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June 2024

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A failure of compassion

Outdoor workers need a little water and shade every four hours. Is that too much to ask?

by Peter W. Marty

Peter W. Marty is the CENTURY*'s editor/publisher.*

One way to deepen your empathy for other people who live in difficult circumstances is to imagine walking in their shoes. I often do this when I encounter people in daily life who perform jobs that I'm not sure I could manage or tolerate for even a day. Whether it's an individual enduring dangerous work conditions, tedious assignments, a hostile environment, or depressingly low wages, I try to picture trading my life for theirs. It's a sobering mental experiment that quickly alters perspective and shifts one's assumptions about how easy or hard life can be. If it doesn't alter such a basic outlook within us, I think we ought to require ourselves to undertake the hazardous or dispiriting work for which we're displaying such grand indifference.

I thought about this empathy-deepening exercise recently when I learned of Florida's governor signing new legislation prohibiting cities, counties, and municipalities from requiring employers to provide outdoor workers with access to water, rest, and shade. Florida's bill matches similar legislation approved in Texas last year. The Texas law nullified existing ordinances in cities like Austin and Dallas that guaranteed construction workers a ten-minute break every four hours. Elements of the business and agricultural communities fought for the newly restrictive legislation, fearing they'd shoulder onerous economic burdens if the bill didn't pass. Apparently they lack the imagination to calculate how a periodic break might actually increase worker productivity and morale.

We should be clear that these heat protection ordinances do not tank companies. They give some water and a few minutes of shade every four hours to workers wilting in the heat. They don't hand over year-end bonuses, offer profit-sharing plans, or create stock options for workers. They involve a cup of cold water, about which Jesus himself has something to say (Matt. 10:42). Is requiring a little water and shade every four hours too much to ask? "Insane and inhumane," writes Jeff Goodell, author of *The Heat Will Kill You First*. "This is 19th-century stuff, as barbaric as kids working in coal mines." Heat is the number one weather-related killer in the US.

I'm trying to guess at what might create the hardness of heart in legislators who make such moves. I wonder if a certain degree of emotional illiteracy is at play, a cold indifference fostering this calculated neglect of vulnerable people. Must compassion really be considered a chore? Can't it be a choice we make, one that's even informed by faith? "When someone suffers, and it is not you," writes Elie Wiesel, "that person comes first. His very suffering gives him priority." That's what I understand the guts of compassion to be. You make choices that privilege the person in front of you instead of merely attending first to your own interests and predilections.

Ninety percent of Florida legislators profess to be Christian; 100 percent of Texas legislators do. These lawmakers must have some basic familiarity with the parable of the Good Samaritan. What they may not have ever heard, however, is Martin Luther King Jr.'s suggestion that this parable should encourage a "dangerous unselfishness." The priest and Levite asked themselves, says King, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" But it's the Samaritan who asks himself, "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?"

It doesn't take rocket science to protect workers from heat. All that's needed is a little drinking water, some periodic shade, and a bit of dangerous unselfishness. Or, as Emily Dickinson put it: "If I can ease one Life the Aching, Or cool one Pain . . . I shall not live in vain." ❑

AGATA NOWICKA

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"Contemplation isn't about heading inward. It's about paying attention to what is really going on."

—Rachel Mann, *page 31*

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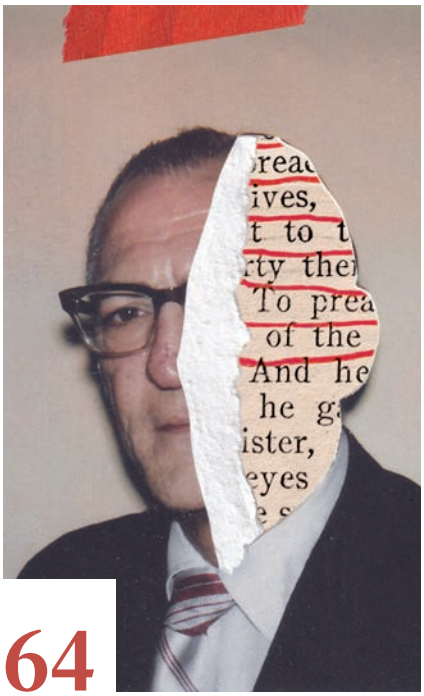

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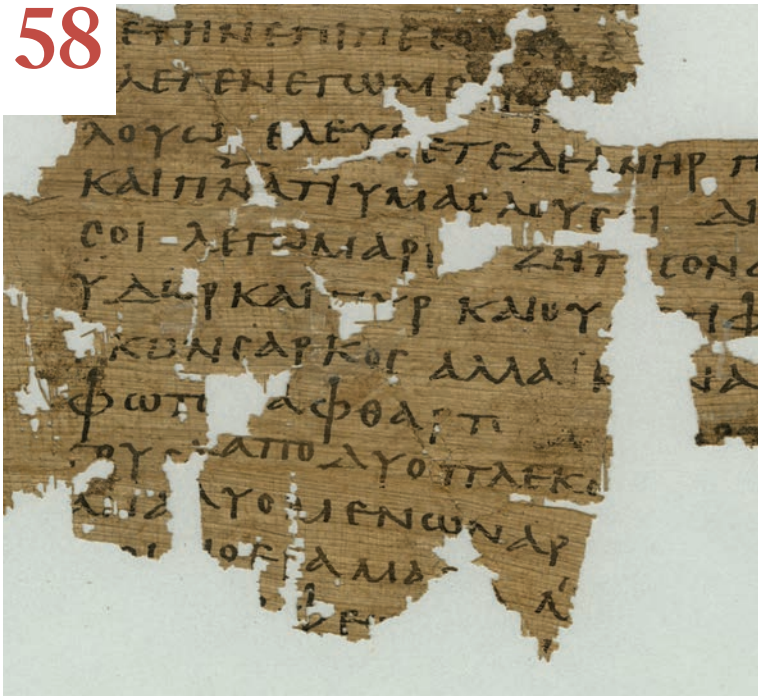

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COFFEE: DANIEL RICHARDSON | Ó TUAMA: DAVID PUGH | PAPYRUS: EGYPT EXPLORATION SOCIETY / UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD | FATHER ILLUSTRATION: VANESSA SABA

Features

"Most of the money in the coffee industry is made by the people who roast the coffee, not those who grow it."

—Amy Frykholm, *page 42*

Poetry

The Christian Century

June 2024 Vol. 141, No. 6

Letters & Comments

We welcome responses to our articles. Email us at letters@christiancentury.org or join the conversation on Twitter (@ChristianCent) or Facebook (@ChristianCenturyMagazine).

Pro-Israel propaganda?

My blood boils reading the piece by Olivia Brodsky and Joshua Stanton ("Ten ways to criticize Israel that aren't antisemitic," May). Accusing Israel of genocide is not an antisemitic trope; it's fully in line with South Africa's 84-page allegation filed at the International Court of Justice, a March 2024 report submitted by United Nations special rapporteur Francesca Albanese, and initial assessments by hundreds of scholars—Jews and non-Jews alike—who study genocide. Still, Brodsky and Stanton take exception as people "who have family trees more dead than alive," even while Israel's assault is wiping out entire genealogies of Palestinians and a new acronym has emerged from Gaza: WCNSF. It stands for "wounded child, no surviving family."

The authors also take offense at the idea of Israeli apartheid. The burden is on them to refute the findings of organizations like Amnesty International, B'Tselem, Human Rights Watch, and the United Nations, among others. One wonders how the writers, who object to accusations of Israeli colonialism, would explain the Jewish Colonisation Association and the Jewish Colonial Trust, or the scores of diary entries, correspondences, and official imperial policies written by the earliest visionaries and architects of Zionism, all of whom characterized it explicitly as colonial. That Zionism emerged in part from the real and present danger of antisemitism does not nullify the colonialism embedded within it.

Its writers' paternalism aside, the piece reads as a deeply cynical, misleading, and manipulative attempt to censor Christian condemnation of Israel's assault on Palestinians, even as Israel continues to engineer total social collapse in Gaza with the unconditional, unwavering support of an American (Democratic) presidential administration. Asymmetry has always been at the heart of this atrocity, and numerous studies, independent

analyses, and journalist accounts demonstrate an enduring and overwhelming Western media bias in favor of Israel. The CENTURY contributed to this by publishing this article. Curiously, the definition of antisemitism seems to expand in direct proportion to the mounting devastation in Gaza, which is a disservice to both Jews and everyone else.

There may not be an easy consensus on the issue among the CENTURY's editorial team, but this piece was the antithesis of "thoughtful, independent, and progressive." It was naked and clichéd propaganda. Your readers, and much more importantly the Palestinian people, deserve better than this.

—Adam Vander Tuig
Beacon, NY

According to Olivia Brodsky and Joshua Stanton, those who accuse Israel of genocide, apartheid, or colonialism are antisemitic. Perhaps that might come as a surprise to groups like the government of South Africa, the late Desmond Tutu, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the Presbyterian Church (USA)—not to mention B'Tselem, Israel's foremost human rights organization, and Jewish Voice for Peace—all of whom have leveled some form of these charges at the state of Israel. The implicit starting point for the article seems to be that Israel can't commit genocide or apartheid, which are dismissed as "tropes," so the authors don't bother with refuting those claims. Presumably the authors know better than the International Court of Justice—or our Palestinian siblings in Christ, who are on the receiving end of unchecked, American-funded Israeli violence.

The definition of antisemitism seems to expand in direct proportion to the mounting devastation in Gaza.

This is a classic form of misdirection. When you don't like the message, attack the messenger. As long as we are talking about whether or not someone is antisemitic, we are not talking about the massive Israeli public support for starvation as a weapon of war, or the 33,000 (and counting) deaths of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, or Israel's targeting of aid workers and journalists and health-care professionals. Brodsky and Stanton seek to define the terms of acceptable debate in a way that functions to distract from and minimize the systemic violence Israel commits.

Shame on the CENTURY for running this article. What aggravates the issue is that this is part of the magazine's refusal to be forthright in its condemnation of Israeli violence, a pattern evident in its December editorial ("Bearing witness to multiple stories"). That editorial hewed to a false and dangerous "both-sides-ism" account that overlooked both international law and the voices of our Palestinian Christian siblings.

—Craig Hunter
Denton, Tx

Olivia Brodsky and Joshua Stanton respond: While we recognize that the responses to our article might come from a place of genuine concern and disagreement, we had hoped for better discourse from readers of this respected publication. We are disappointed to see how well-intentioned, educated individuals can fall victim to misinformation. Once again, others are attempting to define antisemitism on behalf of the majority of Jews—a phenomenon that would be widely condemned for any other vulnerable group.

The working definition of antisemitism set forth by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance offers the following examples:

- Calling for, aiding, or justifying the killing or harming of Jews in the name of a radical ideology or an extremist view of religion.
- Making mendacious, dehumanizing, demonizing, or stereotypical allegations about Jews as such or the power of Jews as collective—such as, especially but not exclusively, the myth about a world Jewish conspiracy or of Jews controlling the media, economy, government or other societal institutions.
- Accusing Jews as a people of being responsible for real or imagined wrongdoing committed by a single Jewish person or group, or even for acts committed by non-Jews.

- Denying the fact, scope, mechanisms (e.g., gas chambers) or intentionality of the genocide of the Jewish people at the hands of National Socialist Germany and its supporters and accomplices during World War II (the Holocaust).
- Accusing the Jews as a people, or Israel as a state, of inventing or exaggerating the Holocaust.
- Accusing Jewish citizens of being more loyal to Israel, or to the alleged priorities of Jews worldwide, than to the interests of their own nations.
- Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor.
- Applying double standards by requiring of it a behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation.
- Using the symbols and images associated with classic antisemitism (e.g., claims of Jews killing Jesus or blood libel) to characterize Israel or Israelis.
- Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis.
- Holding Jews collectively responsible for actions of the state of Israel.

Furthermore, the cherry-picking of historical data and tokenizing of fringe Jewish voices is not a sound basis for meaningful interchange. Nor is the erasure of Jewish peoplehood and history in order to support implausible, distorted historical narratives. The views presented in response to our article are not only problematic but also morally unsound, and—at best—misinformed. To gain a deeper understanding of our views on this matter, we invite you to read one of the many articles we've published on antisemitism in the progressive movement, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and constructive dialogue, particularly in the aftermath of October 7.

Once again, others are attempting to define antisemitism on behalf of the majority of Jews.

The editors reply:
Adam Vander Tuig is correct that there are multiple perspectives on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict within our editorial staff. It would be surprising if it were otherwise, given that the same is very much true of our readership and of the wider world of Christianity. In any case, we are committed to publishing a variety of voices and perspectives on this subject.

That's why we published this particular article—not because it speaks for the CENTURY editors collectively or for any of us individually. It isn't meant to. Neither are the Voices column on the tear gas canisters the IDF fires into a soccer field in a West Bank refugee camp (this issue, p. 32), the review of the new book by Palestinian theologian Mitri Raheb (May), or the reported feature on the dire shortage of clean water in Gaza (April). But we think they're all worth reading and learning from.

As for our December unsigned editorial, while it did indeed aim to summarize the narratives of both Palestinians and Israelis, this was not based in the reflexive sort of "both-sides-ism" that Craig Hunter suggests. It was based in what we see as a fundamental reality of this decades-long conflict. We stand by what we wrote there: "Every conflict involves competing stories, but often one story clearly embodies far more truth than the other. Not in this case. Each of the two stories sketched out here is factually sound, historically informed, and morally compelling. Both stories are true. And they are heartbreaking and tragic."

The value of scars

Thank you for Josh Scott's In the Lectionary column on Luke 24 about Jesus' scars and transforming pain (April). My scars are from the removal of my cancer. Those can be seen by others, and I am able to transform that pain more easily than can my friend, who has unseen scars from childhood abuse. My scars tell a story I enjoy sharing, but some can't share their stories except with their most trusted friends or counselors, so the scars and stories remain unseen. This article gave me a new perspective on Jesus' words in John 20:29, "blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." It is in this knowing without seeing—knowing our scars without seeing them—that we can rise above an us-versus-them mentality and recognize that we all have scars. Even unseen scars can be transformed as we build compassion on this solidarity.

—Ted Larson
Sacramento, CA

Gathering for good

On a Copenhagen street, emergency responders and passersby formed a spontaneous community.

Five years and a day after Paris's Notre-Dame cathedral burned, a fire broke out on the roof of Copenhagen's 400-year-old stock exchange building, known to locals as Børsen. Emergency responders, office workers, and pedestrians watched in shock as flames spread through the iconic building. Firefighters battled the fire on the upper floors while officials on the ground started pulling historic artwork out of the building. As Børsen burned, journalists documented a fascinating development: passersby were running into the building to help save the paintings, antique furniture, and other artifacts.

These Good Samaritans weren't art historians; they were ordinary commuters or people out for a walk. If someone had asked them beforehand what was worth risking their life for, they probably wouldn't have named Peder Severin Krøyer's 1895 oil painting *From Copenhagen Stock Exchange.* Yet when the moment arose, they decided it was worth the risk.

Maybe they sensed that a culture is best embodied when its artifacts are regarded as shared possessions. Maybe their adrenaline was fed by the scene's tangibility: the sound of crackling flames, the vivid colors splashed on canvases. Maybe they just saw six people lumbering under the weight of a massive painting and realized that a seventh could lighten the burden. For whatever reasons, these strangers spontaneously formed a transitory community around the idea of working toward a common good.

In this issue, theologian Brian Bantum explores the role of the church in the world (see "What's special about a church building?" p. 38). How does a church compare to a bicycle club, he wonders, or a public park or art museum? Where do we draw the line between insider and outsider, host and guest, stranger and kin? Can we share the goods we hold in common, so that the beauty we experience in worship might burst out and illuminate others?

Before the Børsen fire, if asked what was worth risking one's life for, people probably wouldn't have named an 1895 oil painting.

Ultimately Bantum describes the work of the church as a collective endeavor, a transitory tending of the earth, "a point in time and space where our participation with God's work in the world condenses, where bodies and souls gather into rich gray clouds just waiting to return what has been gathered." That's a generative image for Christians to ponder, whether we believe the church is a group of members who gather regularly around word and sacrament or we define the church simply as whoever happens to show up on a given day. For a brief period, we who gather—we who are gathered by God—condense into a cloud that's ready to burst, just waiting to water the thirsty land.

Something similar happened at Børsen that April morning. For a stretch of time, the line between firefighter and ordinary citizen blurred and a living cloud of witnesses emerged. It wasn't church, but it also wasn't entirely unlike church. Nobody died in the fire, and some significant pieces of Denmark's cultural history were preserved. It was a small victory but a palpable one. And then it dissipated: the bystanders went on with their days, the firefighters continued to extinguish the flames, the art historians took inventory of what had been saved. The land was a little less thirsty, and life went on. ❑

Seen & Heard

What the CC editors are reading and paying attention to

The cost-cutters come for the AP

Gannett, the publisher of *USA Today* and more than 200 local newspapers, and McClatchy, publisher of more than two dozen papers, including the *Miami Herald* and *Kansas City Star*, are ending their content relationship with the Associated Press. Executives described the termination as a cost-saving move, but some media observers—along with staff members at some of the affected publications—warn that the decision will cut off a vital source of reliable reporting that readers have come to depend on. As local papers have cut staff, they've relied more and more on the wire service to fill the gaps. "For anyone who cares about news in a functioning democracy," said Margot Susca, an American University journalism professor, "this is just another nail in the coffin" (*Washington Post*, March 21).

Defending religious freedom

Harvard Law School's Religious Freedom Clinic, a pro bono student program directed by Brigham Young University alumni Josh McDaniel, offers representation and counsel to members of minority faiths on various religious liberty issues. While legal clinics have been around for some time, clinics dedicated to religious liberty are a recent development. The first was pioneered at Stanford in 2013, followed by clinics at Notre Dame, Yale, Pepperdine, and elsewhere. Since Harvard's clinic was founded over Zoom during the height of the pandemic in 2020, it has filed briefs defending Western Apache and Lakota school children, a death row inmate, and an orthodox Jewish community. Judge John Bush says that these clinics are flourishing at secular institutions in response to the needs of an increasingly diverse and pluralistic society that can no longer take religious liberty for granted (*Deseret News*, April 15).

Jewish security

63%

of Jewish adults said the status of Jews in the US is less secure than a year ago. That's an increase of

30

percentage points since 2021.

46%

of Jews reported they changed their behavior out of fear of antisemitism, including avoiding posting content online that would identify them as Jewish.

1 in 5

American college students said they have been excluded from a group or event because they are Jewish, and

1/4

of those students reported that fear led them to avoid wearing, carrying, or displaying things that would identify them as Jewish.

SOURCE: American Jewish Committee

The end of a choir school?

One of the last remaining residential schools for choristers in the world is considering closing because of financial woes. For 105 years, boys age 8 to 14 have lived at the St. Thomas Choir School in midtown Manhattan, where they sing five services a week. "It costs a lot of money to maintain this tradition. And now the money's running out," said Carl F. Turner, the St. Thomas Church rector. The Episcopal congregation's $138 million endowment is not enough to continue to support the school, which currently has 28 students and 15 faculty and staff members. Tuition, at $20,570 per year, is heavily subsidized, and many students receive scholarships. The residential model is critical to achieving the school's exacting standards. "These are ancient traditions which are disappearing," said Turner. "It's here, alive and well, in New York of all places. But it may not be in the future" (*New York Times*, March 29).

Whose church closures?

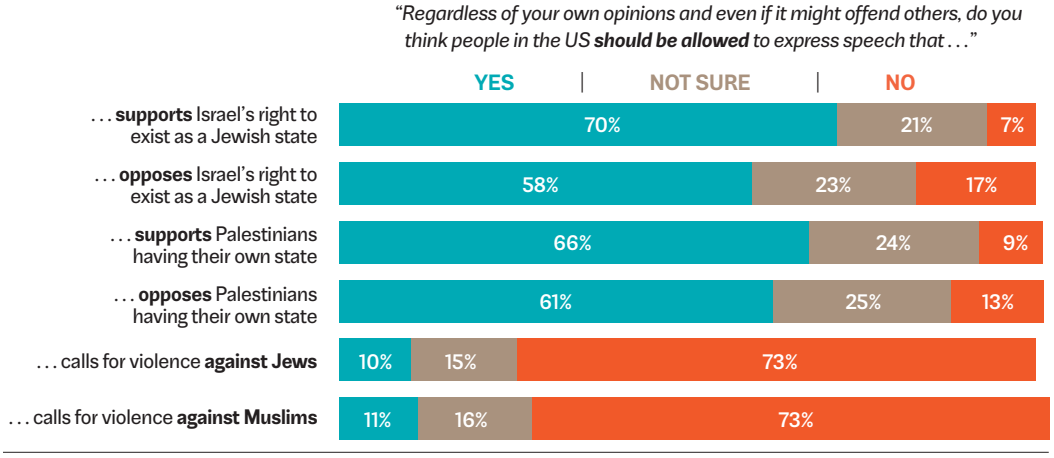
The number of US Catholics is increasing, but the number of Catholic parishes nationwide declined 9 percent between 1970 and 2020, according to a new study from Georgetown University. The number of priests also decreased by 40 percent over that 50-year span, and the priest shortage has played a significant role in parish closings. In 10 of the 11 dioceses studied, closures disproportionately affected Black and Latino neighborhoods and neighborhoods with higher poverty and unemployment. C. Vanessa White, associate professor of spirituality and ministry at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, says that "the CARA report only confirms what many Black Catholics already believe—the presence and gift of Black Catholics is not welcomed in the Church" (RNS, April 5).

A skinless book

In 1934, *Des Destinées de l'Ame* (*Destinies of the Soul*), a meditation on the soul and life after death by Arsène Houssaye, arrived at Harvard University accompanied by a note from a medical doctor claiming that he had bound the book in the skin of an unknown dead woman. The practice of binding books in human skin, called *anthropodermic bibliopegy*, has been reported since as early as the 16th century. In 2014, Houssaye's book—still housed in Harvard's Houghton Library—was tested, and the source material of its binding

Free speech and its limits

Most Americans say speech supporting or opposing Israeli and Palestinian statehood should be allowed, but calls for violence should not.



Note: No answer responses not shown.

Source: Pew Research Center survey conducted February 13–25, 2024

was confirmed. Ten years later, the library has announced that it has removed the skin, citing ethical considerations and consultations with the university's stakeholders. The school also issued an apology for using sensationalistic publicity about the book in ways that "compromised the dignity of the human being whose remains were used for its binding" (BBC, March 28).

So long to swiping

Dating apps are taking a dive in popularity. A 2017 study showed that more than a quarter of different-sex couples were meeting on apps and dating websites. That number has remained consistent, but the vibe has changed: by 2022, only half of subscribers reported having a positive experience on the apps, down from 2019. That may be because apps have monetized, turning to subscription models and paid features, while users were once able to swipe for free. The paid model creates a paradox: monetized apps promise to help us to find love, but they only make money if we keep swiping. This may be why even the big apps have faltered. Tinder saw its paid users fall by nearly 10 percent in 2023, and Bumble and Match Group have seen their stock prices plummet (*Atlantic*, April 10).

A generous correspondent

During her 16 years as an editor at Random House, novelist Toni Morrison wrote hundreds of rejection letters, now filed among her correspondence in Columbia University's Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Her rejections tend to be long, generous, and direct—often including notes on craft. They also provide a glimpse of the

"To support censorship in theory on behalf of vulnerable groups is a very slippery slope. It can lead to the opposite of what you want."

—writer Salman Rushdie (*60 Minutes*, April 14)

TINY EXCERPT

I think Trump is perfect for American christianity and conservatism because he is "Christianity" with zero christianity, and he is conservative without an ounce of conservatism. He ultimately exposes everyone—from [Marco] Rubio to [Kenneth] Copeland to Robert Jeffress—as a grifter. Because Trump is the perfect representation of the human heart's id, he pulls that out of anything that gets close to him.

Maybe Evangelicalism is going through that right now. Maybe there are thousands of churches in this country that are more American than they are Christian. Even still, I know God is good.

—from "**Evangelicalism's Identity Crisis**," by David Podhaskie (*The Jackal* newsletter, March 24)

"I am witnessing my peers and younger kids begin to resent technology simply because of everything it has taken from them. It has robbed them of a life that is fulfilling and actually worth living."

—Jadon Chung, an 11th grader from Los Angeles, in a letter to cultural critic Ted Gioia (*The Honest Broker* newsletter, April 4)

1970s publishing industry, which was undergoing the global consolidation that produced today's "Big Five"—Simon & Schuster, Penguin Random House, HarperCollins, Hachette, and Macmillan—and express her frustrations with readers' tastes and her sympathies for poets and short story writers. When she could, Morrison made connections for writers she had to reject, creating a network of Black writers and editors outside the contours of commercial publishing (*Los Angeles Review of Books*, March 26).

A nation with no land

The Sovereign Military Order of Malta, better known as the Knights of Malta, is a Catholic lay religious order and humanitarian aid organization with nearly 1,000 years of history. It's also a sovereign nation, with United Nations observer status and its own constitution, license plates, stamps, currency, and passports—but no land. The order's crimson passport, still issued to members of its Sovereign Council and leaders of diplomatic missions and their families, is the rarest passport in the world. The Knights originated in Jerusalem around 1099 and were gifted the Maltese archipelago in 1530 by the King of Spain. They were forced out by Napoleon in 1798 and are now headquartered in Rome. Though there aren't many knights in Malta today, you can still explore their history there, including the massive medieval Fort St. Angelo, the order's former headquarters and their only remaining structure on the island (CNN, February 2).

TINY EXCERPT

I think chills ran up and down me. I think there were stars. Phone lights blinked on, though pictures couldn't be any good. The festival fell away, sandwiches forgotten, the dogs went quiet, the wind rustled through the trees and up toward the heavens. Venus glimmered above the horizon. . . .

I already can't remember: it's slipping away. I'm already trying to hold onto it. The shadows snaked as they rushed the darkness away. We gasped like we'd been in water. Heat returned to the field, and we began to sweat again. The miracle moved towards the Atlantic, and we lost it. People packed up and left just like that: Show's over.

—from **"Gods, Omens, and Hot Wings at America's Total Solar Eclipse,"** by Katie Myers (*Atmos*, April 15)

Cocktails for kids?

The number and variety of no- or low-alcohol beverages marketed to adults has exploded, and so have the bars serving them to sober and sober-curious patrons. But should these drinks also be available to kids? If a child can order a Shirley Temple, should a child also be able to order a Dirty Shirley if it's made with zero-proof vodka? Some proprietors worry that mocktails help kids develop a taste for the real thing or that they perpetuate the habits of adult drinking culture. The debate is rooted in arguments over the best time and way to introduce young people to alcohol, and there's no clear answer. Some studies suggest that nonalcoholic drinks can worsen existing substance cravings in adults with alcohol-use disorder, though many adults credit the drinks with helping them maintain sobriety (*Atlantic*, April 10).

Monkey clone

Chinese researchers made the first clone of a rhesus monkey, often used in medical research because its physiology is similar to humans. The animal has now remained healthy for more than two years, indicating the cloning process was successful. Cloning creates a genetically identical copy of a single animal, and identical animals give like-for-like results in drug trials, providing greater certainty at a higher speed. But at least one animal rights group is concerned about the number of animals that will experience suffering and distress in these experiments. "Primates are intelligent and sentient animals, not just research tools," said a spokesperson for the UK's Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (BBC, January 16).

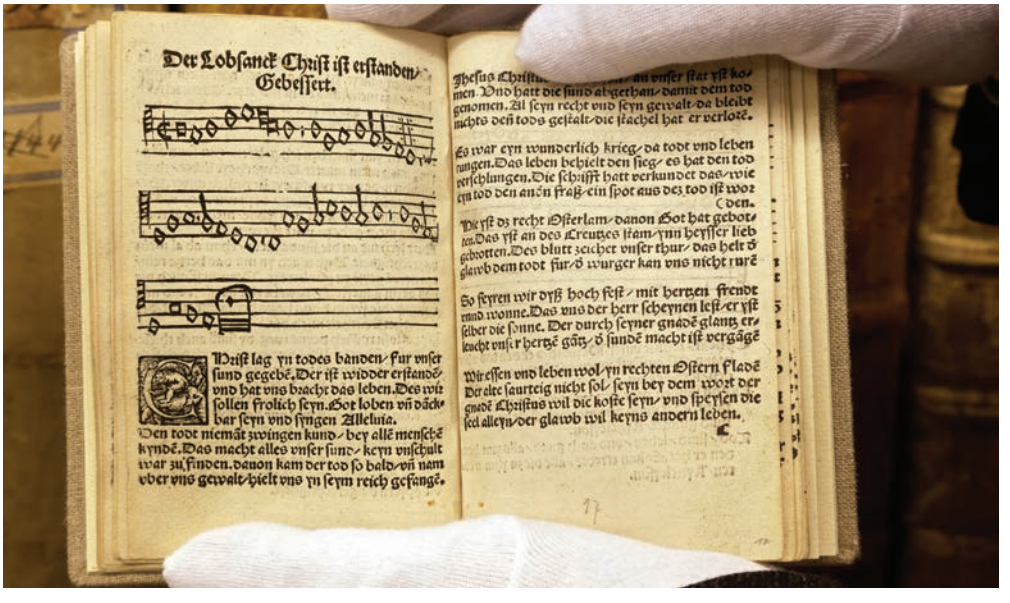
Sonic healing

George W. Van Tassel made his name in the California aviation industry and as a test flight

"I am surprised that my own university—my home for four years—has abandoned me."

—USC valedictorian Asna Tabassum, on the cancellation of her 2024 commencement speech amid concerns over her pro-Palestinian activism (USC Annenberg Media, April 15)

inspector for Howard Hughes. He also hosted some of the first large-scale gatherings of UFO true believers. In 1953, Van Tassel claimed to have been visited by a being named Solgonda, who gave him a formula that would help him construct a time machine. With financial backing from Hughes, Van Tassel starting building the Integratron—so called because it would integrate electromagnetic energy with cells to extend human life—near a site sacred to Native Americans in the Mojave Desert. When he died 25 years later, it remained unfinished. This outlandish history—and the white dome's acoustic possibilities—attracted the property's new owners, who listed it on the National Register of Historic Places and transformed it into a tourist attraction and celebrity destination. (The Arctic Monkeys recorded an album there.) For $55, you can sit in the dome for a sound bath, a spiritual practice inspired by Aboriginal Australians and Tibetan monks that immerses participants in the vibrations produced by singing bowls. Writer Eric Wills described the unsettling sensation as being "positioned inside the world's largest cello" (*American Scholar*, April 15).



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The old songs

The oldest extant Protestant hymnal, the Erfurter Färbefass Enchiridion, celebrates its 500th birthday this year. Until the Reformation, congregations did not sing sacred songs in the vernacular during church services. In the Catholic mass, only the priests sang. Martin Luther wanted to "create German psalms for the people, following the example of the prophets, that is, spiritual songs so that the word of God would also remain among the people through song." The remaining copy of the Enchiridion (from the Greek for "handbook"), first published in 1524, is kept in Goslar, Germany.

Satan visits the Evangelical Theological Society

From the animated documentary Satan's Guide to the Bible, *directed by Zeke Piestrup, which weaves comments from theologians and biblical scholars with a scripted exchange between Sunday school students and their substitute teacher, Satan*

William Lane Craig: How is it consistent with God's nature that he would command [in Joshua 6] that these Canaanite children be killed?

Sunday school student: Exactly! How could God do that?

Clay Jones: God knows who will or will not repent of his or her sin, and if he concludes that the children would have grown up and acted similarly, he's perfectly right to institute capital punishment.

William Lane Craig: God has the right to give and take life as he sees fit. Children die all the time, every day.

John Piper: It's right for God to slaughter women and children any time he pleases.

Satan: Wow, and they call *me* the Prince of Darkness.

News

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

Federal judge rules in favor of Oregon church's unrestricted right to serve free meals

by Melodie Woerman
Episcopal News Service

A volunteer distributes food at St. Timothy's Episcopal Church in Brookings, Oregon.

COURTESY OF THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF OREGON

A US district court judge issued a summary judgment March 27 in favor of St. Timothy's Episcopal Church in Brookings, Oregon, and the Episcopal Church in Western Oregon and against the city, which had adopted an ordinance to restrict the number of days that the church could serve free meals to its community.

The church and its staff "were ecstatic" when they received the news, said Bernie Lindley, St. Timothy's vicar, in an interview.

The church serves meals four days a week, and in March it served an average of 73 meals per day. The lawsuit filed in 2022 alleged that when the city adopted the 2021 ordinance, it violated the church's rights under the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act of 2000, as well as the right to free expression of religion guaranteed under the First Amendment.

US district court magistrate judge Mark Clarke issued a summary judgment in favor of the church, Lindley (who was also named as a plaintiff), and the diocese, a ruling that decided the case without a full trial.

Clarke found that the City of Brookings had violated the church's rights under the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act by adopting an ordinance that allowed "benevolent meal services" to be provided no more than two days a week. Because the ordinance violated a statute, the judge did not have to rule on the constitutional issues raised.

Diana Akiyama, bishop of the Episcopal Church in Western Oregon, said the court "demonstrated compassion and concern for those in our communities who are hungry and houseless. This is cause for great joy in the church as we continue to care for the 'least of these' in our community."

St. Timothy's, however, still faces some legal issues. The church and diocese are appealing through state administrative action other restrictions the City of Brookings

Bernie Lindley, vicar of St. Timothy's Episcopal Church in Brookings, Oregon, sorts bread for the church's food ministry.

has tried to place on what it calls the church's social services but which Lindley said are "what we call ministries."

The church provides a variety of resources to people who are often unhoused and have a history of being abused. Lindley said some of them don't know how to function in many situations because they were never taught how. He noted that, for instance, when someone wants to get a driver's license, a member of the church's volunteer team goes with them to help them navigate the process.

St. Timothy's community response is critical, Lindley said, because there are basically no other services for people in town. While the number of unhoused people has risen in recent years—in 2023 across Oregon it was up 8.5 percent from 2022—the only shelter in town operates only during the winter.

In Brookings there is no domestic violence shelter, no public health or mental health services, and no transitional housing. The closest behavioral health services are 200 miles away. No one other than St. Timothy's provides free meals.

Through the church's Brookings CORE Response team, St. Timothy's provides showers, a clothing closet, a community garden, a variety of vaccinations and tests including for COVID-19, a place where about 100 people get their mail, and space where people can get a cup of coffee and talk to others.

The church's legal advocacy includes the services of an on-staff attorney, who Lindley said spends a lot of time helping people get minor convictions expunged so they have better access to housing and jobs. Helping people navigate services under disability insurance is another big task. Team members also make sure that people are simply treated well when they go to the emergency room or seek medical care.

