

april-june 2026

goodfaith

MAGAZINE



Common Wisdom, Shared Hope

HOW INTERFAITH UNDERSTANDING DEEPENS CHRISTIAN COMMITMENT



A SERMON FOR EVERY SUNDAY*

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FROM THE EDITOR

Years ago, I read a blog by a pastor explaining why he respects interfaith dialogue but doesn't often participate in it.

The image he used resonated with me, and I've frequently used it to describe my own approach. (The post has long since been lost, so I am acting on my memory, which has likely added to and subtracted from the metaphor.)

He described his work as a Christian as digging for treasure in a plot of land entrusted to him. Over his lifetime, he's found a lot of gold and other valuable items. He's learned about the nature of God and the world, and a few helpful ways to live among and treat his neighbors. He's also found some junk, which doesn't legitimize the treasures he's found, but gives him something against which to contrast the valuable items he has discovered. He has committed himself to keep digging as long as he is alive.

But there are other plots of land. Some of them are adjacent to his; others are far off on the horizon. Occasionally, he'll climb up from the hole he is in and see others on those plots of land also digging for treasure. He sees some of them emerging as well, smiles on their faces in recognition of what they've found. Sometimes he wonders about the treasures they've dug up. Occasionally, he'll see some people beckoning others over to their allotted plots of land. Some are like him, though. They are content with what they have found and happy for what others have found, but are committed to continually mining new depths of their own land for the treasures they have yet to discover.

He looks at people on other plots of land and, as a gesture of respect, catches their eyes, nods, and tips his hat to them, then returns to digging. There is no need to learn about what they've found or even prove that his treasures are greater than theirs — just an acknowledgment

that we are all trying our best, tilling the ground that is ours to till.

Although this has largely been my approach to interfaith dialogue, the metaphor has its obvious challenges. What if the treasures others have found are fake, nothing more than fool's gold? Is it my responsibility to tell them? That's a difficult question, but not nearly as dire as its corollary — what if the treasures I have dug up are dime-store plastic toys that have somehow survived years of being buried underground?

I sometimes wonder whether people involved in interfaith and interreligious dialogue place too much faith in the belief that if we just keep digging deeper, we'll find a single source of all truth. But I also wonder if the reason many of us don't dig deeper is that we are afraid we will tap into a reservoir of living water that runs beneath and connects all the plots of land. How do we respond if we find out it's all connected?

I am a novice when it comes to interfaith conversations, but I have learned that it takes a lot of humility and a high tolerance for listening. It requires grace when all the questions are asked and answered — and when not every possible religious tradition can be represented at once, especially in a limited time or space.

In this issue of *Good Faith Magazine*, we attempt to begin the conversation. It may seem clunky and uneven at times, which, I have found, is a feature of interfaith dialogue. Whether you see it as a respectful nod to our neighbors over the horizon or an invitation to dig deeper, we hope you find the conversation helpful and hopeful. **GFM**



Craig Nash

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Rooted in Resilience, Rising in Resistance, Reimagining Tomorrow

By Mitch Randall

Democracy Forward hosted its 2026 “Together for Democracy” conference earlier this year in Washington, D.C. Advocacy groups from across the country gathered in the nation’s capital in late January to demonstrate their commitment to democracy and counter the rise of authoritarianism. Speakers worked from the conference theme, “Rooted in Resilience. Rising in Resistance. Reimagining Tomorrow.” At a time when anxiety is widespread across the country about a variety of issues, Skye Perryman (GFM board member) and her team at Democracy Forward are bringing groups together to fulfill the constitutional promise of creating a more perfect union for everyone.



Perryman offered this inspiration in her opening remarks: “A crisis can be catalyzed to bring about real change.” Democracy Forward has filed more than 600 legal cases over the past year. DF’s legal challenges to authoritarianism constitute the most significant and most successful affirmative legal effort against the

executive branch in U.S. history. Their lawyers have a 70–80% success rate in court, with fewer than 5% of cases reaching, or expected to reach, the U.S. Supreme Court. Perryman credits these wins to “collaboration, organizing, creativity, and preparation,” defying conventional wisdom that elite firms and a favorable Supreme Court composition were prerequisites.

Dolores Huerta, labor leader and icon in the civil rights movement and co-founder of United Farm Workers, reminded the crowd, “It is not so much about who are the people in power, but who put them in power.” Grassroots organizing and advocacy are the greatest tools pro-democracy groups have at their disposal. “While we go through these turbulent times,” Huerta continued, “we’ve got to start preparing for the future, and that future that we want, that future to make it in our image, in the image of democracy and everything that we are fighting for.”

Another often-used phrase during the conference was, “Democracy is not a spectator’s sport.” If people of good faith truly want a better future for their

children and grandchildren, they need to act now — not wait for someone else.

Resilience

One of the common themes running through pro-democracy groups right now is the toll this struggle is taking on their mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual health. Fighting for democracy and justice can be absolutely exhausting and isolating. However, this truth is worth remembering: we are not alone in this fight.

Jesus reminded his followers, “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 11:28–29).

Pro-democracy people of good faith are not alone. There is a vast network of individuals and organizations working for a better tomorrow. Finding community and purpose can offer a much-needed boost mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Resilience does not have to mean simply surviving; it can be an opportunity to thrive toward a healthier future. Resilience leads to resistance to power and to reimagining a hopeful future.

Resistance

New York Attorney General Letitia James began her remarks with a stark warning: “The nation once again stands at a crossroads between justice and complicity, and the ‘Keepers of the Dream’ must choose justice, as silence equals complicity.”

Resistance is an act of faithfulness for those seeking a better world for others. While many feel as though people of faith should be absolutely pacifist, Jesus taught his followers to be peaceful resisters of evil. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also” (Matthew 5:39b). Many think his lesson is one on pacifism, but it is really about peaceful resistance against those in power.

In ancient cultures, slapping another person required a class hierarchy. Someone from a lesser class would never slap someone from a higher class. When Jesus suggested offering the other cheek, it was an act of resistance and defiance. The person

who was slapped was saying, “Your privilege and power will not make me back down.”

Resistance to injustice is an act of faith.

Reimagining

Michele Goodwin, professor of constitutional law and global health policy and faculty director of the O’Neill Institute for National and Global Health Law, and Michael McAfee, chief executive officer of PolicyLink, discussed the importance of reimagining issues, the Constitution, and the country at large. Their conversation produced this vital truth: “Progress is not linear and is often met with significant backlash, requiring a long-term commitment.” Goodwin spoke to the need for a “Reproductive Justice New Deal” that “treats safety, dignity, and family autonomy as comprehensive justice issues across policy domains.”

McAfee went further, suggesting the Constitution needs to be examined so that it works for everyone, not just the privileged and elite. As a country committed to continuous improvement and recognizing that the Constitution is a living document, it has continually reimagined itself to include and empower more people.

That is the brilliance of the American experiment — a country always willing to acknowledge its flaws and better itself.

Be Courageous

U.S. House Representative Jason Crow (CO-6), a former U.S. Army Captain, inspired the crowd when he framed the current dynamic as a “contest of contagions — fear versus courage —” and asserted that courage is contagious and spreading.

People of good faith can no longer remain silent or stand on the sidelines. It is time to be courageous and to get involved. Momentum is building across the country — and around the world — as people come together to say “no” to wannabe dictators and “yes” to democracy.

As Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson reminded their generation, so let this generation have ears: “Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God.”

Be courageous.

Lead with resilience.

Act with resistance.

And, reimagine a better tomorrow. GFM

Reading White Supremacy for Filth as the American Government Bans Words

By Starlette Thomas

Books saved me, my personhood, my childhood, my femininity, and most importantly, my imagination. It might also have saved my teeth from cavities, as Maya Angelou reasoned: “The best candy shop a child can be left alone in is the library.” What likely started as an escape quickly became my own world. Book fort turned second home, my books were always happy to see me and to have me around. Each page felt like a welcome home sign. I always belonged here, there, and wherever the author wanted to take me.

Consequently, I took each page seriously. Never dog-eared, I always remembered where we left off. Turned each page with the expectation that we were going somewhere better than my shared bedroom, which wasn’t colorful, bright, or girly. Judy Blume’s *Are You There, God? It’s Me, Margaret* led me to Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. “There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you,” she wrote. Angelou named my reality, affirmed my experience, and quickly became my role model. She reared me well into womanhood, teaching me that I am “a phenomenal woman” — despite what my home life, American history, and society said about me. I read every one of her books, hoping to get closer to her and, by extension, to myself, to somehow experience her in the flesh and feel better in my own.

It happened while I was in graduate school at Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School in Rochester, New York. Black Active Minds, a group I had been a part of while a student at Buffalo State College, was sponsoring the event. I quickly volunteered to be a part of it. Angelou and I would share a few minutes on her tour bus, where she signed my book before sharing a stage. She stood behind me, just offstage but within earshot. I could hear her responding, affirming my poetry. Angelou even personally complimented me before offering her remarks, which still feels surreal.

My pastor, the Rev. Dr. Troy Anthony Bronner, had announced my participation during a Sunday morning worship service, and the members celebrated with me. Of all the books I had read, including rags-to-riches



Starlette Thomas
and Maya Angelou

stories, I couldn’t believe this was happening to me. To my surprise, several church members came to the event with flowers and personalized cheers directed at me. They even asked me to sign their program. Stunned, I thought to myself, “Really?” but obliged them.

I had even been given the opportunity to name the gathering, theming the event “Poetry: When Words Unite.” Words had brought Maya Angelou and me together. Books had made this moment possible, creating an intergenerational bond through shared suffering, resilience, and creativity. Angelou wrote her way out of the narratives offered to her, and so would I. There were better words to live by; she had claimed them for herself, and so would I. The predictable and tired narratives of patriarchy, misogyny, racism, and white-body supremacy would and should be interrupted with great regularity by embodied storytellers, who live to tell stories apart from tyrannical narrators who won’t let you get a word in edgewise — even though it’s your story to tell.

“The Black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the same time that she is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of power,”

Angelou wrote in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. She continued, “The fact that the adult American Negro female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste and even belligerence. It is seldom accepted as an inevitable outcome of the struggle won by survivors and deserves respect if not enthusiastic acceptance.” These misogynists, racists, and white supremacists want to story your body and tie your tongue before you find your voice so that you struggle to say what happened to you.

Silencing you is a part of the violence done to your body. The dismissal of a woman’s voice denies her lived experiences. But the books told a different story. Caged birds could and did sing.

“The caged bird sings with a fearful trill,
of things unknown, but longed for still,
and his tune is heard on the distant hill,
for the caged bird sings of freedom.”

From one caged bird to another, I tell you, reading can be liberating, freeing us of the hand-me-down narratives, generalized and sized to fit all people of a particular marginalized and ostracized community.

