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Seasons of Christian Spirituality: living the life of Christ until it becomes our own
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This is for Norma Racey, my assistant and my friend:

Thank you for introducing me to the liturgical year and to Christ in a new way.

ADVENT
Christmas Tide

COMMON TIME
Epiphany
Transfiguration
Septuagesima
Sexagesima
Quinquagesima

LENT
Ash Wednesday

EASTER
Palm Sunday
Holy Week
Easter Tide
Ascension
Pentecost
Trinity

KINGDOM TIDE

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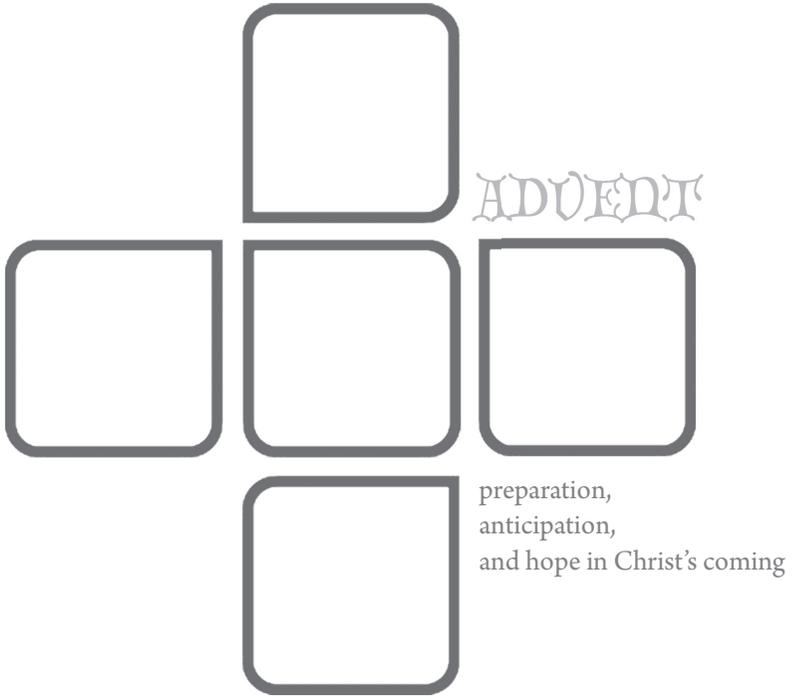
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KINGDOM TIME





Introduction

Our whole life is Advent – that is, a time of waiting for the ultimate, for the time when there will be a new Heaven and a new earth, when all people are brothers and sisters and one rejoices in the words of the angels: on earth peace to those on whom God’s favor rests.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 20th Century German pastor and Nazi antagonist

I confess. Despite having spent a great deal of my life in church ministry, I know nothing about the liturgical calendar. I’m a liturgical virgin. But a couple of years ago a friend of mine showed up at work on Ash Wednesday wearing a smudgy gray cross on her forehead. Like thousands of others, she had attended an early morning Mass and received the sign of the cross on her face as a reminder to carry the sacrificial death of Jesus with her all day (and all year... and all her life) long.

Because I knew my friend wasn’t nuts, her actions intrigued me.

A few months later, another of my friends – a gal I knew from high school – proudly announced on Facebook that she was leaving her “contemporary” church in favor of a liturgical one.

There was that word again. Liturgy. I found out that it means “the work of the people.” In real-life it means that both the services those people attend and when they have traditionally chosen to attend them are largely scripted according to theme, season, and meaning.

I'm not keen on scripts, but I am especially keen on theme and meaning. So this book represents my efforts to get on board the liturgical train and ride it all season long.

Advent.

Christmastide.

Epiphany.

Common Time

Septuagesima et al.

Lent.

Holy Week.

Eastertide.

Ascension.

Pentecost.

Trinity.

Even as I write these words, each representing the big seasons of the liturgical calendar, I have no real clue what they mean. I trust I will. I trust that the process of excavating better than a thousand years of Christian history and tradition will hold some real-world relevance for me. And for you, be ye virgin or matriarch (in the liturgical sense, of course).

I begin with Advent, with the coming of the Savior. I suppose that's only appropriate.

For most of my Christian experience, any and all speculation or imagination surrounding Christ's coming centered on the next time he'd show up, not the first time. Whether with movies like *Thief in the Night* or books like *Left Behind*, it seems we love to fantasize about the Second Coming, but the first one seems too quaint to bother with any longer. Don't get me wrong, there are still pageants at plenty of churches and lots of songs and turkey stuffing; but there's no imagination to Christmas anymore, and that's a bit sad.

It's like all of our fervor goes into imagining the Second Coming, while the First Coming is relegated only to sentiment.

That seems backwards, doesn't it? I mean, our best theologians and biblical scholars have loudly proclaimed for years that the popular conception of the Second Coming in the Western church is not rooted in the Bible at all but – instead – on a bunch of campy B-movies and that old book *The Late Great Planet Earth*. If anything, our scholars



and teachers tell us that we ought to hope for God's great "cleanup of the world" while simultaneously not being too particular about when and how that happens.

In short, we ought to appreciate the real hope that he is coming again, but understand that our ideas about how that will occur are likely sentimental.

On the flip side, though, these same learned dons tell us that we know for sure how Christ came the first time around and can take tremendous inspiration and prophetic verve from his meager birth, humble beginnings, and triumph over opposition. They tell us that our cartoonish renderings of cute stables and kingly visitors miss the point completely of Christ and his Kingdom Come, and that – if we really understood the power and provocation of God's re-entry into humanity – it would change everything about how we treat one another and how we hope for the future of the world.

In short, we ought to figure out – fast! – how and why he really came because doing so will change everything.

To sum up: we're sentimental about the truth that changes everything and fervent about a speculation we invented fifty years ago.

Fervor and sentiment. We've got them confused. We should change.

Christ's coming affords us that opportunity – not just his First Coming, mind you, or his Final Coming, but his coming now.

There are three advents:

He came.

He comes.

He is coming again.

He came in a manger, incarnate.

He will come again, glorified.

But he also comes to us now,

to live in us,

to guide and lead us,

and to help us change from the people we are

into the people we were always designed and
destined to become.

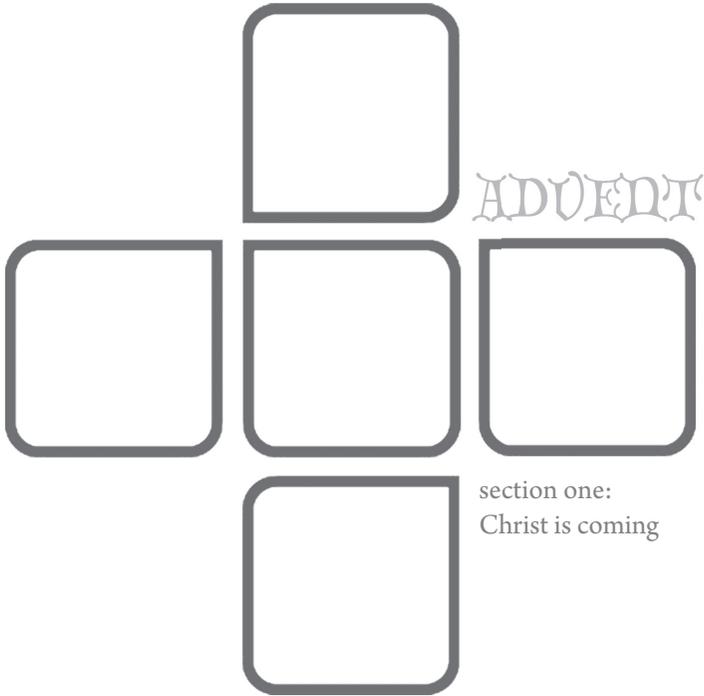
The present is the collision of Christ's comings, a sacred sandwich of sorts.

This book is about exploring that transformation. It is about Christ's Advents. This book is about preparation, anticipation, and hope in God's plans to give us a new beginning and to make ours a better world.

To help us better understand the implications of Christ's comings in real life, I want to start by more fully answering the question *What is Christmas really about?* From there, I'd like to explore the ways in which we might appropriately prepare for his coming, paying specific attention to the ways in which we become hospitable to him now. I'd also like to delve more deeply into the relationship between Advent (Christ's First Coming) and the Parousia (Christ's Second Coming, the Rapture and all that jazz), so we don't mess things up the next time, the same way our spiritual predecessors messed things up the first time. Finally, I want to take a little space at the end of the book and talk about hope. If our faith is rooted in God's character – that is, in who God is – then certainly our hope must be rooted in God's promise – that is, in what God will do. What good is a God who does nothing? Thankfully, we'll never have to know because our God is fantastically active.

That's the scope of this book: the reason, the preparation, the anticipation, and the hope. And the point? Well, I hate to beat a dead liturgical horse, but the point really is theme and meaning. I want you to better understand your Savior and his comings, so you can recognize him when he shows up and pitch in to help so that when he shows up again, you'll hear him say: "Well done, good and faithful servant."

May Christ be glad with the work of his people.



What is advent about?

Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!

John 1.29

In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

John 1.4-5

When I moved to the United States from Canada in 2005, I went through a bit of an adjustment period. Most of that adjustment concerned American holidays, with which I was very unfamiliar. Thanksgiving, for example, is a much smaller affair in the Great White North--especially considering we had no pilgrims and, unlike Michigan, wild turkeys did not roost on my front porch.

At any rate, getting used to these holidays – Veterans Day, Presidents Day, etc – meant that I almost constantly found myself asking the people around me: What are we celebrating and why?

As a joke I asked one of the grocery baggers at our local supermarket why we celebrated Christmas. Her answer was very funny (to me, at least). She said: *It's Jesus' birthday.* I pressed her further, asking why that was important, and she replied: *Because he died on the cross for our sins.*

I found that answer amusing because I imagined what mental images I would have conjured up had I not known the full story of Jesus. Think about it. If her explanation about the importance of Christmas was the basis for my entire understanding of the holiday season, I'm more likely to have a vision of Cupid thumb-tacked to a totem pole rather than God's plan for the salvation of the world.

Jesus was born and then he died on the cross for our sins.

All of that is true, and all of that is truly important, but I think that much like my friend the grocery bagger, many of us have forgotten some significant details about the birth of Christ, the purpose of his coming, and the significance it has for us today.

So let's tease this out a little further beginning with Advent – the "coming" of Jesus.

WHAT ADVENT REALLY MEANS

If Advent means "coming," we might wonder: Who is coming?

The answer, obviously, is Christ. But we might further wonder: Who is Jesus Christ?

In the Christian Bible,

Jesus Christ was and is
God of the Cosmos,
Above Whom There is None Other,
Peerless Peer and
Everlasting Lord of All.

He was born under supernatural circumstances to a teenage girl during her engagement to an older, respectable man who likely only-half believed her explanation of the Holy Spirit impregnating her and planned to divorce her quietly once the baby was born.

Jesus (his name is Joshua in Aramaic) was born under a cloud of suspicion, but later came to be called Christ (which means "anointed one" and relates to an ancient belief by practicing Jews in a military hero known as the Messiah who would deliver them from their national and spiritual enemies).

Christ wasn't his last name, but his title.

Great, we think, before asking: And why is he coming?



He is coming, simply, because something has gone horribly and persistently wrong with his creation. God created the world and placed us within it as a well-ordered and developing ecosystem, complete with interpersonal and interspecies interaction that would have sustained life abundantly and joyously. We were created to be something akin to planetary horticulturalists or zoologists, while simultaneously being given the directive to establish ourselves into society and govern the earth.

Long, long ago our spiritual parents, Adam and Eve, abdicated our responsibility to the world, and we have all suffered greatly since then.

War.

O-zone depletion.

Diminishing natural resources.

Species extinction.

Prejudice.

Genocide.

Terrorism.

Hate.

There is a great corruption in the world, for which – sadly, yet inescapably – we must all acknowledge our own culpability. None of us are guilt-free concerning the human condition or the condition of our planet. Our world is deeply wounded, and Christ came to fix it.

Geez. I read that back to myself and think: What a lot to absorb. But, of course, it begs one further and final question: How does he plan to fix all this?

To begin with, Christ wants to start by fixing us.

Jesus came to live in this world as one of us and show us how we were always meant to live. He demonstrates what it means to be human, while simultaneously giving us a reference for what it means to be godly. He was, and is God, who lived as one of us, showing us how we might behave, love, interact, and aspire to live like God.

In an important sense, Jesus re-lived all of human history – resisted every kind of temptation, confronted every kind of evil, even figuratively re-enacted every one of humanity's great failings up until that point without, himself, failing – and showed us what God has always intended for His people and for His world.

(Note: I've written extensively on the divinity of Jesus in two other publications and will not rehash those arguments and claims here. It is central to the Christian story that Christ made claims to be God, and the Christian faith is founded upon the truth of those claims. For more info, see *Doxa: what you believe matters* and *Down to Earth: why you're really here and why it really matters*)

Jesus has done for humanity what I often find myself doing for my children: He dismantled our mess and put things back together again properly.

My son Jake loves Lego. He loves to buy Lego with his allowance, but has no real concept of the age-appropriate rating on the Lego box. Consequently, he often buys Lego for kids age 10+ (he is only 7) and has a difficult time putting it together. It's fairly common for me to enter his room, see him sitting on his mat disheartened and frustrated, and take a few moments to help him with his project. First, I take apart the stuff he's already done and strip it down to the last time he got something perfectly right. Then I rebuild it, showing him step by step what to do and where to find the answers in the instruction manual when he hits a problem.

That's what Christ has done for us, and that's why he came.

Advent, then, means the coming of a Savior to heal the wounds of the world caused by sin. Advent gives us a new starting point, a new beginning, by bringing to us a new model – a new Adam, if you will.

We all recognize the world is in trouble.

A package of explosives was recently found in a UPS container heading from Yemen to a synagogue in Chicago.

A woman in our community recently caught her son-in-law inappropriately touching his two daughters in the bathtub.

A gay college student just jumped off a bridge after being humiliated by his heterosexual peers.

We all want things to be better, to be different. We want a do over.

We want a chance to start over, to leave our old mistakes and regrets behind.



We don't want to run into our old boyfriends because we're trying to forget that part of who we used to be.

We don't want to see the bullies from high school, because we're not willing to be reminded of a time when we fit into lockers at recess.

We want a new beginning.

We want a world of peace and rest, happiness and laughter. God promises us that world in the future, just as He ennobles us to work toward that world in the present.

That's what we're celebrating at Christmas, during Advent: We don't have to live like this anymore. We no longer have to be corrupted by our hate or governed by our prejudice. Christ's coming means we get a new beginning, that the world is beginning to heal, and that we – finally – can feel like our old selves again.

FEELING LIKE THE 'OLD ME'

Do you know what I mean when I say, "our old selves?" I mean that feeling you get when you're living in such a way that it doesn't matter what others think – you're living without any sense of compulsion, or anxiety, or fear. I mean that sensation that, even though what you're doing might not be cool or popular somehow, it's right and it feels like you're fulfilling some kind of higher purpose.

A friend of mine went through a very difficult season a few years ago, marked by deep depression and mental illness. She received excellent therapy and was on several medications, but – despite all that – she came very close to losing her marriage and her sanity. Eventually, by the grace of God and the combined efforts of her family and her psychiatrist, she came through that difficult season and is now living healthy and well, claiming she now feels like her old self again.

That's the feeling Christ gives us: the power and sensation to live now like we were always destined and designed to live.

To live with courage.
To live in love with the people we care for.
To behave in ways that honor others,
 that sacrifice for them and lift them up,
 to interact with the world
 as an agent of God's healing
 instead of a victim of the world's corruption.

Advent is about Christ coming into the manger of the mind,
the Bethlehem inside,
and about God incarnating Himself in each of us so we get to start over.

It is from that interior nativity that his mission to heal the world begins.
He wants to restore us to our rightful position.

Who is coming and why?

[Jesus Christ], being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God
something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in Heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2.6-11

My dad is a bishop of a denomination in Canada, and as part of his ecclesial duty, he often has to travel across the country and help churches through seasons of great difficulty. One such occasion sticks out in my mind. A little church in a rural community in Saskatchewan had a long-term, dearly beloved pastor who had been caught in adultery. The pastor was unrepentant, and Dad was forced to remove him from his pastorate. But the people were very angry with Dad because he was an outsider making decisions that affected their everyday lives.

They felt like Dad couldn't understand them, because he was a "city-slicker" all decked out in his three-piece suit, and as a result he quickly became the enemy, while their former, adulterous pastor became a martyr to real love instead of the perpetrator of a marital crime.

I'll always admire the way Dad chose to handle this scenario. He was already in this little backwater town, patiently working with these people, and he decided to fly in an old friend of his – Walter. Walter had grown up on a farm in Saskatchewan and knew what these folks were like. Walter had also pastored in many small towns like theirs and knew about the strong bond people form with a church leader in a small community.

Walter showed up at the town hall-style church meeting and sat beside my dad on the platform. Dad was in his suit; Walter was in overalls. Dad's hair was neatly combed; Walter removed his baseball hat as he entered the church, revealing a sweaty ring left around his ears.

Dad convened the meeting amidst a ruckus of coughs and scoffs, mutterings and misgivings, and then turned it over to Walter. Walter got up and in plain, simple speech, told the people he was real sorry about what had happened there and was willing to step in and be their pastor for a few months until things got sorted out.

Problem solved.

The people immediately loved Walter and felt him to be credible – both as a Saskatchewanian and as a former pastor – and with Walter at the head, they were free to ignore Dad's urban airs as well as their fallen pastor's pleas for victimization.

Walter came to them as one of them, and the common people responded to him well.



JESUS IDENTIFIES WITH US

That, by the way, is how God came to us. He did not come as a king or a conqueror. He was not fancified or gussied up. In fact, Matthew's genealogy (see Matthew 1.1-17) shows Jesus to be a person of low birth, descended from incest (Perez), mixed marriage (Boaz), and adultery (Solomon).

Furthermore, Jesus shows up on the scene like Walter – complete with (the first-century equivalent of) overalls, a plaid shirt, and some muddy boots. Contrary to popular belief, Jesus was not a carpenter per se (making tables and fixing eaves, etc.) but a *tekton* (a Greek word for a stonemason or perhaps a building contractor, from which we get our words “technical” and “technology”). Rather than working locally, Jesus would daily have walked the three miles each way to Sepphora, giving him a panoramic view of his hometown and all the Judean countryside. Sepphora had been destroyed by the Romans in 4 BCE and had since been rebuilt and gentrified by Herod in an effort to appease the Emperor. Jesus was more an itinerant laborer than an established artisan, a get-paid-by-the-hour kind of guy rather than a local tinkerer and jack-of-all-trades.

Jesus came to us as a peasant and a tradesman, but he also came to us as a person of religious and family embarrassment.

Remember, even though contemporary Christians have been touting the virgin birth for millennia, once upon a time there was a young girl telling her fiancé's family that God made her pregnant... and by all accounts they didn't buy it for one second. More on that later, but for now, suffice it to say that Jesus grew up as the illegitimate offspring of Mary and somebody other than Joseph.

Christ came to us poor, tired, and mocked so we could identify with him.

Who came at Advent? God – yes!

But God chose to come to us in such a way as to identify

with our poverty,

our humiliation,

our embarrassment,

our struggle,

our jobs,

our family squabbles and issues,

our sense of betrayal,

our relational frustrations,

and our wounds of every stripe.

He could have come as an angel,
as an emperor,
as a fiery flying serpent,
a vision,
an oracle,
a website on some steampunk terminal
that would have wowed the masses,
but he came as nothing remarkable.

He came like us.

Sometimes people question God's wisdom in all this. They wonder if maybe God didn't misplay His cards by coming as something so understated, like maybe it's God's fault if we miss Him, or misunderstand Him, or consider ourselves misfit for religion.

I understand where that sentiment comes from – even the Saskatchewanians love a good Michael Bay movie – but it is a short-sighted version of an all-too familiar history.

The history in question?

The First Testament –
complete with its burning bush,
its flood,
its pillars of salt and columns of flame,
its midnight wrestling matches
and metaphysical priests from Selah –
gave us all the wham! pow! the world could ever desire
of its supreme deity,
and few people took God seriously then.

God, in His infinite wisdom, knew that the way forward was the Walter-way, the way of overalls and sheep-dip shoes.



WHY IDENTIFY?

And as to why God felt it was so important to identify with us? Five reasons that I can think of:

God is coming to identify with us in our wounds and in our suffering so we know we're not alone. When we are hurt, sad, or confused, many of us often wonder how a good and loving God could allow us to go through such misery. We ought to take comfort, knowing not only that Christ endured this kind of misery and overcame it – living with great joy – but that God is with us in those miserable moments, teaching us to hope and giving us the courage to live with joy in spite of the world's troubles.

Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to Him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

1 Peter 2.21b-25

God is coming to model for us what it means to be truly human. So many times we find ourselves in situations that are difficult to navigate. Today, for example, a woman I didn't know approached me in the parking lot of my son's elementary school and asked for advice concerning her son. She had heard him use a derogatory term for people of an alternative lifestyle as an insult on the playground and wanted to explain to him why it was so bad ... but couldn't. Her son is six and doesn't even know what sex is, let alone what sexual orientation is or why prejudicial remarks concerning homosexuals can be deeply alienating. Jesus is our model for how to love others. Jesus is our model for how to live well. When there are no clear-cut rules, and when life seems like so many varied shades of gray, we can find wisdom and guidance by studying the life of Christ and emulating his postures, behaviors, and convictions. In the case of this woman and her son, I encouraged her simply to focus on the hurt words like this can inflict without exposing him any earlier than necessary to sexual mores and preferences. This response resonated with her, and she went away affirmed that God had given her an answer based upon the compassion of Christ for children in a broken world.

...you were taught in [Christ] in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

Ephesians 4.21b-24

God is coming to incorporate us back into His well-ordered creation as image-bearers. We were once made by God to be like God (I have written on this subject extensively in *Shadowing God: living with dignity and humility in God's image*). We were made as God's stewards, His looking-after creatures, and we were given authority and responsibility over the earth. With that cultural mandate came a certain bearing, a dignity but a humility also, and we lived in this world like God's shadows – tethered to Him and cooperating with Him in the care and cultivation of the created world. Somewhere along the way, we left all of that behind and chose to live for ourselves instead. We've neglected God, the world, our true selves as godly people, and one another in the process. Jesus came as the perfect Image of a human being, and when we embrace Jesus that Image is reprinted within us and grows inside of us like some benevolent infection.

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in Heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in Heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Colossians 1.15-20

God is coming to heal the world for us and with us and through us. Since we've made such a mess of things over the last few thousand years (give or take), and since God loves this world He created (as well as all who live in it or on it and certainly with it), God has revealed a plan in which every wrong thing will be set right. Some of that can be set right now, though much will need to be set right later on. But the point remains that God is interested in our beginning to live now like we were originally intended to live and will one day live again in His well (re)ordered creation.



See, I will create new Heavens and a new earth.
The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.
But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create,
 for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy.
I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people;
 the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more.

Isaiah 65.17-19

God is coming to usher in His kingdom rule and reign. Much of the language of wound and decay in the Bible is quite scary. The brokenness within ourselves and within our world is known theologically as sin. And sin, for all our own complicity with it and in it, is seen as the great instrument of a dark and menacing power. That power, a personality really, is known in the Scriptures as *ha-Satan* (literally, 'the accuser') and ever since sin first entered the world through the first act of disobedience against God, much of the authority in this world has rested with Satan. The time has now come for God to reclaim this authority and restore it to His people. And though now we experience some measure of reclaimed authority, a time will come in which God will fully rule and reign over this earthly kingdom, and the kingdom of Satan will be utterly annihilated.

I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you.

Luke 10.19

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Acts 1.8

So, to rephrase and recap our original question: Who is coming and why?

We must now answer that God is coming as a humble tradesman,
living under a cloud of suspicion,
in order to identify with us
so that we might take comfort when we suffer,
learn to be humane,
find our purpose in this life,
figure out what we're supposed to do
while we're alive,
and to break the power of darkness over us
and give us – instead –
power over that darkness forever.

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found,
Far as the curse is found,
Far as, far as, the curse is found.

He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders, wonders, of His love.
Joy to the World, stanzas 3 & 4

How did it get this way?

Just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, death came to all people, because all have sinned.

Romans 5.12

In the Nickelodeon cartoon *Avatar*, episode 11 (“The Great Divide”), there is a story about Ang (the hero, the Avatar) needing to settle a dispute between two warring tribes. One tribe is dirty and uncouth; the other is refined and snobbish. Their tribal feud goes back hundreds of years, with neither side having a clear or accurate memory about when the two brothers – one of whom founded each of the two tribes – began to hate each other and become adversaries. All these tribes people know is that they’ve hated each other for a long time because their parents hated each other and their grandparents, and so on and so forth.

Family feud, anyone?

Of course, these cartoon characters aren’t the only people to be adversely affected by the prior generations’ grudges and wars. The Protestants and Catholics in Ireland – both of whom claim to worship the Prince of Peace – have fought famously, as have the Palestinians and Jews in the Holy Land, and the Serbs and Croats in the Balkans.

While we are not necessarily doomed to follow in the footsteps of our parents, there do seem to be an awful lot of Montagues and Capulets running around the world’s theatre of war.

OUR SPIRITUAL PARENTS

Given what we know about this kind of long-standing animosity,
is it really so hard for us to believe
that a long, long time ago there were only a handful of people –
a man and his wife, their two sons –
who lived in peaceful harmony –
enjoying nature, eating sweet fruits –
and that in this blissful existence
there was no strife
and no distance
between God and humanity?

Isn't that the sort of story upon which all our fairy tales are based?

But like every story since, I suppose, that one incubated tragedy.
Adam, the first man –
created by God to be a steward of the world –
and Eve, the first woman –
created to be a helper for Adam in the way God Himself was considered
a helper to the cosmos –
disobeyed.

They sinned.

To be fair, they didn't sin right away. Who knows how long they enjoyed paradise before they lost it. Ten minutes? Ten thousand years? Maybe Eve really was Mitochondrial Eve, our famous ancestor that anthropologists tell us was the mother of humanity almost 200,000 years ago in East Africa. Maybe not. That's not really the point of the story, though, is it?

The point of the story is that Adam and Eve, charged by God to look after the earth, to fill it, and to subdue it, eventually grew dissatisfied and broke one of only two injunctions, eating fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

They sinned, and through their actions sin entered the world like so many mice in a barn.



Coffee shop philosophers and moleskin-journaling college students love to debate about whether or not it's even possible for the sin of Adam and Eve to truly infect humanity with the condition St. Augustine called "Original Sin." Those discussions are sometimes fun, but most of us living in the cold light of day know that even if Adam and Eve hadn't sinned, we still would have.

Sin enters the world through me,
every time I disobey,
every time I wander,
every time I am careless or hurtful,
bitter,
resentful,
or angry.

Sin enters the world through my shortcomings,
through my judgments,
and through my hypocrisy.

All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

Romans 3.23

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

1 John 1.8

SIN IS A RELATIONAL WORD

Properly understood, sin is distortion in any direction. That means that any time we do anything wrong – big or little, accidental or intentional – it's sin.

Ouch.

When faced with this touchy little fact, most of us respond by justifying our sins. We call them "little white lies" or "indiscretions" or whatnot, but according to God, those things are sin.

That doesn't mean that all sin is equal, however. Some sins have much farther-reaching consequences. An extra-marital affair, for example, is going to cause you a lot more heartache than a half-truth spoken to an acquaintance at the grocery store. It's worth mentioning that most of these consequences are unintended, no matter how foreseeable they may be, and that we never really enjoy the moment when our debt comes due.

The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the Kingdom of God.

Galatians 5.19-21

These consequences need to be suffered and dealt with; they cannot be ignored. As I've written extensively elsewhere (see *Sin Monkey: dealing with the devil inside*), sin needs to be put right. We need to make restitution in order for that sin to be removed and the conditions of our lives repaired back to their original state.

The law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

Hebrews 9.22

Now "sin" is a relational word. In every instance in the Bible where sin occurs, it becomes very clear that some things are called sin and are therefore abhorrent to God because those behaviors/attitudes/associations ruin our relationships – either our relationship with God, our relationship with others, our relationship with our true selves as shadows of God, or our relationship to the world around us.

Murder, for example, is a sin in three directions:

- it is a violation against another person,
 thereby breaking our relationship with them entirely;
- it is a violation against God,
 who made that person and loves them unconditionally;
- and it is a violation against ourselves,
 for we have abdicated (again) our responsibility
 to those around us and to creation, for which we are stewards.

Theft is a sin, likewise, in at least two directions:

- against the other person,
 from whom we've stolen, again fracturing (at least)
 our relationship (or the possibility of our relationship)
 with them;
- and against God,
 who loves that person and values their protection.



Everything is about relationship.

Consider this passage from Romans, in which Paul describes the ultimate rebellion of humanity against God in almost exclusively relational terms:

For although [the Israelites] *knew* God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and *exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images* made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and *worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator*—who is forever praised.

Romans 1.18-25 (*italics mine*)

THE SOLUTION TO THE SIN-PROBLEM

The point that I'm trying to make here is two-fold:

First, we have all contributed to the corruption of this world, either knowingly or unwittingly;

Second, the “sin problem” we all share isn't so much a question of law-breaking as it is of heart-breaking. The real issue behind our sins is not our failure to obey but our failure to love in the appropriate ways with the appropriate priorities.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself.

Luke 10.27

Taken together, all of this means that the solution to our sin problem must also be two-fold:

First, it must be a solution that benefits and cleanses us all;

Second, it must be a relational solution, meaning it has to reconnect us to God more than it has to keep us in line with a bunch of religious rules.

It must be a solution that reconnects us to each other, to the world, and to our true selves as shadows of God, rather than just being a better kind of holy legislation sketched out by a Heavenly or intergalactic parliament.

As we'll see in the next chapter, it is precisely that kind of two-pronged solution that God offers us – a new beginning in a new creation.

But before we can fully appreciate that solution, allow me simply to summarize why we need a solution once again. In answer to the questions: *How did things get this way? Why is the world so bashed, beaten, and bruised?*

We can respond with one deadly word: Humanity.

As a species – no, we're more than that – as God's representatives in this world, we have neglected our responsibility to him, to each other, to creation, and to our true identity as God's shadows.

We have misappropriated our god-given authority
and abandoned our post,
so to speak,
and everything is a big can of smashed tomatoes because of it.

Okay – now on to the good news...

How will it get fixed?

The first man Adam became a living being; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit. The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual. The first man was of the dust of the earth; the second man is of Heaven. As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the Heavenly man, so also are those who are of Heaven. And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the Heavenly man.

1 Corinthians 15.45-49

The Dresden Files are a series of science fiction novels that center on Harry Dresden, a modern-day wizard, living in Chicago and working as a private investigator. They're not exactly what you'd call "high art," but being a fan of SF, I like them anyway.

In the compilation of Dresden short stories *Side Jobs*, there is a tale about the war for our memories. According to the story "Backup," there has been a contest since time immemorial among gods and lesser deities of all kinds and calibers. This contest concerns the origin story of humanity and control over the telling of that story – and, by corollary, over the meaning of human existence. Lesser gods have been swallowed up by new religions, given new names in the new dogma by the new clerics, and so on; whereas some of the old gods, who used to be terrifying, have now been depleted through the slow neglect of time and age. Both they, and their power, have diminished.

Sure, there hasn't been a First Church of Marduk for a while now. But Tiamat got an illustration in the *Monster Manual* and had the role in that cartoon, so she's probably better off.

Bob the Skull, explaining how hard it is for the old gods to keep up their pubic profile, in *Backup*

Jim Butcher, the author and creator of the *Dresden Files*, isn't alone in his assessment of the contemporary god-flict. Neil Gaiman's fascinating book *American Gods* explores much the same theme, with the modern gods of Industry, Entertainment, and Technology facing off against Thor and Odin; and the contest over our origin story and its relative power was a favorite theme of H.P. Lovecraft, whose dark deity Cthulu waited for a supplicant to bring him back into the world through a memory, an incantation, and an opportune time.

BEGIN AT THE BEGINNING

I think these gents fancy this concept so greatly because it's true: where you begin has a profound bearing on where you are now and where you're going to be soon.

If you want to know what's going on, you'd best start at the beginning.

In the beginning God created the Heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

Genesis 1.1-2

In the Christian story, the beginning concerns God's loving creation of this world and everything in it as a self-disclosing, interdependent, ever-complexifying ecosystem in which matter and spirit are fused together into humanity and the nonhuman inhabitants of Earth.

Pretty cool, right?

Of course, as we mentioned in the previous chapter, things kind of went downhill from there. Sin entered the world like a cancer, eating away at the cellular structure of our spirituality, our ecology, and our interdependence.



That is why the solution for our sin problem must begin at the beginning, not only with the time when sin entered the world -- in order to remove it, but with the time before sin entered the world -- in order to restore creation to its perfect design.

A NEW BEGINNING

Jesus Christ came to bring us new creation, a new genesis if you will. This is a favorite theme within Luke's gospel and within Paul's theology. Luke was a gentile (non-Jewish) doctor and by all accounts a student of Paul, the chief thinker and itinerant authority for the earliest followers of Christ after the resurrection.

For example, in Luke 3.23 we read that "Jesus began his work..." Interestingly, if you were to translate Luke's writing directly from Greek to English, the most accurate rendering of the text would say, "Jesus beginning." Obviously, that doesn't make great sense grammatically, but it does make Luke's intention very clear: he is connecting Jesus' beginning to The Beginning by using the Greek word *arche*, which means "source" (and which Greek translators used to translate Genesis 1.1 from Hebrew to Greek).

Luke talks about "Jesus beginning" also at the end of his gospel (see 23.5), reminding us that it was always God's intention for us to understand Christ's work as a kind of (re)creation. Luke also opens up his sequel (the Book of Acts, which concerns the beginnings of Christianity and its churches in the Roman Empire) by reminding us that Jesus' (new) beginning did not end with his death and resurrection but continues now through us, his church (see Acts 1.1).

Jesus brings us all a new beginning. What God began in Genesis 1.1, Jesus re-vamped in Luke 3.23.

Other clues in Luke's gospel support Jesus' new creation agenda. For example, in Luke 3.22 we read about the Spirit hovering over the waters at Jesus' baptism in the same language that Genesis 1.1-2 describes the Spirit hovering over the waters at creation. Likewise, Luke records that the Spirit overshadowed Mary as life came into her womb, just like the Spirit overshadowed creation to bring life into the world.

If there really is a war for the oblivion of human memory, let us not forget how this all got started: God made the world in love, and then it was corrupted. God then chose to enter the world in the midst of all its corruption and birth within it a new beginning.

That new beginning has some ecological and cosmological significance to be sure, but the Scriptures make it clear that nothing could be more significant than the fact that this new beginning is for you and me.

A NEW HUMANITY

Jesus came to usher in a new creation, but he did so by coming as a new Adam – a Second Adam, if you will – and he worked to undo the disorder the first Adam (and we, his descendants) had created. Christmas was the moment when God sent someone to clean up the mess of the world. A human being had gotten us into this mess; a human being would sort it all out.

Theologians have a five-dollar word for this: “recapitulation,” which means something like a summary, or a way to draw conclusions. Jesus, then, is the summary statement of God’s intention for humanity.

It’s like God is in Heaven pointing excitedly at Jesus, yelling at us, saying: *Like that, you were supposed to be like that. Get it?*

Everything Adam did to bring sin into the world, Christ undid (or redid) to get rid of that sin.

This is why, in the medieval mystery tradition, the same actor who portrayed Adam in the theatre often returned at the end of the play to portray Christ – it was a way of reminding us that Jesus was the Second Adam, come to undo the mistakes of the first Adam.

The first Adam was called a “son of God” and was given that sonship by God Himself (see Genesis 2.7), but He allowed that divine-stamp to be corrupted when sin entered the world, and through Him death gained access to all humanity (see Hebrews 2.8-9). The second Adam was called the Son of God and was also given that sonship by God (see Matthew 1.1, Romans 1.4), but through the obedience of Christ and his sacrificial death, the power of sin has been depleted and death is no longer an enemy (see Romans 5.12-19).

So, whereas Adam was disobedient and ate the fruit of a tree, Christ was obedient even to the point of being killed on a tree. And as in Adam all die, so in Christ all are made alive (1 Corinthians 15.22).



The first Adam sought to be God but was only a man. The second Adam sought to become only a man, and could do so only because he was God.

Most of us probably don't realize that the term "son of God" was used to refer to a lot of different people through the ages before Christ ever came and claimed the title for himself. For example, firstborn sons in a Jewish home were considered "sons of God," and – for that matter – every good Israelite was considered a "son of God." Most famously, though, the term "son of God" referred to the angels.

The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterward—when the sons of God went to the daughters of humans and had children by them. They were the heroes of old, men of renown.

Genesis 6.4

In this passage we read about angels having sex with human women and their children becoming something like Titans or superheroes. According to the book of 1 Enoch (a book not in our Bible but quoted twice in the Second Testament), the angels were responsible for corrupting these women, introducing them to fornication, incantation, witchcraft, cosmetics, and spellcasting.

Since the Hebrew people had been unsuccessful in their covenant obligations, and since the angels had neglected their God-given duty to shepherd humanity, we can see that these "sons of God" were not truly God's offspring, at least not in the way He'd intended them to be.

Jesus is the type for which the ancient Israelites, the celestial corps, and even the first Adam were the parody. Everyone prior to Jesus simply could not adequately fulfill their role as a son of God, and it took Christ to show us the kind of son they were supposed to be, just as he is the Son we're supposed to be.

Once sin and death had entered the world, God immediately sought to make things right and restore His relationship to a fallen and corrupted humanity. God called to Adam in the Garden, just as Jesus called to his disciples from their various vocations like a shepherd calling to his sheep. Jesus also promises that he will later call upon the dead, and those that hear his voice will come into resurrection life (John 5.25).

And like God breathed life into Adam, Jesus breathed the Spirit into his disciples (John 20.22) so they could have new life in his new creation, having benefitted from his recapitulation of all that had gone wrong.

Luke's genealogy clearly shows Jesus as a descendant of Adam, and – by proxy – a “relative” to the entire human race, since we all, at this level, are Adam's offspring. Jesus was not just the Jewish Messiah: he was the Savior of the world, of all ethnicities, of every tribe and tongue and nation in history. Adam is the father of humanity. Jesus comes to fix the mess his ancestor has made, the mess we've been stuck with for thousands of years, and he offers us participation in his solution for a better world.

Just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous. The law was brought in so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Romans 5.18-21

THE SOLUTION TO THE SIN-PROBLEM (REDUX)

Now if you're having a difficult time making sense of all this, do not despair. I am simply providing you with the solid biblical evidence in support of the solution we spoke of in the previous chapter.

Remember that our sin problem is two-fold:

first, we are all corrupted by sin;

second, the real problem with sin is that it messes with our relationships.

Remember, also, that the solution to our sin problem needed to be two-fold:

first, that it was a solution that fixed the sin in us;

second, that it was a solution that healed our relationships in every direction.

That's what all this recapitulation mumbo-jumbo is about: God's solution to the problem of our sin. In the first place, this solution affects every one of us who give our heartfelt



allegiance to Jesus Christ, the Second Adam, and thereby receive the new beginning he makes available to all who desire to reclaim their original God-intended identity as shadows of God. Secondly, this solution affects not only our identity, but also our relationships with God, with each other, and with the world, because Jesus came not only as a Second Adam, but also to usher in a new creation and to restore into this world the conditions God originally intended for the cosmos.

If you recall, this was the point we first began making all those pages and pages ago when we asked the question: *What is Advent really about?*

Once again, with feeling, Advent is about the coming of a Savior to heal the wounds of the world caused by sin. Advent gives us a new starting point, a new beginning, by bringing to us a new Adam.

Advent changes things

If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!

2 Corinthians 5.17

Whenever we change schools, change jobs, or even move to a new neighborhood, we are often confronted with an opportunity most of the world wishes it got more often: we get to start over.

After my freshman year of college I changed schools, and though I had great friends at my last school, I found myself thinking critically about what I'd do differently in my new setting. Since I was given the chance to reinvent myself, even if only in little ways, I figured I wanted to take that chance and make the most of it. I partied less. I studied more. I got engaged. I was successful in ministry and in sports.

It was good.

I had a similar experience when I took the job as Coriolis: Narrative at Westwinds. Again, though my life had been great up until that point, I still wanted to capitalize on the opportunity to get a fresh start, to make a new beginning, and to reinvent myself, even so slightly, as more gracious, more forgiving, and less likely to hold onto old wounds, old hurts, and old grudges.



CHRIST COMES, CHANGE

Christ is always coming to us offering us that new beginning, but instead of changing our circumstances or our job or even our nationality, he comes inside us, offering the opportunity to change from the inside out right now, and then again later, and then again after that.

Christ's coming causes us to change. He is born into us, just as he was born into Mary, and just as he is born into the world. We must find ways to welcome his Advent, to be hospitable in each moment, and to embrace his new beginning – his divine do over – that allows us to make recompense and restitution for our sin, while empowering us to live free from sin's contamination in the future.

This is worth celebrating! This is the reason for caroling and figgy pudding (as if we needed one). This is the reason for midnight mass and chocolate-surprise calendars.

Only Christ, coming into me, could compel me to pick up the phone and go through a list of everyone I'd ever wronged and ask their forgiveness.

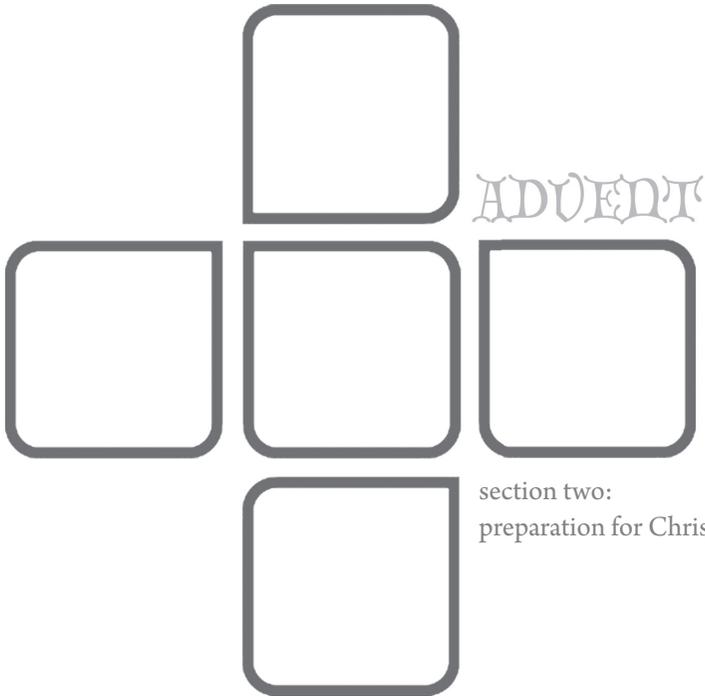
Only Christ, born in me, could inspire me to reserve judgment on hard-hearted religious folk and find ways to love them instead.

Only Christ, with his innate nativity, could embolden me to move my family to another country and in the process to trust that his Spirit would provide whatever wisdom and support I required, separate as I now am from all prior support and counsel.

He comes to us, and he changes us. He gives us a new beginning. He welcomes us into a better world and, as we'll discuss later, gives us the opportunity to cooperate with him to redeem it even further.

That is what Advent is about.





Be ready

In first grade at Harold Bishop Elementary, I was selected to play the part of Joseph in the Christmas pageant. This was a big deal, particularly since public schools had decided that this was the last year “religious” pageants could be performed. I was chosen to be Joseph because my dad was a pastor, and *obviously* I was more in touch with the motivation of Joseph’s character than everyone else.

Obviously.

Little did my teacher/director know that the school pageant was on the same night as some event at our church, and if we hurried we would just barely – barely – be able to make it from the church event (our highest priority) to the public school event (a distant second).

We hurried, but we didn’t make it. Not even close. Mary gave birth to the Christ-child, and her degenerate fiancé was nowhere to be found.

Typical.

Men – they’re never around when you need them.

I can remember that awful feeling as I entered the back of the school gymnasium, wearing flip-flops and a bathrobe with a towel wrapped around my head, holding a hockey stick

for a cane. I remember the shock as everyone turned to see who had blundered in late and the shame as they understood now why Jesus would later have absentee father issues.

MISSING THE MESSIAH

I wasn't there when Christ came into the world. I was unprepared, and I missed his Advent.

We are often unprepared for the comings of Christ, and Jesus warned us of the perils of unpreparedness:

At that time the Kingdom of Heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

At midnight the cry rang out: *Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!*

Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, *Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.*

No, they replied, there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.

But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

Later the others also came. *Lord, Lord, they said, open the door for us!*

But he replied, *Truly I tell you, I don't know you.*

Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

Matthew 25.1-13

Weddings in the ancient Arabic world were quite a spectacle. Typically, the weddings would be held out of doors, at night, and the party prior to the actual wedding ceremony could go on for the better portion of an entire day. The foolish virgins likely arrived just



before noon with only the oil already in their lamps to sustain them until the ceremony, which would begin whenever the groom chose to arrive with his father. When the ceremony concluded, the bride and groom would leave the party and enter the groom's house and consummate the marriage behind closed doors. Until that time, however, it was the job of the bridesmaids (virgins here) to keep the way lit between bride and groom.

It's not hard to imagine how beautiful such a scene would be. The dark evening, the music and laughter, and a path lit to a blushing bride at the altar. Or mostly lit, anyway... because it's also not hard to imagine a certain kind of person neglecting her duty and forgetting to keep her side of the pathway lit until the right time. It's not hard to imagine party-goers lost in revelry, or young people caught up in the moment.

In this little story Jesus illustrates that his comings often occur without warning and when we least expect it. Surely he had in mind the many people who did not adequately prepare for his birth, just as he clearly had in mind the many people who will not be ready for his triumphant return into the world. But I think he also had in mind those of us who are not prepared now to receive him as he comes.

We should prepare for his coming and do so in the right ways.

If we don't prepare, or if we prepare incorrectly, we may miss him when he comes (now and later on). We may miss the significance of his coming; we may not recognize him; we may not be able to partner with him to do the things he says he's coming to do.

What causes this lack of preparation?

There are many reasons, I suppose, but I think three of the major ones may suffice to give us the gist.

First, we often miss Christ's comings because of blindness. Simply, we do not know how to recognize him when he comes. When he came the first time, many people – the Pharisees, for example, that ancient group of spiritual leaders, the Wizengamot of Palestine – were expecting a king or a kind of televangelist. But he was none of these things. He was either the antithesis of these things or, more accurately, he embodied such a complete reworking of the true nature of royalty and priesthood that people could not reconcile their preconceived ideas with the reality of his coming.

We make this mistake all the time. We cannot recognize Christ in the stranger, in those in need in front of our office buildings, in the likeness of our enemies. We cannot recognize him when he speaks to us in small ways, let alone big ones. We must pray for sight.

[Jesus said,] *I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.*

Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, *What? Are we blind too?*

Jesus said, *If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.*

John 9.39b-41

Another reason we often miss God is our narrowness, meaning our sharply defined expectations of just exactly how God should work and what exactly He should do. If blindness is not recognizing the way God appears, then narrowness is not recognizing the means through which God achieves His purpose. We need open minds, open spirits, and an open posture to the endless fount of possibilities and means through which God can and often does work His will in the world.

Too often, however, we get an idea in our minds of what God must do in order to satisfy our designs, and as a result we miss out on the opportunity to partner with Him as he does whatever He chooses in whatever manner He chooses, often right beside us. Jesus chastises the Pharisees again for their narrow understanding of God and His means in Matthew 11:

I tell you the truth: among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the Kingdom of Heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. Whoever has ears, let them hear.

To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others:

*We played the pipe for you,
and you did not dance;
we sang a dirge,
and you did not mourn.*

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, *He has a demon*. The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, *Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners*.

Matthew 11.11-19a

The point Jesus is making is that no one – even John and Jesus himself! – can measure up to the Pharisees’ strict notion of holiness. For the Pharisees, most people are either too severe or too joyous, and in their minds, the only option for acceptable godliness is to become a Pharisee yourself. Our churches are rife with this kind of closed-mindedness, this spiritual severance. If we’re Pentecostal, we think that God can’t work through Baptists or that God is only active in Evangelical denominations and not in NGOs or whatever. But because we begin looking for God in only the narrowest of places, we usually never get a glimpse of precisely how frequently he comes now, or how powerfully.

The last common way in which I think we often miss God is through our hang-ups, our idiosyncrasies, and our preferences. These are the things we care deeply about that, in the grand scheme, don’t really matter. Our worship style, for example, doesn’t really matter, but we often miss the comings of Christ because we’re preoccupied with things like worship or church government or political issues. But it’s a provocative truth that when we care more about how we do church than about the mission of Christ to reach lost people and heal the world, we have prostituted the gospel and traded its power away for our preferences. God forgive us when we do this, for this is the same sin Jesus confronted in the Pharisees:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

Matthew 23.23-24

Knowing that we have the tendency to miss Christ when he comes, and knowing that there are real-life consequences for doing so, ought to make us want to prepare for his

coming in the right ways so we can welcome him appropriately and cooperate with him enthusiastically in his mission to heal the world.

To that end I'd like to look at three contrasting groups of people at Advent:

the Cynics, represented by Jesus' family, being those that don't really believe he's coming now in this way;

the Antagonists, represented by certain Jewish factions and the Romans, being those who don't want him to come or come in this way;

and the Co-operants and Visionaries, represented by certain characters within the nativity story who heard of his coming and modeled for us the right ways in which to prepare.

The cynics

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Luke 2.4-7

Both *Seven Samurai* and *The Magnificent Seven* (the 1960 American remake which takes place south of the US American border) tell the tale of a small village besieged by bandits. The villagers plea with a motley band of heroes to defend them. In both films, the heroes arrive in these villages with no money, no resources, and no place to sleep.

So they sleep in barns, which apparently are nicer in Mexico than Kyoto.

The heroes don't complain, though. They're manly men, and since they are faced with something like ten-to-one odds stacked against them, it's likely that their relative nighttime comfort is compromised anyway.

For all my theological education, and all other images supplied to me that may better fit the context, I just can't help but imagine Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem and

then giving birth to the boy Jesus in between Yule Brenner, Steve McQueen and James Coburn, the magi at high noon.

FAMILY OUTCAST

Because of the census ordered by Caesar, Joseph returns to his hometown of Bethlehem with his pregnant fiancée, Mary. When they arrive, they discover “there is no room for them in the inn.” The Greek word that we’ve translated “inn” is the word *katalyma*, which wasn’t a hotel so much as it was a guest room in a large family home – in this case, the *katalyma* in question would have been at the home of Joseph’s family. To give you a picture of such a space, Luke describes Jesus eating the Last Supper with his disciples in a *katalyma* in Luke 22. It was a modest, comfortable space for conversation, dining, and casual repose.

Bethlehem homes were built into grottos or near the mouths of caves so that three of the four sides of the home were protected from the elements. These homes were two stories. The top floor contained the living quarters, the bottom floor was kind of half-garage, half-barn. Because animals were often the most prized possession of the peasantry, the animals were kept inside on this bottom floor in order to keep them safe from thieves and bad weather. The floor was covered with straw, making it comfortable for the livestock but also acting as insulation for the rest of the home. The animals downstairs were simultaneously treasured and utilized as prized possessions and pre-industrial HVAC units.

That there was “no room in the inn” actually meant that Joseph’s family put their pregnant daughter-in-law-to-be in the pole barn. The lack of space for the Holy Family was not due to poor planning on Joseph’s end, however, but to a deliberate slight on the part of his family. There was a *katalyma* in these Bethlehem homes, and it wasn’t the bottom floor. Someone else, presumably someone who either (a) hadn’t gotten his girlfriend pregnant or (b) wasn’t about to marry some girl who cheated on her fiancé, was given the guest room while Mary was relegated to the kennel.

I mentioned in the previous chapter that Joseph’s family were good representations of people who are cynical about Christ coming at this time, in this way. I reiterate that point now. They deliberately disregarded Mary’s “situation,” partly as punishment for her perceived indiscretion and partly as a manifestation of skepticism concerning God’s involvement in an illegitimate birth.



By all accounts Jesus never fully forgot the insulting circumstances of his entry into the world. He knew what it was like to be cast out, unwanted, and homeless. He knew what it was like for his own family to deny him entry into their home. He was kicked out of his own house before he was even born into it, and as a result Jesus frequently spoke about his desire to give every person a home with their Heavenly Father.

Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.

Luke 9.58

My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

John 14.2-3

BABY IN THE CORNER

Like Jesus, we often feel like there is no room for us in the world. We have a difficult time fitting in. We don't always know our place. We wonder what we have to do in order to settle into our niche, and again Christ provides a powerful answer: we must decrease the room we need. You see, in order for God to fit into a place "with no room" for Him, He had to empty Himself. If there was no space for God in Israel, then God would become something less – a man – and take up His royal residence in a barn.

He made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself.

Philippians 2.7b-8a

Like Christ, we must empty ourselves of all our expectations concerning our place in this world. There is no room for us here; we are over-occupied and have no room even for ourselves. This is why "time alone" is such a luxury. The command to "be fruitful and multiply" (see Genesis 1.28) has been fulfilled to excess, and there is now no room for anything or anyone – not in our great cities, or in our places of privilege, or in our hearts and minds, or in the social structures that cause cliques in high school and that neglect opportunities to the "have-nots" in business.

Furthermore, we have given the best space in our schedule and in our spirits to things other than Christ because he is so inconvenient, because religion needs to stay in one corner of our lives, because we don't want to be bothered with the neediness of a savior waiting to be born into our world.

Somehow we have neglected to plan for Christ in the same way that his family, in all their cynicism and skepticism, neglected to prepare for his coming. We are complicit in the sin of putting the baby in the corner.

Of course, Jesus' troubling birth was not the only hardship he would endure. When he was two years old his family was forced to flee to Egypt to escape infanticide, Herod's infamous Massacre of the Innocents. As an adult Jesus would often find himself abandoned by his closest friends and even ultimately betrayed.

He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, *My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me ...* [later] he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. *Couldn't you men keep watch with me for one hour?*

Matthew 26.37-38, 40

This very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.
Jesus, to Peter, on the night Christ was betrayed.

Jesus lived life without any real companionship and without any comfort. Is it any wonder, then, that he promises to send us another comforter who can be with us in the ways that no one was with him?

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Mark 15.34b

I will ask the Father, and He will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.

John 14.16-18



Jesus had what we today would call “issues.” I don’t mean to imply that he was mentally ill or somehow messed up; he just had a lot of stuff to work through. He was victimized. He suffered. But he refused to be characterized by those things which he suffered, and he refused to remain a victim. Instead, he turned his homelessness into the promise of a home for all. He turned his isolation into a promise of universal comfort.

What do we do with our issues? Do we nurse them? Do we hide behind them? Or, like Christ, do we reverse them and use them as the engine through which we shadow God and heal the world?

How long will we choose to remain patients before we finally begin our lives as practitioners?

What happens to Christ when we do not prepare for his coming?

He has no home.

He is without comfort.

Today, we must make room for him in our hearts.

We must pay attention to him;

we must be there for him – present with him.

We give the vagabond God a home in us,

and we give the Lonely Lord our persistent attention.

The antagonists

My friend Taj is famous for missing flights. I don't know why this is, but we've traveled together a few times, and he's missed two of the three flights we were meant to catch. That stuff frustrates me, but Taj just stares at me blankly and says: *big deal, that happens to me all the time.*

I've known some very spiritual people in my life, and they often have the same attitude about Christ that I do about planes. Whereas I feel like I miss Christ's comings sort-of regularly (and have learned how to cope, for better or worse), for them it's a big deal.

I want it to be a big deal when I miss God. I want to feel like they do – like I do, at the very least, about a missed flight – because deep in my guts I know how important it is to be attentive to the movement of God.

In my mind there were four people (or groups of people) who either were unprepared or prepared inappropriately for Christ's First Coming: the Romans, the Zealots, Herod, and the Pharisees. These were the Advent Antagonists, and as such, they represent four attitudes and postures that we must eliminate in our daily lives in order to better welcome Christ as he comes to us.

NO NEED FOR A MESSIAH

To begin with, the Romans weren't interested in a Messiah of any kind. For one thing, they had their own savior, Caesar, who was to them the Son of God, the Son of Man,

and the Divine One. They knew Caesar as the Prince of Peace, the Savior of the World, and the Liberator. Before these titles ever belonged to Jesus, they were given to Caesar; and actually, these titles were ultimately given to Jesus as a way of taking them back from Caesar and boldly proclaiming, as Paul did, that there is only one Lord of All:

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Ephesians 4.5-6

The competition between Caesar and Jesus continued:

Both Jesus and Caesar were regarded as the Son of God, because Caesar was supposedly born of Apollo, whereas Christ was the son of YHWH.

Both Jesus and Caesar were born in royal cities. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, marking him as an heir to David, a potential Messianic claimant for the throne of Jerusalem and Israel. Caesar was born in Rome, the capital city of the Empire.

Both claimed long-standing genealogies—Jesus tracing his back over three thousand years to Adam (see Matthew 1 and Luke 3), and Caesar claiming a genealogy going back a thousand years to Aphrodite.

Both were heralded by a star. The birth of Jesus was illuminated by a star that led three Persian magicians all the way to Bethlehem. Caesar's birth was also heralded by a star, leading several dignitaries from Troy to Rome.

So the Romans had no interest in a Jewish Messiah because they had a savior of their own. Additionally, they had no interest in a Jewish Messiah, because every time one of those guys showed up, things got very hairy very quickly.

Consider that Jesus was born just before the death of Herod the Great in 4 BCE. When Herod died, there was a huge amount of unrest all over Israel. Much of this unrest was caused by the many rebellions against the Roman occupation of Israel and the efforts of the Jews to replace Herod (Rome's puppet) with a godly and righteous ruler like their legendary King, David.

When the Romans put down those rebellions, they did so punitively and aggressively. In particular, the rebellion at Sepphoris (the capital of Galilee), led by a rebel named Judas, caused the entire city to be burned down and all of its people sold as slaves.

Lucius Annus put to the sword a thousand of the youth, who had not already escaped, made prisoners of women and children, gave his soldiers license to plunder the property, and then set fire to the houses and advanced against the surrounding villages. The able-bodied fled, the feeble perished, and everything left was consigned to the flames.

Josephus, Jewish War 4.488-89

We are like the Romans when we find ourselves disinterested in proclaiming Christ the Lord of our lives. This is more difficult than we might at first consider. Yet there are many competing lords. There are lords of family and business, vocation and recreation. There are lords of sexuality and finance and aberrant versions of those lords like lust and greed. Perhaps the lord we most frequently serve – for, in truth, we often find ourselves flitting back and forth between lords and allegiances, like players in a pickup game of capture the flag or paintball – is the lord of personal comfort. We have a lord already, we reason, and he has saved us from boredom and unhappiness with good homes and good stuff in them, with lots of sex and plenty of friends.

Like the Romans, we often wonder why we need a Jewish Messiah, particularly since they cause so much trouble.

And make no mistake, once we surrender lordship of our lives to Christ Jesus, his coming will make all manner of trouble. He will infect and affect our relationships – causing us to love others, even to the point of sacrifice – and he will require that we make amends when inertia and circumstance lead us to falsely believe that no amends are really necessary.

Christ's coming causes conflict. Undoubtedly, that is what he meant when he brazenly declared he did not come to bring peace, but a sword, and like the Romans, many of us are antagonistic to such an aggressive Advent.

MY GOD'S GONNA GET YOU

On the flip side of Roman disinterest were a group of Jewish rebels – Zealots, as they were called – who wanted a Messiah of violence and aggression. But contrary to the way of Jesus, they did not want an interior and altruistic violence, but a literal one in which Israel's enemies were decimated by the righteous fury and indignation of a jealous God. The Zealots wanted to overthrow the Roman Empire and kick them out of Israel forever.

I find it interesting that Jesus included Simon the Zealot as one of his chosen padawans. There is, it seems, a place for violent Christians – but we must quickly point out that that place is on their knees begging God’s forgiveness for their sin and cultivating the grace of his Spirit so they, too, might forgive their enemies.

You have heard that it was said, *Love your neighbor and hate your enemy*. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in Heaven. He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your Heavenly Father is perfect.

Matthew 5.43-48

The Zealots, with the eventual exception of Simon, were led by a group of avenging priests operating within the Temple. They wanted to live again in a theocracy in which God was both King and Sovereign. They were not prepared for God to show up in vulnerability. Their God was the God of great force, and so they missed Christ’s coming almost entirely. Theirs was the sin of narrowness, and I think we emulate them when we look for military solutions to spiritual problems. When otherwise good Christian people look to politics or foreign invasion as a means of bringing God’s retributive justice to the world, they have fallen under the spell of the Zealots and in their narrowness have missed Christ as he comes to them in vulnerability. We must never forget that the sword Jesus brings is the sword of truth that divides the evil within us from the ontological goodness God implanted at creation. It is a sword of penitence, not of punishment.

A few years back, Pat Robertson, an ultra right-wing conservative Christian, made a bid to be President of the United States. We were living in Canada then, and I was just a boy. My dad is a right-wing conservative, but I remember him watching Robertson’s campaign with a visible sadness. When I asked him what was so wrong about a Christian becoming President, Dad looked at me and said: *If you make someone like this President, then anything they want to do can be easily supported by their interpretation of the Scriptures. I want to serve Jesus, but I don’t want to serve whatever Pat Robertson says Jesus is going to make me do.*

That’s not to say there’s no place for Christians in the political arena or even that Pat Robertson was wrong somehow in running for elected office...just a caution that our desire for God to solve the real problems of our world and ultimately rule and reign in totality cannot be ushered in through any means other than the Spirit.

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus,
 there's just something about that name,
Master, Savior, Jesus,
 like a fragrance after the rain,
Jesus, Jesus, Jesus,
 let all Heaven and earth proclaim,
Kings and kingdoms will all pass away,
 but there's something about that name.

Something About that Name

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

Matthew 24.35

My kingdom is not of this world.

John 18.36

MY SAVIOR IS ME

Like the Romans, Herod the Great wasn't interested in a coming Messiah because he already had a savior. In Herod's case, however, the savior was himself. He had no desire to share power with a new messianic claimant whose presence was likely to either rouse the Romans into further violent action or rouse the Jewish people into new and continued acts of aggression against his patron, Caesar Augustus.

Herod had his own little plans for power and influence. He colluded with the powers of oppression to subjugate his own people, profiting personally from the exploitation of Jewish land and Jewish labor. He was a traitor, and the common Israelites hated him and all the wealthy aristocracy who cooperated with Rome in exchange for special favors.

We are like Herod when we look to ourselves for salvation, when we pride ourselves on our own ability to treat with the powers of oppression and control to leverage our personal gain at someone else's personal cost. When we look to our intellect or our ingenuity to justify our actions, or when the endgame becomes the only game in town, we, like Herod, have abandoned the ancient hope for God and His salvation and chosen to place our faith in ourselves.

That misplaced faith led Herod to do something terribly inhumane: he issued an order that every male child under the age of two years was to be killed by his soldiers.



[Herod] was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.

Matthew 2.16

Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

John Acton, 19th Century English Historian

Recently, some scholars have tried to better contextualize the scale of this infanticide, claiming it was nothing so large as a wholesale extermination. We're told that likely there were perhaps only two dozen babies murdered during that time, but in my mind that doesn't make his actions any less atrocious. Killing one baby to preserve power would be unthinkable, and whether or not Herod killed twenty or two-hundred only makes history paint him with a darker hue of black ink.

Sometimes I think we buy into the lie of proportional sin and distortion. We tell ourselves the sins we commit are really only small things – it's just a few half truths, it's just a small re-working of the numbers; it's just a little extra time away from my family – when in reality, we're just like Herod claiming from beyond the grave to any scholar who will listen: *it's just a few babies, it's not many at all, just a few in case one of them wants something from me.*

Herod was ruled by fear, and we are too. We're afraid we're going to lose our privileges and control if we welcome and embrace Christ in his coming. We're afraid he'll tell us to give everything away to the poor or to fast and pray. We're afraid he'll tell us to leave our families behind and abandon earthly delights in favor of Heavenly pursuits. And our fear that that stuff is actually quite terrible and not good at all – that Christ is spinning us a yarn about “abundant life” – is what drives us to compromise and to cut corners, all the while justifying our stuttering attempts at works-righteousness and self-aggrandizement.

BLINDED BY RELIGION

The final set of Advent Antagonists were perhaps the most ardent, and also the most tragic. The Pharisees were deeply devoted to God and committed to Torah but ultimately missed the manner of God's salvation. I have a lot of respect for this historical group of people. Even though they've been largely vilified in the two millennia since Christ, at the time they were considered the pastors and leaders of their religious communities. No one thought they were bad, mistaken, or corrupt. Even Jesus himself came not with a message of judgment, but with a message that they'd lost the forest for the trees, so to speak. He came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets, not to abolish them.

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I tell you, until Heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Matthew 5.17-19

Still, the Pharisees (as a group, though there were a few exceptions) couldn't quite get their arms around precisely how wrong they truly were. Let me see if I can help you understand why.

In the time prior to Christ's First Advent, there was a sharply defined set of Messianic expectations, meaning the Hebrew people had long been looking for a savior to come and liberate them from foreign military occupation and to restore them into a right relationship with their covenantal Lord. In their minds, such a savior would be like King David, leader of Israel during their "golden years." He would also be like Aaron, a priest who could speak to God on behalf of the people and mediate between their condition and his mercy. Finally, a true Israeli Messiah would be like Jeremiah or Elijah, a prophet who could clearly speak the words of God to the people, thereby giving them confidence as to His intent in the world.

A prophet, a priest, and a king – that's who Messiah was supposed to be. And Jesus did not appear to satisfy any of those criteria. By all appearances, Jesus was simply an upstart with no real connection to the Davidic line of kings because of his illegitimate birth, and no real priestly credentials because of his profession as a tradesman, and no real prophetic anointing as there had not been a true prophet in Israel in over four hundred years.

All that is gold does not glitter,
 Not all those who wander are lost;
 The old that is strong does not wither,
 Deep roots are not reached by the frost.
 From the ashes a fire shall be woken,
 A light from the shadows shall spring;
 Renewed shall be blade that was broken,
 The crownless again shall be king.

J.R.R. Tolkien, in *Lord of the Rings*



And yet, though he did not at first appear to meet these qualifications, Jesus was in fact the fulfillment of all three Messianic types, as is later made clear in both the Gospel stories and the latter writings of the Second Testament:

Jesus was a prophet like Moses (see Deuteronomy 18.18-19 and Acts 3.20-24), performing miraculous signs and wonders (see John 20.30-31) and speaking with wisdom and authority (see Matthew 7.28 and John 7.46).

Jesus was a priest in the Order of Melchizadek (see Genesis 14.18, Psalm 110.4, and Hebrews 5.5-6). Melchizadek was a shadowy figure who appeared to Abraham well before the Hebrew people ever had their own established priesthood. In fact, according to our best scholarship, it is likely that Melchizadek was God-in-human form, a pre-incarnate Christ, being as he was called the “King of the Valley of Peace” (a name much like Jesus’ “Prince of Peace”).

Jesus was a king from the family line of David (see Luke 3.31), a fulfillment of the promise God made to David over a thousand years prior when he guaranteed that his house and his kingdom would be established for ever (see 2 Samuel 2.7).

The Pharisees missed Jesus because they had spent all their time looking in one direction for one kind of solution, instead of opening themselves up to the God of possibilities and receiving whatever He had in store for them.

We’re most like them, I think. Especially now, after thousands of years of Christian history and tradition, we act like we’ve really got everything figured out. We pride ourselves on our Christian practice and theology, forgetting that much of what we do in church today is a cultural construction and not a biblical one – which isn’t necessarily bad, but it is a bad starting point for a posture of openness and willingness to change.

What no eye has seen,
what no ear has heard,
and what no human mind has conceived—
the things God has prepared for those who love Him—
these are the things God has revealed to us by His Spirit.

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God.

1 Corinthians 2.9-10

Having looked now at the various groups and individuals who set themselves over and against Christ's First Coming, it seems only fitting that we turn our attention away from those who missed the boat and toward those who jumped onboard and madly began paddling.

But before we do, allow me to sum up the chief errors of this collection of boat-missers.

The Romans missed Christ because they didn't want him.
The Zealots missed Christ because they didn't see him fight.
Herod missed Christ because he was afraid he would lose his power.
The Pharisees missed Christ because he didn't have the right pedigree.

In all four instances,
Christ didn't fit the model and mold
of people's expectations.

Shouldn't that tell us something?

Shouldn't we, for fear of missing Christ's
coming, hold our expectations loosely?

Since Christ is coming, we must each prepare in the right ways so we don't miss him when he arrives. We must remove any blindness and get over any hang-ups we might have, and we must maintain a strong posture of openness to the many and varied means God may choose to break into our lives.

I think we'll find it's precisely this posture of trust and openness that allows the Co-operants and Visionaries to see Christ as he came. Let us turn to them for instruction.

The co-operants & visionaries

My wife, Carmel, had a difficult relationship with her mother before her mother died. Katherine was a beautiful woman, full of life and zest, but her struggles with alcohol often got the better of her, and that placed tremendous strain on all her relationships.

Prior to becoming a Christian at college, Carmel had almost nothing to do with her mum, but after years of following Jesus, Carmel came to a place where she could finally embrace her mum, welcoming her back into our lives as both mother and grandmother.

This was a long and often troubling process, during which Carmel frequently struggled through feelings of resentment and hurt, but ultimately their relationship was restored to the place where my wife could once again tell her mother that she loved her and was glad to have her in our lives.

That was an important day. That was the day that Christ came into Carmel and into Katherine in strength and maturity, love and power.

It was also an important day because it was Katherine's last day alive. She died that night during her sleep, and Carmel was never again given the opportunity to speak to her mum.

Over the years we have thanked God so many times for his grace and mercy, through which he allowed Carmel to be healed of her old wounds and not only forgive her mum but truly love her.

That's the power of recognizing Christ when he comes: no regrets, no missed opportunities, no moments of self-doubt when we wonder if we'll ever get the chance to make some long wrong right.

The magi, the shepherds, Mary, Simeon, and Anna are the characters within the nativity story who heard of Christ's coming and modeled for us the right ways to receive him. Their example leads us to be people who look for Christ in every circumstance, and who work to cooperate with him in our redemption and healing. These were the people who got it – the ones who recognized Christ and prepared in the right ways for his arrival into the world: magicians, shepherds, a teenage girl, and a mystical pair of masters-level believers.

If there's anything to immediately discern from this list about how we can recognize Christ in his coming, it's that anyone can.

KING OF CROOKED STICKS

Let us begin, then, with the Magi on our exploration of several famous anyones:

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, *Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him...* On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Matthew 2.1-2, 11-12

The Magi were a group of astrologers, alchemists, and diviners who practiced an ancient Persian religion known as Zoroastrianism. Our best contemporary equivalent would be Hinduism or maybe Islam (though Zoroastrianism is still practiced in modern Iran by a small cadre of observers).

Other Magi appear in the Bible. In the First Testament, for example, the prophet Daniel is listed as the *rab mag*, or “chief magus” because he was skilled in interpreting dreams. Daniel was entrusted with a messianic vision: he saw one coming like the Son of Man whose birth would be heralded by a star (see Daniel 7). Similarly, the Book of Acts describes Elymas, a magus at Paphos who was involved with the conversion of Roman proconsul Sergius Paulus.

They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God. But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, *You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind for a time, not even able to see the light of the sun.*

Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand. When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.

Acts 13.6-12

Now, imagine if Christ were coming for the first time today and the people God chose to supernaturally reveal Himself to were Imams and Hindu priests – not credible Christian leaders like Henry Nouwen, Billy Graham, or Rick Warren. Don't you think that would have a significant impact upon our collective psyche?

I'm not suggesting, by the way, that those leaders are misguided somehow; I'm just trying to contextualize the relative strangeness of God's decision to reveal his Incarnation to magicians, not priests, and Arabs, not Jews.

The Magi were crooked sticks, foreigners, pagans, sorcerers, but God used them to point to the Christ, and used their gifts – aromatic spices, made from dried tree sap, often used as incense at coronations, births, and funerals – to illustrate that Christ is King over every tribe and tongue on the earth.

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in Heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2.9-11

The most powerful part of the Magi's tale is revealed within a concise phrase in Matthew: *they returned to their country by another route.*

The fact that Matthew mentions their return route is not merely useless detail, nor is it simply to illustrate that they were avoiding Herod. No, that detail is mentioned for a reason.

Coming into contact with Christ changed them. Like T.S. Eliot famously pointed out in *Journey of the Magi*, these pagan sorcerers could not simply go home because they no longer felt at ease 'in the old dispensation, with an alien people clutching their gods.'

Shouldn't that be the same for all of us? Having encountered Christ at his coming, can we really continue in this life unchanged?

Christ's coming is about our repentance in our individual lives. It is about opening ourselves up to the spirit and to light; to turning away from our darkness and welcoming Christ to be born within us.

If we truly recognize him when he comes, we will certainly be changed. Our old ways will no longer be open to us. We will abandon our former paths, walking instead along another route to life.

I am the Way.
Jesus Christ

GO-BEY

The next group of people who welcomed Christ's coming was the shepherds.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, *Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger ...* So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

Luke 2.8-12, 16-18

Shepherds were poor, actually among the poorest in the ancient world, and yet their presence also recalled some important imagery in the consciousness of the Hebrew people. King David, for example, was a shepherd, just as the ancient Israelites were nomadic and pastoral people, among whom shepherds were common enough. Even the prophet Amos was a shepherd, and David described God as a shepherd to all His people.

This illustration encompasses many ideas, including God's care for us and His discipline used to correct wandering sheep. Our tendency to put ourselves into danger's way and our inability to guide and take care of ourselves apart from God is also reinforced by the metaphor of "sheep in need of a shepherd."

We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

Isaiah 53.6

That the angels appeared to the shepherds was no accident. It was part of God's design to recall Israel's history, just as it was part of God's design to elevate those whom polite society had deemed unworthy.

And the sign the angel gives the shepherds is that the baby they are looking for will be the one found in a manger. Much has been made of the manger in popular literature, but we might best understand it simply as a means of identifying which baby the shepherds were supposed to come and worship. Again, it is highly unlikely that there were several babies in Bethlehem that had been born in the pole-barns of their family homes, and being poor themselves and having been visited by an angel announcing the savior of the world, it is likely the shepherds would have wandered past a manger-baby in favor of some kind of McMansion-baby.

Still, you can't really ignore the sense of rhyme that accompanies shepherds worshipping the God who gives them dignity in the least undignified setting, surrounded by creatures much like the sheep they tend.

I love the simple obedience and immediate faith of these peasant-farmers. They see angels and they go. They do not dicker; there is no question as to the legitimacy of their shared vision. They just go.

I think we need more sensitivity to God, especially more sensitivity of that particular variety. When God (or his agents) says go, we simply should. We should verify that the voice we heard did come from God – though the shepherds were so terrified they had no doubts about its origin (it could only be the Maker of Heaven and Earth who commands the Heavenly Chorus) – but then we should just go.

My kids have learned that I enjoy it when they combine the words “go” and “obey” into “go-bey.” I’ll ask them to do something, and if they complain or fuss, I’ll tickle them and send them off with a quick prompt: go obey. I never realized I was combining those words until my son told my daughter to go-bey yesterday afternoon, before I could even say anything, because she was complaining about needing to clean her room.

God wants us to go-bey. Don’t even pause in the middle to consider all the reasons not to obey. Just do the thing he’s told you to do. Just do it.

OVERSHADOWED BY THE SPIRIT

My soul glorifies the Lord
 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
 for he has been mindful
 of the humble state of his servant.
 From now on all generations will call me blessed,
 for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
 holy is his name.
 His mercy extends to those who fear him,
 from generation to generation.
 He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
 he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
 He has brought down rulers from their thrones
 but has lifted up the humble.
 He has filled the hungry with good things
 but has sent the rich away empty.
 He has helped his servant Israel,
 remembering to be merciful
 to Abraham and his descendants forever,
 just as he promised our ancestors.

Luke 1.46-55



There is a reason why Catholics, the Orthodox, and many Protestants hold Mary in such high regard: she's worth it. Growing up as an Evangelical, I was always suspicious of Mary worship, the idea that some people might elevate Mary to a position of equality with the Holy Trinity. That fear often kept me from treating Mary as I would any other significant biblical figure. I knew plenty about David and Jonah, Esther and Priscilla, but all I knew about Mary was that I shouldn't worship her.

That, my friends, is what you call an adventure in missing the point.

Of all the admirable characteristics Mary possessed – her faith, her commitment to her son and to God and to her family, her resolute confidence in God's sovereignty in the midst of heartache and scandal, her suffering as she watched her beloved beaten and killed – there is one I'd like to single out here: Mary was overshadowed by the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.

Luke 1.35

This is a profound challenge for you and me: to be overshadowed. Most of the time we want to get out in front and make our own decisions. We know what we want and we think we know how to go about getting it, but that kind of presumptuousness is usually what causes us to miss out on God's plans, God's timing, and God's desire for us as we're increasingly formed into His image.

If we're serious about preparing for Christ's comings, then we must be equally serious about allowing the Spirit to come over us, to come inside us, and to come between us and our excited little plans and machinations.

The Orthodox Church has built an entire theology around this, in which they insist that Mary (called *theotokos*, "God bearer") is the prototype for all manner of Christian spirituality. Like Mary, we are called to be God-bearers. We are asked to be impregnated with God's Spirit. We are required to gestate the gravitas of Christ's mission to heal the world.

Just as a pregnant woman takes great care when getting into a car or when walking through an agitated crowd, we too must take care as we carry within us the seed of God in this life. We must protect Christ as we wait for him to be born in us. We must nourish Christ as we anticipate his arrival. We must regularly check on him – think of something like a spiritual

sonogram – in order to be sure the conditions are appropriately set for his birth into the world and his coming into our lives in a new way.

In real life this means we must consider Christ and his health-within-us much like the pregnant woman must constantly be considering her baby. So, for example, when we find ourselves involved in sinful activity we are doing something unhealthy for Christ-in-us; and, instead of growing in us and transforming us from the inside out, Christ is stunted somehow – his development stalls. Or perhaps consider that there are all kinds of habits and practices in which we regularly participate that – though not sinful – distract us from nourishing Christ. The kind of nourishment Christ needs is prayer, charitable service, love, making peace, fasting, sacrificing for others; but if we're too busy to do any of these things, or too preoccupied with either our leisure or our problems to give others any attention, then Christ 'starves,' so to speak.

We must look after Christ-in-us, keeping his maturation and growth at the forefront of our thoughts, evaluating each decision in light of him rather than (as we often do) evaluating our Christian commitment in light of the stuff we really feel like doing at any given moment.

That is how we prepare for Christ's comings. We think of him as something born in us and carried into the world.

GROWING GOD

The final pair of people who model for us how not to miss God are Simeon and Anna, both well-advanced in age and presented to us as paragons of spiritual virtue.

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

*Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel.*

The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: *This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.*

There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

Luke 2.25-38

Both Anna and Simeon are revered as saints in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions. The Orthodox tradition even goes so far as to claim that Christ met his people, Israel, in the persons of these two – like they were the way point between Adam and Eve, and Mary and Joseph. In this cleverly spun connection, Simeon represents a progression from Adam (the wholly fallen man) to Christ (the wholly perfect man). Simeon resides in the middle – wholly fallen man who wholly desires perfection. We are meant to see ourselves like Simeon, sick of our imperfection and deeply desiring Christ's perfection-bringing Advent. Anna, likewise, is representative of the female half of this equation. If Eve "gave birth to sin" through her disobedience, then Mary's birth to sin's destruction was God's response to a world caught in labor pain (see Romans 8.22). Anna, whom tradition typically considers to have been barren, was void of the 'child-of-sin' but anxiously awaiting the birth of the 'child-for-salvation.'

Simeon has come to be known in the Christian tradition as the God-Receiver. According to an eastern legend, Simeon had been one of the seventy-two translators of the First Testament into Greek, and as he hesitated over the translation of Isaiah 7.14 (*Behold, a virgin shall conceive...*) and wondered how this was possible, an angel appeared to him and told him that the prophecy was correct and that he would not die until he had seen it happen.

This means that Simeon was well over two hundred years old when Christ was presented to him at the Temple, and he serves as a model for us of one who anticipates the coming of the Lord regardless of how long it takes or the manner of his final arrival.

I find it difficult to wait long for anything. I'm not impatient, really, it's just that most everything in our world, if it can be delivered at all, can be delivered quickly. I cannot

imagine waiting three years for an answer to prayer, let alone two centuries for the fulfillment of a divine vision.

But if we yearn to see Christ in his coming, we too must wait. We must wait with persistent expectation, trusting that He is in fact coming. God is coming to us, though He may seem to take his time. He is coming to our children, reminding them that they are loved and that their rebellion should not continue. He is coming to those situations and circumstances for which there seem to be no possible positive future – circumstances that bear within them the sin of the world: the recovery from rape, the car crash coma, the failure to complete even a fraction of a college degree.

He is coming, and like Simeon, we must simply trust that he will arrive on his timeline, and when he does, it will be worth it.

The prophetess Anna similarly embodied that kind of patient expectation, which is one of the reasons Carmel and I chose to name our daughter after her. My folks gave me a biblical name, and sharing a name with David always kept me somehow anchored in the story of the Bible. It reminded me that God's story was really my story. They used to tell me how David was a man after God's own heart, and it was like they were telling me my fortune. Carmel and I wanted the same kind of magic in the lives of our kids, so Jacob and Anna both got biblical handles and little monikers to accompany them. We tell our daughter that she was named for a woman who waited on God and then knew Him when she saw Him.

It's a gorgeous expression, really, a fine destiny. Would that we were all so fortunate to run up to God at the moment He appears to us, thank Him for appearing, and then quickly tell the world about who we've seen and why it matters.

Anna recognized Christ when he couldn't speak or act. She saw him in his infancy but knew him in his divinity.

Christ often comes to us in a kind of infancy. We get little peeks of what his coming will do to us in ten months or thirty years if we receive him well and hold on. For example, the way in which he teaches us patience is always infantile at first. We start out being patient about babyish things like grocery check outs and close-talkers, but over time Christ matures in us – he matures us – and our patience enters an adolescence in which we can wait on God for answers or miracles. That maturation never ends, but it always starts out pretty fragile.



Like Anna, we should celebrate Christ right away, even in his infancy, before his full power and authority is loosed within our hearts, telling others about what he will do later on.

It's that kind of faith that allows us to prophesy, in a sense, that we're going to get out of debt within three to five years. We may have only just begun taking a Dave Ramsey class or attending Financial Peace University, but we know that Christ is born in us as an infant, and he must be raised. We know that our financial freedom starts with babyish decisions now but will later mature into something wiser and shrewder.

It's that kind of faith that allows us to talk about how God is healing our marriages, or our relationship with institutional religion, or our past wounds. We don't usually get the full measure of Christ's coming in one fell swoop.

He grows.

He grows in us.

I began this chapter by telling you about Carmel and her mum. I told you the sweet story of how God healed my wife and healed her relationship with her mother. But I never told you the beginning of that story. It began prior to our engagement, with anger and sadness mixed into a cocktail of sorts, concerning what we would do with this woman who had repeatedly embarrassed her daughter.

Those were hard conversations, and there were no easy answers.

During the course of our engagement, however, Carmel heard a teaching on the Ten Commandments. One of those Commandments is *honor your mother and father*. That stuck with Carmel, and it bothered her, and though she didn't recognize it at the time, that was the seminal moment when Christ came to her about her mum.

Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.

Exodus 20.12

Based on her conviction that she ought to be obedient to God, Carmel began to pray and to work through her old hurts and fears. It was never easy, and it was only rarely rewarding, but the long-term effect of her devotion to God was her ability to say, "I love you," and mean it.

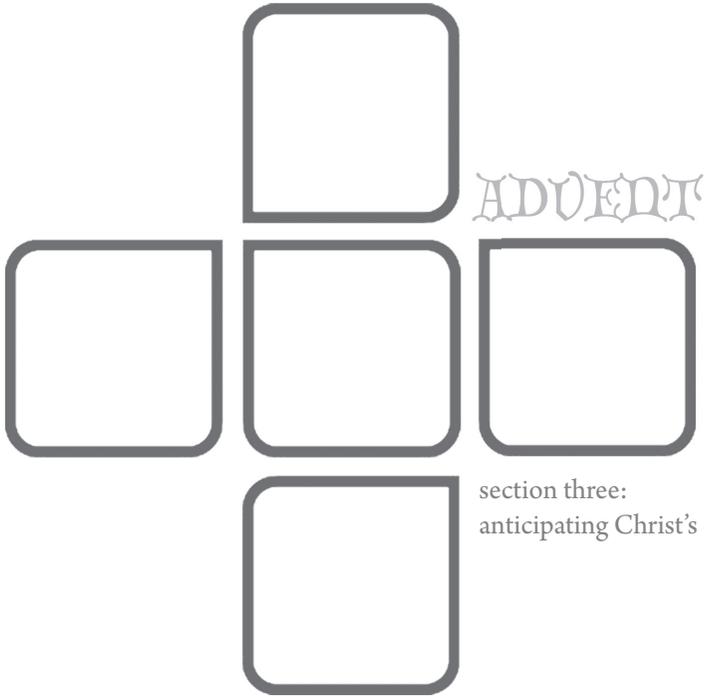
Like Mary, Carmel carried God inside of Her, and He was eventually born into her life as true forgiveness and selfless love.

Like Simeon, Carmel stayed faithful for a long time – a decade, easily – and was rewarded with the miracle of Christ's Advent in her relationship with Katherine.

Like Anna, Carmel's dedication to obedience and submission paid off in such a way that she willingly testifies that God healed her heart.

I am so thankful she didn't miss Christ when he first came to her.





Christianity is eschatology

Christianity is eschatology.

Jurgen Moltmann, 20th Century German Theologian

Then I saw a new Heaven and a new earth, for the first Heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.

Revelation 21.1

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The Heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.

2 Peter 3.10

I once heard a story about a little boy scheduled to play the innkeeper in a pageant play. His job was to greet Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem and sadly, to inform them there was no room for them in his hotel.

The little boy knew this story, and he knew his part in it, but something happened during the performance. He stalled. Faced with Mary's need for a place to rest, and pressed into compassionate action by her pregnancy, the little boy went off script and told the Holy Couple: *Come in, you can have my room.*

Ha!

What a brilliant re-writing of an historical blunder! This little boy knew what we all know – that Christ never should have been relegated to the barn, the basement, or the backyard. He never should have needed a place to be born, for the whole world had long looked for his arrival and should have better prepared for his coming.

But they didn't anticipate he would come then, like that, and so the story of God's occupation on planet earth began in meager majesty. It is that failure to anticipate that concerns us here or rather the ethic of anticipation toward which we now turn our focus.

As I've mentioned earlier, there are three Advents: then, now, and later on.

Advent,
Present,
Parousia.

Christ's First Coming (Advent) was received poorly – infanticide, scandal, disregard – and we should acknowledge our own culpability in that. After all, those who responded poorly to his First Coming were people just like you and me, “spiritual” people who thought they knew what God was like and what he planned to do about the mess of the world.

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.

John 1.10-11

A prophet is not without honor except in his own town, among his relatives and in his own home.

Mark 6.4

So we should better anticipate his coming now (Present), and begin doing the kinds of things he will want to do when he arrives, just as we should better anticipate his Final Coming later on (Parousia). His Advent was an embarrassment, so his Parousia needs to be better. We must anticipate his comings and work to cooperate with him in his mission to heal the world.

Christ's comings bear certain similarities to one another, and though it is common to understand the latter two (Present, Parousia) in context of the former (Advent), I've recently begun uncovering great worth by understanding the former two in context of Parousia.



That's what this section is about: understanding the manner in which Christ comes at the end, so we better anticipate his coming now and more meaningfully reflect on his Advent. Since Advent brought us a new Adam and introduced us to a renewed creation, it's worth mentioning that the Parousia will complete what Advent began.

More on that later, but for now just let it mentally simmer that God has been massaging the cosmos, working things back to better reflect his original design for the world, just as – in Christ – he's been massaging humanity to better reflect his design for his people. We only see this in glimpses now, little glimmers of glory, but later on we'll see this much more obviously, clearly, and comprehensively.

For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face.
Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

1 Corinthians 13.12

The prophet Isaiah gives us a good preview into what this ultimate restoration will look like, claiming that it will include

a just king who ushers in an era of peace (see Isaiah 11.1-10),

an incarnation of God's presence with us in the world

(see Isaiah 7.10-16),

a way back into a land sanctified by God (see Isaiah 40.1-11, 35.1-10),

good news, comfort, and freedom (see Isaiah 61.1-4, 8-11),

and a marriage between the realm of Heaven and the earthly cosmos

(see Isaiah 64.1-9).

In context of all our hullabaloo concerning End Times prophecy and apocalyptic fantasy, we need to faithfully remind ourselves that the End is really only the End for the powers of darkness, oppression, violence, and control. The End is really the Beginning of something better, a new beginning, a neo-genesis resulting from God's great clean-up of the world.

In my end is my beginning.

T.S. Eliot, 20th Century American poet and playwright

That is what the Parousia, commonly called "The Second Coming," is about: not destruction, but new creation. It is into this new creation – finally consummated with Christ's Final Coming – that all Christian hope leans. We anticipate the End and the Beginning, the Great Reversal of the Great Story. That is why Moltmann said, *Christianity is eschatology*, because the promise of the new creation is more important than the

corruption of the original, because we can work toward new creation now with more verve than we can lament the corruption of the old one.

Let us turn our attention now to Parousia, to discovering what the Bible really says about it and what bearing it has not only on Advent but on our lives in the Present.

Parousia

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a Son of Man, coming with the clouds of Heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

Daniel 7.13-14

PREPARING FOR THE PARTY

When I was a little kid, my friends and I used to always dress up like knights and soldiers and go exploring in the woods after school. We imagined ourselves slaying invisible dragons and beasts of every ilk.

I think most little boys do that, which is perhaps why Hollywood has often made movies like *Spartacus*, *Braveheart*, *Excaliber*, *King Arthur*, and *Kingdom of Heaven* (just to name a few). In my mind, though, it's tough to beat *Gladiator* in the movies-for-guys-who-like-movies category. Maximus's raw force inspired every man to overcome the simpering Commodus inside ourselves while quietly working to please the penultimate father figure of Marcus Aurelius.

There's a great scene in the movie where Commodus (Joaquin Phoenix) is entering Rome as the new Emperor. Praetorians and legionnaires are lined up, fifty-people deep,

stemming the tide of the surging and enthusiastic mob of supporters and onlookers, all of whom have gathered for this moment.

That triumphal entry was known in the ancient world as a “Parousia”: it was a royal visitation inaugurated by a grand party.

When the apostle Paul writes about the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, he uses the term “Parousia.” Since Paul was a First Century Jew living in the midst of the Roman Empire, all of his references to such an event must be understood in their proper locale and context.

For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from Heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.

Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.

1 Thessalonians 4.15-17

Paul is here describing a kind of reception. In the ancient world, it was the custom for significant members of society to go out and welcome the king at his Parousia and then escort him back into their city. A Parousia, then, did not entail the king leaving with the people and taking them somewhere else, but the people welcoming the king and bringing him back into their home.

This means that the Second Coming is not about vacuuming Christians off the earth but about welcoming Jesus back to the earth to stay – to welcome the New Heavens and the New Earth and the New Jerusalem prophesied about in Isaiah.

For behold, I create new Heavens and a new earth;
 And the former shall not be remembered or come to mind.
 But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create...
 The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
 The lion shall eat straw like the ox,
 And dust shall be the serpent's food.
 They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain,
 Says the Lord.

Isaiah 65.17-18, 25



Paul, like Jesus before him, believed that God had already begun the work of new creation, of occupying this world with the world to come, and he likened it to a visiting Emperor being greeted, received, and then brought back home.

Here.

To the Earth –
the world he intends to fully heal.

A NEW KINGDOM OF THE AIR

In Paul's discussion of a Parousia, there are some important geographical features. Ancient cities like Hieropolis, for example, often kept their cemeteries outside the city walls. Cities were encircled by tombs and sarcophagi, mausoleums and graves. As you approached the city, you had to walk for miles in between the burial places before you could get inside the walls.

A traveler would be met first by the city's dead outside the gate before encountering the city's living inside the gate.

John Dominic Crossan, 20th Century Irish-American religious scholar and co-founder of The Jesus Seminar

Keep this geographical image in your head as you recall 1 Thessalonians: first the dead, then the living, greeted the Royal Person as he entered the city. So, too, at the Final Coming of Christ, first the dead and then the living Christians will come up to meet Christ in the air (notice the word here is "air," not "Heaven"), and then we will be transformed and completed and together with God. We will welcome Christ back into this world for the Second Time and "be with him forever."

It is fascinating that Paul notes we will meet Christ in the air, because ha-satan (Satan, in our modern translations) is often called the "Prince of the Powers of the Air," and air was typically seen as the domain of demons in the ancient world. With this literary construction, Paul is demonstrating the supremacy of Christ over the demonic forces in service to evil.

Before we delve any further into the Parousia, I want to point summarize the key features of Christ's Final Coming in the Scriptures:



The Coming *King*

is greeted by the *nobility* outside of the city gates,
 is escorted past the tombs of the *dead*
 and brought back into the city
 to establish his Royal *Presence*
 and inaugurate the victorious *rule*
 of his Kingdom over the Kingdom of the Air.

I have highlighted five important terms in this summary, to which we will later return:

King,
 Nobility,
 Dead,
 Presence,
 Rule.

Whenever Christ comes,
 he comes as a King.

Whenever we come to him,
 we come as his kin – nobles, if you will.

Whenever he comes with us,
 we must parade him past our dead –
 our dead hopes,
 our dead dreams,
 our cadaverous version of human achievement.

Whenever Christ lives in us,
 we carry his Presence everywhere we go.

Whenever Christ is enthroned,
 his Kingdom rules over and against all competing kingdoms –
 all those Kingdoms of the Air.

He is the King.
 We are the nobility.
 We confess those things that have died inside of us,
 either for good or for ill,
 trusting in resurrection for the former
 and permanent decomposition for the latter.

He remains with us forever.
 His Kingdom suffers no competition.



We'll return to this later on,
but for now I just want you to get a sense
of the rhythm of his comings,
because it will provide a useful lens
with which to view the Advent,
just as it will provide a useful injunction
for how we are to receive his Present Coming
and anticipate his Final Coming.

CLEANING HOUSE

In 1 Thessalonians Paul uses the certainty of Christ's coming as a means of urging the church to greater efforts in Christian living. This coming is spoken of as "the Day of the Lord," a phrase used in the ancient world to describe God's ultimate justice where sin was recompensed and justice rewarded. Peter calls this the final judgment (2 Peter 2.9), though Paul also calls it the day of redemption (Ephesians 4.20).

On that day, God's action will be as never before.
He will act, historically again, to redeem the world,
To fix what has been broken,
To restore what has been lost,
To remake this world
And occupy it with the presence of God in a new way.

And that is what the Parousia is all about: not getting out of this world but Christ getting deeper into it.

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb,
The leopard shall lie down with the young goat,
The calf and the young lion and the fatling together;
And a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze;
Their young ones shall lie down together;
And the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play by the cobra's hole,
And the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper's den.
They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain,
For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD
As the waters cover the sea.

Isaiah 11.6-9

We'll talk more later on about the implications for God's divine invasion, but the purpose of this chapter is to illustrate that what we should be anticipating is not Christ coming to get us out of here but Christ coming to live here with us.

Knowing that his intention is to stay here ought to change some of the ways in which we prepare for his arrival,
 just as it ought to change some of the things we anticipate he might want to do when he gets here,
 just as it ought to change some of our perceptions about the world, about what can be fixed and what's worth fixing.

To help us better understand this concept, let us use the analogy of a house guest, a very important and influential house guest – perhaps like the president of an independent state. If such a guest were coming to merely pick you up on your front door in their limousine – and were never to enter your home – you would probably tidy everything up just in case she needed to pop her head in for a moment. If, however, that guest announced to you that she would be coming to live with you forever, you would clean your home to within an inch of its life, just as you would ensure that everything that was broken was quickly fixed to the best of your abilities. After all, the president will be forming her opinions of you based on the way you live and look after what you own.

So, too, we must take great care of our world because Christ is not coming to pick us up in his Heavenly towncar and take us to the great White House in the sky; he is coming to live here, with us, on earth. After we die, there is a brief period of Heavenly rest – what Christ refers to as paradise (see Luke 23.43) – but that rest is followed up by a (re)creation of the world in which we live in resurrected bodies (see Romans 8 + 1 Corinthians 15).

The long term plan of God has always been – and remains – to inhabit this world, not abandon it.

And – if you'll permit me one further clarification on this point – I understand that there are Scriptures that seem to indicate otherwise at first blush, among them Christ's soothing words to his disciples: *in my father's house there are many rooms... I go there to prepare a place for you* (see John 14.1-3); but we must understand that the whole universe is the dwelling-place of God. All is His house. Whether on earth or in Heaven, we are still in His habitation. In that vast abode of God there are 'many mansions.' The earth is one of them, Heaven is another. Whether here or there, we are still in the house of God, in one of the apartments of His vast abode.



Jesus was using these words to provide comfort to his disciples who were grieving at the prospect of being separated from him for eternity. His words allayed their fears, just as his promise sponsors our hope for a better world later now, beginning now.

That, dear friends, changes everything.

Stranger in a Strange Land

You shall not pervert the judgment of the stranger.

Deuteronomy 24.17a

You shall not hate a foreigner; for he is your brother: you shall not hate an Egyptian; because you were a stranger in his land.

Deuteronomy 23.7

HEINLEIN'S MESSIAH

Even though I love science fiction, I confess I don't care at all for space operas like *Star Trek* or *Stargate*. Sure, I love *Star Wars* (both versions: old and reconditioned), but that hardly counts as part of the dork fiefdom any longer, right? And *Battlestar Galactica*? Well, that doesn't count either, because it was the single greatest television show ever (I'm referring to the Ron Moore BSG, not the Dirk Benedict-led coloring-book-turned-thespionic-shame-inducing-regrettable *Battlestar* of the 70s).

But no matter who you are or where you draw the base line of acceptable sci-fi nerdiness, every literature buff has to love Robert A. Heinlein, especially *Stranger in a Strange Land*.

Stranger is about Michael Smith, a human child orphaned on Mars and raised on Martian values, and about Smith's struggle to integrate what his Martian family told him is right and good with the overly consumerist and media-driven economy of 20th century America. The story is a sharp criticism of American ills, set against the backdrop of a reverse-prodigal son who returns home to find his father's estate overrun by a bunch of government pigs.



It's a good story with clear biblical allusions, not the least of which is the title, taken from Exodus 2.22. In that verse we read about Moses naming his child Gershom (which means "foreigner"), reasoning: *I have been a stranger in a strange land.*

Though Christ came into the world at Advent as Messiah,
fulfilling over four hundred specific prophecies in that role,
many of which were indisputably outside of his control to influence
(such as his virgin birth [see Isaiah 7.14]
in Bethlehem [see Micah 5.2]
while the Temple was still standing [see Malachi 3.1], his
betrayal by a close friend [see Psalm 41.9],
his resurrection [see Psalm 16.10]
and ascension [see Psalm 68.18],
and his ability to perform miracles [see Isaiah 35.5-6]),
the world neither recognized nor received him.

We spoke about Messianic expectation earlier, so I want to shift the emphasis slightly and simply note how odd it was that the Advent actually occurred. Four hundred-plus prophecies seem like more than you could reasonably assign to chance.

To get a feel for the probabilities involved, consider that the odds of Jesus fulfilling only eight of the Messianic prophecies are 1 out of 10^{17} .

This is equivalent
to covering the entire state of Texas
with silver dollars two feet deep,
marking one of them,
mixing them all up,
and having a blind-folded person
select the marked one at random
the first time.

Given the odds, isn't it strange that almost no one would have clued in?

And yet I'm struck by the fact that Christ always comes as a stranger and appears as especially strange to those who claim to know God. Like Michael Smith from *Stranger in a Strange Land*, Jesus showed up on the scene with values completely contradictory to the dominant forces of power and control in the world. Like Michael Smith, Jesus' values came from another world – or, more accurately, another kingdom. And, like Michael Smith, Jesus was rejected and ridiculed by the very people to whom he offered salvation.

Jesus' otherworldly qualities, values, and ideas made him strange; and, before we continue, let us at least mention that this estrangement would have isolated Christ, allowing him to identify with us when others ignore us, hurt us, or leave us out.

He was an outcast, one of the disenfranchised, and a stranger.

Religious leaders, for example, didn't recognize him during his Advent, nor did they recognize his wisdom and authority during his earthly ministry. Christ challenged their monopoly on understanding God, and that was so far outside the boundaries of their perception and experience that they could not receive him.

But it wasn't just the hypocrites and legalists to whom Christ was unfamiliar.

After the resurrection, the disciples returned to their old vocation as fisherman and didn't recognize Jesus as he waited patiently for them on the shore (see John 21.1-14), despite the fact that they had seen him twice already since he'd been raised from the dead.

Neither did Mary Magdalene recognize Jesus at the garden tomb (see Matthew 28.1-10) or the two disciples who met him on the road to Emmaus and spoke with him for two hours before (finally) recognizing him over lunch (see Luke 24.13-35).

This is one aspect of the Gospel story that has always felt odd to me.

I mean, some of their difficulties in recognizing Jesus – sure! – had to do with his physical appearance: his was a resurrection body, not his natural body (more on that later).

And some of their difficulties had to do with Jesus showing up at unexpected times: after his death, for example, or strolling along the beach.

But what I can't understand is how they still perceived Jesus as an unfamiliar kind of Christ.

They still couldn't understand that by saying, "I will destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days," he meant himself and not as an act of seditious terrorism.

They still couldn't get that he wasn't planning to stick around and play at being a national hero, that he really was "going to sit at the right hand of the Father."

They still couldn't understand that when he claimed to be the Son of Man and the Son of God, he wasn't simply talking about being a human being or the first-born (albeit illegitimate) son of Joseph – he was talking about being the long-awaited eschatological Son of Man Daniel prophesied about and that he, in his divinity, actually proceeded from the Father.

Jesus appeared to the world as a stranger, an outsider, a foreigner in a foreign land, and two things spring to mind about that: first, we can easily identify with Christ because of this, particularly when we are cast out, unpopular, or despised. Second, if Jesus could fulfill four hundred-plus prophecies and appear strange to those who most eagerly anticipated his coming for the First Advent, how much more strange will he appear to us at his Second Coming (given that there are only a handful of prophecies concerning the Parousia)?

If he was strange then, how much more strange will he be later on?

And if the devout were certain they'd know what to look for then – and were proven wrong – how certain can we truly be about what to look for at the Parousia?

This is probably a good moment to insert a word about humility, especially as it pertains to our expectations of Christ's comings. To reiterate a point I made in an earlier chapter: we must be rock solid in our hope that he is coming again but open to the idea that the manner of his coming may surprise us.

That is so hard to do.

Nevertheless, I think it's worthwhile to spend a little time here examining Advent in context of Parousia – remember the bit about the King, the Nobility, the Grave, the Presence, and the Rule? – so we can reflect on the similarities between those events and thus better anticipate what his Present Coming looks like now.

DISDAINING THE KING

During Advent, Christ came not as a high king but as a low-born peasant, a bastard, later given a crown made of thorns and a reed scepter, and no one understood that his “kingdom was not of this world.”

The Jewish aristocracy, Herod and his chums, who should have welcomed him at his coming and ushered him into his rightful position of authority, instead conspired to assassinate him as an infant. It was only the Magi, Arabs – Iraqis and Palestinians – who came to greet him and pay homage.

Instead of being led past the graves of great prophets and kings, Jesus came on the heels of the Maccabbean massacre. The Maccabees led a violent revolt against Rome in the 2nd C BCE, which resulted in the short-lived Hasmonean Dynasty and an independent Israeli state, but they were overthrown and punished harshly. Christ entered the world without pageantry, surrounded by the bloody reminders of the Roman future for any would-be Messiah.

Whereas any newborn should experience the comfort of a family residence, Christ was denied both familial safety and national protection. He was born outside his family home, and within two years he was forced to run away from his ancestral homeland to Egypt in order to escape the cruelty of Herod.

Finally, where Christ came into the world as the intended Prince of Peace, he was met by the God of War, and died at the behest of a cowardly procurator's Roman death squad.

This was the manner of Christ's First Coming, his Advent.

Advent permitted the world to call him a peasant, not a king.
Advent demonstrated the disdain for God
 within the halls of earthly power.
Advent was set against the violence and bloodshed
 of international aggression.
Advent denied him residence in the Holy Land.
Advent pitted the inbreaking Kingdom of God
 against the long-established rule of Caesar
 with little evidence of future victory.

But his Final Coming will be so different.



Parousia reveals Christ as King of Kings.
Parousia ennobles every lover and follower of Christ
as both king and priest.
Parousia honors the dead in Christ, giving them pride of place
in the resurrection parade.
Parousia ushers Christ into his Divine Residence,
the New Earth and the New Heaven.
Parousia establishes the eternal rule and reign of his kingdom
over and against all the kingdoms of the air.

There is a great distance between Advent and Parousia,
from peasant to King of Kings,
from disdain to the refrains of celebration and honor,
from mass graves to resurrection life,
from extradition to eternal presence,
from new meta-political party to Sovereign Rule and Reign.

ADVENT OR PAROUSIA?

I've spent all this time setting up the contrast between the two – Christ's First Coming
and Christ's Final Coming – to ask you one thing:

Which Coming are we closer to?

Is the Present more Parousia or more Advent?

Is Christ more peasant or King?
Disdained or celebrated?
Dead or alive?
Absent or present?
Warring or victorious?

And can people tell what you believe by the way you live?
Whether you serve or scoff,
disregard or worship,
are full of darkness or vibrant with joy,
thoughtless or attentive,
hateful or peace-filled?

Though we live in tension between these Comings, in the famed “already-but-not-yet” of God’s kingdom reality, I think we must conclude that as Christians, we find our identity in the hope of his Future Coming and in resurrection life more than in sadness at the necessity of his Advent.

I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?

John 11.25-26

With that in mind, let us shift our focus once more to determine what we might do to cooperate with Christ as he comes to us in the Present in anticipation of the Future.

Anticipating the end

Men ought to attend chiefly to two things: to eternity itself, and to that point of time which they call the Present. For the Present is the point at which time touches eternity.

C.S. Lewis

I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

Matthew 28.20

THE LORD IS COME

I was twenty-nine years old before I finally learned the words to “Joy to the World.” I don’t mean all the words, by the way – that would be ridiculous – just the correct words to the first line.

See, I love to sing Christmas carols in a brogue, a manly Scotch baritone. It’s good for morale... ish, and the first year I worked at Westwinds I was bringing my verbal bagpipes to full bear. It was stirring. *Joy to the World*, I sang, *the Lord has come!*

But then my friend Norma stopped me, crossly, and, in a way only our betters can, called me on the mat for singing the wrong words. *The Lord is come, honey.*

Norma, I queried, respectfully and graciously. *Do you even speak English? Johnny did not go store. Me Thag, learn to speak pretty talk. The Lord **has** come.*

No, sweetie. The Lord is come. He's coming right now, first to teach you the words to this song, and then to teach you some respect.

As you can probably tell, I love Norma dearly, and I love that she corrected me because I can now appreciate the genius of this lyric: the Lord is come.

He has come – yes! – but he is coming now and will come again. Those are his Comings – Advent, Present, Parousia – and we must attend to him in all three directions at once.

He came, he comes, he's coming.

Life is Advent, and we must recognize Christ in all his many guises.

His is coming as our bother, our sister (see Romans 8.17),
as our husband, our wife (see Ephesians 5.22-23),
as our father, our mother (see Luke 4.16-20),
as our friend, our enemy (see Matthew 5.43-48),
as our companion, our stranger (see Matthew 25.31-46),
and as our benefactor
and solicitor (see Matthew 10.32).

Behold! I am coming soon.

Revelation 22.12

In the wilderness prepare
the way for the Lord;
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.

And the glory of the Lord will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.

Isaiah 40.3-5



In his book the *Orthodox Way*, Kalistos Ware talks about a certain kind of person, the “neptic” man:

There is a Greek word, *nepsis*, that means sobriety and wakefulness – the opposite to a state of drugged or alcoholic stupor; and in the context of the spiritual life it signifies attentiveness, vigilance, and recollection. When the prodigal son repented, Luke’s gospel says that he “came to himself.” The neptic man is one who has come to himself, who does not day dream, drifting aimlessly under the influence of passing impulses but who possesses a sense of direction and purpose.

What we need to “wake up to,” so to speak, is not the present moment (*per se*), but the Present Coming of Christ in anticipation of his Final Coming. Contrary to hedonists and party-animals everywhere, we were not made to live in the present. For the lover and follower of Jesus, the present is never the goal (we don’t “arrive”) but merely the means to the future.

Caught in the interim between Advent and Parousia, between Christ’s First and Final Coming, we prepare, hope, and anticipate his Coming in the Present.

And he does come to us.

He comes to us as Lord, and we swear fealty and obedience to him. With his Present Coming we surrender our desire for total autonomy and again receive the grace of God’s friendship.

If you confess with your mouth and believe in your heart that Jesus Christ is Lord, then you will be saved.

Romans 10.9

As our Lord, Christ has power to raise us up into newness of life. Consequently, what we lost in the Garden of Eden as God’s stewards and shadows has been restored to us. We are no longer the corrupted versions of ourselves, we are new creations. We are kings and priests and joint heirs with Jesus. This requires us to work hard at being open and hospitable to the Spirit of Christ, to run out and greet Christ before the Parousia so we can lead him back inside the city gates to take up his rightful place of authority.

He has made us kings and priests unto God and his Father, to him be the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Revelation 1.6

WELCOMING THE LORD

Since, as in every Parousia, we must lead our Lord back past the dead, it seems fitting that in this case, the dead by which we parade are the things we kill off inside ourselves. Sin-things. For the sake of Christ we kill off those old bits of our ambition and dreams that would otherwise lead us back into our old lives. We put to death everything that sets itself against Christ's lordship. We get rid of slander, envy, greed, lust, and hate. We die to our old lives, our old selves, and the identity we once found as descendants of the First Adam. Those are the gravestones we walk on by: RIP Fame. RIP Prejudice. RIP Belittlement.

For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.

Romans 8.13

At last we welcome Christ to make his home in us, to take up his residence in our hearts and in our spirits. He lives in me, he lives in you – hallelujah. His Royal Presence presides in the life of every Christian. And we must ensure that his Presence is the epicenter around which every other part of life orbits. We must cultivate his Presence, like a tree that must take root or a benign bacteria being cultured. Christ is our guest, and we must make him welcome.

I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.

John 14.20

Of course, not every power in the world is allied with Christ as we are. There are dark powers in the world, agencies and advocates of lawlessness. It is against these powers that we must contend – not against the people that have been manipulated or coerced into alignment with these powers, but in the shadowy things that work behind the scenes. These are the powers of the air, evil, supernatural strings that pull men like marionettes. They are adversaries of Christ, contending bitterly against him as they contend against him-in-us.

Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the Heavenly realms.

Ephesians 6.12



Taken together, all of this means there are certain postures we should adopt as we anticipate Christ's Present Coming:

- a posture of submission to the Lord,
- a posture of nobility and responsibility to our mission,
- a posture of self-sacrifice in emulation of Christ,
- a posture of hospitality to the Spirit,
- a posture of struggle against those dark forces
of power and control.

This is what it means to anticipate Christ's Present Coming. It means we give ourselves wholly in submission, responsibility, sacrifice, welcome, and struggle.

And when we do, we set the stage for Christ's Final Coming.

We participate in the dissolution of darkness;
we usher in the End of the Age
and the Beginning of Eternity.

More on that

Right

Now.

Living in the present-future

For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.

Romans 8.22-23

LIVING IN OCCUPIED TERRITORY

One of the most romanticized elements of the Second World War was the French Resistance, and rightly so. After the Nazis invaded France in 1940, pockets of military resistance organized in cells all over the country. These little groups of freedom fighters were known as Maquis, and though initially they only totaled about 5,000, by D-Day their numbers had swelled to over a half-million troops from several different countries (including Germany). Their fortitude in the face of defeat gave the Allied peoples hope on the ground, and their intelligent leadership helped the Allies quickly move through the continent after June 6, 1944.

The French Resistance is an exceptional picture of contemporary Christianity for three reasons. First, we live now in occupied territory. Though God made the world and crafted it in love, the earth has fallen into corruption and exists now under the temporary control of evil (see 1 John 1.19). Second, though this territory is occupied, it still rightly belongs to God, and He is coming to take it back (see Revelation 11.15). Third, just because we live in occupied territory and just because God is not yet here to fully reclaim what's rightfully His, that doesn't mean we're supposed to just sit around and do nothing.

Calling the Twelve to him, he began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over impure spirits.

These were his instructions: Take nothing for the journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals but not an extra shirt. Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.

They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.

Mark 6.7-13

In this bit of Scripture we see Jesus commissioning his earliest followers to go into the world and through their actions and with their proclamation, spread the word that the time of darkness is nearing its end. Likewise, in 1 Thessalonians 4 the apostle Paul holds out the prospect of deliverance for the world. He encourages the church with the promise that, though it has been repeatedly beaten and hated, isolated and abused, a time is coming when God will make right every wrong.

The Lord himself will come down from Heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

1 Thessalonians 4.16-18

Paul believed that a time was coming in which God would judge the idolatrous world and unveil its blasphemous leaders. Through this lens he also sees events further off, the final coming of Christ, who will destroy all evil and put God's just and truthful judgment into effect against those who had been taken in by lies great and small.

In the meantime, however, all the teachings of the Second Testament assert that we ought to be living now as we will be living later on, once God has arrived and His great clean-up project is underway. And even though the present conditions are often strenuous, we ought to take courage from the fact that Christ is coming again. Since he has already come in us, we are free to live as Resistance fighters, or – even better – franchises of his eternal kingdom now breaking into the Present.