Lindley hopes his fellow citizens will see homelessness, abuse, and poverty as society's failings, not those of the people themselves. And if society has failed them, "it's my responsibility as a member of society to lift you back up again." ❑

LINDLEY: COURTESY PHOTO | HAITI: AP PHOTO / MATIAS DELACROIX, FILE

HAITI

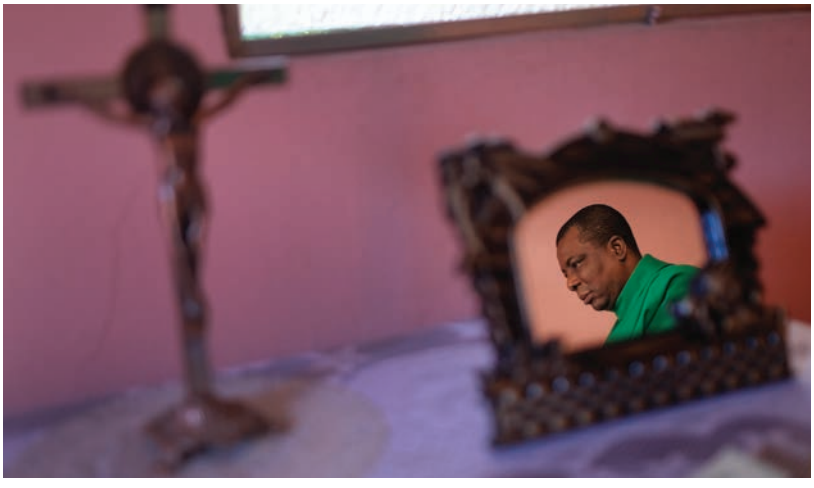
In Haiti, Catholic priests and nuns are targeted as kidnapping victims

by Eduardo Campos Lima
Religion News Service

As criminal organizations extend their control over Haiti, kidnappings have continued to terrorize the country's residents, with Catholic priests and other missionaries becoming some of the most common targets. In 2024, at least 14 priests and religious brothers and sisters are being held.

Over the past three years, since President Jovenel Moïse was assassinated and criminal gangs began to take over the capital city, Port-au-Prince, kidnappers have focused on the country's few higher-income professionals and those they believe will be able to secure large ransoms. In Haiti, that includes clergy and religious.

A nun who was abducted along with two other sisters in early March said in an interview that the gang requested a ransom of $2 million. "It



Catholic priest Jean-Nicaisse Milien prepares to celebrate mass in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, on November 7, 2021. In April, Milien was kidnapped and held for 20 days by the 400 Mawozo gang.

Churchgoers kneel in prayer during a Good Friday service at the Saint Pierre Catholic Church in the Pétion-Ville neighborhood of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, on March 29.

AP PHOTO / ODELYN JOSEPH

was completely impossible to raise that kind of money," said the nun, who asked to remain anonymous for safety reasons.

The bandits ended up freeing the nuns after one day without receiving any money, coming away only with two cars they had stolen to transport their victims.

"The ransom requested by kidnappers is usually too high," said Gilbert Peltrop, secretary general of the Conference of Religious of Haiti. "They ask for hundreds of thousands, at times millions, of dollars."

Peltrop has been negotiating with kidnappers on behalf of Catholic priests, nuns, and brothers for the past three years, becoming something of an accidental expert in how to hold out until a less incongruous amount is agreed upon between the criminals and the church.

The sister who was abducted in March said she was working at her congregation's school when the criminals climbed up the wall and took control of the place.

"Three of us were taken, while two others were spared so they could take care of the children," she said. "They gave us just one meal, and we had to split one liter of water among the three of us during almost two days," she said. They were released by about 6 p.m. on the next day.

Jean-Nicaisse Milien was taken in 2021 by more than a dozen armed men on his way to a fellow minister's installation in a nearby parish. "I was taken by armed men along with nine other people. There were five priests, two nuns, and three lay Catholics," he said.

He and his fellow victims were kept in a small house where they slept on the ground and were given only small portions of rice and bread to eat. In the days before his release three weeks later, Milien got almost nothing to eat or drink.

The kidnappers, part of the major Haitian gang 400 Mawozo, confiscated their captives' cell phones and got in touch with their families, demanding a ransom of $1 million per person.

Peltrop said that most criminals think that the clergy are rich because many Catholic schools are upscale institutions that own houses and cars. "They don't know that large institutions have high costs," he said, or that their apparent wealth comes from donations from international Catholic charities, like Adveniat, he added.

Hérold Toussaint, a psychologist, theologian, and sociologist at the State University of Haiti, says kidnappers may also abduct church missionaries for other reasons besides the financial ones, pointing to the Catholic Church's long relationship with the Haitian state. The government signed a concordat with the Vatican in 1860.

During the Duvalier family dictatorship, which ruled Haiti from the 1950s to the 1980s, the church mostly kept silent in the face of the crimes perpetrated by the state. Despite changes in Haitian Catholicism over the past few decades that brought the church closer to the poor, many Haitians still see it as part of the power structure in the country, Toussaint explained.

In his opinion, the church should adopt a more "prophetic" tone, refusing to play a role in mediating the crisis and taking more concrete steps to help the neediest in society.

Milien said Haiti's Latin American neighbors should do more for the country. He emphasized that the security crisis combines with other factors, such as poverty, lack of infrastructure, and natural catastrophes, which all feed the region's immigration crisis.

Haitians are among the most significant groups currently crossing the Darién Gap, a highly dangerous rainforest zone between Colombia and Panama, to reach the US-Mexico border.

"Other Latin American countries have their own needs and limitations, but they could help Haiti in the struggle against its multiple crises," Milien said.

He thinks that economic and technical cooperation, including an exchange of scientists and students, would reduce criminality in the long run. ❑

GENDER AND SEXUALITY

Vatican document on gender theory, surrogacy puzzles critics and advocates

by Claire Giangravé
Religion News Service

For Catholics hoping for change in their church's teaching on gender, sexuality, and reproductive issues, a new Vatican document on human dignity issued in early April was more than a disappointment. It left many questioning whether Pope Francis has ever intended his famed personal gestures of welcome toward LGBTQ believers to translate into doctrinal changes.

Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernández, who oversaw the new document's creation, seemed to seek to reassure conservatives when he said at a press conference on April 8, "Pope Francis won't ever speak ex cathedra. He won't want to create a new dogma of the faith—not for anything—nor a definitive declaration."

He added rhetorically, "So will it have served nothing, that Pope Francis should have been for 11 years the Supreme Pontiff?"

That's just what many progressives want an answer to. Has Francis's pastoral acceptance of transgender and gay Catholics been merely an attempt to quiet progressives while remaining committed to the status quo?

The topics addressed in the declaration, titled *Infinite Dignity*, are of particular concern to LGBTQ Catholics, who have seen Francis as an ally since his question, "Who am I to judge?" in response to questions about his views on homosexuality. The pope has also raised the community's expectations by pushing for blessings for people in same-sex relationships and meeting with transgender activists and advocates for gay Catholics.

But when the document was released by the Vatican's doctrinal office April 8, it identified gender theory, surrogate pregnancy, and transgender surgery—all matters of concern to LGBTQ Catholics—as threats to human dignity. It condemned the practice of surrogacy—when a woman carries a child for another person—as harmful to children and said that sex reassignment surgery and gender theory amount "to a concession to the age-old temptation to make oneself God."

While the document also contained a long reflection on the dignity of all human beings regardless of circumstances, origins, or actions, it struck LGBTQ and women's advocates as a step back from previous pronouncements—not only by Francis but also from the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and from Fernández, who was appointed to lead it last summer.

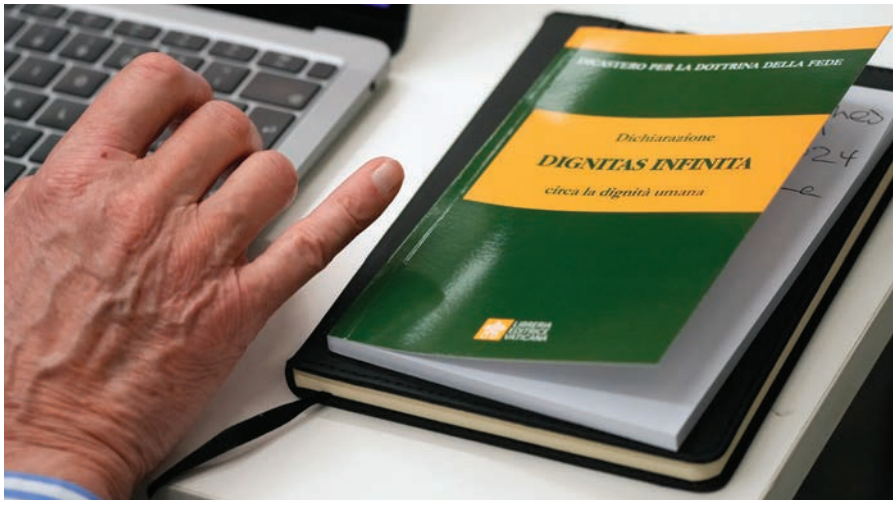
Under Fernández, the doctrine office affirmed that trans individuals may be baptized and act as godparents, as long as doing so doesn't cause "scandal," defined in the church's catechism as "an attitude or behavior which leads another to do evil."

More notably, it approved the blessing of people in same-sex relationships and others in "irregular situations" only two years after ruling out such blessings because "God cannot bless sin."

Some hopeful Catholics believed these decisions pointed to a new opening for LGBTQ believers that would reflect Francis's welcoming attitude. But with its emphasis on the church's doctrinal tradition and its list of prohibitions, the new document was considered a failure by many Catholic LGBTQ advocacy groups.

"As with all documents, this one invites us to engage with it and to question it, particularly when it begins to wade into contemporary debates that it doesn't seem prepared for," said Brandon Ambrosino, a theologian and ethicist at Villanova University who pursued parenthood with his husband through a surrogate.

Ambrosino questioned the document's lack of consultation with a wider selection of experts and theologians, as well as with women who serve as surrogates for family



AP PHOTO / GREGORIA BORGIA

A copy of the *Dignitas Infinita* declaration issued by the Vatican's doctrine office sits on a journalist's desk during a press conference at the Vatican on April 8.

members who are unable to conceive or carry a child.

"I encourage the pope to do what he does best: to listen to these women's stories with an open heart, and to allow their testimonies to meaningfully impact his position," he said.

For those who watch the pope's words closely, however, *Infinite Dignity* was no surprise.

Speaking to ambassadors to the Vatican earlier this year, Francis condemned gender theory as a form of "ideological colonization," and he has supported a global ban on surrogacy, which he said victimizes women in poor countries especially.

On April 5, the pope met with some of the signatories of the Declaration of Casablanca, signed in March 2023 by an international group of doctors, lawyers, philosophers, and others who oppose surrogacy, urging legal bans on the practice. One signer, Katy Faust, founder of Them Before Us, a children's rights nonprofit, said she was "grateful" for the Vatican document.

Faust said she hopes Protestant denominations will "embrace the same level of clarity" the Vatican has reached in *Infinite Dignity*, putting surrogacy in the same category as abortion, sexual abuse, and human trafficking.

Faust said she was confused, however, by the dicastery's ambivalence on questions concerning the LGBTQ community. "It's very hard for me to understand how a pontificate can bless same-sex unions, which will always deny children a relationship with their mother or father, and then understand that surrogacy is the commodification of women and children," she said. "It's hard for me to reconcile those inconsistencies," she added.

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Francis invited a group of trans women, most of them sex workers, to the Vatican for medical checkups and to be vaccinated against COVID-19. He has been reported to have told a trans Catholic that "God loves us as we are."

The head of the Vatican's Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernández, presents the declaration *Dignitas Infinita* during a news conference at the Vatican on April 8.

The gap between the pope's attitude and official church doctrine puzzles many, and some speculate that Francis, who turns 88 this year, is merely kicking controversies down the road for his successors to decide.

These observers also point to the Synod on Synodality, a worldwide meeting of bishops, nuns, and lay Catholics to deal with issues concerning Catholics around the globe, whose agenda was suddenly changed in March, delaying "doctrinal, ethical and pastoral issues that are controversial," including women's ordination as deacons, to at least 2025.

Fernández's question about Francis's lasting imprint on the church may have reflected his own sense that change may follow Francis's pontificate. The cardinal went on to discuss the evolution of church doctrine, saying the church has changed its perspective on slavery and the death penalty over time as well.

"The church hasn't always really effectively recognized the dignity of all people," said Sandie Cornish, a senior lecturer at the Australian Catholic University's School of Theology. "This is an area where we continue to grow in understanding," she added.

While the question of whether doctrine can change is "hotly debated by theologians," said Cornish, "it's clear in the field of Catholic social teaching by looking at the documents and proclamations through time that there is development through teaching."

The contradictions between the church's official doctrine and the pope's example might be a sign that change is bubbling beneath the surface, according to Cornish.

With its broad interpretation of human dignity, the Vatican document might pave the way for a new evolution of doctrine, Cornish suggested. Francis's insistence on synodality and on discerning what the Holy Spirit is trying to teach the church might be an important step in this direction, she added.

"Often right before there is actual change in the teaching of the church you find ambiguous pronouncements," she said, pointing to the church's changing views on migration and female employment. "It's a sign that something is about to change, that we are struggling to understand something." ❑

AP PHOTO / GREGORIA BORGIA

VOTING RIGHTS

NCC launches 'Freedom Summer' to mobilize voters, celebrate 1964 project

by Dawn Araujo-Hawkins

To commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Freedom Summer project, the historic effort to increase Black voter registration in Mississippi and to spotlight the state's violent resistance to Black enfranchisement, the National Council of Churches has launched a campaign called NCC Freedom Summer 2024.

The goal of the new campaign is to mobilize voters in Mississippi, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, and Michigan. Planned activities include a six-week virtual academy to teach the principles of civic engagement and the importance of voting rights from a faith-based perspective, community canvassing, and a five-city freedom ride tour intended to "inspire communities through faith, food, and fellowship."

The original Freedom Summer was the brainchild of Robert Moses, an activist with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Beginning in June 1964, about 700 White college students from the North traveled to Mississippi to run voter registration drives and to teach literacy and civics to an estimated 60,000 Black people.

The idea was that when these White students were met with the same violence that Black people had faced when trying to vote, it might garner enough media attention to force the federal government to intervene.

And it did. White people across the US were horrified by the televised brutality, and that summer President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act. The following year, he signed the Voting Rights Act.

In a statement, NCC president and general secretary Vashti McKenzie highlighted the NCC's involvement in the original Freedom Summer project. According to NCC reports, 254 NCC-sponsored clergy worked in project offices across Mississippi.

"There was a belief that it was going to be a decisive moment in American history. As it was then, so

Clockwise from left: A sign from the launch of Freedom Summer 1964; Vashti McKenzie; Bishop Elizabeth Eaton

In brief

Despite being sued for gender discrimination, a search committee at Abyssinian Baptist Church has selected another male senior pastor to lead the 215-year-old Harlem congregation. A spokesperson confirmed on April 15 that Kevin R. Johnson, founding pastor of Dare to Imagine Church in Philadelphia, would be recommended for the congregation's approval. In December, Eboni Marshall Turman, who had served as assistant pastor under the church's longtime leader Calvin O. Butts III, sued the church when she was not selected as a finalist. All of the finalists were men, and a woman has never held the position of senior pastor at Abyssinian.

—Associated Press

At the first public event hosted by William Barber's Yale Center for Public Theology and Public Policy, 17 pastors, theologians, and scholars signed a declaration committing themselves to preaching on "moral issues" ahead of the 2024 election and to opposing "religious nationalism." In an interview, Barber said it was form of "pastoral malpractice" that few preachers in the US speak about inequality and injustice because those were the very topics that "the prophets and that Jesus put at the center."

—Religion News Service

Cardinal Louis Sako, patriarch of Iraq's Chaldean Church, returned to Baghdad on April 12 after nine months of self-imposed exile. Sako had gone to the Kurdish regional capital of Erbil last summer after Iraqi president Abdul Latif Rashid revoked recognition of Sako's position as patriarch. But in April he was invited back by Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' Al Sudani. Sako has claimed the campaign against him was instigated by Rayan al-Kildani, a fellow Chaldean who is the head of the Babylon Movement political party. Sako said al-Kildani wanted to take over Christian properties.

—Associated Press

OBITUARY

Thomas Gumbleton

Thomas Gumbleton, a Catholic bishop from Detroit and an influential figure in the Catholic peace movement, died April 4. He was 94.

Gumbleton was born and raised in Detroit, and when he was ordained an auxiliary bishop in the Archdiocese of Detroit in 1968, he became the youngest bishop in the United States at the time. He was a beloved member of the Detroit community, known for sharing whatever resources he had, even occasionally paying students' tuition, according to the *Detroit Free Press*.

Gumbleton's ministry extended beyond Detroit. He was a cofounder of Pax Christi USA, a national Catholic peace organization. Gumbleton was arrested multiple times for his peace activism, perhaps most notably in 1987 while protesting at a nuclear testing site in Nevada and in 2003 while protesting the Iraq War.

He was an outspoken advocate for LGBTQ rights in the Catholic Church and pushed for full inclusion. Gumbleton was also a vocal supporter of clergy sexual abuse survivors, which he would maintain was the reason he was removed from parish ministry in 2007.

On social media, Jesuit priest James Martin called Gumbleton warm, friendly, and funny.

"For those of a certain age, Bishop Gumbleton represented the Catholic Church at its best," Martin wrote, "standing alongside in Jesus' name those who were hurting." ❑

—Dawn Araujo-Hawkins

it is now," she said. "We are at a pivotal point in a polarized country. We must retrace our steps to build upon the foundations of justice left by previous generations."

Citing the Supreme Court's 2013 decision to dismantle a key section of the Voting Rights Act, Elizabeth Eaton, presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and chair of NCC's governing board, said in a statement that Freedom Summer 2024 is just as important as the one 60 years ago—calling it a matter of life and death.

"We dare not stand idle—too much is at stake," she said. "We call upon all people of faith . . . to mobilize for this movement."

The NCC Freedom Summer kicks off with a day of action in Washington, DC, on June 19. ❑

CHURCH CALENDAR

Inside the ecumenical efforts to introduce a Christian Feast of Creation

by P. Hitchen
Lutheran World Federation

Could the celebration of a Feast of Creation become a pivotal point of the liturgical calendar in Christian churches? Could that celebration of God's creation be seen as significant as the great feasts of Christmas and Easter? Could Christians learn from each other's traditions to find a clearer understanding of the ties between the biblical account of creation and the current environmental crisis?

Those questions were at the heart of a recent ecumenical seminar held in the Umbrian hill town of Assisi. The March meeting was organized by the Roman Catholic Church's Laudato Si' Research Institute, in partnership with the Lutheran World Federation, the World Council of Churches, the World Methodist Council, the Anglican Communion, and the World Communion of Reformed Churches.

Entitled The Feast of Creation and the Mystery of Creation:

The setting sun seen from the old town of Assisi, where the Feast of Creation ecumenical seminar was held

GUMBLETON: *NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER* / ARTHUR JONES / REPRINTED BY PERMISSION OF NCR PUBLISHING COMPANY (NCRONLINE.ORG) | ASSISI: COURTESY OF THE LAUDATO SI' MOVEMENT

Ecumenism, Theology, Liturgy, and Signs of the Times in Dialogue, the seminar brought together church leaders, liturgists, scholars, scientists, and other experts to explore the history of Christian engagement with the creation story in the context of the growing climate justice movement.

In an interview after the seminar, LWF assistant general secretary Dirk Lange said it had marked a moment to "dig deeper, together with Catholic, Orthodox, and Reformed sisters and brothers, into the ways our churches have developed—or sometimes also failed to foster—a theology of creation."

The Eastern Orthodox Church has an ancient tradition of celebrating September 1 as the day when God created the Earth, a tradition that was revived in recent decades to include both thanksgiving for that gift of creation and prayers for the protection of all of creation.

Many Christian churches worldwide have now begun to mark a Feast of Creation on that day, as well as a monthlong Season of Creation, which runs until October 4, the feast day of St. Francis of Assisi. A proposal by Benjamin Stewart, an affiliate professor at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, to mark the feast on the autumn equinox, when the sun's light falls equally on south and north, sparked interest at the seminar.

The official recognition of a Feast of Creation in the liturgical calendar, Lange said, "could offer us the possibility to expand and embody liturgically a trinitarian theology and spirituality that takes into account a great diversity of approaches."

Looking ahead to next year's anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, which defined the doctrine of the trinity in 325 BCE, Lange noted how a Feast of Creation can help to expand and deepen "our trinitarian spirituality." Even more so, he concluded, "it may help us find new language and practice to embody the Nicaean insight for the faithful and especially for young people, who are particularly attuned to the creation crisis and who understand the power of prayer." ❑

CHURCH BUILDINGS

In Nebraska, empty churches are becoming apartments, museums

by Naomi Delkamiller
Flatwater Free Press

The kitchen table isn't far from the altar in Kathy and Tim Johnson's home. A comfortable recliner and cozy couch share the living room with a wooden pew. Stained-glass windows cast colorful shadows across their bedroom.

After over a century of worship, Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church in Benedict, Nebraska, closed its doors in January 2020. Seven months later, the Johnsons bought it.

"Other people walk in and they stop and they just go, 'wow,'" Kathy said. "We just kind of forget that it was a church."

This house of worship turned home is one of a number of Nebraska churches that, amid rising costs and falling attendance, have found second lives filling gaps in their local communities. Churches are becoming apartments, community centers, and places to preserve history and foster the arts.

In early February, the Lincoln City Council signed off on a proposal to turn the former Southminster Methodist Church into offices and apartments. Cadre Architecture and Design is set to buy the building for $350,000 after the owner, New Visions United Methodist Church, decided to merge three congregations into one building and sell its two remaining properties.

New Visions had a front row seat to what Rick Reinhard, an urban planner and consultant, calls the "great mismatch."

Aging congregations no longer have the resources or numbers to fill and maintain large and, in some cases, deteriorating buildings, said Reinhard, who spent four years assessing United Methodist Church properties across the US.

He points to four factors that have contributed to the mismatch: declining membership, rising property expenses, virtual livestream options, and COVID-19. Churches are also expensive to operate. The International Facility Management

Kathy and Tim Johnson at their kitchen table in Benedict, Nebraska, on February 18. The Johnsons live in the former Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church.

NAOMI DELKAMILLER / FLATWATER FREE PRESS

OBITUARY

Cecil L. Murray

Cecil "Chip" Murray, a civil rights leader and the longtime pastor of the oldest Black church in Los Angeles, died April 5. He was 94.

Murray led LA's First African Methodist Episcopal Church for 27 years and was a pillar in the predominantly Black neighborhoods of South LA. He worked with elected officials on issues of police brutality and public education and is credited with bringing jobs, housing, and development to the area.

In 1992, Murray became known nationally for his calming presence during the riots that followed the acquittal of the four police officers who had beaten Rodney King. After retiring from the pulpit, Murray taught his "Murray Method" of community development to church leaders through the Cecil Murray Center for Community Engagement at the University of Southern California.

In a statement, Stafford J. N. Wicker, president of the AME Council of Bishops, said that Murray's life was a testament to the power of faith in action. "His commitment to service, community, and putting God first in all things inspired countless individuals to live out their faith with courage and compassion," he wrote. □

—Dawn Araujo-Hawkins

Southminster UMC in Lincoln, Nebraska. The new owners are seeking historical landmark status before starting renovations.

Association estimates that it costs $7 to $10 per square foot annually to run a church.

Rising maintenance costs factored into the decision to sell the First Baptist Church in Wayne in 2021, according to Matt Ley. Ley bought the property for $175,000 after seeing the listing on Facebook. At one point, he said, the congregation was considering selling the church windows, demolishing the building, and selling the lot. Ley thought that would be a mistake.

"You cannot build that building the way it is now for less than $4 million these days," he said.

He renovated the church into six apartment units, which now rent for between $1,000 and $2,000 a month.

"I really just wanted to save one of the most beautiful buildings in town and provide different housing options," he said.

Kathy and Tim Johnson sold their home in York and moved into the former church in Benedict out of a desire to live closer to family without the burden of a mortgage. They bought and renovated the 5,100-square-foot church for less than $100,000, most of which was used to build a kitchen, add plumbing upstairs, and update the wiring.

"Overall, the structure was basically sound as far as not needing any repairs," said Tim.

The Johnsons were initially concerned about the utility bills, but

New Visions UMC board chair Beth Baldwin sits in a pew at the church's remaining building in Lincoln, Nebraska, in February.

MURRAY: COURTESY OF THE *LA SENTINEL* | CHURCHES: NAOMI DELKAMILLER / FLATWATER FREE PRESS

Doyle Burbank-Williams, pastor at New Visions UMC in Lincoln, Nebraska, stands at the church's newly renovated entryway on February 15.

CHURCH: NAOMI DELKAMILLER / FLATWATER FREE PRESS | KAGEMA: COURTESY OF RELIGIONS FOR PEACE

they've turned out to be manageable. "If you don't want to be in debt, go buy a church in a small town," said Kathy, a former member of the church she now lives in.

While housing is a common use for a church's second act, it's not the only one.

The First Presbyterian Church in Madison, Nebraska, was sold for $5,000 and turned into a nonprofit arts center in 2007; the former Immanuel Lutheran Church in Snyder was converted into a museum in 2018; and the Seward Chamber of Commerce bought and repurposed a local Presbyterian church to become the Olde Glory Theatre in 2013.

In Pilger, St. Peter's Lutheran Church managed to survive a pair of devastating tornadoes in 2014. But it ultimately couldn't survive falling attendance and a lack of volunteers, said Gene Willers, a former member of St. Peter's. The church closed in January 2023 and the congregation donated the building to the Stanton County Historical Society, which now runs a museum out of the former church.

Church closures can be emotional experiences, especially for families who have deep connections to a church, said Scott Alan Johnson, bishop of the Nebraska Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. He noted that some properties can also include a cemetery.

"There has not been any pushback, but is there grief? Yes," Johnson said.

Some Nebraska institutions are choosing to restructure their congregations rather than sell or donate their properties.

In 2022, the archbishop of the Catholic archdiocese of Omaha grouped 134 Catholic churches into 33 families across eastern Nebraska. The change allows parishes to better coordinate resources that can address declining attendance, population changes, and shifting cultural attitudes, said Riley Johnson, the archdiocese's communications director.

"We want to pivot our attention from maintaining buildings and structures to the mission that we're all called as Christians," said Johnson, "which is to go out and to bring the hope of the gospel to our neighbors."

Doyle Burbank-Williams at New Visions in Lincoln shared a similar message. "The closing of the other two churches gave this one life," he said.

Money from the sales funded renovation projects at their current location, including a new sign, handicap parking, and environmental updates to the building, according to Burbank-Williams. These sales will also help replenish New Visions' reserves after years of income losses.

"There are churches like us that have given themselves permission to not do things the way they've always been done," he said. "And those churches I think are growing." ❑

INTERFAITH WORK

Francis Kuria Kagema named head of Religions for Peace

by Dawn Araujo-Hawkins

Francis Kuria Kagema, the secretary general of Religions for Peace's African Council of Religious Leaders, has been appointed secretary general of Religions for Peace International.

Kagema, a former financial analyst at the Nairobi Stock Exchange, began his two decades of multireligious leadership when he joined the Interreligious Council of Kenya as its first employee 2004. He has also served on the steering committee of the Faith to Action Network.

In a statement, Deepika Singh, RfP's deputy secretary general and director of programs, called Kagema an "ideal candidate" to lead the organization because of his "experience and deep commitment to fostering interfaith dialogue, promoting peace, and advancing social justice."

Kagema succeeds Azza Karam, the organization's first female leader and first Muslim leader. Karam announced her resignation in June 2023. ❑

June 2
Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

1 Samuel 3:1–10, (11–20)

In Samuel's time, visions were not widespread and the word of the Lord was rare. The same could be said of our own time. As the young Samuel is learning to listen for God when he first serves in the temple under the tutelage of Eli, he mistakes God's voice for the voice of his human teacher at first. This makes perfect sense.

We learn by listening to many voices in our lives: our teachers, our parents, our mentors, self-help books, best practices articles, TV shows, even TikTok. Not all voices guide us toward wisdom. There is a lot of traffic in our heads—crowds of opinions, uncertainties, fears, desires, plans, timelines, career options, regrets, frustrations, doubts. We distract ourselves from some of this busyness by watching funny cat videos or binge-worthy TV. We spend mental energy replaying events in our past and imagining scenarios in the future, so much so that we may not be fully aware of what's happening right now.

In the midst of so much noise, how will we know when God is trying to get a word in edgewise? Like Samuel, we may spend time running to our human teachers, checking with them. What do they think would be best? Perhaps if I read one more article or one more book or talk to one more expert or look them up in an online video, perhaps then I'll know what my next step is. Then I'll know what my purpose is, how to live my life in a meaningful way. To which teachers should we listen? Like Samuel, in a way we are all learning to listen for God continually, even today. When Eli recognizes that God is speaking to Samuel and Samuel doesn't even realize it, Eli's advice is that Samuel go lay down. Go back to bed. Take a posture of invitation toward the still small voice of God. Tell God, "Speak." And then listen.

Many great teachers, mentors, preachers, and guides have given us advice similar to Eli's. Parker Palmer calls it listening to our soul rather than to our role. Palmer has taught that co-listeners in circles of trust can help us hear the wisdom in our souls. He cites Thomas Merton when he describes a hidden wholeness within us.

Howard Thurman calls the work listening for the voice of the genuine deep within us. "If you cannot hear the sound of the genuine in you, you will all of your life spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls," he said in a 1980 baccalaureate speech at Spelman College.

Learning to listen for God's voice is a discipleship project we're all invited to. I love to run to these great teachers and others and to read their words again and again. They help me a great deal. But what really changes me is when I actually take their advice and grow still, invite, and listen.

Opening up space and time in our lives is one way to invite God to speak. For myself, I have to listen for the silence that is underneath all the busy words. I have to allow myself to sit and stare at something beautiful for long moments, without distracting myself with busyness. I have to allow some tasks to go undone so that I have time to just be, to listen to silence. When daydreaming is not obsessing, sometimes it opens up spaces for clarity to shine through and new possibilities to blossom in my mind. Sometimes that is God, too, giving me insight that I could not find in all my striving.

As we listen, how can we know whether we are hearing the voice of the genuine deep within us or the internalized voices of the expectations of others? Part of the answer to that is rooted in how we feel, physically and emotionally. This is another way of saying, "Test the spirits." One mentor advised that when I imagine an answer to a question I have, I should examine the subtle feelings in my own body. Does that answer cause my heart to lift, or does it cause my shoulders to sag? Does the idea give me a glimmer of hope or fill me with a sense of dread? The voice of the genuine is often shrouded by other voices, and learning to distinguish between them is not simple. But it is essential to our flourishing.

Just as Samuel needs to learn from Eli, we too need to learn from the experience and guidance of others. And we also need to lie down (sit, wait), to invite, and to listen. "Speak, God, for I am listening." This is what it's like to live in the middle of our own stories. We have choices to make about our next steps. Having a word from God can help us to choose wisely.

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June 9
Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

1 Samuel 8:4–11, (12–15), 16–20, (11:14–15)

THE PEOPLE MUST HAVE BEEN so disappointed in Samuel. He comes into his leadership role as a prophet and judge instead of the sons of Eli, who are corrupt. For all the years of his life, Samuel is a trusted leader of Israel. He goes on a circuit from town to town as a judge. He leads the people militarily, making sacrifices to God and gaining God's support in battle (1 Sam. 7:6–16).

Samuel is a good leader. Until he isn't. When Samuel has grown old, he appoints his sons, Joel and Abijah, to be his successors. Joel and Abijah don't rule and lead as Samuel did. They have more in common with Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, than with Samuel himself. Hophni and Phinehas steal temple offerings by force and assault the women who serve at the tent of meeting. Similarly, Joel and Abijah pursue their own gain, take bribes, and pervert justice. Things are not looking good for the people who live under the leadership of Samuel's sons. What happened to Samuel's ethical compass between delivering a prophetic message about the demise of Eli's family because of the immorality and greed of Eli's sons and appointing his own rogue sons as the next leaders of Israel?

Samuel's decision to appoint his sons as leaders and judges shines a light on his human fallibility. The people see it too, and they want out of this system of leadership based on judges who appoint their own greedy children to take over. When they got Samuel instead of Hophni and Phineas, maybe they thought they were done with that problem. But here it is, happening again.

The people's proposed solution to the problem, however, only creates new problems. A king will be liable to the same failures and worse. A change of leadership will not ensure justice. For justice we need a change of heart. For justice we need to confront wrongdoing. For justice we need ways to hold people accountable.

The people then—like us now—are faced with moral dilemmas and fears for their own survival. We have desires for our own flourishing, yet we are faced with the ethical challenges of human tendencies. Samuel succumbs to the desire to lift up his own sons rather than care for the well-being of all the people. In a way, the people's response, in calling for a king, has a similar tenor. They want a king so that they can succeed in battle against other peoples. It is another story of us versus them. For their own sense of security, they are willing to be slaves to a king. It recalls the people's response to God when they are hungry and in danger in the wilderness after escaping slavery in Egypt. It would be better to be slaves in Egypt than to die in the wilderness, they say (Exod. 14:12, 16:3).

The fantasy of having a strong king includes the mistaken idea that a strong king will care about me and us. A strong king will unite us and conquer our enemies, the story goes; a strong king will make us strong. But Samuel tells a different story: that a strong king will make himself strong and take from us all that we value, including our freedom, our wealth, our property, and even our loved ones. We, the people, will not flourish under a king. Only the king and the king's loyalists will flourish, and then only as long as they also benefit the king and the king's power. (Historian Timothy Snyder reflects on similar issues in his March 16 newsletter.)

How might things have gone differently if Samuel had not appointed his own wicked sons to become the next leaders? Or what if the people had believed Samuel's warnings about the greed of a king and changed their request to a demand for justice and a new servant-oriented leader? And when the humility of such a leader became compromised, how could the people course correct? There are plenty of examples of us versus them mentality tearing people apart, but there is also lots of evidence of humans caring for each other, working together, and collaborating for survival and mutual flourishing.

When the people find a new vision and use their power collectively, perhaps a king is not necessary for survival. Maybe starvation in the desert and slavery in Egypt are not the only two options. God's story, our story, is a long one, and we are only in the middle of it. Now is a time to heed Samuel's warnings. Now is a time to utilize all of our resources—our energy, intelligence, imagination, and love—to work toward God's dreams for our world. That will be a world in which wealth is shared, justice is done, accountability is maintained, and the abundance and beauty of God's creation are honored. —*NS*

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June 16
Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

2 Corinthians 5:6–10, (11–13), 14–17

At the end of a silent prayer retreat at a Benedictine monastery, a Catholic deacon approached me over lunch and asked, "Young man, are you discerning a call to the priesthood?" I was a little flummoxed and said, "Why do you ask me that?" He responded, "I don't know. You just have that look about you." I had not noticed that look, but I told him I was already a Mennonite pastor. He said, "Oh, bless you, Father!"