I read to expand my horizons, to step outside of the nook comfort zones of racism, capitalism, and sexism. Because there’s more to the story and more sides to it, as I am not a one-dimensional character, not just a woman or an African American, racialized as black. No, I require more words than that — even though the Trump administration has compiled a list of more than 250 words and directed federal agencies to limit and avoid saying them. So, let’s say a few of them. These words include activists, advocacy, affirmative action, antiracism, antiracist, belong, bias, black, community, community diversity, community equity, confirmation bias, critical race theory, cultural competence, diversity, equity and inclusion, environmental justice, equal opportunity, equality, hate speech, identity, ideology, implicit bias, inclusion, injustice, integration, marginalized, minorities, multicultural, oppression, prejudice, privilege, race, race and ethnicity, racial equality, racial identity, racial justice, racism, segregation, sense of belonging, social justice, stereotypes, trauma, underprivileged, underrepresented, underserved, understudied, undervalued, victim, vulnerable, white privilege, woman, women, women and underrepresented. No surprise there. Unoriginal, white-body supremacy tells the same old story while leaving out the words that don’t fit its narrative, which is why I decided to read white supremacy for filth.

For over a year, I have read from a selection of books curated to address the ills of white-body supremacy

and shared each author’s findings with an online audience. These books challenge and undermine the credibility of white-body supremacy, racism, and its progeny while attempting to break the spellbinding nature of what Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields name as “racecraft.” Because, as the authors conclude,

“Distinct from race and racism, racecraft does not refer to groups or to ideas about group traits, however odd both may appear in close-up. It refers instead to mental terrain and to pervasive belief. Like physical terrain, racecraft exists objectively; it has topographical features that Americans regularly navigate, and we cannot readily stop traversing it. Unlike physical terrain, racecraft originates not in human nature but in human action and imagination; it can exist in no other way.”

“In human action and *imagination*.” Race is an imagined difference acted out, “a tragic incarnation,” as named by Brian Bantum in *The Death of Race: Building a New Christianity in a Racial World*. I believe we can read our way out of it.

Reading White Supremacy for Filth is an ongoing digital series that invites an online assembly to gather around books that undermine the credibility of race and its progeny, but especially white-body supremacy. Ranging from new releases to first editions, I aim to initiate discussions around the taboo talking points of white-body supremacy that are named and explained on one page after another. Turning the page on racialized identities, reframing, and reclaiming the narrative of what it means to be a human being requires that we highlight race as a caste system, a social hierarchy, a “pigmentocracy.” Not just a literary experience but a semantic exercise in exorcising the ghosts of America’s whitewashed history. Considering the return of book bans and the ongoing erasure of African American and First Nation history, the invitation to read white supremacy for filth is a cosmic calling to kin-keeping. If you have ears to hear me, then won’t you join me? **GFM**



Isn't Pride a Sin?



By Kali Cawthon-Freels

June is approaching, and with it, an abundance of rainbow swag. Soon, stores will carry shirts that say “Born This Way,” and my social media timeline will look akin to the inside of a Skittles bag. It’s a bright, celebratory time of year.



Unfortunately, we’ll also see an influx of church marquees saying things like “Pride comes before the fall,” “God hates Pride,” and “Pride is a Deadly Sin.” For some in these communities, it’s a time to loudly (perhaps even proudly) say things like “love the sinner, hate the sin” — as if that statement is anything other than the sin of judgment dressed up in a mask of false piety.

First, the Seven Deadly Sins aren’t listed in Scripture. Sure, we see admonitions against greed and the like, but they are never grouped together as the Seven Deadly Sins. Are the seven concepts, lumped together, things we ought to avoid in order to be decent people? Yes. Are they set apart by the authors of Scripture as an especially egregious list? No, not at all. This list was developed by some leaders of the early Catholic Church in the sixth century CE. To say “the

Bible says ‘pride’ is one of the Seven Deadly Sins” is simply false.

Even if pride is listed as a sin in the Bible, we have to consider the nuances of biblical interpretation. Too often, folks believe that translation is a perfect one-to-one ratio: one word in biblical Hebrew has only one equivalent in English, and so on. That’s not the case at all, even in modern languages. Sometimes one word in biblical Hebrew has multiple English equivalents, or one word in English has multiple corresponding words in Greek (as in the three different words for “love” we see in the New Testament).

With all this in mind, consider what, exactly, we mean by pride. There are many contexts in our lives where pride is considered a good thing, perhaps even virtuous. Are we not supposed to have pride in our work? Aren’t we supposed to tell our kids we’re proud of them when they overcome a challenge or accomplish something praiseworthy? Aren’t we supposed to tell our spouses, “I’m proud of you,” when they complete a project at work or earn a promotion? If pride is truly a bad thing, why are we taught to express it in so many of our relationships?

Furthermore, is pride a bad thing when we express it as a community? What happens four days after Pride

"In a society where we are constantly told what we need to be ashamed of — whether our salary, our relationship status, our weight, our credit score, or too many other things to name — pride becomes a balm that nudges our souls toward healing."

Month ends? Will we chastise folks on July 4 when they shamelessly sing, "I'm proud to be an American?" Can you imagine all those same churches preaching "Pride comes before the fall" on the Sunday of July 4?

We know there's a time and a place for pride, because the pride Scripture warns us against isn't the same as the warm feeling that rises in our chest when we watch someone we love succeed or feel deep gratitude for our community. There's a difference between harmful arrogance and the self-assurance of your humanity or a job well done, be it your own or someone you care about.

When the queer community talks about pride, we aren't talking about arrogance. We aren't talking about the pompous hubris that tells us it's okay to look down on other people because they believe differently than we do, or love differently than we do, or understand God differently than we do. We aren't talking about the posture of one's heart that allows someone to believe they are better than their neighbor.

When LGBTQ+ people express pride, we're expressing the same sentiment God expresses at Jesus's baptism. Jesus knows that John is baptizing people in the Jordan River, so he goes to him to be baptized. John protests, but agrees to do it when Jesus insists. When Jesus comes up out of the water, the clouds part and the Spirit of God descends on Jesus in the form of a dove. God's voice resounds from the heavens, saying, "This is my son, in whom I am well pleased."

What does it mean to be "well pleased" with someone? The Greek word used in the Matthean account of Jesus's baptism is *eudokeó*, which can mean to "think well of" or to "specially approve of." To think well of someone might include that warm feeling that rises in our chests when someone we love takes an action that's brave. In other words, we might understand that moment as God saying, "That's my

son, and I'm proud of him." Not exactly the Deadly Sin we were conditioned to believe pride to be, is it?

What, exactly, is God proud of here? In this moment, Jesus is taking the first step toward accepting his messianic identity. He's effectively coming out, announcing the beginning of his ministry. He steps into the water, receives his baptism, and is praised for taking these public steps of accepting who he is. From this perspective, it's easy to see that God is proud of Jesus for embracing his God-given identity.

That's exactly what LGBTQ+ people are celebrating when we proclaim "Happy Pride" each June. We're celebrating the bravery it takes to claim the identities we've been given. We're honoring the bravery it takes to step into the public arena and show the world who we are. Not only are we celebrating these steps in our own lives, but we're stepping in for every LGBTQ+ person who should have heard loved ones say, "I'm proud of you," after coming out, but instead had to endure judgment from those closest to them. Here, we step in to follow God's example in saying, "I'm proud of you."

This year, how might you understand pride as a spiritual discipline of compassion? Not the pride that's arrogant and demeans our neighbors, but the pride that empowers each of us to accept who we are and to celebrate alongside our neighbors when they learn to love who God created them to be. That kind of pride is transformative; you already know that to be true. You know how powerful it is for someone to see you — truly see you — and tell you, "I'm proud of you." How might you bless others in your life with that same pride?

In a society where we are constantly told what we need to be ashamed of — whether our salary, our relationship status, our weight, our credit score, or too many other things to name — pride becomes a balm that nudges our souls toward healing. By following the example God offers, we are equipped to be stewards of that healing. All we have to do is speak.

If no one's told you lately, beloved, I'm proud of you. Now, go share that pride with someone who needs that affirmation. Let it heal you both of the sins of this world. **GFM**



A SERMON

FOR EVERY SUNDAY

Sermon provided for the second Sunday in Lent

Brother From a Different Mother

Dr. Imad Enchassi



Editor's Note: In recognition of the interfaith theme of this issue of Good Faith Magazine, we are sharing an excerpt from a sermon given for "A Sermon for Every Sunday," by Imad Enchassi. It has been edited lightly for space and readability.

As-salaamu alaykum — a greeting of peace.

When a Muslim speaks of Abraham — or as we call him, Ibrahim — we are not speaking about someone who belongs to “the other.” We are speaking about someone deeply loved, someone mentioned in our daily prayers. We are a beautiful family, a family that has so much in common.

Let me greet you first with the greeting of peace. In Hebrew: *Shalom aleikhem*. In Aramaic: *Salaam alaikum*. In Arabic: *Assalamu alaikum*. If those sound familiar, it is because we are one family, sharing roots in the Semitic languages. However you say it, it means the same thing — “peace, y’all.” We come from the same origin.

Genesis 16 tells the story of Abraham and his wife Sarah, who could not have children. Sarah asked Abraham to take another wife, Hagar. Hagar bore Abraham his first son, Ishmael — the beginning of our shared family story. Abraham, peace be upon him, left Hagar and the infant Ishmael in the desert. In her desperation, Hagar cried out to God, and God provided a well of water. Muslims believe that well still flows today, and we still drink from it. From



the line of Ishmael, we believe, came the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him — a descendant of Abraham.

So if you are Jewish or Christian, please meet your Muslim brother. I am your brother from a different mother, but we share the same father. When Prophet Muhammad was asked who he was, he said: “I am the prayer of my father Abraham, the prophecy of my brother Moses, the hymn of my brother David, and the glad tidings of my brother Jesus.”

Muslims believe in Jesus — in his virgin birth, his ascension, his return, and that he is the Messiah. Mary holds a place of extraordinary honor in the Qur’an; she is the only woman mentioned by name and even has an entire chapter dedicated to her. Before religious labels existed, the Qur’an describes Abraham as *hanif* — one devoted purely to God alone.

We also share Abraham’s story of hospitality. The Qur’an tells of Abraham rushing to feed strangers without asking their ethnicity or status. He would not eat alone; he always sought to welcome a guest. This spirit of hospitality is part of our shared inheritance.

We share even the story of sacrifice. Genesis 22 and Qur’an chapter 37 both tell of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son. Here, our traditions differ — Jews and Christians understand Isaac as “the son,” while Mus-

lims understand it to be Ishmael. Yet the Qur'an shifts the focus away from argument about the past and toward responsibility in the present: that generation has passed, and now it is our turn to earn righteousness.

Across our traditions, Abraham carries the same title: the friend or beloved of God. The Arabic word *Al-Khalil*, also connected to the Hebrew name Hebron, describes one whose love for God fills every part of their being. In Arabic, even the word for a pickle — *mukhallal* — comes from the same root, suggesting something completely permeated. Abraham's love for God penetrated every part of who he was.

Muslims honor Ibrahim so deeply that our very name is connected to him. The word Muslim means "one who submits to the will of God." Through submission comes *salaam* — peace — and *salama* — salvation. The Qur'an describes Abraham and his son submitting themselves completely to God, and from that act comes the spiritual meaning at the heart of Islam itself.

Each year, Muslims commemorate Abraham's willingness to sacrifice through one of our major holidays, Eid al-Adha, the Festival of Sacrifice. Abraham is honored as one of the great prophets, second only to Moses in frequency of mention in the Qur'an, with Jesus following. Abraham is described as an "imam for humanity," a spiritual leader for all people, not just one community.

