wisdom and Folly. It is likely that they were a later addition, but why?

Wisdom's appeal is serious business. It is a matter of life and death, yet many choose to laugh it off and follow Folly by default. The writer portrayed such "scoffers" as being so irresolute that rebuking them was pointless, and one could gain only abuse by doing so (vv. 7-8a). In contrast, the wise are humble enough to appreciate needed correction and seek greater learning (vv. 8b-9).

This leads to the central mantra of the Bible's wisdom literature: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight" (v. 10). In this setting, "fear" does not suggest terror associated with a divine threat, but deep awe at the power and majesty of God, who is the ultimate source of wisdom.

Gaining wisdom begins with recognizing where truth lies, and choosing it.

Why are vv. 7-12 located between the opposing invitations of Wisdom and Folly? With v. 11 we learn that Wisdom did not disappear after v. 6, but had continued speaking. "For by me your days will be multiplied, and years will be added to your life. If you are wise, you are wise for yourself; if you scoff, you alone will bear it" (vv. 11-12).

The promise of longer life, as in other maxims found in Proverbs, is not a guarantee, but it does reflect a trend. Those who serve God, love others, and follow the ways of Wisdom are likely to have both longer and happier lives than "scoffers" who throw caution to the wind and live as they choose.

A point of emphasis is personal responsibility. Wisdom taught that the wise would gain the benefits of wisdom for themselves, while scoffers would bear the harm of their choices.

Wisdom's antithesis (vv. 13-18)

The central section, then, despite its disruptive appearance, sharpens the shadows of Folly's dark appeal. The antithesis of Woman Wisdom is a "foolish woman" who is loud, ignorant, and knowledgeable of nothing (v. 13). Nothing is said of her house other than a suggestion that it is prominently located in the upper part of town, where elite families tended to live.

Rather than building up her house or preparing her meal, however, she lounges in the doorway, calling to those who are minding their own business and going "straight on their way" (vv. 14-15).

Folly's invitation in v. 16 is virtually identical to Wisdom's appeal in v. 4: "'You who are simple, turn in here!' And to those without sense, she says..."

Wisdom and Folly appeal to the same audience: people who are lacking in knowledge or direction for life. Both believe they have the answer. Wisdom offers bread and wine that she has prepared, sustenance that leads to maturity and insight (vv. 5-6).

Folly, on the other hand, offers misappropriated goods: "Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant" (v. 17). Behaviors that are taboo or opposed to God's teaching may have a powerful allure, but are a shadowy road, for it turns out that Folly's house is the doorway to death: "But they do not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of Sheol" (v. 18).

While the voices of Wisdom and Folly offer a clear-cut choice between wise actions or foolish living, between a full life and an empty one, the options do not come down to a one-time decision. Every day, we are confronted with choices between good options and bad ones, between generosity and selfishness, and between kindness and cruelty. We can make choices that are life-affirming for us and life-giving to others, or we can choose destructive patterns that are corrosive both to us and to those around us.

The sooner and more often we choose the way of wisdom, the better our chances of a joyful, meaningful, and productive life. Even with years of bad choices behind us, however, the option of better decisions remains – and where there are options, there is hope. NFJ

Bible Study with Tony W. Cartledge

August 25, 2024

Joshua 24:1-25
(RCL 24:1-2a, 14-18)

Make Your Choice!

> *Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD. (Josh. 24:15)*

Choices are important: they determine what we do, influence where we go, and shape who we are. In J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, headmaster Albus Dumbledore tells young Harry: "It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities."

Consider the significance of personal decisions related to career, relationships, values, and faith. Smaller choices seen in our everyday behavior reflect our commitment to more major decisions.

Making choices is not necessarily a once-for-all enterprise, however. We may realize that earlier choices were not wise and change course by choosing a new and better way. Conversely, we may be tempted to forsake good choices and stray onto troublesome paths. Are we prone to making helpful choices or harmful ones?

Looking back (vv. 1-13)

No one knew the importance of making choices and standing by them better than Joshua, the man who succeeded Moses and led the people of Israel into Canaan, the land God had promised to Abraham and his descendants.

Joshua understood that God's promise was good only so long as the people were faithful. The story of Joshua's leadership opens with a miraculous crossing of the flooded Jordan River (chapters 3-4), after which he led the people in a covenant renewal ceremony at Gilgal (chapter 4). Israel's entry into the land, described as a rapid series of conquests of people and their cities, is related in chapters 6-11, followed by a lengthy accounting of how the land was distributed among the tribes (chapters 12-21).

A religious conflict between the tribes east and west of the Jordan is resolved in chapter 22. Then, the narrative fast-forwards to a time when Joshua had grown old and knew that his time was short. Like Moses before him, he called representatives of the people to gather so he could deliver a farewell message designed to remind them of God's past blessings, and to encourage future faithfulness (Josh. 23:1-2).

Joshua's speech amounts to a summary review of the theology propounded most clearly in Deuteronomy, a straightforward belief that Yahweh would bless Israel so long as the people remained faithful but would punish them if they turned to other gods.

Today's text deals with a second major assembly in which "Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem" (v. 1a) – not every person, but "the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel" who represented others.

References to "all the people" (v. 2) or "the people" (v. 16, 19, 21, 22, 24, 25) appear often, even though all were not present, suggesting a belief that everyone should follow the lead or instruction of their tribal and family leaders.

Joshua called the leaders to gather at the ancient sanctuary city of Shechem, located in the central hill country, about halfway between the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee. Shechem, now the modern city of Nablus, was situated along the lower slopes of Mt. Gerizim, just across a narrow valley from Mt. Ebal. Located at the junction of important roadways leading from the Jordan River and through the mountains, it was an important city long before the Israelites arrived, and it remained so through much of Israel's history.

The area had a deep sacred history: Abraham had built an altar there after his arrival in Canaan, according to Gen. 12:6-7, and Jacob occupied an area near the city before his sons committed bloody treachery, forcing them to flee (Gen. 34:1-31). Excavations at Shechem have uncovered a sacred area with a standing stone dating to the 15th or 16th century BCE.

Joshua's purpose was to lead a covenant renewal ceremony that would remind the people of their ongoing obligations if they wished to remain in a positive relationship with God. Careful readers will note that an earlier story described a similar covenant ceremony in the same sacred area between Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim (Josh. 8:30-35). Some scholars believe

chapter 24 is a retelling of the same event, while others see them as distinct occasions.

Like many other Old Testament covenants, the ceremony in Joshua 24 bears a strong similarity in form to ancient Near Eastern treaties commonly struck between conquering kings and their new vassals.

In those treaties, known best from Hittite and Assyrian records, the triumphant king set the conditions for future peace between himself and his subjects. His vassals could choose to accept the conditions and live in peace, or to reject them and run the risk of further humiliation.

Such treaties had six typical elements: (1) the ruling king is identified by name; (2) the king's "gracious acts" to the conquered are recited; (3) the vassal's covenant obligations are enumerated; (4) the document is placed in a public sanctuary with instructions for periodic reading; (5) the gods of the parties involved are invoked as witnesses; and (6) blessings are promised for obedience to the treaty, while penalties are listed for those who rebel.

Since Israel's covenant was between God and a people called by grace (not conquered), and since Israel's faith trusted in only one god, obvious adaptations had to be made, but the underlying structure is still apparent.

Joshua first identified the LORD (Yahweh) as the ruling power (v. 2a), and recited God's previous acts of redemption and grace: God's kindness to the patriarchs (vv. 2b-4), deliverance of Israel from Egypt (vv. 5-7), sustaining care in the Transjordan area (vv. 8-10), and divine aid in the conquest of Canaan (vv. 11-13) are all remembered. The result was this: "I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards that you did not plant" (v. 13).

Looking forward (vv. 14-25)

Because of this, Israel was called to serve Yahweh alone (vv. 14, 23). As ancient treaties named covenant obligations, Joshua called the Israelites to revere Yahweh, to serve with sincerity and faithfulness, and to forsake all other gods.