It's sometimes a strange thing to be a pastor. Once upon a time, my spiritual ancestors were part of a 16th-century lay renewal movement. Early communities appointed pastors, but at least at first they were just regular folks drawn from the congregation, sometimes chosen by lot. Today, most of the Mennonite pastors I know wear ordination lightly, admitting in our weaker moments that we're not entirely confident how it's supposed to work. You only catch us slapping "the Rev." in front of our names when we're writing a letter to our congressional representative—or feeling a little insecure. I suspect this rings true for others too, not just Anabaptists.

Paul has been wounded by the church, but he is driven to keep engaging.

And yet, there's something there, some devotion, some compulsion, maybe even a vocation. After a few days of silent prayer, we just have that look about us. It's the elusive quality that the apostle Paul is talking about when he writes to the Corinthians, "The love of Christ urges us on." Christ's love for us and for others drives our leadership in the church.

It takes faith to walk in that love. You see this all throughout 2 Corinthians. Paul has been wounded by the church. He writes "out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears" (2:4). He feels the need to defend his ministry at length in chapter 11. And yet, Paul is driven to keep engaging the church, the very body that causes him so much pain. That tension is part of what gives the letter its heft. Paul is "beside" himself because of his interactions with the church, but he also has "confidence" and is "convinced" and acts "with great boldness" (see also 3:12). He's been taken hold of by the conviction that Christ "died for all," and because Christ was raised to new life, "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation."

This is how I've experienced pastoral ministry. It's part of the reason I love Paul so much: his words ring true to what I've lived. Somehow, the very thing that lights a flame in our hearts to teach and proclaim and accompany and pray with the church is also what makes us vulnerable to being wounded by the church. No surprise there, I suppose, but still a great mystery: Christ's cruciform heart beats in us and keeps driving us back into the heart of his people. The love of Christ urges us on.

Paul's word, translated as "urges" by the NRSV, is a strong one. Elsewhere, it's used to describe those who are seized by extreme pain or those who are in the grips of fever and dysentery (Matt. 4:24; Acts 28:8). It's the "holding" the guards are engaged in when they mock and beat Jesus (Luke 22:63). In Philippians, Paul deploys it as "hard pressed" (Phil. 1:23). The word's uses are mostly unpleasant.

And so this urging on by Christ's love is not unlike a kind of sickness, a rumbling in our bowels that won't release us even when we take our licks. It seizes us and holds us. Ministering in Christ's love is the thing we can't not do.

Over the years, I've leaned into this love of Christ that urges us on when I've found myself meeting with tough personalities or getting behind the pulpit week after week through seasons of congregational anxiety or preparing a gorgeous funeral sermon for the person whose words to me had been so much grit and ash and ball bearings. As Thérèse of Lisieux writes in her spiritual autobiography *Story of a Soul*, "If I hadn't truly had the vocation, I would have stopped at the beginning, because I encountered obstacles as soon as I began to respond to Jesus' call."

That's the vocation: the life that springs from Jesus' love. The thing that drives us and wounds us is also what sustains us.

And that's what we have to keep getting back to: encounter with the love of Christ—with Christ in his love. That encounter lies at ministry's heart. We have to keep rediscovering those still and silent places, those spaces where we can hear Jesus calling us one more step forward in the faith that, as Norwegian monk Erik Varden puts it, "God in his providence has seen something in me I had not noticed.

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June 23
Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time

1 Samuel 17:(1a, 4–11, 19–23), 32–49

When David steps out to challenge Goliath, he's fighting for the people of God but also claiming his faith and vocation. Until that point in the narrative, David had been more the acted upon than the actor. He's the kid brother that father Jesse forgets to call in from tending the sheep (1 Sam. 16:11). He's at the front lines because his father sent him to take lunch to his brothers and deliver cheese for the soldiers (17:18). At the beginning of his story, everyone is summoning David: Jesse, Saul, even Goliath. When David himself finally speaks, his first words in the narrative are a question: "What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine and takes away the reproach from Israel?" (17:26).

The scriptures give us a picture of a young person moving from being enmeshed within his family and community, asking questions and figuring out what his place and role are, to becoming himself and discovering his vocation. When David makes the decision not to fight in Saul's armor, it's really just the latest in a string of reversals in the story. He's not merely the baby brother or the cheese deliverer. He's more than the sweet harpist at the back of the room whom Saul forgets (16:18–23; 17:55). God has looked at David's heart, Samuel has anointed him as king, and the Spirit of the Lord has come mightily upon him (16:7, 13). Something turns in David, and he steps out.

When David steps out to challenge Goliath, he shifts from the acted upon to the actor.

The defining moment comes when David tells Saul, "Your servant will go out and fight." The Philistine's terms were "sword and spear and javelin," but young David comes out "in the name of the Lord of hosts." Humanly speaking, it is an impossible trial, one man a "warrior from his youth," the other merely a youth. Goliath's armor likely weighs more than David, who goes out to face him without a sword. Even after David has slain the giant, Saul still calls him a "stripling" (17:56). Yet it is the moment David steps forward that the course shifts in his story and he begins to become his own person and see the faintly traced path that will lead to the kingship. David takes up his sling and picks his five smooth stones and claims his faith and vocation as his own.

That's how it felt for me. Finding my vocation was about finding my faith. I was the earnest oldest child, growing up in a Christian family and church community. Christian faith made up the wallpaper of my life's most basic assumptions. Bible, church, hymns, baptism. What else could I do?

I came to the living Lord Jesus because of that faith framework, not in spite of it. But I didn't completely own my faith until later, somewhere in that blur between stripling youth and the hint of adulthood. That was also when a vocation to ministry began to stir. My baptism worked on me: becoming a disciple, being washed in the threefold name, learning obedience to everything that Jesus teaches, experiencing his presence (Matt. 28:18–20). I thought: I could do this. In some way, I *must* do this. And I stepped out. I pressed "on to make it my own" (Phil. 3:12).

David, much later in his life, would look back and reflect: "Who am I, O LORD God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?" (1 Chron. 17:16). I feel that too: an amazement at all God's goodness, all the simplest gifts that he has given me. But I also sense the fear and trembling in David's prayer: Who am I to dare to act, to speak, to lead, to step forward? Who do we think we are, getting up in front of a crowd of people hungry for a word and speaking? By what authority?

The question has the power to point us toward a humble kind of reverence. We don't own what has come before us. The calling is beyond our strength and resources. We're stepping into an unscripted kind of life. Yet we can do this. In some ways we must do this. And at some point, it will dawn on us that the God who "does not save by sword and spear" is willing to throw us in front of Goliath with only a sling and a staff and a few stones. Or lead us to the cross.

Which is of course where this is all headed. There is another who will step forward in history, a David deeper still, descended of David's line, who will defeat the enemy of God not with the usual weapons of war, or even the unusual ones of sling and smooth stones, but with his own blood shed over the stone of Golgotha. —*BR*

June 30
Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

2 Samuel 1:1, 17–27

Once I walked into a touristy store in a little town in the mountains. Something about the place spooked me in a crystals-and-crow-feathers sort of way, so I turned around. But before I got out the door, a navy T-shirt emblazoned with a golden bee caught my eye. When the owner invited me to try it on, I responded, "I don't know what the bee means." He looked me over and said, "It's just a bee."

At the beginning of 2 Samuel, things have shifted decisively in David's favor. Saul, his rival for the kingship, is dead. Jonathan, his "greatly beloved" friend and brother in arms, is also gone, killed in battle by the Philistines (1 Sam. 31:2; 2 Sam. 1:26). In their honor, David composes a lamentation called the Song of the Bow. Why?

The reader can be forgiven for detecting a cynical ploy to clothe a naked interregal conflict with a few golden words. After all, David has just spent the better part of 1 Samuel charismatically building up his power base while Saul seeks to kill him. If the winners write history, then David writes this one as a song that nods to his righteous innocence and promotes the inviolability of God's anointed king. Maybe the Song of the Bow is an Iron Age propaganda drop.

Or maybe it's just a song, and David actually means it.

The Song of the Bow is an epic poem lionizing (literally in verse 23) Saul and Jonathan, praising them as the "glory" of Israel, the "mighty" who were an anointed shield defending God's people and whose bow and sword led the people in war. They were "beloved and lovely." Let the "daughters of Israel" who once praised Saul's prowess in battle now weep (1 Sam. 18:7; 2 Sam. 1:24). Let the mountains and fields dry up in mourning.

David's song points to the mysterious gift that marked his life and bound men and women and ultimately a nation to him in love. People didn't follow David because he possessed strength or skill with a sword. Saul had that too. But David had a magnetic heart and a poet's ear. David lived from something deep-down true.

This is why his psalms are so potent. They're true words tapping something true in his life. Sure, the shepherd boy understands that "the LORD is my shepherd" (1 Sam. 17:34; Ps. 23:1). But he also pens the tender "my soul is like the weaned child that is with me" (Ps. 131:2), the brutal confessional of Psalm 51 ("I know my transgressions"), and the unabashed longing of Psalm 63 ("O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water"). Poetry buzzed in David's heart.

Of course, the magic isn't just that David had a penchant for epic poetry. You could say that about any Tom, Dick, or Ashurbanipal. What makes David's life an authentic life that prompted books of sacred history (1, 2 Samuel; 1, 2 Chronicles) and the treasuring and passing on of his verse is that he lived in response to what Eugene Peterson calls the "previousness of God's speech." His songs of praise and reverence and lament flowed from God's word welling up within him, and in that way David was really a prophet (Acts 2:30).

Do we believe this when we come to the Song of the Bow? Our cultural moment primes us to see everything from the perspective of power. We ask: Who gains? What's the hidden agenda? We're prone to make the most cynical interpretation of others' motives, which ultimately risks becoming a kind of otherizing that loses sight of their humanity. We are so unaccustomed to hearing true prophetic voices, rather than the usual voices megaphoned up to prophetic volume, that we struggle to make heads or tails of Nahum or Paul or Mary or David. Cynicism leads us to miss the plain goodness of God speaking something true through another person.

Because we hear others with cynicism, we can also assume that others doubt our own sincerity. Sometimes, I find myself searching for roundabout language to speak the simplest and most necessary truths: God is good, Jesus is with you, trust the leading of the Holy Spirit. You're in my thoughts and prayers. I get shy because I don't want to sound glib.

But sometimes, we need to speak simple, true words in all their straight-up goodness. Entertain the thought that this is what David is attempting in the Song of the Bow, that he actually means what he says about Saul and Jonathan. Maybe the song comes from a corner that lies beyond the political convolutions of his life. Maybe it's a word that can be savored as "sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb" (Ps. 19:10). —*BR*

Voices

"American tear gas canisters litter the streets and soccer fields of a West Bank refugee camp."

—Isaac S. Villegas, *page 32*

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Isaac S. Villegas plays soccer with young Palestinian refugees

Philip Jenkins considers the complex legacy of empire

Heidi Neumark takes a new, rather complicated call

Debie Thomas reconsiders her embrace of mystery

Brian Bantum asks how church is different

THE CENTURY COLUMNISTS PORTRAITS BY AGATA NOWICKA

Brian Bantum • Julian DeShazier • Melissa Florer-Bixler • Philip Jenkins
Rachel Mann • Heidi Neumark • Alejandra Oliva • Yolanda Pierce
Debie Thomas • Jonathan Tran • Isaac S. Villegas • Samuel Wells

Facing a world on fire

The contemplative life is about getting closer to reality, not retreating from it.

by Rachel Mann

Rachel Mann is a priest in the Church of England, a theologian, and author of Spectres of God.

If I told you I've come to believe that the best way to respond to the climate crisis is the cultivation of the contemplative life, I'd expect raised eyebrows. You might reasonably reply that, no, now is the time for action, both corporately and individually, rather than contemplation. I hear that. Anyone with eyes to see and ears to listen knows we have reasons for disquiet about the future of our planet. The crisis we're facing should, one might argue, stimulate any right-thinking person to fresh social and political action. In contrast, the word *contemplation* carries implications of retreat, of detachment and cool consideration.

I hear the insistence that contemplation, whatever its place as a therapeutic response to eco-anxiety, does not represent a serious public action to address our climate emergency. I wonder, however, if such a reaction relies on a misrepresentation of the word *contemplation*. Rowan Williams recently pointed out that the word *contemplation* is intimidating. It has, he says, too many syllables. The very word makes us think contemplation is both difficult and too esoteric to be practically valuable.

Theoria, the Greek root for *contemplation*, means "watching" or "looking." This suggests that contemplation is not so much about stilling ourselves or heading inward in order to find better strategies to cope with the world. Rather, it is about paying attention to what is really going on. And according to theologian Janet Soskice, "attention is rewarded with reality."

For me, then, the contemplative life is about getting closer to reality rather than retreating from it. This means that when I pray or come to silence, I am trying to attend to what is actually going on. The contemplative is prepared to turn their face toward the horror of a world on fire—itself no inconsiderable feat, when many of us want to look away or bury our heads in the sand—while simultaneously seeking to respond to this fearful situation in the love of God.

This work of *theoria* has three key dimensions: seeking to perceive the world as it is, trying to see God as present in the world as it is, and seeking to be receptive to what God is up to in this world and to offer a truthful and holy response. The contemplative life is a work of education in the truth: we seek to look well, that is, as God would have us look. It is a call to respond to God's patient, gracious attention to the world as it is.

Madeleine Delbrêl, the often overlooked Catholic spiritual writer who was recently proclaimed venerable by Pope Francis, provides a helpful way for us to live out this contemplative approach. For her, contemplation is found in loving attention to the circumstances of our daily lives. Instead of hiding from the mess of our world, Delbrêl suggests that as we attend deeply to our daily struggle to act for the good, we begin to act hopefully. She says that while those who live in enclosed community, such as monks and nuns, might treat their abbot or abbess as their superior, the rest of us can make the circumstances of our daily life our superior.

Delbrêl reminds us that life—even when it's tough—can provide the shape of our obedience to find and follow God. "We, the ordinary people of the streets, believe with all our might that this street, this world, where God has placed us, is our place of holiness," she writes. Delbrêl didn't work and live in comfortable circumstances but in the rough-and-tumble of a poor Paris district during World War II. Life came at her full on. Still, she suggests that this kind of in-the-world contemplative seeks, like all contemplatives, to harvest the signs of God in the world: to collect and accumulate them so that we can then make the appropriate response. Delbrêl—a professional social worker who supported worker priests,

among others—suggests that our shared vocation is to show fidelity to the stuff of life and stand up for the ways of God.

This is more than seeing God in the secular world, and it goes beyond starry-eyed wonder. For Delbrêl it is a recognition that what is happening—whether war, climate change, the daily struggle to live, or whatever—will make demands on you. She says that the contemplative is always poised to live between two seeming gulfs: the "measurable abyss of the world's rejections of God" and the "unfathomable abyss of the mysteries of God." The Christian is called to dwell in the border where the two abysses intersect. At this borderland, we become bridges and mediators to love.

For such a seeming activist, Delbrêl knew the power of silence. She calls even the most active of us to its contemplative riches. "Silence," she says, "leads us to make a gift of self rather than a selfishness that has been gift-wrapped. . . . Silence does not mean running away but rather recollecting ourselves in the open space of God." It becomes, then, a gift through which we are more exposed to God. Its abiding power, however, is how the God found in silence leads us to another gift: the gift of ourselves in a world in desperate need.

Perhaps being a contemplative is not the wrong response to a world pulling itself apart. It certainly isn't a retreat from reality or a means of indulging private visions of God. Delbrêl reminds us that whether in the riches of silence or in the determination to make the circumstances of our lives the place where God is known, contemplation calls us out to face the world and offer a holy, generous response. ❑

Tear gas over the soccer field

"You're welcome to take it back home with you," my Palestinian friend said as I looked at the US-made canister in my hand. "Actually, take all of them."

by Isaac S. Villegas

Isaac S. Villegas is an ordained minister in Mennonite Church USA and a PhD student in religion at Duke University.

I have a tear gas canister on my shelf. Already detonated, of course. A friend from the Lajee Center at Aida Camp, a refugee camp just outside Bethlehem, gave it to me during a 2016 visit. We were walking back to the center after lunch. Kids were playing soccer in the quiet road that runs alongside the wall separating olive groves on the other side from cramped housing units on this side, the wall that segregates the state of Israel from the occupied Palestinian territories.

They passed us the ball, which I kicked up to my head, then bounced off my chest and juggled from foot to foot. I soon lost control but managed to pass the ball back before I completely embarrassed myself. We laughed. Then my friend reached to the ground and picked up a cylinder. "Let's just say you tripped on this," he joked. I cocked my head, curious about the object. "I assumed you'd know what this is, since it's from your country," he said, handing the chunk of metal to me. Despite the gashes and scratches, I could read the blue script circling the canister: 73/38 Riot CS Smoke Multi-Projectile (3) Range – 80 YD (73 Meter).

"This is how they shoot the tear gas at us from up there," my friend said, pointing to the watchtowers on the massive wall curving around our corner of the refugee neighborhoods—residents call it the apartheid wall. I could see the outline of a man with a gun slung over his shoulder. Israeli soldiers monitor the Palestinian population and sometimes stage incursions into the outskirts of Bethlehem.

I returned my attention to the tear gas canister in my hand and read the rest of the blue script, which advertised the name of the weapons manufacturer, Combined Tactical Systems (now Combined Systems) of Jamestown, Pennsylvania, along with contact information. And, in a large font: Made in U.S.A. "You're welcome to take it back

home with you," my friend said. "Actually, take all of them." He pointed to more canisters along the edges of the street, the litter of military occupation.

Later that week I joined the kids on their soccer field at the Lajee Center. As I arrived I heard the children before I saw them—shouts of joy, of delight, of kids at play. Young girls were scrimmaging, and the coach put me on one of the teams. I was no match for their unbounded energy and enthusiasm. But soon I found the ball at my feet and passed it to a teammate near the goal. She put all the power of her seven-year-old body into her leg and launched the ball toward the goal. An unlucky bounce sent her shot just wide of the post, and she plopped to the ground, frustrated. Her friends lifted her up, and we played on. Our team lost, but that didn't stop us from laughing.

As we played and laughed, I noticed the netting above us—a web stretched from sideline to sideline, suspended in the sky by a skeleton of metal rods. Caught in the net, kept far away from the soccer field below, were more tear gas canisters. During halftime, I asked the coach about the metal cylinders tangled in the mesh. "They shoot them at us from over there," she said, nodding at the towers and the wall beyond the community garden and playground. She explained that when they first started playing on the field, soldiers would fire tear gas and the canisters would land on the ground, forcing everyone to scatter. Now, with the netting in place, when they shoot the smoke doesn't take as long to blow away.

According to the Council on Foreign Relations, US aid to Israel averages $3.3 billion a year—of which 99 percent is military aid. Like for the tear gas. And for those fighter jets flying over Gaza, bombing cities and killing tens of thousands. For decades, Israeli military officials and pundits have referred to their anti-Hamas tactics in Gaza as "mowing the grass"—restrained operations, they've claimed, with surgical destruction. "This is constant, hard work," a national security strategist wrote in the *Jerusalem Post* in 2021. "If you fail to do so, weeds grow wild and snakes begin to slither around in the bush." Again and again this metaphor has been invoked as justification for Israel's military invasions of Gaza: mow the grass.

After our halftime break, the coach blew a whistle and we took our positions, with grass under our feet and signs of warfare above our heads. To grow up in Aida Camp, I learned, is to live in a militarized valley of death, shadowed by soldiers on walls. Palestinian life can't escape the panoptic stare of the Israeli surveillance state, nor is there any respite from the threat of an army ready to disrupt the goings-on of a refugee city without warning. But the children still play soccer. Toddlers still run around and around the swing set next to the field. And the mothers in hijabs laugh together as they watch from the shade of olive trees.

To grow up in the Aida refugee camp is to live in a militarized valley of death.

"Existence is resistance," a friend from Bethlehem told me when I recounted my experience at Aida Camp. The first time I heard that saying was in At-Tuwani—a Palestinian village with ancient origins, near the Israeli outpost settlement of Havat Ma'on—where two women gave me a tour of their vegetable garden. "We plant, we eat, we hope," one said. The other added, "Our existence is our resistance."

The ongoing existence of Palestinian life is resistance against the destruction that we in the United States have funded. On the edge of violence, always under threat, Palestinians try to stay alive. Like children at play—joy as resistance. Like gardeners tending to olives and almonds and cabbages and beans—the beauty of life. We believe in the gospel of life. ❑

Illustration by Laura Carlin

How empires spread religion

A global map of Christianity is stalked by imperial ghosts.

by Philip Jenkins

Philip Jenkins teaches at Baylor University. He is author of A Storm of Images: Iconoclasm and Religious Reformation in the Byzantine World.

I have been hunting ghosts. Thomas Hobbes wrote in 1651 that "the Papacy is no other than the ghost of the deceased Roman Empire, sitting crowned upon the grave thereof: for so did the Papacy start up on a sudden out of the ruins of that heathen power." While I have long known this quote, only recently did I learn of the larger context of what initially seems like a cheap interfaith potshot. Hobbes really pursues the analogy in some detail and makes some good points. More to the point, his comments apply to the wider influence of empires on all the world's faiths, not just Christianity.

Many factors drive the success or failure of religious movements, including demography and climate factors, but the world's religious history can scarcely be understood except in reference to imperial realities and their stubborn survivals (hence my new book *Kingdoms of This World: How Empires Have Made and Remade Religions*). However often, and however rightly, we denounce the evils associated with empires—their links to racism and slavery, exploitation and colonialism—empires have also supplied the means by which religions have achieved global scale.

A map of modern Christian populations worldwide is stalked by multiple imperial ghosts. The great centers owe their origins to various Christian empires over the past half millennium: the Spanish, Portuguese, French, Belgian, British, and others. Within those empires, many people moved voluntarily, as settlers and colonists. Others were conquered or enslaved and had a new religious system imposed upon them, although over time many conquered peoples made the religion their own.

This is the story of how a religion that in 1500 was overwhelmingly Europe-centered became by the end of the millennium a vast transcontinental enterprise. The world's largest Roman Catholic communities today are in Brazil, Mexico, and the Philippines, recalling the influence of the long-defunct empires of Spain and Portugal. The Anglican Communion, with 90 million believers worldwide, retains the unmistakable imprint of the old British Empire. In each case, survivals are evident in the political traditions and structures of the respective religions, in their languages and forms of communication.

We rightly denounce the evils of empire. But empire has also supplied the means for religions to grow.

In the hierarchy of the Orthodox Christian world, the ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople is still first among equals. He is based in a city that retains the aura of the New Rome founded by the Roman emperor Constantine in the fourth century: the present incumbent is the 270th to hold the see. Even today, after so much turmoil and persecution, the lands of the former Russian Empire still account for some 75 percent of the world's Orthodox believers.

Beyond Christianity, the history of Buddhism is a story of patronage by successive imperial regimes. In turn, the story of Buddhist decline in its ancient Indian heartlands can only be told in terms of shifting imperial fortunes. Islam, Hinduism, and Shinto all bear imperial brands.

Obviously, this is no mere case of humble subjects faithfully following the spiritual whims of each would-be world ruler. In some cases, religions grew and spread despite the violent opposition of the imperial regimes that exercised political control over given territories; Christianity in the Roman world is the obvious example. Time and again, we witness the unintended consequences of imperial decisions and edicts.

What mattered was less the official attitude of any particular empire than the conditions those entities created to maintain their rule. These included efficient means of communication by land and sea, new trade routes, and the cities that grew from them, which became entrepôts for commodities and ideas. Also playing their part were the widespread military establishments that defended imperial frontiers. These maintained public order and suppressed threats to travel and trade.

Of their nature, empires brought together different peoples and ethnic groups who otherwise would have remained ignorant of each other's existence; empires do an excellent job of moving subjects, often against their will. They move faith communities from one part of the world to another while removing or exiling older populations. To use a concept now popular in

political analysis, empires turned communities of locally rooted Somewheres into highly mobile Anywheres, with all that implied for values and ideology.

Crucially, the new imperial orders promoted shared languages of communication and often a degree of literacy. As Hobbes remarked of the Catholic hierarchy, "the language also which they use, both in the churches and in their public acts, being Latin, which is not commonly used by any nation now in the world, what is it but the ghost of the old Roman language?"

Beyond extending the boundaries of faiths, that imperial context transformed the ideas that were communicated, as religions restructured their messages for a new and larger world. Hobbes's remarks on the papacy represent just one example of a religious institution appropriating imperial ideology and iconography.

In some cases, empires favored and promoted religious communities, while in others, populations and faiths were conditioned by reactions against intruding foreign powers, by "empire shock." Much of modern Islamic history can be written in terms of the response to European imperial advances across Asia and Africa. Modern political Islamism grew out of attempts over the past century to reconstruct the faith to respond to those successive traumas. Judaism, too, has been reshaped by encounters with successive imperial frameworks, whether benevolent or hostile. Anyone who has ever opened a Bible has access to a superb manual of the history of empire and the diverse reactions of subject peoples toward their rulers over several centuries.

Whatever the wishes of any given regime, it was these essential qualities of empire—this *empire-ness*—that allowed the rise and circulation of religious traditions and beliefs. As in the case of Rome, many of those features persisted after the formal regimes were destroyed, leaving behind only phantoms, but very potent ones. Imperial memories die hard, often astonishingly so.

Empires are an inescapable component in the making, remaking, and rethinking of the world's faiths. Do you want to understand those religions? Then understand empires. ❑

The wilderness of a rural ministry circuit

I'm now a half-time "missional coach" to a six-church parish. I have many questions.

by Heidi Neumark

Heidi Neumark is a Lutheran minister and author of Sanctuary: Being Christian in the Wake of Trump.

When the bishop first broached the idea of my serving as a "missional coach" with a six-church parish in upstate New York, his expectations didn't sound high. His assistant promised that if it wasn't working out, I could give them a month's notice. I drew a line on a map connecting the six different villages. It traced a question mark, which is perfect because all I have are questions.

At the first parish board meeting I attended, the bishop talked about how great I am. I definitely do not feel great. I can only offer ordinary things: relationship building, small groups, peeling carrots with the kitchen ladies, Bible study, Sunday worship. With only 20 hours a week, there's hardly time for more.

Twice a month, I lead worship and preach at two of the churches. The schedule requires a mad dash from one to the next—no time to greet people after the first service before I get in the car, still wearing my vestments. And after decades of urban ministry, all this driving is new for me. It takes me an hour to get to any of the churches. But the Hudson Valley scenery is beautiful, and I try to get an idea of the economy as I drive by—farms, guns, a Wonder Bread outlet, construction materials. The largest buildings I've passed are a state prison and two Amazon warehouses.

On my second Sunday, I entered a church with the altar attached to the wall and was told that I must face it. With no time to give it much thought, I acquiesced—and for the first time in my life, I celebrated communion with my back to the congregation. Next time, I'll tell the assistant that Jesus faced his disciples at the Last Supper, so let's try that. This church is proud of being the oldest continually worshiping Lutheran congregation in the United States. Their president may be the oldest as well, plus he has advanced pancreatic cancer. But after worship he joined an usher to count the offering. I was told it will take five people to replace him, a challenge when the average attendance is ten.

I began on the first Sunday of Lent, which seemed like a perfect place to start, all of us in the wilderness together with Jesus. When I interviewed, the board was happy that when asked what new mission I thought they should undertake, I said that I didn't know and I didn't think it was my role to impose my ideas (not that I had any). "That's the right answer!" I was told. Now, not so much. They are desperate for answers, direction, a hopeful way forward. *We know you're not a miracle worker, but . . .*

Each of the six sanctuaries displays a US flag. While this would once have been a deal-breaker for me, there are so many issues here that I barely notice the flags. And while White Christian nationalism certainly exists in these parts, the people at the churches I'm serving pray for immigrants. Gay couples appear to feel at home, and two of the churches sport rainbow banners. They enthusiastically share food with neighbors. I have been told that I must never, ever mention or preach about politics. I will always preach what I feel led to preach, so I guess time will tell what is deemed too political. In any case, railing against the flags seems pointless for now.

When I sat with members of the congregation with a worshiping attendance of five, I learned that three of them were baptized there as babies. They are now in their 70s. No wonder they are attached to the place, which needs several hundred thousand dollars of repairs. When we spoke of hopes for the future, a woman in her 90s said that her hope is to be buried from the church and that they could fashion her coffin from the sainted building's rotting wood.

On the other hand, the youngest person present noted that many young families with children have moved into the area, as evidenced by the growing amount of outgrown baby and toddler clothes left at the church doors for distribution. The idea of outreach to young families was quickly shut down since "families are only interested in Sunday sports." I suggested that babies and toddlers might not be engaged in serious sports yet and began to tell them about Wee Worship, but why encourage outreach if their best option is to close the dilapidated building?

A leader at another church said she believes most of these congregations have some passion around LGBTQ concerns, and perhaps I could help them find a common mission there. But for now, all are resisting shared identity and mission as an imagined threat to individual congregational survival. I've been reflecting on the image of the mother hen trying to gather her chicks together, "but they were not willing" (Luke 13:34). It helps me to see these churches with greater tenderness—six frightened, stubborn little chicks loved by Jesus.

This calling is all about sitting with uncertainty.

Almost as soon as I arrived, the pastor announced that she had accepted a call elsewhere, presumably a place with one council meeting a month instead of six. This leaves me as the only pastor: although that is not my intended role, I am a pastor and I am here. At the next parish board meeting, someone proposed a plan to dissolve the parish, but nobody seconded it. I was later told they are waiting to see what the synod will do.

The priest at the wonderful Episcopal church my husband and I joined told me he sees I am still in the wilderness. At first I was annoyed, but of course he's right. This calling is all about sitting with uncertainty. On Kate Bowler's podcast, writer Maggie Jackson talks about breaking the inertia of one's knowledge and going forth despite discomfort. Through the rain, past the stick fields, the prison's barbed wire and the weathered barns, with bread and wine and a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night—onward! ❑

Illustration by Laura Carlin

Too much mystery?

Leaving evangelicalism allowed me to embrace the mystery of faith. I wonder if I've taken it too far.

by Debie Thomas

Debie Thomas is minister of formation and discipleship at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Palo Alto, California, and author of Into the Mess and Other Jesus Stories.

One of the greatest gifts progressive Christianity has given me is the gift of mystery. I grew up in a church tradition that put a lot of stock in certitude, so I am grateful now to be able to affirm simultaneously that I am a person of faith and that my answer to many religious and spiritual questions is "I don't know." Unwavering intellectual assent to a set of black-and-white doctrines is no longer my litmus test for faithfulness. I don't spend my days worrying about my doubts or feeling like I've flunked Christianity because I don't have concise and elegant answers to every theological conundrum. The spiritual life I have embraced these days is so much bigger, more nuanced, and more three-dimensional than what I once knew.

And so I am startled and even a bit disturbed to find myself asking this question about the progressive Christianity I have wholeheartedly adopted: Is there such a thing as too much mystery? Or, more provocatively: Have I reached a point in my faith life where I'm using mystery as a cop-out? As a refusal to commit, to engage, to bear public and vulnerable-making witness in the name of Jesus? Is it possible to turn mystery into a self-protective shield, so that I won't have to stand with conviction and urgency in a world that needs to know the healing love of God?

These questions have been creeping up on me for a while. I think about them every time I see a version of Christianity in the media that is divisive, fear-based, racist, sexist, or nationalistic. I wonder where the impassioned progressive response is. Where is the bold articulation of an alternative Christianity? A Christianity that insists—without polite equivocation—on inclusion, self-sacrificial love, and restorative justice?

Who suffers when I shy away from embracing capital-T Truths worth living and dying for?

I think about the limits of mystery whenever I hear my fellow laity in church settings back away from robust engagement with the Bible, or with church tradition, or with doctrine. As if the mystery of our faith offers the perfect justification for leaving the hard questions and conversations to the scholars in seminaries. If we can't know for sure anyway, why bother delving in?

I grieve over mystery when it leads church leaders to shy away from calling parishioners to embrace their baptismal vows. When ministry becomes more about keeping everyone happy and less about iron sharpening iron. When invitation loses its beautiful and necessary edge—the edge that prods us forward into discipleship and spiritual growth.

I flinch at mystery when it keeps me from sharing the story of my faith with anyone. As if evangelism requires certainty first. As if the world isn't in fact hungry to encounter a God sturdy enough and generous enough to exist in the midst of ambiguity, paradox, and contradiction. As if telling my story of a God who loves me and loves my questions is always and automatically an offensive act.

And finally, I worry over mystery when I think about the privileged place I inhabit as a middle-class, comfortably housed, well-educated American. Do I back away from taking stands because I can afford to? Because my personal stakes are so low? If so, then who is hurt by my unwillingness to commit to a knowing that embraces mystery but also transcends it? Who suffers when I shy away from embracing capital-*T* Truths worth living and dying for?

Yes, it is absolutely the case that our scriptures insist on the importance of mystery in the life of faith. The writer of 1 Timothy insists that "the mystery of our religion is great" (3:16). Paul describes "the mystery that was kept secret for long ages" (Rom. 16:25). Jesus himself speaks of "the secrets of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 13:11). Likewise, our 2,000-year-old tradition rightly emphasizes the role of mystery in the Christian life. We are blessed to have a spiritual lexicon that includes such treasures as *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

And yet we are also the inheritors of revealed truths. Of gracious disclosures. Of God's astonishing willingness to take on human form so that we can know something of God's vast and mysterious nature. In the gospels, Jesus doesn't back away from affirmation; he makes specific claims about what is good and just and loving—and he tells his disciples to go into all the world and do likewise. It is not polite silence in the face of mystery that gets Jesus killed; it is his refusal to water down his convictions.

Likewise, when our spiritual ancestors in the New Testament speak of mystery, it is never as an excuse to back away from deep engagement or risky articulation. In fact, it is just the opposite: the presence of mystery is always an invitation to draw close, to behold, to ask questions. Our response to mystery should be active participation and excavation. It should be pangs of hunger for life-changing discovery.

The invitation embedded in mystery is an invitation to get curious and stay curious, and the gift embedded in mystery is the gift of wonder. Wonder that will lead us to reverence, then love, then proclamation.

In his profound book *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Thomas Merton writes that in order for any of us to find love, we "must enter into the sanctuary where it is hidden, which is the mystery of God." There is, in other words, a sacred response that mystery can elicit from us, if we are willing to be called. We are always invited to enter into that holy sanctuary and take a good look around. We are always invited to pursue the One who pursues us, because the end is not unknowing. The end is communion. The end is love.

Great is the mystery of our faith. Let's dig in. ❑

What's special about a church building?

How many buildings do we pass by in our daily lives where we could simply walk in, sit down, and participate?

by Brian Bantum

Brian Bantum is professor of theology at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary and author of The Death of Race.