The Qur'an even says, "Abraham alone was a nation." Some scholars explain this to mean that Abraham stood alone in his commitment to monotheism; others say it reflects how generations and nations have drawn guidance from him. Either way, he is remembered as the father of nations.

Muslims also associate Abraham with some of our holiest places. The Kaaba in Mecca — the sacred sanctuary toward which Muslims pray — is believed to have been rebuilt by Abraham and his son Ishmael. Every act of pilgrimage performed there connects back not to Muhammad, but to Abraham. Pilgrims drink from the Zamzam well, remembering Hagar's cry and God's mercy. Through these rituals, Muslims see themselves as continuing the story of a prophetic family.

In Islamic tradition, even the practices of prayer trace back to Abraham. Prophet Muhammad taught that many aspects of Muslim worship — prayer, pilgrimage, and devotion — continue the tradition of Ibrahim.

One of the most meaningful honors comes during daily prayer. Muslims pray five times a day, and in every prayer we send blessings upon Abraham alongside bless-

"The Qur'an refers to Jews and Christians as *Ahl al-Kitab*, often translated 'People of the Book.'

But the Arabic word *ahl* means family — the people who belong to your home, your heart."

ings upon Muhammad. Ten times each day, we invoke Abraham's name in gratitude and remembrance. His story is not distant history; it lives within daily worship.

Because of this, when I sit with Jews or Christians, I do not feel like a visitor among strangers. I feel like I am sitting with cousins — brothers and sisters from different mothers. The Qur'an refers to Jews and Christians as *Ahl al-Kitab*, often translated "People of the Book." But the Arabic word *ahl* means family — the people who belong to your home, your heart. That is a powerful idea: people of earlier scriptures are described as family.



Yet too often we maximize our differences and minimize our similarities. As a professor at Oklahoma City University, I sometimes ask students to map the beliefs of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam using overlapping circles. Statement after statement, they discover how much they intersect. Visually, they realize there is more shared ground than separation.

Perhaps that is Abraham's enduring lesson. He reminds us that faith is not only about identity or labels, but about devotion, hospitality, and surrender to God. The traditions that claim him are branches of the same family tree, nourished by the same roots.

So I leave you with the greeting with which we began — a greeting shared across languages and centuries:

**Assalamu alaikum.
Shalom aleikhem.
Salaam alaikum.
Peace, y'all.**



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ABOUT THIS ISSUE

One of the most meaningful aspects of the Christian calendar — the rhythm by which we orient our movement as we seek to follow Jesus — is how it rarely fits neatly within the parameters of the other calendars that dictate our lives. In fact, it often stands in stark contrast to them. For example, American culture has essentially shifted the Christmas season from the moment the last trick-or-treater knocks on our doors at Halloween (if not before) to the moment we wake up from our Christmas dinner nap. After that, we put away the decorations, Google the best diet plans for the new year, and begin planning how we will dig ourselves out of the financial hole we dug over the past two months. Yet the Christian calendar requires something altogether different from us. We do not begin the Christmas story until Christmas Day (imagine that), and it continues several days into the new year.

For a Bible study reading plan, especially one largely oriented around Sundays, these contrasting calendars can present challenges, since the beginning of a liturgical season rarely aligns with the beginning of other seasons. This issue of Good Faith Bible Studies, however, is different. Our first study falls at both the beginning of the month and at what is difficult to argue is the highest point of our lives as Christians — Easter. Is there a better place to begin?

As you follow along, from the Easter texts to reflections on several psalms, as well as studies on Amos and Philemon, we hope you take time to celebrate this joyous season, both in your personal lives and in the communities with which you study these texts. It truly is the greatest story ever told.

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THE BIBLE STUDY PODCAST



A new episode will be available every week to correspond with the weekly lessons on all streaming platforms. Hosted by Craig Nash and Hayoung Park.

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JOHN 20:1-18

EASTER SUNDAY

Confusion, Recognition, Witness

By Jennifer Garcia Bashaw

John's account of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection differs significantly from those in the other Gospels. He crafts stories that help readers find themselves in the narrative. John is especially good at using characters to teach deeper lessons about faith and following Jesus. In John's resurrection narrative, we find several examples of individuals at various stages of understanding and faith regarding Jesus and his resurrection.

One example of faith is Mary Magdalene. Mary is the first to find the empty tomb in John. This narrative detail departs from the other Gospel accounts, which report that more than one woman visits the tomb on Sunday morning. It seems that John wants to focus on one particular woman disciple and her interaction with the risen Christ.

CONFUSION

After Mary discovers the frightening fact of the missing body, she

runs to tell the disciples about it. Mary's first assumption is not that Jesus had risen from the dead but that someone had moved Jesus' body. She returns to the tomb after telling the other disciples and sees two angels, yet she doesn't exhibit the catalytic faith response we might expect. This key disciple of Jesus who followed him to the cross and showed up at the tomb is at first quite lost when it comes to understanding the resurrection or recognizing the truth about Jesus.

Mary is not the only one to struggle initially with believing in Jesus's resurrection. John tells us that two of the most famous disciples of Jesus, Peter and "the beloved disciple," run to the tomb after Mary reports that it's empty, and when they peek inside, they don't recognize what's going on either. As John tells us in chapter 20, verse 9, Peter and the other disciple "didn't yet understand the Scripture, that Jesus must rise again from the dead." They are eyewitnesses to the empty tomb, and they have no idea what's going on. And what about the rest of the disciples?

Mary later approaches them, saying, "I have seen the Lord!" but they do not run into the streets to rejoice. They stay hidden in a room, petrified of the Jewish authorities, until Jesus shows up

right in the middle of them to alleviate their fears.

It is in the context of this misunderstanding and fledgling faith that we should interpret the second half of this passage, the part that some scholars identify as an ancient literary genre called a *recognition scene*. When John recounts Mary's encounter with Jesus, her initial response appears consistent with the confusion of Peter and the Beloved Disciple after their encounter at the tomb. She mistakes Jesus for the gardener and desperately begs him, "If you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."

But then Jesus speaks her name. In ancient literature, recognition scenes were a common trope that tended to follow a set formula. Most of these scenes utilized dramatic means of recognition called "tokens," signs that proved or unveiled a person's true identity. For example, in the story of Electra from Aeschylus's *Libation Bearers* (a Greek play from the 5th century BCE), Orestes offers his sister Electra a lock of hair that convinces her that he has, in fact, returned from the dead.

RECOGNITION

The token in Mary's story is not something she can touch but is something she hears: Jesus's voice calling her name. John does not

explain exactly why Jesus' voice jolts Mary into recognition. Perhaps she had heard him say her name like that countless times, and his inflection struck a chord of familiarity in her. Or perhaps John is using this recognition scene to demonstrate something deeper about Jesus and faith. The theme of recognizing Jesus's voice has been mentioned already in John, back in chapter 10, in a passage sometimes known as the Good Shepherd discourse.

In that mini-sermon, Jesus announces, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me, just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd."

When Mary recognizes Jesus as the Good Shepherd by hearing his voice, readers are to recall this prescient moment from Jesus's teaching. Jesus claims that he would lay down his life for his sheep, and not just for the sheep you might expect to be in his flock, but for all those who listen to his voice.

Mary hears Jesus's voice and recognizes him right after he has, in fact, laid down his life for his sheep. And how countercultural, and yet appropriate for Jesus's ministry, is it that the sheep who recognizes her shepherd's voice,

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who is the first one to see him and to tell the good news of his resurrection, is a woman. Not one of the men who make up Jesus's twelve, but a woman whose testimony would not even be counted in the patriarchal society she lived in.

WITNESS

Mary may have struggled somewhat with her understanding when she first encountered the empty tomb. Still, she demonstrates that she is primary among the followers of Jesus when she is the one who hears his voice, believes in his resurrection, and obeys his call to proclaim. It is no wonder that Mary Magdalene is known throughout church history as the *apostolorum apostola* or "the apostle to the apostles."

John uses the story of Mary Magdalene at the tomb to reveal some key truths about following Jesus. Sometimes, the most important witnesses to God's work

in the world are the least likely candidates. Sometimes, even the most faithful disciples struggle with doubt and misunderstanding. Sometimes, the people who model for us how to hear the voice of Jesus are those whose voices are silenced and overlooked in their society. We can learn much from Mary's recognition scene... if only we have the ears to hear Jesus's voice in the midst of it.

JOHN 20:19-31

What Should We Call Thomas?

By Jennifer Garcia Bashaw

The two scenes in John 20:19-31 are escalating episodes of recognition that John has crafted to lead his audience down a path of trust in Jesus. We've already experienced moments of recognition in John's post-resurrection scenes — Peter and the "other disciple" stumbling upon quasi-recognition at the tomb (20:3-10) and Mary moving from misidentifying Jesus as the gardener to recognizing him when he calls her name (20:11-18). After she tells the disciples about her encounter with the risen Jesus, Jesus himself appears to them in a locked room and shows them his hands and his side. As Mary had her recognition scene with Jesus, the disciples now have theirs. They move from fear to joy as they recognize Jesus and accept his resurrection. Jesus's response to their joy is threefold. First, he wishes them peace. His words recall an earlier scene, when Jesus promises to leave the disciples the Spirit, reassuring them with these words: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let

your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid" (14:27).

SENT BY THE SPIRIT

Next, Jesus announces to the disciples that he is sending them out, thereby finalizing a "sent out" theme that runs throughout the Gospel. God sends John the Baptist in the Prologue and early scenes of the Gospel (see 1:6, 1:33, and 3:28), but the dominant theme is that the Father sends Jesus. We learn that Jesus is sent to complete God's work (4:34), deserves honor for being sent (5:23), is sent to do God's will and lose nothing that God has given him (6:39), is going back to the one who sent him (7:33), and that whoever sees Jesus sees the one who sent him (12:44-45). Now, after his death and resurrection, Jesus sends the disciples out.

Jesus's last response in this recognition scene is to breathe the Spirit onto the disciples. This part of the narrative appears to conflict with Luke's account in Acts 2 of the Holy Spirit's coming upon the disciples at Pentecost. But that doesn't need to be the case. It may be that John is emphasizing a specific function of the Spirit here: the forgiveness and peace the Spirit brings to a community of faith. It could also be a literary device that John employs to ensure that Jesus's promise to send the Spirit is fulfilled within his Gospel account. The main idea is that the Spirit plays a role in the sending that Jesus is undertaking, however loose the details of that role may be.

The disciples have come to recognize the resurrected Jesus and are sent out with the Spirit's breath.

But not every disciple is there. The verses here indicate that Thomas was not present with the disciples and that he wants proof that Jesus has risen from the dead before he can trust that it is so. We read in John 20:25 that when the disciples tell Thomas about the resurrected Jesus, he replies, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, put my finger in the wounds left by the nails, and put my hand into his side, I won't believe."

THE QUESTIONING DISCIPLE

Thomas has a bad reputation in Christian history. He is called "Doubting Thomas." But is that a fair assessment? Is John trying to portray Thomas as a negative example of belief? We might be able to determine this by examining how John has portrayed Thomas thus far in his narrative.