The covenant ceremony at Shechem may also have served to incorporate other people groups who had allied themselves with Israel (cf. the Gibeonites, 9:1-27), as well as any conquered or friendly peoples who may have wished to identify with Israel. If this was the case, then Joshua was calling upon not only "old" Israel, but also potentially new Israelites, to pledge their loyalty to Yahweh.

The heart of the challenge is found in v. 15, where Joshua called on the tribal leaders to choose which god they would serve, once and for all. Idolatry, as evidenced throughout Israel's history, was a constant temptation. Would the people follow the elaborate rites of their Mesopotamian forefathers ("the region beyond the River")? Would they worship the gods of their new neighbors (here designated as "Amorites")? Or would they put away other gods and trust solely in Yahweh?

We try to imagine old Joshua, struggling to his feet and shouting as loud as his voice would allow: "Choose this day whom you will serve! . . . as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD!" (v. 16).

The people responded positively (vv. 16-18), but Joshua remained skeptical. He had seen too many failures and too much backsliding to accept their initial pledge at face value. Playing devil's advocate, he accused them of being so incapable of faithful service that they would inevitably turn to other gods and draw Yahweh's wrath (vv. 19-20).

The tribal leaders reiterated their promise to serve, however (v. 21), and Joshua moved on to complete the covenant.

Since other gods could not be invoked as witnesses (as in the typical treaty formula), Joshua called the people of Israel themselves as witnesses that they had pledged sole loyalty to Yahweh, and he demanded that they put away all evidence of worship of other gods. That would include destroying the small figurines of personal gods, such as those that are commonly found in excavations, even during periods of Israelite occupation (v. 22-23).

Once again, the people avowed their commitment to serve Yahweh alone (v. 24). Joshua then reminded them of the "statutes and ordinances" they were committed to obey, recorded them for future reference in "the book of the law of God," and placed a standing stone beneath a sacred tree "in the sanctuary of Yahweh" as a perpetual reminder and witness of Israel's pledge (vv. 25-27).

Israel's call to choose God's way raises obvious questions. What important choices and commitments have we made that bear review? Have we been faithful to promises we have made to others, and to God?

As Joshua used the symbols of stone and tree to remind Israel of their covenant obligations, we may wear a wedding ring or a cross as daily witnesses of commitments we have made. While symbols may be helpful reminders, the intent of our hearts is what really matters.

Making choices and keeping promises require us to reflect on past, present, and future dimensions of our lives. When faced with the challenge to "choose this day whom you will serve," what is our response? NFJ

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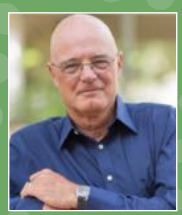
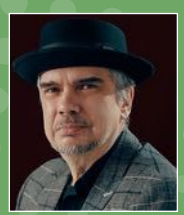

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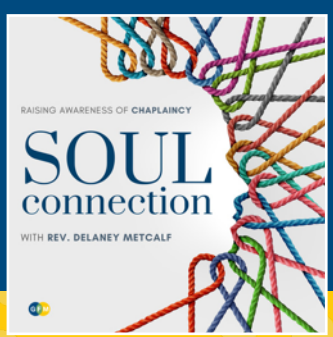

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Fall semester application deadline: July 2

By Craig Nash

A lot of ink has been spilled in recent years regarding the declining influence of Christianity in the United States. People are leaving the Christian faith and organized religion altogether in droves. If you have paid much attention, you have likely heard about the category of "nones," those who don't identify with any religious tradition. Almost a quarter of all of our neighbors fall under that category.

Most of us connected to our faith have been since we were children. According to the General Social Survey administered by the University of Chicago, around 90% of everyone who identifies as "Christian" in the United States was raised in a Christian family. It is possible that the person sitting next to you in the pew entered a life of faith in Jesus as an adult, but highly unlikely.

Trends in the U.S. religious landscape certainly have implications for old ideas like missions and evangelism. (These ideas, by the way, are in serious need of prayerful reconsideration.) But they also should nudge us to deeper reflection about how we walk alongside the children among us and give them the tools to walk more fully in the way of Jesus.

The good news is that there are those among us who have devoted their lives to listening to the voices of children and the Holy Spirit. They are eager to translate what they are hearing so that we can respond with faithfulness, creativity, and joy. NFJ

Children's Lessons

The Kids in Front of Us

By Kelly Belcher

In the minds of children, ideas such as the Bible, the persons of Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit, our rituals of worship, and why we come to church…are all mysteries. Christianity does not come in size 6X and is not custom-tailored for children. Church is a pretty grown-up affair, much of its meaning floating right over kids' heads and some of the adults' heads, too.

The Bible is not a children's book. It is, at best, PG-13 and, at its most challenging, not discernable at all. A recent cartoon showing Jonah inside the belly of the whale, where he was mighty surprised to meet Pinocchio, illustrates how confusing the Biblical material can be.

How will we teach and lead the kids in front of us about faith? After all, children come in all ages, sizes, backgrounds, situations, and experiences. Some didn't have much breakfast this morning. Others heard the grown-ups argue loudly last night. Some are bullied in middle school. More than a few may bear heavy fear, disappointment, loneliness, or anger.

Since faith is learned only through a relationship, we must take kids by the hand and begin from where they are. There is no such thing as "FaithCrafters: Real Christian Formation for Children—in about an hour." It is up to us to teach our children all the time by example. Setting aside times in worship for them teaches them they are important to God, and their understanding is important to us. Regularly setting aside special times to teach faith and worship at any point in the week is vital. It is a great privilege and supreme duty for us to form the faith of our littlest Baptists and Jesus-followers.

Narrowing the focus of the Biblical conversation is always best. There is far more material in even one little finger of that Bible passage than you can address in one read-me-a-story session. What specific idea can you get across? Think teeny-tiny here: laser beam. Children just need a handle.

We want to teach in ways that will not have to be un-taught later on. Kids can be saved from the horror of "What, there's no Santa?" with God. What does your church tradition teach about Noah? Rather than focusing on the mythical traditions of the story, select one of the many aspects of Noah-ness to teach: obedience, trust and uncertainty, the promise of peace, and the restoration after the storm. There are so many good lessons. Teach about your own questions of Biblical accounts. The questions you have, not your certainties, make you a faithful Jesus follower. Where are your own faith questions?

Let children overhear your learning and let them watch you deliberate, question, change your mind, and grow your own belief and understanding. Be generous in your admissions that sometimes you just don't know. Own the beautiful mystery we all bear as gospel. Be aware that children can learn deeply by sensing what they learn emotionally. They can know or suspect a thing whether or not we say it out loud, and whether they can articulate it. They will just wonder if we don't teach.

Enjoy using your imagination. Your emphasis can be one of many things–Church History, Bible, Missions, Music, Art, Spiritual Formation, Ethics, Theology, Worship Education, Poetry/Writing–all these things are fair game as you direct your teaching of faith to children. Let typical daily life and daily or annual events direct your teaching:

- Sing hymns and use music, and listen to great classical music
- Use the meaning of the liturgical calendar
- Highlight historical figures or personally known ones
- Excerpt one character from the story
- Make up a story and have kids act it out
- Write your kids/family into the Bible passage
- Use your body and move
- Display great art
- Let everybody create their own great art
- Use their favorite toys

A favorite lesson of our group of kids is Barbie Baptism, especially in light of last year's Barbie film. On or near the day our church will observe baptism, we bring a little tub of warm water and towels into our children's room. We ask them to bring their Barbie dolls or other water-worthy toys, and we let each toy be baptized, using and teaching the words used for people. Sometimes, kids go home and baptize the rest of their dolls in the bathtub that evening. Sometimes, they put their dolls to bed with the *Sursum Corda* or blessing we teach them to memorize. Not bad!

