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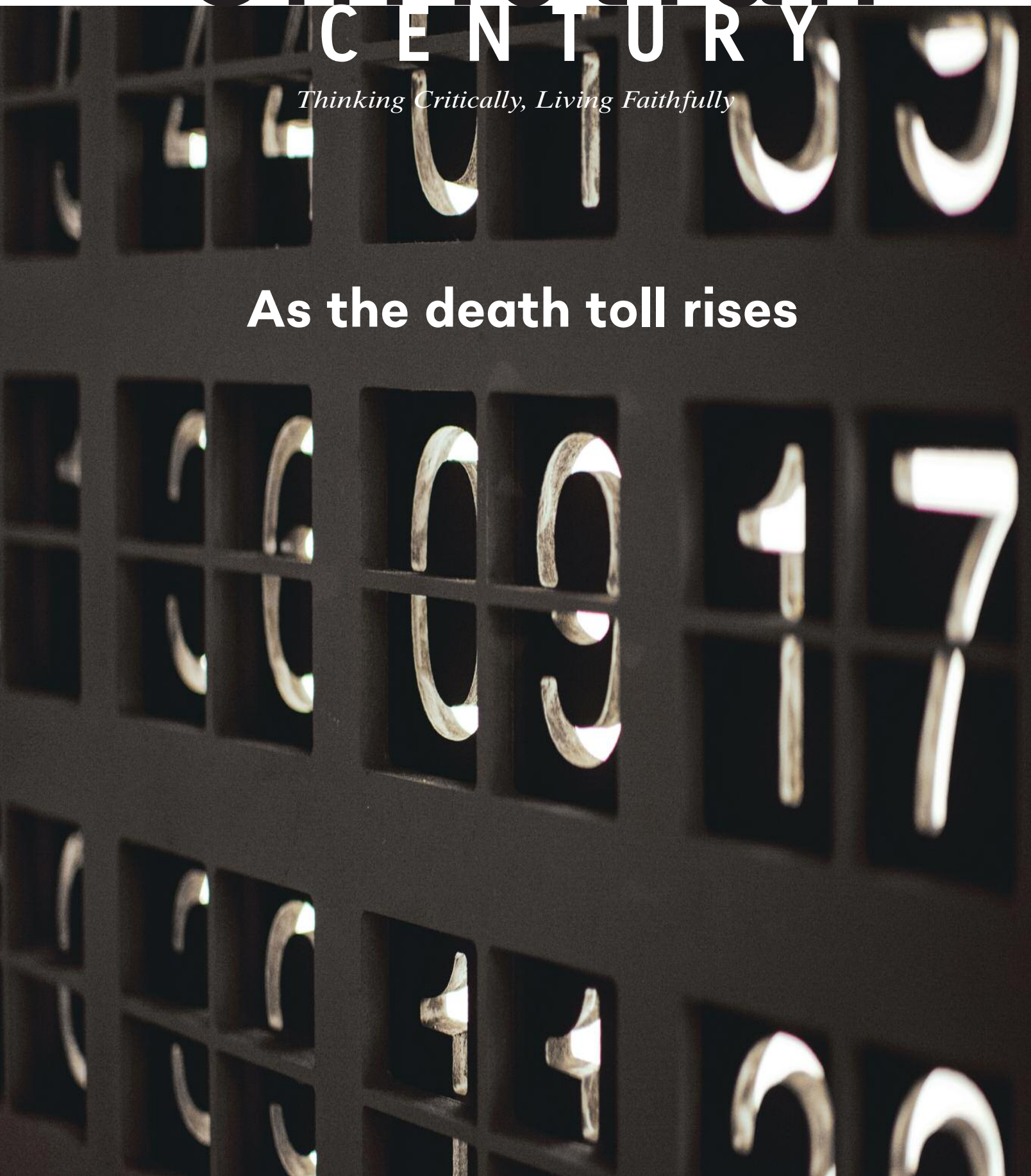
THE Christian CENTURY

December 2, 2020

Thinking Critically, Living Faithfully



As the death toll rises

"Though the life of faith is often described in terms of joyful arrivals and culminations, in reality we spend a lot of our time in between. Though we know that Good Friday gives way to Easter, we live our lives on Holy Saturday, waiting for the fullness of resurrection's promise to unfold. Sometimes it feels as if the whole planet is straining with impatience, yearning for something better. Sometimes I wonder if in-betweenness is the quintessential human condition."

—Debie Thomas

Faith Matters

appears in every issue of

THE Christian CENTURY

featuring

Debie Thomas

Brian Bantum
Samuel Wells
Debra Dean Murphy
Isaac S. Villegas
Stephanie Paulsell

From the editor/publisher

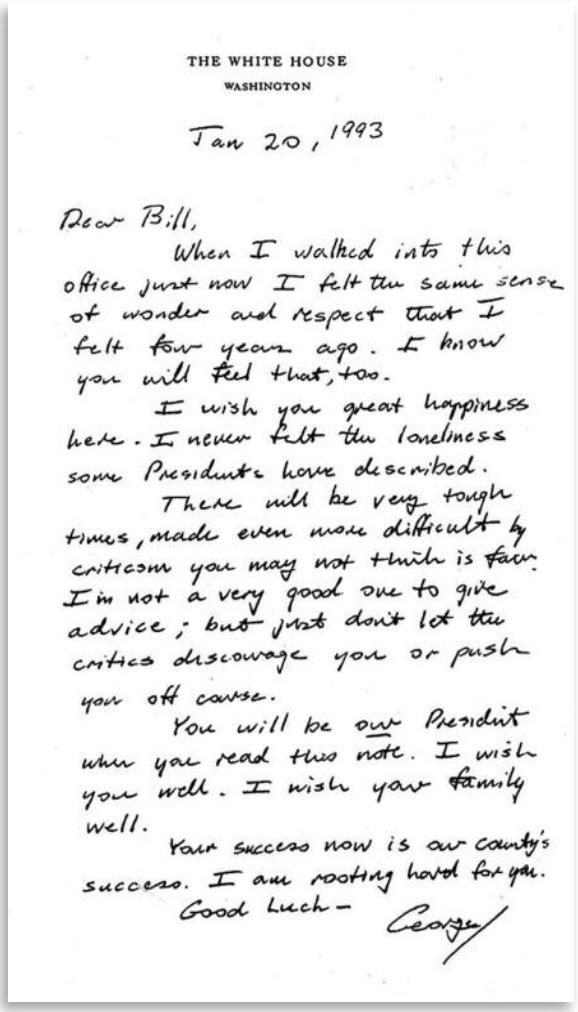
Peter W. Marty

A letter in the drawer

An envelope with "confidential" scribbled across it with a Sharpie marker sits in a cardboard box on the shelf in my bedroom closet. The handwritten letter inside is of special value to me, and I haven't yet brought myself to part with it. Twenty-five years ago, the interim pastor of the church I serve penned this letter to me and placed it in the top drawer of my office desk. When I discovered it on my first day on the job, I opened it to find warm encouragement and wise counsel for what seemed like a daunting ministry assignment facing a young pastoral soul.

Chuck Claus's letter to me won't make it into any history books. His words don't carry the lasting significance of correspondence penned by the likes of Abigail Adams, Winston Churchill, or the apostle Paul. To this day, though, his sentences breathe kindness and respect, which is what all good personal letters strive for.

American presidents have been leaving personal letters behind in the Oval Office desk for their successors ever since Ronald Reagan started this quiet tradition. George H. W. Bush may have left the most striking one of the bunch, made all the more remarkable given his bruising 1992 presidential campaign loss to Bill Clinton. The letter he left in the desk drawer before exiting the White House a final time, reprinted here, is exemplary for its generous tone. In a mere 11 sentences, Bush manages to share respect, display solidarity, express humility, and offer encouragement. "I am rooting hard for you," he writes at the close. Clinton himself has praised this letter on a number of occasions over the years for so beautifully encapsulating the heart and humanity of "Bush 41."



THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

Jan 20, 1993

Dear Bill,

When I walked into this office just now I felt the same sense of wonder and respect that I felt four years ago. I know you will feel that, too.

I wish you great happiness here. I never felt the loneliness some Presidents have described.

There will be very tough times, made even more difficult by criticism you may not think is fair. I'm not a very good one to give advice; but just don't let the critics discourage you or push you off course.

You will be our President when you read this note. I wish you well. I wish your family well.

Your success now is our country's success. I am rooting hard for you.

Good Luck –

George

We don't know exactly how Donald Trump will leave his presidency. But continuing this tradition of letter writing at the end, hard as it must be for any president, would be a tribute to the privilege of serving in that high office. The opportunity for Trump to welcome his successor in this quiet way awaits him. And some thoughtful examples of writing pave the way.

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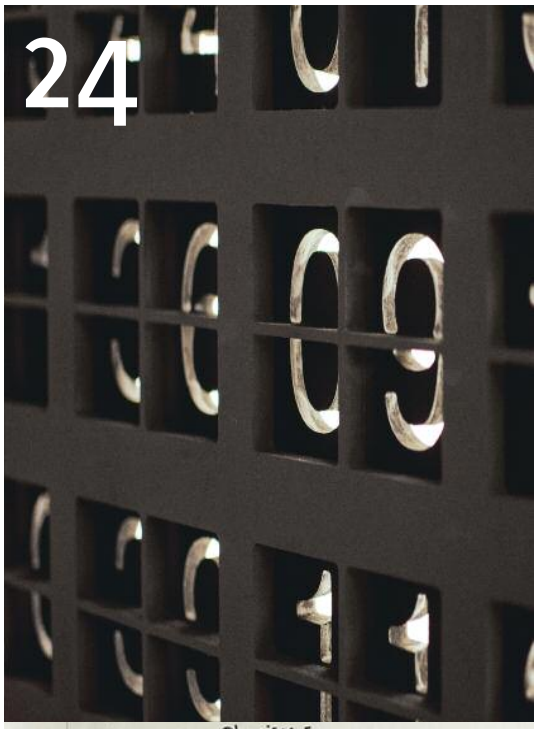

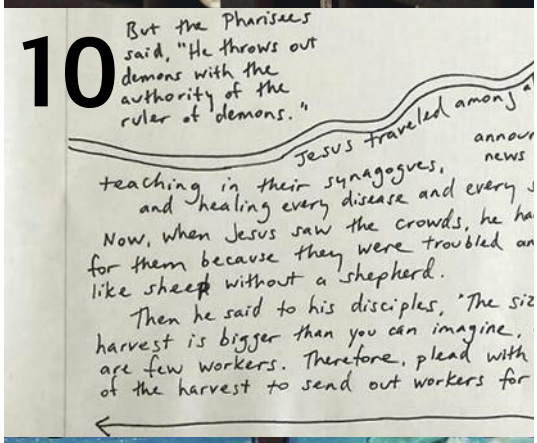

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LETTERS

Giving ourselves

Thanks, Peter W. Marty, for sharing your moment of discovery ("From taking to receiving," Nov. 4). The wedding vows I have suggested to couples for more than 30 years begin: "I give myself to you." The "receive" is implied, though I did have one couple who wanted to include "receive" to complete the vows. If we did more giving of self and receiving one another in trust, we would be serving one another in the way that Jesus taught.

Bob Stebe
Hillsboro, OR

I appreciate Peter W. Marty's words about receiving versus taking, but I would suggest making further changes. Wedding vows are an expression of promise. Saying "I receive you . . ." doesn't quite do that. I would favor vows that begin, "I give myself" or "I offer myself," followed by something like "I accept" or "I receive."

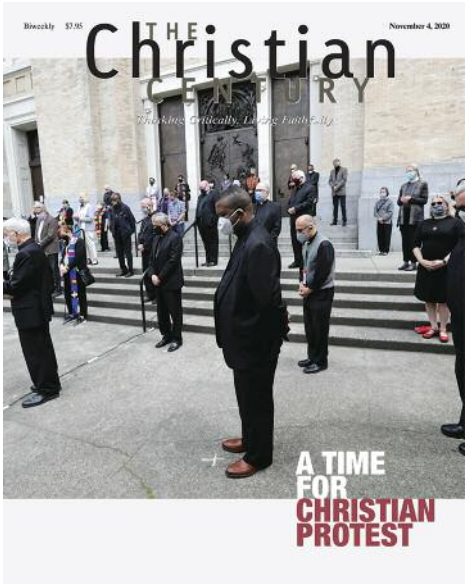
Paul Finger
Madison, WI

Low-wage food chain . . .

I really enjoyed the article "My brother's hard days" (Nov. 4). But the problem Tony Coleman addresses goes deeper. Here in rural West Virginia, "grocery worker" is at the top of the food chain in the job market.

Workers start out at the local industrial laundry plant, where you work 3.5 hours (just long enough that they do not have to give you a lunch break) in extreme temperatures at a breakneck pace. Then they send you home for four hours and ask you back after that for 3.5 more. Six days a week, all at minimum wage.

Moving up, you can become a telemarketer at one of the local "shops," with call after call coming into your headset relentlessly. Signing off for too many bathroom breaks can get you fired. From there, if you are not too old or too homeless looking, you can get hired by a fast-food chain and work 60 hours a week with no thanks and no breaks.



Finally, if you are lucky, you can get a job at a grocery store—where if you stock shelves, you can at least set your own pace. In the small towns around me, several dozen employees do find nirvana—after working their way up this ridiculous chain they get hired by Walmart.

Bill Bradley
Fairmont, WV

Christian protest . . .

Did the CENTURY editors read their own Century Marks items in the Nov. 4 issue? That "we've allowed identity politics to turn society into groups in competition with each other" ("What matters") or that "negative partisanship—political views formed primarily in opposition to a party—is potentially dangerous and can be a prelude to democratic collapse" ("Danger of partisanship")?

In a time when US Christianity is in cultural decline, clergy protesting, as the issue's cover suggests, is just the drug to give them a sense of their own importance they do not deserve. But it sure beats being a peacemaker, to which Christ calls us, and which America very much needs.

Barry Downing
Endwell, NY

THE Christian CENTURY

December 2, 2020

Lament and longing

In her 1993 acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in Literature, Toni Morrison meditated on what language can and can't do. It can't, she said, "pin down" anything. Instead, language reaches. "Its force, its felicity, is in its reach toward the ineffable. Be it grand or slender, burrowing, blasting, or refusing to sanctify, whether it laughs out loud or is a cry without an alphabet—the choice word, the chosen silence—unmolested language surges toward knowledge, not its destruction."

In this issue, we've asked several writers to reflect on the loss of those killed by COVID-19 (see p. 24 and following). These words have been written for the specific task that Morrison lays out: to reach toward the ineffable. How do we talk about the deaths of more than a million people worldwide and hundreds of thousands in the United States? What words do we have to speak about the deaths of our neighbors, our grandparents, those we knew and those who were strangers to us? How do we honor those who are working around the clock to save lives, find solutions, care for the sick? Can words help us? Can we use the power of language to aid, encourage, and heal?

Advent is a particularly compelling time to attempt this reach. During Advent, often called the little Lent, Christians meditate on the world as it is and the world as it might be. We enter a period of self-reflection—not just about our individual selves but also about our social body and the fabric that holds us together. In Advent we are pointed beyond the present moment and our small selves toward the bigger story of which we are a part.

The O Antiphons, known most widely in the hymn "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," have been sung by Christians during Advent since the eighth century. Each antiphon contains both a name for Christ and a call for God to break into the world. Each one is a message of both longing and hope that speaks during a time when the sunlight dims and we wait for new light to dawn.

In this issue, poet Diane Tucker offers us 40 new O Antiphons, each one crafted to speak into our current realities—realities that include both deep lament and hope in the ordinariness of our struggles.

Advent is a time to meditate on the world as it is and as it might be.

Lament and longing are constant companions. During Advent, we long for the Messiah. We long for a world reconciled, healed, and whole. This year, we long for simpler things too: to be able to meet together again in person, to send our children to school, to pick up pieces of our work that we've had to set down.

Come, the traditional O Antiphons beckon, even demand. Come to a world that needs healing. Come and save us. "Be," as Tucker writes, "God of all Tomorrows."

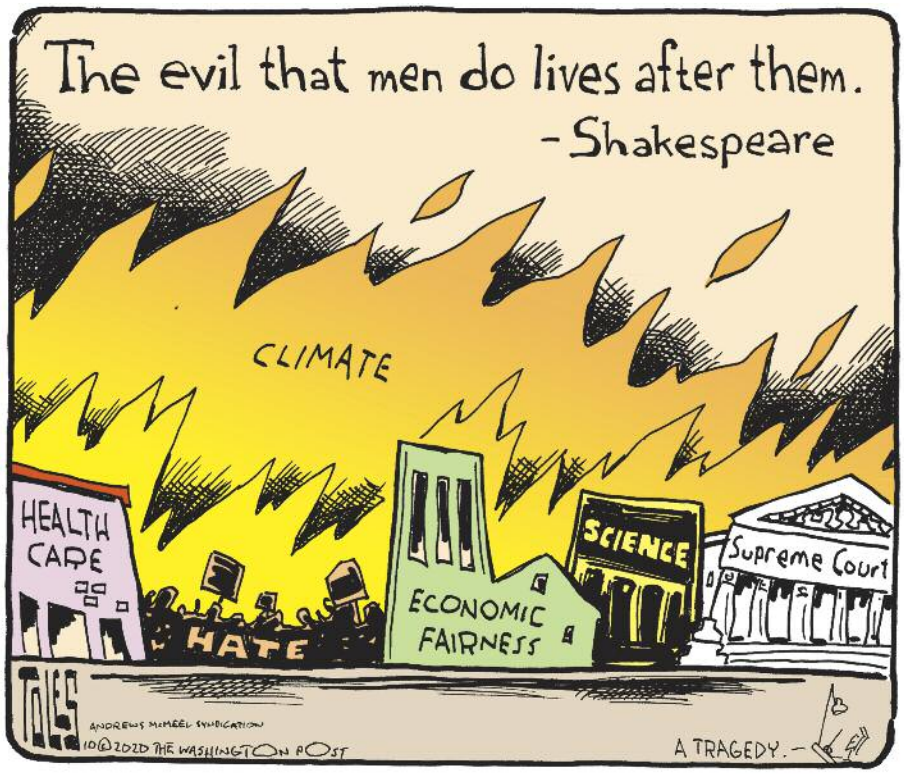
—The Editors

CENTURY marks

CHIEF EULOGIST: Joe Biden, only the second Catholic elected as president, has been known for giving empathetic and heartfelt eulogies. He has eulogized people as different as George Floyd, the African American killed by a Minneapolis police officer, and Strom Thurmond, the segregationist senator from South Carolina. Biden's eulogies are marked by themes of redemption, forgiveness, and the dignity of the human person (*Commonweal*, November 7).