Thomas speaks two other times in John: first in chapter 11 and then in chapter 14. In John 11, Jesus has just heard that his friend Lazarus is sick. In response, Jesus tells his disciples that they will return to Jerusalem, and they are shocked. Religious leaders from Jerusalem want to stone Jesus. Walking back into the area surrounding Jerusalem is not a smart choice. Only one disciple supports Jesus's plan — Thomas. "Let us go too," Thomas says, "so that we may die with Jesus." What does this passage show us about Thomas? We can see that his reaction to Jesus's determination is decisively faithful. He shows bravery, loyalty, and a willingness to give his life completely to

Jesus. He is ready to die with Jesus as a companion and disciple.

The next time we encounter Thomas is in chapter 14. It is the night before Jesus is to die, and he is giving his disciples instructions before he leaves. “Don’t be troubled,” Jesus says, “Trust in God. Trust also in me. My Father’s house has room to spare. If that weren’t the case, would I have told you that I’m going to prepare a place for you? When I go to prepare a place for you, I will return and take you to be with me so that where I am, you will be too. You know the way to the place I’m going.”

And Thomas’s response? A follow-up question: “Lord, we don’t know where you are going. How can we know the way?” In this passage, Thomas sounds honest and engaged, asking Jesus how he can follow him. He really wants to understand where Jesus is going; he just can’t see the way yet. He wants to gather evidence to know what to believe, how to believe, and what he should do. He was willing to follow Jesus to death; he just needed to know the way.

Both of these passages get us ready for Thomas’s recognition scene. Thomas wants to see Jesus and feel his wounds. The man he was willing to follow to death had died, but Thomas was still alive. Maybe a part of Thomas didn’t want Jesus to be alive because then he would have to face the fact that he didn’t die with Jesus. But mostly, it seems that Thomas was waiting to see his Rabbi in the flesh, doubting the word of his fellow disciples but still hoping that the resurrection was true. Because when we see Thomas a week later,

he is still hanging out with disciples, waiting to see if Jesus will make an appearance.

“DOUBTING THOMAS”

Jesus surprises the disciples as he appears in the locked room, and readers sense that he is breaking into the room solely to give Thomas what he needs. Jesus offers his hands and side for Thomas to touch and assuage his doubts, but Thomas doesn’t need that. Nowhere does John say that Thomas actually touched the wounds. Instead, Jesus appears, speaks to him, and, without accepting Jesus’ invitation to touch, Thomas has an epiphany, uttering the central and climactic statement in the Gospel of John: “My Lord and my God.”

Up to this point in the story, John has been hinting at a key point he is trying to communicate about Jesus — that Jesus is one with the Father. Jesus himself says it in different ways throughout John, but it isn’t until now that someone says out loud that Jesus is Lord and God. And who says it? The guy we disparage as “doubting Thomas”.

I think that we make Thomas into a second-class believer because of one of the lines Jesus says in this scene — “Do you believe because you see me? Happy are those who don’t see and yet believe.” Readers might assume that John is holding up those who don’t see and yet believe as greater followers of Jesus — probably because most Bible translations render the word *makarios* as “blessed”: “Blessed are those who don’t see and yet believe.” But that Greek word is best translated as “happy” or “at peace.”

It does not imply that God blesses those people. It’s a simple adjective. And isn’t that a true statement? People who have that simple kind of faith, the kind that doesn’t ask questions or have doubts or require evidence — yeah, they are pretty undisturbed, blissfully happy, even. But is that the goal? Is John suggesting that we should all believe without seeing, without reasoning, or without questioning? I don’t think so. No one in John’s resurrection accounts believes like that. They all need to see Jesus to trust that he is resurrected.

To answer my earlier question about Thomas: no, John does not appear to portray Thomas as a negative example of belief. As we saw, Thomas is dedicated to Jesus, willing to die for him, and so invested in understanding Jesus’s teaching that he asks questions. He doubts when the disciples tell him about Jesus’s resurrection, but he also remains to await Jesus’s appearance, full of curiosity and a desire to find evidence of the resurrection. He is a prototype of so many followers of Jesus who question, hope, and finally believe. His doubt does not define him. It is what leads him down the path to faith. So, maybe we should ditch the accusatory moniker of Doubting Thomas once and for all and give Thomas a new name — Faithful Thomas, the patron saint of inquiry. That way, he can serve not as the second-class believer that the Church has misunderstood him to be, but as the example of resilient hope that John intended him to be.



LUKE 24:13–35

The Road to Emmaus: Walking in Word & Deed

By Sean Palmer

After the death and reported resurrection of Jesus — the hinge point of history and the anchor point of the Christian faith — comes another key event in our faith story. The Road to Emmaus story is unique to Luke's Gospel and begins "that same day" on which Jesus was resurrected. This is not a story of believers looking back with interpretation and reflection. The thoughts, feelings, and confusion are fresh, real, and raw.

Luke, as he has done throughout his Gospel, is determined to help his readers acknowledge Jesus as the divine-human Savior. For Luke, part of what makes Jesus unique in the world is the convergence of the horizons of human existence and the divine — the very question at the heart of this story. This story may be considered the highlight of Luke's Gospel insofar as it raises pressing questions, not only for the characters we meet along the way but also for Christians grappling with contemporary headlines. Here, we encounter three figures. The first is Cleopas, the second an unnamed walking companion — possibly a friend or a spouse — and the third is the risen

Jesus. Along the seven-mile journey to Emmaus, the two sojourners discuss the events of the past few days in Jerusalem regarding the crucifixion of Jesus and, even more startling, the report from "some of the women" in their group who had visited the tomb earlier that day and discovered that there was no body to be found.

CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS

"While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him" (Luke 24:15–16).

At the heart of this story — and much of the Christian faith — is the idea of seeing: how one sees and how one interprets what they have seen. Two people can observe the same reality and arrive at vastly different conclusions. In Jerusalem, the conversation has centered on Jesus, his crucifixion, and now, suddenly, reports of an empty tomb. The two walking companions are so consumed with talking about Jesus that when Jesus himself joins them on the road, they fail to recognize him. The text never suggests that Jesus appears differently after the resurrection than he did before. Nor do we know whether these companions had ever met Jesus personally, which may further explain their lack of recognition.

Jesus asks them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They respond, "Are you the only stranger

in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" Here, Jesus primes the conversation. More than attempting to provoke them, he deploys his favorite teaching technique: asking questions. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus asks more than 300 questions. His aim is to create space for discovery rather than allowing his followers to flip to the back of the book for easy answers.

He asks, "What things?" They reply:

"The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place" (Luke 24:19–21).

The two identify Jesus as a prophet mighty in word and deed. In their eyes, Jesus was more than a talker. Though his words were powerful, his ministry was confirmed through hands-on engagement with the people. After recounting how the chief priests and leaders conspired to bring about Jesus's crucifixion, they speak of their hope — and, importantly, of its collapse. They do not proclaim Jesus as Messiah or Lord. Instead, they

speak from the ache of disappointment.

Here, we encounter a central yet often overlooked insight: at one point, these walkers are both believing and doubting. They believe what they have seen and heard about Jesus, yet they are trying to integrate that belief with two devastating realities: first, that the prophet they hoped would redeem Israel was crucified; and second, that his body is now missing amid unsettling reports of resurrection. Their experience foreshadows that of millions who will follow. “We had hoped,” they say.

Their hope, however, was limited. It was Israel-sized.

Throughout history, human beings have clung to the idea that a great leader will arise, overthrow oppressive powers, and restore beauty and prosperity — or inaugurate a new age of flourishing unlike anything before.

Jesus responds by offering them a Bible study that reaches back to the Hebrew Scriptures, yet he interprets them anew. Where the scribes, Pharisees, and many others have faltered is in assuming that the Scriptures alone are sufficient. Luke makes clear that Scripture must be read through the presence of Jesus. Biblical interpretation without the lens of Christ is bound to wander off course.

“When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he van-

ished from their sight. They said to each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the Scriptures to us?’” (Luke 24:30–32).

After their conversation along the road, the companions urge Jesus to stay for dinner, and he agrees. Then something remarkable occurs. Although *they* are the hosts, Jesus begins to assume that role — taking the bread, blessing it, and breaking it. In that moment, their eyes are opened, and they can finally name what was stirring within them as he spoke along the way.

The reversals do not end there. Echoes of Genesis 3 resonate in this scene, in which the serpent promises Eve that her eyes will be opened if she eats from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Her eyes were opened — but here, in Luke 24, two other sets of eyes are opened at a meal, revealing what Jesus is bringing into the world.

LOOKING FOR REDEEMERS

The Emmaus walkers hoped for “the one to redeem Israel.” Their horizon was narrow. Their dream was of Rome displaced, the temple restored, and their people vindicated. Our own age wrestles with the same temptation. Moreover, we often attempt to talk about Jesus without Jesus himself. This leaves us grasping for redeemers and vulnerable to empty signifiers — religious or political leaders who

invoke the name of Jesus while using the symbols of faith as tools of manipulation. We baptize our political “we had hoped” in pious language and ask Jesus to co-sign our platforms.

The sojourners learn what many of us resist: resurrection requires crucifixion. There is no bloodless hope. This is why Christians and our churches must be deeply rooted in both word and deed. Each of us is invited into a life that moves beyond speech alone and into active engagement with the hurting and the hopeless in and around our communities.

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PSALM 23

The “With God Life”

By Sean Palmer

Psalm 23, in the words of Dallas Willard, is a description of the “with-God” life. Attributed to King David — revered as the shepherd king — the psalm captures the dynamism of life and what it can look like, in all its ups and downs, as we walk with God and allow God to be our constant companion and friend. The author uses names for God, such as “my shepherd.” These words are not born of misplaced hope or misguided romanticism. For David, God is the One who has guided him through actual danger, scarcity, and conflict. Shepherding in the ancient Near East meant constant presence, daily provision, and vigilant protection, because sheep were helpless without someone stronger to watch over them.

That is the overarching picture to embrace when reading Psalm 23: God is the provider and presence in every circumstance, so much so that followers of God have a “life without lack” available to them. Psalm 23, while perhaps the most well-known passage in the Bible, eludes many readers. Where many psalms are com-

plaints, Psalm 23 is a psalm of comfort.

Kelly J. Murphy writes, “Psalm 23 is a ‘song of trust,’ as are Psalms 4, 11, 16, 27, 62, and 131. Songs of trust have two things in common: a perceived calamity of some kind and trust that the calamity or disaster shall pass and all will be well.” Yet there is no pressing crisis in Psalm 23. Instead, it is a reminder that God is caring for God’s people in every moment, making both God’s presence and God’s beauty available.

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.”

There is an intimacy to this psalm. Its first word is God — YHWH. The entirety of the psalm flows from that first word: to name God. We are invited to know God as a shepherd. This is a powerful metaphor, one we often miss. The psalm does not say, “The Lord is like a shepherd,” but rather, “The Lord is my shepherd.” This imagery echoes David’s showdown with Goliath (1 Samuel 17), where he cites his experience as a shepherd — fighting a lion and a bear — as evidence of his readiness to face the giant. A shepherd, often depicted seated on a rock and petting a lamb — which is accurate — is also a fierce protector of the vulnerable, as well as the strong who inevitably find themselves in vulnerable seasons. In the ancient world, the title “shepherd” was used for a range of influential positions in the com-

munity and the nation, and Israel, like our modern world, was not always blessed with good shepherds. Perhaps one reason Psalm 23 remains so popular is the human longing for a good shepherd in a world often led by grifters and con men.