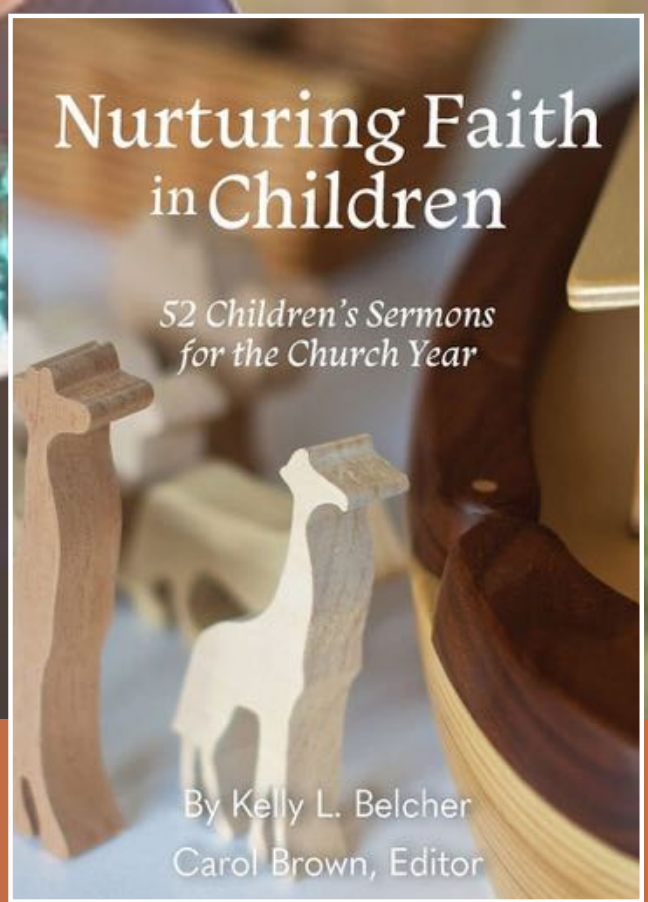
We hope to join children in laying a firm foundation for a lifetime of engaging Biblical material and following Jesus. We hope to lift one another up onto Jesus's knee for a while, a wonderful place for us all. NFJ

—Kelly Belcher lives in Asheville, North Carolina, is a member of the First Baptist Church of Asheville and is currently serving on Good Faith Media's strategic advisory board.

Nurturing Faith in Children

By Kelly Belcher, Edited by Carol Brown

As you spend time with children in worship, count it a privilege to convey to your children a love of scripture, a passion for learning, a desire to know the heart of God, and a love for the wonderful stories of the Bible.



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Nurturing Faith and Youth Sports

By Andrew Meyer

It is no secret that sports reign supreme in the United States. Sports permeate every facet of American life, from youth sports to professional leagues. At some point every semester, when I teach classes on sport and religion, my students realize that sport is neither good nor bad; it is simply what we make of it. Different cultures and faith perspectives engage with sport in unique ways.

The ways in which athletes and religious sports organizations integrate faith into sports practices are also unique. From sport and faith youth programs like the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Athletes in Action, Christians in Sport (UK), and Christians Sports International, young athletes are presented with numerous, sometimes contradictory ways of thinking about what their faith means for their sports participation and vice versa.

Young people of faith are beholden to the world around them, including the world of sports. How do young people understand their faith in relation to their sports activities and the lessons they learn through participation? Much has been written and continues to be written on the intersections of faith and youth sport.

I have collected a few insights from my research on faith and youth sports. Most conversations on this topic are usually separated into two perspectives: Intersection and bifurcation.

Merriam-Webster defines an intersection as "the set of elements common to two or more sets." Intersections are about what two things have in common. Much of the literature on faith and youth sports focuses on this, especially faith-based sports programs and organizations. They highlight their faith perspectives, usefulness, and commonalities with the pillars of contemporary Western sport, seeking to bring two divergent things to a common point.

The other perspective on faith and youth sport that should be considered is bifurcation. Bifurcation is "the point or area at which something divides into two branches or parts." This perspective is a less popular understanding in the faith and sport literature, as it suggests that faith and sport are not well matched. This is represented in all the moral quandaries about sport or the possibility that sport reveals nothing of what it means to be human or live a "good life."

My work has focused on "muscular Christianity," a 19th-century British social movement that effectively melded Christian ideals with the emerging sports of the time (e.g., rugby, soccer, boxing, cricket, modern Olympics, etc.) at elite British boarding schools. Examining muscular Christianity has led me to suggest that the "faith and sport" movement, which made its way into youth sports, was an attempt by Christians to align themselves with one of the most popular cultural activities throughout human history: sport.

Young athletes often find themselves at the point of bifurcation, torn between their faith and their sport ideals.

Regardless of the perspective one might find most appropriate, the insights I gathered several years ago during a faith-based youth and sport retreat are noteworthy. My colleagues and I had the privilege of hearing directly from young athletes, gaining a deeper understanding of the challenges they face in reconciling their faith with their sport. Three key themes emerged from these enlightening conversations.

The first is that sports participation challenges young athletes' faith and beliefs, mostly through their experiences with coaches. Even at religiously affiliated schools and programs, many described their coaches as displaying behaviors and ideals that demonstrated the bifurcated perspective of young athletes' faith beliefs.

We also heard that young athletes had difficulty prioritizing their faith and sporting lives. This finding was clear in their responses about time allocation between their faith and sport, the fatigue of physical activities impacting their faith life, and the focus on sport for future aspirations overshadowing their faith.

Finally, our young athletes said they did not know what to do with these tensions between their faith and sports lives. The importance placed on both areas of their lives challenged their identities, and they felt manipulated and unable to find resolution between these seemingly opposed aspects of their lives.

Academics, coaches, and much of the literature on faith and youth sports focus on intersections. This is undoubtedly a result of our culture embracing muscular Christianity. But if we listen to the voices and insights of young athletes of faith, the picture is less about intersection and more about bifurcation. Adults in both the faith and sports lives of young people should begin asking more questions of the youth they engage with. We should ask them what they need and stop expecting them to believe all the ways faith and sports intersect. They are telling us that they don't see it. NFJ

—Andrew R. Meyer (PhD, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, 2010) is currently an Associate Professor of Sport Foundations at Baylor University.

The Raceless Gospel for Children

By Starlette Thomas

"Jesus loves the little children.
All the children of the world.
Red and yellow, black, and white.
They're all precious in his sight.
Jesus loves the little children of the world."

But this is not how Jesus loves the little children. Jesus does love "all the children of the world," but he does not love them as "red and yellow, black, and white." Even though "they're all precious in his sight," just because it rhymes doesn't mean it's right.

This is how the songwriter, Clarence Herbert Woolston, said Jesus loves the little children. Inspired by Matthew 19:14, the famous children's church song is Woolston's interpretation, his understanding of Jesus' love for infants, toddlers, youngsters, and teenagers. Woolston saw them as "red and yellow, black, and white." I should point out that a few colors are missing: brown and beige for those who identify as "mixed race." But these additions wouldn't make the song any better.

Woolston, a graduate of Crozer Theological Seminary, now Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, believed we love people, beginning with children, according to race, which is the social coloring of skin that determines one's position in American society. Race justifies a color-coded hierarchy, a kind of social ranking, that supports "relationships of ruling." It is the "epidermalization of inferiority," meaning we tuck interpretations like "less than" under some people's skin–skin that is 0.2 inches thick, proving how we lose our sense of human being and belonging by the thinnest of margins.

We have been deceived into thinking we could come close to fully describing a human soul and color-code human beings as "red and yellow, black, and white." This is not the gospel. They are Woolston's lyrics, his words, not to be conflated with Jesus' words.

Woolston's lyrics are an example of whitewashing. One dictionary definition of whitewashing is "deliberately attempting to conceal unpleasant or incriminating facts about (someone or something)." Woolston's suggestion that Jesus agrees with the conclusions of race and loves us based on its class-enforcing categories is an example of whitewashing. The sweet singing of children doesn't change the implication that Jesus would go along with these designations that maintain an us-versus-them, white-versus-people of color, oppressor-versus-oppressed binary.

Rather than deal with the "unpleasant and incriminating facts" about the oppression that race upholds, Woolston wrote a song that suggests Jesus believes in race, accepts its imagined differences for human beings, and loves us based on the social coloring of our skin. It is "social coloring" because humans are not physically colored beige, black, brown, red, yellow, or white.

This is "another gospel" (Galatians 1:8). Woolston is putting words in Jesus' mouth. Mary's baby never said this. Woolston, then, is racializing Jesus' gospel, including race as part of Jesus' good news, though race is not good news for everybody.