CASH AID: The charity Foundations for Social Change, in partnership with the University of British Columbia, gave 50 homeless people in the Vancouver area $7,500 and then followed up with them over the next year to see how they used the money and how they were doing. Compared to a control group that didn't get cash, the cash recipients moved into stable housing faster and reduced their spending on drugs, alcohol, and tobacco by an average of 39 percent. They also increased their spending on clothing, rent, and food (*Vox*, October 27).

MEGACHURCH STUDY: A new study by Hartford Seminary's Institute for Religion Research indicates that 58 percent of megachurches are multiracial, up from 21 percent in 2000. Sixty percent of them have a denominational affiliation. Pastoral leadership is still overwhelmingly White. Many megachurches place special emphasis on special needs ministry, and much of the spiritual formation of members takes place in small groups. Almost universally, megachurches avoid political engagement, but they are increasing their involvement in community service (Hartford Seminary, October 29).



IN JESUS' NAME? A new network of "patriot churches" is forming that wants to take America back for God. Three formed in September alone: outside Knoxville, Tennessee; near Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia; and in Spokane, Washington. They share a belief that their faith is under siege, that the United States was once a Christian nation, and that it should be one now. According to sociologist Samuel Perry, the best predictor of whether a voter supports President Trump is an adherence to a Christian nationalist ideology. Popular evangelical pastor John Piper wrote an article before the election blasting supporters of Christian nationalism (*Washington Post*, October 26).

UNEARTHED: Archaeologists have uncovered slave quarters in southern Maryland that are likely 300 years old and are nearly intact. They are buried in a state park that was once the site of a Jesuit plantation. They may well be connected to Georgetown University's history of slave trading. Georgetown sold 314 slaves in 1838 in order to cover some of its debts. After the discovery of the site, descendants of those slaves were invited to visit it (CNN, November 2).

TARGETED: The Ahavas Israel Cemetery in Grand Rapids, Michigan, was desecrated the day before the election. Vandals spray painted "Trump" and "MAGA" in red paint on headstones. The attack was discovered hours before

Trump arrived in Grand Rapids to stage the final rally of his campaign. It shook the Jewish community, which just last year saw the city's Reform synagogue vandalized (RNS, November 3).

COPYCAT CRIME: Holden Matthews, a 23-year-old man in Louisiana, was sentenced to 25 years in prison last month for burning down three Black churches last spring. He has also been ordered to pay the churches $2.6 million in restitution. He admitted to burning down the buildings due to their religious character in an effort to raise his profile as a "black metal" musician. He was mimicking similar crimes committed in Norway in the 1990s. He confessed to the arson and said that he has since recovered his faith in God (Church Leaders, November 5).

MAJORITY VIEW: If the Supreme Court were to reverse approval of same-sex marriage, it would go against the wishes of the majority of the American people. A recent PRRI poll shows that 70 percent of Americans favor same-sex marriage, while only 28 percent oppose it. Half of Republicans favor it. White evangelical Protestants are the only major religious group to oppose it, at 63 percent. The poll also found that 83 percent of Americans favor laws that would protect LGBTQ people from discrimination in jobs, public accommodations, and housing (Baptist News Global, October 29).

EVANGELICAL DIVIDE: There are two kinds of evangelicals, according to Timothy Dalrymple, president and CEO of *Christianity Today*. There are those who belong to the "church regnant." They were formed in an environment in which Christianity was the dominant force, and they are drawn toward gaining political power in order to reestablish that dominance. This draw to power enabled them to support a president whose own values are counter to Christian ones. The other group belongs to the "church remnant," which is younger and more diverse. They come from an environment in which Christianity isn't the dominant force, and they are more inclined to see faith as living on the margins (*Christianity Today*, November 2).

> "While I may be the first woman in this office, I won't be the last. Because every little girl watching tonight sees that this is a country of possibilities."
>
> — Vice president-elect **Kamala Harris** in a speech after the Biden-Harris ticket was projected to win (*New York Times*, November 8)

> "He is not so much a change agent as a reversion agent. He is elected to Make America Able to Sleep Again. He doesn't see his mission as shaking things up, but calming things down."
>
> — Columnist **Charles M. Blow** on Joe Biden, a moderate Democrat, becoming the next president of the United States (*New York Times*, November 8)

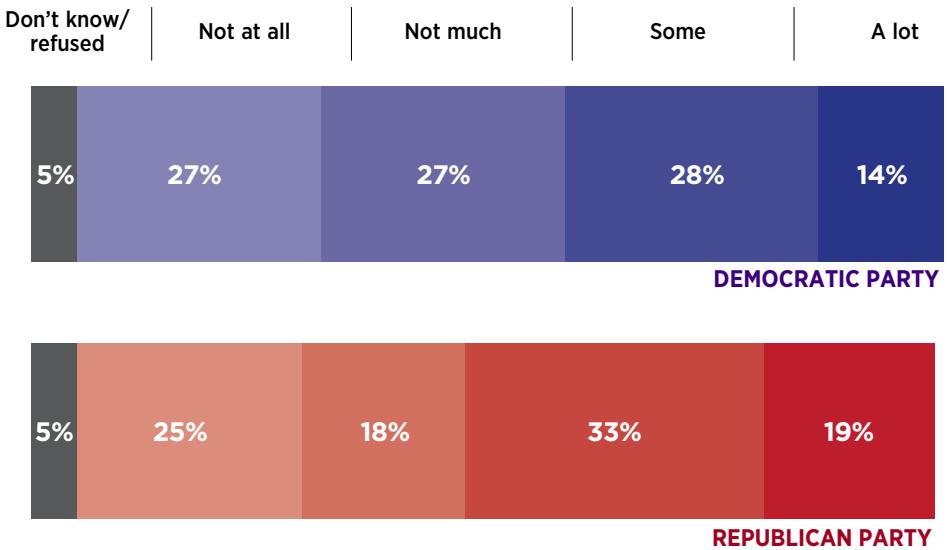
WORD OF MOUTH: *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer's "invitation to celebrate the gifts of the earth," was published in 2013 by Milkweed Editions without a large marketing budget. Seven years later, it has been on the *New York Times* paperback nonfiction list for 30 weeks, thanks to word-of-mouth promotion. Kimmerer, a botanist and a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, worries that too much of the environmental movement is motivated by fear. She thinks gratitude motivated by a love for the natural world is a more effective approach (*New York Times*, November 5).

SIGNATURES MISSING: A UN nuclear weapons accord is set to take effect in January 2021. The treaty states that the countries ratifying it must "never under any circumstance develop, test, produce, manufacture or otherwise acquire, possess or stockpile nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices." Passed in 2017, the treaty was signed by 122 countries. The nuclear powers Russia, China, the United States, the United Kingdom, and France have not signed the accord (UN News, October 25).

PARTY BIAS

SOURCE: AJC 2020 SURVEY OF THE GENERAL PUBLIC

The extent of anti-Semitic views in each of the major political parties, as perceived by survey respondents.



An old way of praying comes to life during the pandemic

How I became a scribe

by Heidi Haverkamp

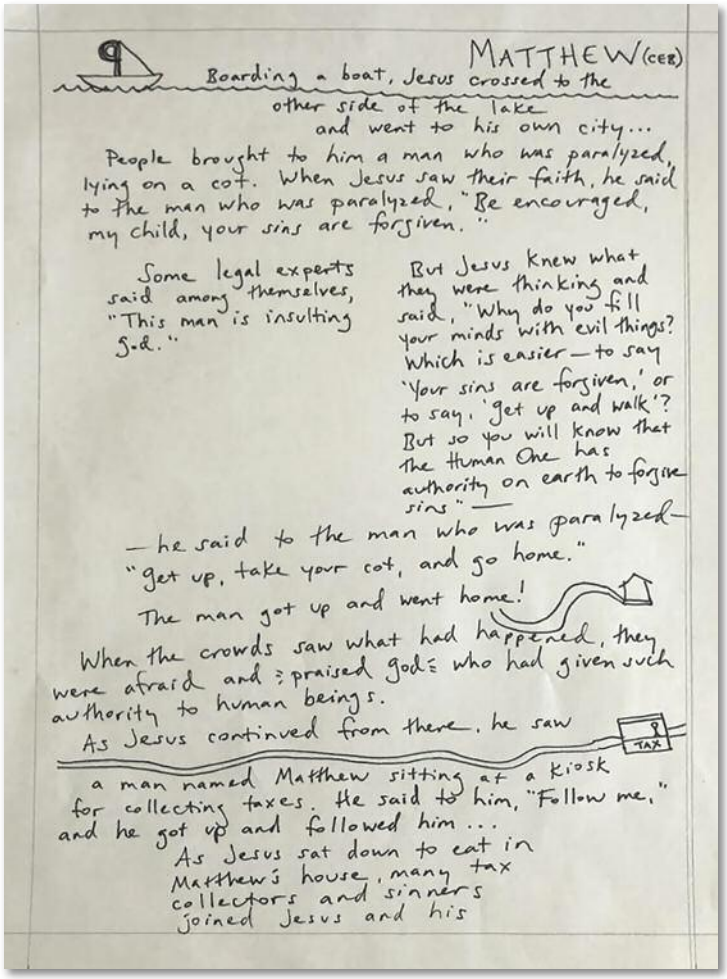
LONG BEFORE books could be printed on a mechanical press or a digital printer and delivered to your door at the click of a button, they were written and copied by hand, word by word, with hand-cut pens in homemade ink on the fussy surfaces of animal skins. The books of the Bible were handed down as scrolls and codices, hand-copied by Hebrew scribes and early Christians. Copyists and illuminators turned scripture into works of art, gilded, colored, and illustrated, often with covers set in gold and gems.

The creation of many hands and thousands of hours of painstaking labor, a codex of the Bible was something the average Christian would never see or touch, much less read. Only churches, monasteries, and wealthy aristocrats could afford them. Today the Bible is available to anyone with an internet connection, searchable and in the translation and font size of your choice. We can buy illuminated scripture verses to hang on a wall, wear on a shirt, tattoo on our skin, or eat in birthday cake frosting. Why would we take the time and energy to write out the scriptures, when they are already accessible in so many places?

Copying holy texts may no longer be a necessity, but it is a spiritual discipline that invites the scribe to deeper engagement with the word of God. It's an old way of praying, like *lectio divina*, that has found new life during the pandemic.

In the early days of quarantine, the Roman Catholic Abbey of St. Gall in northeastern Switzerland invited more than 1,000 parishioners to create a completely handwritten and illustrated Corona-Bibel while they sheltered in place. The project inspired clergy in Chicago and Lincoln, Nebraska, to launch similar projects. While the American iterations are smaller in scope than the Swiss Corona-Bibel, focusing on select books of the Bible rather than all 66, the projects all share a common purpose: to gather people into community during a crisis and encourage them to experience the healing, comforting power of God's word.

ILLUMINATED: Pages from the author's handwritten rendering of Matthew 9 for the Chicago Illuminated Scripture Project.



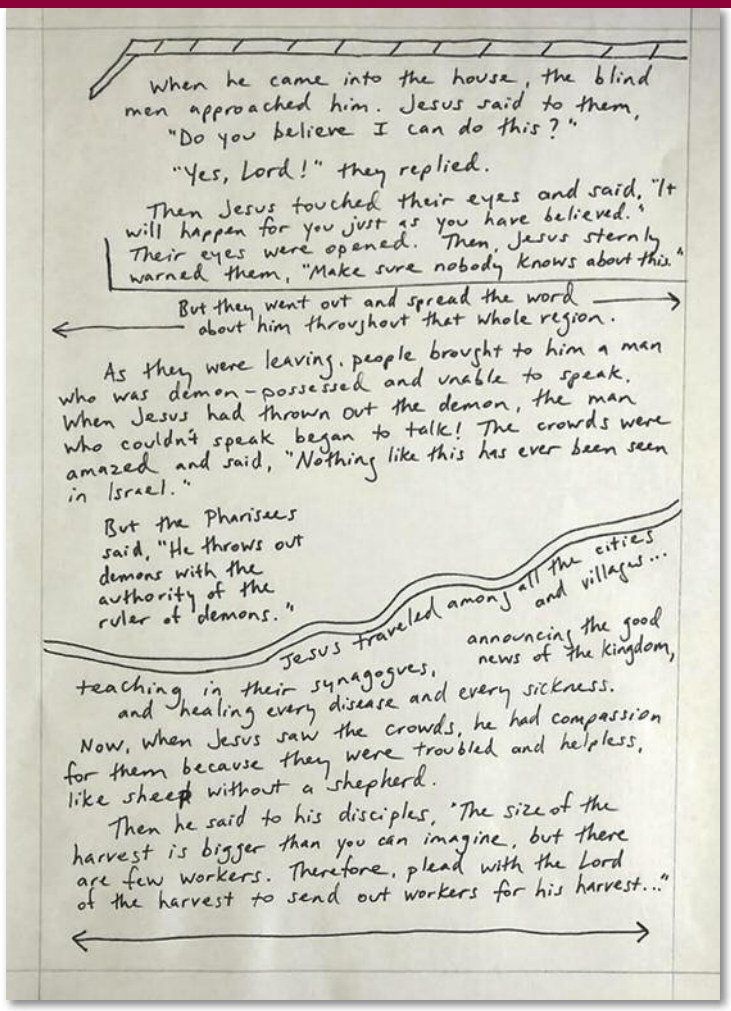
Chicago pastor Erin Coleman Branchaud says she was originally drawn to the practice of copying scripture for the sake of her own spiritual life, which was atrophying under the stress and isolation of trying to do ministry in a pandemic. She kept returning to a verse that appears in both Deuteronomy and Romans: "The Word of God is very near to you."

"As close to us as a pen to paper, during a time when a lot of stuff felt so distant," she says.

Branchaud and three other pastors from the Metropolitan Chicago Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are leading the Chicago Illuminated Scripture Project. They encouraged contributors to write in any language, using any translation they chose, and to be creative with formatting, drawings, doodles, marginalia,

personal comments, and critiques. The copied chapters will be consolidated into a single text and made available to the public as a hard copy or PDF, hopefully in time for Christmas.

I joined the Chicago project and signed up to copy Matthew 9. To start, I realized with a sense of irony, I would have to fish some blank paper out of my printer tray. I have a square standing desk on four slender legs, so I could romantically imagine myself as a medieval clerk, bent over my work. But clerks worked at desks set at a 45-degree angle, better for drawing ink from the tip of a quill pen; mine was flat, with a coaster for my coffee mug. Following the directions on the project's website, I traced margins in pencil with a ruler, which, unlike a medieval clerk, I needed to rummage through four messy drawers to find. My pen was a fine-tip Sharpie, which did not drip, run out of ink, or need to be sharpened with a penknife. I opened a Bible webpage, chose the Common English Bible translation, and started copying.



I wrote out the 38 verses of Matthew 9 twice—once to get a sense of the text and a second time to illuminate it. I have never taken a drawing class, but I do enjoy doodling. I decided I was going to create not something elaborate but something childlike and fun.

Because Jesus and the disciples were constantly traveling or "going out," I drew some winding roads, arrows, and the waves of the Sea of Galilee. I drew a roofline to show when Jesus had gone into a house, and I enclosed one verse in an inner "room." Matthew 9 includes two confrontations when opponents try to debate Jesus, so I wrote their challenges on the left of the page and his retorts and answers on the right. There is also a "sandwich" narrative: Jesus promises to go and revive a man's daughter, encounters and heals a woman with a hemorrhage on the way, then arrives at the man's home and heals the child. I tried to show that narrative hopscotch on the page. I added exclamation points because I like them, and I translated one line, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice," into both Hebrew and Greek in the bottom margin, because I liked writing those alphabets in seminary and why not? (I practiced the Hebrew several times, but it still looks pretty clumsy.)

I signed up to copy Matthew 9. First I had to find some paper.

I won't claim to be any kind of postmodern illuminator-monk, but I had fun. When I finished, it felt like I had been to church, which I hadn't for a long time. With pandemic restrictions still in place, I couldn't worship as part of a congregation or receive the Eucharist, but copying the text of Matthew made God's Word sacramental in a new way. I had to pay attention to the text of the chapter as a whole, and it felt like I was reading with a part of my brain I have never used for Bible study before. The result was a deep and tangible immersion in scripture; I was inside each passage, not just looking on from a distance.

Copying felt liberating because it was new, but also because it was both serious and joyful at the same time—like play. As familiar or obscure as the words of scripture have become, writing them out in my own hand, I recognized they are still very much, as the writer of Hebrews says, "living and active."

I am an Episcopal priest, but all kinds of people signed up for the Chicago project. Families worked together—one mother and daughter copied chapters 1 and 2 of Esther. Scribes included young children and teenagers, seminarians, and church leaders of different races, ethnicities, denominations, and faiths. Such variety reflects the original biblical authors and sources, co-organizer Fanya Burford-Berry points out. Alone at my desk, I joined that vast spiritual family, the communion of saints, with Hebrew scribes, medieval monks, and kids and adults in Chicago and around the world, picking up our pens together. CC

Heidi Haverkamp is an Episcopal priest, speaker, and author of Holy Solitude: Lenten Reflections with Saints, Hermits, Prophets, and Rebels.

FORTY NEW O ANTIPHONS

One winter

by Diane Tucker

O Red-Faced Jesus of the Upset Tables,
keep relieving us of our religious greed.
Please topple to the ground our self-salvations.
Tear up moral scorecards and one-upmanship.
Bless us with true poverty of spirit
that we may flock into your house of prayer,
bringing nothing but our yawning need.

O Lover of the homeless and the addict,
never let us rest, respectable and clean,
assured that we are "not like those people."
Show us the homelessness of our cold hearts.
Show us our own "acceptable" addictions.
So turn our souls to loving those you love
with your holy love, which is our true Home.

Diane Tucker's most recent collection of poems is Bonsai Love. *She lives in Vancouver, British Columbia.*

O Loud and Lavish Lover of the awkward,
the shy and scared, the socially inept,
open our eyes to all their silent beauties.
May we not miss the faithful hearts among us,
not full of many words, but big with love.
May we never idolize exalted speech.
Bless us in our stuttering wordlessness.

O Brother Jesus, who lifts us in temptation,
stand beside our weak and struggling minds.
Help us see past our long-besetting sins.
Be the bridge over rushing cataracts
threatening to drown us one more time.
Show us your patient eyes on the far shore.
Give us grace and strength to hold your gaze.