I've walked in and out church doors for so long I had forgotten. The strangeness of a building, a gathering, an hour or two or three on a Sunday morning where you, me, anyone can simply walk in and sit and listen, maybe meet someone new. No ticket required. No purchase of a pint or coffee or burger and fries in order to stay. You don't need a bike. You don't need to know how to sew or sing to be a part of this living thing that comes into being every week.

You could go to a park or free museum, sure. But that's a different kind of public space, isn't it? We're occupying the same general space. We might be in proximity to other people, but people come and go; you could go there the same time every week and never see the same person. Or maybe by chance I walk my dog at the same time that you walk your dog and we exchange polite eye contact or friendly banter, share the names of our dogs (but not our own names), say hello and goodbye and that's enough.

How many buildings or events do we pass by in our daily lives where we could simply stop, walk in, sit down, and participate—and this is what is actually expected, even hoped for? Imagine seeing a band playing in the park, and as I walk by I unpack my ukulele and simply start strumming along.

After cycling for the last six or seven years and enjoying the peace of solo rides, I had a strange desire to share in this love with other cyclists. I'm a little shy and anxious about meeting new people, so a friend invited me to a social ride

Illustration by Laura Carlin

that meets every Tuesday evening. I rolled up and sheepishly said, "Hello, my name is Brian." They were incredibly friendly and welcoming. But it was also so clear I was new, that so many of these folks had history with each other. I'm sure the more I go, the more I will see what we have in common. I may get to know the names of their kids or even if they have a rough time in their job. But that space isn't really designed for more than enjoying each other and an activity we all love.

But the church is (could be?) different.

How many places exist in our world anymore that aren't tied up with subscriptions, tickets, memberships, or the IYKYK that only shows up on my social media feed after the fact, leaving those of us on the outside wondering how people find out about such cool things?

How many buildings exist in virtually every neighborhood, every city and town, as little nooks of possibility, of sanctuary—where one can walk in and be reminded, "You are loved. You are good."

How many spaces exist where you come to visit, visit again, and after weeks, months, years you realize you've transformed from stranger to kin, from guest to host, from the one receiving reminders to the one offering them?

I'd forgotten what it meant to be a church visitor, to be a person with such yearning that I risked walking into a foreign land full of strangers.

It's been so long since I've walked in and out of these doors that I'd forgotten what it meant to be a visitor, to be a person with such yearning that I risked walking into a foreign land full of strangers looking for something, for someone. It's been so long that I forget that I'm still that person looking, hoping, stretching for a small reminder that God loves, that God is somehow present, that I'm not alone in this world. And I too often forget that I'm the face the stranger sees on those mornings when there are people who risked something to walk through those doors and that God may actually speak through my "Hello, my name is Brian. What's yours?"

But I suppose it's also true that too many of our churches are not this kind of public space. They have their own entry fees, implicit subscriptions, and terms to keep a membership in good standing. We keep tabs without realizing, we close doors in our silence or lose sight of each other in the clutter of our own lives we bring with us.

Amid all of our collective hand-wringing about the future of the church, I wonder what our church buildings might become if we saw them as public spaces, more like parks than sanctums. If we appreciated the radical interruption of a place where anyone can come, sit, sing, be welcomed and invited to simply be, where each week we are hosting and being hosted, where all can be nourished.

And as with a park, the welcome is not just keeping the gates open but also the tending we collectively have to commit to, remembering that this little patch of land doesn't belong to us or exist for us. It's where we're allowed to tend, a point in time and space where our participation with God's work in the world condenses, where bodies and souls gather into rich gray clouds just waiting to return what has been gathered.

In the end, we may have rich theologies of the church, but part of our uniqueness may have more to do with the ways we recognize just how unusual our gathering is in our community—and what that gathering might offer those who stumble in. ❑

Features

"Has Mary's long-lost vision from the Gospel of Mary finally come to light?"

—Elizabeth Schrader Polczer, *page 58*

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Lisa M. Wolfe and **Leslie Long** talk to **Pádraig Ó Tuama** about poetry, the Bible, and the nature of God

Readers respond to the one-word prompt *stretch*

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"Joyce doesn't attack the idea of heroism. He remakes it so that it's about ordinary human wisdom and resilience."

—Rebecca Bratten Weiss, *page 68*

Café Justo's alternative to the fair trade model keeps the means of production—and most of the profit—in the local community.

Coffee justice in Mexico

by Amy Frykholm

THOUGH THE COFFEE AT THE HOTEL was bland and stale, the carafe bore a label indicating that this was no ordinary brew. "Rainforest Alliance Certified," it said. A few hours later, on an airplane on my way to Agua Prieta, Sonora, Mexico, my coffee cup was marked with a label that said "Community Coffee" and noted that the airline selected its coffee in order to "do good."

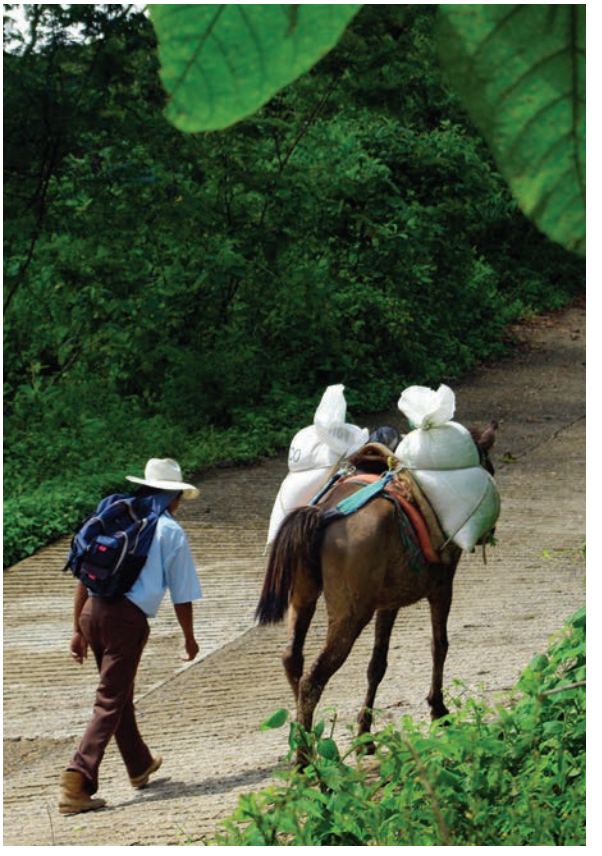
That's a lot of angst for an ordinary drink that is part of the everyday life of 62 percent of Americans. I noticed it because I was on my way to visit Café Justo, a coffee company started by coffee farmers in Chiapas, their migrant relatives in the border town of Agua Prieta, and the Presbyterian church on both sides of the border. Americans have gotten the message that there is a problem with coffee, and Café Justo is linking the personal with the social in order to try to give them an answer to what troubles them.

Coffee is a unique site for doing so. Coffee rituals are as personal as they are ubiquitous. Every morning, I sit down with a cup of coffee and my notebook in one of my most central and intimate rituals of the day. To make the coffee, I hand grind the beans and steep the coffee in an insulated French press. I carry the coffee to my desk, and for almost an hour, I sip and I write. My husband carries his coffee to the living room, where he drinks with the dog curled up next to him and reads the *New York Times*. Another friend of mine prepares her coffeepot the night before, so that when she gets up for her early Zoom meeting, she can carry a cup to accompany her.

As I looked around the airplane, indulging my caffeine addiction even without my hand grinder, I wondered about the coffee drinking rituals of each of the passengers, the coffee shops they might frequent, the person who maybe brings them coffee in bed, the people in their lives that coffee connects them to. Coffee inspires rituals of connection and rituals of pleasure. There are few things, in my life anyway, that are as ritualized.

The United States is the world's number one consumer of coffee. It imports 22 percent of the world's coffee. Coffee grows in some of the world's poorest countries and then flows, almost as fast as oil, to some of the world's richest countries. Awakening to this reality and the deep history of colonialism and exploitation rooted in coffee, the fair trade movement has tried to get the message out: how you buy your coffee, how it is grown, and who gets the profit are matters of vital importance. Fair trade has had a small impact on the coffee industry as a whole—it accounts for less than 5 percent of a $14 billion industry—but it has had a strong impact in making some

The production process for Café Justo in Agua Prieta, Mexico, begins with planting, farming, and harvesting the coffee berries.



IMAGES COURTESY OF CAFÉ JUSTO AND FRONTERA DE CRISTO

Coffee inspires rituals of connection and pleasure. There are few things, in my life anyway, that are as ritualized.

US consumers aware that the origin of their beloved coffee is marred by economic and environmental problems.

Café Justo, however, has gone further, diagnosing the problems that exist even with fair trade coffee and coming up with an alternative model. Whereas the fair trade model pays farmers a guaranteed price for their crops, Café Justo keeps the entire means of production in the hands of farmers, from the moment of planting to the moment the consumer enjoys a cup of coffee. They call this "vertically integrated direct trade." Once you know that this experience is possible—that you can connect your coffee drinking rituals in a direct way to the farmers who grew the bean, the land on which it grew, and the people who roast the bean—it is pretty hard to say no. It is easy not to care about those things if you have no real way to connect them. But once you know you can? There is something almost irresistible about that.

At Café Justo headquarters in Agua Prieta, Daniel Cifuentes dips his hand into a burlap sack of green coffee beans to show me the difference between the smaller robusta bean and the larger arabica bean. Coffee growers in Cifuentes's native Salvador Urbina, more than 1,750 miles to the south of this border town, have been growing both since the late 19th century, when they transitioned from maize to what was then a more lucrative crop in coffee.

Cifuentes shows me in photographs how the beans are fermented and dried before being delivered to Agua Prieta, where they are roasted, packed, and shipped to customers all over the United States.

Cifuentes grew up in Salvador Urbina. His family were members of the Presbyterian church there and coffee farmers going back generations. When Cifuentes was growing up, farmers in Salvador Urbina could sell a 50-kilogram sack of raw coffee beans for 1,350 pesos, or $130. "That was a lot for us," he said. But after the fall of prices in the 1990s, they could get just $33 a bag.

Adrián González, Café Justo's customer relations director, later explained what caused this precipitous fall. After the North American Free Trade Agreement took effect in 1994, both the United States and Canada protected their farmers with subsidies against the vagaries of the market—but Mexico did not. Meanwhile, in the economic chaos after NAFTA, the peso was devalued against the dollar: two pesos to one dollar fell to 20 pesos to the dollar. In a perfect storm, at the same time, the World Bank helped Vietnam set up as a coffee-growing country, and Vietnamese coffee was so successful that it flooded the market.

For the farmers and communities of Chiapas, these factors were devastating. With the loss of 70 percent of the community's income, buses started appearing in the town that would fill up with young people headed north looking for work. The buses were organized by representatives of cartels, called coyotes, who were quick to sense vulnerability and facilitate the deadly work of border crossing.

Cifuentes was a young man when coffee prices plummeted. Like many others, he felt that he had to move north to find work, maybe in one of the *maquiladoras*, factories that were opening on the border after NAFTA. US companies had put duty-free and tariff-free factories on the Mexican side so that they could use the cheaper labor to make parts for cars, gaming systems, wristwatches, and so on. Like many others from Salvador Urbina, Cifuentes landed in Agua Prieta. He found work making electrical parts.

He saw how many of his friends and relatives were tempted to cross the border to work in the United States, he told me. He understood why. You could earn more money per hour, and those higher wages could be sent back home to make life a little easier there. He considered crossing himself, but he was a member of Lily of the Valley, a Presbyterian church in Agua Prieta, where the border ministry worked with migrants. He felt his work at the church was important. He also saw firsthand the devastating consequences of crossing the border.

Meanwhile a conversation had started among economic refugees from Chiapas and people who worked with Frontera de Cristo—a border ministry of the Presbyterian Church. From the US side, Mark Adams, a pastor, was asking questions about what he saw. From the Mexican side, migrants like Cifuentes and fellow Salvador Urbinan Eduardo Perez were sharing their stories. Together they began to wonder about a solution.

According to Perez, the root of the suffering was losing their land. "To leave our land is to suffer," he told Adams and Tommy Bassett, who'd come to Agua Prieta to work as a manager in a *maquiladora* and forged a strong interest in social justice. In a book that Adams and Bassett have written about the process of founding Café Justo, they note, "He did not say, 'Not being able to enter your country legally is suffering.'. . . He did not say, 'Being chased as a criminal and being thrown on the ground is suffering.' He did not say, 'Being kicked and having a boot placed on my neck on the desert floor is

Before shipping direct to consumers, the coffee is processed and packaged. At Café Justo y Más, drinks are prepared to be enjoyed immediately.

suffering.'" For Perez, leaving the land was the source of all other suffering.

That inspired the people involved in the conversation to ask: What would make it possible for people to stay on their land? The answer was obvious, even if the solution would require them to rethink the coffee industry from the ground up. The farmers needed to be able to control the price of coffee.

Most of the money in the coffee industry, as it is currently configured, is made by the people who roast the coffee, not those who grow it. Even on the fair trade market, commercial coffee outfits are buying coffee at a price guaranteed to the farmers, but most of the money is not being made by the farmer; currently that guaranteed price is $1.80 a pound for ordinary commodity coffee and $2.20 for organic coffee. (The price of coffee fluctuates like other commodities, sometimes drastically.) By the time such coffee is roasted and sold, the price has increased to anywhere from $8.50 a pound to more than $20 a pound. Compared to the 40 cents a pound that representatives of the coffee industry were paying in the early 2000s, when fair trade practices first began to spread, $2.20 is a lot. Compared to what consumers are willing to pay for a pound of fair trade coffee, $2.20 is not so much.

When the coalition of farmers, migrants, and concerned border dwellers began to consider how to help people in Salvador Urbina stay on their land, they ran into some of the difficulties of the fair trade market. At first they thought they might help the farmers of Salvador Urbina join a fair trade cooperative and thus get a better price for their coffee. What they discovered was that supply of fair trade coffee far outstripped demand. No one in the industry was accepting new members. Even farmers committed to fair trade cooperatives are only able to sell about a quarter of their coffee as fair trade. The rest of it is sold at market price, which can be lower or higher than the guaranteed price, depending on the vagaries of the market.

But the even greater problem for Café Justo's founders was that farmers had no access to the majority of the funds that a consumer spends on coffee. Those funds were going to the roasters, the marketers, the people who got coffee into consumers' hands.

The idea they developed—and it turned out to be the critical idea—was to create a coffee company that would directly connect farmer to coffee consumer, without passing through the host of people in the middle.

There were several problems with this vision. One was convincing the farmers in Salvador Urbina that they should risk investment in this new kind of cooperative. When the group visited Salvador Urbina together in 2002 to discuss their idea with the farmers, they were welcomed with hand-roasted coffee and resistance. The farmers had been scammed by seemingly earnest Americans who promised them a better price for their coffee and scammed by coffee industry representatives who conspired to keep prices low. And the proposal

IMAGES COURTESY OF CAFÉ JUSTO AND FRONTERA DE CRISTO

that Adams, Bassett, Perez, and Cifuentes were putting on the table had never been tried.

For example, one of the most difficult issues to resolve was when the farmers would get paid for their coffee. They had been accustomed to selling an entire year's harvest in one shot. Even if the price was low, there was a guarantee. The cooperative that the nascent Café Justo was imagining would never have enough money to buy all the coffee at once. The farmers would be invested in the risk of the final sale. They would be reliant on a different form of cash flow, with an unproven record of being able to sell the coffee in its finished form to imagined consumers on the US side of the border.

Then there was the fact that "we were not businessmen," Cifuentes said. "We didn't know how to package coffee, how to export coffee. At the beginning, we just put a whole bunch of coffee in the trunk of a car to sell it on the US side" until they were stopped at the border, with what Cifuentes describes two decades later as "serious problems."

They also didn't know how to roast coffee in large batches. At the beginning, they hand roasted the coffee in *comals* (traditional cast iron pans) in both Agua Prieta and Salvador Urbina, until they purchased a machine that they didn't know how to put together. It took them several days to roast their first 50 kilograms of coffee, something they can now do in four minutes.

Over the next several years, they refined their model, giving the farmers in Salvador Urbina control over how the money was spent, cultivating a consumer base among churches in the United States to whom they could tell their story, and working out the details of a robust export business. It took time, but growth was steady.

"What's your biggest concern now?" I asked Cifuentes.

"Finding the customers," he said matter-of-factly.

"Really?" I said. I was thinking that Café Justo already sends out more than 1,000 pounds of coffee a month. "What if every church in the United States decided to buy your coffee? Is there really room for that much growth?"

"Absolutely. What worries us is finding them," he said. The waiting list of farmers to join the Café Justo cooperative is long. There are more than 800 farming families in Salvador Urbina alone, and right now the cooperative includes about 80 of them.

But the model has worked to bring schools and hospitals and young people back to Salvador Urbina. The cooperative invests 10 percent of every dollar it makes back into the community. There would be an even greater benefit, Cifuentes says, if they could spread the model farther. Even though the price of commodity coffee has grown significantly since the 40 cents a pound rate in 2001, the difference Café Justo makes is that farmers themselves decide how to distribute every dollar they make from the final sale. They set a competitive price to pay each farmer directly and pay benefits; then the collective puts money back into the community while also creating secondary jobs all along the chain. One hundred percent of the money stays in Mexico. In the conventional coffee and fair trade models alike, most of the money stays in the United States.

The bottom line, however, for Cifuentes and the farmers in Salvador Urbina is that the model is built on relationships. Real relationships. Every penny is accounted for, but even more than the pennies are the conversations, the connections to consumers, the relationship between the church and the business. In a way that continually surprised me as I spent time in Agua Prieta, Café Justo and everything that has flowed from it is a religious enterprise. The investment of religious organizations from day one has not stopped. The vast majority of customers are faith-based. The connection of Presbyterian to Presbyterian remains strong. Café Justo itself is rooted in the relationship between town and church, between farm and church, between church and church. Every year, Frontera de Cristo brings a group of interested consumers to Salvador Urbina to see the coffee harvest in process and to connect with the farmers. On every bag of Café Justo that is shipped to the United States, they symbolize the connection with a small label with the name of a farmer: Provided by Guadelupe Morales, Ayde Ruiz, Anna Verta, and so on.

I spent some time in the newly built Café Justo y Más, the first sit-down coffee shop of its kind in Agua Prieta, which now houses both the warehouse and shipping business. In a tiny back office, Carmina Sanchez pulled back from her computer on a rolling chair and gave me a friendly smile. Sanchez is the office manager at Café Justo. She processes invoices, balances the books, runs payroll. She is practiced at telling her story, and when I was talking to her, my Spanish didn't seem so broken and partial. The office is a tiny, low-ceilinged room with filing cabinets and two side-by-side desks. A shy intern named Victoria worked at the other desk while Sanchez and I talked.

Sanchez is Cifuentes's niece, but unlike Cifuentes, her branch of the family owned no land in Salvador Urbina. That made them even more vulnerable to the crash in coffee prices. As a child, she knew that her family was poor, but her community of family and cousins made them seem rich. She knows that her father was burdened by the reality that he could not feed his children. But she remembers being a happy child in a loving family. Later he told her how sorry he was for their suffering, but she didn't remember suffering. In her mind, the suffering began when he left.

"People leave out of necessity," she said. "It's crucial to understand that." When she thinks back on her life in Chiapas, she knows that it's almost all nostalgia now. But she thinks of the rolling hills, the little houses in and among them, the freedom of the children playing in the deep green land. "It's magical," she said.

Her father and older sister left first, both making their way to Agua Prieta via the coyote buses. She followed them when it became clear that any plans she might have had for university

What would make it possible for people to stay on their land? The answer was obvious: they needed to be able to control the price of coffee.

were not viable. She arrived at night, and when she woke up in the morning in the Sonoran Desert, she was not happy about it: "Here it was so dry and hot and empty." She says her heartbreak at leaving Salvador Urbina, her mother, and her younger siblings was intense. She missed the rivers, the green, the land's abundance. She got a job in a *maquiladora*. It surprised her that there were so many young people like her there, people who wanted to be in university but instead were channeled by global markets to this border town. There were workers as young as 15 there, she says. She felt looked down on as an outsider. She dreamed of home.

But time passed. She fell in love with a Sonoran and got married. She had two children. Her father left for the United States. "I was confronted with the reality that we were now each alone. We had always lived together. Our way of life was poor, but we had each other. I feel a lot of sadness about this—about how far apart we all are and how alone we all are," she said.

Twelve years ago, she started working for Café Justo, which has allowed her to be free of the relentless shift work of the *maquiladoras*. Her family was part of the experiment from the very beginning. Her mother was one of the first to practice roasting the coffee in a *comal* for commercial purposes. She sees how Café Justo has provided these opportunities amongst difficulty, but her perspective is still very much the perspective of the migrant: "Migration is a hard path. No one wants to leave their home and start over in a strange place, to completely change your way of life. It's very difficult."

González, unlike Cifuentes and Sanchez, is a native of Agua Prieta. When he was a child, he used to cross into Douglas, Arizona, on a regular basis to go to the swimming pool, waving at border guards with a smile. But by the time he was in his 20s, the dilapidated border fence that had marked the boundary between the United States and Mexico for decades had become a massive wall. González was thinking about crossing the border to work in the United States, following his friends and relatives. At Lily of the Valley Presbyterian church, he met the founders of Café Justo. They invited him to apply for a position at the new company, packaging coffee. At the interview, they asked him, "What are the different kinds of coffee?" He shrugged. "As far as I know, there's regular and there's decaf."

"I don't know why they gave me the job," he laughs. But now, 22 years later, he travels around both Mexico and the United States telling people the story of Café Justo. "I love the story and the philosophy," he says, "but what excites me is how good the coffee is." I concur. This coffee has spoiled me forever.

When you live surrounded by consumer culture, as I do here in the United States, every social media influencer, brand name, and entrepreneur has a story they want you to buy. As I grow more jaded, the stories seem to grow louder and more insistent, as if the whole economy rests on training my desire, co-opting my heartstrings.

Café Justo is also asking about my heart, but in a different way. It's asking me to stake my morning ritual on a journey of faith. Does it matter to me if I can connect my coffee to that journey? Does it matter that the consumer that Café Justo wants me to be is a consumer who believes first and foremost not in its story but in the presence of justice in my everyday life?

In Matthew Desmond's book *Poverty: By America*, the sociologist urges Americans like me to become "poverty abolitionists." Becoming a poverty abolitionist entails conducting an audit of our lives, he argues, "personalizing poverty by examining all the ways we are connected to the problem—and to the solution." Thanks to Café Justo, I know how to conduct this audit on my morning cup of coffee. I connect the dots from the deep suffering of migration to the suffering at the border to the agriculture of the rainforest to the dynamics of the market that keep money concentrated in the hands of a few. And I can also see with my own eyes what happens when you reverse that economy, when you start with the well-being of the farmer and the farmer's community and land, putting power and money into the farmer's hands. It's a lot to ask from a cup of coffee, but from what I saw and tasted, it's worth it. ❑

AMY FRYKHOLM *is a* CENTURY *contributing editor and author of* Wild Woman.

"I don't believe in God as character," says poet Pádraig Ó Tuama, "but I do believe in God as plot."

The making of God

interview by Lisa M. Wolfe and Leslie Long

Pádraig Ó Tuama is a poet, theologian, and host of the podcast Poetry Unbound *with On Being Studios. In 2022 he published both the chapbook* Feed the Beast *and the anthology* Poetry Unbound. *This interview took place at Oklahoma City University, where both interviewers teach.*

Lisa M. Wolfe: In preparation for this interview, I read your 2015 collection *In the Shelter*. It felt very comforting and pastoral, kind of devotional. There's even a litany in it. After finishing that, I pulled *Feed the Beast* from the library shelf. I sat down and read the whole thing at once. It was so engrossing and compelling, even searing. But it is completely different from *In the Shelter*! What happened between those two works?

Nothing really. I suppose partly, I became safer. I'm not working in religious environments anymore, even liberal ones. I'm not looking for employment in those areas either. In *In the Shelter*, there is reference to the antigay exorcisms performed on me—my first foray into trying to put something of that in print. I was curious about how to bring literature into conversation with those events. The experiences I had are relatively mild in comparison to other people's, but I still wanted to come back to them.

Poet and theologian Pádraig Ó Tuama

To my mind, underneath *In the Shelter* is the quiet narrative saying, "None of this worked." What I mean is none of the religious literature worked in the sense of the promises of belonging that it offered. *In the Shelter* pays close attention to literature but contains a certain recognition that all of the promises that religious literature offers fail. *Feed the Beast* is just exploring that side of the failure.

LMW: I like to introduce my students to resistant reading of the biblical text, which is something you're using in *Feed the Beast*. How did you come upon that style or hermeneutic?

I was always attracted to it. But the more I read, the more I thought, "Oh, you can do that?!" I think learning about midrash was a great life changer. I was at a conference in London, looking at the Holocaust and human behavior through the lens of history. The conference was about teaching young people about critical thinking, and I was one of the few non-Israelis there. There were conversations about midrash that changed the way I looked at things. I began reading historical midrash like Rashi, but from there I continued to look at contemporary midrashic scholars, particularly Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, and began seeing what you're able to do when it comes to reading text.

I also love *The Gospel in Solentiname*, by Ernesto Cardenal. There's something about the way that he doesn't correct people: they read a text, and then immediately they're talking about what happened yesterday. These unconscious associations are a psychoanalytical approach to seeing what happens when you open a text. He's right not to correct people, because they're doing nothing wrong. But so often, in the context of a controlling environment regarding a text, the desire is to say, "Well, you need to get it perfectly right in order to be able to justify making that association." He doesn't try to do that.

It's not just in biblical material. What would it be like to do that with *Gilgamesh*? Or with Irish mythology, or Greek mythology? The way the interpretation of narratives develops has a lot to do with the associations and personal experiences the reader brings to it. I see biblical literature as another world literature onto which human projection is entirely welcome, as part of the project about what it means to live with a story.

Leslie Long: Your poem "There Is a Time to Love and a Time to Hate; A Time for Making War" is based on the Vatican's 2021 "*Responsum* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to a *dubium* regarding the blessing of the unions of persons of the same sex." You call this an "erasure poem," and you've said, "I had great fun with that." I was really struck by the idea of having great fun with a text that is doctrinal documentation of exclusion, a text that is inherently not fun for the people about whom it's written.

There's an Irish writer, Nuala O'Faolain, who was an editorialist for the *Irish Times*. Her book *Are You Somebody?* is a collection of her editorials, but half of the book is a long introduction, like part of an autobiography. I read it in my early 20s. One of the editorials says something like, "Me and the pope have reached a new level of our relationship: I no longer care what he says." I remember thinking, "I yearn for your life. I yearn to be in a situation where I don't care." I was still trying to be very devoted at that stage, but I loved the freedom she had. The fact that she was writing about it meant she wasn't entirely free, either. I didn't see that as hypocrisy, I saw that as cultural: How could you be a feminist in Ireland in the '80s and '90s and not care about what the pope was saying? Because it's not about caring for the pope or not, it's about thinking, "This shit is going to affect me, and it's going to affect other women."

During the pandemic, somebody asked if I had seen this new Vatican paper that had just come out. I had known that something was being released, but it wasn't like I had marked it down to go, "God, keep an eye out on Monday morning for what's going to come through." I don't sign up for any of those lists anymore. So when I did read it I immediately thought, "What can I make it do?"

"There Is a Time to Love and a Time to Hate; A Time for Making War" demonstrates a dialogical relationship with the Vatican's text—dialectical too, in the sense that every text is always saying much more than it seems to be saying. There's an attempted forensic precision that you find in a Vatican

PHOTO BY DAVID PUGH

Orthodoxy

by Scott Cairns

—after Kapouzos [ΝΙΚΟΣ ΚΑΠΟΥΖΟΣ]

Yes, sweet, and very sweet the darkness
of the nave, and also very sweet
the observant surround, these icons
of our ancient fathers and our mothers,
whose images have acquired a warm
chiaroscuro from centuries
of fragrant smoke—incense, beeswax wafting
for centuries attended by seamless
petition and praise. Such prayers as these
yet fill the air with yet another
palpable sweetness.
So often, the world
appears wretched, choked by a broken,
angry and willfully cruel people.
So often, the world proves wretched indeed,
and its darkness is bitter. How then
to mitigate the assault waiting
just beyond the narthex? How to carry
at least some distance into the world
this fragrance, this sweetness, these images?

SCOTT CAIRNS *is emeritus professor of English at the University of Missouri. This poem is from his latest collection,* Correspondence with My Greeks, *forthcoming from Slant Books.*

document like that; it thinks it's being so clear. Part of me wanted to initiate some psychoanalytical anarchy into the text, to say, "Well, look at what else is there, hidden." Some of it is creative; some of it is playful; some of it is theological; some of it is just protest.

I had another page at the end of it, which was all from the footnotes, that just spelled out "flibbertigibbet" because I kind of wanted playfulness of language. But I was limited in terms of pages, because it's a chapbook. So whenever that poem gets published in a full-length collection, I think "flibbertigibbet" will go back in.

I do see "There Is a Time to Love and a Time to Hate; A Time for Making War" as a literary project. Language is always saying much more than we think it's saying. Terrence Tilley has a book, *Story Theology*, which is a very basic introduction into reading gospel texts through the lens of literary criticism: plot, character, locale, time. He has a line, "The teller of the story cannot control a story's power to reveal." I find that anarchic in its insight about what happens in writing; and for him to say that theologically, that's very interesting. It confirms something that poets are always trying to say: you can never control a poem in its reception. The Vatican can't control the story that they're telling you.

LL: We live in the Bible Belt, and many of our students here were raised with a strict understanding of scripture and its interpretation. So it feels very unsafe to step away from those interpretations. How did that process begin for you?

For me, it was kind of an accidental falling into Ignatian spirituality. Ignatius, in his guidance on prayer, says, "Read a text, maybe read it twice, then close the text, and call it to mind and then put yourself into it and describe what you can see." These are very imaginative readings, to free-associate with the text; they're also an exercise in point of view, in close reading, and in plotting the gaps of the text. So I think for me, Ignatius was the surprising door in.

In my late teens, I heard a few lectures from biblical scholars, one of whom, Frances Hogan, focused on the gospels. I loved the way she'd say, "Well, this is the Jesus of *Mark* we're talking about here." I'd never heard anyone say that. Again, I asked, "Can you say that?" I loved that she had read closely enough to say, "Jesus of Mark and Jesus of John are very different characters; my God, I don't think they would have liked each other at all." Mark's Jesus would have told John's Jesus to shut up.

So for me, the opening door was a literary one: I began to see texts as works of art. As much as I appreciate the art of poetry and the art of fiction, you can also appreciate the art behind the gospels. It's a mystery as to how they're compiled; of course, there's some historical data, but there's also so much we don't know. I feel full freedom therefore to bring

"God is discovered and made and remade in the possibility of doing something surprising."

what my limited brain says about art appreciation to these texts—and to a life in response to those texts.

I feel freedom to say, "You can say whatever you want." So what do you want to say? What have you thought about saying—about religion, its experience, its influence, and its relationship to the text? So many of the problems of the texts are not in the text itself, rather it's the policing and controlling mechanism of the text's interpretation. That is both boring and dangerous.

LMW: As you were talking about Ignatius, it struck me that in your podcast you offer an Ignatian reading of poetry. Have you thought about it in that way?

Completely! I also think that all Ignatius was doing was learning from others who read texts closely. All good historical engagement is people who read texts carefully and then can read the world in conversation with those texts. Ignatius was brilliant at it, and he created a very simple system for teaching others, but it's not a specific project to Ignatian spirituality or to any one religion.

I think what we've found over and over again throughout world literary history is how revolutionary it is for somebody to take a text—or a mythology or a piece of art—and read it in a new way. A new point of view is enlivening. The idea of point of view can be dignifying for people who've been told their point of view is invalid. I found my way into that both through midrash and through Ignatius. I suppose the two are doing different things, but in a certain sense each is paying close attention to the text, to reading carefully, and—alongside that—to reading yourself very carefully.

LMW: My sense is that you are not particularly interested in questions about belief. If that's the case, what does interest you?

I mean, what is God? God's just a sound that we make with our mouths. Whatever God is—or as Aquinas says, "that which we call God"—is discovered and made and remade in the possibility of doing something surprising.

Wouldn't it be extraordinary if voices of compromise, creativity, unexpected alliances emerged from within warring factions? Can you imagine, in much of the world's population, what a collective sigh of relief and excitement it would be, to think, "Oh my God, listen to that." That is the making of God, in a certain sense. Always small, always naive, because something is always being born. I don't believe in God as character, but I do believe in God as plot—and the emergence of God as plot is always small and risky. And open to being killed.

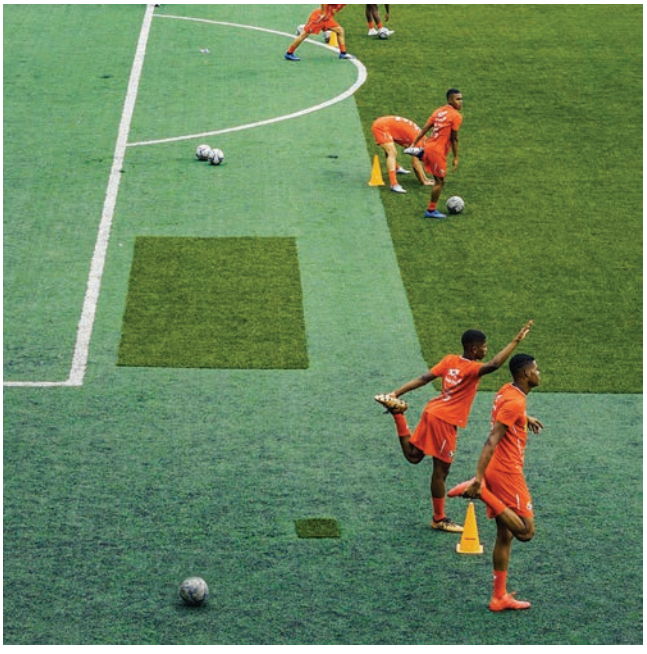
LMW: It sounds to me like you're also identifying God as seeing, observing, noticing.