While we are physically different, Paul wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians, "Not all flesh is alike, but there is one flesh for human beings, another for animals, another for birds, and another fish" (First Corinthians 15:39, NRSV). Yes, we look different, but we are all human beings. Even when the pigment of our skin is a different shade, we are still all "hue-man beings." Just because an animal is a different color doesn't mean it's not an animal. Just because a bird is a different color doesn't mean it's not a bird. Just because a fish is a different color doesn't mean it's not a fish.

Race simply does not exist in God's eyes as a creative tool, a means of soulish measurement, or divine insight. It is solely how human beings have been taught to see each other and feign omniscience. The meanings we associate with the color-coding of human beings are not God-given. We received those messages, stereotypes, and prejudices from human lips.

Woolston's song implies that Jesus loves us no matter our race. But why would that be Jesus' position? Race teaches us that God created human beings in comparison and as opposites, that some human beings are "created a little lower" than others, and that some human beings are better than others–innately, naturally, and spiritually. But there is no biological or biblical basis for this belief.

There are no scriptural references to race as a system of oppression based on the social coloring of skin. This did not exist until the 17th century. The Christian scriptures were written in the first century. Consequently, when you see the word "race" in the Bible, it is the interpreter's addition to the text.

The late New Testament scholar Cain Hope Felder teaches us in *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class and Family*: "Today popular Christianity too easily assumes that modern ideas about race are traceable to the Bible. … Centuries of European and Euro-American scholarship, along with a 'save the heathen blacks' missionary approach to Africans, have created these impressions."

In Matthew's gospel, "Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.' And he laid his hands on them and went on his way." Jesus didn't say a single word about race. He told his disciples to let the children come to him and not to get in the way.

They are citizens of the "kin-dom" of heaven. They are not in the way. They don't need to stop talking, fidgeting, or giggling. They don't need to "hurry up and grow up." They don't need to dress a certain way or cut or comb their hair to look "more presentable." No, Jesus said, "Come to me."

Woolston's song, written in the 1800s, said more about him and, perhaps, the hurdles he faced when coming closer to Jesus. If you let Jesus tell the story, you'll see that race is not a part of children's ministry.

NFJ

Glorious Distraction:

Some thoughts about children in worship

By Terry York

Little angels, that's what they are. The children who disrupt worship are little angels. Angels don't have wings or feathers, but they do have important messages.

I planned to use those opening sentences as the closing sentences, but I couldn't wait. However creative a congregation might get in dealing with the question of what to do with children on Sunday morning, they will ultimately choose a variation of one of three options.

1. Children are never in "Big Church."
2. Children are always in "Big Church."
3. Children begin worship in "Big Church" but are eventually dismissed into children's church.

Variations would make the list longer, but these options are it. Each has pros and cons that make sense at different times, even for the same congregation. The "right" approach is very often a temporary solution.

There is a list of maxims that carry weight and must be spoken into every conversation about this matter: Parents need a break. Congregants without children shouldn't have to be bothered. Distractions disrupt the flow of the worship service. Children learn from seeing how adults conduct themselves in worship. Children are learning and listening, even if they aren't focused on the song or sermon.

When all the obvious give-and-take statements have been made, the minister, the committee, the team, or business meeting folks must finally decide what they want to accomplish and how close they can reach that goal.

Who or what is the focus of the discussion? God? The congregation? The parents? The kids? Worship? Oh, and what of the kids without parents present?

These are essential questions. There are always more questions than answers. What about the sermons? How graphic can the preacher get in sermons about the cross when kids are present? God help us.

Then there are the painfully silent congregations, those that no longer have any children around to worry about. Their concerns are about how to get (noisy) young families back into the church. They need more new ideas, more life, more energy in the congregation, and more young leadership. The dilemma is another facet of the tension between "make a joyful noise" and "keep silence before Him." A change in worship style is often seen as the only path forward.

Returning to an earlier question: "What about the sermons?" Let's add to it, "What about the music?" "What about the rituals?" Is the answer to keep it all at a juvenile level–no mystery, no unusual words, no messiness?

Children are the most awe-capable, the most wonder-prone of all humans. Let them lead us to wonder.

Let the presence of children require of us clarity without sensationalism in matters of blood and death and life issues. Let there be "plain English" engagement of rituals, and new words to learn in our songs. Let us teach the vocabulary of our liturgy as we go, a sort of on-the-job training. Children are learning-oriented. Teaching that elevates the learner not only respects the children who are present in worship but also creates a connection with "uninitiated" adults.

Let the children lead us to the visitors and seekers. Clarity of language and an invitation to learn are good reviews and reminders for the seasoned worshiper, as well.

Children learn patterns of speech and movement by observation. Children learn magnitudes and levels of importance by watching the postures and attitudes of the adults in their lives. Children learn rhymes, lyrics, and stories almost coincidentally, and certainly without understanding the meaning of the memorized words. They then grow into the definitions, implications, and weight of the words that have been, until then, only meter and movement.

Being mindful of children in worship does not necessitate dilution or dumbing down. It requires humility, honesty, and respect for the processes of teaching and learning. The presence of children in worship requires us to hear "Let the children come unto me" (Matt. 19:14) and "Except that you become as a little child" (Matt. 18:3-5) with fresh ears.

Ultimately, "children in worship" is not a child issue. It is an adult issue. It is not an isolated "graded ministry" issue. It is a congregation-wide issue. It is a matter of listening to the angels, that is, to the messengers.

Angels are best known for their "Be not afraid" and " For unto you this day" messages. Some angels are good wrestlers. Some are sly "unawares" companions along the way. Some are sent to be glorious distractions from our decorum, future leaders with the current messages: "Be not afraid; your congregation is blessed with life and learning" and "For unto you this day is born the noise and wiggles of hope." NFJ

—Dr. Terry York is a retired Professor of Christian Ministry and Church Music at Baylor University's Truett Seminary. He has served in numerous ministry roles and published over 40 hymns.

Expanding the Roster

By Angie Fuller

Some of us have painful memories of classmates choosing teams in gym class. Those with better athletic skills were naturally selected early, and those chosen at the end–well, gym class couldn't end fast enough for them. I can't complain. My name was usually called somewhere in the middle. I could be counted on for effort and mediocre speed, but my hand-eye coordination and upper-body strength were abysmal.

At the outset of his ministry, Jesus assembled a team, although one might assume he didn't select the twelve disciples in order of athletic prowess. But it's not surprising, knowing what was in store as they traveled on foot, that he selected *fishermen* to fill over half of his roster. They wouldn't shy away from hard work and would easily tolerate all kinds of weather.

But this team needed some diversity. So Jesus invited some from other walks of life to offer different skills and perspectives, including a government employee, an accountant of sorts, and a nationalist. It was an eclectic bunch, and they had no idea how they would impact the kingdom of God.

Modern-day children's and youth ministry leaders often choose teams, too. Knowing what's in store for these crucial volunteers, it's not surprising that early invitations are extended to professional educators. Teachers don't typically shy away from hard work and easily tolerate unexpected situations.

But ministry leaders know these teams need diversity (and frankly, there are a lot of roles to fill). So they invite wonderfully gifted people from other walks of life–perhaps government employees, accountants, and even those with diverse sociopolitical views. What do most churches end up with in their children's and youth ministries? A fairly eclectic bunch, and only God knows, truly, how they will impact the kingdom of God.

Which sounds cliché.

But isn't it beautiful to watch a medical researcher and a real estate agent invite a hesitant toddler to their tea party on a Sunday morning?

Or a social worker who weekly provides a snack of crackers and (what their preschoolers call) "squirty cheese," making Bible study something to look forward to?

Or a senior attorney who draws awkward sixth graders into a conversation about one of Jesus' parables?

Or a senior living center director sharing a personal story that gently neutralizes a fourth grader's judgmental comment?

Or an engineer (and summer camp bus driver) who engages an autistic teen in conversation at a gas station while the rest of the noisy group heads inside for snacks?