“He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.”

Again, we see the theme of a trustworthy guide — someone who shows us the way. This is a strong image for an exodus community. Throughout Scripture, walking is a chief metaphor for discovery, partnership, and discipleship. God is a faithful leader in every

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environment — waters and pathways alike. With God as leader, our souls can be restored because that deepest part of us — beyond our minds, feelings, desires, bodies, and relationships — is free to enjoy the still waters. At the same time, we are freed from unrighteous paths we might choose, or poor shepherds might choose for us.

The soul — our whole person, ordered or disordered — is repaired as God's own life flows into fractured desires, memories, and habits. Out of that healing comes a new ease in obedience. As Willard paraphrases the idea, we walk in righteousness as a natural expression of a renewed inner nature.

“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” (Psalm 23:4)

Evil exists in the world, and in many places it becomes an organizing political, theological, and philosophical force. The psalm — which so far has offered only comforting imagery — suddenly turns to the topic no one asked for: evil. The hope, especially among people of faith, might be that the with-God life offers insulation or outright protection from it. The psalm promises no such thing. Instead, it reminds us that we live in the thick of evil even as

God leads us in righteousness and restores our souls. The promise is not “I will experience no evil,” but “I fear no evil.”

While no one would choose life's evils, this Psalm's words assure readers that God is present as they walk through them. The shepherd's rod and staff — instruments of guidance and correction — become sources of comfort.

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.” (Psalm 23:5)

This may be the most misunderstood line in the psalm. Modern readers are tempted to imagine God setting a feast while enemies stand at a distance, watching hungrily. That is the opposite of David's intention. God sets a table in the presence of enemies — and since this same God commands love for enemies, they are welcomed at the table as well.

In *Life Without Lack*, Dallas Willard writes, “Since I love my enemies, I would not feast upon a delicious meal in their presence and let them stand hungry. The abundance of God's provision and safety in my life is so great, I would invite them to enjoy what God has prepared for me.”

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I

shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.” (Psalm 23:6)

The psalm ends with perhaps its greatest comfort: wherever one may be, the goodness and mercy of God follow. This assurance has sustained believers through poverty, war, famine, and disease. It does not dismiss suffering but affirms that, in the midst of it, God is present — empowering both endurance and the pursuit of freedom.

At the same time, God's goodness and mercy are not bound by geography. God is present across time and place. The promise is both now and forever.

THE “WITH GOD” LIFE

When God created Adam, the Lord declared it was not good for the man to be alone and created Eve. Going even further, God promises personal and faithful engagement with humanity through divine presence itself. Psalm 23 is David's praise of a life in which God is as near as breath — a possibility for those who trust the Lord as shepherd. Such trust can feel countercultural in a world that urges constant reliance on self and resources. Yet that guidance ultimately leads to the place for which human hearts were made: the house of the Lord.



PSALM 31:1-5; 15-16

By Sean Palmer

Psalm 31 launches from a posture most people try to avoid: complete and total dependence on God. Traditionally attributed to David, this is a psalm written in the midst of distress, as David cries — indeed screams — to God for immediate rescue. “Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily,” are the words of women and men who have reached the end of their rope and resources. Many spiritual guides suggest that at the end of our ropes is exactly where we find God. To deepen this understanding, the Hebrew word *chasah* (to take refuge or to trust) suggests that David is expressing something both personal and intense. Psalm 31 is not a theory. It is a cry of desperation.

It should not come as a surprise, given the intensity of this psalm, that it is one of the three psalms we hear late in the Passion of Jesus: “Into your hand I commit my spirit” (Psalm 31:5). This is our signal that this psalm is for anyone who is suffering and particularly useful to those who suffer unjustly. It is also safe to assume that Psalm 31 is the kind of psalm the people of God frequently reached for in times of distress.

shame; in your righteousness deliver me. — Psalm 31:1

Verse 1 introduces two key ideas: refuge and righteousness. Refuge is the image of God as a safe place — a shelter when everything else feels threatening. God’s righteousness here is not just God’s strictness but God’s faithfulness to the covenant and moral rightness. The righteousness of God is often understood as severe and stern, but David understands it as protective. David is asking God to act in line with God’s own character. As distressed as David is, he remains confident that God will be who God claims to be.

At the center, for David, is the request for God not allow him to be “put to shame.” Shame in the modern imagination is, rightfully, a deep and abiding feeling that we are fundamentally flawed and unlovable. For David, shame is centered on vindication that his God is the one true God. In front of his enemies, David wants to be proven right in trusting that the God of the Hebrews is the one true God. In our modern context, shame often has to do with disappointment in the self; in the ancient world, it was about disappointment with God. Defeat for David would be shameful because trusting God, should God not deliver him, would be interpreted as foolish and groundless.

of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me. — Psalm 31:2

A rock, a refuge, and a fortress are images universally understood in the ancient world to be firm, solid, and impenetrable. Remembering that these images are protective, and that David uses them as obstacles for his enemies, not himself, he presents a picture of God who is stalwart for God’s people. The inflexibility of God is where God’s people run in times of trouble. The images themselves are drawn from the Ancient Near Eastern landscape, where limestone cliffs and natural fortresses offered literal sanctuary to the hunted. This is also why the psalms are such beautiful poetry: David merges his inner desires with the physical world around him. The God who created the physical world is both envisioned and encountered within it.

There is also a turn in David’s tone, where his requests deploy language that seems urgent, even demanding. God’s vindication needs to happen “speedily.” Here, too, we should be careful. David’s appeal that vindication happen “speedily” or “quickly” is an expression of urgency and intimacy. Though modern believers often resist it, for David — and countless Jewish teachers, leaders, and prophets — God is a deity who can be argued with.

*In you, O Lord, I seek refuge;
do not let me ever be put to*

*Incline your ear to me;
rescue me speedily. Be a rock*

*You are indeed my rock and
my fortress; for your name’s*

*sake lead me and guide me;
take me out of the net that is
hidden for me, for you are
my refuge. — Psalm 31:3–4*

There is a subtle shift here. David moves from petition (asking) to declaration. A central tenet of faith is not only believing that God responds to our requests, but also affirming that certain qualities of the Divine remain true regardless of our immediate experience of God. Where earlier David trusted God to be a rock and refuge, now he claims it as an undeniable truth.

God is a rock and fortress, not for David's sake but for God's own name's sake. This is why David trusts God to lead and guide him. God acting for God's name's sake means God will act in accordance with who God has revealed Godself to be. Here is a declaration of divine integrity. This reality is a great comfort to both David and us. David's merit or performance is not central to who God is or what God will do. God's protection and comfort are not dependent upon human behavior. God acts because of who God is, not because of who humans are. God's faithfulness is nonnegotiable.

*Into your hand I commit my
spirit; you have redeemed
me, O Lord, faithful God. —
Psalm 31:5*

This is the theological and emotional climax of the passage. The Hebrew pāqad — “to commit,” “to

entrust” — carries the sense of depositing something precious with a trustworthy custodian, a legal or commercial act of confident delegation. David commits his entire being, his spirit, into God's hands. These are the same words Jesus used on the cross.

To the untrained ear, these words can sound as if both David and Jesus are resigned to their fate, but that is far from the truth. Instead, the psalm represents release. Having done everything within his power — reaching the end of the rope — David places ultimate trust in God to act according to divine righteousness and character. In times of anxiety, what could be better than the assurance that each of us is called to do the best we can and then trust God to do what only God can do?

*My times are in your hand;
deliver me from the hand
of my enemies and persecutors.
Let your face shine
upon your servant; save me
in your steadfast love. —
Psalm 31:15–16*

Later in the psalm, David uses the unusual phrase “my times.” This does not refer to a single moment but to critical moments or turning points in life. Moving from a plea for rescue in the present moment, David acknowledges that God holds all of life, and he freely entrusts his whole existence to God. For David, there are only two places anyone

can be: in the hands of enemies and persecutors or in the hands of God.

Psalm 31 reminds us, as Dallas Willard said, that the safest place to be is in the hand of God. Our protection does not come from wits or wealth, position or politics. Our protection comes from the hand of God. Believers are presented with a question: Where will we take refuge in times of trouble? More than that, the psalm offers the wisdom that our entire lives should be given to God. We can commit our spirit to God during any season, for any reason.

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PSALM 66:8-20

God Will Not Let Our Feet Slip

By Rev. Dr. Kate Hanch

Psalm 66, like many others, includes most of the elements of what makes a good worship service: praise for the good God has done (vv. 8–12), an offering in word and deed (vv. 13–16), a call to witness God’s goodness and deliverance (vv. 16–19), and closing in praise (v. 20). Within each movement, we see a larger telling of God’s story with God’s people.

PRAISE & REMEMBRANCE

The opening to this latter half of Psalm 66 invokes the people of God to remember how God has rescued them. The psalmist attributes their suffering to God’s testing (“you laid burdens on our backs”). Most likely, scholars say, this references the Exodus narrative, where the Hebrews were enslaved for 400 years under harsh labor. God rescued them through water when they crossed the Red Sea (Ex. 14). God rescued them again when the Hebrews

crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land (Joshua 3).

Interestingly, in v. 12, God’s protection is simultaneously associated with God’s testing. The psalmist hints at the questions surrounding what theologians call theodicy — why innocent people still suffer. Followers of God, to be honest, have never had a clear answer. Jesus asks on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mk. 15:34), referencing Psalm 22’s opening lines. Even in Christ’s shout and the psalmist’s questioning, God is with them — through fire, through water, and even on the cross. We don’t have answers, but we do know God is with us.

THE COLLECTIVE AND INDIVIDUAL

After the general call to praise, we see how the psalmist responds. The first instance of praise proclaims that God “has kept us among the living” (v. 9) and has “brought us out to a spacious place” (v. 12). Then, in v. 13, the psalmist begins a first-person singular discourse, claiming, “I will pay you my vows” (v. 13) and “I will make an offering” (v. 15). Here, we see another pattern in the worship experience — communal prayers prompt individual reflection, and vice versa. Because the psalmist can see how God has sustained the community, and because the psalmist has worshiped with that community, they can then discern how to

respond. They uphold the promises they offered to God when they were distressed. That bargaining with God can feel familiar to some of us who have made promises to God in desperation or fear. Some of those promises can feel a bit trite: “If I get an A on the test, I promise to always study.”

We don’t know if the vows the psalmist promised were part of the burnt offerings or something else. We do know from the Pentateuch that the faithful offered rams for ordination, atonement, thanksgiving, and praise. We also know that the meat could have been used for the whole community. The psalmist seems to give beyond a tithe here, out of love and abundance. In context, the abundance of offerings reveals the psalmist’s thankfulness for God’s steadfast presence and deliverance.