[He is the God] who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they are.

Romans 4.17

Thy Kingdom Come
Thy will be done
On earth as it is in Heaven.

Matthew 6.10

Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light.

Ephesians 5.8-13

DEVOTED TO HOLY ACTION

Our task in the Present is to live as if we were fully in the Future. We live in the Present-Future. We live in the world into which Christ has already come, just as we live with the clear understanding that he is come in us – now! – and we anticipate his full arrival in the future. The manner of our anticipation is what some have called participatory eschatology – meaning we have a role to play (participatory) in bringing about the end of darkness (eschatology).

The present age is not a time for rest and sleep, but it is a struggle, a combat, a market, a school, a voyage. Therefore you must exert yourself, and not be downcast and idle, but devote yourself to holy action.

Starets Nazarii of Valamo, 17th Century Finnish theologian

The best way for us to achieve that is to proclaim the pressing timeline of Christ's Final Coming by the way we actually live; which, again, is meant to be the way we will ultimately live in the new creation on the New Earth in the New Heaven.

How, then, will we be living?



Seven characteristics define our experience in the New Created Order:

eating,
worshiping,
knowing and being known,
learning,
serving,
experiencing epiphany,
and being named.

Let's briefly look at each of these in turn.

Len Sweet once told me that Jesus never ate alone, and that Jesus would eat with anyone. It's true. Go back and read the gospels with an eye for mealtime manners of the Messiah and you'll find him dining with aristocrats, gentiles, government officials, religious leaders, peasants, family, friends, all manner of sordid folk. According to John's vision in the book of Revelation, that was by design. Jesus was giving the people around him a foretaste of what Heaven was like. In Heaven we will eat together, and laugh, and experience sacrament for centuries (see Revelation 19.9). Eating is spiritual. Sharing a meal is an intimate experience that creates close bonds leading to love, to friendship, and to unity. In Heaven there will be a great feast. Our best advice in the Present Coming of Jesus is to imitate his mealtime mission: never eat alone, eat with anyone.

My first worship leader told me that Heaven was a great worship festival, never-ending, and perpetually ecstatic. At the time, I was a fairly committed worship junkie, so that idea sounded pretty cool. It still does, though I confess that my understanding of true worship has matured beyond thinking of worship as exclusively (or even primarily) music. Nonetheless, all of Revelation chapters 4 and 5 depict a kind of mystical bliss we can anticipate in Heaven. If you want to bring light into the darkness now, and hasten the removal of evil in our world, worship. Worship lots, in every imaginable way.

In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul talks about the changes he will experience in Heaven. Chief among them he lists, "knowing fully, and being known." Heaven is the unmitigated Presence of God. When God is fully Present, everything about us will be revealed – not only to Him (He experiences that knowing now anyway) – but also to us, just as we will be given the appreciation that He knows us fully. Heaven is a place for knowing; so, too, we should know one another now and make ourselves available for others to know. In the simplest version of this, we echo Jesus' words and say, *love one another*.

We will never stop learning in Heaven, which is pretty cool, because I love learning. *For who has known the mind of the Lord (Romans 11.34), in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 2.3). God is the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity (Isaiah 57.15), and it will take eternity to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and depth and height, and to know the love of Christ (Ephesians 3.18-19).* We should learn now, as we will learn then, for learning implies transformation and constant progression from who we were to who we were always designed and destined to be: shadows of God. This is why Christ chose the term “disciple” to refer to his followers. It means “learner.”

Christ came to us as a servant (see Isaiah 53), and in Heaven we will serve God. Far from any element of slavery or forced labor, however, the conditions of this service will be something akin to holy vocation. We will do what God has made us to do, and in so doing, render service to Him (see Revelation 22.3-4, and Genesis 2). In our present condition we are called to love and serve others – love all, serve all – just as we are called to serve in the church and serve with the Spirit to heal the world.

Revelation 22 tells us that we will also see God in Heaven face to face. That’s a remarkable promise, being as no one in the Bible could see God and live (see Exodus 33). Much of what I’ve been urging and encouraging in this book is to recognize God. We fight against the darkness by calling attention to the Presence of Light. Look for God. See Him now. Point Him out and diminish the dark.

The final portion of our experience in Heaven concerns receiving a new name. Revelation 2.17 tells us that to all those who have overcome, God will *give a white stone and on the stone a new name written, which no one will know except the one who receives it.* Furthermore, God’s own name will be written on our foreheads (see Revelation 22.4). We will no longer be known as stupid, or ugly, or inappropriate, or overpaid. We will no longer be accessible to malice and lies, slander and accusation. Our true name will be given to us, and God’s name will be marked upon us, and our esteem will be Teflon with God. Now we must find our worth in Him, even in the absence of a true name or a marked head. Now we must stop speaking in ways that demean others, and insist instead on speaking the righteous truth about ourselves, others, and the world God made in love.

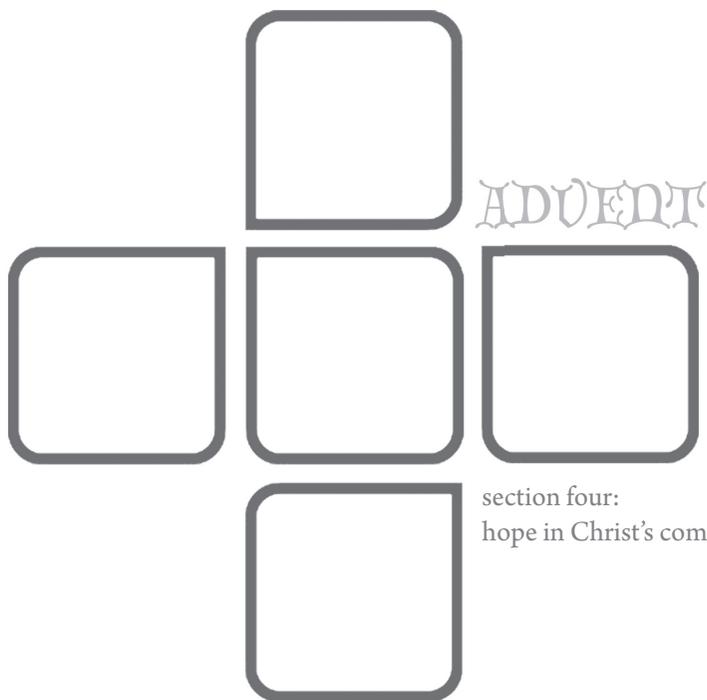


That, friends, is how we live the life of Heaven now. That is how we participate in the eschaton, the end of darkness, and anticipate the Final Coming of Christ which fills us up with great hope. In the final section of this book, let us now turn our attention to knowing and incubating that hope.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 15.13





section four:
hope in Christ's coming

A new hope

[He is the God] who gives life to the dead and calls those things that are not as though they are.

Romans 4.17

Realism, much less cynicism, has never been a good ally of the Christian faith.
Jurgen Moltmann, 20th Century German theologian

In *Star Wars: A New Hope*, there is a scene in which Obi Wan Kenobi departs from his companions, intending to fulfill his part of a complex plan that will help them all escape their enemies' stronghold, the *Death Star*. Obi Wan Kenobi's job is to disable a tractor beam, thereby allowing him and his friends to escape on board the *Millennium Falcon*, their ship.

In the *Star Wars* canon, Obi Wan is an aged Jedi Master, possessing remarkable skill-at-arms, insight, wisdom, and stealth. His companions, however, grew up in a world without Jedi and are often struck by the odd manner of their elderly friend. Han Solo, the handsome and rakish rogue, is particularly concerned that Obi Wan isn't up to the task; but Luke Skywalker, Kenobi's protégé and the series' hero, is convinced that he is a great man and can do what he promised.

Eventually we see Obi Wan Kenobi succeed, though at the expense of his own life. His companions escape, and their liberation marks the first step in the demise of the evil Galactic Empire.

I'm telling you all this, not simply to rehash part of our American mythology, but to illustrate the nature of faith and hope. Faith is rooted in the character and nature of another person. Skywalker has faith that Obi Wan Kenobi is capable of fulfilling his mission. Han Solo has no faith in Obi Wan, thinking he's just some crazy old wizard. Neither does Han Solo have any hope that this crazy old wizard can actually do what he promised. That, by the way, is the nature of hope: trust that those who can do, will do. Luke Skywalker takes strong confidence in the hope that Kenobi can and will succeed.

There's an obvious, albeit childlike, spiritual application here: we have faith in God's ability to save, and we anticipate His salvation in the hope of His Coming.

We have faith in God, and we hope in God's activity.

Since Christ is coming to heal the world
 and has come already
 and – *Joy to the World!* – is come,
 and since his kingdom is already breaking into our reality
 and, as a result, we find ourselves in a great struggle
 against another sort of kingdom –
 a struggle we know we will eventually win,
 we should hope.

We should hope.

It is through faith that we find the path of true life, but it is only through hope that we stay on the path.

Jurgen Moltmann, 20th Century German theologian

All hope is invisible and immaterial. Hope comes from the possibility that things can be different. Hope is rooted in imagination. It is not rooted in what already exists, but in what might exist and in what might occur when God transforms. God reveals Himself in promise. Remember, Christianity is eschatology; it is the religion of the future – and, in that sense, all hope is resurrection, all hope comes from the belief that in the end God will make the impossible possible.

We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf.

Hebrews 6.19-20



Christ is the actual object of our hope, because in his Parousia our hopes for a new creation and a new beginning are fully realized (see 1 Timothy 1.11, Colossians 1.27, and Titus 2.13).

For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved.

Romans 8.20-24

So what does that mean for us? Well, to stretch the cinematic illustration a little further, it means that we continue to take risks, to trust in positive outcomes even when they seem unlikely, and to continue with our portion of the mission in the hope that God will look after his.

In *Star Wars*, based on the hope that Obi Wan Kenobi was going to come through, Luke and Han Solo never waver in their commitment to freedom, even going so far as to take additional risks to liberate the captive rebel Princess Leia. If they had no real hope in Obi Wan, they would have stalled, floundered, or been paralyzed into inaction; instead, they move quickly and aggressively to do what they need to.

Likewise, once Leia is free from the detention level, Luke and Han (together with their interstellar entourage, including Chewbacca, R2D2 and C-3P0) make their way back to the hangar bay and fire up their ship in preparation to escape, during which time Han Solo famously remarks: *I hope that old man got the tractor beam disabled, or this is gonna be a real short trip.*

Finally, in order for them to get back to the *Millennium Falcon*, Luke and his friends need to first sneak past security, then disguise themselves as Imperial troops, then free the princess, then fight through the hallways of the *Death Star* – none of which they would have been able to do were they unwilling to hope that Obi Wan would succeed.

This small band of rebel troops succeeded in their mission only because of hope.

Now, if you're like me, you're probably reading all this *Star Wars* stuff and, while maybe finding it a bit quaint, realizing that life is not *Star Wars*, and that our problems are both less scintillating than intergalactic jail-break, and more emotionally complex than putting up with wizards and rescuing headstrong princesses.

All of that is true.

Our problems are more complex, and our solutions are never quite so simple, but the fact remains that when we hope in God, we are energized to continue fighting.

Only hope keeps the discouraged husband from leaving his wife when she says she no longer loves him. He hopes that God will give him strength, like He promised He would, just as he hopes that his children will learn what true love is by watching their earthly father sacrifice himself for his wife.

That's hope in action.

Only hope keeps the military chaplain from giving in to bitterness and violence when she sees her battlefield parish bloodied by enemies that masquerade as friends. She hopes God will get her through this – like he promised he would – just as she hopes that her noble efforts in an ignoble circumstance will count for something.

That, too, is hope in action.

It is hope that fuels us when our friends abandon us, when our adversaries disdain us, and when the world looks as though it will never truly be free.

Hope makes a difference.

We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.

Oscar Wilde, 19th Century Irish poet

But as for me, I watch in hope for the Lord,

I wait for God my Savior;

my God will hear me.

Micah 7.7

Hope for healing

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

Genesis 2.15

For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.

Romans 8.19

Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

Philippians 2.12-13

One of the great privileges of my job as a pastor is that I get to pray for so many different people in so many different contexts. Something special happens when we pray – especially when we pray and ask for God to intervene, to save, and to heal.

He answers.

He doesn't always answer in the ways we think he should, but prayer is a way of inviting God to be with us with greater proximity. It's a way of opening up ourselves to the fact that we don't have to go through life's difficulties alone. If you conceptualize two people praying – both knowing that God has the power and authority to make wrongs right – then

imagine that, simply by the act of prayer, it's like God enters the room and sits between us. Prayer is a way of waking us to the fact that the One with power and authority to save and to restore and to heal is there with us, and somehow we're going to get through these difficulties, simply because He's there.

For example, this past week I prayed with a woman whose life came completely unraveled. She discovered an instance of sexual abuse in her extended family, concerning children, and it has devastated her to her very core. She is angry. She is hurting. She is confused.

When she and I began to pray in the lobby after church, I could feel her quivering with raw emotion. I couldn't fix anything that was happening to her, and I know enough to understand that God will not rewind history and simply make this all go away, but together we put our intention to God that He would be present, that He would come, and with His coming would help, bring peace, and heal.

In that short amount of time, I could see physical changes coming over this woman. Her posture changed. The muscles in her face relaxed. She was still angry – she has a right to be! – but her anger had turned from something venomous to something just.

She was healed somehow, and on some level, of a dark thing inside of her.

I don't make that claim lightly, but I do insist that is what occurred. I know what healing looks like because I've seen it. Hers was a kind of inner healing, an emotional healing, and that is the most frequent healing I am privileged to encounter.

Since God is our Healer, it is no wonder that the heft of His activity in the world involves healing. But we often find healing a difficult thing to understand and, more so, a difficult thing to quantify.

ALL MANNER OF HEALING

Healing is a difficult thing to quantify.

First, because there are many kinds of healing:

spiritual healing – a restoration of faith or hope, or the ability to love and trust;

inner healing – the healing of our memories, of our damaged emotions, of grudges and old wounds;



healing from demonization – which, though rare, still exists and even proliferates in many pre-industrial and underdeveloped parts of the world;

healing of mental illness – including character deformities, chemical imbalance, and all manner of conditions to which we have both a natural propensity and an environmental cultivation;

physical healing – in which our bodies are repaired or reformed;

and resurrection – both figurative and literal, in which dead things come back to life.

Healing is difficult to quantify.

Second, because there is no good way to measure how much healing has been done and in which way (with the obvious exceptions of physical healing and literal resurrection). We may not know whether someone has been completely healed or whether the healing they now experience is the first step in a long progression.

And yet I believe in healing.

I believe people are healed today, by the power of God's grace, and I have seen all manner of healing (with the exception of literal, bodily resurrection) with my own two eyes in a variety of contexts and encounters.

Furthermore, I believe that we're best able to understand God's mission as being His desire to heal the world. Whether we look in Isaiah 65-66 or Ezekiel 40-48 or Romans 8, or Revelation 20-21, we see clearly God's intent that things now are not the way He wants them to be. The world is no longer an Edenic paradise in the way it was first designed in Genesis 1-2, and God's every desire is to get it back to its original condition of peace, rest, and procreation in which we enjoyed unbroken intimacy with our creator, with each other, and with the whole created order.

See, I am doing a new thing!

Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?

I am making a way in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland.

Isaiah 43.19

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children.

Revelation 21.6-7

Since God is coming to heal the world,
and has already come
at His Advent to begin that healing work,
and will come again
at His Parousia to complete that healing,
and since we can participate in His mission to heal the world now,
by living now as we will live then,
in a Present Parousia, if you will,
we should be looking for –
and forward to –
all manner of healing activity in which we can take part.

God is healing the world, and we should be also.

“Healing” is a pretty good category for us to understand

eating + worship + knowing + learning + service + epiphany + being named

which is to say all the stuff we've previously
(and perhaps confusingly)
labeled participatory eschatology,
just as it is a good catch-all
for any good we might now do in the world
that assists in returning the world to its
original state of good and well-ordered
creation.

So, praying for people is good healing.
Encouraging others is healing.
Cooperating with NGOs
and churches
and local mission agencies
to help those less fortunate is good healing.



This is the spirit of Advent, the reason for which Christ came, comes, and will come again.

Christ comes to heal. He is the Savior, here to heal the wound of the world caused by sin. Christ gives us a new beginning, coming to us as a new Adam.

At Advent, I choose to remember three substantial healings from the nativity stories: the healing of Zachariah, the healing of the disenfranchised, and the healing of Messianic expectation.

The first healing

is a physical healing and a spiritual healing coupled together.

The second healing

is an inner healing and a figurative resurrection.

The third healing

is a spiritual and internal healing of another sort,
in which the collective consciousness and imagination
of a people is repaired from something distorted
to something true.

But make no mistake, these healings occurred only because of Christ's coming.

Advent heals.

HEALING THE SKEPTIC

Because we have not yet talked about Zechariah, and because his story takes some time to tell, let's begin with him and with the healing God gave him.

Zechariah was John the Baptist's father and a Pharisee. The circumstances that precede John's birth concern us here, for the Gospel of Luke records that while Zechariah ministered at the temple, an angel of God announced to him that his wife would give birth to a son, whom he was to name John, and that this son would be the forerunner of the long-expected Messiah (see Luke 1.12-17).

In disbelief, Zechariah asked for a sign – since both he and Elizabeth were very old – so he would know the truth of this prophecy. In reply, the angel identified himself as the Archangel Gabriel, sent by God specifically to make this announcement, and took away Zechariah's ability to speak until the day these things happened.

As an aside, it might be worth noting that angels can be testy.

At any rate, when Zechariah went back out to the temple courts, everyone knew something was wrong. They realized that he had seen a vision but could not share it.

On his return home Elizabeth conceived.

Eight days after Elizabeth gave birth it was time to name the child, and everyone assumed he would be named after his father (which was the custom). However, Elizabeth insisted that his name was to be John, so the family questioned Zechariah, who quickly wrote, *His name is John* on a tablet and had his powers of speech restored. Immediately he praised God and prophesied, saying:

Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
 because He has come to his people and redeemed them.
 He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
 in the house of his servant David
 (as He said through his holy prophets of long ago),
 salvation from our enemies
 and from the hand of all who hate us—
 to show mercy to our ancestors
 and to remember His holy covenant,
 the oath He swore to our father Abraham:
 to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
 and to enable us to serve him without fear
 in holiness and righteousness
 before Him all our days.
 And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
 for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for Him,
 to give His people the knowledge of salvation
 through the forgiveness of their sins,
 because of the tender mercy of our God,
 by which the rising sun will come to us from Heaven
 to shine on those living in darkness
 and in the shadow of death,
 to guide our feet into the path of peace.

Luke 1.68-79



As a devout Jew, and especially as a Pharisee (one of the few good ones, it seems), Zechariah had been waiting a long time for the Messiah. Like Simeon and Anna, Zechariah was old and had likely pondered the problem of Israel's occupation by the Romans for a long, long time. But even the holiest and most austere among us can be completely taken aback when confronted by an angelic messenger. And while we might question the wisdom of Zechariah's skepticism (he was speaking to an angel, after all), we can at least understand the startling news that *everything he had ever hoped for*, every national fantasy and God-given dream for restoration, was about to come true.

That realization was, in and of itself, a kind of healing. Zechariah was healed of his uncertainty and doubt. However, in the process of having his doubt removed, he lost his speech – but even that was restored to him in due time when his son was born (given their old age, that birth was another sort of healing). At that point Zechariah could exercise his obedience and call him John. The Benedictus, Zechariah's hymn of praise, burst forth in joyous expression not only of his own physical healing, but of his internal healing, which was representative of God healing Israel, just as he always promised he would.

HEALING THE STATUS QUO

In addition to Zechariah, several groups of people were healed during Christ's First Coming. Taken together, I'll refer to them here as "disenfranchised," meaning that they weren't part of the dominant social structure of 1st century Palestine. The Magi, for example, were considered outsiders because they were both foreigners (Persians) and Zoroastrians (hence, idolaters and "enemies" of God). The shepherds were also disenfranchised, being from a very low class within the social strata and normally kept outside of the boundaries of power in all realms: religious, political, and relational power were all arenas in which they had no place. Finally, women were part of those I'm considering disenfranchised, being that they had no real authority outside of their own homes. They were not considered credible witnesses in court; they could not serve as priests or Pharisees, and so they largely lived at the pleasure of the men in their lives.

Outsiders. Peasants. The lesser sex.

I believe that Christ's Coming radically altered the status of these marginalized people.

Advent included the outsiders:

The Magi were not only welcomed into the presence of Christ, but they received visions from God warning them about violence and danger at the hands of Herod

and were permitted by God to return to their own lands. Christian history and tradition holds that the Magi went their separate ways after this: one traveled to India where he was later discipled and baptized by Thomas (Jesus' disciple who demanded proof of the resurrection, see John 20.24-29), one ventured to Armenia and later returned to make an evangelistic appeal to the Emperor Nero, and one moved on to China where he began a family whose many descendants include Prester John, the legendary Central Asian Christian King.

Advent elevated the lowly:

Mary's Magnificat speaks of God exalting the humble, filling the hungry, and remembering to be merciful. There could be no more humble folk than shepherds, and none hungrier or more in need of mercy. In fact, Mary's prophetic song seems to be almost completely about the events that will transpire within the very near future, rather than – as is usual in prophecy – events that are long in coming. God chose the shepherds to receive a divine message that He had not forgotten those of low birth, and did not intend for them to stand at the back of the line while everyone else got first dibs on the Messiah. No one else ever did this. There was no precedent for this kind of behavior in the First Testament, nor was there any model upon which this could have been built in 1st century Palestine. This was new: God cares about the poor to such a degree that they get pride-of-place in the Messiah's schedule.

Advent elevated the status of women:

While it is true that there are notable women of faith in the First Testament, it is also true that notable women of faith are disproportionately fewer than men of faith. Not so in the Nativity: Mary, Elisabeth, and Anna figure much more prominently than Joseph, Zechariah, and Simeon. It is the women who never doubt, it is the women who never put up a fuss, and it is the women who bear and lift up both John and Jesus. In my mind, this is one more indication that Christ's First Coming ushers in the beginnings of a new creation in which the conditions of the Fall are reversed, particularly the portion of the curse of sin that seems to render women as subordinate to men. Good news: in the new creation, women once again appear alongside men as equals – as prophetesses and priestesses, as *theotokos* and God-bearers, and as apostles and teachers concerning the way of the Lord and the Advent of Christ.



Christ healed the outsider, the peasant-class, and the role of women in religious service. That's worth taking notice of, because it provides strong evidence that this was not merely the birth of a special boy with a special mission, but an entire reworking of the world, designed to set things back to their original status.

HEALING FALSE EXPECTATIONS

The final healing I think it's worthwhile to note is the healing of Messianic expectation. As we discussed earlier in this book, Jesus did not at first appear to satisfy the prophetic requirements demanded of God's Messiah. Upon closer inspection, however, we see that he did. But we wonder: with his Coming right under their noses, how did they miss it? How did they miss something that, for us, seems so obvious?

Again, asking this question is pretty dangerous. In order to adequately answer it, we need a great deal of humility – and also a good understanding that we likely would have made the same error had we been alive then. But the answer is a good one, especially as it reveals a similar flaw in our own understanding of who God is and what the nature of his ultimate triumph over evil will be.

The ancient Israelites expected a king, a priest, and a prophet; but once we begin to examine some specific kings, priests, and prophets, it becomes easier to understand why they were so misled. For example, many of Israel's kings were considered heroic because of their military success. King David, for instance, was the greatest king in their national history (though Solomon enjoyed more wealth and success, he also failed to secure a peaceful succession for his son and heir), and David both won and held his throne through military conquest. From God's perspective, David was a good king because he was a man after God's own heart (see 1 Samuel 13) who was quick to repent when he erred. From the perspective of the Hebrew people, however, David was a good king because he gained and held onto power. And the basis of his power was military might.

Their Messianic expectation, then, included military superiority.

Furthermore, the ancient Israelites loved some of the more dramatic elements of their prophetic tradition. Elijah was the greatest and most demonstrative of Israel's prophets, and God used him tremendously to restore faith to the Hebrew people. God loved Elijah because he was singularly committed to God and ardently desired the Hebrew people to be committed also. The Israelites, on the other hand, loved Elijah because of some of the crazy things he did, most notably calling down fire from the sky in a cage-match between Yahweh (the Hebrew God) and Ba'al (the Assyrian god) and then ordering the death of Ba'al's prophets after their god was proven impotent.

Their Messianic expectation, then, included drama.

Finally, the ancient Israelites always held Aaron as the model for a priest within Judaism. Aaron had some good qualities. He established the Levitical clergy, spoke for his brother Moses, and functioned as a prophet of God. But he also had some failings. His chief failure was the creation and subsequent worship of the Golden Calf (see Exodus 32), a false idol constructed in Moses' absence in order to appease the people. The people loved Aaron because they knew he listened to them and tried to deliver on their demands.

Their Messianic expectation, then, included capitulation.

Christ's Advent had no element of military superiority. If anything, we see the Holy Family running away from conflict, not even demonstrating the kind of passive, non-violent resistance that has often been romantically attributed to Jesus.

Christ's Advent had no dramatic clash between other-worldly powers, no fire-from-Heaven, and no slaughter of pagan priests. If anything, the fire from Heaven was a comet or a star gone nova, and the pagan priests weren't murdered with it, but ushered by it into the presence of Christ.

Christ's Advent had no capitulation to the whims of the people. The people were vocal about what they wanted – revolution! uprising! judgment! – but God chose instead to come as a saboteur for the human soul.

I wanted to point out to you these three false Messianic expectations and how Christ's First Coming healed them, so I could also point out that Christ's Present Coming must heal these things again in us.

Like the Hebrew people, our spiritual ancestors, we want military superiority for the United States over and against her enemies. We want Al Qaeda to be blown to smithereens and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to be executed like Sadaam Hussein. Somehow, we've managed to think that these deaths would please God. I'm not a total idealist. I understand that peace – to paraphrase John F. Kennedy – is not merely the absence of conflict but the presence of justice, but I also understand that Christ's Coming is not meant to be a baptism in blood.

We must never allow our faith to justify our hate.



Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in Heaven.

Matthew 5.43-44

Like the Hebrew people, our spiritual ancestors, we want a dramatic clash between our religion and non-Christian spiritualism and false religions. We want Muslims to be kept out of the monument to the World Trade Center, and we want Sikhs and Hindus to abandon their turbans and their swords, to eat beef and dress like Americans... or else. I'm not a universalist. I know we don't all believe the same thing, but I'm not spoiling for a jihad or an Inquisition either.

We must never allow our faith to justify our hate.

My kingdom is not of this world. *If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.*

John 18.36 (*italics mine*)

Like the Hebrew people, our spiritual ancestors, we want God to do the things that we think are best. To give us what we think we need. To be our errand-boy, our servant, and our genie in a bottle. We want him to smash those that need smashing, make guilty those we choose to loathe, and condemn the criminals great and small in order to appease our sense of justice and self-vindication.

We must never allow our faith to justify our hate.

You unbelieving and perverse generation, Jesus replied, how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?

John 17.17

Having looked at these diverse healings at Christ's First Coming, it is my hope that we can avoid the same failings as our spiritual ancestors, just as it is my hope that we can experience the same liberation, freedom, and joy.

May God heal us with His Present Coming like He healed those who have gone before us.

May He heal our understanding of kingship, of the prophetic office, and of priesthood.

May He elevate us, include us, and re-incorporate us back into His original intention for the world.

And as a result, may His song spring from our lips and burst from our bellies because here – now! – finally, He is come.

Hope for restoration

He who has begun a good work in you will carry it on until completion on the day of Christ Jesus.

Philippians 1.6

Now we come to it:

the Great Reversal,
the penultimate goal,
the picture of what God will do in the world
when he comes for the last time in Parousia
to complete the work of Advent
carried forth into the Present.

In this section I want to take a look at our hope for a four-fold restoration:

New People,
New Bodies,
New Creation,
New Relationship.

Knowing that this is God's promised future for us ought to give us hope when we face life's difficulties. We can trust in God. He will do what he's always promised to do, and – indeed – has already begun.

NEW PEOPLE

After the Fall, when sin entered the world (thus necessitating some world-healing activity on the part of God) and the corruption of sin began to effect everything and everyone, God decided to make His peace in and among one particular group of people – the children of Abraham. Through His covenant with Abraham, God intended to heal the world, to use Abraham's heirs as a catalytic converter for turning sin into salvation.

I will make you into a great nation,
 and I will bless you;
 I will make your name great,
 and you will be a blessing.
 I will bless those who bless you,
 and whoever curses you I will curse;
 and all peoples on earth
 will be blessed through you.

Genesis 12.2-3

The people intended to be the centerpiece of God's solution, however, became themselves part of the problem, and the Israelites (as the descendants of Abraham later came to be called) abandoned their ancient covenant with God.

Instead of a chosen people, God sent a representative, His son, called Jesus the Christ. Christ came and undid the sin of the world. He broke the power of sin, just as he emptied sin of its power to deface God's people. Through Jesus came a new engine of world-healing activity and likewise, a new people chosen by God.

For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, *It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.* In other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring.

Romans 9.6-8

In this confusing piece of Scripture above, Paul sets out the groundwork for participation in God's new people: faith (that is what it means to be "children of the promise"). No longer will our relationship with God be based on cultic ritual (see Galatians 6.16) or ethnicity (see Ephesians 2.11-13), but now it will be based on our commitment to Christ Jesus (see John 14.6) and our cooperation with him in the redemption of the world (see John 14.15).



For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.

Ephesians 2.8-9

And now, as “heirs of the promise” through whom “all the nations of the world will be blessed,” we must consider ourselves incorporated into the new family of God, as joint heirs with Jesus, as the new Israel, and as the new ethnicity of Christian men and women.

Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

1 Peter 2.10

What does this mean for us today? Well, for most of us it likely means that (a) something we didn’t know about (b) doesn’t hurt us. For example, most people who grew up in the Western world have no idea that “once upon a time” God had a chosen group of people, and if you weren’t one of them that could be very bad. With God’s new people, however, the boundaries have been adjusted significantly so that (a) you no longer have to be Jewish to be welcomed into God’s future plans, and (b) those future plans are already taking shape in the present.

To extrapolate this a step further, let me give you confidence that the entire concept of God’s “new people” is one more example by which God demonstrates His commitment to give us a new start. We are all welcomed into God’s new family, whether we might otherwise have been disqualified because of our nationality, some family scandal, bad history, past mistakes, or the sense that we’re pre-dispositioned to go crazy like the rest of our earthly family.

None of that matters anymore. You’ve been given a new identity, a new start, and a chance to be part of God’s mission to heal the world.

NEW BODIES

I’ve lost several friends to cancer in the last few years, and several family members to bad hearts, bad blood, and bad lungs. It’s sad, but it’s a fact, that our bodies simply do not last. In the Garden of Eden we saw no such imperfection, but imperfection entered the world and our flesh became corruptible when Adam and Eve rebelled.

Since our great hope is for Christ in his Coming to restore Edenic conditions to us, one of those conditions has always been a new body.

A Christian in the present life is a mere shadow of his or her future self, the self that person will be when the body that God has waiting in his Heavenly storeroom is brought out, already made to measure, and put over the present one – or over the self that will still exist after bodily form.

N.T. Wright, 20th Century Anglican Bishop of Durham

God's people are promised a new type of bodily existence, the fulfillment and redemption of our present bodily life. Much like the bodies God gave Adam and Eve, the purpose of our new bodies will be to look after the world – to steward creation, to shepherd it with the authority given to us by God. It is to this stewardship that the passages in the Second Testament about God's people reigning refer: Romans 5.17; 1 Corinthians 6.2-3; 2 Timothy 2.12; Revelation 1.6, 5.10, 20.4, 22.5 (just to name a few).

For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.

Romans 8.22-23

These new bodies specifically relate to God's promise to put us back into the original ecology for which we were designed. Thus there is a relationship between 1 Corinthians 15, which focuses specifically on the resurrection, and Genesis 1-2, which focuses specifically on creation.

That relationship centers around the similarities between (first) creation and (new) creation, between our (first) bodies and our (new) bodies, between our physicality (animated by nature) and our physicality (animated by Spirit).

The purpose of 1 Corinthians 15 is to show us that God's breath of Life then (in the future, in the new creation) is the same as it was (in the past, in the original creation).

Dust we are, and to dust we shall return...
but God can do new things with dust.

N.T. Wright



We can take great confidence from the fact that our present, corruptible bodies will be replaced with something better in the future. In real life that means we'll never run out of energy for doing the things we enjoy; we'll never have to call it quits and take a rest, watching frustrated from the sidelines while others do what we desire to do and often used to be able to do. This means we'll enjoy life more, just as we'll enjoy a greater variety in life.

The promise of our new bodies often fails to communicate just how great those new bodies will be. But imagine how great life would be now if you had a body that could move at the speed of thought, never tire or get sick, radiate with both an inner and outer beauty, and never get old. Think about it: you'd be around forever to enjoy your kids, and those you've previously lost would be returned to you in such a state that you could not only do everything you used to do with them, but you could now do anything you imaginable.

That's a good promise – the pleasures of *Twilight* with the innocence of *Peter Pan*.

NEW CREATION

The Bible begins in a garden paradise, created by God for the playful and fruitful interactions of people and planet.

The Bible ends with Heaven and Earth colliding to create a New Heaven, a New Earth, and a New City: Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is significant because it was thought to be the place where Heaven and Earth meet. It was the liminal space between our world and God's world. That a 'New Jerusalem' is coming means that every space is liminal space – every space is God's residence, every space a collision between God and humanity. And the fact that it is a New City is likewise important, because it shows a development from God's original creation of the Garden (which He solely built, and left to the care of humanity) and the new creation (which God built together with humanity, thereby giving us a picture of what the world is like when we cooperate with God as His stewards and co-creators).

The victory won in the resurrection of Jesus Christ is not simply a new exodus from sin, but even more grandly, a new creation.

The world of new creation is, again, the world of new *creation*, meaning it is a remaking of the same thing God made before. And we are permitted – encouraged even – to have a hand in the remaking.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve Him. They will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

Revelation 22.1-5

The human project of bringing wise order to the garden is not yet complete. We are called now to redeem creation and bring forth bits of new creation.

Of course, this doesn't mean throwing away what we have and starting over; it means fixing what we have and continuing on. The possibility of redemption is rooted in the power of God at creation and demonstrated by the power of God through the resurrection.

Matthew, Luke and John all name the day of Jesus' resurrection as the first day of the week. To the early Christians, this signified the first day of the new creation. The old creation came about through the symbolic six days of creation. Now, the new creation has only one day, what the Gospel narratives refer to as the "first day of the week." This single day for the new creation, in contrast to the six days for the old, hints that the new creation has only just begun. God has begun the work of the new creation with the resurrection of His Son. And this godly work, begun on the first day of the week, teaches us that a new age has begun. Those who believe in Jesus Christ, conforming their lives to him, take part in this new creation.

Much like all of the other promises and future eschatological hopes, the promise of a new creation inspires hope. Take my town, Jackson, Michigan, for example. It's a mess. It's a post-industrial depression town that has roads that make no sense, dead cars on lawns everywhere, sidewalks that go nowhere, and about fifty golf courses you can't play at because they're either closed down or too deep in debt to maintain. In the new creation, though, Jackson will get a face-lift, and you and I will be supernaturally empowered to help Jackson become the best possible version of a garden-city – to literally help make it Heaven-on-earth.

That will require some work ... but, by all accounts, we'll have some time on our hands.



It may take a thousand years to remove all the concrete and re-culture the fields (because, you know, who needs roads when you can move at the speed of thought). Our homes will all be taken away and maybe replaced with trees grown into the shape of dwellings (because, if you've got eternity, you could learn a few things about how to shape and culture an ecosystem). The deer won't be running in front of our cars, nor will we be forced to weave away from the roadkill like we're driving go-carts. Instead, we will be playing with our children in the way that Audrey Hepburn used to feed and care for that fawn.

That future is a long way off, but that's the kind of future we're promised. We will get to cooperate with God in healing the world, and once the evil and darkness have been leached out of it and the dominant forces of violence and control are banished, there is no limit to the manner in which we can serve God by stewarding and caring for the new creation, like we were meant to do with the first one.

NEW RELATIONSHIP

Christianity came in...startlingly with a sword, and clove one thing from another. It divided the crime from the criminal. The criminal we must forgive unto seventy times seven. The crime we must not forgive at all...there is room for wrath and love to run wild.

G.K. Chesterton, 20th Century British writer

In the Garden of Eden we enjoyed a friendship with God that has long since been lost but – for just as long – has been promised again. Our relationship with God will be re-forged through a new covenant, which we experience now through grace by faith in Christ, and the ultimate endgame of that new covenant is new friendship with God.

*The days are coming, declares the Lord,
when I will make a new covenant
with the people of Israel
and with the people of Judah.*

*It will not be like the covenant
I made with their ancestors
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they broke my covenant,
though I was a husband to them,
declares the Lord.*

*This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel
after that time, declares the Lord.
I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God,
and they will be my people.
No longer will they teach their neighbor,
or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,'
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest,
declares the Lord.*

*For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more.*

Jeremiah 31.31-34

This is why, in Revelation 21, John describes Heaven as a place with no temple, for we will literally live in God and everyplace will be a temple. There will be no sun, because God is Light, and since He comprises wholly the sphere of Heaven, there can be no darkness. Its gates will never be closed, for there will never be any danger that can get inside of God to harm us there.

The picture of Heaven is so holistic, so co-mingled, that “friendship” ends up being a pretty poor description of it. It’s perhaps better to say we’ll be eaten by God (though that gives the wrong idea too) or that God will ingest us to gestate us (though that is gross, so...no). We’ll be like Marushka dolls, those little Russian things that stack one inside the other, and we’ll be the tiny one in the center of God’s Boris Yeltsin.

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

John 17.20-21

I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing... If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

John 15.5, 7

My grandfather died when I was very young so I didn't get to know him much, but he lives vividly in the stories my dad and grandmother tell about him. Through them, I know my papa. But a time will come when I get to be with my papa forever. In the same way that I'll get to know him firsthand, I will also get to know God firsthand – without the intermediary of Scripture or the necessity of interpretation by those who have known God longer than I have (just as my dad and grandmother knew my papa longer than I did).

Getting to know God will be an overwhelming experience, certainly, what with all the shock and awe; but Scripture seems to indicate there will also be some measure of real friendship, like Adam and Eve experienced in Eden. So I imagine that eventually I'll be able to ask about the salvation history of cryptids and the possibility of the *imago dei* in cyborgs, or the real meaning of Job and the competing accounts of the non-canonical gospels, or what a quark is, or what the warning signs are before a star implodes, or whether or not he used the Big Bang, or whether Mitochondrial Eve was more of a fiction than her namesake. Then I might ask why I can't seem to build anything with my hands and not have it look like an eighth grade science project, or why math became so impossibly difficult in eleventh grade, or why I could never figure out a protractor (or a tractor for that matter), or whether or not it was wrong for me to stop dating that girl or start dating that other one when I didn't feel like it.

Geez... poor God. He may need therapy once I show up in Heaven.

Then again, lucky me. Lucky us. We don't deserve the future he promises. We don't deserve the benefits of his Comings.

But we get them.

We've gotten some already, we're getting some now, and we'll be getting more later.

That is the Christian hope surrounding his Comings.

Conclusion

My brothers are both a fair bit older than I am, and like me, they love to travel. Because I'm so much younger, when they were off gallivanting around the globe, seeing new places and experiencing once-in-a-lifetime adventure, I was stuck at home, imagining what they were doing and – mostly – hoping they'd bring me back something cool.

They always did. Usually they brought me a weapon of some kind, which is funny, by the way, because they are a policeman and a ranger, whereas I am a holy man. I guess I got rid of my need for shooting and hacking early on.

I digress.

One of the coolest gifts I ever received was a boomerang. I was so excited. I imagined myself as an outback superfriend, tossing my "karli" into the bush and having it swing back into my hand once it rescued the baby from those dingoes.

None of that ever happened.

Not even close. I couldn't get the goofy thing to come back to me. Maybe once or twice I got it to make a turn and at least head-fake me, but it never came back all the way.

Christmas is like that boomerang. When we were kids, it felt like the magic of Christmas – that special feeling the night before, the giddiness of wrapping presents and the

expectation of Santa eating the cookies – kept coming back automatically. Year after year the boomerang of Christmas magic would return and knock us off our feet sometime after Thanksgiving.

But for us adults, that doesn't quite happen anymore. Personally, I love seeing it happen for and in my children, and that is its own sort of magic, but the boomerang never returns to my hand any longer.

It gets harder and harder for the magic of Christmas to boomerang back to us.

Maybe Advent is the same way. When we first learned of the promise of Christ's Comings, it was so easy to be excited – like when I first received my boomerang – but then, over the next years while we practiced with Advent, maybe the magic didn't always come back.

That's ok.

Some magic is for kids, and you feel it, and you feel like a kid again, and everything is wonder.

Some magic, on the other hand, is mental – adult magic – and you hold onto it with a will and refuse to surrender to all the counter-magic that tells you none of this counts and none of it matters.

It counts. It matters.

Advent matters.

Christmas matters.

Even when the boomerang doesn't come back to you,
you've got to know and trust and will yourself to remember
that Advent isn't a toy,
that Christ's Comings aren't novelties,
and that, eventually
there will be another Advent,
Parousia,
during which time that boomerang will come back
and kick our feet off the ground,
landing us on a New Earth.



This book was about Christ's Comings – his three Advents – and their collision in our lives and the effect that has on us. We are transformed. We have entered into liturgical exploration, we have done “the work of the people,” and in the process God has done His own work, coming in us.

For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Ephesians 2.10

david mcdonald

friday, november 5 2010, at home



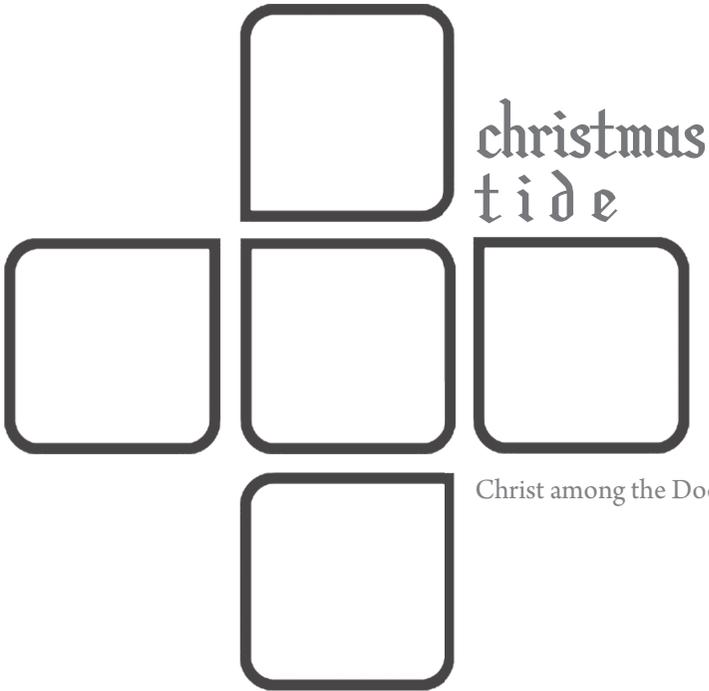
ADVENT
Christmas Tide

COMMON TIME
Epiphany
Transfiguration
Septuagesima
Sexagesima
Quinquagesima

LENT
Ash Wednesday

EASTER
Palm Sunday
Holy Week
Easter Tide
Ascension
Pentecost
Trinity

KINGDOM TIDE



Christ among the Doctors

Christmas Tide

Having spent the last several months learning and exploring the Christian liturgical calendar, I feel compelled to mention that I find it all both fascinating and silly. It's fascinating because of the rich heritage and theology. It's silly because no two groups seem to agree on what happens when or why or what it's supposed to mean.

I guess that's a pretty good snapshot of religion in general: complex, historical meaning surrounded by pointless bickering concerning the details.

Christmastide – or, as it's more commonly known, the Twelve Days of Christmas – is no exception. In almost every tradition, this is meant to be a season of big meals and grand celebrations. If you were to try to honor Christmastide for the first time ever, you might cobble together the various feasts of global Christianity (see diagram on opposite page).

One of the few things that people from various Christian traditions seem to agree on is the central text for Christmastide, in which the boy Jesus travels with his earthly parents to the Temple in Jerusalem. This episode in the Life of Christ is commonly referred to as “Christ Among the Doctors.” It is the episode that best connects Advent to Common Time, and it is the only credible story we have concerning the childhood of Jesus during the time between his Nativity and his Epiphany.



- Great Feast of the Nativity
 - Adoration of Shepherds and Magi
 - Recognition of Mary [also called the Synaxis of the Theotokos]
 - Feast of St. Stephen the Martyr

- Feast of the Holy Innocents
 - in recognition of the children executed by Herod

- Apodosis
 - apodosis means 'leave-taking' and refers to the departure of the Magi and Shepherds, as well as our own 'departure' from the Nativity

- Feast of the Righteous Ones
 - in recognition of Joseph the Betrothed, David the King, & James the Brother

- Feast of Circumcision

- Forefeast of Epiphany
 - a time of celebration prior to Christ's baptism

- Paramony
 - a time of reflection prior to Christ's baptism, also called "Twelfth Night"

Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up to the festival, according to the custom. After the festival was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the Temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, *Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.*

Why were you searching for me? he asked. *Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?* But they did not understand what he was saying to them.

Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.

Luke 2.41-52

I don't know what it is about little kids, but they all seem to love to run away. When my kids were little, I used to love going with them to the mall so we could walk around during the winter time and get a little energy out. But, guaranteed, the moment I turned my back on either one of them, they would bolt for the door to the parking lot. They do that at church, too, and I remember one horrible day when I couldn't figure out which door my daughter had tried to escape from, only to find her perched at the top of a long, steep flight of concrete stairs getting ready to do her first big dive.

Once during those mall-walk sessions, I lost sight of my son for about a minute. I guess I'm over-protective, but I normally didn't let him out of my sight for three seconds, so this minute seemed like an eternity. I got the sweats and that ache you get in your spine when dread comes over you like a shroud. And when I found him sampling ladies perfume, I wiggled out and scolded him for being so careless.

As if he was the careless one.

These are the memories that come to mind when I think of Mary and Joseph forgetting Jesus at the Temple. Only Jesus wasn't missing for a minute, he was missing for 4320 minutes.

Knowing a little about the context, though, keeps us from calling Palestinian Child Protective Services.

The Holy Family were in Jerusalem for Passover, an eight day celebration, held about 70 miles from their hometown of Nazareth. All good Jewish families participated in Passover – especially those with boys 12 years and up (they had special duties and privileges during the feast) – and so there were often large groups of people traveling together, much like a caravan. Since this tedious journey took several days and you were accompanied by friends and family (many of whom had children), it was common for the children to run around and play with each other, visiting their cousins and the other members of the family. If you’ve ever been a chaperone for a school field trip, you know how this kind of thing goes. Every time you stop for gas at a service station, all the kids get out and run around and buy candy and swap seats and it’s mayhem, complete madness, trying to get back on the road.

Well – that’s not how their ‘stops’ went, that’s how the entire journey was.

After Passover, on the journey home, Mary and Joseph each likely thought Jesus was with the other. The women typically went well ahead of the men (since they walked more slowly), and historians tell us it often took an entire day for someone from the back of the caravan to reach the front of it. Since the departure was such a big deal, and since it would have been so obvious that everyone was leaving, it’s no wonder that Mary and Joseph supposed Jesus to have been there – and indeed it’s quite possible that he started out with the group and then wandered off into the Temple later.

And, of course, their world was quite a bit different than ours. The dangers of child-snatching and pedophilia were less pronounced, and – particularly in such a close knit extension of neighbors and kin – the degree of trust in other people was exceptionally, and justifiably, high.

Once Mary and Joseph realized Jesus wasn’t with them, the panic would have set in quickly and deeply:

Where is he?
Is he ok?
Has he been kidnapped?
Has he fallen and been hurt?
Has he run away?

Had he gone on ahead of them and by heading back to Jerusalem they were further distancing themselves from their son?

Maybe he wanted to live in the big city and foolishly decided to try to make it on his own.

Lo and behold they found their twelve-year-old son in the Temple. Luke mentions that it was after three days that they found him – one day to head home and then (at the end of the day) realize Jesus isn't with them, one day to scramble back to Jerusalem, and one day to search for him in Jerusalem and ultimately find him in the Temple.

These “three days” are significant, by the way.

Just as the story of Jesus' birth subtly rhymes with the account of his burial (the swaddling clothes are like burial clothes, the frankincense and myrrh are used in preparation for internment, etc), this account anticipates his resurrection. Notice the timeline ('after three days'), as well as the connection between Jesus' question to Mary (“why have you been seeking?”) and the angels' question to the women at the empty tomb (“why do you seek the living among the dead?” see Luke 24.5). There is also a connection between Mary 'treasuring these things in her heart' and the tomb-women 'remembering these words' (see Luke 24.8).

Obviously Luke intends for us to make the connection between what happens with Jesus as a boy, cooperating with his Father's mission to heal the world, and the price he will pay for that mission later on at the hands of the very people with whom he is now learning.

During Passover it was common for the Sanhedrin – the mucky mucks and learned men of Second Temple Judaism – to gather in the Temple court and dialogue with anyone who wanted to stretch their theological muscles. It was the ancient equivalent to a town hall meeting, when politicians show up in small venues to get face-to-face with their constituents, or – maybe even better – when a DJ broadcasts their radio program from a mobile booth in the park.

While many famous paintings and works of art show Jesus wowing the crowds with his pre-teen understanding of Torah, it was much more likely that Christ was learning from the Sanhedrin rather than one-upping them. “Listening to them and asking questions” was the normal Jewish way of learning; so rather than thinking of the boy-Christ educating the educators, we must understand that he was coming under their intellect and studiously applying himself to the Scriptures.

Some might wonder about this.

Since, they might ask, Jesus was (and is) God, and since God is all-knowing, doesn't it stand to reason that Jesus would have already possessed his supreme knowledge? Wouldn't he have shared it with the Sanhedrin, exposing them to their ignorance and showing his worth as Messiah?

Simply, no. Remember that Christ came into the world and emptied himself of his divine privileges (see Philippians 2.7) and so lived (and grew and matured) just as any common person would have. He did not “cheat” with his divinity, but fully invested himself in the human condition.

Anne Rice, famed novelist and noted Christ-follower, conceives this self-limitation as a kind of knowledge and power that Christ had but refused to access.

I like this way of conceptualizing Jesus' divine-human duality, because I can relate to the experience of suppressing memories.

Anytime I counsel someone, for example, I try to later suppress what I've just heard and learned so they don't feel stigmatized.

Anytime I learn of a scenario in which one person has wronged another – say a husband to his wife, say – I willfully dismiss the knowledge I have so I can be available and present to others without judgment and - perhaps more importantly - without circumventing the natural revelations that people want to share themselves, without me supplying all the answers or claiming to know everything which then makes them shy and afraid, lazy and even belligerent.

Jesus lived and learned and loved as any other human child. He was eager to be trained, though, and showed promise to such a degree that Mary and Joseph were both astonished at his development. That word “astonished” in Greek means something like “hit in the face” and causes us to recognize that, despite his supernatural birth, Jesus was in many ways just a normal boy. Obviously the uniqueness of their son and his divine calling and nature had faded somewhat from their memory, and in this moment that realization came crashing back to them.

It was like they saw their son for who he really was.

And in response, perhaps with surprise and shame mixed together, Mary blurts out an accusation: *Why have you treated us like this?*

That reminds me of when I found Jacob in the mall, smelling perfume: *How could you be so irresponsible? So careless?*

Isn't it funny how Mary and I both chose to lay the blame for the disappearance of our children on them instead of on us? Shouldn't we have said: *I'm so sorry, I don't know how I could have been so irresponsible?*

Haven't you ever done this? Shouted at your kid when all you really wanted to do was grab them and hold them tight? To burst into tears of relief and joy?

But Jesus sees right through Mary's emotion, and refuses to accept any blame. He says: *Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?*

Two things stand out here: first, that Jesus is under some kind of divine compulsion ('didn't you know *I had to be* in my Father's house?'); and second, the subtle way in which Jesus takes the name 'father' from Joseph and gives it to God? That's very significant, something no one else would have done. To everyone else, He was Lord (Yahweh), but to Jesus He was Father. And Joseph was not.

The gospel stories don't tell us whether or not Jesus' realization of his divine parentage slowly dawned on him over time or whether it came to him in a flash. But they do tell us that by age twelve he already knew his true Father.

But Mary and Joseph did not understand this – which, again, is remarkable. Even with all their prior preparation and messianic brooding, Mary and Joseph couldn't fully comprehend that Jesus was meant to be the savior of the world. Or, if they did understand in principle, then they certainly didn't get it wholly right.

Maybe that's why Mary "treasured these things in her heart."

Lots of parents keep little books in which they write down the funny things their kids say and do. My wife and I blog about them. It's a nice way of going back and remembering who they were then, and being able to see – in the early stages – who they were becoming. Mary had no blog, and no scrapbook, but she held these episodes in her heart because she, too, could see who Jesus was already becoming and had already become.

Interestingly, one of the things he had already become was obedient. Luke says that Jesus went with his parents back to Nazareth and obeyed them. Although divine, it's obvious that Jesus knew his parents loved him and were concerned for him, just as it was obvious to him that his Father had entrusted him to Mary and Joseph and He meant for them to be obeyed.

In that, as in everything else, Jesus grew. He “grew in wisdom (intellect and morality) and stature (physicality and charity), and in favor with both God and men.” This is a phrase which, in Greek, means something like persistent forward-movement, like what you'd imagine an explorer doing in the jungle – cutting and hacking a way forward, blazing a trail.

Later, as a grown man engaged in public ministry, Jesus would again cause his family pain and confusion, and again they were chagrined because they failed to understand the fullness of who he was and why he had come. Looking back, it's easy to see that Jesus himself always had a clear picture that he had been sent by his Father to heal the world.

Four key features of this text stand out to me:

- God comes first
- God honors authority
- God is concerned with His Temple
- God can be lost

I want to explore each of these in turn, because I feel that understanding them will help us to better understand the bridge between Advent and Common Time.

GOD COMES FIRST

My daughter, Anna, has discovered something about me she doesn't like. Truth be told, I'm not sure how she arrived at the conclusion or even why her mind works the way it does. But she's discovered a horrifying reality about her dad: I love God more than anything.

That, in and of itself, doesn't seem so bad. In fact, it even seems quite noble. But my daughter is no slouch and she's come to realize that if I love God more than anything – or anyone – then that must mean that I love God more than her.

I'm not in the business of ranking my loves. I don't have a list somewhere that places Anna and Jake and Carmel just above my friends and slightly further above my Gibson Les Paul. My daughter does, however, and will often rank her toys and her friends depending on her moods. I've tried to help her see past this kind of love – especially when she feels less loved because I love God. I have told her repeatedly that it is precisely because I love God so very much that I am able to love her that much more.

But she's not buying it.

I hope that, in time, Anna will come to understand the truth of those words. My love for God is the fuel for loving everyone else. The more I love Him, the more I love her. I want her to love Him more, so she better knows and understands His love and is filled and defined by that love.

Jesus, in this episode, demonstrates that he loves the Father more than anything and, as a result, has prioritized his Father's business above every other concern. Jesus is single-minded in his devotion, almost baffled by his parents' concerns, and (in the universal manner of both zealots and adolescents) gently scolds them for not knowing this automatically.

This episode in the Temple is only the first of several in which Jesus prioritizes love for God over every other love. Later in his adult ministry, Christ often spoke of the unparalleled love his followers must have for his Father:

I did not come to bring peace, but a sword... anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. (see Matthew 10.34, 37)

Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?...whoever does the will of my Father in Heaven is my brother and sister and mother. (see Matthew 12.48-50)

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind... (see Luke 10.27)

But Christ doesn't leave these words alone. He clarifies and accompanies them with encouragement and promise. He makes it clear that the reason our allegiance to God must come before all other allegiances is that it will last and ultimately validate all other allegiances:

Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.

Matthew 19.28-30

I know Anna doesn't understand this now, but I hope that she will understand it later just as I never fully understood the choices my parents made when I was young but now much more greatly appreciate them.

For example, my dad (a pastor) was often criticized in our church and refused to fight back. He was sometimes criticized for his leadership style, and sometimes for his teaching style, and sometimes for no apparent reason at all. Maybe we had a really contentious church when I was younger, but I tend to think it's just the nature of the business that people get worked up and say mean things because they care so much about their spirituality. Any perceived threat is seen as something having far-reaching repercussions and they don't have the necessary skills to deal with their emotions properly. Anyway, the point is, my dad never fought back.

One time I had been on an overseas trip, and I had been badly hurt by some of the leaders (one in particular). Afraid to take their criticisms to my dad, they chose instead to treat me to their accusations, claiming that dad was wholly evil, and it was his fault that God's will wasn't being done, or some such nonsense. As a young kid, that hurt me so badly. I told dad all about it in the car on the way home from the airport. I wanted him to pull the car over and drive to the leader's house and scream at him. But dad refused to do that. After some time, he had a private, calm, conversation with the leader in question and challenged him on his behavior, but it was never the thrashing I thought should have happened.

As a kid, I wondered why my dad would allow me to be hurt by this leader and not defend or avenge me. Dad told me it's because he understood that that wasn't what God wanted from him. God didn't want him to take vengeance, or to give himself permission to hurt someone else in return for injuring his son.

There was a gospel message in there somewhere, but I didn't recognize it until many years later when that leader (long since gone from our church) asked permission to confess to



our congregation on a Sunday morning. He publicly repented and publicly affirmed dad in his leadership. There was a great reconciliation between this leader and our church, this leader and dad, and this leader and myself (he also sought my forgiveness privately).

None of that would have happened had dad put my need for angry revenge ahead of God's desire for calm confrontation and reconciliation. And because dad loved God more than me, I got to see reconciliation instead of martyrdom, victimization, or a deepening rift among our church leadership.

Hopefully Anna will someday get a front-row view of the privilege of her father's love for the Father. I hope she will follow my example and cultivate that love in her own spirit so that she can know the joy of putting God first and reaping the just rewards for her commitment to Him.

GOD HONORS AUTHORITY

Christ Among the Doctors is an important story in the life of Jesus, displaying both his full humanity and his full claim to divinity. It is the episode in Jesus' life in which he discovered who he was, and yet this discovery didn't make him proud. It begins with his disappearance from his parents, centers on his discourse with the Sanhedrin, but ends with him meekly returning as an obedient son.

In fact, he is an obedient son in two ways – to Mary and Joseph, and to God who gave him to Mary and Joseph.

Knowing his “real” Father didn't make Jesus rebellious to the earthly family God had given him, but extra submissive to that family. God does not despise earthly ties. It is our godliness that requires us to be fully invested in this world and its inherent responsibilities with supreme fidelity.

When I was little and would hear my dad speak about this piece of Scripture, I always had a secret little voice in me that said: *Please don't let him apply this story in some way to honoring your mother and father and obeying your parents.* It was like I understood that obeying my folks was a spiritual endeavor, and that my obedience to them was representative of my obedience to God, but I didn't really want to make that connection. I wanted a free pass. I wanted to ignore the authority over me and yet still claim to be a “good” Christian.

Don't we do this all the time? We flaunt the law and our employers, our spouses and our families but think nothing of it so long as we feel good about our spiritual relationship with God.

Religious people do this often when they protest at political or social gatherings, thinking that the urgency of their cause is so great that it allows them to circumvent the process, to mistreat others, and to do whatever they please in service to their cause.

Christian people often do this if they are married to non-Christian spouses, just as devout believers do when they are married to lapsed or backslidden Christians, thinking that “they” are often wrong or limited in their understanding in every capacity simply because they are blind to the spiritual reality of the world around them.

Christian teenagers do this when their parents don’t profess to be believers, thinking that their parents are inherently base and foolish and have no real love for them because they don’t care to serve Christ, forgetting that Christ gave them those parents to begin with. Of course, there are some parents who are base and foolish and hurtful, and those parents should be ignored, but on the whole we cannot simply disregard our parents and families merely because they do not share our faith.

Just as we cannot disregard our government
or law enforcement
or judiciary
or employer
or professor
or counselor
because they do not share our faith.

GOD IS CONCERNED WITH HIS TEMPLE

We sometimes forget that in the time before Christ entered the world, God’s presence was congealed within the Holy of Holies in the Temple. So it was with great religious ardor and spiritual significance that pilgrims journeyed from all over the ancient world to reach the Temple and offer sacrifices there. Jesus understood the holiness of the Temple, just as he understood that the Temple was where he would learn to please his Father.

We ought not forget that the Temple was special.

Entering the Temple was like entering God’s secret lair
hidden behind the bookcases,

holding the original Torah,
accessed by pressing a hidden switch
beneath a fancy lamp.

Despite the fact that the church and the Temple are not the same, I still cringe a bit when I hear people speak derisively about the church. If nothing else, the church is a spiritual kind of Temple-descendant, and I think we've allowed our awe to erode whenever we treat it so lightly.

But the Temple is no longer standing, for it was destroyed both figuratively (see John 2) and literally (by the Romans in AD 70). Furthermore, the clear teaching of Scripture is that *we* are now the Temple – the secret location of God's Presence – both individually (see 1 Corinthians 3.16-17) and corporately as the church (see Ephesians 2.19-22). Which means that the Holy Place is in you. When we come together as His church, that holy Presence is once again manifested in us (see Matthew 18.20).

While he may have declared that "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Luke 9:58), Jesus was never truly homeless. God the Father was always in residence in Jesus' heart. And, after his twelve-year old truant-trip to the Temple, Jesus learned to take his Father's house with him wherever he went.

Jesus could never be lost or alone:

even when he argued with the scribes and Pharisees
 he used to learn from,
even as he endured the cluelessness
 of his uncomprehending disciples,
even as he separated himself
 from his confused and doubting family,
 even as he felt the heat of the political power's anger,
 even as he faced betrayal by those he loved most,
 even as he hung on the cross.

Jesus' human parents taught him how hard love will search for the lost.
Len Sweet, 21st century American futurist and theologian

Always and everywhere Jesus was at home with God's presence and love. As an adult, Jesus took the knowledge of this intimate, unbreakable bond between himself and the Father on the road. Everywhere he went was home. Everyone who loved him was family. Jesus isn't the only one who experiences this kind of everywhere-at-homeness – all lovers and followers of Christ do too.

Let me give you an example of how this works in real life:

Have you ever traveled for business or school and met people meant to be your chaperones or hosts or guides? They're usually polite and hospitable, but things are always a little awkward. You don't want to impose and they don't really want you to overstep your bounds, and everyone is always concerned about the event or situation, whatever it may be – meeting, concert, etc.

But things aren't like that when you travel with church groups. In my travels all over the world – 27 countries, 18 trips, 12 teams – I always experience exuberance and joy, laughter and love and celebration *right away*. Why? Because I'm home when I'm with them. Because when we get together it's a reunion, even if we've never previously met. We hug and sing and tell stories late into the night, and it's often better than it is with most of our natural and biological families because there is something deep binding us one to another.

That's the family of God. That's the Temple for today.

We experience that in church, too – oh, not to the same degree since many who come to church are coming for the first time and are unsure about where they stand with God. But for those who know what team they're playing on, every Sunday is like a picnic or a graduation or an open house. There are always plenty of jokes and someone usually sneaks in food or an inappropriate comment. Then many go out for the after-party, lunch at Applebees or something. And like any good party, there will be a few folks huddled in corners trying to get over a broken heart or speaking words of comfort to the needy.

But it's all family, and it's all evidence that God is at work in His people, in His church, and in the world.

When Jesus tells Mary and Joseph he was in his Father's house (or, in some translations, "about his Father's business"), he was not only referring to looking after the Temple and to the business of learning and applying Scripture, but he was equally in the business

of being part of the People, the community, of God who would later become the True Temple of God's Presence.

GOD CAN BE LOST

In Luke 24.13-35 we read about two disciples (not among the 12) walking along the road who are joined by Jesus after his resurrection. The disciples were lamenting about Jesus' death and about all their washed-up hopes for a messiah. But Jesus gently pushes back against their negativity and, over dinner, finally reveals *who* he is and *how much power* there is in his resurrection.

In many ways, the Emmaus Road story is very similar to Christ Among the Doctors. In both stories, people have lost Jesus and despair of finding him again. And in both stories the same people are surprised at how and where Jesus is found.

Jesus, it seems, is a little more elusive than we might first have thought.

I've often found Christ to be a bit slippery. Every time I think I've got him figured out, every time I think I really understand him, he seems to slip away from me – either because I've read something new in the Scriptures or I've read something old in the Scriptures in a new way and understood it differently through prayer or conversation or meditation – and I have to drop everything and eagerly pursue him.

Mary and Joseph and all their friends and family had made the pilgrimage for Passover, but as soon as the holiday was over they hit the road, anxious to get back to their normal lives. But young Jesus refuses to let his relationship with God be regulated according to some culturally contrived calendar.

They left, but he stayed.

Therein lies an important lesson for all of us: We mustn't assume Christ is accompanying us as we go off on our own business. Sometimes we get eager and jittery to get back to "business as usual," but Christ wants us to stay rooted in his Father's house and in his Father's mission to heal the world. If and when we sense the lack of his presence, we must be prepared to hunt for him – in prayer, in the Scriptures, in worship, in community – and not to give up until we've got him back again.

And let's be careful that we don't idealize sitting around and praying and studying at the expense of active participation in the world around us. Remember that even though he started out in the Temple, Jesus finishes this episode of his life by obediently following Mary and Joseph back out into the world where he belongs.

* * *

Taken together, these key features are reminders that, through his Advent, Christ has come into the world to save and to heal. As we'll see in the following section concerning *Common Time*, he demonstrates the manner of saving and healing by the way he lives and interacts with others.

 COMMON TIME

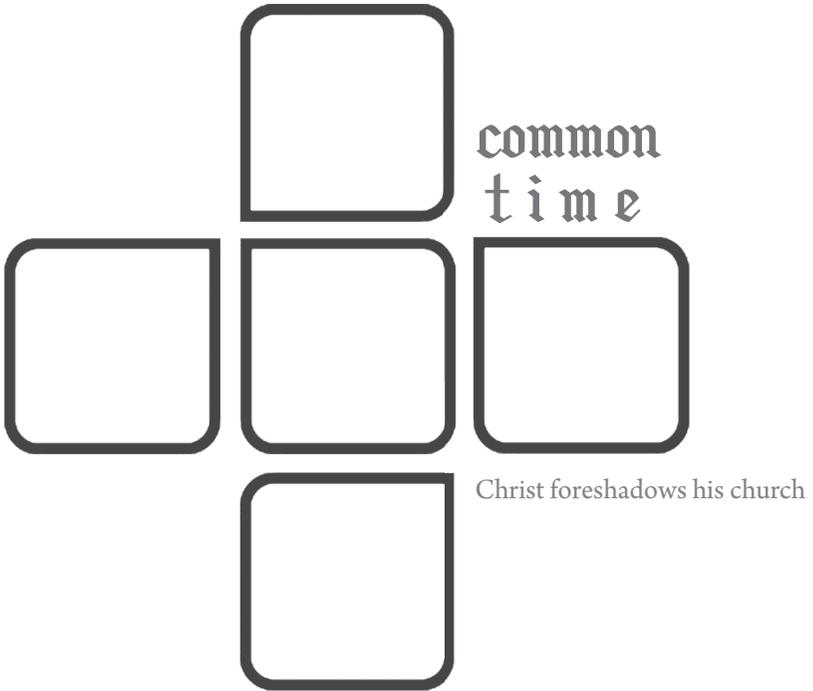
ADVENT
Christmas Tide

COMMON TIME
Epiphany
Transfiguration
Septuagesima
Sexagesima
Quinquagesima

LENT
Ash Wednesday

EASTER
Palm Sunday
Holy Week
Easter Tide
Ascension
Pentecost
Trinity

KINGDOM TIME



Introduction

I can probably think of six exceptionally spiritual moments in my whole life:

Johnny Markin praying for me at an altar in a Surrey gymnasium. I was so overcome by emotion that my nose turned into a faucet and my mom had to bootleg Kleenex for me at the front of the church.

A youth retreat in Whistler. I got my first glimpse into the invisible world ... and learned about girls.

Meeting Rock Tannehill in Seattle and staying up all night at his place talking about God. When I got home, I collapsed in my front hall, crushed by the guilt of my rebellion.

Holding my children, newly born and still covered in gloop. I realized I knew nothing about God at all because I knew nothing about fatherhood.

Dancing in worship with my friends, Barry and Erika Crocker, from Australia, soaking my Fender Jaguar guitar in olive oil, laughing and singing.

Grieving with Jvo over the staff cutbacks at the Winds, my first massive failing as a pastor, followed quickly by the death of our friend Randy.

That's it. Six exceptional moments. Thing is, I count myself lucky. Not everyone gets moments like those, let alone a half-dozen. And I don't mean to suggest those were the only times of spiritual consequence in my life – far from it! It's just that those were exceptional experiences that marked and shaped me forever. They were times when I felt the veil between Heaven and earth thin out and I was alive in glory.

But those moments are rare.

I might not even have another six before I bite the biscuit, pay the piper, or wake up dead for the long goodbye. But herein lies an incomparable spiritual truth:

Our spirituality is not forged in the exceptional,
but in the average.

It's not founded on the extraordinary,
but the ordinary.

The infinite truths of God
are most often expressed in the everyday.

Yet somehow, spiritual people often forget that the biblical model for transcendence is more holiness-as-usual than rapture, climax, and abandon. Thankfully, our Christian heritage has established sound rituals for reminding us that ordinary time matters.

In the liturgical calendar, Ordinary Time is the season during which there are no feasts or festivals. It is the Time between Times during which we refuse to be overwhelmed by the distraction of celebration and lamentation, pomp and poignancy. Life, after all, is more ordinary than not, more business-as-usual than ecstasy, amazement, and peril. Ordinary Time is for us to live like we normally ought, governed by the driving truths of the faith – therein lies enough spirituality for a lifetime.

Strictly speaking there are two seasons of Ordinary Time:

the first, Common Time, occurs between Epiphany and Lent;
the second, Kingdom Tide, occurs after Trinity and before Advent.

They are both lengthy seasons, and they both concern the foundations of the church.



Kingdom Tide is about the birth of the church. Common Time is about the episodes during the life of Christ that influence who the people of God will later become.

Christ came to reconcile and to heal. He provides the source material for what it means to be the church.

Allow me to explain:

The church is an agency of healing. By that I really mean something like a place for healing – but not a place like a park or even a hospital. I mean something more like a headquarters, a place with a mandate or a mission – more CIA than Hollywood Boulevard. When I think of the church as an agency of healing I think of it (as I'm convinced the Bible does also) as a collection of people committed to one allegiance with one mission: to heal the world. I define this healing rather holistically as, again, I'm convinced the Bible does. It is spiritual healing, emotional healing, psychological healing, social healing, physical healing, relational healing, counteracting the effects of the all-encompassing corruption brought on by sin.

The church is an agency of healing, a people called to fix what's broken.

The church is, concordantly, involved in the ministry of reconciliation. Meaning, the primary ways in which the church heals are relational (i.e. reconciling two parties back together again). That 'ministry of reconciliation' (which Paul speaks about in 2 Corinthians 5) can be traced back to the initial relationships that God ordered in Genesis 1 and 2 – our relationship with God, our relationship with others, our relationship with our true selves as image-bearers of God, and our relationship to Creation. Though Paul explicitly refers to only the relationship between ourselves and God in 2 Corinthians, he speaks explicitly about the reconciliatory nature of the other three relationships in many other places throughout his letters (more on that later). The church, then, is an agency of healing that is working to reconcile us to God, to other people, to our true selves (teaching us how to live the way God intended for us to live), and to Creation (everything that has been made by God).

The church is in the business of healing and reconciliation. We fix, and are fixed ourselves.

Based on the life of Christ between Baptism and Transfiguration (the traditional scope of Common Time), we gain insight into who we are as the people of God and what we're collectively supposed to do as the church.

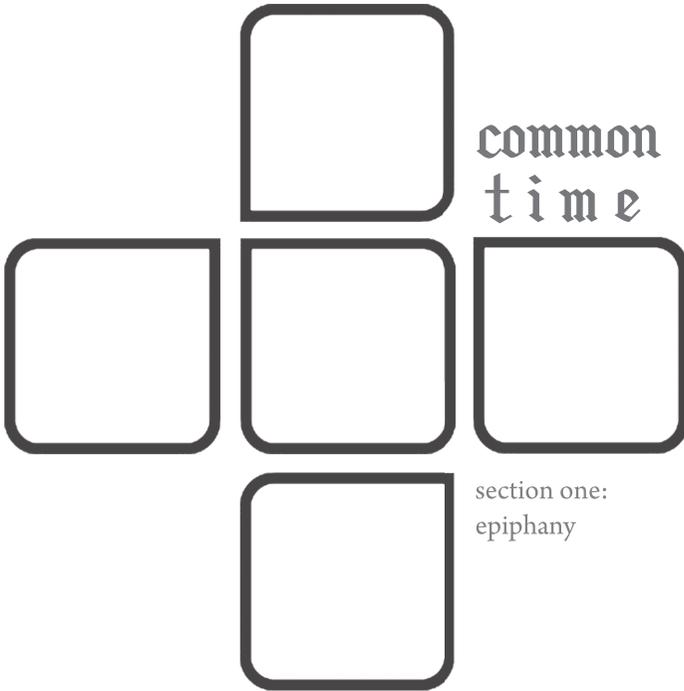
If Kingdom Tide is about the birth of the church, then Common Time is a sonogram showing us the church in the Gospel womb.

In his life, Jesus showed us what we must later do ourselves. If life truly was sport, then we might imagine him explaining football to an eager group of athletes as they sit together in a diner. Jesus can take out a napkin and draw all the positions on the field and explain all the rules of play. He might even get rambunctious and jump up from the table, kicking an orange around the restaurant, jovially showing his young friends how it all works. Later those athletes will go out and play the game for themselves on a full-sized pitch with teammates and uniforms. But for now they watch Christ and learn what they are expected to do.

That's what Common Time is.

In *Common Time*, we will look at 6 episodes from the life of Christ to figure out (1) what he did and why he did it and (2) what we're supposed to do as a result. During Common Time we live the life of Christ until it finally becomes our own. Together, we must become an agency of healing in the ministry of reconciliation just as he worked to reconcile and to heal.

The transformation from Christian to church is explored through episodes of baptism, Sabbath, blindness, storms, outsiders, and transfiguration. By examining these lodestones of Christian spirituality, we will come to a clearer understanding of Christ's life and mission, and his mandate for the life and mission of the church.





epiphany: becoming the people of god



sabbath: reconciled to god



blindness: reconciled to ourselves



storms: reconciled to creation



outsiders: reconciled to others



transfiguration: the hope of the world



on becoming the people of God...

Jesus meant for us to understand baptism as a symbol of his death and resurrection. As such, it has a mystical significance for Christ-followers.

*When we are baptized,
we acknowledge that our old lives are over
and our new lives of following in Jesus' footsteps have now begun.*

Additionally, baptism provides us with a model for rituals of reconciliation – ways of healing our relationships and dealing with our sin.

Water Cross

Naturally, we would all prefer seven epiphanies a day and an earth not so devoid of angels.

Jim Harrison, 20th Century American poet.

An epiphany is, literally, a “manifestation.” It’s what happens when we see the truth of something, or when something is revealed for what it really is. In that moment we “get it.”

We have all sorts of little epiphanies –
 how you treat others matters,
 the limitations of our earthly fathers
 often cloud our perception of our Heavenly father,
 black clothes don’t actually make you look skinnier –
but we are sometimes privileged with a few epiphanies of greater significance –
 I am going to marry *her*,
 I have been made to do *this*,
 I’m sure *this* is the right thing to do –

Epiphany is also the name of one of the feast days on the liturgical calendar, traditionally celebrated on January 6 with much bread and board, sport and mirth.

In Western Christianity, Epiphany celebrates the Magi finding and adoring Christ, proving that he is the savior of the whole world and not merely the Jewish one.

In Eastern Christianity, however, Epiphany commemorates the baptism of Jesus.

Hungarian Christians refer to Epiphany as *Vizkereszt*, which means “water cross;” they believe Christ’s baptism foreshadows his crucifixion (a connection the apostle Paul explores in Romans 6.3-5 and Colossians 2.12). They celebrate the Water Cross by bundling up in early January and participating in a cruceSSIONAL (a parade with a giant cross at the head, carried by the bishops and fathers of the church) through the city streets to the banks of a river. The giant cross is then blessed by the bishop and heaved into the sub-zero water. Many burly (presumably sober) men then strip down to their *Fehérnemű* (underwear) and wrestle for the lumber. The man who returns the Water Cross to the bishop receives a blessing for his family for that year, and hopes no one is around with a digital camera.

In this book, I want to explore the significance of Epiphany from an Eastern perspective. I think Christ’s baptism has something to do with us, the church, and what kind of church he wants us to become.

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying: *I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?*

Jesus replied: *Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.* Then John consented.

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment Heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from Heaven said: *This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.*

Matthew 3.13-17

This little conversation between Jesus and John the Baptist takes place at *Qasr al-Yehud*, a site on the Jordan River traditionally called “The Jewish Castle” and is thought to be the place where the Israelites crossed the river and entered into the Promised Land. It was a spiritually and historically significant location for baptism—a fact not lost on either John, Jesus, or the thousands of onlookers. Maybe this is why John paused to wonder whether he should really baptize Jesus instead of the other way around.

The significance of that moment in the present was underscored further when God spoke from Heaven saying:

This is my beloved Son

(a reference to King David, whom the Psalmist spoke of as God's adopted son in Psalm 2,10; and to Isaac, Abraham's "beloved" son who he willingly sacrificed to God in Genesis 22),

with whom I am well pleased

(a reference to the suffering servant of Isaiah 42, a historical and spiritual figure who demonstrated the means by which God would save the world).

The baptism John offered was a ritual of repentance, a form of spiritual cleansing from the pollution of sin. Jesus was perfectly sinless, yet he submitted to John's baptism to show us two important truths: first, that he had chosen to identify himself with sinful humanity; and, second, to demonstrate the importance of being cleansed from our sin.

Baptism is not merely some kind of ancient purification ritual – though it was, indeed, that. Jesus' baptism gave it new significance by symbolizing the grave in which he would later be buried, followed by his resurrection. Christians were baptized from then on as a way of identifying themselves with Christ, his sacrificial death, and his supernatural resurrection. So, when we are baptized, we are mystically united with the death and resurrection of Jesus.

But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.

Romans 8.11

This connection is so powerful that Jesus often used water imagery to illustrate the spiritual cleansing he offered his followers and continues to offer us now.

He is the spring of water welling up to eternal life (John 4.14).

His flesh and blood are food and drink which give eternal life (John 6.53-54).

He offers streams of living water to all believers, indicative of spiritual rejuvenation and vitality (John 7.38).

Jesus compared himself to Jonah—the First Testament prophet’s three day stint in the belly of the great fish was like Jesus’ three day experience with death.

Jesus was also compared to Noah by Peter—the water carrying the Ark was a preview of baptism, and the newly purified land represents the new Creation.

In many ways Jesus himself is the baptismal water, transforming us from who we used to be into who are meant to become. Because baptism is such a powerful experience of reconciliation and healing, Jesus’ final words to us refer to it:

All authority in Heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

Matthew 28.18-20

Clearly, getting baptized is one of the most important things that we do as lovers and followers of Jesus Christ. Through baptism we are tied to his death and resurrection more than any other activity described in the Second Testament. It is a concrete reminder that our old selves have died, that sin and death no longer have dominion over us, that God has raised us up into new people here and now, and in anticipation that, like Christ, we will rise again after death.

Since we are followers of Christ, and he was baptized, then we need to do the same, don’t we? He was baptized by John and by death on the Cross, and so we die to our old lives through baptism and are resurrected to new life in Jesus.

Can you drink the cup I drink,
or be baptized with the baptism I will receive?

Mark 10.38

Baptism is about receiving God’s forgiveness (see Acts 2.38),
about experiencing God’s salvation (see 1 Peter 3.21, Acts 2.40,
and Mark 16.16),
and about being reborn into new life with Christ (see John 3.5,
Romans 6.3-6).



It is an external washing accompanied by an internal or spiritual cleansing. It is the moment when we die to ourselves and come alive in Christ. It is a proclamation of Christ's supremacy over death and the truth of the power of his resurrection. It is the moment when our old self dies and our new self rises, when we once again become the people of God in the way we were always meant to be.

It is the first visible sign of the birth of Christ's church – all of his followers were, and are meant to be, baptized. Consider baptism to be something like a draft into professional sports. It's the time when we first put on the uniform and shake hands with our new teammates. It's the time when we stand up and tell people what team we're playing for and what contribution we plan on making.

We'll talk more about the significance of baptism in the next few chapters – ecologically, ritually, and practically – but for now I simply want you to understand that Jesus was baptized even though he had no need to be cleansed, and that he wants you and me to be baptized as well to lay the foundation of the church he's building.

Obedience precedes understanding

What is more pleasing to the LORD:
your burnt offerings and sacrifices
or your obedience to his voice?
Listen! Obedience is better than sacrifice,
and submission is better than offering the fat of rams.

1 Samuel 15.22 (New Living Translation)

My friends Paul and Heidi have a parenting rule I've always admired—they allow their kids to ask why. They refuse to tell their children to do something *because they said so*.

It seems so simple, so dignity-bestowing, doesn't it?

Unless, of course, you have a daughter like mine who asks why no matter how many times you tell her the reasons behind the reasons.

Dad, can I have a pony?

No, beauty, I'm sorry.

How come?

We don't have anywhere to put the pony, babe.

But why can't we keep it in my room?

Because ponies need their own space, and because they can't live indoors with little kids.

But we could build it a pony house. Why can't we build it a pony-house?

Because that would cost a lot of money that dad and mum haven't put aside for pony houses.

But you could start saving, dad. Why don't we save for a pony-house?

You could save for a pony house, Anna. But it would take you a long time.

But you could loan me the money daddy, please can we get a pony?

And so on.

By the end, I just wish I'd told her: *No. You can't have a pony, because all the ponies died in a fire.*

<sigh>

Alright. Maybe that wouldn't have been better.

We all have Anna's nature, though, to ask why why why, to poke and prod for the loopholes in the reasoning, searching for the escape clause.

But sometimes we just need to shut up and do what's right whether we want to or not. Sometimes obedience is an end unto itself. In the military, for example, every new recruit must learn to follow orders. At the beginning, those orders can be pretty inane – *stand up, on the ground, give me 20, shut your mouth* – but the point is to learn obedience. Because there will come a time when following orders can save your life, or the life of the guy next to you, or the lives of countless others.

I try to teach my kids obedience for much the same reason. I want them to listen to me so that if we're ever in a threatening situation, they'll just obey without deciding whether or not they feel like it. Every time we're in a parking lot, I'm glad I've trained them this way:

Anna. Stop. Come back. Hold Daddy's hand in the parking lot.

Sorry, dad!

This obedience has saved her life at least twice when my high-energy, always skipping and leaping daughter runs into traffic.

There is an obvious spiritual application here: we need to learn to obey God without always questioning His motives, His means, or His opportunity.

I don't mean to say it's inappropriate to question God, or that our questions are unwelcome – quite the opposite is true. I think one of the great graces God extends to us is allowing us to question His infinite wisdom *ad nauseum*. I don't think we question too often either. No, I feel like it's one of the hallmarks of my life and ministry and personality to ask good questions and tenaciously pursue satisfying answers. But I do think one small failing in my teaching is to underemphasize obedience for the sake of obedience.

I work tirelessly to help others find solid biblical answers for why we should live as we're instructed, which is a good, good thing. But I also think it's important that we learn to obey God because He's God and we're not. At the end of the day He makes the rules. Even when we don't understand we ought to do as He commands, trusting that what He commands is actually in our best interests anyway.

Jesus modeled for us this *obedience for its own sake* by being baptized, even though he didn't need to receive baptism for the repentance of sins.

I see three reasons for Jesus' baptism. First, his baptism fulfilled a prophecy about the entrance of the Savior of the World to the world stage (see Matthew 3.1-2, 13-17, and Isaiah 40.3). Second, it made a public declaration of his ministry and connected him to all who had come before him preaching repentance. Third, it modeled obedience. He showed us there are things we ought to do even if we think we don't need to do them.

That's powerful.

In my short life I've heard an awful lot of people speak about an awful lot of spiritual things they don't think they need to do.

I've heard people say they don't need to serve at their local church because it would take time away from their kids or they volunteer somewhere else or they're just too busy.

Those are good reasons for not serving in our local churches for a season, but they become problematic if we never prioritize the work of the ministry in our families and our schedules.

I've heard people say they don't need to give money to their local church because they give money elsewhere or they don't have much money or they think the church is not as responsible with money as it should be.

Those are valid considerations, but a few short conversations with an elder or member of a finance team can address them. Our refusal to give to the mission of Christ's church says more about what kind of people we are than it does about the church.

I've heard people say they don't need to study the Scriptures on their own because they get such good biblical teaching at church or they get such great input through blogs and podcasts or they find the Bible too difficult to understand.

Even if true, those things do not mutually exclude the truth that everyone needs to read and study the Bible for themselves so they can grow personally and learn individually from the Holy Spirit.

I've heard people say they don't need to pray, or invite others into the life of the church, or fast, or forgive, or be involved in spiritual conversation with those around them, or extend the hand of friendship to someone not like them, or, or, or whatever.

They always have good reasons.

But sometimes

we just need to do the things God has commanded us to do,
even if that means

our obedience precedes our understanding.

Waters of chaos and healing

For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.

Habakkuk 2.14

Baptism contains an ecological significance. Remember the *Vizkereszt*, the Water Cross of Epiphany in which the Hungarians toss a symbolic cross into the nearest running water? They toss the cross into the river so creation itself might come into contact with the symbol of God's re-creation.

Allow me to explain:

We know that with the rebellion of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, sin entered the world (see Genesis 3).

We also know that sin's corrupting influence spread beyond people and into the created order itself. Sin ruins everything (see Romans 8).

More specifically, we understand that the corruption of sin is at least partially responsible for the deterioration of the physical world: directly, through some metaphysical undoing of creation's harmony, or indirectly, through human sin and disregard for the planet.

We also know that God's plans to restore creation include both human and non-human inhabitants of this world and the world itself (see Isaiah 65-66, Revelation 21).

God plans to heal every aspect of the world, and His rescue mission begins with the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (see 2 Corinthians 5).

In a very real way the cross is not just for us but for the river as well. The Hungarians toss the cross into the water because they're preaching to it.

Sound far fetched? Too liberal? Is my heart bleeding overmuch?

I understand this stuff can seem kooky. But if I may, I'd like to delve a little deeper into some of the biblical ideas about water (though we might, additionally, do this with any aspect of Creation, let us allow water to work as representative of the entire Created order).

The ancient Near Eastern world, including Israel, commonly assumed that the earth existed in a kind of water womb. They believed we were encircled by water and were brought up out of the water onto dry land, as if God (or the gods) had built a palace in a falling tear drop (see Psalm 104.2-3, 5). Our spiritual ancestors often thought of this water as anything but pleasant and gentle. Rather, it was churned up, chaotic, a perpetual threat to human existence.

In other cultures, the watery chaos represented both the violence of the gods who made the world and the result of their continued in-fighting. The Hebrews, however, understood that Yahweh had conquered the restlessness of the waters and brought peace to the world.

But peace came at a price. God had to fight for order, though His "fighting" really only amounted to some angry words that caused the seas to behave (see Psalm 104.7, 77.16). Furthermore, God exercised His power and authority over these chaotic waters by establishing boundary markers that they could not cross (see Psalm 104, Job 38, and Proverbs 8). He patrolled these borders with angelic horses (see Habakkuk 3.15) while making Himself a throne above and out of the very waters of chaos (see Psalm 29).

Jon Levenson, a popular First Testament scholar, described the situation like this:

The sea is a somewhat sinister force that, left to its own, would submerge the world and forestall the ordered reality we call creation. What prevents this frightening possibility is the mastery of God, whose blast and thunder force the sea into its proper place.

When God created the world as we now know it, He ordered the waters into peaceable submission. Rather than threatening humanity, the waters were now repurposed to bring life and nourishment to the world.

That changed when sin corrupted the earth. Whereas once the waters sustained life, they began again to damage and threaten. No longer the fountain from which the world drank, they became a raging enemy.

I don't mean to suggest that the water has become evil somehow, merely that it has fallen out of its proper relationship to the rest of creation. The harmony once enjoyed within the world has been disrupted, as and a result the waters are no longer entirely safe.

In Genesis 6, however, God wrests back control of these waters once again and uses them to cleanse the earth. The Flood was a kind of planetary baptism, a cleansing and washing away of all the sin of the world, precipitated by the waywardness of humanity. However, this cleansing was only momentary. Humanity persisted in sin, and sin once again began to dominate creation as new sin took root in the earth.

It is significant that Jesus uses so much water imagery when the waters are no longer an agency of healing. It is significant that Jesus is baptized, and instructs his followers to be baptized, demonstrating not only that we are new creations, but that all creation is new. Baptism is, therefore, a kind of ecological reconciliation in which the waters of chaos are transformed into the waters of healing.

To recapitulate:

God made the world good, but sin corrupts it.
God, in His grace, still uses an imperfect creation
to work His good purposes in the world
just as He works toward perfecting that creation itself.
The 'Planetary Baptism' (Flood) was a foretaste
of God's final clean up of the world,
just as Christ's baptism was a foretaste
of God's final clean up of human sin and worldly corruption.



In short, what God does for us, He does for creation also.

God is working, simultaneously, to heal us and to heal the world. Both our (re)creation and the healing of the original creation are works in progress. The healing has begun, but will only be complete later, just as we are new creations in Christ Jesus now, but will only be perfected later on (see 1 Corinthians 15.42-44).

Metaphorically, in baptism the chaos of our lives is stilled by the God who brings order out of chaos, patrols the seas with angelic horses, and presides over all creation. Baptism calms the churning tempests of our lusts and ambitions, the tumultuous storms of our past memories and associations that threaten to scuttle and down us.

Call upon me in the day of trouble, and I will deliver you.

Psalms 50.15

Rituals of reconciliation

If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin.

1 John 1.7

People coming up out of the water after being baptized experience a strange explosion of emotions. They feel startled and a bit cold from the water, and they feel proud but also a little embarrassed at all the attention they're getting. But mostly they feel new and fresh--like they've finally gotten their stuff together.

I think the greatest thing about baptism is feeling clean.

When my kids were very little, I used to tell them that baptism is like a special bath and a special prayer.

It is a spiritual bath. Coming out of the tub, we feel our soul has been scrubbed.

In life we all understand that things go wrong. We know that we sin. We hurt people's feelings. Sometimes we miscommunicate or misunderstand. Sadly, even good people can purposely perform acts of incredible hurt, like when an otherwise loving spouse loses perspective and willfully decides to wound their partner with words. Or worse.

Most of us usually offer one another grace. And yet, somehow, we neglect to do what is necessary to make those bad things good again. While acknowledging our need for

healing and restoration, we fail to produce those things. We need regular rituals, ways to make those things right.

Baptism is such a ritual. I think that's why Jesus modeled being baptized for us. He wanted us to understand how easy, and how powerful, it can be to be cleansed from our sins. But for all intents and purposes, baptism is kind of a one-time deal. Since we all accumulate spiritual junk of every variety even after we've been baptized, we need ways to be continually cleaned out, to remind ourselves of God's grace and live with all the benefits of a forgiven, grace-infused life.

I think this is why church camps were so successful during the earlier part of the 20th century. Families and congregations would retreat for a weekend into the woods and have church--and all other manner of spiritual and playful activity--together for three days. Those days held games and festivities, to be sure, but the real value of church camp was the emphasis on repentance and getting right with God.

People would come, and cry, and kneel, and pray, and find themselves laid bare before God and their community. And because the community was in such close physical proximity, those moments of close spiritual proximity to God often quickly translated into reconciliation with others.

Once you got your spiritual junk sorted out, it was easier and more expedient to get your relational junk sorted out. After repenting before God of your selfishness, you could approach the victims of your self-aggrandizing tirades and hissy fits and ask for their forgiveness as well.

That's reconciliation: making things right. Fixing broken relationships. Being reunited and healed.

Just as church camp was the common ritual of reconciliation, youth camps and youth retreats amounted to much the same thing in their hey day in the nineties. For adults, conferences often play that role now. But we need to be more intentional about creating those rituals of reconciliation on our own, rather than waiting for our churches and congregations to plan and execute special events in which those things can occur rather naturally.

For myself, I have several reconciliation rituals. Quiet drives, prayer walks, and even some web-browsing help me get out of the staid and habitual routines of daily prayer and devotional Bible reading. For example, if I'm feeling like I'm in a spiritual funk and

can't quite put my finger on why, I'll often grab the dog and my pipe and go walking in the Michigan cold through leafless forests to pray.

I also sometimes like to use a couple of confessional-related websites (mysecret.tv or postsecret.com) in order to read others' confessions and have that spirit of repentance modeled for me. It also allows me to put my thoughts out into the world without having to worry about repenting in the right way, as a "pastor" should, in pastor-y ways, wondering if I'll be judged or appraised on my relative holiness by some stranger somewhere who thinks we men-of-the-cloth ought to be just a bit more holy than Jesus.

Those personal rituals are important, meaningful, and powerful, but I don't want to give the impression that the church community should bypass collective rituals of reconciliation in favor of purely personal ones.

Quite the contrary. Like church camp, church offers a unique opportunity to place our sins against God alongside our sins against others. That might seem like a great opportunity for compounded guilt, but really it's a far better opportunity for holistic repentance and reconciliation.

We've done some cool stuff to that effect at the Winds.

We've had virtual confession booths, in which people sat in a kind of prayer closet and confessed their struggles to a silent video camera, knowing that their words were being recorded and broadcast live into another room (with their faces shadowed to provide some anonymity).

We've done chat-room confessionals, in which we paired people with live-prayer counselors from all over North America, allowing them to confess their sins and receive some encouragement via synchronous chat.

We used the screens in our auditorium to record a kind of chain repentance letter, giving everyone the opportunity to walk up to a laptop and add their confession to the string of confessions preceding them.

We've seen people confess their sins to each other, to themselves, to God, to the world, and then burn their confessions, smash them, eat them, share them with someone outside the church, and most importantly and most frequently, act differently after getting the monkey off their back, so to speak.

There is power in confessing our sins and making things right.

Confession removes the crap that gets in the way of good relationships with God, with other people, and with our true selves as image-bearers of God.

The secular press we have gleaned because of our activities in this regard has been especially humbling. The *Wall Street Journal*, *CNN*, *Time Magazine*, *the New York Times* and our local paper, the *Jackson Citizen Patriot*, have all done stories on our unique approach to confession, repentance, and these rituals of reconciliation. I suppose some might think that this amount of mainstream press would be cause for pride. I hope not. To be honest, rather than feeling proud, I feel quite curious. It startles me to think that *the world out there* is excited about confession. We often have this impression in the church that the world isn't interested in confession or repentance at all, that they want to just keep sinning and mock those that follow God or cultivate a conscience. My experience doesn't bear that out at all. As far as I can tell, reporters and readers on a national scale care so much about confession and repentance that they want to do story after story on how that works for us and why.

The reason?

Isn't it obvious?

They want to feel clean. Confession isn't the promise of guilt; it's the promise of guilt removal and repaired relationship. Though "repentance" is a church-y, almost dirty word to the world, the act of repentance contains the promise of not feeling shamed. It is the promise of being able to look in the mirror and not want to throw up, or being able to close your eyes at night and not wonder about the kind of person you've become, how far you've fallen from who you think you were supposed to be.

Everyone wants to feel clean, to feel whole, to make things right in their relationships. That's why we as the church must be intentional and inventive about how often, and how powerfully, we offer people the chance to make things right.

That's why we as the people of God must be disciplined and careful and routine about giving ourselves the opportunities to make things right in our own lives.

My friend Jonathan has a little ritual that he uses, a little prayer trick that he learned a few years ago at one of our college retreats. As part of a teaching I was doing on Christian

iconography, I introduced everyone to the *triqueta*, a representation of the trinitarian wholeness of God.

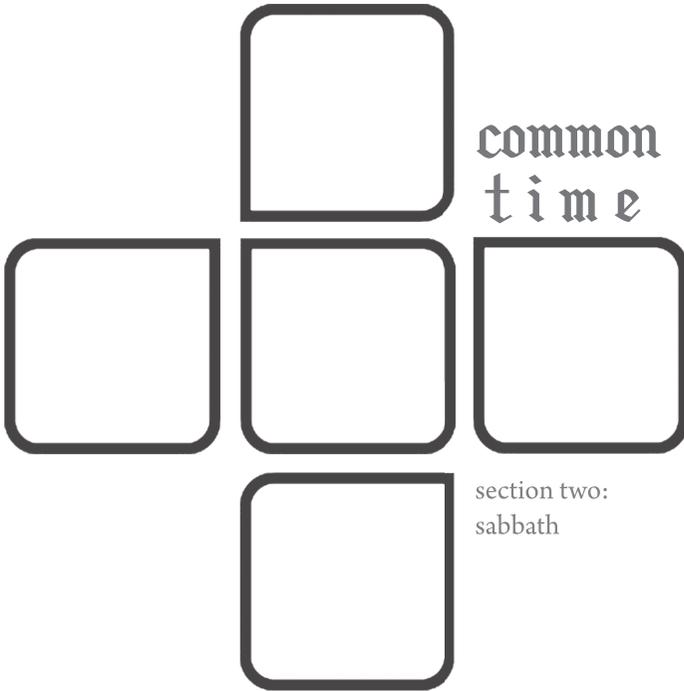


Similar to a Celtic knot, the *triqueta* just keeps looping around and around in an unbroken field. There is no beginning and no end-point, just a circuit that symbolizes the unity of the Father, Son, and Spirit in three spirals.

After hearing me teach about the significance of the *triqueta* and God's invitation for us to join Him in His holy community, like an invitation to a dance in which the Father, Son, and Spirit are already caught up, Jonathan made his way into the woods and knelt down by a mountain stream. It was a perfectly idyllic setting: sharp air, woodland creatures, nothing to get in the way of communion with the Creator. Taking a sharp stone from the edge of the water, Jonathan began to etch the shape of the *triqueta* into a much larger stone. He did this, while praying, for about three hours, constantly pouring out his heart to God and asking for God's forgiveness, peace, and guidance on how he might make things right with others.

His prayers were answered, and that was a pivotal moment for Jonathan in his spiritual journey. It was also a moment he would repeat. Jonathan still routinely etches the *triqueta* into various objects--at home, on napkins, with sidewalk chalk. The icon helps him to access those parts of his heart and his subconscious that normally he ignores because, like all of us, he's too busy or too tired to do that without some prompting.

We all such need rituals, things we do regularly, on purpose, with some spiritual intent. Things designed to help us get right with God, with others, and with our true selves as image-bearers of God.





epiphany: becoming the people of god

sabbath: reconciled to god

blindness: reconciled to ourselves

storms: reconciled to creation

outsiders: reconciled to others

transfiguration: the hope of the world



on being reconciled to God...

Jesus demonstrated that our relationship with God is based on love, grace, and the intention of our hearts to please God.

Like Christ, the church ought to give her energy to helping people become reconciled to God.

*This is a spiritual kind of healing,
in which we are brought back
into our proper relationship with our Creator.*

Wrong religion

It is a mistake to think that God is chiefly interested in religion.
William Temple, 20th Century Archbishop of Canterbury

One of the first and truest clichés that any Christ-follower learns is that *Christianity is not a religion, but a relationship.*

Sadly, the potency of that statement is diminished by the frequency of its appearance, especially on bumper stickers, bracelets, and t-shirts.

Nothing holy should go on a bumper. If you're not ready to live it, you're certainly not ready to weave it through traffic. If you are already living it, you recognize that brandishing it like a slogan sort of undermines it in the first place.

We have difficulty living with God. That's why religion is such a comfort. Religion compartmentalizes God and gives us clear rules for how not to tick Him off. It segments and augments the things we should be doing instinctively, turning our behavior into merits and demerits for glory or gore.

Though it has been pointed out before, our relationship with God can be understood as any other relationship. My relationship with my wife, for example, has "rules" of a sort: don't cheat, don't lie, don't mistreat, don't neglect. But if I did nothing but follow those

rules, our marriage would sorely lack romance. We wouldn't be fostering love, we'd be cohabiting a contract.

Forgive us for wanting something more.

The sports world also provides an adequate parallel. Did you know you can successfully play a full soccer match without breaking any rules simply by standing at midfield and never moving? Technically, you'd be keeping all of the rules; you'd be on-side, you'd never tackle from behind, you'd never touch the ball with your hands. But in reality you wouldn't be fit for the national team of Liliput.

There must be more to relationship than rules.

There must be more to God than religion.

But we often fail to see it, and further fail to experience the thrill of living it. Jesus tried to demonstrate this with his numerous confrontations in the Temple, on the Sabbath, and against the religious powers of his day. He wanted them to know they were completely missing the point. They kept the rules, but they were playing midfield statue soccer. They obeyed everything they were supposed to, but there was no romance in their divine marriage.

For them, everything was legislation, a spiritual bureaucracy, an adventure in missing the forest for the trees.

In this section we will look at four episodes of Jesus' life that placed him into direct conflict with the religious establishment of his day. These episodes demonstrate clearly that Christ understood the relationship between God and His people to be broken and in need of reconciliation. We need to be reconciled to God for our sins, but we also need a further reconciliation--a deeper and more holistic healing, if you will--of our basic understanding of how this relationship with God is supposed to work.

The first episode I'd like to examine is the famous Temple Tantrum, found here in John 2.13-22:

When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said,

Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market! His disciples remembered that it is written: *Zeal for your house will consume me.*

The Jews then responded to him, *What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?*

Jesus answered them, *Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.*

They replied, *It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?* But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

Let's be clear: what Jesus did here was like attacking the Bank of America. He went right into the heart of the culture and economy of his own people and blasted them for exploiting and living unjustly.

Jesus' action gave a clear warning, not only to his original audience, but to future audiences as well. He made it clear there is no place for those whose minds are filled with religion-for-hire or who seek to prostitute the gospel for the sake of position, favor, or authority.

Nehemiah, a 5th Century BCE Jewish governor, did much the same thing when confronted with Temple fraud. In his case, he learned that the high priest had been renting out rooms in the temple and skimming from the rations of the temple workers in order to curry favor with foreign dignitaries. In his anger, Nehemiah broke into the temple storerooms and cleaned them out, fired everyone responsible, and tore out the hair of the high priest.

Jesus followed in Nehemiah's footsteps, modeling that same kind of single-minded devotion to God for us.

Jesus' clearing of the temple took place in one corner of the large building. Though the story makes it seem like his temple cleansing was the main event, in reality, Jesus probably only interrupted a very small portion of the temple business that day. However, the aftershocks of his activity went far and wide. The area in question was the Court of the Gentiles, measuring roughly the size of ten football fields, contained within the temple complex which was about three times larger – and the likely commotion would have been equivalent to a cheerleader kicking a linesman in the shin at halftime. That's not to say it wasn't significant. Many people would have seen and been startled, and news would have

spread fast. But it wasn't on the scale of *WWE Smackdown* or the Main Event at Caesar's Palace.

Jesus was specifically confronting the wanton slaughter and selling of animals for huge profits to the priests and their black market thugs. The doves mentioned in the story were the only sacrifices that the poor could afford, while the cattle were the more extravagant offerings available to the upper class. Since the Court of the Gentiles was meant to be the place where anyone could come and offer sacrifices in appropriate ways (and without inappropriate fees or interference), and since many of the people who came to offer those sacrifices traveled a great distance and would have arrived totally burned out and exhausted, it is easy to understand why Jesus was so intolerant of this criminal behavior.

Furthermore, notice that the first thing Jesus did was to scatter the animals and set them free (v. 15). Prior to Jesus' Temple Tantrum, the road to redemption was paved with the blood of animal sacrifice and priestly intercession, but Jesus changed all of that for good. His compassion for the outcast spilled over into his passion for the animal inhabitants of the world. There is no biblical record that Jesus ever participated in animal sacrifice, nor did he advocate that his followers do so. Clearly, Jesus had in mind that the old system of killing animals would be replaced by a new system predicated on a sacrifice of a very different kind.

The blood of animals was replaced by the blood of Christ himself.

Jesus replaced one kind of sacrifice with another, also replacing the old temple with the new temple of his body (see verse 21). Now, instead of sacrificing animals and offering them to God, Christ has sacrificed and offered himself to God on our behalf, and it is in communion that we recognize the sacrifice of his broken body and shed blood.

The meal where Jesus becomes bread for our bodies is the divine substitute for animal sacrifice.

Len Sweet, 21st Century American futurist and theologian

The church is now the community in which the sacrifice of Jesus is embodied. We carry his sacrifice with us wherever we go (see 2 Corinthians 4.10), and in so doing keep a constant reminder that it is not our forms and functionality that make us holy, but our relationship with the God of the Universe who descended into the world to die for the world.

At this point it may be very easy to become smug, to look back at those temple servants and wonder how they could have ever missed the boat to such a degree. But I caution you against doing that, because the same sins that plague them--and that plagued the temple servants in Nehemiah's time--plague us now.

We still commodify religion. We still prostitute the gospel. We commercialize religion and advance our own agendas over and against the mission of God to heal the world.

There are obvious examples of this to excess: TV preachers, political Protestants, denominational lackeys. But it is the less-obvious examples that deserve a little space and criticism here.

For my own church, I think we're pretty careful not to co-opt the gospel for political or financial purposes; however, I do think we often run the risk of expropriating the gospel for social causes and anti-establishment rants and raves. Ours are the left-wing sins that mirror the sins of the right-wing infatuation with the military industrial and entertainment complex, but are themselves no less sinful.

We join churches because they stand up for what we already believe in: that people matter, that human rights matter, that human dignity matters, that ecology matters... and they do! But then we get impatient with the pace of the gospel mission and seek to short-circuit the plans and purposes of God.

Simply put, God's mission sometimes takes longer than we would like. Our agendas are not often patient enough to wait for God's mission to bear fruit. As a result, when we don't see our churches doing enough social justice, or when they seem to be spending too much on frivolities like building maintenance, or wasting too much paper, or not speaking out loudly enough against whatever the current foreign military occupation has designed, we become nasty and mean-spirited. We treat others with contempt, and we ignore the movement of the Spirit in our own lives, thwarting the transformation that God wants to see in us in favor of the transformation that we hoped to see in the world through us. We justify our hate with geopiety. We comfort our intolerance with a shiftless grace that allows us to feel safe from God's judgment so long as we're judging those who haven't figured out what we already claim to know.

But we've really just traded one set of sins for another, haven't we? We've polarized our unrighteousness and called it holy because it doesn't look like the unrighteousness of those we feel privileged to have rebelled against.

The Democrat only sees the sins of the Republican, and vice versa.

Why *do* you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the *plank in your own eye*?

Matthew 7.3 (*italics mine*)

This is why Westwinds has adopted a three-fold mission statement. We want to focus not only on the transformation of ourselves as image-bearers of God, not only on the beautiful community of God's people in which His will reigns supreme, but also on the ultimate reconciliation of the world back into a perfectly ordered and harmonious planet.

That's why we tell our people we're here to shadow God, build the church, and heal the world.

Shadowing God reminds us that we must stay in step with God's plan for us as individuals. We are never fully formed; we are always works-in-progress. That work progresses only by staying in step with the Spirit and being constantly malleable to and edited by God.

Building the church means we recognize Christian spirituality is not an individual sport. Church is plural, and God's purposes for reconciliation involve us sorting out our relationships with the people around us.

Healing the world connotes the fact that our salvation is neither merely privatized nor communized, but expressed most faithfully in mission. We invite the Spirit to change us and to create a holy community of similarly simultaneously changing people, so that together we can effect change in the world.

Shadowing God protects us from either
 just being content to remain crappy people
 but have lots of church-y friends, or
 just being involved in some kind of social agenda
 with no real ethic of personal transformation.

Building the church protects us from either
 just focusing on our own spiritual experience
 to the exclusion of those around us, or
 just diving into random projects as a means
 of escaping human interaction, laughter, learning, or
 solidarity with those in pain.

Healing the world protects us from either
being really great moral examples who are
so 'Heavenly minded as to be no earthly good,' or
creating little ecclesial communes who focus
only on those with club-member elite status, content
to let the pagans, or their forests or their ozone, burn.

There's a trifecta at work in the ministry of the church, a three-legged stool that simply cannot function well while balancing on only two or (God-forbid), one leg.

What God really wants from us, His people individually and corporately as the church, is that we come to Him in open relationship, embody the sacrifice of Jesus, and work to reconcile ourselves and others to Him and His mission to heal and to save.



With authority

They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, *What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!*

Be quiet! said Jesus sternly. *Come out of him!* The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.

The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, *What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him.* News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

Mark 1.21-28

As near as I can tell, I've preached about 1200 sermons so far in my life. Give or take a few here and there, count in sick days and alternative methods of communication, and I've clocked up some decent numbers for a young buck.

In all those sermons, I can only think of four times when I was interrupted during the teaching:

a homeless man begging for change in Surrey,
an angry husband looking for his wife in Jackson,
a gypsy woman under some kind of influence in Guatemala,
and a rifleman who (thankfully) had abysmal aim in Belize.

In every circumstance, being interrupted while teaching was a negative experience. Bad things happen when someone stands up during the sermon with something of their own to say.

In this episode of Jesus' life, he and his disciples were heading back to Capernaum, the hometown of his four fishermen-followers (Peter, Andrew, James and John). This would have been familiar territory for them, and likely Jesus would have previously taught at the synagogue there. Once Jesus began to teach, however, some very strange things began to happen.

First, the people began to comment that Jesus' teaching was qualitatively different than that of the other religious leaders. Jesus had something the other teachers didn't. Notice that Mark doesn't relate what it was Jesus actually taught, just that his words were astounding. His hearers weren't necessarily impressed by what Jesus said but by how he said it: with authority (see verse 22).

Second, a demon-possessed man stood up and challenged Jesus, who subsequently exorcized the evil spirit plaguing him. From the perspective of our modern American armchairs, this is a completely nutzoid experience, on par with science fiction or CG graphics in a blockbuster film. In that world at that time, however, this kind of demonic exorcism, though rare, was still common enough to be neither unbelievable nor unheard of.

Of course, if we stop and consider, we might begrudgingly admit that more supernatural activity happens around us than we'd care to acknowledge; thus the popularity of shows like *Ghost Hunters*, *True Blood*, *Avatar*, or even the dark and demonic powers displayed in the recent Disney feature film, *The Princess and the Frog*.

Granted, these days we expanded our definition of evil to include evil that can be healed through therapy, psychology, or medicine. We do have a better grasp on much of what ails the world than those who lived in biblical times, but in the end, we must acknowledge that there are at least some things happening out there for which we have no categories and no good explanations.

About demons, C. S. Lewis points out there are two equal and opposite errors into which we can fall:

One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.

All we have to do is open a web browser, read a tabloid headline at the check-out counter, or hear five minutes of Howard Stern or Nancy Grace to know that unclean spirits still stalk the earth. After a half-century of world wars, cold wars, nuclear wars, guerilla wars, genocide, terrorism, and WMDs, who among us has any reason to doubt the straightforward biblical perception that unclean spirits and demonic powers roam in our midst?

According to the biblical worldview, evil and everything associated with evil is attributed to the person and work of the devil, who we have come to know as Satan (from the Hebrew word *ha-Satan*, which means “accuser”). God made the world to be good, but evil has corrupted it into a distorted reflection of that original good creation.

Perhaps this is why there are currently more exorcists employed by the Catholic Church than at any other time since the Middle Ages, and why in excess of 100 Roman Catholics have gathered at an exorcism conference in Baltimore to receive training on the rare and extraordinary rite of demonic rebuke and removal.

We’re not the Federal Reserve. We deal with angels and demons... we deal with the supernatural.

R. Scott Appleby, 20th Century Professor of Church History at Notre Dame, concerning exorcism

Ever notice that the demonic spirits Jesus encountered always identified themselves in the plural? (Have you come to destroy *us*?) When our minds and our spirits are invaded, we do not break cleanly. Our brokenness is a kind of shattering, a splintering, an explosion of self and psyche, ID and identity.

The demons that inhabit us are rightly named “Legion.”

Len Sweet, 20th Century American futurist and theologian

When we invite Jesus into our lives, there is a lot of stuff for the Spirit to clean up. And the more we get cleaned up, the more we realize there is to be done. While the Spirit replaces

the mess with an order and an energy that brings us into new life, there's always some new nook and cranny in the soul to be scoured.

When the unclean spirit finally revealed himself to Christ, he announced Jesus' true identity to the congregation: *I know who you are, Holy One of God.* As if this were his cue, Jesus pounced on the demon, commanding it to *come out.*

One simple authoritative word from Christ banishes the dark and possessing spirit. Called out by the Holy One, surrounded by people in awe of Jesus' abilities and in sync with his spirit, the demon has no options. With a convulsive wrench it departs from the man and is heard from no more. Not surprisingly, witnessing this powerful demonstration of Jesus' authority further amazes the synagogue.

In this story, it seems that the lack of authority was just as big an issue as the demonization. If we are to learn anything about how Christ wants his church to function based on this passage, we must learn the twin virtues of healing and authority. Since we've covered the healing aspect by looking specifically at the narrative and background of the episode, I'd like to turn our attention to the topic of authority, especially since the exorcism was accomplished by means of that authority.

Jesus demonstrates the highest caliber of authority: the supernatural authority of Almighty God. Without that authority, we can have no effect upon the supernatural world or the invisible realities that lurk behind the natural one. Thankfully, we have access to that authority through our relationship with Jesus and the indwelling of his Holy Spirit. We should not take these power encounters lightly but remember that the ultimate power over darkness is not ours but his.

I give unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you.