Encounters like these are valuable in young people's spiritual formation because they beautifully reflect *community*. Kids learn that God's kingdom invites everyone to the table, welcomes questions, guides with love, and values relationships. While kids may be unable to put it into words, *they see God through people.*

Few of us can remember a curriculum, icebreaker, or small group discussion that shaped us in our spiritual formation. Not that these didn't cumulatively play a role. Our teaching resources and activities certainly matter. However, what matters most in introducing young people to the love of Jesus is the people who show that love to them.

Because they do, these volunteers experience spiritual formation, as well.

"We who work with children are disciples just like those young people..." notes David M. Csinos and Ivy Beckwith in *Children's Ministry in the Way of Jesus.* "We are formed as disciples even as we form others." Kids challenge and inspire us. They remind us that God is worthy of our gratitude for the smallest things and can handle our biggest laments. Kids also show God's love to us! Truly, we are all being formed together.

Investing in children and teens is not solely about nurturing the adults of the next generation. It's about cultivating God's kingdom here right now. God's kingdom includes toddlers and engineers. It includes attorneys and outspoken fourth graders. Bus drivers and high school juniors. Kids, volunteers, and pastors. We are all God's kingdom: growing as followers of Jesus and doing it together.

Isn't that what a team is all about? Growing...together?

Most children's and youth ministry directors have a soft spot for an incident recorded in three of the gospels when Jesus showed a rare display of anger toward his "team" as they shooed away admiring parents and their curious children. In indignation, he made his point: All are welcome, and we would do well to spend time with children and follow their lead in the kingdom of God.

So, as children's and youth ministries assemble teams of volunteers, may the approach be less like choosing a team for whiffleball, and more like getting out the giant, beloved parachute. It's so colorful and inviting! It requires many people to make it work. Parachute games can be chaotic and include both giggles and frustration, but as people listen to one another and learn to work together, they cultivate community.

Room for lots of different people? Chaotic fun? Learning together in community? That sounds like the kingdom of God.

As young people become adults and look back on the early years of their lives, may they see themselves surrounded by a large, eclectic circle of volunteers who invited, listened, played, comforted, and guided–reflecting God's love. May we all be willing to grab a loop on any hypothetical parachute with young people around it–open to how God may use us. All of us are welcome, and we would do well to spend time with them and follow their lead.. NFJ

—Angie Fuller is the Children's Pastor at Second Baptist Church in Liberty, MO.

Nurturing Contemplative Faith in Children

By Rachel Sciretti

It was springtime in southeastern Virginia – Tidewater country – and the banks of the James River were teeming with life, welcoming elementary schoolers from partnering churches across the area into a weekend of simply paying attention. Without the distractions of screens, a strict schedule, and parental helicopters, we set out to open our bodies, minds, and hearts to the Divine.

One thing that made this retreat different from "typical" retreats, was that there was not a focal time of teaching or preaching. Sure, the large group gatherings were important, but they were for singing, hearing the holy words in fresh ways, and new ways of praying.

One morning, we went on a "listening walk." We walked in as much silence as our elementary schoolers could, and then, at random moments, we would "freeze" to take in a snapshot of creation all around us.

At one such pause, a few of the children discovered some moss-covered rocks. They bent down on their knees to take in this wonder with as many of their senses as they could. They touched the moss, smelled the moss, examined the moss. Creation was ministering to the children, offering herself to them, speaking to them through the portals of their senses. It was holy, and the exchange felt like a kind of prayer. It was a contemplative moment and is a core memory for me of the twenty years I ministered to and with children.

The word "contemplative" describes a path to God that goes straight to and through the heart then back out into the world. The person on the path becomes a bearer of the Presence of God. In contemplative spirituality, the heart is the center of one's being where feeling, thought, and action integrate. The heart, mind, and body seek to be open and receptive to divine healing and wisdom that comes to us in countless ways.

God is found by going in and through, not so much up and out. Jesus teaches, "When you pray, go into your inner chamber and shut the door and pray to your Father, the One in secret…" (Matthew 6:6). Jesus, who is always concerned with the heart, invites us to cross the threshold of the body and mind, into the holy of holies of the heart where we can commune with God.

Practices such as Centering Prayer, sensing, lectio divina (holy reading), visio divina (holy seeing), imaginative prayer, breath prayer, body prayer, Examen, inquiry, journaling, meditative walking, and chanting or meditative singing help us cross that threshold. Stillness and silence are highly valued because they create space for the movement and voice of God to be felt and heard above personality or ego.

The contemplative way is available to anyone at any age and stage, but perhaps more easily accessible to children and older adults. Located at opposite ends of the life span, both in liminal spaces, children have more recently come from God, and older adults are contemplating the return to God. The rest of us in the middle have the capacity for both remembrance and longing, but our pace of life, caregiving responsibilities, and perceived obligations take a great deal of attention and energy. So we end up putting our spiritual journey on hold with the intention of returning to it "when things slow down."

As a new parent, this prospect was very frustrating to me. The thought of waiting years to water my soul with the discipline and grace of contemplative practice felt unfair. But parenthood was the life I chose. It is what I had prayed for; therefore, I needed to figure this out. Contemplative spirituality was going to have to manifest itself in the tired and messy beauty of my life as a mother.

As I practiced being present to and with my children, a whole new realm opened up. As I held them close and their breathing slowed to rest, so did mine. As they were enfolded in awe and wonder, so was I. As they experienced delight, so did I. As they engaged their senses, so did I. As they explored with curiosity, so did I. Wake-up calls to the presence of God were abundant in those years. My children and I had a symbiotic relationship.

Yes, I was holding space for them, but it turns out they were doing the same for me. I wanted them to remember their origin in God and to know that they themselves are made of Love. And in the process, I remembered my origin story in God and that I am made of Love, too.

From the breath of a baby to mossy rocks and weeds in the vacant lot, the children in my life show me that if I pay attention with an open heart, there are doorways all around me and within me that lead to the Heart of God. This is the contemplative path, and it is children who can help lead us.. NFJ

—Rev. Rachel Sciretti is Associate Pastor of The Center for Christian Spirituality at Chapelwood United Methodist Church in Houston, Texas.

Praying

It doesn't have to be the
blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones, just
pay attention, then

patch a few words together
and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.

Mary Oliver, from *Thirst*

How Churches Can Respond to Emerging Trends in Family Ministry

By Matt Cook

This issue of Nurturing Faith is focused on the faith development of children. Every church I know thinks the topic is essential, yet just like other areas of ministry, a changing culture requires us to rethink our methods in the 21st Century. These trends should catch our eyes and push us to adapt how we consider ministry to children and their families.

The birth rate in the United States is the lowest in a century.

It is a little-known fact that church growth and birth rates are firmly related, but stop and think about how this trend might impact your church's expectations for growth and attendance. How do you reach young families if people aren't even starting them?

The age of first-time parents has steadily increased for decades.

Some of that is driven by good news, as the teen birth rate recently reached a record low. It is also being driven, however, by an increased delay for women who are balancing parenting and work outside the home. Thirty years ago, people were more likely to have kids in their early twenties than in their early thirties. Now, however, the average age of first-time parents has nearly reached thirty years of age.

Christianity among young adults has been steadily declining for thirty years.

Last year, Ryan Burge, the prolific researcher and statistician of American politics and religion, wrote a story on the four most dramatic religious shifts in the previous fifty years. Number two on his list was the "loss of religion" among adults ages 18-35. In 1992, more than 80% of young adults self-identified as "Christian," whereas less than 10% self-identified as "none" when it comes to religious affiliation. In 2020, the percentage of those identifying as "Christian" declined to 60%, and those identifying as "none" rose to 35%.

These three trends paint a challenging picture for ministry to children, teenagers, and their parents. Fewer kids, busier parents, and less interest in religion among the people our churches hope to serve call for an immediate and adaptive response, but where should we start?

First, we must see and understand the changes if we're going to respond effectively. Lately, I have been telling every pastor who will listen that among the most critical needs for the 21st Century Church is to expand significantly both an awareness of and a dedication to an adaptive mindset among lay leadership. Most of our leaders were raised in the Church and remember when ministry to children and their families was much easier.