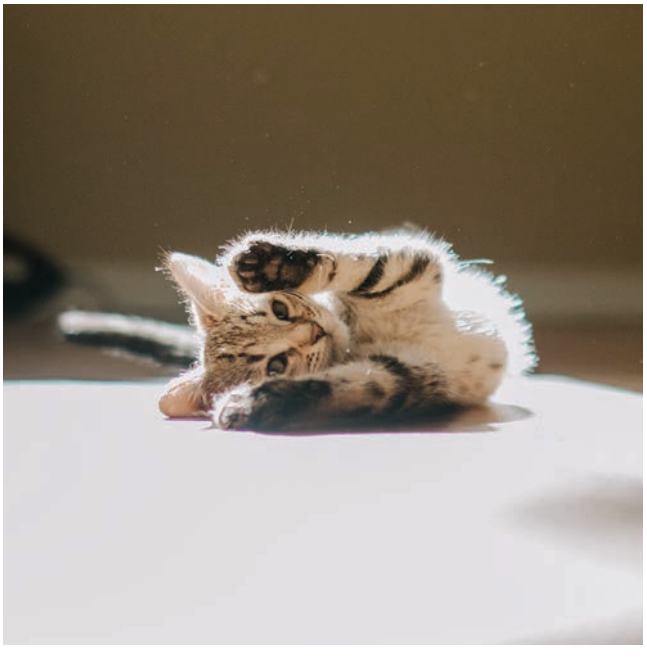
As art, also. Any creative endeavor on a geopolitical scale is artistic. In the Good Friday Agreement between Britain and Ireland, the preamble concludes, "in a spirit of concord, we strongly commend this agreement to the people." In the "spirit of concord": *concordia*—shared heart. It's that level of elevated language that moves me deeply. To think, "Look at what is possible when people do creative work with each other." ❑

LISA M. WOLFE, *a United Church of Christ minister, teaches Hebrew Bible at Oklahoma City University.* **LESLIE LONG** *teaches religious education and youth ministry and serves as director of the Wimberly School of Religion at OCU.*

Essays by readers

Stretch





Moments continue to go up in flames like the bush in Midian to illumine, if only for a moment, a path that stretches before us like no other path. And such moments call out in a voice which, if we only had courage and heart enough, we would follow to the end of time.

—Frederick Buechner, *A Room Called Remember*

In the waning evening light, I stared with awe at the vast expanse of trees surrounding my house. Our electricity had been out for 16 hours, my husband was working out of state, the roads were unsafe for travel, and all of my electronic devices were dead after eight hours of Zoom classes. I'd lived in the Texas Hill Country for 15 years, but this was my first ice storm—one I would weather alone.

Our oaks and cedars were so heavily laden with ice that 300-year-old sky-bound branches grazed the ground. With the power grid crippled by the storm's icy fury, the symphony of modern life was silenced. I felt a strange gray stillness enveloping me as my nervous system found resonance in the relentless creaking of trees stretched to their limits.

Every few minutes, the intensity of the scene was broken by a sound like an echoing gunshot, signaling that another ancient branch had succumbed to its icy burden. Each fracture resounded like a resolute declaration of surrender, as if the trees shed their ice to reclaim their truest essence. It reminded me of the delicate balance between strength and fragility.

The scene began to overwhelm me. My yard brought to light the condition of my heart. I too was frozen, weighted down, and stretched by grief well beyond my capacity. The thaw's aftermath would leave me uncertain what parts of me would endure.

One year earlier, we lost our oldest daughter to suicide after a relentless ten-year battle with mental illness. At her funeral, loved ones shared stories about the ways she had profoundly impacted their lives through her fierce strength and contagious laughter. Tears eluded me, and I confided to my family, "If I don't sob soon, I'm afraid I will break."

Over the next year, I did all the right things: EMDR with my counselor, regular meetings with my spiritual director, exercise, books on grief, and silent retreats. Yet instead of the gift of warm tears, my frozen body expressed its grief through tremors in my hands and legs, sometimes making it difficult to eat or drive.

My self-reflective moment was broken when I noticed a flurry of movement beneath the trees. Curious, I leaned in and saw hundreds of birds carpeting the ground. In stark contrast to the straining trees, they appeared jubilant and free as they consumed some unexpected feast provided by the storm.

With a deep breath, I felt a holy invitation to acceptance. Acceptance that parts of me, stretched by the frozen weight of grief, would be broken away—with the possibility of creating a fiery warmth in the future. Acceptance that being fully present in deeply painful moments can lead to expanded internal capacity and strength. Acceptance that by leaning into the stretch of a weighty storm I might catch glimpses of joy, abundance, and freedom.

Tamara Ramirez
Bulverde, TX

"Make sure you arrive at the barre warmed up and ready to dance," my ballet teacher said. We only had an hour and 20 minutes twice a week to work on our technique, which meant we didn't have time to waste on something like stretching that could be done individually. When I could, I arrived 20 minutes early to put on my pointe shoes, do floor stretches, and loosen my hips at the barre. I wanted to do my best because I was definitely not the most talented dancer in the room.

"Point, flex, point, close," my teacher's voice would ring out over the piano. "Make sure you are stretching those toes as far as you can, both forward and back." Even though I had begun dancing at the age of four, danced competitively, and spent nearly every day of my youth in the dance studio, there were always people with more natural talent—those who could point their toes farther and turn out their legs naturally.

"Make sure you're tucking under your pelvis," I heard every class, knowing my bottom was sticking out and my back was swaying. I was the weakest link in the class, for sure. I took this class for fun, but others were majoring in dance—they ate, slept, and breathed dance. If I did happen to arrive early to

The Buechner Narrative Writing Project

This project honors the life and legacy of writer and theologian Frederick Buechner with the aim of nurturing the art of spiritual writing and reflection.

Selected essays will be published in the print or web magazine. Authors of the selected essays will receive $100 and a free one-year subscription to the CHRISTIAN CENTURY. Send essays to contest@christiancentury.org.

Readers are invited to submit first-person narratives (under 1,000 words) on the following topic:

Face Deadline: August 1, 2024

CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT: GIOVANNI AYALA (UNSPLASH). AZRISURATMIN. PEOPLEIMAGES. RYANJLANE (ISTOCK / GETTY)

Friends chastised me for pursuing ice skating at my age. They didn't know that I loved the feeling of flying.

stretch, I didn't always do it, because I had such precious little time to rehearse with my course schedule that I would end up practicing rather than warming up my muscles.

"Just lightly touch the barre." I had a death grip on the piece of metal attached to the wall, convinced it would save me. It felt like an extension of my body, which did me no good when I was doing the same work in the center of the room without the support of the barre. My torso would tip because my core wasn't strong enough. I didn't have the flexibility because I hadn't spent the time stretching.

"Where are you looking?" the instructor asked. I was never looking in the right direction. When we were supposed to look stage left, I looked stage right. When I was supposed to be warming up, I was jumping in with both feet. When I practiced outside of class, I never warmed up. Years later my body, now nearly 40 years old, reminds me what a poor choice that was, as my hips pop and I have permanent damage in my right heel.

"Keep breathing."

I didn't become a professional dancer. My body changed so much after I had kids that I danced less frequently. I've spent many years unpacking the harm dance did—to my body, to my emotional health, to my understanding of the world. Dance is an extremely competitive art. Thankfully the dance world is becoming more diverse and inclusive of more body types, but it can still be toxic. For me, it wasn't all bad: amid the harms, there were lessons like my teacher's admonition to keep breathing.

Even when I make an unexpected turn, when I forget the dance, when the music stops unexpectedly, when something goes wrong, I keep breathing.

Katrina Pekich-Bundy
Alma, MI

After an urgent hip replacement following an ice-skating accident, I left the hospital with my daughter Abbie, who is a nurse. At home she had me stretch out my arms so she could gird me with a medical device called a BalanceBelt. She held onto it tightly while I clutched the stair rail, grimacing as I took one step after another until we made it into the house. When she was a toddler and confused her pronouns, she used to say, "I carry you," when she wanted to be held. Now she indeed carried me through this ordeal.

Jesus tells Peter, and all of us, that we will grow old. That we will stretch out our hands and be girded, that we will be taken where we do not want to go (John 21:18). I certainly felt this loss of independence when I wobbled with a walker and then learned to carefully move with a cane. Although at 62 I did not consider myself old, I ended up extending my hands, wearing a belt, and facing months of physical therapy.

At the ice rink, a young boy had raced recklessly across the ice and run into me, knocking me off my feet and into the air. I landed on my left hip. Some of my friends chastised me for pursuing the sport at my age. But they did not know that I grew up with a mother who skated, that my grandmother knit my stocking cap and mittens along with matching pompoms to attach to the top of my skates, that I loved the feeling of flying.

They did not know that as a teenager I would walk to the lake with my friends, our skate laces tied together and slung over our shoulders. We would sit on a log by the side of the pond to put on our skates in the cold, crisp air that stung our hands and faces. The bare cottonwood branches swayed in the unrelenting wind. We would skate for hours, balancing ourselves on the blades, teetering on an inside or

outside edge, doing simple spins and crossovers. We raced from the south end of the lake to the north end, and to escape the blustery breezes for a few minutes we took turns sheltering in the hollow oak tree on the lake's west bank. After hours of skating, we would put on our shoes, sling our skates over our shoulders, and walk to my house, where my mother always offered us hot chocolate and cinnamon toast.

Nor did they know that I raised my own ice-skating children many years ago. I carried my three-year-old daughter across the frozen surface where Sonja Henie won the last of her three Olympic gold medals in Garmisch, Germany. Two of my girls took up the sport when they were young. I loved skating with my mother, my siblings, my own children. I even loved pursuing the sport by myself, which is why I was adventurously gliding across the frozen surface on the fateful day of the accident.

The surgeon put me back together, friends brought meals, and my husband and daughter lovingly took care of me. I have a new hip and a new appreciation for my fearless mother. She extended our horizons as we learned and mastered a new skill. She stretched our imaginations as we experienced God's beautiful world in the rippled ice that formed as the freezing wind roared across the water, in the winter silence joyously interrupted by the laughter of friends across the lake, and in sunlit sparkling snow under a bright blue sky.

Lori Drake
Farmville, NC

It was the penultimate day of 2022, and I was dragging myself to the end of year. It had been a long year, and the years before were not much better. I could get through my days by staying busy, but then night would fall and the darkness would bring me a trio of fear, grief, and sadness. Middle age hit me with all its complexities: parenting my tween and my trans teen, caring for my dad with Alzheimer's, supporting my overwhelmed mom, learning how to trust a new church community again after devastation at the last one, working toward never-ending professional goals, cursing the 20 pounds I just couldn't lose, and living in a body that felt like it was holding my tension and stress in every joint and muscle.

As I was getting ready for bed that night, without a plan or a YouTube instruction video to guide me, I lifted my hands to the sky, then let them fall to the floor. I walked my hands into a downward dog that morphed into a plank, then pressed my forehead to the floor in child's pose. The whole time, I breathed deeply and slowly, centering myself on the only true thing amid my angst. In my head I repeated "God is with me" over and over, calling God to come close and not let me go.

Skeptical of all touchy-feely yoga-like things, I surprised myself. The next night, I repeated the exercise. I threw in a few more stretches and yoga poses. I continued the nightly practice of my mash-up of prayer and stretches and yoga and mindfulness, mixing up the movement but always breathing and connecting with God through my simple prayer.

It's been many months, and I think I'm a bit stronger and more flexible. My sleep comes easier most nights, too. In the turbulence of midlife, this practice has reminded me that God is not here to suddenly clear away every challenge and hurt in my path. Instead, as I stretch and breathe, I remember that God is always with me, holding me close in the dark.

Elizabeth Dollhopf-Brown
Hanover, NH

I remember the exhaustion, so deep you think it will never leave you. (The truth is, it never really does, it just becomes your constant companion.) I remember touching my daughter's bare skin for the first time and realizing that there was skin that actually did feel like velvet. She smelled like nothing and like everything good all at once. And I remember staring at her for hours on end, my eyes thirsty for just the sight of her. Most of all, I remember the wonder of it all, the feeling that something so much bigger than myself had happened, and I was lucky, so lucky, just to have been a part of it. A new life is holy—our baby girl.

It was late when we were discharged from the hospital. We got home, and the first thing we did was collapse on the couch. We sat shoulder to shoulder and thigh to thigh on that old purple leather couch, held her between us, and just stared at her little sleeping face. I remember whispering, "I can't believe they just *let us take her home*." Didn't they know how unqualified we were?

My husband gave a tired snicker. "I know, right?"

I didn't know my heart could stretch so wide with so much love.

Two years later, when we welcomed her sister, the exhaustion and joy were the same, though we were a little more confident in our parenting. After all, we had kept her big sister alive for two years! But again I was taken aback by how much my heart could stretch—filled with wonder, awe, and not a small amount of fear, but over it all, love. The love we had for her, this precious second daughter.

To be a parent is to exist with your heart outside your chest. It goes out into the world with your children. It goes to the first day of kindergarten with its attendant tears. It goes with them to their first sleepover while you lie sleepless, wondering if they are OK. It goes on their first solo car drive and their first date. Your heart stretches and stretches as it lives out in the world, away from its home in your chest. How could something stretch so wide and not break? It never does, though, and in all the stretching, with every day that passes, your love grows stronger still.

Your love would also like to stretch a hedge of protection

My wife and I celebrated her progress and the small miracles we encountered. One of those miracles was stretch bands.

around them so that no pain can reach them, even though you know pain is often how we grow. It's your love that wants to crush every bully, that wants to make sure they are never left out and never alone, that sometimes makes you deeply irrational about your precious babies.

You find yourself stretching in other ways, too. You start to grow in your patience and kindness. You want to be the best person you can be for them, and so you try to dull your rough edges. You become more than you ever thought you could be.

The most significant stretch of all comes late—after 18 years, in fact. They are tall and strong and so beautiful you still want to stare at them. You have been practicing letting them go in a million small ways over the past few years, knowing you'll never truly be ready. But the day comes when you have to let them go. To take them to their new home in a strange city and set them free.

So much of your life has been about holding them close that it seems impossible you will now be asked to let them go. But you do. Because you love them, and you can't wait to see them grow and flourish. But your heart has to stretch wide to accommodate this leaving. You wonder if you will survive it.

The only thing that brings you comfort is the same thing that has sustained you each day of their lives: the belief that Jesus is with them and for them. In the water of their baptism, they received the sign and seal of God's grace. The truth is that they have been enveloped in Jesus' love and providence in every moment, and they will continue to be. Jesus and his love were at the root of all that wonder when they were born. It was Jesus who walked with them through their first day of kindergarten, past the doors where you could not go. It was Jesus who held them in the palm of his hand when they experienced their first broken heart. It is Jesus who is the bedrock of your life and theirs. You hope they remember that. You are sure you will never forget it.

Tara Bulger
Huntsville, AL

When my wife, Jeanne, had a stroke, the entire right side of her body was affected. And she was right-handed. Thank God she retained the functionality of her left side, as well as her neck, brain, and senses. With those blessings she could understand what her doctors and nurses had to say to her, and she could use her left hand to do some of the things she had done with her right hand, if more awkwardly and imperfectly than she wished.

Jeanne's therapists began working with her while she was still bedridden to regain some of her abilities on her right side. Slowly, feeling returned, including the pain of atrophied muscles and sinews being stretched once again, and with it a bit of strength. How hard she worked, too often with tears in her eyes and her teeth clenched. All I could do was steady her and encourage her as she worked through both her exercises and the shock and emotions generated by a body that no longer worked as it always had. She felt useless at times, and so did I.

In the down times between Jeanne's physical or occupational therapy sessions and her doctor's appointments, the two of us would sit in her room quietly talking as we had throughout our marriage about how far we had come together, where we now found ourselves, and what was in store for us. We planned together and prayed together, and we celebrated both progress and small miracles.

One of those small miracles was stretch bands. These are essentially large rubber bands, three or four feet or more, of various strengths designated by color. To us they were laughably simple—but to our surprise, they worked! From the earliest days after her stroke, Jeanne was given bands and taught how to use them. For example, place one under your foot, hold onto it with both hands, and try to straighten your leg. Try a stronger one with your strong leg. Now try it with your weak leg. Repeat as often as you can. Now try them on your arms. Try them sitting up. Or standing. Wrap them around your back. Pull, relax, pull again. How do you feel?

Jeanne did her due diligence and got much stronger, with ever more use of her right side. Unfortunately an aggressive form of thyroid cancer invaded her lungs before she was deemed strong enough to endure radiation and chemo treatments. She died four and a half months after her stroke. How I miss her! But I sometimes bemusedly think that, had it not been for cancer, stretch bands, of all things, might have been what brought Jeanne home to me.

Herb Evert
Cottage Grove, WI

Summer Musings

by Sally Witt, CSJ

How small the life
with space for only what I know
or can find with certainty
by moving just one finger on a surface.

I want to cast away
every instrument of instant answers
to enter mystery, that place
that lies in stillness, open to the Spirit.

There I might find room for emptiness,
for nothingness, for waiting;
there my heart may watch
for waves that rise and fall

as on a gentle lake in summer,
and there perceive the depths that gather,
the movement unrestrained by boundaries,
the wild and constant surging into love.

SALLY WITT, CSJ, *is a Sister of St. Joseph of Baden, Pennsylvania.*

A new published volume of ancient papyri contains sayings, attributed to Jesus, that were previously unknown—including a dialogue with a disciple named Mary.

Early Christianity, fragment by fragment

by Elizabeth Schrader Polczer

LAST SUMMER BROUGHT BIG NEWS for scholars of early Christianity. Three previously unknown gospel fragments were published for the first time as part of an ongoing series, the Oxyrhynchus Papyri. These three Greek manuscript fragments, which scholars date between the second to the fourth centuries CE, all purport to preserve otherwise unknown sayings of Jesus.

They were copied on papyrus, the most common writing medium used in ancient Egypt. Although the papyri have similarities with more familiar gospels, these particular ancient Christian texts were previously unknown to scholars. They have been cataloged as P.Oxy 5575 ("Sayings of Jesus"), P.Oxy 5576 ("Gnostic Text"), and P.Oxy 5577 ("Valentinian Text?").

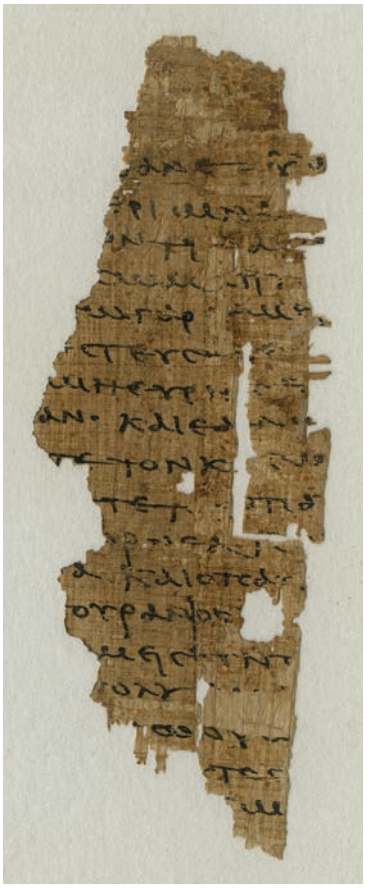
In the late 1890s, two Oxford professors named Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt began excavations in Egypt in search of ancient papyri. By some accounts, their goal was to rescue papyri from ancient rubbish mounds before farmers dug the mounds up for fertilizer. But Grenfell and Hunt were also rather opportunistic in their timing: this was during the British occupation of Egypt (1882–1956), when British excavators could legally claim whatever Egyptian antiquities they discovered and bring them back to England.

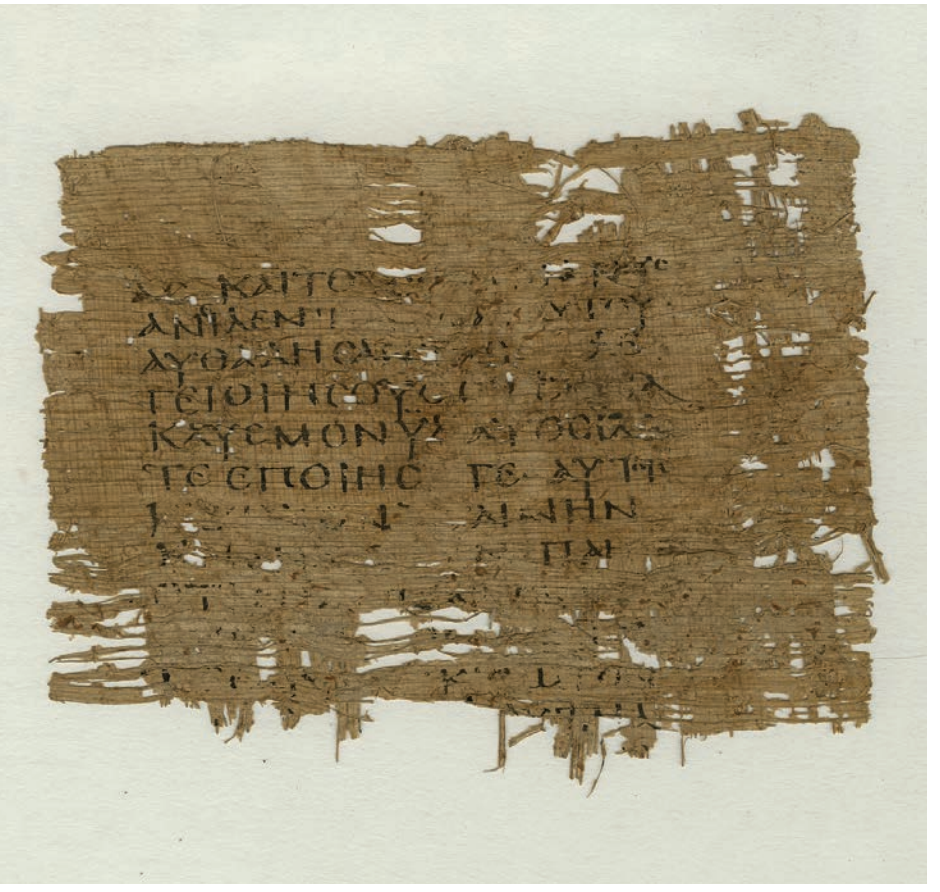
In 1896, Grenfell and Hunt began digging in the ancient Christian city of Oxyrhynchus (today Al-Bahnasa) with a large team of local workers. They soon struck gold. The rubbish heaps contained hundreds of thousands of papyrus fragments, representing a huge range of written material: receipts, letters, fragments of the gospels, portions of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and many unknown literary works. These texts were mostly copied in Greek, and they dated from the second century BCE to the seventh century CE. Although the papyri were falling apart, many were still legible due to having been preserved in Egypt's dry climate. The website for the Oxyrhynchus papyri explains that ever since Grenfell and Hunt's excavations, "scholars have worked continuously to catalogue, decipher, and publish this material" in the now 87 volumes of the series. (To learn more about previously published Christian papyri from Oxyrhynchus, see AnneMarie Luijendijk's *Greetings in the Lord* or Lincoln Blumell and Thomas Wayment's *Christian Oxyrhynchus*.)

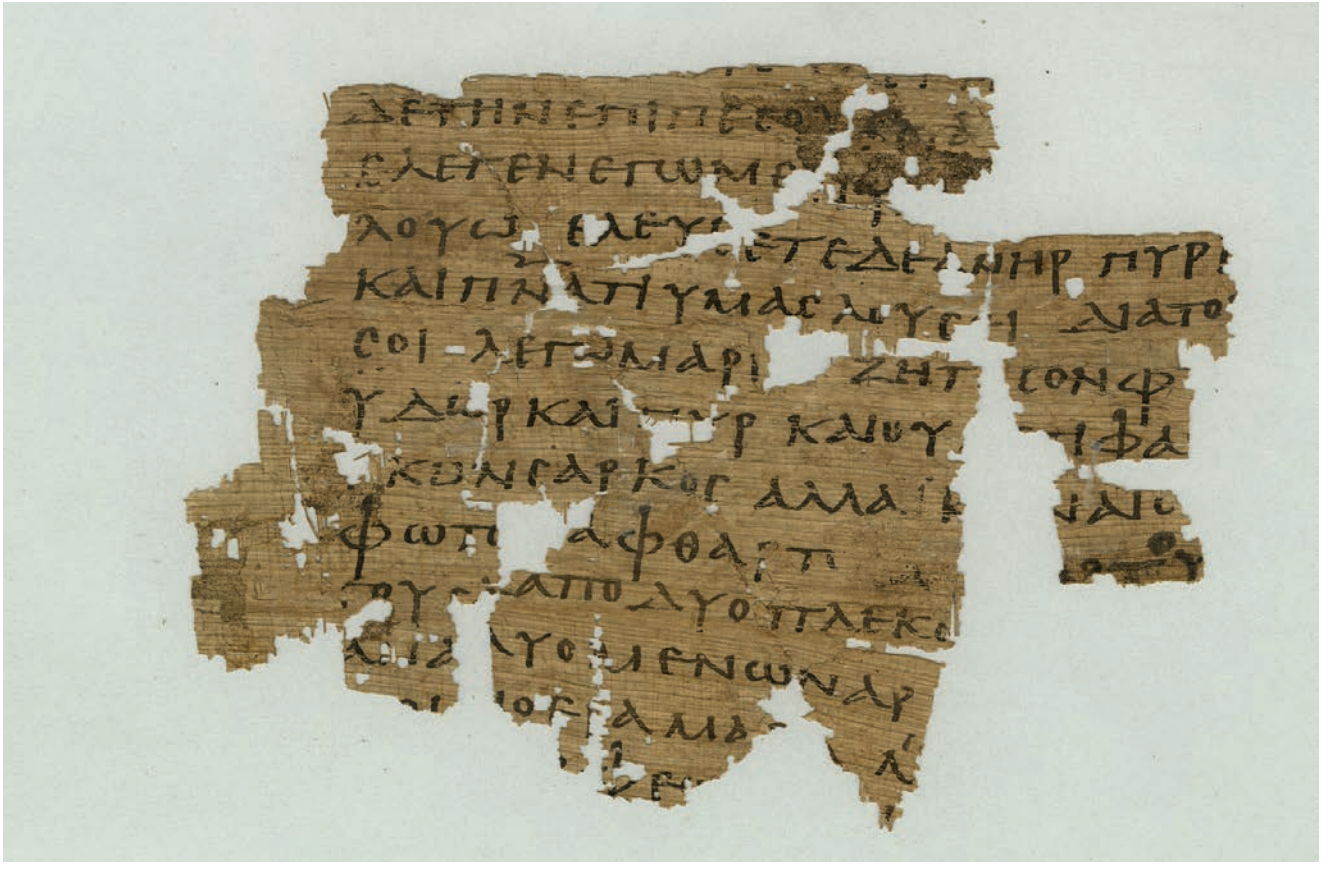
Grenfell and Hunt brought back an astounding half a million papyrus fragments to Oxford. More substantial papyri comprised a few pages, but most were smaller than a business card. Today the papyri are housed at Oxford's Bodleian Art, Archaeology and Ancient World Library (formerly the Sackler Library). They are a treasure trove of information about the ancient world, including early Christianity.

To some extent, the Oxyrhynchus papyri were overshadowed by the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library in 1945. When people think about lost Christian gospels, they

The Oxyrhynchus papyri include (clockwise from left) 5575, "Sayings of Jesus," 5576, "Gnostic Text," and 5577, "Valentinian Text?"







COURTESY OF THE EGYPT EXPLORATION SOCIETY AND THE FACULTY OF CLASSICS, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

In 1896, two Oxford scholars found half a million papyrus fragments in Egypt. Most were smaller than a business card.

often have in mind these codices, which were copied in Coptic in the fourth or fifth century. The Oxyrhynchus papyri are much more varied and fragmentary than the Nag Hammadi library, but they still have much to tell us about Christian origins, particularly in Egypt in the first centuries of the Common Era.

In fact, the very first volume published by Grenfell and Hunt in 1897 contained a text called *Logia Iesou: Sayings of Our Lord from an Early Greek Papyrus*. Although they didn't know it at the time, P.Oxy 1 preserved the opening of the lost Gospel of Thomas, which would be discovered in full at Nag Hammadi. Other notable "lost gospel" fragments would also eventually be published in the series—including a potential section of the Gospel of Peter (P.Oxy 2949) in 1972, a section of the Gospel of Mary (P.Oxy 3525) in 1983, and a possible rewriting of Mark 5 or Matthew 10 (P.Oxy 5072) in 2011.

Today there is approximately one volume published in the Oxyrhynchus Papyri series each year, and more than 5,600 papyri have been edited. Considering the time and effort it takes to decipher and edit each scrap of papyrus, it is daunting to consider that hundreds of thousands of scraps still remain unidentified and unpublished. The series has its work cut out for many years to come, and many more treasures may yet come to light.

The 2023 volume presents "first editions" of 58 papyri discovered more than a century ago at Oxyrhynchus. Most of these texts are banal snapshots of ancient Egyptian life: "Order to Pay Rent," "Receipt for the Price of Cogwheels," "Receipt for Wine," "Account of Sale of Acacia Wood." This volume also includes a section of Paul's letter to the Romans, a fragment of Revelation 17, and some classical texts. But Christian readers will be most interested to learn about the three previously unknown gospel fragments that purport to preserve words of Jesus.

My own research focuses on Mary Magdalene, so I will start with a discussion of a fascinating papyrus that preserves a dialogue between Jesus and a disciple named Mary. The editor of the papyrus, Juan Chapa of the University of Navarra, dates this manuscript to the fourth century (although the dating of ancient manuscripts is rarely certain, and in any case the dialogue itself could have been authored much earlier). Here is Chapa's reconstruction and translation of the fragment:

> . . . good Father . . . introduces (?) the simple and incorruptible form. Therefore I say, Mary: I showed myself as the artificer mind in the *logos* made flesh filled with the incorruptible Father, awakening through my kindness the hidden life of the Father . . . form and . . .
>
> . . . will fall on the earth. [John] said: "I bathe you with water, but a man will come and will bathe you with fire and spirit." Therefore I say to you, Mary: seek to mix water and fire and you will no longer appear as an image of flesh, but an image of the eternal incorruptible light, bringing together for you, Mary, intellectual spirits from two intertwined and dissolved elements.

What does this fragment tell us? First of all, it appears that a disciple named Mary is being given a special revelation. The person speaking to Mary refers to himself as the *logos* (word) made flesh, and Chapa concludes that this "strongly suggest[s] that the speaker is Jesus." As far as we can tell, Mary is the only person that Jesus is speaking to. After he refers to the baptism of John, who only bathed with water, and his own baptism with "fire and spirit," he instructs Mary to "mix water and fire" in order to advance spiritually. He says that she will then no longer appear as a fleshly image but as an image of "eternal incorruptible light."

What does this mean? Since the papyrus is so fragmentary, it's difficult to be certain, but the references to water and fire are likely symbolic. This focus on Mary, as well as the emphasis on

water, fire, light, and baptism, are similar to the Gospel of Philip, which was found at Nag Hammadi. That gospel is thought to be associated with the second-century teacher Valentinus; in part, this is why Chapa has titled the fragment "Valentinian Text?" Yet even this possibility is uncertain, since there were many early Christian groups interested in baptism, initiation, and symbolism around fire and water.

When Chapa unveiled this fragment at a conference in Vienna last July, German scholar Silke Petersen asked whether P.Oxy 5577 could be part of the missing section of the Gospel of Mary. This gospel was probably authored in the second century by a community that revered Mary Magdalene and is preserved in the fifth-century Berlin Codex (another important "lost gospel" manuscript written in Coptic) and two other third-century Greek fragments discovered at Oxyrhynchus. The Gospel of Mary describes a woman named Mary encouraging other disciples after Jesus' departure; she then shares her own vision of a conversation she had with "the Savior." Unfortunately, in the section where Mary describes this vision, several pages are missing from the Berlin Codex, and neither of the two Greek fragments preserves this lost content.

Has a missing section of the Gospel of Mary finally come to light? At the Society of Biblical Literature annual meeting last fall, British specialist Sarah Parkhouse built an argument that P.Oxy 5577 may indeed retain a portion of that gospel's missing vision section. Parkhouse even asked for a show of hands to see which of the 70 or so scholars in the room were convinced that this might be the Gospel of Mary, and more than two-thirds did so (including me). While it can't be proven, it is a reasonable possibility.

But caution is also in order. When I asked Mark Goodacre of Duke University whether he thought P.Oxy 5577 was a piece of the Gospel of Mary, he said to me: "The thing that makes me cautious is that it has the Matthean-sounding 'Therefore I say to you' twice, and for such a tiny fragment that is striking, since the expression does not come anywhere else in what we have of the Gospel of Mary. Also, we have 'incorruptible light' and 'incorruptible Father' in the fragment, as well as a second 'Father,' but we don't have any of that vocabulary in what we have of the Gospel of Mary. These are not decisive points, especially when dealing with such a small fragment, but they are enough to make me pause."

Goodacre is correct that if P.Oxy 5577 is part of the Gospel of Mary, it would turn many assumptions about this gospel on their head. It may be that we simply didn't have access to the sections of this gospel that refer to God as Father, and it could also be that Mary's vision is stylistically different than the rest of this gospel. It's a shame that we do not have more of the papyrus preserved, since there was certainly additional content; many have longed to know what took place in Mary's missing vision.

But even if this is not a portion of the Gospel of Mary, P.Oxy 5577 is significant: it shows that multiple ancient Christian groups identified someone named Mary as receiving special revelation from Jesus. This has real consequences for our understanding of Christian origins, as well as the authority given to women in some early Christian circles.

If you've already gotten wind of these new fragments, it's likely that the fragment you've heard about is P.Oxy 5575. In an August *Daily Beast* article, Candida Moss of the University of Birmingham gives a thorough introduction to this papyrus. She writes, "Although the fragment does not include the phrase 'Jesus said,' it appears to be a collection of sayings attributed to Jesus. As the fragment is so short, it is difficult to determine exactly what kind of text it was." Moss also addresses some initial speculation that this fragment was a portion of the sayings source Q, a theoretical lost written source of sayings of Jesus that was perhaps known to Matthew and Luke. Moss explains that P.Oxy 5575 cannot be Q, because it "departs from Matthew and Luke in small but important ways. It is, however, a sayings source."

The editors of this papyrus date P.Oxy 5575 to the second century, but this dating has since been challenged (see below). The papyrus is quite fragmentary, so there is substantial guesswork involved in the following textual reconstruction:

> . . . he died (?). [I tell] you: [do not] worry [about your life,] what you will eat, [or] about your body, what [you will wear.] For I tell you: [unless] you fast [from the world,] you will never find [the Kingdom,] and unless you . . . the world, you [will never . . .] the Father . . . the birds, how . . . and [your (?)] heavenly Father [feeds them (?).] You [also] therefore . . . [Consider the lilies,] how they grow . . . Solomon . . . in [his] glory . . . [if] the Father [clothes] grass which dries up and is thrown into the oven, [he will clothe (?)] you . . . You [also (?)] therefore . . . for [your] Father [knows] . . . you need. [Instead (?)] seek [his kingdom (?), and all these things (?)] will be given [to you (?)] as well.