Luke 10.19

These signs shall follow them that believe; in my name they will cast out devils.

Mark 16.17 NKJV

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.

Acts 1.8a



Jesus teaches that authority is crucial to spirituality and in the life and ministry of the church. Furthermore, there are different kinds of authority, and exercising the right kind of authority is crucial to success in ministry.

I've always found it quite sad to see so many men and women entering the ministry who have no clue about what authority is or where it comes from. The supernatural authority that God gives to every believer can manifest itself in many ways. Teaching, for example, is shown in Mark 1 to be an arena for the authority of a godly leader. Jesus' example reminds us teachers that--study and write and craft all we like--the real power in teaching comes from God and not from our wit, our wordsmithing, or our metaphors.

Similarly, when leading people, we must constantly access the supernatural authority God gives us as pastors and shepherds, not the authority we may think is due our position.

There is, after all, a significant difference between positional authority and supernatural authority. Positional authority is the idea that because we're in charge, we can actually get people to do what we want them to do, whether that's stop sinning, stop some harmful activity in the church, begin practicing a more devotional lifestyle, or contribute to the mission of the church.

To be frank, the number one mistake new pastors make--whether they've got an MBA or an MDiv, whether they're entering their second career or dropping out of seminary in their second year--is relying on positional authority.

There's no such thing.

The goofy thing about pastoring is that you can't make anyone do anything. You've got no leverage. You don't pay anyone. You can't fire anyone. Sure, you can manipulate them or guilt-trip them or whatever, but if you're willing to do that, you shouldn't be in ministry anyway.

Positional authority is a joke, a thing you think works but doesn't. It's a parody.

When I was doing my Master's degree, a guy in our cohort got a job at a new church. In his first town hall meeting with his new congregation he showed up with a wooden sign for his door that said, "Pastor." He showed it to the group and asked them to read it aloud. They did. Then he asked them if they had a sign. They didn't. So this guy says: Well, then I guess we all know who's in charge.

They fired him six months later.

This clown relied on authority that didn't exist. I wish he was the only one, but he isn't.

Another kind of supernatural authority is relational authority. Any real authority must be birthed in prayer, stay present with God's Spirit, and rely on a careful study of God's Word. Beyond that, relational authority is what happens when we invest ourselves in others, doing everything we can to help them move further and deeper into an experience of God. Rather than trying to make them do something, we try to help them understand what the next steps might be when they're ready to take them. We don't cram a vision down their throats, spin an objective, or sell bad news as something good; we listen, we tell the truth, and we treat them with respect, and if they go crazy on us we calmly wait them out. We are the non-anxious presence, and our lack of anxiety ultimately restores equilibrium to the group dynamic.

It's worth noting, too, that our relational authority changes from person to person. I don't have the same authority with everyone in my church that I do with those I've invested more into. If I told Jvo, for example, that he was out of line and needed to repent on some issue, he would do it, because he knows I love him, have sacrificed for him, and would never work to harm or control him. My "authority" comes from my commitment to Christ Jesus and from the application of that commitment into my love for Jvo.

It works the same way in reverse. If Jvo tells me I'm out to lunch or disobedient somehow, I'm going to listen to him, because we're in relationship; but if some weirdo sends me an anonymous letter telling me I'm a heretic and I better check my facts before I get up to preach next time, I roll the letter up and throw it away.

The one rebuke has authority; the other is just the empty words of a scribe.

Of course, it bears mention that the whole concept of authority is not just for pastors and church leaders. This concept is easily applied to parents and children, peers and friendships, leaders and followers in any arena.

Love people with everything you've got, and serve them at every turn, seeking to foster the good inside of them, to authenticate the movement of the Spirit in and around them, and to celebrate them when they win. Start there. Too many of us too often start with all the junk we don't like about other people, and then wonder why they never want to listen to our good advice.

I'll tell you why: you don't love them, and you don't love God enough to recognize Him in them.

But when you devote yourself wholly to the movement of the Spirit, to coming under the Father's authority and acting in concert with His desire to heal and to reconcile, then you will be able to speak truth when others need to hear it who would otherwise be deaf. You'll be surrounded by people who love you back and will sacrifice for you as well.

Holy time

One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grain fields, and his disciples began to pick some heads of grain, rub them in their hands and eat the kernels. Some of the Pharisees asked, *Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?*

Jesus answered them, *Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and taking the consecrated bread, he ate what is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.* Then Jesus said to them, *The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.*

On another Sabbath he went into the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was shriveled. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal on the Sabbath. But Jesus knew what they were thinking and said to the man with the shriveled hand, *Get up and stand in front of everyone.* So he got up and stood there.

Then Jesus said to them, *I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?*

He looked around at them all, and then said to the man, *Stretch out your hand.* He did so, and his hand was completely restored. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus.

Luke 6.1-6

Christian spirituality is about action. Jesus tells us to love without considering what may or may not be in it for ourselves. *If someone wants your coat, give it to him, and your shirt also* (see Luke 6.29). Christian love is action, not rumination, investigative committees or long-term studies. When the time comes for us to act, we should act promptly, not sitting around waiting for a better moment or some divine sign.

It's not the strong that eat the weak, it's the fast that eat the slow.

Anonymous

Sometimes taking action can be difficult, either because of our own impediments (such as fear, lethargy, lack of resources) or because of outside impediments (such as external pressure, lack of support, red-tape). But the worst impediment to action is that of criticism.

Criticism hinders mission.

In my short life I've received my fair share of criticism:

academic criticism (from profs and advisors),
 athletic criticism (from coaches and trainers and sideliners),
 musical criticism (from conductors and teachers),
 ministerial criticism (from church folk of every stripe),
 and though I usually try to incorporate it into making me a better performer or person or employee, I can comfortably say that criticism sucks.

Criticism makes nothing happen. Criticism brings nothing new into the world; it just stands apart from the world and adjudicates. In fact, the surest way for you to lose friends and lose influence with people you respect is to set yourself up as a critic instead of a collaborator, coopererant, or co-creator. People who chip in and work alongside others get some permission to adjudicate, but people who stand on the sidelines leaning on a shovel just drive everyone nuts.

Critics are like horseflies which prevent the horse from ploughing. The horse works, all its muscles drawn tight like the strings on a double bass, and a fly settles on his flanks and tickles and buzzes... he has to twitch his skin and swish his tail. And what does the fly buzz about? It scarcely knows itself; simply because it is restless and wants to proclaim: *Look, I, too, am living on the earth. See, I can buzz, too, buzz about anything.*

Anton Checkov, 19th Century Russian Playwright

In this episode from the Gospel of Luke we notice that Jesus once again was confronted with a collection of critics.

When he was hungry they criticized what and how and when he ate.

When he taught they showed up just to poke holes in his methodology.

When he performed supernatural miracles they were irate
because his timing was off.

The Pharisees in this episode were like a bitter woman I once knew, whose husband became so tired of her ceaseless griping that he told her he hoped she died and went to Hell so no one would have to listen to her complain about the temperature, the lighting, the company or the furniture in Heaven.

Yikes.

Generous readers might choose to empathize with the Pharisees and claim that the real issue here was one of religious difference; but I disagree. In fact, I think that the differences here stem from a fundamental misunderstanding of their own religion. The Pharisees were mad at Jesus because “he was doing it all wrong,” when Jesus’ actions showed they had forgotten what it meant to be right.

The central issue here concerns the Sabbath, the sacred seventh day of the Jewish week upon which no work was to be done because God had divinely ordained that day as a day of rest (see Exodus 20.8-11). The Sabbath is Saturday (in our modern calendar) and should not be confused with Sunday when Christ-followers celebrate his resurrection.

The Pharisees believed that keeping the Sabbath day as a day of rest meant keeping a bunch of rules concerning how far you could walk, how much you could lift, what sorts of things you could touch, and what sorts of things you could use. They had rules about the Sabbath and rules about the rules about the Sabbath. These sub points and subsets of final religious legislation were all designed to keep them in God’s good graces.

I admire their devotion, actually; but something had gotten lost along the way. Over several thousand years, these Jewish leaders had forgotten why God gave them the Sabbath in the first place. The Sabbath wasn’t a rule to prohibit work; it was blessing to rest and to enjoy life. Keeping rules and enjoying rest are very different concepts, and an enjoyable rest feels different than an unbroken injunction.

The ancient Hebrew people began to hold the Sabbath in the highest regard while in Egyptian captivity. Contrary to their Hebrew slaves, the Egyptians had no day of rest. In their reckoning, every day was a day for the weak to work and the strong to rule. Every day those that could took every available pleasure, and those that could not took every available brick and stacked it onto every available palette.

The Egyptians considered seventh days to be unlucky, controlled by evil spirits. For them, working on the seventh day meant subjection to the malice of dark, supernatural personalities. This superstition was part of their slaver's glee: they forced the Hebrew slaves to agitate the evil spirits by working on the unluckiest day of the week.

During this time, though, Sabbath took on new significance for God's people. It had always been holy, but now Sabbath took on a kind of defiant holiness. It became an affirmation of faith that God would protect them from harm on the seventh day because He was Lord of the Sabbath and not the Egyptian devils. Sabbath refuted the Egyptian way of life and the shadowy powers that sought to corrupt life itself. By calling the seventh day holy, our spiritual ancestors were reminding themselves of their God-given dignity. They were not instruments to be used, but people made by God to be like God. The very idea of "blessing" was the antithesis of the Egyptian superstitions concerning the invisible world.

There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord...that is Sabbath.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, 20th Century American Rabbi

Every time the Hebrews worked on the seventh day they affirmed two great truths:

first, that they shouldn't work every day with no time to enjoy life;

second, that God was stronger than any dark spirit and no supernatural harm could befall them. Even if they were forced to labor on that seventh day, it was still holy, because He was still holy.

These affirmations gave them hope that ultimately God would liberate them from their captivity. In their liberty they would once again enjoy life as God originally intended.

And He did originally intend for them to enjoy life. In the creation account of Genesis 1, every day of the seven days of creation comes to an end except the seventh day. It's as if



God is telling His people that we are meant to live in a perpetual Sabbath, that our entire lives are meant to be marked by rest and enjoyment.

The Sabbath is for rest, which is to say it's really for nothing. It's not about rest from the work we've done, or even resting up for the work we're about to do. It's about enjoyment. It's about reward. It's about life and laughter. It's about living well and experiencing God.

The Sabbath is holy time. We aren't particularly familiar with holy time. In our culture we tend to think more about holy space (temples, churches, sites of ritualistic importance like Stonehenge), but there used to be no sacred spaces or holy landmarks, because when God created the world, every space was sacred. Every tree was a temple. The holiness of the world was corrupted by the Fall, however, and creation suffered as a result. Space became polluted. But not Time. The holiness of Time still remains. Each moment is holy, each breath a Sabbath, when we permit ourselves to perceive it and to rest in the ongoing seventh-day pleasures of God.

So getting back to Jesus and the Pharisees, Christ was so antagonistic to the Pharisees because they had totally lost sight of what the Sabbath is.

If there ever was an appropriate time to heal, it was on the Sabbath.

The Sabbath was a time for health and healing, a time for creation to be affirmed, a time for life to be valued and authenticated, a time for the slavery of disease to be undone.

When Jesus rebuked the Pharisees and told them that *the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath*, he intended two meanings:

first, that he, the Son of Man (using the messianic title), is God, and as such is in control of what's okay or not okay on the day He made for the good of the world; and second, that we, the son(s) of man (which is a colloquial way of simply saying "humanity"), are also in control of what happens on the Sabbath because it was made for us to enjoy, and to enjoy with God.

The Sabbath is for people, not the people for the Sabbath. The holy time is for rest and good living; the time is not holy because we keep the rules.

Jesus once again confronts a massive religious distortion when he challenges the Pharisees on their understanding of the Sabbath. He tells them they had it all wrong. And we do too, when we forget that we are meant to be living in each moment as if it were the culmination of creation and we are playing in the garden of the world with God.

Christ killed

So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jewish leaders began to persecute him. In his defense Jesus said to them, *My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.* For this reason they tried all the more to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

John 5.16-18

The “Jewish leaders” in this passage were likely community leaders, not Pharisees, and they were angry with Jesus because he had just healed a man on the Sabbath at the pool of Bethesda (see John 1.1-15).

The pool of Bethesda was a sacred space for both Jews and pagans, both groups possessing various mythologies about who would heal whom and when and why. Basically, every time the pool began to bubble, the people surrounding the waters believed that the first person to dive in was healed. By all accounts, this worked but worked spastically and was an especially unsatisfying arrangement if your ailment hindered you from winning a foot race against the other would-be miracle-receivers.

Into this arena came Jesus, doing what the pool had always promised to do but without all the pomp and circumstance. Jesus fulfilled the Jewish hopes, but, confusedly, also the pagan hopes for healing as well. For us, reading this story over two millennia later, it seems obvious that Jesus was demonstrating that the gospel was not only for Jewish people but for all the world; but then, that would not have seemed obvious to either Jews or pagans.

Paganism looks at the world of creation and tries to harness forces within it for its own ends. The healing that Jesus offers is... what Israel and the rest of the world had been longing for. Jesus is bringing new life, new creation, and it is bursting through into the present world, bringing healing and new possibilities.

N.T. Wright, 20th Century Anglican Bishop of Durham

The Judeans were furious that Jesus had broken the Sabbath by deliberately doing something they identified as work. Jesus, however, had no trouble “working” on the Sabbath. He felt like his Father was working, and so he too should be working on his Father’s business. The Father was perpetually in the business of bringing about new creation, and there should be no rest from that work. Rather, all such “work” was really a kind of restoration, the work of healing.

The Sabbath is for healing.

Jesus, like his Father, recognized that the true extension of Sabbath “rest” was putting things back the way they were meant to be. It was the work of bringing the world to come here, like a foretaste of Heaven or a fountainhead of eternity. The Judeans, however, seemed content to keep living in the existing creation, neither understanding the reconciliatory nature of new Creation labor or of God’s mandate for His people to participate in it.

Theologian Tom Wright suggests that we might best understand this ideological clash as a kind of theological jet lag. Jesus was working in a theological time zone well ahead of his audience. He knew it was time to be about his Father’s business, while the Judeans were still bleary eyed and cranky, refusing to be awakened from their slumber and lethargy, in which sickness and exclusion were the ongoing nightmare of the world.

Eternal life does not grow away from us; it is planted within us, growing beyond us. The world to come is therefore not only a posthumous condition, dawning upon the soul on the morrow after its departure from the body. The essence of the world to come is Sabbath eternal, and the seventh day in time is an example of eternity.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, 20th Century American Rabbi

One characteristic of living in the “old creation,” living life the way they had always lived it, was for this group of detractors to argue over correct interpretation of the rules. The Judeans griped at the lame man Jesus had just healed, telling him it wasn’t right that he carry his bedroll around on the Sabbath (see John 5.10). Then they became angry with him for receiving healing on the Sabbath and with Christ for healing on the Sabbath (see John 5.16).

In this episode, I imagine how Christ must have felt:

Really? This is what you're upset about?

That's often what happens with religious folk, though. They deny the power of God while hiding behind the forms of religion. Sometimes people envy those who do good because it's not they who are doing the good, and sometimes people resent the good work because it's not done in the ways they think it should be.

Sometimes people wonder why pastors seem to be okay with breaking the Sabbath. From their perspective, it looks like every Sunday (erroneously, most Christians think of Sunday as Sabbath, though it is actually Saturday) pastors work their hardest while telling everyone else to take a break. However, I look to the example of Jesus, who picked grain, healed men, and ran for his life on the Sabbath: that's what every Sunday feels like in the lobby after church. I'm gleaning the good stories of God's harvest in the lives of our people, nourishing my soul and my optimism. I'm healing whomever I can however I can with whatever means I have available: prayer, counsel, love, laughter, and attentiveness. And I'm running for my life from those who seek only to wound, criticize, or sabotage the mission of the church. I'm actually only half-kidding about that last bit.

At the heart of both Christ's experiences with the Judeans and my own experiences in church ministry is an intolerance of a hypocritical spirit.

Jesus came into the world to save and to heal, and the people around him persecuted him for his effort. The persecutions likely looked like character assassination, false accusation, and slander. The manner of the persecution, however, is less important than the fact that they rejected him.

They sought to kill him (see Luke 4.28-30).

That is the lesson for us. We, too, often kill Christ when we try to control what he does or how he does it in our lives or churches. We kill Christ (metaphorically, of course) whenever we put our plans and purposes, our agendas and associations, over and against his mission to heal the world.

Christ has a habit of getting in the way of our religion. He screws things up. We want our religion to be about social justice, and it is, but not primarily; and we want our religion to be about issues, and it is, but not primarily; and we want our religion about getting along with others, and it is, but not primarily.



Christianity is about being reconciled to God, to others, to our true selves as image-bearers of God, and to the world.

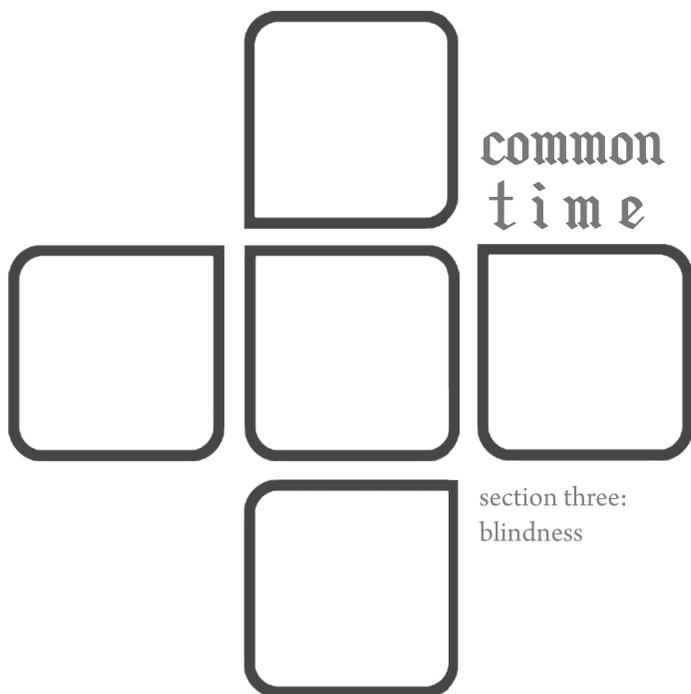
Christianity is about serving and knowing Jesus Christ.

Christianity is Christ: loving him, incarnating him, being mindful of him, imitating him.

This means that he gets to do whatever he wants, because our allegiance is not to a book or an ideology or a set of rules and behaviors.

Our allegiance is to a King and Kingdom. That's what the Judeans couldn't understand, and that's why they killed him.

Let's not make that mistake now. Let's focus all our efforts on knowing, loving, and enthroning Christ, not on squabbling and bickering and quarrelling about how the good things in the world get done or whether they can truly be called good at all.



epiphany: becoming the people of god

sabbath: reconciled to god

blindness: reconciled to ourselves

storms: reconciled to creation

outsiders: reconciled to others

transfiguration: the hope of the world



on being reconciled to our 'true selves...'

*God's original design for humanity
was physical perfection,
relational interdependence,
and a holy vocation.*

*God's desire is to repair the damage that sin has done
and to reconcile us to our true selves.*

He wants to make us once again the people He intended us to be.

Healing perceptions

When God created people, He made them whole. Eve could speak and hear and smell, and Adam walked without a limp. Nowadays, the physical perfections of our spiritual parents are some long-forgotten dream. We all have ailments and illness, things that shouldn't crack but do or should work but don't.

That was never the plan.

In fact, human sickness and disability of all stripes is indicative of the corruption in our world and the ways we suffer beneath it. Not that all sickness is related directly to sin; good people get sick and die regardless of their goodness, just as greedy and insolent people often live to a ripe old age regardless of their immorality. However, the present human condition involves suffering that it shouldn't.

God's perfect plan for each of us is a new body. He teaches this clearly in the Second Testament (see 1 Corinthians 15). A time will come when this body will deteriorate, but we'll get a new body, a perfect physical vessel for our perfected spiritual identities in Christ, and God plans for us to enjoy that new body forever.

This is good news, because my body isn't anything worth screaming about. I'm too hairy, too round, and too short for my liking. Give me a bigger chest and longer limbs and I'll be more likely to head to the beach without trying to rent a burka.

The Gospel of Mark tells a great story about Jesus healing a blind man using some strange methods and producing some strange results. Truthfully, this story seems a little more like sorcery than divine healing, and the effects of the miracle don't seem at first to take, but exploring this miracle gives us some strong evidence about God's desire to heal us and (re)create us as the people we were originally designed to be.

They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, *Do you see anything?*

He looked up and said, *I see people; they look like trees walking around.*

Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. Jesus sent him home, saying, *Don't even go into the village.*

Mark 8.22-26

Initially, there are two strange features in this story I want to point out, before getting to the really strange bit about the men-as-trees. First, Jesus took this man outside of the village; second, Jesus spat in the man's eyes.

I think Mark included these details for a reason. In the first place, I think he meant to show that Bethsaida wasn't very spiritually receptive. Sure, it was the home of several of Christ's disciples, but Jesus was still disappointed with the city and somewhat frustrated with its inhabitants.

Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.

Matthew 11.20

Despite the fact that the city as a whole had rejected Christ, Jesus took pity on one man and led him outside of the city. This demonstrates one further character trait of the Messiah: he actually cares for individuals.

He is the Good Shepherd who leaves the flock to find the stray.

In this case, Jesus took this one man outside the borders of disbelief and introduced him to the miraculous plans of God to reconcile and heal.

Imagine yourself as that blind man, being led by Christ outside of your home. That must have been terrifying. The blind man would have had no clue where he was going, or even if Christ was necessarily who he claimed to be. His was the seminal act of blind faith.

Herein lies another lesson: even when we cannot see, we can trust God's guidance. He will not lead us into danger, but will rescue us from darkness and obscurity.

God always seeks out the individual, even if he is found in the company of fools.

God spared Noah when He set out to cleanse the world population
(see Genesis 6).

God also spared Lot from the devastation of Sodom and Gomorrah
(see Genesis 19).

Christ met the Garasene demoniac, a crazed man no one else would come near (see Mark 5), as he met the woman at the well (see John 4), and the woman with the issue of blood (see Mark 9).

That is how God works. It's His M.O. He is always seeking the outcast outsider.

The second important observation we ought to make right away is that Jesus took this blind man and spat in his face. Christ could have cured him with a word (perhaps there was even a moment when the man would have preferred to remain un-cured), but instead he performed a kind of ritual.

This ritual has precedent in two places in the First Testament (Deuteronomy 25 and Numbers 12). Spitting in someone's face meant more than merely an insult (though it was, of course, insulting). It demonstrated that the person was living in a way that insulted God and that they ought to be called out for their behavior, shamed, and brought back into repentance.

Spitting in someone's face was a cruel way of telling them to get their act together.

When Jesus spat in the blind man's face, he was deliberately calling upon this tradition, but in the way he often did, he was also challenging it. He was offering grace to the person who lived in disregard for God. He healed someone who by all accounts didn't deserve it.

The man's physical blindness was akin to his spiritual blindness, and Jesus made that connection explicit so that when the physical blindness was healed, his audience would understand that the spiritual blindness was healed and forgiven also.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Luke 4.18b-19

Through this healing, Christ restored the man's relationship with his true self, his image-of-God self, complete with a healthy body and fully functioning eyesight. He restored him to God's original intention of a whole person, well and healthy.

As is often the case, Christ did not merely heal the man physically, but spiritually as well. He healed his perception as well as his body, reconciling this man back to God as well as to his true self.

This brings us to the final aspect of this miracle that bears some scrutiny: the vision of the men-as-trees and the two-stage healing.

This is one of those strange bits of the Bible that has always stuck with me. It's an episode for which I find the common interpretation rather wanting. The common rationale for what happened usually goes something like this: *Jesus set out to heal this man, but because of the lack of faith (either of the man himself or of the community of Bethsaida), Jesus was compelled to pray for him twice in order for the healing to be completed.*

To be honest, while my personal experience bears out the truth of this explanation (I have often had to pray and pray and pray a thousand times to see results of any kind in many situations, so I understand the pray-and-keep-on-praying-for-miracles methodology), I simply cannot buy the explanation that Jesus didn't get it right the first time, that he under-healed the man, like his aim was off or he hadn't stretched before the big match.

A few years ago Jvo shared a unique take on this passage from his friend, Steve Wiggins, the Artist in Residence at Harvest Christian Fellowship in California. Sitting in a pub one night, Steve told Jvo he thought that Jesus hadn't under-performed, but rather over-performed, giving this man a peek at the spiritual reality of humanity and showing him that we actually are like branches connected to the vine of God and Christ.

Over the last few years I've done some of my own work to flesh this out, and we're going to spend the next chapter understanding what it means for us to be like trees planted by streams of righteousness and branches grafted into the family of God.

Sacred groves

I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

John 15.5

The day will come when the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the Lord shall be the pride and glory of the survivors of Israel.

Isaiah 4.2

Men are like trees; each one must put forth the leaf created in him.

Henry Ward Beecher, 19th Century American abolitionist

In our home we have a magic tree, the Happy Tree, that lives outside the bay window on the north side of our living room. When we first moved to Jackson, my son was often upset and colicky, and the only way I could ever get him to stop crying was to tell him stories about the magic tree in our yard. It worked every time.

The Happy Tree is the truest thing about our home. It's the part of our lives here that I know I'll miss should we ever move, or be forced to remove that tree. It's a part of our story, of our history, and I always think of that tree as a prayer that God answered on behalf of my son years before I ever prayed it through the hands of a person I've never met who planted it.

It's sacred to me.

Sacred trees are a favorite motif in fiction and mythology. We see them in tales and literature from all over the world: current and historical, fantastical and poetic. Everyone seems to have an inborn understanding that trees are marked by longevity and relative indestructibility. Here are some of my favorite holy trees:

Avendesora, the Tree of Life, is a recurring icon in Robert Jordan's best-selling *Wheel of Time* series.

The White Trees of Numenor play a key role in the kingship mythology of *Lord of the Rings*.

George R.R. Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* series features the sacred groves of Weirwoods.

The Parliament of Trees is the judiciary for plant elementals in Alan Moore's highly acclaimed *Swamp Thing*.

The Norse Vikings held that Yggdrasil, the World Tree, is the umbilical cord of the earth.

Tu B'Shvat, the New Year for Trees, is celebrated among devout Jews as one of four Rosh Hashanahs where families plant trees, eat special fruits, and collect monies for re-forestation outside of Palestine.

Shel Silverstein wrote a heart-breaking and highly controversial children's story about a self-sacrificing *Giving Tree*.

Even *Disney's Animal Kingdom* has a sacred softwood, a 14-story, 50-foot wide sculpture of the Tree of Life.

Somehow, that original story of Eden's twin sentinels has stayed with our imagination and formed, and re-formed, the basis for our cosmogony over thousands of years. Maybe it's not just those first trees, though, but also the Tree of Life as it appears in the book of Revelation, with its *leaves given for healing the nations* (see chapter 22). There's something magical about the Scriptures being bookended with dendrology, as if the plants have their own salvation history, a redemption story that mirrors God's plans for people. And make

no mistake, there are significant parallels that even include a cultural mandate (*go forth and multiply!*); for trees were given this instruction: *bear fruit with seed in it, according to various kinds*.

Perhaps the special status of trees in Scripture is underscored by their scarcity. In the arid deserts of pre-modern Palestine, after all, trees were difficult to come by and as such were very valuable.

With that in mind, I'd like to look first at some of the biblical imagery associated with trees and then at how we might best understand what is happening with the men-as-trees miracle outside of Bethsaida. To begin, let's look carefully at Jesus' words in John chapter 5, that will provide a reference point to which we can commonly refer.

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit He prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; **apart from me you can do nothing.** If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. **This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit**, showing yourselves to be my disciples.
John 15.1-8 (emphasis mine)

Notice that in this passage Jesus uses the metaphor of the vine to describe key aspects of Christian life:

interdependence (*without me you can do nothing*)
 and fecundity (*you will bear much fruit*),

origin (*I am the true vine*),
 and purpose (*this is to my Father's glory*).

If all your only knowledge of Christian spirituality was the content of these few verses, you'd be hard pressed to screw it up. Jesus' metaphor is so powerful, and so clear: He is our origin, glory is our purpose, and we can't do anything without relying on him.

Everything we have and everything we want come from God. We can't get it for ourselves, and if we try, we run the risk of dying on the vine.

Keep that in mind as a means of contextualizing these other scriptural references. Now, this kind of thing has a tendency to get confusing, so let me briefly tell you why I'm going to list the following Scriptures that further explore the metaphor of people-as-trees:

First, understanding ourselves as trees frees us from the normal ways of thinking about ourselves. It gets us un-stuck from our mental and spiritual ruts.

Second, looking at the "tree-language" is a good way to similarly re-frame the salvation story. There are apparently good trees and bad trees and bad trees that once again become good trees with the advent of our Savior.

Third, Scripture describes both God and His people as trees, which, if nothing else, models for us a close and organic connection between who He is and who we are in relationship to Him.

Finally, the tree language instills in us some sense of ecological responsibility, a constant refrain in the Bible ever since our first command to fill the earth and subdue it.

With all that in mind (you got all that, didn't you?), let's briefly explore the three ways in which the men-as-trees language is used in Scripture: as a means of understanding righteousness, as a means of understanding wickedness, and as a means of understanding the Messiah.

The righteous are like trees ...

Trees are often used in Scripture to provide images of hope and restoration: hope for a better future, a maturity, a new life, a grafting and a bloom.

The Psalmist declares himself to be an olive tree *flourishing in the house of the Lord* (52.8).

Hosea prophesies the restoration of Israel, in which the nation will send down roots and produce shoots of new growth, *beneath which men will rest* (14.5-7).

Joseph is described as *a fruitful bough* (Genesis 49.22 RSV).

Paul refers to the unbelief of the Jewish people as being like branches broken off an olive tree, whereas believing Gentiles are described as *new branches that have been grafted* onto a tree from which they did not originally grow (Romans 11.16-24).

God promises long life to His people, *like the days of a tree* (Isaiah 65.22).

Job contrasts the hopelessness of humanity with the remarkable capacity of a dried up stump to *sprout new life at the scent of fresh water* (14.7).

Israel restored will be *like a transplanted cedar* that brings forth boughs and bears fruit (Ezekiel 15.22-23).

The wicked are like trees...

Wicked men, too, are sometimes compared to trees: barren, without fruit, twice dead, plucked up by the roots, sometimes flourishing for a while, but suddenly perishing and coming to nothing.

John the Baptist spoke of an axe already at *the root of the tree*, threatening that *the fruitless tree was to be cut down* and destroyed (Matthew 3.10).

In Jude, godless people are referred to as *autumn trees, without fruit* and uprooted-twice dead (v.12).

The destruction of the armies of Assyria is likened to the conflagration of a mighty forest fire, with *only a few tree stumps surviving* (Isaiah 10).

Job's counselors describe an *evil person as a tree whose branch will not be green* (see Job 15.32) and whose branches wither above (Job 18.16).

Nebuchadnezzar's downfall is pictured as *a tree that is held down, with its branches cut off* and with birds fleeing from its branches (Daniel 14.4).

The Messiah is like a tree...

The most prominent figure associated with trees in Scripture is the Messiah, the Savior of the world. It stands to reason that the righteous trees, fallen into corruption, require a Savior like unto themselves. Christ is that Savior, the branch of Jesse.

Hosea records *God describing Himself as a green pine, giving fecundity to the world* (14.8).

Isaiah prophesies that the stump of Jesse, the long-diminished line of Israelite kings, will again *sprout into the shoot of Messiah* (11.1).

This promise is reiterated by Jeremiah (23.5, 33.14) and Zechariah (3.8, 6.12), and the image of *the branch later becomes a title for God's coming leader* who will be both king and priest to God's people.

Jesus identifies himself as this branch, a vine, in John (15.5), even describing his sacrificial death as a kind of wine-making in which his blood is represented by the fruit of the vine served at the Last Supper.

The ability of a branch to sprout from the stumps of some types of tree *make it a symbol of rebirth*, and thus of resurrection (Job 14.7-9).

I list all of these references, again, not to simply show you I can use a concordance, but to systematically build an argument that we are meant to see and understand people differently than we do.

We tend to see people dissociated from one another; but trees are not dissociated. Trees are connected.

We tend to see ourselves as having little to do with the rest of creation, especially with the nonhuman inhabitants of the world, but the persistent use of trees-as-men in Scripture ought to force us to reconsider our isolationism.

Now let's turn our attention back to the miracle of the blind man at Bethsaida. When Jesus first spits into the man's face, he asks him what he sees. The man replies: I see men like trees, walking around.

Men like trees.

That's good biblical language, keeping in line with the other twenty or so references we've just explored. Perhaps this man is finally beginning to understand the invisible realities that keep us tethered to one another and to God. He is beginning to perceive an unbroken holism, an organic unity, between God and His creation.

And how, we might ask, does the blind man receive this revelation? It is revealed by the Holy Spirit. The blind man was healed not only physically and spiritually, but also perceptually. His spiritual sight was restored.

In the preceding section of Mark 8 (verses 17-21), Jesus points out that perception and understanding are gifts of the Spirit (*Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear?*). He tells both his followers and to his adversaries that there is a big difference between human reason and supernatural understanding.

I'd like to offer a confession at this point: recognizing that you're spiritually deaf, dumb, and blind only gets harder as you get smarter. I'm smarter now than I was fifteen years ago, but in many ways that only makes me more susceptible to relying on my own intuition, education, and rationale instead of helping me attune myself more fully to the Spirit.

I make the same mistakes these Pharisees were making, and taking my cue from Christ, I've spent more and more time in prayer and in mediation with the Scriptures to sharpen my supernatural acumen and invite the Spirit to teach me.

What I want, what we should all want, is an ongoing experience like that of the blind man in which we see people as Christ sees them.

By healing this man--after spitting in his face, identifying him as someone who lives in opposition to God, and then gifting him with not only physical sight but spiritual perception--Jesus is showing the Pharisees what it truly means to be holy.

They would have thought this man was unclean. He was, but in one moment with Christ he became reconciled to God and to his true self as an image-bearer of God.

They would have thought this man was spiritually dim. He was, but in one moment he glimpsed the divine perspective on interdependence, fecundity, origin, and purpose.

In one moment this man passed from victim to victor, knowing deeply the reality that Christ is the vine and we are truly his branches, that we were meant to bear fruit, from him and for his glory.

That is the real meaning of this passage of the Bible. It's not about Jesus' inability to heal (sorry, biblical scholars, but that's completely bejanxed), but to demonstrate that when Christ heals, he heals us in every direction and we are changed forever.

Biomimicry

Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them;
let all the trees of the forest sing for joy.
Let all creation rejoice before the Lord, for He comes,
He comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples in His faithfulness.

Psalm 96.12-13

Despite its sizeable population, 73% of Japan is uninhabited due to the dangers posed by the volcanic Mt. Fuji and the torrent of the Pacific Ocean. As such, the Japanese people have always looked for clues from nature as to where they ought to build, reading the landscape like braille to find out where the safe havens are.

The best clues are the old trees.

The evergreen trees of Japan (akin to the Douglas fir of British Columbia and the sequoia of Northern California) thrive in areas naturally sheltered from the rage of nature. But there is something weird about these giant trees. Despite being over 300 feet high and 21 feet wide, these trees grow fairly close together and are marked by an organic peculiarity.

The trees share their roots.



They are connected to one another through their root systems. This interdependence allows the trees to survive the wind, the ocean, the storms and volcanoes. They glean strength from one another. They are tied to one another, demonstrating that what matters most is not our individuality but our interconnectedness. Because of their connections, these trees have lived long enough to remember back before the Common Era, the time of Christ, the Shogunate, and through history past the Second World War.

We need to foster connections like the root structure of these trees. Our churches should work like these shoreline groves. This isn't just an issue of geopiety, loving God's creation because we love God who made it, but of biomimicry, learning how to live as the people of God based on how we see the rest of creation working together.

This is why I think it's so crucial to pay attention to the elder trees, the sentinels of co-relationship. They're matrices of connection. They model the kind of relationships we're meant to have in the Kingdom of God and in His church.

This book is about who we are as the people of God and what we're supposed to be doing as Christ's church. We're supposed to be in the business of reconciliation - healing the relationships between ourselves and God, ourselves and others, ourselves and the people God made us to be, ourselves and Creation.

It's so hard to do that, so hard to stay focused, but it's absolutely imperative. We get distracted by worship wars, theological disputes, claims to fame, liturgical and social rabbit trails; and often we wind up elevating some minor thing to a major thing, abandoning our mission to heal the world in the process.

We've got to keep a laser focus on the fact that the world out there is full of hurting people, hurting families, hurting institutions and employers and communities; and we need to work hard to reconcile and to heal.

The book of Ezekiel contains a great picture of healing. The prophet has a vision, prefiguring many of John's visions about Heaven in Revelation, that describes cosmological and ecological healing. The vision is a metaphor for both the healing of humanity and the commensurate healing of creation.

God brought me and showed the bank of the river.

When I returned, there, along the bank of the river, were very many trees on one side and the other. Then he said to me: *This water flows toward the eastern region, goes down into the valley, and enters the sea. When it reaches the sea, its waters are healed. And it shall be that every living thing that moves, wherever the rivers go, will live. There will be a very great multitude of fish, because these waters go there; for they will be healed, and everything will live wherever the river goes. It shall be that fishermen will stand by it from En Gedi to En Eglaim; they will be places for spreading their nets. Their fish will be of the same kinds as the fish of the Great Sea, exceedingly many.*

But its swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they will be left for salt.

Along the bank of the river, on this side and that, will grow all kinds of trees used for food; their leaves will not wither, and their fruit will not fail. They will bear fruit every month, because their water flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for medicine.

Ezekiel 47.6-12

I love the way everything works together in this passage: trees, streams, salt, fish, fruit, leaves. There is such richness and diversity to this healing offered in abundance. Our world today requires so much healing: spiritual healing, healing of inner demons and dark thoughts, mental and emotional healing, relational and social healing. The good news of the gospel of God is that the Spirit empowers us to go into the world to reconcile and to heal.

Every person committed to loving and following Jesus Christ needs to be equally committed to walking in step with the Spirit in each moment of each day, constantly engaging in a running conversation with God and seeking to better please Him with our thoughts, our behaviors, and our speech.

At our church, we've retooled many of our spiritual practices in order to help people find just that. Our spiritual formation portal called "The Elements" routinely gives suggestions to people about what kinds of spiritual activities they should be involved in. We want them to do something for their soul (personal devotional activity), something for their relationships (marriage enhancement, intentional parenting, or small group), something for their church (volunteerism), and something for their world (some act of social justice or advocacy).

We think the Bible strongly teaches that Christians should be engaged in these things.

But over the years, we've recognized that simply providing options for people to participate in hasn't always created the kind of disciples we were anticipating. So we retooled The Elements again, trying to help everyone focus on becoming students of the Scriptures, present with God in prayer, believing that more time spent studying God's Word and in concentrated prayer could only result in better discipleship practices and ultimately increased spiritual maturity.

Though we saw good fruit with that retooling, we still were dissatisfied with what we saw in the lives of our people. So now we've begun coaching them that, no matter what they do, though they need to do something, the key to spiritual transformation is inviting the Spirit to change and direct and shape them while they are doing it.

The key is invitation.

The key is our active engagement of the Spirit.

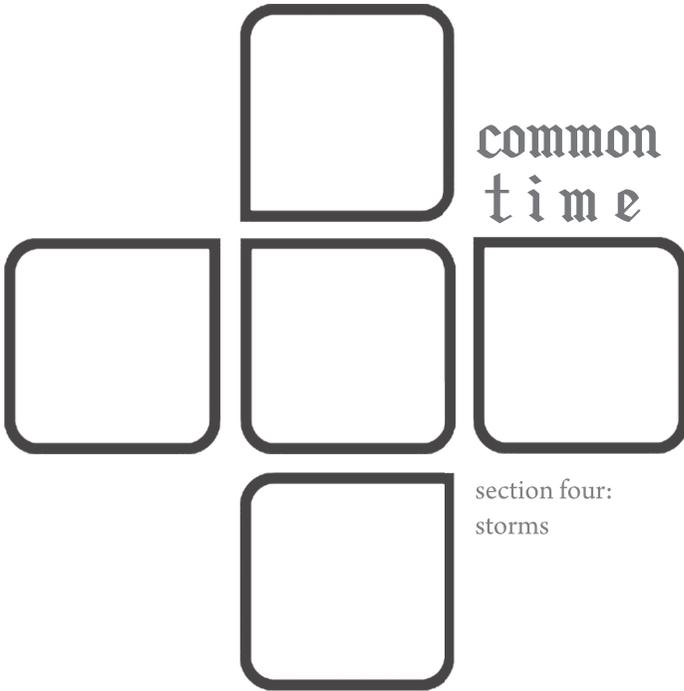
We have a choice about where we will direct our energy, how we will choose to live together, and how we will seek to be empowered.

We can choose whether to focus our efforts on healing
or be distracted by the peripherals.

We can choose whether to focus our efforts on interdependence
or live largely in isolation.

We can choose whether to focus on the Spirit
or try to figure things out on our own.

The choice is always before us, and whether we know it or not, we are always making it. I pray we learn how to make that choice persistently, enthusiastically, and with purpose.



epiphany: becoming the people of god

sabbath: reconciled to god

blindness: reconciled to ourselves

storms: reconciled to creation

outsiders: reconciled to others

transfiguration: the hope of the world



on being reconciled to creation...

The world was created perfect but that perfection has been lost.

*Creation is now a threat to humanity—
instead of a planetary garden we cultivate,
it is a cosmic jungle full of threat and danger.*

God wants to restore our relationship with creation and heal the world.

*The full gospel story contained within the Scriptures
paints a clear picture of a new Heaven
and a new earth
in which creation is no longer an adversary of humanity.*

It will again be a well-ordered ecosystem

in which we explore our holy vocation as stewards of the world.

Creation gospel

What is salvation? To be delivered from everything mean, low, despicable, selfish, cringing, fearing in my whole nature, that I may stand humble yet bold and free before the Universe of God, because God knows me and I know God. That is salvation!

George MacDonald, 19th Century English poet

I'm starting to feel old. It's not that my body is breaking down or that my eyesight is failing. I'm feeling old because I'm wondering about things like are the number of earthquakes increasing? I wonder how much damage the next tropical storm will do?

Somehow I have become infected with curiosity about how quickly the world is deteriorating and how much to worry about it.

There are just *so many* natural disasters.

My friend Josh was caught in the Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004 while vacationing in Thailand. A trained life guard, Josh and his brother spent almost two days performing *ad hoc* rescue operations on vacationers and villagers – including one pregnant mother and her toddler, a memory Josh says he'll never forget.

Like you, I wonder why these things are allowed to happen. And, probably also like you, I find the common Christian responses deeply dissatisfying, that either (a) God is using

these disasters for a nobler purpose than we can comprehend, or (b) that these tragedies are necessary in order for other, preferable graces like creativity and spontaneity to exist.

Forgive me for saying so, but when I study the Scriptures God doesn't seem to be in the habit of throwing up His hands in defeat and blurting: *oh well, you can't win 'em all.*

I do think, however, that Scripture is very clear on why things like tsunamis and earthquakes exist, and the answer we're given is that something is wrong with the world.

Creation has fallen out of its proper relationship with God and His people.

In Genesis 3 we read about the fall of humanity from perfection. In my mind, one of the big things most of us overlook about the Fall is the effect it has had on the non-human, cosmic, and planetary aspects of creation. Simply put, the Fall is not just about human sin and corruption. It's about human sin corrupting creation. In the account of the Fall we're told:

there will be hostility between snakes and people (vs. 15)
 women will experience pain in child birth (vs. 16)
 the earth will be stubborn in yielding vegetation (vs. 17, 19)
 vegetation will now contain thorns and thistles (vs. 18)
 humans will die (vs. 19)

Nature fundamentally changed as a result of sin. The world we now live in is cursed. This means that the laws of nature that have naturally brought about hostile snakes, pain in childbirth, hard-to-till soil, and death are not altogether "natural."

The world is not the way it's supposed to be. The creation in which we currently live is not the creation God originally spoke into being. Things like parasites, viruses, bacteria, and disease kill and torture millions and millions of people – not to mention earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, mudslides and volcanoes.

It's as if the world was created by a cosmic predator rather than by an all loving, peaceful, benevolent Creator.

Nature does not abhor evil, she embraces it.

Howard Bloom, 20th Century American author of *The Lucifer Principle*

This is one aspect of “natural” evil that I think has been conveniently pushed aside: there is a cosmic predator at work in the world, and he – Satan – does have some measure of power and influence over the world.

I’m usually pretty reluctant to talk about Satan and demons. To be honest, I think people who focus on that stuff tend to get preoccupied with it and go weird. They attribute too much to the dark side of the invisible world and not enough to human culpability or personal responsibility.

But things like earthquakes are only caused directly by people in science fiction movies, so the danger here isn’t in mis-appropriating blame to Satan when it should rest with humans, but in assigning blame to God when it should lie with Satan.

Satan and the fallen powers of this world are said to have incredible stature and authority. According to the Second Testament, Satan is:

the “lord” (*archon*) of the world (John 12.31, 14.30; 16.11)
the principality and power of the air (Ephesians 2.2)
the god of this age (2 Corinthians 4.4)
in control the entire world (John 5.19)
the authority of all the kingdoms of the world (Luke 4.5-7)

In this light, why should we think it impossible that this fallen archangel, along with his minions, has messed with the natural order of things, which – if you recall – have already been corrupted by the influence of sin?

The good news is that lovers and followers of Jesus Christ are no longer under the authority of Satan (see Colossians 1.3), having been set free from sin’s influence and dominion through the sacrificial death and resurrection of Christ on the cross (see John 8.36, Mark 10.45, Romans 3.24, Romans 6-8).

But Satan does still exert, for the time being, some authority in the world.

However, because God loves the world (see John 3.16) He is working to set creation right once again, and to place His people over creation as He first intended.

When we were created (see Genesis 1,2) we were designed to be stewards and caretakers of the earth. We were in charge and responsible for continuing the emergence of a well-ordered creation.

But with the entry of sin into the world, the corrupting influence of evil spread. It spread to all people, and it spread beyond all people to infect the cosmos. That corrupting influence manifested itself in storms, chaos, danger, earthquakes, fire, and destruction.

God wants to reconcile us to Himself and to creation. He wants to heal and to restore our broken relationship with the world around us.

That's what I want to focus on in this section – a theology of creation and restoration, a theology of ecological reconciliation, a biblical understanding of who we are in relationship to the earth, and a glimpse into the future of how earth will look later on once things are again the way God intended them to be.

I think it's important that we read the Bible and understand the *whole* Gospel. We need to understand that God's mission is not to keep you out of Hell, but to heal the whole world.

Think of a football coach. He's not just trying to keep his quarterback out of jail, but to win championships. Not going to Hell is a very short-sighted perspective on why we're here. Our mission is not to avoid Hell but to cultivate Heaven on earth.

The Second Testament teaches that Christ died not just to redeem humans. He died to restore the entire creation.

God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in [Christ], and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in Heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

1 Colossians 1.19-20

Now, if “all things” needed reconciliation, this tells us that nature as we now find it is not nature as God originally intended it. Paul says the whole creation is groaning to be *liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God* (see Romans 8.21). When humans are reinstated as the rightful rulers of the earth, reigning with Christ, creation will no longer groan or suffer decay (see 2 Timothy 2.12, Revelation 5.10).

Since the cosmos itself is in bondage, depressed under evil forces, the essential content of the word “salvation” is that the world itself will be rescued, or renewed,

or set free. Salvation is a cosmic event affecting the whole of creation ... of which I am only a small part

James Kallas, 20th Century American theologian

The scope of God's healing and reconciliatory work in the world, then, extends beyond people into every other aspect of creation.

The earth was created in perfection (Genesis 1),
was corrupted through sin (Genesis 3),
and now groans under the authority of a malicious master
(John 5).

It yearns for redemption (Romans 8),
experiences glimmers of hope in the present (Mark 4),
and will finally be wholly restored (Isaiah 65).

In the following two episodes – Christ walking on water and calming the storm – we see God exerting His authority over the authority of Satan. God is healing creation, and He intends for us to do likewise. He is healing our relationship to creation, teaching us again to be stewards of the earth.

This is the thinking that has led our church to do so many things differently over the last couple of years. In contrast to our natural disposition (those of us on staff probably best fall into the category of tamed rebels), we began to realize that we needed to take our ecological responsibility more seriously. We began the first recycling center on the west side of our town (making it available to the public at some cost to our own congregation), did away with all paper cups and coffee cases (at some cost to our own preferences), and have begun using paper very differently (at cost, again, to us).

This is hard for us, but important. I'm sure that to the outside world, this could seem like some kind of green-washing or left-wing idiosyncrasy; but it's not. This is a matter of conviction that goes against our grain. There's nothing in me that naturally wants to be an eco-freak, but everything in Scripture tells me that it's my own sin and corruption that allows me to disregard the planet – that makes me cooperate with the forces of corruption – and so I feel convicted and have had to change.

We have to change.



We have to cooperate with God in healing the world, reconciling ourselves to the world, and reclaiming our identity as stewards of the world. God's long range plans are for this place to get better and He is looking to us for cooperation.

The earthquakes will cease, and the seas will lie down. The cancer of sin will dry up and go away, and the fields will produce great yield. The old parts of our town will be torn up and remade, and the empty buildings for lease and full of black mold will again be full of people and joy. Children won't be run over, and violence will exhaust itself, because God is fixing the world and we are helping him do it.

God has stilled the storm to a whisper;
the waves of the sea are hushed.
The people are glad when it grows calm,
and He guides them to their desired haven.
Let us give thanks to the Lord for His unfailing love
and His wonderful deeds for the world.

Psalm 107.29-31 (author trans.)

Storms in stride

After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. *It's a ghost*, they said, and cried out in fear.

But Jesus immediately said to them: *Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.*

Lord, if it's you, Peter replied, *tell me to come to you on the water.*

Come, he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, *Lord, save me!*

Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. *You of little faith*, he said, *why did you doubt?*

And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, *Truly you are the Son of God.*

Matthew 14.23-32

I always find it amusing to watch movies about the life of Christ and see how they portray the bit where he walks on water. Typically, there is a raging tempest blowing around the sound stage while the actor precariously balances on an underwater platform. There's so much happening that he can barely keep his balance.

Which is funny to me.

Jesus successfully walked on water. Hollywood actors, on the other hand, can't seem to successfully walk on a platform hidden underwater in a controlled environment with millions of dollars backing them.

Ha!

Apparently, even fraudulent water-walking requires a little faith that nothing will go too wrong.

In the gospel accounts, Jesus had sent his disciples ahead of him to Bethsaida. They had to cross the Sea of Galilee and were caught up in a storm (see John 6). Even though the disciples strained against the oars and refused to give up (see Mark 6), they only went three miles in about eight hours. Jesus finally shows up during the fourth watch of the night – sometime between 3am and 6am, the witching hours of *uh-oh* phone calls and children's nightmares – and the disciples think he's a ghost.

They were exhausted, the storm was furious, the hour was late, and Christ was walking on the water. To be fair, I think just about anybody in their position would have wondered if they were hallucinating. Once Jesus called out to them, though, their fears were alleviated.

Christ calls to his friends and says: *it is I*. From anybody else, that probably wouldn't have brought much comfort, but from the lips of the water-walking Messiah – Lord of Storms and God Incarnate – those words were filled with power. Those were the words of old, of a voice from Israel's past that said: *I AM*.

I think it's cool that *I AM* comes to us at four in the morning, in the middle of our storms. Sometimes we wish he'd come earlier – like at lunch, or for tea – and that the circumstances surrounding his coming would be more pleasant – without storms, for example – but the fact that Christ shows up miraculously when we need him is a provocative element of faith.

I think Christ “shows up water-walking” whenever I hear stories about people asking God for a sign.

Recently, a friend of mine asked God for a sign of hope in his marriage and received one;

last week, a fellow pastor asked God for a sign that he wasn’t alone, and I happened to call him seconds later;

yesterday I was feeling very discouraged about a personal matter, only to receive a sign that clearly communicated to me that God was with me and I would be okay.

God is still showing up to rescue His people – to provide hope in brutal circumstances – by showing up, miraculously, and “walking on the water.”

Though we are often troubled by storms, Christ shows up walking through them as easily as if the wind and waves were merely aisles at a meteorological Target.

Mightier than the thunder of the great waters,
mightier than the breakers of the sea—
the Lord on high is mighty.

Psalm 93.4

It’s probably worth noting – as we pull real-life application from this story – that Christ came to the rescue after:

- (1) the disciples had been in trouble for some time, and
- (2) after the disciples had been rowing all night,
refusing to give up despite their own fatigue, and
- (3) that the manner in which he came was to provide hope in the storm
and not (this time, at any rate) to get rid of the storm.

As anybody with grey hair will tell you:

- (1) there will be storms in this life, and
- (2) you’re going to have to fight hard to get through them,
even when you feel like giving up, and
- (3) we take strength from and find hope in Christ
in the midst of the storms. It is that hope and strength
that helps us endure and survive.

Of course, Jesus wasn't the only person who walked on water in this story. Peter calls out to Christ and – take a careful reading here – asks Christ to ask him (Peter) to step out of the boat. Peter asks Christ to ask. Peter knows that Christ commands the storm, and he knows that only God can do what Jesus is doing. He knows furthermore that a miraculous leap of faith was the only way to prove that Christ wasn't a ghost.

Peter wasn't being daring so much as he was proving a hypothesis:

*I think that's Christ.
 Only Christ could do what I think I'm seeing in front of me.
 But if it is Christ, he's not just showing off –
 he's showing the Way
 and that means – if it is him –
 it's the Way for me.*

Peter steps out of the boat and makes his way to Jesus. Pardon me for feeling sentimental, but I can't help but identify the early stages of Christian belief with Peter's walk on the stormy seas. When we first "come to Christ" and step out of the boat (so to speak), we feel a bit like the actors portraying Jesus in the Hollywood films – shaky at best. Our faith is fledgling, and all we can do is stumble closer to Jesus. Like Peter, our faith starts out alright, but then we often begin to panic and feel like we're sinking.

When Peter begins to sink, Christ rescues him. Christ is always reaching out a saving hand to help us in our crisis of faith or in those times when we feel like we're going under.

But there is an oft-overlooked bit of this story that I find interesting: it's the wind that freaks Peter out, not the water. Despite the fact that he's walking on water – a physical impossibility – Peter is rattled by the wind.

Isn't that how it is for most of us?

We could see a miracle right in front of our eyes, but somehow still have doubts about normal stuff – like making a dollar stretch or completing our college degree. The supernatural stuff seems to do less for building our faith than the natural stuff does for dismantling our faith.

What a paradox.

Take a lesson from Peter here and learn to ignore the wind. Learn to focus on the miracles of your life –

your new birth in Christ,
your reconciliation to God,
your church community,
the safety of your family,
answered prayer,
fostered hope,
the miracle of being different than you used to be,
the miracle of ongoing personal and spiritual transformation –

instead of focusing on all the hot air and blowhard people around you –

who tell you you're nothing special,
or that you're not good enough,
or that the things you care about don't really matter,
or that you should be different (sure!)
only so long as the transformation you experience makes you
more like them.

Take heart. Step out of the boat. Ignore the wind.

We are all waterborne creatures,
meant to stride on storms, because

we are more than conquerors, through him who loved us
(Romans 8.37).



Lord of storms and spirits

That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, *Let us go over to the other side.* Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, *Teacher, don't you care if we drown?*

He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, *Quiet! Be still!* Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.

He said to his disciples, *Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?*

They were terrified and asked each other, *Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!*

Mark 4.35-41

I used to have real difficulty sleeping. I'd thrash around in bed almost every night, getting more and more frustrated that I couldn't sleep. But I couldn't get up and do all of the things that were keeping me awake, either. You know the kind of things I mean – looming deadlines for projects and budgets, conflict with coworkers or employees, battling factions within my church and business, worry about my children or money. It's like Punch and Judy had been digitally grafted onto the back of my eyelids and they're treating me like the next dictator about to be overthrown.

I know I'm not alone in this – one quick trip to the pharmacy and I'm overwhelmed by the amount of sleep-related products: herbal remedies, pills, music, white-noise machines, soothing smelly things, soft and robotic beds, ear plugs and eye shades and so on. Suddenly Michael Jackson becomes less of an oddity and more a product of his environment.

In sharp contrast to myself and the 70 million other American insomniacs is this story of Jesus, asleep in the bow of a wee boat caught in a violent storm. Make no mistake, this storm was something vast, something powerful – *the Minnow would be lost!* – due to the unique topographical features of the region.

The Sea of Galilee lies about 600 feet lower than the ocean and is surrounded by high mountains and ascending plateaus. Waterways in the area have gouged significant gorges and ravines which converge into the sea, creating a kind of funnel effect that draws the wind down from the mountains. This wind can whip up storms quickly and very, very aggressively. In fact, even the parking lots around the Sea of Galilee have warning signs posted on them, informing visitors that if they park too close to the water their car could be swept into the sea.

Though many of the disciples were fishermen – and, we might safely assume, fairly familiar with storms – they get scared and started to panic. By all accounts, the reason they panic is because they understood storms differently than we do today. For them, as for all people of the ancient Arabic and Palestinian world, storms represented chaos – the ongoing contest between gods and monsters.

As we discussed earlier in the chapter on baptism, the sea was consistently seen as a symbol of dark power threatening to destroy God's creation, His purposes, and His people. Books like Daniel and Job frequently portray the sea as the abode of monsters. The books of Isaiah and Jonah teach us that the ability to still the sea is a power reserved for God alone:

For I am the Lord your God,
who stirs up the sea
so that its waves roar

Isaiah 51.15

We must be careful to understand this story the way Jesus' disciples and earliest followers would have understood it - not as a travelogue but as a contest for divine power. It is crucial to the story that Jesus is sleeping. He isn't just exhausted (though he may also have been very tired); he's sleeping because this contest is really no contest at all. He won

the battle decisively over chaos at creation. So Christ is undisturbed by the malevolent power of the storm and chooses to exercise his divine prerogative to rest.

Rest, after all, was what the ancient Near Eastern cultures understood to be the reward for victory – which, again, is why the seventh day of rest is significant in the creation narrative of Genesis 1.

God has defeated all opponents. God is victorious. God can rest, and so we too can rest in Him.

After he is awakened by the disciples, Jesus does another interesting thing. In verse 40 of this story, Jesus tells the storm, “*Peace, be still,*” which is the same language he used to silence the synagogue demon in Mark 1.25: “*Be still!*”

Jesus treats the storm as something demonic, and his action against the storm was a kind of re-enactment of God’s battles against the raging seas in the First Testament. Jesus continues to battle for creation and neither the demons in the sea or the demons in the synagogue have any power against Christ. They pose no threat to those of us who have aligned ourselves with the Living God. These demons are treated like minor annoyances – one sharp rebuke is enough to slap both sea and spirit back into submission.

There is one final unique point that I’d like to briefly explore: Jesus’ rebuke to the disciples (recounted in neither Matthew or Luke).

Just like the disciples had accused Jesus of abandoning them during the storm (*Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?*), Jesus now turns on the disciples and accuses them of abandoning their faith (*O ye of little faith*). This rebuke, coupled with the awesome display of divine power, makes the disciples more afraid of Christ than they were of being capsized, and brings to light a common failing among Christ-followers: being fearful.

When our minds are governed by what we think we know and control rather than by faith in God’s promise to care for us, then we will always tend to be afraid.

So long as it is our capacity to save and to heal
that defines what’s possible or likely or desirable,
fear is the only real emotion available to us –

because we might fail,
because we have limitations,
because we cannot foresee all ends,
because we're finite,
because we're insufficient to face challenges
at the supernatural
or suprapersonal
or cosmic level.

We experience hope only when we choose to believe that God defines what's possible, not us.

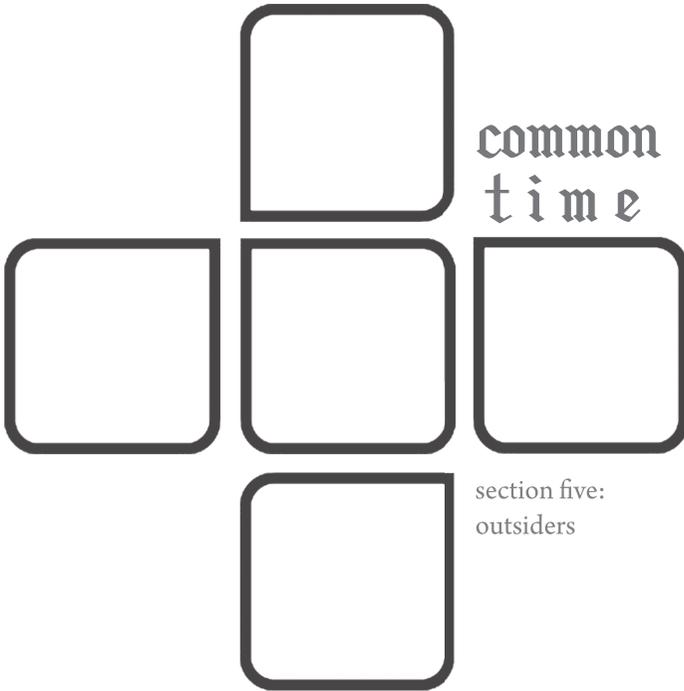
We can have hope that things may turn out better
than the way they look now,
hope for change,
for a rescue,
for a winning strategy that can play out unimpeded,
hope for a miracle,
for divine intervention,
or for grace.

Simply put, when we rely on ourselves we will always be afraid.
To find hope, we have to rely on God.

Fear is what we get when we think about who we are and what we can do, instead of trusting and believing in who God is and what He is capable of.

We have nothing to be afraid of – not when Christ is beside us and within us, over us and ahead of us. Not when Christ is Lord of Storms and over Spirits. He commands us to be still, and our anxieties and worries are calmed. He comforts us with his presence, and the promise of his protection brings us divine rest.

To be sure, in this life you will go through storms, but you don't have to go through those storms alone. Christ will buoy and sustain you, and not only will you get through those storms but, sometimes, you will be delivered from those storms entirely.



epiphany: becoming the people of god

sabbath: reconciled to god

blindness: reconciled to god

storms: reconciled to ourselves

transfiguration: the hope of the world

outsiders: reconciled to others



on being reconciled to others...

*Christ demonstrated what it means to be a human being
by loving and welcoming outsiders
across social,
religious,
and political boundaries.*

We ought to be doing that as well.

*'Welcoming the stranger' is one of the primary ways that we experience healing
in our relationships with other people.*

Abraham and aliens

You shall not pervert the judgment of the stranger, nor of the orphan; nor steal a widow's clothing.

Deuteronomy 24.17

When I was first getting started in ministry I pastored a group of misfits and miscreants. Most of them came from low-income backgrounds and still smelled like pot. I loved those guys, and those early days of ministry were some of the most rewarding times in my life. Everyone was so raw and so fresh. Often this was the first time they had been exposed to the gospel and in many cases they didn't know that Jesus Christ was an historical person.

We had sinners and bandits of every stripe – buskers and hookers, addicts and vagrants, drop outs and washouts galore. And they all brought their friends.

As new as many of our folks were to church –

and the typical norms that accompany church attendance

(like how you should dress or what kinds of things are okay and what times are appropriate to share them ...

and, by all this, I don't mean suits and ties and hallelujahs, I just mean something more than a bikini top and something less than a random *Hell yeah* in the middle of a sermon) –

their friends and guests were even newer.

My favorite guy came in for the first time while I was teaching, goth-ed out from head to toe and pasted white with makeup and bruised with eye liner. He wore leather and chains in creative combinations and violent boots that probably cost upwards of \$500. He marched in while I was preaching and a wave of sniggering moved through the room. That was strange behavior for the group because they were normally very accommodating. But I soon realized why, as he turned around to face the group while pulling up a chair in the front row.

He had no bum in his pants.

When he first walked to the front of the church, everyone but me got a nice full-moon view. But when he turned around, I got the show, and I've gotta say, there's really no good way to cover up a startled reaction to full bum-tal nudity while preaching.

Fortunately for this guy, he was well-connected to several of our regulars and leaders. He wasn't bothered by the reactions he got – he was cool enough to admit he had dressed the way he did precisely for the reaction.

I tell you that story because this is the guy that comes to my mind whenever I think about “outsiders”. Whenever I think about the gospel mandate to love those who are not like me, who are so far removed from church and church culture as to be invisible to Christian people, this guy comes to my mind. He was an outsider, and if it weren't for Terry (one of my regulars), he never would have come to church or heard the gospel.

The Bible has a word for outsiders like this – “stranger” or sometimes “alien”. Scripture tells us that there are people out there who we are obligated to love and welcome into the life God desires for His creation.

Jesus modeled for us the way we ought to love strangers and aliens. In this section of the book I want to explore Christ's model, understanding that he is teaching us how to be reconciled to others. When we follow his lead, our ethic of loving others is one way we partner with God in His mission to heal and reconcile the world.

In the beginning, human beings enjoyed unbroken harmony and fellowship with each other. We knew no shame. We knew no differentiation. We knew no judgments, no class or socializations or demographics. We were all human together, made by God to be like God. With the corrupting influence of sin, that harmony was shattered and something about our human condition changed. We are no longer together in the same way, and

God wants to fix that.

It's easiest to fix the relationships we have with people we know, people we already love and who are just like us. Middle class people usually marry other middle class people, and wealthy people golf at exclusive clubs with other upper-crust folks, while the poor gather in clusters around their favorite shops or homes. There's nothing wrong with any of that, really. But what is wrong is that we make so little effort to cross-pollinate, to reach out, and to welcome those who aren't like us.

I want to explore the ways in which Christ modeled reconciliation between us and other people by looking at three episodes from the Gospels that show Christ dealing with Gentiles – the Samaritan woman at the well, the Centurion's servant, and the Syrophenician woman. Since Jews and Gentiles were adversaries, and Christ's mission wasn't focused on Gentiles but Jews (as he makes clear in Matthew 10.5-6, Romans 15.8-9), it is significant that Jesus reached across social boundaries to welcome outsiders into his Kingdom. Jesus modeled for us what it means to be the church – a ministry of reconciliation that reaches across social, political, and religious boundaries to welcome others in keeping with the instructions in Deuteronomy 23 and Ecclesiastes 4.

Additionally, there is one other theological point worth mentioning here: Jesus said the message of reconciliation had to come first to the Jews and then, through the Jewish people, to the Gentiles. He believed – as did all good Jews of that period – that if and when Israel was redeemed, the Gentiles would then be brought under the saving (and judging) rule of Israel's God. Christ's understanding of this plan not only came directly from his Father, but also from the ancestral understanding of God's covenant with Abraham:

I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.

Genesis 12.1-4

The idea here is that, since the world has been turned around and disoriented from God and His perfect designs, God raised up a person – Abraham – to fix it. That person would



eventually become a people – the Israelites – who would perpetuate that fix over all the planet – including every nation and every creation.

This covenantal promise was reiterated in several other places in the First Testament, notably in Exodus 19, Deuteronomy 26, and Ezekiel 36. In all these cases, the reason God promised restoration to the world and to His people was because it remains His world and they remain His people and God's own reputation is at stake. God wants to heal the world, and God wants others to see Him do it and to participate as He does it

It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone.

Ezekiel 36.22

With Christ's death and resurrection, the mission of Abraham's descendents to heal the world became the mission of the church – the 'true heirs of Abraham' (see Galatians 3.16-29). The mandate has been co-opted and re-tooled by the church:

through you the nations will be blessed
has developed into
go and make disciples of all nations.

Yet we have often neglected our God-given mission to be a blessing to the world around us, to reach out to those unlike ourselves, and be reconciled to others. To help us reclaim some of that impetus, let's look at four categories of people who need the church to reach out to them in love and reconciliation:

widows (see Exodus 22.22)
orphans (see Deuteronomy 10.18)
paupers (see Psalm 140.12)
strangers (see Deuteronomy 23.7)

These groups all have something in common: the absence of power and the ease with which they are taken advantage of.

The widow has no husband to offer protection.
The orphan has no parents to offer hope for the future.
The pauper has no money or resources.
The stranger has no friends.

no protection
no future
no means
no friends

These people hurt in two ways: circumstantially and relationally.

They live in terrible circumstances – whether living off government assistance, in foster care, on the dole, or in obscurity – and their desperation offends our civilized sensibilities. We don't know how to help, we don't know how to process their misery, and so we ignore them. We abdicate our responsibility to them, and consequently to ourselves, forgetting that helping them forms and shapes us. Ignoring them leaves us the way we are.

Their other hurt stems from the first: these people are lonely. They are missing crucial relationships that would help them – family or employers or anyone else who feel responsible for their wellbeing. They have no one to pick them up when they fall, to keep them warm when they are cold, to protect them against robbery or attack, or to speak to them when they are alone.

That's why I was so happy that the bum-less pants guy had someone who befriended him at our church. And that's why I was so convicted of my own white-middle-class-ness. While I don't think I could have handled the situation any better than I did, I am nonplussed at how easily my life slips into a pattern in which the only people I'm surrounded by are people just like me.

I've got to fight against that. I've got to be intentional about loving aliens and strangers, about providing strength and protection to those who don't have it, or painting a hopeful future to those who can't see it, or giving generously and sacrificially to those who don't have what they need.

As we turn our attention now to the Gospel stories, I want you to keep three things in mind: first, that Jesus is modeling for us how we ought to love outsiders and welcome them into the life God desires for His creation. Second, that Jesus has in mind all manner of outsiders – those without protection, a future, means, or friends – and he's drawing on the First Testament teachings and traditions we've just seen to show us that God hasn't changed His mind all of a sudden about whether or not people matter. This kind of reconciliation has been the goal all along. Third, that Jesus has in mind God's promise to



Abraham to bless and heal the world through Abraham's descendants.

Jesus is reconciling himself to others,
and showing us we ought to do likewise
just like our spiritual ancestors
were taught in the First Testament
because it has always been God's desire
to restore humanity back into one people,
together before God,
living in harmony
like we did in the beginning.

The gospel and outsiders

My dad is a great coach – not a sports coach or a skills coach, really, but a great coach for how to deal with people. He’s very well-respected, and has plenty of long business relationships that have been both profitable and enjoyable over the years. I admire that about him.

But it’s tough to take his advice. Not because I resent getting advice, just because advice is difficult to put into practice. Dad’s got these great altruisms – *get in front of him, David, help him see; don’t let yourself get boxed into a corner where you can’t read the situation properly or tell others why you’re there and what you care about* – but while those altruisms are easy to memorize, they’re really tricky to put into practice in the middle of a meeting or a conversation.

But when I watch dad take his own advice, it’s amazing. I watch him get out in front and tell people what he wants to happen and why it matters to him, and it all makes sense in that moment because I’m watching him do it.

The first time I bought a used car, dad came with me to the dealership. The whole way there he was giving me advice, as if his altruisms were radiation meds and we were getting closer to Chernobyl. I couldn’t keep it all straight, despite being able to rattle his advice back to him.

When we got to the dealership, dad let me take the lead in the bartering over this old Datsun B210. I wasn’t doing well with the salesman, and I began to get frustrated and



angry, so dad stepped in and turned on the charm. If you think used car salesmen can charm anybody into a car, you ought to see my dad charm a salesman out of a car sometime. He was funny, firm, genuine, and cut through all the bull. He asked the guy what kind of commission he needed and haggled until we could get that guy his money while we paid what we wanted for the car.

I've learned a million lessons like that from dad because I watched him in action.

Advice by itself only counts for so much. Same with classroom training, or book learning, or stuff you do in a lab. It's what happens right in front of us that changes how we behave and interact with others.

I've heard a lot of sermons about how we ought to treat outsiders, but when I read the Gospel stories of how Jesus did it, it's like I'm standing beside my dad at the used car lot. *Now I get it.*

Let's look at three of these Gospel stories, beginning with the healing of a centurion's servant in Matthew 8:

When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. *Lord, he said, my servant lies at home paralyzed, suffering terribly.*

Jesus said to him, *Shall I come and heal him?*

The centurion replied, *Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it.*

When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, *Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

Then Jesus said to the centurion, *Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would.* And his servant was healed at that moment.

Matthew 8.5-13

Because my brother has done several tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, I've been very interested to see all the Hollywood movies about the US military in action, like *Three Kings*, *Green Zone*, *The Hurt Locker*. I watch these movies and, though I know they're highly sensationalized fiction, it helps me keep Jeff in mind and I feel a little closer to him.

When we read this gospel story about a centurion approaching Jesus and asking for help, I can't help but imagine a US Marine approaching an Iraqi Imam. I know the parallel is faulty in some ways – American versus Roman, Muslim versus Messiah – but it's also a pretty accurate picture of the kind of socio-political tension behind the scenes in this story.

The Romans, remember, were a foreign occupying power in Palestine – much like the States in Iraq. Though the Romans weren't typically cruel or malicious (not at this point in history anyway), there was still a large amount of suspicion and distrust on both sides. Imagine how nervous a Marine would be approaching an Imam surrounded by his followers. Perhaps that's why he tells Christ to just say the word and have his servant be healed, rather than inviting Christ back into his home.

Make no mistake, this Roman centurion – who, by the way, was likely the head of the garrison stationed at Capernaum and the chief military officer in the area – was Jesus' enemy. By helping this man and extending him favor, Jesus shows us what it really looks like to *love your enemy and to bless those who persecute you* (Luke 6.27).

Jesus takes it one step further and not only helps the centurion but blesses him for his great faith, faith Christ doesn't see in his own people. In this case, we're made to understand that faith isn't a general attitude but an understanding of true authority and where it comes from. The centurion knew that the authority he had was significant but limited, whereas the authority Christ had was greater, but still based on the same principles.

With the centurion, Jesus' authority was already spreading to people outside of Judaism. Even though Christ was clear that the time for ministry to the Gentiles hadn't yet come, he saw this man's faith as an early sign that that time was coming soon.

All of this brings to mind Simeon's prophecy shortly after Christ's birth:

Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.



For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel.

Luke 2.29-32

Jesus is clearly beginning to fulfill Simeon's prophecy, just as he is continuing along the trajectory set by Abraham to heal the world and reconcile outsiders to God.

The next gospel story I want us to look at concerns a Syrophenician (also a Gentile) woman whose daughter was demon-possessed. Once again we see Christ dealing with someone outside of his religious and ethnic world, and once again we see him offering outsiders benefits previously available only to insiders:

Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an impure spirit came and fell at his feet. The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.

First let the children eat all they want, he told her, for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs.

Lord, she replied, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.

Then he told her, *For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.*

She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Mark 7.24-30

One thing common to just about every developing country in the world is dogs. When I travel, as I often do, I see dogs all over the place. In Guatemala they use dogs to herd cattle. In India they use dogs to chase away snakes in tall grass. In Haiti they use dogs to guard their huts from nosy neighbors.

There's always a ton of stray dogs too – mongrels and wastrels haunting garbage dumps and lurking in alleys. These things are infested and infected with every imaginable ill. All the locals recognize them and are quick to aggressively shoo them away.

There's one more category of dog – besides the utility dog and the stray – and that's the pet. Just like stateside, people all over the world love and keep dogs as companions and playthings. They cuddle them, bathe them, make clothes for them, kiss them on the mouth, and carry them around in purses (yes, even in India, they have purses for dogs).

When we read this gospel story, the first thing that stands out is Jesus calling this woman a dog. While others are sometimes content to pretend this insult doesn't matter ("dog" was a common insult traded back and forth between Jews and Gentiles), I am not so easily sated. Having done some research, I'm pleased to honestly say it's not as bad as it first sounds. The word Jesus uses for dog is actually better translated puppy. He's teasing the woman, referring to her not as a stray or a utility dog, but as a favored pet and member of the family. Also, like he so often did, Jesus is taking this common insult and turning it on its head. He is instructing his disciples on what to do with their prejudices, first exposing and then abandoning them.

Also in the background of all this is the miraculous feeding of the five thousand (see Mark 6.30-44 and Matthew 14.13-21), which Matthew's gospel indicates occurred in a largely Gentile area. Given that Jesus had already literally fed a horde of Gentiles, the woman has no qualms about asking Christ to figuratively feed one Gentile. Additionally, because there were so many stray dogs in that place, it seems almost inconceivable that those strays weren't running though the area picking up scraps after the day's teaching had ended. Since Christ permitted those literal strays to glean scraps, what would prevent him from permitting a figurative pet from gleaning scraps now?

As to the rest of the exchange between this woman and Christ, it follows a fairly common rhetorical pattern from the ancient Hebrew world. This is difficult to recognize in English (and coming, as we do, from 21st century American cultural background), but the conversation follows the pattern of two *chavrusas*, partnering students of the Talmud, debating nose-to-nose and testing one another's learning.

It's playful.

I suppose our best cultural equivalent would be like an *ad hoc* spelling bee, or a spontaneous haiku competition.

They just start ... dueling, and though the woman is certainly desperate for the well-being of her daughter, she has come armed with faith and wit.



In response, Jesus plays along, testing the woman's faith and finding her an exceptional match. This is not only an interesting dialogue, but it also reveals an important truth: the old barriers – the taboos about who is good and who is bad, who is clean and worthy and who is unclean and unworthy – were being swept away. The family pets were already sharing the meals and soon they would cease to be “pets” at all (either socially or spiritually). They would be considered full members of the family instead.

Remember that this gospel story comes directly after a section in Mark's Gospel in which Jesus teaches about what makes someone clean or unclean, holy or unholy, sacred or secular. Jesus is taking the teachings he has just delivered orally and is now showing what he means in real life. He is including the outsider, welcoming the stranger and the alien, and sanctifying the Gentile.

Much later in Mark's Gospel, as Jesus breathes his last breath on the cross, we read about a Roman soldier looking at up at him and saying: surely this man is the Son of God (Mark 15.39). From that moment on, what was anticipated in the Syrophoenician woman became universally true. The King of the Jews had become the Savior of the World.

The final gospel story I want to examine here concerns Jesus confronting a Samaritan (Gentile) woman at Jacob's Well (a place of some spiritual and ethnic importance for Jewish people, a place that still exists today in Israel).

In this story (which is simply too long to reprint here in its entirety), we see an exhausted Jesus send his disciples off to buy food while he rests by the well. He meets a Samaritan woman there and asks her to draw him some water from the well. This story, already, would have raised a few eyebrows in the Jewish community, for men were almost never alone with women (for fear of gossip or temptation). If they did happen to find themselves alone with a woman, they would never speak to her. Though that culture wasn't quite as oppressive, you might imagine this scene being played out in a hyper-conservative context like the Taliban, under whose authority women are not permitted to speak to men nor to show their faces. Imagine the scandal of an American movie star putting his arm around a woman in a burka. You can probably imagine the scandal of Jesus speaking to the woman at the well.

The Samaritan woman responds to Christ's request with something that meant *get it yourself*, reminding us that the animosity between Jews and Samaritans was not one-sided. Jesus replies to her rebuke with a veiled mystical metaphor:

If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.

Sir, the woman said, you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?

Jesus answered, Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

John 4.10-13

When we read passages out of the Old or Second Testaments, we must always remember that our Bible stories are about desert people. Desert people are inextricably bound by life-giving, life-sustaining water.

Consider the significance of water in the First Testament:

Creation began with God separating the water and creating the land.

God cleansed His creation with a Flood.

Drought in Egypt brought Joseph's brothers to beg for relief from the very brother they had previously betrayed, thus bridging a huge gap in the family that God intended to use to heal the world.

Hebrew slaves escape through the Red Sea, and that same sea crashes down and destroys Pharaoh's pursuing army.

Moses struck a rock and water came to quench the people's thirst and save their lives as they wandered in the wilderness.

When Jesus offered this woman living water, he was offering her the ultimate soul-saturating drink – a living, vital relationship with God made possible by Christ's own sacrifice.

The Samaritan woman expresses some eagerness to taste this water, but Jesus slows her down – perhaps wary that she had other intentions for him than just spiritual union – and asks her to fetch her husband. At this point we realize that there's more that makes

this woman an outsider than just her ethnicity – she has had five husbands and is now living with her boyfriend. Now we understand why she was the only woman at the well. Normally, there would have been quite a crowd there, coming early in the cool of the day or late in the evening to avoid the heat. Jesus was there mid-day, and so was this woman, probably trying to avoid the gossip and the hassle of being around religious conservatives who were certain to judge and upbraid her for her sexual misconduct.

When Jesus addresses her marital situation, the Samaritan woman blusters something about holy mountains and ancestors, but Jesus isn't fooled. He knows this is a smokescreen designed to keep him from pursuing the conversation about her life and her sinful choices up until this point. Her words were a way of deflecting his moral and ethical question, as if to say: *Look, there are so many opinions out there about what's right, about which religion is the true one, and about whose rules we really ought to follow... let's just agree to disagree, knowing that we're both probably a little bit wrong anyway.*

In other words: *Maybe there's nothing wrong with me, or with my sexual choices or lifestyle. Don't judge me, and I won't pretend to judge you either.*

Sound familiar?

Whenever I get into serious conversations with people about Christian spirituality, they usually throw half-baked arguments at me about how all religion is the same, about how the Bible is really untrustworthy, and about how Jesus probably wouldn't have anything to do with Christianity as a religion if he were alive today. When I begin to address those concerns, I find that most people don't want to hear my responses. They've played their ace-in-the-hole and want the conversation to move on having declared a stalemate.

But Jesus doesn't leave the conversation there. He presses his advantage, reminding the woman that the true and living God isn't contained geographically or architecturally. He is Spirit, transcending the physical world just as he inhabits it.

She panics at this a little and tries again to punt the conversation: *One day Messiah will come. When he comes, he will explain everything.*

To which Jesus replies: *I am he.*

The story ends with the Samaritan woman not only understanding who Jesus is and why he has come, but also becoming a powerful evangelist for Christ. Jesus' fame spread



quickly through the region based on the remarkable transformation of this promiscuous outsider into an eager and willing participant in Christ's Kingdom (see John 4.39-42).

When we take a step back and look at these three stories together – the centurion, the Syrophoenician, and the Samaritan – we begin to understand how Christ wants his church to act and to behave. It's true that God has been saying this is what He's wanted from His people all along, but in a manner of speaking that was more like getting a lot of advice – laws, rules, feasts. Now, with Christ demonstrating how all this stuff works in real life right in front of his first followers, we are finally beginning to get it.

Let's turn now to the final chapter in this section and consider how Christ-followers and church communities might apply what we've seen here.



Love all, serve all

My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

John 14.2-3

Based on Christ's example, it's important that we, the church, recognize our mandate to reach outsiders, and our general failing to do so. We've got to welcome people into the life God desires for His creation. That's how we become reconciled to one another – we're intentional about it, we work towards it, we discipline ourselves to demonstrate that love in practical ways – and that's one major way in which God is working to heal the world through us.

Think of it this way. Since God's desire is to heal the world through His people (see Genesis 12, Galatians 3), then He's got to get His people working in concert in order to demonstrate to the world what He's inviting them into. So imagine a party that someone wants you to go to, but when you arrive everyone there is acting like a jerk. They're fighting all the time, making fun of those who look a little different or come from a different school or vocation. You wouldn't want to go to that party. Neither would you want to go to a church full of judgment and infighting. Why would you participate in the Kingdom of Heaven if it looks like Hell?

God's effort to heal the world is like the work of an orchestral conductor – He's got to get everyone playing together in order to make beautiful music out of the horrid screeching and thumping and tooting they make individually.

We need to be marked by love and hospitality so that the world can see God at work in us and through us get a picture of how God really wants His people to get along.

And, of course, one of the most obvious and powerful ways we do that is by instilling within our churches the value of reaching outsiders.

Depending on our circumstances, outsiders really could be anybody. I don't mean to classify them only as poor people, because if your church is in a poor area and it's already full of the poor, then obviously the poor are no longer your outsiders. The same goes for people of minority or religious groups – the movement between insider and outsider is always in flux depending on where your church is located and who comes to it.

As diverse churches, we each need to discover who we are. From there we can figure out who's not like us and how we can demonstrate love to them.

The point on a strategic and ecclesial level is not so much trying to reach this group or that group as it is trying to reach across groups – the poor extending grace to the rich, the educated to the drop outs, and so on.

But what do we do when the outsiders become insiders? A predominantly Caucasian, affluent congregation may feel the need to become more hospitable to a group of Haitian refugees in a nearby town. They might change all of their programming and redirect many of their resources in an effort to show love and be welcoming to their Haitian community. This is a powerful thing, and demonstrates the willingness of the church to emulate Christ's welcome to outsiders, but once the Haitian community is wholly integrated into the church, then what?

Because they have so strongly equated Haitian refugees with outsiders, that church runs the risk of being blind to the new outsider – the senior citizen in the long-term care facility, the migrant worker, the solitary entrepreneur, the illiterate and undereducated American.

We ought to be less concerned about groups of people, and more concerned with the people around us. Instead of asking questions like: what group should we go after next?

Or, who are the people least like us and how can we make a big splash in their lives for the Gospel? We ought to ask questions like:

Who do I have in my life that drives me nuts, who I routinely try to avoid, or who embarrasses me? How can I stop being so gun-shy around them and begin instead to love them for who they are?

Because they're the outsider.

Who is it that constantly antagonizes our church, creates a ruckus, or tries to damage our reputation in the community? How can I love them in the middle of their hatred, and tangibly demonstrate to them that I am committed to working past their issues and welcoming them into the life God desires for His creation?

Because they're the outsider.

Who is it that scares me, who makes me feel intimidated or inadequate? How can I get out in front of their intimidation instead of playing the victim? Can I consider myself an emissary of God to them?

Because they're the outsider.

Is there anyone our church isn't good at looking after when they show up – no way to deal with their specific issues (physical, mental, spiritual, or relational), no way to offer hope in their specific circumstances, no way to make them feel comfortable or loved when they first arrive? How can we treat everyone who is brave enough to walk on our property like a guest in our home?

Because they're the outsider.

In order for us to be faithful to the example of Christ and to reach out to the outsiders, we've got to think less about "reaching people groups" (as a strategy) and more about what God is calling us to do in this moment.

That's not to say that the missiology of reaching people groups is flawed somehow. In fact, for many organizations that is the perfect mission and one that God (and His church) wholly supports. But for a local church, it is misleading to articulate the mission of reaching outsiders by first identifying groups of people not like us (by making some

broad generalizations and diminishing the individuality of the people involved) and then coming up with strategies to reach those groups of people (like the elderly Korean Baptist church who asked their choir to perform songs by the Black Eyed Peas in an effort to reach the young folk).

A better way is for us to be constantly asking the Spirit: what do you want us to do? Who are we shying away from? What opportunities are you putting right in our laps that we are blind to, or negligent with, or reluctant to fully engage? How can we see the world and your people like you do? And how can we love them like you, extending hospitality to every person no matter how they make us feel or how different they are from ourselves?

That is how we reach outsiders.

Remember, in all three episodes from Christ's life we studied in the preceding chapter, he never went looking for the centurion or the Syrophenician or the Samaritan – he just stumbled across them (or they came to him) and he loved them well.

We tend to think we've got to go out and discover who the outsiders are or where they've been hiding, when the truth is, they're right in front of us. We just don't like them.

That's why they're "outsiders."

Our church, Westwinds, has had a remarkable turnaround in this regard, but we've got a new curve we're still navigating.

We used to be known as the "rich church" in town. People in our community would often make snide remarks about how our parking lot was full of Beamers and Hummers and Caddies and Corvettes, and how you wouldn't be welcomed at Westwinds if you drove a beater. I'm very thankful that has changed – and changed dramatically – because we've become far more hospitable to people from all socio-economic sectors. In fact, we're much more a church of the common people than we are a wealthy church, and we feel very privileged to have been part of a spiritually-motivated downward mobility.

We didn't achieve this downward mobility, though, by "targeting" blue collar people. No, we simply began sharing our concern that outsiders perceived us as elite and exclusive, just as we began suggesting there may be some behaviors and attitudes we subtly possessed that kept people from feeling welcome. Our pastors preached and taught more and more on loving the poor and spoke passionately about our responsibility to demonstrate generosity to those in need. We stressed that everybody matters to God and to us and

that we ought to do what we can to help (much of our teaching in this regard is available in *Heart of Gold: the joy of living generously*).

Of course, those who used to be outsiders – the blue collar folk – are now our insiders, and those who once were insiders – the white collar folk – are now our new outsiders.

So guess how God has been working on us? How do we love and welcome the white collar folk back in? How do we show love to them without once again ignoring our blue collar people, or making excuses for those in the white collar community who don't want to be associated with more "common" people? And how do we convince the unemployed that the white collar person is an outsider at Westwinds, especially when, outside the church, the unemployed is an outsider and the white collar guy is the insider who fired him?

Some might be tempted to say that the white collar folk are never outsiders and that the real power of the Gospel is most holistically found in a blue collar church like Westwinds. But they're wrong. The Gospel is for everybody – rich and poor, black and white, Jew and Gentile, American and Immigrant. God cares about people, regardless of who they are and what they have – and it's that caring ethos that drives us to welcome the unemployed when they feel outcast, and the employer when they feel maligned and demonized as "the Man."

This whole thing plays out in another way for us at Westwinds. We've begun to articulate our mission and our vision a little differently than we used to. Rather than selecting a target market – like unchurched 'Harry and Mary' – we've simply recognized that there are four kinds of people who feel attracted to Westwinds:

The spiritually curious – those who know there's more to life than science can explain, but aren't yet sure what to think. They want to explore religion and spirituality in a non-judgmental setting.

Those disenfranchised with organized religion – those who've been burned out by church, who hate "religion," who left their parents church or their own church after some old wound or issue.

Creatives – people who make things, who enjoy design, who appreciate beauty, who – even if they themselves are not 'artistic' *per se* – love to see art in everything and understand there's something holy about it.

Intellectuals – thinkers and wonderers, theologians and bloggers, the critically-minded philosophers and status-quo challengers whose questions are not usually welcome in other places.

These are “our” people.

But you know what? Because these are our insiders – even though they’ve been outsiders in most other churches – we’ve got to do everything we can to demonstrate love to people not like us. So when a guy shows up wearing a suit to the Winds – guess what? He’s an outsider. And rather than judge him for his ‘religious spirit’ or feel embarrassed for him, we need to hug him and get him a mug of coffee and a heads up on what he’s about to experience in our service. Or when a lady shows up in a flowered dress and starts speaking in tongues in the lobby, she’s an outsider and we need to find good ways to help her feel loved and valued and welcomed rather than stigmatized or maligned.

We need to find ways to love the people who think art is dumb or that our answers for things are too complicated. That doesn’t mean we’re going to change the flavor of our church or the exercise of our mission, but it does mean we’ve got to find ways to love and include those like us while we continue to do the things we feel like God has called us to do.

We don’t want to pity others or placate them with charity. We don’t want to generalize or homogenize, we want to include and welcome. We don’t want to live in fear of others or distance ourselves from them, we want to love.

Maybe the Hard Rock Café said it best: *Love all, serve all.*

Love those who aren’t like you and serve them also.

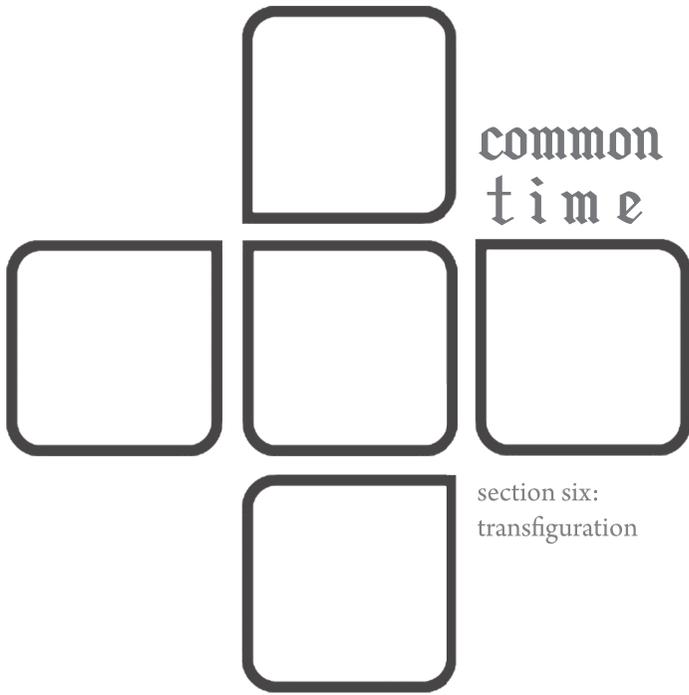
Welcoming outsiders into the life God desires for His creation is a critical part of being the church. It demonstrates that the gospel is for everyone, not just for Jews – or people just like us – but for creatives and bean-counters alike, intellectuals and thugs, those who hate church and those who don’t want church to ever change, those who are curious and those who think they know it all.

People like you and me.



But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. *Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

1 Peter 2.9-10 (*emphasis mine*)



section six:
transfiguration



epiphany: becoming the people of god



sabbath: reconciled to god



blindness: reconciled to ourselves



storms: reconciled to creation



outsiders: reconciled to others



transfiguration: the hope of the world



concerning the hope of the world...

During the Transfiguration

*Christ was revealed to be the Son of God
with authority over Moses (representing the Law)
and Elijah (representing the Temple).*

We too are now revealed as Christ's body alive and at work in the world.

*Christ is literally acting through his church
to heal the world
and to bring reconciliation in all directions.*

That's a high calling

*and a powerful motivation
for us to take our corporate identity seriously.*

Spies and poets

The Transfiguration is the episode in Jesus' life where he was supernaturally revealed to his closest friends to be divine. It is celebrated in the liturgical calendar toward the end of Common Time and it is a significant moment from which we learn how be the church.

During the Transfiguration Christ was revealed to be God. He showed his disciples what God looked like – a powerful reminder that *we* ought to be showing people what God looks like.

I want to briefly explore this episode of Christ's life briefly, and then – in the next chapter – explore the significance of the Transfiguration for the mission and identity of the church.

After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

Peter said to Jesus, *Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters— one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.* (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)



Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: *This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!*

Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Mark 9.2-9

Growing up I had a good friend, Jason, whose family had moved from Hong Kong to Canada while he was in elementary school. We used to hang out all the time – we both liked video games and junk food – and he would always tease me that my family smelled like sour milk (that, apparently, is how Canadians smell to people from Hong Kong – it’s their stereotype of us). He liked to call me Ghost-face (which, though a derogatory term for Westerners in Asia, was a pretty funny term of endearment coming from him).

We had a lot of fun together. But our cultural differences sometimes hijacked our enjoyment of each other’s company. Not only was Jason’s family from a country very different from my own, but also Jason’s family was very, very wealthy. My family was not. Consequently, we often had weird moments where I would do something at Jason’s place that was really uncouth – either inappropriate in their culture, or inappropriate for their class. Jason would be really embarrassed.

The worst of these moments came when Jason was given a solid gold necklace. We were only ten years old and I couldn’t believe he was *that* rich. I thought something must have been lost in translation, so I grabbed the necklace and bit it, thinking that if it was real gold it would bend (but since it wasn’t real gold this would be the way to prove Jason was showing off in front of his ghastly-countenanced mates).

I bent the necklace badly, and Jason screamed. I had never before felt so horrible about anything. Jason started freaking out, worrying about what his dad was going to do to him. I told him not to worry, that I would accept responsibility for it. But Jason was not comforted.

Don’t you get it, stupid? My dad is going to break my face!

He’s going to hit you? I asked. *That’s awful!*

No, dummy. My face – I am going to be bad in front of him.

I immediately thought of a solution: *Maybe he can hit my face?*

No – you don't even have a face. My parents hate you.

At that point, I knew there was something going on I didn't fully understand. Something cultural and also something very personal. I was much older before Jason was finally able to explain the concept of face in ways that made sense to me (though his parents still don't acknowledge my existence).

In Asian cultures “face” is everything. Your “face” is the combination of honor, reputation, responsibility, prestige, and worthiness you've got to maintain in all social interactions. To “lose face” is to have every aspect of yourself – social, emotional, intellectual, spiritual – diminished, disfigured, and disgraced. In Jason's Asian world I had nothing – no prestige, and no value – to commend me to his parents.

Over time, however, I've learned to better manage my demeanor (and not to ruin my friend's property) around Jason and my many other friends of Asian descent. That experience stays with me, though, and I can't help but think of it whenever I read anything about people's “face”.

Consequently, when I read Luke's account of the transfiguration, and he says that *the appearance of [Christ's] face changed* (Luke 9.29) as Jesus stood before his Father and his true identity was revealed, I immediately think not only of Christ's countenance, but also of Christ's prestige, his authority, and his worth. I've always seen the Transfiguration as a full-scale revelation of God's identity to His disciples. It was the moment in which God's glory came face-to-face with God's humanity.

Christ is the human face of God.

Len Sweet, 20th Century American futurist and theologian

Christ's “face” went way beyond social status, however, as this was the face of love. This was the face that Moses could only see reflected on Sinai (see Exodus 33) because the power of that love was too great, too awesome, to behold. And it is still difficult for us see that face. We have difficulty recognizing Christ's true identity – both as God and as Love Incarnate – because we are limited by our human perceptions.



For example, when Philip blurted out his blindness by imploring Jesus to *show us the Father, and we will be satisfied*, Jesus pulled back the curtain even further: *Have I been with you all this time Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father* (John 14.8-9).

Thankfully, we have six witnesses, three human (Peter, James, and John) and three supernatural (Moses, Elijah, and the Voice from Heaven), who were present at the Transfiguration and can testify about what they had seen and heard – that Christ is the human face of God:

The human witnesses were there to testify on earth – to write down the story as evidence of Christ’s divinity and mission to heal the world after his resurrection (see v.9). Peter did this in Mark 9 (Mark’s gospel is commonly considered to be based on Peter’s testimony) and in 2 Peter 1.16-18 (*we ourselves heard this voice that came from Heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain*).

The supernatural witnesses were there to demonstrate Christ’s authority in Heaven – to validate the ministry of Jesus in front of the disciples and to show how he fulfills the Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah), just as he claimed he would in Matthew 5.17-19. They show that Christ is elevated even above the two prominent figures of Judaism

The Voice from the cloud gave Peter, James, and John a straightforward command: *This is My Son, whom I love, listen to him*. The message and mission of Jesus was to guide the disciples in their actions and understanding. God’s proclamation to those three disciples is the same for all who follow Christ, even today.

We need to continue this kind of testimony today. The church must do what these witnesses have done. We must help people see the “face” of God by showing them who Christ is and what He has done, and by helping them understand what He wants to do with us and in the world.

I like to think of our role in this regard as something like a tour guide – showing people around the world, pointing out to them the many ways in which God is working all around them. But there is an even better word, a medieval word – *scop* (pronounced *shōp*) – which refers to something like a spy-poet. A *scop* was a person who would sneak behind enemy lines in the midst of a war and spread stories of dissent among the enemy before returning home with stories of hope.



In many ways, our task in this world is to go behind enemy lines, to go into the dark places of the world, and spread stories of the inevitable demise of darkness. We are meant to remind the powers of oppression and control that their days are numbered, for God's true face has been revealed, and He is coming to heal the world. And we are also meant to come back to our own people and bring them stories of hope and healing. We are meant to tell them that the enemy is not as strong as they thought, or as cunning or close.

The church is meant to keep revealing God's true face to the world. He is our protector, and He is Lord, and before Him every knee shall bow on Heaven and earth and under the earth.

Let's focus our efforts less on strategies and budgets and more on testimonies and chronicles, bringing out more parables than programs, in order to encourage the people of God that He has come, that He comes to us now, and that He will come again to finish what He has started with Christ.



The church incarnate

As a pastor (and a pastor's kid), I've never really thought of the church as anything other than the thing I give my life to. I've never looked to the church to provide me with anything. I've never been disappointed with the church for failing to meet my expectations because – honestly – my expectations of church are fairly pedestrian.

I expect to sometimes be exhilarated,
and other times be pretty bored;

I expect to have a couple of friends,
but also have to hang around a bunch of people I may not like or
otherwise choose to associate with;

I expect to learn something and feel something, maybe even be challenged to do
something,
but I also anticipate feeling like I've heard it all before, that the feelings
are a bit stale sometimes, like I've tried the thing I'm being challenged
to do (again) and I'm not sure it's really all the man up front says it's
cracked up to be.

I think my expectations of “church” (when we define church as a Sunday service or local church community of Christ-followers) are pretty healthy. We shouldn't expect too much from others – not in this capacity – and we shouldn't expect too much from what happens in a typical weekend worship experience.

Because neither the people around us or in front of us are good substitutes for the Spirit of Christ within us.

It's too trite and a little too inaccurate to say that church is what we make it.

But that sentiment gets close.

It's more accurate to say that we are the church, and to whatever degree we submit to the ongoing transformational energies of the Spirit is the degree to which we will find our faith growing and flourishing. This means we all need to invite the Spirit to change us and, as we are changed, church will become the thing we all believe it's supposed to be.

That's what I tend to think of as a transformational (ever-changing) ethos (meaning, the norm).

Typically though, church people evaluate their local church on the basis of whether or not it meets their needs as a family or a spiritual person or whatever. That's not wholly evil, but it is wholly inadequate. The church isn't a place, but a people. So many others have said this better than me, but it bears repeating: *you are the church*. The church is defined by who you as a people are becoming as the Spirit continues to transform.

So those who leave churches because *they're not meeting our needs* are actually suffering under a grand delusion. They think the church is *for* them, instead of understanding that the church *is* them, and the very thing they hate about their church is the very thing they have been tasked by God to change.

Because a church is built, and fed, and grown – not found or purchased or tried on for size. And, though I understand why – in practical terms – it sometimes has to work like this, it's completely back-asswards to try and find a place that lines up with your spiritual desires (as if church were a provider of religious goods and services, instead of God's agency through which He works to heal the world).

If you can imagine a group of laborers building a brick home, try also to imagine that one of the hired hands refuses to do any work, standing instead off to the side and leaning on his shovel. The lazy worker asks those who are building the church: *when will you finish my house?* But what this lazy worker doesn't understand – incomprehensibly! – is that the house he is building is not for him. He is just the worker, not the home-owner.



So it is with church. The house isn't for you. You are supposed to be the one building it. The church's job is not to meet your needs, or even to foster your own spiritual transformation. Your task is to be transformed by the Spirit and to cooperate with the Spirit to heal the world.

The transformational ethos of any church is only there if you cultivate it. And here I don't even mean a collective "you," but you – personally – reading this paragraph.

(P.S. – Every single pastor in the universe would agree with me wholeheartedly on this point. If you can find one – just one in all the world – who thinks differently, tell s/he to call me and I'll try and figure out which Bible they're reading.)

One of the things I've loved about the church where I currently serve is the ethic of transformation. To be honest, I found it startling and uncomfortable at first. People took their faith so seriously – calling each other on their garbage, refusing to allow each other to get away with little sins, and (most importantly) giving each other permission for that accountability.

In the beginning, it sometimes felt like I (as one of the pastors!) was among the least motivated to change.

That was so convicting –

watching my friend Andy submit to grueling life-lessons and maintain a posture of humility and teachability;

watching Tom and Donna struggle with health issues and old wounds, yet remain gracious and loving in the process;

seeing Randy die with dignity and love, making amends and setting plans in motion that would bloom after his death;

being adopted by Beth, his widow, and her kids who have loved us more than we have ever been able to love them in return;

having Craig and Wendy reach out to us and give us a safe place to process our own suffering and hurt and confusion –

it was humbling to realize how many better people there were,
and are,
at the Winds than me.

With experiences like these, I've come to realize just what it means to be the church. Not just to have community, or be loving, or even to be "on mission", but to be the body of Christ.

And this is how we get back to Christ's Transfiguration...

Just as Christ is revealed to be God, we – the church – are revealed to be Christ.

Christ lives in us (see John 14.17, Romans 8.9-11, 1 Corinthians 6.19) and bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God (Romans 8.16). We are participants in his divine nature (2 Peter 1.4), as he has made his home in us and we in him (John 15.4).

That's not just fancy language, or some veiled metaphor. He really is inside every Christian person. Furthermore, he's not just inside of us – like some spiritual fish in a human tank – but he lives *through* us. Indeed, it might be better to say that he lives *as* us.

There's good biblical evidence to this point. Paul, for example, says that *if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation* (see 2 Corinthians 5.17). We are literally new creatures, new beings, new persons, and our old "selves" have been crucified with Christ (see Romans 6.6), and we are now made new (see Ephesians 4.24, Colossians 3.10).

Christ is our life (Colossians 3.4),
and we live together with (1 Thessalonians 5.10)
and through (1 John 4.9) him.
He is our righteousness (2 Corinthians 5.21) and,
as new creations,
we have been (re)created in holiness (Ephesians 4.24)
and are loved (Colossians 3.12),
perfected (Philippians 3.15)
and sanctified (Hebrews 10.14).

Just as Christ was incarnated *then* as a man, he is incarnated *now* as his church.



This is what it means when people say *we are the hands and feet of Jesus*, or *you are the only Jesus the world will ever see*. This is the powerful and provocative truth behind the cliché one-liners and cosmopolitan quips.

We, the church, are representatives of Christ in the world (2 Corinthians 5.20), and whatever we do is what Christ is doing. The Transfiguration means that not only has Christ been revealed as God, but that we are revealed as Godly, transformed through the ministry of reconciliation and the power of the Spirit.

We have become synonyms – co-identified with Jesus – in two key ways:

first, in terms of public perception – when Christians mess up, the entire reputation of the gospel is tarnished;

second, in actuality – for Christ is working through us to heal the world (Ephesians 2.10) and to reconcile all humanity back to himself (2 Corinthians 5.19).

So when I talk on and on about how *we are the church* – I really mean it. And when I say that people who leave churches because they aren't getting their needs met are missing the point – I really mean it.

If you leave a church because your needs aren't met, then church isn't really what you should be looking for. You should be looking for a nursery. And if you don't understand how to be transformed or how to invite the Spirit to change you from the inside out, then you should find someone to ask. I've written elsewhere on that topic (see *Shadowing God: living with dignity and humility in God's image*), but for now let me simply say that if you aren't being transformed, the fault does not lie with your church, but with yourself.

There's one other theological avenue I'd like to explore that concerns the final coming of Christ – commonly referred to as the *Parousia* or Second Coming (see *Advent: preparation, anticipation, and hope in Christ's coming*).

Since Christ is revealed to be God,
and since we (the church) are revealed to be Christ,
and since he is incarnate in us (we are his body)

we ought to recognize
that a significant part of the *Parousia*
is the fulfillment of our mandate to build the church.

Consider these two passages, commonly understood as referring to things that *must* happen before Christ's final Advent:

And this gospel of the Kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

Matthew 24.14

And the gospel must first be preached to all nations.

Mark 13.10

Are you catching this? The gospel must be preached to the whole world before Christ can return. Not only must the gospel be preached *in order to satisfy the requirements* for Christ's return, but Christ is returning *as the gospel is preached* to the world.

When the gospel is received in every culture – when there are people in every place, as Christ – co-identified with him, alive, and functioning as his body – then his *Parousia* has already begun.

Once Christ is incarnated in every culture, then Christ will be everywhere.

I don't mean to suggest that there will be no literal Second Coming – quite the opposite. Actually, I'm very much a believer in Orthodox theology, the supernatural, and the validity of biblical prophecy. But I am suggesting that we often miss the significance and the association of our presence as Christ's body with his future presence as himself.

We are both his bride and his body.

Wherever we are, there he is.

When we go, he comes too.

So when we bring the gospel into every corner of the world,
the *Parousia* spreads.

The mission of Jesus is to encompass all creation in his transforming presence. He came to heal the world, the whole world, not just the bits of it we see everyday. Our collective salvation will only be complete when all the world is gathered together. Only then will all of Christ's body be present.



Think about it.

If we are the Body of Christ, and God's plan is for the fullness of humanity to be (re)united in Jesus, then Jesus is currently missing bits and pieces of himself. Christ's representation in this world will only be complete when people of every tribe, tongue, and nation come together to cooperate with God.

Because it takes all cultures and all peoples from all over the world to accurately reflect God's image.

It is to this issue that Paul writes to the church in Ephesus:

Christ's purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility... Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household.

Ephesians 2.15-16, 19

This is a celebration of Christ breaking down the walls between Jew and Gentile, between the once-seemingly irreconcilable differences that separated us from each other. Each of us are like bricks, like living stones, brought together to create a home for God.

Each of us.

That means that the true identity of the church is not simply found in USAmerica, or Canada, or Britain, or Australia. It's not just European or African or Russian or Asian. It's all of the above, and is incomplete without all of the above.

So what I want us all to understand is that the mission of the church is absolutely critical to God's long-range plans for humanity.

As Bill Hybels, pastor of Willow Creek church, has said so powerfully and so stirringly:

the local church is the hope of the world.

As theologian Scot McKnight has said so accurately,

the church is the vehicle God has chosen for redeeming the earth.

As we've said so frequently at the Winds,

*God is working to help us Shadow God,
Build the Church,
and Heal the World.*

All my bellyaching and my angst about people "having their needs met" is really not about them being shallow; it's about people completely misunderstanding what it means to be the people of God.

We are meant to be a people of transfiguration – inviting the Spirit to change us and to reveal our true nature as Christ's body to the world around us. We are meant to be an agency of healing and transformation – a missionary organization through whom God works to heal the world.

We must always ask ourselves:

*What is God doing in me?
How is God working to change me?
How can I cooperate with the Spirit to be different,
to be better,
to be more faithfully Christ,
than I was before?*

These are the key questions sparked by the Transfiguration on the Mount, just as they are the key questions facing every Christ-follower who reads the stories of Christ and begins to understand what it means for him to work through us.

Since he is in us.

And is us.

Conclusion

One of the most common conversations I have with people who claim to love Christ is about their lack of love for the church. Recently even celebrated convert Anne Rice, author of *The Vampire Chronicles*, has declared that she simply cannot associate herself with the church any longer despite her persistent dedication to Christ.

With all do respect to Anne, and to the many other intelligent and altruistic believers out there, you're making a mistake.

Yes – the church is flawed.

Yes – the church does not adequately represent the life or love of her founder.

Yes – we should be intolerant of ecclesial abuses and scandals.

But for all that, the church is still the bride of Christ.

I was at a wedding not too long ago where the best man got up at the reception and to toast the bride. He was drunk, and the toast deteriorated to a roast, and then to a re-hashing of every boyfriend and sexual partner, every illegal substance and indiscretion, the bride ever had.

It was humiliating for her, and infuriating for her new husband.



The church is the Bride of Christ, and – much as we might like to quibble – when you mess with someone’s blushing bride (no matter her failings), the groom gets very angry.

*Dear Anne, please try to look past the failings of the church
and see her as Christ sees her.*

Christ died for the church, and we ought to be prepared to make a little sacrifice of our own.

Of course, I’m skating around the fact that Anne and I are both part of the church. In fact, we are the church – as are you, dear reader. And for us to opt out of the church is as ridiculous as a collective decision to say I no longer wish to be David McDonald, husband to Carmel and father to Jacob and Anna. I will now be the artist formerly known as David, represented by the following symbol: ^%&\$.

Perhaps the most critical issue facing Christians concerns how we live as the church. We cannot condone the church’s mistakes. They are our mistakes and we must redress them. Neither can we pretend that we’re starting a new church that has no bearing or relationship to the last 2100 years of Christian spirituality and practice.

Having looked at Christ’s life, understanding that it is the source material for who we’re supposed to be and what we’re supposed to be doing as his church, we must now turn our attention to living differently. We must do everything in our power to be an agency of healing in the ministry of reconciliation. We must work tirelessly to be reconciled to God, to others, to our true selves as image-bearers of God, and to creation.

We must cooperate with God to the redeem the world so that the gospel can be incarnated in every culture—so that Christ himself can return in triumph and beauty, setting every wrong thing right and every crooked path straight.

Nothing less is at stake than the salvation of our species, our planet, and the cosmos.

This is a big deal – and we’d better begin to live differently as a result.

Right now.

dr. david mcdonald, at home
december 14, 2010

ADVENT
Christmas Tide

COMMON TIME
Epiphany
Transfiguration
Septuagesima
Sexagesima
Quinquagesima

LENT
Ash Wednesday

EASTER
Palm Sunday
Holy Week
Easter Tide
Ascension
Pentecost
Trinity

KINGDOM TIDE



septuagesima

the workers in the vineyard

Septuagesima

Septuagesima comes from the Latin word for seventieth and signifies the seventy remaining days (excluding Sundays and holidays) prior to Easter. In the Christian liturgical tradition, it is common to study the parable of the vineyard workers contained in Matthew chapter 20 to commemorate this holy day.

For the Kingdom of Heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, *You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.* So they went.

He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, *Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?*

Because no one has hired us, they answered.

He said to them, *You also go and work in my vineyard.*

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, *Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.*

The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. *These who were hired last worked only one hour, they said, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.*

But he answered one of them, *I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?*

So the last will be first, and the first will be last.

Matthew 20.1-16

Jesus lived in an agrarian society—people made their living from the land and from working with its raw materials. They were farmers, shepherds, craftsman, and trades people. This is why so many of Jesus' parables concerned things like fields and vineyards. He illustrated spiritual truth with commonplace occurrences, placing metaphysical reality in simple terms that ordinary folk could understand.

Oftentimes, employers would head into the local town to hire day-laborers for seasons of intense need. For example, there was only a very short period of time to harvest the grapes before they were destroyed by the ensuing spring rains. If the grapes were not harvested before the rains arrived, all of the hard work of the previous season (as well as a sizeable economic investment) would be lost.

Employers would head into town and survey the usual collection of unemployed trades people looking for skilled work at an honest wage. These weren't homeless folk or "good-for-nothing" types, but unfortunates who had either lost their long-term employment or suffered some other equal misfortune. They appeared every day in the market, ready for work, tools in hand, and eagerly waited to be hired. Imagine that, in a modern equivalent, each worker would expect to receive about \$120/day as a fair wage.