PROCLAIMING THE GOOD NEWS

In vv. 16–18, the psalmist turns from their conversation with God to a conversation with the community: “Come and hear” (v. 16). In a worship service, this would be the moment of testimony or sermon. If one grew up in a more conservative setting, the notions of “testimony” or “witnessing” can leave a bad taste, as both terms often imply coercion toward a specific prayer and a heaven-or-hell decision. However, when framed as gospel, the notion of witness or

testimony arises out of thanksgiving and excitement. God is saving us, and God has saved us — this is good news!

Not mentioned, but implied, is the notion of sin. The psalmist proclaims, “if I had cherished iniquity...the Lord would not have listened” (v. 18, my emphasis). Unlike the stereotypical American evangelical testimony of a dramatic sin followed by conviction and repentance, the psalmist implies they did not cling to sin. This statement can feel concerning because it seems to imply that God

will only help us if we are perfect. Does the psalmist mean to say that they have never sinned? I doubt it. The psalmist, who praises God with their community and offers thanksgiving, wrestles with sin, as we all do.

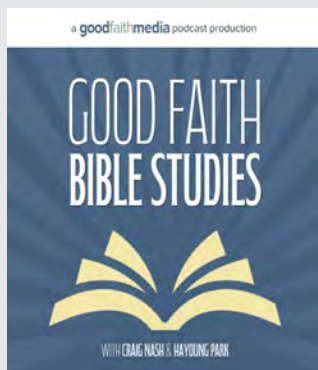
I understand the psalmist’s not “cherishing iniquity” as an act of awareness and reflection. For me, I know that when I fail to self-reflect, I am less able to hear God’s voice. That sin could be systemic. I attach what I own and wear to a sense of worth, not recognizing how I harm the planet through overconsumption and my inability to recognize God’s good gifts. I don’t always realize how my assumptions and behaviors could be shaped by white supremacy, denying the image of God in others. That sin could also be individual — like speaking ill of others out of jealousy. God “truly” listens not because we are perfect, but because God’s nature is to continue to seek and unite us with God’s self. God’s nature is grace. The late medieval theologian Julian of Norwich asserts that “for I am sure no one asks for mercy and grace with a right intention unless mercy and grace be given first to them” (S LT 42.251). The psalmist could only ask for God’s help because God was, as Julian says, the ground and foundation of their prayer, enabling them to pray to God for deliverance. The God who

is with us through fire and water is our foundation for all that is good.

PRaise

In church, after we hear the gospel, we respond with praise. So too for the psalmist, who announces, “Blessed be God” (v. 20), who hears and loves us continually. God heard the psalmist, just as God heard Hagar (Genesis 16), Jonah (Jonah 2), and even Paul (Acts 16). The psalmist does not promise a life free from hardship. As Julian says, our life is both a mixture of “well-being and woe.” And still, God is with us. Because God is with us, we can testify that God’s love can — and will — be with others. That is the psalmist’s benediction for us.

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LUKE 24:44-53

Ascension Sunday: You Are Witnesses

By Mary Alice Birdwhistell

Luke is the only Gospel writer to give a detailed account of Jesus' ascension — a moment that doesn't usually receive much attention in the life of the church. In many congregations, Ascension Sunday is skipped altogether or given a brief mention before the excitement of Pentecost. Yet this day carries profound wisdom for people of faith.

After all, this is the moment when Jesus passes us the baton. As Nancy J. Ramsay writes, "Jesus ascends to God so that the urgent work of the church may begin." If we hurry past the Ascension, we miss something essential about what it means to be followers of Jesus in the world today.

Luke tells us that this event takes place in Bethany, a village just outside Jerusalem, woven deeply into Jesus' story — where he stayed during his final week and where his journey into Jerusalem began. Now it becomes the place where earth and heaven meet, where Jesus' earthly ministry gives way to the church's mission.

"YOU ARE WITNESSES OF THESE THINGS"

By the time we reach the end of Luke, the resurrected Jesus has appeared to the disciples multiple times. He

has eaten with them, shown them his wounds, and patiently walked with them in the midst of their shock, grief, disbelief, and amazement. Now, having done all this, he gives them instructions they must learn to live into.

As Debie Thomas puts it in her essay titled *Embodied*, "after taking pains to convince his friends that he is not a ghost, after guiding their grief-stricken hearts from terror and disbelief to wonder and joy, he gives them a new vocation in six short words: 'You are witnesses of these things.'"

The word "witness" can feel complicated for many of us. It has often been reduced to a strategy for proselytizing, as if witnessing means convincing someone else to believe exactly what we believe. But in Luke's telling, witnessing isn't coercive or dogmatic. It is simply telling your story about where or how you have encountered the Holy One.

A witness is not someone who has all the answers. A witness is simply someone who speaks honestly about what they have seen and experienced. Jesus does not hand the disciples a script, a formula, or a set of talking points. He does not ask them to persuade or pressure anyone. He simply asks them to bear witness to what God has done and how their own lives have been changed.

In that sense, you and I are called to be witnesses, too: to the ways God has met us in grief and joy, in doubt and hope, in endings and new beginnings. The question is not whether we will be witnesses, but how we will

bear witness — with humility, honesty, and love.

"YOU WILL RECEIVE POWER"

But Jesus does not stop there. Knowing how anxious and uncertain the disciples feel in this moment, he also offers them a promise: "You will receive power from on high." They may not have it yet, but help is coming.

It's a fitting way to end Luke's Gospel. At the beginning, the power of the Spirit overshadows Mary to bring about the birth of Christ (Luke 1:35). Here at the end, that same power of the Spirit gives birth to the Church.

But what does that power look like? For many of us, power can

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sound intimidating at best — or manipulative and controlling at worst.

Researcher Brené Brown offers a helpful distinction between power over and power with that feels especially timely to consider. Power over assumes scarcity and domination; power with assumes that power multiplies when it is shared. Throughout history, faith has too often been distorted into a quest for power over others — used to justify conquest, domination, and control. The rise of Christian nationalism today makes it clear how easily faith has been co-opted to become power over others. And yet, when we look at Scripture, it is equally clear which kind of power Jesus embodies and entrusts to his followers.

You and I might describe this kind of power by other names: the courage to speak when we would rather stay silent, the conviction that stops us mid-step when we know something isn't right, the strength to keep going when everything feels heavy. It empowers us toward what we never thought we could do on our own.

Marion Williams was often called the “greatest living gospel singer,” known worldwide for her powerful, soaring voice. However, what often surprised people was that Williams had a relatively quiet, measured speaking voice.

In an interview on NPR near the end of her life, she reflected, “I don't know why — I just don't talk very loud. I don't. But give me that singing, and I'm ready.” When asked what happens when she sings, Williams immediately replied, “It's the Spirit of God, honey! It overflows me...It makes a little voice big, a shy person brave, and takes an ordinary,

dim little life and makes it a bright light for the world.”

That is the kind of power Jesus promises — not power over others, but power that animates, emboldens, and transforms ordinary lives to shine God's light in the world.

BLESSED – AND CALLED TO BLESS

Finally, before Jesus ascends, he blesses the disciples. This is his last act on earth. That detail matters, especially because Jesus is blessing people who had betrayed, denied, and abandoned him. And yet, there are no conditions attached. No tests to pass. Just blessing.

Verse 51 goes on to say that “*while he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried into heaven.*” In other words, Jesus never really stops blessing. God's work of blessing the world is ongoing — it's never finished.

Some of us may feel uneasy with the word blessed. It has been used so casually — and sometimes so carelessly — that it can sound like a measure of success or a marker of privilege. When blessing is equated with wealth, health, or happiness, it can unintentionally divide the world into winners and losers.

But Scripture tells a different story. Blessing is not something we earn or hoard. It is not proof that life is going well. It is an expression of who God is and how God relates to the world. From the very beginning of creation, God's posture toward humanity is blessing.

Before sin, before failure, before we ever get it right or wrong, God calls creation good. Original blessing comes before original sin. And in

Jesus' final act on earth, he goes out by blessing.

If Jesus ascends while blessing, then the church is invited to carry that blessing forward, too — in acts of compassion, justice, healing, and love. The question for us to ask is not, “*How can I be blessed?*” but “*How can I participate in God's ongoing work of blessing the world?*”

SOMETHING BIG IS ABOUT TO HAPPEN

In many ways, the intentions behind Jesus' final instructions have been co-opted and distorted today. Witnessing has become coercion. Power has become control. Blessing has become privilege and favoritism. So where do we go from here?

Perhaps we return to Jesus' original invitation: to bear witness to a bigger story than the one popular Christian culture tells; to trust a power from on high that grows when it is shared; and to remember that God's work of blessing the world is far from finished.

You see, the Ascension is not the end of the story. It is the moment when the story turns toward us. The real work is just beginning. And it matters now more than ever.

In his commentary on Luke, Fred Craddock points out that Luke's Gospel ends where it began: in Jerusalem, in worship. He notes that the opening chapter creates a sense of anticipation — “*God is at work, and something marvelous is about to happen.*” And that same anticipation closes the book.

The disciples return to Jerusalem as witnesses, entrusted with the power to shine a bright light in the world. They stand under an unfinished blessing, poised on the edge of something new as the story continues to unfold.



ACTS 2:1-21

Pentecost Sunday

By Mary Alice Birdwhistell

One of my favorite movies growing up was *The Wizard of Oz*. I even had a blue-and-white checkered dress, a stuffed dog named Toto, and ruby red slippers made of glitter and Elmer's glue.

The movie begins in black-and-white Kansas, where Dorothy Gale lives a small, ordinary life with Auntie Em and Uncle Henry. She dreams of a place "somewhere over the rainbow" where "the dreams that she dares to dream really do come true." When a tornado tears through the farm and carries Dorothy's house away, she opens the door and steps into the technicolor land of Oz, saying the line we all remember: "Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore."

I can't help but wonder if the disciples felt something similar on the day of Pentecost.

FAMILIAR AND UNEXPECTED

To understand what is happening in Acts 2, we need to pay attention to where and when this story takes place. The disciples are not gathered randomly. They are in Jerusalem during Pentecost, one of the great Jewish festivals, when faithful Jews from across the world travel to the city to celebrate the

spring harvest and give thanks to God.

The Spirit arrives at their Pentecost gathering with wind and fire — images that echo Mount Sinai where God descended in flame and the mountain trembled (Exodus 19–20). But something radically different is happening now. At Sinai, God gave the law to one people, in one place, in one language. At Pentecost, God's Spirit speaks through ordinary Galileans in the native languages of Jews from Parthia, Media, Mesopotamia, and beyond.

Peter interprets this moment by quoting the prophet Joel: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young will see visions, and your old will dream dreams." In Joel's vision, the Spirit would no longer be limited by privilege or power — the Spirit would be poured out on everyone.

CALLED OUT OF SAMENESS

Acts 2 opens with the disciples together in one place. After Jesus ascends into heaven, uncertainty sets in. Fear has a way of narrowing their vision, so they turn inward, clinging to what feels familiar and safe. As Nadia Bolz-Weber points out in her 2012 Pentecost sermon, they had good reason to be afraid — just not for the reasons they thought. The real danger, she says, "was from a God who was about to crash the party and bring in everyone they were trying to avoid."

Suddenly, a violent wind fills the house. Tongues of fire rest on each

person's head. The disciples begin speaking in other languages — languages they have never learned.