Daniel Wallace, one of the editors of the papyrus, notes a surprising aspect of the papyrus, one first observed by his graduate student Rory Crowley: these sayings have parallels in the Gospel of Thomas. In particular, the fragment recalls saying 27 of the Gospel of Thomas: "If you do not fast from the world, you will not find the Kingdom of God. And if you do not sabbatize the Sabbath, you will not see the Father." Here, something resembling that apocryphal saying is unexpectedly folded between sayings of Jesus reminiscent of Matthew 6 and Luke 12. This new papyrus fragment also apparently begins with "he died," which recalls saying 63 of the Gospel of Thomas: "There was a rich man who had much money. He said: 'I will use my money so that I may sow and reap and plant and fill my storehouses with produce, so that I lack nothing.' This was what he thought in his heart. And that very night the man died."

I asked Mike Holmes, another of the papyrus's editors, about the connection between these sayings and the Gospel of Thomas. He emphasized that much remains uncertain: "First, the wording of the fragment is not identical to Matthew, Luke, or Thomas, but only similar, and second, the fragment is very small." As for the second-century date assigned to the papyrus, Holmes underlined that this is an approximate date based solely on its similarity of handwriting with other papyri: "When dating on the basis of a comparison of scribal hands, one deals with degrees of probability, not certainty."

Very shortly after the papyrus was published, respected papyrologist Brent Nongbri challenged the second-century date. He did so by confirming the editors' tentative suggestion that the scribe of these sayings was the exact same scribe as that of P.Oxy 4009—an Oxyrhynchus papyrus published in 1993, which preserves yet another previously unknown rewriting of gospel traditions. Pasquale Orsini, one of the world's foremost paleographers of ancient Greek, has assigned P.Oxy 4009 to the fourth century, so it is possible that the editors of P.Oxy 5575 have leaned slightly early in their dating.

This papyrus has already caused a huge stir in New Testament studies, especially for those who assume that the four canonical gospels were static and carefully preserved from the beginning. This papyrus demonstrates that some early Christians were happy to mix and match words of Jesus, and some apparently gave equal weight to sayings that would be preserved only in the Gospel of Thomas. As Holmes explains, "in this significant respect, 5575 is unique among all known papyri." (Although, as Ian Mills of Hamilton College points out in an article for the Text and Canon Institute, we do know of several other early Christian works that recombine familiar stories about Jesus.) Holmes underlines that "whether the 'Thomas' material came from the Gospel of Thomas, or a possible source of Thomas, or from some oral source cannot be determined. And the same may be said of the synoptic material: it could be from an oral source or a written one."

To see a comparison of the new sayings fragment alongside sayings of Jesus known from other gospels, Goodacre has provided a helpful English synopsis of the fragment on his website and put it in parallel columns next to Matthew, Luke, and the Gospel of Thomas.

P.Oxy 5576, another fragment published in the latest Oxyrhynchus volume, describes Jesus uttering several apocalyptic sayings. Chapa edited this papyrus as well, and he dates the fragment to the third century. Again, the text itself could have been authored earlier, and again, papyrus dating is imprecise. Nongbri told me that "for 5576 and 5577, Chapa's dates may well be correct, but they could also be a bit earlier or (especially in the case of 5576) a bit later." Here is its reconstruction:

> . . . and [he?] killed the tyrants who acted arrogantly against him.
>
> Jesus says: "When you saw a flood of water, you made for yourselves a wooden ark and on it you rested. When you see a flood of water, make for yourselves another ark and rest on it . . .
>
> . . . , but they will not even perceive my rest."
>
> Jesus says: "Your time has become short, since we do not have the fire of flesh from the place of truth, nor, indeed, the fire unquenchable . . . from the same place . . ."

Chapa notes that this content is reminiscent of several themes found in the Nag Hammadi codices. For example, in Nag Hammadi texts like *The Reality of the Rulers* and *The Concept of the Great Power*, arrogant cosmic rulers decide to annihilate everything with a flood in a sort of rewriting of Genesis 6–7. These texts also refer to an ark, and many Nag Hammadi texts emphasize the concept of rest or repose.

When encountering ancient papyrus fragments with the words "Jesus says," it is understandable to wonder whether Jesus actually spoke these words. In the case of P.Oxy 5576, it's difficult to argue that this was an actual historical saying of Jesus, since only one papyrus preserves it and this gospel appears to be completely unknown otherwise. Moreover, it was quite common for later gnostic Christians to author such stories and attribute sayings to Jesus.

These three new fragments are fascinating for scholars of the New Testament and early Christianity, as well as for curious Christians. Has Mary's long-lost vision from the Gospel of Mary finally come to light? Were the earliest Christians less strict in their copying of the gospels than has often been assumed? These texts remind us that the first centuries of Christianity were much more varied, and sometimes much stranger, than anyone has ever imagined. ❑

ELIZABETH SCHRADER POLCZER *teaches New Testament at Villanova University.*

imagine eating a fruit

by Alex Baskin

so sweet it revealed

your own skin to you.

why say we did wrong?

guilt's just a melody,

a comet, a dry tin bucket.

there's a pomegranate-sun

nestled neatly in the body,

but we forget this fact.

if i had visited the garden,

i wouldn't have shown up

as a snake, no no.

instead—a pink baby pig.

i'd have played the fiddle,

told the-woman & the-man,

> *dance with me, drink milk,*
> *let's plug in this antique lamp,*
> *let's pour honey on our toes.*

why not believe in us—

why not believe

in the things we can do?

ALEX BASKIN *works as an interfaith hospital chaplain.*

What can I learn from what he underlined—or didn't?

My dad's old Bible offers more questions than answers

by Thomas R. Steagald

I INHERITED MY DAD'S BIBLE, a battered old Thompson Chain-Reference (KJV), upon his death in 1988. It is an amazing storehouse of information that Frank Charles Thompson assembled in hopes of couching the scriptures in "simple yet scholarly" terms for interested and studious laypeople—as well as for struggling preachers like Dad. The genesis of Thompson's project, in fact, was his frustration regarding the limitations of reference Bibles in his time. The result, first published in 1908, was a block of righteousness that Dad considered an indefatigable doorstop to keep closed all the gates of hell.

Each double page of sacred text is flanked and guttered with cross references (more than 100,000 in all). In the back are a concordance, thick indexes of explanatory notes, and in-depth character studies. There is a plenitude of charts and maps, not to mention the complex "chains" of Thompson's references (more than 4,000).

Dad's particular copy presents as a leathery, tough veteran: unyielding and strong, the kind of book you want on your side in a personal theological throw-down or in a battle in whatever war the culture might be fighting. True to the part, the book has taken some hits: it has scars, and its increasingly brittle stiffness suggest it might be time for a Purple Heart and an honorable discharge.

By the time I got my hands on it, the black cover had already passed through its "old jacket" comfort stage and had begun to harden again. There were cracks in places, and a couple of dry open wounds—proof of its dutiful, unyielding protection of its tender innards, edge-gilded pages thin as onionskin. Stamped onto the front cover—in letters still visibly gold—are his name, Ray L. Steagald, and a date, February 13, 1955. I was born five weeks before, on January 4.

Dad had recently received a call to Bradley's Creek Baptist Church, a beautiful little white-framed building in the small town of Lascassas, Tennessee. Bradley's Creek's quick gathered across the gravel road from Bradley's Creek's dead—in a building with two front doors, one for the women and one for the men. Dad preached for two short seasons during two brief tenures at Bradley's Creek.

In lovely script, someone wrote on one of the stiff blank pages just inside the Bible's cover:

This Bible was presented
to Ray L. Steagald by
the Radnor Baptist
Church on the day
of his ordination to
the full work of the gospel ministry.
February 13, 1955
Nashville Tennessee

The facing page is blank and loose. Whatever binding glue once held the two together has let go completely. Now, what appears to be a wide incision—you can see down to the spine—separates the pages. I have wondered if Dad might have pulled

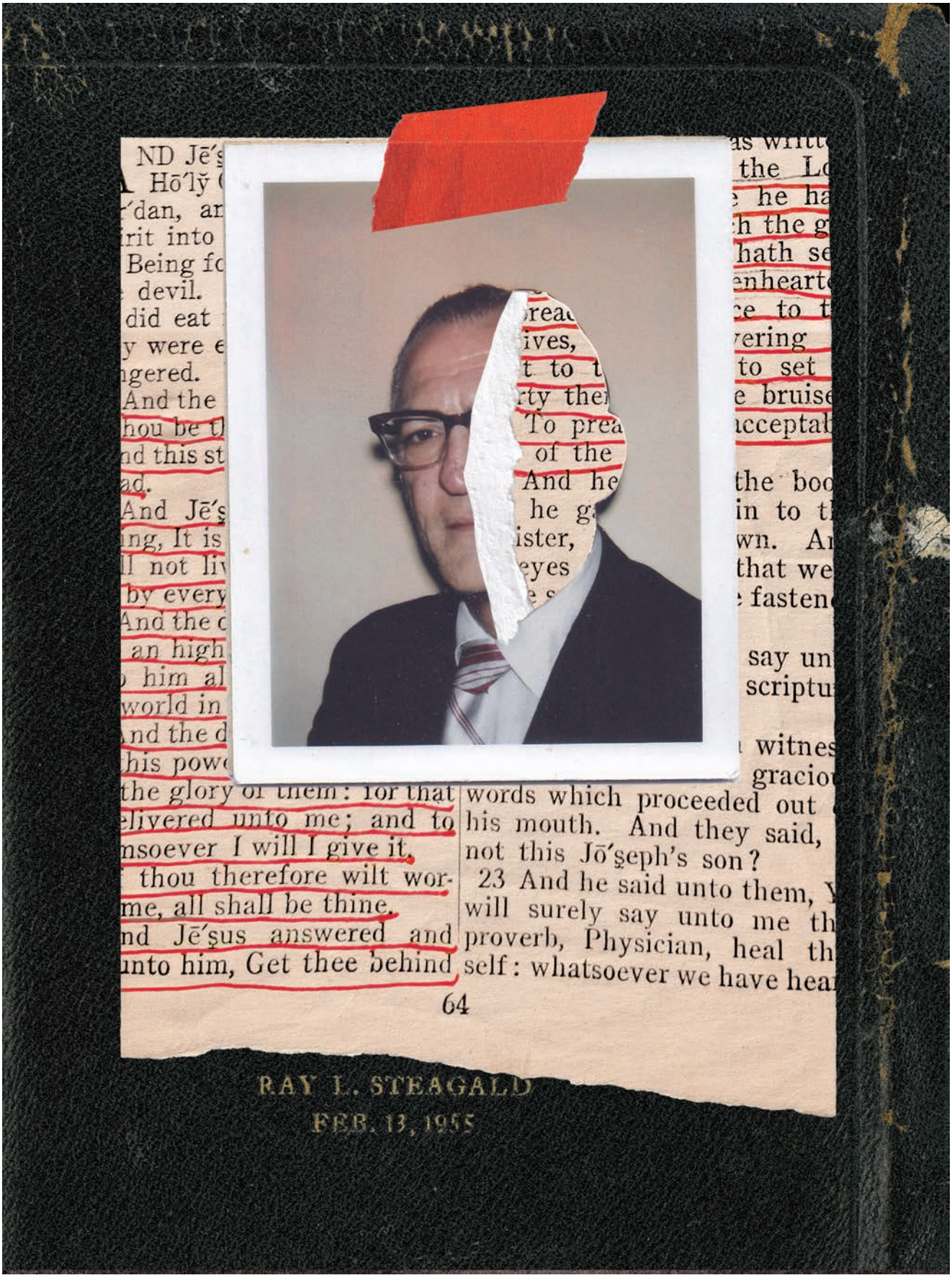


Illustration by Vanessa Saba

Juneberry Primer

by Karen An-hwei Lee

As a girl, I'd pronounce *compote* like *coyote*.
Clafoutis rhymed with clematis or stephanotis
instead of cherry or juneberry,
syllables I never quite pronounced right—
add to this list, a plaque and the plague;
musically, a zydeco versus a xylophone.
Now I make compote with fruit and sugar
on a long summer night
gleaming with the off-rhymes
of compound and quarter note,
draughts of light pouring through the homonyms
of ring and wring, a choir and quire,
yearning for the humble, gold clarity
of honeybees in the lacy elderberry's arms,
a rushing brook with its wild blackberries,
to say only *juneberry* in the foraged dark,
June and june again, June.

KAREN AN-HWEI LEE *is provost of Wheaton College in Illinois.*

those pages wide, the better to see the inscription. I do imagine he regularly pondered that day, those words, and his hope for a full life's work in gospel ministry—a hope that never came to be. He lacked college or seminary training, having gone to work with the WPA during the Depression, so no church that could have supported his young family and his new mortgage ever came calling. Nor was he able to itinerate, as he was landlocked on three-eighths of an acre in south Nashville.

He was like Simon and Andrew, always fishing the shallows—Bradley's Creek, Eastwood, Calvary—while the Jameses and Johns he knew and resented fished in the deeps. Self-loathing metastasized into bitterness (for lack of faith, he said, more than lack of education, and for lapses in moral rectitude he could neither confess nor forget). At the end he was not only diminished but withered: shriveled in body and soul.

Knowing how it ended, I wish I knew more of how it began.

Even now, I take his Bible from its practical crypt in my study, open to the elegant inscription, and reflect on one phrase: "the full work of the gospel ministry." What might that be, after all? When the covers are pulled open? Beneath the dry layers of routine labors? Preaching, yes, but what else? Teaching, likewise. Visiting the sick. Administering the sacraments (though Dad could only go the ordinance route) or the life of the church. To what end?

Dad did not live long enough—nor, while I was in college or seminary, was either of us brave enough—to ask or answer those questions for him. All these years later, I would like to know how he thought about what he thought he was doing. I have a few of his sermons still, which are propositional, moralistic, illustration-less. I know he was doing the best he could, thinly echoing Calvin and imitating Calvin's followers who inspired him. I would just like to know how and why that kind of preaching and theology spoke to and motivated him to ministry.

I think it would have something to do with fear.

In any case, I take the time, now and then, to carefully thumb through his Bible itself, trying to get to know him better by noting and reading the verses and sections that must have spoken to him especially, given the highlighting and underlining. And also by noting those verses, chapters, and books that are not only unmarked but feel unread, were perhaps unconsidered and certainly unrealized in the full work of his ministry and personal discipleship.

For the latter, I often have to peel the onion: pull apart the pages that stick together, that ward large swaths of Bible where there is no underlining at all and no sense that he read them or began to do what they said.

In a place or two, the prophets' call to welcome the stranger and defend the widow and orphan are underlined in red, as is Jesus' reiteration of Jubilee in Luke 4 as the full measure of social ethics: "good news to the poor, release to the captives, liberty for those who are oppressed." But if I know Dad at all,

I know my dad did the best he could as a minister. I'd like to know how he thought about what he was doing.

he came at those texts in a self-identifying, evangelical, and spiritualized way: that *he* was poor, wretchedly captive to his moral failings, and oppressed by guilt but—praise the Lord!—now has been set free by faith in Jesus. Something like that.

Whether or not Dad (or others like him) actually *felt* free or joyful (he didn't) seems beside the point. In other words, he believed the gospel but only in a personal, pietistic, salvific kind of way. Most of his ethics were individual and prohibitive; not surprising, then, that his "repentance" was a matter of self-loathing: moralistic remorse for individual transgressions.

He did not know the sin that was sin, as a prime example, the night Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis. With my own ears I heard him say that his only hope was that "one of his own people did it."

Really? *That* is your hope? Your only one?

Tellingly, Obadiah 12–13 is not underlined in Dad's Bible. I myself did not know this passage on April 4, 1968 (I was 13), but it has become an important word for me since, in every moment and not just the catastrophic ones:

> You should not have gloated over your brother on the day of his misfortune; you should not have rejoiced over the people of Judah on the day of their ruin; you should not have boasted on the day of distress. . . . You should not have joined in the gloating over Judah's disaster on the day of his calamity.

In 1 John, however, Dad underlined several verses in chapter 4, among them:

> If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also. (20–21)

Also underlined was Galatians 3:26–28, which I am sure he had preached and probably could have quoted:

> For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female:, for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.

In a place of sighs too deep for words, I would soon realize that Dad could not have added, "there is neither Black nor White," neither in his head nor in his heart, much less "there is neither gay nor straight."

I have wondered whether my kids or grandkids will care to examine my Bibles when the time comes. Some of them have cracked covers and all-but-ruined spines. A few have covers studied off them, while others have barely been opened.

Will, could, should my heirs draw inferences, or actually learn anything about me, by means of what I have marked or left untouched? Would I be willing for them to compare my actions and attitudes to my underlining? Or am I liable to their judgment for what I have not underlined at all?

Or more, by what I did underline but did not, so far as they knew, incarnate? I have left myself open to the charge of hypocrisy and selective legalism—many times over.

But I hope that if they retain any kind of biblical faith, they might draw some comforting connection to me—a taste of the communion of the saints—from my study and preaching Bibles. At the same time, I trust they'll not draw final conclusions about me based on highlighters, not-always-straight underscores, or the rarely legible (and often fading) chains of notes and references I scribbled into the margins, some of them as unpalatable as the brittle outer layer of an onion's peel.

I would tell them to remember that some of my markers highlighted aspirations rather than attainments, that I knew how hard it could be to let me off the hook. But to try, please, to do so, even as I continue to try to afford Dad the same grace. ❑

THOMAS R. STEAGALD is a retired pastor and the author of *Shadows, Darkness and Dawn* (Upper Room).

Filtered through my deconstructed Catholic faith, *Ulysses* holds up surprisingly well.

The post-Catholic Joyce

by Rebecca Bratten Weiss

"HISTORY IS A NIGHTMARE from which I am trying to awake," Stephen Dedalus says, early in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Twenty-five years ago, when I was starting my dissertation research on this groundbreaking novel from 1922, I spent some time analyzing the significance of this statement in the context of Irish history and Joyce's artistic theory. Now, I don't have to analyze it. I just get it. I am watching an epoch of history unfold, and I don't like where it seems to be going.

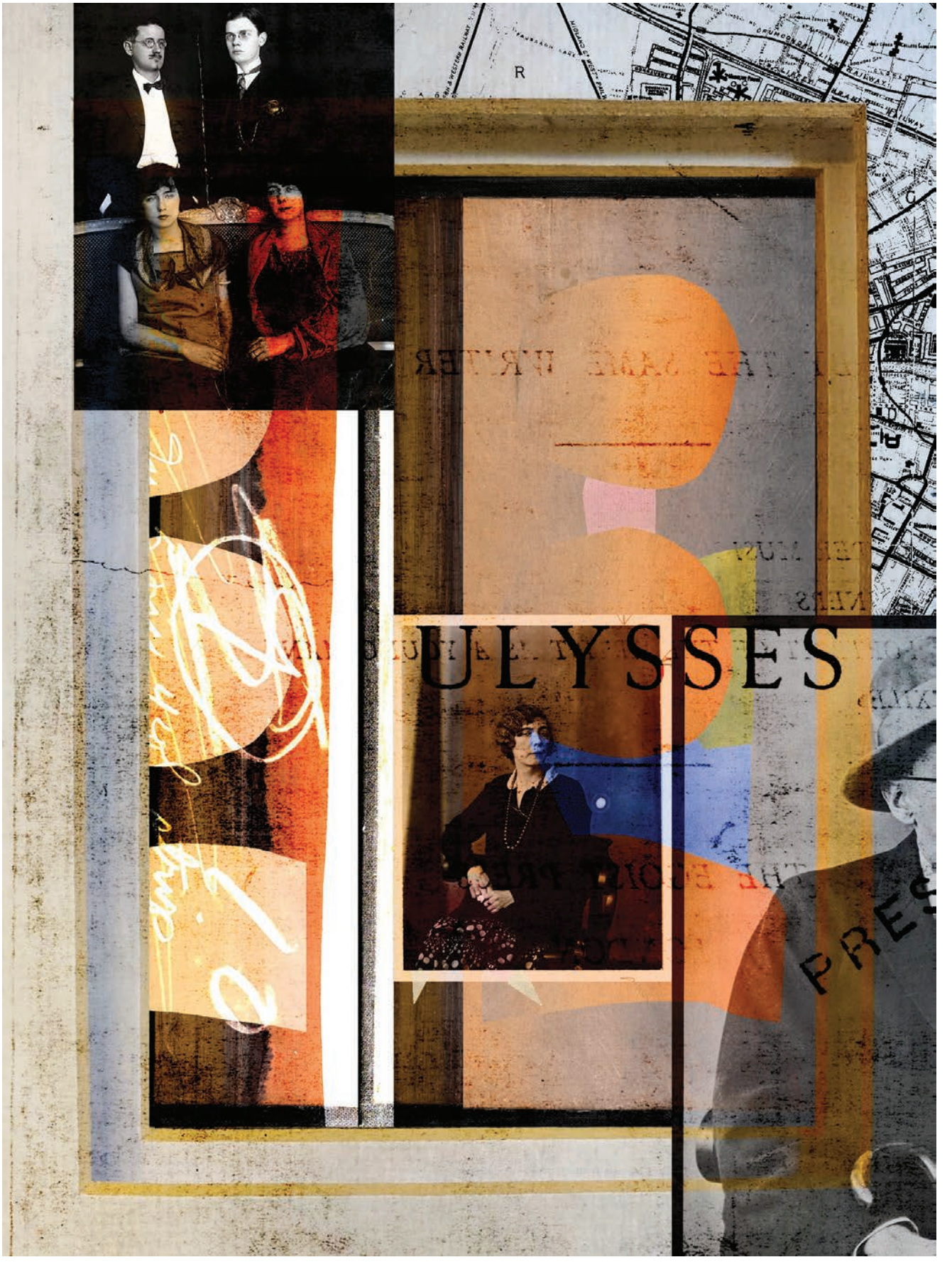
In the last few years I've watched dangerous forces coalesce into a rising fascist movement in the United States and seen many former associates and acquaintances assent to conspiracy theories and revisionist history. I have frequently thought this is what it might have felt like in Europe in the 1930s.

Large portions of my life, work, and identity were formed in a pocket of ultraconservative Catholicism that has lent its considerable political influence to backing some of the most dangerous movements in US culture today. My experience of religious deconstruction has not included disaffiliation from the Catholic Church, but it's still been a shake-up. I find myself constantly pausing to reevaluate beliefs I once held, trying to determine what still has value and what should be discarded.

Part of this has entailed revisiting some of the literary works that formed my understanding of myself and the world. Sometimes, these works were even my refuge *from* that world. It's disappointing to return to them and find that many don't hold up in the light of my new, post-deconstruction perspectives. Yes, I could, in theory, skip over some polite racism in the novels of Evelyn Waugh or ignore the threads of homophobia in the stories of C. S. Lewis—because those bigotries don't directly affect me. But they affect others, and ultimately they affect our collective hope for the future.

To my surprise, I have found that *Ulysses* holds up pretty well 100 years later—especially in comparison to many of the works of the author's contemporaries and friends. While T. S. Eliot was fretting about the fragmentation of Christendom and Ezra Pound was weaving antisemitic screeds into his *Cantos* prior to coming out full-throttle for Mussolini, Joyce was creating a sometimes ribald, sometimes esoteric, but ultimately life-affirming experimental novel in which gender is fluid, family transcends biological connections, the hero is Jewish, and the monsters he confronts are bigotry, nationalism, and violence. *Ulysses* is a novel that I appreciate more, not less, following my Catholic deconstruction—perhaps because the author grapples with many of the same personal and moral questions I am working through now.

Ulysses is a modern retelling of the *Odyssey*, one in which the hero's journey takes place on a single day, June 16, 1904,



CENTURY ILLUSTRATION | SOURCE IMAGES: METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NY / CREATIVE COMMONS

Substitute

by Sarah Gordon

—for Lois

Placing your foot in the circle
without touching the line,
you're a part of the game:

a teacher filling in, an under-
study backstage called forward,
taking the lead, speaking

those words you'd practiced
fervently before the mirror.
You're a part of the play.

You're the pinch hitter, why yes,
moving toward home plate,
swinging that bat, nervous

maybe, yet proud. The one
who comes before, or after,
you're it. Standing next to

the light, all right, but
surely casting its shadow.
The priest came to anoint

the sick man, forgot his
oil. You, the sick man's wife,
ever at his side, retrieved

canola from your pantry,
the priest prayed over it,
and lo and behold

SARAH GORDON *is author of the poetry collection* Six White Horses, *forthcoming from Mercer University Press.*

in Dublin. The day was important to Joyce because it was when he had his first date, and probably his first sexual encounter, with Nora Barnacle, the woman who would eventually become his wife. Joyce's letters to Nora, written a few years later while she was in Zurich and he in Dublin, have become famous for their eloquent raunchiness. While *Ulysses* is comparatively tame, it was still banned in both the United States and Britain, even before it was published, on grounds of obscenity.

Joyce fans refer to June 16 as Bloomsday, and every year groups gather in Dublin to celebrate by reading from *Ulysses* and touring the different sites referred to in the novel. (The novel's hero—Joyce's Odysseus figure—is Leopold Bloom, a middle-aged, middle-class Jewish man who works in advertising.) The first of such celebrations, organized in 1954 by Irish writer Brian O'Nolan and critic John Ryan, was cut short in the city's red-light district because the participants were too inebriated to continue.

Before I ever read Joyce, I had heard from conservative scholars that he was bad news, and not just because of his monumental vulgarity. They spoke of him like they spoke of Nietzsche, as though he were a cynical nihilist or dangerous subversive out to destroy an ancient and hallowed tradition, puncturing the ideals of heroism, mocking the values of chastity and fidelity.

But when I read *Ulysses*, I found its author to be the opposite of nihilistic; his subversion is not for its own sake but rather in the service of humane values. Joyce is not attacking the idea of heroism; he's remaking it—so that it's less about the isolated and tormented individual and more about ordinary human wisdom and resilience in the face of humiliation and heartbreak.

When I decided to write my dissertation on *Ulysses* at the University of Dallas, the novel's association with scandalous behavior was a factor. The contrarian in me couldn't resist the impulse to poke the conservative hornet's nest. But my whole intellectual background had been leading me to Joyce. He too was raised in a deeply conservative religious culture. At his Jesuit and Christian Brothers schools, he was trained to approach the world from the standpoint of Catholic traditions, categories, and definitions. Later, at University College, he studied Thomas Aquinas. Though he ultimately left the church—an experience he chronicles in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*—his mind and imagination remained indelibly marked by his Catholic education.

Reading some of the most revered secular critics of *Ulysses*, I realized that for most of them, Joyce's Catholic thought was viewed as a curiosity or a problem to be solved. But it's difficult to get one's critical teeth into *Ulysses* without a deep familiarity with Catholic thought. In order to get at what he is doing when he applies principles of Thomistic thought to his own aesthetic theories, they would have to dive into Aquinas.

While Eliot was fretting over Christendom and Pound was weaving antisemitic screeds into his *Cantos*, Joyce was creating a life-affirming experimental novel.

But I had already done the diving. I was adrift in that vast sea we call the "Catholic intellectual tradition," and Joyce was there swimming ahead of me.

For instance, Joyce draws on the doctrine of transubstantiation, the attempt to explain how the eucharistic bread becomes the body of Christ, for his development of his aesthetics. Just as the ordinary stuff of bread is transformed into the flesh of God, so the artist, as Joyce writes in *A Portrait*, transmutes "the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life."

In *Ulysses*, Joyce puts this aesthetic theory into practice, transforming the realistic events of that single Dublin day into myth and legend, inviting his readers to believe in a world in which we need not be defined by rigid circumstances of birth or history—where change, transformation, and metamorphosis are possible. For the reader who is going through a process of religious deconstruction, wondering whether anything good or beautiful can come out of the mess one has made of one's life, this can be reassuring.

Bloom's wanderings through the city parallel the wanderings of Odysseus, and each episode of the novel is based on an encounter or adventure in the original epic. Bloom's wife, Molly, is the Penelope character, but unlike the long-suffering heroine of the Homeric epic, she is waiting at home not for her husband but for her lover. The character who correlates with Odysseus's son Telemachus is the morbid young intellectual Stephen Dedalus, whom readers met earlier in *A Portrait*. Though Dedalus is not Bloom's biological son, by the novel's end they have established a father-son relationship connected with the healing and transformation each of these three characters will experience.

Bloom's Jewishness is significant to his status as hero. While many of Joyce's contemporaries, such as G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc, perceived Jewish identity as a threat to nationalist assimilation and homogeneity, in Joyce's story Bloom as a Jewish man has a sense of connection with a broader world beyond the boundaries of Catholic Ireland. And this awareness of a global community fosters greater tolerance, a more lively curiosity. Like other Irish writers of his day, Joyce was attentive to the injustices meted out on his people by the British Empire as well as by the Roman Catholic Church, but he also believed that fixation on national grievance and a romantic obsession with an imaginary past had a negative effect on Irish culture and society. Bloom's capacity to transcend this augments his resilience.

But as a Jewish man, Bloom is repeatedly subjected to antisemitic harassment. This happens most notably in the Cyclops episode, in which a belligerent Irish nationalist called "the citizen" bullies Bloom at a pub. Bloom's attempts to defuse an increasingly tense and unsafe social situation will be familiar to anyone who has experienced racist or sexist harassment in a hostile environment. At the end of the chapter, when the citizen attempts to physically attack him, Bloom finally loses his temper and shouts a litany of names of famous Jewish philosophers, ending with the taunt, "Your God was a jew. Christ was a jew like me."

The citizen, enraged, shouts, "I'll brain that bloody jewman for using the holy name. By Jesus, I'll crucify him so I will," and throws a biscuit tin at Bloom, who ducks and escapes. The narrator describes the scene in biblical and even apocalyptic imagery, mixed with the colloquialisms of a Dublin pub: "And they beheld Him even Him, ben Bloom Elijah, amid clouds of angels ascend to the glory of the brightness at an

Joyce shows us that we need not be defined by the nightmares of our history. Yet the nightmares still loom.

angle of fortyfive degrees over Donohoe's in Little Green Street like a shot off a shovel."

Throughout the novel Joyce experiments with different narrative or rhetorical styles in this way, sometimes mixing them up for a kaleidoscopic effect, in order to capture reality from different angles and perspectives. While in his earlier, overtly realist writings, especially in *Dubliners*, Joyce uses his art as a "nicely polished mirror" (his metaphor) to show people to themselves, his preferred metaphor for his technique in *Ulysses* is that of parallax, the optical phenomenon whereby an object's position appears to change as the observer's position changes. What emerges from this use of language is not a reflection of reality but something new and different, reality transformed. By the novel's end, the characters have been changed by this magic, this metamorphosis. Bloom, Stephen, and Molly emerge as figures of heroic epic, but at the same time authentically themselves.

Before Bloom's transformation can be complete, however, he must undergo a kind of catharsis. Just as Odysseus has to descend to the underworld and confront his own ghosts, Bloom must face the specters that haunt him. Embracing his own Jewish identity is part of this. But not until the Circe episode, when Bloom and Stephen visit a brothel and experience a carnivalesque sort of Walpurgisnacht, does Bloom fully confront his own subconscious fears and desires, especially his dread that in "allowing" his wife to liaise with her lover, he is somehow less of a man.

In a lengthy phantasmagoric sequence, Bloom is declared to be an "example of the new womanly man" and promptly gives birth to eight children. But Joyce doesn't depict Bloom's intersex or hermaphroditic nature as something negative or horrifying. The scene is surreal comedy, yes, but the effect is to affirm the legitimacy of the feminine aspects of Bloom's nature. Though his change into a woman is not permanent, it is essential to his metamorphosis.

In representing femininity as an aspect of the heroic and not something to be ashamed of, Joyce challenges the views on gender that were widespread at his time and remain dominant in many conservative spaces. Similarly, his choice to depict his Penelope character as cheating on her husband does not undermine the value of fidelity as such. As a woman who freely chooses where and how to give her love, Molly's choice of Bloom, reaffirmed with her famous yes at the end of the novel, is more meaningful because it is freely given. Unlike the Homeric original, in which Odysseus's prolonged journey home is punctuated by flings with women mortal and divine while chaste Penelope waits at home, in *Ulysses* both Bloom and Molly have agency. Joyce does not weigh them by a gendered double standard.

Joyce's view of family in general was complex, perhaps partially due to his own experiences, on which he models Stephen's. Stephen's father, like Joyce's, is a drunkard and a "praiser of his own past," as Joyce describes him in *A Portrait*. His mother is dead, and Stephen's many siblings are living in poverty. In *Ulysses*, as Stephen wanders the city, a Hamlet-like figure dressed all in black, he is haunted by the loss of his mother and by his own refusal to pray with her by her deathbed. Even though he refused on principle, he can't shake the guilt he feels at having disappointed her in her final moments. And he has his own underworld encounter in the Circe episode, when the ghost of his dead mother confronts him.

Throughout the novel, Stephen is fixated on re-creating a coherent vision of life to take the place of his lost faith. His meeting with Bloom is significant for his own transformation as an artist. It is also a detail that may resonate with readers who have had to set boundaries or cut ties with toxic friends or family members and who look for community and creative support in found family.

This doesn't mean everything is neatly wrapped up and fixed for Joyce's three central characters. No matter what magic Joyce works with his art, life still has to be lived, often painfully. Yes, Joyce offers a new vision of heroism and shows us that we need not be defined by the nightmares of our history. But the nightmares still loom. Homer's epic heroes may have experienced some catharsis or resolution in their stories, but Achilles still died young, and Odysseus still had to leave home again in order to expiate Poseidon's curse. Similarly, Stephen will probably go on being plagued by Catholic guilt. Bloom will still be harassed by his antisemitic peers. Molly may even cheat again. Joyce doesn't try to tell us otherwise, and this honesty, too, is a relief. There is only so much we can escape from.

"Every life is many days, day after day," Stephen muses. "We walk through ourselves, meeting robbers, ghosts, giants, old men, young men, wives, widows, brothers-in-love. But always meeting ourselves." □

REBECCA BRATTEN WEISS *is digital editor at* U.S. Catholic *magazine and author of the forthcoming* In Search of the Unfound Door: A Literary Journey Through Religious Deconstruction.

If We Are All Unremarkable Angels

by Anna Elkins

The Remarkables, New Zealand

After a long morning of hiking and getting lost,
I walked to the pebbled edge of the lake to wash my feet.
When I looked up, a toddler with a smile of pure
and fearless joy was running up to me. He stopped
short, bent down to select a stone, and handed it to me,
his face full of a hope so bold it was a knowing—
that I'd think his gift as rich as gems. I smiled back.
Like he had bowed to choose his gift, I bowed to accept it.
I held the stone in my open palm to give it proper honor,
loving not just the gift but how it came *after* the thought
to give. He'd approached me empty-handed, found
what he needed just when he needed it—nothing
planned or stockpiled, as would be my way.
I said, *Thank you*, and put the stone in my pocket.
He ran back to his father, mother, sister.
A beauty suffused the whole family. Maybe
they were angels. Maybe we all take turns playing
angel. Maybe I did earlier, for another child
who'd come running down the mountain, crying,
Can you help me? I'm lost! So we all are, so often.
And then we're found—someone appears, leads us
back up the path or offers us a talisman of praise,
and once again, we're good enough for now.