In this parable, the vineyard owner hires several workers to help him bring in the harvest, knowing he has only one day to do so before the rains arrive. Things progress well, but too slowly, and so around lunchtime (and again at mid-afternoon) he returns to the market and grabs a few more workers to help out. After all, his entire investment is at stake. He's got to bring in his whole harvest *today*, or his hopes for the future are dashed.

Part way through the afternoon he realizes the work still isn't going to get done on time and so he goes back to the marketplace one final time at five o'clock in the evening and sees a group of guys standing around. You can imagine that the remaining workers, the five o'clock people, are not the best workers. They're the guys no one else wanted to hire ... probably for good reason. And they're likely the most desperate as evidenced by the fact that they're still standing around waiting to be hired.

The vineyard owner approaches them, hires them on the spot, and agrees to pay them whatever is fair for the remainder of the afternoon.

At the end of the day, the vineyard owner happily realizes that his harvest has come in and his investment has been protected. He's thrilled. Everything he wanted to have happen has happened, and so he approaches the foreman and instructs him to pay the workers most recently hired first.

The five o'clock workers receive \$120 for their efforts. They, too, were thrilled. The midday workers and the morning workers were, initially, thrilled thinking that the vineyard owner was doling out \$120/hour. In their minds, they imagined themselves earning \$480, \$840, and \$1440 respectively. Their enthusiasm quickly turned to disappointment and then anger when they realized they would only be getting \$120.

And so they complain.

The vineyard owner, however, is unimpressed and addresses the ring leader, using a distinctly unfriendly word for friend. The Greek word is *hetaire* which sarcastically means something like "buddy" or "buster" or "pal." His response to the complainers meant something like *take your money, count your lucky stars, and get outta here*.

Furthermore, the vineyard owner employs a fascinating Greek phrase which is here translated as "jealous." Literally, however, the Greek text reads *Should your "eye be evil" because I am kind to others?* If you've heard of the "evil eye," you may be surprised to learn that it has its origin in the Scriptures. The owner is telling the complainers that their whole

outlook on life, their perspective, is sour. Jealousy has focused their attention inward and darkened their thoughts so they care nothing for the fortunes of others.

Remember the context here—the vineyard owner is more than anything else excited that the harvest has come in. He’s overjoyed that the grapes have been preserved and will not perish in the rains. His investment is protected, and he wants to reward those people who came in and did what he asked them to do.

Curiously, some people will take this piece of the Bible and apply it in an economic circumstance, thinking that it is some kind of model for spiritually managing your business. But this parable isn’t at all about economy. It’s not about just labor practices for workers. It’s about grace. It’s a parable of the Kingdom.

We need to understand it as a parable about grace and a story about mercy, not as an example of bookkeeping. There is no bookkeeping in God’s Kingdom. There’s one Book—your name is either in it or it’s not. It’s this Book we talk about mythically in holy language—the Lamb’s Book of Life—from which our names are read for those who belong to Christ Jesus. If bookkeeping were part of God’s Kingdom, then it would have been Moses and the Mosaic Law that would have saved people and we would have no need for Jesus Christ. But it’s not. There’s just grace.

To best understand this parable we must ask ourselves who this parable is for. To whom is Jesus speaking, and why is he telling them this story?

If we read the proceeding verses, we find out this parable is being given to the disciples to illustrate a point they found difficult to understand: their relationship with Jesus was no guarantee of future wealth, influence, and reward. The disciples thought that their “early adoption” of Jesus meant that in the end they would sit at his right hand and rule over the world with him. But Jesus told them: The last will be first, and the first will be last.

This parable, additionally, was likely also misunderstood by the disciples. When they first heard it, they probably thought that the early workers—the breakfast club, as I like to think of them—were the ethnic Hebrews, or maybe the self-righteous Pharisees. The disciples would have identified themselves as the five o’clock people who were graciously receiving God’s unmerited favor. What they failed to understand is that *they* were the breakfast club and that later Christians (even Gentiles!) would become the five o’clock people. The disciples would need to guard themselves against becoming indignant, thankless, and angry.

This, by all accounts, is the problem everyone has when they first hear this parable. Early non-Jewish Christians heard this story and thought the Jewish Christians were the breakfast club, or the Pharisees, or even the disciples. We read this story today and think the same thing. But we're all missing the point. The point is that we all begin as five o'clock people, but over time we are displaced by newer converts and Christian people who enter into our churches. We've got to come to terms with the fact that we are all en route to becoming the breakfast club, but must work hard to maintain our five o'clock heart. We've got to remain grateful like the five o'clock people, even after we've been following Jesus for a while and feel like we deserve something better than what everyone else gets.

Contemporary churches have a particular problem with this. We think that because we've been attending a church for several years (sometimes even several generations) that we should be entitled to special privileges. We think our musical preferences, or our programmatic preferences, should be given more weight than those of the newer folk or the younger generation. But we fail to see that this attitude is representative of the breakfast club, and not the five o'clock people. We fail to see how our preferential demand causes us to miss out on the grace of God and subtly undercuts our sense of gratitude and thanksgiving for all God has done for us.

It gets even worse the longer we've been around church. The longer we're in a place, the longer we serve and follow Jesus, the more we have to recognize that we are becoming the breakfast people, the people who are reminding God that he ought to be just, not merciful.

There is a tension, by the way, between God's justice and God's mercy.

We ought to be happy and grateful to God that we were once five o'clock people, but humble and open and welcoming to the new workers in the vineyard, to the new people in the church, the people who haven't even shown up. We ought to hold our position, even our rewards, loosely and gratefully so we always retain the five o'clock attitude, even when we have the longevity of the breakfast.

One of the things that makes this so important to me is an experience I had when I was in eighth grade. I grew up as a pastor's kid and was pretty good—a little mischievous, maybe, but a good kid nonetheless. One time my friend, Chris, invited me to go to *his* church. His church was cooler, and there were a lot more attractive people there. I thought it might be cool to check it out and maybe meet some godly, Christian, eighth-grade girls.

So I went there and I sat in on their youth group. They were letting kids stand up and say whatever they wanted. I remember this one girl standing up, their pastor's daughter actually, and complaining loudly about all the riff-raff ruining their church and their youth group. She then pointed me out and wondered aloud why anyone in their right mind would let some bad kid like me into church right off the street.

I was floored. I remember thinking *Wait a minute. I'm good. How can you possibly think I'm riff-raff!?*

That experience shaped me, and I always will remember that feeling of being singled out and shamed at church. I never want anyone to feel that way at our church, which is why we work so hard never to single anyone out or pre-judge people based on either their unfamiliarity or their appearance.

It's unethical.

It's humiliating.

It's the breakfast club attitude, and it hinders the five o'clock spirit of gratitude Christ wants us to embody.

Remember, it's very easy for us to understand what this parable is really about. We know the vineyard owner is God. Because of all the other times that these kinds of examples and metaphors are used, we know the vineyard represents God's people—once Israel, but now the “new Israel” as Paul refers to all those who love and follow Jesus. The workers are God's people meant to bring in the harvest and the harvest is souls. The harvest is the time in which all the people who want to love and serve and follow God are brought in. So the parable is, in a sense, about evangelism. It's a parable about welcoming people into God's kingdom and into God's church. It's a parable ultimately about having a posture of openness, humility, welcome, and invitation, of hard work to bring more people to God and welcome them when they get there.

It's a parable meant to remind us not to become too self-satisfied, not to become too secure, and not to demand God's just reward.

Now, if there is a tension between God's justice
in giving just rewards for the people who worked all day long
and God's mercy
in giving a merciful bonus to those who showed up later on

and if we acknowledge that we (who have been around a little longer) are likely to feel a little irritation with His mercy
and we're likely to feel a little demand for what's just,
then what are we *really* trading on here?

What do we really want? Do we really want to ask for God's justice instead of gratefully receiving His mercy? Do we really want God, in His infinite wisdom and justice, to adjudicate our lives based on every deed, every thought, every word? Do we really want Him to scrutinize us that closely so that He really asks what justice is for us based on the way we've lived?

I don't think I want that at all. I don't think I could survive under that scrutiny, not just for biblical reasons like Romans 3 that says, "There's no one righteous, not even one; *no one* who has been able to keep the Law." I know even independent of everything the Scripture says, I don't measure up. I'm not good enough. I'm not holy enough to stand before God and say, "You'd better give me what I deserve" because I would be hooped at that point.

I had a professor in college who is a famous biblical exegete and a famous Bible nerd—the other Bible PhDs call him and he edits their work and tells them where they're wrong. One day while I was enrolled in one of his classes on advanced Greek, I noticed that he had mistakenly given me back a paper with an A- on it. I knew it was a mistake because he mentioned in his comments that the reason it was an A- instead of an A was because of x, y, and z. However, my paper clearly demonstrated x, y, and z so I decided to point his error out to him in hopes of getting a better grade.

I approached him in all humility and requested he re-grade my paper. He complied, right then and there, giving me credit for x, y, and z but also removed marks for all the other mistakes he had previously overlooked. In the end, I was given back my paper and I received a C instead of an A-. I did get points for the things he missed, but he also decided to be less lenient with me and docked marks for every conceivable infraction.

That was justice.

I didn't realize at all what I was asking for. I went there thinking I was just about perfect, but as soon as I opened up myself and he began to scrutinize my work, I began to realize there were a lot of little things he overlooked that he wasn't overlooking anymore. That's what it's like when we start thinking we're pretty good. That's what happens when we start comparing our best to everyone else's worst. That's what happens when we begin

to demand God's just recompense for our relative sinlessness instead of freely receiving God's grace.

As soon as we start trading on justice, we have to be careful, terrified even. If that's where we get our standing before God, if that's how we understand our relationship with God, then we have to be prepared for Him to go through our life with a fine toothed comb and start pointing out not that we're an A-, but that we're a C or worse. That's going to result in some hurt and sense of betrayal.

That's why these guys in the parable were protesting, because they forgot that earlier in the day they had no job and they earned no money. Now, through their employer, they got work and they got cash and they should be grateful for that. We should be grateful for what we have in Christ. Everything we have, we have because of his mercy. We get to pray, because he's merciful and doesn't strike us dead when we come with our goofy little prayers and talk about how good we are or how lucky we are. We should be so glad that he loves us to the point of death and suffering on the cross. We should be glad that God even still talks to us.

Our posture ought to be one of humility. Our posture as a result of that humility to others ought to be one of welcome and invitation.

I want to end on a positive note, because this is my favorite thing in this passage. In verse 8 when all the harvest has come in, when all the work is done, when everything that could be saved was saved, the employer gets everybody together to pay them. At the end, when everything he wanted to happen happened, when nothing was destroyed, when everything was preserved, when the best possible outcome was achieved—in that moment he calls everybody together and gets ready to pay them.

If you've ever worked a trade or if you've ever had a day job or you've ever been in this situation, you know what happens right after this. If you're a construction worker and you work on a jobsite and you get paid at the end of the day with all of the other guys in cash, where is the first stop everybody makes before they even go home? The bar, of course! They head to the pub, because the end of the day has come and it's Miller time.

The clear connotation here is: *Look! The work is done. Take your money and have fun. Enjoy what you've got.* That's what Jesus wants to say to the disciples—*Don't stress out about who gets what. Enjoy what you have. It's good! You can either celebrate and toss one back with the boys, or you can keep grumbling and be sour and go home fuming and angry about what everybody else got.*

 SEPTUAGESIMA

Hey, church, come on. It's time for us to celebrate. It's seventy days until Easter, the most significant event in Christian history. It's the time when we recognize that we don't deserve anything good. It's the time we recognize our posture of openness and humility before God and thank him for his many blessings.

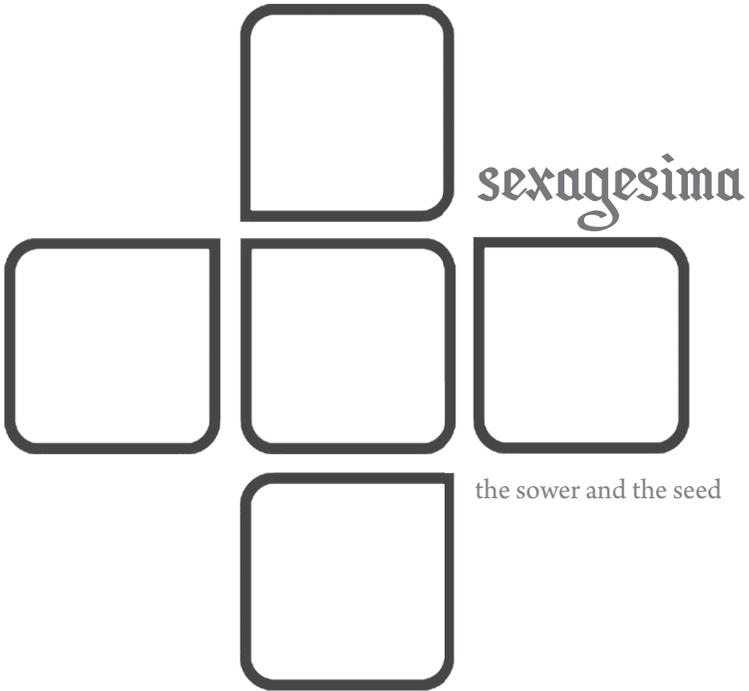
ADVENT
Christmas Tide

COMMON TIME
Epiphany
Transfiguration
Septuagesima
Sexagesima
Quinquagesima

LENT
Ash Wednesday

EASTER
Palm Sunday
Holy Week
Easter Tide
Ascension
Pentecost
Trinity

KINGDOM TIDE



Sexagesima

Sexagesima comes from the Latin word for sixtieth, signifying the sixty remaining days (excluding Sundays and holidays) prior to Easter. In the Christian liturgical tradition, it is common to study the parable of the Sower contained in Luke 8.1-18 to commemorate this holy day.

After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.

While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable: *A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up. Some fell on rocky ground, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown.*

When he said this, he called out: *Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.*

His disciples asked him what this parable meant. He said, *The knowledge of the secrets of the Kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that,*

*‘though seeing, they may not see;
though hearing, they may not understand.’*

This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God. Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. Those on the rocky ground are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away. The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life’s worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.

No one lights a lamp and hides it in a clay jar or puts it under a bed. Instead, they put it on a stand, so that those who come in can see the light. For there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open. Therefore consider carefully how you listen. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they think they have will be taken from them.

Luke 8.1-18

I used to write songs and play in a bunch of bands. That can be a very vulnerable experience. To be successful you need to really put yourself out there and be prepared to play and sing the most intimate and personal bits of your life in front of strangers and have them respond honestly. It’s fascinating, but true, that the way people will receive your music largely depends on their context.

For example, I once wrote a worship song that was personally very meaningful. I played it for a friend of mine in the church basement late one night, and he really loved it. But the following day when I played it again for him and one other person, it didn’t go over nearly as well. The other person was distracted, sending an email on his laptop while only half-listening—and my friend began to feel embarrassed that he had liked the song, and now this other person obviously didn’t care. So my friend did what most of us would have done in that moment; he interrupted the song, changed the topic, and said the reason he probably liked it in the first place was because it was late and he was tired.

My point is that the context for the performance really matters. That song, which was soft and tender, would have been booed and called off-stage had it been done during half-time at a football game, but lauded and loved around a campfire. Why? Because it's all about the audience and their context.

Or, as Jesus says here, it's about the soil.

The parable of the Sower is the parable of parables—the most famous of all, the prototype upon which all others are based. Parables were much more common in the ancient world than they are today, and serve as something like Aesop's fables in Judeo-Christian thought. They were famous linguistic tools of the First Testament prophets, and even endured after the closing of the canon in certain rabbinical schools.

Take this Jewish parable, for example, about the different kinds of disciples:

One is like a sponge, one is like a funnel, one is like a strainer, and the last like a sieve. Which is best? The sponge soaks up everything. The funnel lets it in one end and out the other. The strainer lets the fine wine pass through it, but remains stuck with the lees. The sieve lets out the bran but retains the fine flour. The worst kind of disciple, then, is the funnel because information flows in one ear and out the other. The best is the sieve, which retains only the most worthy information.

This parable does what all parables are meant to do: help people better understand spiritual truths. If that seems confusing at first, don't worry. Modern-day preachers do this all the time. I frequently tell stories about my children or write little fictional episodes to illustrate biblical theology because those stories are far more accessible to most people than big words and scary phrases like propitiation, transubstantiation, and penal substitutionary atonement. Not everyone can understand Jesus' teaching on the already-not-yet nature of his Kingdom and its catholicity (see, even those words are confusing), but everyone can understand the basic meaning of the parable of the Sower. Both accurately tell it like it is, but the former way is intimidating while the latter is pretty basic and achieves much the same thing.

The Sower is a parable about people responding to Christ's Kingdom. Jesus often spoke about the fact that the kingdom was everywhere and for all people, and here describes four different types of people who hear his message and their responses to him.



Most of his audience were expecting their Messiah to do something huge like replace Herod, or topple the Romans, or reform the Temple. But through this parable, Jesus was trying to open their eyes to the fact that his Kingdom wasn't made out of stones and swords and animal sacrifices. His Kingdom concerns thoughts, deeds, motivations, and behaviors. His Kingdom was a Kingdom of the Word.

Now, had Jesus' audience known the parable was about 'the Word' they would have thought this story was about Torah (the Jewish law). Parables of this sort, after all, were usually concerned with Torah observance, and Jesus' parable could easily have fit within this framework. Perhaps his audience would even have had famous Scriptures like Isaiah 55.11 lurking in the backs of their minds: *My word shall not return empty, but it shall accomplish my purpose.*

But the Word in the Sower is not Torah, but Christ himself—God made flesh. This, incidentally, was what really infuriated the Scribes and Pharisees—not that Jesus rejected their transactional understanding of spirituality, but that he claimed to be the true Word in the place of Torah and Temple.

The Sower, then, is not Jesus (as is often assumed) but God the Father. Jesus is the seed sown into the soil. In terms of this parable, the seed has been sown everywhere—the kingdom is in every place, and available to every person. But the critical issue remains how each person will respond to it.

Jesus' teachings were making the kingdom a reality, insofar as what he said caused people to change what they believed and how they lived. His kingdom was at work then—right away!—and continues to work now as more people respond with belief and begin to live the way God desires.

This parable suggests that the Word, even if you see it, doesn't look like much (seeds are disproportionately small compared with what they eventually produce). It is not a thunderclap or an explosion, but a seed—something small that, once planted, disappears because it's covered by the soil and, so far as its identity is concerned, dies and disappears, transforming into something else entirely.

Christ the Word comes to his own people and they reject him. He is not welcomed or lauded by the powers-that-be, but instead he is received by the humble and the lowly, the poor and the abject. To top it all off, he is betrayed, murdered, and buried. His entire earthly life was like that of a seed, but like a seed, once he was placed within the ground, he became something much more.

Forgive me if it feels like I'm getting ahead of myself here, but we needed to understand the players and the program before we could accurately understand the play. Let us turn our attention now to the actual details of the parable. First, notice that the seed falls into four kinds of ground.

The common ground in Palestine was split into long narrow strips. Between the strips there were paths for walking and working. When the seed fell on these paths (which were beaten as hard as the road), they had no chance of getting into the ground. So birds came down and ate them.

The rocky ground refers to ground that looks good but is really only a thin layer of soil over a shelf of limestone. In such ground there was no water or nourishment, and the seed would quickly die.

The ground full of thorns probably looked clean on the surface because it had been turned over, but the weeds and thistles were still alive underneath and began to grow along with the seed, choking it.

The good ground was that ground which was deep and clean and well-prepared.

The climax of the story is the unusually high harvest. Though not an impossible yield, it would have been a once-in-a-lifetime dream come true for the farmers listening to Christ to have received 100 times their harvest.

After Jesus tells everyone the parable, his disciples pull him aside and ask him for clarification. At first, it seems like Jesus is reluctant to give it, saying:

The knowledge of the secrets of the Kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that,

*'though seeing, they may not see;
though hearing, they may not understand.'*

In order for us to properly understand his meaning, however, we may need a little lesson on the background of the ancient world. "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom" is a construct that refers to ancient mystery religions. These "mysteries" weren't things unknown but things that God (or the gods, in the pagan scenario) had already revealed to His people. To say *the mystery of the Kingdom of God has been given to you* didn't mean that you'd been given a puzzle you now had to solve, but to remind you that Christ has



already shown you the answer. *Though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand* was Jesus' way of expressing his frustration with the obtuseness all around him. He was quoting from Isaiah, who himself was furious with his people's refusal to understand the severity of their sins against God. Jesus was identifying with Isaiah and the struggle they had in common.

Jesus isn't using the parable as a way to make plain truth confusing—he's using the parable to make an unpleasant truth (*You need to be receptive to the Word and stop hardening, flagging, and ignoring me*) accessible to everyone. His quotation of Isaiah, then, wasn't to justify being confusing, but to express frustration that no matter how simply he said what needed to be said, the people just didn't seem ready to listen.

Then Jesus indulges his friends with an explanation. The parable emphasizes both receptivity and bearing fruit. Farmers sow seed in order for them to bear fruit. Without that result, the plants are good for nothing. The only variable determining failure or success is the soil onto which the seed falls.

The hard path is like a shut mind, refusing to consider Christ.

The shallow ground is like the person who never thinks things through, and fails to realize the consequence of not doing so until it is too late.

The thorns represent those things in life that force God out because our lives get too busy and too crowded.

The good ground represents a heart belonging to the person who listens attentively, thinks things over, and translates those thoughts into transformational behaviors.

Notice that two of the three "failed" sowings describe people who respond positively to the message. They even hear the message with joy, but their hearing is still superficial. Receiving the kingdom with joy is not enough—there must be fruit; there must be transformation that changes hearts and aligns behavior.

The Hebrew word for "hearing" (*sama*) is most often translated into English as "obey." Real hearing is hearing that leads to obedience. The disciples can understand the mystery because of their decision to obey. But, for everyone else, it's hard to understand because it just seems like Jesus was making up folk tales. To really understand God's Kingdom, you've got to live in it for a while. You've got to experience it. It has to live in you as well.

Galatians 5.16-26, concerning the fruits of the Spirit, reinforces the parable of the Sower. In his letter to the church of Galatia, Paul distinguishes between the works of the flesh and the fruits of the Spirit. The works of the flesh are a list of disastrous character traits that Paul says result from trying to achieve God's abundant life without God. These works aren't merely obvious sins like greed and lust (the phrase "according to the flesh" doesn't refer to our bodies so much as it refers to our self-centered efforts), but are instead mental, physical, emotional, and even (aberrantly) spiritual sins that try to circumvent the Spirit and get what he promises without his involvement.

The fruits of the Spirit, however, result not from our efforts but from our cooperation with God. They grow simply by being unimpeded by our ambition and our impatience. This is why they are described as fruits—fruit simply grows in the right conditions, without much interference—as opposed to works, which obviously indicate the striving and the earnest efforts of the self-satisfied person.

Having now explained the parable, Jesus concludes his teaching with a confusing set of seemingly random remarks. Yet, upon further reflection, we begin to see that his words are designed again to provoke a response from those who *though they have eyes, do not see*.

The first remark (*No one lights a lamp and hides it under a bed*) sounds roughly like: *What am I supposed to do? Hide the truth because people don't like it?* While the second (*There is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed*) has to have been offensive to those who believed God had already disclosed everything to them. The final remark (*Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they think they have will be taken from them*) sounds to me like Jesus is saying: *If you grasp the fact that the kingdom works mysteriously, then you will have more and more understanding. But if you don't hold onto that, then everything that happens will make it look as if you're understanding is being deliberately subverted.*

I think this parable was also a warning against despair for the disciples. Think of the situation. Jesus had been banished from the synagogues. The Scribes and the Pharisees were up against him. Inevitably, the disciples would be disheartened. When Jesus tells them this story, it's like he is reassuring them that despite these setbacks the harvest is assured. Every farmer knows not every seed will grow, yet he still plants the seeds.

Jesus' parable was both a warning and an invitation to his audience. The warning concerned receptivity and fruitfulness, or, as he proclaimed it elsewhere, the call to repent



and believe: Believe in the Word, and change the way you live in accordance with your beliefs.

The invitation concerned all who heard—the message of the gospel was for everyone, which I think is one of the reasons the first few verses prior to the parable are so important.

In Luke 8.1-3, we read about a collection of women that accompany Jesus and his disciples. Luke lists them, interestingly, as patrons and benefactors of the ministry. These *married* women followed Christ around and covered his expenses, and we should never neglect the fact that this would have been seriously scandalous behavior. Today people might make jokes about these women being sugar mammas or cougars, inferring somehow that they were keeping Jesus and his friends like favored pets to show off to their society friends. But notice that Jesus simply accepted their good will and charity, knowing that they too are welcomed into the kingdom. The kingdom message is for the poor, but it is also for *The Real Housewives of Orange County*. It is for everybody:

Come one, come all;
repent and believe.

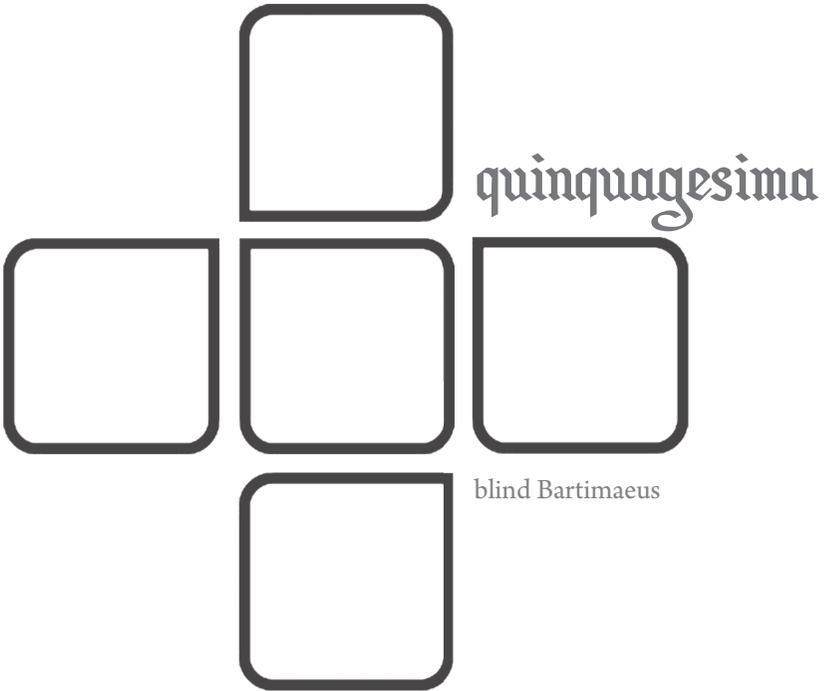
ADVENT
Christmas Tide

COMMON TIME
Epiphany
Transfiguration
Septuagesima
Sexagesima
Quinquagesima

LENT
Ash Wednesday

EASTER
Palm Sunday
Holy Week
Easter Tide
Ascension
Pentecost
Trinity

KINGDOM TIDE



Quinquagesima

Quinquagesima comes from the Latin word for “fiftieth” and signifies the fifty remaining days (excluding Sundays and holidays) prior to Easter. In the Christian liturgical tradition, it is common to study the Healing of Blind Bartimaeus contained in Mark 10.46-52 to commemorate this holy day.

Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (which means “son of Timaeus”), was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, *Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*

Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, *Son of David, have mercy on me!*

Jesus stopped and said, *Call him.*

So they called to the blind man, *Cheer up! On your feet! He’s calling you.* Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus.

What do you want me to do for you? Jesus asked him.

The blind man said, *Rabbi, I want to see.*

Go, said Jesus, *your faith has healed you*. Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.

Mark 10.46-52

In the 2004 film *Million Dollar Baby*, Hillary Swank plays promising female boxer Maggie Fitzgerald. The story begins with Maggie pursuing famed trainer Frankie Dunn (played by Clint Eastwood), who reluctantly accepts her as a student with surprisingly victorious results. As Maggie continues to win and rack up substantial earnings and sponsorships, she decides to use her money to benefit her family, led by matriarch Mardell Fitzgerald. Mardell, though, wants no charity. Despite living in a trailer park for her entire life and constantly complaining of never having enough money, Mardell refuses Maggie's money (even refusing the home Maggie purchased for her outright) because it would interfere with her weekly unemployment check. Maggie wanted to help her mother rise above her poverty, but Mardell chose to remain a victim instead.

Many people put moral pressure on their friends and families to feel sorry for them. Many people would rather persist in their victimization (perhaps especially in their self-victimization) than accept a genuine offer of help and the subsequent responsibility that comes with being a full human being.

Jesus' question to Bartimaeus addresses that possibility: *What do you want me to do for you?*

That was a powerful question—not just because it revealed that Bartimaeus truly wanted to be healed, but because his response stood in opposition to the crowds of people who constantly surrounded Christ, making demands of his energy, his attention, and his time. Even the disciples were not exempt from trying to get a little something extra out of Christ. Whereas Bartimaeus' response to this question was that he wanted to see, the disciples told Christ they wanted to be elevated to positions of power, prestige, and prominence in his new Kingdom (see Mark 10.32-45).

Bartimaeus' response was powerful because of the context in which he met Christ. Jesus was making his way to Jerusalem for that final showdown between himself and his political, religious, spiritual opponents and had stopped near Herod's Winter Palace in Jericho. Since Jericho was only 15 miles outside of Jerusalem, thousands of people were stuffed inside the city on their way to celebrate Passover. Whenever a distinguished rabbi passed through the town they were usually surrounded by throngs of people—both the traveling disciples who typically accompanied them on their journeys and by the mobs within the

city who were eagerly pressing up against the famed teachers in order to overhear their discourse. Jericho, in particular, was a bedroom community to almost 20,000 temple priests and servants, and these religious workers often proved to be persistent participants in these ad hoc debates.

Imagine then that as Christ comes into Jericho, he does so in the midst of a seething populace eager to see the audacious young Galilaeen who had pitted himself against the assembled might of orthodoxy. Imagine the vicious minds likely looking to start a theological fist fight. Imagine the tension, the animosity, the emotion, the pitch, and the furor of the crowd.

Having swam his way through the sea of angry and excited congregants, Jesus encountered blind Bartimaeus on his way out of the city. Perhaps because the simple needs of the beggar proved to be a reprieve from the complex demands of the crowd, or perhaps because Bartimaeus was being shouted down by the crowds, or perhaps because Bartimaeus came to Christ in need and with enthusiasm, Christ was moved to compassion by this wounded man.

Notice that the author of this gospel story, Mark, makes a clever wordplay. He notes that Christ met Bartimaeus along the roadside. In Greek, this literally translates to say Christ met him *along the way*. “The Way” was an early Christian colloquialism referring to people who followed Jesus. Followers of The Way were Christ-followers, and Bartimaeus’ encounter with Jesus was also the beginning of his journey along The Way. Furthermore, since Christ was *en route* to Jerusalem for his final showdown against the dominant powers in this world, Mark also means to show that The Way of Jesus is the way of the cross—the way of rejection by his Jewish contemporaries, the way of betrayal by his own disciples, and the way of suffering and death at the hands of the Jewish and Roman authorities. Along the journey described in Mark 8, Jesus has been trying to help his disciples understand the true nature of The Way, just as he’s been trying to help them understand his true nature. At this point in the story, they still haven’t figured it out, but Mark means for us to understand that Bartimaeus viscerally came to know who Christ was and what he came to do.

Always in the Second Testament, physical ailments mirror spiritual ailments. Physical blindness is always representative of spiritual blindness, and even though the one doesn’t always cause the other, healing the one always heals the other. When Christ heals Bartimaeus’ sight, he didn’t just give him the ability to see with his eyes. He was also giving

him the ability to accurately understand who Christ really was and who Bartimaeus really was in relationship to him. With his sight restored, Bartimaeus also received spiritual understanding about the nature and power of the Kingdom of God.

For this blind beggar, any price—even self-sacrifice and martyrdom—was worth paying in service to the Messiah who gave him back his sight. Christ helped him live, and Bartimaeus knew he would live in service to Christ.

Bartimaeus may have been a beggar at the beginning of the story, but he ended up a follower of The Way. He refused to slink back into the old comforts of disability and victimization. He asked Christ for healing and received it, and then translated his gratitude into loyalty—a perfect picture of the Christian life.

Two things stand out to me about the title Bartimaeus ascribes to Jesus (“Son of David”). First, that particular messianic title had a military connotation. The Son of David was thought to be a great general who would forcefully oust Israel’s enemies. This moniker was a messianic archetype that contrasted with “One like Moses” (a messianic prophet who would restore Israel by speaking God’s truth to His people) or “Priest like Aaron” (or Levi, or Melchizadek, who would beseech God on behalf of the people for national restoration).

The second thing that stands out to me is that the real son of David was Solomon, whom many in ancient mystical religions thought to be a magician and healer *par excellence*. Bartimaeus, then, either was referring to Christ as a general or a wizard. In either case, before his healing he had been wrong about who Jesus was and what he came to do.

This is spectacularly important because it reminds us that you can be wrong about Christ and yet he will still love you, meet you, heal you, and save you. Jesus healed people who had unformed and half-cracked ideas about who he was, but through his healing and saving work he revealed himself to them more fully.

You can have an inadequate understanding of Christ and still be saved. The key issue is not understanding, but allegiance. Christ demands our faith. Bartimaeus was healed because he came to Christ for healing, not because he correctly understood who Christ was and could articulate it in a compelling thesis statement. God wants us to think and reflect carefully, but we should never make the mistake of thinking that God requires us to become theologians before we are followers.

Simply put, it is better for us to come to Christ and say *Lord, I'm yours* rather than proudly proclaiming *Lord, I'm right*.

There are three things we can learn from Bartimaeus about how to bring our requests to Christ. First, Bartimaeus' persistence paid off. Despite drawing attention to himself, nothing deterred Bartimaeus from getting Jesus' attention and holding it. He didn't just want to see Jesus, he wanted Jesus to see him and to help him. Bartimaeus wasn't motivated by sentiment, but by faith that Christ could heal him and that he would if only they could come together.

Second, Bartimaeus' response to Christ was instantaneous and enthusiastic. He cast off his cloak and ran to Christ when he heard he was getting his chance to speak with the Messiah. Most of us don't respond like that most of the time. When God calls us, we dither and dicker, prioritizing other concerns until we finally get around to our spirituality. But Bartimaeus shows us the powerful and provocative truth that we ought to get on God's timeline rather than expecting Him to work on ours.

Finally, Bartimaeus knew exactly what he wanted. He understood who he was and the true nature of his shortcomings, and when the time came to receive help he made sure he got the help he needed. He knew that in order for his life to change he had to get help with his blindness, and so that was his petition. In order for our lives to truly be transformed by Christ we've got to get help with our blindness, and until we recognize our own blindness, we're likely to continue prioritizing things that won't really affect change.

The story of Blind Bartimaeus is a story about you and me. It's meant to remind us of our powerful need for healing and being saved and of the requirement to be loyal to our Healer and our Savior. It's meant to remind us of our need for Christ Jesus and our need to follow in his way - The Way that leads to suffering and the cross. This is the true road to redemption.





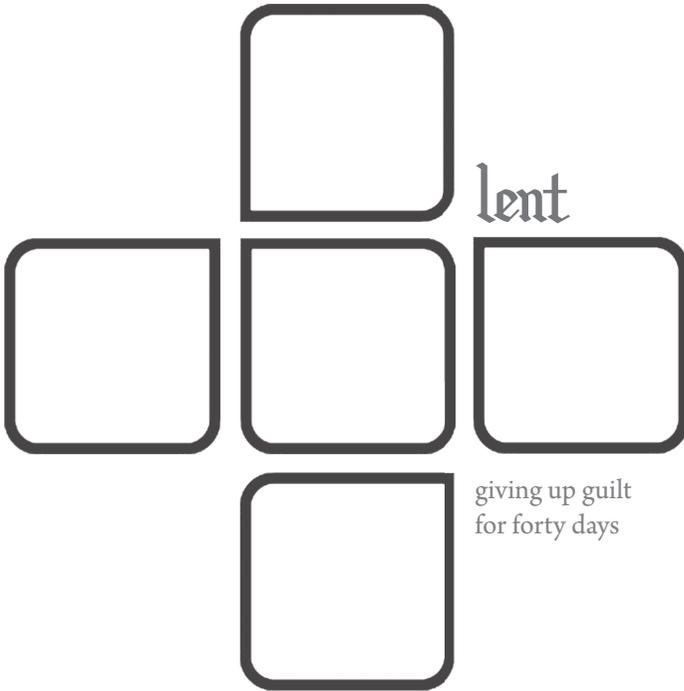
ADVENT
Christmas Tide

COMMON TIME
Epiphany
Transfiguration
Septuagesima
Sexagesima
Quinquagesima

LENT
Ash Wednesday

EASTER
Palm Sunday
Holy Week
Easter Tide
Ascension
Pentecost
Trinity

KINGDOM TIME





Introduction

My first exposure to Lent was with the 2002 film *40 Days and 40 Nights*, during which the handsome brother of a priest decides to go without sex until Palm Sunday. If this is your first introduction to Lent, allow me to clue you in a little more gracefully.

Lent is the time leading up to Easter. In the Christian liturgical calendar it is a period of forty days (beginning on Ash Wednesday) devoted to spiritual preparation. During Lent we ready ourselves to receive Christ's sacrifice on the cross with fresh meaning and significance.

I learned about Lent through the movies. Prior to that film I'm sure I'd never even heard the word before; or if I had, I certainly hadn't registered it as having anything to do with me, with Christ, or with spirituality. And while I imagine every Catholic priest is rolling his eyes over the idiocy of Protestant clergymen, I think it's telling that even a well-educated pastor could go for so long and not know anything about Lent.

It's because no one cares.

Those who do know about Lent often describe it like receiving free kicks in the face. Now that I am paying attention, I notice that people mention Lent with dread and guilt. Something plays across their face like betrayal, as if they're wondering: *when did I sign up for this and how soon will it be over?*

To push this point a little further, I read almost fifty books in preparation for Lent this year and found almost nothing of value in any of them. Because Lent is a season of self-denial in service to Christian maturity, I imagined that all the writing would focus on the maturation process, on new wonders of God's grace, and fresh revelations of God's mercy. In my naïveté, I thought that Lenten reading would scour the soul and prepare the reader for self-denial in exchange for spiritual maturity.

Nope.

In fact, the majority of everything I read seemed titillated with the idea that self-denial should produce no spiritual movement at all. These words of pithy wisdom cited monks and saints galore who cautioned us not to do something just for the sake of growing closer to God but to do it so we are further from ourselves.

I apologize for beginning our teaching on Lent with a rant. Maybe I'm just getting it out of my system, but maybe not. I really think the purpose of Christian spirituality is transformation, and I really want to be personally challenged, changed, and transformed this Lenten season.

So that's what this book is about: prayer, repentance, self-denial, and watchfulness *in service to* transformation. It's about a strong desire to be changed over the forty-day period between Ash Wednesday and Palm Sunday, the time our spiritual predecessors referred to as the holy spring, the time of bright sadness. It is a time when we focus all our energies--indeed, we muster them more than we could perpetuate throughout the year--on Christ's sacrifice and our acceptance of his grace. We do this in preparation for what comes right after Lent: Easter, when he died, was buried, and rose again, changing everything.

Everything must change, because it already has.

This book contains forty daily readings and devotionals to help you process the gravity of Christ's sacrifice and of your sin. But it is more than that. It's not just a book about feeling crummy. It's a book of hope. It's about helping you receive and be transformed by the remarkable power of Christ's gift and grace. It's about teaching you to carry a spotless heart through the borders of a stained past. It's about helping you stand up, freely, and shrug off the guilt for which you have already been forgiven. It's about experiencing joy and light and laughter, because there's no longer any point living in the dark.



I'm writing this book differently than most of the others I've done. I'm envisioning myself sitting in my office with you sitting on my couch. We're both drinking coffee (or water, if you're one of those) and we've got lots of time. You're asking me all kinds of questions and I'm trying to answer those questions in ways that will actually help you in real life. I'm not thinking too much about the top-shelf theology that I love to immerse myself in, teasing out abstractions like I'm crocheting catechesis, nor am I overly concerned with clever metaphors and pop cultural antecedents to the biblical narrative. I'm just sitting here, with you, trying to help you uncover life with Christ as it happens.

So with that in mind, grab your pen and your notebook and let's reason together about the meaning and the significance of these forty days prior to Palm Sunday and to Christ's sacrificial death on the cross. We'll start with the four hallmarks of the Lenten season--repentance, prayer, self-denial, watchfulness--and then move into some further biblical and personal exploration.



Day 40: Ash Wednesday

May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule—to the Israel of God.

From now on, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.

Galatians 6.14-17

Ash Wednesday is the beginning of Lent, observed by placing an ash cross on your forehead in memory and anticipation of Christ's sacrifice.

This will be the first year I will receive the ashes on Ash Wednesday. To be honest, I've really no desire to walk about looking like a fool. I do not mind foolishness, but I do mind spiritual attention. I don't want people to pay attention to me, especially not to any outward display of religious fervor. Rubbing ashes on my forehead in the shape of the cross seems about the least David McDonald-ish thing I could possibly imagine.

Maybe that humiliation is good for me. Plenty of folks think I'm a little too proud, I'm sure, and it's probably a good idea for people in positions of spiritual authority to keep from looking too self-assured. But maybe that humiliation is just wasted on one such as myself. Can the person who feels foolish ever be truly humiliated?

Anyway, despite living in a fairly conservative religious town, full of Catholics and mainline Protestants galore, I don't see many people roaming around with the ash cross on their heads. My assistant did it last year, and my friend Lori either does it all the time and lies about it or only did it last year and lied about it from the other direction. I've only ever seen one person, a college student, under the age of forty bear the ashes, and I've never seen anyone who looks like me.

Again, those aren't really reasons to do it or not (I'll get to those in a moment), but they are my observations about Ash Wednesday, and I share them so you can be reminded of my liturgical infancy. I really am learning all this as I go; I'm a true beginner.

As I said, there is zero appeal for me to smear my face with ashes (I haven't even begun to consider the affect to my complexion, or the lack of biblical precedent, or the likelihood that I'll forget it's there and smear it all over my forehead into some kind of Rorschach blot), but the game-changer for me was learning where the actual ashes come from.

They are made from the burned branches of the previous year's Palm Sunday.

The triumphs of the past are consumed by the grief of the present.

That's so beautiful. My old triumphs have certainly turned to ash, and so I can relate to the palms. My athletic triumphs vanished faster than my physical fitness, and all I have now are some old awards and some fond memories of road trips and locker room jibes. My academic triumphs never really counted for much even as I received them. My social, pre-marital romantic, and musical triumphs, too, are nothing.

But I can take those old triumphs and give them up, give them to Christ--smear them, as it were, all over my face and my identity--and recognize that my true value is found in him, not in them. It's hard to realize that all we have worked for turns to ash in the end, but it's liberating too. It frees us from the misplaced and destructive notion that we are defined by our achievements and lauded because of our accomplishments.

We are not.

Strangers may appreciate these things, but our wives, children, friends and coworkers care more about who we are than what we've done. They care more about people who choose to be re-formed by Christ than by our old trophies and our aging stories.



That's why I'm bearing the ashes this year. Because I'm no longer an athlete. Because I don't play the drums or the guitar for crowds anymore. Because my camera is no longer my primary means of expressing my identity. I'm bearing the ashes because I've found myself in the cross. I'll smear it, I'm sure, just like I smear the cross every time I mess up or live inconsistently the witness of Jesus, but I'll be marked by the cross just the same, and Christ will know I'm wearing it. I'll likely be pock-marked as a result, but there is no promise about the prettiness of the Christian life, only the promise of solidarity with the One who suffered. I still won't be able to find a biblical precedent for it, but I tend to think that anything I do in service to Christ counts, whether or not I invent it myself, copy someone else, or can prove it with a text.

I'll bear the ashes because my old life is over, and I'm living something new now. I'll bear the ashes to remind me that everything in this life is transitory, destined to die.

But death is not the end for me.

Day 39: Repentance

God is light; in Him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

1 John 1.5-9

I was startled when I first learned that repentance means something more like “changing teams” than “groveling.” It’s not that anyone I knew had ever officially defined it for me, just that the way everyone spoke of repentance made it sound both necessary and necessarily painful--a metaphysical root canal, if you like. But true *metanoia*--the Greek word from which we get our understanding of repentance--is about allegiance. It’s about giving ourselves wholly to God. Originally it was meant to describe what happens when one army was defeated by another one. The victors gave the vanquished the opportunity to repent and come over to the winning side, or be slaughtered. There were lots of battlefield conversions then. Repentance was mercy, a way for the powerful to extend new power and hope to the weak. It was the offering of new life on the winning side.

Christian repentance, too, is the merciful extension of grace. God has defeated our sin, defeated the worst parts of our character: the parts that embarrass us, shame us, or force



us to cower in the company of others. To experience His power, we must simply repent. We must simply accept the hand of divine friendship.

We need to accept that divine hand often. This is one of the most commonly misunderstood features of repentance: it's not a one-time deal, but an oft-repeated exercise. True, we only need to "change teams" once to officially belong to God instead of belonging to ourselves, but repentance has other virtues as well. We continue to sin, so why not continue to repent? When we repent of our sins, we make a choice to once again come clean with God and accept His friendship. We remind ourselves that we have no real strength of our own, that everything we have we owe to Him, and that we perpetually need His mercy.

Athletes understand this intuitively. You may play for a great coach on a great team, but if you don't perform the way the coach wants you to, you had better own up to that on your own rather than waiting for the coach to chew you out at halftime.

Children understand this intuitively. You may experience all the benefits of growing up in a loving household, but if you don't behave the way your parents desire, you had better change, and change quickly.

Spouses understand this intuitively. You may have a fantastic marriage, but if you persist in selfish behaviors that you are unwilling to acknowledge or change on your own, eventually your husband or wife will be forced to confront you and the situation will become wrought with either tension or emotional distance, neither of which you want as part of your life at home.

I once heard a great man, Dave Currie (one of my early ministry heroes), talk about his evening ritual. Each night as he lay in bed, Dave would replay the day's events in his mind and ask God if there was anything for which he needed to repent. He claimed that just about every day there was something for which he needed fresh forgiveness, some sloppiness or selfishness of which to repent. Notice that this was not necessarily a prayer to wash away his sin, but a prayer meant to reorient him more faithfully back to God.

I loved Dave's example and began immediately to put it into practice that evening. Trouble was, as I quickly found out, by bedtime on most days, I couldn't remember what my sins had been. To make matters slightly more complicated, every time I sinned, I was more concerned about remembering that I sinned than I was about taking that sin seriously in the moment, doing what I could to repent of it then and there and to receive spiritual guidance to move on. So I adapted Dave's method, and began to find time alone throughout the day to examine myself and deal with my sins.

Sadly, there's lots of raw material to work with. If you take the teaching in the Bible seriously about what sin is--that it's not just misdeeds but also ill thoughts, harsh words, and wayward intentions--then you realize that we sin all the time. It's almost impossible not to be sinning in some way at any given time.

Many of us tend to overlook so many sins, trying to convince ourselves that the wrong things we think and say and do aren't really so much "sinful" as they are un-preferential. But God's holiness is ruthless. Sin cannot be pleaded down to a misdemeanor. If that sounds harsh, it is, but that hard truth really serves a sweeter, better one: we're forgiven for it all. If our sinfulness is absolute, then the good news of the Gospel of God is that His grace is absolutely, overwhelmingly sufficient to remove every inkblot from our sin-stained souls.

This is why a true realization of God's grace is so stunning: all of us are so far off His mark for perfection that we truly have no hope whatsoever of being saved. Except by His grace, His mercy, and His forgiveness. Since every one of our mean thoughts is enough to remove us from His original plan of intended perfection for humanity, and since we have those kinds of thoughts a hundred thousand times a year, we know that He is serious about grace.

I repent twenty or thirty times a day, sometimes more. I don't even count, really, because counting misses the point. The point is not that I sin; the point is that I repent. When we sin, we must repent. Not just to receive forgiveness, but to be continually realigned with God in Heaven who reaches down beyond the boundary of power, lifts us up in weakness, and loans us His strength.

Lent is the season in which we are extra-mindful of our need for ongoing repentance. It's the training ground for which we prepare for the rest of the year, for a lifestyle of ongoing allegiance and re-orientation to the purposes of God. But remember that this repentance is not a groveling, but a reception of mercy and strength from the God who gives life to those who have been defeated.



Day 38: Prayer

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

Matthew 7.7-8

I can never figure out why people get so excited about rules for prayer. There are prayer forms and prayer formulas, prayer rubrics and prayer mnemonics, structures for prayer and prayers to memorize while observing certain postures and facing a certain way. It's all a bit Dr. Seuss-y for my tastes. Not that there isn't any value in learning more about various traditions, or even in exegeting Scriptures like the Lord's Prayer to better learn how God wants us to communicate with Him ("These are the words people have successfully said to God without getting burned up," Phyllis Tickle says), but sometimes I think we overcomplicate things.

In Dylan Thomas' poem *Fern Hill*--one of my favorites, containing one of the most complex structures in a modern poem--there is a moment where he completely breaks his own structure and bends his own rules. I love it. It's like he was writing, up in some lofty place, trying to make the number of syllables fit his construction and trying to say what he meant in the form he meant to use. Then he just said: *Screw it. I'd rather write a beautiful poem, than a mediocre poem beautifully.*

I feel like that about prayer. It's so hard to pray "right," even if you've spent most of your adult life teaching others how to do it.

When Carmel and I were dating, I used to write her poetry. (Please don't tell anyone, I'm a little embarrassed by that [and some other things] now.) I used to try so hard to make these poems clever, but I don't think, even with her background in English literature, that she ever appreciated the poems themselves. She just fell in love with the poet.

When Peter miraculously walked out onto the water and then began to sink because his faith was weak, he prayed, *Lord, help!* What an honest prayer. No pretense. No flowery language. Just *help!* When I need help from God--courage, strength, hope, perseverance, grace, patience, or a million other things for which my resources are shallow and His are great--sometimes all I can pray is Peter's prayer. And that's ok. It's ok for you to call God and ask for help.

Sometimes even that feels impossible, though. Like when we know that the reason we need help is because of a mess we've created. Or when we know that the help we want is not likely the help He'll give (*Lord, help no one find out what I've done* comes to mind here...). Or when we're still sinning, still living in rebellion and refusing to find a place of repentance before God and don't mean to do so any time soon, but we need His help anyway.

In those moments I like to imagine God as my earthly father, Gordon. I know I have to ask him for gas money, but I also know I've been a jerk. I ask him for the money, and I see him frown--puzzling in his mind as to the best way forward, the way of grace and mercy but also the way of maturity and development. While he's frowning, and before he can answer, I always cave in. I tell him I'm sorry and that I've been a jerk. I tell him why I did what I did and why it felt right at the time, though I always knew it was wrong. I tell him it feels horrible to ask him for money and that I feel stupid and ashamed of myself and of the situation. And then I find myself not caring whether or not I get the gas money. There's such relief, and such closeness with dad then. I feel like so long as he'll hug me and hold onto me, I probably don't need to go anywhere anyway.

Dad wouldn't always help me the way I wanted him to, but I was always glad I got his help. And I think it's like that with God, too. It's better to ask for His help than to keep dancing around stuck full of pins and needles, worrying about two problems: the thing you need help with, and the God whose help you need.

Every Sunday morning, before I get up to preach in each of the three services, I go through this same rigmarole. I know I've got to get up and teach, but I feel totally inadequate to do so. I'm prepared, and I can speak in front of people, so my inadequacies aren't skill-



related. They're sin-related. I know that most Sundays I do not feel holy enough, gracious enough, or spiritually-minded enough to get up and preach without getting angry, or feeling like I know what everybody's issues are and how best to fix them, or giving myself permission to be extra caustic because that's the only way "they" will listen, or going off on some rabbit trail because I'm bored with what I've prepared and have said it twice already. Every Sunday as I spend time wracking my brains for stray thoughts and my heart for stray desires, I come close to a panic attack because I know that what I'm about to do matters so much to God and to His people. I'm terrified to ask for His help because I know He will bring up other stuff that I'll have to deal with. But I always ask, and He always answers, and it's perhaps the most spiritually formative time of my week.

I think most of us pray this kind of prayer because it's the kind we find helpful. We pray without form, clumsily, but honestly. It's like we're driving our prayers without a steering wheel, foot hammering the gas pedal, holding on for dear life hoping we don't crash.

Maybe our velocity comes from anxiety, or guilt, or passion. Whatever it is, once we get going, it's hard to stop.

And that's ok.

Because God isn't in love with our poetry. He loves us amateur poets.

If you do want to work on your communication skills with God, like the two you of are in marital therapy and you plan on doing some exercises together so you don't fight as much or as often, then I suggest you take prayers in the Bible and re-work them to be your own. Re-write the Lord's Prayer in your own language, word-for-word, using your own words. When Christ says, "Our Father, who is in Heaven," you say something like, "Dear Dad, out there in the universe, watching over me in the playground of the world."

Ish.

Try it with the 23rd Psalm (*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...*) or with Christ's prayers on the cross (*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do...*). Keep a journal of your re-written prayers; or, even better, write them in the margins of your Bible next to the originals. I've always been a fan of illuminated manuscripts; I like to see the Bible as a string of replies between myself and my Father. And writing in your Bible means you have one less thing to lose.

The point is that the Bible teaches us to pray without confusing us. There is no calculus, no doctrinal statement, no confusing conjunctions. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he said: *when you pray, pray like this*. When you want to learn to pray, find a prayer in the Bible (there's a few to choose from) and pray like that.

I've re-written and re-prayed *Lord, help!* in every conceivable fashion.

Lent is a time for prayer, a time to ask for God's help, a time to thank Him for His sacrifice and to sacrifice ourselves for Him.



Day 37: Self-Denial

When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Matthew 6.16-18

Turns out, not getting what you want all of the time is actually pretty normal. Training yourself to not get what you want all of the time, however much sense that might make given the inevitability of disappointment, is, in our world, largely abnormal.

We just want what we want, even if we can't have it. But God help the fool who tries to keep it from us.

Money. Sex. Power. Position. Toys. Homes. Possessions. Fame. Adventure. Security.

There's that great line in Ridley Scott's 2000 film *Gladiator*, when Commodus, newly raised Emperor of Rome, says: *all my desires are bursting in my head*. That's how it is with all of us, isn't it? Our desires burden and pressure us. They compete, urgently, with each other and with the world around us.

Our desires, by and large, help us with very little, spiritually speaking. Or more accurately, our worldly ambitions help us very little, as of course desire can be a spiritual endeavor.

We desire to know God better. We desire to experience God like those famous biblical heroes, Moses, David, and Ezekiel. We desire to show ourselves worthy of Christ and his sacrificial death on the cross. We desire to make a difference.

To that end we sacrifice our worldly ambitions, desires for fortune, advancement, or whatever, for our spiritual desire for Christian maturity. The manner of this sacrifice is called fasting, and it is one of the hallmarks of the Lenten season.

There are two kinds of fasting – giving up something forever, and giving up something for a while. The former kind is the basis for every monastic order currently in existence. Monks give up sex, wealth, their name, their professional future. The latter kind is that most often practiced by Christian people who choose to stay engaged in the world. We go without eating for a few days, choosing to pray during those meal times instead. We forego pleasures like sweets or films in an effort to find sweetness and wonder in Christ and his story.

There are some, claiming to be experts, who get a bit grouchy about this latter kind of fasting. For example, I was at a pastor's conference recently where an elderly woman, a presenter, stood up and said: *if one more suburban housewife gives up chocolate for Lent I'm going to shoot her*. That was a funny thing to say. I laughed, but I was laughing because of how completely backwards this lady had it. She thought that fasting was all or nothing. But it's not. Our commitment to Christ Jesus must be all or nothing, but our commitment to a certain spiritual practice should only go so far as that practice actually helps us to better understand God. A suburban housewife's chocolate sacrifice may actually be the perfect next step for her in her journey with God. After all, maybe the woman in question has never had to give up anything before in her life. Maybe this is her first step in giving something up rather than hoarding everything and living in fear of robbery. Or maybe chocolate has some deeper significance to her, her one luxury, the thing that makes her feel safe. Regardless, the point I'm trying to make is that the elderly presenter had proudly proclaimed some kind of harsh new spiritual legislation instead of validating the fact that most of us never give up anything, but we ought to start. Just like the suburban housewife.

For myself, I've tried often to practice self-denial. I try to say no to as many things as I am able to. But it's hard. I try not to buy anything, but I do. These days, after years of practice, I'm at least able to buy only things for which I can pay in cash and for which I have either saved specifically towards or planned to purchase well in advance. You might scoff at that kind of self-denial, but in my immaturity I can confess that it has taken me over a decade to achieve even this small accomplishment.



I have driven cars I didn't love, even when I had the money to replace or repair, as a nod towards denying my worldly ambitions: my desire to look cool, to have something I could be proud of, to fit in. I have worn clothes that no longer fit, even though my desire was to buy new ones that fit my slimmer frame, having lost some weight and wanting to show it off. I have read the same books over again, rather than buying new ones, because I buy so many books for work anyway, and I am trying to teach myself to be content with what I already have.

But it's hard.

And I find fasting even more difficult. I have some experience with it, having fasted maybe a couple of dozen times, but I'm no expert. The longest fast I've ever done was ten days, but I was trying for fourteen. I've done several weeklong fasts and a slew of two-day fasts, but to be honest, the only value I think I really got out of them was some kind of bragging right. No, that's not true. For me, the real value in fasting has been to be able to shut people up who would otherwise criticize me for being a pastor who didn't fast.

Isn't that horrible? But it's true. The merit of fasting ought to be the experience of drawing closer to God, but it seems most people are more concerned with how much you suffer, as if your suffering proves somehow that you are holy.

That's so backwards. Yes, Christ suffered, and we are meant to be Christ-like. But that doesn't mean we should inflict ourselves with pointless misery. He suffered so we don't have to. Any suffering we endure now must be either in service to him or to others, or sadly because others have chosen to afflict us with suffering.

Coming back to my point, fasting ought to produce spiritual growth. If it doesn't, it will likely only serve to fuel our pride. It will contaminate our noble desire to know God better and turn it into worldly ambition to have others perceive us as holy.

So, I think everyone this Lenten season should spend some time in prayer asking God: *what are my worldly ambitions? And how do they get in the way of my noble desire to better know you?*

And then we ought to further ask: *how can I rearrange my life so as to sacrifice the one kind of desire for the other?*

The real question for Lent pertaining to self-denial is not, *what should I fast from?* but, *how shall I fast and why?*

Day 36: Watchfulness

Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap. For it will come on all those who live on the face of the whole earth. Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.

Luke 21.34-36

The whole concept of the Christian liturgical calendar is that we get to re-live the life of Christ as it is presented in the Bible over the course of a very few short months. We not only study his teachings and read his stories, but we find ways to act those stories out and to live the life of Christ until it becomes our own.

The Gospel stories demonstrate a strong movement in Jesus' ministry toward Jerusalem and his final showdown with the spiritual, political, and religious forces of his day, culminating in his crucifixion. The Gospels read like a landslide, with all the force of their parables and prophecies thrumming downhill to Golgotha.

During Lent, we ought to be feeling this sense of momentum carrying us to the cross. We ought to be preparing to re-enter the Passion by imagining ourselves in the story of the Gospels.

Putting ourselves into the Gospel stories, knowing what we know now, isn't it hard to imagine that the disciples could have missed the significance of everything that was



coming? How did they not better appreciate the Transfiguration? How did they not understand the prophecy about rebuilding the temple in three days? How did they not seize Judas at the last supper, after he heard the accusation of Christ and fled to the Pharisees? How could they fall asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane before Christ's arrest, then flee, then fail to appear boldly at the crucifixion?

Why weren't they better prepared?

This is the question Christ is asking us now: *why aren't you better prepared for my coming? For my passion? For my resurrection? For my kingdom? For my new creation?*

We have all the benefits of history and hindsight to help us understand who Jesus was and what he did, and yet we still often make the mistake of the disciples, napping through life. During Lent, however, we observe the momentum of the Christian story sliding towards climax. We prepare our hearts for the full significance of Christ's sacrificial atoning death, his descent into Hell, and his resurrection into new life.

We can't prepare for all those things in the past, but we can prepare for them in the present-future. We can prepare for Easter, to once again feel the sting of sin and its sweet removal. We can prepare for the times which require us to descend into our own private Hells, confident that we will come out the other side. We can prepare for the resurrection of Christ as he brings us new life, new hope, and new dreams. And we can prepare for the new creation, in which Christ comes back into the world, reuniting Heaven and earth in a new way.

We prepare for all of this in our hearts and thoughts, with our attitudes and actions. Right thinking. Right living. The old words for those were *orthodoxy* and *orthopraxy*.

When I was growing up, Catholic spirituality was terribly misconstrued. I thought it was almost cultic. I'm not sure anyone taught me to think that way; I had somehow identified all their liturgy and ceremony with old Conan movies and lifeless customs and rituals.

But now when I think about it, I'm struck by how little I ever really did to prepare for Easter. Catholics spent forty days in self-denial, prayer, repentance, and preparation while I usually never thought about Easter until the week prior, when there was usually some weird exercise involving palm branches and a half-hearted, lukewarm extrava-hosanna.

I realize now I've spent much of my life under-preparing for and under-appreciating Easter. I realize now I've cheapened much of the Gospel story and robbed it of its momentum. I realize now that I've often been a sleeping disciple, unaware of what's coming, and uncaring as to its larger significance.

I want that to change, with Lent, and with all aspects of my life before God. I want to live in the story, treading water in two time zones. I want to live in the story then, feeling the things they felt. And I want to live in the story now--without shame or a sense of failure, but with a renewed confidence that Christ's death was part of the plan (or that it was the whole plan, really). Because of what's about to happen I can live free from all the garbage into which I have previously been bonded. I can work toward and anticipate the new creation. I can live as God's shadow, working at building His church and healing His world. I can know the power of the resurrection and feel the Spirit preserve me through the decay of this life, bringing new vitality into a culture of death instead.

For my part, I prepare through contemplation, through reading, and through holy action. Because I know Easter is just around the corner I spend a little time each day thinking about what it meant for Christ to go willingly to the cross. There's a lot to think about there, and a lot to consider when you really put your mind to it. And the more I think about it, the more incredible it becomes. I can hardly sacrifice my television preferences with my family. Christ gave his life and gave it gladly. Reading helps me deepen my appreciation of his sacrifice. I read the Bible, but also the writings of certain theologians and mystics. They stretch my imagination – sometimes providing new information, but mostly just treating the information I already know in a fresh way. But thinking and studying aren't really good preparation all on their own, and so I try and do something with what I've contemplated and what I've learned. Sometimes I do something small, like share my thoughts with a friend or blog them. Sometimes I try and do something dramatic, like try and find a way to reenact the passion, or reconstruct some similar condition. But I always try and do *something*. I'll try, for example, and go willingly into a meeting I'd rather ignore. It seems a small imitation, but it's something. And for me to prepare best I've got to act out what I'm thinking through.

I guess, at the core, that's what Lent is: a chance to prepare for the event that changes everything, and a chance to be involved in that event as it happens again.



(These next few readings explore episodes in the Christian Bible associated with the number forty, which are also traditionally associated with Lent)

Day 35: Christ in the Wilderness

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, *If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.* Jesus answered, *It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'*

Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. *If you are the Son of God, he said, throw yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'* Jesus answered him, *It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'*

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. *All this I will give you, he said, if you will bow down and worship me.* Jesus said to him, *Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.'*

Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

Matthew 4.1-11

We all struggle to answer the question, *Who am I?* Perhaps Jesus struggled to answer this question as well. That's not to suggest that he didn't know, simply that he had to struggle in order to fully uncover his identity and mission. This, I think, is really what the temptation of Christ is all about: Jesus figuring out which Jesus he was meant to be.

Remember that this is core Christian doctrine. Even though Jesus was God-made-flesh he came into the world and lived a fully human existence. He set aside the better part of his divinity, and limited his divine understanding, power, and privileges. Jesus, based on the supernatural events surrounding his birth and the witness and testimony of both his mother and his cousin, knew he was the Messiah and he knew that he was God's own son. But he still had to determine how we would fulfill his destiny. In order for his humanity to have been anything other than a farce, Jesus had to have the ability to actually sin. That means the possibility always existed that he could have accepted Satan's offer. Jesus could have decided to be the Military Messiah, or the Political Messiah, or the Magic Messiah, but he endured his temptation and accepted the role his Father had prepared for him to be the Suffering Servant – the Messiah who would give up his life as a ransom for many.

In *The Sandman* comics (Issue #54, *The Golden Boy*), author Neil Gaiman tells of a messiah in a parallel universe who gives in to the temptations of Satan (though in that universe, Satan appears as "Boss Smiley," a suit-wearing smiley face called "the Prince of this World"). Prez Rickard, the messiah in question, rose to early political prominence, becoming president of the USA at 18, and was courted by lobbyists and superheroes alike. Prez was frustrated with his inability to affect real change in the world, however. He thought that by accepting Boss Smiley's offer that change would be guaranteed. Yet, even though everyone loved him, and even though he worked incredible change into both the domestic and international polity, Prez could never find a way to affect changes that truly matter. He couldn't get people to stop hating one another, killing, or somehow serving Boss Smiley instead of himself. Despairing, Prez left office abruptly and became a vagabond and a traveling salesman before finally succumbing to his death under mysterious circumstances.

I love that story. Gaiman, who does not profess or pretend to be a Christ-follower, has stumbled onto a powerful truth: the devil's offer to Jesus is based on smoke and mirrors. Even had Jesus accepted the offer to become self-sustaining, famous, or powerful, Boss Smiley would have found a way to limit his ability to bring real transformation into the lives of real people.

Satan was not tempting Christ to give up being Messiah. He was tempting Christ to take on a lesser form of messianic identity.



Christ was tempted with relevance:

Turn these stones into bread.

Feed yourself.

Feed all the hungry people around you.

Be everything they need you to be;

be an endless supply of nourishment.

No need for this metaphorical bread of life when you could just feed them for real, right?

He was tempted with spectacle:

Jump from this high place.

Show the world you're the king of all kings.

Show them you control the angels.

Show them they ought to obey

and be mesmerized in their lack of rebellion.

Teach them the wonders of your mighty hand

and of your incredible wisdom.

Wouldn't they benefit from it?

Wouldn't I?

He was tempted with power:

I will give you the kingdoms of this world,

for they are mine to give.

I am the prince of this world.

I control these countries like fiefdoms,

and I will happily give you limitless exercise of your power

if you just throw me a bone,

say something nice,

give a little credit where credit is due.

Wouldn't it all be better

if we could sort out our little power struggles without casualty?

I am tempted with these same things. I'm tempted to be the solution to everyone else's problems. I'm tempted to pretend I know how they're feeling and what they need, or what they should do when they find themselves in a bind. I'm tempted to think my advice or perspective will somehow set them free instead of enslaving them to another set of opinions, when what they really need is to hear from God's Spirit.

I'm tempted to dazzle and amaze, to think that my abilities will somehow convince people I should be listened to, followed, or loved.

I'm tempted to compromise on my ideals and my allegiance, to trade away little bits of my godly desires and beliefs in an effort to keep the peace and make everyone happy.

Christ's temptations are really my temptations; his test is mine too. And the way forward for me is the same as it was for him. He refused to be defined and identified by anything other than his identity in the Father: *Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.*

That's who he was: God, co-eternal with the Father. Christ found his identity, his true self, his mission and purpose in the Father's will.

And so do we. That's why the answer to that great question, *Who am I?* is the same for every one of us, once properly understood. In fact, to better answer it, we may be better off to just tweak it a little and ask instead: *Whose am I?*

I am God's.



Day 34: Israel in the Desert

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron: *How long will this wicked community grumble against me? I have heard the complaints of these grumbling Israelites. So tell them, 'As surely as I live, declares the Lord, I will do to you the very thing I heard you say: In this wilderness your bodies will fall—every one of you twenty years old or more who was counted in the census and who has grumbled against Me. Not one of you will enter the land I swore with uplifted hand to make your home, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun. As for your children that you said would be taken as plunder, I will bring them in to enjoy the land you have rejected. But as for you, your bodies will fall in this wilderness. Your children will be shepherds here for forty years, suffering for your unfaithfulness, until the last of your bodies lies in the wilderness. For forty years—one year for each of the forty days you explored the land—you will suffer for your sins and know what it is like to have Me against you.'* I, the Lord, have spoken, and I will surely do these things to this whole wicked community, which has banded together against Me. They will meet their end in this wilderness; here they will die.

Numbers 14.26-35

Complaining doesn't help anything. Neither does criticism. But we tend to be experts in both. We complain when things aren't as they should be. We criticize when others fail to meet our expectations. But I've never seen complaining produce a positive change in anyone. I've never seen criticism make anyone a better person.

The idea that complaining helps people to know what they are doing wrong is really just a negative person's way of justifying their mean spirit. The lingo about constructive criticism is really just permission for us to tell one another we're not good enough.

Don't misunderstand me. I regularly pursue critique. I want to be better. I want to develop and hone my skills. But my searching for helpful critique is way different than my going out and offering unsolicited criticism. Most of us don't search out others to help make us better; most of us just shoot our mouths off, trying to tell everyone else what they are doing wrong.

This is what is happening in the desert with the Israelites. They're complaining, criticizing God. Remembering the relative security of life in Egypt, they begin to complain that life isn't easy anymore. Somehow, they have forgotten that life wasn't easy when they were slaves, but we all conveniently forget the hardships of the past when faced with the inconveniences of the present, don't we?

They criticize God for the manner of His salvation. They complain about the miraculous daily delivery of manna and quail. They complain about the difficulties they see in conquering the Promised Land. They take their complaints to God, lashing out at Him. All their lamentation must have sounded to His ears like one long continuous antiphonal chorus, wailing: *You're doing it wrong; You're doing it all wrong.*

Don't we do this all the time? We want to experience God's promises--His promise for restored relationships, His promise for abundant life, His promise for greater resources to cope with difficulty--but we find the manner of His saving difficult and unpleasant. We want a better life without having to work for it. We don't want to wander through life without any clear direction; we want to know what we are supposed to do right now, right away. We want to be stronger, more faithful, more capable of handling things like conflict and stress, but we want to go from total weaklings to superheroes in one fell swoop, skipping all the developmental requirements in the process.

And so we complain that life is hard, as if that should come as a surprise.

We groan that spirituality isn't automatic, easy, or even easy to understand, as if we were ever promised anything other than a long obedience in the same direction.

Our complaints then turn to criticisms against God. We accuse Him of afflicting us unnecessarily, of torturing us with other people's obstinance or lack of self-realization, as



if all the problems of the world are someone else's doing, and we're just here to clean up the mess. Lucky world, to have us as janitors.

In these moments we would do well to remember that God made the Israelites wander for four decades because of their complaining and grumbling, their criticism and lack of faith.

The consequences of complaint and criticism are always negative, not only in the lives of those complained against or criticized, but (more frequently) in the lives of the complainers and the critics.

Sometimes our complaining dooms us to wander around for an even longer time. Having appreciated nothing, we find pleasure in nothing and we take pride in nothing. We become aimless, bored, and unable to enter into the Promise of God, even though it is often right in front of us. That's what happened to Israel. In forty years they could have walked from Egypt to England and back several times, but they didn't. They stayed largely stationary. That's what complaining does: it keeps us from going anywhere in life, even to the good spots right beside the bad ones.

The Promised Land is always adjacent to the desert, but our complaining keeps us from getting in.

And our criticisms often isolate us in the process. Had Israel shown a little gratitude to God for all He had done on their behalf, had they acknowledged how far He had brought them and all that He had done to get them there, I'm tempted to think that His mercy would have extended to them one more time. But they weren't thankful. They were critical:

*Why, God, can't you be more like Pharaoh?
He was harsh, but we always knew what was coming.
You are merciful, in a way,
but we never know exactly what's coming next.
Why can't you just give us the answers we want?*

Our criticisms isolate us from others and from God. Our criticisms break our relationships. We wonder why no one wants to work with us, or hang out on a weekend, when we share our opinions about them freely. But it's so simple, isn't it? The reason no one likes you is because you're mean to them. My friend Vince taught me this lesson when I was once critiquing someone else's work. I wondered why that person and I weren't better

friends, and Vince told me it was probably because every time I spoke to them I had a suggestion for something they could improve. I meant well, but such suggestions have a way of undermining good intentions.

Sometimes we just need to celebrate the good things that are already there and worry less about telling others how they could improve.

Many of you reading this might be tempted to think that I'm advocating low standards. No. I have the highest standards for myself. I am advocating, however, a posture of celebration, love, and acceptance for others, rather than a posture of fixing, saving, pointing out shortcomings, and drawing attention to the many ways in which they do not measure up.

I think the devil came to Jesus hoping to get him to do what the Israelites in the wilderness did. The devil wanted Jesus to complain and to criticize. The bread he offered was designed to make Jesus feel dissatisfied. The demonstration of power he offered was meant to tempt Jesus to show everyone how things should be done. The authority he offered was meant to tease Jesus into proving how a real messiah would act. You see? Jesus was supposed to complain about the bread. Jesus was supposed to be critical of his own incarnation and the plans of His Father. Jesus was supposed to show the Father and everyone else that they were doing it wrong and prove that he could do it better himself.

But he didn't.

Jesus knew that there is more to life than bread, more to God's purposes than merely humiliation and suffering, and more to authority than forcing others to do what you want.

He was tempted to complain and critique, but he did not. He succeeded where Israel failed.

And he wants us to do the same.



Day 33: Jonah and Ninevah

Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, *Teacher, we want to see a sign from you.*

He answered, *A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here.*

Matthew 12.38-41

I like movies, video games, and performance art. I like the low-brow stuff like the Cirque de Soleil, but I also like the real weird stuff by David Byrne or Robert LePage. I like action films, multi-media presentations during rock shows, and live performances because of all the thought, creativity, and spontaneity that usually accompanies them.

I want to see something cool. I want spectacle.

This, I think, is what the Pharisees were after: a little razzle dazzle. They had heard all these rumors about Jesus and wanted him to perform for them what he had demonstrated for so many others. They wanted some proof from the pudding, something to validate Christ's ministry and teaching, a way to make sense of all the provocative things he had said and done.

Thing is, they had it all wrong. The “sign” they really needed to see was the sign of Christ’s resurrection, prefigured by the three days and nights Jonah spent in the belly of the great fish before being vomited (resurrected) onto the shore of Ninevah.

They wanted magic, but Jesus knew that the only real sign that would satisfy them was the sign of his resurrection.

Why, then, did he call them wicked? Because resurrection is always preceded by death. In order for them to get their sign, Christ had to be killed; and, as it turns out, they were only too happy to oblige him in this regard later on. Not only are they wicked because they refuse to repent (unlike the Ninevites), but they are also wicked because they plan to murder the prophet who brought them their chance at redemption.

In contrast to the Ninevites (the people to whom Jonah preached for forty days) who looked evil and yet were quick to repent, the Pharisees looked outwardly holy but had no desire to re-orient themselves to Christ or to God’s true plans to heal the world. When Jesus told them they would receive the sign of Jonah, he was referring to both his resurrection and the coming judgment. While the Ninevites escaped this judgment, the Pharisees did not.

I wonder sometimes if I, too, trade lightly the suffering of Jesus in favor of some small spectacle. I wonder if, instead of taking the hard and narrow path of right living and right thinking, I wander down a broader path of easy living and idle thought.

Whenever I find myself dreading a conversation or a confrontation, putting it off to do something fun, easy, or whimsical, I wonder if I’m trading away the model of suffering Christ gave me. Whenever I choose to study more or write more, in my warm office with my magnificent Mac instead of taking another sorrowful phone call or spend another hour on the couch counseling, I wonder if I’m trading spectacle for suffering.

I wonder, from God’s perspective, how often I choose to look at things that make me smile instead of things that keep others from smiling.

Maybe this is all too big of a stretch. Maybe I’m reading too much into them, but I can’t help but hear real pain and real hurt in Jesus’ words back to the Pharisees: *A sign?*

Do you know what that will cost?

Do you have any idea what manner of sign will satisfy you?



That's it, really. I'm a little terrified that I will never be satisfied by all the signs in Heaven and earth. I'll just keep wanting more, because the real sign I ought to be looking for isn't the performance art of a messiah, but the humble obedience of a servant. I ought to be providing my own signs, suffering alongside him for the sake of others, and through that empathy and compassion experiencing the new life and significance he promises to all who take up their cross.

This is my final thought: signs don't come cheaply. They have to be purchased. Real joy and peace don't come cheaply either. That's why the wealthy and healthy so rarely have a resident and unshakeable joy. They've got what they've got by bypassing suffering and death, not by going through them.

If you want to witness a resurrection, then all you've got to do is put an end to Christ and watch him wow the world with his power, but if you want to be resurrected, then you've got to be crucified.

Is that a price you're willing to pay?

Day 32: Moses on Sinai

When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from within the cloud. To the Israelites the glory of the Lord looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain. Then Moses entered the cloud as he went on up the mountain. And he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

Exodus 24.15-18

When I was a kid, the Sunday night services at our church were the spiritual highlights. Not always for me, you understand, but certainly for the adults in our congregation. It was a time of hootin' and hollerin', a bit of that weird worship dancin', and lots of cryin' and prayin' at the altar. Not crying and praying, mind you, but cryin' and prayin'. Sunday night was a night for contractions. It was the time when normally sane and well-to-do folks let their hair down and shook all their holies right out onto the orange carpet.

Just about everyone referred to those Sunday nights as “mountaintop” experiences. What they meant was, like Moses on the mountain for forty days and nights with God, we would be changed by our experiences with the orange carpet for three or four hours each Sunday evening.

In Exodus, while Moses is up there communin' with Lord, he sees God's glory: His *kavod*. That's the Hebrew word for glory, and it shows up like a lightning cloud, like a fiery



darkness. It was also, in case you're curious, the inspiration for J.R.R. Tolkien's Balrog, a creature of shadow and flame, the sinister and lesser counterpart to Yahweh's *kavod*. That cloud of fiery glory represents the first time God allowed His presence to be tamed, domesticated-like, and bearable.

I have had my own mountaintop experiences. A couple of them were even on Sunday nights. And there's always a peculiarity to them. I've always counted it a great privilege to have such experiences with God. Though I have certainly never seen a physical cloud during those times, I will testify to the fact that once you get alone with God for a long time and are only concerned with Him and His pleasure, you might as well be stuck in a cloud, because you can't really see anything else. In those moments of divine proximity, you realize that, no matter what's happening at the bottom of the mountain or outside of the cloud, everything is going to work out okay so long as you remain in the shadow of the Almighty.

Of course Moses got to put that trust to the test, because as soon as he came down from the mountain, he found out that his spineless brother Aaron had capitulated to the whims of the people and built them a golden calf to worship. To Moses' credit, he didn't run back up the mountain. Instead he beat everybody up and burned the calf down and made the people drink what was left of it after he'd mixed it in their water.

I want everybody to have a few of those mountaintop experiences, because I know that everybody is going to face tests like Moses did when he got off the mountain. I'm not sure Moses would have had the strength to pick the fight he did, had he not been newly empowered by his experience in the *kavod*. I'm not sure the people would have been quite so easily cowed by Moses' fury had his face not been still shinin' with God's light. I'm not sure any of it could have had any kind of happy ending were it not for Moses' time with the Lord.

In my experience, though, usually once people get a taste of that mountaintop, they never want to leave. If they have to leave and then run into trouble like Moses, they come runnin' back up the mountain. I saw a lot of that on those Sunday nights: people with no stomach for real life, runnin' back to church in hopes of gettin' their *kavod* on, pleading with God not to make them deal with their problems and just hopin' to hide out with Him awhile.

But you can't do that. You need the mountain so you can go back down the hill and do somethin' worthwhile.

I think that's what Jesus was up to when he got out of his time in the desert. Matthew's gospel says he went right away and started preaching, *Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near*. That's much the same message Moses preached to the Israelites, though gentler. And then Christ called his disciples and set to work healing people. Again, that's what Moses did, calling the newly repentant people to be set apart, then going back to beg for the Lord to heal the sins of the people.

For our purposes, I humbly suggest that we take our cue from Christ rather than from the ancient Israelites. Let's be healers rather than people who need healing. Let's spend our time with the *kavod*, then return energized to shadow God and heal the world.



Day 31: Elijah and Horeb

Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. *I have had enough, Lord*, he said. *Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.* Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep.

All at once an angel touched him and said, *Get up and eat.* He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again.

The angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him and said, *Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.* So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. There he went into a cave and spent the night.

1 Kings 19.3-9

I love this story. It occurs right after Elijah's miraculous victory over the prophets of Baal. By all accounts, he should have been on some kind of spiritual high, but instead he finds himself melancholy and full of complaint. I always feel like that on Sunday afternoons. I'm exhausted, having preached and prayed and counseled and comforted, having done my

best to respond graciously to malcontents and antagonists alike, and all I want to do is lie down and die. Or nap. Most days I settle for a nap. But at times I feel just like Elijah in this episode of the prophet's life.

I love that the remedy for Elijah's despair is both supernatural and just plain normal. Angels (that would be the supernatural part) bring him warm bread (the normal bit). Is there any food more comforting than fresh-baked bread?

As a kid I was prone to fits of melancholy. I still am, but I think I am now able to cope with them intelligently because of my mum. She knew me so well that she was always able to diagnose how I was feeling and prescribe exactly what I needed. It was always the same thing: sleep.

That's what the angel does here, telling Elijah to rest. *The journey is too much for you.* Truth be told, life is too much for any of us. It's not that life will necessarily kill us (actually, it will) or that life will crush our dreams (though it usually will), but that we all know--feeling it deep in our bones--that life ought to be better than it is. We have this in-borne longing for abundant life. And usually the first step in experiencing that abundance is rest and food.

We often have the strength to access the supernatural because of our attention to the supernatural.

Strengthened, Elijah walks the 300 miles or so to Horeb (also called Mount Sinai), the mountain of God. It takes him forty days to get there. There is a kind of mystical and metaphysical significance to these numbers. Most scholars see some numerology at work here, connecting Elijah's walk to the Israelites' wandering, to Moses' time on Horeb, and later to Christ's experience in the wilderness; but I like to focus on the fact that it takes a long time to walk 300 miles and reach the place God has prepared. In Elijah's case, that was a cave on the holy mountain. In our case, that may be any number of things.

I know for myself, after recovering from my Sunday afternoon nap-ocalypse or one of my bouts with melancholy, it takes me a long time to get back to where God wants me. My mood is often sour, and I'm quick to make a biting comment. So I spend most of my newly-wakened time silent, trying to protect everyone I love from one of my moods. In my mind I'm already thinking: *OK, God, it was so fantastic to get that rest, but I've got to get myself correct now. I need to control my mouth. I need to watch my moods. Help me get back to being the kind and loving father, friend, and husband I know you've called me to be. Help me to be better. Help me to be different.*



That takes a long time. It feels like 300 miles, that journey from despair to love and from doubting yourself to loving your people, and it feels like it takes 40 days and nights. That's the Lenten connection, I guess. Lent is the time when we come back to the place God has prepared for us. Through most of the year we wander away from the people God has designed us to become. Lent is a homecoming. Lent is the 300 miles back to Christ. It's the time when we are startled by our moods and our inconsistencies, when we rally our strength and walk that steep road back to God.

For thousands of years people have gone to the desert to get right with God. Their inspiration comes from many of the passages we've been reading (Christ in the wilderness, etc), and they teach us about how best to observe Lent. This 'desert spirituality' is marked by five disciplines: solitude, transformation, testing, encounter, and self-emptying. I am critical, though, of how those disciplines have often been understood.

The next few readings are meant to re-frame these disciplines for 21st century American life.

Day 30: Solitude

But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Matthew 6.6

It is entirely possible to be alone in a crowd. I wish more people understood what a gift this can be. Usually we feel alone in those situations because we feel no one cares or that we have no value. That's not true at all. We feel alone because everyone around us is going somewhere, with others counting on them to arrive. When we have nowhere to go and no one expecting us, that's when the isolation of crowds presses upon us. But we should reframe these moments. They are not afflictions. These times of isolation are gifts, because solitude--that ancient and venerable spiritual discipline--is so hard to come by.

I find solitude almost impossible to achieve. I don't think I fall particularly into all the clichéd traps of modern American life. Though I have a cell phone, an iPad, and a personal assistant, they do not rule my life. Not even close. I come home and throw my cell phone into a bin, rarely checking it. I don't ever answer my phone at home. My iPad usually stays in the car or at the office. But I find it hard to be alone because there are so many people who need me. My children need me. My wife needs me. My friends and my parents need me. There's nothing more frustrating than needing someone who is purposefully unavailable, and nothing more selfish than making yourself unavailable to find spiritual solitude for an extended period of time.



There is a reason monks and nuns don't marry and have children. If they did, the special privilege of their solitude would be exposed.

For the rest of us, we must learn to find solitude in the midst of its opposite. We need to clear space in our minds and hearts for God to speak, but we cannot simply run off in the wilderness. We must find solace in the long lines, solitude on the subway. We've got to find silence amid neighboring television sets and children's games. And we must do all of this without listening to the voice in our minds that says: *This doesn't count. You're not really spiritual; you should take a long walk and speak to the birds.*

That voice is ridiculous. It abandons the incarnational teaching of the Scriptures and tries to turn us all into St. Francis. St. Francis was great, but his understanding of the spiritual life was markedly different from Christ's. Jesus loved to eat, laugh, drink wine, and celebrate. Francis put ash in his food for fear the pleasure might corrupt him.

We have to stop sanctifying Francis at the expense of Jesus.

That's not to say that there must never be times of isolation with God, only to remind us that extended spiritual solitude is neither realistic or healthy or modeled in the life of Jesus. He went away one time for forty days, and his famous times of solitude were never more than an hour or two, here and there. But when I read the contemporary writing on Christian spirituality, it all sounds like solitude is the apex of enlightenment. It's not. It's just time free from distraction.

If we recognize that what we really need is time free from distraction, then we ought to focus our energies on learning to live undistracted than on trying to escape the distractions of real life. Case in point: my two young children often interrupt me while I am writing and studying in my office. I love that. Even when I'm teasing out some scriptural inconsistency or answering a troubling email, or even when I'm caught on the phone, I want my children to waltz in and clamber upon my knee.

What kind of spirituality makes no allowance for children? Or for your spouse? Or for your friends?

These are not distractions. They are the people who show you God. They are the ambassadors of the Spirit.

We must learn solitude, that undistracted time with the Lord, in the midst of the multitude.

Yes, we need time alone, but others have played that tune so much I fear we forget why we need time alone. Time alone is only holy insofar as it helps us to better see God.

We should learn to see God everywhere, in everyone, in each moment, and then we will all be monks and fathers fit for the desert of American life.



Day 29: Transformation

The desert and the parched land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.
Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom;
it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.
Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy.
Water will gush forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert.
The burning sand will become a pool,
the thirsty ground bubbling springs.
In the haunts where jackals once lay,
grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.
And a highway will be there;
it will be called the Way of Holiness;
it will be for those who walk on that Way,
and those the LORD has rescued will return.
They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Isaiah 35.1-2, 6-8, 10

Here is the greatest misunderstanding of grace: since God changes us, we think we don't have to keep on changing.

But we do.

You have to change.

You have to be different.

God loves you the way you are,

but He's not pleased that you should remain this way.

He wants you to change.

This is where all our Christian vernacular falls short: discipleship, spiritual formation, Sunday school--it all focuses on learning, growing, and acquiring knowledge. While all of those things are fine, none of them best represent the full measure of what God wants from us: transformation.

Transformation means a complete change. It means a change in statistics and combinatorics. It means a change from one state (solid) to another (liquid). It means a change from a man into a lycanthrope. It means a change from a Peterbuilt 373 into an intergalactic leader of Autobots.

Transformation means one thing becoming something else.

When you come to faith in Christ Jesus, that transformation begins, but it does not end. Your transformation is not finished. And while it's true that that transformation will never wholly be completed until your rise with Christ into new resurrection life at the end of the world, that doesn't excuse you from taking certain baby steps now.

We find the idea of ongoing transformation incredibly unappealing most of the time, which is why it is so rare to find a Christian among us who is not an utter hypocrite. As a rule, church people are prone to intolerance concerning sexual sin and addiction of any stripe, but they court social sins like lovers and toxins. Church people will often find no spare grace for a pregnant teenage girl, but they'll excuse any amount of gluttony, gossip, and grab for (ecclesial) power.

It is rare to find a person in church who looks to their own sins first, without concerning themselves too much over the sins of others. But this is what we must do. My point here is not about hypocrisy as much as it is that not a single one of us is yet holy enough to please the Father.

But He wants us to be.



He wants us to carve the sin out of our lives. He wants us to cultivate the best possible version of ourselves, inviting His Spirit to occupy more and more of our spiritual real estate. He wants us to give over our baser ambitions, lusts, and thoughts, renewing our minds, exchanging those older and lower things for newer and higher ones.

That is transformation. Sin-removal and righteous-infusion. It doesn't happen through strength of will alone. It happens primarily through hospitality to the Spirit and cooperation with the will of the Father. But we still have a role to play in the process. Our willingness to be changed is paramount. Our effort to be different is vital. Our belief that we must be transformed into someone better is critical.

So begin now with this Lenten season. Fight hard to be someone better than who you are now. Know, believe, and understand that you can conquer sin by accepting the power of Christ's Spirit. Live the life you were meant to live, instead of lamenting the life you wish you had.



Day 28: Testing

No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it.

1 Corinthians 10.13

Life, physical and spiritual, is full of tests. We may not like it, but there's really no getting around it. We are tested, and if we pass we grow. Sometimes we grow even more when we fail.

I once drove a car right off a cliff in a snowstorm. I was with two friends, and I cussed myself blue in the face all the way down the hill. I was so ashamed. I failed the test. I was shamed not only by the profanity, but also by my lack of self-control. I hadn't meant to swear; the words just gushed out of me.

A few weeks later I got a re-test. I slipped while rock climbing with a friend. I was sliding out of control down a sharp slope, with a steep drop off at the end that certainly would have killed me. The whole way down I thought only one thing: *please don't let me swear again* I grabbed hold of a branch, and passed the test.

This happens to me all the time. I'm good at failing first.



Two weeks ago someone came to our church and criticized us heavily in the lobby after the service. I became so angry that I screamed at them in front of everyone.

Fail.

I quickly found my friend Tom, explaining what had happened. I wanted to confess right away to someone I knew loved me and believed in my development. Tom was good to me, talked me down, and helped me profess my failure.

But then our critic came back for round two, only an hour or so after our first encounter. This time I was ready. No anger. No screaming. I even felt strong enough to ask for his forgiveness.

Pass.

Life works through testing. We are tested in our spending, our desires, our motivations. We need these tests, if for no other reason than to track our development. We need to be able to see how we're growing and progressing, to find evidence of the Spirit's work inside us. We need to know that what previously would have been a problem for us we can now overcome by the grace of God and the power of His Spirit.

Once you have gone through some hard things, you are better prepared to go through more. Your competencies grow. Your confidence in Christ swells. Once you make it through one contentious thanksgiving dinner with your in-laws, you know you can make it through them all. Once you've had to make a hard decision at work, you know you can make the next one. Once you've confronted your accusers with grace and challenged them on their hurtful actions, you know you never have to live in fear of that kind of confrontation again. You are a different person now, and Christ is constantly getting bigger inside of you.

But it takes a test in order to find that out.

Here is one last example, to encourage you that not all tests end in failure. About three months ago I received a string of bad news. Every day for a week I got at least one phone call or email that really affected me. Two people died. I received a really negative review about my work. I was hurt by a friend. I didn't get into a graduate program I'd set my heart on. I found myself in conflict with someone I loved. All in one week. I remember this moment, at around 3:00 a.m. while sitting with my dog Flash on the basement couch, when it hit me: *I'm ok.*

Had any one of these things happened even a year ago I would have been a hot mess. Any one of those things would have crippled me, forced me to reconsider my employment, to question my calling, to wonder about whether or not I was loved.

Any *one* of those.

But now, I stood up under a string of these things and did what previously would have been impossible: I laughed. It all just seemed so obvious. This was a test. And I passed.

I am so thankful, happy, and grateful to God for His work in my life. He continues to grow in me, and I continue to grow in him. In this life you will face many tests, but do not be discouraged. They are one of the many ways God uses to show you how far you've come.



Day 27: Encounter

All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from Heaven not to do my will but to do the will of Him who sent me.

John 6.37-38

It's difficult but important for me to remind myself that I am exactly where God wants me to be. On good days that's easy, but most days are not unreservedly good. Most days have some mean surprise. Usually I can easily overlook the hurt and inconvenience of such a surprise. But not always. Sometimes the hurt gets through the cracks. Sometimes I am taken off guard by life's frustrations. In those moments I begin to wonder whether I am where I'm supposed to be.

That attitude is such a conceit, isn't it? As if life's joys and triumphs had anything to do with where and when we live rather than how.

When I lived in a large, beautiful metropolitan city, I sometimes wondered if I was where God wanted me to be. Now that I live in a small Midwestern town, I still have those days. But that kind of speculation is misleading. Somehow we have all bought into the notion that there is a "supposed to" concerning our geography, our employment, or our romance. We need to be disenchanted of this notion. Instead we need to chant the mantra of alcoholics everywhere: *wherever you go, there you are.*

You will have the same real problems in the next job as in this one. You might slide by for a while, but after some time you will experience the same old conflicts, because you are at least partially to blame. You might enjoy a brief reprieve from church conflict if you change congregations, but ultimately you'll catch up to yourself, and others will know you for who you are, responding to you in the ways people always seem to respond. Your new husband might be better than the last one, but only until he realizes that both he and his predecessor married the same woman, with the same flaws and the same hate.

The only real hope for any of us is to come to grips with the fact that the place we're "supposed to" be is here. Just as the time we're "supposed to" live in is now. Just as the people we're "supposed to" be around are already around us.

Abundant life isn't really about the place, the job, the friends, or the neighbors. It's about who we are around, in, and for those things. It's about our availability to God and our willingness to be changed by His Spirit.

This is hard to understand because it requires us to see ourselves as something less than heroes and something more than bystanders. We never see ourselves as villains, but we do tend to either inflate our significance, moralizing our actions, or excuse ourselves completely, pretending that all of this bad stuff (whatever it may be) is happening to us, usually while we were just standing around minding our own business.

We need a proper understanding of encountering God. We are always involved in what goes on around us, whether we wish it or will it were otherwise. We are always complicit. The things that happen around us happen at least in part because of us, and if we don't like what we see happening, the first step is for us to address the part of the equation we can control: ourselves.

We need God's help to do this. We aren't fully capable of changing who we are at a moment's notice (if we were, wouldn't we all be physically fit, brilliant, and artistic?). We need to first acknowledge our need for Him and then welcome His Spirit as He begins that work. Then we must open our eyes to the people and circumstances surrounding us. They are God's curriculum. He is teaching life through living. He is teaching us to love through the people we know. He is teaching us to find our holy vocation--to shadow God and heal the world--through the stuff we find ourselves immersed in and can make a positive difference toward.



This is encountering God: when our self-deception comes to an end, when our destructive and apathetic fantasies conclude, when we are no longer willing to label ourselves as victims but choose instead to work alongside the Lord for the good of all.

This is what Jesus was getting at in the Scriptures. He understood that he was meant to help whomever the Father brought to him. Jesus understood that the Father intended for him to live where he was, to be incarnate, and to accept life as a gift even when it was later taken from him.

That is the difference between a messiah and a martyr.

Day 26: Self-Emptying

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in Heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Matthew 6.19-21

It is a hard thing to give up on our own desires and give ourselves willingly to God.

I have a friend with whom I regularly talk about how non-intrinsic Christian spirituality is. My friend is always looking for the angle, the payoff for why we do what we must do in order to obediently follow Jesus. For my part, I tend to think that obedience is most frequently rewarded with closeness. God calls the plays, and I execute, and because of that He rewards me with more of Himself.

But my friend is dissatisfied with this understanding. He wants his life to be better (don't we all?). He doesn't just want to obey for the sake of remaining in right standing with God, and he isn't really interested in getting closer to God either. He wants to obey in only those things for which there is some tangible return.



That's why he likes the biblical teaching on money. *It's good budgeting practice*, he says, *to set aside some funds for the church. It teaches me to better manage the remainder. It's good fiscal practice*, he says, *and it allows me to keep some money away from the government at tax time.*

My friend is economically obedient because it suits his purposes.

This is also why he likes the biblical teaching on sex. After all, you can't risk an STD if you each only have one partner.

Here, too, I think my friend is economically obedient.

He budgets his obedience, looking for the tally at the end of the ledger. If his life is better--safer, richer, more recreational, with more free time, happier--then he is willing to obey.

To be honest, I wasn't entirely convinced my friend was wrong until I began to think about things like justice and self-sacrifice, showing mercy, and doing good deeds in secret. These are entirely selfless acts for which there is no tangible payoff.

If you travel across the world, away from cameras and agencies, and spend months feeding starving people in a refugee camp, you would be a good imitator of Christ, but my friend would be dissatisfied.

I don't want to paint my friend to be some lecher, but I do want to point out that only beginner spirituality is concerned with tangible benefits. It takes Christian maturity to be concerned with intangibles. This is undoubtedly what Jesus is referring to when he spoke of treasures in Heaven. I used to think that "treasures in Heaven" was a fancy way of guilt-tripping people into doing things they didn't want to do. Now I realize that there is always some kind of payoff for our actions: we either ignore our accumulations here, or we ignore our accumulations there. Treasure *here* is tangible now, but lost later on. Treasure *there* lasts forever but begins to last now in our stories, our spiritual memories, and our relationship with God, who looks down on our good deeds and smiles.

In the introduction I spoke of my dissatisfaction with much Lenten teaching. I mentioned that it seemed like it was written in order for us to take joy in our suffering as an end unto itself. I still maintain that's a silly attitude. But to that silliness I would add that there can, indeed, be joy in suffering. When we suffer for the sake of others, for the sake of the gospel message, or for the promise of a future reward, then our suffering does in fact produce perseverance, which in turn manufactures character, and character hope.

And hope does not disappoint us.

So let's not be economically obedient. Let's not get caught up in obeying God only when we fully understand how it benefits us. Rather, let's be marked by obedience, and in those times where the payoff seems intangible, let's celebrate in the knowledge that we'll get what's coming to us later on, and that will be more than enough.



These next readings are designed to help us explore the “desert dimension” of life’s unique challenges. In the old times, people went to the desert to hide, to search, or to commune. We’re still hiding and searching and communing, but those things look different now. However, we still often take meandering and indirect routes toward our goals. We are nomads like that. And so these readings are meant to help us make sense of our American deserts--not the ones we choose to enter, so much as the ones that are common to us all.

Day 25: Depression

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

1 Peter 4.12-13

I have never really been depressed, at least not clinically. I say that not to distance myself from the stigma of depression, but to validate the pain that those who suffer a clinical depression must endure. They hurt far more than I do in my low moments of self-absorption and gloom, and I don’t want to cheapen their pain by trying to say I understand something I really don’t.

I will limit my thoughts on depression as a desert, then, to those of an outsider. Two of my very close friends have suffered for a long time with depression. I have watched them struggle, fight, and refuse to give in, only to give up when their strength and their resolve eventually failed. From the outside they looked like desert-walkers--aimless and desperate. They knew they needed to get out of that place, but it seemed like everywhere they turned there was only more sand. They cried and fell down, then picked themselves back up, determinedly marching toward a spot on the horizon that would never move, then fell down again.

Depression is a desert.

Friendship in that desert is a mirage. So is medicine. So, sadly, is faith. These things appear to offer hope, but they evaporate when clutched at.

I remember talking with one of these friends, who said he was so alone, asking him how he could feel that way. We spoke every day, deeply, and we spent dozens of hours together every week. But though I reached out to him, he could never actually receive the friendship I offered. I was an illusion to him in the desert time, and it made us both sad. We were cheated.

My other friend ditched his meds, claiming that God had healed him of his depression. Faith was meant to be his new prescription. And for a while, faith was effective. Or so we thought. Later we found out that his body was overcompensating for the dosage of his medication, and when he stopped taking it he became manic. What looked like healing was only a chemical response to persistent stimuli. What a letdown. The art projects he had made during that time, photographic *kerygma* he called them (after the Greek work for preaching), still remain on my hard drive. He wants me to delete them because he feels like they were fraudulent, because there was no miracle. I refuse, because I think the miracle was having hope and fighting anyway.

I still do.

My heart goes out to those who suffer with depression, but I still have hope, and I pray it into you as well. Take courage. God didn't heal my friends (one died from an unrelated illness, the other is still on meds), but God rescued them both from real dangers in the midst of their respective ordeals. They overcame their fears about depression, and they overcame their fears about being labeled as faithless, wayward, crazy people. They beat the stigma, and they learned how to live and be fathers and friends and husbands in the desert. They learned that life doesn't have to end in the desert; you just have to learn how to survive there.

You will too. You'll get through this nomadic season. You, too, have friends around you – and faith within you – and though you likely cannot believe that they are anything other than a mirage, or a useless hallucination, take what heart you can from knowing that they are real and you are not alone.

The same God who said these words to His people long ago is speaking them to you now: *I am the Lord, who brought you out of the wilderness... open your mouth and I will fill it with good things.*



Day 24: Unemployment

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Matthew 11.28-30

Our town currently has an unemployment rate of about 12%. That's actually good news. For a while it was upwards of 18%, and our neighboring communities even breached 20%.

Many of my friends are unemployed. These are good people, hard workers who are not too proud to do what needs to be done to provide for those they love. But times are tough. People are forced into early retirement. Buy out packages are meager, but they're better than getting laid off completely. People here are trapped by the decline of the American motor car, a slow famine twenty years in the making.

It's hard to go without a job.

Unemployment is a kind of desert because you find yourself going nowhere and finding nothing to do. For some, the busy stage only lasts a little while. You get laid off, fired, or out of school, and you immediately set to work finding a job. You're industrious. You're serious. You set your home page to monster.com or findjobs.com; you work on your resume; you faithfully collect the classified ads; you look for the right kind of work.

This is like the entry into the desert. You're prepared for what you think might be out there. You're even a little eager. You know it may take a long time to get through it, but you're counting on your good attitude and your determination to get you through.

After a while, though, that initial burst of discipline wanes and you check the internet less often: the postings are all the same since last week anyway, right? You only get the classifieds once a week. You're less picky now, but less determined too. You wonder whether or not all your efforts have paid off or ever will. You begin to think that the right job will come along at some point, and when it happens it happens.

This is the early-middle of the desert trek. The realization is sinking in that you don't have as much control as you thought you did; but there is also a nagging doubt as to whether or not you're quite as capable as you thought you were. You begin to feel twinges of anxiety, but you push them aside thinking: *It'll all work out.*

Somewhere along the way, people begin to offer first suggestions, then criticisms. They nag. They poke. They tell you things you already know and offer opportunities that you've already exhausted. You resent them for it. You're still not hungry, but you're not optimistic anymore, either. You're a realist now, and you know that you're not likely to cross the vast desert any sooner because of their nattering.

Then you get hungry. Then you starve. Then you see your children hungry and forlorn, and you get desperate. You work anywhere for a few bucks. You think back on all the things you had that you didn't appreciate. You remember the things you had that could have been sold for more. Thinking in the moment, you hit yourself for your prior generosity and for your prior contributions to others when what you should have been doing was planning for the security of those who love.

Now you're really in it. This is the desert of unemployment. As you look around, all you see is more desert. You're out of determination. You're full of panic. You don't know which direction to turn.

From time to time you'll see someone else in this desert. They may offer advice or give direction, but you don't want that. All you want is for them to take you with them. If they have employees, you want them to employ you. If they have just found work, you want them to put in a good word for you. If they are unemployed like you, then you want them to like you, but you also want to keep them from dragging you any lower.



There is good news in the desert, though. There's help for you from those around you, from your church, from the people who love you, if you can accept it. And there will be work, too. None of my friends who were unemployed two years ago are still unemployed now. Those were tough years, to be sure, but the nice thing about years is that they always come to an end.

Just like the desert.

In the meantime you've got to focus on why you're stuck in the desert in the first place. For the ancient Israelites it was because of a lack of faith and an abundance of complaint. For many today, they are in the desert of unemployment because of the way they conducted themselves as their last job. Few are ready to admit this publicly, but for most they acknowledge (at least to themselves) that there was something they weren't doing well that they should have been. Maybe, in better times, that wouldn't have cost them their job but now it has. And yet, regardless of why you find yourself now jobless (and in full view of the things you'll need to change in order to get and keep the next good job), you must still ask the all-important question of what God is trying to teach you through your experience. For Israel, His gift of manna and quail taught them daily dependence upon His mercy.

What are you learning? Or have you thought only about escape, and forsaken encounter completely?

Remember, God may not have caused you to enter the desert; but while you're there He is certainly trying to teach you something. Best to learn it quickly, so you can come to rely on the strength that lesson will provide while you find your way out.



Day 23: Being a Young Mother

She sets about her work vigorously;
her arms are strong for her tasks.
She is clothed with strength and dignity;
she can laugh at the days to come.
She speaks with wisdom,
and faithful instruction is on her tongue.
She watches over the affairs of her household
and does not eat the bread of idleness.
Her children arise and call her blessed;
her husband also, and he praises her:

*Many women do noble things,
but you surpass them all.*

Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting;
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.
Honor her for all that her hands have done,
and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.

Proverbs 31.17, 26-31

There is no vocation quite so much like being a monk as being a young mother. The goal of most monastic orders is to disavow yourself of every worldly ambition, to empty yourself of vain thought, and to devote yourself wholly to God.



That's what every mother does, or at least attempts.

Perhaps by necessity (though that hardly robs them of their nobility), moms care little for themselves in comparison to the care they give their children. Their children are fed first, dressed first, given new clothes and new school things first. When the children are in need, moms drop their own work and attend to them. When the children are not in need, moms are typically at work preparing for what their children will need again soon.

When women enter a convent and take their vows to become nuns they are given a special uniform, called a habit. The habit represents total commitment to a holy order. Mothers wear habits – diaper bags and burping clothes – and live with their own kind of religious observation. The habit of motherhood is pressing, but good. The demands are endless, but the smiles, the snuggles, and the joys make the work worthwhile.

When I was a child, I would walk home from school and my mum would immediately stop whatever she was doing to make me tea and toast. I had thirteen years of tea, and most of toast as well. I always received two lumps of sugar, some milk, and a loving, attentive ear. Now I see my wife attend to my children, in different ways but with the same love. Jacob and Anna sit on stools at the counter, drinking hot chocolate and eating peanut butter crackers while they tell Carmel about which letter today was, or about math facts, or adjectives, or which classmate they will marry but never kiss.

If worship truly has the etymological root of “worth-ship”, by which we mean “giving value to something,” then isn't this after-school ritual a kind of lesser worship? Moms ascribe worth and value to their kids every time they set their own work aside to drink tea.

And though it is all worth it, I don't suppose anyone would be foolish enough to suggest that it's easy to be a mom. Moms are tired. Their feet hurt. They can't keep up with all the demands, and they wonder if anyone appreciates all that they do. Working moms find this difficult in several directions at once, and I think single moms have to be among the most holy and special people on earth.

It's no surprise to me, then, that there are biblical allusions to God as our Mother (though they are typically either overlooked or quickly dismissed). Jesus compares the Father to a mother hen, and both Isaiah and Deuteronomy describe God as a comforting mother. Some will try to make a persuasive argument about gender in the Bible (either one way or another) based on passages like these, but that's really missing the point. The purpose

of these word-pictures is not doctrinal but pastoral. They are there to remind us that God cares for us, that He gives us our worth just as we in turn worship Him.

God is motherly, and by corollary, motherhood is godly.

As our understanding of God deepens so does our appreciation of our mothers, and of our requirement to show gratitude and affection for those who have given us life.

And for moms, remember that the fatigue you feel now will pass long before you lose the memories of your little children. Centuries after they had left the desert, the Hebrew people still told stories and sang about their experiences there. But they didn't sing about how hard it was. They sang about the miracles they experienced with God.

The desert of your maternity is a miracle, and you will continue to celebrate the good times long after the hardships have passed.



Day 22: Divorce

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

2 Corinthians 1.3-7

Divorce is a kind of desert, especially if you are religious. Even if you're not religious, though, divorce leaves you exposed. Just as travelers in the desert endured harsh conditions and meager provisions, recent divorcees have little to fall back on. Their primary companion through life is no longer there. Despite the fact that, in their particular circumstance, that absence might be a good thing, it is always difficult to be alone after you have been with someone for a time.

The conditions of divorce are harsh, too, like the desert. Advice comes from everywhere, usually well-meant, but still misplaced, usually more hurtful than helpful. People will say

all kinds of mean things about your ex, just to show they love you. Sometimes you will want to hear those things, and sometimes you will recognize that more hatred is not likely to help you move past the wounds of your marriage. Other people will side with your ex, displaying coldness, anger, or impatience toward you. That, too, is harsh. But it must be borne. There's really no way around it. You must pray for grace and peace, knowing that what others say cannot define you. True, you have some things to be sorry for, and there is much for which you must undoubtedly repent, but the Spirit ought to convict and heal you, not the patrons of your past life who are themselves hurt and betrayed by your absence.

This is where you tend to feel the lack of provisions most keenly in divorce: not so much the financial lack (though that stings), but the relational lack. You've lost part of your family, both intimate and extended. Your couple friends no longer feel comfortable around you, so you wander from couple to couple, trying not to feel like a third wheel and trying not to make them choose sides, though you want them to. You are also without his friends or her friends--friendships that belonged to your spouse and preceded your marriage, but that you have come to cherish. These losses are inevitable, but still cause pain.

If you are religious, then you know that divorce has its own special stigma within the church. It's a super-sin in the eyes of many Christian people. As a rule, churches don't do a good job of helping people recover from divorce, let alone work through the grief, loss, and resentment that inevitably accompany it. We are too busy reminding everyone what the Bible says about divorce instead of helping people find what the Bible says about healing and hope, about new beginnings, and about second chances.

Divorce is a special desert for Christians, made more miserable by the exclusion and the labeling from within the community.

People say divorce is a sin. Is it any wonder why? The pain is so great, so diverse. God, in His mercy, tells us to keep marriage sacred and to avoid divorce in all but the bitterest circumstances because He loves us and is trying to spare us all *this*. But if you are divorced, the time for prohibitions against divorce has already past. It's too late for you not to get divorced; you must now journey through the desert of divorce and come out the other side. You must learn how to be a divorced Christ-follower. You must re-learn your Christianity. You have to start over, with a new paradigm in which the Spirit shapes you. This can be good.



Focus less on the fact that you are divorced, and focus more on the fact that God's Spirit is cooperating with every new opportunity to help make your life better. There is much to be done, as there is in all of us, but you will get used to your new journey and will come out the other side.

Deserts always end. You may not remarry, you may not want to, but there will come a day when you are no longer labeled and defined by your divorce but by your love. That will be a good day.

Day 21: The Internet

They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.

Hebrews 11.38

People used to go off into the desert to find themselves and to uncover new truths about God. The Internet is a new kind of desert. We go online to create ourselves and uncover candid photos about our celebrity-gods, mediated by their paparazzi priests.

Where once we stared into the sun, froze at night, and lived on next to nothing, we now stare at overly bright screens and eat Doritos. I'm not even suggesting this is bad; actually, I think the web presents many of the same opportunities that the desert experiences lent their pilgrims many years ago. I just want us to view the web with fresh eyes.

Take community, for example. Desert pilgrims often joined desert communities, places of collective learning and mutual understanding. These were set up with some basic rules, each differing from place to place. Most people lived there for the same reasons, relational and spiritual enlightenment, but some were there merely to regain their strength. For them, it was a waypoint on a longer journey.

Facebook is our desert community. Some go there for interaction and understanding; most go en route to somewhere else. Facebook lurks in the back of our OS, with a tweet



roll trawling along the bottom of our display like a desert spring (there when we need it, usually overlooked). Facebook is a new monastic community, but with shoddier ideals (hooking up, mostly) and less rigid rules (seriously, does anyone have the power to stop Farmville?).

The Internet also provides vast amounts of information and shared knowledge. Like the desert, the Internet is full of heretics. In the desert, these faulty-thinkers were isolated. In order to reach them and hear their teachings you had to travel a long way. Only the best teaching was worthy of traveling a great distance to hear, and since many of their ideas were readily exposed as heresy very few people made the journey to hear them. Consequently, their influence was very limited. Internet heretics, though, are less obviously wrong and it costs considerably less to entertain their ideas. They are less obviously wrong because many of the people who are exposed to their ideas do so without any prior knowledge or training in the truth. The reason that novices and beginners can access any number of thinkers is, again, because of the reduced cost in learning. The Internet is free. Information is free. Anyone can get access to anything. Consequently, young minds can be exposed to dangerous thoughts with almost no filters to help them determine what thoughts are orthodox and what thoughts are heretical.

On the flip side, the good information available online is monumental. Google is the Library of Alexandria¹⁰⁰ and what you can get from Wikipedia (even with the fluffy stuff thrown in) is far more reliable than what any Palestinian Jew could ever get from his local rabbi in the synagogue.

There are diverse dangers, too, on the web. In the old way, travelers had to be on their guard for hucksters and frauds, crooked merchants and shadowy brothels. Online gambling and porn, email worms and pop-ups pretty much cover that these days.

The Internet is the place where you can most freely be the person you want to be in your own mind. That makes it wonderful, but also dangerous. It is a telling place, like an oracle, and it is an oasis. We know who we really are when we find ourselves surfing the web, led by curiosity, our search, and our favorites.

Who you are online is who you are.

Never forget that.

The remaining readings in this book will explore various aspects and subsidiaries of prayer, repentance, self-denial, and watchfulness. They are meant as ruminations and explorations of what a life wholly devoted to Christ should look like. Think of them as pieces of advice for how best to change into the person God wants you to become.

Day 20: Holy Indifference

A person's wisdom yields patience;
it is to one's glory to overlook an offense.