Soon, a crowd gathers outside, bewildered, until Peter finally steps in and identifies this unexpected party crasher. He says, "What you see and hear today means that God's Spirit is here."

Pentecost, Peter insists, is an invitation to move beyond comfort and familiarity — to follow God into uncharted territory. The Spirit pushes God's people beyond circles of sameness and into a community far more expansive than they imagined.

As Luke Powery, in his 2016 Duke chapel sermon titled "All Together," reminds us, togetherness without diversity is not unity — it's uniformity. Uniformity, he says, "means everyone looks the same, acts the same, and thinks the same...but what uniformity really means is that we are just worshipping ourselves and not God whose beauty is embodied by multiplicity and diversity."

The question is: when the disciples are confronted with a vision of God's world far more expansive and diverse than they expected, what will they do next? And just as importantly, how will you and I respond when we are confronted by the same?

A DIVINE DISRUPTION

The coming of the Spirit is unsettling — even threatening — to the crowd. Faced with chaos they cannot control or explain, they scramble to make sense of it all.

It's tempting for us to do the same thing with this text — to get

stuck trying to explain the mechanics of the wind and tongues of fire and different languages. But Peter invites us to look more deeply. Pentecost is not a puzzle to solve or a theory to master. It is an invitation to follow the Spirit into places we cannot begin to understand, predict, or imagine.

And that invitation can be unsettling! Scripture often refers to the Holy Spirit as our Comforter (John 14–16), but there is nothing about Pentecost that feels comfortable. In his 2015 Pentecost reflection, David Lose points out that the Spirit doesn't soothe or console the disciples — the Spirit agitates, disrupts, and wildly shakes things up.

There is nothing comforting about a violent wind or tongues of flame. And once the disciples spill into the streets, the crowd's reaction isn't peaceful — it's chaotic. The Spirit propels the disciples to bear witness to the dangerous news that the one the crowds put to death is alive through the power of God.

The same Spirit continues to move today — not always gently, not always predictably, but persistently calling God's people beyond fear and into faithful action. Perhaps the question Pentecost asks us is not "Where do I feel comforted by the Spirit?" but "Where is the Spirit disrupting and beckoning me forward?"

DARE TO DREAM

Peter goes on to tell the crowd that Pentecost is also an invitation to dream.

We don't often give "dreamers" much credibility. They are easy to

dismiss as unrealistic or impractical, people with their heads in the clouds. But what if dreaming is one of the ways God moves us beyond where we are into where the Spirit is leading us next?

After all, Pentecost reminds us that the Spirit never allows God's people to stay too comfortable for long. If the disciples had remained safely inside the upper room, choosing caution over courage, the church as we know it would never have been born. The greatest risk is not dreaming too boldly — but failing to dream at all.

Many things we now consider "ordinary" parts of church life first began as Spirit-inspired dreams. Churches built kitchens because they imagined feeding the hungry. They created classrooms because they dreamed of teaching children in their neighborhoods to read. At one time, these creative types of spaces were God-sized dreams of what the church might become. Over time, what once felt visionary became familiar, and then forgotten entirely.

But the Spirit does not stop moving. The invitation of Pentecost still stands — calling us to keep dreaming about where God might be leading us next. As Abraham Heschel writes, "To pray is to dream in league with God."

Barbara Brown Taylor offers a fantastic image of Pentecost when she writes that in Acts, God performs "artificial resuscitation on a room full of well-intentioned bumbler and turns them into a force

that changes the history of the world."

Her question is: Do we still believe in a God who acts like that? "Do we still believe in a God with power to transform us," she asks, "or have we come to an unspoken agreement that our God is pretty old and tired by now, someone to whom we may address our prayer requests but not anyone we really expect to change our lives?" ("The Gospel of the Holy Spirit," in *Home by Another Way: Words of Faith for the Longing and the Lost*.)

Do we expect the Spirit of God to change our lives? To transform our world?

The good news is that the Spirit doesn't seem to wait on our belief or lack thereof. The Spirit doesn't wait until the disciples are ready, confident, or well-prepared for this mission. The Spirit comes while they are afraid, unsure, and even skeptical — and sends them out anyway.

And by the power of the Spirit, they step fully into a new reality. They are no longer hiding in the upper room, clinging to certainty or safety. Like Dorothy opening the door into Oz, they discover that the world has changed — and so have they.

They are not in Kansas anymore. And neither are we.

Today, the Spirit still blows where it wills. The fire still ignites courage where there was fear. The languages of love, justice, and mercy are still spoken into a divided world.

AMOS 1:1; 2:6-8

Noticing What We'd Rather Ignore

By Tyler Tankersley

The book of Amos begins with a surprising detail: “The words of Amos, a shepherd from Tekoa...” (1:1). From the start, we meet a prophet who didn’t fit the usual mold — no palace connections, no formal prophetic lineage, no advanced training — just a shepherd called to speak into a world that did not want to listen.

And the message he brings is unsettling. “They sell the righteous for silver,” he declares in 2:6-8, naming a society where justice is manipulated, and worship has become detached from daily life. These verses confront us with the uncomfortable truth that faithfulness to God is inseparable from how we treat the most vulnerable.

But Amos does not only accuse; he invites. His words offer an opportunity for faith communities to remember who God is, and to imagine what a more faithful, compassionate society might look like.

AMOS IN CONTEXT

Amos lived in the eighth century BCE, during the reigns of King Uzziah of Judah and King Jeroboam II of Israel (Amos 1:1). This was a period of relative peace, political stability, and economic growth, particularly in the northern kingdom of Israel. Trade routes were secure, agriculture was booming, and the upper classes enjoyed unprecedented wealth.

Yet beneath the surface, the prosperity was unevenly distributed.

Expanding urban centers with luxurious homes sat alongside cramped dwellings for laborers. The prophetic literature of the time echoes similar concerns: the wealthy were becoming wealthier, often at the expense of the poor.

Amos was from Tekoa, a small Judean village about ten miles south of Jerusalem. He tended sheep and cared for sycamore fig trees (7:14). Figs were commonly eaten by those with limited means, suggesting Amos was deeply familiar with the economic realities faced by ordinary people.

The book opens with a series of oracles against the nations surrounding Israel (1:3–2:5). These judgments read like a laundry list of Israel’s enemies. One can imagine the crowd nodding as Amos condemns Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, and Moab, and then finally turning to Judah. It is a prophetic setup. Then, in 2:6, Amos sucker punches them. The oracles against the other nations were the opening act, designed to draw the crowd closer. Israel itself is the real concern.

- *“selling the righteous for silver and the poor for a pair of sandals”*
- *“trampling the heads of the poor into the dust”*
- *“turning aside the way of the afflicted”*
- *sexual exploitation (“a man and his father go to the same girl”)*
- *keeping garments taken as pledges*
- *drinking wine purchased with fines at the sanctuary*

Each accusation reflects something real in Israelite society:

- “Selling the poor for a pair of sandals” likely refers to debts so small, such as the price of a cheap pair of shoes, that the wealthy

could foreclose on a poor person’s land or force them into debt-slavery. Deuteronomy specifically forbade such practices, yet Amos shows that these legal safeguards were routinely ignored.

- “Garments taken in pledge” (v. 8) refers to a cloak given as collateral for a loan. Exodus 22 commands that such cloaks be returned by sunset since, for the poor, it doubled as their blanket. To keep it overnight was to jeopardize a person’s very life. In modern terms, this resembles predatory lending.
- “Drinking wine purchased with fines” points to a corrupt court system where the wealthy profited from penalties imposed on the poor, then used the proceeds to fund religious festivals.

These sins are not abstract. Amos describes systemic patterns of exploitation. For him, injustice is not merely an individual failing but a societal one — embedded in economic, legal, and even religious structures.

This may be the clearest lesson we learn from this rural prophet. Sin, for Amos, is not confined to the heart of an individual; it can be woven into the collective fabric of a community. In his book *The Tears of Things*, Franciscan writer Richard Rohr observes, “The prophets, far ahead of their time, learned that it is social sin that destroys civilization and humanity... They attacked hidden cultural assumptions more than they did the people caught up in them.”

While the wealthy and powerful in Israel may have been celebrating a Gilded Age, Amos recognized that all this indulgence came at the expense of neighborliness. He saw a community losing its identity — a people called to compassion who were instead shaped

by the values of the empires around them.

THE MAD FARMER

Nearly 2,700 years after Amos, the Kentucky farmer and writer Wendell Berry gives us a recurring figure in his poetry: the “mad farmer.” This persona is “mad” only because the world around him has gone insane. He reveals the ways consumerism, technocracy, militarism, and unbridled capitalism quietly shape our desires. To reject those systems, even gently, is to appear foolish.

In his well-loved poem “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front,” Berry writes:

As soon as the generals and the politicians can predict the motions of your mind, lose it. Leave it as a sign to mark the false trail, the way you didn't go. Be like the fox who makes more tracks than necessary, some in the wrong direction. Practice resurrection.

Berry’s “mad farmer” is a prophetic witness whose life is a quiet rebellion against destructive cultural forces. He calls us to notice the economic habits that numb us, and to cultivate a spirituality that resists exploitation and honors creaturely limits.

In many ways, Amos is a biblical version of this mad farmer. A shepherd with dirt under his fingernails becomes the voice of God’s critique — not because he is credentialed, but because he can see clearly. He sees the poor being crushed, worship divorced from ethics, and a society convincing itself that everything is fine while

those on the margins are gasping for air.

Communities today still need such prophets speaking against the grain, offering alternative imaginations of what a faithful life looks like, and reminding us that the gospel is always good news for the poor.

SEEING WHAT WE PREFER TO MISS

One of Amos’ greatest gifts is helping us notice what we would rather ignore. It is easier to focus on personal acts of kindness than on the systems we participate in. Yet Amos reminds us that faithful living involves both. He invites us to examine our community’s life with honesty:

Who is most vulnerable among us? How are we participating, directly or indirectly, in economies that benefit some and disadvantage others? Where might our religious practices soothe our conscience while distracting us from the needs around us?

Amos urges us toward a form of discipleship that pays attention.

The judgment in Amos sounds severe, but beneath the warning lies a tender conviction: God believes communities can change. God does not send prophets to shame, but to heal. The harshness of Amos’ words reveals the depth of God’s longing for justice, generosity, and mercy. And some of the most hopeful words in the entire book come at the very end: “I will restore...” (9:14). Even after all the ways Israel had failed, God still dreams of restoration.

Prophetic critique, in Amos, is a form of love. It is a call back to the covenant — to the life of generosity,

compassion, and neighborliness that Israel was always meant to embody.

A QUESTION FOR THE CHURCH

In Amos 2:6–8, a question arises: What would it look like for our worship to align fully with God’s heart for justice? Not in a partisan sense or in the language of outrage. But in the steady, lived-out work of love. Imagine congregations where:

1. prayer and justice ministries are equally central,
2. generosity is as habitual as singing,
3. economic vulnerability is met with compassion,
4. and worship forms people who see the sacred worth in every person.
5. Amos does not demand perfection. He asks for sincerity — an honest willingness to let God’s compassion shape our life together.