ANNA ELKINS*'s latest poetry collection,* Hope of Stones*, won an Oregon Book Award.*

The Zone of Interest interrogates the desire to bear witness that animates the Holocaust movie as a genre.

Why do you want to see?

by Mac Loftin

Eleven years ago, the *Hollywood Reporter* hosted a roundtable to hype the Oscars. Somehow things got onto the topic of Holocaust movies, and Austrian director Michael Haneke called movies like *Schindler's List* "unspeakable" because they make mass murder into entertainment: drama and resolution, suspense and catharsis, popcorn and candy. The only responsible way of representing the Holocaust on film, Haneke said, is for the film to refuse to entertain, for it to demand something of the viewer: "What do you think about this? What is your position? What does this mean to you?"

Reducing the Holocaust to entertainment might be unspeakable, but the Holocaust movie is a garrulous genre. Wikipedia's "List of Holocaust films" shows roughly five new ones every year. A cynical reading of the genre's popularity is that it offers the audience a sadistic thrill at the spectacle of limitless violence. But movies like *Schindler's List* and *The Pianist* are popular for an understandable reason as well: they promise to make the incomprehensible comprehensible, to take the unhealing wound of millions of lives snuffed out and forever unlived and suture it up in the familiar arc of a blockbuster.

We can watch *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* and tell ourselves that we have borne witness to a thing that in reality exceeds our understanding. Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the rabbi of the Warsaw Ghetto, preached to his community before its destruction that the reason for God's absence is that God's sorrow over the Jews' suffering is too great for the world to bear. To keep the world from breaking, God retreats into his private chambers and weeps in lonely agony. The Holocaust movie offers the fantasy that we can finish this mourning, a power not even God has.

The Zone of Interest, Jonathan Glazer's new film about the commandant of Auschwitz and his family, refuses to be that kind of movie. Instead it interrogates the desire to bear witness that animates the Holocaust movie as a genre. It asks the viewer, over and over again, like the awful rhythmic grinding that makes up its soundtrack, "What do you want to see? Why do you want to see? What do you think seeing will bring you?"

The film opens with a black screen and the sound of groaning metal, screaming, and occasional

A scene from the film *The Zone of Interest*

COURTESY OF A24

gunshots. The sound goes on and on, and the screen remains black for what feels like several minutes. I could feel the audience squirming in the seats around me; someone looked up at the projector to see if this was supposed to be happening. The desire to see builds and builds, before the movie cuts to Höss and his family having a picnic by the river.

There's very little actual drama in *The Zone of Interest*. It tells the relentlessly dull story of the Höss family: Rudolf, his wife, Hedwig, and their children. The Hösses are pioneers on the new frontier, attempting to build an idyllic life in their dream home while negotiating the tensions brought on by Rudolf's demanding job as overseer of the camp. Their house abuts the camp wall, its barbed wire and concrete the backdrop to Hedwig's beautiful garden.

The real tension in the movie comes from Rudolf and Hedwig's nauseating, infuriating, maddening refusal to see the evil in which they wallow. Hedwig plants flowers in the garden and soothes her crying baby, amid the unending noise of murder. Rudolf files reports, takes meetings, reads bedtime stories to his children, and blows his nose in the sink, great gobs black with soot from the roughly 3 million people incinerated in his crematoria. The Hösses are completely immersed in evil, and they do not want to see. We are right there with them, in claustrophobically close shots, and we do want to see. But how different are those two desires?

There's only one scene that gives a glimpse inside the camp walls. It's only a few seconds long, which was long enough that I almost had to step outside the theater. But even here, Glazer doesn't let us see. The shot is an extreme close-up of Höss's face. The awful, rusty groaning and desperate screaming that had been the muted soundtrack to the Hösses' domestic drama is now almost deafening. Höss's face is partially obscured by the thick smoke from the crematoria. The camera lingers on him for a moment, his eyes roaming around with the bored determination of a man doing an unpleasant but necessary task, then we're back to the dream house.

The uncomfortable proximity between the desire to see and the refusal to see builds throughout the movie until its final scene. Rudolf calls Hedwig from Oranienburg late at night to tell her some good news: they're going to name the extermination of over half a million Hungarian Jews after him. "Operation Höss," he beams. Then he turns off

Throughout the film, an uncomfortable proximity builds between the desire to see and the refusal to see.

the office lights and walks down the stairs. He stops at the landing, bends over, and retches. Starts walking again, stops, retches again. Something like a conscience seems to flicker in him as he stares into the pitch darkness of the hallway. Suddenly the scene cuts to footage of the present day at what has become the Auschwitz museum. At first it feels like Dantean contrapasso: Höss had wanted to be forever remembered for Operation Höss, and his punishment is that he gets his wish.

But as the scene drags on, Höss's defeat by history starts to feel hollow. Don't these silent Polish women cleaning the Auschwitz museum look an awful lot like the silent Polish women forced to clean Höss's Auschwitz home? The camera lingers on the famous display case full of the shoes of the murdered. Can the absence of so many people really be contained within a museum display? Might the glass case be fooling us into thinking that now we have seen and understood what happened here, hiding from us the fact that we never can? Might the very structure of a museum trick us into thinking we're looking at something contained safely in the past, obscuring the reality that the violence and the loss will reverberate forever? Surely we are right to do whatever we can to remember, but are there things all this remembering protects us from having to confront? The scene cuts back to Höss staring into the dark. He blinks and walks out of the building.

The most upsetting part of *The Zone of Interest* for me was after I left the theater and went home. I couldn't shake the feeling of an awful likeness to the Hösses. To live a relatively comfortable life in America, as I do, is to live in comfort as my government entangles itself in genocidal conflicts around the globe. This comfort is bought by the suffering and death of so many—my laptop made with cobalt mined by enslaved children in the Congo, my food harvested by trafficked child laborers in California, my taxes buying the bombs that have killed 30,000 people so far in Gaza and God only knows how many people elsewhere. What is this life if not a dream home next door to a death camp? And what does the constant satisfaction of our desire to see—bodycam footage of police executions, wall-to-wall coverage of wars, true crime podcasts and documentaries—allow us to avoid seeing?

Georges Bataille, writing during the Nazi occupation of France, recorded extensively his feelings of complicity and his suspicion that his desire to bear witness was really just a desire to feel innocent. "Before excessive cruelty," he wrote, "either that of men, or that of fate, it is natural to rebel, to cry out (our hearts fail us): 'That can no longer be!'" But all too often, "that which weeps and damns within me is my desire to sleep in peace, my fury at being disturbed."

Stoking our desire to see while refusing to satisfy it, *The Zone of Interest* does not let us sleep in peace, and it does not entertain. It demands of us that we stay awake, exhausted and furious and disturbed. ❑

MAC LOFTIN *is a PhD candidate in theology at Harvard University, where he studies the relationship between Christian theology and political thought.*

Museum

by Siobhan Drummond

Who curated the pile of old shoes?
The rusty hinges?
Who decided on the cascade
of dusty eyeglasses, barely glinting,
now blank, blind?

How could that person not
have wept at first sight,
not stand there weeping
uncontrollably?

Surely there was a committee.
Did they all weep? Together

or individually? Some of them
blatantly, right in the middle
of the decision-making process.

Others later, at home,
in the privacy of their kitchens,
standing in front of their ovens.

Others maybe only in their hearts,
or not at all yet.

SIOBHAN DRUMMOND *is an editor, proofreader, and poet who lives in Evanston, Illinois.*

Books

"One story tells of Artemis being born before her twin brother and helping their mother give birth to him."

—Elizabeth Felicetti, *page 88*

Discussed in this issue

Antonia Hylton's history of a Black psychiatric hospital in Maryland

Israel Knohl's exposition of the messianic idea in first-century Judaism

Greg Garrett's guide to the writings of James Baldwin

Marty Folsom's summary of Barth for the masses

Patricia Ventura and **Edward K. Chan**'s analysis of how White power and neoliberalism feed each other

Sandra L. Glahn's study of the goddess Artemis in the New Testament

Amy Butler's memoir about getting to—and leaving—Riverside Church

New middle-grade children's fiction by **Lisa Yee**, **Ellen Oh**, and **Kelly Yang**

The uniquely American story of Crownsville Hospital

Antonia Hylton digs into the history of a Maryland asylum that forced its Black patients to build their own facilities.

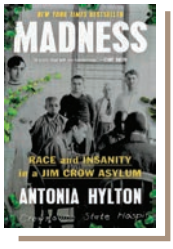
by Mihee Kim-Kort

I was at a youth soccer tournament when I walked on the grounds of what remains of the Crownsville Hospital for the first time. My youngest was on a team that hosted a tournament on the hospital campus just off I-97, about a 15-minute drive from our home in Annapolis, Maryland. When we drove up to the freshly mowed fields with makeshift bleachers and parked by the decaying Georgian buildings covered in overgrown wild ivy, I felt the hair on my arms raise a little. Briefly Googling some of the history of the hospital confirmed my uneasiness. It was originally named the Hospital for the Negro Insane of Maryland. I wondered about the stories, known and unknown, that lingered in the shadows of the shuttered buildings.

Antonia Hylton gives us a way into those stories, telling the story of the "first and only asylum in the state, and likely the nation, to force its patients to build their own hospital from the ground up." As Hylton explains, during the First World War, 275 acres of land were developed through the unpaid labor of patients, who not only built a hospital but turned the land into "a modern, highly productive farm—one that was able to produce much of its own food." These patients were all Black.

After Emancipation, Maryland lawmakers sanctioned numerous levels of segregation, including barring Black people from assembling for religious events or living in neighborhoods that were more than 50 percent White. By the early 1900s, there was a consensus among doctors that Black people were especially prone to insanity. Something had to be done with all the people who appeared to be mentally battered and bruised, so they were confined to a hospital where physical labor was considered therapeutic. The patient-worker model went on for decades at Crownsville. Because it was the only mental hospital in Maryland that accepted Black patients, it held 2,700 people during its peak years.

Madness is about a hospital, Hylton explains, but it's also about "American institutional history" more broadly. Crownsville's "surviving records tell us a uniquely American story" that might "help us understand both our current, broken mental healthcare system and our carceral one." The deeper Hylton digs into the hospital's history, the clearer it becomes that our health care and prison systems not only are intertwined but perpetuate each other. Together, they extend an "antebellum social order" that stands against the flourishing of Black people.



Madness: Race and Insanity in a Jim Crow Asylum

By Antonia Hylton (Legacy Lit)

Indeed, Crownsville is a kind of microcosm of the region. The conditions for patients were brutal and exploitative, and the hospital's all-White staff was buttressed by the persistence of racial hierarchy. Alongside accounts of a young Black man lynched on Maryland's Eastern Shore, Hylton describes the hospital's practice of isolating and secluding patients. In doing so, she deftly tells a layered story about race—one that doesn't let us off the hook but makes us look squarely at the suffering of human beings, both at the hospital and outside it.

Although Crownsville sits at the center of the narrative, *Madness* is also about the lives of particular human beings. To illuminate these lives, Hylton "weaves the testimony of more than forty former patients and employees of Crownsville Hospital with the records that have been preserved at the Maryland State Archives and in the homes of former staff members, and with newspaper reports from both mainstream and historic Black-owned publications."

Hylton tells the story of Estella and William Jones, who met at the hospital shortly after each began working there. Neither had much education or experience, but "the hospital needed help in every corner." Despite the terrible pay, the work came with health insurance and potential raises. Bill was hired as a lab assistant and Estella as an aide. By the time they retired in 1996, Bill had assisted in countless autopsies and Estella had worked with generations of children, adults, and families. Their jobs provided economic stability for their family, but they watched in dismay as funding

decreased and patients were increasingly discharged with no plan for their care. Perspectives like these illustrate the complex dynamics associated with this controversial institution embedded in the greater Annapolis community.

Madness also asks readers to hold space for the stories of patients. The book opens with a riveting story about William Murray, one of the hospital's first patients. Murray, a survivor of typhoid fever, suffered from depression. When his wife died unexpectedly, he became a single parent to six young children. Although he was a Howard University graduate, a pianist, and a respected principal and teacher, at the hospital "he was just another inmate." After several years at Crownsville, Murray got into a disagreement with a guard, who dragged him to the basement and bludgeoned him to death. Of surprising note: he was the father of Pauli Murray, who went on to become an eminent legal scholar, poet, civil rights activist, and Episcopal priest. The last time the young Pauli ever saw her father, in the Crownsville visitors' room, he was nearly unrecognizable. This experience, writes Hylton, fueled a lifelong "commitment to justice that sprang from a childhood with an intimate understanding of the vulnerable Black American condition."

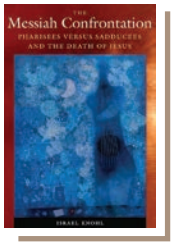
Hylton writes about some of her own experiences with family members' mental health struggles, bringing to life the entangled histories of institutions and communities. This interweaving of stories shows how deeply anti-Blackness is embedded in many of our systems. The book ends on a hopeful note about the county's endeavor to develop the space for the public by creating a museum of the history of mental health treatment. Crownsville already houses "a food bank and a small handful of organizations treating substance abuse and behavioral disorders." *Madness* does not provide easy redemption, but it shows how confronting local histories can lead us to work toward the flourishing of all our neighbors. ❑

MIHEE KIM-KORT *is a Presbyterian minister and author of* Outside the Lines.

The Pharisees didn't kill Jesus

If they had been the ones presiding over Jesus' trial, says biblical scholar Israel Knohl, there wouldn't have been a crucifixion.

by Zen Hess



The Messiah Confrontation: Pharisees versus Sadducees and the Death of Jesus

By Israel Knohl (Jewish Publication Society)

In Mark 14, the scene is tense. Jesus stands before an assembly of the high priest, all the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes. False witnesses rise and tell tales meant to condemn Jesus, but their accounts don't add up. So the high priest asks Jesus a pointed question: "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" "I am," Jesus says. At this, the high priest tears his clothes and accuses Jesus of blasphemy. The assembly agrees and condemns Jesus to death for it.

Interestingly, according to Israel Knohl, a leading Jewish biblical scholar, things could have gone differently. In *The Messiah Confrontation*, Knohl traces the complex story of the messianic idea in Jewish thought leading up to Jesus' death. The story concludes with Jesus standing trial before a group of religious leaders who did not believe a (semi)divine messiah was coming to restore the Davidic kingdom. These were the Sadducees. Had it been the Pharisees presiding over Jesus' trial, Knohl suggests, "Jesus would not have been condemned to death, convicted, and crucified."

The Pharisees, like most Jews in that period, hoped for the kingdom to be restored by a messiah who bore godlike qualities. The Pharisees may have disputed and rejected Jesus' self-identification as the Messiah, but it would not have been considered blasphemy worthy of capital punishment. (The Pharisees would only have condemned someone to death for speaking God's ineffable name.) For the Sadducees, however, Jesus' claim to be the Son of the Blessed One was a grave offense.

The story Knohl tells begins in the world of scripture. The first seven chapters of his book explore tensions and developments related to the idea of messiah in the Hebrew Bible. Knohl shows, for example, how prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah hope for a kingly messianic figure who will restore the kingdom of Israel, while Hosea proclaims a more antimonarchic message. Likewise, although the Torah maintains a clear and consistent distinction between God and human beings, certain psalms and prophets are willing to ascribe to kingly and messianic (anointed) figures godlike qualities. Knohl

also explores the tension between the prophets Zechariah and Haggai, who imagine a high priest and a royal messianic leader working together, and Malachi, who appears to set aside messianic restoration in favor of the priestly rule.

The concept of messiah differs not only from one book to the next but also within individual writings. Isaiah, for instance, speaks of three messianic figures. In the first 39 chapters, the messiah is a future king who restores the kingdom of Israel; in chapters 40–55, Isaiah associates the messiah with King Cyrus; and in the final chapters, the messiah appears to be all of Israel.

These biblical tensions gave rise to various interpretations and competing religious factions. Knohl shows how the Pharisees and the community at Qumran emphasized the prophets and Psalms, holding out hope for a coming semidivine messiah. While the two groups' ideas about the messiah were not identical, they were similar. Both imagined a strong, godlike, warring messiah. The Qumran community, however, had a small number of documents that depicted the messiah as suffering pain and mistreatment. Their messianic expectation, Knohl says, was generally representative of the Jewish people during the century before Jesus' death.

As for the Sadducees, Knohl proposes that they took a minority position by adhering to the other side of the biblical tension. Because they privileged the Torah (perhaps taking *only* the Torah as authoritative scripture), the Sadducees followed the biblical traditions that dismissed messianic expectations, rejected the possibility of human beings having divine qualities, and preferred that priests rule over the people rather than kings. The high priest who presided over Jesus' trial was a Sadducee. To him, when Jesus said he was the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One, he spoke blasphemy of the highest order, blasphemy worthy of death.

Knohl acknowledges that our sources for knowing about the Sadducees are incredibly sparse. There are no extant writings composed by Sadducees, and the authors who discuss the Sadducees opposed them. Moreover, it appears that the general Jewish population was never beholden to them, raising questions about how this minority group could have single-handedly persuaded the crowd to turn on Jesus without the cooperation of the Pharisees, who were more numerous and accessible to the people. In other words, Knohl makes his argument reasonably and compellingly, but it rests on a great deal of speculation. But sometimes speculation is necessary to push a conversation forward.

And Knohl seeks to push forward a deeply significant conversation. "It is a great distortion of history to place the blame for Jesus's crucifixion on the Jewish people as a whole," Knohl explains. "Jesus's judges belonged to a small antimessianic group, the Sadducees, which one generation

after Jesus disappeared from history." Knohl draws all of these loose threads together into an argument to dispel the notion that the Jews, in general, instigated Jesus' death. Moreover, Knohl reiterates that it is not right to say that Jesus' trial was a "clash of Jewish and Christian doctrines." Instead, it was "a confrontation between two internal Jewish positions . . . in which Jesus and the Pharisees were on the same side." Knohl hopes these clarifications will clear the way for new discourses and healing between Jews and Christians. I hope the same.

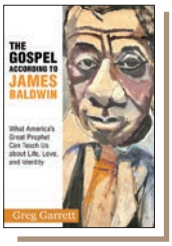
Christians remember Jesus' crucifixion, death, and resurrection every Sunday. Knohl invites us to hear that story in the context of 750 years of debate between Jews about whether a messiah was coming and, if so, what that messiah would be like. ❑

ZEN HESS *is host of the podcast* Currents in Religion *and a doctoral student at Baylor University.*

Navigating James Baldwin's legacy

Greg Garrett provides a road map for the terrain of the prophetic writer's work and thought.

by Jon Mathieu



The Gospel According to James Baldwin: What America's Great Prophet Can Teach Us about Life, Love, and Identity

By Greg Garrett
(Orbis Books)

Some months ago, inspired largely by this magazine's content (see "Baldwin the exorcist," November 2022), I declared for myself a Year of Baldwin: for 12 months, all of my nonfiction reading material would be the essays of James Baldwin and most of my fiction reading would be his novels. After a few months, I already felt like part of that nameless club, stretching back 70 years, of straight White progressive Christians who can't get enough of this queer Black intellectual's incisive prophetic work. So when I was invited to read and review a new book by another member of that club—theologian and English professor Greg Garrett—I jumped at the chance. (I technically had to break my reading rule, since this is a nonfiction book not written by Baldwin. But an ode to Baldwin that analyzes his writings adheres to the spirit of my strange law.)

In preparation for this book, Garrett read everything Baldwin ever wrote, in addition to watching his recorded interviews and the movies about him or based on his work. Garrett also went on a pilgrimage through the most important locations on Baldwin's journey: Harlem, Paris, and a small village in Switzerland. While this globe-trotting plays only a tiny role in *The Gospel According to James Baldwin*, Garrett's close and astute reading of Baldwin's catalog of writings comes through on nearly every page.

The introductory chapters, which include a biography and a prophetic framing of Baldwin, lead readers to the heart of the book: five chapters on enduring themes in the writer's work. When Garrett chose these themes, he "tried to listen to Baldwin's words, to let him teach me what he had to say, not to try to fit them into some framework of my own devising." The topics he discerned Baldwin teaching him about are culture, faith, race, justice, and identity. These five chapters are worth the price of the book, and they are ordered in a way that allows Baldwin's insights to build upon each other.

The word *culture* seems to be a stand-in for art, and Baldwin had plenty to say about good and bad art. In his many book and film reviews, his primary rubric involves questions

of authenticity. Does the reviewed work portray people as they actually are, full of complexity, or does it rely on easy stereotypes and simplifications? This question is crucial because only by telling the truth can art teach us about our culture and ourselves. This paradigm sets the stage for Garrett's project: showing how Baldwin's essays and novels invite us to see and grapple with the realities, rather than the convenient fictions, of our societies and the way we journey through them. In each of the following four chapters, Baldwin's ideas do the work of great art: they reveal clear if painful truths and invite us to respond.

In the chapter on faith, we encounter a Baldwin concerned with the fruit of religion—and in particular, the fruit of Christianity in both Black and White churches. Does our religion lead us to love, liberation, and healing, or does it stir up racism and fear while offering a mirage of deliverance from suffering? I was interested in how Garrett would present Baldwin's own relationship to the faith. Baldwin was clear he had left the church, but there's something religious about so many of his visions and aspirations. Garrett describes this as a "spark of Jesus within James Baldwin that never went out." That may sound audacious or presumptuous, but it feels less so to me alongside the facts that Baldwin likened his calling many times to that of the biblical prophet Jeremiah, addressed the World Council of Churches, and named his greatest dream as the New Jerusalem. No matter how we might describe Baldwin's religion or lack thereof, Garrett insists he is "a thoughtful guide who has something to teach us about faith and practice."

Baldwin also asked hard questions about race, justice, and identity. One of the most fascinating threads woven through these three chapters is Baldwin's sense that we are all interconnected and responsible to each other—across lines of race, across lines of sexual orientation. The implications of this commitment are far-reaching. So, while Baldwin minced no words about the centrality of racism in the American story, the rampant anti-Blackness in the criminal justice system, and the crushing weight he experienced living always under the White evaluative gaze, he also wrote about the "soul-killing" damage that White supremacy inflicts "daily" on White people. When Baldwin wrote a play with a White racist villain, he added in his show notes, "We have the duty to try to understand this wretched man; and while we probably cannot hope to liberate him, begin working toward the liberation of his children." Yet, in the midst of all this interconnectedness, Baldwin fiercely located some responsibilities in the realm of the individual person. You can (and should) reject everything society tells you about your identity, value, or beauty. You can claim and define those things for yourself. As Garrett reminds us, it's "bad art," after all, that "imagines we can define each other or that we require definition."

Baldwin was concerned with the fruit of religion—and in particular, the fruit of Christianity in both Black and White churches.

When considering a book like this, you may find yourself asking: "Why should I read *The Gospel According to James Baldwin* when I could just . . . read James Baldwin?" It's a fair question, and I would say yes—read James Baldwin. But there are at least two reasons I'm glad I also read Greg Garrett.

The first is practical: Baldwin wrote a lot. He authored six novels, seven books of essays, and dozens of additional essays, poems, and plays. These are thoughtful, weighty writings, and it is not easy to breeze through them. Where to begin? What to prioritize? Because Garrett incorporates an immense number of Baldwin's pieces into his analysis, the book acts like a roadmap for the terrain of Baldwin's work and thought. I enjoyed reading about some of my favorite essays (like "Stranger in the Village," a reflection on race that Baldwin wrote in a small Swiss village) as well as learning about those I hadn't read yet (such as his book-length critical essay *The Devil Finds Work*).

Second, Baldwin died in 1987, and Garrett brings Baldwin into conversation with important theologians and artists of the last 25 years. This fascinating engagement shows the resonance and legacy of Baldwin with thinkers like Ibram Kendi and Kelly Brown Douglas and movies like *BlacKkKlansmen*, and it maps contemporary terminology onto Baldwin's thought. Garrett helps us explore how Baldwin's insights in the 1950s relate to concepts and understandings that are prevalent today: privilege, White supremacy, intersectionality.

Ending the book with words of thanks to "Blessed St. James of Harlem and Paris and Saint-Paul-de-Vence," Garrett crystallizes the writer's teachings into two pillars: "Live the life you're given," and "We can be better." For wisdom like this, I have given Baldwin one year of my reading life. I'm grateful that Garrett has given him—and us—much more. ❑

JON MATHIEU *is the* CENTURY*'s community engagement editor.*

Karl Barth in a nutshell

Marty Folsom does what no previous scholar has done: make *Church Dogmatics* available to all.

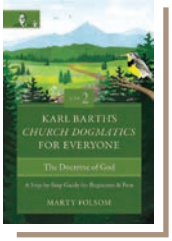
by William H. Willimon

Kornelis Miskotte once said that Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* was as tough of a read as *Moby-Dick*. This may be unfair to *Moby-Dick*. I've made repeated attempts to infect seminarians with my love of Barth, and student course evaluations said that I mostly failed.

The fact that Barth has been more admired or criticized than read is mostly his own fault. He doesn't just do theology; he attempts to rewrite readers into a whole new world where God in Jesus Christ matters more than anything. It takes him 6 million words to do this, and he dies before finishing what he wants to say. Barth reads scripture carefully but creatively, believing it to be the judge and sole source of all we know of God. (Only Barth would highlight Judas, with 90 pages of exegesis, as the prime exemplar of God's gracious election!) *Church Dogmatics* defiantly, notoriously resists abridgment or summarization. Every paragraph depends on every other, and the whole ought to be read in order fully to understand any part.

Undaunted by the obstacles presented to readers of Barth, New Zealander Marty Folsom does what no previous scholar has done: make *Church Dogmatics* available to all. In this volume, the second in his series, Folsom offers a gracious and perceptive invitation into volume 2 of *Church Dogmatics, The Doctrine of God*. Although Barth despised synopsis or condensation of his work, Folsom boldly presents volume 2's 1,500 pages in 370, covering paragraphs 25–39, no small feat. (Some of Barth's "paragraphs" are a couple hundred pages long.)

"This book is all about nutshells," Folsom says, but it's far better than a summary of Barth for beginners. It's an expertly guided tour in which a native guide, who knows and loves every inch of the terrain, shares what astounds him, hoping we'll be astounded too. Folsom uses the metaphor of music to draw us into the tour, noting that "metaphors open our eyes and ears to see and hear more clearly" and thereby "illuminate Barth's point." While Barth was notoriously suspicious of metaphor and analogy, Folsom makes the metaphor work as an invitation into the strange new world of Barth. Light, playful drawings created by Abigail Folsom illuminate the musical theme.



Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* for Everyone: Volume 2, The Doctrine of God

By Marty Folsom (Zondervan Academic)

Folsom displays volume 2 of *Church Dogmatics* as the summit of Barth's theological ascent and the vantage point from which Barth views and reviews everything in the subsequent volumes. Folsom shows how Barth explosively corrects both Augustine and Calvin as he reworks them into his doctrine of election, which he calls "the sum of the Gospel." For Barth, Jesus Christ is God's eternal election to be God for us and for us to be for God, God's unbounded, active yes to all. As Folsom explains,

> Barth does not argue that God chooses some for heaven and some for hell. Instead, he engages God's eternal decision in Jesus to be for all humanity—whether or not they respond. The doctrine of election is not an eternal decree that binds God's hands, keeping Him from further involvement with humankind. It is God's choice to be for and with humanity as the Lord who loves in freedom.

Folsom's summaries are concise, witty, accessible, and presented in the spirit and tenor of Barth: "When teaching on election elicits fear, God's part is almost certainly being misrepresented." Folsom's discussion of Barth's brilliant modification of supralapsarianism is without peer in Barth studies, and his deft exposition of Barth's alleged universalism is just as impressive.

Again, Folsom: "In coming to church, people should expect to meet with the God who speaks. It is best to come with a sense of wonder, but not wondering what is in it for them. The goal is to know the reality of God and to connect deeply with the God who made them and loves them. Hopefully, they will leave as those who didn't even know what they were missing." Barth couldn't have said it better.

Anybody reading Barth must deal with his dated, exclusively masculine pronouns for God. Since the goal of this volume is to make Barth accessible to everybody, I wish Folsom had followed more inclusive contemporary practice.

The volume concludes with short essays by scholars reflecting upon the value of *Church Dogmatics*, volume 2, for biblical studies, pastors, ordinary people, mental health, spiritual formation, and more. Including these voices was one of Folsom's best ideas. (Jeremy Begbie's little essay on volume 2 and the arts ought to be expanded into a book.) Folsom includes the voices of a New Testament professor, a psychiatrist, and a software developer, but no women—which is a commentary on either the limits of Folsom's circle of friends or the limited range of contemporary readers of Barth. Still, after having plowed through so much Barth, it's great to end with distinguished readers saying, in their distinctive ways, "Here's why Barth is worth the work." ❑

WILLIAM H. WILLIMON *is a retired bishop in the United Methodist Church, a professor at Duke Divinity School, and the author of* Don't Look Back: Methodist Hope for What Comes Next.

Twin threats to democracy

Patricia Ventura and Edward Chan interrogate the ongoing enabling relationship between White supremacy and neoliberalism.

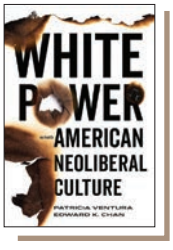
by Amar D. Peterman

It is rarely contested that a reciprocal relationship exists between White power and American neoliberal culture. As the public conversation around racial capitalism and the threat of White Christian nationalism to democracy increases, so does the awareness that neither neoliberalism nor White power could exist in its current form without the other.

Patricia Ventura and Edward Chan acknowledge that identifying the relationship between Whiteness and neoliberalism in a racialized free market system is not a novel observation. But they aim to interrogate further the sources of formation that have led to the ongoing enabling relationship between White power and American neoliberalism. These two traditions, Ventura and Chan argue, support one another "in ways that supercharge the power of both."

Neoliberalism, according to the authors, is "a sprawling term traditionally naming a set of capitalist economic approaches favoring financialization, business deregulation, minimal taxation, globalization, free trade, and market fundamentalism supported by states dedicated to corporate interests." From this definition, the authors identify "neoliberal culture" as the "massive infrastructure shaping everyday life under neoliberal racial capitalism. It is like an ecosystem in which contemporary life is lived and emotions are felt."

The goal of *White Power and American Neoliberal Culture* is to "analyze a deeply dangerous and growing threat to democracy and people's lives that is installed at the fundamental level of capitalism." The primary litmus test, write Ventura and Chan, is the investments made in the White, hetero-patriarchal family by proponents of both White power and neoliberalism. The shared threat that galvanizes the cooperation of these investments is not "big government in the form of the social welfare state" but instead a democratic republic "that would attend to the needs of nonwhite people and women who live outside the patriarchal family." The central example of this convergence is Donald Trump, who embodies "the white power moment that reconnects us to American neoliberalism's misty prehistory as a market-obsessed 'theoretical utopianism'"—a term Ventura and Chan borrow from Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith—"of economic freedom against centralized planning."



White Power and American Neoliberal Culture

By Patricia Ventura and Edward K. Chan (University of California Press)

The authors approach their task through several methods. First, they build on their previous scholarship—Chan's on White power visions of dominance and Ventura's on the culture of American neoliberalism—to examine their convergence in our nation today. Then they look back to the historic strategies that neoliberalism and White power have employed to maintain control, such as supporting the vision of the patriarchal family and reinforcing various versions of replacement theory mythology. Next they turn explicitly to the image of the ideal family at the heart of White power and neoliberal culture that is found in White power utopian fiction, including William Luther Pierce's *The Turner Diaries* (1978), Kenneth Molyneaux's *White Empire* (2000), David Lane's *KD Rebel* (2001), and H. A. Covington's *The Hill of the Ravens* (2003).

Chan and Venture identify a regime that flourishes within the supercharged co-enabling of White power and neoliberalism. This regime is fundamentally opposed to equality and democracy. It aims to dismantle notions of society, the commons, and social obligation in favor of radical individualism, maximized profit through racial capitalism, and the reestablishment of the White, hetero-patriarchal family.

One of the book's important contributions is its rationale for why White middle-class people support the neoliberal system embodied by politicians like Trump. If these families and individuals are not financial benefactors of the no-holds-barred system of profit, why support it? The answer Chan and Ventura provide is that neoliberal culture at the site of Whiteness produces an idealized subject, *Homo affectus*, who becomes a central figure in the "emotional economy of the neoliberal workforce." Citing sociologist Birgit Sauer, the authors note that much of the right-wing discourse creates a culture in which people "are given the right

Any pursuit of justice in our world today must reckon with the realities of power, race, and capitalism.

to be furious and passionate" and a set of lenses through which to perceive the world as if they were victims. As Chan and Ventura describe in their chapter on White power utopias, the goal of participating in this system is not necessarily the creation of an economic blueprint but "the idealization of whiteness as collectivity and consciousness."

In other words, although the White middle class does not benefit financially from the neoliberal economy, it supports it nonetheless because neoliberal culture provides a sense of in-group identity through which its frustrations and sense of victimization are heard. When this shared racialized imagination is centered, the tensions between neoliberalism and White power are resolved.

According to the authors, the current movement toward social justice, racial equity, and inclusion has created a ripe opportunity for a neoliberal resurgence. Ventura and Chan tie this claim to the ongoing violence perpetrated by White supremacists today. They provide page after page of examples of people who commit violence in the name of White power—Dylann Roof, Wade Michael Page, Chris Harper-Mercer, Dionisio Garza, the Capitol insurrectionists. It is painful to read, but it emphasizes how crucial it is for us to reckon with the entanglement of White power and neoliberalism that magnifies and empowers both. In a constructive conclusion, the authors rightly acknowledge that any continued pursuit of justice in our world today must reckon with these realities of power, race, and capitalism.

Ventura and Chan broadly frame neoliberalism as pervasive among White conservatives. While we should have no tolerance for neoliberalism's racist, fascist, and oppressive consequences, only a small faction of American conservatives are militant adherents of neoliberalism. More often, conservatives find solidarity in neoliberal culture but are unwilling to turn to neoliberalism's utopian literature, extreme solutions, and material consequences—what Chan and Ventura present as a White "ethnonational" state—for answers to the issues of our nation. In short, while the authors are right to point out the threat to democracy found in the partnership of neoliberals and White supremacists, the power this group holds is minimal. I fear that by framing this group as being more pervasive than it actually is, readers will be tempted to frame all of their conservative peers in a neoliberal light.