Proverbs 19.11

I think I do a pretty good job of overlooking the thoughtless things people often say and do. I have learned to smile and nod, making up some excuse for their behavior. I am mostly happy with that approach, but sometimes it tires me out and I revert to a more confrontational version of myself. In those moments, I usually say something like: *Why did you think that was okay?* That embarrasses people and forces them to consider how they come across. I don't like that approach, though, because it embarrasses them. I don't want anyone to feel humiliated or shamed around me. The benefit of their considering how they come across is overshadowed by their fear of looking stupid. So mostly it's just not worth it.

My real trouble comes later, driving home, sitting in my office or lying down at night. It's then that I find my aggression kicking in. I re-play the scenario over and over in my head. In those replays, I say clever things and have sharp retorts. I am courageous and convicting, and instead of being embarrassed, my adversaries turn to repentance and make amends for their wrongdoing. I am the hero, the prophet, and the sage, and the only people nodding and smiling are the crowds, the endless crowds of onlookers and appreciators.



It appears I am still quite childish with my spiritual fantasies.

To my credit, though, I am usually quick to diagnose what's going on and smack some sense into myself. I remind myself that if the offense was really that bad, I should have dealt with it in the moment. Now the moment has passed. The event has concluded. And the only person responsible for any present hurt is me.

I like to think of this progression, from offense to anger to replay to release, as holy indifference, the spiritual discipline of recognizing that not everything is a big deal. People say mean things sometimes, and rarely do they mean them to the full degree. So? Are you going to spend time being angry about that? Are you going to let those words fester? Are you willing to let those things steal your life, energy, and joy?

People do foolish things sometimes, and the consequences of their folly are often meted out upon those closest to them. So? Deal with it and move on.

But that advice is easier to give than to accept, and it's easier to accept than to put into practice. We know we should move on, we know we shouldn't stew over some petty grievance or workplace slight, but we do anyway. We nurse our grudges, keeping them close. They feed off of us, weakening our spirits and draining our mental and emotional resources, but we are maternally protective of those grudges and take a perverse delight in watching them grow into their adolescence. We love our grudges because they enable us to pretend we're victims, and victims never have to account for their anger. The victims' anger is always justified. So is their hate. And they are excused for their refusal to move on.

But we need to move on. We need to move past our grudges. We need to keep short accounts. We need to purge our memories and our pride every day. We need to acknowledge that some things--most things, even--simply are not worth the energy it takes to get over them.

Day 19: Word Made Flesh

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 1.14

Jesus Christ was the Word made flesh. That Word was the Word God spoke to bring creation into existence. That Word was divine. It was power. But when Christ was born into the world, the Word was no longer abstract. It was a person. The time for debating what the Word was had concluded. Now we all know what the word means because we have the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth recorded.

Everything Jesus did shows us the full meaning of that Word. Prior to Christ, rabbis and theologians understood that words were creative, that they were used for making and describing things, and that they could be beautiful and hurtful. People knew that words mattered, but they didn't know how valuable a word could be.

But with Jesus, there was no division between his word and his life. He did what he said, and he meant what he did. Jesus' words were actions, events; every word was a verb. He didn't just describe healing; he healed with his words. He didn't just talk about the curse of fruitlessness; he actually brought death to the tree without fruit.

When we call someone a hypocrite, we mean that their actions and their words do not line up. The word "hypocrite" comes from the ancient Greek word for "actor." A hypocrite



is someone whose real life doesn't match his public perception. A hypocrite is a pretender, a fake.

The words of the hypocrite are not made of flesh.

Jesus shows us what it means to end all hypocrisy. He shows us how to stop playing at being human and start living like we were meant to. Christ was a man of his Word.

Every time we speak and mean it, we are our words made flesh. When we say we'll do a thing and then do it, we put skin on our intentions. To do this well, we invest ourselves in the Scriptures and learn what kind of people God intended for us to become. We learn His words and speak them. We often find them easier to say than to do, and we shudder at our hypocrisy. However, this should not make us stop speaking the truth, though it should make us that much more careful to live the truth.

In his first letter to his church, John points out that if people claim to know Christ yet persist in darkness, they are liars and do not do the truth. Doing the truth is the important bit here.

Do the truth.

Be people of your word.

Make your words flesh.

That is what it means to let Christ grow inside of you, to cultivate your life as a habitat for his ongoing incarnation. That is what he intends for us to understand when he says, *Make my home in me, as I make mine in you.*

He means that he has come, Word made flesh, to make his dwelling among us.



Day 18: Body of Christ

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many... God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

1 Corinthians 12.12-14, 24-27

Christ's first body was destroyed on the cross. His first incarnation, or the first time he took a body, ended. He now has two new bodies. He has a resurrection body, which is his original body re-formed and remade. His other body--his other incarnation--is his church.

There is value in having a body. It is tough to carry on a conversation without one. It is even more difficult to shake hands or embrace. You can't fix a building without hands or walk into the home of a friend without legs and feet. You cannot hear without ears.

During his first incarnation, Jesus put his body to good use. He spoke to others, and they understood that his words were God's words to them. He listened to others, and they



knew that God heard their prayers. He lifted others up, healed them, and comforted them, giving them the knowledge that God was with them.

God with us. Immanuel.

Immanuel is not a clever metaphor or a nice way to express a sentiment. Christ was Immanuel because he was actually with us. We could have touched him then. He could not be separated from his body. What he did bodily was what he actually was doing.

Then he died, and his body went away. The world was absent its Immanuel.

But as the high doctrine of the church teaches us, the world got Immanuel back in the church. The church is the body of Christ. He cannot be separated from his body. What Christ does bodily through the church is what he is actually doing.

Christians in One Body make the church Immanuel. Our task is to make God visible in the world. When people ask, *Where is God in the midst of all this?*, it should be the church who hears and authenticates their complaint, just as it should be the church who answers in word and in deed. The mystery of the church requires that we love each other in visible and tangible ways, to portray the visible, tangible love of God. Because what we do is what He is doing. We are His hands. We are His voice. We are His.

Christ will never be visible to the world unless the church begins to act like he did.

This is hard news, because too often we are a shabby Christ. I don't mean that we're poor or that we slouch, I mean that we do a poor job of our Immanuel, allowing the posture of the church in the world to droop. We become preoccupied with things Christ largely ignored: the hot issues of the day, government, war and the military, doctrinal dispute. We neglect the people Christ came to heal: – the sick, the low, the wounded, the blind, the disenfranchised, the outcast, the penitent, the sinner.

We must repent of our shabbiness and better represent Immanuel. We must strive for unity, love, charity, and mercy so the world can be reminded that God is, once again, with us. Only this time, his body is not limited to one small place in space, but has diversified into two billion franchises across the globe. Then they will know that when they speak, God hears, and when they ask for help, it will come.



Day 17: *Chesed*

This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

We love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

1 John 4.17-21

I like words. I like learning new words and playing with words. Words have a funny way of stirring the imagination, like when you begin to incorporate a new word into your life or writing, you realize that word exactly captures the thing you've always been trying to say. Or you learn that a common word actually means something different than you thought it did. "Epitome" comes to mind (it is not the apex of something, but the most obvious example of a thing), or "cell" (which was originally a small room where monks used to hide for prayer, but only later became a place to hide our criminals so they can learn to pray). Such knowledge opens new possibilities. You begin to reinterpret the world based on the new word and the truth it unveils.

I have learned a new word. It is the root of our English word "mercy." It comes from the French word *merci*, which means *thank you* and is appropriately spoken after you receive a gift. God has given us a gift, and the response is gratitude. That is the first level of mercy.



But *merci* itself comes from the Latin word *misericordia*, which means *the seat of propitiation*. *Misericordia* were chairs in which the accused sat awaiting judgment. It was where they awaited sentencing, and when they got off scot free, their chair was known as the “mercy seat.” This is the second level of mercy: though we are guilty of many crimes against God’s holiness, He has pardoned us from our just punishment.

In the fourteenth century, German monks became famous for their artistic representations of *misericords*. In their case, they would carve rude and funny pictures into the bottom of the chairs in their church halls as a means of escaping the punishment of listening to an endless blathering of sermons.

But *misericords* and *misericordia* are not the final level of mercy. To find that, we must reach back even further into ancient Hebrew and the word *chesed*. There is no adequate English equivalent for this word. In English, mercy means *compassion* or *pity*. In Hebrew, *chesed* means *fidelity* and *strength*. In English, having mercy means overlooking an offense. In Hebrew, having *chesed* means loving the offender so much you’re willing to suffer instead of making him suffer. *Chesed* is the power that binds us to God and to one another.

If one of your children has ever broken something irreplaceable, you know the power of *chesed*. When I was a child, I snatched my grandfather’s Bible from its secret spot beneath my father’s bed. My grandfather had died a year before, and I was still angry, so I cut up his Bible with a knife I stole from the kitchen. My father was furious. That Bible could never be mended, just as my grandfather would never be returned to my father. But I was not punished. My punishment was seeing my father cry over the Bible and over his father. My father never made me repay him for the damage done. He refused to burden me with the guilt of it, and I remember knowing the full measure of his grief and of his love for me in refusing to pass that grief on to me in anger.

We are bound to God by mercy and by *chesed*. We know that He suffered for us because he loves us and wishes to spare us the full measure of atoning for our crimes.

One final word I’ve recently learned is related to *chesed*. That word is *chasid* and it means *saint*. The *chasid* is one empowered by *chesed*. We become saints when we live with mercy. When we appreciate the mercy of God, we are transformed by it. We no longer live as people who have gotten away with it (whatever it may be), but we are now people who pass mercy on to others. It is a gift we have received from God, a painful gift, and it is a gift we pass on to others. Through the *chasid*, God reaches into the world and passes His mercy virally.

This is the final level of mercy, in which we are transformed from recipients to vendors.

Day 16: Lazarus

Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. *Take away the stone*, he said.

But, Lord, said Martha, the sister of the dead man, *by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.*

Then Jesus said, *Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?*

So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, *Father, I thank you that You have heard me. I knew that You always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that You sent me.*

When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, *Lazarus, come out!* The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

Jesus said to them, *Take off the grave clothes and let him go.*

John 11.38-44

The first time I traveled overseas, I was only fourteen years old. Our youth group was doing a missions trip, and my folks thought it would be a healthy experience for me. Time has certainly proven them right. Getting out of your element and being exposed to world citizenry (especially in the developing world) is a guaranteed game-changer. It's hard to



complain about your Playstation once you realize much of the rest of the world eats only rice, only once a day.

Prior to that little jaunt, our youth pastor led us in two months of Bible studies and prayer meetings that focused on healing and the supernatural power of God. I had read about miracles in the Bible, of course, but had never imagined the possibility of modern-day miracles. I asked my folks if this stuff was real, and they confirmed that, though rare, it did happen. That blew my mind, and I began to pray and trust God to see some crazy stuff happen. I have one strong memory of a conversation with my friend Chris about a week before I was to leave. Completely serious, I told Chris that I truly believed I was going to see God's power bring the dead back to life.

I now find it hard to write those words without feeling some need to qualify or defend my youthful expression of faith. But I won't. Those who know me are not likely to claim I'm superstitious or weak-minded. Quite the opposite. And yet that is the very thing I want to address: the ridiculous nature of childlike faith and how we need it.

I saw several miracles on that trip to the Philippines, though no resurrections, a fact for which I am now thankful. I have seen several other miracles since then as well, in a variety of settings. I don't want to get into details (if you're a skeptic, I'm not sure my details would convince you anyway), but I do want to point out that my experience supports a belief in the supernatural.

My context, my education, and my cultural conditioning, however, do not support my experience. Nothing about my life either requires, validates, or would even benefit from the miraculous. I live in a world that is functionally anti-supernatural. We might believe that that stuff might be out there somewhere; we have enough pop cultural fodder to take as evidence that things like aliens, UFOs, parapsychology, and all that other stuff from *Fringe* and the *X-files* might exist. But that rarely translates into a willingness to believe that the guy we pray for after church might legitimately get up out of his wheelchair and walk home on his own two feet.

In the years between taking that first trip to the Philippines and getting my graduate degree, I experienced a subtle but persistent shift in adopting the world's skepticism about the supernatural. It began with honoring the miracles I'd witnessed, then doubting the point of praying for miracles since they didn't always occur, then intellectualizing away the need for miracles since modern science and social welfare programs pretty much cover our bases anyway, into finally either neglecting or denying the supernatural world at all.

But then I came across the Scripture concerning Lazarus' resurrection. When I first read it, my thoughts turned to fear. I sincerely hoped no one anywhere in the world was preaching about that story, because it was too outlandish to do anything other than discredit our Christian message altogether. Anyone with a brain, I thought, would see through this fairy tale as the pre-industrial, non-scientific mythologization of a group of people desperate to believe in their own ethnic folklore.

But then it hit me that this was the very same story I had heard teaching on as a young man that gave me all that faith and confidence prior to traveling to the Philippines. This was the story that led me to tell Chris I thought I'd see resurrection.

The story that gave me faith as a child exposed my lack of faith as an adult. And my rational world began to crumble a little. I realized then that the entire Christian story is one fantastically complex web of miracles and supernatural exigencies. Everything we believe is crazy, at least in the eyes of the cynic and the skeptic. We can explain it away, we can ignore the weird bits of the Bible, but I can tell you for a fact that the weird bits, the bits I'd rather ignore, have proven to be the most powerful and transformational in my short yet eventful life.

If we can believe there is a God in Heaven who came into the world incarnate, who conquered death and came into new bodily life again, and who now lives inside billions of people as a nonmaterial Comforter and Counselor, why do we have so much trouble believing that prayer actually makes a difference in the lives of the sick and the infirm? How can we not believe in the power of belief?

Since that re-discovery of the Lazarus story, I have experienced my own manner of resurrection. That faithful child, buried by academia and the rational rules of western thought, has been resurrected. I'm not content to live a life that denies the things I know to be true. I'm not content to wait around for science to validate what I have witnessed firsthand. My faith does not demand God to perform the miracles I want to see in the ways and at the times I want to see them. Nonetheless, my faith is based on the miraculous, the divine, the invisible, the spiritual, the metaphysical, and the supernatural.

If we want to see what God's kingdom is like, we must become like little children. Children have imagination, perhaps the most key ingredient of faith. And without faith, it is impossible to please God.



Day 15: Wounds

Thomas was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, *We have seen the Lord!*

But he said to them, *Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.*

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, *Peace be with you!* Then he said to Thomas, *Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.*

Thomas said to him, *My Lord and my God!*

John 20.24-28

Everything I'm about to say is totally speculative. Or at least it is anchored, as it were, in my ruminations and imagination and not in proof texts and solid biblical theology.

But it starts with Scripture.

When Jesus was resurrected, he came back into new life still bearing the wounds of his crucifixion. He had holes from the nails in his hands. He had the wound from the spear in his side. These wounds proved to doubting Thomas that he was, in fact, the same Christ

who had been crucified. Thomas doubted, even though everyone else believed. Thomas took no comfort from the testimony of his peers. Thomas refused to acknowledge the miracles Jesus performed after his resurrection as proof of his identity. Only Christ's wounds identified him.

It is our wounds that define us. It is our wounds that tell others who we really are.

I imagine that when we are resurrected into our new bodies, perfect though Paul tells us they may be, the manner of their perfection will be quite different than the way we picture perfection now. Like Christ, we will still bear our wounds. I don't know to what degree, or even which wounds we will retain and which will be healed over (or even if the specifics will concern us). But this thought is consistent both with Scripture's witness concerning Christ and with the character and nature of God: our wounds will show forth even though they have been healed.

The wounds will be there, but they will neither bleed nor hurt. They will no longer hinder us, but will instead be marks of who we really are. They will be the proof that David is still David, telling the story of how David came to life in Christ Jesus and into eternal life.

In the First Nations bands, known as Native American tribes here in the Midwest, totem poles are used to tell the history of each band of people. Each totem tells part of their history. Each visual is a representation of who they really are. Our bodies will someday be like these totem poles. Just as Jesus shared himself and proved himself to Thomas, we will share and prove our stories and our experiences with one another.

But unlike Thomas's experience, these times will not be marked with grief, accusation, or shame at our lack of faith. These times will be celebratory and fun, like times we share in the lodge after snowboarding, where we pull up our pant legs and show the scars we earned when we first failed a landing. These will be locker room moments, where we compare who got the most stitches from the biggest hit. Our wounds will give us bragging rights, but without any braggadocio, because God will get the glory for our wounds.

Now, when we share our testimonies with each other, we praise God when we hear of someone who came out of an abusive situation, or who is no longer involved in illegal activity, or who was delivered from addiction or involvement in the occult. Their deliverance from a dark past causes us to glorify God. Only He could set them free from that. That's what comparing our wounds will be like. Only God could resurrect us from such hurt. Only God is able to give us new life when our old lives left us so little.



I told you earlier that this idea is speculation... ish. It is based on Scripture, but it's entirely possible I've mis-imagined how this will all work. But if nothing else, it does give us a good way of understanding how to love our wounds in the present. We should not hide the sufferings from which we have been healed. We should share them. Only God could have brought us this far, and we must tell our stories to others so they can marvel at the size of our scars and the miracle of our healing.

But it all begins with a willingness to show one another our wounds; only then will we see each other for who we really are and who God has become in each of our lives.

Day 14: the Buffet

As a man thinks in his heart, so he is.

Proverbs 3.27 NKJV

I know there's likely some kind of neuroscientific reason for this, and maybe we all know it intuitively anyway, but I'd like to remind us that our thoughts are powerful. How we think and what we think about have a profound influence upon the world. Our thoughts control us. They limit us. They liberate us. They allow us to see the world as a land of opportunity. They prohibit us from receiving love. Our thoughts may not entirely determine reality (you cannot, after all, think your way out of a holocaust), but they certainly frame it. And that framework, and what controls it, matters.

Our thoughts control our emotions. For example, the more we think about the way Susan looks for an occasion to insult us, deride us at work, or insinuate somehow that we're not good enough, the more we begin to feel anger and resentment toward her. We project our negative thoughts onto Susan, which causes us to interpret everything she says or does--even when she does it innocently--as evidence proving she is out to get us. What starts with our thoughts translates into a strong emotional response against another person. The point is that this all starts in our head. Thoughts control emotions, and emotions in turn control our demeanor. The more resentment we feel towards Susan, the more our outward appearance begins to reflect that resentment. When we smile at her it is strained, forced, and she wonders why we're trying so hard or what our problem is or what we've covered up. Everyone around us begins to realize we're in a mood. That demeanor affects



our relationships. People recognize there's something off about us, something unstable, and they keep their distance. They ask Susan what's going on, trying to figure out whether or not there's something more sinister or more exciting going on than they had realized (a soured affair, perhaps, or a weekend conflict that would titillate were the tale told). When we see Susan receive what we think of as support, we then further project our resentment from Susan to everyone around her. Our resentment grows, our demeanor continues to darken and become more oppressive, and more and more of our relational sphere is sucked into the vortex of our dark imagination. At this point, things have swollen from an uncontrolled thought to a systemic framework for interpreting reality that is now causing us great harm in the real world. We have isolated ourselves, stigmatized ourselves in the eyes of others as an outsider, as an angry person, as a loose cannon.

All this, because of our thoughts. They control reality, or at least the framework through which we interact with the real world.

We must learn to control our thoughts. That is where all this stuff begins. We live what we think, and we think with our hearts. Notice that none of the thought-stuff I described above could ever be considered rational or cognitive. It's not how we think that's really the issue here, but what we think about and how often those thoughts occupy our minds.

It's like thinking feeds everything else. The more we think about something, the bigger the something becomes. The more we think about some crime in the world, the more we begin to see that crime perpetrated everywhere. The more we think about the new car we want to buy, the more we see that new car on the road. It's not that reality has changed; it's just that we've energized our perceptions of reality and created a framework for seeing the real world in concert with the world of our thoughts.

We must learn to control what we think about. We must learn to stop thinking about certain things and think instead about other things. We must exercise thought-discipline early on so we don't have to exercise so much emotional discipline later on. When we discipline our thoughts, we don't have to work so hard to discipline our demeanor; and so our relationships will require less discipline as well. In this way our reality will conform more naturally to our desires and our intention, without us having always to focus so much on constricting our behavior. A change in behavior will naturally result from a more disciplined thought-life.

My friend Greg talks about controlling his thoughts like a buffet. There are two sides to the buffet--the good stuff and the bad stuff--and in each moment can choose which side of the buffet he will eat from. If he eats from the bad buffet, his life will get worse.

So if he is in a car accident and ruins his vehicle, Greg disciplines himself not to worry about the damage to his car. He knows he will have to pay for it, and he knows he will be inconvenienced, but he only allows himself to think about those things one time. After that, he considers them part of the bad buffet and he chooses not to eat there because he doesn't want his life to be consumed with worry or drama. He doesn't want to feed those parts of himself that make his life worse. Instead, he eats from the good buffet. He thanks God that he is okay after the accident. He imagines all the ways in which things could have turned out worse and is grateful that they didn't. He looks at the rest of his life and focuses on his many blessings. And his life gets better as a result. He lives with gratitude. He has a pleasant spirit. People find him encouraging to be around, because he eats from the good buffet.

When you choose to eat from the good buffet, you are choosing to think more about the good things, which affects your emotions. When you think about Susan's good qualities--her smile, the way she volunteers on the weekend, the one nice thing she's ever thought to say to you--your emotional responses to Susan change. You begin to notice little things you wouldn't have noticed before. You're not falling in love with Susan, but you are learning to like her. Your emotions determine your demeanor, and so Susan herself begins to respond to your genuine smiles and your courteous manner. You're not yet her favorite person, but she's no longer mean-spirited toward you, and sometimes she's even kind. Your relationship with Susan reaches a positive balance. It's a good start. Give it time. One day you may even have cause to call Susan your friend. Your thoughts control your emotions, your emotions dictate your demeanor, and your demeanor affects your relationships. If you're warm enough and gracious enough for long enough, even enemies become friends.

And reality is changed for the better.



Day 13: Boredom

What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?

Mark 8.36

Everyone goes through seasons of boredom. We get bored with our work; we get bored at home. Our hobbies sometimes bore us. Even spirituality can be boring from time to time. Prayer can feel like a chore, and the Bible, which we know is supposed to good for us, can put us to sleep faster than Bea Arthur explaining the intricacies of growing older.

We try not to complain when we find our lives boring. We've grown accustomed to others telling us to shut up about our boredom while they are presumably either in crisis or having a grand old time and don't want it ruined by our apathy. But when your whole life becomes boring, when you feel persistently bored with who you are and what you are doing, that's a real problem.

This boredom, however, is symptomatic of a deeper issue, like most other surface evaluations. Boredom is a sign of disconnectedness. We become bored when we think that what we do doesn't matter or is not important enough to make a difference.

For example, many people work only in order to provide food, clothing, shelter, and all the basics for their family. That kind of work, in my opinion, is actually very noble and selfless. They are not working because they love to; they are working to take care of their family. That's the good kind of old fashioned. But at some point the work becomes so dull and mindless that our boredom with work transfers into a boredom with our entire existence.

We wonder if the kids really appreciate what we're doing. Or if they care. Or even if we care that they care. We entertain thoughtless fantasies about just quitting everything and moving on, with or without the people who love us.

The danger of that kind of boredom is the possibility that we might take reckless action, in the process ruining the lives of those who depend on us.

The solution, I suggest, is not a change of circumstances, vocation, or whatever, but an investigation into why these things (our job, our hobbies, our spirituality, etc) matter in the first place. To get through our boredom, we have to remember why we're doing what we are doing. We have to get back to the street level, to re-discover our job, our family, our joys and our chores from the ground up.

To return to our previous example, the only way that the 9-5 grind can be de-bored is by focusing on love and dreams. When you realize that the work you do has a direct connection to the people you love, your boredom dissipates. The longer you think about your beautiful daughter and all that she needs to feel like she's loved and safe and worthy of attention, the less boring your work seems. Furthermore, if you have something specific in mind--a dream about saving for a vacation or a surprise birthday present or a weekend away with your spouse--then you can connect everything you are doing toward working for that goal.

When my wife was in college, her dad promised that whatever money she earned over the summer he would double. Dollar for dollar, whatever was in her account on September 1st. Consequently, Carmel worked the most miserable jobs, provided they had the best pay. She never spent any money on herself during the summer (she would buy clothes on September 2nd), and she spent as little as possible on gas and eating out. She had a dream of not running out of money half-way through the second semester, and by connecting everything she did to that dream, she was able to conquer the boredom of tree planting in isolation in Northern British Columbia.

Pastoring, like anything else, can be boring work too. But I only need a quick jaunt through some of the notebooks I keep to remember why I do it. I save the kind letters and encouraging emails, and whenever I am tempted to think that it doesn't really matter how I spend my time or what I do, I take a quick look at those books and I am right as rain.

You need to find ways to love and dream in order to keep yourself connected to why you're doing what you're doing and why it matters that you continue to do it, so that you don't wake up one morning, quit your job, and join the circus at age 52.



Day 12: Commands Aren't Burdens

In fact, this is love for God: to keep His commands. And His commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world.

1 John 5.3-4

Carmel and I have pastored many people over the years who have completely failed to see the point of obedience to Christ. Like much of American society, these folks have resisted coming clean before God because their sin--usually sexual sin or greed--provides so much excitement. They cannot stop sinning because it's still fun, and they think that by coming to Christ wholly they will miss out on their fun.

I suppose that's a fine theory, until you take into account the lives they are actually living. Without judgment, Carmel and I have spoken to wayward souls while they mourned their sense of shame and brokenness after one-night stands and pregnancy tests. They have poured their guts out to us about feeling used and unwanted. We have shared their scares with STDs and ecstasy and weed laced with heroine, and we have held them while they cried with regret. We have talked to them when their marriages were falling apart because all their time was spent investing in work instead of in people. We have refused their sizeable donations in an attempt to disavow them of the notion that if they are rich and generous, somehow God will no longer be concerned with their hearts.

We have done a lot of that kind of ministry before, and we do it now. In all likelihood, we will always be there with grave countenance and heavy heart, trying to control our judgments and our self-righteous desire to scream: *What do you think you're playing at?*

God gives us instruction so we don't have to live like that. Sex is great, but that kind of sex is neither great in the moment nor great afterwards. It becomes a chore to try to scrub off the wrong sex over and over again, impossible to scrub your mind free of regret. Money is so good when you don't have enough of it, but when you start to chase it, hungering for it to the exclusion of all other concerns, it really isn't so good anymore. Neither is ambition. Or partying. Or clout.

All of that stuff sours over time, through overuse or the wrong kind of use. If you haven't yet discovered this truth for yourself, you probably think I'm feeding you the company line. I'm not. I'm sharing with you the truth as I understand it from my vantage point, rubbing heaving shoulders leaned over toilet bowls and passing tissues to dab at mascara. I'm sharing with you the opposite of dogma (do this, or else!) and showing you simply that you do not have to do this any longer.

The pleasure of sin fades, but obedience is its own reward. This is why the commands of God are not burdensome. Obedience may be difficult at times, but it is so much less difficult than living with regret and shame in isolation and hurt.

And, of course, these commands are even less burdensome when we properly understand which commands we're talking about. We're not talking about long lists of sins and virtues. We're not even talking about the Ten Commandments. Memorizing all the sins in the Bible and trying not to accidentally do them, or memorizing all the good stuff and trying to check them off the to-do list, would be silly at best and frustratingly circular at worst. You would never be a better lover and follower of Christ; you would only be better at making lists.

No, the commands we are meant to follow are the commands from the Spirit. We pay attention to the Spirit--which is attentiveness to God--and listen for His instruction. We strain to hear His whisper. He tells us how to be. He tells us which things we should avoid. He tells us which opportunities to grab. We educate our spiritual intuition by reading the Bible, but even the Bible does not contain an exhaustive list of all the potential sins of which we must be aware. Sin is simply too complex and diabolical. Sin is always manifesting in



new ways, and we cannot rely only on the Scripture to warn us of the possibility of sin. We must rely heavily on the Spirit to warn us when sin is imminent, or to convict us of the sins we have already committed. We need the Spirit to instruct us to shadow God and heal the world through our good deeds, our kind thoughts, and our noble intentions.

Obedience is not burdensome when you undertake it in the context of a relationship. The Spirit is your guide, and he is not heavy-handed. He is your gentle advocate. He wants you to succeed. He is not waiting for you to fail so he can convict you. He is nudging you, ushering you into a better life, working with you to make it a better world.

The invitation of the Spirit is always to life, and to a better life. Better is never burdensome; what weighs us down is our insistence to continue chasing after pleasures we will never catch, catching instead wounds we can never release. This is why, in the Scriptures, John ends his thought with a reminder that we have overcome the world. We have beaten the system of wound and have chosen instead to align ourselves with the author of Life.

And it is good.



Day 11: How You Treat Others

Then the righteous will answer him, *Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?*

The King will reply, *Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.*

Matthew 25.37-40

A few years ago I was in South Africa at a children's village. The woman in charge was called Mamma Mary, and she was perhaps the most profoundly spiritual person I have ever met. In the few minutes we shared together at her kitchen table, she spun out some of the most complex theological truths you could ever mine from the Scriptures.

This was remarkable because she was herself. She grew up under the Apartheid regime, suffering greatly at the hands of the Afrikaners. But she understood the deep things of the Scriptures because of Desmond Tutu, the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, from the tribe of Xhosa, like Mary. Mary learned from Bishop Tutu what she could not read in the Bible. She learned who she was in the eyes of God and what God wanted for her and for all South Africans. She learned about the discrepancies between her real life and the life God wanted for her, and she learned that those discrepancies made Him angry.



But Mary was not angry. Maybe that was because Apartheid had been over for over a decade when we met, but I suspect that the absence of anger had less to do with time past and more to do with her understanding that all people, even those who wounded and persecuted her, were loved by God.

I wish I could have recorded those few minutes around Mary's table. She said everything so powerfully and so simply. She was full of light and joy.

Of all the things she said to us, the one that stands out most for me is this: *How you treat others is how you treat God.*

Surrounded by the effects of the Afrikaners' persecution--the stump of a leg remaining on the man next to me, several scarred men and women serving in the kitchen behind Mary, Mary herself bearing the wounds of her victimization--and hearing these words spoken about loving the white South Africans was a transformational encounter.

There was never a better sermon.

This idea is at the root of the Ubuntu proverb, *A person is a person through other persons*, which itself comes from Jesus' teaching concerning "the least of these." The people around you are themselves made in the image and likeness of their Creator, bearing a resemblance to Him, made like His shadows. The way you treat them is the way you treat God Himself.

Lent is a good time to be reminded that we do to others not only what we want them to do to us, but what we want to do to God.

Day 10: Eternal Life

God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

1 John 5.11-12

What is eternal life? First, it is life that persists beyond death. In the Christian understanding, human beings are not spirits contained within bodies, two disparate things joined together. Human beings are living souls. That is why any biblical understanding of the afterlife must take into account all teaching on the resurrection. We don't go up into Heaven as disembodied spirits. The clear teaching of the Bible is that we live again in new bodies on a new earth. Eternal life, then, is the life we will live here after we have been resurrected. And that life will never end, for there will be no more sickness, death, or time. We will just go on living in the presence of God forever.

Second, eternal life is the quality of life we will enjoy. Some have rendered the phrase "eternal life" as "the life of the ages" or even "life, the way it was always meant to be lived." These are good renderings, linguistically credible. What's more, they make good sense. Not only will we live forever with Christ, but we will live a life fantastic, wondrous, and awesome. It will be the high life. We will feel truly alive every moment. Our prior lives on earth will feel like the work we had to do before we could enjoy this eternally long weekend.



The Bible talks so much about eternal life because it's a carrot worth chasing. It's good to have the best life possible. It's even better when such a life never ends. Life will be full throttle, and we will never run out of gas.

I could say a lot about how we will spend this eternity--our activities and occupations and whatnot--but that's not really what I want to talk about. I just want to remind us what eternity is supposed to feel like, not go over the weekend schedule of events.

More importantly, I want us to understand that we do not have to wait for death and resurrection to begin enjoying the life of the ages now. We can experience life, presently, the way it was always meant to be lived, eternally. Through Christ and his promise for abundant life, we can come to enjoy a better quality of living than we ever thought was possible on our own. We have access to Heaven's resources now. Please don't get sidetracked into thinking that I'm promising unrestricted health and wealth. And please don't be deceived into thinking that neither material means or physical wellbeing matter. (Jesus healed too many people and taught too much about money for us to be deceived into thinking that health and wealth are irrelevant. They are only irrelevant for people of relative means and relative wellbeing. For the poor, the promise of self-sustenance is good news. For the sick, the promise of good health is gospel.) I'm talking about so much more than health and wealth. I'm talking about the ability to forgive. To let go. To move past old hurts, wounds, bitterness, and resentment. I'm talking about the power to love those who persecute you, and in the process watch them be transformed by that love and become friends instead of enemies. I'm talking about a life so good it's contagious.

And we can begin living that way now.

To illustrate, let me share with you that we have recently hired a web developer at our church. Shane was offered the job almost three weeks before we began paying him, but during those three weeks he spent his evenings and weekends doing the job for which he would later be rewarded. Don't you see? Shane was already living the life he wanted, the life he was promised, before he had received his final and just reward.

We can do that with eternal life now as well. Later on, life the way it was always meant to be lived is a certainty, but now it remains a possibility. All we need to experience that eternal life in the present tense is faith in Christ and an open posture to his Spirit.

Day 9: Listening

Consider carefully what you hear.

Mark 4.24

Did you know that the word “absurd” means “deaf”? It comes from the Latin word *surdus* which is used to refer to someone who can’t hear properly and, as a result, ends up playing their instrument out of tune with others in the band. These days we say someone is absurd when their ideas are out of sync with reality or when their behavior is so hostile or inappropriate as to be damaging or reckless.

But it’s interesting to note that the beginning of absurdity was the failure to hear correctly.

The spiritual life is much more about hearing than seeing, more about attentiveness than even preparation or knowledge. It’s much easier to study and to prepare than to listen, though, and it’s even easier to get a vision for something than it is to wait to hear from God. But we must be mindful of that fact that the Spirit speaks to us: He does not perform for us. He is a whisperer and a counselor, not a television or a drama. Ours is the drama, his is the voice of the director off-stage.

We must learn to tune in to the voice of the Spirit if we are ever to succeed spiritually. That’s why all my favorite spiritual words are nuanced words, words that lead me to do something other than what I had planned initially. I am often checked in my spirit, which is a word I use to describe the Spirit telling me, *Tut tut, do not continue*. I am often edited in my spirit, which is a word I use to describe the Spirit telling me, *Maybe not like that, maybe*



like this instead. I am often nudged in my spirit, which is a word I use to describe the Spirit saying, *No, a little more like this, this way.*

It is tricky to help others learn to be led by the Spirit this way. It's almost impossible to write about, and it's super-weird to try to preach about. Ironically, we just don't have really good words to describe this concept. Well, that is not entirely true; there is one word. But I don't want to tell you what it is yet.

First an example, then the word.

I first learned how to really listen to the Spirit when I was in grad school. A guest lecturer came to instruct us on prayer. We opened the first lecture, an evening session, with about fifteen minutes (give or take) in personal prayer. I was tired, I confess, and my prayers were pretty inane. I probably thanked God for the day or something like that. Maybe I asked for something generic and riskless, like having a good class. Anyway, when we were finished (and it was hard to stop some of the others, both those who were earnestly seeking God and those who wished to be perceived as earnestly seeking God), the prof had us sit in a circle on the floor. It was very Woodstock, to my way of thinking. Once we were seated, he began to lecture on the true meaning of prayer. It was stuff we all knew, and we were all a bit disappointed that he didn't have something better to share with us. But then he stopped and asked the killer question: *What did God say to you?*

That was a five-alarm moment in my spiritual life. I always thought of prayer as a dialogue, but I had never actually dialogued. I'd grown so comfortable rattling on to my silent partner that I no longer even bothered to see if He had something to say. I knew He speaks through His Word, the Bible, and I knew He has permission to speak audibly if He wants to, so I just stopped quieting my heart and straining to hear His still small voice.

Oops.

That one question, asked at that perfect moment, has come to define what I want out of every moment in prayer. I want to listen more than I speak. I want to wait to hear what God is saying. I want to be like the watchman, Habakkuk, who said: *I will stand at my watch and I will see what He will say.*

Hearing is an important spiritual discipline. We have a good word for that, actually. The word comes from the Latin, *audire*, which means "to listen."

The word is obedience.



Day 8: Healing the World

Whoever believes in me does not believe in me only, but in the One who sent me. The one who looks at me is seeing the One who sent me. I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness. If anyone hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge that person. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world.

John 12.44-47

One of the great revelations from Scripture for me has been the scope of God's salvation plan. In the beginning, I thought God only wanted to help get us into Heaven after we died so that the afterlife could be more happily worshipful than this life. Later I learned that His plans were not so much about *getting us out of here*, but about *getting us back here* in new bodies on a new earth. At that point I thought getting a new earth would necessitate destroying this one, but the Bible makes clear that the new earth is really this earth, only fixed somehow. It's like the planet gets its own resurrection. The new Heaven and the new earth also include non-human inhabitants (angels and animals) as well as cities, gardens, streets, and trees. Such descriptions call to mind scenes from Narnia or Lothlorien.

The more I have studied the Scriptures, the more I have come to realize that God wants to save *everything*, not just *everyone*. This means He isn't interested in *starting over* with everything, so much as He is working towards *healing* everything.



And by everything I don't just mean people and plants and animals and the ozone layer, but also culture and language and recreation and vocation and identity and pleasure and everything we now consider part of being alive.

The Greek and Hebrew words for “saving” are the same as the words for “healing”. Jesus came into the world to save and to heal. Those are much the same thing. He came that people might experience life abundant, life the way it was always meant to be lived. That life would happen fully later on, but it could happen partially now. This tension between the life that is possible already, yet not wholly available, is what theologians call the apposition of the *already* and the *not yet*.

The mission of God, through Christ and through His Spirit in us, is to heal the world. This was the desire behind His covenant with Abraham. This was His grief concerning the affair with Noah. This was His plan for Israel, for David, and even for the exiles. His Servant was meant to suffer to this end in Isaiah, and Christ came as the Suffering Servant meant to bear the wounds of the world so we might be healed. God's plans are to heal the world. God's plan for His people is that we would cooperate with Him in healing the world. This cooperation, this healing, begins now.

But though we understand this world-healing concept at a meta level, most of us have a difficult time grasping it at a popular level. We wonder: *What does it mean for God to heal my world?*

We must cooperate with God to see Him heal our families, our relationships, and our image of ourselves and of Him.

That healing has already been promised. We know that, at the end, the world will be remade, and that is why Christian people talk about “the victory.” Christ conquered death, Hell, evil, and decay with his sacrifice on the cross. The victory over the world-corrupting powers has been won, because those powers exhausted the full measure of their strength in killing Christ. But Christ came into new life in resurrection, and they had no strength left to fight him. His resurrection was the insemination of God's Kingdom into the world, the time when the victory went from being promised in the future to being realized in the present. It was just beginning, but it was beginning.

God has given us proof in Christ that He has power over those dark and harmful things. God has shown us that His power to heal is greater than the power of decay. The Spirit is the down payment of God's full healing of this world and renewing of creation.

But we remain in the tension of the *already* and the *not yet*. The down payment has been paid; the life of the ages is possible but not actual in every circumstance. This is why we might work to cooperate with God and heal our world. There is a contest between the weaker powers of decay and the stronger power of God to heal. The powers are not equal, but they do contest, and we have a part to play in this struggle. Our efforts against humiliation, malevolence, disease, and injustice in this world are not natural or human, but efforts undertaken with the realization that every contest is spiritual. Every battle we fight is a supernatural struggle, the struggle between salvation and decay.

We have to live *already* in a *not yet* world.

Through prayer, belief, discipline, and control of our thoughts, through faith, Scripture, and the power of the Spirit, we can see our *not yet* world be transformed into the Kingdom of God *already*. At the very least we can turn our *not yet* family into an *already* family; meaning, through the power of prayer and the help of the Spirit we can see our children return to us after a season of waywardness. We can overcome our selfish desire to punish them for their adolescence, and instead receive them back like the prodigal's son with open arms. In doing so, we can have the family we've always dreamed of having – not a perfect family, perhaps, but a healthy and loving and harmonious one where before we suffered the effects of selfishness and isolation and resentment.

Likewise, we can turn our *not yet* thoughts into *already* thoughts; meaning, we can stop ourselves from sliding down the slippery slope of negativity and self-loathing and remind ourselves that we are new creatures in Christ. We no longer have to be afflicted by low self-esteem or haunted by past mistakes. We can a new start with Christ, and that new start comes with the chance for a healthy thought life, just as it comes with the promise of new dreams for a better future.

We can turn our *not yet* loves into *already* loves. We can turn our *not yet* church into *already* communities of faith. But mostly, we can cooperate with God to turn our *not yet* selves into the *already* people we're meant to become.

And this is how we have actual victory, not just promised or future victory. This is what we hear Christian people celebrating when they say they “have the victory.” They have the victory over their *not yet* children, who--by the grace of God and the movement of His Spirit--have become *already* children. They have a victory when their children find a place of repentance before God and are ransomed back from Hell to find new life in Christ. That victory is *already* here.



We get the victory when we struggle for so long to pay off a debt or clear out a mortgage, suffer under a persecution, or work to repair a broken relationship, and then the things we've been believing for--the *not yet* things we were not sure would ever happen--begin to happen *already* in the here and now.

That's victory. Victory over sin. Victory over the forces of decay and despair. Victory over brokenness and the crumbling nature of humanity in a fallen world. Victory that passes from death into resurrection life.

And it doesn't have to wait. It is happening *already*. It is happening in and around and among you.

We get access to the victory now because Christ won the victory then and promises future and final victory later on. This isn't to suggest that we will get everything we want just because we want it – herein is the error of the 'name it and claim it' preachers – but it is to say that a better life is available to us because we have been empowered by Christ's Spirit.

Your life can get better. You can already live life the way it was always meant to be lived. You just need to choose to live in the Kingdom *already*, to set your mind on the things above and to focus your intention on bringing further and more comprehensive healing here and now so things on earth can be like things in Heaven.

This requires us to discipline ourselves to live, speak, and respond as if we're *already* living in the Kingdom. We've got to keep a clear picture in our minds of how God wants things to be. We've got to work tirelessly to be and live and dream a life that's *already* like that. That's how we get victory now instead of just anticipating victory later on.

What we're all working and yearning for is present and persistent victory now, not just promised and final victory then.

This is why I find it so compelling to think that God's mission is to heal the world: He has already begun, and He has already invited me to participate with Him by healing me and by healing my world through me. This is what I was driving at earlier when I talked about the incredible and comprehensive nature of God's plan for salvation.

It's not just about citizenship and residence in Heaven later on, but about experiencing the life of Heaven now.

God doesn't want to wait to heal the world; He has begun to save us *already*.

Day 7: Your Right Hand

If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into Hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into Hell.

Matthew 5.29-30

Today's reading contains such harsh words. We wonder how gentle Jesus meek and mild could ever get away with making such demands, but he did. He often spoke harshly to his opponents, just as he often gave hard instruction to his adherents. None, though, is as harsh as this.

A Michigan State trooper, who used to attend our church, pulled a man over for speeding one day. That man had only one hand, having hacked the other one off at the wrist because he could not stop masturbating and wanted to follow Jesus more faithfully. Every time I read this piece of the Bible, I wish I had been this man's pastor before he had done what he did, just as I pray to God that I am not required to be his pastor in the future. I'm not sure I would have the heart to tell him that he misunderstood Christ's words (A for effort, though, right?).

Jesus means something less gruesome and yet more difficult, I think, than what our half-handed friend took him to mean. I suppose Jesus would have (at least!) applauded this



man's zeal, and if the demand was made hyperbolically, then I'm sure it still counts when taken literally. But we know Jesus wasn't speaking literally because none of his earliest friends and followers cut off their arms or eyes or tongues. They were there when he said these harsh things, and they could easily have asked him for clarification. Furthermore, if he did mean for the words to be taken literally, he undoubtedly would have repeated them, and scolded his followers for their failure to understand and comply with his teachings on the Kingdom (as he did in many other situations).

No, Jesus meant these words figuratively. As was his way, he often spoke of one thing while intending another meaning entirely. He used parables, similes, and metaphors. When he spoke of seeds, he meant souls. When he talked about fish, he really meant people. When he spoke about cutting out your eye, he really meant "the way you see the world."

If the way you see the world causes you to sin, then gouge it out. Change the way you see things.

Ah! That's so much easier, isn't it?

Not really. Changing our understanding of the world is superbly difficult. For example, we hold dearly to a host of beliefs and freedoms that are neither biblical nor particularly Christian. Democracy. The Constitution of the United States of America. The right to bear arms. Capitalism. Mortgages. I could continue, but I don't want to belabor the point. The point, by the way, is that many of the things we call Christian and take for granted as part of our spiritual heritage are actually more American than biblical. These things are necessarily bad, but we do have to sift through what's what. When we do discover that Scripture decries some American virtues, it can be very, very challenging to repent, change the way we see the world, and so move into the future.

Our half-handed friend misunderstood Christ, but his misunderstanding may have been easier to solve. His obedience took five painful seconds, followed by five months of itching, healing, and changing bandages. He is unable to sin with one hand any longer. But for us to truly understand Christ's words, we can't just lop our problem off; we have to be changed from the inside out.

The "eye" and the "hand" in these verses refer to the way we do things. *If the way you do things causes you to sin, then cut it off. Change the way you do things.*

So often our sins are sins of convenience. We drink too much because we walk right by a bar on the way home every day. We waste too much money on beer because it's right

there. We eat too much junk because we're so busy and fast food is so convenient. We sin because of the way we do things. Our routines inevitably lead us into sinful habits and patterns. We know that the environment matters to God--He made the world and wants us to take care of it--but the best way to preview our work is to print out hundreds of pages and review it on paper. We know we shouldn't get sucked back into that old relationship, but we continue to keep our ex on speed dial and never refuse to answer the phone when she calls.

We sin because we are surrounded by traps of routine that we refuse to disarm. We sin because we don't change the way we do things. But changing the way we do things, even a little, would prevent us from being caught up in sin.

Better to change your cell number and not tell your old boyfriend than to get weak in the knees every time he calls drunk and lonely.

The time for us to change how we see the world and interact with it is right now. Change how you see things. Change how you do things. Those changes may inconvenience you in the short term, but suffering through short term change is far better than continuing to be ensnared by the same old sins that have been tripping you up for years.

The alternative is to chop off your hands and gouge out your eyes. But what will you do when you run out of eyes and no longer have hands, but cannot stop falling into the same old sin?



Day 6: Confession

Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

James 5.16

Confession is good, but scary. It means telling the truth about who you are and what you've done to someone else. In comparison, I think confessing your sins to God is easy. I don't mean to suggest that God doesn't care all that much when we sin (quite the opposite!), only that there are no *immediate* negative repercussions; you just confess and experience the tsunami of weightless grace roll over you. But confessing to a real person--that is hard. Real people have real reactions right in front of you, and there's no telling in advance what those reactions will be except that they are mostly unpleasant. Shock is unpleasant. So is horror, fear, disgust, or that weird nervous laughter that accompanies the embarrassment we feel for others. To confess your sin to another person and have them stifle a giggle is about the most shameful feeling I can imagine.

But you have to confess to another person if you want any kind of accountability. In fact, those negative reactions are usually the best deterrent to future sin. After seeing that look of stunned distaste on your best friends' face, it's hard to want to go back to your old ways. And the idea that your friend might begin asking you probing questions is also pretty uncool. But once you have shared something secret with another person, just about everything else becomes fair game; meaning, once you've shared the darkest and most vulnerable things about you, it becomes a lot easier to share the less-dark and more-common sins we commit on a more regular basis, and to ask for help overcoming them.

I am a big advocate of regular confession. I think it gets easier the more you do it. It never becomes effortless, mind you; it just becomes less traumatic. My friend John (the other lead pastor at our church) and I have a pretty open relationship in this regard. We tattle on ourselves just about every day. We can share those failings and find grace from one another, but we find accountability too. If I keep messing up in the same ways, John will find a way to tell me I need to sort my junk out and that stop giving myself permission to be flawed in the same kinds of ways. Those are tough things to hear, but I appreciate having someone I know, love, and trust tell them to me. It took us a long time to establish that trust, though, and we probably began our relationship of confession and accountability before we even knew we were safe to do so. That's another thing about confession. It always implies risk. You never know if the person you tell is going to tell ten other people, blog about it, or use it against you. But it's still worth the risk.

The pain of confession is worth the freedom of coming clean. Once we come to terms with who we are and what we have done, exposing both our true identity and our true failure to someone else, the liberty we experience leaves us with very little to lose. We risk a little in telling someone, but we gain way more in releasing our sin.

I learned about the true power of honest confession from two of my friends at our church. The three of us meet once a month or so for breakfast. We turn over our dirty laundry and talk openly about how we want to be different. During those breakfast conversations, the confession is usually pretty tame (it's not even that part that impresses me), but the accountability part, the grilling about future plans to avoid sin. The pressing and needling conversation that follows the confession is so specific and yet so graceful, I'm always glad just to sit there and witness it, let alone be a part of it. When one of us fails, the other two put on the hats of their inquisition. They systematically pick and pull at any remaining self-deception until we're picked clean.

With that kind of attention, in grace, coming from people who love you, how can you not do better the next time around?

Two things stick in my mind here: we all need the courage to come clean to another person about who we are and what we've done. We all need the guts to have a long and uncomfortable conversation with our friends when they come clean with us: not to shame them or to judge them, but to help them understand how they got where they are and make sure they never go there again.



Day 5: Denying Evil

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. *Get behind me, Satan!* he said. *You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.*

Mark 8.31-33

I'm always amazed at my ability to read the Bible and skip over the bits about supernatural evil. The epistles, the gospels, and the stories are chock full of references to supernatural evils and malevolent, invisible personalities, yet I hardly ever think or talk about them. My life runs on an OS that largely treats all problems as either my fault, your fault, or the fault of someone *over there* (wherever that might be, usually across the Atlantic).

But rarely do I attribute the evil in this world to something as preposterous as evil spirits, dark powers, demons, or Satan. And yet the Bible makes it abundantly clear that there are dark powers at work in the world that we should take seriously. These powers cause storms (not all, but some), they cause wars (not all, but some), and they inflict disease (not all, but some). They create conditions like blight, famine, malnutrition, oppression, and violence. They work to destabilize governments and overthrow just leaders. They

infiltrate churches and plague God's people. Not all of the time, true, but some of the time.

Maybe it is so difficult to accept the existence of these powers because it is so frightening to think they might be real. It's even more frightening to think they might be targeting me, working through people close to me, or even affecting me directly.

This is what Jesus addresses with Peter in the above passage. When Peter tempts Jesus with disobedience to God, Christ calls him *ha-satan* (a Hebrew word which means "accuser" and from which we derive the name Satan, referring to God's chief adversary). Peter is being influenced by forces in opposition to God, and Jesus shows neither tolerance or fear of such a force.

I am not advocating that we all run around labeling demons, but I think Christian people must acknowledge that there is an invisible war going on around us. There is a world behind the one we see, affecting the world in real ways. We participate in that war through prayer, the careful reading of Scripture, and obedience. But, as Duke often said to open G.I. Joe, *knowing is half the battle*. Just knowing you're in a war makes you that much more likely to come out on top of every skirmish.

As an avid fan of *Lord of the Rings*, I like to puzzle out the biblical precedents for Tolkien's characters and their archetypes. Saruman gives us a good picture of the spiritual contest I am describing. After the battle at Helm's Deep, he has lost much of his power and all of his armies, but his malice remains.

Later, at the end of *The Return of the King*, the final book in the trilogy (though, regrettably, these scenes were omitted from Peter Jackson's wonderful films), the hobbits return home to the Shire and are dismayed to find that it has been burned and pillaged and is now controlled by a gangster called Sharky. Sharky, they learn, is Saruman. He has used his diminished influence to convince mean-spirited people to punish the hobbits' home as retribution for their victory over his army. Once the hobbits discover who is behind all of the mayhem, they quickly trounce Saruman once more and send him running. The conflict is over before it even begins, and Sharky proves no real threat at all.

The devil and all his powers are like Sharky. They have been defeated. Their strength is meager and paltry in comparison to God and to His people empowered by His Spirit. But the fight must be fought nonetheless. Before the hobbits knew who was behind it, the



possible threat seemed greater and the final resolution seemed much more distant. But once they knew who they were fighting and the limited measure of his resources, they quickly sent him running.

What I'm hoping to convey here is my desire for every Christian person: a brief acknowledgement that we have a foe, that we must fight, and that we can have confidence as we do fight, because our foe has already been defeated. Any spiritual battles we fight now are tantamount to a retreating enemy doing as much damage as possible before being imprisoned and halted for good. Our responsibility during this 'mopping up' of the dark powers in our world is to stay grounded in the truth of the Scriptures, covered in prayer, and alert for any further signs of enemy activity.

Because it's not enough to simply know that the victory has been won or the enemy has been routed. He needs to be run out of our homes, out of our churches, and out of our hearts and minds.

And the only way we can do that is through prayer.



Day 4: Sin is Blindness

The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because He has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Luke 4.18-19

Has anyone ever challenged you with these words: *Can't you see what's happening to you?*

Or these: *How can you not see what's going on?*

These words speak to the blinding nature of sin. Once we get caught up in sin, it has a way of creating spiritual cataracts. We don't see how our sin is affecting other areas of our life. We don't see how our workaholicism is affecting our children. We don't see how our carelessness is affecting our career. We don't see how our spending habits are affecting our financial future. We don't see how our gossip is affecting our neighborhood.

We don't see.



Paul talks about this spiritual blindness, referring to fools whose hearts had been darkened and whose thinking had become futile. Jesus accused the Pharisees of this same thing, telling them they were blind guides leading the blind masses to their doom.

This is why Jesus often spoke of his mission as bringing sight to the blind, referring to himself as a light in the darkness. Christ wants us to see. He wants the blind spots in our vision to be burned away. He wants us to remove the spots of sin from our perspective so we can share his vantage over creation and see the big picture of his plan to heal the world.

For this reason, most commentators connect Christ's sight-giving miracles with his sight-restoring prophetic mission. Jesus healed actual blind people, in the process giving us a visual metaphor of what he wanted to do with our spiritual sight. Just as he restored physical vision, he meant to restore supernatural vision as well.

Consider the miracle in which Jesus heals a blind man by rubbing mud on his eyes. After the man is healed, the Pharisees question him. They doubt his healing was legitimate, but the man's parents vouch for its authenticity and tell them he had been blind since birth. Then the Pharisees lash out at the man, claiming that his healing is worthless anyway because he is such a crappy person, and they throw him out of their synagogue. When Jesus hears about this, he becomes very angry. He tells the man that his mission is to make the blind see and bring blindness to those who claim they see perfectly. Christ shows his desire for us all to see clearly, even if that means first exposing those who claim they already can.

This story cautions us in two directions: first, it cautions us not to persist in our blindness; second, it cautions us never to presume we see things exactly the way they are. We must learn to see the world as God sees it, knowing always that our perceptions must be constantly examined and tweaked.

We ought to pray always for vision. We ought to pray: *Lord, help us to see like you see. For where there is no vision, we perish. When we are blind, we are in constant danger, so arise, shine, let your light come.*

Day 3: Sin is Bondage

Everyone who sins is a slave to sin.

John 8.34

All sin is slavery, but it's easier to see that with certain kinds of sin. Addiction is easy to perceive as slavery: once you're hooked, there's no easy way out. You're in a prison of need, and every fix only adds years to your sentence. Cruelty is another easy one. Once you have learned the habit of meanness, it's always so easy to slip back into it. Even when you try to speak positively and to think of others, the temptation is to slide in one last cruel jape during the moments after your kindness is almost impossible to overcome. You can spend months trying to change your spirit, but that old impulse can still sneak attack you, leaving you right back where you left off.

If you have ever been caught in a lie and had to tell additional lies to cover your tracks, you will also understand how sin is slavery. In the movie *Spy Game* (one of my favorites), Robert Redford plays a seasoned CIA operative responsible for giving field training to a new recruit played by Brad Pitt. In a charming moment, Redford directs his recruit to approach a woman, flirt, and get her phone number. Pitt succeeds (was there any doubt?) but is still chastened by his mentor. Redford tells him: *You gave away too much. You told two lies that now need to be true.*



In this case, Pitt told the woman about (1) a false profession, and (2) a false pretense for why he was in town. If for some reason he needed to continue his charade with his 'mark,' he would have to find a way to support his cover story.

Deceit is always like this. When you start out with a lie, you must do something to make that lie true before you're discovered. You must now tell a bunch of additional lies to create a scenario in which your original lie can be believed.

We all know there is only way real way out of a mess like that: just tell the truth. The truth will liberate you from the prison of your sin. The truth will set you free.

In the Christian understanding, truth is the person of Jesus. To know the truth means to know Christ, and in the intimacy of that knowledge, all our self-deceit is exposed and our sin is revealed. We don't need to inflate our own importance when we find our true identity in Christ: he's all we need. We don't need to be enslaved to our addictions, because the power of Christ can liberate us from our sickness and our need for a fix. We don't need to continue treating others poorly, because the Spirit is alive and at work in us, coaxing us to live differently.

Jesus is the truth, and knowing the truth changes everything about what is possible in this life. Imagine a schoolyard bully tormenting you every day. When you were alone, you got pummeled and had no hope of standing up to this tyrant. But imagine that now you're facing all of life's bullies with Christ beside you, behind you, and before you. Just having him there changes everything. You take confidence from his presence, so you can tell the bully to leave you alone. You know that with Christ right there, the bully isn't going to try and attack you, but if he does, you know Christ will intervene. But you've still got to have the jam to stand up to the bully and stand up for yourself. You couldn't do it before because you were alone, but now you're not alone anymore. You used to believe that this bully was invincible, but now you see the truth: the bully is only slightly tougher than you used to be, but nowhere near as powerful as you are with Christ on your side.

With Christ on your side, you can see the true nature of life's challenges and of your own sin. Yes, the challenges are real and significant, but they are not insurmountable. Yes, your sin is real and you must really struggle to be different, but you do not have to rely solely on your strength. Christ is with you. It is his strength that defeats your enemies. It is his power that sets you free.

You just have to know that and know him.



Day 2: Jesus and Repentance

A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, *Son, your sins are forgiven.*

Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, *Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?*

Mark 2.1-7

The big difference between Jesus and the Pharisees was not about morality or even about sin. Both Jesus and the Pharisees called the people to a life of repentance in line with the prophets and leaders from the First Testament. Both Jesus and the Pharisees reminded people that love for God should come before all other loves. Both Jesus and the Pharisees held the Jewish laws in high regard. The difference between them was that Jesus called the people to follow *him* personally instead of following the law. In Jesus' teaching, he personally was the fulfillment of the law. To obey the law meant to obey Jesus. That was the real offense to the Pharisees. For them, listening to Jesus would have been the cultural equivalent of listening to some raving nut claim that he was God. The Reverend Sun



Myung Moon claimed that, just like Jim Jones. Those guys were whackos. That was the criticism of the Pharisees against Jesus: he was pretending to be God.

This became most clear whenever Christ taught about repentance. For Jesus, repentance did not involve going to the Temple and offering sacrifices. This was something that the Pharisees also had against John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin. John told the people they could get right with God in the Jordan River instead of heading up into Jerusalem and going through the cultic rituals of 1st century Judaism. This was hugely offensive to devout and practicing Jews of that time. Jesus took it one step further, telling people they didn't even need to go the Jordan River; they just needed to come to him. Jesus offered forgiveness on his own authority and by his own process.

Jesus' call for people to embrace the good news, especially when he framed it as "believing in me," was not a doctrinal call. He wasn't asking for people to believe in a bunch of abstract propositions or to sign off on some dogma or another. He was asking people to give him their wholehearted allegiance and affiliation. They were to follow him rather than the law. He didn't even give them much instruction on who he was, precisely, other than to say he was a prophet like his cousin, but greater, sent by God to usher in the Kingdom of God for all eternity. Sure, he called himself the 'son of God,' but in Judaism every firstborn son (as well as every good Jew) could legitimately call themselves that. It was a colloquialism, and when Jesus used it they didn't immediately understand that he was employing sonship differently than they were. Given all we now know about Christ--his incarnation, the hypostatic union, his sacrificial atoning death and resurrection, his ascension--they hardly knew anything about him. He had yet to perform any of his more extravagant feats. The miracles he performed were miracles that others had done before him. The things that made him super-special were as-of-yet undone.

Jesus was not just offering the people forgiveness. Forgiveness was what the rabbis had been offering the people, not just some kind of self-help moral code that would keep God from smiting them. Jesus was offering people abundant life, the life of the ages, life the way it was always meant to be enjoyed. Scholars like to point out that for the ancient Hebrew people this would have entailed a sort of homecoming--with inherent promises of a new king, a new dynasty, and an end to their national exile--but all of that stuff rather misses the mark for the average American. The important point for us is that repentance was less about religion and more about putting an end to misery. It was a way of turning your back on the blindness and bondage of sin and accepting instead the offer of eternal life with Christ in God.

Why, again, did Jesus encounter such opposition from his peers?

It wasn't because he was preaching about love while everyone else was preaching about rules. And it wasn't because he was pushing a new kind of religion. And it wasn't because he was hanging around sinners and poor folk (we have no historical record of the Pharisees beating up on people who have crappy friends or who live below the poverty level), or even because Jesus was showing hospitality to outsiders and gentiles.

The Pharisees were angry because Jesus was replacing allegiance to the Temple with allegiance to himself.

This is why his opponents were so frustrated when he claimed to forgive sins, because he was declaring on his own authority that anyone who trusted in him would live the life of the ages forever.

When we accept Christ, believing in his name and in the gospel, we give ourselves to a new government, a new citizenship, and a new authority. It's not about our beliefs per se, but about our allegiance.

In the strictest sense, what Jesus offered was himself. That is Christianity: Christ. Nothing more, nothing less, than a King and Kingdom.



Day 1: Palm Sunday

For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

John 3.16-18

And so now we come to it, the end of Lent, the beginning of Holy Week: Palm Sunday. This is the day on which the rest of the world celebrated the arrival of the Messiah, while he went willingly to suffer and to die. Never has there been a more dramatic irony: he knew what we did not, that we were celebrating the wrong thing, and celebrating the right one eight days too early but for the wrong reasons. We thought he had come to triumph over the occupying powers of a foreign military. We thought that he had come to set things right with the Temple and with the religious institutions and their cults. We thought that he had come to rule. But he had come for none of these. Not like that. Not yet. He had come to die. A lamb walking willingly to the slaughter. Isaac led knowingly to the stone on Mt. Moriah. He was the suffering servant from Isaiah, come to carry our sorrows, come to bear our wounds, born of a virgin and dying as one too. He was the perfect sacrifice, and we lauded him as he slouched toward Jerusalem to finish his mission to conquer the evil around and within us.

I wonder if we get that now, in the way he would have liked for us to get it then. I wonder if we truly understand his sacrifice and the ortho-paradox nature of his ministry: *Whoever will lose his life will find it; he who lays down his life will keep it; the last shall be first; whoever asks for your cloak, give him your tunic as well.* Now, after forty days of soul-searching and spirit-scouring, after forty days of repentance and prayer, self-denial and watchfulness, I wonder if we understand just why he came and just what he's about to endure because of his great love for the world.

I visited an elderly man in a nursing home once, who was kept alive on oxygen. He had to wear a mask that fed air into his lungs to breathe. But whenever his youngest grandson came to see him, the boy would grab the mask and put it on his own face, giggling. To the boy it was something to play with. To the old man it was life. I often wonder what happened later when the boy grew up and discovered that the thing that gave him joy caused his grandfather grief. At that time, though, the boy only saw his grandfather's glad tears, happy to see the boy smile.

Such is love: Jesus Christ gave up his life for us, and so we ought to give up our lives for one another.

And God held in His hand
a small globe. *Look*, He said.
The son looked. Far off,
as through water, he saw
a scorched land of fierce
color. The light burned
there; crusted buildings
cast their shadows: a bright
serpent, a river
uncoiled itself, radiant
with slime.

On a bare
hill a bare tree saddened
the sky. Many people
held out their thin arms
to it, as though waiting
for a vanished April
to return to its crossed
boughs. The son watched
them. *Let me go there*, he said.

- R.S. Thomas



Conclusion

Through the miracle of the Internet my son and daughter have discovered the old *He Man* cartoons. In the show, young and timid Prince Adam of Eternia fights his enemies by utilizing the power of a magical sword. When he activates the sword, Adam is transformed in an instant from the timid prince to He-Man, the Master of the Universe. As He-Man, he is unstoppable. Nothing conquers him. Nothing harms him. He is perfect.

This is the image most of us hold in our minds about Christian transformation. We think that Christ comes into our lives and in an instant we're completely changed. While we are changed metaphysically, receiving different resources and enjoying a different relationship to God, we are not changed in actuality. We still have to overcome our pet sins, our idiosyncrasies, and our aberrant desires.

Even the oft-repeated transformational metaphor of a chrysalis and a butterfly gives us the wrong idea about spirituality: thing A goes into the cocoon and thing B comes out.

Poof. Instant transformation.

We can understand spiritual transformation with the same way we understand human growth and development. No matter what, like a child you will spiritually grow so long as you stay spiritually alive. As long as you are connected to Christ, you will grow. But you may grow slowly. And you may grow fat. And you may grow at some things but not in

others. Like the smart kid in math who can't talk to normal kids, you may grow smart but spiritually insensitive. As parents, we make sure our kids get the right kind of nutrition and exercise so they develop strong healthy bodies. That's how spiritual growth works too. And when you finally reach adulthood, you can't really just eat and do whatever suits your fancy without having your body deteriorate into something less energetic, less vibrant, and less enjoyable.

Transformation is rarely, if ever, instantaneous in this life (sorry He-Man). It is almost always progressive. That's what I've been trying to help you understand. We grow little by little, day by day, by attending to the Spirit and by inviting him to change us. And, even though we rarely see change happen instantaneously, we do see change happen quickly when we set our minds on things above.

With that in mind, may every season be for you another Lent, another holy spring, in which you devote yourself to the miracle of Christ's sacrifice and the magic of receiving his grace.

david mcdonald, february 6, 2011
at home

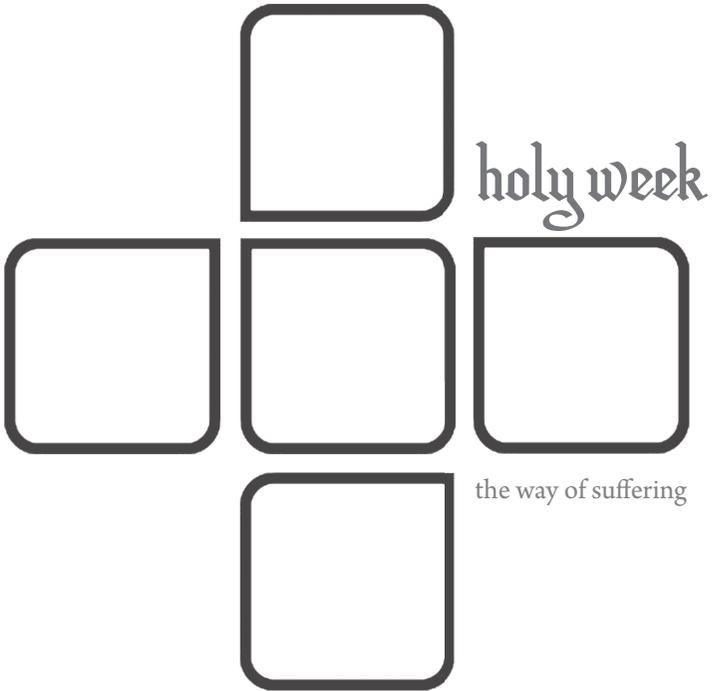
ADVENT
Christmas Tide

COMMON TIME
Epiphany
Transfiguration
Septuagesima
Sexagesima
Quinquagesima

LENT
Ash Wednesday

EASTER
Palm Sunday
Holy Week
Easter Tide
Ascension
Pentecost
Trinity

KINGDOM TIDE



TheCommonTruth.org

Nobody remembers the greatest story ever told. At least not wholly. If we knew it—if we were truly immersed in it like it was our own story—we would be changed forever.

That story concerns Jesus Christ—whom God sent into the world to save it—and his betrayal, murder, and supernatural resurrection.

It is the story of Easter, and we re-tell that story every year during Holy Week.

It begins with Palm Sunday, when we celebrate Jesus Christ’s “Triumphant Entry” into Jerusalem—the height of his popularity among the common people.

Fig Monday tells the story of Christ cursing a tree that failed to bear fruit—a warning to his followers concerning their usefulness in the world.

Great and Holy Tuesday teaches us about our corporate identity as the church, the bride of Christ.

Spy Wednesday tells the story of Judas, one of Christ’s closest friends, betraying Jesus to the authorities.

Maundy Thursday concerns Christ's Last Supper with his friends and followers, and his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Good Friday focuses on the crucifixion of Jesus and his sacrificial atoning death.

Holy Saturday recalls Christ's descent into Hell to overthrow the powers of darkness.

Easter Sunday is about Christ's physical, bodily resurrection from the dead—the cornerstone of Christian belief.

These writings were designed to work in tandem with thecommontruth.org, a website designed to help encourage participation in Holy Week. For each of the eight Holy days there is a short film, a brief reflection, and a place for you to dialogue with others.

Do this in remembrance of me.

Palm Sunday

On Palm Sunday, we remember Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It was the height of his popularity, occurring only days before his betrayal and execution. He was joyfully welcomed by the common people who heralded him as the coming King and Savior of the world.

The most oft-celebrated feature of the Triumphal Entry was the waving of the palms. A symbol of royal welcome, palm branches were often waved during a parade to demonstrate the people's support of their monarch. When Jesus entered Jerusalem, several of the Gospel writers record that his followers' welcomed him as if he were a king.

Only in the Gospel of Luke are there no palm branches mentioned.

Why?

It's easy to speculate. Luke was a Greek doctor, a wealthy Gentile who had come to faith in Christ later in life. His gospel was written with a special emphasis on the status of women and the elevation of the poor— that emphasis on social and interrelational justice was a foreign concept to the Greco-Roman culture. Luke understood that Jesus treated women differently than anyone else, and he admired Christ for that. He wanted to highlight this aspect of Jesus' ministry and personality to his Greek audience so they too could understand just how fantastically different was Christ's message and example. Luke was also deeply affected by Christ's downward mobility. Here he was, Son of God, Incarnate

Creator, King of the World and of all Time, yet he spent his time as a homeless tradesman, wandering and teaching among the poor, the disenfranchised, and the lowly. Christ could have courted royalty, but he opted for obscurity.

Furthermore, Luke wanted his audience to recognize that the poor loved and welcomed Jesus in a way they could never have loved and welcomed Caesar. When Caesar came into town, people greeted him with singing and flowers and celebration. But much of their celebration was state-sponsored partying. The Romans pre-arranged for Caesar to receive an appropriate welcome and the event was largely staged at little personal cost for citizens. In contrast, when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, the poor spontaneously tossed their cloaks—something terribly precious to them, a covering and a shelter from the weather (they likely only had one cloak, a prized possession)—and joyously received Christ. No one would have chosen to give up the thing that kept them warm and safe and dry to welcome Caesar, but they gladly gave up their cloaks for Christ. This was not staged. This was an outpouring of gratitude and happiness and anticipation that everything for which they had ever hoped was now about to come true.

Jesus spent his time among the poor, and they loved him for it. Their love was not feigned. It was a self-sacrificial love representative of Christ's self-sacrifice of Christ himself.

That's what Luke wants his audience to see: the way of Jesus, the way of downward mobility, is that the last shall be first. The greatest shall be the servant. Whoever denies himself will be elevated.

Everything about Jesus' manner and message was contrary to the Roman way, just as it is contrary to the American way. Our culture today is a culture of abundance, and we too must learn to praise the King who comes in lowliness. We must become downwardly mobile because in some way we are all poor before Christ and must simply learn to acknowledge our poverty.

Fig Monday

At the end of his ministry, Jesus finally made his had a dramatic showdown with the Temple establishment in Jerusalem. The Jewish religion had gotten off-track and Christ had been sent by God to set things back to rights. They weren't going to like his message, but he wasn't going to put up with their nonsense any more.

En route to the Temple, Jesus and his disciples come across a fig tree that had yet to bear fruit (see Mark 11). There was nothing particularly strange about that, especially given that the figs weren't in season, but Jesus gets angry and curses the tree saying, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again."

It's a really strange story, until you realize that the next thing Jesus does is head into the Temple courts and do much the same thing to the religious establishment. He overturns tables and makes outrageous accusations. He claims the priests have made his Father's house a den of thieves.

Actually, in the original Aramaic Jesus says they've turned the Temple into a brigand's lair.

That's significant, because 'brigand' doesn't mean thief so much as it means "revolutionary" or "freedom fighter" or "rebel." Jesus isn't accusing the authorities of being religiously greedy and materialistic, so much as he's accusing them of confusing worship with politics, holiness with ethnic and national identity, and shalom with seizing power.

The Temple, like the fig tree, is a disappointment. They're both out of season, sure, but when you're hungry (either physically or spiritually) that which is meant to nourish ought to.

These two stories are a rhyming pair, reminding us that God does, in fact, judge and His judgment can sometimes be terrible.

Great Tuesday

In first century Palestine, weddings were playful affairs. Festivities often built up in anticipation of the wedding feast, ever-intensifying receptions prior to the ceremony instead of afterward like in our American tradition. Then, as now, many young people would get carried away with their partying and sometimes neglect the bride and groom.

As someone who has officiated countless weddings, let me tell you that bridesmaids and groomsmen are often the foils to the bride and groom rather than their “best” man or maid of “honor.”

In the parable of the ten virgins (see Matthew 25), Christ talks about such a group of bridesmaids—they get carried away dancing and laughing and drinking, and forget to keep their lamps filled in preparation for the arrival of the groom. These lamps were special, serving to illuminate a romantic sort of runway that would guide the groom to his bride; and, if the lamps were doused or extinguished, then the effect would be ruined.

I once did a wedding for which the maid of honor arrived wearing the wrong color shoes and sash. The effect was much the same. The ceremony was beautiful and went off without a hitch, but the bride was irritated at the thoughtlessness of her friend.

Having your lamp go out would be *like that*.

As a result of being preoccupied with their own pleasure, five of the ten bridesmaids miss out on the wedding and are universally shamed and scorned. Like so many of Jesus' parables, this one makes immediate spiritual sense to us, demonstrating two important truths:

There are certain things you cannot get at the last minute.

There are some things you cannot borrow.

Simply put, the time to get right with God is now. Let's not put this off until our own pleasures and enjoyments in this life are suddenly exposed as self-indulgent and unsatisfying. Similarly, let's not pretend that union with Christ is something we can get through our heritage or our church or our cultural background.

We either have oil in our own lamps or we don't.

Spy Wednesday

At the Last Supper, while Jesus was sitting with his closest friends and followers, he looked at them and said, “One of you will betray me.”

However, if we look more closely at those words in Greek, we find that a better translation might be, “One of you will hand me over.” The wording “hand over” comes from the word *paradidomi* and in this case it doesn’t just refer to Judas—it also refers to God. The Apostle Paul in Romans 8.32 tells us *that God did not spare His own son, but handed him over for the sake of us all.*

Once Jesus has been handed over, he is no longer the active agent in his own story. He is a passive victim, and it is important to note that Christ’s mission is fulfilled by what is done to him.

Most of our lives are about coping and dealing with the things others do to us. We might wish it was different, but it’s not. I might wish everything I had to endure was only the product of my well-reasoned self-assurance, but it’s not. Other people do things—even messy and inconsiderate things—and I have to cope or deal with what they do to me.

Isn’t it interesting to note that “passive” and “passion” have the same root word? It’s almost like, linguistically, God is trying to remind us that we shouldn’t allow ourselves to be victimized by what others do to us. Instead, He wants us to re-frame our understanding of that victimization and convert it to passion.

What if we recognized that the things done to us are the most obvious way for us to demonstrate our passion for God's healing? What would it look like for us to stop complaining about our jobs, or our spouses, or our lack of resources, and instead begin to see these shortfalls and shortcomings as the primary arena in which we get to shadow God?

When others hurt me, I can passionately refuse to seek revenge. When I am bullied, I can overcome my aggressive impulse to get back at them, to humiliate them, or to one-up them in public. This path would demonstrate my willingness to live in the Way of the Cross.

Most of our lives are more passion than action. We've got to recognize this and begin to seize our opportunity to live the way we were meant to, even if we have no real control over what happens to us.

It is good news to know that Christ was handed over to his passion, and yet it was through what others did to him that he accomplished his divine mission to heal the world.

Maundy Thursday

Maundy Thursday is the time when we remember the final night Jesus spent with his friends. During the Last Supper, Christ re-vitalized the Passover Meal, infusing it with new, prophetic meaning concerning his sacrificial death on the cross. Afterward, he led his disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray and to prepare for his betrayal and execution.

En route to Gethsemane, John's Gospel mentions that Jesus crossed the Kidron Valley (see 18.1). This is fascinating symbolism, given that during the time of Christ the Kidron Valley was the dumping ground for the Jewish Temple. Every year at Passover people would travel hundreds of miles to offer sacrifices in Jerusalem. This was messy business, and in order to keep the Temple clean, the priests had constructed a drain that expunged the sacrificial leftovers—the blood of the 200,000 slaughtered lambs—into the valley.

To correctly imagine Jesus' last moments, we must see him walking to Gethsemane through a sopping field of blood and guts. On the night that he was to be betrayed, Christ was baptized in sacrificial blood. Of course, if you're familiar with some of the latter Second Testament you'll know that Christ's followers understood his death to be a replacement for the cultic sacrificial system. Where once people had to sacrifice animals to atone for their sins, Christ himself became the perfect and final sacrifice. No more animals needed to be killed—he himself was the Lamb who was Slain.

Picture this: On his way to the garden, the Lamb who would be slain was saddened by the Lambs who were being slain.

This mental picture ought to help us understand the true nature of Christ's death. He walked through a landscape wholly marked by sacrifice. When he got there, it was marked by the sacrifice of others. When he left, it was forever transformed into a landscape of self-sacrifice. Just by being there, it was like he was proclaiming that sacrifice in-and-of-itself was no longer enough. For us to be made right with God, we must now claim the sacrifice of Christ Jesus. And, like Christ, we too must learn to walk the path of self-sacrifice.

Self-sacrifice is an unappealing ethic, but it is the basis of Christ's Kingdom teaching. His Kingdom works on paradox—the last shall be first, and the first shall be last; whoever wants to keep his life must lose it; whoever wants to become great must become like a servant. In the Kingdom of God, all taking must be transformed into giving. All greed must become investment. All violence must become love.

We should remember this when we enter our own Gethsemane experiences, when we feel betrayed, isolated, and doomed to die. In those moments, we ought to let Christ's example embolden us to walk bravely into situations we might otherwise choose to avoid. We must never forget that behind our tragedies there stands a Savior who has walked through judgment and suffering too, and the manner of his suffering has become the pathway for our salvation.

Good Friday

One of the details we often overlook concerning the life of Jesus was the animosity between his friends and his family. Christ's disciples loved him, but his family rejected him utterly. This rejection began even before his birth – Jesus' family made no room for him to be born, in their hometown, when Mary was in need – and it continued until after the crucifixion.

Yet, while he was on the cross, the gospel writers record a strange kind of reconciliation. It began with the symbolism inherent in Christ's side being pierced. This piercing is significant because it also happened to Adam in the Garden of Eden. When Adam's side was pierced, his rib was removed, and from it God provided Adam with a bride. Christ became the Second Adam, says Saint Paul, and when his side was pierced, he too received a bride.

The church was born from the effusion of water and blood. The water that came from the side of Jesus represents the water of baptism. The blood represents the new covenant and the final sacrifice for sin.

The church is born in atonement, in baptism.

By his wounds we are made whole again. The piercing of Christ brought together his family and his followers.

In the midst of his suffering on the cross, Jesus had the presence of mind to heal the rift between his family and his followers, telling John *here is your mother*, and Mary *here is your son*. These were his last words, the final message to the faithful, and with these words Christ brought his people together.

Then *he gave up his spirit*, a phrase that (when literally translated from Aramaic) means *he gave his spirit to them*.

With Christ's death, the church became the custodian of his spirit.

After the crucifixion, we're told that all the disciples gathered together with Christ's family in the room where the last supper was shared. Family and followers were bound together by the blood of Jesus. After the resurrection, Christ found them there, together, and breathed on them. When they received his breath, the church was born.

God breathed life into Adam, Christ breathed life into his church.

With his final act on the cross, Jesus gave up his life to bring his people together. Within the new life of his resurrection, he took this new "family" and gave them his spirit – a dowry for his bride.

I find it beautiful that in the midst of the macro-cosmic significance of his substitutionary atoning death for all humanity across the sea of time, Christ was concerned for his family and friends. I imagine that pedestrian kind of love extends even to me, to us, and that his sacrifice comes to me now to heal the wounds in my life.

Holy Saturday

Jesus died and descended into the depths of Hell (Ephesians 4.8-10). He did not suffer, for his suffering was completed on the cross (John 19.30). He preached to those tormented because of their sin (1 Peter 3.18, 20; 4.4), spreading the fragrance of himself even into Hell (2 Corinthians 2.14-16). He departed (Acts 2.27, 31), bearing the keys of Hades (Revelation 1.18) and destroying death itself (Hebrews 2.14).

Holy Saturday is the time in the Christian liturgical calendar when we remember that Christ descended into Hell. It wasn't over for Jesus after he was crucified. He didn't just die and then ascend into Heaven—he died and then descended into Hell, into the very fires of sin and oppression.

He let himself be overcome by death so that it would gulp him down into the depths of the world. He penetrated death. He went beyond death. And he brought the redeeming, re-creating God with him down into the depths and re-seeded creation with resurrection energy.

On Holy Saturday, a rift opened between how things are and how we experience them. What on the outside looked like victory for darkness and evil was actually the beginning of victory for the beautiful, the noble, and the true. When things looked darkest, the churning work of redemption had already begun. On the surface, everything looked as if evil had triumphed and was now enjoying its eternal reign. Beneath that surface, however,

Christ was working furiously to undo the power of death and to de-power it forever. What appeared to be a tomb was actually a womb through which new creation was born (and continues to be born).

Jesus' resurrection was like the eruption of a volcano. An eruption is the result of constantly building heat and pressure beneath the surface of the earth. From the outside, a volcano can look dormant, but if you saw what was happening beneath the surface you would know that the mountain was about to blow. Holy Saturday looked for all the world like a dormant volcano. There were no visible signs of activity or heat or generative pressure, but the eruption of resurrection proved to us that the fire of God was already burning deep in the heart of the world.

And so Easter morning was like the eruption of a divine volcano. The resurrection reveals that God's fire had been burning in the bowels of the world, a fire which continues to burn and overflow with its healing power and presence and passion.

The holy eruption affects everything. Everything in its way will be destroyed. This is a good kind of destruction, for the things that stand in the way of Christ are not things we ought to protect. Pride stands in his way, and will be removed. Disingenuous behavior stands in his way. Fear stands in his way. And they will all be removed. Our sins are destroyed, as is the power they once held over our lives.

Just as new life always emerges after a volcano's eruption, another kind of spiritual ecology will also emerge. This is resurrection—new life in place of the old life that has died. The old life—concomitant to all those things that stand in the way of Christ and seek to divert him-in-us—is gone, but the new life is just beginning and everything is in bloom. The new life is healthy, whole, and understands its proper relationship to God.

I think sometimes when we lose our jobs, or enter into a separation from our spouses, or when we suffer some great reversal like rejection or failure, we are living through a Holy Saturday. Everything on the surface of life looks like we've lost. It's as if hope has gone out of the world and now we are stuck in the humdrum hopelessness of business-as-disappointingly-usual. But it is precisely at this moment that we must remember there is no Hell where Jesus has not already been. There is no pit of darkness where life can take you that Christ has not penetrated with the light.



Already, from the heart of the world, the new forces of transformation and resurrection are at work. We do not take heart merely from what we can see, but also from that which is unseen. The volcano is not dormant. The failure is not final. There is more to the story. Christ's sacrifice, of necessity, preceded his invasion of death and Hell. He had to die before he could be resurrected. God's promise is building beneath the surface of your life, and will soon erupt in new life, new hope, and the fulfillment of new dreams.

In this we place our hope: that on Holy Saturday the sacred heart became the innermost heart of the world.

Resurrection Sunday

Easter Sunday was the day Christ Jesus defeated the powers of death and Hell by rising from the dead and reclaimed his divine authority as the author of life. It is the day we finally come to understand that Jesus really was who he said he was—God-made-flesh, the Messiah, the hope and savior of the world—and that he really did what he came to do—conquer the powers of dominance and control, and rid humanity of our bondage to sin and evil.

One of the things that has always fascinated me about the post-resurrection stories of Jesus concerns his appearance to Thomas. Thomas was one of Christ's twelve disciples, but he was absent when Jesus first appeared to them after the resurrection. The other disciples tried to help Thomas understand that Christ had risen from the dead, but Thomas refused to take their word for it. Instead, he told them he would only truly believe if he could place his hands inside of Christ's wounds and see for himself. Soon afterward, Jesus appeared to Thomas and the "doubting Thomas" received the proof he was looking for. The story is well-known and often re-told as an admonition to not demand proof of Christ's resurrection, but that is not what fascinates me about this story.

I'm fascinated, instead, by the fact that the resurrected Jesus still had wounds. Despite conquering death and rising into a new life with a new physical body, Christ kept the holes in his hands and side. His wounds were preserved. Certainly they didn't hurt him or hinder him any longer, but I find it strange that he kept them at all.

The Apostle Paul makes it clear in 1 Corinthians 15 that we, too, will rise to new life in Christ at the general resurrection. At the end, when God finally sets the world to rights, we will have a resurrection body much like the resurrection body of Jesus. It will be a physical body, and we will live here on a renewed earth.

But I wonder if we will have wounds?

Will our hurts be healed, but still visible?

I like to think that they will indeed. Christ's wounds were proof that he really was Jesus of Nazareth and that he really had risen from the dead. He had come through his trial and suffering, emerging victorious. Doesn't it stand to reason that our wounds will prove much the same thing? Isn't that already true now?

For example, I have a large scar on my right forearm from a fantastic accident a few years back. I was riding on a BMX track and spilled after taking off a huge ramp. I lost half of the flesh on my arm and, because I was nowhere near a hospital, I had to clean the wound with steel wool in the shower. I have this enormous scar because I'm a survivor, and when I get around other extreme sports fanatics (though I barely qualify) we compare our scars and tell the stories of how we got them. This story-telling time is always full of laughter and playfulness, but there's always a kind of quiet reflection as well because we all know that we could easily have been injured far more seriously, or possibly even died. We tell our stories and show our scars as a means of expressing our gratitude for still being alive.

I think that's how our wounds will function after the resurrection. We will show off our scars and tell our stories, and our scars will prove that we really are the people we say we are. They will prove that God was gracious enough to rescue us from the situations that scarred us. He brings us into new, resurrection life.

And that's how our scars function today in the community of saints we call the church. We show our scars—our emotional scars, the scars in our memory, our ecclesial and theological and social and relational scars—and we tell our stories about how God rescued us from harmful circumstances, about how God has given us new life in Christ, and about how we're able to keep on living by God's grace.

Scars prove we are who we say we are, just as they prove that God is doing what He said He would do.

He gives new life to us, and *that* is the message of Easter Sunday.

 **EASTER TIDE**

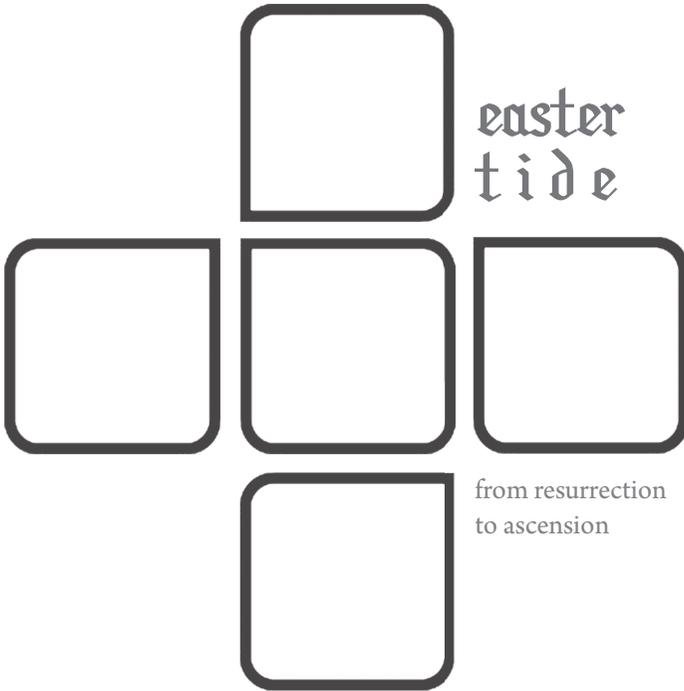
ADVENT
Christmas Tide

COMMON TIME
Epiphany
Transfiguration
Septuagesima
Sexagesima
Quinquagesima

LENT
Ash Wednesday

EASTER
Palm Sunday
Holy Week
Easter Tide
Ascension
Pentecost
Trinity

KINGDOM TIDE



Introduction

I left Canada in six weeks. Having given notice to leave my job a year prior, and having taken my sweet time determining where next I would go, my wife and I made up our minds and moved 3500 miles to the right in about 40 days.

Forty days for us to leave the most beautiful city in the world, to arrive some time later in a small town just outside of Detroit – a town I now proudly call home and in which I now take great pleasure.

During those final six weeks, my wife and I took care to visit all the important people in our lives and tell them how much we loved them and would miss them. We took special care to spend extra time with family and close friends, but even those times were a little rushed and there was always a niggling feeling that we had to be moving on soon.

That's what I think Jesus was doing after the resurrection. Of course, we might wonder what "journey" Christ was about to take, and that's what I would like to focus on here for Eastertide: The journey of Jesus from Incarnate Son of God to Glorified Son of Man.

Eastertide, in the Christian liturgical tradition, is the season directly following Easter Sunday and it lasts 40 days until the Ascension—the time Jesus Christ *ascended* back to his Father in Heaven. Easter always comes at a different time each year and, consequently, so does Eastertide. It is associated with the Jewish festival of Passover, in which the Hebrew people (our spiritual ancestors) remember their deliverance from the Egyptians as God's

angel “passed over” their homes and descended in judgment upon their oppressors. Passover is celebrated on the night of the first full moon after the spring equinox, and we move the date on which we celebrate Easter in order to stay in step with Passover and to ensure that we remember Christ’s resurrection on a Sunday.

Easter Sunday has always been significant to the Christian church because it anchors our belief that Christ’s resurrection began a new creation here on earth. Just as God brought peace to the Sabbath after creating the world, Jesus brought peace on Holy Saturday by cleaning out Hell after completing his work on the Cross. Just as God spoke creation into existence on the first day, Jesus—the Word—was ‘spoken’ into new creation on the eighth day.

Unlike some of our other liturgical seasons, Eastertide tells a story—the forty day chronology of events that occurred after Christ was raised from the dead into a new physicality, a resurrection life.

In many ways, Eastertide is the exact opposite of Lent. Whereas Lent was forty days of preparation, Eastertide is forty days of feasting and merriment. (So, if you gave up eating chocolate for Lent, why not bathe yourself in Godiva after Easter?) We are meant to celebrate the fact that Christ rose from the dead and has ascended to God.

There is a priestly significance to the Ascension, and a prophetic significance too. But it is primarily the kingly aspect of the Ascension that I want to focus on during Eastertide. I’ve never been enamored with the kingly language in the Bible. I’m not sure why, but it’s never resonated with me that Christ is my King. Don’t get me wrong, he’s got me heart and soul, but the metaphor of a king is difficult for me to connect with viscerally, perhaps because in America we don’t have one, and when I lived in Canada, the closest we had was the Prince of Wales

Forgive me for not wanting to associate Christ with either Prince Charles or Bill Clinton.

At any rate, I’ve had a change of heart. That may be because of my favorite sort of books—fantasy, since you asked, full of kings and knights and all that jazz—but I suspect it has rather more to do with the Ascension.

The Ascension was Christ’s coronation--the moment when he took his rightful place on Heaven’s throne. He is no longer the homeless rabbi, the upstart Galilean, or the fanatical



preacher. He is once again the Risen, Exalted, Second Person seated at the Right Hand of the Father who reigns in Glory.

We'll explore this more later on, but for now let it suffice to say that just as Christ descended into our human condition and left Heaven, he has now returned to God and re-entered Heaven in a new way. That which he put off to live like one of us, he has now reclaimed to live as he always did before his sojourn on earth. What's more, because he lived like us here we can live like him there—a little now, but entirely later on.

Eastertide tells the story of Jesus' preparations to leave earth and re-enter Heaven as its king. It tells the story of Christ taking care of business before his Ascension, focusing on three primary tasks: first, to reveal himself in all his divine glory to his closest friends and followers; second, to help them get ready to continue his mission to heal the world; and finally, to dispatch them into the world and get them started.

Revelation.

Readiness.

Dispersion.

Christ wanted them to know that he really was who he said he was, that they've got to continue what he started, and that he'd help them (with community, the Scriptures, and the Spirit).

That's the story of Eastertide and here's what we'll cover in this book:

In **part one**, we begin by looking at the resurrection stories in the gospels. I don't want to focus much on the actual *miracle* of the resurrection (though, in the past, I have—see *Dying for a Fix: living with resurrection*), but I'll look instead at the larger story and how the resurrection affected the various people involved. These early “resurrection stories” were mostly concerned with revelation.

In **part two**, I want to continue tracing this story into the post-resurrection encounters, watching to see who Jesus visited in his final days on earth. These stories are concerned both with further revelation, but also we see Christ beginning to get his friends and followers ready for the days to come.

Both of these sections are largely exegetical in nature, meaning I want to examine the biblical story and bring out some interesting elements in the text.

Parts three and four, on the other hand, are much more theological, meaning I want to explore the significance of several concepts and how they relate to real life today.

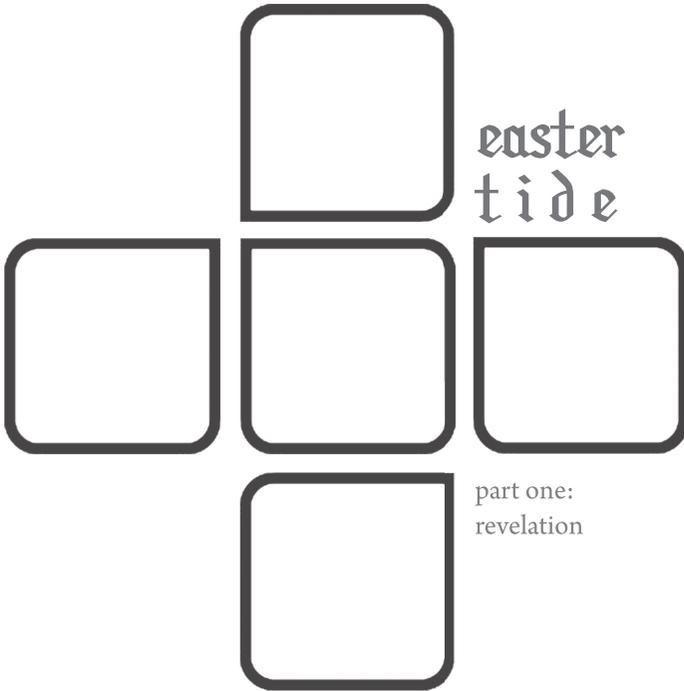
Part three will focus on the Great Commission and Jesus' final instructions to his disciples. This is the transition from readiness to dispersion, during which time Christ shifts from getting his people ready to getting them going. It contains the mission statement of the church, arguably the single most important part of church identity.

Part four will explore the relevance of his Ascension to Heaven, and what it means for us to understand that Christ is enthroned as King of All.

Taken together, I pray that the sections of Eastertide will encourage you to re-examine your faith and your response to the God who has overcome death itself and now reigns forever in Heaven.



EASTER TIDE





EASTER TIDE

The resurrection stories . . .

tell us about Jesus Christ overcoming death and returning to new life. His resurrection vindicated his claims to divinity – proving beyond any shadow of doubt that he was, and is, the Son of God. These stories record the manner in which Christ revealed his true nature to his closest friends and followers, so they could later reveal him in turn to the world.



EASTER TIDE

Don't be fooled by the idea that modern science has disproved the resurrection of Jesus. Modern science has done no such thing. Everybody in the ancient world, just like everybody in the modern world, knew perfectly well that dead people don't get resurrected. It didn't take Copernicus or Newton or Einstein to prove that—just universal observation of universal facts. The Christian belief is not that some people sometimes get raised from the dead, and Jesus happens to be one of them. It is precisely that people don't ever get raised from the dead, and that something new has happened in and through Jesus, which has blown a hole through previous observations. The Christian thus agrees with scientists ancient and modern: Yes, dead people don't rise. But the Christian goes on to say that something new and something different has now occurred in the case of Jesus. This isn't because there was a glitch in the cosmos, or something peculiar about Jesus' biochemistry, but because the God who made the world, and who called Israel to be the bearer of his rescue-operation for the world, was at work in and through Jesus to remake the world. The resurrection was the dramatic launching of his project.

Tom Wright, 21st Century Bishop of Durham

Resurrection harmony

All four gospels cover the resurrection, but differently. To help us get a hold of the large story, I've harmonized them here. The result is a little wooden—I wasn't trying to get literary, just chronological—but it will help us to piece together what happened when (and to whom) as we talk through each of the resurrection accounts in turn.

Early Sunday morning, when the Sabbath was over, a group of women came to the tomb of Jesus. They were now legally permitted to prepare his body for internment, and so Mary Magdalene and Mary (the mother of James and John), Joanna, and Salome brought spices to anoint him (see Mark 16.1-2, Luke 24.10).

On the way there, the women began to wonder who would remove the heavy stone door from in front of the grave (Mark 16.3); however, when they arrived they discovered that it was nothing to worry about.

There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord had come down and rolled back the stone. He was sitting on it, waiting for the women to arrive (Matthew 28.2). His face shone and his clothes were white like snow. His appearance was so glorious, in fact, that the Roman soldiers who were meant to guard the tomb had passed out from shock and awe (Matthew 28.2).

The women entered the tomb (Mark 16.5), but did not find the body of Jesus (Luke 24.3). As they tried to piece together what had happened, two men came and stood by them. They were dressed much like the angel, and even resembled him in appearance (Luke 24.4). One of these was a young man (Mark 16.5).

The women, seeing them, were terrified and fell to the ground covering their faces (Luke 24.5).

Then the young man spoke to the women and said: *Do not be afraid. I know that you have come to look for Jesus of Nazareth, the man who was crucified* (Matthew 28.5). *But why do you seek the living among the dead?* (Luke 24.5) *He is not here. He is risen, just as he told you* (Matthew 28.6). *Don't you remember? He told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man was to be given up in to the hands of sinners and was to be crucified, and would rise again on the third day* (Luke 24.6-7).

Come and see the place where he was buried, though it is now vacant (Mark 16.6), and then go quickly (Matthew 28.7) and tell the disciples (Matthew 28.7) and Peter (Mark 16.7) that he has risen (Matthew 28.7) and that he is going before you into Galilee (Mark 16.7) and there you will meet him again (Matthew 28.7), just like he said (Mark 16.7).

Then the women remembered everything Jesus had told them (Luke 24.8).

They left the garden quickly, with both great fear and great joy (Mark 16.8, Matthew 28.8). They said nothing to anyone on the way (Mark 16.8), but went at once to the disciples (Matthew 28.8). However, Jesus himself appeared to them before they could reach their destination, and they fell down and worshipped him, completely overcome (Matthew 28.9).

When they finally arrived at the place the disciples were staying, the women told them that they had not found the body, but instead had been visited by angels (Luke 24.22). The disciples, however, thought they had lost their minds and refused to believe them (Luke 24.11), though Peter and John decided to go and see for themselves what was at the root of the women's hysteria (Luke 24.12) and to investigate the removal of the stone door (John 20.1-2).

John got there before Peter (John 20.4), saw the grave clothes lying there, but didn't enter the tomb (John 20.5). When Peter arrived he went straight in and saw the empty tomb with the burial shroud set off to the side (John 20.7).

Then John entered also, and believed (John 20.8), though they still hadn't connected what was happening with the ancient prophecies in the Scriptures (John 20.9).

Peter and John then returned to the others (John 20.10), but Mary Magdalene remained near the tomb weeping (John 20.11). Peter and John told the other disciples what they had found, that the women were telling the truth, and that—as of yet—they had not yet seen Jesus (Luke 24.24).

Back at the tomb, Mary encountered Jesus—whom she first mistook for a gardener. When he called her by name—*Mariam*, in Aramaic—she knew him at once (John 20.16). Jesus warned her not to hold onto him, however, but to go instead and proclaim his resurrection, which she did, saying *I have seen the Lord* (John 20.17-18).

These are the only “resurrection” stories in the Gospels, but they are not the only stories of Christ after his resurrection. The others, what I’m calling “post-resurrection” encounters, involve Jesus making appearances to clusters of his friends and followers at various places and for various amounts of time. Those encounters are the topic of section two, and it is in and through them that we begin to see how Christ is making his disciples ready to continue his mission after the Ascension.

Misery, interrupted

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from Heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

The angel said to the women: *Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.'* Now I have told you.

Matthew 28.1-7

A few years ago my wife and her friend Theone were out hiking in the woods of Vancouver. They'd long since lost sight of any other people and were exploring some of the less-traveled paths near Bunson Lake, looking for a place where we might later take our families camping. Pressing further into the forest, they came across an old camp, full of cabins and shacks and recreational toys long since abandoned and decayed. This by itself was disturbing, but what happened next was even more so.

From out of the woods to their left came Freddy Krueger, knife-fingered glove, burned flesh, and all, saying: *Hi, ladies. Can I help you?*

After they finished screaming, Carmel and Theone were delighted to find out that this was Robert Englund (the actor who played Freddy in all the original films), and that the latest installment of the franchise was being filmed on location.

My wife loves to tell that story—about Freddy’s terrifying appearance, his sudden arrival, and their relief once they realized they weren’t going to be killed.

Though the variables are noticeably different, I still think of that story when I read the angels’ words here, after suddenly and dramatically appearing, in Matthew’s Gospel: *Do not be afraid.*

Every time angels appear in the Bible they always come with that same admonition, and it’s tough not to wonder why.

The answer, of course, is that they are terrifying. Certainly they look nothing like Freddy Kreuger, but nevertheless these are not the naked babies of Anne Geddes’ imagination. These are the supra-natural messengers and warriors of God’s Holy Throne Room who sometimes appear as dragons (*seraphim* literally means *fiery, flying serpents*), as griffin-like composite beings (see Ezekiel 1), or anthropological wonders whose very appearance knocks battle-hardened soldiers on their backs.

In this story, one such angel arrives on the scene with such force that it causes an earthquake. The angel then sets aside the 400 pound stone (give or take) covering the entrance to Christ’s tomb and sits on it like it was a bean bag chair. The soldiers aren’t immediately struck down, but are first stunned (the word used here describes something like an epileptic seizure) and then pass out.

At the risk of trivializing these events, I can’t help but see it all playing out in my mind like a good Japanese movie—you know, the ones where the reactions are overdone, the monster-costumes are ridiculous, and the special effects are made with toys and gasoline.

This is why I think Matthew’s gospel has the best resurrection story—it’s the version that emphasizes the supernatural, the glorious, and the overwhelming power of God to interrupt the miserable conditions of this life, even if those conditions happen to include life’s absence.



We sometimes forget that God can, and often does, interrupt life's misery. Perhaps that is because the last couple hundred years in the Western world have been dominated by a functional kind of atheism. We've been skeptics for a long time. We've been taught to trust our intellect, to trust our scientists, to trust our governments and our teachers and our experts. But there always seems to be a limit to what the experts can really do, and sometimes we find ourselves wishing there were other options than trusting in what, or who, we know.

This is the threshold of faith—not faith in others (though, that's not necessarily a bad thing), but a larger faith that wonders, *Is there anybody out there?*

I love it when God surprises us and answers back: Yes. I AM.

I AM the One who gives you courage to get through failure. Strength to get through suffering. Hope to get through every disappointment.

I AM the One who calms you when you're angry. Spurs you when you're afraid. Chastens you when you're out of line. Celebrates you when you rise above yourself and live in love.

I AM the One who knows you and loves you, not in spite of who you are, but precisely because of who I made you to be.

I AM the One who never leaves, never walks out, never gets mad and goes home in a huff.

I AM the One who forgives, who saves, and who heals.

We may never experience first hand the miracles of angelic visitation or physical resurrection in this life, but we are awash in miracles of another stripe all the same. When we open ourselves up to God's supernatural intervention, we can be quite surprised how often He interrupts the mundane and the miserable to bring us something truly miraculous.

...and to you

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other: *Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?*

But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.

Don't be alarmed, he said. You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'

Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

Mark 16.1-8

I confess I don't always think everything through before I get started. My friends tell me I have a little bit of the "ready, fire, aim" syndrome, and I am often accused of taking the bull-in-a-china-shop approach to life. I think that's part of my charm, though apparently I'm in the minority.



EASTER TIDE

In this story, Mary, Mary Magdalene, and Salome adopt the “David McDonald method” to life and come to Jesus’ tomb without having previously sorted out all that that would require, namely a way for the giant boulder in front of the tomb to be removed.

Tombs in those days had no real doors, but were closed up with large stones. In front of the tomb’s opening was a groove, and in the groove ran a circular stone as big as a cartwheel. The women knew it was way beyond their strength to move such a stone, and yet they came anyway knowing that it was important for them to take care of Christ’s body as soon as possible.

Before we say anything else, let me just pause for a moment and point out that it’s sometimes okay not to have everything planned out in advance. As John Lennon said, life is what happens to you while you’re busy making plans, and sometimes our preference for having everything all figured out well in advance gets in the way of us experiencing life’s special encounters as they happen. That’s not to say we should be unprepared on purpose, or that planning has no value. It’s just that sometimes we ought to loosen ourselves up a bit and make space for the unexpected.

Like these women did by coming to the tomb without a plan for removing the stone. In this case, it was precisely their lack of planning that allowed them to get front rows seats to an existential marvel the likes of which the world had never seen.

They were coming to anoint Jesus’ body for internment. It was the custom in Palestine to visit the grave of a loved one within three days of their burial because of an ancient belief that the spirit of that person hung around until the body began to decompose. That usually took about three days. The perfumed “anointing” helped to keep the stench of decomposition to a minimum, and it often required a hefty investment on the part of the family to afford the appropriate spices. The shops that sold these spices would have been closed on the Sabbath, but the Sabbath officially ended early Saturday evening. That’s likely when the women did their shopping, and they went first thing Sunday morning to take care of Christ’s body. And his body did need care, given that he died so close to the beginning of the Sabbath and had not been either cleaned or anointed before sundown on Friday.

Jesus was improperly buried because the priests of the Temple were in a hurry to relax and enjoy Passover. I find that both ironic and disturbing. The Romans, as it turned out, didn’t need to rush his execution at all (since he’d already died, having been beaten to within an inch of his life twice in the previous twelve hours), but they still complied with the priests and had Jesus unceremoniously tossed into a loaner-grave.

The fact that the grave did not belong to Jesus or his family is significant, because it underscores both Christ's poverty and provides the reason for the women's haste. In those days more than one person often used the same tomb, and so burial etiquette was a big deal. It was not only inconsiderate to neglect the anointing, but also deeply disrespectful to the grieving families of the other funeral parties—much like someone cursing loudly at a wake, or listening to their iPod at a funeral. In the Jewish tradition, bodies were buried in a tomb until they decomposed, and then buried a second time in a little box for bones called an ossuary. These bone-boxes were the final burial, as the skeleton of each person was ultimately all that remained of their physical body, and inside those skeletal remains there was said to reside the spiritual, soulful, identity of every righteous Jew, called *luz*.

Luz, in the ancient literature, was a key requirement for resurrection.

In the book of Ezekiel there is a story about resurrection called The Valley of Dry Bones. I've written extensively on this subject (see *Bleached: hope for the desolate*) but the reason I find it so fascinating is because of how it relates to the resurrection of Jesus. In this story, the prophet Ezekiel has a vision concerning a battlefield in which the skeletal remains of God's people have dried up and cracked. As it's told in Hebrew, it is clear that the bones are so dead that even their *luz* is gone. For the ancient reader, they would have understood that now *even resurrection* was impossible. There really was no hope for these fallen soldiers in either this life or the next. They were beyond redemption. Yet into that hopeless circumstance the Spirit of God begins to move and breathe and brings new life to these fallen people. They are resurrected despite the fact that everyone knew it couldn't be done.

God deals in the commodity of the impossible.

And these women should have remembered that story. More, they should have remembered that it is in the character and nature of God to surpass expectations, to baffle the limits of human understanding, and to bring life where no life was thought possible.

And yet all the women could think about was this stone.

The question of the large stone is soon settled as the women discover an open tomb and a striking young man who we later come to identify as an angelic messenger. He tells the women not to be afraid, but to go and tell the disciples and Peter that Christ has risen from the dead. Those two simple words – *and Peter* – have since become famous. On the one hand, they seem to indicate that Peter should no longer be counted among the



disciples, having disavowed himself of Jesus Christ and denied the faith. On the other hand, the fact that one of God's messengers has mentioned him by name ought to remind us that God's grace often outstrips our inconsistencies.

Yes, Peter had abandoned Jesus. But Christ had not forgotten Peter. He sent an angel to request him by name, thereby welcoming Peter back into fellowship both with Christ and with other Christians.

Every time I screw up I think of these simple words: *and David*. I think of all the little ways in which I deny Jesus—through careless remarks and idle thoughts, through unchecked ambition and the desire for revenge. And then I think of all the harm my denial has brought into the world—hurt feelings and broken relationships, backwards movement within the church and stunted personal development. All of my sin threatens to drown me and I feel totally inadequate as a pastor and a father and a husband and a Christian.

And then I remember the grace of God extended *to David* and I am relieved.

These words are the only truly unique feature of Mark's resurrection story. The angel appears elsewhere (albeit differently), and the women appear in two of the other stories as well, but only in Mark's gospel do we know that God calls for Peter by name.

Just like he calls to you.

Good women

On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, *Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.'* Then they remembered his words.

Luke 24.1-8

I think the single greatest spiritual revelation I've ever experienced was when I first understood that the Bible is really one big story. Though comprised of several dozen books by several dozen authors spanning several dozen centuries, when you take a step back from the Scriptures it actually becomes quite easy to see that Jesus fixed the problems first introduced in Genesis. And by the time we get to Revelation we've really just come back full circle to the very beginning chapters of the Bible. Prior to figuring that out, I had spent years and years trying to figure out why the First Testament was important, how it related to contemporary American life, and what possible relationship existed between the church in the Second Testament and the churches we attend today.

So when I see that Luke begins his version of the resurrection story with the words *on the first day of the week* (though, in the original text it is often rendered *on the eighth day*), a light comes on in my mind.

Because this story is part of a larger story.

In this case, Luke is deliberately calling to our attention the creation story from Genesis 1 in which God creates the Heavens and the earth over a period of seven days. In that story, each of the seven days of creation come to an end except the seventh and final day. We're meant to understand that the seventh day was a day of *shalom*—of rest and perfectly ordered peace. God's original design for the planet was to exist forever *like that*.

But things went awry when human sin and disobedience interrupted that perfectly ordered peace with chaos and rebellion.

Adam and Eve, our spiritual ancestors, brought a premature end to the seventh day of creation.

Luke's resurrection story takes place on the eighth day, which is to say the first day of the *new* creation. The *old* creation has expired, and a new creation has begun with the resurrection of Jesus. The eighth day, in Jewish religion, was a fancy way of referring to eternity – just think of it, by corollary the day that comes after 'the day that never ends' is a day marked by eternity.

But this numerological marvel is not the only creation feature of Luke's resurrection story. As he often does, Luke draws our attention to the particular role that women play in the unfolding events.

This, too, is significant.

In the Garden of Eden it was Eve, the woman, who was first deceived by the serpent and disobeyed God. Humanity fell into sin through the female sex, yet humanity was also restored through the female sex. That is Luke's point—not only here, but also throughout his gospel.

A virgin woman gave birth to Christ—no human male had any participation in Christ's conception—and a group of women were the first to proclaim Christ had risen again.

Through a woman, death,
and now through women, life.

The instrument communicating our downfall became the instrument communicating our restoration.

All those who would seek to limit the role of women within the church must pause here and consider why it was that Christ chose to come into the world through a virgin, and proclaim his resurrection to women, who themselves were meant to pass the message on to disbelieving and skeptical men.

To our modern ears this all sounds a little old fashioned. Of course, we think, women aren't really to blame for all that's wrong in the world. Of course men and women are equal in the sight of God, as in everything else. But, sadly, there are still many people who fail to understand this basic truth.

Christian people have often been slow to afford full rights and privileges to others (slavery was one example, women is another) and we must be faithful to those places in the biblical text that elevate women rather than simply looking at those few passages that seem (at first blush) to denigrate them.

And so we tell the stories of Deborah and Esther and Sarah and Miriam and Huldah and Jael and Mary (and the other Mary [Magdalene], and the other Mary [James' and John's mother]) and Priscilla and Philip's daughters and Junia and Phoebe and Euodias and Syntyche.

We tell those stories with special emphasis as both a defense against male hegemony and an apologetic for the beautiful and godly women we have among us who are commissioned and gifted to lead: Lori Tate, Becky Veydt, Kathy Meister, Amanda Iott, and many, many others.

And I tell these stories with special consideration for the women in my life: Carmel, and Glenda, and Anna Jordan.

My prayer is that our women become enamored with the women in Scripture and, like them, boldly step out in faith to make up for the shortcomings of the men who are too cynical, too lazy, and too sluggish to proclaim the good news of the Gospel of God.

Christ is risen, and we can thank God we had a few women to tell us about it.