O Lord of all the failing and forgetting,
may peace come down on all who have dementia.
Preserve, in age, their humour and their hearts.
Be with newly nameless sons and daughters.
Fill the grieving with your everlasting Name.
May all that's lost leave space for re-creation:
rest and reflection, silent hours, and song.

O Jesus, King who kneels and washes feet,
teach us how to lead by bending down.
Thrust a pin in our inflated egos
and change our lording-over into loving.
Help us serve the small, to be devoted
to the blessing of the little and the least.
Help us know ourselves as lowest of the low.

O Fashioner of every bird and beast,
Designer and Creator of the crow,
the Mind who made up pigeons, rats, raccoons,
help us who live in cities love them still.
Show our thin hearts the place you made for all
the creatures' lives that share our concrete days.
May alley fur and feather bring you glory.

O Lord of the cattle on a thousand hills,
free us from the fear of giving freely.
Deliver us from hoarding to ourselves
blessings that you've poured on us like rain.
Give our souls assurance of abundance,
that you have, and long to give us, all we need.
Show us the beauty of wide-open hands.

O Healer of all sickness and all sin,
pour blessings on those whose daily work is care.
Give nurses, doctors, counsellors your grace
and patience with your broken, wayward children.
Help them grow in holy love and courage
and give them days of deep and lasting rest.
May they feel the health and wholeness they would give.

O Lord of every path and passageway,
Door and Key and Bridge across the abyss,
Flashlight in the darkness, blackout's Candle,
steady us on our way with your bright wisdom.
Make us quick and nimble with our love
on the Jesus-path of kindness—no detours!
Resurrection Lord, light our way home.

O God of words and music, we give thanks
for psalms and hymns and spiritual songs
connecting us to long-ago believers.
We thank you, Lord of sound and harmony,
for the Church's many voices raised in praise.
Sing your Spirit in our hearts and voices,
that our gratitude might brim and overflow.

O Lord of leaves, O Maker of the trees,
O Rooter of all life by living waters,
Pruner of branches, Ripener of fruit,
Lord who sweetens sap and reddens berries,
help us through the season of cold hearts.
When bare of fruit, build us firm in faith.
Feed our hidden roots until the spring.

O Father of Secrets, Knower of all things,
O Mind who gives our smallest prayer his ear,
O Bearer of black sins, Patient Listener,
thank you that you cherish every hair
and every breath and every stumbling step
your silly sons and daughters finally make.
You know but love us still, Refuge Divine.

O Lord of bodies, God who came a man,
Creator of head to toe, who called it "very good,"
God who walked in dust with feet of flesh,
All-Divine Incarnate as a man,
thank you for our senses, for our skin,
for bones and breath and voices, ears and elbows,
for all you fashioned fit to live your praise.

O Lord who thought up kangaroos and cacti,
and threw the stars like snowballs into space,
who dashed the Milky Way across the heavens
like a child in love with finger paint,
lift our busy eyes from all distractions
that we might see the beauty you have made.
Help us to awaken and awaken.

O Spiller of Rain, Scatterer of Snow,
One who frees the wind and aims the hail,
prepare our hearts and bodies for all weathers.
Help us warm the chilled and house the houseless,
dry the soaked and still the storm-tossed soul.
Help our small selves be thankful in the tempest,
brave the blizzard, praise you in the bluster.

O God of Twilight, Lord of Day to Night,
Spinner of the Earth, O Sunset Painter,
our hearts lift praises for the many blues
you spread above us as the evening falls,
pinks and reds projected on the clouds
and orange fire spilt across the mountains.
Our souls sing out in thanks for all your colours!

O Friend of Sinners, Lord of Gentleness,
a single wounded reed you will not break.
The smallest spark of faith receives your Breath
until that living coal ignites a fire
that fuels the sorry soul, that heats the heart.
Kindle every fire that sleeps within us
that in this world we may be warmth and light.

O Living Water, Depthless Source of Life,
revive our drooping days, slake every thirst
when we fill our dry and foolish hearts with dust.
Slick our sticking throats that we may praise
your flooding grace. And teach us how to drink
the sweetness that will never let us drown,
but only make us lush with flowing love.

O God of Sun and Moon, King of the Stars,
the heavens praise you with each constellation,
each silver point of light-year-distant fire.
More plenteous than sandgrains by the sea,
you've seeded the whole universe with sparkle.
And more than these, as long ago you promised,
are all the twice-born children of the faith!

O Lord who spread the silver on the salmon,
you sculpted sleek the dolphin and the whale.
What joy the otter and the seal's play bring you,
the eagle's dive, the cormorant's spread wings.
All these you raise beside the glinting inlet
and fill them full of fish your own hands hatched.
We sing with thanks your love for sea and shore!

O God of rain and those who love the rain,
of all the walkers under their umbrellas;
give us eyes to see you in the mist.
May we breathe your mercy in the chill.
Fill our bones with green rainforest fire
that we might see and love the weak and wet.
Help us to help each other home and dry.

O Father of the dark, abortive day,
when rain drowns all and plans go down the drain;
when storms knock us about, when baking burns,
and duties force us far from home and hearth.
When tired minds cannot redeem the hours
and all the hours we have slide by too fast.
For our flat hearts be God of all Tomorrows.

O God of Time, O Lord of Memory,
You set your works like jewels in our souls.
When we seek the light they flash and sparkle,
reminding us of victories long past,
of sweet vows kept, dear promises fulfilled.
When all we see seems heartless, born of lies,
dear Spirit, shine your light on what we know.

O Jesus Christ, down in the winter solstice,
the dark pit of the year, the lowest low,
be with us in our waiting and lamenting.
Assure us that our cold hearts are not dead,
but dormant now, only to wake anew.
Help our emptiness believe your filling.
Crushed by this world, embrace our sighing souls.

O Lord of the Sunrise, Lifter of the Light,
Spreader of the gold and copper morning,
unfurl this day before as your gift.
Stuff our hearts with thankfulness as treasure.
The brisk new day, the hours yet to fill,
let all we do with them reflect your love,
that we may mirror back to you your glory.

O Father of the orphan and the childless,
You who set the lonely into families,
and draw the sad and timid into friendships,
usher our injured souls into their healing.
Give us eyes to see each other's beauty,
even the trust-lame, even the sour-souled.
So we might feed each other, crack us open.

O Lord of Silence, glorious soundlessness,
of sound's anticipation and its memory,
God of seashore rhythms, birdsong breather,
sing us into silent hours and days!
Free us from the world's insistent clamour,
the chatter that chips away our peace of mind.
That you might speak to us, help us be quiet!

O King and Father of the blessed martyrs,
Keeper of their death-reflected light,
how lovingly you bring each beaten body
home to you. You make them ever whole.
Grant us, in your love, the hearts of martyrs,
so that in this lying world we love the Good.
Teach us to live your death-defying Truth.

O Lord of Yes, O Ruler of all that is,
Filler of the void, Chaos Tamer,
You who set the tides and spun the planets,
who drew the Fibonacci and the fractal,
show us creation's glory, large and small,
the atom and the galaxy together.
We are held together by your love!

O Sin Healer, Brother of the Saved,
Collector, Keeper, Mender of the lost.
You gather up our broken, misplaced pieces,
remake our souls, recast each twisted heart.
In you we die and rise, our new true selves.
Shatter, we pray, our tiny hearts of stone.
Give us hearts of flesh that we might bleed.

O Waker of the rain, Lifter of every leaf,
You whisper into life each sleeping bulb.
Each daffodil's green arrow rises for you,
warmed in winter by your burrowing love.
So too we lie in wait, in darkness buried,
Incapable of life without your touch.
Pull us heavenward, Lord, into your light.

O Master of the sunlight and the sky,
Windsmith, Field Feeder, King of Trees,
How thoughtfully you build in us a garden
to meet the green and glorious world you made.
Warmth and water feed us, and the sun,
as it does limbs and grasses, lifts us up.
The apple tree and we, alike, bear fruit.

O Ear to all our prayers, Heaven's Listener,
how we try your patience when we whine!
And yet you see the fear inside the whinging.
You bear our angry cries so tenderly
that when the tantrum's over and we're weary
your arms will still receive us and forgive.
Dear Patient Lord, love us to repentance.

O Resurrecting Lord, remember us
as we labour in our sad, decaying flesh.
Outwardly we waste away, forgetting
the inward self you constantly renew.
As time and gravity consume our bodies,
fill us with your bright forever-life,
the quenching water of Life that swallows death.

O Prince of Life, Bridegroom to the Bride,
Host of Heaven's perfect marriage feast,
take pity, Lord, on this world's wives and husbands.
Help them love and listen. Help them wait
while you sand off rough edges and sore points.
Help each to see the other's special beauties
and know the spouse anew, a precious gift.

O Safe One, Sure One, Refuge from the din
we find ourselves immersed in every day,
rising from within or loud without:
the world's deafening, distracting cries.
The needs we cannot meet, the mess beyond us,
the puzzle and the pains we cannot solve,
these we bring in weakness to your Strength.

O God and Father of our hidden life,
Keeper of Secrets, Bearer of our tears.
Fill your bottle, Jesus, with our weeping,
to water seeds that fall to the ground and die.
All our suffering springs at last to singing.
Almighty Mason of our misery,
from our ruins fashion a cathedral.

O Lord, Curator of creation's bounty,
Clouds' Custodian, Seas' Husbander,
Cause us to remember we are gardeners.
Help us fall in love with earth so deeply,
we'll work for more than money, more than gain.
Pierce our hearts with arrows of conviction
to nurture every splendour that you've made.

O Lenten Lord, Holder of these days,
God of Waiting, King of the Not Yet,
help our forty fasting days prove fruitful.
You are the Life, the Raiser Up from Death,
the Steadfast Light we see in every distance.
Lift our heads, heavy with condemnation.
Bear our barren darkness to new day.

New lawmakers are religiously diverse

On November 3, the United States elected its first Catholic president in 60 years, but that wasn't the only important religion angle of the 2020 election.

More than 100 Muslims ran for office this year, and five states elected their first Muslim state lawmakers. Madinah Wilson-Anton was elected to the Delaware House of Representatives, while Iman Jodeh won a seat in Colorado's house. In Florida, Christopher Benjamin was elected to the House of Representatives, and Mauree Turner was elected to the Oklahoma legislature. Samba Baldeh was elected to the Wisconsin's State Assembly.

Christopher Benjamin

Samba Baldeh

"It was incredibly surreal. I felt like we had the chance to make history in Colorado," Jodeh, the daughter of Palestinian immigrants, told local media after her historic win.

Turner, who is also the first nonbinary state legislator, told the *Washington Post* that their campaign was all about visibility. "The legislature hasn't always been a friendly or welcoming place to many folks, and this was about drawing space—not fighting for a seat at the table, but creating a new table altogether."

In Georgia, Kim Jackson, an Episcopal priest, became the first openly lesbian candidate to be elected to the Georgia State Senate—and only the third openly LGBTQ Black woman to be elected to the senate of any state.

Kim Jackson

Annise Parker, president and CEO of the LGBTQ Victory Fund—a nonprofit dedicated to electing openly LGBTQ candidates—hailed Jackson's win. "As an Episcopal priest, Kim can diffuse legislators who claim religion as the reason they oppose equality and will make clear that many LGBTQ people are of faith too," she said in a statement.

Also in Georgia, Raphael Warnock, who pastors Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta—the church where Martin Luther King Jr. was pastor—will head to a January runoff election for one of the state's US Senate seats. Warnock hopes to become the state's first Black senator. Neither he nor the Republican incumbent, Kelly Loeffler, earned 50 percent of the vote on November 3, as Georgia requires.

Kirk White, founder of the Wiccan Church of Vermont, became one of a handful of pagan lawmakers when he won a seat in the Vermont General Assembly. White told the pagan blog Wild Hunt that his spirituality was not an obstacle to his election.

Kirk White

"I have never been in the broom closet, and a quick Google search—which many neighbors did—will tell you lots of things about me. And that was not a barrier to my election," he said. "Years of hard volunteer work pays off. I am humbled,

COURTESY RAPHAEL WARNOCK / FACEBOOK | ALL OTHERS COURTESY PHOTOS

MAKING HISTORY IN GEORGIA: Raphael Warnock, pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, is headed to a runoff election in January for one of Georgia's two open Senate seats.

honored, and overjoyed that my neighbors supported me."

The Catholic vote, which was the topic of much discussion before the election, was split almost evenly between Democrats and Republicans, according to Associated Press exit polls. Fifty percent voted for Donald Trump, while 49 percent voted for Joe Biden.

That same polling found that about 80 percent of White evangelicals voted for Trump, while Black and Latino Christians largely supported Biden. —Dawn Araujo-Hawkins

PHOTO BY TED EYTAN VIA CREATIVE COMMONS LICENSE

A NEW SCOTUS DYNAMIC: In October 2019, clergy protested outside the US Supreme Court building as justices heard arguments about anti-LGBTQ discrimination in the workplace. Now that there are three Donald Trump appointees on the bench, there is concern that the court will allow for more religious objections to antidiscrimination laws.

A more conservative court hears same-sex foster parent case

On November 4, the Supreme Court seemed likely to side with a Catholic social services agency in a dispute with the city of Philadelphia over the agency's refusal to work with same-sex couples as foster parents.

The case is a big test of religious rights on a more conservative court.

Catholic Social Services, which is affiliated with the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, says its religious views keep it from certifying same-sex couples as foster parents. And it says it shouldn't be shut out of a contract with the city to find foster homes for children. Philadelphia says it requires all the foster care agencies it works with not to discriminate as part of their contract.

With the addition of three appointees of President Donald Trump—justices Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh, and Amy Coney Barrett—the court seems poised to extend protections for religious objections to antidiscrimination laws.

Kavanaugh, for his part, suggested there should be a way for Catholic Social Services to continue to work with foster families. The case, Kavanaugh said, requires the justices to think about how to balance "very important rights" the court has recognized: religious rights and the right to same-sex marriage.

"It seems when those rights come into conflict, all levels of government should be careful and should often, where possible and appropriate, look for ways to accommodate both interests in reasonable ways," he said.

Even liberal justice Sonia Sotomayor seemed to recognize the court was sympathetic to Catholic Social Services. "If one wanted to find a compromise in this case, can you suggest one that wouldn't do real damage to all the various lines of laws that have been implicated here?" she asked at one point.

As they have been doing, the justices heard arguments in the case by telephone because of the coronavirus pandemic.

During nearly two hours of arguments, several justices brought up the fact that there's no record that any same-sex couple has ever asked to work with Catholic Social Services and been turned away. If a couple did ask, they'd be referred to another of the more than two dozen agencies the city works with, Catholic Social Services says.

The justices, seven of whom are Catholic or attended Catholic schools, also asked about other hypothetical contracts officials might make.

Justice Stephen Breyer asked what would happen if a religious organization bidding on a transportation contract wanted men and women to sit separately or women to wear head scarves.

"If there's an agency that refuses to employ women, would the state have to contract with that agency?" Justice Elena Kagan asked at one point.

Barrett, hearing her third day of arguments at the high court, asked about a hypothetical case where a state contract with a private Catholic hospital requires it to perform abortions.

Earlier this year, before Barrett joined the court, the justices ruled 6–3 that a landmark civil rights law protects gay, lesbian, and transgender people from discrimination in employment. The opinion was written by Gorsuch, who said it was not likely to be the court's last word on a host of issues revolving around LGBTQ rights.

The case before the justices Wednesday began in 2018 after a *Philadelphia Inquirer* reporter notified city officials that two of the foster care agencies the city contracted with would not work with same-sex couples. One of the agencies, Bethany Christian Services, changed its policy.

Catholic Social Services did not, and the city stopped placing children with the agency, which sued. Catholic Social Services says it views certifying a family to be a foster family as an "endorsement of the relationships of those living in the home" and therefore its religious beliefs prevent it from certifying same-sex couples. It also doesn't work with unmarried couples.

The Trump administration has urged the Supreme Court to side with the agency, saying Philadelphia is unconstitutionally discriminating against religion. —Jessica Gresko, Associated Press

Three church coalitions in Deep South partner to urge racial reconciliation and justice

Leaders of multiracial church coalitions in three southern cities have confessed to being too "comfortable" and have committed anew to "work for justice to right past wrongs" and seek racial unity.

"As a group of racially, ethnically, and politically diverse church leaders in the Deep South areas of Charleston, SC, Montgomery, AL, and Mobile, AL, we recognize and lament how the historic nature of our cities and region contributed to racial oppression and division in our country," they said in a statement.

"We believe that the good news of Jesus mandates Christians to pursue a reconciliation that is centered on his redemptive work for humanity."

Kyle Searcy, a Black pastor of a Montgomery church, said the multiracial cadre of organization officials decided to come together to make a statement after the "public killings" of Black people in 2020 deepened racial divides.

"We decided we're not going to cross the street on the other side and ignore that," he said, referring to the biblical parable of the good Samaritan.

Ed Litton, a White Southern Baptist minister in Mobile, said that the three groups, each from "notorious slave-trading cities in the past," learned about each other and decided to put the statement out together to encourage churches in other cities to take similar actions toward unity.

"We all agree that this a major hindrance to us communicating the gospel in our communities," he said. "It's a divided church."

Asked about the statement's mention of both reconciliation and justice—where some Christian groups have focused on the former when it comes to racial matters—Litton said that both are part of a Bible-based commitment.

"We know that the Bible profoundly speaks to the issue of justice and it profoundly speaks to the issue of reconciliation," he said. "And so we see them as inhaling and exhaling. We believe that they're a part of what it means to be gospel-centric."

AP PHOTO / DAVID GOLDMAN

A NEED FOR HEALING: On June 20, 2015, Allen Sanders kneels next to his wife, Georgette, as they pray at a sidewalk memorial in memory of those killed at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. In a new statement, leaders of churches in the Deep South say the gospel mandates racial reconciliation and justice.

Each of the cities has separate multidenominational initiatives aimed at bridging racial divides. The Montgomery leaders have met for three decades and the Charleston group has met for a decade.

Litton said the Pledge Group started six years ago and has hosted Shrink the Divide events, such as one in 2019 featuring reconciliation advocate John Perkins and Southern Baptist ethicist Russell Moore. More than 940 people have attended such an event or participated in a small group or a Bible study.

Litton and David Richey, a Black minister in Mobile, said the meetings over the years have been at times tense and candid, but their faith helps them continue.

"We've had some knock-down drag-outs and we find our [way] right back to the meeting again and loving the one that you wanted to slap the week before," said Richey. "It's because it's God."

Charleston mayor John Tecklenburg, whose city witnessed the massacre of nine people at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in 2015, said while some groups use the term *reconciliation*, a city commission that is focused on furthering equity has different terminology.

