

What shall we say?

A triptych for Thomas G. Long

by [Thomas Lynch](#) in the [June 24, 2015](#) issue

I

The etymology is perilous:

pulpit from *pulpitum*, meaning *scaffold*,
by which we come, at length, to *catafalque*—
those f's and a's, like tongue and groove boards,
like rope enough to hang, or hoist, or let
a corpse down to its permanent repose.

One platform's raised; one frames a coffin's rest.

So, first the elocution, then the wake?

Like lamentations or the case of Job—
that vexing, god-awful, comfortless book.

And yet we rise to the occasion,

Sunday after Sunday after Sunday.

A bit of scripture, a psalm or poem,
something that happened in the week just past;
we try to weave them all together as
if to say a loving God's in charge.

As if we were certain of a loving God.

We see by faith. We live in hope. We love.

Or play the odds, as Pascal did. We fall.

Sometimes it all seems quite impossible.

And yet we rise again and walk the plank,
and sing into oblivion good news:

Unto God the glory, all praise, all thanks!

while nodding congregants loll in their pews.

II

Imagine Tom out on the fire escape,
between the world at large and inner life,
edging the proscenium, downstage right.
whilst curios and characters and shades

unveil themselves as dancing beauties do.
I have tricks in my pocket, things up my sleeve!
Upstage, sheer curtains rise, transparencies:
Truth in the pleasant guise of illusion.

Like John on Patmos, John the Harbinger—
voices crying out of the wilderness—
Make straight ye the Lord's way! quoth Isaiah.
Eschatology and Apocalypse:

Think Esmeralda in the cathedral,
Jim Hawkins in the rigging, chased by Hands
or Ishmael, just flotsam at the end,
alone, before God and all these people.

Or Montaigne in his tower library:
"the whole of Man's estate in every man."
Or Yeats pacing the boards at Ballylee:
"How can we know the dancer from the dance?"

Thus, exegetes and preachers on their own
hold forth, against a never-ceasing din
of second-guessing, out there on their limbs:
Have faith! Behold, the mystery! Behold!

III

That fresco of the *Sermon on the Mount*
by Fra Angelico (dear brother John)
shows Jesus semi-circled by his men,
gilt-haloed Galileans, but for one,
who will betray him later with a kiss.
Atop their sandstone tuffets, rapt, engaged,
he's going on about beatitudes,
fulfillments of the law, the words to pray.

Outside the frame, unseen, a multitude
leans in to listen to the hermeneutics,
which are not without some challenges, to wit:
though we be smitten, turn the other cheek,
go the second mile, love our enemies;
while we're forgiven only so much as
we forgive those who trespass against us.
A certain eye-for-eyeness to that scheme,
a tooth-for-toothedness. A quid pro quo?
As if, to finally get, we must let go?
Sometimes it's so, sometimes it isn't? So,
what shall we say to these things? Who's to know?
Say who abides in love abides in God.
Say God is love. Love God. Love one another.
Say grace is undeserved and plentiful.
Say if we're saved, it's mostly from ourselves.