Early dark

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said: *They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!*

So Peter and the beloved disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

John 20.1-10

After the crucifixion, the disciples were scared. Judas had betrayed Jesus. Peter had resorted to violence and attacked the Temple guards and then denied Christ completely. With the exception of John, all of the remaining disciples had scattered (not even sticking around to witness the crucifixion), finally making their way back to the little room in which they

had celebrated the Last Supper. It was like their hideout. They had partied there a couple of nights before, thinking that the final confrontation between Jesus and his enemies was going to go very differently than it did. Now, they returned to this upper room and were, we must assume, trying to figure out how to escape the city without getting arrested, murdered, or mobbed.

In John's resurrection story, Mary Magdalene makes her way to Jesus' grave and is startled to see the stone has been rolled away. Probably Mary's imagination ran away from her and she was thinking that Christ's enemies had looted his grave and defiled his corpse. In a panic, she dashes back to tell Peter that something was wrong. So he and John (*the beloved disciple*) run to find out for themselves what has happened.

John gets there first but doesn't enter. Peter, on the other hand, barges right in with his characteristic bluster. That's when he notices that the grave clothes were lying there, emptied, like a balloon from which all the air has escaped. That was very strange, for if grave robbers had stolen the body why would they have taken time to rearrange Christ's clothing? And, what's more, when Peter saw the burial shroud (a kind of hood for the deceased) it had been placed off to the side.

Of course many Catholics hold to the belief that this same shroud has been found. The Shroud of Turin (named for Turin, Italy where it was discovered) is famous for being imprinted with a kind of facial image, presumably left over from the glorious (read *hot and glowing*) resurrection of Jesus.

There is a lot of debate as to the authenticity of the Shroud of Turin. Some wonder if perhaps the Shroud isn't a fake. It may be. Of course, whether or not this particular Shroud is the leftover shroud from the Tomb has little bearing on whether or not such a shroud actually existed in the first place. But, if the Shroud is a fake, has anyone ever stopped to consider the remarkable artistry of the craftsman? The level of detail, the care, the veracity of the image? If the Shroud is a fake, we should find out who made it because they are an artist in the imaging and weaving of fine cloth that likely surpassed any of their time (or arguably any since). After all, that's why there's a debate raging in the first place, because even with carbon dating and the most sophisticated DNA mapping technology available, we still can't tell whether or not it's real.

Can that be said about any other work of art? Isn't it obvious that the Mona Lisa and Michelangelo's David are simply representations? But the Shroud...

I digress.

John's purpose for giving such detail about the grave clothes is not to draw attention to them, but to illustrate the difference between the kind of resurrection Jesus experienced and the prior instances of resurrection experienced by other people in the Gospels, namely Lazarus (see John 11.38-44). When Lazarus was resurrected, he came alive still wrapped in his grave clothes. He was wrapped in death and had to be set loose by the disciples. Yet when Jesus was resurrected, he was no longer wrapped in death. He was not only alive again, but free of death forever.

Christ came into new life in a qualitatively different way than Lazarus or any of the other resurrection people. Jesus' resurrection was the first time anyone had been privileged to witness the final and future destiny of humanity, clothed in glory, about which the Apostle Paul would later write with such care:

But someone will ask, *How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?* How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else.

So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.

If there is a [body animated by nature], there is also a [body animated by the Spirit]. So it is written: *The first man Adam became a living being; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit.* The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual. The first man was of the dust of the earth; the second man is of Heaven. As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the Heavenly man, so also are those who are of Heaven. And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the Heavenly man.

I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.

1 Corinthians 15.35-37, 42-53

I'm struck that the resurrection of Jesus means infinitely more than *just* Jesus being God's son (which he was), and very God Himself (which he was), and that his teachings and miracles were valid (which they were). The resurrection happened to one man, Jesus Christ, but that one man acted as a representative for the entire world. He was Israel's Messiah. He is our Savior. And that means that the resurrection has, in principle, happened in and to us all.

The resurrection means that God's plan to heal the world has been put into effect, that we are able and responsible to cooperate with Him in that plan, and that the remarkable power of the Spirit is alive in us and working to accomplish that plan through us.

One thing is certain, if Christ had not resurrected we'd have never heard of him. If you doubt that, consider the fact that there were at least a dozen other prominent Jewish Messianic claimants within a hundred years or so of Jesus and no one is still following them (even though, ironically, two of those others also had the name Jesus). And think about the disciples. After the crucifixion they were terrified, hiding, and in doubt. Something must have happened to turn them from fair-weather friends to martyrs and messengers of the kingdom. And there are no other plausible or credible reasons for that, other than the fact that the resurrection actually happened. He really was dead. He really did come into new life. And the response of Christ's friends and followers was not only relief, or joy, or devotion; it was also an increase in love.

Love plays a powerful and pivotal role in this story. It was Mary, who loved Jesus so much, who was first at the tomb; and it was John, the beloved disciple, who was first to believe in the resurrection.

If we get nothing else from this story we ought to get the importance and the supremacy of loving Christ. Lovers of Christ will see miracles, they will witness resurrection, and they will find it easier to believe. And this belief is not shallow or naïve, but rooted and grounded in the proof that God has once and for all changed the rules of who we are and how we're meant to live.

Jesus isn't meant to be admired

So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. *Greetings*, he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them: *Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.*

Matthew 28.8-10

When I was in college I used to love attending worship gatherings. Festivals, marathons, extravaganzas...you name it. I simply loved to worship and went for it with gusto whenever I got the opportunity. Thing is, I wasn't much of a singer. My pitch is bad and I get too caught up in the moment to really care.

One time I was sitting with my friend, a vocalist, and I guess I must have been swinging for the fences because he started smiling at me. *What's wrong?* I asked. *It's nothing... just that your pitch is so bad I can't help laughing.* To which I replied: *Good thing I'm not singing to you.*

I believed, and still do, that Jesus Christ deserves our worship. That's not limited to music or the arts. Worship is a quality in everything we do before the Lord, but I am convinced that how we approach Christ ought to include a certain amount of gratitude, humility, and honor.

One of the fascinating features of Matthew's resurrection story is that the women worshipped Jesus when he appeared to them on the road. That's something new. Jesus

had never been worshipped before. He had been adored as a child by the visiting Magi and the shepherds, but Jesus had never been properly worshipped. Worship was reserved for God only. No one else could be worshipped—that would be blasphemy—and no one else had ever been worshipped, including Jesus.

Until after the resurrection, after the dramatic entrance by the angel, after the supernatural appearance en route to see the disciples, Jesus' deity is obvious and the women fall to their feet. They acknowledge that he really is who he said he was, and that he has done what he said he came to do.

He has conquered death. He has overcome. He has bridged the gap between God and humanity in a way that only God Himself could do.

And that is why we worship him.

Jesus isn't meant to be admired. He isn't looking for us to be impressed. This, undoubtedly, is why both he and his followers made such a big deal out of calling him "Lord." A Lord is unlike any other kind of person.

A Lord is worshipped,
 but an actor can be admired.
 A Lord is revered,
 but a politician can be followed.
 A Lord requires tribute and fealty and honor,
 but a million other people
 require ever so much less from us.
 And so we are always tempted *away* from worshipping Jesus,
 because worship is so absolute.

As Lord, he is terribly unyielding.
 He doesn't compromise.
 He doesn't permit another perspective.
 Either Jesus Christ is Lord,
 or he is nothing at all—
 and if he is Lord,
 as the resurrection indicates,
 then he is meant to be worshipped.



That's why these Easter words are so powerful: *His is risen, indeed.* They are a declaration of Lordship and of our willingness to give Jesus Christ all the glory and honor and blessing and power and praise.

Conspiracy theory

While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them: *You are to say, "His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep." If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.* So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.

Matthew 28.11-15

I was, if nothing else, a mischievous child. I liked to pull pranks, to play jokes, and to behave inappropriately whenever possible. I still do.

One of the skills mischief requires is the ability to misdirect, especially when it comes to getting away with things. For example, I once hid above the office of my high school band director (in the ceiling, through the utility hatch) and laughed myself silly while calling his office line on my cell phone, and then disconnecting his outside line by unplugging the wires in the wall of the school. I watched him for about an hour as he got increasingly flustered, wondering aloud what could possibly be wrong with the phone system. Well, in order to get away with that, I had to sneak into the school in the wee hours of the morning, use bolt cutters to snip the lock closing the utility hatch, and then replace the lock with a fake plastic one that looked somewhat similar so I would not be stuck up there long after my little joke ceased to be amusing.



I got away with it.

The gospel story above, which takes place immediately after the first resurrection story in Matthew, is about people who try to get away with it. And, at first, it looks as if they will succeed. They think their political clout and the influence they wield with their special interest group will guarantee that they get to write history however they wished. But, of course, it doesn't guarantee any such thing.

Jesus will not be tamed, or confined, or constrained by either their religion or their politics. He defies their power, demonstrating that he—and only he—is Lord.

One of the favorite things I've learned over the years has been the seditious nature of the resurrection. Jesus was executed for being a traitor and an insurrectionist, even though there was very little political evidence to support that verdict. However, as he came back into new life, new political evidence began to add up.

For example the stone that was placed over top of Jesus' tomb was fitted with Pilate's (the Roman Governor) seal. Breaking that seal was a capital crime, punishable by death. When Jesus rose from the dead, and the angel rolled the stone away from the tomb, that seal was broken and Jesus was now guilty of defying the laws of Rome.

Good luck killing him the second time, though.

Additionally, striking a Roman officer was a capital offense, seen in the same light as if you hit Caesar himself in the face. So when the angel knocked the Roman soldiers over with his glorious presence, he too was guilty.

Along with this execution-infatuation was one final law that bears mentioning—the law that condemns any soldier to death for sleeping on the job. Now, it was very difficult to sleep on the job because soldiers were clustered together in groups of four and none of them would have been very likely to let the others get away with something so shoddy, but the law was there (and the 4-person company) to ensure that when Rome guarded a thing it stayed safe.

After Christ was resurrected, the four Roman soldiers who attended his grave began to panic. Two capital crimes had been committed and they had arrested no suspects. Additionally, the body of Jesus had been taken right from under their noses, and the only logical explanation would be that they had fallen asleep, a crime also punishable by death.

The soldiers catapulted into action, desperate to find some way to save their skins, and found their Jewish allies. This was an uneasy alliance (Jews and Romans were never on the best of terms), but in this case it was their best hope. The Jewish priests devised a cover-up scheme and promised to use their influence to keep Pilate off the soldiers' backs (remember that Pilate had a certain fear of the Jews and their power to whip the people into a riotous frenzy).

Anyway, the reason I chose to highlight this part of the story is that I still hear people make the audacious claim that Jesus' body was probably stolen by his disciples.

But this is nonsense for two main reasons.

First, a stolen body would not have accounted for the hundreds of eyewitnesses who are recorded as seeing Jesus Christ after his resurrection. Eyewitness testimony was the highest form of verifiable evidence in the ancient world. Since there was nothing like video surveillance technology or DNA fingerprinting, a person's word was the best evidence you had to offer. People took their testimony seriously because of this, recognizing that their identity and their testimony were intricately linked. To purger yourself in the ancient world was not only to falsify evidence, but to compromise your basic humanity before God and the people with whom you lived. Additionally, we're probably wise to recognize that it would have been impossible to get 500+ people in different places at roughly the same time to agree to tell the same lie (Jesus is risen ... no, seriously) without the benefit of telecommunications or the internet. Nevermind convincing the people to lie, you would have had to be The Flash just to travel back and forth to all the different groups of people and let them know you were even contemplating pulling the wool over the eyes of human history.

Secondly, a stolen body would not have accounted for the remarkable transformation in the disciples themselves. At the crucifixion, all of the disciples except John abandoned Jesus. Judas betrayed him. Peter denied him. Everyone else ran away, except for a group of women who stayed with Christ until the bitter end. The disciples were cowards, and went immediately into hiding after Christ's execution. But strangely, three days later, they re-emerged telling nonsensical stories about Jesus overcoming the grave, so full of passion and conviction on this point that they were willing to be arrested, tried, and ultimately (and joyfully!) executed one by one. While it is conceivable that maybe one or two disciples might have kept up the charade for a little while, it is beyond comprehension to

believe that the remaining ten disciples and their female counterparts persisted in this grand deception to their deaths (or in John's case, into exile), especially when revealing the truth would have spared their lives and the lives of the people they loved and held dear.

I say all of this, not to take issue so much with the priests from Matthew 28, but to gently remind those today who find the 'body-thief' idea compelling that it really doesn't hold water.

On a more devotional note, I find this story interesting because it shows very early on that the resurrection created problems for some people. It created vocational problems for the soldiers, it created religious problems for the priests, and it created political problems for the Roman Empire.

The resurrection creates problems for me too. Because Jesus Christ was raised from the dead I'm forced to make a whole series of choices about how I want to live and the ways in which I want my life to be counted. These are *good* problems:

Will I try to cover my own failings and inconsistencies, and so take the road of the soldiers?

Will I try to cover up uncomfortable truths and dismiss the possibility of divine and supernatural intervention, and so take the road of the priests?

Will I try to justify my own influence and political clout, seeking to prosecute those who stand against me, and so take the road of the Empire?

These are crucial questions in my life, because I too find it frustrating to own up to my failures and to always accept that there is a power at work I cannot quantify. That sometimes people stand against me and I have no real authority with which to call them down.

But therein is the true power of the resurrection:

I don't have to cover up my failures, because they are the landscape in which his perfection is manifested, and his strength is made perfect in my weakness.

I don't have to limit or leverage the will of God or the invisible world, but must instead learn to submit to God and to welcome the possibilities and the presence of Him who does what He wills, who pulls me along in His story.

I don't have to force everyone to agree with me, or obey me, or do what I want in any given situation because I have learned to know and to trust that God is working in them, and even through them, so that I might agree with and obey God.

He is Perfect.

He is Powerful.

He is the Authority.

And when I read this little story, I am reminded of how pathetic it really is for me to pretend otherwise.

Crazy women

When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.

Luke 24.9-12

I was about eight when the fire burned down our forest. My best friend, Geoff, and I used to often camp in those woods, building forts and climbing trees, pretending to be Robin Hood and Conan and Robinson Crusoe. But his sister, Whitney, was never allowed to come with us. I can't remember if it was we who prohibited her, but I do remember thinking: If you came, you'd wreck it.

Poor Whitney. She went camping with two of her girlfriends (she was only ten or so) and they started a campfire that they did not properly put out. The fire traveled underground for a couple hundred yards and erupted through the roots of an old growth tree, catching quickly and burning about 2 acres of our enchanted forest to ashes.

We didn't know this at the time. Geoff and I were playing in my yard when Whitney first came to us and said: I think I started a fire. We didn't believe her (after all, she wasn't allowed in the woods, so how could she have started a fire there?). We told her to scram

and went back to playing. About three or four hours later, sirens started going off and school was cancelled the next day because the fire department had commandeered the school property, which backed up to the forest, for their headquarters.

I felt so bad for not trusting Whitney. I can't even tell you why I dismissed her out of hand, just that I did. We both did. And we were fortunate that the only casualties of our skepticism were ferns and firs.

In Luke's story, the women return to the disciples and tell them the news that Christ had risen from the dead, but the disciples do not believe them. In fact, the word that's used to describe their unbelief (*leros*) is a Grecian medical term, used in reference to people who catch fever and babble on about their dreams.

Perhaps one reason the disciples were so incredulous has to do with their idea of "resurrection." The ancient Jewish people believed that resurrection was something that would happen at the end of all time to every single righteous Jew all at once. This general resurrection would inaugurate God's final cleanup of the world. The people of God would receive new life and finally experience the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham—He would use His people in their resurrection bodies to make every wrong thing right and restore *shalom* to all creation.

Simply put, the disciples never anticipated that one person either could or would be resurrected in the middle of time, which is why they failed to understand Jesus' many prophecies about his own death and resurrection. Their disbelief wasn't just grounded in skepticism about supernatural power, but about coming to grips with precisely how wrong they had understood the end times.

That's probably something we should remember in the midst of our own speculations concerning the End of the World. The Christian imagination, after all, is notably apocalyptic, and most of our end-of-the-world scenarios are based much more on (a) action and disaster movies and (b) our belief that Westerners are inherently "Christian," than they (c) are actually rooted in Scripture.

We need to cultivate speculations and fantasies (which can be good things) about an ending that could actually be better than we'd hoped.

One key feature of the good news of the gospel is that we are sometimes wrong, but happily so. God has better things in store for us than we can possibly imagine or even possibly understand. Whenever we consider all the various "end of the world" scenarios

(as we often do whenever a new apocalyptic book or movie, secular or otherwise, is released) we ought to always make room in our sanctified supposing for the possibility that His plans are likely more adventurous, more loving, and more just than we could otherwise imagine.

At any rate, nobody had picked up any of Jesus' hints that he would be resurrected into a new physical body while the rest of them carried on like before. It was a complete paradigm shift, and it required some fast thinking—and fast accepting—on the part of Christ's followers.

Peter, for one, takes off on an impulse to discover for himself what has really occurred.

It's that impulse that I find so inspiring. Peter is easily the disciple with whom we're able to most identify. He fails a lot, but he never wholly gives up. After denying Christ three times prior to the crucifixion, he still hangs around the apostolic band and even continues to function as their de facto leader. That in and of itself is remarkable, but nothing leans our hearts towards the failed fisherman like his mad dash to the empty tomb to see for himself if Christ had defied his expectations.

Say this much for Peter, though, that even in the midst of his skepticism he took the chance that Christ had risen, and decided to go find out for himself. Coward—yes!—but hero, also.

This is something else we ought to remember: People can be both “good” and “bad” in the sense that good people can still have massive failings and bad people can still sometimes act virtuously. Most of us forget that. As a result we tend to label people as one or the other – treating them warmly or harshly. What's worse, I think, is that we tend to do this with ourselves as well. We are so often crushed by the reality of our shortcomings, our failures, our immaturities, and our sins that we forget we are still a work in progress. We have hope, though, because if God hadn't given up on Peter the Cowardly Hero, He likely hasn't given up on us either.

That's good news.

Don't stand so close to me

Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

They asked her: *Woman, why are you crying?*

They have taken my Lord away, she said, and I don't know where they have put him. At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

He asked her: *Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?*

Thinking he was the gardener, she said: *Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.*

Jesus said to her: *Mariam.*

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, *Rabbouni!*

Jesus said: *Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'*

Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: *I have seen the Lord!* And she told them that he had said these things to her.

John 20.11-18

I've had several nicknames in my short life: Bishop. Radar. DeeDee. Slick. None of them have really stuck, but the people who've christened me with each name still insist on calling me by that handle whenever I see them. As a result, whenever I hear someone call me Slick, I know it has to be Landrum. My old rugby coach, Mike Martin, insisted I was a bishop even though I was a pastor, and Randy Shafer was the only person I allowed to call me DeeDee (Doctor Dave) without earning a punch in the neck.

My point is that nicknames don't just identify the named, but the namer. Slick means "Landrum's way of identifying David" more than it means that I resemble Pierce Brosnan.

Which I don't.

At all.

In this episode of the resurrection stories, Jesus appears to Mary but she doesn't initially recognize him. In all likelihood this was because Mary was overcome with grief and couldn't see through her tears. Additionally, however, it might be worth mentioning that Mary really wasn't looking for Jesus—she had no expectation of actually encountering him. As we mentioned in an earlier chapter this was because the Jewish conception of resurrection didn't really include one man being resurrected all by himself in the middle of time. And, despite Jesus' many words to the contrary, his friends and followers never put two and two together to realize that was precisely what he meant to do all along.

Mary mistakes Christ, at first, for the gardener. This is important because, as John is careful to point out all the way through his gospel story, Jesus comes into this world as a kind of Second Adam—a replacement Adam for the first man who ever lived and through whom sin entered the world. The first Adam was a gardener who polluted his garden and invited death into the world. The Second Adam, Christ, also appears as a gardener but this time the gardener has come to remove death from the world completely, just as he's come to remove every kind of pollution—both spiritual and physical—from the cosmic garden of creation.

In her grief, all Mary can ask for is that the gardener point her to Jesus' corpse so she can have some privacy in which to mourn, but it is precisely at this point that Jesus reveals

himself to her by using her nickname: *Mariam* (the Aramaic version of her Greek name, Mary).

At once Mary recognizes Jesus and blurts out her own favored affective, *Rabbouni*—a word that literally means “teacher” but has a friendlier tone, like when you got to call your high school science teacher “Mr. P.”

At this point we come face to face with the fact that something has changed in the relationship between Jesus and Mary. He tells her not to touch him, which initially seems rather abrupt. Based on latter stories involving the resurrected Christ (like when he invites Thomas to touch his wounds) we know that Jesus is not reluctant to have people actually, physically, touch him. Instead, he’s trying to gently let Mary know that things aren’t just going to go back to the way they were. He’s different now, and Mary herself will be different because of what has happened.

I don’t think enough attention has been given to just how different the resurrected Jesus is from Jesus *prior to his crucifixion*. On the one hand, I understand why this is the case—he is the same Jesus after all, that’s one of the hallmarks of the Christian faith—and yet on the other hand I think that Christ prior to the resurrection is so much easier for people to co-opt into their own belief systems, their own moral philosophy, and their own concept of spirituality.

Yet the resurrected Jesus is no longer surrendering his divinity. He’s not limiting himself to a purely human experience any longer. The gloves have come off. He has defeated death and Hell. He has overcome the grave, and he will not sit quietly in a tomb while the Romans continue to tell the world he has been defeated. He will not stay shuffled off in someone else’s grave while the Pharisees tell everyone he was a fraud. And he will not allow his closest friends and followers to go on thinking that he’s simply their buddy.

This new relationship isn’t going to be like the old one. Jesus isn’t about to resume gallivanting around Judea with his chums, and with the words *Don’t hold on to me*, he’s trying to warn Mary not to become possessive or clingy.

This is a warning many of us need to hear. Sometimes, for example, we get so completely caught up in expressing our emotion and devotion for Christ that we neglect the purpose for which we remain in the world. We’ll unpack that further in section three, concerning the Great Commission, but for now let it suffice to say that we sometimes get lost in worship at the expense of mission. We become introverted instead of cooperating with

God to heal the world. We get caught up in our churches, and in our liturgical preferences and musical tastes, and in our own internal priorities instead of pressing ourselves outwards into the surrounding communities with the good news of the Gospel of God.

Don't hold onto me was a way of saying *don't get carried away in worship and neglect your mission*. Worship is important, but proclamation far more so.

I love that directly after (a) seeing the resurrected Jesus (something for which she had no real frame of reference) and (b) being warned that their relationship must now drastically change, that (c) Mary obeys immediately and without question.

I've been working to cultivate this kind of immediate obedience, but it's tough. Most of the time it involves feeling foolish and being plagued with doubts concerning whether or not I'm being obedient to God or just being impulsive. Most of the time it starts out awkwardly and only sometimes does it end well. This is a risk with Mary, too, yet she runs to the disciples and tells them she's encountered Christ despite the fact that they had previously doubted her and told her she was speaking nonsense. Yet because of her immediate and unquestioned obedience Mary Magdalene becomes the very first apostle—indeed, she has been called “the apostle to the apostles.” She was among the first to believe, but she was the first to testify.

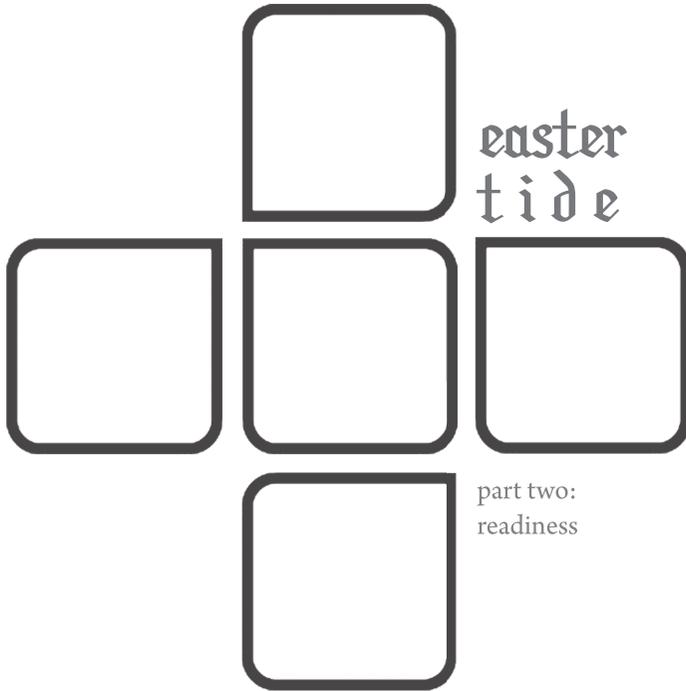
I find this so wonderfully fascinating. Women in those days were considered less credible witnesses than men, and the fact that Christ appeared first to them is one more way in which God elevates and honors the status of women.

Still, I don't want to get too sidetracked on the feminist angle of this story—it's there, and it's important, but the real thrust of this episode can be summed up as follows:

Look for the risen Christ,
not the dead one.

Meet him,
love him,
and then quickly obey him.

 EASTER TIDE



 EASTER TIDE



The post-resurrection encounters . . .

continue the saga of God in the World. As Jesus demonstrated his lordship, his authority, and his purpose he prepared his disciples for his immanent departure performing normal, natural tasks in supernatural, supra-normal ways. Christ transformed work, and speech, and travel, and mealtimes from the mundane into the miraculous simply by being present. Knowing he would soon leave, Christ took time to teach his friends about who they were meant to become and what they were meant to do after he left.

Relief effort

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, *Peace be with you!* After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

Again Jesus said, *Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.* And with that he breathed on them and said, *Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.*

John 20.19-23

One of my favorite authors is Richard Mattheson, who wrote for the original *Twilight Zone* television show and then moved on to mainly horror and science fiction novels. He did write one murder mystery, though, called *Now You See It...* The book describes the suspicious death of a famed magician and the bumbling police inspectors who try to piece his death together. They discover (spoiler alert!) that his death had been staged in order to arrange for a more sinister murder.

The entire book takes place in a single room, the magician's study, with never more than three people in it at one time. Yet there are almost twenty characters in the book. People keep coming and going, but not always through the door. There are secret compartments. Hidden panels. Moveable bookshelves. Even a sarcophagus with a false back. The effect of all these comings and goings is quite dramatic, and I get totally caught up in the story every time I read it.



I imagine that the disciples were experiencing something like that when Jesus appeared in the middle of their locked room. Having secluded themselves back at their hideout for fear of further persecution and violence, the motley crew thought they were safely hidden from unwanted company and from prying eyes. It's difficult to imagine exactly how shocked they were when Jesus walked through the wall to get to them, but it's fun to try. They were given a front-row seat to one of the greatest metaphysical mysteries of all time: the resurrection body.

It is important to notice that Jesus' new physicality has some new properties. Jesus is not a ghost or an apparition (otherwise how could Thomas have later put his fingers *inside* Christ?), but his body is different than ours in some important senses. In my science fiction-fangled brain, I like to hypothesize how he did it—something to do with control over sub-atomic particles or the space between molecules, I'm sure—but I really don't know much science, and my fiction probably treads too close to fairy tales to be compelling.

The point is that Christ is there, alive and in a body, and that proves his mastery over life and death in two directions: he won't stay dead and he won't live within his former limitations either.

Coming close to his disciples, Christ breathes on them and says: *Receive the Holy Spirit*. This is the first commissioning of the church. Christ will use the church to be his hands and feet in the world after his departure. It means the church needs Christ, her power source. It means that Christ is sending out the church in the same way that the Father has sent Jesus. This is a particular emphasis of John—that Jesus was perfectly obedient to the will of the father—and now we too are meant to be perfectly obedient.

And we're meant to understand all of this in context of the creation stories in Genesis.

There are actually two creation accounts in the book of Genesis. Genesis 1 tells the play-by-play of God's work in creating the world. Genesis 2 tells the story of how God created humanity and set us to work in the Garden of Eden. Strangely enough, scholars unanimously agree that the creation story of Genesis 2 was written well in advance of the play-by-play. As a result, we ought to give it a little more attention than we normally do.

Futurist Len Sweet is fond of pointing out that "the oldest image we have of God" involves Him playing in the mud. God fashioned Adam out of the earth, like a potter crafting from clay. Into that earthen man, God breathed His spirit, and when that Spirit entered the man, Adam became a living soul.

Two things are important here: First, that the language indicates Adam became a soul, not that he received one. We don't *have* souls, we *are* souls. A soul is the combination of God's spirit alive in a human body. Soul = spirit + flesh. Second, the soul comes from God's spirit. So, strictly speaking, we can diagnose much of what's wrong with the world simply by tracing which spirit they've been inhaling.

The advertisers on Madison Avenue are often called "soulless," as are the warlords of Africa and the big businesspeople of the corporate West. In a sense, they are. The spirit that fuels and fills them is not the breath of God—our Creator, who is the source of *shalom* and the provider of peace—but some other spirit. Greed. Lust. Power. Control. Whatever. The point is that there is only one way to have soul, and it's to be breathing the breath of God.

This is the backdrop for John's story about Jesus breathing on his disciples. His actions recall Eden, but also the Valley of Dry Bones as well as the prophecies of Joel:

*Come, from the four winds, O breath
and breathe on their dry bones that they may live*

and

In the last days I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh

John wants us to know that the coming of the Spirit upon the church is like waking up the dead, and like a downpour at the end of a long drought.

When Christ was alive in the world, he could only be in one place at one time. He came to inaugurate his kingdom, but he also came to empower his disciples to continue his work. Once the disciples were empowered to cooperate with God to heal the world, and could make more disciples who would likewise work in the healing endeavor, then you basically have something like a metaphysical Amway—a Messiah becomes 12 disciples becomes 72 who are sent out becomes 120 who receive the Spirit on the day of Pentecost becomes ... becomes ... becomes ... 2 billion people by spring 2011.

That's quite a down line.

You might also think of Christ's strategy here as being something like relief work. Whenever relief agencies come into a developing area one of the first things they do is bring water. The water they bring with them can neither (a) last, or (b) be leveraged to amend the ecological and environmental damage caused by war, drought, or fire. So they always dig a well.

I think of Jesus' mission as being something like a relief effort. He comes by himself to heal the world, and it's like he's showing up to some underprivileged area with a tanker full of water. Christ is killed and removed from the earth, much like that tanker full of water eventually runs out. However, Christ returns and when he does he gives power to his followers. Here we have something equivalent to a relief team building a well that will sustain a village for a long time to come. Additionally, the power Christ gives to his people enables them to replicate the power they've received. Not only does this village get a well, but they learn how to make more wells, and how to irrigate and construct water purification systems. This village can now be watered and grow crops.

The world is a global village. Christ is the water of life. One drink from him and you will never thirst again.

Fueled by the Spirit, the disciples can now do what they never otherwise would have dreamed of—they are to pronounce, in Christ's name and through his Spirit, the message of forgiveness to all. They are also to "retain" sins, a peculiar phrase which might have been better translated to say that the disciples are charged with reminding the world that sin is a deadly serious problem that, if left unchecked, will lead to death.

And, of course, the real payoff in this story for us is that this same Spirit will later be available to us all on the Day of Pentecost. That day was still in the future for the disciples, but for us it has long passed. When we read this post-resurrection episode now, we're simply brushing up on our history. We're discovering when the gift we've received was first made available, like educating ourselves on the origins of the first cask of a fine port.

Walking wounded

While the two followers were telling this, Jesus himself stood right in the middle of them and said, *Peace be with you.*

They were fearful and terrified and thought they were seeing a ghost. But Jesus said, *Why are you troubled? Why do you doubt what you see? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see, because a ghost does not have a living body as you see I have.*

After Jesus said this, he showed them his hands and feet. While they still could not believe it because they were amazed and happy, Jesus said to them, *Do you have any food here?* They gave him a piece of broiled fish. While the followers watched, Jesus took the fish and ate it.

He said to them, *Remember when I was with you before? I said that everything written about me must happen—everything in the Law of Moses, the books of the prophets, and the Psalms.*

Then Jesus opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He said to them, *It is written that the Christ would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and that a change of hearts and lives and forgiveness of sins would be preached in his name to all nations, starting at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I will send you what my Father has promised, but you must stay in Jerusalem until you have received that power from Heaven.*

Luke 24.36-49

Over the last couple of years there's been a lot of brouhaha about several gospels that aren't included in the Second Testament. Maybe this is because of the *Da Vinci Code*, or maybe it's a little more high brow and can be traced back to the Jesus Seminar. Regardless, it's out there. Everyone from Jodi Piccoult to Tony Robbins to Madonna, they all seem convinced that non-canonical (read: *not in the Bible*) gospels are actually somehow more authentic than the ones we've been reading for thousands of years and can archaeologically and historically date back to the time of Jesus.

And here I thought Tony Robbins was a genius.

Anyway, the point is that once you begin reading some of these gospels you realize that the portrait of Jesus they paint is very different from the one we see in the Bible. You might think that the non-canonical Jesus is somehow more human, more approachable, and therefore less of a problem in the whole divine-human thing.

Surprisingly, you'd be wrong.

One of the most common features of the phony gospels is how Superman-ish they make Jesus appear. He's not just God-made-flesh, he's got super-speed and super-smarts and he never ever finds himself with a hair out of place. In one of these stories, Jesus has a footrace with another boy. Jesus – being superboy – easily beats the kid at first, until that kid cheats and trips Jesus. To get even, Jesus kills him with Holy Spirit power and then resurrects him again just to prove he can.

Jesus is also, apparently, super-crazy.

But he comes by it honestly. His mom and dad were apparently crazy too. Consider that in the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene* we're told that the baby Jesus pooped his diaper while the holy family was en route to Egypt. Needing a place to wash it out, Mary stopped at a nearby oasis. Before she could do laundry, however, the other people surrounding the oasis complained to her that the water was poisoned. Mary addressed this problem by washing the diaper in the poisoned water, thereby making it safe for drinking once more.

I'm inclined to think the author of this particular story simply got the order of events backwards. But then who am I to judge?

The point here is that the real gospels paint a surprisingly human picture of Jesus. In fact, Jesus' full humanity is of critical importance to the Christian story. It is only because he was simultaneously fully human and fully God that his sacrificial death on the cross

atones (because he's God) for the sins of every human being (because he's human). So it is totally consistent that we find Jesus, in Luke's story about Jesus' post-resurrection appearance, asking his friends if they have any food and then sitting down to eat broiled fish.

Honestly, if this story was fraudulent the author would never have bothered to include that bit about broiled fish. It's not sexy. It's not educational. It's not even particularly relevant to the plotline... well, not by itself.

But those are all marks of authenticity by which we can tell that this story is not about selling books or garnering fame. It's about telling the true Story of God and His plans to set the world to rights.

To contextualize, this story happens right after the Emmaus road encounter where two of Jesus' followers, Clopas and Mary, have just arrived from their surprise exchange with Christ over supper. Jesus appears in the middle of the room and says to his friends: *Peace be with you*, which means something like *May God give you every good thing*.

Recognizing that they are still startled, despite all of them having encountered the resurrected Jesus previously, Jesus gives them proof that he is not a ghost. That proof comes in the form of the wounds in his hands and feet—the wounds from his crucifixion.

Isn't it strange that Christ retained the signs of his wounds and the marks of his scars? He keeps these wounds for our sake to demonstrate the cost of our freedom and that he gladly pays it.

The very wounds that Christ shows his disciples are the wounds he will show the Father as trophies of our salvation.

Is there something connecting the wounds of Christ after the resurrection and the imperfection (read: *wounds*) of his church? Is it possible that we are in the process of becoming new creation(s), and that the difficult process often results in scarring and wounding? Is there any sense, then, in acknowledging our ecclesial and personal wounds for what they are—evidence that we are not yet the people we have been called to become? Not yet the bride or the body or the church God has intended?

Christ was scarred while still encapsulated in old creation. In the new creation, he was made new but kept his scars.

The church is wounded while stuck here in the old creation. We are made new creations in Christ, but—like him—we retain our wounds.

His wounds were like merit badges—the holes in his hands and feet proved that he had suffered and come through the other side victorious.

Our wounds—our broken hearts, our failures and disappointments—are also like merit badges, proving that we have endured much but come through the other side because Christ is making us new.

After demonstrating that he is in fact a person, Jesus goes one step further and orders the fish fry. They ate while he—again—took time to teach them the story of the First Testament and to reveal to them how he brings it all together.

The episode ends with Christ reminding them of the Father's promise. That language recalls God's promise to Abraham, which is arguably the most important piece of the entire First Testament. It's where God promises Abraham that through him He will heal the world. Jesus instructs his disciples to remain in Jerusalem until they receive this new promise.

Later, on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit fulfills that promise and empowers the believers with spiritual gifts, guidance, and inspiration. The Spirit of Christ is the means by which the incarnate Christ's presence will continue to be with the disciples, bestowing all the gifts made possible by Christ's incarnation, suffering, death, and resurrection.

This story has two great takeaways for us. First, we should recognize that the Story of God and the World is our story, and we ought to learn it well. Not only to see how Christ fits into the First Testament, but to see how people have been struggling with the same issues we struggle do for thousands of years and how God, in His wisdom and goodness and grace, has been working to help us get ahead since day one.

Secondly, we should recognize the value of our wounds. Yes, we want to be healed, but also we want to take something that caused us great harm and have it redeemed. We want our mourning to turn to dancing. We want our complaint to turn into laughter and singing. We want to participate in God's story of healing and reversal, using those things from our past that have hurt us as instruments of healing for others.

 EASTER TIDE

Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
Yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by Him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.

Isaiah 53.4-5



Believing is seeing

Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, *We have seen the Lord!*

But he said to them, *Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.*

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, *Peace be with you!* Then he said to Thomas, *Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.*

Thomas said to him, *My Lord and my God!*

Then Jesus told him, *Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*

John 20.24-29

At some point in our relationship, my great affection for mischief was passed on to my wife. Carmel had always been mischief-averse prior to our romantic entanglements, but I appreciate how her mind has slowly evolved into something much more devious.

Take, for example, her days back in college while she was still playing basketball for the University of British Columbia. On one ill-fated road-trip, Carmel decided to play a prank on a naïve teammate. They were traveling on a ferry to Vancouver Island and Carmel's friend had never been on a ferry before. Thinking this was funny, my wife told her that if you needed to use the restroom on a ferry you had to remove your pants completely, otherwise the suction created by the boat would pull them into the drain.

Her friend believed, with no real need to be convinced. And was thusly robbed of her pants while incapacitated. If I have my facts correct, the poor gal had to cut leg-holes in her backpack and wear that (like a corduroy diaper) off of the ferry to her enduring shame.

That story is funny, and even Carmel's friend laughs about it now, but its also very revelatory. It's a story that reminds us to be cautious with our beliefs. It's a story that reminds us that naïveté is not normally an admirable quality, that we should not get sucked into silly ideas, and that we should verify a few basic facts before doing anything out of the ordinary.

And, of course, I'm telling you this story as a way to try and remove (or at least lessen the sting) of Thomas' nickname, *Doubting Thomas*.

Poor Thomas, he gets such a bad rep. He's only mentioned a handful of times in John and nowhere else. He was likely related to Matthew and James, since the three of them were always mentioned together and both Matthew and James were "sons of Alphaeus." Additionally, John tells us that Thomas was willing to follow Jesus into Jerusalem even if it meant his death (11.16), and it was Thomas who expressed his great concern as to where Jesus would go after leaving the world because Thomas could not bear to be parted from his master (14.5). Sadly, we remember none of these things. We only remember that Thomas did not, at first, believe.

It's not even that Thomas refused to believe entirely, it's just that he wanted to ensure his beliefs were substantiated. We've villainized him for this, but I'm not sure we should have. He simply didn't want to be robbed of his pants while on the ferry boat.

We would do well to remember that the ancient Jewish conception of resurrection didn't leave room for one man being resurrected in the middle of time. Thomas was open to the possibility that Christ had been raised from the dead, since over the years I'm sure he had

to be open to lots of possibilities. They'd all experienced some crazy stuff while hanging around Jesus—miracles, healings, resurrections of another sort—and they had plenty of weird stories in their Jewish history to boot, like ghosts, witches, exorcisms, séances, and so on. Thomas, we can be sure, wanted to figure out exactly what manner of creature this “Jesus” really was. Was this actually Jesus? Or a spirit masquerading as Jesus? Was this Jesus back in a physical form, the product of a literal, bodily resurrection? Or was this just Jesus’ ghost?

Even in the midst of his supposed skepticism, Thomas is a model of two great virtues: he wouldn't pretend to understand, and he wouldn't lie about what he believed. So, for Thomas to be sure that Jesus was who they all said he was, he wanted to see for himself.

And we ought to be glad he did. Had he not, the rest of us would have spent the last couple of thousand years wondering why no one bothered to actually touch Christ and make sure they weren't hallucinating or something.

If we're brutally honest, Thomas really only made one mistake—he left his friends. He was part of a community, and when the tough times hit he ditched them. Sure, he had his own grief and loss to work through and sure he might have preferred to do that on his own, but the net result of his isolation was that he was the last one to experience the resurrection.

This is a lesson for us. We miss out on a lot of good things when we choose to go out on our own and hoe our own row. We all need solitude, granted, and we all ought to have space to process events and emotions in our own way. But there is a cost to our insistence on individuality. In this case, that cost was high.

This is why Jesus rebukes him and tells him to stop doubting. And this is also why Christ quips: *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*

We're all very glad Jesus said that, given that we have the exact opposite experience from Thomas. He got to see the resurrected Jesus, and we have not. And yet, we have access to something that Thomas did not have either—the church.

Christ is the head of the church. The church is the body of Christ. The disciples couldn't yet see the church that Christ was talking about. It hadn't really been formed yet, but they could see Christ himself. They could see the head, but not the body. We have the opposite problem. We see the body fully—through the last 2000 years of church history—but we can't see the head.

They had a head-on-a-platter faith. We have Sleepy Hollow. Only later on, will both we and the disciples get a full picture of who Christ is and how he's able to work in the world. *Now I see through a glass dimly* and all that.

In the meantime, though, we'll all have to make do with seeing the imperfect body of Christ. And, make no mistake, it takes real faith to look at the church and see Jesus. That is both our challenge—to see Christ—and our mission—to reveal him. When asked what the single most important contribution each individual Christian could make on the health of the church at large, famed theologian Eugene Peterson replied: *Go to the church nearest your home. Shut up. And like it.* I feel like there are a million qualifiers we ought to add to Peterson's sharp advice, but I also actually like it. We spend too much time focusing on the peripherals, and too little time recognizing that church—even the crappiest church on the planet—is holy somehow. When we get together we're given an opportunity to demonstrate Christ to the world.

For Thomas, seeing Christ meant believing in the resurrection. For us, believing in the resurrection means looking at the church and seeing Jesus.

In other words, seeing is not believing.
Believing is seeing.

Jesus touched their eyes and said, *Because you have faith, you will see.* And their sight was restored.

Matthew 9.28

A legend...

The Jewish poet Bardesan wrote a famous book about 175 years after Thomas died, chronicling Thomas' exploits in India. For various reasons, many of them theological, this book is not recommended reading (Bardesan, apparently, confused Jesus Christ with a kind of Kung Fu Cosmic Wizard which, while exciting, is pretty bogus). *The Acts of Thomas* do, however, tell us a historically accurate recounting of Thomas missionary journey into India and what is now Afghanistan.

Legend has it that after the Ascension, the disciples divided the world so they could each spread the message of Jesus across the world. Thomas was chosen to minister in India, but he didn't want to go because he was something of a racist. Jesus appeared to Thomas in a vision and instructed him to go anyway but Thomas stubbornly refused, saying: *I will go wherever you send me, so long as there are no Indians.*

Around that time, there was a wealthy merchant from India visiting Jerusalem. He had been sent by King Gundaphorus to secure skilled carpenters who could work on the King's new palace. Thomas was such a carpenter but refused to go with the merchant, Abbanes. Jesus, however, approached Abbanes in the marketplace and told him Thomas was his slave. He sold Thomas to Abbanes, who then proceeded to find Thomas in the market and confront him.

Abbanes cornered Thomas and asked him if Christ was his master. Thomas told him that indeed he was, and then Abbanes informed the disciple that he had been sold and would now travel back to India to work on King Gundaphorus' palace.

Thomas said nothing in reply, but traveled to India and led the project on the King's home. The King gave him vast amounts of money and conscripted hundreds of workmen to help him, but Thomas gave all the money to the poor. He told the King the palace was coming along nicely, but Gundaphorus began to get suspicious. In the end the King sent for Thomas and asked him: *Have you finished my palace?* To which Thomas replied: *Yes I have. You may go and see it. Not now, of course, but when you have departed this life you will see the mansion I have built for you in Heaven.*

At first the King was furious, but his anger subsided and he was won over to the cause of Christ.

This is how Christian spirituality first came to India, and how the Thomist Christian Church was formed.



Chew your Bible

Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him.

He asked them, *What are you discussing together as you walk along?*

They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Clopas, asked him, *Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?*

What things? he asked.

About Jesus of Nazareth, they replied. He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus.

He said to them, *How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?* And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

Luke 24.13-27

Both Carmel and I are verbal processors. We need to not only think things through, but talk things through as well. Over the years, we've become pretty good at it. We talk through financial issues. We talk through political issues. Most importantly we talk through relational issues pertaining to each other and to faith in Christ.

Consequently, some of my favorite experiences as a lover and follower of Jesus have come when I get to do something with Carmel. Like if I go to a pastor's conference and she goes along with me, it's always way better than if I attend alone or with some friends. Carmel has a different take on things than I do, and the slant from which she sees the world often helps me get out of my ministerial and ideological roots. She's a different smart than me, and so I get better insights when we're together.

Like one time when we went to a church planter's conference to investigate the possibility of starting a new church in Vancouver. The conference was fun and informative. There were people there offering us money to get started, promising to supply us with the necessary resources – both capital and educational – and everything seemed like it was a go.

Until Carmel piped up and began asking questions that I'd largely ignored. She wanted to hone in on whether or not this was the right thing for us to do at that moment (as opposed to just a good thing for any moment, which we both agreed it was). She wanted to know about what specific skills we would need to cultivate in order to succeed (like meeting strangers, leveraging existing contacts, and being humble enough to beg all of our friends for their multi-layered support). Most importantly, Carmel began to ask what spiritual changes we thought we would likely undergo if we started a new church. She wondered about what kind of people we would be a few years down the line if we submitted ourselves to something that might help, but might also not be part of how we're wired or what we're called to do.

That was the game-changer for me. I realized that if we were to plant a church we would only be exposed to the people we already knew, with the skills we already had, and we would rely too much on our existing knowledge, expertise, and networks.

Talking that through ultimately led us to make a very different decision than we otherwise would have. There were some other factors involved to be sure, but Carmel's attentiveness to the Spirit was the overriding factor in why we choose something different.

The post-resurrection encounter in Luke 24 is a story about two people meeting Jesus as they head back home. These two people were likely Clopas and Mary (see John 19), disciples of Christ and family friends, and they were processing all that had happened with and since the crucifixion much like Carmel and I would have been processing all of that too. Many people have found this episode to be a wonderfully affirming story about how we're meant to bring our concerns as a couple before Christ.

Notice that Luke says that Clopas and Mary were "kept from recognizing Jesus," almost as if Christ was using his divine prerogative to test them somehow. Unlike his appearances to the other disciples, here Jesus is willing to let this couple sweat a little bit and he's keen to see how they respond.

Imagine if you were them, how scared you would feel at this moment. You'd be worried about all kinds of strange things—spies, infiltrators, people willing to turn coat and toss you over to the authorities for being a co-conspirator—and yet Clopas finds the courage to speak openly anyway. Maybe that's because he's really brave. Or maybe that's because he just doesn't care anymore. His whole world has been rocked and things aren't likely to get too much worse. Nevertheless he broaches the subject with Christ, and even presses this "stranger" further after Jesus rebukes him for his stupidity.

P.S.—Now is a good time to point out that sometimes Jesus left his meek-and-mild demeanor at home with the lambs.

At any rate, Jesus begins to teach Clopas and Mary, walking them through the story of the Scriptures. This is profoundly significant, because the story of the Bible is the framing story for correctly understanding Christ. His life was not his own, but was lived in obedience to the will of the Father who sent him into the world to save the world.

Only when we understand Jesus as the climax of the story that began in Genesis can we properly understand who he is and why he came into the world. As I once heard Tom Wright cleverly put it: *The First Testament is the thing that keeps us from making up whatever we like about Jesus.*

Jesus, then, is showing them that the entire First Testament is really about him and it is only through the Scriptures that they are made to understand. And the full measure of his

teaching (and, subsequently, of their understanding) is that the Messiah has now *entered his glory*. That's a kingly phrase, often used in ancient near eastern coronation rituals, and it's important to note because it underscores that the resurrected Jesus is different somehow than Jesus prior to his crucifixion.

Before he was killed, he was a king who had given up his kingdom. Having come through death and out the other side into new, resurrection life, the king has triumphantly reclaimed his throne.

Christ has entered his glory, and he wants them to know and understand that this isn't just fancy rhetoric. This is part of the long "Story of God and the World," and it is precisely through the Messiah's suffering that he has conquered death. This is a dramatic reversal of what the ancient Hebrews expected, since they thought that the Messiah would save them from suffering, never understanding that he planned to save them through suffering.

One of the things that continues to surprise me, though I know it really shouldn't, is how powerful and significant the biblical story really is for helping people work through life's challenges. I don't mean that there's a bunch of answers in the Bible that everyone should go digging around to find, and then memorize, and then quote at each other. I mean that there is something strangely potent about the Bible, and when we read and study and engage it in such a way as to see ourselves in each story, to see ourselves as the subject of each episode, we allow the Bible to fertilize our imagination and we are changed as a result.

Business people use case studies, and marketing professionals too, but what the church often forgets is that the Scriptures contain thousands of "case studies" with reflective commentary and first rate teaching on every issue from leadership to spirituality to philosophy to government to family to education to international political relationships to economics, and more.

When we read ourselves into the biblical story, and use our imagination to re-live each episode, we are truly affected. This is why things like Bible studies and Satellite groups are so important. Because the Scripture isn't meant to be read, it's meant to be engaged—argued, discussed, chewed on, hashed over, dialogued, quoted, acted out, versed, staged, cross-referenced, played on—so that we will finally arrive at that holy moment in which someone says:

It's like when you're...

I've experienced something like that at work when...

I can totally relate to...

Why don't we...

As I said, that really surprises me. I keep thinking that what people really want is easy answers and clear, concise, principles for living. But no one really wants that—except for a sad few—and even if they did want that, it would be hard to find evidence that those easy answers and clear rules actually help them live life with greater reward.

Principles and guidelines are not transformational. Rules can't change you. Every parent knows this. We know that the only way our children really change is when we walk alongside them for a long time and they see how life is supposed to be lived or not, as in the case of our mistakes. That's what reading yourself into the Bible does, it provides a model and a context for change.

And we need to believe that change actually can happen. One of the great hopes of the resurrection is that things can be different, even when it looks as if all promise and potential has gone out of the world. I imagine that Christ is somewhat brutal with Clopas and Mary precisely because it seems they've given up that hope too quickly.

Why have you given up hope, just because you've seen him crucified, because you've looked at him hanging there, because you have thought him weak?

He was like that for the thief on the cross, but that thief believed.

What looks like darkness is often merely the prelude to light.

I feel like saying these kinds of things to others (and yet most often speak them to myself) when things look dim. Things have looked hopeless before, but in that dark place the seeds of redemption are germinating. Of course the only reason I know that things have looked dark before and yet experienced a dramatic reversal is because I know the stories of the Scriptures. I know the grand Story of God and the World, revealed in Christ, and I know the million little stories that demonstrate how that can happen in real life.



Lion's Den.

Dry Bones.

Belly of the Whale.

Art of the Covenant.

Hur the Hand-Holder.

7 little stones.

Curtain torn, tomb empty.

He is risen, indeed.

And I want us all to know and to share those stories, like I'm sharing the story of Clopas and Mary with you now.

Broken bread, open eyes

As they approached the village where they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, *Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.* So he went in to stay with them.

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, *Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?*

They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, *It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.* Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

Luke 24.28-35

Recently I was back in my hometown grabbing lunch at one of my favorite burger bars with some friends. We'd been there for a long time, laughing and eating and catching up, but the whole time we were there I felt like our waitress was giving off a strange vibe. Only when she brought us the check and did something peculiar with her pen—a distinct motion I recognized—did everything click together for me and I finally realized this was Clarissa! I used to go to school with her and I used to be her pastor. She had recognized

me right away, but was waiting to see how long it took for me to clue in. I apologized profusely, we all had a good laugh at my expense, and I left the restaurant promising myself I'd be more attentive to the people around me in the future.

That is nothing like what happened with Clopas and Mary and Jesus.

In the first place, Luke tells us that they were *kept* from recognizing him. Additionally, they hadn't gone long without seeing him—it was only about 40 hours since he'd been crucified and John's gospel mentions that Mary had a front-row seat. Also, unlike me and my friend Clarissa, Clopas and Mary were sitting at the same table with Jesus after having spoken with him directly for several hours while traveling home. This wasn't just a case of Clopas and Mary being inattentive, this was a case of Christ choosing to stay hidden until it suited his purpose to be revealed.

That's weird, don't you think?

If they were Jesus' friends (which we know they were), and if they were saddened by his death and disappointed in his supposed failure, why wouldn't Jesus have revealed himself earlier?

In all probability for the same reason that I don't always give out all the information that I need to when I'm doing marriage counseling. For example, I always have couples take a personality test before I agree to do counseling with them. Not only does it help me better understand them before we get started (and thus make our time together a little more profitable), but also proves to me that they're willing to do some work on their own and not just rely on me to fix all their problems. It shows a willingness to work, and a willingness to submit to the process. When the couple comes back to meet with me after the test, I explain everything I need them to hear and understand before I give them the results, otherwise they won't listen to a word I say. They'll just nod, pretend to pay attention, and skip through the results page asking out loud all of the questions I'm trying to answer while I'm in the middle of answering them.

That's what Jesus is doing here. He's spent this long walk explaining to them that he is the promised Messiah foretold in the First Testament, longed for over thousands of years by kings and priests and peasants alike, *because it's important they understand*. And if Christ reveals himself to them as being resurrected from the dead their joy will overshadow everything else he has to say.



He needs them to comprehend before they celebrate.

And so Mary and Clopas invite Christ into their home for supper. But, instead of Jesus being served as the guest, he somewhat rudely begins to serve them. Jesus acts as the host because now he is always the host, not only for every meal but also for every encounter. This encounter, though in some ways resembling the Last Supper, is really something different. It's not the Passover meal. It's just an ordinary meal, but it is in the ordinary that Christ chooses to reveal himself as extra-ordinary.

As their eyes are opened they were able to “see” Jesus breaking the bread. I like to think that maybe Jesus had a particular flourish or something with which he broke bread—like that thing Clarissa did with her pen—and that distinguishing feature was the trigger God allowed to tip them off. Regardless, it's funny that they cannot recognize Christ while he's teaching them, but they see him clearly when they sit down for supper. There is something sacramental about meal times, something holy, and that's part of what's being communicated here. We don't just experience “communion” through the sacraments in church, we have communion every time we sit down with those who love the Lord and are open to his Spirit.

Broken bread is the key to open eyes.

And notice that Luke uses the same expression (*their eyes were opened*) here that is used in Genesis 3. The eyes of Adam and of Eve were opened when they ate the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, and they recognized they were naked. There is something about the presence of Christ that strips us of all our protection, of all our masks, and of all our deceit. We are laid bare before him. Our weakness and our foolishness are exposed.

Perhaps this is what the couple was referring to when they mentioned that their hearts were burning within them while Christ taught the Scriptures. They were on fire. They were being refined. All their misconceptions and misunderstandings concerning Jesus and his way were being melted away like dross.

My prayer is that I am revealed and my eyes are opened in each moment. I want every meal to be sacramental. I want every encounter to be holy. I want to be stripped bare of all my conceit, and all my little lies, and stand before Christ like I'm back in the Garden.

Such is the power of coming face-to-face with resurrection.

153

Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way: Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. *I'm going out to fish*, Simon Peter told them, and they said, *We'll go with you*. So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.

He called out to them, *Friends, haven't you any fish?*

No, they answered.

He said, *Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some*. When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.

Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, *It is the Lord!* As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, *It is the Lord*, he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a

hundred yards. When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.

Jesus said to them, *Bring some of the fish you have just caught.* So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, *Come and have breakfast.* None of the disciples dared ask him, *Who are you?* They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

John 21. 1-14

I was 18-years-old when I first began working in pastoral ministry. I was on a grant for the summer after I finished high school and I was working with local teenagers, primarily as a sports coach and Bible teacher. It was a great summer and I had a ton of fun mixed in with a high dose of excitement and some great spiritual experiences. But when the summer ended and my grant money ran out I didn't know what to do. So I did what I had done before, and what all my friends were doing, I went to work at a cool, upscale bar and grill.

It was pretty lame in contrast to the thrill of Christian ministry. I probably couldn't have even told you what the appeal was—money and girls were part of it, but really only part. My explanation for going back there, to others and to myself, was simply: *It's what I know.*

After about three miserable weeks I got a call from my friend Vince telling me he'd secured money for me to come back and work at the church. I quit the restaurant job that second and went back to work for the church and have been enthusiastically doing that for the last sixteen years.

It's even better now.

I tell you all that only because there's a big part of me that relates to the disciples in this post-resurrection encounter. Jesus had been crucified, and then came back into new resurrection life. The disciples had seen the empty tomb, and even had Jesus show up in person several times already. But because things are different now, the disciples aren't super sure about what's supposed to happen next.

So they go back to what they know. Peter says: *I'm going fishing*. Everyone else says: *Sure. Ok*. And just like that the story of the disciples has come full circle and they're back to doing what they were doing before they ever encountered Christ.

We do that a lot. In my short life as a pastor, I've met all kinds of people who have had profound experiences with Jesus only to later fall away and end up right where they began. Sometimes they snap out of it and re-engage Christ with new maturity and sobriety. Mostly they don't. They just fade away, puzzled as to what happened, usually thinking of their experience as a fad or a season or something. Though when I ask about it—and I always make sure to ask—every single person acknowledges they had something real, something that should have endured, but they chose not to stick with it.

How heartbreaking.

And how frequent.

And how easy to go back to the people we used to be, instead of pressing forward into the people we're meant to become.

In this story, Jesus finds his disciples right where he found them the first time. I love that he doesn't become angry or judgmental, he just helps them out early one Galilee morning.

There are certain kinds of fishing that are always done at night or very early in the morning. In the ancient world, much of this fishing was done by torchlight. It's not hard to imagine how beautiful that would have been—beach front, torch light, dark water, cool breeze—and neither is it hard to imagine how tricky such work could be. Hanging over the edge of their boat, torch in one hand and either net or spear in the other, fisherman would stand perfectly still until they caught the movement of their prey and then, quick as lightning, strike it down.

Typically the men in the boat would be accompanied by another man on the shore as daybreak approached. This was because of the changing conditions of the light, and the fact that it became hard to see through the water from directly overhead. The job of the person on shore was to see from an angle what the person in the boat could not. Galilee being a fishing town, it was pretty common for a passerby to call out from the beach and give some helpful advice as to where the fish were.

That is the context for this story. The disciples don't recognize Jesus at first because he's



just doing what normal Galileans on the beachfront in the early morning did. Jesus was the shore man and he was helping them catch fish. And when he calls out to them, he's using a common expression: *Friends!* The word, actually, is children (*paidia*), but it means something slightly different like “lads” or “dudes.” It's the way guys would talk to other guys while fishing—not the fun version of fishing, but commercial fishing or working as longshoremen.

From his vantage point on the shore, Jesus could see where the fish were. He told them and they responded to his advice with great success. Sometimes people refer to this story as the “miraculous catch of fish,” but there's really nothing miraculous about it. It was a fantastic haul, but not a supernaturally-and-otherwise-impossible haul. The nets strained, but they didn't break. They caught a lot of fish—153 of them—but they didn't catch them all.

Or did they?

The number 153 is curious. At first it appears to have no real significance other than adding some color to the story, but several historians have thought otherwise. At that time, fishermen thought that there were precisely 153 different kinds of fish in the sea. That this is the number hauled in by the disciples, at the instruction of Jesus, ought to make us pay attention.

Jesus is recruiting fishers of men.

Jesus is recruiting fishers of *all* men—not just Jewish men, and not just religious men, and not just men who have the right manner of background. Jesus has expanded his ministry from “coming to save Israel” to “through God's people, saving the world,” and he intends for his disciples to get that message. Not just intellectually, but viscerally.

That's the significance of 153 and really the significance of this entire episode. Jesus is reminding his disciples that they have a mission—they're meant to be fishers of men. And in the same way that they've caught all manner of fish, they need to get busy catching all manner of people.

There is room in the net for every single kind of fish from the sea.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come.

Then he sent some more servants and said, *Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.*

But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business. The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.

Then he said to his servants, *The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. So go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.* So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.

Matthew 22.1-10

Suivez-moi

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, *Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?*

Yes, Lord, he said, *You know that I love you.*

Jesus said, *Feed my lambs.*

Again Jesus said, *Simon son of John, do you love me?*

He answered, *Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.*

Jesus said, *Take care of my sheep.*

The third time he said to him, *Simon son of John, do you love me?*

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, *Do you love me?* He said, *Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.*

Jesus said, *Feed my sheep. Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.* Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, *Follow me!*

John 21.15-19

I've often found that God gives us chances for do-overs. Once, during a rugby match, I was punched in the throat and I retaliated. I screamed like a Viking and threw thunder like Thor, got ejected from the game, and walked off the pitch to a teammate saying: *Way to go, Pastor Dave*. It wasn't long after that that I was attacked by a homeless person in the lobby of our church. He was HIV positive and scratched me, claiming he was going to give me AIDS. I responded better that time, without violence, and escorted him out of the church before calling the police.

Another time I got into a car crash and let loose a string of expletives that would have made Eddie Murphy sound like Dora the Explorer. Again, it wasn't long before I found myself in another life-threatening predicament. Again, I responded better (prayer, rather than profanity).

Still once more I can remember working hard to meet a deadline in my basement office and snapping angrily at my daughter for disturbing me while working. As she fled in tears I realized how horribly I had confused my priorities. She's come back every day since, and every day I take the opportunity to snuggle and to laugh and to eat sour candies before I get her situated on my couch and work with her chirping in the background.

Thank God that we get more than one chance in this life to become the people He's designed us to be.

In John's gospel, after the early morning fishing expedition, Jesus and his disciples are sitting around a charcoal fire eating breakfast and talking. It's important that they're around a charcoal fire, since it was a charcoal fire around which Peter denied Christ three times only days before. Peter probably didn't make that connection right away, but I'm guessing it came to him quickly once Christ began to prod him.

Do you love me?

Jesus asks Peter three times if he really does love him. Peter is enthusiastic the first time, a little off-balance the second, and I'm sure by the third time he's forced to answer in the affirmative the message has sunk in: *Prove it*.

Peter gets his second chance, but with an imperative: *If you love me, feed my sheep*.

Which is to say:



If you love me, do what I ask. If you love me, don't just tell me about it and then flake-out at the first sign of opposition. Follow me. Follow me into persecution. Follow me into martyrdom. Follow me into death. And then keep following me into Heaven, into resurrection, and into reward.

That's the same message Christ has for all of us: *If you love me, prove it. Do what I ask. Go where I go. Follow me.*

At the risk of sounding juvenile, it's always Jacques from *Finding Nemo* (the shrimp in the dentist's tank) that helps me remember this. When Nemo is unceremoniously dumped into unfamiliar water, scared and alone, it is Jacques that comes to him in the night with an offer of friendship and adventure. Jacques begins to lead Nemo to an unknown location with the haunting words: *Suivez moi.*

Follow me.

Like Nemo, we're being asked to follow Christ into the unknown. There's untold risk, but we have confidence because Christ promises to be with us.

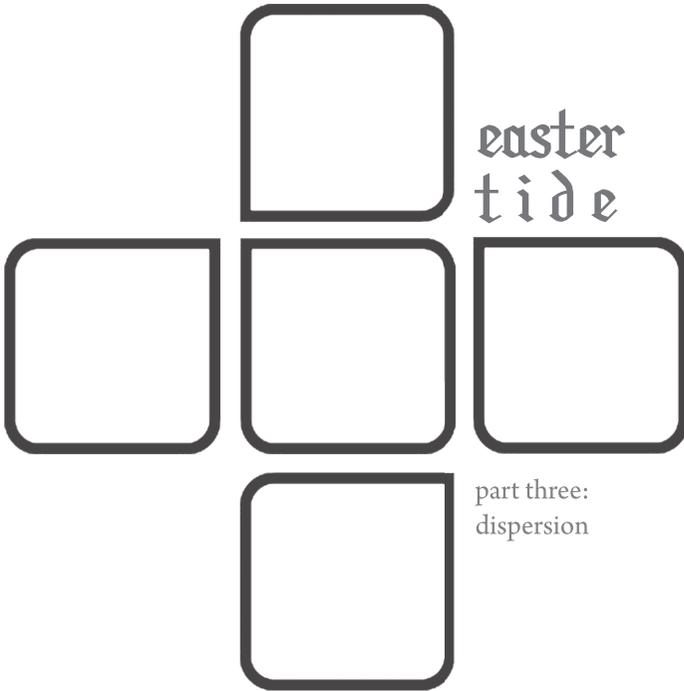
The adventure of following Jesus has taken me all over the world. I've met millionaires and street people, dined with artists and prophets, and am proud to call myself friend to almost everyone I know. I have a beautiful family and a lovely life, but there was a time I had none of those and still chose to follow. And lucky for me, especially during those times when I fell off the wagon or got caught off course, Christ always seems to come round to my side of the fire and give me another invitation, another chance, to live the way I'm meant to live.

Never forget: Our primary identity in this life is as followers. We are not visionaries. We are not leaders. We are not intellectuals. We are neither husbands or fathers or students or examples.

Not first.

First, we follow. *That* is how we show Christ we love him.

 EASTER TIDE



 EASTER TIDE



The Great Commission . . .

was Jesus' final set of instructions to his disciples. These words are the mission and the mandate of his church, Christ's body, and they guide and govern us in all we do.

Comprehension and compliance

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, *All authority in Heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*

Matthew 28.16-20

I love the mountains. There is something magisterial about them. From up on a mountain you can see for miles. Everything looks pretty at that height. Whether it's Whistler in Vancouver, or Table Mountain in Cape Town, Rainier in Washington or the Catskills, Himalayas, or Masada, the view from the top of the world is just right somehow.

Maybe it's because of the effort it takes to get there.

There is a mountain outside of Pretoria, South Africa, upon which I etched the names of my children. I felt like I was going to die during the ascent—I'm no longer in fighting shape, you might say—but when I got to the top and looked out at the world, I was renewed. Once I'd caught my breath, my family was all I could think of. So I grabbed a sharp stone and spent an hour scraping their names into the rock and praying: *God, let them see you from the mountain and pray.*

Matthew's gospel makes a big deal about mountains. Jesus preaches his two most famous sermons on mountains—the Olivet discourse and the Sermon on the Mount—and it is on the mountain that Christ was transfigured in front of Peter, James, and John. There he revealed himself to be greater than Moses and Elijah. It was also on the mountain that Christ gave them their commission, their charge, and in so doing brought together everything they had ever learned, seen, and been promised into a new vision for the future.

It was a great moment.

Hence, the *Great Commission*.

Many have said that the Great Commission is like a summary of the entire Second Testament and, by extension, even the whole of the Scriptures. That's not quite true, but it certainly is the catalyst for the next major episode in the Story of God and the World—that complex tragedy in which something that was originally good had gone bad and must be restored to its original goodness.

And, since there are still obviously parts of the world that need healing—spiritual healing for those caught in sin, ecological healing for the planet, sociological and political healing for those in developing nations, financial healing for those suffering in the global economic collapse—Jesus' Great Commission is our divine mandate.

God enlists us to be His fellow workers, His agents of transformation. We're meant to cooperate with God and see His dream realized: that the kingdoms of this world would become the kingdom of our God.

We'll spend the next few chapters looking at the various components of Jesus' especially important words, but here I'd just like to focus on one detail that often escapes our notice: the reaction of some of the disciples.

Many worshipped, but some doubted. They may have stumbled over now being expected to worship Jesus instead of simply following Jesus. They may still have been coming to terms with the fact that the risen and resurrected Jesus is more than the Galilean rabbi they've been chasing after for the past three years. It may be that they doubted whether or not their own gumption was sufficiently mustered to be killed in the same way Christ was

killed. Regardless, the point remains: even after the resurrection, even after several other miraculous encounters, even after touching him and eating with him and fishing with him and even (in Thomas' case) sticking their fingers in him, they still had doubts and misgivings about everything Christ required and everything those requirements would entail.

Isn't that good news?

For my part, whenever I wrestle with my spiritual doubts I always feel stupid and foolish and unwise. When I come back to some of the old questions and begin to explore them in a new way I feel like an adolescent or an upstart. But the good news is that even people with every conceivable evidentiary benefit struggled with their beliefs, and God used them anyway.

We don't have to be certain, we simply have to be obedient. Comprehension is not a requisite to compliance.

That's the moral at the heart of this episode of the story. Some of the disciples were still struggling with what they thought they knew and with what they saw happening around them, yet all of the disciples eventually worked through whatever issues they'd had because they turned the world upside down with their faith. The gospel spread super-lightning quick and in the end every one of the original eleven remaining followers (and hundreds of others besides) were either martyred or exiled for their conviction.

What began as doubt-riddled obedience resulted in such strong belief that even death could not dissuade them from their cause. That's good news for everyone who's doing their best, working through their issues, and stumbling towards faith in a lurching kind of hurky-jerky shuffle.

We don't have to have everything figured out. We don't have to have all the answers. Our doubts don't disqualify us. Our weakness doesn't eliminate us. These things simply require us to have more faith and to disciple ourselves into further obedience.

I want to turn our attention now to the three main features of the Great Commission:

that Christ assured them of his power,
that Christ gave them a mission,
and that Christ promised not to leave them alone.

We'll explore each of these in turn, before looking a little deeper at some of Christ's earlier teachings that shed better light on the Great Commission, as well as some passages from the First Testament that often serve to tie the whole story in together.

Pan's sanctuary

All authority in Heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Matthew 28.18

A few years ago I was in Juarez, Mexico with a group of high school students doing some leadership development. Our exercise for the day involved heading out into the desert and learning some basic survival skills. That seemed pretty tame—after all, what could go wrong with 20 teenagers in a parched landscape inhabited solely by venomous arachnids and aggressive serpents?—until we passed a sign that said: *Danger. Missile test site.*

I pointed the sign out to our guide but he laughed it off, claiming that the site had been dormant for several years.

The military escort that came screaming down the gravel path to intercept us indicated otherwise. Our guide was detained, and we came very close to spending the afternoon in a Mexicali prison for trespassing on government property.

Many things could be said about our guide, but for the sake of connecting it to this passage in Matthew, let me only say one: He had no authority to take us there. The people who did have authority received no opposition to kicking us out. Authority means something. If you've got it, you can do what you want within the defined parameters. If you don't have it, you're hooped.

The ancient world had all manner of competing powers and authorities. There were the obvious political, religious, and social powers (Rome, the Sanhedrin, and the in-laws), but then there were a vast number of competing supernatural powers as well. The Roman Empire was comprised of over a hundred different ethnic groups, each with their own tribal customs and pagan practices. At this point in world history, the Empire stretched all the way up into modern France, through parts of Asia to the edge of Russia, down into Africa and across the Mediterranean to Spain. With so many diverse peoples came so many diverse spiritual practices including demonology, the occult, and the ritualistic slaughter of people and of animals.

Take, for example, the large city of Caesarea Philippi where Jesus and his disciples visited several times during his public ministry. It was a city famous for its natural beauty, but also for being the house of Pan's Sanctuary—a temple dedicated to the pagan god of nature.

This temple was carved into the side of a mountain, and immediately dropped quickly off into a sharp abyss. The pit stretches down for several hundred yards, earning it the reputation as the entrance to the underworld.

It was called the Gates of Hell.

The ancient world, then, was like something out of a fantasy film. Powers were competing with other powers on multiple levels. Spiritual powers laid claim to geographical hotspots like Pan's Sanctuary just as political powers laid claim to those same locations, backed by the might of military and taxation.

There were powers upon powers upon powers.

And yet Jesus boldly tells his disciples that all power, all authority, on Heaven and on earth has been given to him.

All power is a bold claim. Political power. Economic power. Military power. Intellectual power. Spiritual power. Social and relational and public power.

Yes, all of those and more. Which is why, earlier, Jesus had told Peter those famous words while standing directly in front of Pan's Sanctuary: *I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.*

Prior to his crucifixion, Jesus was giving his disciples a hint that he would not be satisfied until he had built a church right on top of the devil's playground.



It's that same spirit that led renowned cricketer and early Christian missionary Charles Studd to brashly announce: *Some wish to live within the sound of a chapel bell; I wish to run a rescue mission within a yard of Hell.*

It's not a stretch for us, with the benefit of hindsight, to understand that Christ does in fact have that power. As Son of God and Creator-Word, Christ has an original right of ownership to everything. He made it. It's his. Christ Jesus can control things and dispose of things at his leisure.

Christ redeems his people.

Christ gathers his church.

Christ defends his creation.

Christ subdues her enemies.

Christ restores all that is

back to its original design and intention.

But to say that Christ already has that authority does not necessarily mean the world is exactly the way he wants it to be. It means he's working to take it from where it was—under the rule not only of death, but of corruption, greed, and every kind of wickedness—and to bring it, kicking and screaming, under the rule of his life-giving love.

And he means to do this through us. God's plans to heal the world are contingent upon the cooperation of His people—which is precisely the point of the Great Commission.

Because all power is mine, go! I can defend you. The world is placed under my control. It is redeemed. It is given me in promise by my Father, as the purchase of my death. Though you are weak, yet I am strong! Though you will encounter many troubles and dangers, yet I can defend you! Though YOU die, yet I live, and the work shall be accomplished!

William Barclay, 20th Century Scottish theologian, paraphrasing Christ

Go make disciples

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

Matthew 28.19-20a

I first heard the word “commission” in second grade. The word actually means that “authority has been entrusted to someone,” but all I heard was that I got to be in charge.

I was commissioned to lead a team of second graders and create the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria out of paper mache. I took my responsibility seriously, cracked the whip, and brooked no disrespect. I ran a tight ship. We suffered some losses, but you can’t make an omelet without breaking some eggs.

Stalin said that.

I was a little like Josef Stalin in those early days of leadership. Maybe he, like I, simply misunderstood the true nature of authority and the expectations associated with receiving a commission to lead.

Because of the complexities involved in translating from Aramaic to Greek to English, Jesus’ mission statement tends to get a little convoluted. It’s not so much that something gets lost in translation, it’s that a whole lot of things get added in translation.



For my money, Chicago theologian Scot McKnight translates this piece of the Bible the best. The Great Commission says: *Go make disciples.*

Pretty simple.

All the other stuff is best understood as either the target market (*the nations*, which is to say *everybody*) or the means. Disciples, we know, are literally “learners.” They are the people who learn to walk in the Way of Jesus. That doesn’t simply mean memorizing his teachings or following his example. It means inviting Christ inside of them to change them from the inside out. It means learning to follow God inside of you. It means being constantly transformed and re-formed from the crummy version of yourself into the best possible version of the person God has designed and destined you to become.

That’s what we’re supposed to learn.

The way in which we become disciples—the means through which we learn the Jesus Way—are baptism and teaching.

Baptism is an ancient ritual meant to symbolize spiritual cleansing. Beginning with the church in the Second Testament, though, baptism became something more. It became a public declaration of faith in Jesus Christ. It was the way you let everyone know which team you were playing for, like a draft broadcast on television.

Additionally, it’s important that you’re baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit to avoid any ambiguity concerning your allegiance. Many people, after all, claim to be disciples of Christ but do not hold to many of his teachings. Nor do they invite the Spirit to come in and change them. Nor do they acknowledge that Christ did only what the Father told him to do and that we likewise are meant to be obedient to the Father. Nor do they acknowledge the authority of Scripture which has been inspired by the Spirit and through which the Father now speaks to us by that same Spirit. This “trinitarian formula” (the Father, Son, Spirit thing) is meant to distinguish the Christian faith from any other religious system or brand of spirituality that likes a lot of the things Jesus said and did but doesn’t really want to buy into the full meal deal. Likewise, it’s meant to identify those people who actually believe that Jesus Christ is equal to the Father and the Spirit.

I have written more about baptism in *Common Time*, but for now please just understand that baptism isn't something we do in addition to becoming disciples—it's part of how we become disciples in the first place.

The same is true of being taught to obey. Jesus makes a point of instructing his disciples to instruct others about his instructions. Christ won't be satisfied to have a bunch of people running around calling themselves Christians while living any way they choose. He wants people who will give him their full allegiance—heart, soul, mind, and strength—and that will require instruction. Ultimately every single part of human existence must be re-learned, re-acquired, and re-formed in light of his sacrificial death and divine resurrection.

Co + mission

Lo – I am with you always, to the very end of the world.
Matthew 28.20 KJV

I've chosen to use the King James translation of the text in the verse above. I'll be honest, it's really just because I like the word "Lo." It sounds so manly. Like, if you say "Lo," the thing that comes next is super-important. If you don't follow the "Lo," you know your dad will be ashamed of you ... and probably hit you with the flat side of his battle axe.

Just sayin'.

Anyway, the problem with the King James' here is that the end of the verse says that Christ will be with us until the *end of the world*. That's not a very accurate translation. Truth be told, much of the King James translation isn't what it's cracked up to be. Once upon a time it was our most faithful translation to the original biblical manuscripts (such as they are), but over time the English language has changed so much that the King James often means something different than what we think it does. We need a translation for our translation.

That's what's happening here. The end of the world doesn't refer to doomsday. In Aramaic, the phrase reads *end of the age*. Jesus had a thing about ages. There was this present age—the age in which he lived (and still the age in which we live now) where there was great spiritual conflict and turmoil and sin (a result of a creation struggling to get free of of



spiritual and moral and ecological corruption). Then there was the age to come, at which point everything that's screwed up now would get sorted out completely. In this piece of the Bible, Jesus is telling his disciples that he'll stay with us all the way through this present age—all through its disappointments and hurts and struggles and evil—and ensure our ultimate arrival in the age to come when we'll all be together in the Heavenly plane of God's existence. We'll all end up at Jesus' house for the after party.

Truthfully, the difference in meaning through either translation is very small. However, in the King James it seems to indicate that the world is going to blow up like a good summer blockbuster and that Jesus is not only okay with that, he's kind of planning on it. Of course that's not what God wants for this world. He came to heal it and to save it, not to light it on fire with a cosmic magnifying glass.

Jesus said: *I have not come to judge the world, but to save it.*

Christ's promise to be with us is kept through the coming of his Spirit in Acts 2. While he was alive on earth, Christ could only be with the people who he was physically around. Now ascended into Heaven, Christ is able to send his Spirit to be with every Christian on the face of the earth at all times, simultaneously.

It is the Spirit that draws us to Christ, that gives us counsel, that renews our thoughts and heals our wounds. It is the Spirit who also draws us to one another and binds us together in love.

I think this concept is vaguely reflected in the term "commission." Though the word literally means "entrusted with authority," in English at least, it looks like it has another meaning entirely: CO + MISSION.

Commission looks like we're meant to do mission together. And, though that's an incorrect etymology, I think we are. We're meant to fulfill the mission of God to heal the world in concert with other believers and, most importantly, with Christ Jesus himself through the power of his Spirit.

God promises to be with us, and we are thusly bound together in Him.



Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you.

Deuteronomy 31.5

For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.

Matthew 18.20

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have summoned you by name; you are mine.

When you pass through the waters,

I will be with you;

and when you pass through the rivers,

they will not sweep over you.

When you walk through the fire,

you will not be burned.

Isaiah 43.1-2

Spiritual immigration

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

1 Peter 2.9-10

In college I confess that much of my identity was wrapped up in sports. That was a pretty new thing for me. I'd always been a jack-of-all-trades, but varsity sports programs don't typically allow much room for extra-curricular activities. This became even more pronounced when I began dating Carmel, who was also an athlete at a nearby large university.

After my first year at a very large school playing volleyball (yes, there are parts of the world in which men play that sport *indoors*), I transferred to a much smaller school. I met with their coach and he was excited I was coming into their program. Until I showed up and played terribly.

I got cut. It hurt. Worse, it was embarrassing to play well at a large school only to perform poorly at a school about 1/10th the size.

I don't think any of my friends thought less of me, but I thought less of myself. Desperate for some sense of belonging, I responded to a flier advertising that the rugby program

needed walk-on recruits. Little more than human tackle dummies, the rugby recruits simply needed to be fast and strong and willing in order to make it.

I was all those things. And I fell in love with a great game that gave me great memories. It taught me great things about brotherhood and released me from my need to be validated through sports.

When I joined the rugby program I was an outsider. Over the next three years I was welcomed into something special. I became one of them, part of the team, a brotherhood of blood and grass. There is a theological term for what happened to me. I was incorporated. I was grafted in.

The same thing happened when my family immigrated to the States. Though I am American by birth, I was still an outsider when I arrived in Michigan. Over the last six years I have been incorporated. I have been grafted in. I am one of you now.

The Great Commission is actually not about some new teaching. Jesus gave the same instruction to his disciples in Matthew 10. We'll explore that text in a later chapter because it's much more comprehensive and much more specific. But for now it's important to notice the one really huge difference between the Little Commission in Matthew 10 and the Great Commission in Matthew 28.

The difference, in all likelihood, is you.

Jesus understood that his mission was first to the Jews. He came to the lost sheep of Israel. He came to fulfill Jewish Messianic expectations. He came to fulfill the promise made to Abraham. By and large he ignored non-Jewish people. The Little Commission even specifically points out that the disciples are not to waste their time with Gentiles, but to focus exclusively on the Jews.

It was only later, after his crucifixion and resurrection, that Christ expanded the mission field to include Gentiles.

The plan had always been that God would heal the world through His people. The Jews were His people. With the advent of Christ and his resurrection from the dead, however, a new ethnicity was formed. Now the appropriate question is no longer which country you were born in or which lineage you possessed. Now the appropriate question is whether or not you have been born again, of water and spirit, into the family of God.

But for the ancient people—especially the Jews—it was important to understand how a Jewish Messiah suddenly became the Savior of the whole world. Jewish people were often segregated from other ethnic groups, and there was even a whole section of the Jewish law that was written to ensure their ethnic purity was protected.

As it turns out, what Jesus did in opening up his rescue mission for the world has a long-standing Jewish precedent. Way back in Genesis 12 God called out his servant Abraham, the very first “Jew,” from whom all other Jewish people find their ancestry. God sets out an agreement with Abraham, called a covenant, and He promises that through Abraham the whole entire world will be saved.

I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.

Genesis 12.2-3

This provides the basic shape of God’s redemptive plan prior to Jesus Christ. The world was a mess and God, as a loving Creator, had set out to repair it rather than destroy it. He chose one man, Abraham, and his lineage to help him. And as Abraham’s heirs got to be more and more numerous, there would be more and more people cooperating with God in His mission to heal the world.

That plan backfired, as the people of the solution often turned out to be part of the problem. But notice that God is still employing the same basic solution through Christ Jesus. God sent His son, Jesus of Nazareth, to be His chief agent in the world. Jesus is like Abraham, only better—more perfect, more attune with his Father. And Jesus’ disciples will become the agents in God’s mission to heal the world, much like the Jewish people were meant to be God’s agents through Abraham.

The two strategies differ in two important ways: First, Jesus is greater than Abraham because, rather than simply being God’s Servant, he is also God Himself. Second, Jesus’ disciples are given the opportunity to cooperate with God in His mission to heal the world, rather than being conscripted by birth.



In three examples (which we explored much more fully in *Common Time*), Jesus demonstrates his willingness to engage Gentiles, despite the fact that he came first to Jews. He heals a Roman centurion's servant. He exorcises a demon from the Syro-Pheonician's daughter. He brings the message of reconciliation to the Samaritan woman at the well.

Already with these three examples, Jesus' authority was spreading to people outside of Judaism. Even though Christ was clear that the time for ministry to the Gentiles hadn't yet come, he saw Gentile faith as an early sign that the time was coming soon.

All of this brings to mind Simeon's prophecy shortly after Christ's birth:

Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel.

Luke 2.29-32

Jesus is clearly beginning to fulfill Simeon's prophecy, just as he is continuing along the trajectory set by Abraham to heal the world and reconcile outsiders to God. Just as Abraham was meant to heal the world through his offspring, Jesus is now in the process of healing the world through his church. Jesus first sent his disciples out first to the "lost sheep of Israel," but now "Israel" has become the whole world.

And there's never been a better time for global development, missional impact, or world-healing activities than right now. Given our global economy, our internet connectedness, and the environmental danger that is common to us all, we find ourselves in a situation in which whatever we do has massive and non-local ramifications.

We are all connected.

Consequently, when we preach the gospel it is not just the people in our churches who hear it, but it is people all over the world. Take our church, Westwinds, for example. We have less than a thousand people there each Sunday, but another 500-600 people watch online each week, and almost ten times our weekly attendance download a podcast from iTunes. Additionally, the book you're reading right now (that I'm writing in my basement on an old computer in my borrowed sweat pants) will be printed and published and distributed to a dozen countries in half as many weeks.

And we're nowhere near the "most-influential online" list. Others have a reach that exceedingly outstrips our own.

When God told Abraham that *all the nations of the world will be blessed* through Him, and Jesus told his disciples to *go into all the world*, both Father and Son must have looked far into the future with a certain amount of longing for a time like ours when telecommunications and hard work could produce more results in a weekend than the initial fruit of St. Paul's first missionary journey.

The steamship of eternity

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, proclaim this message: The Kingdom of Heaven has come near. Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give.

Matthew 10.5-8

In the first part of Matthew 10, called the Little Commission by some Bible scholars, Jesus gives his disciples their first mission and message: proclaiming the Kingdom of God. All the other stuff—healings, miracles, exorcisms, resurrections—accompanies the kingdom message. It's not stuff they're supposed to do in addition to proclaiming the kingdom; it's the stuff that in and of itself proclaims the kingdom by virtue of the fact that it is happening.

I have a little phrase, a guilty one I'll admit, that sums up for me all the powerful ministry stuff Jesus describes. I call it *taking the suck out of the world*. Sickness sucks. Demons suck. Death sucks. Being poor sucks. Being alone and friendless sucks. As the kingdom message is proclaimed, I like to imagine all of the suckiness of this life itself being sucked right out of it and shot into Hell. I like to think of the goodness of God then rushing down into the world from Heaven like a river of good.

Let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream

Amos 5.24

The kingdom message is a good one. It's God's mass-marketing campaign in which He wakes us up to the fact that things are not the way they're supposed to be. Things are supposed to be better. Life isn't meant to be like this. Relationships shouldn't be so strained. Work shouldn't be so joyless. Everything is cockeyed.

The problem, succinctly stated, is that we are living in the midst of a civil war on contested territory. The kingdom in which we find ourselves is governed by a tyrant—an accuser, a killer, a thief, a liar, a blasphemer, a glutton, a wastrel—but there is another king and he's offering free citizenship and free help with immigration.

The kingdom message says: Life doesn't have to be this way. There is a better way. A way of peace and love and harmony. A way of laughter and friendship and joy. The old word for that is *shalom*. *Shalom* means perfection and goodness and wholeness.

And when God first made the world, everything was *shalomed* to the nines.

And the way to have *shalom* once more is not through some program or moral and ethical code. It's through the king who governs the kingdom of perfection, goodness, and wholeness.

It's through the Prince of Peace.

Jesus is the Prince of Peace and his kingdom is not of this world. It is within you. You can begin to experience the life God always designed for you to enjoy right now.

The good news is that you can have something better. Your relationships can get better. Your temper can get better. Your finances can get better. You'll get the help you need to get your immigration started so you can live in Peace.

This is the part where people begin to get a little confused. But that's ok. Sometimes that's because they confuse the term "Kingdom of Heaven" with "Heaven" (as in the Heaven you go to when you die, to be with God). But "Heaven" (as it's used here) is like saying "things are the way God wants them to be." This is where the confusion comes in because



in the actual Heaven things are the way God wants them to be. But the point here is that things can be *on earth* as they are *in Heaven*.

I like to imagine this in terms of a family immigrating to America, from Europe, during the late 1800s via steamship. The voyage over the Atlantic ocean is long and hard, but during their travels it is entirely possible for the soon-to-be-Americans to begin living on the ship like they will once they arrive at Ellis Island. Knowing that they'll need to get used to it eventually, the family begins to speak only in English. They begin to read American comic books and newspapers and periodicals. They even change the way they dress and the ways in which they eat and converse, all so that when they finally get to the States they can fit right in.

That's what we're driving at with the message of the Kingdom of Heaven: life now can be more like life then.

And that's good news.

Relational resources

Do not get any gold or silver or copper to take with you in your belts—no bag for the journey or extra shirt or sandals or a staff, for the worker is worth his keep. Whatever town or village you enter, search there for some worthy person and stay at their house until you leave. As you enter the home, give it your greeting. If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, leave that home or town and shake the dust off your feet. Truly I tell you, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.

Matthew 10.9-15

One of the biggest mistakes people make when they think about Christian ministry is assuming that more money and more resources will produce results. They don't. Resources tend to produce results in the hands of those who have earned them. But, by themselves, silver and gold do very little good in God's economy.

To illustrate, if you gave me \$10 million and six months to build a church, I bet I could do pretty well. But if you gave Rick Warren 10 cents and 10 weeks, I bet he could do a lot better.

That's really at the heart of Jesus' instructions to his disciples.



Don't take a bunch of money or pack a bunch of stuff.

Stay fluid.

Trust God.

Look for good people,

and make good relationships,

and when you find them, invest in them.

Don't try to purchase their love.

Share your life

and your story with them, and—

most importantly—

share my life and my story too.

And if it all goes badly,

and the people hate you

and run you out of town,

don't sweat it.

There will come a time when they'll figure out that God sent you

and that they've made a spectacular error in judgment.



This one's gonna hurt

I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. Be on your guard; you will be handed over to the local councils and be flogged in the synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles.

Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. You will be hated by everyone because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. Truly I tell you, you will not finish going through the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul... Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in Hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in Heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in Heaven.

Matthew 10.16-17, 21-23, 28-33



Last spring I took my first trip to India. I had always wanted to go, and have since been eager to return. But I don't know that I was adequately prepared for the many differences between our Christian culture and theirs. Not little differences, mind you, but big ones.

Like persecution.

People over there get killed for doing the things I'm paid (and protected by law) to do over here. And much of their persecution—while not officially state-sanctioned—is noted and suitably ignored by their government (both local and federal). It's crazy.

When I was out in the villages every single Christian I spoke to had been violently assaulted because of their faith in Jesus Christ. I met women whose husbands had lopped off their arms, and children whose fathers had burned them with gasoline and shoved bamboo under their eyelids.

This blew my mind. These people are our heroes. When we get to Heaven, Mother Theresa and Billy Graham will be way ahead of me, but still miles behind the 12-year-old boy whose father clipped off his right leg when the boy told him he loved Jesus.

In the early church, persecution and opposition were the norm. They knew that telling others you were a Christian would immediately invite suffering. As a result, our spiritual forebears developed secret hand-signals and coded messages whereby they could identify other followers of Jesus. One of these was the fish. If you were a Christian in the first or second century, and you were talking to someone else, you might nonchalantly use your toe to draw an arc in the dirt. If the other person drew a second arc in the dirt with their toe, thereby forming the image of a fish, you knew that you had met another Christ-follower. They had other signs—the triquetra and, later, the cross—but the clandestine nature of Christian spirituality was necessitated by the violence and the intolerance of the state and of her religion.

Jesus is telling his disciples this nice and early, so the faint-hearted and the double-minded could be weeded out. There are no surprises here. Whether we're obedient to the Little Commission or the Great Commission, suffering is inevitably the main course.

Those of us in the States have the hardest time understanding this. We tend to think that either (a) America is mostly "Christian" so we won't have to deal with this nonsense, or (b) our society is so pluralistic that no one in an educated, westernized country would dare mock or malign someone because of their religion.

We're so naïve.

As a result it takes us off guard when people say mean things about churches and preachers and Christians in general. Usually we try to distance ourselves from the people who are being criticized, but at some point you've got to come to terms with the fact that the message of Christ tends to rub people the wrong way.

We've got to work hard not to tone down the message of the gospel, while at the same time allowing the Spirit to form us and shape us so that any offense we give is truly the gospel and not that part of us willing to lash out because our country isn't the way we think it should be.

Either he is or he isn't

Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn:

a man against his father,
a daughter against her mother,
a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—
a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.

Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.

Matthew 10.34-39

This is one of the harshest things Jesus ever says to anyone, but he says it to us all. The purpose is to remind us that there can be no room for competing allegiances. Either Christ is Lord or he isn't. Either he's first in your life, or he's not.

You've got to make a choice. And that choice is hard.

Incidentally, the sword that he mentions here is not a literal sword. Christ is not advocating violence; he's demonstrating that he divides people. Like my friend Iqbal, whose family

will never again speak to him because of his allegiance to Jesus Christ. Like my friend Susan, whose family thinks she's bat-nuts crazy and has joined a cult—they refuse to return her phone calls or invite her over for Christmas dinner.

A man against his father.

A daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.

This is the reason for Jesus' other harsh words:

*No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back
is fit for service in the Kingdom of God.*

*Follow me,
and let the dead bury their own dead.*

*Foxes have dens and birds have nests,
but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.*

It's not that Jesus is being unduly harsh, it's that following Christ requires absolute obedience and unquestioned loyalty. Jesus is being harsh because he knows what life is like, and what people are like, and that, given any wiggle room at all, people will opt for compromise, half-measures, and the path of least resistance.

Like my friend Jamie (not his real name) who loves to read theology, but also for years tried to get me into the strip clubs with him.

Or my friend Alex (not his real name) who thinks that everyone ought to live sacrificially except for homosexuals.

Or my friend Cynthia (not her real name) who feels like it's okay to mix Taoism with Christianity in an effort to convince her mom she's still Chinese.

Given the choice between 99% allegiance to Christ and harmony in other areas of life and 100% allegiance to Jesus and some conflict, almost everyone opts to cheat on Jesus. And it's sad. Because it doesn't take long before the percentage of faithlessness required to keep your family, or boss, or your libido happy keeps escalating to the point where such things no longer even matter.

Little ones to him belong

Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.

Matthew 10.40-42

At the end of his instructions to the disciples about how and why they're meant to carry the message of the kingdom into the world, Jesus brings the tantalizing promise of reward. For those who welcome them, who welcome and care for the prophet and the righteous person, they themselves will receive a righteous reward.

There is an old rabbinical allusion here, a tradition that speaks well of looking after holy men. And that tradition calls to mind those episodes in the First Testament when the prophet Elisha stayed in the widow's home, repaying her kindness with prosperity and life.

Once again, we see the Story of God and the World coming around full circle—we see the First Testament prophets here connected to the Second Testament disciples, and if we read into it a little further, we see them both connected to us.

Jesus most notably calls attention to “the little ones”—to the everyday, ordinary, undistinguished disciple. That’s me, I think. To the one who is thoughtful enough even just in something as small as offering a cup of cold water, they too will reap the reward of the prophet and the righteous. A small, simple act of everyday compassion brings with it the wealth of the Kingdom of Heaven.

In the midst of all Christ’s harsh words about allegiance and fealty, we ought to remember that he is not a harsh master. He is good. And insofar as we endeavor to put him first—even if all we’re able to produce is a cool drink on a hot day—he’s promised us he’ll notice and approve.

That’s grace.

The fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that my desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it.

Thomas Merton, 20th Century American Trappist Monk and Political Activist

Dragons. Conflict. Mischief.

As I looked,
 thrones were set in place,
 and the Ancient of Days took His seat.
His clothing was as white as snow;
 the hair of His head was white like wool.
His throne was flaming with fire,
 and its wheels were all ablaze.
A river of fire was flowing,
 coming out from before Him.
Thousands upon thousands attended Him;
 ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him.
The court was seated,
 and the books were opened.

Daniel 7.9-10

I hate that we've de-mystified Christian spirituality. I hate that we've anthropomorphized God. There's something to be said for the fact that the biblical writers used awe-inspiring, terrifying imagery to describe angels, saints, Heaven, Hell, and God Most High. God doesn't look like Morgan Freeman. Neither is the Holy Spirit a nice-looking Asian gardener like the one in *The Shack*.

When I was a kid, my oldest brother, Jeff, used to drop hints that there was stuff in the Bible I might actually like. Dragons. Fights. Mischief. My other brother, Dwayne, confirmed this, though neither of them really fostered the same kind of curiosity I did on the subject. I wrote *Monsters: the imagination of faith and fear* in part because I thought some body else ought to know all that stuff was in there. Someone had to make sense of it and to celebrate it rather than just explain it away or pretend like it didn't matter.

I'm at a different point in life, now, and my son Jacob is just beginning to experience the same glazed-over look I remember having when people describe Jesus running through wildflowers waving amber waves of grain. To compensate, I've been having a lot of fun taking Jake through all the "dude-bits" of the Bible. Monsters. Conflict. Tension. Intrigue. Espionage. Betrayal. It's been so fun that I've even joked with Jvo (my co-pastor at the Winds) that there ought to be a science-fiction Bible, highlighting all the super-cool stuff that will appeal to fans of *G.I. Joe* and *Yu-Gi-Oh* alike.

Because they are absolutely central to the gospel message.

Take this passage, for instance, from Daniel 7, in which the terrifying specter of the Son of Man appears before the Throne of God:

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of Heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into His presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

Daniel 7.13-14

The terrifying bit isn't the "Son of Man" part. That simply means human being. The terrifying part is the storm clouds and the glory, while receiving worship from every person ever having lived and being gifted with absolute and utter control over the cosmos.

That's a bit terrifying.

That's also Jesus. *Son of Man* was Jesus' favorite self-reference. And every time he employed the term he was referring back to this piece of the Bible, this ancient prophecy, that talked about the time in which God would intervene to get rid of the suck.

What's more, there are certain similarities between these few verses in Daniel's prophecy and several phrases from within the Great Commission. (Have I mentioned the Bible is really just one big story before?) For example, in Matthew Jesus tells us he *has been given all authority* and power, just like the Son of Man in Daniel. Jesus instructs the disciples to bring the gospel *to all nations*, just like Daniel sees the Son of Man enthroned above all the nations of the world. Jesus tells his friends he will be with them always, just as the Son of Man exercises an *everlasting dominion* that will *never pass away* and *never be destroyed*.

The point I want to make here is not simply that

Christ is this Son of Man (he is),

or even that the Great Commission borrows heavily
from this prophecy (it does)

or even that that "borrowing" was intentional (it was),

but that by speaking these words
in this way
to these people

Jesus was finally and fully proclaiming himself
King once again over all creation.

Like Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings*, Jesus has played at being something less than he truly is for long enough. He has now willingly received the full measure of his sovereign and divine power and rightfully assumes the throne he could have taken at any other moment.

What makes this moment so special is the fact that he finally does.

Your throne, O God, will last forever and ever;
a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom.

Psalm 45.6

From messy to wonderful

See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse—the blessing if you obey the commands of the Lord your God that I am giving you today; the curse if you disobey.

Deuteronomy 11.26-28a

A blessing is a powerful thing. Both Simeon (the aged saint) and Anna (the prophetess) blessed Jesus when he was born. Both my father and mother blessed my son and my daughter when they were born. I have often been moved to pray, from deep within, prayers of blessing for those I have loved and even those I have lost.

I blessed my friend Randy before he died, and I have blessed my wife in her sleep. Those words—the words of blessing—have such power.

I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse

Genesis 12.3

Many scholars see a precedent for the Great Commission in Numbers 6, the most famous blessing in the Bible. It is a beautiful piece of poetry, often used in benediction or in farewell, and I have known several people to have cited it on their grave stones or in their obituary.



The Lord bless you
and keep you;
the Lord make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;
the Lord turn his face toward you
and give you peace.

Numbers 6.24-26

If you're like me, you're probably wondering (maybe just a little) what "blessing" has to do with the Great Commission. How does blessing relate to mission? How does the shining face of God heal the world? And what of peace? That makes sense of a sort, but we cannot shake the feeling we're missing something, some important detail.

Theologically, these are actually easy questions to answer. The world is a mess and God wants to fix it. That's blessing in a nutshell—going from messy to wonderful. The world is dark and many ill creatures lurk in such places—so the shining face of God forces them to run, but also causes them to disperse completely. The world is at war and God wants peace—again, this is so easy to understand!

But, alas, the world doesn't work on theology. Real life is just a lot messier. And what you can figure out with some time and some words and some advice, you can't always make happen in real life.

And there is the problem of how Christian people often interpret the Great Commission. Sometimes they think it just means evangelize, and then they wonder why no one wants to receive their "blessing."

But I can tell you that blessing is different. I can tell you that I've held a sick child in my hands and blessed him, and somehow reality has changed—it has changed for the parents who now know and understand that God is with them, and it has changed for me, for now I know and understand that I am with the child, and I am with the parents. It has even changed for the child, who recovered.

Blessing is more than evangelism. Blessing is healing. Blessing courts *shalom*. Blessing multiplies. And though there are those who want to corrupt the concept of blessing, or leverage it for book sales or TV or whatever, they simply cannot. A blessing is too powerful a thing.

And the Christian story, at the root, is about God's desire to bless the world, to heal it, and to remake it.

The land yields its harvest;
God, our God, blesses us.
May God bless us still,
so that all the ends of the earth will fear Him.

Psalm 67.6-7

It is true that things don't always work out the way we want them to. It is true that sometimes our blessings don't produce the results we'd hoped. It is true that we live in contested territory, and our world is in the process of being re-made while much of it remains ugly and corrupted. Not every child lives. But it's also true that we've made too much of those moments when things have turned to ash. We take them at face value, instead of recognizing that they are distortions.

We are too cowardly to bless, for fear nothing will change.

But when we do, it does. Not always, but more than you'd think. We have more good stories than bad ones. More moments of grace than greed. More beauty and truth and goodness than malice and lust and lies.

At the center of this goodness is God, who works to bless and to restore and to heal this world and we who live in it.

So may the Lord give you peace,
because He can.

And may He light up the dark places in your life with His light,
because He can.

And may He turn His face to you,
and bless you,
and keep you always in Him,
because He can.

And we need to be reminded of just that.

Pointing the finger

Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.

Mark 16.15-18

C.S. Lewis wrote a series of books that were markedly less famous than his Chronicles of Narnia. His space trilogy – *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, *That Hideous Strength* – were every bit as good narratively, and quite a bit superior theologically, but they suffered from Lewis' own scientific limitations and those of his day.

He still thought there could be people living on the moon.

'nuff said.

Having read and re-read these books (I'm quick to overlook scientific flaws in science fiction...it goes with the territory), I was surprised to see on Amazon.com a few years ago that there is a fourth book in the series, published posthumously. It's called *The Dark Tower*. I ordered it, and loved it, but was completely bummed to realize that Lewis died half-way through completing the book.

It honestly just ends. It felt like the publisher should have included a bunch of blank pages at the back so you could make up an ending on your own.

Which brings us to Mark's gospel.

It ends with kind of a cliff-hanger. According to our best scholarly records, it ends with an angel at the empty tomb telling a few women about the resurrection.

And then those women run away in fear.

The end.

Over the years, however, there have been additional verses added to the ending of Mark. We know that Mark didn't write them (they don't fit his style, or even necessarily within his narrative framework), but we also know that they carry some weight and were included at the end of Mark really early on (which is why they're still included in every one of our Bibles).

So I suggest we read them, and treat them like a really great book by the most respected Christian author and leader you can imagine. If they included stuff that wasn't anywhere else in the Bible, or even in the Second Testament, or even in the gospels, we could be a lot more suspicious. But, as it is, we've got some inspiring words put together in a meaningful way that are all substantiated elsewhere.

All that to say, it's safe to trust these words.

This is Mark's version of the Great Commission. It's worded differently, and because of its historical "issues" it's always de-emphasized in comparison to the one in Matthew. But Mark's Great Commission does have some interesting things to say.

First and foremost is the command to go out and preach the gospel to all creation. This is a beautiful rendering of the text, reminding us that it's not just people who suffer from the effects of sin in the world but the entire created order. Governments suffer from sin. Art suffers from sin. Animals and plant life and the ozone suffers from sin. Sin is a big deal, and all the world needs to hear the good news of the gospel of God.

This is why St. Francis of Assisi used to preach to the birds and the trees. Probably he was also a bit nuts, but the theology behind his delusions was pretty good.

Fake-Mark then goes on to give a stern warning about baptism and belief. This is not new content for the gospels, but it is presented here pretty harshly before fake-Mark jumps quickly into all the stuff that will happen in the lives of people who love and follow Jesus: exorcisms, glossolalia (tongues), immunity, and healing.

Having written on some of these supernatural phenomena in other places (see *Archetypes: unlocking your spiritual identity*) I'd like to focus here on the fact that all of these things are not meant to be an end unto themselves. These things are all pointing to something else.

The Kingdom of Heaven.

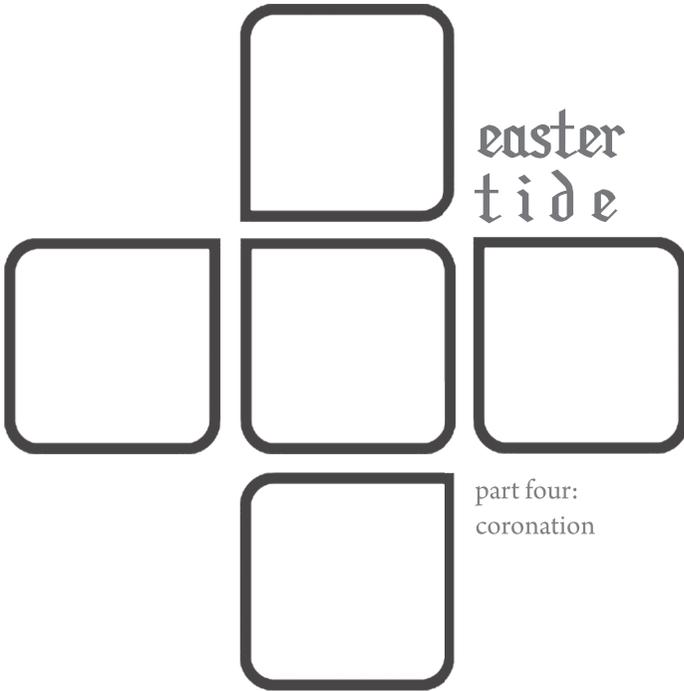
Just like Jesus instructed his disciples in Matthew's Great Commission, so too Jesus is instructing the disciples here that as they go out in the power of the Spirit to do the work of the Father in proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, crazy cool stuff will happen to provide a little support that what they're saying is, in fact, true.

We shouldn't get too hung up on the stuff that happens, though – as some often do. Miracles still occur, and people still speak in tongues, and there have even been occasions where someone got poisoned and didn't die. But that doesn't mean we should either (a) go out looking to manufacture that stuff, or (b) get too worked up if we don't see much of that first hand. I don't want to belittle it—it's important stuff, it's in the Bible!—just to remind us that the stuff is meant to proclaim the kingdom.

British bishop Tom Wright once related this issue to that of owning a pet. If you have a dog and you try and point to something with your finger, the dog will never actually see what you're pointing at. The dog will just lick your finger. They can't follow that what you're doing by pointing is not (ironically) the point.

So it is with things like manifestational gifts and power encounters and superhuman immunities. That stuff is like a great indicator pointing to the kingdom, and we'd better be sure we follow where it's pointing rather than sitting around sniffing each other's fingers.

 EASTER TIDE



 EASTER TIDE

The Ascension . . .

was the capstone of Christ's activity on earth. It was the moment of his enthronement, when he ceased – finally! – to be the upstart rabbi from Galilee and took his rightful place at his Heavenly Father's side. He now resides in glory, and reigns with authority, over the Heavens and the earth.

Ascension: a beginner's guide

After [Jesus'] suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the Kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: *Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.*

Then they gathered around him and asked him, *Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?*

He said to them: *It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by His own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. *Men of Galilee, they said, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into Heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into Heaven.*

Acts 1.3-11

Any time anything good has happened in my life, it has always involved going up. When I graduated from college I went up onto the stage to receive my awards and my degree. When I was ordained I went up to the platform to receive my commission. When I was first invited to become the teaching pastor at Westwinds I went up in front of the people to speak.

My favorite ascent, though, was going up the familiar back stairwell of my old church to stand before my family and friends while waiting to receive my bride.

I'll bet it's the same for you. You go up to receive awards. You go up to receive commendations. You go up to make speeches. We watch our best athletes ascend. We watch our favorite entertainers ascend. Every four years we watch our President ascend to the highest position of leadership on the planet. There's just something about going up, about ascension, that's implanted into our consciousness. We know that what happens "up there" is important.

We're not alone.

Ascension was an important concept in the ancient world also. People often ascended to do all kinds of spiritual things. They went up to the Temple. They went up to pray. They went up to offer sacrifices. And it wasn't just Jewish people who did this—all the Ancient Near Eastern people did this. That's why there's so much about the "high places" in Scripture—because those are the places the pagans went to worship. And when the Israelites got tired of waiting for God to do what they wanted, they often wandered over to those high places to see if they could get better customer service.

In this episode of the Christian story—the final episode of Eastertide—we witness Christ's Ascension into Heaven. Over the next few chapters we'll discuss the really common questions about the Ascension, like where Heaven is located, where Jesus' body currently resides, and what the relationship is between his Ascension and the Second Coming. But for now I think it's important to simply deal with some of the more immediate issues in the text. This might get a little technical, though I promise to try and get it interesting, but just know that what we're doing here is laying the foundation for the rest of our understanding of Christ's Ascension, kingship, and our own cooperation with God to heal the world.

Jesus went *up* in part because God knew that there's something hardwired into us that thinks of "up" as something special. A disappearance down into the earth would lead us to a completely different set of emotions, symbolizing a completely different paradigm for Christ.



Christ identified with us *here*, so he could incorporate us into his kingdom *there*. He became like us so we could be with him. That's why Jesus is called Immanuel, which means "God with us." He is completely 100% divine. Jesus is God. And yet, he came here to live with us as one of us—he is also 100% human. Jesus didn't just come down to slum it for a little while before heading back home to his mansion in glory. He came to get us. He came to pick us up and bring us back home.

Even during the resurrection Jesus didn't stop being human. He was resurrected into new, human life. Even when he ascended into Heaven he was still a human being. And when he entered Heaven and assumed his rightful place on the throne of God, he did so as a human being.

Jesus is not stripped of his humanity, but adorned with it.

And the reason that is so important is because he is taking us with him back to his home. *We with God* is the opposite of *God with us*.

If you're struggling to make sense of all this, perhaps it will help if we rewind the tape a little bit and consider once again the Story of God and the World. We've got to have the plot fit firmly in our minds if we're to properly understand that Jesus Christ is the answer to a very specific problem—the problem of human sin and its destructive consequences to creation.

How can this problem be addressed? Since a human got us into this mess, it will take a human to get us out of it. However, since human beings are superbly incapable of doing this on their own, God is required to lend a helping hand.

Enter Jesus: fully God, fully man. He qualifies for getting us out of this mess because he's human. He's able to succeed because he's God. Jesus is the new Adam who brings in a new creation so the full measure of sin and its destructive after-effects can be removed.

In context of this big story, though, Jesus has his own story. A story within a story. The Apostles' Creed fleshes out the basic plot of Jesus' story nicely:

He was **conceived** by the Holy Spirit.

Born of a virgin.

Suffered under Pilate.

Crucified.

Died.

Buried.

He **descended** into Hell.
He **rose again** from the dead.
He **ascended** into Heaven.
He is now seated **at the right hand** of the Father.
He will **come again**.
To **judge** the living and the dead.

What's important to grasp here is that the Ascension is intimately related to the incarnation. Jesus can't ditch his humanity without us somehow descending back into our old mess. If he stops being human, we're back to trading on the relative imperfection of the old Adam instead of the new one.

Translation: we're screwed.

Which means it's super-important that we understand Christ has been resurrected as a human being. He's still fully God and fully man; but we find the fully God part a lot easier to come to terms with because he's walking through walls and disappearing in the middle of meals. However, it is equally important that we understand Christ is fully human, because Jesus promises to return again to judge humanity, and that requires him to both identify with us in his humanity and appraise us in his divinity.

Let me try to say all this more succinctly (though, with fancier words): if Christ didn't retain his humanity, the resurrection undid the incarnation.

If he didn't fully come down as a man, then we're not fully saved. But if he rose again as something more than a man, we're not fully saved either. But since Christ became what we are, he can also take us with him back into the place we used to be denied.

In many ways, it's like the oft-repeated (but ever-varied) fable of the prince who sneaks out of the palace to explore the market. For some time the prince lives among the common people. In some versions of the story, he is there for many years, falling in love, working a trade, and generally finding life quite pleasant. But as the climax of the story is reached, the prince recognizes it is time to return to his palace and assume his rightful place as his Father's son and heir. And as he does, he is certain to reward those who have loved and befriended him while he lived among the regular folk.

The great moment of the story is not only the coronation of the marketplace prince, but also the elevation and incorporation of his new family.



He takes his friends with him.

One of the reasons this plotline has become so popular in our culture—variations of it are seen in *A Tale of Two Cities*, *the Prince and the Pauper*, and even in the short stories of George MacDonald and Susanna Clarke—is because it really is our story. This fable is extrapolated from some of our finest theological work on the Ascension of Christ and his identification with us for our incorporation into the Kingdom of God.

Incidentally, it is precisely the Ascension that keeps us from limiting Jesus to the sum of his teachings. Many people, for example, are quite fond of Jesus the rabbi. They quote him. They esteem him. They do everything they can to imitate him.

But the difference between a rabbi and a king is Ascension.

For instance, we're told that the ultimate in devotion was for a disciple to walk so closely behind their master that they were hit with the dust from his sandals.