Although pitched as short and accessible, *White Power and American Neoliberal Culture* is a thick read. Tremendous research has gone into creating this book, and the uninitiated must follow a rabbit trail of footnotes to make sense of key concepts in each chapter. For those invested in this conversation and knowledgeable about the history behind it, *White Power and American Neoliberal Culture* is certainly a valuable resource. For those seeking an introduction to this conversation and its place within the broader political discourse, I'd recommend starting elsewhere. ❑

AMAR D. PETERMAN *is the founder of Scholarship for Religion and Society LLC.*

An evangelical scholar reads scripture through Artemis

Sandra Glahn shows how the Greek goddess's prestige influenced the portrayal of women in Ephesians and 1 Timothy.

by Elizabeth Felicetti

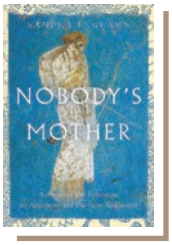
Women without children, like me, may be disturbed by the assertion in 1 Timothy 2:15 that women will be "saved through childbearing." Where does that leave us?

Sandra Glahn understands this concern personally. As she states in the introduction to *Nobody's Mother*, she has had seven pregnancy losses, an ectopic pregnancy, and three failed adoptions. In this study, she dives deeply into the context of the first epistle to Timothy, with particular attention to the city of Ephesus and the Greek goddess Artemis, carefully dismantling the myth that Artemis was a fertility goddess.

Glahn, who teaches at Dallas Theological Seminary, writes for an evangelical audience. She refers to Paul as the author of 1 Timothy (an attribution that many scholars would dispute) and spends some time justifying her role as a teacher despite being a woman. She states that *Nobody's Mother* is for "the reader who wants to avoid sacrificing a high view of Scripture while working to reconcile conflicting narratives about God's view of women." Still, more progressive readers will glean much fascinating information from this tight, well-researched book.

The meat of the argument about the "saved through childbearing" verse appears in the book's final chapter. Before that, Glahn meticulously lays the groundwork. She begins by showing how most arguments against women in public ministry are historical rather than biblical. She ably demonstrates that the women's movement is not responsible for women in ministry, showing that such ministry was embraced during Jesus' time and in the earliest churches. She connects the later exclusion of women from ministry to a number of factors: the abandonment of the idea of a priesthood of all believers, the movement toward infant baptism (which eliminated the need for women to help female baptismal candidates get dressed), congregations moving from house churches to independent physical structures, and the influence of Greek cultural values on Christians.

Glahn spends the next four chapters writing about the city of Ephesus and the goddess Artemis, who is connected to Ephesus in Acts 19:23–41. The goddess's enormous prestige in Ephesus significantly influenced the way women are portrayed in 1 Timothy and Ephesians—including the claim that women would be saved through childbearing. Some scholars regard Artemis as a fertility and mothering goddess, partly based on an ancient statue of Artemis that some believe shows her with many breasts. In a chapter about Artemis in architecture and art, Glahn posits that the items on this statue are jewelry instead of breasts. They are differently colored than the statue's skin, they lack nipples and areolas, and they resemble items worn by male figures (including Zeus) in other statues.



Nobody's Mother: Artemis of the Ephesians in Antiquity and the New Testament

By Sandra L. Glahn (IVP Academic)

In a chapter on Artemis in early literary sources, Glahn thoughtfully includes content warnings about sexual violence before sharing various myths about the goddess. Glahn concludes that evidence does not suggest that the Artemis cult was involved in prostitution but rather that she was a chaste virgin who was not associated with mothering (thus inspiring the book's title). Artemis of Ephesus was associated with Amazon women in literature, as she was unmarried and carried a weapon. She was further associated with midwifery: one story tells of her being born before her twin brother and then helping their mother give birth to him. When 1 Timothy was written, giving birth was dangerous and life expectancies were short. Some Greek women prayed to Artemis to reduce their pain in childbirth.

Another chapter focuses on Artemis in epigraphic sources—that is, inscriptions. Glahn points out that such carvings are "unmediated primary sources from the past—no scribes have written comments in their margins or edited them." She uses these underutilized sources to strengthen her argument that evidence does not suggest Artemis's cult practiced prostitution or was anti-male. Further, the inscriptions do not suggest that she was a sex or fertility goddess.

The final chapter touches on various troubling instructions about women in 1 Timothy before focusing on the verse about childbearing. For example, the author writes about modesty, which

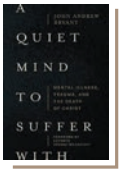
has led some scholars to assume that religious pagans were obsessed with sex. In contrast, Glahn believes that the writer was speaking about social class rather than arguing against revealing clothing. Wealthy women could afford expensive coverings, fine jewelry, and elaborate hairstyles that showed their socioeconomic status. The letter writer envisioned Christianity as a religion without rank based on affluence, Glahn notes.

The troubling verse, 1 Timothy 2:15, states, "But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety" (NIV). Glahn believes that the writer here is attempting to counter the idea that praying to Artemis during childbirth will bring about a delivery without pain. Glahn further points out that the rest of the epistles emphasize salvation through grace by faith alone. Expecting all women to give birth in order to be saved contradicts other parts of scripture too, including 1 Corinthians 7:8, in which Paul suggests that widows should remain celibate. Glahn also suggests that the idea of women being saved through childbearing might refer not to eternal salvation but rather to "temporal deliverance. . . . What if the author was assuring Timothy that, in light of the nature of the local false deity, a woman in his pastoral care would not die in childbirth?"

Most mainline Protestants may not be as troubled as Glahn by the verse about childbearing. *Nobody's Mother* might not be much help to mainline preachers—especially since many of our churches use the Revised Common Lectionary, which omits much of 1 Timothy, including the verse about childbearing. For women without children, however, this book sets that verse in its historical context and would make an excellent companion for Bible study. ❑

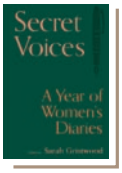
ELIZABETH FELICETTI *is the rector of St. David's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia, and the author of* Unexpected Abundance: The Fruitful Lives of Women without Children.

In Brief



A Quiet Mind to Suffer With: Mental Illness, Trauma, and the Death of Christ
By John Andrew Bryant
Lexham Press

"I love Jesus and am still very much mentally ill," writes John Andrew Bryant in this memoir. "My love for Jesus has not fixed that. And Jesus' love for me has not fixed it either. I love Jesus very, very much. And I've still been made to see and feel horrors." Structured around lines from the eucharistic liturgy of his Anglican tradition, Bryant's narrative is at once notably particular and theologically expansive. His deeply Barthian theology is punctuated by tangible details: the tattered ESV Bible someone gives him while he's in the psych ward, a cross-shaped tile in the pool where he goes for his morning swim, the gentle feel of his wife's hand on the back of his head as she reads to him from the Psalms, the choppy waves as he bodysurfs with his aging father on a family vacation. Buoying up these concrete images is the constant presence of "a terror that is a tenderness, a severity that is also a consolation. . . . a Mercy that is not felt or even thought but is still, somehow, quietly understood. An understanding of the heart." This understanding comes to Bryant through "a broken body and spilled blood that is the Word for us," the Christ who suffers with us and enters hell on our behalf, who bears our affliction and frees us of our captivity to sin. Bryant is clear that faith is not a cure for mental illness, and he doesn't attempt to offer advice to readers who struggle with their own afflictions. He writes as an evangelist who has a poignant story to share and solid theology to wrap around it.



Secret Voices: A Year of Women's Diaries
Edited by Sarah Gristwood
Batsford Books

"The diary has been the echo chamber for a woman's own voice, as opposed to what she was supposed to say," writes British journalist and historian Sarah Gristwood in the introduction to this anthology of brief excerpts from women's diaries spanning from the 17th century to the present. The entries are ordered not by subject matter or chronology or their authors' identities but rather by the day of the year on which they were written. Thus, readers can open the book to any date and find a record of what a handful of women decided to write about on that day across the centuries. The result is enlightening in a kaleidoscopic sort of way. On September 1, for instance, we read: "War is on us this morning. Hitler has taken Danzig" (Virginia Woolf, 1939), "The gladiolus on the shelf shine and ramp at us" (Naomi Mitchison, 1939), "Haunted. Can't shake Diana's death" (Oprah Winfrey, 1997), "I dreamt last night that I was married, just married, & in an agony to procure a dissolution of the engagement" (Elizabeth Barrett, 1831), and "At Grundlsee, the day before yesterday, I pulled out one of my molars" (Alma Schindler, 1899). These pages provide glimmers of thought on gardening, postpartum depression, grilled cheese with cayenne pepper, air raids, philandering husbands, prayer, abolitionism, hangovers, breastfeeding, dinner parties, menstrual cramps, broken engagements, and hundreds of other topics.

A New Heaven: Death, Human Destiny, and the Kingdom of God
By Harvey Cox
Orbis Books

Long before Harvey Cox became a professor of comparative religions at Harvard, he worked as an assistant to his uncle, who was the town undertaker. Now in his 90s, Cox remembers those teenage years as one source of the questions about religion that led him to graduate school. Like much of Cox's writing, this book is broad in scope and almost addictively readable. Cox guides readers amiably through a variety of rituals and beliefs related to the afterlife, traveling from Emanuel Swedenborg to Kabbalah to Evagrius of Pontus to Brigham Young to a Huichole community in northwestern Mexico. "Heaven is far from dead nor has it passed away in either our high or popular culture," Cox notes. This lively book proves that he's right.

A pastor's disappointments

Amy Butler's memoir is a story of relentless striving and continued failures. In other words, it's a story of the church.

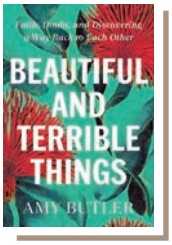
by Benjamin J. Dueholm

Of all the eponymous terrible things in Amy Butler's memoir, the one that left the strongest impression on me was not the tragic death of a teenager in the streets of New Orleans, the nonviable pregnancy and late-term abortion, the childhood sexual abuse, the divorce, or the author's tortuous departure from Riverside Church in New York City. It was the last words Butler, then an ordained Baptist pastor for ten years, ever heard from her staunchly conservative evangelical grandfather. "When I approached his chair and kissed him hello, he grabbed my hand and pulled me close, looked me straight in the eyes, and said: 'You are the biggest disappointment of my life.'"

That dreadful imprecation, and the early life of relentless striving it discounted with such harsh finality, rang in my ears for the rest of the book. *Beautiful and Terrible Things* touches on several recurring themes in its episodic recounting of an upbringing in the evangelical world and an adult career in the Protestant mainline, especially the redemptive role of relationships and dialogue in a season of cultural polarization and institutional breakdown. But in the end, I think, it is a book about disappointment: in family, in churches, sometimes even in God.

After a childhood marked by fundamentalist perfectionism, Butler pursues ministry education in a Southern Baptist setting that won't accept women's gifts for ordained ministry. (She recalls her male fellow interns at a big church being brought onstage and licensed to preach on the spot, while she is merely thanked.) Moving into Baptist circles that welcome women's leadership, at least in principle, she discovers that even these congregations house sexism and ordinary cruel, petty behavior. When Butler and her husband divorce, she is surprised by how little unwelcome commentary follows. (That was its own terrible moment for me, to see someone surprised by a supportive response from a church.)

Eventually, Butler is hired by New York's literally and figuratively storied Riverside Church, occupying the tallest church building in America, graced by preaching luminaries like Harry Emerson Fosdick and William Sloane Coffin and famed for a history of social activism. Due to what she describes with necessary vagueness as conflicts with lay leaders over a number of issues, including the chronic sexual harassment of staff and others by one of those leaders, her five-year contract is not renewed and she is forced to brass her way through a last Sunday at which she is forbidden from even mentioning her imminent departure.



Beautiful and Terrible Things: Faith, Doubt, and Discovering a Way Back to Each Other

By Amy Butler (Dial)

Along the way, there are redemptive moments of human connection. Butler discovers the good-heartedness and cooperative impulses buried under facades of trivial criticism. She makes friends with a hard-line gun rights advocate after making public comments on gun control. She gets a huge Black Lives Matter banner hoisted on her Washington, DC, church building in time for the January 6 protest and riot, and she has a respectful interaction with one of its attendees. "When I get home, I'm going to tell my wife I met a woman pastor!" the man tells her. "If we find ourselves at a shore from which love has not built a bridge, perhaps here is where we teach one another to swim," she concludes.

Along the way, Butler's faith changes, though perhaps not as much as the distance from hard-line fundamentalism to Riverside Church might suggest. *Beautiful and Terrible Things* is not the witness of one who has overcome a demanding and punitive childhood fundamentalism by discovering a gospel of grace; rather, it's the story of inverting that fundamentalism into a more progressive dimension. Success—the accomplishment of some biblically inspired norm of personal and collective behavior—is still the criterion by which Butler seems to judge both herself and her communities, even if the meaning of success has changed. She tells a moving and revealing story about her biracial daughter responding differently to a Black school counselor telling her, "You are a light," than to Butler telling her, "You have a lot of potential." She uses the same word for Riverside: "If the tallest church in America could live up to all of its potential, just think about how encouraging

and affirming that would be for other communities struggling with the burdens of institutional religion, conflict, and scarcity." But it didn't, and it can't, because just like individuals, communities are something infinitely more, and other, than their "potential."

This need for churches to be better, more activist, and more charitable with each other and the world than they are capable of being is fuel for disappointment, just as surely as the need for personal purity, single-minded piety, and familial tranquility. And this inevitable disappointment is reflected in the book's end-stage Protestant ecclesiology, in which the church is not the body of Christ, not Luther's "creature of the Word," nor even, as the Second Vatican Council put it, the "people of God." Instead it is an "institution," merely "another vehicle by which some of us might encounter the Divine."

This sets up the modestly hopeful conclusion to *Beautiful and Terrible Things*, in which Butler helps develop a fund for turning liquidated church assets into seed money for various spiritually inflected social enterprises. Old church buildings can be turned into coffee shops and art galleries that serve "as meeting spaces for spiritual community." This may feel like a worthy legacy or even a step forward from the rickety, failed "institutional church." But after 20 years, every social justice food truck or bakery will have either disappeared or become an institution itself, with its own regulations, conflicts, rules whose origins are forgotten, and niches for misconduct. Institutions are just what relationships look like over time. To endure—in a faith, in a vocation, in a form of community life—is also to disappoint. ❑

BENJAMIN J. DUEHOLM *is pastor of Christ Lutheran Church in Dallas, Texas, and author of* Sacred Signposts.

In Brief

Reparations and the Theological Disciplines: Prophetic Voices for Remembrance, Reckoning, and Repair
Edited by Michael Barram, Drew G. I. Hart, Gimbiya Kettering, and Michael J. Rhodes

This collection of essays is a must-read for anyone interested in making the case that Christians have an ethical responsibility, rooted in scripture and inextricable from theology, to work toward reparations for Black slavery in the United States. Highlights of the book include Matt Schlimm's reflections on reparations in Exodus (first published in the CENTURY, January 12, 2022); essays on Philemon by Angela Parker and Michael Gorman; a sermon by Duke Kwon on Zacchaeus as a model for reparations; essays on atonement theory by Mako Nagasawa and Rodney Sadler Jr.; an article by Jim Bear Jacobs, Pamela Ngunjiri, and Curtiss Paul DeYoung about the "ten-year racial justice initiative with a three-point platform of truth telling, education, and reparations" launched in 2020 by the Minnesota Council of Churches; and Joseph Downing Thompson Jr.'s story of leading Virginia Theological Seminary's $1.7 million reparations fund to benefit the descendants of people who were enslaved at the seminary, people who worked there during the era of enforced segregation, two local Black congregations that have historical connections to the seminary, and the ministry of Black seminary alumni who serve in historically Black contexts. Endorser Ellen Davis is right when she calls this book "practical theological inquiry at its best."

Remedies for Sorrow: An Extraordinary Child, a Secret Kept from Pregnant Women, and a Mother's Pursuit of the Truth
By Megan Nix
Doubleday

Megan Nix's memoir begins with a series of notable events: the birth of her second daughter, Anna; a failed hearing test that alarms the pediatric nurses; a "'shotgun' baptism" at the Byzantine Catholic church where Nix first met her husband, Luke; a long journey from Denver to Sitka, Alaska, where Luke works as a salmon fisherman during the summer months; and Anna's diagnosis of congenital cytomegalovirus, a common virus that can be harmful or even fatal to babies who contract it in utero. The rest of the book unfolds less dramatically as Nix settles into the mundane realities of parenting two small children, negotiating with insurance companies about which of Anna's treatments will be covered, setting up auditory-verbal therapy appointments, and learning as much as she can about CMV. Although the memoir is structured around Thomas Aquinas's "remedies for sorrow" (weeping, contemplation, company, pleasure, and caretaking) and draws upon the wisdom of a 1957 treatise by an Italian priest called "The Pedagogy of Innocent Suffering," it is aimed at a broad audience. Nix's main goal in telling her story is to raise awareness of CMV and advocate for education and legislation that will lead to early diagnosis.

Wisdom from the Witch of Endor: Four Rules for Living
By Tikva Frymer-Kensky
Eerdmans

This small book, compiled from papers found in Tikva Frymer-Kensky's office after the biblical scholar's death in 2006, contains seven brief chapters that explore various facets of the story of the witch of Endor, found in 1 Samuel 28:3–25. Written at a level that will engage nonacademic readers, the book delves into the linguistic and historical aspects of the biblical text before drawing four broad lessons for life from the story of the witch. Like Frymer-Kensky's *Motherprayer: A Pregnant Woman's Spiritual Companion* (1995), this book functions on a variety of levels. It's likely to be cited in sermons, quoted by scholars, and passed around between friends who are going through difficult times in life. Just as the witch of Endor feeds Saul, Frymer-Kensky feeds us through this delightful little book.

The stories I needed growing up

I'm excited about the direction of AAPI children's fiction.

by Liuan Huska

Living in Southeast Texas as a teenager, I belonged to one of the few Asian families in our small town. My parents owned a Chinese buffet, where I worked every Saturday and many evenings. Pentecostal groups, their women's uncut hair in sweeping updos, settled on the place in droves after their evening services, just as we were about to close. A man wearing a "Jesus Is My Homeboy" baseball cap always came on weekends and ate unthinkable quantities of salt-and-pepper crab. When I came across *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, Jade Snow Wong's autobiography about growing up in San Francisco's Chinatown, and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, about immigrant mothers and their Chinese-American daughters, I clung to these books like scripture. I felt known through them, for more than just my family's Americanized Chinese food.

Two decades later, I live far from my family's old restaurant. Books featuring Asian American and Pacific Islander characters no longer feel like rare discoveries. I recently checked out one of Lisa Yee's new chapter books, *Maizy Chen's Last Chance*, from our public library for my husband to read aloud to our three half-Asian boys.

Twelve-year-old Maizy spends the summer helping at her grandparents' Chinese restaurant in Minnesota, serving "ancient Chinese recipes" like fried cream cheese wontons. Unlike my family, who are first-generation immigrants, Maizy's family descends from a man named Lucky Chen who came to San Francisco in 1869. Over the summer, Maizy's ailing grandpa tells her Lucky's story of finding work in a new country, confronting anti-Chinese violence, and eventually establishing himself as a valued resident of Last Chance, Minnesota. Meanwhile, Maizy encounters modern forms of racism and finds a community in her grandparents' town.

Yee's book started me down a rabbit trail of reading other middle-grade fiction featuring Asian American characters. It was like the starved immigrant girl in me finally sat down to an all-you-can-eat literary buffet cooked up just for her. These are the kinds of stories I wish had been available to me growing up.

In *You Are Here: Connecting Flights*, Ellen Oh assembles 12 short stories by AAPI authors, all set in a Chicago airport as bad weather causes flight delays and friction among travelers.

Maizy Chen's Last Chance

By Lisa Yee
(Penguin Random House)

You Are Here: Connecting Flights

Edited by Ellen Oh
(HarperCollins)

Finally Seen

By Kelly Yang
(Simon & Schuster)

The main characters in each story face conflicts between how they've been socialized to act—quiet, compliant, always obedient to elders—and what they feel is right and true to themselves.

Some characters encounter explicit racism, like when a woman in a pink sweater comments, "Just our luck that we'd get stuck behind *these people*. They slow everything down." This is said about Paul, who is traveling to Thailand with his family. His grandma is carrying his dead grandfather's ashes in a coffee can, which causes a commotion at the security checkpoint.

Then there are the expected comments—"Hopefully they go back to their own country and stay there"—and overt aggressions, like when Henry, a Korean American boy with autism, watches two other boys walk up to him, snickering, trying to knock him off-balance.

One story, by Traci Chee, stood out to me for articulating the many small, almost unnameable cuts that come with growing up Asian American. Natalie is a Japanese American girl joining her best friend Beth's family on vacation. Beth's father calls it their "Annual Martin Independence Day Cross-Country Extravaganza," which stirs up a weird feeling for Natalie, "sort of flustery and twisted up." Natalie's family doesn't do hot dogs or fireworks, Mr. Martin's definition of a "good summer celebration." Her favorite Independence Day food is her grandma's somen salad, but she doesn't mention this, for fear of seeming impolite.

Though Natalie tries to let the feeling fizzle away, it only intensifies as the day progresses. Mr. and Mrs. Martin make another careless comment about an Asian kid who gets his finger stuck in a chair at the food court. Beth, who is White, blithely shows off her Japanese language skills, while Natalie feels she can't walk around without drawing suspicion. "It wasn't Beth's fault, of course, but it was another of those small things, accumulating around Natalie little by little like dozens of tiny stones," writes Chee. By the end of the story, Natalie is able to name the feeling as "something-is-weird-and-bad-and-it-has-to-

do-with-race." Seeing this naming gave the immigrant girl in me a palpable sense of relief. It's not just me. It's real.

Finally Seen is one of Kelly Yang's many works. In it, ten-year-old Lina Gao joins her parents and younger sister in Southern California after living with her grandmother in Beijing for five years. Lina's family has taught her to "act invisible, don't create trouble." Lina's own struggles with English pronunciation push her deeper into a protective shell.

At Lina's new school, her beloved teacher picks a book centering an AAPI character to read aloud, which a classmate's parent calls "divisive." In a poignant scene, Lina speaks up at a school board meeting about why the book matters to her. In halting English, she declares, "For me, this book is mirror. For other kids, it is sliding door. A door to see real life." I'll be honest: I choked up here.

If the stories we tell ourselves shape our sense of what is possible, then these books give young readers today broader possibilities than I could have imagined as a Chinese immigrant girl working at the Great Wall restaurant in Texas in the early aughts. For my three mixed-race children, I hope these stories offer them more-sophisticated categories and precise language at an earlier age for the race-tinged situations they already encounter. Though race may be a social construct, how we navigate it has world-shaping power.

Reading these stories also helps us imagine the possibility of bridging the chasms of misunderstanding, pain, and outright animosity that characterize so much of American social life. All three books contain scenes in which people perpetuating racist attitudes get their comeuppance. Though there is always some satisfaction in these outcomes, for me as a reader there is also the risk of enjoying retribution over transformation. Sure, the woman in the pink sweater gets publicly shamed for her abhorrent posture toward AAPI people. But what's next for her? Does she change?

This is what I would like to see more of in AAPI fiction, for any age group. How can the narrative move beyond naming the feeling and calling out the wrong (which usually happens to characters who are depicted in two-dimensional ways) to giving some of the characters who acted hurtfully and unjustly their humanity back, too? What's their backstory?

I see authors reaching toward that full relational loop in these stories. At the end of *Finally Seen*, Lina meets her classmate Jessica (whose mother called the class read-aloud "divisive") at an ice cream truck, and they exchange book recommendations. In *You Are Here*, Natalie has a conversation with Beth about misappropriating elements of Japanese culture. Beth acknowledges that she hasn't had to think about race, authenticity, and belonging the way that Natalie has had to all her life. This is the difference between what activists have named "calling out" (which leads to rupture) versus "calling in" (which leads to repair). Often, both are needed.

I'm excited about the direction of AAPI children's fiction. There's no one right narrative, as the many stories out there display. Taken together, they help us imagine and enact a society where children and adults of all races thrive together. And they help the immigrant girl in me feel a little less alone. ❑

LIUAN HUSKA *is author of* Hurting Yet Whole: Reconciling Body and Spirit in Chronic Pain and Illness.

Fargo and *Wicked Little Letters* take on the patriarchy

It's hard to dramatize the evils of patriarchy without falling into melodrama or historical difference.

by Kathryn Reklis

Kathryn Reklis teaches theology at Fordham University.

Early in the first episode of the latest season of *Fargo* (created by Noah Hawley), Dorothy "Dot" Lyons (Juno Temple) fights off attackers who have broken into her home. After she retreats upstairs, we watch the attackers follow a strand of yarn that she seems not to have realized is leading them straight to her hiding place. It turns out the yarn is a lure, not a trail, and we are just as surprised as the attackers to discover what waits on the other end. The rest of the episode is a whirlwind of chaos and violence as we realize this Minnesota mom is more than she seems.

Dot has already had a rough 24 hours leading up to this fiasco. The episode opens in the midst of a middle school committee meeting that has gone horribly wrong: parents and teachers wrestle and punch each other, throwing furniture and screaming in each other's faces. Dot is arrested when she accidentally tases a police officer as she tries to shepherd her daughter out of the brawl. We never learn what caused a planning meeting for the fall festival to erupt into physical violence, but it is 2019, and the menace of civic breakdown haunts the show at every turn.

Fargo is an anthology series, so every season is a new story with new characters. What connects the seasons to each other—and to the 1996 Coen brothers film of the same name—is a darkly humorous exploration of the forces of good and evil that overwhelm ordinary lives. Usually, the forces of evil in *Fargo* take on almost supernatural qualities, represented in figures who unleash violence and chaos beyond the control of any one person to rein them in. There are several contenders for this role in the current season. Dot's mother-in-law, Lorraine (Jennifer Jason Leigh), is the head of a "debt empire" that has made an exorbitant fortune profiting off people trapped in debt of all kinds. One of the bounty hunters who attack Dot in her home is a payer of debts on a cosmic scale. In another season, the entangling power of debt and forgiveness would be the central story. But this season has its sights set on even more prosaic and unambiguous evil: patriarchy in all its guises.

We meet infantile, self-absorbed husbands and mediocre, entitled businessmen alongside weak-willed cops looking for an excuse to exercise brute force. But the wellspring of all this patriarchal bluster is Dot's ex-husband, Roy Tillman (Jon Hamm), a self-professed Christian nationalist and "constitutional sheriff" who recognizes no law beyond his own interpretation of patriotic patriarchy. The fight between good and evil is between Roy, who wields almost unlimited power within his fiefdom, and Dot, whose unbreakable will for freedom gives her preternatural survival skills, like a caged tiger ready to spring.

It is hard to make a drama about the evils of patriarchy without falling into melodrama or historical difference, as though these are only problems from the past. I was reminded of this when I saw *Wicked Little Letters* (directed by Thea Sharrock), which is based on a real-life case of libel and scandal from the 1920s in an English seaside town. Edith (Olivia Colman) is the target of a series of filthy-language poison pen letters she accuses her neighbor Rose (Jessie Buckley) of sending. Rose is a loudmouthed Irish woman who lives out of wedlock with her lover and daughter, making her the perfect suspect for scandalous behavior in a small, decorous

Juno Temple as Dorothy "Dot" Lyons in the most recent season of Fargo

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Protestant town. When police officer Gladys Moss (Anjana Vasan) suspects her blundering male colleagues have the wrong culprit, she and other women band together to clear Rose's name.

As a caper, it wears thin. By the time the culprit is revealed about halfway through the movie, no viewer will be surprised. But sitting at the heart of the story is another case of Christian patriarchy. The patriarch in this story could be Roy's progenitor, demanding absolute obedience and choosing the victims most inclined to submit to his tyrannical will. He stomps and spews and convulses with anger at the way women are demanding rights and taking on new social roles. *Wicked Little Letters* plays the patriarchy like a joke, a reminder of the bad old days when women police officers faced discrimination and men bemoaned the rise of women's rights. It is a lighthearted film that doesn't fully grasp the red-hot rage at its center.

Fargo understands this rage more fully, partially because it understands that the battle for patriarchal power is far from over. The men in *Fargo* are fuming at a world they feel has displaced them, and they are determined to make the world great again in their image of Christian patriarchy. The women in *Wicked Little Letters* have only petty pranks to use in the fight against the patriarchy. Dot, on the other hand, could give both MacGyver and Jason Bourne a run for their money as she outmaneuvers every scheme against her. The stakes feel substantially higher in this world, the violence more pronounced and unsettling. In the end, though, it is only Roy who sees this as a cosmic battle he is ordained to fight. Dot can't defeat him on her own, but her greatest power is refusing to accept a world where she would have to.

In 2019 (and maybe in 2024 as well), as neighbor turns against neighbor and men armed to the teeth declare themselves victims, the evil Roy represents begins to seem more like pathetic flailing than revolution. About midway through the season, Dot's current mother-in-law and former husband meet for the first time. As Lorraine takes the measure of Roy, she sums him up: "You want freedom with no responsibility. There's only one person on earth who gets that deal," she teases.

"The president?" asks Roy.

"A baby," she shoots back. Maybe we are meant to be laughing after all. ❑

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COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

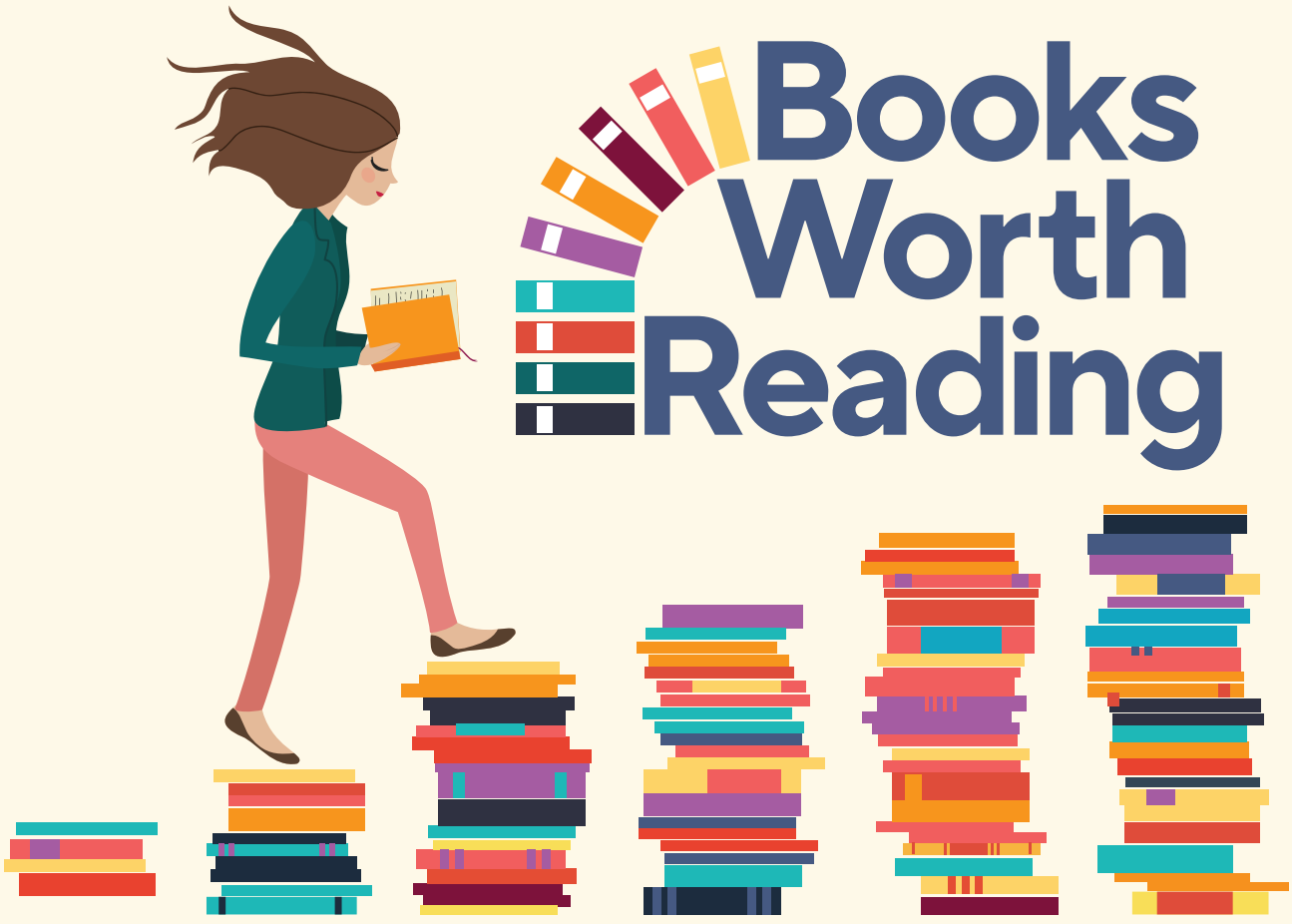
Maha Rukab's *The Potter's Purpose*

Maha Rukab's artistic talent was first recognized by a sixth-grade teacher who praised her sense of color in painting a pottery jug at the Friends School in the West Bank city of Ramallah. The Palestinian Christian artist's life trajectory would be changed by the Six-Day War and Israeli occupation, foreign job opportunities, and family concerns that left no time for art. Rukab took it up again in her 30s, working as an elementary school teacher and translator, raising two children on her own in Dubai.

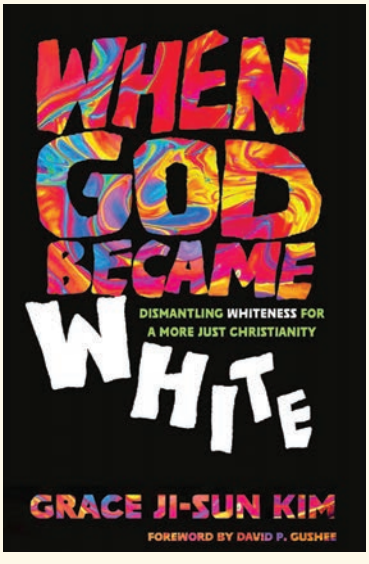
For Rukab, art-making is praying with paint. She finds a sense of spiritual release in creating abstract compositions in swirling colors with no set plan in mind. Then she meditates on the finished pieces, linking them to passages from the Bible. One painting in bright primary colors proved an especially meaningful joining of word and image when Rukab drew its title from Isaiah 64:8: "We are the clay, you are the potter; we are the work of your hand."

Rukab does not normally use black, but in adding outlines to the original abstract, she summoned up the first painted jug of her childhood and the pottery workshops of the Ramallah she once knew, turning the clay pieces into spiritual vessels. A portrait emerged of a Palestinian woman, much like herself, "pondering the reason God created her." As Rukab explains: "Art has been given to me as a divine gift to lighten my soul burdens. Every work becomes a prayer for peace—in my heart, in the Holy Land, and in the world." ❑

Art commentary by **JOHN KOHAN**, *a writer and art collector (sacredartpilgrim.com).*



CHRISTIAN CENTURY books editor Elizabeth Palmer sorts through her stacks



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TOMORROW'S THOUGHT LEADERS WILL NEED THE *CENTURY*

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