"We use the word 'conciliation' rather than 'reconciliation' with the thought that we're bringing together folks that ain't never been together before," he said. "It's so uplifting, refreshing that other cities in the Deep South are on this journey together."

Alan Cross, a Southern Baptist minister who lived in Montgomery and pastored there before moving to California in 2019, has been supportive of the groups working together.

"They are demonstrating how Jesus still heals and makes all things new," he said.

—Adelle M. Banks, Religion News Service

Study finds that lesbian, gay, and bisexual young people quit organized religion almost twice as much as others

Taylor Valci was seven the first time she spoke in tongues. The daughter of a Pentecostal pastor in California's Bay Area, she grew up watching *Veggie Tales* and attending Missionettes, the Assemblies of God version of Girl Scouts.

But by the time she was attending Gordon College in Massachusetts in

2016, Valci no longer considered herself a Christian, at least in part because she was starting to realize she was queer.

Her experience is a common one. Earlier this year, the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* published a report that said same-sex attraction, behavior, and queer identity are strongly associated with a decision to step away from organized religion, attend church less frequently, or stop going altogether.

The authors of the study, sociologists Brandi Woodell at Old Dominion University and Philip Schwadel at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, found that those who report same-sex attraction were almost twice as likely to disaffiliate from their religion.

The study, which observed changes in queer people's religious attendance, religious identity, and prayer practices over time, included only lesbian, gay, and bisexual people age 11 to 34. Not enough data was available on other sexual identities to include them in the analysis.

The overwhelming majority of those in the study's sample were Christian.

Emmy Kegler, a minister in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, said the findings matched her experience. Though the study didn't give reasons for the phenomenon, Kegler suggested it was the church's attitudes toward human sexuality. "There's still a significant understanding in Christian culture overall that being a member of the LGBTQ+ community is incompatible with the Christian faith," she said.

That bias can work to alienate LGBTQ individuals, even if they have come to terms with their sexuality. "Even for people like me, who are out loud and proud," said Jamie Manson, president for Catholics for Choice, "there's always going to be that element of shame, of not being legitimate, of your love not being worthy to be blessed by God in the church of your childhood."

The decision to leave one's faith often begins not with feeling rejection from others but with raising questions about Christian values. While in high school, Valci learned that her denomination had once excluded Black and Brown people.

"I started to break [my faith] down," said Valci. "Why is the Bible all written by men? Why is it all one-sided? What do we do with the genocide and the poor treatment of women?"

But when Valci got to college, she developed a crush on a woman and soon joined the campus's underground queer scene.

She ended up coming out as both queer and non-Christian during her first year of college. "I was coming to a place in my own life with my sexuality where I just wanted to stop living in shame," she said. "I wanted to be transparent about what I believed and who I was."

Kurtis Zolman's departure was more directly a result of discovering his queer identity.

Zolman, 26, grew up attending a Nazarene Church in rural Michigan that had rules he compared to those in the movie *Footloose*—no dancing, no drinking. When he was in ninth grade, he told his parents that he is gay. They sent him to a "straight camp" where, Zolman said, he was told he'd go to hell if he didn't conform.

PHOTO © THEPALMER / E+ / GETTY

***LEAVING THE FLOCK:** A study published in the* **Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion** *found that same-sex attraction and queer identity are strongly associated with a decision to step away from organized religion—although not necessarily with a rejection of faith.*

Zolman remained a Christian, however, until after high school graduation, when he came out publicly. Soon after, his youth pastor told him he could no longer be on the church praise team or attend youth group and asked Zolman to sit in the back during church because he was "actively living in sin."

"That was ten years ago," said Zolman, "and I've been to a church maybe four times since then."

Yet if LGBTQ people drop out of church, they don't always lose their spirituality altogether.

"I am always talking to God," said one man who, as a teenager, played piano at services for his Fundamentalist Baptist congregation in the Bahamas. A decade later, the man, who asked to remain anonymous, said, "I have a closer relationship with God than I could ever have because I'm being honest with myself."

Zolman said he also finds himself praying "about once every other week."

"I think a common motif with gay people brought up in the church is that we don't hate Jesus, but we hate the institution the church has become," he said.

That can be true for some who stay as well. Kegler, who is a pastor at Grace Lutheran Church in northeast Minneapolis and founder and editor of the *Queer Grace Encyclopedia*, said that "probably once a week, I consider disaffiliating from Christianity. Not because I lack faith in Jesus or conviction about the importance of Christian practice in my life, but simply because the church remains toxic for its LGBTQ+ members and others."

She's remained in the church, she said, because she is compelled by the story of Jesus and is convinced that Christians can tell the story better, "without toxic theology." —Kathryn Post, Religion News Service

In Nashville, a former Catholic school-turned-swingers club is reborn as a homeless shelter

The red brick building at the corner of Drexel Street and Seventh Avenue South in Nashville has a colorful history.

In the early 1900s, it was home to a Catholic school founded to educate Black children in Jim Crow Tennessee.

COURTESY PHOTOS

INSIDE AND OUT: After renovations, the Drexel House homeless shelter features spaced-out seating that can be spread around a stage.

By the early 2000s, the building had become a swingers club.

But in November, it reopened as a faith-based shelter for the homeless, due in part to COVID-19. The swingers club-turned-shelter, now known as Drexel House, is one of a number of pandemic innovations made by faith-based groups that serve the homeless.

More than half a million people experience homelessness in the United States, according to a 2020 report from the National Alliance to End Homelessness. And faith-based groups "provide the backbone of the emergency shelter system," according to the NAEH.

Many of those groups have faced challenges during the pandemic. Social distancing requirements have reduced the number of shelter beds available and made it harder to deliver services such as counseling and support groups.

Rachel Hester, executive director of Room in the Inn—the nonprofit that bought Drexel House earlier this year—said many of their guests have had no place to go during the pandemic. Libraries and fast-food restaurants, often safe havens from the streets, have been shuttered. Day centers have had to limit the number of people who come inside and can no longer house 12-step meetings or counseling sessions. Older volunteers who once helped out are no longer able to do so.

So faith-based groups have had to get creative.

Room in the Inn got its start at Holy Family Catholic Church in Nashville in 1985. That winter, some Nashvillians who were homeless were sleeping in the church's parking lot after the camp they'd set up by the Cumberland River was shut down.

Charlie Strobel, the church's pastor at the time, invited them inside.

Strobel would later send a letter to other congregations in Nashville, asking them to open their doors as temporary shelters. Four churches signed up for the new program, which was christened Room in the Inn after the biblical story of the night of Jesus' birth.

Eventually, almost 200 congregations joined the coalition, offering a hot meal and a safe place to sleep—often on a mattress in a church gym or classroom—to 1,500 people during the shelter season each year.

COVID-19 has changed all of that.

Many of the congregations that have hosted shelters in partnership with Room in the Inn in the past are still closed down for in-person worship or don't have space for social distancing.

"I have 41 congregations out of 200 that are participating," Hester said.

To offset the loss of shelter space at churches, Room in the Inn is taking a hybrid approach, sheltering some people at churches and others in several central locations, including the gym at a former Catholic school, the second floor of its day center in downtown Nashville, and Drexel House—returning it to its original faith-based identity.

In 1909, the building opened as Immaculate Mother Academy, the state's first Catholic primary and secondary school for Black children, founded by Katharine Drexel and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament.

Charlotte West, a longtime volunteer from St. John African Methodist Episcopal Church, is grateful that Drexel House will once again be a place of ministry.

"We are so blessed to have it," she said.

For West and other members of St. John AME, having the central shelter location means their ministry with homeless guests can continue. The church has participated in Room in the Inn since the 1980s. But in March, when a tornado hit Nashville and destroyed their building, they could no longer host a shelter.

Still, West and other longtime volunteers like Erskine Lytle want to lend a hand. They hope to start volunteering at one of the alternative shelters set up by Room in the Inn in a few weeks.

"The need is still there," said Lytle, who has volunteered since 1987.

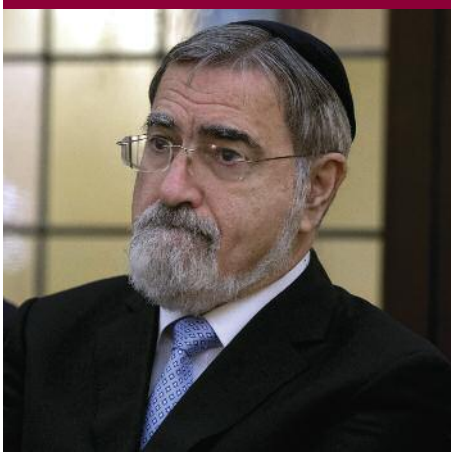
The Catholic Diocese of Nashville has set up a central site for Room in the Inn at St. Vincent de Paul parish, which was also founded by Drexel. The diocese spent $50,000 to renovate a space that once housed a gym for a parish school, adding a kitchen and other improvements. That space will now serve as a central location for Catholic parishes involved with Room in the Inn.

The diocese also donated $50,000 toward the nonprofit's budget, said Brian Cooper, the diocese's chancellor. Cooper, whose family has volunteered with Room in the Inn, said it was important to step up and help during the pandemic.

"Necessity is the mother of invention—the Holy Spirit has guided us," he said.

—Bob Smietana, Religion News Service

People



AP PHOTO / ANDREW MEDICHINI

■ Rabbi **Jonathan Sacks**, the former chief rabbi of the United Kingdom, a widely admired teacher and prolific writer who connected Jewish thought with a larger concern for universal human values, died on November 7.

He was 72 and had undergone treatment for several bouts with cancer, which he was first diagnosed with in his thirties.

A proponent of interfaith understanding, Sacks was a Modern Orthodox rabbi with wide crossover appeal to other Jewish groups and to non-Jews. He was easily the best known and most recognizable European rabbinic authority. He was a frequent visitor to the United States, where he taught courses at New York University and Yeshiva University, and to Israel, where he led classes at the Hebrew University.

At 43, Sacks was appointed chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth—a position he held from 1991 to 2013.

He was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 2005 and awarded a life peerage in the House of Lords in 2009.

But while Sacks spoke eloquently about his responsibility to engage with other faith traditions—and had longstanding friendships with Christians and Buddhists—he did not seek out Muslims. Imam Abudullah Antepli, an associate professor of the practice of interfaith relations at Duke Divinity School, challenged him on this during a three-day visit to Duke in 2017.

Sacks did speak out forcefully about anti-Semitism and was very critical of Britain's former Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, who he said "defiles our politics and demeans the country we love."

Sacks received numerous honors, including the Templeton Prize in 2016, the Grawemeyer Prize for Religion, and the Abraham Kuyper Prize from Princeton Theological Seminary. —Yonat Shimron, Religion News Service

■ **Rance Allen**, a Gospel Music Hall of Fame inductee perhaps best known for his hit "Something About the Name Jesus," died on October 31 at the age of 71.

VIDEO SCREENGRAB VIA WARNER MUSIC GROUP

A five-time Grammy nominee, Allen formed the Rance Allen Group in 1969 with two of his brothers, Thomas and Steve. They released their first gospel album in 1971 after catching the attention of a Detroit music promoter and signing with Gospel Truth, a subsidiary of Stax Records.

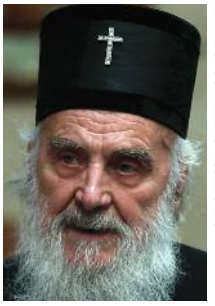
As the lead vocalist for the group, Allen was widely praised for his vocal range, and the group became known for incorporating rock, soul, and R&B with traditional Black gospel music. They performed with a number of gospel greats, including Andraé Crouch, Marvin Winans, BeBe and CeCe Winans, Kirk Franklin, and more. The group also performed for President Barack Obama in 2015 at an event celebrating the history of gospel music.

Even as he appeared on stages around the world, Allen remained committed to his pulpit at the New Bethel Church of God in Christ in Toledo, Ohio, where he served as pastor from its founding in 1985. In 2011, he became a bishop for the COGIC Michigan Northwestern Harvest Jurisdiction.

"I've been singing over 60 years, and it's all been, as far as I was concerned, a ministry," Allen told a Toledo TV station after being honored for Black History Month this year. "Then to get to be 71 years old and someone says, 'we want to honor you,' it made me want to put my suit on today. It's a wonderful thing, and I'm enjoying every bit of it." —Roxanne Stone, Religion News Service

■ The 90-year-old patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church was hospitalized after testing positive for the coronavirus, days after leading prayers at a large public funeral for the head of the church in Montenegro, who died after contracting the virus.

On November 4, the Serbian Orthodox Church said that **Patriarch Irinej** was hospitalized but had no COVID-19 symptoms and was in "excellent general condition."



AP PHOTO / DARKO VOJINOVIC

The next day, Serbia's Defense Ministry said that the patriarch was admitted to a military hospital in Belgrade where he could be under "medical supervision and control." The ministry said he was in good condition and did not have a fever or other signs of illness.

On November 1, Patriarch Irinej led the prayers inside a packed church for the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, Bishop Amfilohije, who had died after contracting COVID-19.

Many of the people inside the Montenegrin church did not wear protective face masks or keep their distance from one another, in violation of restrictions to fight coronavirus. Many kissed the bishop's body in an open coffin.

Among those in the church were Serbian president Aleksandar Vucic and Montenegrin prime minister-designate Zdravko Krivokapic.

Montenegro and Serbia have seen a surge in virus infections in the past weeks. Montenegro authorities warned that Bishop Amfilohije's funeral created a major health threat.

The Serbian Orthodox Church is also the main church in Montenegro, a fellow Slavic and Orthodox Christian nation. About one-third of Montenegro's 620,000 people identify as Serbs.

Bishop Amfilohije was highly popular among pro-Serb Montenegrins who advocate closer ties with Serbia following Montenegro's split from a joint state in 2006. —Associated Press

LIVING BY The Word

December 13, Third Sunday of Advent
John 1:6–8, 19–28

WHO ARE YOU? Almost every professional development setting I have been in over the last decade has at some point queried the participants about their personal brand. I'm an older millennial, so my investment in a virtual audience and platform is readily presumed. Online activity now lines the fabric of our culture. One's social media "success" is now often a critical key to procuring everything from book contracts to speaking opportunities.

Who are you? Living in a world in which the depth of capitalist logic and technology has imbued our very lives with the potential for commodity and celebrity, the answer to this question can often be flattened to an at sign, a screen name, a web presence. We are (and are expected to be) on display in unprecedented ways. Identity is mitigated through screens that either draw us intimately near to or push us distortedly further from some sense of authenticity, some sense of truth.

John the Baptist is anything but mainstream. But ironically enough, his eccentricity makes a remarkably compelling branding case. No, camel hair clothes are not an avant-garde fashion statement, and his diet of locusts and honey does not spark the latest sustainable eating trend. But John is deeply connected to the following he creates. His persona meets the main criteria for building a platform today. His messaging is clear and consistent; he stays in his lane; he speaks with singular authority and palpable authenticity. His commitment is its own brand, occupying the sweet spot where purpose meets passion. He is tapped into his own potential, and he knows his "why."

John the Baptist has a brand. He knows his "why."

And yet, there is something that isn't quite legible. Again and again, John is asked who he is and what boxes he checks. He presents a conundrum, and he is ruffling enough feathers to attract attention from those more inclined to function as gatekeepers than to really pay attention to his message.

John remains steadfast despite the undertone of critique. Despite being likened to a genealogy of greatness, he maintains his commitment to the power of God and to manifesting his message through the work of transformation and liberation. He is marked by raw authenticity and deep humility. He isn't interested in clout or in the accolades or affirmation from systems committed to anything other than freedom. His voice speaks the love of community and of kinship, of accountability and invitation, to join in the revolution he knows is to come and is already here.

Across the Gospels we see John working beyond the boundaries of traditional authority and bucking expectations as he rallies others to follow Christ. He doesn't just speak of the behaviors of advocacy and justice; he lives them. He is in the trenches, committed to new possibilities and new life, baptizing indeed. We already know that he will be imprisoned out of fear for his message, that his life will be grotesquely and abruptly ended because of his work.

In a world that constantly demands we say something about ourselves, what does it mean to use our platforms, our power, our privilege—whether at the dinner table or to throngs of followers—to amplify something greater than our personal endeavors? To be an Advent people, not just pointing to Christ but living like Jesus is to come and is already here? To follow a Messiah who has no problem turning over tables and tearing down systems and speaking truth to power and abolishing the structures that do not serve all people? John reminds us of who we are to be, as someone committed to the fullness of the way—even if he does not live to witness it completely for himself.

The start of a new calendar year is often marked by the energy to ask and again pursue who it is we want to be. Perhaps the accounting of a new Christian year might best be marked with the energy to ask and again pursue who it is we are *called* to be. To give an accounting of ourselves—of the things we say, the resources we have, the people we value, and the love we seek to live by.

Are our voices crying out through the wilderness that is this country, this world? Are we laying the groundwork that prepares the way for something bigger than personal gain? Are we, individually and collectively, resisting the temptation to be so bound by the market that our baptisms—our death and resurrection in Christ—have been lost to amnesia? Do we find ourselves listening to the prophets in our midst, or are we satiated with the perfected image we see online?

Who are you? What do you say about yourself? Perhaps these are questions that can only be answered if we consider Christ's own: "Who do you say that I am?"

December 20, Fourth Sunday of Advent
Luke 1:26–38

HOW WILL THIS BE? I never planned to be postpartum in a pandemic. It was late January when I finally felt the waves of contractions pulsing through my abdomen. We had expected our daughter much sooner—due on Epiphany, my family was certain she would come by Christmas. But as the early days of 2020 stretched on, I watched my due date come and blandly go, before fading from my memory behind a scaffold of growing anxiety.

My baby would not budge. We joked then that the protruding kicks and stretches were actually her taking measurements and putting up curtains. We joke now that perhaps she sensed the year to come in ways we did not.

When she finally arrived I found myself immersed in a liminal space between newborn snuggles and newfound sadness, getting acquainted with this precious human who once called my body home, a place I no longer recognized. I measured her every exhale with awe and wonder while internally fighting the plunging sense of foreboding that the dance in her lungs might suddenly cease. Dusks gave way to dawns as I held tightly, fiercely to the miracle before me, as anxiety quietly gripped my dreams for my daughter, suffocating the inches of my peace. I did not know I would tremble at the world I brought her into, a world I wished to be her oyster, but in a country where her very embodiment, her Blackness, would be despised.