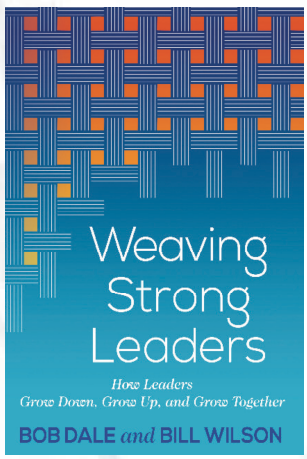
The changing shape of American religion is profound but also complex. Our most dedicated members (and thus the ones most likely to give energy to a response) are, in some ways, the least suited to understand the change as they are not significant participants. This is a learning moment, and ministers must not be the only ones who understand what's happening.

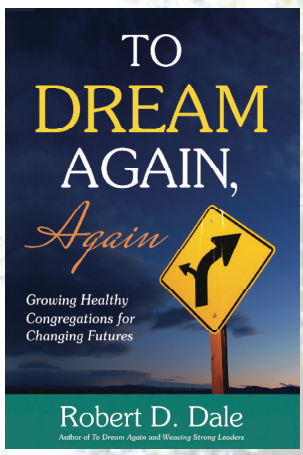
Second, we must not underestimate the emotional toll these changes take on ministers, particularly those who work closely with children, youth, and their parents. Ministry to children and youth is becoming increasingly demanding, requiring more energy with fewer people and often with limited financial resources. Even though every organization focuses on results and requires accountability, this is a moment where we need to be understanding and supportive. If you evaluate your Youth or Children's Minister based on the standards of years past, you'll be setting them up for failure. On the other hand, if you want to see greater effectiveness in the years to come, you will likely need to increase support for these ministers beyond the levels of years past.

Third, while we never want to give up on any generation of young adults, the decline in faith among young adults means that churches will likely have to find creative ways to minister to children with little or no parental involvement. A recent study on afterschool care in public schools revealed that nearly one in three children have grandparents listed as their afterschool contact. Recognizing the role grandparents play as caregivers in busy families, one savvy Children's Minister I know has started a Grandparent Team to enlist, encourage, and support grandparents within that ministry. This is not just to normalize the involvement of grandparents, but also to pair up "adoptive" grandparents with kids who have no family involvement at all.

This is one small way to invite the church to redefine ministry to families as ministry by the "church family." Some challenges come with this approach, but the Church can choose to be that family in a world where everyone is increasingly choosing their family as much as they are assigned a family at birth. NFJ

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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Making Time to Nurture Faith in Children

By Christina Embree

I recently stirred up a robust conversation when I addressed the importance of the faith community joining with parents and caregivers in intentional discipleship.

"How?" was the most common question, which usually included extra information along these lines: "We are so busy (tired, full schedule) that we are barely home (awake, together), and when we are, we just want to rest (relax, watch TV) not try to have church (do a family devotion, have a faith talk)." The conclusion usually sounded like, "I know that's not right, but I just don't even know where to start."

I feel that. I truly do.

Like many of you, our family is busy. Currently, all of us, from the youngest to the oldest, are students in five different schools, with activities ranging from musicals to yearbooks. Three of us are gainfully employed, to boot. Our calendar is a veritable rainbow of appointments, events, and practices. And the thought of adding something else to it, especially something as intentional as a family devotional time or a faith talk, can feel overwhelming.

At this point, it is tempting to say, "Forget it. The kids will just have to get the Jesus stuff at church." That thinking leads to relinquishing our unique responsibility to raise our children in the faith and a willingness to overlook the very real fact that parents and caregivers, not ministers, have the most significant influence on their child's faith, whether intentional about it or not.

May I offer a different perspective, another way of thinking?

Could it be that when the charge to "impress these things upon your children" was given in Deuteronomy 6, it wasn't just a call to family devotions? Perhaps what God had in mind was a bit more involved than that. What if, instead of adding another thing to our calendar, we sought ways to intentionally invite Christ into what we are already doing? What if instead of saying, "There's no time to do more," we started saying, "We are going to let God do more with our time."

In that famous Deuteronomy passage, four discipleship moments are mentioned: getting up in the morning, going to bed at night, sitting down at home, and leaving the home (along the road). These things happen every single day throughout the world. We all wake up, we all sleep, we all sit, and we all go. I find it so interesting these are the times God said, "Talk to your kids about me." The day's most ordinary, normative moments become extraordinary moments to disciple our kids in the faith.

So, back to that original question of "How?"

By simply inviting Christ into your calendar, each moment, and each activity. It starts with just one comment, reflection, and pause to turn our focus from the temporal to the eternal.

At a workshop I once conducted for family ministers, I had people write down some "everyday activities" they do during these four moments. For instance, what do they do each morning when they wake up? Then I asked them, "Now consider how you can invite Jesus into those moments."

A lady piped up, "I don't think Jesus can join me while I brush my teeth." I challenged her to get creative and see if there was anything she could think of to invite Christ into that most ordinary moment.

A few months later, I bumped into her, and she said: "Oh, I just have to tell you. I took you up on your challenge. I had the idea to start writing Bible verses and encouraging notes to my family and using Post-it notes to hang on the bathroom mirror. Now, when they brush their teeth, they read God's Word to them for the day. We all do it now. It's become a 'thing' in our house. Thanks for pushing me to think about how to invite Christ in."

Brushing teeth as discipleship. If there could be a more mundane, nonspiritual activity on the planet, I can't think of what it would be. And yet, it becomes extraordinary when Christ is invited into that space.

It begins with reflecting on where we can invite Christ in our daily lives.

Could we talk about a verse as we drive to soccer practice? Could our dinner conversation open doors to discuss how God loves and lives through us? Could movie night be a chance to impress God's commands upon their hearts? Could God meet us as we tuck our kids into bed each night?

Discipleship at home isn't about doing more; it's about inviting Christ into what you are already doing. It's about impressing God's heart into our children's hearts in everyday moments so that being a Christian isn't about going to church, managing sin, or even reading the Bible, but rather about living each moment with hearts turned to God and lives reflecting God's love.

It is about creating disciples by remembering Ephesians 5:15-16's exhortation: "Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time." NFJ

—Christina Embree is the founder and director of ReFocus Ministry.

Scan the QR code to learn more about Christina's ReFocus Ministry.


Asher

the MONSTER at the end of this book

If you hate spoilers and are unfamiliar with *The Monster at the End of This Book, Starring Lovable Furry Old Grover*, I encourage you to stop what you are doing and find a copy to read. And if you are under the age of 50 and have never read the book, I would like to express my sympathy.

The classic *Little Golden Book* featured one of the beloved characters of Sesame Street and led the way in breaking the "fourth wall," a method in literature and television that would, years later, become a mainstay. Its premise is that Grover, after reading the title of the book he is in and learning a monster will appear at the end, implores the reader to do everything they can to not arrive at the end of the book.

He begins where we all should begin when we don't want someone to do something. He asks. "Listen," he says, "I have an idea. If you don't turn any pages, we will never get to the end of this book. And that is good, because there is a monster at the end of this book. So please do not turn the page."

If you refuse his request and turn the page, you discover his rage at what you have done. Grover can't understand why you aren't as terrified of the monster at the end of the book as he is. So, he resorts to more extreme measures.

The next section of the story is a variation on the themes found in *The Three Little Pigs*, with Grover constructing increasingly more difficult barriers to keep you from turning the page: rope to tie the pages together, wood planks to nail the book shut, and, finally, brick and mortar to create a wall between him and the end of the book. When all that fails, he resorts to begging.

But once Grover and the reader arrive at the end of the book, they find comfort rather than terror. It turns out the book's title was correct. There was a monster, but the monster was Grover himself.

I have met many people who read this book as children. Only a few of them remember connecting to it on a deep, existential level as I do. I would read the story repeatedly, and continued to read it long after I graduated to more advanced books. I can remember lingering over

the pages that Grover had attempted to tie, board, or wall shut and thinking, "I probably shouldn't turn the page," before I turned the page.

Even decades after I first encountered the story, my chest still tightens with a certain intensity just thinking about it.