But Jesus isn't our rabbi. He's our king. And following Jesus doesn't mean copying the life he lived *then*. The Spirit of Christ lives inside of us *now* and it is him-in-us that we're meant to follow as he leads us in the *present* moment.

Follow the promptings of the Spirit.
Follow the nudges of God.
Following the leading
and the echo
and the hope
and the nuance of the Spirit
as he works and weaves us through the world.

Follow God inside you,
not the rabbi in front of you.

And don't follow because you want to imitate. People may want to imitate their king, but they follow because he is their rightful ruler and heir. Imitate, sure, but understand that imitation will occur naturally once we give God ownership and fealty and love and permission to teach us how to become the people He's made us to be.

We cannot make the mistake of thinking that Jesus is still the marketplace prince. He has ascended now. He is no longer just our friend, he is now also our Lord.

And it is as their Lord and High Priest that Jesus blesses his disciples at the Ascension. If you recall, in the last section we looked at the similarities between the priestly blessing found in Numbers 6 and the Great Commission. Certain similarities exist between that blessing and Christ's speech at the Ascension as well.

Jesus' last words are a blessing, in which he reads his last will and testament while he is in the world. He leaves his disciples everything he received from his Father—which is to say he gave them his inheritance, the Holy Spirit of God.

This blessing is a kind of echo of several First Testament stories. So many, in fact, that the earlier stuff almost always seems like foreshadowing, as if the Bible was written in circles. Daniel's vision concerning the Son of Man (which we touched about in a previous chapter), spoke of the Son of Man going up on a cloud. Enoch, the seventh person from Adam, was also translated into Heaven in much the same way, as was Elijah who ascended to Heaven in God's angelic chariot.

There is also a connection between the Ascension and the Exodus. Matthew's gospel points out several ways in which Jesus is like Moses—the time in Egypt, the forty days in the desert representing Israel's forty years of desert wandering, Jesus' new "law" given on the mountain. With the Ascension, Jesus continues to re-enact Moses' prophetic career. Luke's gospel picks up on this theme as well and actually uses the word *exodus* in his telling of the transfiguration story. Though in English we often read that Moses and Elijah spoke with Christ about his departure, in Greek it says they discussed his *exodus from the world*. With that word, Luke connects the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the Ascension to the mightiest act of God in the First Testament. The God who brought Israel up out of Egypt is now about to bring Christ up from the grave, up from Jerusalem, and—finally—up into Heaven.

Notice, too, that at the end of the Ascension episode that two men in white appear to the disciples. They are described here in a similar way as Moses and Elijah were described on the Mount of Transfiguration, and their appearance has great significance.

We've already talked about Moses, albeit briefly, but not a ton about Elijah. In 2 Kings, when Elijah is getting ready to die, his protégé Elisha asks him for a double-portion of his prophetic spirit. What he's really asking for is to be twice as holy, twice as powerful, and twice as useful both to God and to the people. Elijah told him this was a hard request, but that if Elisha saw him departing, then he would receive the gift.



He did.

This is why Luke makes such a big deal of the disciples watching Christ ascend. They, like Elisha, will receive the ability to do greater things than Jesus when they receive the promised Holy Spirit.

Now we're with him spiritually, but when we die we will be with him in spirit, and then wholly at the resurrection. We'll be with him always, in one way or another.

Alright. That was the overview of the Ascension story and its context within the larger Story of God and the World. Please accept my apologies if it got a little heavy, but I do want us to understand that this story is rich and layered with meaning. Having looked at some of its foundations, I think we're ready to dig into some of the more exciting stuff, beginning with the one question everyone seems to want answered: *Where is Jesus now?*

Where is Jesus now?

As I was preparing to write on Eastertide I was somewhat surprised to see that every book on the Ascension handled the question of where Jesus body was right now. I thought that was weird. I've never really considered it. I guess, maybe, it's either because the fact that *it's not here* is enough for me to know, or because there are so many possibilities, none of which can be tested. Either way, I'm fine with not knowing and until recently I had assumed most other people were too.

I was wrong. Over the last couple of months, as I've mentioned to friends that I'll be writing on the Ascension, they've all asked me that one question: *Where is Jesus?* As I was telling Carmel how weird I thought that was, she looked at me and said: *That's actually the only question I have.*

I will now attempt to answer that million-dollar question, though I'm sure that in the end you're probably going to feel like I did a few months ago.

Jesus ascended on a cloud into Heaven. As we'll discuss in the next chapter, Heaven is a fairly complicated term in the Bible. Much of what the biblical community meant when they used it is different than how we might initially interpret it (I've spent some time pointing this out in greater detail in *Dying for a Fix: Easter and resurrection*).

So, *where is Jesus now?*
He's in Heaven.

Yeah, but where's his body?

In Heaven, and our best guess is that Heaven is in another dimensional reality that exists sort of beside and behind and around ours. Heaven exists *grosstopically*, meaning right on top of or even through us, but we can't perceive it.

I always think of there being a veil between this world and that one. If we could thin out the veil, we could step right through into that place where everything is as it should be. The good moments in life are those moments where that veil appears really thin, and it almost feels like there's heat and light coming through a kind of bed sheet, something that doesn't quite stop things from breaking through just a little.

Light is actually a good example for how all this dimensional mumbo-jumbo really works.

Light has three dimensions. However, when you shine a light onto a piece of paper that three-dimensional light is quickly reduced to two dimensions. It becomes something less. That's not to say that the third dimension of light is no longer present, it's just that we are incapable of seeing it. We see a limited version of reality. And given that physicists currently contend there are at least 11 dimensions (though possibly as many as 23), it's a good bet that what we're able to grasp in our 4-dimensional understanding is pretty rudimentary at best.

Perhaps the reason Christ can move through walls and disappear at a whim and shoot up into the sky and enter Heaven is because his resurrection body is uniquely, dimensionally, suited for Heaven.

Okay, then why did Luke mention that Jesus went up into Heaven?

Jesus was carried up not so much because "up there" was where God lived, but because he was exalted and seated on the throne that was his birth rite. The incarnation is about God leaving the God-place and coming to the human-place. The Ascension is about God heading back home, and taking us along with Him.

No one present at the Ascension could escape the conclusion that the same Jesus whom they had abandoned, whom the mob condemned, whom the elite handed over, whom the Romans had murdered, had in fact turned the tables on these principalities and powers.

[Jesus Christ] has gone into Heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

1 Peter 3.22

All authority in Heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Matthew 28.18

God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in Heaven and on earth and under the earth...

Philippians 2.9-10

God raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the Heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything...

Ephesians 1.20-22

Jesus' Ascension isn't really about his location so much as it is about his status. He ascended to glory—he is now the King Who Sits On The Throne, not the king who left his throne to live among us as one of us.

So, in the final reckoning, the real answer is that Jesus is in Heaven. But the real question is not where is he, but *who is he?* And the answer?

He Is King Who Sits On The Throne.

The neighborhood of Heaven and Earth

The Heavens belong to the Lord,
But He has given the earth to the children of men.

Psalms 115.16

The Bible is a love story, in which the hero ultimately gives his life to save his beloved. It begins as a tragedy, for the beloved rejects him, but ends in triumph, for the hero overcomes every obstacle, including his own death, and they live happily ever after in a kingdom paradise, governed by peace.

We've now got to understand the setting for this story. It happens some *place*, and that place is creation. The Story happens on earth and in Heaven.

Heaven isn't some other place miles up in the sky. It's God's dimension, His magnificent home, in which things are precisely the way He wants them to be, and where creation totally corresponds to Him because it is saturated with His glory. It intersects in some important way with ours. Heaven is God's space, and earth is our space, but the two are interlocking spheres of God's good creation.

God has made creation sort of like a duplex. It's a good home for two different kinds of people. You've got Heaven on one side—the place where God lives and in which all the higher order of angelic beings reside—and earth on the other. And though the two are

right next to each other, and even share some of the same foundation. Even though we can sometimes hear the noise from next door and piece together what's happening over there, they are not the same. Not yet. Heaven is like the control room for earth. God's house is the only one with a thermostat, or an HVAC, and He pays all the bills and makes sure the lights stay on.

We often make the mistake of thinking our home is some kind of training ground for God's home, and while it's true they are related, God's long term plans don't include having everyone vacate our side of the duplex to move in with Him. Rather, God has it in mind to create an entirely new home in which we all get to live together. That's the new Heaven and the new earth John tells us about in Revelation, and it begins when the walls that separate the existing Heaven and earth come down and the two dimensions will be fused together at last.

For Jesus to ascend into the Heavenly dimension doesn't mean getting beamed up somewhere, so much as it means living next door in the same duplex. It is the limitation both of our language and our metaphysics that make this tricky to understand.

I've been increasingly enamored with the TV show *Fringe*. It's a paranormal detective show that flirts with quantum physics, M-theory, and presupposes a belief in parallel universes.

Which is to say, it's awesome.

The basic riff in the show is that there are two universes competing for the same reality. Ultimately only one of those universes can survive. In the meantime they compete, in a manner of speaking, for all kinds of existential resources. As part of their conflict, it often happens that one universe will break through the other. Consequently, you'll have scenes in which a glimmer appears around a building (or even around a city) and the building will look different all of a sudden. Not completely different, but different enough that you know you're not quite looking at the same thing. There may be different molding on the exterior, or it may have a different pattern of wear and tear.

For example, in the other universe, the New York skyline still boasts the Twin Towers. The airways are filled with zeppelins and airships, and there are no longer any sheep.

It's that "glimmering" that I think helps us understand how Heaven and earth overlap. There are times in which the space between our home and God's home gets very thin, and



we can see through to the other side. I think the birth of a child, the miracle of human life, is such a time. I think true love is another. I think that heroism, nobility, and self-sacrifice show us Heaven-on-earth.

Heaven and earth are like two halves of God's created world. They aren't so much like the two halves of an orange, more or less identical but occupying different space. They are more like the weight of an object and the stuff it's made of, or perhaps the meaning of a flag and the cloth of which it's comprised: two related ways of looking at the same thing, two different and interlocking dimensions, the one perhaps explaining the other. Talking about Heaven and earth is a way, in the Bible, of talking about the fact, as many people and many cultures have perceived it to be, that everything in our world has another dimension, another sort of reality, that goes with it as well.

Tom Wright, 20th Century Bishop of Durham

One of the many things we glean from the biblical stories of Christ's resurrection is that the risen body of Jesus is the first (and so far the only) object which is fully at home in both Heaven and earth, anticipating the time when they will become something new together. We are promised that same kind of body, just as we are promised citizenship in that same new setting, usually called the new creation.

This is why Paul refers to Jesus as the firstborn over all creation—not only because he existed before the world was made, but now because he is also the prototype of the resurrection.

The relationship between his resurrection and our future resurrection is much like the birth of a child. When a baby is born, it's normally born head first. Once the head emerges, the whole rest of the baby comes out naturally. The head is the tricky bit. Christ is the head of the church, and the first fruits of the resurrection, the firstborn over the (new) creation.

This is why some of the earliest Christians referred to the Eucharist as the medicine of immortality, because when we are joined with Christ we become heirs in the promise that this world is not the end.

We don't have to spend eternity in a duplex.

Talkin' jive

When I was just starting out in ministry I made a couple of really boneheaded mistakes. One of these had to do with failing to understand the meaning of the words I was using.

I had to send a letter to all the participants in my college group. This was in 1996, just before email became a primary means of communication for most of the culture, and snail mail was the best way to get people things like updates and calendars and general information. Realizing that I would never want to open one of these mass mailings myself, and not really wanting to fall into the trap of so-many pastors who try and make things hip or cool (and in the process fail spectacularly), I decided I would develop a kind of literary signature. This was to be the first, but soon I thought everyone would come to eagerly anticipate how I would mark my future mail, so that what once was boring could now be a little treat.

My signature was going to be a new kind of slang. I would make it up. Nonsense, really, but nonsense used in such a way as to be clever and fun and do no harm. Little did I know that much of the slang I created had already been invented by people I hadn't met, and who certainly hadn't invented these terms for pastoral ministry.

That was how I discovered the meaning of the words 'turd,' 'nooky,' and 'bollocks.'

It was also how I learned the importance of language, and of ensuring that the things you write are correctly understood by your audience, and in the ways you intend.

One of the most important things you can do whenever you write, especially for an academic or critical audience, is define your terms. If you don't tell people what you mean when you say whatever it is you're saying, some people will certainly misunderstand. Some will misunderstand because they fail to grasp the point. Some will misunderstand on purpose because they're lurking, like sharks beneath the surface of the water, waiting for their moment to feast on weakness and inconsistency.

That is why, in this chapter, I want to examine the four different words used for the Ascension in the Second Testament. In so doing, I think we're going to discover that the word—and of course the event itself!—means quite a bit more than we might first assume.

The first of these words, and the most common, is the word *anabaino*. It means “to ascend and to offer,” and has a kind of cultic significance. A priest would *anabaino* in order to make a sacrifice to God on top of a mountain. This sacrificial ritual began at the bottom of the mountain, in prayer and with other kinds of spiritual preparation, and climaxed with the offering given to God. It concluded when the priest had returned to the bottom of the hill.

I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.

John 20.17

Jesus, as we'll talk about in greater detail in a later chapter, is both our High Priest and our atoning sacrifice. He sacrificed himself for us. When we say that he Ascended to Heaven, what we're really saying is that he began preparing for his crucifixion the moment he arrived in our world. He knew why he had come. He knew the price he would pay. He came anyway and died willingly in order to ensure we could be free from our sin.

The second term is *kathizo*, which means “to sit down.” I understand why at first this seems like the exact opposite of an ascension word, but it carries some pretty heavy connotations. It is a kingly word, used in reference to a king who has for the first time sat down upon his throne. It is the word we use for enthronement and for coronation. It is a word of victory and power and conquest.

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which He has called you, the riches of His glorious inheritance in His holy people, and His incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength He exerted when He raised Christ from the

dead and seated him at his right hand in the Heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.

Ephesians 1.18-21

The Ascension was really more of an enthronement than a departure. Christ ascended to Heaven to assume his rightful place at God's throne.

The least used term, and yet somehow I think the most poetic, is *analambano* and it is found only in Luke 9.51. The word refers to the smoke created by burning incense. As the people pray and burn incense, both the smoke and their prayers ascend to God.

As the time approached for him to be taken up to Heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.

Luke 9.51

The time has come,
 after exhausting the powers of evil
 and conquering death and Hell,
 after being raised to new life
 and inaugurating new creation
 through his resurrection power,
 for Christ to ascend to Heaven like a prayer.

Finally, *hupsoo* literally means “to be lifted up on high and exalted.” When Christ came into the world, he emptied himself of his divine privileges. In theological circles, this is referred to as the *kenosis*. He made himself nothing for our sake. But with his resurrection and ascension, Christ has once again been exalted. *Kenosis* completed. *Pleurosis*—the divine filling—has begun.

God exalted Him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that He might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins.

Acts 5.31

I used to wonder what significance the Ascension really had. I could understand the incarnation—of course God had to become one of us, in order to show us how to live. And I could understand crucifixion—of course he had to die, to atone for our sin. And I could understand resurrection—of course he came back to life, to finally defeat evil. But I now also understand the Ascension.

 **EASTER TIDE**

Of course he ascended to Heaven,
where he now works as our High Priest.

Of course he ascended to Heaven,
where he now sits enthroned as King.

Of course he ascended to Heaven,
like a prayer offered in faith to the Father.

Of course he ascended to Heaven,
and has once again assumed his divine power.

I lift up my eyes to the mountains—
where does my help come from?
My help comes from the Lord,
the Maker of Heaven and earth.

Psalm 121.1-1

Get what you need

In the last six months at Westwinds, we've undergone a pretty extensive search process for a few key staff positions. Because resources are limited and because they come from God through His people, we were very sure to make both our requirements and our expectations very clear. We knew what we wanted and we went out and got it.

Over the years, the Hebrew people (our spiritual ancestors) had found themselves in a number of tricky predicaments. Once upon a time the Egyptians had enslaved them. Later on, they found their fledgling nation poorly led and spiritually misguided. In the twilight years of their ancient history, they found themselves exiled from their homes. In each thorny situation, the people had called out to God and asked Him for help. They, too, knew what they wanted and set out to get it.

Each time, God responded by sending a leader—Moses, David, Isaiah—whom He had summoned to rescue them. God sent a savior, someone anointed to salvage His people.

Prior to the birth of Christ, the Jews had experienced their worst run of luck to date. They'd be conquered again and again, and even their conquerors had been conquered. They had no real king, and no real hope, and both their national and spiritual destiny lay in ruins.

For hundreds of years they had been calling out to God for a savior like they had in the past. They wanted God to anoint someone like Moses to lead a new exodus, or someone

like David who could be a proper king, or someone like Isaiah to speak the word of the Lord once more.

And, truth be told, they didn't so much want just one of these but a perfect collision of all three. There is a word for that—Messiah (which means *anointed one*). And God, in His mercy and goodness and grace, sent His son to be that Messiah.

Throughout his earthly ministry, Jesus functioned mostly as a prophet performing many signs and wonders, just as he taught many holy and brilliant truths. It is through his death that he functions mostly as a priest, dying willingly and sacrificially on the cross for the sins of humanity. His resurrection and his ascension are the main portals through which we understand Christ's kingship, that he is enthroned and has been given all authority.

The Ascension was the moment in which Christ wholly fulfilled their expectations. He proved he could do the job God had given him, and had in fact been doing it all along.

The Ascension marks a turn in Christ's prophetic office, providing the necessary prelude to the sending of the Holy Spirit

The Ascension signals the completion of Jesus' priestly act of atonement, though it's also the beginning of his priestly mediation on our behalf before the Father.

The Ascension demonstrates the full measure of Christ's kingly glory, and inaugurates his rule as the divine-human Lord.

I want to take a little space in this chapter to demonstrate briefly how the Ascension satisfies these Messianic expectations. In the next chapter, I'll focus more fully on the kingly nature of the event.

One of the things that has always puzzled me about Catholic theology in general and Catholic commentaries in particular is that they always refer to Christ as "the Prophet." It seems like a Muslim affectation at first (*there is one God, and Jesus Christ His prophet*), but upon further reflection it's obvious that the Catholics are simply underscoring something we've long been happy to take for granted.

Christ's earthly ministry was more prophetic than rabbinical. A rabbi teaches—and certainly Christ taught and was called a rabbi by his closest friends and followers—but a prophet teaches and performs miraculous signs and wonders.

Because so much of Christ's ministry involved miracles, healings, resurrections, exorcisms, and various displays of power, if you were to categorize him without knowing anything other than the plotline of the gospels, then it would be obvious that Jesus of Nazareth was more like Ezekiel than Gamaliel (a famous first-century rabbi). He was a perfect prophet in the traditional sense of the word.

But there is another sense in which Jesus fulfills his prophetic calling. Prophets, you may recall, were tasked with speaking on behalf of God to the people. They used a special phrase to remind everybody that what they were saying didn't originate with them, but came straight from God—the *Word of the Lord*. When they invoked that phrase, people perked up. They took the message seriously, even if they didn't always listen. And they certainly punished fakers and frauds harshly enough, stoning anyone who claimed to speak the Word of the Lord but actually did not.

One of the beautiful truths expressed in the prologue to John's gospel is that Jesus Christ is the Word made flesh. He's *that* Word, the Word of the Lord. Now, there's a lot more going on than just being the fleshy version of some old prophecies, but it is precisely that little piece that concerns us here.

Jesus Christ is the Word. He teaches, then, about himself. When he performs signs and wonders, they point back to him. Everything he does is self-referential, in obedience to his Father's will.

Jesus' ascension marks the official end of his prophetic ministry. But we get to pick up where he left off. Every time we preach or tell others about Christ, we are acting as prophets proclaiming the Word of the Lord. And in those moments, it's like we're re-incarnating Christ, like we're yanking him out of Heaven and bringing him into the conversation.

The writer of Hebrews has a profound understanding of Christ as our High Priest. In chapters 8-10 he compares the work of the High Priest in the First Testament tabernacle with the work of Jesus. Every year, the High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies and offer sacrifices for himself and for the people. What the High Priest did for God was accepted on behalf of all the people. He was a vicarious man—the one who represented many.

Take, for example, the Day of Atonement. On that day, the High Priest was meant to prepare two goats for sacrifice. The first goat he sacrificed to God, to make up for the sins of the people. Then, after he had finished the ritual sacrifice inside the Holy of Holies, the



High Priest would place his hands on the second goat and symbolically transfer the sins of all Israel onto it. This was the scapegoat, which was then driven off into the wilderness. Finally, the High Priest would bless the people. He both represented the people to God, and God to the people.

He was a mediator.

Jesus was both scapegoat and sacrifice, both priest and victim. He gave his life as a perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world, and then took up his office as the ultimate High Priest dressed in the priestly robes of glorified flesh, humanity at its fullest, restored into eternal life. Now he remains with God in Heaven—inside the Holy of Holies, so to speak—and there he continually advocates for us and intercedes on our behalf.

The reason this matters is because *only on this basis* can we boldly approach God without fear of ticking Him off. This is also why you can suck at prayer without being afraid of getting zapped for blasphemy—Christ intercedes on your behalf, ensuring that anything the Father sees from you, He sees through Christ-tinted lenses. This is also why you can be brutally honest in prayer, even irreverent and angry and disrespectful. Not that you should.

With our typical American brazenness, most of us have no idea that we really need a mediator. We just do whatever we want and, since God is good and couldn't possibly be conceived of as being angry with us, enjoy that it all works out in the end.

But there is a reason why it works out in the end. That reason is Christ and his consistent advocacy on our behalf. And it does need to be consistent—it needs to be a dynamic kind of mediation to keep us close to God, not to keep us saved, but to ensure we are constantly in touch with the Spirit and can continually grow into the people God destined us to become.

We need to realize this so we neither continue to live in such disregard (doing whatever we want with no thought for the fact that someone has to clean up our mess) or continue to go on living without taking time to express the appropriate amount of gratitude.

It's worth noting here that Christ's priesthood involves our own derivative priesthood. Peter tells us we are a *holy nation* and a *royal priesthood*, but this is only because of our connection with Christ Jesus through his Spirit. In real life, it also means that we have a responsibility to sacrifice ourselves on behalf of others and to provide some intercession for them, both praying them into the Kingdom of God and holding up their needs to the Father.

Having spoken of the Ascension in terms of Christ's prophetic and priestly calling, it's now appropriate to speak of his kingly commission and how the Ascension is the completion of all Jesus came to do in the world. It is his enthronement, in which he is proven to be finally victorious over his enemies and now reigns over his endless kingdom. Now Christ sits at the right hand of the Father, installed as the head of the new humanity, the prince of the new creation, and the king of the kingdom he has won and established through his incarnation, his passion, and his resurrection.

We'll talk more about this in the next chapter as we compare both the ancient and the universal longing for a good leader to our satisfaction with Christ, our King.

The good king

Jesus said, *Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'*

Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: *I have seen the Lord!*
John 20.17-18a

My favorite books are coming to HBO. *A Game of Thrones* is a complex political fantasy, billed as *The Sopranos* in Middle Earth. The plot centers around a competition for the Iron Throne, the hotly contested seat of royalty for the fabled Seven Kingdoms. Without spoiling anything, the gist of the currently four (eventually seven) book series is that one failed king after another botches things worse than their predecessors, leading the entire realm into deeper levels of disaster, civil war, and economic hardship. Early on in the series, the Seven Kingdoms (which had previously been united) quickly divide and partition off into smaller fiefdoms and monarchies, each with their eyes on the whole prize. But no matter who leads which country, or for how long, all of the kings are butchers and oath-breakers and power mongers.

This is a popular theme in science fiction and fantasy story-telling. It's one of the reasons I love the genre so much. Science fiction gives you a way to critique reality without getting hung up on all the particulars. Writers and imagineers are able to point out what's wrong with government and religion and human society in general without their words being

used as hateful propaganda, or worse, deteriorating into a criticism of one or two present-day leaders.

Fantasy criticizes reality, not just the people who happen to control reality. And one of the things in our world that most needs critique is government and authority. Hence, *A Game of Thrones*. Because it is impossible to find a good king these days.

I've mentioned previously that the point of the Ascension is not to illustrate how Jesus leaves the world, but that he is elevated as the true King of the World. He's the good king that all these fantasy stories have way back in the background—the one to whom none of those who play the game of thrones can measure up, just as he's the prototype for the inborn goodness and nobility of those famous characters, like Aragorn from *Lord of the Rings*.

Ascension doesn't mean absence. It means sovereignty exercised through the Spirit.

Maybe a little historical background will help us see how this all works.

Every year during the Hebrew New Year's festival, the people would act out a liturgical coronation of God. This coronation had four parts:

- A procession, leading the Ark of the Covenant to the Temple.
- A dramatic presentation of God's triumph over evil.
- A re-enthronement of God via the current national ruler.
- A wedding between God and His people.

There is a parallel between this festival and the Ascension.

Jesus ascended into the Heavenly Temple,
 after exhausting the powers of evil on the cross,
 assuming his rightful place on Heaven's throne,
 and now prepares for his wedding to the church.

When Mary tells the disciples that she has *seen the Lord* (John 20.17-18), she means something ever so much more than that she likes Jesus a super-lot. What she's saying, in effect, is what Thomas gets at later on: *My Lord, and my God*. Mary and Thomas and Peter and all of us who love and serve Jesus Christ mean for *Lord* to indicate that Christ:



Is king of the universe.

Makes the nations tremble.

Is God in whom, and for whom, all things were made.

As theologian N.T. Wright has helpfully pointed out, the Ascension shows that the power of love is supremely stronger than the love of power.

He interprets the death and resurrection of Jesus in light of Daniel 7 where the prophet Daniel has a vision of a great monster emerging from the sea. It boasts before a courtroom about its power, muscle, and destructive potential. The monster, representative of all human empires, believes its power is shown chiefly in its ability to kill.

But here is the twist in Daniel's vision. God is presiding over this courtroom, and in one swift move He silences the monster's boast and exalts *one like the Son of Man*. A human being. God gives him authority, dominion, and kingly power. But this is a power different from the one the monster had exercised; it's the power of love.

Jesus was this Son of Man, and went to his death believing that the power of the monsters would be broken, that the weight of human arrogance would have done its worst, and that the God of love and new life would vindicate him and begin establishing a new kingdom, in which power has been stood on its head.

The chief thing that the monster can do, then and now, is kill. But of course, all kinds of things can kill. Only God gives life. True power is found in the apparent failure of a young Jew at the hands of a ruthless empire, but that power is exhausted while the power of love and life and new creation is just getting started.

Justin Martyr, one of our earliest heroes, liked to riff on this concept of success-though-failure (something my friend Dwight Friesen likes to call *orthoparadoxy*). Justin Martyr saw plenty of parallels between the First Testament stories and the life of Jesus. For example, in Psalm 24 (a song about the "King of Glory," normally thought to be about Solomon), Justin understood that the angelic sentinels guarding Heaven did not recognize Jesus when he arrived to assume the throne. They asked: *Who is this "King of Glory?"* because Jesus arrived scarred, and in human form—so different than when he first left. It is only then that the Holy Spirit testified on behalf of Christ and said: *This is the Lord of Hosts. He is the King of Glory.*

Of course, we wouldn't want to totally take Justin Martyr at face value here. After all, the Ascension was a triumph and Christ went up in a glorified body, no longer beaten and broken and wan. But the imagery is cool, because it reminds us that the pain and disgrace of the cross actually cost Jesus something, and that through suffering and foolishness the cross became the trophy of God's grace for the world.

One last thought here about the true nature of a good king: the greatness of a king has always been known through his generosity. Christ gives his Spirit to his people—a true gift from God. As Christ leaves this world, it is only so he can send the Spirit through whom the world will be convicted of sin and be guided down paths of righteousness.

We serve a risen and exalted savior, who has given us everything we need to exercise power and love to heal the world. He does not govern us through fear or intimidation. He does not seek to control us. He coaches us. He coaxes us. He guides us, leads us, and loves us.

*The king is dead.
Long live the king!*

Parade!

Redeem the time, because the days are evil.

Ephesians 5.16 NKJV

A couple of years ago we took our kids to Disney World. They were young, so they got to experience every conceivable pleasure—nothing had yet become cheesy or tame, everything was magic and marvel. One of the things they most looked forward to were all the parades. I hate parades, but out of love for my children I agreed to stand there and lick ice cream while enduring the caricatures of Mickey and Minnie and the oddly garish makeup of princesses and men in tights.

Whenever we talk about the Second Coming, as we're going to do in this chapter, I want you to have the image of a parade firmly fixed in your mind. For me, the stereotypical parade is Disney World. For you, it may be Macy's on Thanksgiving, or the more local variety on the fourth of July. Regardless, though an imperfect comparison, a parade is about the most accurate picture we've got in contemporary American life for the true nature of Christ's return.

When I was writing *Advent (Seasons of Christian Spirituality, Volume I)* I was surprised to learn that the same language is used for both the incarnation and the Second Coming. The word in question is the Greek word *parousia*, and it refers to a kind of royal parade when the emperor would ride through the center of town amid a cheering throng of grateful citizens. That word is used to describe Christ coming into the world as a human

baby. Indeed, *advent* is a kind of synonym, a derivative, of *parousia* and it is also used in reference to that time when Christ will come again to finally set everything right in the world once more.

His first coming and his final coming are related.

In many ways, it's best to conceptualize the time between his departure from this world and his Second Coming as a pause in the middle of the *parousia*. Imagine the emperor coming down Main Street, then getting off his chariot and entering his Father's home in the middle of town, staying there for a while before coming back out and finishing the parade. That's the idea. What Christ began with his advent, he completes with his *parousia*.

His Ascension begins the time Christ will spend in his Father's house part-way through the parade.

Bear in mind that the Ascension isn't about Jesus shooting up into Heaven—lucky guy!—and promising that we'll get vacuumed up there as well when our number gets called. It's about him going there and promising later to return and stay here. That's why the angels say: *He's coming back in the same way you saw him go into Heaven* rather than saying: *You're next, won't that be cool?*

When he comes back we'll celebrate in the best possible way—with a party and a feast and a wedding (everybody loves weddings)—establishing once and for all that he is Lord over Heaven and earth and everything under the earth. That's why John writes in Revelation that *the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord*.

As a result, we find ourselves living in two times. On the one hand, we've really enjoyed the beginning of the parade. Christ is now with the Father, and we trust they've got some important business to attend to, but we're often guiltily left wondering: *How much longer is this going to take?* We know that he's coming back eventually to sit at the head of the resurrection parade, and that when he does we'll not just be spectators but participants (all the best parades catch you up and pull you along), and that when the parade gets to the finish line there'll be a party like none other.

There's a lot to look forward to, but in the meantime we know we've got to go back to our business and to our families because there's no telling how long Christ will remain with his Father. (He's not even sure how long it's going to take.) But when we return to our

normal lives we find our attention drifting back to the parade. We work, we love, we make friends, we help others, but in the back of our minds we always hear the music and feel the beat of *parousia*.

That's what I mean when I say we live in two times. We live in the time of the passing world and all its stress and decay; but also in the time of parade, the time of new creation, aware in the knowledge that we're in the middle of something that will soon be completed. Something which from time to time breaks into the world, like the marching band tuning up their instruments on Main Street, or the fireworks they sometimes shoot into the air to remind you that things aren't over.

We live with the knowledge of advent, and in anticipation of *parousia*, but we must turn our hearts and minds toward the work Christ has set for us to do now.

Jesus has ascended into Heaven *but he is coming back* to finish off the parade. And when he does come back, we will celebrate because he will finally and completely heal the world. Creation will be restored.

That is the picture—not of unmaking, but of remaking. The old field of space, time, matter, and the sense is to be weeded, dug, and sown for a new crop. We may be tired of that old field. God is not.

C.S. Lewis

When he returns, Christ will complete that work of transformation and restoration. But it has already begun—the parade has started and we ought to live in the knowledge that the king is present even though there are many dark powers and scornful skeptics who maintain that things are as they have always been.

This is why the Second Testament calls us to redeem the time. We're not supposed to drag our way through life, tired and unaware, but to cooperate with God in the redemption of the world. And even though the party hasn't totally begun, we can still get our groove on at work and at home, much like normal people will often dance in anticipation of the party they will later attend that evening.



The day of the Lord's Ascension causes
the pleasant spring to come forth,
and the beautiful young buds to grow up
the vine shoots appear heavy with fruit
the olive trees come into flower
the fig trees bear early fruits
the closely sown fields are stirred by the west winds,
imitating the billows of the sea
All things rejoice with us at the Lord's Ascension.
John Chrysostom, 4th Century Archbishop of Constantinople

Can I get a witness?

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. *Men of Galilee, they said, why do you stand here looking into the sky?*

Acts 1.8-11a

I heard a story recently about a devout Hindu who came to visit a Christian bishop and explore the story of Christ. He was given a Bible and began to read the Second Testament vociferously, feeling like Christ had cast a spell on him. But it was only when he made it into the book of Acts that something changed inside of him. In Acts, what the disciples did and thought and taught had taken the place Christ had occupied. At that moment, the Hindu converted, saying: *I must belong to the church that carries on the life of Christ.*

That is the significance of the Ascension for the church. We have been commissioned to carry on the life of Christ, to cooperate with God in healing the world by bringing the gospel to all creation.

When the Second Testament speaks of Jesus being raised from the dead, it evidently refers not only to the resurrection of the body from the grave but also to his being raised up as the appointed Messiah, the anointed prophet, priest, and king. All of this is encapsulated in the term *Christ*.

Christ is like a seed. He was raised up as a root out of the dry ground, the shoot of the vine, after it had been mowed down. He's like a seed born from a barren womb—like Sarah's, or Hannah's, or Elizabeth's—or, alternatively, like a seed implanted in a virgin. And now we see how the birth and resurrection are connected—they both raise up new seeds through which the world will be healed and all nations will be blessed.

So, the seed is not only Christ, but also the church. He is the kernel of wheat that falls to the ground. He doesn't come up alone, but with a whole harvest of grain.

This is why so much of Jesus' final speech to his friends is focused on mission. The time for giving them new knowledge and information is over. He barely talks about his identity as the Messiah and shrugs off their question about the consummation of Israel. Instead, Christ focuses on the fact that they're to remain in Jerusalem until the Spirit comes and empowers them to get busy with the work of healing the world. His focus is firmly fixed on what we're supposed to do while he's gone and how we're supposed to do it.

And of course the means by which we're supposed to carry on the life of Christ are the very same means that Christ employed so wonderfully in the world. We are empowered for mission by the Spirit as he was. We'll talk more about that when we finally arrive at Pentecost, but for now it's enough to say that despite Christ's physical absence, he is everywhere accessible because of his Spirit. The Spirit is the sign and the guarantee, the backing if you will, that we are emissaries of the king.

During the Ascension, the disciples were caught looking up. There was a lot to see, and a lot of new information to digest—the kingdom will come, the Spirit will baptize, the gospel will be proclaimed—and yet, it is precisely because of all that that we cannot stand around and gaze upwards at Christ. Ascension is the moment that the mission of Jesus became the mission of the church. We are now called to usher in the kingdom, to introduce others to the Spirit, and to preach the gospel.

That is why the two glowing messengers appeared—to prod the disciples into action. That's why they ask: *Why are you standing here gazing up at the sky?*

Or, as I like to think of them saying: *Well? Get to it.*

In the first century, when someone was enthroned as king, he would send heralds throughout the territory telling everyone: *We have a king!* That was always good news, because everyone in the ancient world knew that anarchy is worse than government. Governments may stink, but chaos smells like cabbage and old men's clothes. So the heralds would go off to the far reaches of the kingdom—to Spain, Britain, and Egypt—and demand allegiance from all their subjects.

And that is what Jesus had told his disciples they must do, and that is what the holy messengers are making sure happens.

The disciples are commissioned to be witnesses to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. That word, *witness*, is a fascinating term. It sounds like the witnesses that present evidence in a courtroom. That's a fair definition. I especially like how that kind of witness knows what they're saying is true. After all, no good lawyer would put someone on the stand who's only *pretty sure* about something that may have happened at some point. Ish. No—a witness is someone who knows, and the best witnesses are people who have seen with their own eyes something that happened right in front of them.

I also like this use of the term witness because in the most dramatic sense a witness is always somewhat at risk. A witness to a mafia murder is at risk of being taken out by the accused (hence all that good stuff about “witness protection”). In a less dramatic sense, a witness can also risk their reputation (by confessing they were somewhere they shouldn't have been in order to incriminate someone they saw while they were there), or their business (because that which they're testifying about may not reflect well on the nature of their market).

A Christian witness is always at risk, too. We're at risk of losing friends who think we're nuts for believing in the resurrection. We're at risk of staying single because it's difficult to get involved in a non-sexual romance. We're at risk in our jobs and schools and in our culture and society for standing against the tide of darkness, choosing to live differently regardless of the social, political, or economic consequences.

It's risky to believe what we believe because we're always up against a massive evidentiary flaw: real life. History is on our side—we have the best records to indicate beyond any reasonable doubt that Christ was who he said he was. Archaeology is on our side—we know where this stuff happened and can prove it. Even quantum physics is on our side. But the overwhelming, insurmountable evidence in the lives of most people is that there's no way any of this stuff happened because it doesn't make sense to your typical 21st century post-modern American.

That's why it's easier to find evidence for the resurrection once you've experienced Christ for yourself. *You ask me how I know he lives—he lives within my heart.* We have an apology of personal transformation. Something perhaps inexplicable is different because of Christ-in-me. This is why we're witnesses and why our confession and our testimony matter so much to God and to the world. To an outsider, that probably seems like nonsense, but to anyone who's experienced the grace of God and the power of the Spirit, there can really be no other explanation.

Of course, we're really only at risk to the degree that we take Christ's teaching and his example seriously. The less devoted we are to the Way of Jesus, the less we're at risk of being ridiculed for our sexual standards, our engagement with the supernatural, or our insistence upon justice and equality.

But when we choose to elevate Christ above every other concern, then we find the true meaning of the word witness.

It means martyr.

A witness is loyal to Jesus Christ, to his teachings and, more importantly, to him personally as the Second Person of the Triune God, no matter the cost.

Every lover and follower of Jesus Christ ought to take this four-fold mission field seriously. Every church ought to be reaching out into their own Jerusalem—their own home town—and into their own Judea—their own surrounding region, in my case, the Midwest—and to their own Samaria—the decaying and undesirable part of their community—and to the ends of the earth—meaning the international component of mission work.

And we're meant to do this because that's precisely what Jesus did. And we are here to carry on the life of Christ now that he's gone.

Jesus and his church are different

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves. Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor.

1 Peter 2.13-17

We need to seriously consider the Ascension in order to avoid a really common misunderstanding about the church. The language in the Bible is that the church is the body of Christ. By corollary, we're made to understand that the church continues the mission of Jesus to heal the world. Jesus is now working through his church to accomplish his mission. That's the nature of the on-going incarnation, right?

However, the church and Christ are not one and the same. And when we downplay the Ascension we run the risk of thinking that since Jesus isn't here any longer it's up to us to fix everything.

A lot of good Christian people tend to think this way, and at first it really doesn't seem like such a big deal. The problem arises when we try to make other people believe like we do, when we belittle their beliefs or convictions, and when we try and legislate spirituality.

We mistake these kinds of outward controls for evidence of the Kingdom of God being present. But it's not the same thing. *The Kingdom of God is within you.* Government, society, culture and all the rest of it are largely inconsequential to Christ's regenerative mission. His truth marches on regardless of whether or not there's prayer in schools, good health care, or overtime pay for union employers. That's not to say that this stuff doesn't matter, just that it's not the church's business.

And when the church gets too involved in politics or economics or foreign policy, then two super-crappy things happen:

First, many good people will stop thinking for themselves because they believe that the higher-ups have got it all under control and must certainly know the will of God in this (and every) circumstance.

Second, everybody who disagrees will begin to despair both because it is now impossible to be a Christian and have a divergent opinion and because once you throw all your eggs in the [church=Jesus] basket, then whatever the church wants is really the best you can hope for. Consequently, you find yourself kicked out of the church and robbed of your hope for something better.

Double-suck.

We've got to leave room in our thinking for the fact that the church can get it wrong. Only then, when we understand that Christ is the head of the church, but not limited to the actions of the churches here on earth, can we be rescued from Shiite Christianity and shallow despair.

Know him like this

For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face.
Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

1 Corinthians 13.12

When I was a kid many of my friends had pen pals. A pen pal was someone who lived in another country with whom you exchanged letters. This was usually set up by the schools in order to foster cross-cultural awareness.

These days the Internet provides a totally new kind of pen pal experience. For example, I've got 500 or so friends on Facebook that I've never ever met, and most of the people I communicate with via Twitter I'm not even sure I want to. And yet, somehow through the medium of the web, we learn about each other, often become fast friends, and even develop a certain level of (appropriate) intimacy within the confines of our digital world.

All this just goes to prove that you can get to know somebody really well without actually being with them face-to-face. This is good news, since the Ascension reminds us that Christ is absent from this world, despite also being strangely present through his Spirit. We've got the gist of him, a whiff of him, but we don't have a monopoly on his actions, his insights, or his designs.

Because of the Ascension it is now impossible for us to meet Jesus in person. That means the only way we can ever figure out who Jesus was or what Jesus was like is by reading the

story of the Scriptures. Christ wants us to know him, but he chooses not to show up at our house for dinner and have a chat. He chooses that we will know him through his life, his death, his resurrection, and his ascension. There is no other Christ to know, no new spin on Jesus that helps us better understand him, than simply engaging the story of the Scripture.

That's what's so difficult for people to understand. Because we're smart and because there are so many great books and so much new science, we think that there's got to be more to Christ than what we read about in Scripture. But there's not. Still, we shouldn't get bummed out about this, especially not when so few of us know what information there actually is about him in there. You could spend a lifetime scouring the Scriptures for a better understanding of Christ and still never run out of new insights and new revelation.

But we never quite believe this is true.

Like my friend Doug (not his real name), who believes that Christ was something less than divine. Doug has read some fascinating books that talk about how Christ ascended to divinity from humanity, and that we too can become gods in the exact same way. Doug has bought into a subtle deception—a common heresy in 200-350AD—and one that can easily be dismissed through careful study of the Scriptures. But Doug's other books are so much more enjoyable.

My friend Chris (not his real name) has a different issue, because she believes that Jesus was actually something other than divine or human. Chris thinks of Jesus as the Christ principle (or consciousness) and thinks that the energy of Jesus can course through your body and make you him. Again, this is a subtle distortion, and one easily corrected through the Scriptures, but Chris is happy to go on believing this newer, sexier version of a more politically-correct and mystically-enlightened Christ.

And of course one of the many modern fallacies involves the Gnostic gospels, like the *Gospel of Thomas*, and their supposedly superior teachings. Gurus and motivational speakers love to quote these books because it makes them seem like they've got secret knowledge the institutional church has tried to hide for centuries. But now that you're attending their seminar you too can know the truth about how power and influence are revealed.

I understand the appeal. I also understand that at the root of these false gospels is the presupposition that secret knowledge is the pathway to eternity, which is exactly the

opposite of what Jesus taught. His message was about a king and a kingdom. The Gnostic message was about esoteric truth that smarty-pants prophets deliberately withheld from the rest of the world.

Jesus said: *Come unto me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.*

Thomas' version of Christ said: *Let the seeker, seek until he finds. That which he finds, shall cause him grief. That he grieves shall puzzle him, and he who is puzzled shall rule over all.*

At the root of the infatuation with the Gnostic gospels is a white-collar hedonism that wants to be part of the select few who have all the answers and can thus justify their extravagance. They're full of nice words that make rich people feel good about their privileges. For every one metalworker or grocery clerk or football coach who can possibly make sense of the "puzzling grief that gives seekers authority," I'll show you three wealthy white westerners who wax eloquent about human destiny and freedom.

It's sad.

These days, in the present-absence of Christ Jesus on earth, there are really only three ways we can come to know him:

First, and foremost, we come to know Christ through the Scriptures. I've said a lot about this throughout this book, but it bears repeating. Christ chose to reveal himself to us through the Scriptures. He could have hung around and put himself on TV, but his proper place is at the right hand of the Father running the cosmos. For two thousand odd years we've only been able to discover who he was and who he wants us to be by understanding the Bible.

Second, we come to know Christ through his body, the church. Other Christian people demonstrate to us what it means to live the life of Christ. They show us how to love. They teach us how to understand the Story of God and the World. They comfort us when we need encouragement. They demonstrate grace and patience and courage. We learn about him from them.

Third, we come to know Christ through his Spirit which lives in us and testifies to his designs and desires. The Spirit coaches us and convicts us, leads us and calls us

up short, encourages us and interrupts us in order to show us how we are meant to live from the inside out.

In all our conversation about Christ and his Ascension, this is what I hope stands out:

He is enthroned and interceding on our behalf,
and he has given us his Spirit
to empower us
to continue his mission.

He wants us to understand
the full measure of what this means
by engaging the Father
through the Story of God and the World.

Conclusion

The first few years I lived in Michigan, I missed Vancouver badly. In some funny way it became for me a kind of longing for Heaven, for that garden-city in which God dwells and everything is good.

I kept thinking: *I'm a foreigner. I'm an immigrant. These aren't my people. They don't understand me. This isn't where I belong.* I felt it so deeply, so acutely: *This is not my home.*

But then I realized that my home is not in Vancouver either.

My true home is Heaven, and if I got my wish to go back to Vancouver and experience all of the things I used to experience, it would never satisfy the ache *behind the longing* I have for my home.

Because there is no place on earth in which I truly belong;
and yet I can belong anywhere,
and to any group of people,
when I welcome the presence of God
to shape and mold and transform me,
to incarnate me
into the landscape
into which I have been placed
by His sovereignty and kindness.

So Jackson, Michigan—the Prison City—is my home. Not because I belong here, but because I belong to God and this is where He has placed me. I get Heaven here.

The Ascension of Christ enables us to realize that we are not at home in this world. We are en route. In the meantime, this is what we've got. Our home is Heaven, but our work is in the world. We commute in prayer. We carpool in fellowship.

The Ascension was Paul's remedy for the sensuality he encountered in Asia Minor. This was when he first began to teach being *in the world* but not *of the world*. *In the world* means living here. But not being *of the world* means living here differently than everyone else.

We live here normally, but differently.
We spend, but aren't materialistic.
We make love, but we don't commodify sex.
We relate, but we don't demean or condescend.
We learn, but we don't become proud.
We work, but aren't governed by ambition.
We laugh, but we don't belittle others.

We are citizens of a far off country.

Once we've encountered Christ through the whirlwind of events after his resurrection, it's impossible not to be marked and changed by these basic facts. That's what he revealed on the Road to Emmaus, and to Mary at the Garden Tomb, and to his disciples over broiled fish. And he spent all his time readying us for his departure, so that without having him stand right here beside us, we could figure out how to carry on afterward.

So may you live with the energy of the Spirit,
sent by the Father
who conquers death and empowers love;
And may you carry on the life of Christ
here and now
in anticipation of the veil thinning out
and our final, collective, trip home.

Amen.

dr. david mcdonald
march 31, 2011 at home

 PENTECOST

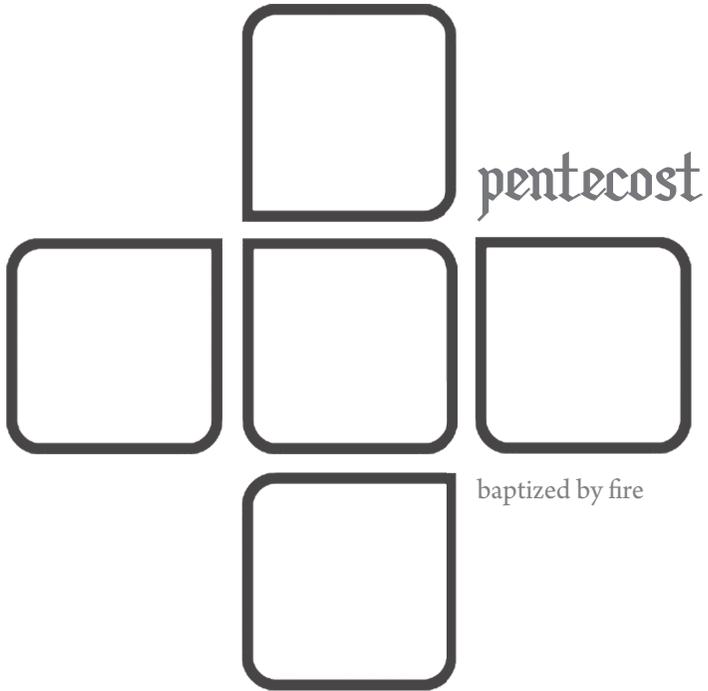
ADVENT
Christmas Tide

COMMON TIME
Epiphany
Transfiguration
Septuagesima
Sexagesima
Quinquagesima

LENT
Ash Wednesday

EASTER
Palm Sunday
Holy Week
Easter Tide
Ascension
Pentecost
Trinity

KINGDOM TIDE



Baptized by fire

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Acts 2.1-4

Pentecost was the name of an ancient Jewish feast associated with the Exodus. Fifty days after the first Passover Moses ascended Mount Sinai and received the *Torah* (the Jewish law). This occurred just as the grain was being harvested; so the Hebrew people took the first sheaf of grain, known as the “first fruits,” and offered it to God.

From the beginning Pentecost was about the law and the harvest. The law was associated with fruitfulness because of what it produced in the lives of the righteous. Yet it was also compared to fire because of its tendency to burn away unrighteousness.

After the Ascension 120 disciples gathered together for prayer on the Day of Pentecost, during which time the Holy Spirit descended upon them in a new way. Everyone would have been aware of the connection between the law and the harvest. They would have known - independent of fire and wind and tongues - that a new law and a new kind of harvest were breaking into their reality.

When Moses ascended Sinai he received the law, which he then brought down to the people. Christ also Ascended, but into heaven rather than a mountaintop, and he has sent his Spirit to replace the law of Moses.

The coming of the Spirit at Pentecost was like a new Sinai.

But Sinai wasn't the only episode from the First Testament to rhyme with Pentecost. In Genesis 11, for example, all of the world's population gathered together and attempted to build a tower leading straight to heaven. It's not that they wanted to invade heaven, so much as they want to prove their equality with God. In judgment, God dissembled their language from one common tongue to many disparate ones. As a result, the people could no longer understand each other.

In Genesis 11 God supernaturally diversified language, but in Acts 2 God supernaturally unified language. Not wholly, but representatively. Now, instead of human beings reaching up to identify with God, God has come down personally to identify with us. He has sent His Spirit to provide us a comforter, an interpreter, a guide, a healer, and a counselor.

We also see the Holy Spirit in the First Testament coming on particular people at specific times for unique tasks. For example, the Spirit filled Bezalel with skill, ability, and knowledge to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver, and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship (see Exodus 31). Likewise, the Spirit empowered cowardly Gideon – the least among all men in his tribe – to become a mighty leader and judge (see Judges 6-8). Samson, too, is a baffling tale in which an ordinary man is given superhuman strength when the Spirit comes upon him (see Judges 13-16). Isaiah proclaimed good news to the poor in the Spirit's power, and prophesied Christ's coming (see Isaiah 61, 40, 53).

The coming of the Spirit at Pentecost was also the fulfillment of an ancient promise. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel prophesied that God would one day replace the law 'written on tablets of stone' with a new law 'written on the hearts of men.'

I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

Jeremiah 31.33

The Spirit was seen as the means to experience abundant life now more than ever before. This is the fulfillment of another ancient promise, made through Joel:

I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
 your old men will dream dreams,
 your young men will see visions.

Joel 2.28

The Day of Pentecost was a special event, but not entirely unique. Both prior to and following Pentecost people were filled with the Spirit and empowered as witnesses for Christ and his kingdom. In fact, Luke describes nine different instances of people being filled with the Spirit in his writing (Luke 1.15; 1.41; 1.67; Acts 2.4; 4.8; 4.31; 9.17; 13.9; 13.52). This demonstrates that Pentecost was a continuation of God's long-term mission to heal the world. The only difference was the distribution method.

Pentecost is about the transfer of the Spirit from Christ to the disciples. During his earthly ministry Jesus was the sole-possessor of God's Spirit, but at Pentecost he re-distributed God's power to his followers. When Christ told his disciples he must leave but they should not be afraid, he was referring to the fact that he would Ascend to the Father and send the Spirit in his place. Christ told them they would be clothed with power from on high. This promise is consistent with his commissioning of the Twelve earlier, when Christ gave them authority to heal diseases, cast out demons, and exercise power (see Luke 9.1-6). They became partners with Christ colonizing the Kingdom of God on earth. Through this transfer the disciples become the heirs and successors to the ministry of Jesus. Because Christ poured out the Spirit on them, the disciples can continue God's mission to heal the world with the same resources as Christ himself.

I like how Brian McLaren, in his book *The Secret Message of Jesus*, has conceptualized this:

If you get a glimpse of soldiers in camouflage sneaking through the forest, if you notice planes from an enemy country flying high above us, if key political leaders in your country disappear or are mysteriously assassinated, then you might suspect that an invasion is coming. If bullets start flying and bomb sirens start going off, your suspicions will be fulfilled. Another nation, let's call it a kingdom, is preparing to invade and conquer your kingdom.

But what if the kingdom that is invading is a kingdom of a very different sort? What if the invasion is one of kindness and compassion rather than force or aggression? What if sick people start getting well suddenly and inexplicably? What if rumors spread of storms being calmed and insane people becoming

sane again, hungry people being fed and dead people rising alive from the grave? Couldn't this be the sign of a very different kind of invasion ... the coming of a different kind of kingdom?

This is how I've come to understand the signs and wonders of Jesus Christ. They are dramatic enactments of his message – the message of the kingdom spread in a media beyond words that combine to signify that the impossible is about to become possible, the kingdom of God with its peace, healing, sanity, empowerment and freedom is available to all here and now. Signs and wonders unbolt the mechanisms that tell us what is mathematically and practically possible and impossible. They make way for faith that is something new, unprecedented and previously impossible is now on the move. They tell us that we are being invaded by a force of hope, of group of undercover agents clouding goodness.

Being filled with the Spirit always had a prophetic dimension to it. That's not to say that everyone is supposed to be a prophet, simply that Luke makes a connection between the ministries of the First Testament prophets with that of the church.

Prophetic ministry is eschatological, concerned with how things end up; supernatural, concerned with things that cannot be seen or measured; and universal, meaning it is no longer available to only particular people at particular times for particular tasks. It is for everybody. Our job is to keep our focus on the future (eschatology), while mindful of people's hidden motivations and machinations (supernatural), telling everyone (universal) the good news of the gospel of God.

Many of us try to do this on our own, but that is always doomed to fail. We don't have sufficient strength or will to change. We need God's help to become godly. That's why God sent His Spirit. The Spirit empowers us, providing us with a pervading sense of God's presence. The Spirit works by changing the way we think. This doesn't happen overnight.

In N. T. Wright's book *Simply Christian*, he writes:

Once we glimpse this vision of the Holy Spirit coming to live within human beings, making them temples of the living God which ought to make us shiver in our shoes, we are able to grasp the point of the Spirit's work in several other ways as well. To begin with, building on the startling call to holiness that we just noticed, we see right across the early Christian writings the notion that those who follow Jesus are called to fulfill the Law.

The word used to describe the Holy Spirit in Biblical Greek is the word *paraclete*, which means advocate - one who pleads a client's case before a court. The Spirit is our supernatural Counselor. When we become Christians the Spirit of God comes to live in us. When he does, he begins to communicate with us so we learn to understand the "voice" of God. Typically that voice is understood as a sense of direction or a strong conviction that we ought to act in this way or not this way. It's not so much a question of the Spirit saying: *do this, or do that*. It's much more a recognition that our whole lives need to change in such-and-such a way. We test those feelings, those impulses, and those compulsions against wise counsel and against Scripture.

When we know his will and act accordingly, the Spirit's action in our lives produces positive results known as the Fruit of the Spirit (see Galatians 5.22-23). The Bible defines the fruit of the spirit as love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, and self-control. Because Jesus said "you will know a tree by its fruit" then we can test ourselves, based on our behaviors, to determine whether or not we're growing in godliness. We must learn to adjudicate our behavior based, striving for lives of virtue and good character in response to God's movement within us.

Most of the time God speaks to me through nudges, or promptings. They're little ideas that pop into my head about something I might say or do, a gentle push to step outside my comfort zone. I have learned to understand the prompting of the Spirit, typically, as a sense of direction or a strong conviction that I ought to act in *this* way or not *that* way.

In our backyard we have an electric fence dug into the ground for our Bernese Mountain Dog. It's attached to a device on the collar he wears, and if he ever crosses the threshold of the fence, the device vibrates on his neck. The closer the dog gets to the boundaries of the fence, the more the device begins to beep a warning. When the dog is warned, he backs away from the boundary marker because he doesn't like what happens when he crosses that line.

In many ways the conviction of the Holy Spirit is like the warning beep on that device - the Spirit speaks to us, reminding us of who we are and what we're supposed to do in this world to shadow God. If we disregard the Spirit, we inevitably end up with results we don't like. He doesn't zap us or shock us or hurt us, but the consequences of crossing God's boundary lines are always unpleasant and include things like broken relationships, broken dreams, and broken hearts.

In reality, the Spirit is working in us to change who we are completely. That usually begins with small changes that grow into larger ones. You will discover all kinds of nuances, too,

the more attentive you are to the Spirit. You will make discoveries and observations about the world that are God's unique gift to only you. Pay attention to them. They are God's gift to you and you're meant to share them as your gift to others.

Of course, the primary purpose for the Spirit's coming was to empower us to witness. The Spirit hasn't only been given so we have power to change, but was also given so we have power to change the world. We're meant to testify to those around us that God has something better in store for them than the life they're already living. And, just as the ministry of Jesus had been inaugurated in the power of the Spirit, so was the ministry of the church.

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Acts 1.8

The Spirit of God gives us both the desire and the ability to tell other people about Christ. This doesn't mean you have to force feed them your religious beliefs. On the contrary, the most compelling thing you could ever do is tell someone about your own spiritual experiences. Tell them how you felt, tell them the parts you still don't entirely understand, and be honest about how strongly you feel now. This is called witnessing – when you tell other people what God had done for you. Evangelism, on the other hand, is when you tell other people what God can do for them. The Bible tells us there are people with the gift of evangelism (see Ephesians 4; 1 Corinthians 12), but all believers are required to witness (see Matthew 28; Acts 1). So you aren't required to tell people what God can do for them, only about your personal experiences. In fact, if you don't have the gift of evangelism and you feel like you're supposed to "evangelize," you probably run the danger of coming off as confrontational. However, if we are obedient to the Second Testament text and share our story with words like – "this is what Jesus Christ has done for me," or "this is how I experience the power of the Holy Spirit," or "this is how I know God," then we can be sure of two things: first, nobody can argue with you or doubt the validity of your experiences; second, no one feels threatened or boxed in by your religious rhetoric.

In all our discussion about Pentecost we've skated around one of the most significant facets of this story. It concerns *glossolalia*, or "speaking in other tongues." Luke tells us the disciples were supernaturally gifted with the ability to communicate in languages they had never learned. Tom Wright makes a fantastic point concerning the gift of tongues in his commentary on Acts.

It is precisely part of being a genuine human being, made and renewed in God's image, that people should do that most characteristic thing, using words and language, in quite a new way. We are called to be people of God's word, and God's word can never be controlled by rationalistic schemes, or contained within the tight little frameworks that we invent to keep everything tidy and under control.

Because this issue has often been divisive within Christianity, I want to take a few moments and address its contemporary use.

WHAT EXACTLY IS SPEAKING IN TONGUES?

Speaking in tongues is a kind of prayer, one of many different forms listed in the Second Testament. Sometimes these tongues turn out to be actual human languages (see Acts 2), like a Russian who spontaneously begins to speak Chinese without ever learning it. Sometimes these tongues sound inhuman, almost like gibberish (see 1 Corinthians 13). Sometimes the person who speaks in tongues knows what they are saying and can interpret it, but not always.

This kind of prayer was, and is, powerful. It evokes the presence of Jesus, celebrates the energy of the Spirit, edifies individuals, and guides Christians concerning how they should pray.

If you think of face to face being the highest form of interpersonal conversation, and of friends who are joined at the hip, and lovers whose hearts are joined together, than I think it's entirely appropriate to conceptualize tongues as a Spirit-to-spirit connection between God and us. It's that moment when, instead of getting tripped up by words I think might be inadequate or fear that I might say something inappropriate, tongues allows me to simply open my heart to God and pour everything out before Him.

Tongues is a sign that God's Spirit has been poured out on humanity, and particularly on those who were least expected to be included in God's kingdom. Gentiles, for instance, were baptized in the Spirit before the Council of Jerusalem even officially welcomed them into the church (see Acts 10.44-48).

HOW DOES TONGUES HELP?

We are all limited by language. The average American knows about 4500 English words. Some people, of course, know considerably more. Englishmen are famous for boasting about Winston Churchill's 15000-word vocabulary, but whether you know 4500 or 45000 there's still a limitation to what you're able to articulate. We all know this. We know what it's like to be at a loss for words, to have nothing to say, or to find ourselves speechless.

It's precisely those instances for which praying in tongues is most useful.

In **worship** we often find ourselves calling out to God, extolling His many virtues. But there comes a point in which I, for one, begin to feel a bit silly. Once I've told God He's awesome about a hundred times I find myself reaching for other words. Somehow, *Lord You're the Grooviest* doesn't quite seem to convey what I truly feel. Tongues is a very useful tool for expressing my feelings to God in these moments.

Other scenarios for which I find tongues useful include those times when I'm afraid, or stressed out, or feeling confused, or even apathetic. In moments when I **don't know what to say** or what's wrong, I pray in tongues. I pray in tongues everyday, usually in my jeep or sometimes while walking up and down the halls at work. I'm careful to do this privately because of Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 14, but also out of respect for others whose experience with God differs from my own.

Finally, I often employ tongues when I'm **praying on behalf of someone else**. Sometimes I'm driven to pray for someone whom I know barely at all. Sometimes I pray a long time for people who need healing. Sometimes I pray for someone I know very well but that God brings into my mind for no readily identifiable reason. Rather than guessing what they might need prayer for, or even repeating my desires over and over again to God, I pray in tongues. That way, I can pray for a long time and experience a sense of God's presence and awareness concerning both the people in question and my own heart in submission to Him.

WHAT ABOUT PAUL'S TEACHING ON TONGUES? DOESN'T HE LIMIT THAT GIFT?

Paul is very clear about the silliness of excessive tongues in church services (see 1 Corinthians 14). He makes it very clear that a bunch of people all speaking in tongues in a public meeting will be of little benefit to one another unless there's someone to interpret (vs. 27). However, Paul also makes it clear that tongues shouldn't be prohibited (vs. 39), since he himself speaks in tongues more than all his peers (vs. 18) and strongly desires everyone to exercise and utilize this gift as well (vs. 5).

HOW DO WE RECEIVE THE GIFT OF TONGUES?

Tongues isn't for everybody. Those who are gifted with the ability to pray in other tongues shouldn't feel special, or more holy, or more privileged than other Christians. However, I have noticed that certain people greatly desire the gift of tongues. They have an inborn sense that tongues is *for them*, as if it's the perfect tool for their spirituality.

If that's you, here's how I suggest you pray to receive the gift of tongues.

First, *ask God to give it to you*. Tell Him why you want to pray in tongues, and spend time each day asking for God to fill you with His Spirit in this new way.

Second, *get around other people who pray in tongues and ask them to pray for you*. This might be a little scary at first, and they might even give you strange-sounding advice, but that's okay. Keep your focus on Christ while they pray for you and continue asking God for the gift.

Finally, take opportunities during worship services to *begin verbally thanking and praising God* in your own words, rather than just the words from the music. In my experience this is often where people first begin to pray in tongues, almost as an afterthought. They get so caught up in the presence of God that they forget their desire for the gift. That's entirely appropriate. Remember that the gift is meant to help us know God.

God is the point, not tongues; so keep your focus on Him, not on it.

One last thing...

Luke uses exciting imagery to describe this supernatural encounter - gale force winds, moaning noises, flickering dashes of flame - but we shouldn't get too caught up in the details. His point isn't pyrotechnics, but spiritual transformation. They're not the event, just the effect. The real event is the coming of the Spirit in this new way. The wind and the fire are unpredictable, wild forces; but based on other accounts in Scripture we know that God equally appears in serene, gentle manifestations as well (see 1 Kings 19 for the story of God coming in a whisper, not a whirlwind).

I do find one of these details of some consequence, however, and that is the nature of tongues of flame. The image that Luke has in mind is something like fiery teardrops placed over the head of every person present. The purpose for the image is to show that one single fire has sparked many different flames. The flames rest on individuals, but they all come from the same place.

It occurs to me that many different denominations, tribes, and church cultures have different views on the Day of Pentecost. Some give it greater weight than others, some provisionally ignore it, and some elevate its importance to that of the cross. Some emulate

it as precisely as possible in their worship gatherings, and some disregard it altogether for fear of excess, while still others try and continue ministry in that same spirit without worrying too much about all the particulars.

These differing practices are like the tongues of fire falling in the upper room. Provided no one quenches the Spirit (see 1 Thessalonians 5.19), or fails to test the Spirit (see 1 John 4.1), or refuses to control themselves while experiencing the Spirit (see 1 Corinthians 14), we're best to understand that our differences of opinion and theology concerning the precise nature and practice of Pentecost should be considered second or third-tier Christianity.

I pray in tongues. You may not. So what?

You pray in tongues and find it to be the single most important part of your prayer life. My friend John does not. So what?

Be humble and gentle, patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Ephesians 4.2-5

God is at work. He is filling up the empty space inside of us and transforming us into faithful emissaries and dignitaries of His kingdom and His mission to heal the world. We need the Spirit to equip us and guide us and change us so we can better cooperate with the Father.

We must always be asking the Spirit for insights as to the behaviors, judgments, and postures that cause us to eclipse Christ instead of shadow him. When we do clear away the stuff, however, we uncover our "new humanity," as Paul calls it. That new humanity speaks to the very heart of this issue of spiritual transformation, because, as the saying goes, once out with the old, back in with the new.

That's the purpose of Pentecost: power to change, and power to change the world.

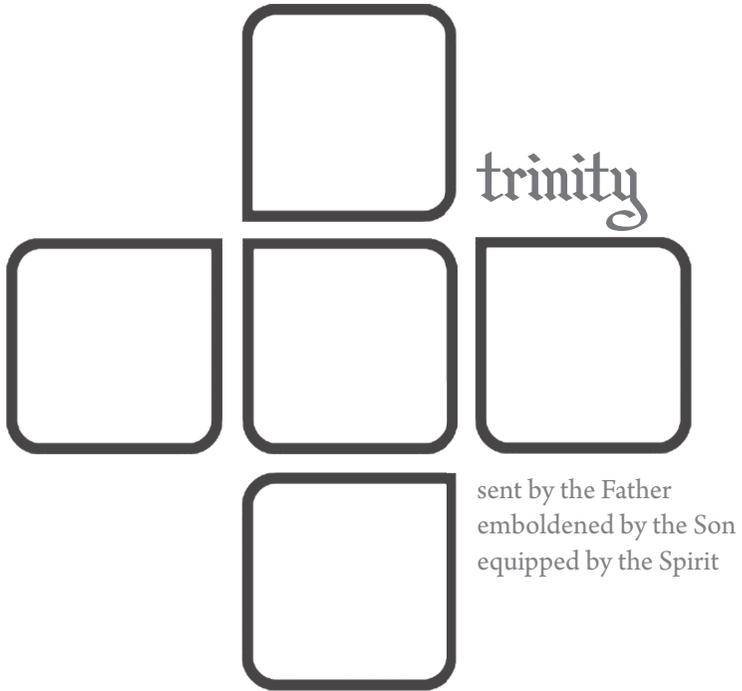
ADVENT
Christmas Tide

COMMON TIME
Epiphany
Transfiguration
Septuagesima
Sexagesima
Quinquagesima

LENT
Ash Wednesday

EASTER
Palm Sunday
Holy Week
Easter Tide
Ascension
Pentecost
Trinity

KINGDOM TIDE



Trinity

I used to run my own music studio, tutoring professionally in both electric guitar and drums. One of the most common complaints my students had was my requirement that they learn to read music. “Why?” they used to ask. “I just want to play and feel it. Reading it off a page feels stupid and lifeless.”

They’re right. Reading sheet music is boring. It’s stuffy. There is very little room to feel your way through the rhythm and the exchange of melody and harmony, percussion and pause. The best musical experiences are those we create inside and release through our instruments like we’re playing our soul.

The problem is that every musician is inherently limited to what they know already, what they’ve experienced and discovered for themselves. That is to say, they are limited until they learn to read music. Once you can read music, you can learn from the greatest musicians—not just of our age, but of every age. Guitarists can learn from classical composers and percussionists can adapt Chopin. It’s magic.

Sheet music is the transcription of the composer’s soul. By studying it, you expand your musical universe that much faster. And as you do, a very curious discovery occurs: You realize that all your “original” ideas are not, in fact, terribly original. There is nothing new under the sun. Someone has already discovered the technique and the inversion that you thought you created for the first time. They may not have used it in the same way, but they knew what you know before you knew it.

The good news is that they also experimented with it in ways you have not yet considered, and adapted it for purposes you have not yet imagined. So once you begin studying their experiments and adaptations, you learn faster and more comprehensively than you ever would have learned on your own.

When you finally exhaust what everyone else knows and have mastered it for yourself, you get two wonderful opportunities: first, you can actually innovate and create something truly new; second, your enjoyment will have increased tremendously from what it was before.

You're further along and having more fun in less time because you studied someone else's notes.

That's just like theology.

Theologians are often accused of over-complicating faith. But faith is complex, and the dangers of oversimplification include suffering, confusion, fear, and alienation. But like musicians studying sheet music, when we study Christian theology we can figure out more quickly how things truly work with God. Ignorance presents significant risks, but diligence offers even greater rewards. Because of this, I'd like us to put on our big boy pants and get some theological education concerning the central metaphysical mystery of the Christian faith - the Trinity.

THE TRINITARIAN CREED

*We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity;
Neither confounding the Persons;
nor dividing the Essence.*

*For there is one Person of the Father;
another of the Son;
and another of the Holy Ghost.*

*But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one;
the Glory equal,
the Majesty coeternal.*

*Such as the Father is; such is the Son; and such is the Holy Ghost.
The Father uncreated; the Son uncreated; and the Holy Ghost uncreated.
The Father unlimited; the Son unlimited; and the Holy Ghost unlimited.*



The Father eternal; the Son eternal; and the Holy Ghost eternal.

*And yet they are not three eternals;
but one eternal.*

*As also there are not three uncreated; nor three infinities,
but one uncreated; and one infinite.*

*So likewise the Father is Almighty;
the Son Almighty;
and the Holy Ghost Almighty.*

*And yet they are not three Almighty;
but one Almighty.*

*So the Father is God;
the Son is God;
and the Holy Ghost is God.*

*And yet they are not three Gods;
but one God.*

*So likewise the Father is Lord;
the Son Lord;
and the Holy Ghost Lord.*

*And yet not three Lords;
but one Lord.*

*For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity;
to acknowledge every Person by himself to be God and Lord;
So are we forbidden by the Catholic Religion;
to say, There are three Gods, or three Lords.*

*The Father is made of none;
neither created,
nor begotten.*

*The Son is of the Father alone;
not made, nor created;
but begotten.*

*The Holy Ghost is of the Father and of the Son;
neither made, nor created, nor begotten;
but proceeding.*

*So there is one Father, not three Fathers;
one Son, not three Sons;
one Holy Ghost, not three Holy Ghosts.*

*And in this Trinity none is before, or after another;
none is greater, or less than another.*

But the whole three Persons are coeternal, and coequal.

So that in all things, as aforesaid; the Unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in Unity, is to be worshipped. He therefore that will be saved, let him thus think of the Trinity.

Excerpt from the Athanasian Creed, 5th Century AD, central doctrine of the Trinitarian Nature of God

God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit comprise what theologians refer to as the Holy Trinity.

Our God is one substance, but three persons.

The Father's will
mandates the Son's mission
requiring the Spirit's guidance.

The Son does the will of the Father.
The Spirit bears witness to the Son.

Yet, there is no hierarchy with God,
he is three-in-one.

There are several places in which we find evidence of the Trinity in both the First and Second Testaments. We refer to these instances as *Trinitarian Formulae*, meaning that these passages help us understand the triune nature of God, and it is upon these passages (in conjunction with the narratives of both the Gospel and Acts) our belief in the Trinity rests.

For example,

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the **Father**, and of the **Son**, and of the **Holy Spirit**.
Matthew 28.19

The grace of the Lord **Jesus Christ**, the love of **God**, and the fellowship of the **Holy Spirit** be with you all.
2 Corinthians 13.14



In the beginning **God** created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the **Spirit of God** was hovering over the waters. And God **said (Word)**, “Let there be light,” and there was light.

Genesis 1.1-3

We also see God referring to Himself in the first person plural in Genesis 1.26 when He says, “Let us make man in our image.” Clearly, the concept of God’s Oneness and Plurality is already present in the first chapter of our Bible.

Another important Trinitarian Formula shows up in Isaiah 63, where we read about God sending his Savior (the pre-existent Christ, who comes as the Angel of the Lord) to rescue His people, yet those people reject God the Holy Spirit and this grieves God the Father.

He said, “Surely they are my people,
sons who will not be false to me”;
and so he became their **Savior**.

In all their distress he too was distressed,
and the angel of his presence saved them.
In his love and mercy he redeemed them;
he lifted them up and carried them
all the days of old.

Yet they rebelled
and grieved his **Holy Spirit**.
So he turned and became their enemy
and he himself fought against them.

ISAIAH 63.8-10

Do you ever wonder how theology begins? Did you ever wonder how thoughts about God began, or what the first thoughts were about God? Did you ever think about how we actually arrived at some of these doctrines?

Once upon a time people knew about God in a vague sort of way. They understood he was there and what he was like. Then came somebody who claimed to be God – a man walking around making claims that he was, in fact, the God they had always known. He was not the sort of man you could really just dismiss as a lunatic. He made people believe in him – so the government and the religious

establishment had him killed. His followers, though, met him again after they had seen him killed. Then they formed into a little community and somehow found “God” inside of them as well ... directing them, making them able to do things they could not do before. When they tried to intellectually grasp how this had happened, they arrived at the Christian definition of the three-person God.

C.S. Lewis, 20th Century British novelist and theologian

The New Testament itself affirms that there is only one God. Yet the early Christians were faced with two events that revolutionized their understanding of him. First, Jesus came and made claims to be God, and then he was crucified and resurrected from death. Since resurrections are uncommon, people take notice of them. Concordantly, people knew there was something special about Jesus. He had to be God.

The second event with which the early Christians had to reconcile their monotheism was the arrival of the Holy Spirit. After Jesus shot up into heaven at the Ascension, he sent “another comforter.” Believers began to experience the power of this comforter. He guided them. He gifted them. He gave them an awareness of his presence. Taken together, the church referred to this experience as the “indwelling of the Holy Spirit.” They understood that God was no longer out there somewhere, but alive and at work inside each of them. They began to experience the supernatural (divine healing, miracles, wisdom, and knowledge) in ways they knew were manifestations of the God’s divine power, but were also entirely new. No one had ever experienced what they were experiencing. They encountered God’s wisdom, God’s promises, and God’s intervention in a completely new way. And yet they understood that everything that happened was absolutely, definitively, from Yahweh.

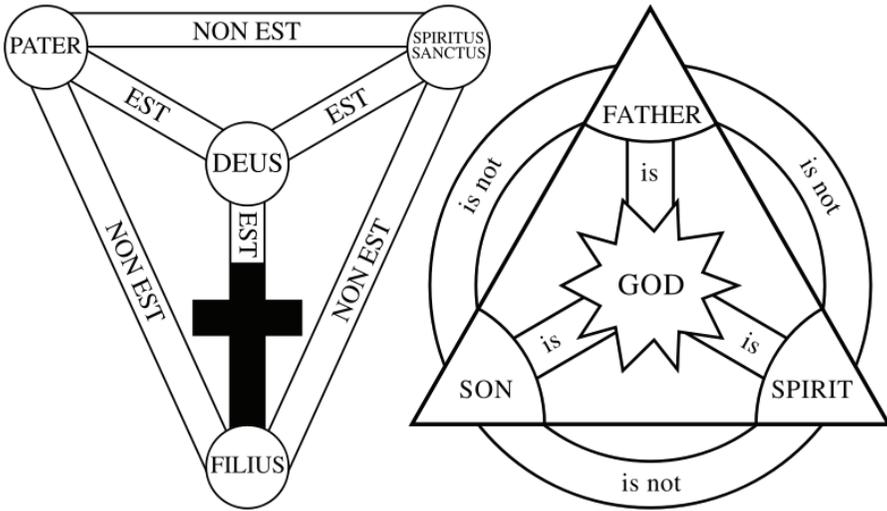
So they developed the Athanasian creed, our sheet music on the Trinity, as a way to make sense of all that has happened.

Interestingly the word “trinity” is never used in the Bible, yet we might liken it to words like duplicity or duality – words we’re familiar with. It would have been a familiar word to people in that day, but applied in this new way. It’s derived from the Greek word *trias*, first used by Theophilus (A.D. 168-183), and from the Latin *trinitas*, first used by Tertullian (A.D. 220), both of whom adapted it to explain the character and nature of God.

There is an important distinction between who God is and what God does as the Trinity. For example, the Son and the Father are equal in their substance but function differently; likewise with the Spirit. They are all God, but they are not all the same. The Father is not



the Son or the Spirit, but He is God. The Son is neither Father nor Spirit, yet he is God. The Spirit is neither Father nor Son, yet he is God. They are all God, but they are not all the same.



Many theologically-minded scientists have suggested that the universe is a good way to understand the Trinitarian nature of God. Our universe is made up of three components - space, time, and matter. Space is trinitarian with its length, breadth, and height. Time is also trinitarian with its future, past, and present. And matter consists of energy, motion, and phenomenon. The universe could not exist without space or time or matter; nor could they exist without their dimensionalities (length, future, motion, etc).

But if that's too confusing a metaphor, you could just follow in the steps of Saint Patrick who compared God to a shamrock - one little green plant with three green leaves.

But whether or not your preferences are horticultural or astrophysical, the point remains: the Trinity is a difficult, yet crucial, concept for Christians to grasp.

THE TRINITY: WHY DOES IT MATTER?

I imagine you would swoon if you heard me speak lovingly to my wife, telling her how beautiful her black hair is, commenting on the raven magnificence of her opal curls.

And such a reaction would be appropriate. Far too few married men give their wife compliments. Far too few of us take the time to let our wives know that they're still attractive, still sexy, and still the object of our fantasies. Affirmation is the fertilizer of enduring love.

But there's just one problem. Carmel doesn't have black hair. It's currently dyed light brown, though she's a natural blond. She's even had a little pink in her hair once. But it's never, ever been black.

Instead of appreciating my compliments, Carmel would either be irritated or dismissive. She would think "he doesn't really know me." And she would be correct.

When we speak about God, and especially when we speak to God, it's worth giving some energy to making sure we're talking about the right deity. Our God is Three-in-One and though there are a lot of other details we might choose to emphasize about our Creator, that one is absolutely central.

Knowing and experiencing God's Trinitarian nature reminds us that the whole Story of God and this world is a story of relationships.

God, a being in relationship with Himself, creates us for union and communion with Him.

Through our rebellion, that relationship was lost –
and our relationship with others,
and with Creation,
and with our True Selves
as image-bearers of God –
and the rest of the biblical narrative is about God trying to get us off the
sidelines and back into the game.

God wants us to live in community with each other and with Him, so we can experience the complexity of life's joys, pleasures, and surprises.

In his oft-recommended screen-writing book *Story*, Robert McKee instructs his writers that the central truth of characterization concerns the choices we make in the presence of others. A boy may not stand up to a bully unless the girl he likes is watching. His relationship with her defines his activity in the world.

God, too, makes choices based on His relationship with us. He made the choice to create, redeem, select His holy people, to become incarnate, the choice to suffer, the choice to interrupt human misery with the miraculous, the choice to re-define His holy people, the choice to heal the world through those people - His church - and he makes the choice to one day return and set every wrong thing to rights.



The word I'm emphasizing is, of course, choice. God could have done anything. He could have fixed the world through force, or blown the world up and started over completely. But He chose not to. God chose to do things this way. And by virtue of those choices, we have come to know Him better.

We emulate God's Trinitarian nature by being in community and relationship with others. Robert McKee had it correct: We are defined by the choices we make in the presence of others.

THE TRINITY: A COUPLE OF PROBLEMS

We typically run into three hiccups when we consider the Trinity: limitations, misunderstandings, and heresies. I want to tackle some common instances of each in this section, before moving onto the final - and most important section - concerning how to make sense of this in real life.

Because we are human beings, and not gods ourselves, we always run into the problem of being created beings trying to understand our Creator. He has no limits, whereas we have many. Because of this, our language is often insufficient to accurately describe God. Our intellects are often insufficient to comprehend God. And our dimensionality, which is to say the way we were made, is often too limited to grasp the true nature of God.

C.S. Lewis described the inherent limitations of our humanity in terms of geometry. He compared animals to one-dimensional shapes, like lines, but people to two-dimensional shapes like squares. No matter how the animals try, they will never be able to fully comprehend people. They are not sentient, whereas people are. Much like the line is incapable of grasping the true nature of the square (because the square has corners), the animal will never understand the true nature of people.

So, too, we will never understand the true nature of God. Lewis describes God as being a three-dimensional object like a cube. Far from just being more multi-faceted than a square, a cube is actually six squares existing on an entirely new plane of reality. No matter what, a square cannot really grasp a cube, nor a person, God.

Another of the common hiccups we face when trying to understand the Trinity has to do with a rather confusing line in the Athanasian Creed. The line refers to Christ as one "begotten, but not made" and the Spirit "not begotten, but proceeding." People have wrestled with this language since it was first written down, wondering if it means that somehow Christ and the Spirit are not wholly divine. I will do my best to clarify what is meant by using two metaphors.

First, consider the nature of things that “beget,” which is to say things that give birth to other things. Human beings, for example, beget other human beings, whereas beavers and unicorns and rhinos all give birth to other beavers and unicorns and rhinos. And so on. When one thing begets another, that which is begotten is of the same substance. A human cannot beget a duck, nor a unicorn a dragon. But just because something is begotten doesn’t mean it’s worth less.

Christ was begotten, not made, which means he came from the Father but was not the Father’s creation. A creation is different than a birth. A potter creates pottery. Pottery is something less than human. It is not the same stuff.

Christ was made of the same stuff as the Father, begotten but not made.

Likewise, the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, but is not made either. Think of the sun—it has three indivisible parts. It is a flaming ball of *gas* that gives off *heat* and *light*. You could never think of a cold sun, or a dark one - not without venturing into the realm of science fiction. Likewise you can’t think of the Father and the Son without also thinking of the Spirit who proceeds from them like heat and light from the sun. They cannot be separated. They are one, even though they are three.

Not surprisingly, this confusing language has led to several heresies (or unorthodox beliefs) as people tried to more fully understand what it means. Two of the most significant heresies which still exist in various forms today are Arianism and Sabellianism.

Arianism essentially reduces Christ to a sort of “junior deity.” It treats Jesus as a prototypical human who had attained special revelation and enlightenment, and it is often becomes a soft polytheism. It splits the one into three completely separate people so they become like a water polo team in the celestial realm.

Sabellianism, on the other hand, reduces the Trinity to three modes of expressing the same person. According to this school of thought, the Father, Son, and Spirit are no more than symbolic names for God, although they are the same person. In fact, I used to tell people that the easiest way to understand the Trinity was to think about myself: I’m Dave McDonald – the son of Gordon, the father of Jacob and Anna, and husband to Carmel. This, however is heretical, so I tend to avoid this explanation even though it remains the easiest way to help people understand the threeness and oneness of God.

If all of this seems confusing and arbitrary, be at ease. We are stuck in the rift between understanding our native dimension and the higher ones. We are finite beings reaching



for an infinite God. That's not to say we should give up and never think about this stuff. Only to provide some small measure of comfort as we do. There will always be an element of mystery when speaking of God. His true nature is beyond us.

THE TRINITY: HOW DO I LIVE DIFFERENTLY BECAUSE OF IT?

One of the greatest theologians of the Church, Augustine of Hippo, wrote fifteen volumes on the Trinity around 400 A.D., synthesizing and adding the finishing touches to the most profound and exacting statements ever made on the subject. Yet Augustine never claimed that he had plumbed the depths of the doctrine. He never made a claim that he finally and fully "got it." In fact, he claimed quite the opposite, saying, "If you can understand it, it is not God."

Upon hearing this, typically after struggling for some brief time with the concept of the Trinity, many will ask, "So why are we talking about it?"

And my response is that we shouldn't actually spend too much time talking. It's far better to live and experience God than to conceptualize Him with words.

So how do we experience God in His Trinitarian nature?

A friend of mine, a therapist, once remarked that in order to truly change something about yourself you need three things: a point of reference, a role model, and a facilitator. She understood that the point of reference was therapeutic technique, and that the role model might be a good father or coach or something, while she fulfilled the role of the facilitator. But it struck me then how trinitarian this formula was, and how neatly it corresponds to God's work in our lives.

Our ultimate point of reference is the Father. He tells us where we came from, and He tells us where He wants us to go. Christ is our role model, demonstrating for us a perfect human life. The Spirit facilitates our Christianity, teaching us in each moment how to respond and how to move forward. The Three work in concert as One, and we experience them altogether as God.

If you think of the Father as someone out there in front of you and the Son as someone standing at your side helping you to pray, trying to turn you into another son (sort of into his image), then you have to think of the Spirit as something inside you or maybe behind you.

C. S. Lewis

Think of it like this: When we pray, we're trying to get in touch with God. But we also know that the thing inside driving us to pray is also God - the Spirit inside of us. And yet we also understand that anything we actually know about God in the first place has come through the person and work of Jesus Christ - God made flesh - and so we feel the presence of Christ beside us while we pray, helping us and praying for us himself.

Make sense? Every time we pray, we're praying to God. He's our goal. But He's also our motivation. And He's also the means by which we get there.

God is the bridge to God.

And once we cooperate with God, and experience God, in order to know God, we learn that God doesn't just want us to sit around and pray but to continue His divine mission to heal the world. The Father sent the Son to do the same. The Father and the Son sent the Spirit at Pentecost to equip us to follow suit. Father, Son, and Spirit have now sent the church to continue saving, redeeming, and restoring creation.

Sent by the Father,
emboldened by the Son,
equipped by the Spirit.

When you live out your Christian spirituality, you must make every effort to remember your "sent-ness," boldly living out your missional imperative because of the confidence you have that God has given you everything you need to win.

CONCLUSION

In Derek Webster's book *The Abbot and the Dwarf* there's a great story about Sarmatas, learned scholar and master teacher. He comes seeking the titular characters to ask for their advice about the limits of his spiritual understanding.

Sarmatas narrates:

A while ago I met in the streets of Alexandria an old woman who earned enough money to live by taking in washing. I helped to carry her load and as we walked I asked this question: *Do you believe in that Trinity which is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit?* She answered in a whisper, with head bowed and eyes seeking the lowliest part of the road:



*Holy Master, I have no letters and am without understanding of that dread Truth.
My life is this:*

*I wash the shirt of a potter
 who brings form and beauty to shapeless clay.
I lave the silken tunic of an architect
 who plans great buildings on fine goatskin.
I clean the birth clothes of a midwife
 who awakens the Creator's living gift.*

Thus I saw that God the Father was ever born as she cherished her part in creation. She went on:

*I give alms to the sick beggar who lies at the city's gate.
I sit through each night caring for my friend as life ebbs from her.
I seek to bring reconciliation to my neighbors
 that enemies may be friends again.*

Thus I saw that Christ the Son was ever born in she who was an instrument in His redemptive task. She went on:

*My endeavor is to bring to those who are put within my way:
A dagger to sever the strap that binds their freedom;
An axe to break the yoke that crushes their joy;
A dart to pierce the helm that hides peace from them.*

Thus I saw that the Holy Spirit was ever born as she went her loving way doing His work. It was in this way that I perceived she who demurred from knowledge of that Blessed Trinity yet lived her whole life within its compass.

The washer woman in this story understands the true nature of the Trinity. She hasn't yet crossed all her theological T's and dotted all her doctrinal I's, but the story makes it clear she figures it out eventually. The point is that she knew where she came from, how she was supposed to live, and she went ahead and did it.

That's what I want for myself, and for you, and that's what we can expect the more we attend to our experiences with God. Assisted by doctrine and theology - the sheet music of shadowing God - we grow in faith and in godliness every day.

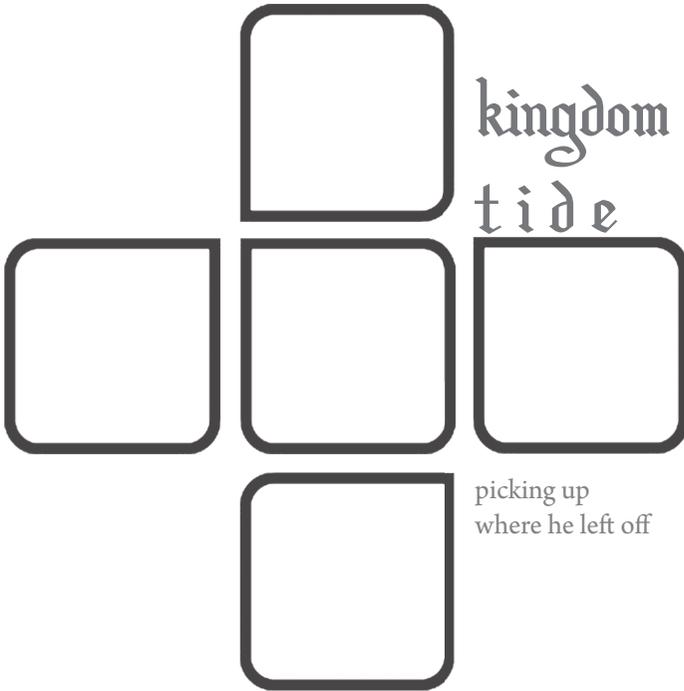
ADVENT
Christmas Tide

COMMON TIME
Epiphany
Transfiguration
Septuagesima
Sexagesima
Quinquagesima

LENT
Ash Wednesday

EASTER
Palm Sunday
Holy Week
Easter Tide
Ascension
Pentecost
Trinity

KINGDOM TIDE



Introduction

Fact: King Arthur was actually more French than English. Much of his legend has actually been borrowed from the annals of Charlemagne, King of the Franks and Emperor of the Romans during the 8th and 9th centuries.

Charlemagne (which means “Charles the Great”) was a great military hero and, though how devoted he was to Christ is debatable, he made it his mission to protect Christian spirituality from Muslim persecution.

Chief among his tactics was the creation of a Special Forces group, a band of holy brothers sworn to protect the innocent and defend the faith. Contrary to many other medieval Christian groups, this assembly was intended to be a shield rather than a sword. In other words, they didn’t exist to beat up God’s enemies, but to protect the gospel and God’s children.

These were called the Paladins, or the 12 Peers, led by Count Roland and his inspirational second-in-command Olivier de Vienne, who was the “finest knight for a thousand years.”

After securing his position over the Empire and bringing relative safety and good governance to Western Europe, Charlemagne sent his Paladins to rescue persecuted Christians and recover lost Christian relics. One such exploit that I’d like to focus on was the recovery of the Balm of Fierabras.

Fierabras was the Prince of Spain who (as legend has it) was a mean-spirited giant, standing at fifteen-feet tall, and a devout follower of Islam. He and his father the King of Spain, Balan, led an army into Rome searching for two barrels containing the balm used to anoint the corpse of Jesus Christ. This balm was said to have the power to immediately cure the sickness and wounds of whoever used it. Well, Fierabras and Balan found the Balm, and on their way back home Fierabras looted and burned the city.

When Count Roland learned of this, he sent Olivier de Vienne, the best of the Paladins, to recover the Balm and to rescue those Christians whom Fierabras had imprisoned. A terrible battle ensued in which Fierabras kept using the Balm to heal himself. Even though Olivier was the superior swordsman, he could not overcome Fierabras. Olivier finally realized he had a choice to make: give up and let the Spaniards keep their prisoners and the Balm, or deal Fierabras a mortal wound that the Balm could not heal, which would compromise his Paldian vows and Christian integrity. But Olivier refused to make such a choice, and continued to fight until Fierabras had used up all of the Balm. Once he could no longer heal himself, Fierabras was finally overcome. Fierabras begged for death, but Olivier gave him something else instead.

The gospel.

And Fierabras was converted to Christianity. When he later became King of Spain, he used his influence to spread the good news himself, living also as one of the Paladin.

I'm telling you this ancient story for a reason. The story follows a pattern, one that we will follow throughout this book.

In the first episode of this story,
Charlemagne gathers his Paladin.

In the second,
he sends his Paladin into the world to save it.

In the third,
the Paladin, represented by Olivier de Vienne, face incredible
opposition, in the form of Fierabras of Spain.

Finally,
the Paladin are triumphant – and, in this case, that triumph takes the
form of conversion and transformation.



More simply, there was:

A gathering
A sending
An opposition
A triumph

The book of Acts follows this pattern: Christ's church is first gathered, then sent across the world, exposing them to immense conflict (both natural and supernatural), after which they experience victory (either in this life, or in the life to come).

This pattern still holds for us today.

You have been gathered into Christ's church, and he has sent you into the world to bless and heal and save it. But as you obediently perform God's mission, you will face tremendous persecution – political, social, spiritual, relational – and you must hold fast to God's promise that He will vindicate you and lead you out of even the darkest places.

And so Kingdomtide (that second season of Ordinary Time, the first being Common Time) is the story of the Church after Pentecost. It concerns the formation of God's holy people, His Paladin, as they cooperate with His Spirit to continue the mission of Jesus.

How the liturgical season of Kingdomtide is celebrated varies based on denomination and tradition, but for our purposes I have chosen to consider Kingdomtide to be the time between Trinity and Advent. There are approximately 18 weeks in Kingdomtide, so I have arranged this book into 18 weekly readings so you, dear reader, may consider the fate and future of the church one week at a time.

We will examine what it means to be gathered, sent, oppressed, and triumphant—exploring:

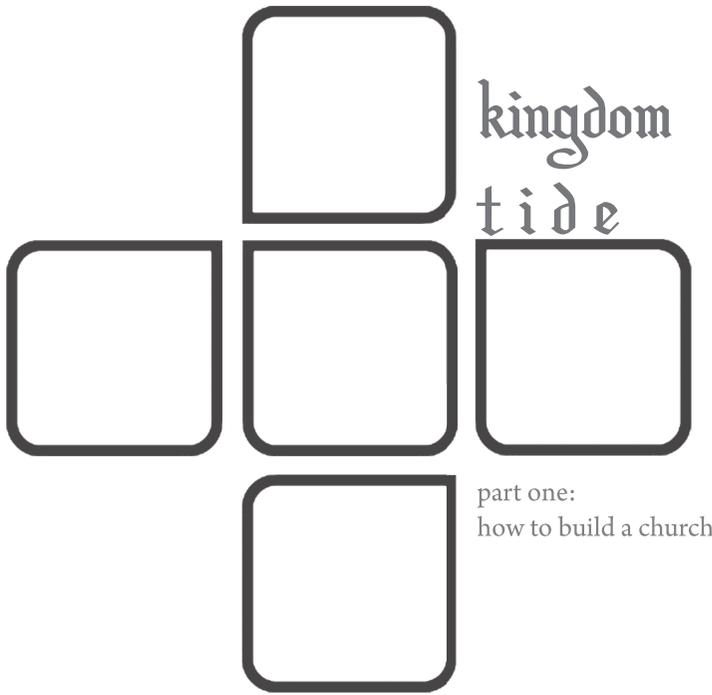
How to build a Church
How to lead a Mission
How to fight Evil
How to Win

God has chosen to heal the world through His church. We pick up where Christ left off, continuing his Incarnation by cooperating with his Spirit. Many people have tried to

abandon the church over the years, claiming it's too full of hypocrisy or bureaucracy to resemble at all the intent of Christ. But no matter who you are or where you're from, if you read the Bible you can come to no other conclusion than this:

The church is God's Plan A, there is no Plan B.

It's His plan for mission,
His plan for salvation,
and His plan for you
to be the sword in the darkness
and the shield defending the world in His name.





Building the church...

In this section I want to answer some of the foundational questions concerning the church, namely:

What is it?

What does it involve?

How does it work?

Who gets to come?

Despite the fact that there is a certain amount of latitude in how we choose to answer these questions, my work here will be both biblically orthodox and awesome. Pay attention – failing to understand who we are and why we gather will likely result in about five decades of boredom, complaint, and general uselessness. You could skip this section if you want to become the sort of person everyone hates to travel with and who spends their holidays alone. Or you could read it to see how you can help God jump start goodness and kick evil in the nards.

What is “church?”

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

1 Corinthians 12.12-14

After Jesus took the sky-train to Heaven, his closest friends and followers were left wondering *what next?* Christ’s last instructions (both in Matthew 28 and in Luke 1) were pretty much the same: *Keep doing what I’ve been doing. Go make disciples. Preach. Tell everybody things can be better than they are.*

So off they went. But a curious thing happened. The more people they told the good news to, the more people came to them for advice, direction, help, empowerment, and hope.

A few years ago, Westwinds (the church in which I serve as Teaching Pastor) blew up. It wasn’t an act of international terrorism, but a considerable failure in leadership resulting in a massive breach of trust among our people. It took us a long time to rebuild that trust – a lot of heartache, prayer, and unwanted (though I guess not unexpected) poverty. But piece by piece, brick by brick, person by person we put our church back together again. We focused on the things that matter: the people, the Lord, the gospel, the world.

But on the far side of that Extreme Church Makeover, we found that people increasingly wanted Westwinds to be more and more church-like. They needed a place for friendship, resources, storytelling, and – yes, still – for spiritual triage. They needed their leaders to make decisions about key theological, governmental, and structural issues within the church.

One of the central questions on everyone’s mind after the ascension concerned what would come next. Now that Christ had been resurrected and returned to his Father, and now that the Spirit had descended in power upon the church, what were they supposed to do and how were they meant to go on doing it?

As we mentioned earlier (and spent some time developing in *Eastertide: from resurrection to ascension*), the role of the church is to continue the mission of Jesus. The church is meant to be an agency of healing, working to reconcile us to God, to other people, to our true selves, and to the world.

In short, the church is *for* something. It’s not just a place where people can come and hang out – like a Christian Starbucks, complete with weak jazz and some over-priced Testaments – but a relief agency actively proclaiming the good news that life doesn’t have to suck, that you don’t have to suffer, and that God wants everyone to experience life the way He originally designed it.

The church fulfills the mission of God to heal the world. Church is not a what, but a who. It’s not a building or an institution, but a new kind of ethnicity. We are the people of God, called His heirs by virtue of our divine adoption. God has named and claimed us, incorporating us into the miracle of His new creation. And He calls us His body, His hands and feet, working as His ambassadors, stewards, and emissaries.

One of the most common battles I’ve fought in my short life is about the viability of the church. All kinds of people think church is stupid.

Atheists, of course, but they don’t count for much. (Some day either we’ll be proven wrong or they will, but the scenario in which they’re right really isn’t so bad. The reverse, however, sort of blows for them.)

People of other religions, especially those who’ve been historically persecuted by Christians, think church is stupid too. Tough to argue with those guys. Best

to just keep your head down and spend your life proving that not all of Jesus' followers hide hand-grenades in their Bibles.

The really bad ones are Christians who think church is stupid. These guys – maybe because they're so much holier, cooler, or smarter than the rest of us – think that the church isn't worth investing in. Usually they blather on about how the church today is way different from the church in the Second Testament (though they can't usually point to any specific differences except that the wieners on Church TV wear make up and sing songs from the Michael Bolton B-sides). They talk about how God doesn't need us to sign up for any man-made institution (though, again, they seem to conveniently leave out the bits of Scripture that tell them they're being dumb).

I used to give this last group the benefit of the doubt. I was patient and kind. Not any more. Having spent all that time trying to see things from their point of view has only convinced me about what brand of wrong they are. They're the kind of wrong that doesn't want to go somewhere they're not in charge – where they don't pick what to sing or what to read or what to preach or what to do or who to do it with. They don't go where it'll cost them something – maybe time and cash, probably convenience and comfort.

A couple of years ago a group of dissenters came to our church. It was kind of a weird group, actually. They were nice people, but they hated church – our church in particular. Some of them grew up in our church and had “outgrown it”. Some of them were profs at a local Christian university and “too smart” for church. Some were missionary kids and too holy for church.

But, strangely, they never stopped coming.

In fact, they used to meet in our lobby during the worship service to have their “we're not going to church anymore” Bible study.

Weird.

My elders were furious. The Dissenters were well known to us, and I was under a lot of pressure to put an end to their little gathering. Honestly, I was annoyed too. It felt like someone coming to your house for lunch, but then ignoring you and only talking to the other invited guests. And when the time comes to clean up the dishes, they quietly hand you the dirty plates with a patronizing smirk.

But I decided I didn't want to go with the heavy-handed approach. Instead, I went out one Sunday before church with my friend (and our youth pastor, Ben) and bought coffee and juice, pastries and several large fruit trays. Ben and I displayed everything nicely in the office space where we have our weekly staff meetings. And then I waited for the right moment.

The Dissenters arrived and camped out in their usual spot. When I asked them to come with me, you'd have thought I was Schwarzkopf drafting them to serve in Baghdad. Very, very reluctantly they followed me back to the office where I sat them down and told them I loved them, I understood they had some struggles with church, and if there was anything I could do to serve them I would.

An awkward 45 minutes later, the food and drink were gone and we all parted as friends. They never came back. Which, actually, makes me sad. Like I said, these were good people, but they'd gone screwy concerning the church. They were still laboring under the delusion that church was for them.

But it wasn't. Church is plural, a collection of people shadowing God. It's not about you; it's about everyone but you. Church is an incomplete expression of the Kingdom of God. As such, when we think about the church we must always have a vision larger than that of our local assemblies. We're not competing against one another. We're combating a culture of fragmentation, consumerism, and despair. And yet there are so many flaws within our churches that we feel disappointed. We know the church is our best shot for experiencing the Kingdom of God now, but the gap between our hopes and our reality causes us tremendous despair. It almost breaks us in two. We know how it should be, but it's not that way.

British author Neil Gaiman wrote a series of short stories, later adapted into comics, concerning the Pub at the End of the World where heroes and extraordinary creatures from all over the realms of men and gods gathered to rest, tell stories, find companionship, and gather their strength for the next great push forward into the future. The church is like that Pub at the End of the World. It's our headquarters, a Third Place for religious reflection, training, friendship, and healing. If you want to do something useful with the Pub, you've got to mobilize the people who go there frequently. You've got to get them involved, connected, and recruiting others.

This is why we make a big deal about getting our people to give, serve, and invite. They've got to give of themselves, their time, and their money. They've got to serve one another,

serve the church, and serve the Lord. They've got to invite others to church, invite the Spirit to change them, and invite others to participate in the mission of Jesus.

Your job as a lover and follower of Jesus Christ is to continue his mission to heal the world. You don't have to do that alone. There's a bunch of us. Your role with us is highly customizable, but these three constants really don't change.

No matter who you are, if you want to have your life count for something Jesus-y, you've got to give. Nothing is free. He didn't climb onto the cross because it felt awesome. He wasn't punished for your sins because the tennis courts were full. Following Jesus requires sacrifice — *whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me* (Matthew 10.38). Give it all, or get lost.

The Christian life is about serving God, and serving others, before serving yourself. *The Son of Man didn't come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many* (Mark 10.45). If that's what he did, where do we get off thinking our preferences and tastes and ambitions are what drives Christian community?

The kingdom is, first, relational. It's about who we are before God, and about who we are to each other. Don't sit around whimpering about your wants and needs when there's a hundred thousand people within an hour's drive who are broken, hurting, needy and already stuck in a living Hell. Invite somebody into the abundant life Jesus promised. Invite somebody out of the suck. Invite them into something good. Invite them to cooperate with God to heal the world, to get a taste of Heaven on earth, to experience the kingdom. *Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full* (Luke 14.23).

This week, take some time to confess
your lack of understanding about why Church matters
your indifference
your allegiance to your preferences
your lethargy.



Come before God with a humble heart and repent
for pride
for sin or indiscretion
for failure to acknowledge God's plan to heal the world
for not cooperating with the Spirit in that healing.

And then turn around and tell everyone you see the good news
that God has something better in store for them
that life doesn't have to be like this
that no matter who they are,
or where they're from,
or what they know
there is place for them in the church.

What does church involve?

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Acts 2.42-47

Despite there being a good many church activities *described* in the Bible there really aren't that many church activities *prescribed* in the Bible. We have to do the things the Bible tells us we have to do; but all the other stuff – the stuff that the Bible simply records that the earliest Christians did – we can either do or not do, just like them or completely different. Those things that are commanded are required (such as loving others, putting aside quarrels, submitting to authority, etc); but those things that are recorded are simply good models (such as what songs to sing, how frequently we're meant to assemble, the locations of our gatherings, etc).

Acts 2.42-47 tells us the earliest Christians listened to the apostles' teachings, spent time together as friends, shared meals, and prayed a lot. Those are good things to do. It also tells us they sold all their property and evenly distributed their wealth. It's a bit kumbaya,

really—it’s admirable, even exemplary, but it’s not mandated for us to follow. In fact, as we’ll discuss later on in section three, part of what they did was disobedient to Christ. He told them to “go into all the world,” but they instead hunkered down in Jerusalem to create an early form of Christian communism. So Luke, in writing Acts, was *describing* early church community, not *prescribing* it for all time.

There is tremendous value for us in studying the life of the early church in Acts. But we are not dogmatically bound to behave in precisely the same way, following precisely the same forms, as they did. We get to make it up as we go along, deciding which things the church should or should not do to continue Christ’s mission of healing the world.

The form our churches take ought to be culturally contextualized; which is to say they will always be changing in order to stay in step with the culture. And the better job we do of translating the gospel, the more we’ll find “outsiders” coming alongside to join us. They will see the good we do, and be compelled to cooperate with their Creator, recognizing viscerally – if not intellectually – that all goodness springs from Him.

I’ll admit this is tough for many of us. As I’ve alluded to already, we’ve got to avoid getting hung up on church stuff – worship, programs, polity, procedures, traditions, forms, governmental structure, etc. There are a million ways to skin a church-cat, but we seem intent on fighting over all of them when, in fact, none of them are, strictly speaking, biblical. Almost every single expression of contemporary church life is based on a scriptural precedent (meaning someone, somewhere, in the Bible did it) and not a scriptural mandate (meaning everyone, everywhere, must do it).

For example, people who love worship often think that everything rises and falls on experiencing the presence of God. People who like to pray often think that everything rises and falls on bringing our petitions before the Father. People who love good preaching think that everything rises and falls on exceptional teaching. They’re all right, but they’re all wrong too. Experiencing the presence of God matters, so do prayer and preaching, but they’re not *all* that matter.

So, before we go any further, allow me to supply you with some pastoral advice about how to overlook the stuff you hate at church (or “How not to be a wiener”).

HOW TO OVERLOOK THE STUFF YOU HATE AT CHURCH

These are some things I've done over the years to cope, even when my opinion and their practices both fall within the acceptable range of Christian history and tradition:

Pray for God to speak to you. If you focus on Him instead of on the church service, or the preaching, or a decision made by the church leaders, then you rightly place your expectations for happiness on God instead of on God's human, fallible agents. People can never be expected to do everything you want, the way you want it. When you look to others to satisfy your desires you'll always, inevitably, be unfulfilled. Focus on God instead.

Ask God to show you who needs love, friendship, help, and prayer. If you can stop wishing things were different in your church, and instead think of yourself as one of the pastors (see Revelation 5.10) charged with comforting and healing people, then you can get beyond your personal issues and be of some use.

Read the Bible intently. Sometimes this is the only way to get over a really bad sermon, or a really awful musical performance, or a really tedious meeting. When you find yourself rolling your eyes and checking your watch, making noises from *The Cat in the Hat*, then you know it's time to crack open your doily-embroidered ESV, or close *Angry Birds* and open *YouVersion*, to begin a little solo study.

Take notes. Turns out, even the worst preachers in the world can say something worth hearing. And, if your problem isn't with the teaching, taking notes is a really good way for you to hear from God. Begin by asking God, "What do You want me to hear right now?" Then start writing.

If all else fails, repeat the Jesus Prayer over and over: *Lord Jesus, son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner*. It is a way to remind yourself that you're far from perfect, that you need to repent of your hang ups concerning church stuff, and that your attention needs to be re-directed back to the cross.

GETTING BACK TO MISSION

Church ministry is about reconciling the world as it is with the world as it was and will be again.

Over the years at Westwinds we've done a ton of stuff to heal the world. We give each of our departments a decent budget every quarter and tell them to sow that money into

the community, fulfilling our quotient for a triple-bottom line. We tell them they need to bless the community, make back the money in the process (so they can do even more ministry), and get some kind of media-partnership so the story gets told outside of our own church.

For example, Jvo (my co-pastor) recently hosted a folk-music festival called FolkGalore. He brought together twenty different folk performers and held concerts over the course of 5 days at a dozen locations. Westwinds paid for this music festival, but then sold tickets to make our money back. We then donated the profits to the Jackson United Way as a means of breathing life into our community. The tagline for the event brought together our local history, our shared dreams for the city, and the gospel.

FolkGalore: story, music, redemption.

At some point, we realized we were doing so much stuff out in the community with so many people we didn't even know – and not just the people we were serving, but the people who were serving along with us – that we had zero confidence that the people who were executing the mission actually knew what the mission was or who it came from.

Non-believers, caught up in the energy of do-good-ism were showing up at our events to help wash cars, change oil, renovate bathrooms, walk the streets in a vigil, support local artists, and we woke up to the fact that the people working with us needed to hear the gospel. We had a whole new mission field, which – ironically – was layered on top of the existing one.

So we established 4 easy guidelines to help us re-connect everything we did back to its proper source.

First, everyone needs to know why we're doing what we're doing.

They need to know, based on the story of the Scriptures that God is working to heal the world.

This is why the Father sent the Son. This is why the Father and the Son sent the Spirit. This is why Father, Son, and Spirit send the church – to heal the world – and this is why Westwinds is sending you to bless others, to help others, and to provide whatever manner of health and healing you can as a representative of God.

Second, everyone needs to invite the Spirit to change them as they do it.

We're not just bringing healing to others. We are being healed and saved and restored in the process of cooperating with God.

The more we get aligned with Him, the more His Spirit changes us. And that process of transformation – from ramshackle people into people living the abundant life that God promises – happens more quickly when we're aware of it, and when we make efforts to submit to it, than if we just let it run in the background like one of the system processes on an old DOS computer.

Third, the church needs to be included as part of the story.

When the inevitable ranters and ravers amp up their religious-angst and talk about how all Christians are hypocrites we want our community to be able to shut those clowns down.

My friend Casey, another pastor, actually had to talk one of his people out of beating up their neighbor because of this. Casey had been instrumental in this guy's alcoholic recovery and when his neighbor began to shoot his mouth off about the church, the recovering alcoholic said: if you say one more bad word about my pastor I'll kill you.

We don't want violence in defense of the church; but we do want there to be so much evidence in support of the church's efforts to heal that no one dares breathe a word of criticism or complaint for fear of the onslaught of offense and indignation.

That's precisely what will happen when people start realizing that they've got jobs (and better jobs) because of their church, that they've got clothes because of their church, that they've got heat and light and utilities because of their church, that they're safe and protected and loved and empowered because of their church.

Thing is, most of us are shy about involving the church in the conversation – but we need to get over this because our bad press is killing us and – make no mistake – in the eyes of the world the church and the cross are linked.

When people say they love Christ but not his church they are either deceived about the true nature of Jesus or the true identity of his church. When their deception is revealed, and they find out Christ actually loves his church, their churchy-revulsion will deter them from Christ. This is a PR war we can't afford to lose.

Finally, in context of everything we do we have got to elevate, celebrate, sing out, dance, and name-drop Jesus.

He not only has to be mentioned, he's got to be center-stage.

When people in the community see you doing good deeds they have got to connect it to the mission of Jesus and not some ideology.

I'm not out there to be nice, I'm out there to help the world work and run and live the way it should, pleurably and honorably. And I'm not doing this because I'm an idealist, I'm doing this because I'm in love with Jesus.

He made this a good place to live, we messed it up, and for my part I'm doing all I can to fix it before he gets back from his celestial vacation.

For us, living in 21st century post-modern United States, we've got to learn to focus on the mission and the gospel without getting hung up on church stuff. Once we do that, we're likely to run into a host of new problems concerning the massive influx of people being challenged and changed by the Spirit of God. Hopefully these final few points will give you some guidance in that regard when the time comes and you're forced to pose that question once again: what does the church involve?

This week, take some time to confess

your tendency to major on the minors

your willingness to be distracted away from the mission

your own judgments

your reluctance to believe that healing the world is possible

your preference for absolutizing traditions and habits



Come before God with a humble heart and repent
for any condescension
for any superiority
for any failure to submit to authority
for any negativity or sourness toward others
for any rebellion or resentment toward your church

And then turn around and tell everyone you see the good news
that God is changing lives and saving souls
that regardless of what
or who
or when
or where
or how it looks
the Spirit is working in His church
to accomplish His purposes.



How does church work?

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.

Acts 4.32

I used to coach sports camps for a Christian organization called Athletes in Action. I was one of their Camp Directors, often leading a team of over a dozen coaches who oversaw hundreds of kids. The coaches were all varsity athletes from colleges and universities across Canada, the USA, and Europe. Many had played for their respective national teams. None of them were wimps. They knew what it was like to struggle and to overcome challenges in order to win.

But none of us were prepared for Hell Camp.

There was a church in Vancouver's inner city that had successfully brought in hundreds of kids for summer programs, activities, and discipleship classes. The church asked us to put on a week-long multi-sport camp for them so the kids could get a chance to experience structured play and meet some world-class athletes that might serve as healthy role models. We were all excited, until about the third hour of the first day.