Within six weeks, that world became cloistered and quarantined. *How will this be?*

I wondered how I was going to make it, as social distance and safety guidelines fed both my isolation and my fear. Returning to Mary's words now—in medias res the wreckage of COVID-19, the thick of a tense election cycle (outcomes of which I do not know as I write this before the votes are counted), and the wake of a biological viral pandemic and a racial one—I find myself peering through the edges of Advent, braced for the start of a new liturgical year, with a deeper desperation for hope than I have had in recent years. I return to Mary's words and remember, barely, the anticipation that swelled within me just a year ago. It seems so long ago. I return to Mary's words and remember the anxieties I have not yet been able to cast off.

How will this be? Our readings so often focus on the mechanics. Mary's question to Gabriel is the obvious one: Since she is a virgin, how exactly will these puzzle pieces of incarnation fit together inside of her womb? Just a few verses earlier, after receiving similar news of Elizabeth's unexpected and miraculous pregnancy, Zechariah asks a parallel question. There in the temple, Gabriel takes umbrage at the inquiry as a sign of doubt and leaves Zechariah temporarily unable to speak. When it is Mary's turn to receive good news, why is her question received so differently? I've always thought there must be something undetected in the text that changes Gabriel's response. Perhaps it is her youth, or an uncaptured air of sincerity, or perhaps the knowingness of the ask—to give your flesh, to become someone new, to commit to a life that cannot answer the question of how exactly this will be.

How will this be? I am returned to this question that is so foreign yet so familiar, perhaps because it holds together the tensions of apprehension and trust, of fear and of courage, of the now that seems irrationally far from the not yet. I often find myself in tears—perhaps from the postpartum, from the pandemic, from the precarity, from the news cycle, from the protests, from the plague of isms, from the gulf of injustice that threatens to swallow me whole.

But every lament, every "How long, O Lord?" that leaves me raw and vulnerable, returns me to Mary. *How?* My ask of God resonates far more deeply in my soul. I am not asking God for a plan to work or a system to stick to. I am asking, again and again, to be met with the tenderness and tenacity to make it through whatever the day may bring. How, O God, is this going to go down, get accomplished, get fixed? How am I going to hang on, press forward, overcome? How am I going to make it, tired and discouraged, with an immediate horizon filled with far more fog than clarity and with little respite from a year of onslaught?

But the eyes of an infant remind me that both her existence and mine are acts of divine protest. We are signs of new life in a dying world, too. So I dare to ask again: *How?* Knowing I will not be silenced but heard. I ask because I believe that, like Mary, I will be answered, even if only with holy mystery. I ask because I realize that what I sometimes need is to simply know that the Holy Spirit is still at work—and to rest assured that even when I do not have answers, the presence of God will meet me. I ask because I believe that, like Mary, I will be reminded of God at work in community—that we will witness together even when we cannot gather in person.

How? It's a question that will not get a roadmap or a timeline in response but is returned instead with a promise for the journey: no word from God will ever fail.

The author is Amey Victoria Adkins-Jones*, assistant professor of theology and African and African diaspora studies at Boston College.*

Photo by Nick Hillier on Unsplash

Unfathomable loss

How do we grieve the hundreds of thousands of people the pandemic has killed? Five writers respond.

Grief is a strange thing. One might describe the pain we feel as love, stopped at the source. Grief is what happens to love when its subject is no longer there, when it has no one to receive it. The effect is pain.

Something similar happens with communal grief. We feel the pain of loss when we recognize humanity—our own or that of our loved ones—in the tragedy. The nation grieved in 1986 as we watched the tragedy of the space shuttle *Challenger*, the turn from pride and wonder as a schoolteacher traveled into space to shock and sorrow upon viewing her very public death. We grieved as a nation in 2001 as a mundane morning was disrupted by the televised deaths of thousands of innocent civilians in terrorist attacks.

Those moments of tragedy, like countless others, brought us together in a shared outpouring of grief over the passing of people we didn't know. We didn't have to know them to shoulder the pain with their families and grieve their loss. It was visceral.

In October, we learned that 545 migrant children remain separated from their families. That should have roused a national response, but it didn't. Neither did COVID-19 when it began its route through the United States, impacting predominantly states run by Democrats—our federal government chose to ignore it. Now the virus is all over the country, and more than 240,000 people are dead as a result.

And yet we still have not grieved, not as we did for previous national tragedies. Something is wrong.

There's no right way to grieve. But a lack of grief when it's clear that trauma has happened may indicate that the body is unwell.

When social boundaries are drawn too narrowly on the maps of obligation, we miss a lot. Narrow lines of obligation make it less likely that we see humanity in the losses—those suffering are outside the bounds of our concern. Many have not yet felt the impact of pandemic-related deaths on their personal lives. These deaths remain for them little more than a political talking point, one that helps or doesn't help their side.

There's no right way to grieve. But a lack of grief after trauma may indicate an unwell body.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was speaking of another moment of great communal pain when he said, "It remains an experience of incomparable value that we have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below . . . from the perspective of the suffering." The suffering group he refers to were oppressed and outcast people, a community placed outside the boundaries of obligation, whose pain is usually invisible.

To realize the moral fiber of our community, to become who we must be in this strange time of tremendous suffering, we need to see through the eyes of the groups of people who are suffering the most within the country that we'd like to call great. Even if we have not been touched by this trauma, we are humanized when we acknowledge and value and grieve the lives of others, especially those who are suffering. Perhaps, if we can learn to mourn 200,000 people, it won't become 300,000.

In the midst of such a huge number is ambiguity and anxiety about the future. But if we can see the toll taken on our communities by the wave of pandemic-related deaths, perhaps we can recover something of our collective humanity as well.

—***Reggie Williams**, who teaches Christian ethics at McCormick Theological Seminary and is the author of* Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance

It's impossible to hold one person's pain for them, much less to hold the pain of thousands upon thousands. In this pandemic, either we're in the storm or we're in the eye of the storm, floating there and feeling it all around us—the grief, the disrupted lives, the danger. What could happen and what has already happened reverberate in the air.

The word *bereft* keeps occurring to me. It's a form of *bereave*, a word from Old English that originally meant to deprive of, to rob, to plunder, to dispossess. It's strangely fitting.

We are a plundered nation, a society robbed of more of its people than was necessary because of a ruling class more intent on plunder than on the safety of human beings. But then, we always have been a plundered land, a nation built on the backs of the labor of exploited peoples. And being "robbed" of old ideas of nation is the right thing at this time, the only way forward. The pandemic has hurt people of color the most; it has found an alarming number of Americans willing to sacrifice the aged or the immunocompromised in the name of continuing with life as usual. We must be collectively dispossessed of the illusion that some Americans deserve safety and health more than others. We must fully internalize the lesson of our own fragility and use this knowledge to defend ourselves against being robbed of our humanity.

The arts are in a unique position to teach us to hold such complexity and contradiction. When the pandemic hit, I had just started an artist's residency at Emmaus Way, a church in Durham, North Carolina. As a spiritual-but-not-religious writer, I was eager to find out what I could offer this community and what I might learn. But soon the quarantine began, and my readings and workshop went online. In those confusing and painful early days of isolation, I quickly realized the community lacked the emotional bandwidth to write about what they were witnessing. So I turned to poetry, offering up the words of poets, those experts in witness.

I shared poems by Franny Choi, Ross Gay, Tomas Tranströmer, Naomi Shihab Nye, and US Poet Laureate Joy Harjo. I found myself reflecting on how poets help us "hold" the difficult truths, such as the rage that can accompany grief or the history of injustice that has gotten us to this point in our national story. We need them to help us imagine what the loss of even one life means, as well as to imagine ways forward as a loving society.

We must be dispossessed of the illusion that some deserve health more than others.

In *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, poet Claudia Rankine explores post-9/11 existence through innovations in hybrid form, stylistically performing themes of disconnection, searching, and grieving. How does the text find any movement beyond nihilism and locate a position from which to reclaim hope—without providing an imaginary resolution to this very real despair?

The last section of the book proposes a strategy of presence. Art helps us to claim the right to presence, even hope. Rankine cites Celan ("I cannot see any basic difference between a handshake and a poem") and ends with these words: "In order for something to be handed over a hand must extend and a hand must receive. We must both be here in this world in this life in this place indicating the presence of."

The only humane response as a nation to what we are

enduring is a reevaluation of our collective humanity and a renewed awareness of our interconnectedness. If we accept the call to presence, nobody can rob us of the fierce compassion we need.

—***Joanna Penn Cooper**, a writer, teacher, and literature scholar who is the author of* The Itinerant Girl's Guide to Self-Hypnosis *and* What Is a Domicile

How do you mourn more than 240,000 dead? A year ago, who could have imagined such a question? In our lifetimes, we haven't experienced a loss of life of this magnitude.

I fear that the politicization of the pandemic has disconnected people from the harshest of realities: these are not merely numbers on a page; they are real human beings, each one created in God's image. All of those who lost their breath as a devastating consequence of this horrible virus were made by the God who "blew life's breath into their nostrils" (Gen. 2:7).

In this moment, Christians have a particular responsibility for both a pastoral response and a prophetic one. We make a statement about valuing life when we adhere to common sense, evidence-based practices to mitigate the spread of the virus. As churches, we can model empathy and understanding by demonstrating safe practices that reduce the loss of life.

We can also turn to lament as a powerful tool for mourning both individual and social pain. Lament is a truth-telling exercise, what Walter Brueggemann calls the "anti-silent," a space where we can be completely forthright about our agonies, fears, and losses.

When we lament the losses of 2020, we proclaim the full humanity of each life lost.

As a chaplain who works in health care, I have seen how frontline workers have been inundated with death while facing their own fear and vulnerability. As a clinical ethicist, I've been rocked by the racial disparities that have always existed but are now exposed in the virus's morbidity and mortality rates. How does one mourn such gravity, catastrophic failure, and loss—particularly when the death dealing is ongoing and relentless?

As my own emotions range from sadness to fear to anger, I think of the psalms of lament and the raw, fearless emotion that the psalmists express to God. Lament tells the truth about pain.

When we lament the losses of 2020, we make a theological proclamation that affirms the full humanity of each of the valuable lives that has been lost. We honor those lives by being "anti-silent." We must speak out—speak directly to God and name our pain and suffering, speak to other Christians and remind them of our collective responsibility to care for one another, and speak straight to the whole of society to say that things are not right.

—***Kerri N. Allen**, a Presbyterian minister and a Reformed and womanist theologian and ethicist who currently serves as the manager of mission and spiritual care and a clinical ethicist for Advocate Aurora Healthcare*

Angels everywhere

Some days I notice angels everywhere—
light glancing through windows, flying
through stained glass as if through air.

A human ear shaped like a wing,
curiously curving to admit a flare
of sound, tells me of angels listening
to my listening, even as I sing.

What is that vagrant cloud, that glistening?
Often in the blue of heaven a trail
of light from a plane to me appears
as a heavenly body playing there
beyond my grasping. Or, at night, the tail-
light of a truck sends a red spark
like some twinkly being in the dark
trailing her glory robe in sight
of stationary sightseers. Yesterday, morning light
and over the marsh a winged flight,
another view—Gabriel, or a Great Blue?

But often, nightly, through the skylight
stars multiply like silver sand. And near to far
I link myself again with, Oh—there!
One bright, angelic, particular star.

Luci Shaw

In the midst of a global pandemic, a group of Christians decided to gather and sing loudly about the love of God. They said it would be a witness. They said it would bring healing to our city. Portland had been making national headlines for the brutality of local and federal police against Black Lives Matter protesters. I went to observe and bear witness to the larger story at play. But I also went to figure out where I stood in relationship both to my fellow Christians and to a God who demanded praise while so many suffered.

I looked around at the crowd. Some of these people, no doubt, could have COVID-19 or get it at some point in the future. Some would recover, some would spread it to others, some would be affected the rest of their lives, and some would die. And now there was the added burden of people believing there must have been something wrong with them if they caught the virus. They must not have sang loudly enough or had enough faith. After all, the God they served

was greater than COVID-19. God had not given them a spirit of fear.

I watched the faithful gather and sing. I watched them refuse to mourn. I watched them turn up the volume on their loudspeakers so they couldn't hear the voices of the counter-protesters, whose signs asked for criminal justice reform and for people to wear masks. I saw how easy it is to ignore grief when the music is loud, the lyrics triumphant, the key change coming around the corner to lift your spirit and remind you that you are on the winning team.

I went home that day and cried at what felt to me like the death of something in my life: my identification with White evangelical Christianity. I realized afresh how I did not have the language, the spiritual practices, or the imagination to worship a God who lamented and mourned with the suffering—and yet that was all that I craved.

The truth is, I don't know how to mourn so many deaths. I don't know how to listen to the cries of protest and suffering without wondering how my life might be affected, without rushing to quick solutions or dismissals of pain. I don't know how to lament, because I was born and raised in the midst of an empire that has to silence grief in order to continue to grow and exploit the world and its people.

My faith community didn't teach me how to lament. But I can learn from others.

But my faith community is just one small strand in the rich tapestry of Christianity. In the Bible I see a faith based on articulating just how bad the world has been to the most vulnerable in our society—and how this grieves the heart of a good and loving God. When I look to faithful Christians from other traditions, I see a richer and deeper community I can lean on and learn from. I see fellow believers who trust that God can handle their anger, rage, lament, confusion, betrayal, bitterness. I see Christians who are intimately connected to grief and who believe in a God who knows what it is like to mourn death on a personal, visceral level.

Whatever comes next for Christianity in the United States after this pandemic, we know who will lead the way forward. Jesus already told us: it will be those who intimately know how to mourn, and we will be blessed if we learn to listen to their cries.

—***D. L. Mayfield****, author of* The Myth of the American Dream *and* Assimilate or Go Home

I've sat at the bedside of the dying, and I've conducted graveside funerals. The reality that many of the people who have died from COVID-19 were alone as they passed from life to death—and that many didn't receive a decent burial—has left a mark on my soul. How do we mourn such an unfathomable number of dead? How do we weep for the unknown?

In prayer, I remember the details I have read in the news. I imagine the lives of these people.

You were poor. No safety net from your hardworking parents, no one to help you with child care. You were an essential worker, and it was a death sentence. Lord knows you didn't have the luxury of working from home; you couldn't even afford internet service. So you kept the grocery shelves stocked. You cared for the old folks at the nursing home; you were a daughter or a son to them when their sons and daughters couldn't show up. You were an agricultural worker, harvesting fresh food, milk, and wine. But those who ate and drank what you harvested, delivered to our doors while we sheltered in place, were not even conscious of your existence.

As you lay dying, no one could visit, no one could sit with you and express care or remorse.

You labored like Sisyphus. Day in, day out, you pushed your rock up the hill, only to have it roll back down again. And for what? As you lay dying in the hospital, no one could visit, no one could sit with you and express care or remorse, except for maybe a compassionate nurse or doctor—total strangers.

Maybe there was no one to come, anyway. Maybe, as an agricultural worker, you were far from your home in the hills of Mexico. You worked to feed Americans, and you lay there knowing there would be no one to feed your family back home. You were long gone from your family and community. Here, you were nobody.

Maybe you were a single parent, worried sick about your children because there is no one to care for them now.

Hollow again

(Quercus agrifolia)

Look at this trunk, burnt hollow,
keyholed from side to side.
Yet, in spite of a few dead limbs,
a crown of leaves pushes against

the patient sky. So we might
flourish, in spite of ourselves,
evacuated of fortitude. Paul
said it: in weakness, strength;

in death, life. I don't know how.
But most days, a long resilience
of xylem and phloem.
Of chlorophyll. *Ex nihilo.*

Paul Willis

You died alone. I imagine your corpse in a white body bag, stacked on top of others like you, like those found in a U-Haul outside a Brooklyn funeral home when the morgues were overflowing. When the stench became too much for the neighbors, the authorities were called. I pray you were spared this indignity, but you might have been one of those bodies the subcontracted city workers laid to rest in a potter's field, an unmarked mass grave off the coast of the Bronx.

When I pray, I stand at this grave and ask forgiveness. Our country failed you. The church failed you. America considered you essential workers, and yet your lives were expendable. You were Lazarus, and we were the rich man who rendered you invisible.

This is an ode of remembrance for you, a eulogy. In this life, you were forgotten. In death, few, if any, mourned your passing. But I mourn for you now. It's on us to care for those you left behind, to strive to never let this happen again.

—***Marlena Graves**, author of* The Way Up Is Down *and* A Beautiful Disaster

Some losses can only be carried alone

A lonely grief

by Charlotte Donlon

IN A VOICE MESSAGE from my dad that I saved on my phone, he tells me what I need to do: "Just hang in there. Do what you're supposed to do. Rest. All that other stuff. Drink fluids. Sleep, sleep, sleep. Love you. Bye." The message is 15 seconds long. I received it a few years ago while I was sick with the flu.

When I listen to this message, I hear my dad's accent, formed by his Detroit childhood and his Deep South adulthood. I hear the humor and lightheartedness that could make me smile even while I was ill. I see him in the cozy recliner in a corner of his den, rocking gently, one or two dogs on his lap, his 65-inch TV on but muted.

My dad didn't leave this message because he thought I needed him to tell me what to do. He just wanted me to know he was thinking about me. That's what he did: he thought about me. He thought about me often.

I found the message on my phone the night my dad died from complications due to COVID-19. He was in a hospital room in Panama City, Florida, with my mother and my aunt by his side. I was on the sofa in my living room in Birmingham, Alabama, with my husband and two teenage children. We were separated by a few hundred miles and a pandemic that insisted I stay away when everything in me wanted to be with him.

I stayed on that sofa for a week. During those first days of heartbreak and grief, I did what my dad told me to do a few years before when I had the flu. I drank water. I slept. I remembered that he loved me.

That was in early August. But in truth I'd been grieving for 15 years, ever since my first therapy appointment. My therapist told me that I had experienced many things over the course of my life that were very messed up and that I needed to grieve the brokenness I knew as a child, an adolescent, and a young adult. I had lived my whole life convincing myself everything was OK. But everything was very much not OK, and many of those things that were not OK required grief and tears.

The thing is, once you begin to grieve the things that are worthy of tears, you can't stop. I started grieving that day, and I cried several times a week for two years because I kept remembering events, conversations, and trauma I had ignored or denied.

Some Christians believe we're supposed to smile and thank God for the "gifts" that result from whatever tragic things have happened. They try to console the grieving with pat aphorisms that end up wounding them instead. They reinforce a culture of denial.

Many people in our families, communities, churches, and nation have never learned to grieve in healthy ways. So a lot of us feel alone right now as we navigate multiple losses and process our personal and collective griefs. When we don't have support, grief becomes tinged with shame, guilt, and confusion. We think something is wrong with us and wonder why we can't get it together and snap out of it.