It doesn't take a therapist to figure out that my childhood love, and then obsession, with the book had more to do with anxiety than it did with Grover. Like all great children's literature (and, for that matter, all great art), the story drilled a hole deep into my experience to excavate what was really going on under the surface.

Like Grover, I was always fearful of what was around the corner and would develop elaborate plans to stave off whatever lurked in the dark. Those plans were mostly mental, and developing them occupied much of my time. To compound the problem, I was reading another book as a young child that promised the end would be full of monsters.

The religious tradition I grew up in was as obsessed with the book of Revelation as I was with *The Monster at the End of This Book*. But unlike the children's literature I was reading, I assumed the scary things in that book were "really real." Sadly, there were no adults around to tell me otherwise.

As an adult, I find it curious that those in the church who are most leery of things like math and the hard sciences, are also the ones most likely to demand that we read the book of Revelation literally. But they are also the ones least likely to be fans of poetry and fiction, which makes it difficult for them to understand the monsters at the end of our book as being anything other than metaphor and allusion.

This made childhood for those of us who grew up in that world difficult, excruciating even. Compounding these anxieties were the preachers whose livelihoods depended on making us question whether the prayer we prayed was done so with enough sincerity and intention to ensure we didn't slip into the lake of fire at the end of this book.

I am old enough to raise an eyebrow at every young person who uses the word "trauma" to refer to something they experienced as a child that was uncomfortable. Still, millennials and those in Generation Z have given us a gift in questioning the acceptability of many of the things that were inflicted on us when we were younger.

So, even though I can laugh about it, I can say with certainty that the fundamentalist obsession with the "lake of fire" at the end of the book, and their insistence on using campfires as opportunities for object lessons, was child endangerment. The same goes for the beasts spewing sulfur and horseman swinging scythes.

None of this is to suggest Revelation is off-limits for children. On the contrary. There's probably no category of human more capable of understanding the true depth and meaning of the book than children. We should actually be letting them lead the way.

At this point, I probably shouldn't assume this is old information for you. John's Apocalypse, which we know of as Revelation, belongs to a genre of literature that largely faded away in antiquity. But there are still remnants of apocalyptic literature peppered throughout what we refer to as "fantasy" and "science fiction." And its primarily characteristic is not just that it is metaphorical, although it is certainly that. Its true ability to transform is in who can understand it and for whom understanding is elusive.

The ancient believers who first received the colorful, majestic, and cryptic letter from John the Revelator would have known exactly what the book was about: God favors the meek, the powerless, and the oppressed. Their end is a hopeful one. To quote Frederick Buechner, a saint who understood children and ancient literature well, "The worst thing is never the last thing."

Beuchner offered other instructive words about the advantage children have in understanding the ways of God, in his book *Wishful Thinking*: "... the people who get into heaven are people who, like children, don't worry about it too much. They are people who, like children, live with their hands open more than with their fists clenched. They are people who, like children, are so relatively unburdened by preconceptions that if somebody says there's a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, they are perfectly willing to go take a look for themselves."

For those compelled to ask, "Are you saying Revelation isn't true," I must reply with what all children know in their hearts to be the case, regardless of how literal it was meant to be taken, "Of course it is true." The monsters at the end of our book reveal to us the same truth that the garden at the beginning of the book did: God is the first and the last, we are his children, and we will be with God in the end.

And you were so scared. NFJ

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 Meeting – Norman, OK

CBF North Carolina — Greensboro, NC
March 14

Americans United Summit for Religious Freedom — Washington, D.C
April 13-16

American Baptist Home Mission Societies' Space for Grace and Spiritual Caregivers Conference — King of Prussia, PA
April 9-11

United Methodist Church's Council of Bishops — Charlotte, NC | April 17

Eastern University — St. Davids, PA | May 2

American University — Washington, D.C
April 26

Identity Theology

A Through Line of Violence and Antisemitism

By Keri Ladner

Most people have never heard of Identity Theology. But they have heard of the Ku Klux Klan, Aryan Nations, the 1992 Ruby Ridge siege, the 1995 Oklahoma City Bombing, Cliven and Ammon Bundy's 2014 and 2016 standoffs against the US federal government, the 2015 Charleston church shooting, the 2017 Unite the Right rally and the 2018 Pittsburgh synagogue shooting. And how many of us were unable to look away on January 6, 2021, when our televisions showed live footage of white supremacists attacking the U.S. Capitol and waving a Confederate battle flag in its rotunda?

Identity Theology is a through-line of these American tragedies, and most of us don't understand it or the real and present danger it poses to democracy.

Identity Theology is a set of beliefs and practices that has been animating acts of violence and terror by white supremacists for nearly a century. Its fundamental tenet is a pseudo-historical teaching known as Anglo-Israelism, which claims that the true people of Israel, as spoken of in the Old Testament, migrated from the Levant into Europe and, ultimately, into the British Isles.

As such, white people—not Jews— are the true Israel spoken of throughout the Bible, and they are central in what Identity followers believe are prophecies about the "end times." If that belief sounds inconceivably outlandish, it is. But at the same time, not entirely so.

Dan Brown's 2003 bestselling novel "The DaVinci Code" drew heavily on a parallel belief system known as Franco-Israelism. Franco-Israelism claims that the French people, particularly the Merovingian dynasty that ruled from the fifth through eighth centuries, are the true descendants of Israel. When used as the storyline for an action-packed novel-turned-movie, Franco-Israelism became not only palatable to a mass audience, but also highly believable.

Similarly, Anglo-Israelism and, by extension, Identity Theology, do not need to be historically verifiable to be highly influential.

So, if Identity claims that white people are the true Israel, what do Identity followers make of today's Jewish people? One of the most unrelenting themes of Identity Theology is profound and violent antisemitism.

When white supremacists carried tiki torches and marched through the streets of Charlottesville chanting, "Jews will not replace us," they were drawing on this Identity trope. When the shooter who murdered 11 people at Pittsburgh's Tree of Life Synagogue claimed that Jews were the "enemy of white people" and posted on social media, "I can't stand by and watch my people get slaughtered," he was also operating out of Identity-based antisemitism.

This particularly virulent hatred emerges from a heterodox doctrine known as the "two-seed theory." Two-seed theory claims that the original sin committed by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is not that the couple ate the forbidden fruit, but instead that Eve had sex with the serpent. She became pregnant with Cain, who was the literal spawn of Satan and the father of the Jewish people. To Identity followers, Jews are less than sub-human; they are pretty literally incarnations of Satan and must be eliminated.

In the aftermath of the October 7 Hamas attack, the world has become divided over support for the liberation of Palestine versus the security of the Jewish state. This disjuncture has turned into a proxy war across university campuses in America, as presidents are forced to step down, valedictorian speeches by students who support Palestine are canceled and on-campus vitriol against Jewish students reaches new highs.

Both sides have very legitimate concerns about the wholesale destruction of Israelis and Palestinians. Yes, Israel has been engaging in humanitarian atrocities against Palestinians for decades, and this savagery must stop. Yes, Hamas fighters brutalized children while their parents had to watch and murdered family members in front of each other.

That barbarism cannot be condoned.

Yet there are rogue elements that cannot be accounted for in this binary, Israel-versus-Palestine approach to the violence in the Levant. They include Christian Zionism, Identity-fueled antisemitism, conspiracy theories that have institutionalized antisemitic tropes, understandings of biblical prophecy and governments around the world whose priorities do not include the cessation of violence in the Levant.