I sent three kids home, stopped two fights in the restroom, pulled a switchblade off a 9-year-old boy, chased a violent teen through freeway traffic before tackling him and wrestling him back to the gym so he couldn't assault *another* pedestrian, and allowed

two of my staff to quit. I was ready to never coach again. It was only through sheer determination and strength of will that I was able to get control of the camp, instituting something like martial law in which I threatened every kid there with harsher and harsher penalties unless they behaved.

Things improved, kind of, but by Wednesday I'd lost two more coaches (one was hospitalized and the other spent the next two days visiting his therapist). I was at my wits' end. I called the director of the summer program at the church and told him we needed reinforcements. He came personally the next day.

And everything changed.

He walked into the gym and all Hell broke loose as every single kid screamed his name and ran over to him, hugging him and giving him high-5's. He took the time to touch every kid there. Then he got them all lined up in perfectly straight rows and listening attentively to the instructions I then passed on.

He stayed for the rest of the day and we experienced zero difficulties, emergencies, or problems. But in his absence the following day we were back to the same old scenario. Fortunately, it was the last day of the camp and we made the decision to end at noon instead of going until 5pm like every other day. We made it out by the skin of our teeth, but I was on a mission to discover the strange power this director had over the kids. So, as soon as they all left, I walked over to his office.

"How did you do that?" I asked, though I confess I may have used slightly more colorful language. He laughed and clapped me on the back, and then gave me the simplest answer:

"Love, David. If they know you love them, they'll do anything you ask."

That's true for adults, for church people, for children, for students and athletes, for politicians, and even sometimes our enemies.

The earliest days of Christ's church were marked by incredible love and generosity toward both insiders and outsiders. By all accounts, Jesus' first followers took his teaching to heart, that men would know "you are my disciples by your love for one another."

When we take time to ask How does church work?, the answer must invariably be through love.

Christian ministry is built on relationship. Whenever you're placed in some position of influence, remember these words: people will only volunteer to help you or accept anything you have to say if you have taken the time to build a good relationship with them.

You can't actually make anyone do anything. That's a fact. But we try. We labor under a couple of false delusions, especially when asking others for help either in context of church ministry, friendship, or with a personal project.

We think people will be willing to help us because they believe in the mission of the church. But, even if they do, how they understand their role in the kingdom may be different than what we're trying to convince them to do at any given time. Good luck trying to get a vocalist to clean toilets, FYI.

Or, we think people will be willing to help because we asked nicely and because our need is dire. Wrong again, Honcho. Just because you're pleasantly desperate doesn't mean anybody is showing up to help you move on a summer Friday afternoon.

And sometimes we think people will listen to us because we're right, or because we're in a good space with God and genuinely want to help them in their spiritual journey. Good luck with that.

People won't listen to you for any of those reasons because anything worth telling somebody is probably hard. And hard things are easy to ignore.

People will listen to you when they know you love them and therefore you can be trusted. This is what I call relational authority.

This isn't just a lesson for pastors.

All of us have some role to play within our churches. We all have influence somewhere, with someone. In some capacity, we are all called upon to be leaders of something.

That doesn't mean that everyone is going to be Lee Iacocca or Steve Jobs, or even that they should be, but it is likely that at some point in your life you're going to want to do something for your church, or through your church for the world, and you'll need help with it.

And, if you're like everyone else, you'll try and get that help by guilt-tripping others, by quoting Scripture, by begging, by manipulating, by calling out in desperation, by holding your family and your friends hostage until you get the help you need.

And people will resent you for it.

And, even if they help you this one time, they will never help you again.

Furthermore, by dominating the people around you like this you lose your credibility in other areas.

So, once you've bullied people into helping you with the church fund-raiser, or the picnic, or the prayer-rally, or the political demonstration, or the bulletin, or the youth project, you can now no longer operate in their lives as a confessor, or a comforter, or a guide because all of those roles (and many others) require a vulnerability that you have demolished by your heavy-handedness.

Decide in advance to like people and pray for God to fill you with love for everyone you meet. Treat everyone like your best friend – just assume they like you and ask them about their lives. Let them tell you about what matters to them. And if they ask you about yourself, tell them openly and honestly without defending or justifying your opinions, without backpedaling or whitewashing anything. And if they don't run away screaming, that's a pretty good indicator you're beginning something good.

Overlook offenses. Do the hard work of getting along. Initiate conversation. Don't try too hard. Ask questions. Foster interest. Have no agenda. Never ask for anything, but offer everything you own to the people around you. Don't hold on to stuff. Share what you've got—healthy relationships start when you're the one who helps, not the one who always has their hand out.

In churches one of the main relationships that people choose to foster is an accountability partner. A lot of people say they want accountability. What they mean is that they want someone else to remind them of the way they're supposed to be living, and call them up short when they fail as well as encouraging them to do better. But, in real life, accountability is a funny thing.

Because no one can keep you accountable.

Often, by asking someone to be our accountability partner, what we're really doing is giving ourselves permission to slack off. We abdicate our own role as people who listen to God and endeavor always to live the way He intended. We outsource our conscience; and then, if perhaps they don't see us bending the rules a little, we have a little breathing room to continue our guilt-free living.

Three things must be said about this:

First, there is no need to do this. Because of the grace of God our shortcomings in Christian character are made up for by Christ. He knows you're going to fail, but died on the cross for you anyway – in fact, precisely because of this fact.

Second, the reason we try and live holy lives is not to avoid breaking the rules but because of the gratitude we feel toward our Savior and the promise that life will be better if we can live the way He designed life to work.

And finally, if you really want to be held accountable don't just have one accountability partner – make everyone your accountability partner. Be open and honest with all your friends, with your spouse, and – whenever appropriate – with your children. If you have secrets that you cannot share with any of these people, or sins with which you struggle so fervently and simply must confess and get help, I humbly suggest you see a professional counselor. Because, it's true, there are things that have tremendous power to wound your life and hurt you; but if such things are present it is best to either be open with all those who are close to you about them, or to seek professional-level help with the hope of overcoming these things for good.

But please don't short-change yourself by having a buddy to talk to about too many beers while golfing. Talk to all your buddies about that, and the next time you golf and they start to sneer around beer number 4 put it away and stop acting like a turd.

This week, take some time and confess
your need for relationships
your relational shortcomings,
including those things that keep others distant
your own hurts and wounds from past relationships that soured
your own feelings of foolishness and embarrassment
about making friends
your need to be in control.

Come before God with a humble heart and repent
for any manipulative actions you've taken
including any guilt-trips, sad stories, or bribery (in all forms
and guises)
for anything sinful you may have said or done
while feeling frustrated with others

And then turn around and tell everyone you see the good news
that every vocation can be enjoyable,
that ministry can be deeply fulfilling,
often communicating to us the very reason God has placed us
here on the earth



Who gets to come to church?

If the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and inquirers or unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if an unbeliever or an inquirer comes in while everyone is prophesying, they are convicted of sin and are brought under judgment by all, as the secrets of their hearts are laid bare.

1 Corinthians 14.23-25

When I was a kid I always wanted my friends to come to Sunday morning church. I thought that they would surely fall on their knees and give their whole lives to Christ once they entered the building and sensed the presence of God.

But my non-believing friends usually came to church extremely wary. They found it weird that we all sang – like bad karaoke with a live band – and that the singing went on and on. Then usually there was a bunch of stuff announced, some of which was invariably about money, setting off every alarm bell about religion and wealth, preachers and scandals. To top it off, somebody got up to talk for 30-45 minutes about the ethnic myths of an ancient civilization. And then we went out for lunch.

If we expect the Spirit of God to get through to non-believers at church, we might put some time in preparation on two fronts: first, in ensuring that the service could be understood by someone with absolutely no knowledge of any of our customs, idiosyncrasies, jargon, or rituals; and second, by covering the entire experience in prayer knowing that God has

a lot of stuff to sort through in the mind of this person. Most people are very unlikely to have a transformational spiritual encounter while they're waiting for the vestal virgins to come marching out of the broom closet leading a goat, know what I mean?

We're not big fans of the term "seeker-sensitive" at the Winds. To be seeker-sensitive sounds like you're afraid to say something that might offend a non-believer. But the gospel is offensive, and the thought of somehow compromising the gospel in order not to offend a visitor seems cowardly.

And yet, I've seen so many people's lives changed for the better simply because they came to church and could understand the gospel. I always want that to happen.

That's why we're mandated to always translate the gospel – in every service, in every encounter, with every opportunity – from the language of 1st century Palestinian Judaism into the language of 21st century post-modern American pop.

Once people hear the gospel in a way that makes sense to them, despite the offense, they recognize it has power to help them live differently. And most people want exactly that. They're aware that wealth and pretty smiles only get you so far, and they jump at the chance to be re-made into the image of their Creator.

The gospel captures them. And though it might initially sound like we're niggling, we refer to this gospel-translation as being "seeker-engaging." Church ought to be hard at the center, but soft at the edges.

Church is for everybody, not just Christians. I think you can belong before you ever have to behave or whether or not you believe. In fact, I'd wager that about 1/3 of our people at the Winds are either not Christians at all (just dipping their toe in the Jesus-water) or have recently become Christians. My prayer is that all of those people find God in a meaningful, personal way, and that another 1/3 of our church fills up with new people, either curious or burned-out, ready to once again flirt with faith.

Of course, once you welcome everyone into your church you're going to have a tricky time getting everyone to immediately behave the way you want them to.

My friend Doug, a pastor in northern California, has a great story about a woman who gave her life to Jesus and was profoundly impacted by him. During a testimony service one night, she grabbed the open mic and gave the following testimony (verbatim):

You ask me if I love God? Before I found Jesus I didn't have no food for my babies. Now I got food left over.

You ask me if I love God? Before I found Jesus I didn't have no money for rent, and my car wouldn't start. Now I got it. My car is good.

You ask me if I love God? Before I found Jesus I was lonely and scared. Not no more.

You ask me if I love God?

Shiiiiit.

And then she sat down. Doug, laughing, told me about all the angry emails and phone calls he had to field because of that woman's profanity. But he also said that once he reminded the complainers that this woman had a real encounter with Jesus and that the gospel had been proven to her in real life (she just didn't know how to tell it nicely yet), everybody cooled their jets and was able to celebrate the goodness of God.

The thing we often fail to understand about who gets to come to church is that it's not about how you come, but about how you leave. If you leave unchanged, unaffected, unchallenged, uncaring, satisfied with who you are and what you're doing, you're a failure.

But if you come hungry and humble, and leave with a yearning for things to be different, then you're a success.

And while I might wish in secret, unsanctified moments that certain people wouldn't come to church – especially religious people, people who want to fight about theology, worship dancers (the ones whose arms flow like the waves on an Always box), the power-hungry, the close-talkers, the urinal peekers, the perpetually poor and happy-to-mooch – the fact is I don't get to choose.

Because it's not my party. I'm a guest. And since I'm a guest I've got to do what every good guest does to keep from embarrassing his wife, offending his friends, or making a fool out of himself. I've got to shut up about what I don't like or would do differently.

Here's the deal. Everyone gets to come. Even the people I don't like. Because I don't get to decide who's part of the kingdom. And every time I start feeling otherwise, it's like the Spirit taps me on the shoulder and says:

Hey, monkey-nuts, if you want to start a church for perfect people go ahead. Only you won't be allowed in. This church is the real deal. It's made up of used-car people who need a tune up and a fill up so they can go a little further and a little longer. Get over your sense of entitlement and discover the sport of plurality. Give up trying to control everything and learn to bear witness to what I'm already doing. Join in, if you can stop moping and complaining long enough to enjoy it. And don't get territorial. You're not supposed to stick around here forever anyway. Go play outside.

Signed,

H.S.

So, in answer to the question of who church is for, it's for everyone. It's for the sinner and the sanctified, the pretty lass and the kid with the bowl-cut. It's for mechanics and bankers and hookers and spinners. It's for spinsters and servers and bikers and writers, dumb folks and amputees. It's for smarty-pants-es and war vets, comedians and Canadians and cashiers and clerics.

It's for those who philander with faith, but are afraid to jump all the way in just yet. It's for those who're burned out and angry, suspicious and wounded, bitter and hurt.

It's for the thinkers and the thoughtful, the fight-pickers and the educators. It's for the out-of-the-boxers and the artists, the ex-hippies and those who love change just for the sake of change.

It's for the curious, the disenfranchised, the intellectual, and the creative. It's for the people who want to go deeper in their faith and for people who think they ought to know more than they actually do.

It's for me.

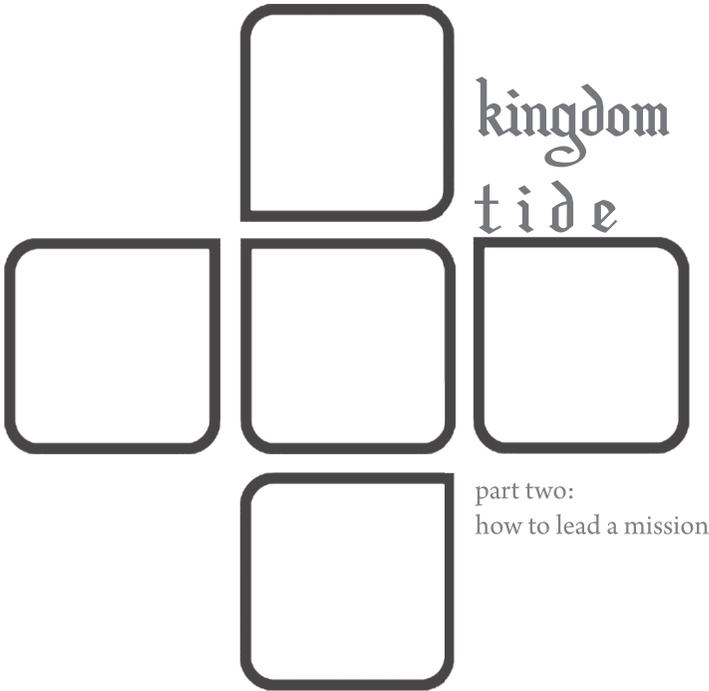
And it's for you.



This week, take some time to confess
your fears about letting newcomers or nonbelievers
into the church,
your fears about the church being controlled by religious-types,
your anxiety over how the church is run,
over who has the power, and over whether or not there's
something to be wary of in the congregation,
your uncertainty about who gets to come to church.

Come before God with a humble heart and repent
for any feelings of entitlement
for any territorialism
for any hostility toward newbies
for any indignation regarding displacement
for any judgments upon those less holy than yourself
for any kind of religious spirit.

And then turn around and tell everyone you see the good news
that all are welcome
that God ennoble even the lowliest people
that God humbles the proud
that God has given us grace
extending to us privileges that we did not earn
and do not deserve
but fearfully and wonderfully enjoy.



Leading the mission...

In this section I want to focus our attention on those issues arising from our being sent into the world, namely:

Mission

Service

Hospitality

Story

Context

Power

Too many people fail to understand what we're doing and how and why, and as a result they fritter their lives away in pointless pursuit of goofy ideals like trying to make Christianity cool or starting the next Christian t-shirt company, talent agency, or all-ages discotheque. But that is spiritual lip synching – moving our Christian mouths but having the world's words come pouring out like an anointed Milli Vanilli. It's time for us to learn the words and tune for ourselves, bringing gospel back to the charts with renewed vigor and soul.

Mission

I am the living bread which came down from Heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.

John 6.51

King Abgar Ouchama V of Edessa was one of the first Christian kings in history. But his conversion story is weird. Many Eastern Orthodox believers consider some version of the story to be gospel truth. Many of the details have been historically verified and all persons involved were actually alive and gave testimony to the events. But I'm not yet ready to nominate this one for the solid gold integrity award. For now, let's continue to call it a fanciful Christian legend, useful in illustrating a point.

Abgar lived and ruled in Syria during the public ministry of Jesus. He had heard of Christ's miraculous powers and his claims to divinity, and was quickly convinced of both despite being separated from Jesus by several hundred miles. Abgar got mysteriously ill about the time that Christ's persecution by the Jewish religious leaders was heating up and getting violent, so the king wrote to the King of Kings and offered him political asylum in exchange for a prayer of healing.

Abgar had his court archivist, Hannan, visited Christ and delivered the message in person. Jesus declined, but when Hannan returned to Edessa he carried with him a portrait of Jesus that he claimed was not made by human hands. According to Doctrine of Addai (4th

century AD) this portrait was crafted by God Himself, and when the archivist placed it in front of King Abgar, it spoke these words:

Happy are those who believe in me, but have not seen me... When I have ascended to my Father I will send you one of My disciples. He will heal all your sufferings and your city will be forever blessed because of your faith.

Some time passed before anything else happened, and Abgar's condition continued to worsen. After the ascension of Christ Thomas the Apostle sent Thaddeus (one of the 70 followers of Christ, from Luke 10) to Abgar. Abgar was promised in a vision that salvation was coming, and when Thaddeus entered into the royal court Abgar fell on his knees and cried out, "Are you really one of the disciples of Christ?" To which Thomas replied, "All your desires will be fulfilled if you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

"I have come to believe," Abgar said, and was healed instantly.

After this, Thaddeus worked his way through Edessa putting his hands on people, blessing and healing them in the name of Christ. Pagan temples and brothels alike were closed or put out of business. And although no one was forced to convert, many thousands accepted Christ that day and each day after.

It's a cool story, and very old which, if nothing else, demonstrates that the purpose of the church is to go out and actually make a difference in the lives of real people. We have been called and commissioned to heal the sick, to cure disease, to fight the power of evil, and to bring the good news of the gospel into every corner of the world.

Somehow our contemporary church has overlooked all of that.

Maybe it's because we find the supernatural bits of the Bible difficult to rationalize.

Or, maybe it's because telling others about the gospel seems somehow colonial, intolerant, or pushy.

Or maybe it's because we have no real control over the outcomes of the kind of encounters and that kind of risk is uncomfortable we have gotten away from the fact that the gospel works in two directions – Heaven later on, but also Heaven-on-earth now.

In this life,
not just the next.

Abgar didn't call out to Christ to gain entrance into Heaven. He called out to Christ because he was sick and miserable and wanted life to be better and to live well.

We need to reacquaint ourselves with the gospel priority of telling others about Jesus Christ and what he can do for them
and through them
and in them
and with them.

I understand why we're reluctant to promise healing, a better life, or better circumstances. We don't want to pander to people's base desires for material comforts or sell the lie of easy living. Neither do we want to mislead them into thinking that everything will be better once they become Christians. But to leave out the promise of the gospel to make a difference in real life – to fix our relationships, to empower us to overcome adversity, to bolster us to withstand temptation and persecution and trial and misery, to heal our bodies and restore our flagging spirits – is to leave out the good news.

The church is an agency of healing, working to reconcile us to God, to others, to our true selves, and to the world. Healing the world is comprised of three key facets:

- Charity – our service to the world,
which is called *diakonia* in the Second Testament.
- Hospitality – our community in (but not of) the world,
called *koinonia*.
- Storytelling – our proclamation to the world,
called *kerygma*.

I want to unpack each of these in the next few chapters to help us better understand how we demonstrate the kingdom to others, how we invite them to join in kingdom with us, and how we remind people that they were made for something better than this so-called life.



This week, take some time to confess
your reluctance to share the gospel
your insecurities about how people will respond
your fears about whether or not you'll tell it well.

Come before God with a humble heart and repent
for narrowing the scope of the gospel
to something purely about life after death
for narrowing the scope of the gospel
to something purely about the quality of earthly life.

And then turn around and tell everyone you see the good news
that God isn't just trying to give you metaphysical fire insurance,
but abundant life in the here and now,
that God isn't looking to punish you, but to reward you
with something better than what you've been able to provide
for yourself,
that God's plans aren't just limited to a few special people,
but include the redemption of the world,
every culture, tribe, nation, language, city, country,
and ethnicity,
that God's plans are not merely His,
but ours, too, as we participate with Him
in healing the world.

Service

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Isaiah 62.1-2

I was pretty embarrassed the first time I learned about all the social justice stuff in the Bible. I'd always heard that it was contrived – that Jesus had compassion on poor people, sure, but he never did anything about it other than heal and pray for them. What difference did it make that you were poor when you were blind? In the Pentecostal understanding of the Bible, Jesus fixed the latter so they could fix the former themselves.

There's something to be said for that, but there's an equal amount we could say concerning *whatever you do to the least of these*.

My first real foray into the collision of the gospel and the indigent happened through a ministry called Nightshift. We brought premade sandwiches down to the rough part of town, giving prostitutes bologna in Jesus' name. I was initially suspicious, but eventually I was won over because of the passion and conviction demonstrated by a group of young

moms at our church. All week long they looked forward to handing out those sandwiches, and I could see the incredible work God's Spirit was doing inside of them when, every week, they returned with a new story to share about some new conversation illuminating some new aspect of grace.

Now that kind of ministry is par for the course at the Winds, and whether you call it kingdom living, or community service, or Christian activism it best represents the spirit of the church in Acts. Scripture tells us the early Christians came together and held all things in common (Acts 2.42), an expression that means more than just buddying up and sitting around the Christian campfire. They looked after each other. They were bonded in love, and that love spilled out in tangible ways for others. What they had, they shared, including a mutual concern with turning the world upside down (see Acts 17.6)

Like Rodney Copperpot, star of Dreamworks Animation's *Robots*, the early Christians lived by the mantra *see a need, fill a need*.

Recently we partnered with a local auto shop to give single mothers free oil changes and carwashes on Mother's Day. We've partnered with the elementary school next door to supply backpacks and school supplies for underprivileged children. Right now we're cooperating with one of the local school districts to supply their students with free Bibles.

And, like I mentioned previously, there are always four things we want people to do whenever they partner with us in this kind of world-healing activity:

understand why they're doing it from the Scriptures,
invite the Spirit to change them as they do,
include the church as part of the story,
and elevate Christ.

Scripture
Spirit
Church
Christ

These four imperatives underscore the fact that mission and activism are different. The reason we do this stuff isn't just because we want to be nice. It's because we believe that the world is not the way it should be and that we bear some of the responsibility for setting it

straight. We believe that, by demonstrating the love of God in tangible, real-life ways, we can introduce people to Jesus Christ's transforming Spirit. He will help them experience abundant life in all its fullness and grandiosity, happiness and pleasure – something we simply cannot offer on our own.

Contrast this with social activism, which is simply doing good things because it's good to do them. Let me be clear: there's nothing wrong with that. I wish that everyone would make greater efforts on behalf of their fellow man. But we're not working to make the world more polite or more pleasant—we're working with God to fix it completely.

In the Second Testament, a funny little word began to float around the church. It was the word for a waiter at a restaurant, a *diakonos*. The idea behind this word (from which we get our word *deacon*) is that we're going to serve Jesus Christ to the world just like a waiter serves dinner to a customer. And whereas a waiter might serve wine with dinner, we serve Christ with compassion.

Christ himself was a servant, and so it's important to remember that we're not doing this "for" God, but "with" Him. Sometimes non-believers will join in with us and serve alongside us in our noble efforts to shadow God. That's cool. But, again, that's also a good reminder as to why we need to come back to those four imperatives, thereby inviting them to experience the God-life phenomenon with us.

The role of the church is to heal the world, to be the hands and feet of Jesus for people who need to be picked up and set straight. God has no hands but our hands. We're here to love and serve others, to bless and to minister, as we endeavor to cooperate with the Spirit and shadow God.

This week, take some time to confess

your position of privilege and all that you have to offer others
your failure to thank God for your relative prosperity
your desire to use all that you have to bless the world
your willingness to serve those God brings into your life.



Come before God with a humble heart and repent
for any feelings of revulsion or shyness you have
toward those in need
for any reluctance to leave your socioeconomic group,
neighborhood, or sphere of influence and reach out and down
with the gospel and love
for any thoughts you have about your own needs, your
unfulfilled wants and desires, or about your relative poverty
given that, by virtue of living in the Western world, you're
already "wealthy" in the eyes of 2/3 of the planet's inhabitants

And then turn around and tell everyone you see the good news
that God has entrusted us with the well-being of one another
that God is always recruiting new people
to join Him in His mission to heal the world
that the charitable deeds you perform in the service of Christ
are effective in demonstrating His love for all humanity
and appreciated by the Father
that every time you demonstrate love like this to someone else,
Christ accepts your service
as if it were done to him personally
and it makes him glad
and proud.

Hospitality

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Acts 2.42

A better title for this chapter may have been “fellowship,” but I don't really like the limitations of that word. Fellowship means something like Christian friendship. It's a good word, as far as it goes; but when we think about the mission of God to heal the world the idea of Christian people sitting around talking to other Christian people about *30 Rock* reruns seems pretty weak.

That's why I chose hospitality.

When I invite people over to my house for dinner, I'm make sure that all the appropriate introductions are made so that everyone feels comfortable and no one gets left out. That's how I think we're supposed to engage the world. That's one of the big ways I think we can heal the world – by treating everyone we meet as if they were our personal guests in our own home, by introducing them to others and making sure everyone's in on all the jokes.

The early Christians demonstrated this right from the get-go. Primarily comprised of Jewish converts, the Christians still opened their membership rolls to allow non-Jewish (Gentile) adherents immediate entry without having to go through any goofy Jewish

rituals. Peter started it, breaking his own kosher laws in order to welcome Gentile Christians (see Acts 11). Paul and his Merry Men (Barnabas, Silas, John Mark, Timothy) spread the gospel outside of Jerusalem, specifically targeting non-Jewish audiences. And it didn't hurt that God quickly blessed and authenticated the experience of Gentiles by filling them with the Spirit (Acts 10.34-38) and raising up strong leaders from among them (see Acts 16.11-15; Romans 16.1-7).

My favorite season of ministry doing a ton of multi-media projects with an assorted band of tech-heads and film geeks. We used to brainstorm ideas we had no capability to execute, and then try – every night for a month, staying up till 4am and driving home when the hookers and the vampires were jumping for the bushes in fear of the sun – and then try again. It was fun because we did it together. Because every video we made, every website we launched, every presentation we displayed was built on hundreds of hours of pizza, laughter, and exhaustion. And through all that, a bond was formed that allowed us to be open and honest, telling each other when we were out of line and clapping each other on the back when we weren't.

This kind of camaraderie – into which we welcomed many new friends – was called *koinonia* in the Second Testament. That's a word with a very complex set of meanings. It can mean communion (sharing together spiritually), fellowship (sharing together socially) or even intercourse (sharing together sexually). The basic meaning is “partnership,” though the kind of partnership indicated is usually that of a man and a woman in marriage. All partners are equal, participate fully, and share both responsibility and privilege. To a lesser extent, *koinonia* was also an economic term. Business partners were considered to be in *koinonia*, and if multiple people received an inheritance from the same estate they were awarded *koinonia*.

Every local church was considered a *Koinonia* – a vibrant and dynamic partnership of Christian people in which they experienced participation with God, with others, and with the world. Churches usually had a *koinonia* box at the back of their meeting space. Every time you put money in the box it was redistributed to the poor. Playfully, yet accurately, you were performing *koinonia* by putting *koinonia* in the *koinonia* so others could be awarded *koinonia*.

Restoring relationships is a big part of healing the world. We've got to remember that the gospel is demonstrated through our treatment of one another – that the way we treat others is the way we treat God – and that we need to always be in the habit of creating space for newcomers whether they're migrant Christians, non-Christians, or even anti-Christians.

This week, take some time to confess
your need for healthy relationships
your desire to make room for others in your life,
even if that desire is not yet wholly manifested
your willingness to cultivate *koinonia*.

Come before God with a humble heart and repent
for any hard-heartedness
for an insiders-only mentality
for dismissing the importance of hospitality, openness,
and acceptance in the Scriptures.

And then turn around and tell everyone you see the good news
that God has extended His friendship to us
that the Kingdom of God is full of laughter and love,
good stories and enduring friendship
that God has welcomed us Gentiles into the new ethnicity
of His holy people
that we are given the opportunity to share this *koinonia*
with others.

Story

For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

1 Corinthians 1.21-25

I love preaching in another countries, largely because it's something of a contact sport. In Haiti, I preached in a little village church so crowded that I delivered my entire sermon with a bongo drum stuffed into my ribs. There was a tambourine resting on the drum, so every time I turned to face one side of the crowd or the other my preaching was accented by a shushing, rattling, tambourine noise and a quiet thump on the drum as the drummer tried to keep it quiet. I felt like a circus performer , all I needed was a big bass drum strapped to my chest and a triangle dangling from my Bible.

But a bunch of people got saved and a few more got healed, so what am I complaining for, right?

A couple years prior I was preaching in a large tent in Guatemala, much more circus-like than anything I'd previously been exposed to. This group of gypsy women, all of them

built like brick-outhouses, came to me for prayer after I was done. As I laid hands on one of them, she began to vomit this thick, black, viscous fluid all over my shoes. Someone told me she had been demon possessed, and that all that oily muck was proof of her exorcism. She later became a pastor.

I've been booed, heckled, called out for heresy, had people get up and walk out in disgust, and had several things thrown at me. I was shot at while preaching in Belize, and almost arrested this past spring in India.

When I preach, I feel at least 1/2 stupid and 2/3 an idiot. I often think that no one is awake, listening, cares, or understands what I'm saying. Probably they don't agree with me, aren't convinced that what I'm teaching is actually in the Bible. Maybe, worst of all, they aren't motivated to change their lives to more faithfully follow Jesus Christ.

And yet, despite my homiletical neuroses, every time I get done preaching – including the time I was so overcome by despair that I gave up and walked off the platform in the middle of my talk – there is always a line of people waiting to tell me that God used something I said to challenge, motivate, encourage, or convict them to be increasingly governed and guided by the Spirit.

That's the foolishness of preaching. A 30-45 minute oratory, in our current culture of media-saturation and image-stimulation, of quick-cuts and high-gloss candy apple effects, seems like the stupidest, most anachronistic, and poorly reasoned method of proclaiming the gospel imaginable. And yet, speaking as someone who has tried every other alternative – from sermonless services to video presentations, to mixed-media performances, high-gloss brochures, low-fi zines and graphic novels, social media networking, interactive web portals and free-lemonade-with-your-baptism stands – I can tell you that preaching works best.

Of course pastors aren't the only ones who preach, and podiums aren't the only spot to do it. Sometimes we preach by letting others see how we behave toward those in need, sometimes by observing our work ethic. *Preach the gospel at all times and, if necessary, use words.* We proclaim Christ by the way that we live. We tell his story every time we tell our own story, and about how Christ changed us.

But even so, there comes a time when someone has to actually say something to others about Jesus. Whether public or private, whether large-scale or small-scale, someone has to connect the dots for the gospel to make sense in the lives of real people.

In the Second Testament preaching was the primary means of communicating the good news of the gospel of God to large groups of people. That public proclamation was called *kerygma*, a Greek word referring to the actions of a public herald in the Roman Empire. The job of the herald was to stand atop the steps at the city center and call out the headlines of each day's news to the passersby. He was the anchorman of the ancient world, and listening to him was like having Nightline on in the background while relaxing after supper. That's preaching – telling the breaking news of Christ come to save the world.

Something new is happening.

It was prophesied a long time ago by the Jewish prophets, referred to as an outpouring of the Spirit, the beginning of a new age, the inauguration of a new covenant written on the heart of humanity.

This "thing" has happened as a result of God coming down to live among us, as one of us, and being crucified for us.

His life and death were the means by which we became incorporated with Him. In death, He exhausted the powers of evil and was resurrected into new life. We have been resurrected with him. and now he has ascended back to Heaven where he intercedes on our behalf acting as both our high priest and our king.

God has empowered us with His Holy Spirit.

The Spirit is the sign of God's presence and of the new covenant given to help us live now like he wants us to live for all eternity, and to equip us to spread the story of his triumph over evil.

The incredible story will climax with His return to earth.

He will come at the head of an angelic army and a Heavenly host, at which point those who have opposed and defied Him will be called up short for their disobedience.

So right now is the time to get your act together.

Don't waste one moment. Get your game face on and get right with God.

In our world we do much the same thing as the apostles: we tell the Story of God and the World. Our purpose isn't so much to disseminate a bunch of new information, but to help people make sense of the world they already think they know.

We don't focus all our energy on people's failings, shortcomings, guilt, and woe. We deal with their sin but we do so in context of God's plan to heal them, to heal their relationships, and to make things right.

Our goal isn't merely correction, but reorientation. We're not just trying to modify their behaviors, but to help them be transformed and renewed into their full humanity through the power of the Spirit.

People, after all, don't change much because of new information. They change because of an experience, revelation, or encounter with a compelling story that connects with a desire for things to be different.

This week, take some time to confess

your own "homiletical neuroses" about sharing the gospel
your own need to hear the Story of God in fresh ways
your own desire to re-tell the Story of God in fresh ways.

Come before God with a humble heart and repent

for any negligence
for allowing the gospel to de-volve into something other
than what God intended – maybe for you that's a particular
style or a pet doctrine or a preferred presentation or package
– instead of allowing the full measure of the gospel story to be
proclaimed in power in new ways and with new efficacy.

And then turn around and tell everyone you see the good news

that something new is happening
that this new thing has been a long time coming
that it all centers on the person and work of Jesus Christ
that we participate in it through the Holy Spirit
that a time is coming during which we will be held accountable
for our response to Christ
that great and eternal rewards await those who give their lives
and hearts
and allegiance
and treasure
to him.

Context

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

Matthew 28.19-20

The oldest known work of German literature dates back to the 9th century AD. It's called *Die Heiland*, which means *The Savior*, and it re-tells the gospel story.

The author was a *scop*, a medieval spy poet (I introduce *scop* in my other book *Common Time*) who infiltrated the camps of the Saxon dissenters during the expansion of the Holy Roman Empire into Britain. The Saxons had been forcibly introduced to Christianity several decades earlier but they were disinterested in Christ. He seemed too weak, too womanly, for their taste. They favored warlike, aggressive behaviors. In order to win their hearts, the *Scop* (we don't know his name) began spinning yarns around the campfires, reworking the stories of Jesus into more culturally-suitable tales.

Rather than talking about Christ as some kind of moral teacher, the *Scop* described him as the Prince of Peace, a Sovereign Ruler whose kingdom had been established on the earth with strength and justice, whose loyal Vassals, the apostles, continued his work after he ascended to Heaven.

This was a hero the Saxons could get behind. He was a man's man who drank tankards of ale and ate roasted haunches of mutton at the Wedding in Cana while his valorous companions sat beside him on long wooden benches. He stood at the prow of a Viking vessel on Lake Genesareth, horned helm atop his black brow, wrestling the water to stillness with a stern command, demanding obedience even from the deep places of the world.

Some have criticized *Die Heiland* for making Christ out to be something he wasn't. But I wonder why? His clothing and his supper were contextualized, but *Die Heiland* never departs from the gospel. Christ is never violent. His teachings are never distorted (in fact the Sermon on the Mount makes up about half of the entire manuscript), and no new actions are attributed to him but what are contained in the canon.

Rather than criticize *Die Heiland*, I think we should emulate it. And the boundary markers *Die Heiland* observes – such as preserving Christ's teaching and not politicizing him – are ones we too would do well to keep within. So long as Christ remains Savior and not Sex Symbol, Politician, or Military General we can safely re-tell the life of Christ to fit the story-taste of our time. The Celts did this when they portrayed the Holy Spirit as a wild goose instead of a dove, re-imagining the Spirit as a common cultural symbol. The South American natives initially referred to Christ as the Jaguar of the Tribe of Judah, since there are no lions indigenous to the rain forest. The Cubans famously portrayed Christ as Che Guevara's distant cousin, capitalizing on Che's symbol of hope and equality.

We, too, are meant to contextualize the gospel. It's like a seed. When sown in Palestine, it grows into the tree of Palestinian Christianity. When sown in Rome, it germinates into Roman Christianity. We should sow it in Canada, in the Philippines, in the Appalachians, and in Detroit's skate parks and tenement buildings and see what grows.

Every time Peter preaches the gospel in Acts he does so to Palestinian Jews using ancient Israelite stories, symbols, references, and themes. But when Paul preaches to the Greeks at the Acropolis, he uses Greek poetry, songs, and themes.

Our job is to figure out the signs, codes, metaphors, themes, and values of our culture. We're not Palestinian Jews. We're not pagan Greeks. We live somewhere else, and so the gospel has to make sense to our audience. In order for our message to be heard, it must be delivered in a language our world can understand.

We've got to combine the gospel text with our present context. We've got to find things in common between us and the people around us, between the Word of God and the words of the world. We've got to mine our culture for signs of redemption and cooperate with the Spirit to bring the good news to those we're near and those we know.

There may be many paths to knowing Jesus Christ, but he is the only path to the Father and salvation. Therefore, we've got to use any means necessary to connect the gospel with our world, provided our effort doesn't contradict Scripture or Christian orthodoxy.

This past Christmas I produced an amateur version of Christ's birth in the form of a comic book and short film called "Cybertron Nativity." I took the story of Christ' birth from Luke's gospel, verbatim, and animated it stop-motion using my son's Transformers. I had originally only done this because my son refused to stop playing with his toys to listen to me read him the nativity story. And so Optimus Prime and Arcee gave birth to a beautiful chrome boy. I received so many requests for copies of it that I finally distributed them at church and put the short film on You Tube. It was fun, but far more importantly, my son now knows the stories of baby Jesus better than any seven-year-old alive.

There was also a My Little Pony nativity, but – fortunately – no records have survived. (They have been discarded along with my masculine pride.)

Pop culture supplies us with the raw materials, and we craft the gospel artifact. We use what the world provides, but differently. We take their best lines and expropriate them for Christian purpose.

I hate it when people do this with pop songs. Re-writing Top 40 tunes with Christian lyrics is about as tired a cliché as religious bumper-stickers or passing out tracts in the mall. It's not effective, but it is the right idea. Just the wrong medium. Once upon a time it was very effective – many of our old hymns (*Amazing Grace*, for example) were tavern tunes and bawdy songs re-purposed for the kingdom. But ever since that goof ruined the theme to *Chariots of Fire* by adding the lyrics *Give Glory to God, Church* we've abandoned this particular manifestation of appropriation.

Here, though, are some basic guidelines for how to translate the gospel. It's a three-step process that anybody with a television and half a brain can do.

Find the symbols that matter in your world . Look a step behind corporate logos and popular advertisements, and see what’s really going on. For example , the current series of Chrysler commercials featuring cars “imported from Detroit” are powerful examples of a cultural symbol. We want to be proud of one of our great cities, and we are collectively heartbroken at its decline. We fear for the loss of an original American industry to the swelling factories in Asia. When Chrysler put this ad out there, featuring Eminem no less it unified Americans and reminded us that we’re not finished yet.

Identify the values at work. These are usually really obvious, like hope/despair, sacrifice/selfishness, love/hate. The dominant values of any culture have some biblical precedent; or at least they rhyme somehow. Find out what the big values are around you are. What do people care about? What gets them worked up? Find *this* in the Bible.

Tell the story. Tell the story of your people, in their place, struggling with their values using their symbols. And then introduce the hope of the gospel there. So, to return to our earlier example, a great gospel message for Detroit would look like this:

Everyone thinks you’re broken and used up—bankrupt.
But there is still hope.
You have the promise of something new: ingenuity, innovation,
perseverance.
But don’t be deceived.
Even if you got everything you wanted from this car, or this auto
manufacturer, you still wouldn’t have dealt with the deeper issues that
landed you here in the first place.
You may have a better marketing team now, but without dealing with
greed and ego at the top of the company, or finding some sustainable
resolutions with the UAW, or adopting green-materials for your cares,
you will continue to rot from the inside out.
You’ve got to come to grips with the despair inside of you.
You’ve got to open your heart to God and let him change you from the
inside out.
Then you and Eminem can ride in your Chrysler 300
without guilt or fear.



Our task is to stay in step with our culture, to stand for things and not against them. We need to mine this culture for values and stories that rhyme with the grand Story of God and the World so we can introduce people to Christ in ways that make sense to them.

This week, take some time to confess
your lack of missional initiative
your failure to translate the gospel into your own context
your negligence in telling others about Christ.

Come before God with a humble heart and repent
for any laziness, disinterest, or apathy
for any impatience with those who don't know God
for any missed opportunities you've passed over.

And then turn around and tell everyone you see the good news
that Christ has been incarnated into every place
where his people live and into which his followers
have spread the good news
that there is no place on earth
where the light of Christ cannot shine
that God makes sense in every culture,
because it's really all of our story—
we know it
and, hearing it, will respond.

Power

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Acts 1.8

Despite knowing the context into which we're meant to execute our mission and means, one thing still remains: the need for the Holy Spirit. By ourselves we can do nothing. We must constantly rely on the power, presence, and prompting of the Spirit to bring the gospel and healing to the entire world. We need power to sustain us and make us effective. We need the Presence to comfort us and assure us. We need promptings to guide and correct us when we get off track.

St. Martin de Porres was a 16th century Peruvian saint with a fondness for animals. He claimed they helped him better understand the movement of the Spirit and the desires of God. Martin also had the supernatural gift of healing and many of the people for whom he was asked to pray were also treated to visits from his traveling zoo of puppies, kittens, and strays.

When one of Martin's fellow friars was sick in the infirmary, Martin would often keep vigil through the night. Every morning a large black, white, and brown Tomcat jumped into Martin's lap and mewed. Martin, from experience, knew that the cat was reminding him to rise and sound the prayer bells, thus awakening the entire monastic community. The

cat reminded Martin to remind the brothers to pray, and so every time Martin saw any cat he was reminded to pray, regardless of the time of day or the occasion.

We respond to the Spirit in a variety of ways and through a variety of circumstances—sometimes through cats. But we also respond to God through the needs of others as they arise, or to our own intuition when we get a gut feeling about where to go or what to do, or to the movement of the Spirit when we sense He is nudging us into one arena or another.

In order to move forward quickly and confidently, we must constantly be in prayer to discern the will of God so that when opportunities arise we don't have to spend a lot of time praying about them then—we will have invested ourselves in the Spirit already and will be able to act.

Mission is sensitive.

Some of the oldest Latin American theologians, those first dropped off in the New World by the conquistadors, suggested that we have spiritual senses that correspond to our physical senses. We have a kind of spiritual sight, a spiritual touch, a spiritual taste, a spiritual smell, and a spiritual sound. We've got to employ these spiritual senses as we work with God. Obviously these spiritual senses are nothing scientific or concrete. They're a way to conceptualize something we often experience but don't have a way to talk about. Without getting too hung up on the specifics, I hope these will help you pay attention to the Spirit of God at work inside you – keeping you free and unbounded within the power and purposes of God.

Your spiritual sight is your sense of perception. It's the thing that allows you to figure out what's going on behind the scenes. Scripture talks about this as discernment – a way of realizing who's really in control, what they really want, and how they're maneuvering people and circumstances to their advantage. Cooperating with the Spirit and honoring your spiritual perceptions will allow you to get to the heart of the matter, ensuring greater results and providing better opportunities to heal the world.

Your spiritual touch is the feeling you get in any given moment. My friend Randy Shafer was very “touchy” like this, and people used to refer to him as being “in touch” with God and with others. He would often refer to a decision we were

making as something that either “felt good” or “felt bad”. My co-pastor Jvo and I have come to adopt this language and cultivate our own spiritual touchiness, as a result. We see this in the Bible when the apostles declared that *it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you* (Acts 15.25 NASB).

Your spiritual taste refers to the experience you have after an event. *That left a bad taste in my mouth* is a good example of how something sits poorly with you after the fact. Having to deal with corrupt officials or predatory legal counsel often has this result. *Taste and see that the Lord is good* (Psalm 34.8) conversely refers to the afterglow we enjoy after a sweet encounter with God.

Your spiritual smell is what you use to sniff out fraud or determine veracity. If spiritual sight is about discerning motivation, then spiritual smell is about discerning authenticity. Often when someone comes to see me in my office, proposing some great new scheme that will revolutionize the ministry, my spiritual sense of smell starts working overtime. I think, *this stinks. There’s something rotten about this person.*

Your spiritual sound kicks in when you pick up on a common cultural riff or refrain, or even start to notice repeated words and phrases and emotions from those you love. Similar to a musician picking out harmonies, your spiritual sense of sound allows you to determine what tune the world is singing. A few years ago, the dominant tune of our culture shifted from an anti-supernatural skepticism and scientific rationalism to a fascination with the paranormal and a rising belief in the invisible world. That was an important re-tuning, and I’m glad we’ve picked it up.

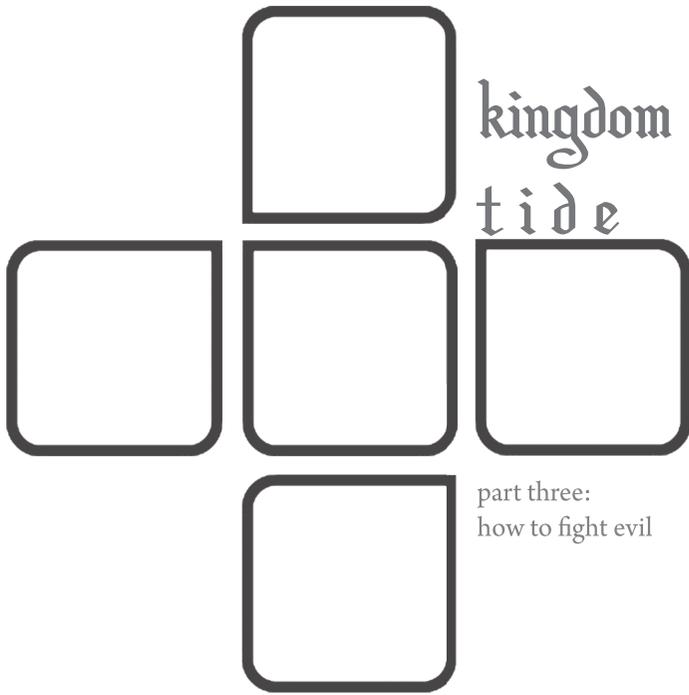
We use our spiritual senses much like we use physical senses – to know what’s going on and figure out how to interact with the world. But more than that, our spiritual sense help us make a difference. When you bring the good news of the gospel of God you’ve got to use good sense, staying in tune with the Spirit, so you don’t falter from weakness in times of trouble.



This week, take some time to confess
your tendency to rely on your own strength,
resources, abilities, and competencies
your ignorance of the Spirit and your desire for that to change
your inability to get in touch with the Spirit,
your spiritual senses, or your godly intuition
your need for God's guidance.

Come before God with a humble heart and repent
for any dismissive posture toward the Holy Spirit
for any over-confidence or vaulted opinion of your own gifts
for any refusal to trust God or His guidance

And then turn around and tell everyone you see the good news
that God still speaks, still guides, and still helps
that the Spirit is alive and at work in His church
that God is not absent or unaffected by human suffering,
but has sent us into the world empowered by His Spirit to save,
to restore, and to heal.



Fighting evil...

In this section I want to talk about the timeless conflicts of the church, namely:

The opposition

The persecution

The war

Our response

Our revolution

You need to know what to expect out there in the wide, wild world so that when you open your yap and start yipping about Yahweh, you don't get taken by surprise when people either ignore or insult you. The world isn't a nice place. The same powers that stuck Christ on the cross like a butterfly in a display box are also likely to fry you up and serve you for dinner. It's best if you come to grips with that now, because a weeping martyr makes for poor headlines. Be bold. Be strong. Know what's coming. And don't go weak in the knees when the haters, the scoffers and cynics, the literati and illuminati come looking for you.

The opposition

As you go, proclaim this message: The Kingdom of Heaven has come near. Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give.

Do not get any gold or silver or copper to take with you in your belts—no bag for the journey or extra shirt or sandals or a staff, for the worker is worth his keep. Whatever town or village you enter, search there for some worthy person and stay at their house until you leave. As you enter the home, give it your greeting. If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, leave that home or town and shake the dust off your feet. Truly I tell you, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.

I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. Be on your guard; you will be handed over to the local councils and be flogged in the synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. You will be hated by everyone because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. Truly I tell you, you will not finish going through the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

The student is not above the teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for students to be like their teachers, and servants like their masters. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household!

So do not be afraid of them, for there is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in Hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in Heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in Heaven.

Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.

Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.

Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person as a

righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.

Matthew 10.7-42

Before we get into all the specifics of the opposition to the gospel, I want to rewind the tape a little and return to something we touched on briefly during Eastertide. In Matthew 10, Jesus gives his disciples their first commission. It's a lead-in to the Great Commission, sometimes called the Little Commission, and it's filled with instructions about what to do and with whom and how, and what to expect as a result. The commission tells a kind of prophetic story: When you obey, this is what's gonna happen. And that is useful for helping us understand our probable future.

I want us to explore some of the major themes in this passage of the Bible, so that we can get a good handle on all that's coming. You can refer back to the lengthy passage I've included at the beginning of this chapter to see these points in context, but I do want to highlight six critical features of the future story of the church.

The **message** of the gospel is simple: Life can be better. *Go tell [the people] that the Kingdom of Heaven is near. Heal the sick, raise the dead, cure those with leprosy, and cast out demons* (vs. 7b-8a). Jesus gives his disciples the task of taking the suck out of the world and with cultivating a new peace under his divine kingship.

The **economy** of the gospel is relational, not financial. *Don't take any money with you... whenever you enter a city search for a worth person and stay in his home until you leave town* (vs. 9, 11). We must never make the mistake of thinking the gospel is inhibited by lack of funds. The gospel gains traction through friendship, partnership, and cooperation. Here's a case-in-point: give someone a million dollars, and someone else a million friends on Facebook and ask them both to start a church. In twelve months the Facebook church will be viable, connected, and the message will be spreading. Guaranteed. The million-dollar church should have great staff, great facilities, and great advertising. But the results are a crapshoot. Money makes the world go round, but the Word works in people.

The **opposition** to the gospel will be violent, persistent, and public. *I am sending you out as sheep among wolves. So be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves. But beware! For you will be handed over to the courts and will be flogged with whips in the synagogues* (vs. 16-17). I don't know why we think Jesus' warnings about opposition and persecution don't apply to us. Maybe we've believed the myth that America is a Christian nation, or that that

moniker means something somehow. But we are guaranteed to be mocked, hurt, isolated, ridiculed, falsely accused, punished unjustly, and possibly impoverished, widowed, and killed.

The **rewards** of the gospel are eternal. *Everyone who acknowledges me publicly here on earth I will also acknowledge before my Father in Heaven* (v.32). I don't know why some are so keen to ignore or downplay our eternal destiny. Seems to me it's kind of a key feature of Jesus' teaching (see also Matthew 5.12; 6.19-21; 18.3; 22.30; John 14.1-3 ... just to name a few), and we shouldn't downplay it. Life here is short, but a short life can have a long impact. What we do now, echoes in eternity.

The **requirements** of the gospel are absolute. *I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother... If you love your father and mother more than me you are not worthy of being mine. If you refuse to take up your cross you are not worthy of being mine* (vs. 35, 37-38). Before I say anything else, let me point out that Jesus' words here are not to be twisted to mean something like "parents should hate their children for religious reasons." Jesus is expanding on his earlier predictions concerning the effects of preaching the gospel. Children who choose to follow Christ will suffer for it, like my friend Iqbal who had to flee Iran for fear of his life after converting to Christianity. His father and brothers tried to kill him for abandoning Islam. That's what Jesus is referring to – persecution. It's not his desire that we spread violence, but it should be our expectation that violence will be done to us. The point is not simply to caution us about what's coming, but equally to underscore how severely we must cling to the cross in order to be saved.

The **ordinary followers** of the gospel are not forgotten. *And if you give even a cup of cold water to one of the least of my followers you will surely be rewarded* (vs.42). The Greek translation of this passage renders "ordinary followers" as "little ones," which is a better indication in my mind of who Jesus is talking about. He's talking about those who cannot look after themselves, either physically (like little children) or spiritually (like new, or immature, believers). Christ brings good news here in two directions: first, he tells us that we'll be rewarded for any gesture of kindness to any of the little ones; second, he tells us that any kindness *to us* will be rewarded. He tells us we are not alone and we are not forgotten.

To sum it all up, here's what Christ is saying:

Get out there and tell everybody that life doesn't have to be like this. It doesn't have to suck. Things can be better, and it starts by getting right with God. Don't get hung up on money and means, just make friends everywhere you go and let them introduce you to their friends. Network, and trust the Spirit will massage the good news into the hearts of people everywhere.

Don't be surprised if you encounter opposition. Expect it! You're bringing a message of hope, liberation, and promise. But there are all kinds of people out there – politicians, religious leaders, bullies of every stripe – whose power will be threatened. Their only choice will be to try to silence or discredit you. And no matter what they do, it's not going to be pleasant.

But take heart! The second they put you on trial all you've got to do is tell them the good news, just like you've been telling everyone else. Let the gospel do the talking. Let the power of the Spirit inspire you. Don't give up or give in. And I'll remember what you suffered when I introduce you to my Father. He appreciates that.

He *doesn't* appreciate compromisers, or cowards, or capitulators, or collaborators. Understand this: absolute loyalty is a requirement. Don't mess around. Instead, make a point of living the gospel in your own life, knowing that every little thing you do – even something as seemingly insignificant as sharing a cup of water – counts in the eyes of God.

Jesus knew that a message powerful and provocative enough to change the world was powerful enough to provoke the dominant powers of the world. He prepared us in advance for the suffering he himself would endure, and that we would experience after him. In this we take hope, that we are hard pressed on every side. But we are not crushed. Maybe we're perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

This week, take some time to confess
your willingness to ignore Christ's warnings
concerning opposition, persecution, and suffering
your ignorance (intentional or accidental) of the sufferings
of other Christians all over the world
your tendency to compromise your beliefs
in order to make peace with those
who might label you "intolerant."

Come before God with a humble heart and repent
for any attempts to live a pain-free, über-pleasant Christian life
at the expense of the gospel
for any feelings of resentment toward Christ
due to the exacting nature of his requirements for absolute
obedience and compliance.

And then turn around and tell everyone you see the good news
that God strengthens and prepares us
for the opposition we must inevitably face
that God promises to reward those
who stand up under opposition
that God is pleased with our noble efforts in the world,
no matter how small or seemingly insignificant
that God has personally participated in and overcome
the suffering of this world
and loans us His strength to get through it too.

The persecution

Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

2 Timothy 3.12-15

From the very beginning of Christianity, and whenever it takes root in some new place, it has been met with relief by some, joy by others, and violent opposition by those in power. The latter is most disturbing, but more common than you might think. Christ was crucified for preaching the gospel. Stephen was stoned for preaching the gospel. Saul, who later became the apostle Paul, stoned him and was later executed himself for preaching the gospel. Ten of the twelve original disciples were executed for preaching the gospel, and so was Matthias (Judas' replacement). Riots occurred in Ephesus because the gospel was preached, and every Christian from the Ascension to the conversion of Constantine (313 AD) feared for their lives at the hands of either Pagan or Jewish zealots.

We often think that persecution is a thing of the past.

This is simply not the case.

In August 2008, I received the following email from one of our pastors in India, Suresh Sawant, a young man we support financially and to whom we provide ministerial covering. It's about persecution. The Hindu population of India, despite technically being "tolerant" of other religions, had launched a massive underground purge against Christians of every denomination.

Pastor David,

Christians are being persecuted in the state of Orissa, hundreds and thousands of them have fled into jungles, or forest to hide themselves. Today, my friend called me from Orissa asked me pray for the Orissa and he is getting ready to flee in the jungle, he also told me that there is a pregnant lady, hiding the jungle.

Please ask Westwinds to pray for the Christians in Orissa and also other Christians all over India.

Gajapati district today has witnessed torching of one independent Baptist Church. Local sources report of a church in Baliguda and six in Phulbani district being burnt by the errant mob.

According to reports three persons were burnt after their houses were torched at midnight of August 25th 2008. One each in Kandhamal and Bargarh were burnt to death during the 12-hour statewide ban.

Compassion East India office (NGO) in Bhubaneswar was ransacked. A man named Ramesh Digal was brutally cut into pieces.

Three adults and one child were reportedly killed in fresh violence in Barakhama, Kandhamal.

Kandhamal district has already witnessed the death of 15 Christians so far. Two in Mutungia village, 1 in Petaponga village, 1 in Borimunda village, 3 in Katinga village, 3 in Tianga village, 3 in Adikuppa village and 1 in Bakingia village. They were hacked to death by the rampaging Hindu mob.

Mission Compound in Sunapanga in Baliguda is also set on fire. Terrified Christians from Padapara, Marlova and other places have fled to the jungles.

There have been already over 58 instances of violence in which more than 400 Christian houses are gutted down by fire in Kandhamal including 150 houses in Rupagaon alone.

The authorities are helpless, merely spectators watching Christians being lynched before their eyes.

Pray, pray, pray, pray for the presence of God to be real to them in the midst of fiery trials.

Yours in Christ,
Suresh

This letter reveals what we now know all too well: persecution persists. People are killed every day for the religious freedoms we take for granted in the western world.

But that's not to say that we don't have our own, less extreme, manifestations of persecution. And though ours really don't compare to those of my friend Suresh, they are nevertheless ours and we often fail to endure them, overcome them, or proclaim Christ in the midst of them.

We are worse at suffering, arguably because we have so little practice. There may be other reasons – that we have so little character, that we have so little commitment, that we have so little to gain and so much to lose – but, regardless, we ought to take a little time to examine the nature of persecution in our context so we are not caught unawares or unprepared when next we face it.

There is a kind of sexual persecution. To understand this, we have to realize that Christian people who love and follow Jesus Christ are bound to live chastely. This is difficult because being chaste means enjoying every pleasure in its appropriate season, whereas our culture revels in the expression of every pleasure as soon as we learn about it. Christians, it must be said, are often horribly compromising when it comes to their sexuality. They look at porn. They have affairs. They sleep around. They break their vows of celibacy, or at least cheat by engaging in either oral or anal intercourse and somehow justifying those acts as “not sex.” In many ways, Christians don't look any different from the world in their sexual mores and preferences at all.

Except one.

Christians feel bad about their sexual sin. They are rightly convicted of their failure to observe the sexual ethics of Scripture and, if they are faithful to the movement of the Spirit inside of them, they will stop. The moment when a Christian person decides to begin living like a lover and a follower of Jesus Christ – especially when they are in a committed relationship – is the moment in which they will likely experience their first bout of sexual persecution. Their partners, perplexed at this apparently sudden change of heart and values – like adult-onset Puritanism – may get angry, become aggressive, say hateful and hurtful things, and ultimately (if they cannot pressure their Christian lover to compromise their standards once again) end the relationship. This is profoundly hurtful, but also liberating. The Christian who chooses to live chastely has suffered and endured the mark of their oppression. But they have given testimony to the transforming power of the gospel, making God proud by finally deciding to live the way they know they should.

The one preferable scenario is for a Christian person to only date other Christian people and to keep from screwing around in the first place—which, though not eliminating the possibility of sexual persecution, the Bible seems to indicate is a pretty good idea.

There is a kind of relational persecution. When someone becomes a follower of Jesus there is an almost inevitable break from their old group of friends. Young men, for example, often find it difficult to keep up their old acquaintances because many of their former activities included bar-hopping, gambling, and chasing after girls. But now they find themselves in two kinds of conflict: a scheduling conflict, since they must make a choice between going to the bar and going to their Bible study or mid-week church service; and an ethical conflict, since now they must choose between living according to the way of Jesus or living like they have all along. When they choose Christ and his church, their old friends don't like it. They're confused by it. They will often tease and poke and pick. Initially this feels like good fun, but at some point the worm turns and these little exchanges become more uncomfortable and more heated until the relationship is no longer worth pursuing for either party.

Which is too bad. Christ wants us to keep our old friends so long as we can keep from being dragged away from him in their company. The gospel is meant to spread from us to them, and if we evacuate, what positive witness remains? And yet, as much as I wish what was ideal was also frequent, I think we all know it usually doesn't work like that. Most people, most of the time, have to choose between their old life and their new one, between their allegiance to their friends and their allegiance to the Cross. This is relational, or associative, persecution.

There is also a kind of violent persecution, sometimes even resulting in martyrdom. This has historically been the most dominant form of persecution against the church, but rarely occurs in the western world today. Aside from isolated incidents in big city high-school locker rooms or small town scenarios of bullying, this is a problem from which we are largely protected by law.

There is also a kind of intellectual persecution. This, I think, is the single most widespread manifestation of persecution in the west. Christians are maligned, slandered, and jibed for being anti-intellectual, unscientific, and willfully stupid by their academic and philosophical counterparts. Learned men like Richard Dawkins or Stephen Jay Gould are fond of holding up the worst examples of Christian intelligence imaginable – comparing those who believe in the authority of the Bible with terrorists, inbreeders, and people who believe in a Flying Spaghetti Monster. They compare the best of atheism with the worst of theism and conveniently gloss over their philosophical and rhetorical losses at the hands of Christian intellectual giants like Alistair McGrath, Francis Collins, or William Lane Craig.

Whenever we identify ourselves as Christians in any kind of academic or intellectual venue we must be prepared for the swift and preconditioned disdain of the elite. Upon entering such arena we are reminded of Peter's admonition to be prepared to give a ready defense of our faith, knowing all the while that no matter what we say we will not be able to deconstruct an anti-supernatural, scientific, rational, and modernistic epistemology while sipping cocktails in our black ties. We defend our faith in those arenas simply to prove that it can be done – to protect further labeling and to remind Christians that there are credible reasons outside of the realm of theology for why we believe as we do.

Those apologetic exchanges are extremely common, and commonly arduous, unfair, and condescending, which is why we refer to them as “persecution.”

There is also a kind of professional persecution. Here I am referring to the ways in which Christians are treated in the marketplace, or on the athletic field, or in the media and Hollywood. If intellectual persecution claims we are all fools, then professional persecution claims we are all bigots, hypocrites, and haters. Christian people are routinely excluded from the after-hours activities of colleagues, as well as subjected to the frustrations and prejudices of employers and coaches who seem intent on keeping them out of the spotlight.

The good news is that we've had lots of practice over the years with persecution, and as a result we have lots of heroes who have overcome persecution to whom we can look for encouragement. Consider, for example, this story – reprinted with permission from the Voice of the Martyrs website (accessed Spring 2011):

The young brown-eyed girl looked up at her mother. What would she decide?

Earlier that morning, the young girl's mother, their pastor, and twenty-six others in her North Korean village of GokSan were bound and taken before a screaming crowd of Communists.

One of the guards ordered Pastor Kim and the other Christians, "Deny Christ, or you will die." The words chilled her. How could they ask her to deny Jesus? She knew in her heart he was real. They all quietly refused.

Then the Communist guard shouted directly at the adult Christians, "Deny Christ, or we will hang your children." The young girl looked up at her mother. She gripped her, knowing how much her mom loved her. Her mother then leaned down. With confidence and peace she whispered, "Today, my love, I will see you in Heaven."

All of the children were hanged.

The remaining believers were then brought out onto the pavement and forced to lie down in front of a huge steamroller. The Communists gave them one last chance. "Deny this Jesus or you will be crushed." The Christians had already given up their children; there was no turning back.

As the driver started the heavy piece of equipment, the singing from the villagers started softly. "More love, O Christ, to thee, more love to thee."

Stories like these bring to mind both the words of the Psalmist - *for your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered* – and of the Lord - *to him that overcomes I will grant the right to sit with me in my throne.*

Sadly, this is nothing new. In those early days during which time Christian people had to hide from the Roman government, they began to hold many of their church gatherings in crypts and catacombs. Since many of the crypts also led into deeper tunnels that could

not be seen from outside, it was a convenient way for a sizeable number of Christians to gather without attracting unwanted attention.

Perhaps for expediency's sake, many pastors were employed as gravediggers. This kept them apprised of which crypts and tombs were the least used, or had the largest underground spaces, and which ones were closely watched or guarded. These grave-digging pastors often secured one or two of their preferred haunts for repeated use.

As the tradition of subterranean piety grew they were even entrusted with family crypts given to the church solely for the purpose of holding meetings. They dug out huge cave systems and gallerias, some of which spanned hundreds and hundreds of acres and descended more than four stories underground. Burial niches, called *loculi*, were carved into the sides of the walls so those who had been martyred for their faith in Christ could have their bodies recovered and be properly buried in the presence of the church.

As part of their liturgical preparations the pastors would often decorate the interiors of the crypts with frescoes revealing early Christian symbols, and both ornament and structurally reinforce the doorways and arches with the femurs, rib cages, and skulls from incomplete remains.

There is a kind of insect, a *fossore*, that lives underground and lays its eggs in the sand; and it is from there that these gravedigger priests took their name: Fossares.

These gravedigger priests took their name from an insect, the *fossares*, that lives underground and lays its eggs in the sand. So too, the *Fossares*, were laying the eggs of the future-church in the sands of the crypts and catacombs of Rome.

Workers. Artisans. Clergyman. A triple-vocation for a troubled-time. And an inspiring one at that. We're all *Fossarians* now, working our regular 9-to-5's while doing whatever we can to shadow God and heal the world. And no matter how dire our circumstances, or how deeply we are driven underground, the creative life-giving Spirit of God will continue to birth in us new visions, new dreams, and new desires for His church.

Take heart, I have overcome the world!



This week, take some time to confess
your relatively comfortable Christian life
your gratitude for that comfort
your appreciation of all that has been suffered
 over the years by prior Christians
your thankfulness for the examples of Christ and his martyrs,
 to whom you can look for strength and inspiration.

Come before God with a humble heart and repent
for any cowardice, weakness, or fear
for any surprise or indignation at the fact
 that you are persecuted for your faith
for any feelings of injustice or victimization,
 given that the manner of your persecution is so much less
 intense than that of your global Christian peers.

And then turn around and tell everyone you see the good news
that our suffering is not wasted
that God rewards those who suffer in His name
that Christ claims those who endure much
 for the sake of his kingdom.

The war

The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.

1 John 3.8b

Having disarmed the powers and authorities, Christ made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Colossians 2.15

One of the more sacrilegious, and yet somehow amusing, films of recent years was *Jesus Christ: Vampire Hunter* (2001). The tagline for the film read like this: *Vampires used to fear the sun, but now they fear the Son of God.*

Please don't go see this movie.

Yet for all the intended offense and irreligious mockery, there is a faint shadow of truth to the film's premise. Christ did actually come to defeat evil; and, though he exemplified a life of non-violence toward other human beings he was violently confrontational against demons, sickness, and the father of it all – Satan.

In this chapter I want to explore the basis of Christian warfare. By that I don't mean Just War Theory, but a way to understand the spiritual battles spoken of so frequently in the Second Testament. These battles are important because they are directly linked to persecution in the natural world. In order to do so, we've got to go back into the First

Testament and do a little digging. This might get a little academic, but honestly this stuff is so cool I think it's worth nerding out over.

To begin, it may surprise you to learn that the Bible does not deny the existence of other gods.

On the contrary, it assumes that the cosmos is full of deities other than Yahweh (see Jeremiah 23.18, 22; Isaiah 6.2-8; Psalm 86.8, 96.4, 135.5).

They act like a kind of Heavenly council, over which Yahweh is enthroned as the Lord of Hosts. Yet those powers are subservient to Him (see Psalm 29.1, 97.7-9, 95.3).

This is the rationale behind the commandment *you shall have no other gods before Me*.

These other powers include:

The sun, moon, and stars (see Deuteronomy 4.19-20, Job 38.7), the winds and the thunder (see Psalm 104.4, Hebrews 1.7), and angelic armies (see 2 Kings 2.11; Psalm 68.17; Daniel 7.10).

These powers were given spiritual authority over the nations of the earth (see Deuteronomy 32.7-9), while Yahweh kept Israel for Himself.

Their role was to look after the nations, not to somehow replace Yahweh as the object of their worship, yet many did precisely that and consequently compromised their status as 'sons of God' and assumed the rank and role of demons (see Deuteronomy 32.17; Psalm 106.37, 95.5).

The famous Prince of Persia, in Daniel 10, might be considered one of these fallen and rebellious powers. He opposed God's plan to assist the prophet Daniel and fought the archangel Michael (to whom God has given guardianship over Israel, see Daniel 10.21, 12.1).

Chemosh was probably entrusted with guardianship over Moab before he also rebelled against God (see 1 Kings 11.35; 2 Kings 23.13).

Many of these powers rebelled against God and the Bible refers to them

as false gods (see Numbers 21.29; 1 Kings 16.31)
as demons (see Deuteronomy 32.17; Leviticus 16.8-26; Psalm 106.37),
and as evil spirits (see Isaiah 19.14; 37.7; Jeremiah 51.1).

And even though some were temporarily employed by God to wreak havoc upon His enemies in divine judgment (see Judges 9.22-25, 1 Samuel 16.14, 22; 1 Kings 22.21-33), Scripture is unilaterally clear that these forces are out of control.

God must constantly battle these gods, spirits, and demons
as well as other cosmic beings (see Psalm 74.4)
including Satan himself (see Zechariah 3.1-10; Ezekiel 28.12-15).

Since many of these cosmic forces have rebelled and since they were tasked with overseeing the universe (see 2 Peter 2.4; Jude 6; 1 Timothy 3.6; Matthew 25.41), we're made to understand that it is their ill will at work in the world that causes so much physical, social, and even ecological suffering (see Psalm 91.5; Job 38.6-11; Psalm 104.7-8).

Christ's basic mission was liberating the cosmos from rebellious supernatural powers that have used their free will to revolt against God. Their actions have throwing everything out of order; causing massive devastation of which human sin and earthly corruption are only one.

Jesus didn't come, primarily, to get rid of sin. He came to destroy evil, to plunge his cross into the vampiric heart of Satan and all his demonic hordes, to cleanse the universe from death and decay with the Light of the Son.

The message of Christ's kingdom is this: Those old powers have had their fun, but the rightful heir and ruler of this world has now resumed his place upon the throne of the cosmos. And he will set things right again.

Every instance of healing and exorcism in the gospels – theologians refer to these as “power encounters” – was a demonstration that the old powers no longer hold sway. And though there is an obvious anthropological (natural, human) benefit to these confrontations, the basic point is cosmic (supernatural, universal).

Christ claims victory in the Heavens, and we benefit from it on earth.

In the following chapter, we'll explore how we can experience those benefits and do our part in this cosmic conflict.

This week, take some time to confess
your feelings about the reality
of other supernatural powers
your need for divine protection in the face of
a threatening supernatural reality
your allegiance to Christ and his defeat of evil –
both cosmic and anthropological.

Come before God with a humble heart and repent
for any collaboration, intentional or otherwise,
with those dark powers of oppression and control (for example,
any flirting with the occult, witchcraft, or demonology)
for any blame you may have cast toward God
for some evil thing when in fact all evil is directly attributed to
Satan and his forces

And then turn around and tell everyone you see the good news
that Christ has defeated evil
that a cosmic cleanup is underway
that there is hope not only for people,
but for the planet and the universe as well.

Our response

And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in Heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in Heaven.

Matthew 16.18-19

I've previously confessed the nerdiness and dorkiness that infects my theology. I'm an overeducated fanboy, a former athlete with the body of an intellectual and the imagination of a little boy wearing underoos outside his pants, flying around the mall with swim goggles and a towel around his neck.

With that image in mind, I'd like to tell you about one of the greatest confrontations in comic book lore ever. It concerns Hell and the Sandman, who is the personification of human dreams.

The titular hero begins by journeying to Hell. He has been robbed of his magical artifacts – the Dream Helm, the Pouch of Sand, and the Ruby of Selfhood – and must retrieve them from Choronzon, one of the dukes of the underworld. Chrononzon refuses to give the artifacts back to the Sandman unless Dream (that's the Sandman, stay with me) can defeat him in a contest of imagination. Dream agrees. The rules of the contest are simple: each person must try and out-do the other in an ever-escalating description of things that destroy other things. Choronzon begins:

CHORONZON: I am a dire-wolf, prey-stalking, lethal devourer...

DREAM: I am a hunter, horse-mounted, wolf-stabbing

CHORONZON: I am a horsefly, horse-stinging, hunter-throwing

DREAM: I am a spider, fly-consuming, eight-legged

CHORONZON: I am a snake, spider-devouring, poison-toothed

DREAM: I am an ox, snake-crushing, heavy-footed

CHORONZON: I am an anthrax, butcher bacterium, warm-life destroying

DREAM: I am a world, space-floating, life-nurturing

CHORONZON: I am a nova, all-exploding, planet-cremating

DREAM: I am the universe, all things encompassing, all life-embracing

CHORONZON: I am anti-life, the Beast of Judgment. I am the dark at the end of everything. I am the end of universes, worlds, and God.

DREAM: I am hope.

And Choronzon stutters. He has never been confronted by hope. Not in Hell.

If ever you arrive at a place adorned with a sign that says *Abandon all hope, ye who enter here...* refuse. Never abandon hope.

Hope renews our strength. Hope fills us with joy and peace. Hope does not disappoint us. Hope is the anchor for the soul. Hope keeps creation in eager anticipation of deliverance, that time when the sons of God are finally and fully revealed. Hope makes us sure. Hope is the ruin of misery. Hope can never be defeated. Not even in Hell.

Dream went into the depths of Hell and brought hope with him. And though this little comic book excursion may not immediately appear religious, the author confesses a certain fascination with Christ's episode at the gates of Hell.

As we mentioned in *Eastertide*, Jesus often traveled to Caesarea Philippi. There was a spot of much pagan activity nearby called Pan's Sanctuary, and it contained a dark cave which itself contained a long hole that dropped into the center of the world. The nickname for this place was The Gates of Hades, as the ancient people thought this tunnel was the entryway to the underworld.

Gates are always symbolic of things that need to be protected. The people who gather within gated areas are important somehow, and in the ancient world the gates were the barrier that protected politicians and decision-makers from the throngs outside. Gates were to them what City Hall is to us.

When Jesus speaks about the Gates of Hades he has several meanings in mind:

First, that his church will overcome all false religions and deceptive practices by idolaters ;

Second, that his Kingdom will overcome the kingdom of Satan (this is why Jesus prayed *Father, protect them from the evil one*, since he knew Satan wouldn't just sit around passively while the church took the offensive, but would himself seek to deceive, to corrupt, and to devour the church);

Third, these gates "will not prevail" means that when Christ's kingdom goes on the offensive – as now it certainly must, in anticipation (then) and continuation (now) of his work on the cross – the ultimate hope of victory lies with God. All that stuff about binding and loosing refers to the Hell-bashing activity of Christ and his church, in which we systematically destroy whatever dark and oppressive Satanic strongholds exist in our families, in our health, in our churches, and throughout the world.

We're called to a theology of revolt, a guerilla war against sin, death, darkness, and control. This isn't a physical war, but a spiritual one in which we contend *against powers and principalities and rulers of the darkness of the world and wicked spirits*. Neither are we meant to fight using physical weapons. On the contrary, *we wield divine power to demolish arguments and strongholds and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God*. We take captives, but the POWs in this conflict are wayward thoughts captivated by the mind of Christ and transformed by the power of the Spirit so that our minds are renewed and our thoughts purified.

The church is meant to assault the Gates of Hell. This is why the Catholics call us the *Church Militant*. That term has recently been abandoned, since it now connotes something like a jihad. But the idea is fantastically pure. We are in a fight. We struggle against sin, against Satan, and against the powers of this world set in opposition to Christ. The Latin word *militans*, from which we get *militant*, means to serve as a soldier but it also has a secondary meaning of struggle, perseverance, and endurance. We struggle, endure, and will ultimately persevere in our conquest over evil in the world because of the cross of Jesus.

The apostle Paul, in Ephesians 6, famously describes the kind of armor we take into our spiritual battles. I did a little research to try and un-caricaturize the too-familiar emblems of our spiritual struggle so that we can more faithfully understand Paul's intent.

We have a *lorica hamata*, a breastplate, which was a kind of lightweight chain mail fastened around the body with leather straps. Paul says our breastplate is the righteousness of God in Christ. We're protected by his blood so that, no matter what happens, he's got our back.

We are equipped with a *scutum*, a rectangular shield, which protected soldiers from spears and arrows. The *scutum* were made of iron so that, even if the arrows were on fire, they wouldn't harm the soldier. Faith is our shield and, when we are attacked, we can raise our faith and put our trust in God's protection so we don't get burned.

The *cingulum* was a military belt, worn all the time – even at home and on leave – and Paul takes care to mention that truth, our *cingulum*, should never depart from our hearts and mouths and minds.

The helmet, or *galea*, protected the cheeks, ears, and neck – the most vulnerable parts. In the ancient world the neck was said to connect the body to the spirit. In fact, one of the old Hebrew words for soul – *nepshesh* – also meant the neck. The helmet of salvation preserves our very soul from harm.

The *caligae* – marching sandals, complete with cleats – allowed for sure footing and expedient travel, just as the gospel of peace gives us surety in our mission to heal the world.

And finally, the sword of the spirit, a *gladius*, is double-edged and used to divide truth from fiction, fact from falsehood, and friend from foe.

Notice that all of the armour – with, of course, the exception of the *gladius* – has a defensive purpose? It's meant to keep the man from dying. But our armor is different. We're not avoiding death, but claiming abundant life. We know and trust that we are covered by a protective layer of divine love given to us in our salvation. And so we're jumping into the fray – alert, alive, and firm! – extinguishing the darts of the enemy and casting down every pretension against the Spirit of God.

We have got to get in the habit of thinking about this life in terms of warfare. That's hard for me, and I tend to shy away from militaristic language. But so long as we understand who our enemies are – that they are not people and that our weapons are not ballistic – then the language of conflict and skirmish is precise and accurate.

Get yourself together like one for war.

Job 38.3

This week, take some time to confess
your desire to storm the gates of Hell,
even if only armed with a squirt gun
your intent to clothe yourself in the armor of God
and go to war with your invisible foes
your tendency to misidentify your enemies as specific people,
rather than as powers or principalities
your desire to change your perception, change your heart,
and change your tactics.

Come before God with a humble heart and repent
for any refusal to engage the enemy
for any lack of faith concerning the protection of God
for any apathy toward being ready or even being aware
of the conflict surrounding your life, your family,
your friends, your job, your church, or your home

And then turn around and tell everyone you see the good news
that the battle belongs to the Lord
that Christ has already conquered evil, and that our skirmishes
in this life are simply part of mopping up the old regime
that God goes before us,
that Christ grows within us,
and that the Spirit readies
and equips
and empowers us for every fight.

Our revolution

“From the least to the greatest,
all are greedy for gain;
prophets and priests alike,
all practice deceit.
They dress the wound of my people
as though it were not serious.
‘Peace, peace,’ they say,
when there is no peace.
Are they ashamed of their detestable conduct?
No, they have no shame at all;
they do not even know how to blush.
So they will fall among the fallen;
they will be brought down when I punish them,”
says the Lord

Jeremiah 6.13-15

Bud Osborne is a Vancouver poet who lives in the rough part of town and makes his living (sort of) as a poet. He’s a provocative Christian voice in the community, and when I first invited him to share some of his work at our college group I had no idea what I was about to get myself in to. Somewhere between the fifth word-that-rhymes-with-truck and the comparison of suburban churches to menstrual rags I started worrying about my job security.

Here's an excerpt from one of Bud's pieces:

a judge told me
I was of no use
no use at all
to society
but I got news
news for him
a society of bullshit
bullshit and greed
ain't no damn use
ain't no use to me

Bus Osborne, 20th century street poet, "Amazingly Alive"

When I was first confronted with Bud Osborne I had no way to categorize him. What he said felt true, but the way in which he chose to express it was disruptive.

Maybe that's why I've come to value him so highly. He has a knack for getting through my veneer. We always run the risk of becoming so in love with our own bullshit that we don't recognize it for what it is. *Everyone ought to have a built-in bullshit detector.* Thing is – we're way blind to our stupidity most of the time (anyone remember the story of King David and Bathsheba?).

During those times when we've gone off the deep end, what we need is a good solid dose of holy provocation. We need someone to deconstruct our stupidity. We need someone to break down the walls of our indifference.

The problem, of course, is that this feels bad and we're likely to hate the very people that God has brought into our lives to release us from our captivity.

There are two ways of being a prophet. The first involves going to people who have been enslaved and telling them they are free. That is the path of Moses. The second involves going to people who believe they are free and telling them they are slaves. That is the more difficult path of Jesus.

Unknown

We see many examples of prophets in the Bible who were uncouth and offensive to respected persons. Hosea married a prostitute, Jeremiah bought land that had just been

laid desolate (a cultural gaff in the ancient world, tantamount to inviting a curse upon your life), Ezekiel lay on his side in filth for over a year beside a model of Jerusalem, and King Saul even prophesied naked. Jesus was no more orthodox than these, exemplified by his cutting down the fig tree and prophecy of the Temple's destruction, nor was John the Baptist in any way "nice." These are the Founding Fathers of the spiritual underground – talking about holy things in unholy ways. Prophecy is a seditious method of communication – a guerilla tactic designed to upset the sociopolitical applecart. The power lies with the critique of how the world *is* versus how it *ought* to be.

God is calling us all to fight reality . Why? Because "reality" is not the whole story. If you only look with your eyes, you won't see any of the deeper things beneath the surface. You won't see people's dreams, you won't see their hope, you won't see any promise, you won't see aspiration or ambition, and you won't see gladness or joy. All you'll see is the way things are.

And things stink the way they are. They ought to be different.

So we're called to fight reality with promise — to give people an alternative way of understanding how great the world ought to be . To welcome the Kingdom of Heaven to this Earth, starting right here, starting with me, starting with us.

We fight by being a people of holy provocation – writing our own stories and singing our own songs that refuse to let evil be done.

We must become a people of holy disturbance. When we get too comfortable we become afraid of anyone disrupting that comfort, and so we allow ourselves to be lulled into uselessness.

Our task is to expose the world's numbness what's killing it. We're watchmen, warning others of incumbent danger even when they would rather remain ignorantly, blissfully, palliatively, comatose. Our role within the kingdom is to prophesy change.

But change is hard, and telling the truth about what needs to change – especially within the church – is difficult. Participating in the prophetic minority – the collaboration of those like Bud Osborne or Bob Ekblad or Derek Webb or Walter Brueggemann – is a sure way to get yourself tarred and feathered by the good, clean, church-folk.

Yet we must. We must persist in sanctified subversion. But in order to do this we must first be freed from the common misconception that running a church is about keeping people happy.

To reinforce this, I recently started a website as a kind of self therapy called “Mildred is Angry.” I began to understand that a big part of shadowing God meant being an irritant – that faithfully following God causes friction almost everywhere.

I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.

Matthew 10.34

I began to hypothesize about an old lady – the proverbial church lady – who had been alive since the beginning of Time complaining (via email) against God’s people for their needless provocation. I called her Mildred, which just fit somehow.

Here is one of my favorite Mildred moments:

My Dear Eve,

You must know how fond I’ve always been of you (young women ever remind me of my own adolescent delicacy); however, I admit I have cause for some concern.

Three concerns, to be precise.

First, I must inquire as to why you think it’s appropriate to parade about your garden au natural? Certainly God has gifted you with a lovely figure (I, also, am similarly blessed), but that is no excuse for your lack of modesty. Have you no shame?

Second, having watched Adam during his many days at “work” (playing with animals, no less) I should suggest you find a more suitable mate. He is no match for you - grubby and unkempt - and you would be wise to look elsewhere for a husband.

Finally, I must strongly object to your current dietary preferences. Despite the increasing pressure for ladies to look thin and pretty, you simply cannot get the proper proportions to your figure without some adjustments.

Quickly, then, here are my recommendations for how you ought to proceed in a life of greater godliness:

Cover up (for Heaven's sake). You never know who may be watching.

Go exploring. There are other parts of Eden you might enjoy - make friends with some other male company (I know, this is always a tempting offer).

Oh - one more thing - please, eat more fruit.

*Lovingly,
Mildred.*

Mildred was good self-medication. She reminded me that good “church” folk often make for bad religion. Through their kind controls and condescension, many otherwise godly people have derailed the church from her prophetic calling.

Many times I am asked how ‘normal’ people are meant to go about exercising their “prophetic voice,” especially when they don’t want to be offensive. For my part, I’ve tried increasingly to let the gospel do the offending. I’ve got a ways to go, but here are some phrases that have worked their way into my repertoire that help me critique reality, saying *The world is not the way it should be* (criticism) *but things can get better* (hope) *if you get over your bad self and turn to God* (gospel).

That’s not ok. I use this phrase when someone has hurt me, or have done something to someone else that I think they ought to make right. I used to quote Scripture and throw verses at people like *shuriken*, but that never really produced the results I wanted. This has become my new way of saying *don’t do that* and of exercising my spiritual sense of touch, indicating *that doesn’t feel good*.

That’s not right. I say this when I witness something out of my control, beyond my sphere of influence. When I heard about the (initial) cancellation of the National Day of Prayer, for fear that Christians were being shown favoritism at the expense of American Muslims, I thought, *They shouldn’t do that... it doesn’t fix anything, it only makes things worse*.

Stop. Whenever I encounter something that requires immediate opposition – hurtful behaviors, lack of self-control, danger, malice, intent to injure – I respond in such a way as to inform those involved that *I am actively opposing you, and will do whatever I must to keep you from doing what you’re trying to do*

Fix it. When someone tells me about a thing they regret, or about which they're experiencing some guilt, I tell them this. Whenever I feel like *it is morally wrong for you to allow things to continue the way they are* then I think the appropriate, critical response is to get busy and make things right.

You earn the right to criticize when you give your life to an alternative. Picketing doesn't work because you can easily be dismissed as a complainer. Raising money and awareness and putting the funds and attention into an alternative wins you the respect of the community and the curiosity of the media so you can then say *I'm doing this because I'm tired of that. You can too!*

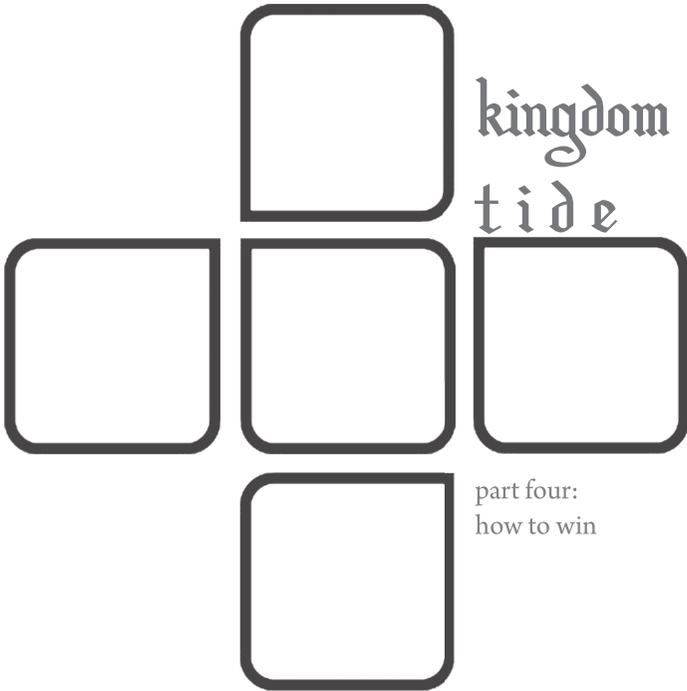
We are the prophetic voice, independent of both left and right wing. For my part, as a dual-citizen of Canada and the United States, it means I get to exercise my right to criticize the governments of two different countries. But reality isn't just political. To be faithful to the mission of God I've got to be critical of the church, and also of my family and myself.

Lastly, a word of caution – not all acts of provocation are holy. Some are just stupid stunts, done in the flesh. Ignore those. They'll fall flat and our foolishness will be exposed. But make sure you take time to discern whether or not something offensive is ungodly or not. Because if it's legitimate and we ignore it, we do so to our own peril.

This week, take some time to confess
your frustration with prophets and poets
and agitators and irritants
your desire to speak boldly about the way things ought to be
your concern for the declining influence
of the Christian majority in the western world

Come before God with a humble heart and repent
for any criticism you leveled that were in the flesh
or borne out of angst instead of originating with God's vision
for the future
for any part you've played in keeping the world the same
instead of cooperating with God to make things better
for any reluctance to speak up.

And then turn around and tell everyone you see the good news
that things will be different
that change is coming
that hope never fails
that God isn't finished yet with the world
that God has a better plan than just consigning us
to live in a mess
that the new creation God has promised us
can be pulled forward into the present moment and experienced
partly now, but wholly and satisfactorily later on
that things are getting better.



Winning...

Spiritual warfare comprises a large portion of the Bible, and occupies a significant position in the lives of every Christian believer. This final section concerns our victory over evil, Satan, and darkness:

*Ultimate Victory
The Middle Distance
Total Victory*

Too many people give up, throw down their toys, and whimper in the corner when adversity, challenge, and temptation come their way. Spiritually, we tend to be like the chubby kid playing dodgeball. We think we're hooped, so we don't even try. But this section of the book teaches you how to pony up, how to keep fighting till the final bell of the final round has sounded.

Ultimate Victory

He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Colossians 2.13-15

There is an old story about a young woman from a poor but pious family. She cried out to God for deliverance from her poverty. She wept before the Lord and God blessed her with a special gift. Her tears turned to diamonds.

When news spread of her gift, many people came to see her – telling her sad stories and then scooping up the jewels once she began to cry. Some, motivated by compassion, tried to tell her funny stories hoping that tears of laughter would produce similar results. They did, but the laughing-diamonds soon returned to their original, watery composition. Only the diamonds of sorrow lasted forever.

Over the years this young woman's heart became increasingly hard and she could no longer cry. And so no one came to see her, and she was left alone to rot.

After some time, in another part of this fabled land, a cruel Duke came looking for his taxes. He came to the home of a newly married young couple, and they could not pay him what they owed since the husband was a bard and made very little income. The Duke

stole away the pretty bride and told her husband he would give her back once he received his payment.

The bard began to travel, desperate to earn the money required to earn back his wife. He traveled far and wide, and for a long time, but was unable to raise the money required.

One day he learned about the woman with the gift of tears and he went to see her. He told her the story of his wife, and of the cruel Duke, but she was unmoved. She told him she was very sorry for him, but that she had no tears left. She was bitter and alone and he would have to find some other way to earn the money.

In despair, the bard sat down and gave up. He tried to cheer himself up by sharing all of his favorite stories with the old woman. Soon she was laughing, and all the laughing-diamonds came running down her face. Her entire floor was covered with jewels and the bard quickly began to scoop them up, unable to believe his good fortune. The old woman warned him that these jewels would soon turn back to tears, but the bard was already off running to see the Duke.

He banged on the castle door and demanded to see his wife. The Duke, greedy as he was cruel, saw only the sack of jewels and threw the bride back to her husband. Joyously, the two of them ran back to thank the old woman.

They ran quickly, for in the distance they could already hear the Duke screaming in rage as he opened the sack full of tears.

This story is a fairy tale that uses something called The Trickster motif, in which a hero outsmarts his adversary and turns their wickedness against them. God of course is a Trickster who outsmarted Satan at his own game. None of the dark powers understood why Christ came into the world, for if they had they would not have pinned him to the cross. Satan, ironically, even entices Judas to betray Jesus and in so doing signs his own death warrant.

Maybe these dark powers were blinded by their own ambition or greed. Maybe, when Christ took fragile human form, they thought, "What luck! Here's our chance to end it all." Regardless, they played right into God's hands. God used Satan's own evil to bring about Satan's own destruction.

Two popular movies illustrate this concept well: *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (Part II) and *The Matrix: Revolutions*. If you are unfamiliar with these stories, then perhaps these examples are difficult to understand. You may, in fact, want to skip over the next few paragraphs. However, for those who are familiar with them (and for whom these next few paragraphs will serve only as reminders of these remarkable narratives), you will recognize some of the most brilliant portrayals of Christian theology ever penned, filmed, or seen.

In the climax of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, the boy sorcerer squares off against his arch-rival, Lord Voldemort. Throughout these books, which transpire in a world hidden behind our own and is run by wizards and witches through magic instead of electricity, Harry Potter (the character) has been heavily pressured to use spells that hurt, wound, or kill others. With one accidental exception, Harry has always refused. The tension in the story grows as we see the long-term effects of Voldemort's persecution on the magical world. He killed Harry's parents. He killed Harry's Godfather. He attacked Harry's home. He manipulated and hurt several of Harry's closest friends. He killed several of Harry's allies. Every time Voldemort's evil strikes, the reader feels a strong desire for him to die. For seven books we wait for Harry to finally execute this magical Hitler.

But he doesn't.

Here's how Harry is like Christ (forgive me, Potter-heads, as I leave out some of your favorite details in favor of expediency). During their final confrontation, Voldemort and Harry each take their final shot, casting their final blow. Voldemort throws a killing spell (*avada kedavra*), but Harry throws a disarming spell (*expelliarmus*). Voldemort's spell rebounds off of Harry and comes back in mid-air, killing him immediately. The Killing Curse intended for Harry, killed Voldemort instead.

Voldemort's hatred caused Voldemort's death.

In the *Matrix*, Keanu Reeves plays a hacker by the name of Neo who is embroiled in a war to save the last dredges of humanity. This war is largely carried out online, in a restricted kind of cyberspace (the matrix) over which Neo exhibits tremendous control. He has two adversaries in the films – Agent Smith within the matrix and the Machines in the real world.

Here's where things get complicated. Agent Smith used to work for the Machines, but has now gone rogue. He has deteriorated into a computer virus. He will corrupt the matrix,

killing all of the humans by reprinting his cyber-DNA over theirs, essentially possessing them in the real world. But his corruption will also destroy the Machines by infecting their mainframe. The Machines, for their part, use the humans as batteries, a power-source derived from the bioelectricity the body generates. They need the humans, but they also need Smith dead.

Neo is like Christ, outsmarting Agent Smith, when – at the climax of the Matrix trilogy – he allows himself to be captured by the Machines in the real world. He cooperates with the Machines and turns himself into an anti-virus inside of the matrix. In the matrix, he fights Smith and allows himself to be defeated. When Smith attempts to imprint himself on Neo, the plan is hatched and Neo, instead of being corrupted, uses the newly-opened pathway into Smith to eliminate the virus. Humanity is spared and the Machines are saved.

Smith's greed caused Smith's death.

Both Harry and Neo demonstrate the willingness of Christ to do whatever it takes to defeat evil. They faced death. They suffered. They refused to compromise.

Christ was willing to pay whatever price was required to defeat Satan. That price was bloody, gruesome, and Hellish.

But it was worth it.

Paul describes Christ's death on the cross in terms of a rescue operation that has liberated humanity from the slavery of sin's dark power. Christ is the Victor over the hostile powers that hold the world in bondage. Because Christ has already overcome Satan – who ultimately controls and designs and energizes all sin (see 1 John 3.8, 12; 4.3) – we, too, can overcome sin and Satan because Christ is alive and at work in us. Evil can be overcome in every way because the Evil One has been dethroned, and the Righteous One has been re-enthroned, taking his rightful place as Lord of All.

Whether we feel it or not, whether it looks like it or not, and whether we believe it or not, evil has been defeated. Its back has been broken. But a defeated foe can still be a dangerous one, and between ultimate victory and total victory lies the middle distance. Our enemy refuses to surrender and is Hell-bent on taking us down with him.

Let's not give him the chance.

This week, take some time to confess
your feelings of weakness and inadequacy in the face
of difficult circumstances and the problems of life
your tendency to forget that the victory has already been won
your willingness, at times, to give up or give in
instead of pressing on for the glory of God.

Come before God with a humble heart and repent
for any lack of participation in spiritual contest
for any overestimation of Satan's power
or underestimation of the victory Christ achieved
on the cross.

And then turn around and tell everyone you see the good news
that Satan has been defeated
that Christ has resumed his proper place as the head
of everything in Heaven and on earth
that the Church has been equipped with the Spirit of God
to continue to mission of Jesus
that the Church is privileged to remove the stain of sin
and death from the world
that Christ is coming back to complete what he first began
on the cross
that those who love and serve Christ Jesus will rule with him
for eternity.

The Middle Distance

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

For in him all things were created: things in Heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in Heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Colossians 1.15-20

A young man came to see me in my office not long ago, confessing a problem with pornography. He asked – as many others have before him, on a wide variety of subjects – why does God not simply take this addiction away? If it's true that Christ has defeated evil, and if it's true that I am no longer a slave to sin, then why can't I stop masturbating and looking at porn?

This young man, sincere in his devotion to Christ and genuinely struggling to live like God wants, is experiencing the heartache of life in the middle distance – that time between Christ’s ultimate victory over evil on the cross and Christ’s final victory over evil in which it is eradicated forever.

Despite the fact that Christ’s death on the cross defeated evil in principle, and has even guaranteed the ultimate end to evil of every stripe, there’s still a bunch of evil spilled and stained across the carpet of the world. We struggle against the powers and principalities of this present darkness, continuing the work Christ began. He came here, in an earthly body, to defeat evil and heal the world. We’re here now, as the Body of Christ, to continue twin works of conquering Satan and healing the world.

That means that we’ve got to fight against evil out there, but also against the evil inside each of us that seeks to corrupt and destroy our families, our spirits, our relationships, and our souls.

This is why the church exists: to defeat evil and heal the world. We provide teaching, love, friendship, experience, support, prayer, strength, hope, and a place in which we can come with our failures, our struggles, and our frustrations to find grace.

God is using us – His church – to execute His divine clean up of the world. His Spirit pushes us out to every corner of the earth and we who used to be slaves to sin and Satan are now the instruments of their defeat. God has always used the foolish and weak things of the world to confound the wise. Now He’s using the weakness of human agency and the foolishness of human cooperation to overthrow the so-called strength of the kingdom of darkness.

We will one day rule with Christ over all the earth (Revelation 5.10; Matthew 19.28; Luke 22.28-30; 2 Timothy 2.12; Revelation 3.21, 0.4-6, 22.5), resuming the very task we were first given in the Garden of Eden. We were stewards then, intended to conserve and conceive God’s creation, and through Christ we have become stewards once more.

But we’re not there yet. For now, we’ve got to contend in the middle distance against the powers and principalities we spoke of in the previous section. I want to take a few moments here to flesh this out further based on Colossians 1 before moving on to how we defeat these powers here and now.

Paul refers to the supernatural powers and personalities at work behind the scenes in our world. There are human powers, and there are spiritual powers. The human powers are

easy to identify. The spiritual powers are less easy, but it is precisely because they are so sly and indistinct that we must be on our guard. There are rulers and authorities intentionally set against us, working to carry out the schemes of the devil (see Ephesians 6.11-12).

In the natural order of things, we might best understand that:

Thrones are the institutions of power
Dominions refer to their sphere of influence
Principalities refer to the people in charge of those thrones
Powers refers to the forces that keep the thrones in play

Yet despite the fact that these human structures exist, they are not *simply* human structures. Medieval scholars used Paul's words to construct an angelic hierarchy (see diagram). Human authority is influenced by these "powers."

The Third Reich, for example, was an institution of power (throne), and its influence spread throughout Europe and into Africa (dominion). Hitler was in charge (principality), and the Reich moved forward with both military and political force (power, natural) but also a sinister energy that sought to consume the world (power, supernatural).

The spiritual world influences the natural world, but that's not to suggest that every non-Christian is somehow demon-possessed, Satanically-controlled, or supernaturally dominated. They are slaves, but they are not drones. The former retains free will but not freedom; the latter has no will but that of the one who holds the remote control.

Paul reminds everyone that these earthly powers originally ordained by God (Romans 13.1-7) have become aberrant and are no longer working the way they should. He then assures his readers that the human institutions and the supra-human principalities will ultimately be reconciled to Christ because of his death on the cross (see Colossians 1.20; Philippians 2.9-11).

To describe Jesus' defeat of these dark powers, Paul uses the imagery of a royal triumph. In a triumph, enemies of the state (usually high-profile captives or enemy generals) are lead publicly through the capital city of the victorious nation so the mob can shout at and humiliate them. When Jesus was arrested, his walk to the cross was like a triumph for the forces of evil. He was shamed at every step by every man, woman, and child. Yet when Jesus was resurrected, he turned the tables on these dark powers, triumphing over them and shaming them in turn.

Jesus has also defeated those powers at work inside of us. Our world is full of Satan's values – consumerism, materialism, nihilism – and full of false powers that seek to capture our allegiance – economy, sexuality, politics. We must guard ourselves against placing these subordinate powers over and above Christ. We must be very shrewd when it comes to how we live.

By all accounts the major battlefield in which we contend against the works of the devil is our mind.

Satan binds the minds of unbelievers so they cannot receive the truth (see 2 Corinthians 4.4), and is ultimately behind all false teaching (see 1 John 4.1-4) leading to legalism, superstition, false doctrine, and a bunch of really stupid ideas about God (see Galatians 4.8-10; Colossians 2.8).

Satan's primary activity in the world now is to get in the way of the church, slow it down, or screw it up from the inside.

Satan is our adversary. He works to entrap church leaders, smear our reputations, seduce young people, and fill our minds with garbage and lies and half-truths about what the Bible really teaches, about who Christ actually was, and about our standing before the Father (see 1 Timothy 3.7, 4.1-7, 5.11-15).

This is why Paul was so adamant that we change the way we think, monitor our beliefs, and study the Scriptures. This trifacta has come to be commonly known as “renewing the mind.” Since Satan most wants our minds to be corrupted, we've got to constantly cleanse our minds and fill them full of things of God.

The battle for our souls is fought in the arena of the *noosphere*. I know that sounds like a made-up word, but it's the technical term for the geography of the mind. It's the landscape of your thoughts, your ambitions, your dreams, and your desires.

If you think of the noosphere as a sort of kingdom, you must also imagine this kingdom under constant attack. Every minute of every day the enemy of your soul floods the noosphere with images and thoughts that deconstruct the rule and reign of Christ in the middle distance. Christ cannot be uprooted completely, but his influence – which is to say his joy, his peace, the love he pours into us and through us to others – can be severely limited. That's not to suggest that you're defenseless, only that most of the time most of us are simply ignorant that there is, in fact, a battle waging in our minds.

In order to combat the enemy, you must contend for the noosphere by:

Listening to good teaching.
Reading good books.
Studying the Scriptures.
Engaging in conversation about the things of God.
Praying.
Challenging our cultural beliefs, norms,
and values against those of Christ.
Allowing ourselves to be shaped by the Spirit, by the Church,
and by the Word.

This is how we win in the middle distance. We begin the war in our brains, and it spills onto the rest of our lives.

That's not to suggest that everything about the spiritual life is cerebral – far from it! But it is to say that our mind is something that must be managed, constantly cleansed, and something over which we have control.

An experience with God – whether in prayer or worship or during time alone – can change you in a moment and have a powerful, transformational effect on your entire life.

But you cannot discipline for an experience.
You can't force an experience to occur.
You can't manufacture an experience, or count on it, or wait around for one to happen.
But you can control what you put in your mind,
and what you allow to stay there,
and what you allow to roam around in your thoughts.

Satan knows this, and is assaulting you at every turn to shove crap in your brains to make you tired, useless, and scared.

You can't hope to come out on top when you refuse to fight back. Fight back by renewing your mind.

Change your thoughts and you will change your life.

This week, take some time to confess
your failure to clean out your mind
your failure to replace your thoughts
your desire to fight back against the enemy of your soul
in the war for your noosphere.

Come before God with a humble heart and repent
for any willingness to surrender the territory of your mind
for any compromise concerning the materials you see, read,
digest, discuss, and in which you participate,
or to which you contribute.

And then turn around and tell everyone you see the good news
that Christ cannot be uprooted
that it's not too late to turn the tide of the battle
for your thoughts
that when you win in the noosphere the effects of that victory
spread to every avenue of life
that the good things of God are always waiting to burst out
and all it takes is for you to remember them, hold on to them,
and unleash them in your thoughts
that right thoughts produce correct action
that correct action produces just habits
that just habits produce healthy life-styles
that healthy lives are fertile soil for peace and trust and hope
and goodness and friendship and love.

Total Victory

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

1 Corinthians 9.24-27

I won a bronze medal for Greco-Roman wrestling at the BC Provincial Games when I was in eighth grade. I've been an all-star in four high-school sports. I played varsity in two sports for two different universities. I received a half-dozen scholarships between academics, athletics, and music. I won the spelling bee in third grade.

But do you really care?

Me neither. That stuff seemed so important then, but now it has almost nothing to do with my life. That's what Paul is getting at in the verses above. Crowns don't last. Kings come and go. Great athletes age, retire, and take a seat on the couch next to the rest of us.

By describing the victory crown – which was made out of olive branches twisted together – on the head of a triumphant winner as a perishable wreath, Paul reminds us that athletic

accomplishments matter about as long as leftover carnations after Mother's Day. No matter how fast you ran, how far you threw, or how many points you scored, it was just a passing moment and all that follows you into the future is a few crumbling leaves.

By contrast, there is an incorruptible crown that will not wither or fade. This crown is special, signified by the Greek, *amarantinos*, which is also the name given to a special flower, the *amanaranth*.

The *amanaranth* has a storied history, appearing in Greek myths, enduring poems (*Paradise Lost*), and even as a device in contemporary novels (like *Speaker for the Dead* by Orson Scott Card) and video games ("Vampire: the Masquerade" for Mac and PC). It has been called the flower of life, the source of vitality, and the bloom of Africa.

An *amanaranth* planted in a garden near a Rose-Tree, thus addressed it: "What a lovely flower is the Rose, a favorite alike with Gods and with men. I envy you your beauty and your perfume." The Rose replied, "I indeed, dear Amanaranth, flourish but for a brief season! If no cruel hand pluck me from my stem, yet I must perish by an early doom. But thou art immortal and dost never fade, but bloomest for ever in renewed youth."

Aesop's Fables, 6th Century BC

Paul wants us to look beyond the present. Look instead to the real prize – the victory of Christ's death and resurrection. To get it, all you've got to do is run with purpose, hit someone in the face, throw yourself into a wall, and shove yourself inside a cage. This incorruptible crown goes to people who live for Christ like a runner, a boxer, a linebacker, and a wrestler (WWE style).

This prize goes to those who live with a deep-ceded conviction that Christian character is worthy of incredible self-sacrifice. It takes the will and discipline of a champion to live like Christ intends.

Piece of cake, right?

Hardly. I know it might seem silly even to mention this, but for the sake of those who might consider themselves deficient or odd, let it be said: Self-discipline is easier said than done. Life is difficult, and adding another level of things we ought to do, or another layer of things we shouldn't do, can be exhausting. We try so hard not to be bad, but it's almost impossible. Even Paul said, "What I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." We try so hard to be good but that, too, is unattainable. *There is no one righteous, not one.*

The real problem, though, with all our attempts at moralizing and behavior modification is that we either get so stringent about rules that we ignore grace; or we get so caught up in authenticity that we dismiss those who care about obedience.

So when Tina gets mad at Bobby for not taking seriously the Scriptural commands to guard your tongue, Bobby often responds by noting that Tina is so worried about profanity that she's broken Christ's prohibition against self-righteous judgmentalism. Tina is a Pharisee, Bobby is a sinner, and no one has any hope of living like God wants.

A few years ago I started thinking that there's got to be an alternative to either manically following all the rules or doing whatever I felt like and trusting that grace would make up the difference. That's why I've taken to the language of Genesis 1 to help me in my Christian life.

In the beginning we are described as men and women made in the image and likeness of God. I was made to be like Him. So were you. We were like shadows of God. And when we live the Christian life, we're not trying to do anything other than what we were originally made to do. In a sense, our Christianity is simply learning how to do what comes natural. You're becoming the person you were born to be.

What could be simpler?

I'm not trying to follow rules, I'm trying to be the person God created by paying attention to the movement of His Spirit inside me. I'm not trying to avoid responsibility or conviction, though, because His Spirit is constantly nudging and guiding me toward paths of righteous living. So rather than [a] walking around with a checklist of things to do/not do, or [b] just going with the flow and trusting it will all come out in the wash, I've chosen to [c] do my best at staying in step with the Spirit and paying attention to all His nuances, hints, and prompts.

When life began for us, we were at play in the Garden with God. That's a great metaphor for understanding how we're meant to live now.

I play this game with my kids. We go into the basement sometimes and turn off all the lights, and then I pull out a flashlight and shine it on my legs and ankles. They line up behind me and try to stay in my shadow. We often fall over giggling or laughing or whatever, but it's fun. And it's easy.

Imagine yourself playing such a game. God is walking in front of you, and your job is to stay in His shadow. As He twists and turns through the busyness of life His shadow twists and turns also. You may slip out of the shadow momentarily, but it's easy enough to get back in. He casts a big shadow. There's lot of room inside the Lord to play.

Most of our lives we've felt wretched and degenerate for every single millisecond spent even one-half centimeter outside of God's shadow. That completely misses the point. That's like someone who stops playing in the middle of the game because they can't win. But that's not playing, that's pouting.

And of course there are always those who like to brag about how good they are at the game. But it's impossible to stay completely in the shadow all of the time. And usually right about the time that someone starts boasting about their skill, they slip right out from behind the Lord and are exposed.

You will win – one way or another – this crown of incorruptibility so long as you don't quit and you don't boast. You win when you stay in step with the Spirit. You win when the desire to please God seeps into every part of your life.

You even win when you die.

The Church Triumphant was the name the medieval Catholics gave to dead Christians reunited with Christ in Heaven. No matter whether they were martyred or died in their old age, every deceased person has now resumed their walk in the Garden with God. This is victory.

The clear promise of Scripture is that, in the end, the conflicts of this world will finally be put to bed and Christ will gather up everything into himself.

But in the meantime here are the rules: No pouting and no boasting. Just get behind God and go for it.

This week, take some time to confess
your tendency to judge
your tendency to look for clear cut rules
and follow them obsessively
your tendency to ignore the rules and do whatever you like
your tendency to treat God's grace cheaply.

Come before God with a humble heart and repent
for any failure to shadow God
for any disregard for personal holiness
or for holding moral perfection on par
with the grace of Christ.

And then turn around and tell everyone you see the good news
that life isn't about rules, but about a relationship
that Christ isn't a principle, but a person we get to know
and love and follow
that Christ is living his resurrection through,
and in, and with you
that the Christian life isn't a problem to be solved,
or a set of questions to be answered,
but the Kingdom of God
alive and at work
inside you.

Conclusion

The blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church.
Tertullian, 3rd century Christian theologian

When Nero was Emperor of Rome, he commanded an elite cadre of special soldiers known as The Emperor's Wrestlers. They were said to be the fiercest warriors the world had ever seen, the pride of the Empire, and the scourge of the world.

After learning of a tiresome rebellion in Gaul, Nero dispatched his Wrestler's to put an end to the commotion once and for all. Under the command of their Praetor, Vespasian, they marched through the cold winter all the way from Rome to modern-day France.

In those days, Christian spirituality was still outlawed by the state, but the message of Christ was so contagious that the gospel was spreading like wildfire. Nero particularly hated Christians because of their refusal to acknowledge his divinity. He thought of them as atheists, intolerant and troublesome beyond measure. Tales of mass-conversion soon reached Nero and he began to be afraid that some of the Christian contagion may have spread to his favored soldiers. Nero sent word to Vespasian and ordered him to gouge out the Christian infection from the camp.

When Vespasian received the Emperor's commands he acted immediately. He assembled his men in front of a frozen lake and requested that those who had sworn allegiance to Christ in defiance of the Empire make themselves known. Forty men stepped out without



hesitation, and Vespasian made them a generous offer: You have until sundown to recant. *Repent of your Christian faith and your lives will be spared.*

That evening the Wrestlers assembled once more, and once more forty proclaimed they were willing to die for the cause of Christ. Vespasian ordered that they be stripped of their military kit and marched into the lake naked, where they would slowly freeze to death.

The forty soldiers complied, but began at once to chant their defiance of the Empire and their allegiance to Jesus Christ:

*Forty soldiers for thee, O Christ,
for thee the victory, for thee the Victor's Crown.*

All through the night Vespasian and his faithful Wrestler's heard this chant. It never wavered. It never paused. It never stopped. Not until the sun broke the horizon the following morning. Far from bringing added heat, the daybreak was accompanied by snow and sleet and hail.

Only then did the chant falter, and die off, before resuming moments later slightly altered:

*Thirty-nine soldiers for thee, O Christ,
for thee the victory, for thee the Victor's Crown.*

Vespasian, intrigued, looked up from the fire and saw one man coming out of the lake. He collapsed on the shore and was immediately attended by his former fellows, all of whom eagerly welcomed him back to their ranks.

But not Vespasian. In part admiration of the martyrs and their Christ, and in part fury at the weakness of the coward, Vespasian threw off his own armor and marched out in the lake, resuming the cry that accompanied his death as a lover and follower of Jesus Christ:

*Forty soldiers for thee, O Christ,
for thee the victory, for thee the Victor's Crown.*



We began *Kingdomtide* with the story of Olivier de Vienne and his conversion of the brute Fierabras. It was a story of victory. Olivier rescued the distressed Christians, returned the sacred relics from the Saracens, and won over the heart of his enemy to the cause of Christ.

We conclude with the story of Vespasian. It is also a story of victory. Unlike the Paladins, Vespasian died without seeing the merits of his sacrifice. Yet his victory was no less sweet. Nearly two millennia later we are still telling the story of Vespasian's courage and commitment. He was welcomed as a hero in Heaven, and he is celebrated by the church as a hero of our shared history.

Christ needs heroes. He needs men and women who will fight with no guarantee of victory or fame. He is looking for those who care more about the gospel than about their comfort, wealth, or good reputation. He is looking for people who labor in obscurity, work without reward, and never quit.

He is looking for the lost sheep of Israel. He is looking for his lost coin. He is looking for his sons and daughters.

He is looking for you.

david mcdonald
friday, may 27 2011, at home



BENEDICTION

May God grant to all of you
to believe on him who rose again,
and to look for him who is gone up,
and is to come again,
who sits on high,
and is here with us,
in the steadfastness of his faith.

Do not think that because he is now absent in the flesh,
he is therefore absent in the Spirit.
He is here present in the midst of us
ready to present those
who are coming
in the Holy Ghost to the Father,
and to say:

*Behold, here am I
and here are the children whom the Father has given me
– to whom be the glory forever.*

Amen.

Cyril of Jerusalem, 4th Century Bishop of Jerusalem