Charlotte Donlon is a spiritual director, author of The Great Belonging: How Loneliness Leads Us to Each Other *(Broadleaf), and host of the Hope for the Lonely podcast.*

"It is impossible to grieve in the first-person singular," writes Cristina Rivera Garza. If we try to grieve alone, she suggests, the expression and experience of our grief can't be fully realized; our grief cannot be what it needs to be. We need more family, friends, spiritual mentors, and therapists who will support us and validate our losses and sadness. We need to learn to grieve together.

In an article published in the journal *Culture and Psychology*, Svend Brinkmann explores grief as a learned emotion. Grief is not a simple inner reaction that's automatically triggered by an experience of loss, he claims. "Rather, grief is a way of understanding and acting in the world," he writes. "Grief is a way of 'thinking sadly' or 'responding sadly' to a loss," a way that we first learn from our parents and other close relationships.

I know I'm surrounded by a cloud of witnesses—but my dad didn't love anyone else the way he loved me.

If our parents, faith leaders, and others who model behavior for us are uncomfortable with grief or deny it or suppress it, we may never learn healthy ways to process loss or navigate the complexities of lament. But even if we know how to grieve and are surrounded by people who also know how to grieve, we may still experience loneliness in our grief. That's because feelings like loneliness and grief don't fit into boxes very well. There are too many pockets of mystery.

My first experience of parental loss came with a new and significant sense of isolation. It isn't just that my dad is no longer physically present. This new loneliness surfaced when I realized this is a grief that only I can carry. I'm his only daughter. He didn't watch any other daughters dance a different role in *The Nutcracker* every winter. He didn't explain the rules of football to any other little girl on game day. He didn't walk anyone else down the aisle on her wedding day.

I'm the only person he loved in the ways he loved me. He's the only person I loved in the ways I loved him. Plenty of other people have also been grieving my father's death; none of them knows my grief. None of them knows the particular ways we belonged to each other. The unique relationship I had with my dad has created a lonely grief.

But it has also created a secret belonging. My dad and I shared a lovely secret language about ordinary things that others might have deemed boring or inconsequential. I hold the unique memories of the curiosities I shared with him throughout my whole life before his death, just like I hold the unique sense of sorrow I've known and will continue to know in the weeks since he died.

One afternoon in October, I whispered to my dad, asking if he's ever noticed how the yellow butterflies always fly in the same direction, how they are always coming from the same place and moving toward the same destination. If I'd been able to call him, he would have responded with curiosity. He would have Googled it. He would have asked me questions: What shade of yellow are the butterflies? What size are they? We would have realized that the butterflies I noticed are most likely cloudless sulphurs, and they are flying in the same direction because they are migrating before the cold weather arrives. We would have said how cool it would be if the butterflies that pass through Birmingham also pass through Panama City on the way to their destination in South Florida. And we would have said something along the lines of, "What else are we missing?"

I didn't get to talk about cloudless sulphurs with my dad. But I do get to talk about them with other people, and I get to write about them. The way my dad and I belonged to each other still lives when I know people are listening and seeing me and knowing me. I can depend on that as I depend on the rhythms of the natural world, like cloudless sulphurs migrating every October. When my mother, brother, husband, and all those who are grieving my dad in their own particular ways feel pulled toward despair, I can tell them what he would say: Just hang in there. Do what you're supposed to do. Rest. All that other stuff. Drink fluids. Sleep, sleep, sleep. Love you. Bye. CC

The best said prayers

Somewhere between our soil and his sun,
between the puddles we drive through
and the oceans he tunes, somewhere

between flickering streetlights and stars,
caves and galaxies, the music of the spheres
and the half notes we play

we think we caught him, calling him away
from the immanence that surrounds him to heed
our cries and sew back the fabric of our lives,

like some button on reason's foolscap.
We believe the fervor of our voices will gain
the favor he should crown us with,

as if he were the deaf man of the Bible
dependent on us to fetch Ephphata mud
to unseal his ear and give us what we want.

Better to have baling wire wrapped tight
around our tongues to fence in our arrogance.
The best said prayers are those unspoken,

the most moving, the most unflourished
and most selfless, unscripted, except for
our Amens.

Philip C. Kolin

Silence before the mystery

by Thomas Lynch

"BLESSED ARE THOSE who mourn," says Jesus, "for they shall be comforted." To which Donald Trump, the boon of latter-day Good Newsers, appends, "People are dying." Then, drawing from the dry socket of his humanity, "It is what it is." The sacred and the simpleton are thus aligned among Christian triumphalists. One man's beatitude is another's balderdash.

Here in the autumn of an abysmal year we are wondering what to make of more than a million deaths worldwide, going toward a quarter of them here in the United States, from a pestilence that threatens to overwhelm our mainline theologies, our bodies politic and intimate, the customary emotional registers of grief. Likewise, we had a summer of racial injustice and the outrage and reckoning that proceed from a long-neglected account marching toward amends. In one dire week we had hellfire and high water—a conflagration that destroyed people and property from California to Washington and hurricanes that flooded the Gulf Coast with deaths and devastations.

In early July my long lost and cruelly afflicted daughter leapt to her death from a bridge in California, adding a deeply personal desolation to the general bereavement. Over a holiday weekend her lifeless body lay without identity in a county morgue—"Jane Doe #102" they named and numbered her—until the medical examiners traced her back to a family of origin in southeast Michigan. She had estranged herself from us all for 15 years, beset, we supposed, by depression and mental illness, as the tightening spiral of schizophrenia made her more and more separate in her helplessness and ours.

This summer my daughter died by suicide, adding a deeply personal desolation to the general bereavement.

After years of deepening isolation and a disabling closed head injury when she fell from her horse, the voices and delusions and the stay-at-home order and quarantine moved her to flee her willful solitary confinement, escaping the idyllic remove she had achieved to run across the country in search of what we can never know. We can't know whether impulse or planning, the coincidence of method and motive and madness or something else, got her to enact the final, fatal, symptom of her illness. Nor can we know if she ever saw in the jump she took the beckoning, welcoming arms of a comforting Savior who promises to free her from fear and pain.

By getting the dead where they need to go, my years as an undertaker have instructed me, *the living get where they need to be*. We deal with death, the idea of it, by dealing with our dead, in the flesh and in the fact. "Grief work," to borrow Erich Lindemann's trope, begins with the large muscle, heartbreaking, heavy lift the lifeless bodies of the dead require. Whether we get them to the ground or fire, the grave or crematorium, they do not get there on their own. The shoulder work, the shovel work, the bearing and witness work—these are the first labors of the living in grief.

And so it was for my family as it was for the hundreds of thousands of other families this year. We got our dead home to let her go again, into the abyss we chose—the opened ground—for every one of us, a heavy lift.

The bewilderments of love are plentiful. Grief is the other

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No post on Sundays

Dear Sir or Madame, begins my scribble,
"Too stiff," says I, which ends that quibble.
New page—*Old Friend!* I start to scratch,
but soon cross out. What words can match
this Word I am replying to
sent by a Love that I once knew?
You may not hear from me that much,
but today I thought I'd get in touch . . .
And when I get the words just right,
my signature's nearly in sight,
I blot the hopes leaked from the pen,
reset the margins, try again.
My crumpled drafts carpet the floor—
"I give up!" Then upon my door
a knock.

Michael Stanley

side of the coin of love. Bereavement is a far country at the edge of oblivion. The only way around, alas, is through it. We are upheld by the condolences of helpless friends, of family who, like us, haven't a clue.

But after the corpses and mourners, we need a story, a narrative nimble enough to endure our doubts, our existential queries, the whence and whither questions that present themselves: Where did we come from? Where are we going? Here the life of faith, whether held to or vanquished, comes into play. Our theodicies are comfortless, their vindications hollow, harrowing.

Of all the sympathies that came my way, one rang truest to my brokenheartedness: the friend who wrote to say the grip of pestilence prevents our gathering, our mute embraces, our helpless attendance to each others' loss, that it forbids our doing what our souls surely want to do—"to sit with you in silence before the mystery of it all."

I've been sitting in silence before the mystery for months now, endeavoring to turn my grievances into thanks, to lave myself in waves of gratitude rather than fear.

The spiritual life is not a theory, proclaims a fellowship I'm in. We must live it. Our cloud of witnesses keeps filling with the faces of the ones we love. CC

Why did death rituals leave our houses?

From home to funeral home

by Christiana N. Peterson

I FREQUENTLY WALK the alley across from our house to a coffee shop on Main Street in our quaint, small, midwestern town. Like most alleys, it is lined with forgotten or hidden things. Neighbors park their vehicular eyesores at the back of their property so that no one but alley walkers can see them. Flowers on bushes that were planted as fences suddenly bloom like a beautiful secret.

A few paces farther, a large but tidy house sits at the crest of the alley, facing Main Street. It is old but well maintained and neatly refinished with cream-colored siding and dark red shutters.

Only from the alley can you see a curious feature that separates this house from the others that line the path: a round metal tube extends toward the sky, too large to be a normal chimney. It pumps smoke into the air all year round, even on warm summer days.

From the back of the house, this is the only evidence that bodies are being burned inside.

Like many funeral homes, this place of business has been made to look like an actual home, both inside and out. Designed for ease and comfort, funeral homes are often decorated with overstuffed comfy chairs, carpets in soothing colors, patterned wallpaper just a few decades out of date. Soft music plays; low, measured murmurs drift unobtrusively through the rooms. A chapel-like room is used for services.

But what would we see if we went farther into the bowels of the funeral home, into the basement or the outbuildings behind the house? Hidden things: places to store corpses, the tools of embalming, a crematorium.

We might witness what mortician Caitlin Doughty describes seeing while working in a crematorium in San Francisco in her darkly funny memoir, *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*. Nothing prepares you, she writes, "no matter how many heavy-metal album covers you've seen, how many Hieronymus Bosch prints of the tortures of Hell, or even the scene in *Indiana Jones* where the Nazi's face melts off," for what it looks like to see a "flaming human skull" burning in an oven.

> There was a time when more of us lived in closer proximity to death and its mysteries.

Or perhaps we would see an embalming in process: all of the blood in the entire body drained and replaced with embalming fluids that brighten and preserve the skin. We might see the mouth sewn, glued, or clamped shut so as not to disturb mourners, the eyelids glued together, and much of the contents of the body cavity sucked out through a tube inserted into the abdomen. "Embalming restores a lifelike appearance to the deceased," writes Mark Harris in *Grave Matters*. "Refrigeration

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Christiana N. Peterson is author of Awakened by Death: Life-Giving Lessons from the Mystics *(published this fall by Broadleaf Books), from which portions of this article are adapted. Used with permission.*

COURTESY FRED HULTSTRAND HISTORY IN PICTURES COLLECTION, INSTITUTE FOR REGIONAL STUDIES, NDSU, FARGO, ND

LOST TRADITION: A family, likely in North Dakota, gathers at home for the funeral of a child.

does not, which may only matter if you expect the dead to resemble the living."

Making things resemble the things they once were or the things that they are not is one special task of funeral directors. It is no wonder funeral homes look as they do on the outside and beckon mourners with the word *home*. Would anyone in our death-averse culture be willing to enter if it looked on the outside the way it does in the places where the dead are prepared for the eyes of the living?

My own house has doors built for death. Constructed in the 1850s, it has narrow stairways that appear in unexpected places (and are perfect for hide-and-seek), with steps that creak and bend from more than a century of foot traffic.

It wasn't long after we moved into this old house that I began to wonder about our front doors—of which there are three. We started finding packages delivered to each door. Knocks rattled across the house so that I wasn't sure which of the three doors a visitor had decided to try.

"What a strange thing, to have three doors," I said to one guest who'd grown up in the area.

"Oh," he said, "they're built for wakes. You know, to keep the line of people moving, from one door to the other."

This information shook me. I could suddenly imagine the bodies of those who had lived in our house laid out in our dining room. The elderly, widowed spouse mourning a husband who died from heart disease or a wife who died in her sleep. Or worse heartaches too painful to imagine as I watched my four children play hide-and-seek in the house's nooks and crannies.

At the time my house was built, people often died at home rather than in hospitals. Their families cared for the bodies. Typically, the deceased was washed and groomed by the women of the household and clothed in a simple home-sewn garment or winding-sheet, a cloth that, when wrapped around a body, made the dead resemble a mummy. Sometimes people would sew their own death shrouds.

These death rituals were carried out in community—a group of people with a history, with communal memories and rituals, who shared ways to grieve and manage the reality of death.

Today, the home has lost its place at the center of our death rituals. We no longer live near our families of origin, and our communities do not function in the ways they once did.

Death practices in the United States had changed greatly by the 1940s, when Howard Thurman gave his Ingersoll Lecture at Harvard. Thurman said that as death moved out of the home and into the hospital and the mortuary, "our primary relationship with death [became] impersonal and detached."

In her early years as a mortician, Doughty saw the strangeness of this cultural decision to hand over death rituals to the professionals. On her first day at the crematorium, she was expected to shave a dead man's body. A 23-year-old who had never seen this man before and knew very little of dead bodies was tasked with caring for his body instead of his family or community.

Poet and funeral director Thomas Lynch, featured elsewhere in this issue (see p. 30), writes in *The Undertaking* that we often try to prearrange things like funerals in order to "pre-

feel the feelings" that accompany death. Perhaps the cultural release of the distasteful parts of death to the care of others is done in an effort to un-feel, to move on from grief more quickly, to get back to life instead of dwelling on death.

But this displacement of our grief onto the funeral industry has consequences. When we are so far removed from death, the result is a strain on our emotional lives. According to Thurman, "tremendous emotional blocks are set up without release, making for devious forms of inner chaos, which cause us to limp through the years with our griefs unassuaged."

It's no wonder that some of our best writers and teachers on death, like Doughty and Lynch, have practiced death many times over. They have handled the most gruesome parts of death and have returned as witnesses to some of the deepest truths of the human experience.

The funeral industry's death practitioners provide invaluable services, and many of them are family businesses that serve small communities like mine. But there was a time when more of us lived in closer proximity with death and leaned more readily into its mysteries. Lynch embalmed his own father, a process he describes with beauty and heartbreak. It helped him and his siblings to grieve.

When death came to our homes in previous generations, it mingled where family meals were shared, stories were told, and babies were born. In the place where dead bodies were laid out, life had been lived.

Death was never meant to leave our houses.

Harris tells the story of Beth, a woman who had to face the unimaginable death of her child. Beth made an unusual decision, at least in our culture. Instead of releasing the body to the funeral home or mortuary for storage, cleaning, or embalming, Beth decided to care for her six-year-old daughter's body herself. She said it helped her accept the reality of her death.

Afterward, Beth became a "death-care midwife," teaching people across the country how to prepare their loved ones' bodies for burial. According to Beth, the natural condition of the body after a three-day wake helps the bereaved let go: "The body is often beautiful that first day . . . by the third day, the deceased begins to look like an empty shell."

One evening my husband told me that if he died first, he didn't want me to send his body to the morgue to be kept or to the funeral home to be prepared. He pointed to our dining table in our creaky old house. He wanted his body to be laid out there like many others before him, opening two of our three doors for mourners to file in and out.

Am I really prepared to give my husband a home funeral? Up late one night with this question, searching online for answers, I found the National Home Funeral Alliance, an organization that gives practical advice on everything from your particular state's requirements about funerals (an illuminating read in itself) to body cooling and myths about dead bodies.

According to the NHFA, a home funeral can mean, among other things, that the family or community fills out the necessary paperwork, cares for and transports the body, makes coffins or shrouds or urns, and has a wake at home. A home funeral gives the family more control over the process, offering a more "healing experience for loved ones." And home funerals are often less expensive and more environmentally friendly than "industry-led funerals."

I would love to be able to tell my husband that I can give him a home funeral if he dies before I do. The problem is that when death comes, grief is so powerful that we need the people in our communities to help us walk through the rituals of death. And I'm not sure our communities are prepared to walk with us through home funerals.

But what if more of us decided to have them? How would it affect our culture's approach to death? Would we, as Thurman suggests, be able to grieve in healthier ways? Would we feel more connected to our losses, more able to live fully in their wake?

COVID-19 has wrought great horrors. It has also left communities unable to continue to ignore the specter of death and the ways it disrupts our lives. Families have been unable to say good-bye to their loved ones in person. Many have had to forego funeral homes and public mourning all together. When I hear these stories of unresolved grief and imagine myself in the same situation, I wonder if it's time to reconsider the old traditions and bring death home again. CC

Whose voice comforts the nation now?

Billy and Barack

by Grant Wacker

TODAY'S PANDEMIC SCOURGE, coupled with a new awareness of centuries of racial injustice and economic disparities, has created pain of such magnitude that it seems unique to our time and place. It isn't. Misery caused by the cruelties of nature, combined with the cruelties caused by humans, has afflicted people since time immemorial. Even so, this moment somehow feels unique because it is *ours*. Ours to suffer, ours to atone for, and ours to repair.

In times past, pastoral figures have periodically emerged to help guide the entire nation. Abraham Heschel, Theodore Hesburgh, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Martin Luther King Jr. spoke from the covers of national magazines. Dorothy Day and Fanny Lou Hamer spoke equally powerfully from more modest venues.

As we wait for a pastor to emerge in our current crisis, it's worth returning to the words of two individuals who spoke in tragic settings in our nation's recent history. In their mournful grandeur, both Billy Graham (who died in 2018 at age 99) and Barack Obama model how a pastoral benediction might help us find a way forward today.

Billy Graham and Barack Obama each offered a pastoral voice in a time of tragedy.

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, amplified by horrifying images on television, released emotional shock waves everywhere. A flood of patriotic grief followed. The components of the calamity were in one sense entirely different from today's crises. Still, the result was in many ways the same: pain and grief surging like a tsunami across the entire landscape. And not just in the United States, but other parts of the globe too.

Three days after the attacks, President George W. Bush hosted a memorial service at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC. The invited speakers reflected America's religious pluralism. Besides the president, they included an Episcopal bishop, an imam, a rabbi, a cardinal, a mainline Protestant minister, and Graham, an evangelical, who offered the keynote address. The words of the other speakers, though important at the time, have largely faded. But not Graham's.

Bush's choice of Graham was not random. Among evangelicals, no other person came close in international recognition. Eighty-two years old and a celebrated preacher for more than a half century, he brought the respect earned by age and longevity in the public eye.

Graham's talk followed a tragedy only deepened by the extraordinary heroism of first responders, many of whom sacrificed their own lives to save others. "This event reminds us of the brevity . . . and the uncertainty of life," he said. "We never know when we too will be called into eternity." Unlike self-appointed sages on both the right and the left, he did not offer a theological explanation for suffering. Rather, he said, the reason remains hidden in God's mystery.