Also on this list is the legacy of the Holocaust, something of particular significance given that Adolf Hitler's occultic belief system paralleled Identity Theology in significant ways. Identity Theology and white supremacism must be understood, and faith-based alternatives to the never-ending cycle of terrorism must be explored. NFJ

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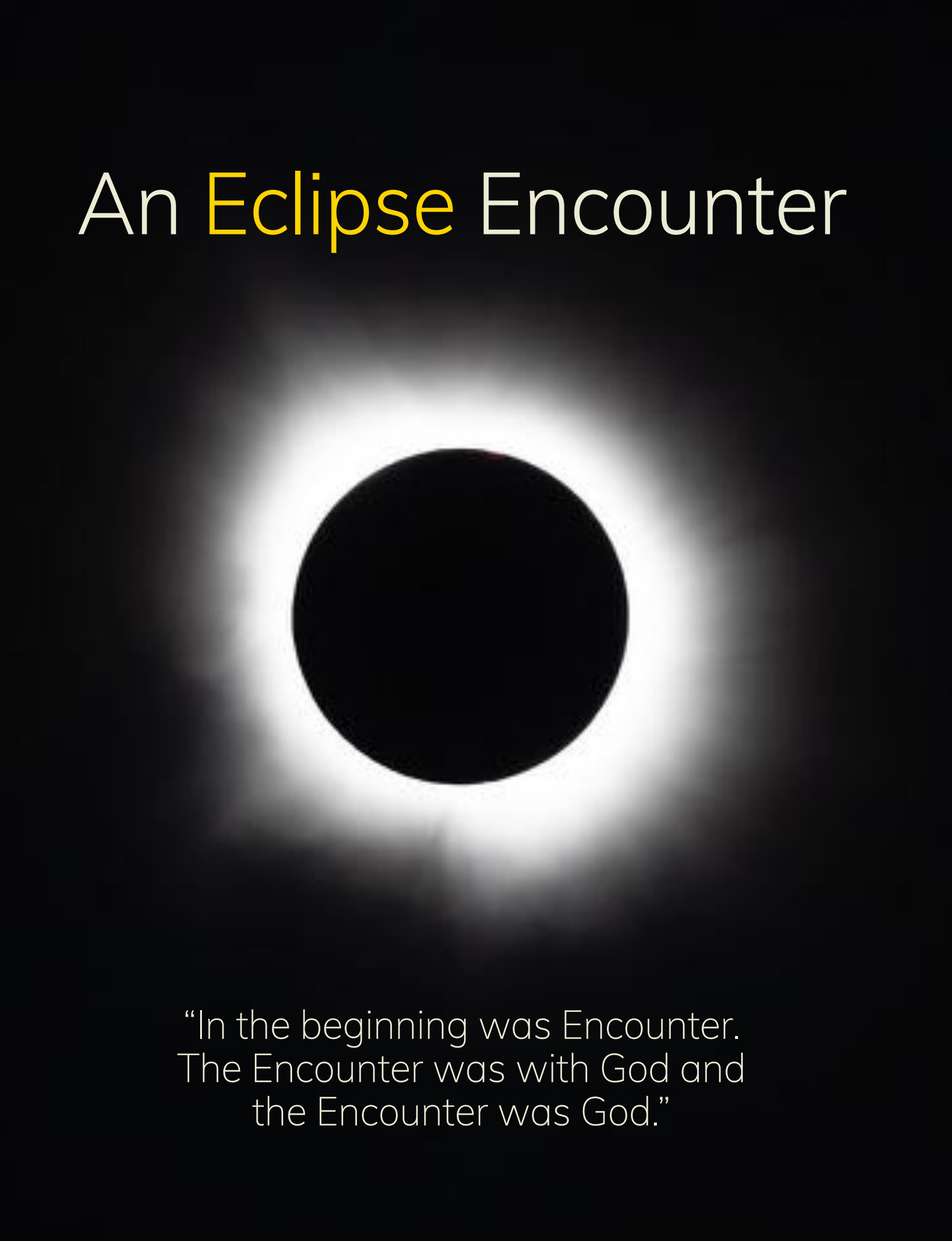
An Eclipse Encounter



"In the beginning was Encounter.
The Encounter was with God and
the Encounter was God."

By Craig Nash

I sat in 33F, a window seat, on my way from Dallas to Pennsylvania for the annual Space for Grace & Spiritual Caregivers Conference hosted by the American Baptist Home Mission Societies. Sitting next to me, in the middle, was a mom who I presume to be South Asian and in her mid-30s. Her young children and husband sat in the row behind us. A Black woman in her mid-20s sat in the aisle seat. Once we were all situated, I just had to know, so I asked: Did the kids see the eclipse?

I had scheduled the flight several weeks earlier, and when I received the confirmation email, I noticed something didn't seem right. I thought to myself, "April 8…April 8…Why does that date sound so familiar?" Then it hit me. It was familiar because my hometown of Waco, Texas had been marketing itself for over two years as a prime destination for eclipse viewing, as our part of the state would be right in the path of totality.

The flight I originally scheduled would be in the air when totality hit, but fortunately, I was able to reschedule for later in the afternoon.

With all the warnings of apoc-eclipse traffic swirling for weeks, I left early in the morning to avoid missing the event or my flight. I planned to arrive and work from the tailgate of my truck in the remote airport parking lot, then view the eclipse before boarding the plane.

The drive from Waco to Dallas was as quick and seamless as any I have ever made. I-35 was more speedway and less parking lot than I expected. This gave me time to land at a coffee shop before heading to my pre-paid eclipse viewing area.

When I arrived at the parking lot, I expected more people to have had my idea, but it was only half full. I arrived a few minutes before the show began. The only other humans nearby were a couple parked on the far end of the lot. I could tell from a distance that they had professional viewing equipment.

A few years ago, in the West Texas town of Marfa, some friends and I happened upon a younger couple of amateur astronomers with a high-power telescope. We were invited to look into it as it was focused on the rings of Saturn. I gasped in an unguarded moment of awe.

I thought this experience might be replicated in the airport parking lot, so I slowly moseyed my way over to the couple like Doc Brown approaching Doc Brown in Back to the Future II.

I started the small talk by saying, "I kind of thought there'd be more people here." They agreed and told me they try to see the eclipse wherever it appears. They are from Chicago and were in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, for the 2017 totality.

But they didn't seem too interested in chit-chat and never took the bait to invite me to look into their equipment, so I returned to the truck to experience the moments in solitude.

The clouds were rolling in Dallas, so much of the next hour was spent calculating where certain clouds were in the sky, how fast they were moving and whether they would ruin the much-anticipated moment.

I also, to quote one of my favorite Jason Isbell lyrics, "fought the urge to live inside my telephone" for the next hour. I did pick it up occasionally to share snarky posts about tipping the eclipse and how youth pastors will preach about "gazing into the Son" next week. But for the most part, I lived in the moment, looking up with my special glasses every few moments to track the moon's progression.

When it covered about 90% of the sun, I was all in. So were the clouds.

At 95%, the moon-sun combo was unobstructed, but a cloud was threatening. At 99%, the cloud appeared to ruin the day completely. I was resigned to my fate.

The cloud seemed too large and moving too slowly to be out of the way before the totality ended. So I took my glasses off and shrugged.

Now look. I completely understand how problematic it is to attribute fortunate or unfortunate weather circumstances to God.

One person's "The tornado turned left just before it hit my house, thank God!" is another person's "Oh my God, the tornado destroyed my house!" So, I will not attribute what happened next to the Divine.

Regardless, at 100% coverage, the cloud split in two.

Trying to put into words the next four minutes feels akin to being asked to be on the team to carry the ark of the covenant on poles after the first guy who did it was struck dead.

The best I can do is this: In the movie "Contact," when Jodie Foster fell through the portal of time contraption, the loud, dissonant music that had been in a steady crescendo for a long time stopped, and there was complete silence. After gazing into the universe, trying to make sense of it all, the only words she could get out were, "They should have sent a poet."

I'm not a poet. I also am not, by nature, a hand-raiser. But in the moment, it was an involuntary response, just after I gasped.

The next hour or so is a blur. Things only began to clear up when I was in 33F and just had to know–did the kids see it? I didn't know these kids, but I hoped desperately they had.

The mom and her kids saw it, but the young lady in the aisle seat did not. She was on another flight when it occurred. The next few minutes consisted of the mom and I stuttering, trying to find the words, with tears slowly welling up in both our eyes.

Just before take-off, as I was reaching to put my phone in airplane mode, my own mom texted me– "I saw it." The tears flowed even more.

In tinkering with the opening words of the Gospel of John, Father Peter Day translated the famous passage, "In the beginning was Encounter. The Encounter was with God and the Encounter was God."

And I saw it. NFJ

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