But he did assert that God understands the pain. After all, in the Christian reckoning, the torment of death on a cross, followed by a resurrection to new life, stands at the very center of history:

> From the cross God declares, "I love you. I know the heartaches and the sorrows and the pain that you feel. But I love you." The story does not end with the cross, for Easter points us beyond the tragedy of the cross to the empty tomb. It tells us that there is hope for eternal life, for Christ has conquered evil and death and hell. Yes, there is hope.

Graham then called his hearers to choose. Believe that life holds no larger purpose, or believe that God somehow holds history in his hands. Embracing the second option would not dull, let alone erase, the pain, but it would give grievers a wider context for framing their loss. Graham closed the sermon by reciting a stanza of the hymn "How Firm a Foundation."

Graham was not a profound thinker or an eloquent preacher, but he dealt with serious things in serious ways. *Newsweek* religion editor Ken Woodward later said that Graham could make the simplest sentence sound like sacred scripture. By that point in his career, Graham seemed to stand above divisions, somehow transcending the welter of political and religious boundaries.

More than once during his presidency, Obama played a similar role. Most of his public words pertained to affairs of state or to the Democratic Party. But sometimes he, like President Lincoln, spoke as a pastor.

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OFFICIAL WHITE HOUSE PHOTO BY SHARON FARMER

OFFICIAL WHITE HOUSE PHOTO BY PETE SOUZA

PASTOR TO THE NATION? Billy Graham in 1993, Barack Obama at Clementa Pinckney's funeral in 2015.

The challenge for Obama was extraordinary. For Graham, the pastoral role came naturally and the script was preset. Both were what the nation had come to expect. But Obama had to navigate the venerable distinction between church and state without violating the integrity of either one.

On June 17, 2015, pastor and South Carolina state senator Clementa Pinckney was one of nine people gunned down by a White supremacist during a Bible study at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston. Nine days later Obama delivered Pinckney's eulogy to a capacity crowd at the College of Charleston TD Arena.

The audience had gathered, the president began, to honor a man who "embodied a politics that was neither mean nor small." Pinckney had distinguished himself by how he conducted his life, "quietly, and kindly, and diligently." Moreover, Pinckney had often marched as a prophet. "His calls for greater equity were too often unheeded, the votes he cast were sometimes lonely. But he never gave up."

On that solemn occasion Obama's words pivoted on a single theological point. "This whole week," he mused, "I've been reflecting on this idea of grace." Being the fine preacher that he is, Obama proceeded to define the concept. "Grace is not merited. It's not something we deserve. Rather, grace is the free and benevolent favor of God as manifested in the salvation of sinners and the bestowal of blessings." With an unerring sense of timing, the president paused, then repeated the momentous word for emphasis: "Grace."

The nation has not earned grace, continued Obama, given the perpetuation of its original sin, its moral blindness, its complacency. But God has bestowed it regardless. "It is up to us now to make the most of it, to receive it with gratitude, and to prove ourselves worthy of this gift."

Implementing grace in our personal and national lives is no solitary endeavor, Obama went on. Only in our "recognizing our common humanity by treating every child as important, regardless of the color of their skin or the station into which they were born," can grace take root and become real.

A great-souled man, Obama did not suggest that grace is the peculiar possession of any one person or group. "People of goodwill will continue to debate the merits of various policies . . . and there are good people on both sides of these debates." The challenge requires deep empathy, the kind that grows from "recognition of ourselves in each other." It is more than just working together, trying to see eye to eye.

Though the president did not use the term *social gospel*, he articulated its message with brilliant succinctness:

Love in the time of coronavirus
Quarantine day #8: Super moon

Last night we walked along the river path.
The full moon rose and shone its pale light
across the water. It did not feel like night
but, rather, evening or morning or something
in between, blue and smoky, like the last
set of a Jazz Man's song. What could go wrong
on a night like that? The sick & suffering
lay a few hundred yards from where we walked,
the hospital windows just out of view.
For now the world was just me and you.
We strolled slowly, eyed the sky and talked
of stars, how far they were and how long
it took their light to reach our river path,
how long after it dies a star's light lasts.

Angela Alaimo O'Donnell

> Our Christian faith demands deeds and not just words; that the "sweet hour of prayer" actually lasts the whole week long . . . to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and house the homeless is not just a call for isolated charity but the imperative of a just society.

At the end of the eulogy, in what is perhaps the most remembered part, Obama took courage in hand and proceeded to sing—not recite but sing—the first lines of what may be the best-loved hymn of all time: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound / That saved a wretch like me. / I once was lost, but now I'm found; / Was blind, but now I see."

At different periods, Americans have heard stirring words rolling from various tongues: in Thomas Jefferson's "all men are created equal"; in Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a woman?"; in Julia Ward Howe's "Mine eyes have seen the glory"; in Abraham Lincoln's "mystic chords of memory"; in Emma Lazarus's "huddled masses yearning to breathe free"; in Ronald Reagan's "slipped the surly bonds of earth" to "touch the face of God"; and, of course, in Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have a dream."

Does the nation need or even want a single authoritative pastoral voice? It's a fair question, even during times of national trouble. Graham previewed that inquiry when reporters asked him, as they often did, who would succeed him. Often he quipped, "No one," since "you have already seen too much of me." But turning serious, he said he trusted that his message of God's love and forgiveness would be carried by thousands of unheralded evangelists who had never heard his name.

Obama may never have addressed such a question directly, but he certainly did indirectly—and perhaps equally powerfully—through his example. His deeds suggest that we're all called to be pastors to one another. Those gifted with a public voice may use it as a platform for addressing the common good. At the same time, ordinary folk in their own small but important ways may use social media to worship faithfully and address the common good even through the challenges of COVID-19.

Many voices with a global resonance speak in their own tones, from their own traditions. The best of these, like Graham and Obama, try to detoxify the poisonous streams running deep in our environment, society, and economy. They speak beyond their tribal self-interest and seek to sow seeds that will come to fruition after they are gone.

The stage is set. As the death toll mounts, we wait for research scientists, medical professionals, and political leaders to do their work. We also wait for a pastor—or better yet, uncountable pastors—to speak not just to some but to everyone. A nation can survive without remembering eternal things. But the need for humility, repentance, forgiveness, and faith in the future is always a word in season. CC

Faith MATTERS

by Isaac S. Villegas

The politics of Mary

JESUS MUST HAVE learned his prophetic ministry from his mother. She was the one who said, "The Lord has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:52–53).

Jesus learned this gospel when he was a child, a baby, as he fussed at his bedtime. He learned his message from Mary, as she held him in her arms, rocking him, whispering her song, comforting him with dreams of a new world—the Magnificat as a lullaby. Mary preached with a song of joy. Political power is about who has a voice, who can speak, who we listen to. And here, at the beginning of Luke's Gospel, the voice we hear is Mary's.

"Truly," she says with authority, "from now on all generations will call me blessed" (1:48). She knows who she is; she knows what God has done, not just for her but for all of us through her. It will mean a transformation of the world, a structural overhaul of society. The powerful will be brought down from their thrones and the lowly lifted up.

Mary prophesies a new political arrangement, which will involve the abolition of the old systems of power. This revolution springs from the advent of "God's mercy . . . from generation to generation" (1:50). She sings her song "in remembrance of God's mercy" (1:54), which shatters the institutions of injustice that threaten and imprison. Mercy will melt the iron grip of oppressors. Mercy means her liberation and ours.

Racism imprisons our lives. The organizing principle of social relations in the United States has always been racial capitalism, as Cedric Robinson argued in his 1983 classic *Black Marxism*. Racism structures the institutions that govern us, that slot our lives in hierarchies of human value. Our world operates according to the rule of racialized exploitation.

The 2016 election of Donald Trump, whose campaign outlined a trajectory for racial power, emboldened White supremacists to declare their beliefs on street corners. They felt at home again in their country—comfortable enough to gather, in June 2017, at the North Carolina State Capitol building in downtown Raleigh.

With a 75-foot state monument to "Our Confederate Dead" towering above them, a group of 70 White people, mostly men, assembled with their guns and combat gear to spew bigotry, to reclaim this land as their land. Some wore the insignia of militias, the Oath Keepers and Three Percenters, stitched onto their military surplus store clothing. One, with a megaphone in one hand and a Bible in the other, preached racist slander about Islam.

They stood behind a row of riot police, the officers' backs to the armed White nationalists as if protecting them and their monument from our crowds marching through the streets. I was there with for a rally in solidarity with our Muslim neighbors. The militiamen waved their "Don't Tread on Me" flags and shouted venomous aspersions, proclaiming fantasies of ascendancy, the delusions of White power, while we—an amalgamated body politic, our bloodlines connecting us to peoples around the world—celebrated the joy of mutual welcome. "No matter where you're from," signs in our crowd announced, "we're glad you're our neighbor." Unbeknownst to the people who held them, a Mennonite congregation in Virginia designed these placards, which have made their way into neighborhoods across the country—signs to conjure a hope for a society different from the one we have.

Mary prophesies the joy of a reconstructed society, a world where she and her people will be released from oppression, freed from an abusive regime. I bet Mary would have joined our dancing and chanting in Raleigh, our flagrant rejoicing in the streets, under the malevolent gaze of ethno-nationalists. Drums and whistles accompanied our march as we flowed through downtown. A group of Arab women—keffiyehs covering their heads, scarves wrapped around their shoulders—were playing plastic kazoos with pictures of Disney princesses on them, as if they'd stopped at a toy store on the way and scoured the shelves for a suitable instrument to counter the slurs of militarized White supremacists. I saw a cluster of young women in hijabs dancing to the music. Children soon circled around to twirl and twist with fearless joy.

Mary's politics of mercy announces the remaking of this world so that women in keffiyehs can play their Disney kazoos and young people in hijabs can dance without men in military gear shouting lies about them. Her prayer for the reign of mercy involves the undoing of White power, the loosening of racism's grip on this country. Her song calls upon God to expose the deception of the proud, to unseat the arrogant from power—for God to scatter the wealth accumulated by means of racial capitalism.

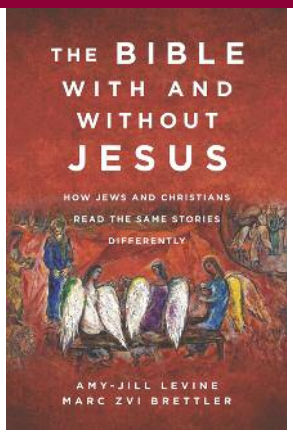
And she rejoices at the downfall of oppressors. This summer Carolinians pulled down the confederate monument at the state capitol. When I saw the statue crash to the ground, I prayed for this to be a portent of Mary's pronouncement. Months later, however, the president of the United States told a White supremacist group to "stand back and stand by," to be ready when the president might need them for God knows what. Racism unleashed will be the legacy of Trump's administration.

My politics are Marian. I join in her prayers to God the merciful, from generation to generation, who has promised joy to the descendants of Abraham, to the children of Sarah and Hagar, to Isaac and Ishmael—to every Mary, María, Miriam, and Maryam.

Isaac S. Villegas is pastor of Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and serves on the governing board of the North Carolina Council of Churches.

Same stories, different Bibles

by George C. Heider



The Bible with and without Jesus: How Jews and Christians Read the Same Stories Differently
By Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler
HarperOne, 512 pp., $34.99

Robert Burns's famous couplet came to mind as I read this book: "O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us / To see oursels as ithers see us!" In this case, the "Power" is two Jewish scholars, Amy-Jill Levine, who teaches New Testament and Jewish studies at Vanderbilt University, and Marc Zvi Brettler, who teaches Jewish studies at Duke. Together, they examine roughly a dozen biblical passages that the New Testament cites from the Old, employing three lenses: a historical-critical reading in search of the text's "original meaning," the appropriation of that text in the New Testament (and often by early Christian writers), and the appropriation of the same text in the early rabbinic tradition (usually ending with the Mishnah but sometimes extending through the Talmud or even medieval commentators).

The authors plainly state their objective: to enlighten both Jews and Christians (but clearly primarily the latter) as to how adherents of the other tradition have both in good faith and within reasonable interpretive boundaries read the same texts in very different ways. Such differences, they aver, should stimulate not polemics but "possibilities" of mutual respect and enlightenment. They are overtly not interested in simply finding commonalities between Christian and Jewish readings (although I found myself intrigued by how often later interpretations overlapped for reasons entirely internal to their respective faith traditions).

Levine and Brettler deal almost immediately with the problem of nomenclature: What shall we call the source collection of texts? Any term in use by one tradition is problematic to the other. In the end, they settle on "Old Testament" when discussing Christian appropriation of the collection, "Tanakh" for Jewish usage, and "Hebrew Bible" when examining the texts in their original context. The latter comes across as their least bad choice, as no faith community employs a body of writings by this name; it's a term favored by scholars for its supposed neutrality. But it has its own baggage. Indeed, Levine has elsewhere written: "The so-called 'neutral' term is actually one of Protestant hegemony."

Another question that arises at the outset is what place two Jewish scholars have in describing and rendering judgment on Christian interpretations. Although the authors write unapologetically as Jews, I would object strenuously to any attempt to apply a scholarly equivalent of an "identity politics" critique to this work. For one thing, these two have demonstrated their knowledge of and sympathy for the New Testament. They coedited the marvelous *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (Oxford University Press). For another, they demonstrate a deep understanding of how the Christian construal of texts and reality has led to a coherent, defensible belief system. In fact, they argue that Christianity is in its essence a belief system, in contrast with Judaism as an ethnicity centered on an ethic. Yet nowhere do they even hint that they would consider "Christian ethics" to be oxymoronic.

After outlining the hermeneutical assumptions of both traditions and elaborating the Christian understanding of prophecy, the authors illustrate how Jews and Christians operate with the "same stories" but "different Bibles." They discuss a broad selection of texts and themes, including the creation stories in Genesis 1–2, what Christians call "the Fall" in Genesis 3, Melchizedek's role in Genesis 14 and Psalm 110 (and the interpretation of these texts in the letter to the Hebrews), Jesus' interpretation of the law in the Sermon on the Mount, sacrifice and the role of blood in atonement, the claim in Matthew 1:23 that the virgin birth of Jesus is "to fulfill" Isaiah 7:14, the suffering servant in Isaiah 52:13–53:12, the "sign of Jonah" cited in Matthew 12:38–40 and Luke 11:29–32, Psalm 22 (and other psalms) vis-à-vis Jesus' "cry of dereliction" on the cross in Matthew and Mark, and the various references to the "son of man" in Daniel 7:13–14 and in the Gospels.

Levine and Brettler examine each text through their three lenses, although in some cases they give little attention to the rabbinic appropriation. Invariably, they conclude that the historical-critically derived "original meaning" does not lend itself to its later New Testament (or other Christian) usage, absent both hindsight and an a priori decision that the Old Testament scriptures testify to Jesus (as Jesus himself claims they do in Luke 24:27). At the same time, when they do take up rabbinic usage, the authors note

George C. Heider, who most recently taught theology, Old Testament, and Near Eastern studies at Valparaiso University, is a research scholar living in northern Michigan.

that the rabbis also interpret the text according to their own presuppositions, which often manifested as anti-Christian polemic.

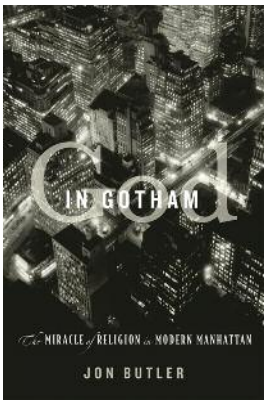
This latter point highlights one of the real benefits of this book for Christians. At long last, many Christians seem to grasp that Jesus was truly Jewish. What they often do not realize is that rabbinic Judaism underwent significant development following the Roman destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, such that what became Judaism and what became Christianity developed in tandem. It is appropriate to envision Christianity as in some ways the child and in other ways the sibling of Judaism—and in either event for adherents of the one to recognize those of the other as family.

This is not to obviate the reality of great differences between the two. For the most part, the authors fulfill their objective of stressing possibilities rather than polemic. In part, they do this by a fair and accurate, even generous, reading of the Christian interpretive tradition. One of the very few exceptions is their apparent assumption that all Christians accept an Augustinian understanding of original sin as veritably genetic. This is not true of Orthodox Christians, nor of some Protestants.

Levine and Brettler also regularly and civilly cite Christian scholars. A rare exhibition of sharp elbows comes in their suggestion that one scholar is not "doing history" properly in his treatment of Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:23. Their critique seems to suggest that a secular, even positivist approach is required to "do history" by proper, critical standards. But it is not clear to me from the quotation of this particular scholar that he is intending to do history, critical or otherwise, nor why this must be so in a book devoted to enhancing Jewish-Christian mutual understanding.

The book opens with a discourse on Marc Chagall's painting *Abraham and the Three Angels*, which is only pictured on the dust jacket. Call this a quibble (and it is), but the location of the image is problematic for users of library copies on which dust covers are not retained. Future printings might consider inserting a color frontispiece across from the preface.

I believe there will be future printings, since this book is so incisive and accessible in content and welcoming in tone. The authors express very well a point I sought to convey throughout my career at Christian colleges and universities: "The more one knows of Israel's scripture, the more meaningful the New Testament becomes."



God in Gotham: The Miracle of Religion in Modern Manhattan
By Jon Butler
Harvard University Press, 320 pp., $29.95

At first glance, the theme of religion in modern Manhattan might seem discouraging. Through much of the last century, evangelicals and conservative Christians were at best suspicious of the threats to faith and morality in the burgeoning metropolis, and some preachers denounced it savagely. Antiurban passions were acutely expressed in the temperance and Prohibition movements. But as Jon Butler demonstrates in his dazzling study of faith and its practice in the city between 1880 and 1960, religious life of all kinds was vibrantly alive in Sodom on the Hudson.

How could it have been otherwise? Gotham was a city of immigrants who found support and solace not in government but in popular institutions. Above all, that meant churches and synagogues. Populations that might not have been

Reviewed by Philip Jenkins, *who teaches at Baylor University and is the author of* Fertility and Faith: The Demographic Revolution and the Transformation of World Religions.

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terribly religious in their home countries became legendarily pious in the New World. Religion became fundamental to identity and scarcely separable from culture and ethnicity. Urban Catholics never asked which section of the city a new acquaintance lived in; instead they inquired, "So, what's your parish?"

This is the metropolitan society that Butler portrays in such loving detail. He is especially good on how religion shaped the urban landscape. Building activity was intense throughout the period, and Butler has much to say about religion's encounter with art and architecture in this soaring capital of modernity and modernism. With all the new building and decoration, the opportunities for patronage and commissions were mouthwatering.

That boom produced some spectacular edifices that still dominate the streetscapes. Particularly for Catholics, those religious complexes also created a localized world of shrines, sanctuaries, and holy places that were fully visible and comprehensible only to the faithful. Churches sacralized the city. The city's complex and interlocking ritual calendars included fairs and festivals, processions and demonstrations. Religion was visible, unavoidable, and inevitable.

Butler is scrupulously fair in his coverage of the city's faith traditions, Jewish as well as Christian. He covers Black religion well in a substantial chapter called "Modernizing God in Jim Crow Manhattan." He shows how White Protestants remained a powerful force as Manhattan became a flourishing center for theology and religious education. New York was the center of religious broadcasting as well as publishing, and it served as the organizational hub of many of the main denominations.

The diversity of the city exposed believers to unfamiliar interactions on a daily basis, demanding a rethinking of interfaith relations. In 1955, New Yorker Will Herberg published his classic analysis of America's new pluralist norm in *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*. Such everyday encounters could be life-changing: just think of the impact that Harlem's Black churches had on Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the 1930s.

Against this New York background, Butler offers thoughtful accounts of many other innovators and opinion formers in 20th-century religious thought, including Paul Tillich, James Baldwin, Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Fulton Sheen, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Norman Vincent Peale, Dorothy Day, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Jacques Maritain.

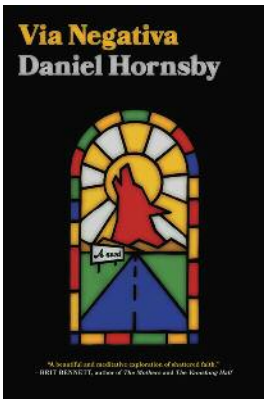
Butler's discussion of the quotidian realities of religion is equally valuable. He details the ways churches and synagogues organized themselves and used new technological opportunities to communicate to a wider world. Even something as seemingly basic as the coming of electric power transformed the life of the great urban churches, making them visible centers of progress. An innovative chapter called "Organizing God" shows how thoroughly the denominations borrowed the managerial and organizational techniques they observed in their commercial neighbors.

Butler's conclusion, "Moving Out, Moving On," describes the religious impact of the great shift to the suburbs from the 1950s onward. This chapter could easily have evolved to become a book in its own right. By this point, so convinced are we by the author's thesis about the power of metropolitan religion that we begin to wonder how faith could possibly stagger on in any other setting.

The book could hardly be more comprehensive than it is. Still, a few areas seemed to me to require more detailed treatment than Butler provides. Besides all the benevolent interfaith exchanges, he might have paid more attention to the tensions and animosities that quite regularly manifested between communities. To take one egregious example, Catholic anti-Semitism became a terrifying source of street violence and intimidation in the years around 1940, when Father Coughlin's militant followers formed the despicable Christian Front. For New York Jews, the Nazi menace was not just something that loomed across the Atlantic. I would have found it hard to resist quoting Harry Sylvester's trenchant satire of the corruption and bigotry of New York clergy in his explosive 1947 novel *Moon Gaffney*.

Had space permitted, Butler might also have said more about the teeming variety of esoteric and occult sects and cult movements that abounded in the city. This theme appears in *God in Gotham* almost exclusively in the context of Black Americans, among what anthropologist Arthur Huff Fauset famously described in 1944 as the "Black gods of the metropolis." But White would-be gods, messiahs, and healers also proliferated in Gotham, as did their enthusiastic urban clients. In the wise words of a song from the New York musical *Sweet Charity*, "Brother, there's a million pigeons / Ready to be hooked on new religions."

It would be difficult to over-praise *God in Gotham*. Massively researched and lucidly written, it is a major contribution to modern American religious history. Filled with fascinating material, it cries out to be reread. Rather like exploring the streets of the city Butler describes, turning any page at random leads to some new and unsuspected treasure.



Via Negativa: A Novel

By Daniel Hornsby
Knopf, 256 pp., $23.95

In the first paragraph of Daniel Hornsby's debut novel, the main character, a retired and homeless Catholic priest, watches a coyote struck by a minivan fly off to the side of the road, "a gold smudge." Father Dan stops to take the coyote into his car, names him Bede after the Venerable Bede, and goes to seek medical care for the wounded animal.

This is the first sign that Father Dan's road trip will be weird. The *via negativa* (negative way) in question is the literal road between Indiana and Washington State, where Father Dan is headed because he doesn't know where else to go. Despite the fact that he is carrying a personal library that includes Bede's homilies and the collected works of Origen, he seems to be discarding his faith as he goes. His aimless path includes such national treasures as the world's largest ball of paint and a world-famous bottomless pit.

Father Dan blames the spiritual *via negativa* for the way that his life has devolved. His fascination with *The Cloud of Unknowing* led to a reading list—"the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite, the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, Thomas Merton, Simone Weil, Julian of Norwich." This fascination, he claims, is "at the root of why I no longer live at the rectory, why I now live in a Toyota Camry." He gradually disengaged from the religious institution that sponsored his life and gave him a job. In the end, the two could no longer coexist.

Father Dan is not only a potential mystic but also a cultural critic with a keen eye for what makes America strange. As he drives past Jesus statue after Jesus statue, he reflects, "My country is a bad church. A church of itself." He muses about the "oddly medieval" nature of roadside attractions like the bottomless pit:

> They are the great- (great-great-great, etc.) grandchildren of the enterprising shrines along the old *vias*, peddling their relics to high-speed pilgrims, telling them they have only to stop for a while to stick their feet in the strange currents of mystery. I'd been tempted by a few already—a giant concrete prairie dog, a hall of fame for greyhound racers—but this one, with its small gesture toward the infinite, I couldn't resist.

Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised that a book entitled *Via Negativa* doesn't move Father Dan forward in his spiritual struggle, but I found myself waiting for him to make some kind of pilgrim's progress. Hornsby graduated from Harvard Divinity School, and one of the many pleasures of this novel is the fact that he is well steeped in the Christian contemplative tradition. He uses that knowledge deftly to take Father Dan's dilemma seriously, but not too seriously.

At the same time, Father Dan does not find a path greater than the one that has flung him out on the road. The church whose hierarchy badly let him down still dictates the culture and the future. After some particularly troubling revelations, Father Dan says, "I decided it was my role to remain on the edge of the outside of things."

This would be an apt starting place for Father Dan, but as an ending place, it seems incomplete. John of the Cross, one of the first Christians to articulate the *via negativa*, sees the dark night of the soul as ultimately a path to joy. For Father Dan, that does not seem to be the case.

Even so, the book has a wonderful road-trippy feeling. There is a just-rightness about it: just enough road trip, just enough backstory, just the right number of episodes and encounters, and all together enough quirkiness to make the whole experience worth going on the road.

One of my favorite scenes involves Father Dan and one of his traveling companions helping paint the world's largest ball of paint. At the bottomless pit, there's nothing to do but stare into it. But with the ball of paint, visitors can participate. "You have to do a whole coat," the proprietor says. "That's the deal." It's a roadside attraction that is self-perpetuating. The more that visitors add paint, the larger it grows. The larger it grows, the more something of value, however strange, appears.

It seems like a bit of religious commentary: when we get involved, something happens. It might be weird, it might lead us where we don't want to go, but through creativity and participation, we can make something together, even "on the edge of the outside of things."

Father Dan and his traveling companion find a momentary satisfaction in participating in the painting of the world's largest ball of paint, but can this short-lived satisfaction become joy? Can Father Dan continue on the *via negativa* and find what John of the Cross found? The novel ends with the sense that the mystical road is not finished with Father Dan yet. Where it leads, we still don't know.

Reviewed by CENTURY *senior editor* Amy Frykholm.

BookMarks

The Stillness of Winter: Sacred Blessings of the Season

By Barbara Mahany
Abingdon Press, 224 pp., $19.99

This collection expands upon some of the material from Barbara Mahany's 2014 book *Slowing Time*, setting it within the context of the winter months during a time when many people feel hollowed out, "jarred and broken by the hatred spewing all around." The reflections, prayers, recipes, illustrations, and writing prompts gathered here are gentle and lush, providing an antidote to the anxiety many are feeling these days. "Be curious. Be imaginative. Be not afraid to dabble in whimsy. Be willing to put yourself out there. Be humble, so humble."

Honest Advent: Awakening to the Wonder of God-with-Us Then, Here, and Now

By Scott Erickson
Zondervan, 224 pp., $18.99 paperback

Scott Erickson is a visual artist and spiritual director whose writing is at once poignant and punchy. These gifts converge in his collection of Advent images and meditations, which illuminate intersections between the biblical story and life today. "Sacred motherhood unfolded" for Mary, writes Erickson, "with third-trimester heartburn, swollen feet and ankles, insomnia, and fatigue." He imagines the attentiveness of the teachers who taught Jesus to read. He recalls the moment he first looked into the eyes of his daughter Elsa and wonders if Joseph felt the same way. The tangibility of these images draws us into the story too.

A Weary World: Reflections for a Blue Christmas

By Kathy Escobar
Westminster John Knox, 127 pp., $13.00 paperback

For years, pastor and spiritual director Kathy Escobar has been leading "Blue Christmas" worship services for members of her congregation who are grieving. After her college-age son died by suicide last year, her perspective deepened. "These days my husband and I cry daily," she writes. The devotions and spiritual practices in this book aren't for those who wish to escape the difficulty of living in a world that's marred by sin and death. They are ideal for readers who are in the midst of their own grief, as well as those who wish to be supportive of others who are mourning.

Our Hope and Expectation: Devotions for Advent and Christmas 2020–2021

Edited by Laurie J. Hanson
Augsburg Fortress, 96 pp., $3.00 paperback

"What if we saw God tearing open the heavens, like so many light beams streaming through the cathedral skylight?" Each of the daily devotions in this slim but momentous book includes a scripture passage from the lectionary, a quotation to ponder, a brief reflection, and a prayer. The variety of authors gives the book a textured feel, but the overall message is focused on what it means to await God's presence in a world that gives us plenty of reasons not to hope. "To live in faith is to take the long view," Rozella Haydée White writes, "to lean into liberation, and to let go of fear."

Faithful Families for Advent and Christmas: 100 Ways to Make the Season Sacred

By Traci Smith
Chalice Press, 128 pp., $12.99 paperback

This collection of faith practices for families with children is rooted in the conviction that Advent invites us "to wait, to reflect, and to slow down." Its 100 activities aren't meant to be fodder for an overcrowded to-do list. Each of them—picking up trash in the neighborhood, talking about the differences between joy and happiness, making a "not-to-do list" together, imagining how you might design an Epiphany party—is simple, flexible, thoughtful, and manageable.

The soccer coach we all need

I wouldn't have guessed that the television show I needed right now was about an obsessively nice American football coach who is hired to coach a British soccer team. But 2020 has been a strange, hard year, and *Ted Lasso* (Apple TV) imagines a world where kindness, honesty, and compassion are valued more than winning. I didn't want it to end.

When Rebecca Welton (Hannah Waddingham) wins ownership of a British Premier League soccer team in a divorce settlement, she is determined to burn the team to the ground for the sheer pleasure of tormenting her ex-husband, who loves the team even more than his many mistresses. Her strategy is to fire the sleazy head coach and replace him with Ted Lasso (Jason Sudeikis), an American football coach who has never played or coached soccer. He exudes a folksy charm and a thick Kansas drawl that make him the butt of endless jokes from his players, the press, and the locals at his neighborhood pub.

Even an experienced coach would struggle to succeed with this team. The star player is self-serving and vain, openly mocking weaker players and encouraging bullying and mean-spirited pranks. The captain is so angry about aging past his prime that he exudes hostility and contempt toward the team he's meant to lead. And at every turn, Rebecca is actively seeking to sabotage Ted's chances of success.

But Ted, it turns out, knows far more about coaching than his innocent bumbling suggests. He overwhelms everyone he meets with a nearly nonstop verbal barrage of positive energy. When greeted by shouts of "wanker!" every time he walks down the street, he returns the greeting with a cheerful, "I appreciate your opinion and hope we'll have your support in the next game."

Underneath his cheerful demeanor, Ted is sizing people up, learning what motivates them, what they love, and what they fear. He recognizes in Nate (Nick Mohammed), the bullied and mocked equipment manager, for example, a wealth of knowledge born from years of watching players at their best and worst. And when Roy (Brett Goldstein), the aging team captain, asks him what he's going to do about the other players bullying Nate, Ted carefully considers his choices. He decides not to do anything, because he knows he will only make things worse—and he knows that Roy is capable of stepping up to solve the problem himself. When he realizes that Sam (Toheeb Jimoh), the new recruit from Nigeria, is underperforming because he is lonely and homesick, he throws him a birthday

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CULTURE CHANGE: Ted Lasso* (Jason Sudeikis) *is an eager and kindhearted American football coach who knows nothing about soccer, hired to coach a British soccer team.

party and buys him treats from his home country.

For Ted, people are not pawns in a game but fascinating creatures with capacities for goodness they have let atrophy because they are wounded or scared. There is a lot of American sports mythology at work here: the wise coach who helps mold his players to be better men both on and off the field. But those myths usually assume an idea of masculinity that is tough and terse, that hides a heart of gold under a gruff exterior.

There is nothing gruff about Ted. He is openly exuberant, relentlessly kind, and he wears his heart of gold like a badge of honor. In different hands, this could be a setup for painful or awkward jokes at Ted's expense. But Ted's kindness extends to the show itself. In every moment where we expect the worst—embarrassment or cruelty to befall our hero—something entirely different happens and decency prevails over humiliation.

After years of living in a culture in which cruelty and mockery have been elevated to presidential speech, Ted offers a different vision of American masculinity. Straight talk is married to vulnerability and honesty to kindness. His motto, as he tells a crowd gathered in the local pub, is "Be curious, not judgmental." While judgment walls you off from others, he says, curiosity opens you up to them.

Ted makes this speech when he steps in to save Rebecca from her ex-husband's barbed insults by challenging him to a game of darts. *Ted Lasso* isn't a story of underdogs scraping their way to narrow victory; Ted insists throughout that he doesn't care about winning or losing. His goal is to build a team. The dart game is a rare moment when winning and team building go hand in hand. It is also the moment Rebecca—and by extension all the people in the pub—realize they have not been curious enough about Ted. Ted isn't a wise sage who can mold men or solve their problems, but he wills the best from others by offering it in turn. As Rebecca says, "It feels so good."

The author is Kathryn Reklis*, who teaches theology at Fordham University.*

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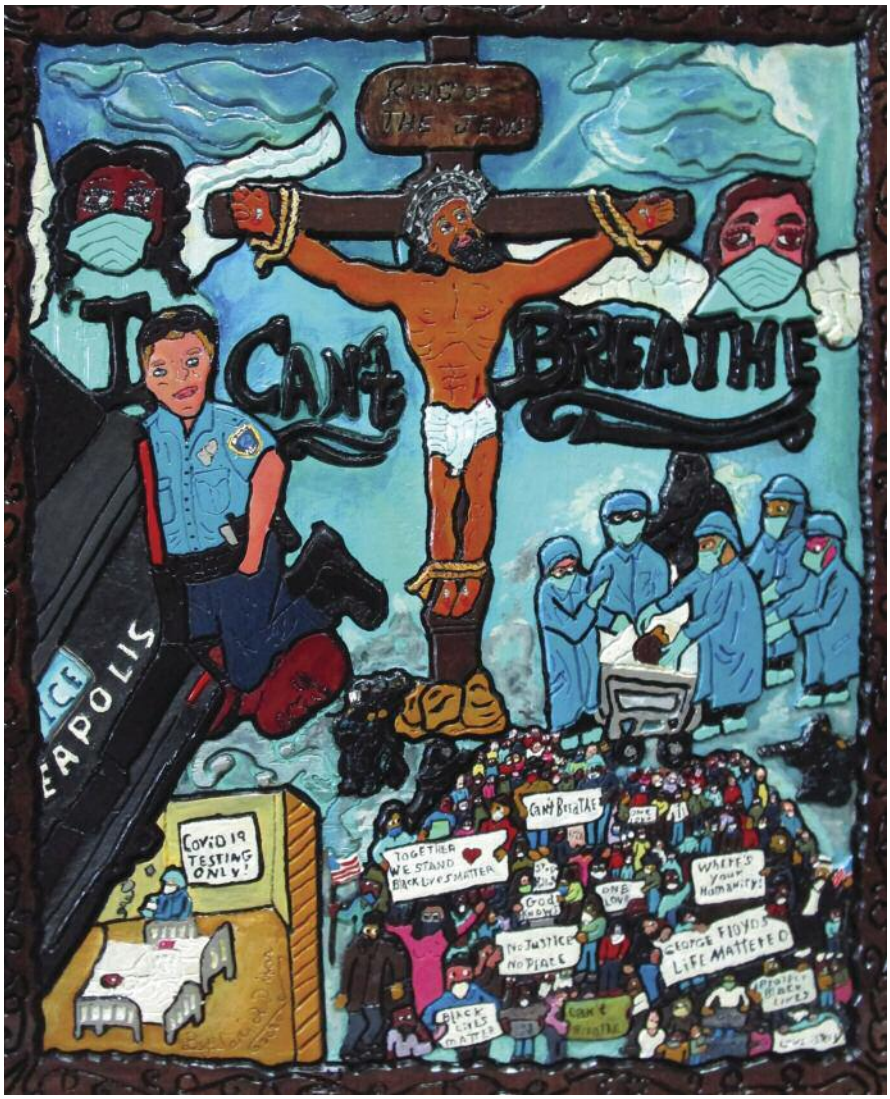

***"I Can't Breathe,"* by Carl Dixon**

George Floyd's dying words on a Minneapolis street have become a lament for the nation. They appear in this carved panel, mixed-media piece by Carl Dixon as the text for what he calls a "sermon in wood" about the many ways people are struggling to breathe free in these troubled times. Beginning with an image of Floyd with the restraining knee of a police officer on his neck, the Mississippi folk artist shows sign-carrying protesters choking from tear gas and a COVID-19 patient on a ventilator. The masked angels in heaven send the message that covering your face saves lives. The panel is dominated by a depiction of the crucified Christ, offering his last breath in an act of redemptive love. "We're in a time now when none of us can breathe," says Dixon. "We all feel this pressure weighing down on us and we want it to let up. That's why I included Jesus on the cross. You know for sure that when he makes you free, you shall be free indeed."

Art selection and commentary by John Kohan*, a writer and art collector (sacredartpilgrim.com).*

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