AN INVITATION TO EXAMINE

Amos enters the biblical story as an outsider, but his voice endures because he names a truth at the heart of our faith: love for God and for neighbor cannot be separated. The message is challenging, yes. But it is also hopeful. For behind every prophetic warning is the God who desires justice, restoration, and flourishing for all.



AMOS 5:18–27

Prophetic Worship

By Tyler Tankersley

Few passages in the prophets are as arresting — or as unsettling — as Amos 5:18–27. Here, the prophet turns his attention not primarily to economic injustice or corrupt courts, but to worship itself. The people of Israel are gathering for festivals, singing hymns, offering sacrifices, and longing for what they call “the day of the Lord.” From the outside, their religious life appears vibrant and sincere. And yet, Amos speaks a devastating word on God’s behalf: *“I hate, I despise your festivals... Take away from me the noise of your songs.”*

These are among the harshest words about worship in all of Scripture. They confront a temptation that has followed communities of faith across generations — the belief that religious devotion can substitute for moral responsibility, and that enthusiasm for God can excuse indifference to neighbor. This text presses us to ask difficult questions: What kind of worship forms us? What kind of people are we becoming through our prayers, our songs, and our rituals? And how do we recognize when our spirituality has drifted away from the heart of God?

THE DAY EVERYONE WANTED

Amos begins by addressing a popular religious hope: *“Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord!”* (5:18). For many in Israel, the “day of the Lord” was imagined as a moment

when God would decisively act on their behalf — vindicating the nation, defeating enemies, and confirming their special status.

But Amos reverses this expectation. Rather than a day of nationalistic triumph, he describes it as darkness instead of light, danger instead of deliverance. His vivid imagery — a person fleeing from a lion only to meet a bear, or resting a hand against a wall only to be bitten by a snake — suggests a sobering truth: there is no safe refuge from divine justice when injustice has become normalized. Culturally, this warning is significant. Eighth-century Israel experienced economic prosperity and relative political stability under Jeroboam II. The assumption was simple: prosperity meant God’s favor. Corporate worship reinforced this belief, functioning as reassurance rather than transformation. Amos exposes the illusion. The problem is not that Israel longs for God’s presence; it is that they expect God’s presence to confirm them rather than confront them.

WORSHIP WITHOUT JUSTICE

The heart of the passage comes in verses 21–23, where God rejects Israel’s religious practices outright. Amos rattles off a list of the established rituals within Israelite worship: festivals, assemblies, offerings, and music. Despite the people’s fervency, God outright disdains these acts of worship.

This rejection does not stem from a dislike of worship itself. Elsewhere in Scripture, God commands festivals, offerings, and music. What Amos condemns is worship detached from justice. The people gather in sanctuaries while ignoring the cries

of the poor. Their liturgies are beautiful, but their lives contradict them.

In Amos’ context, this disconnect was systemic. Courts favored the wealthy. The poor were exploited through fines. Those harmed by these practices could still hear psalms sung in the temple — songs funded by their own suffering. For Amos, the disconnect from justice means distance from God. While the people were “going through the motions” of religious ritual, their lack of social engagement had created a chasm between them and God’s presence. As James Limburg writes, “There was no communion with the Holy One, only a commotion at the holy place.”

Verse 24 offers the alternative vision: *“Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”* In an arid climate where water meant survival, this image would have landed powerfully. Justice is not meant to appear occasionally, like a flash flood after a storm, but to flow continuously — sustaining life for all.

PROPHETIC WORSHIP

No modern voice drew more deeply from Amos 5 than Martin Luther King Jr. In his “I Have a Dream” speech, King famously invoked verse 24 as a moral and spiritual vision for America:

“We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating ‘for whites only.’ We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, we are not satisfied and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down

like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

But King’s use of Amos was not merely rhetorical — it shaped his understanding of faith. King understood the formative power of worship. Churches, he argued, were not simply places for comfort but training grounds for courage. Spiritual practices were meant to shape people capable of love, sacrifice, and sustained resistance to injustice. In this way, King stands firmly in the prophetic tradition of Amos — calling communities not to abandon worship, but to allow worship to remake them.

Amos and Spiritual Formation

Amos 5 invites us to think carefully about how spiritual practices form — or deform — our lives. The problem is not that Israel worships too much, but that their worship has failed to shape their character.

This text offers several formative insights:

- 1. Worship reveals what we love.** The people sing loudly and gather often, but their daily lives betray allegiances to wealth, comfort, nationalism, and status. Amos reminds us that worship does not automatically reorder our loves. It can just as easily reinforce existing priorities unless we allow God to question them.
- 2. Spiritual practices can numb us or awaken us.** When worship becomes routine or self-referential, it dulls our moral awareness. Amos insists that genuine spirituality heightens our sensitivity to

suffering rather than insulating us from it.

- 3. Justice is a spiritual discipline.** In Amos, justice is not an optional add-on to faith; it is a core expression of devotion. Practices like generosity, simplicity, advocacy, and solidarity with the vulnerable are not distractions from spiritual life — they are among its most faithful forms.
- 4. God desires formation, not performance.** The repeated refrains, “I will not accept” and “I will not listen,” signal that God is not impressed by religious activity alone. What God seeks is a people whose inner lives and public lives tell the same story.

A WORD OF WARNING

The tone of Amos 5 is undeniably severe. Yet even here, judgment is not the final word. The critique assumes that transformation is possible. God speaks because God still desires relationship, still hopes for renewal. The prophets are not cynics; they are realists with hope. Their refusal to bless empty worship is rooted in a deep trust that God’s people can live differently — that communities can be reformed, hearts can be softened, and practices can be reoriented toward life. For those engaged in spiritual formation today, Amos offers a vital reminder: God is less interested in how beautiful our worship appears than in how truthfully it shapes us.

WORSHIP THAT TRANSFORMS

Amos 5:18–27 stands as a bracing reminder that worship is never neu-

tral. It either forms us toward God’s justice or trains us to ignore it. The prophet refuses to let faith become sentimental or self-protective. Like Martin Luther King Jr., Amos calls us to imagine worship that does more than inspire — it transforms. Worship that does not merely praise God, but reflects God’s character in the world. Worship that sends people out attuned to suffering, committed to righteousness, and willing to let justice roll. Such worship is costly. But it is also life-giving. And it remains, in every generation, the hope of God’s people.

Ultimately, Amos’ fierce critique of hollow worship finds its fullest expression in the ministry of Jesus. Repeatedly, Jesus stands in the prophetic stream, refusing to separate love of God from love of neighbor. He heals on the Sabbath, eats with the poor and excluded, overturns tables in the temple, and teaches that mercy outweighs sacrifice. Like Amos, Jesus exposes religious practices that have become self-protective rather than life-giving, and like Amos, he does so not to abolish worship but to fulfill it. To be formed as disciples of Jesus, then, is to allow our prayers and sacraments to shape us into people whose lives echo God’s justice in the world. Discipleship is not measured by the intensity of our devotion alone, but by the way our devotion flows outward toward compassion, truth-telling, and love. In following Jesus, we discover that true worship is not confined to sanctuaries, but is lived wherever justice rolls, mercy abides, and God’s reconciling love is made visible.



AMOS 8:1-8

Sabbath as Resistance

By Tyler Tankersley

Dad jokes are a very particular genre of humor. They are not designed to make you laugh so much as to make you groan. Their power lies almost entirely in the pun.

Why did the scarecrow win an award? Because he was outstanding in his field.

I stayed up all night wondering where the sun went... then it dawned on me.

Cue the eyerolls. You can see it coming a mile away. And yet, once the punchline lands, you are stuck with it. The joke lingers longer than you want it to, precisely because it forces you to hear the same words in a new way. What first sounded ordinary suddenly carries a second meaning you cannot unhear.

The prophets sometimes sound like that. Amos 8 opens with what seems like an innocent image: a basket of summer fruit. It sounds harmless, even pleasant. If we were skimming the passage, we might expect a meditation on harvest, blessing, or abundance. Instead, Amos delivers one of the sharpest moments in the entire book, and he does it with a pun.

But this is not the kind of pun meant to entertain. It is the kind meant to expose. Amos uses wordplay not to soften the message, but

to make it unavoidable. The joke, such as it is, stops being funny very quickly.

Amos 8 opens with one of the prophet's most striking visions: a basket of summer fruit. At first glance, it seems gentle, even pastoral. But like many prophetic images, this one carries a devastating edge. What appears ripe and abundant is, in fact, a sign that time has run out. This passage confronts a question that echoes into the New Testament and beyond: *What happens when a community becomes so consumed with productivity, profit, and performance that it can no longer rest, listen, or attend to God, or to the vulnerable in its midst?*

A BASKET CASE

"This is what the Lord God showed me — a basket of summer fruit" (v. 1).

In ancient Israel, figs, grapes, and pomegranates were enjoyed in the summer. A basket of such ripe fruit would usually signify abundance, blessing, and satisfaction. In an agrarian society, summer fruit signifies the successful conclusion of the growing season. It is the reward for patience and labor. But Amos immediately destabilizes that meaning through a pun that is untranslatable yet unmistakable in Hebrew.

In Hebrew, the word for "summer fruit" (qayis) sounds nearly identical to the word for "end" (qes). When God asks Amos what he sees and Amos replies, "A basket of summer fruit," God responds: "The end has come upon my people Israel" (v. 2). The fruit is

ripe — and so is the judgment (Carroll R., 438).

This wordplay reveals something essential about prophetic imagination: language itself becomes a vehicle of truth. What people celebrate as success, God names as culmination. The society has reached its moral harvest, and what it has grown cannot sustain life.

The New Testament echoes this imagery in Jesus' own parables of ripeness and reckoning. John the Baptist warns of an ax already laid at the root of the trees (Matt. 3:10). Jesus speaks of wheat and weeds growing together until the harvest (Matt. 13:24–30). In both cases, judgment is neither sudden nor arbitrary; it arises when growth has fully matured. Amos' basket belongs to this same theological logic.

Verse 2 intensifies the warning: "I will never again pass them by." Earlier in Amos, God had relented, holding back judgment. Here, patience is exhausted. Like Jesus weeping over Jerusalem — "If you, even you, had only recognized the things that make for peace!" (Luke 19:42) — God grieves a people unwilling to change.

Verses 2–3 conclude with a haunting reversal. Songs turn to wailing. Temple worship collapses into silence. Bodies are left out in the open without receiving a proper burial (Carroll R., 441). The final word is not explanation but stunned silence. When injus-

tice has become normalized, there is nothing left to say.

SABBATH KEEPING

Beginning in verse 4, Amos turns from vision to accusation, addressing economic elites whose wealth depends on the suffering of the poor.

“Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land” (v. 4).

These are not people unaware of injustice; they are practitioners of it. Amos exposes their inner monologue: “When will the new moon be over... and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale?” (v. 5). Worship has become an interruption. Holy time is resented because it delays profit.

In his book, *Sabbath as Resistance*, the recently deceased Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann argues that the people in this passage are practicing a sin well known in our own world: multitasking. While they ought to be focused on the New Moon festival and keeping Sabbath, they are actually glancing at their watches and scheming how to increase their profits. Their minds remain at the marketplace even while their bodies sit in worship. Sabbath, which exists to reorient life toward God’s abundance, is treated as wasted time.

Brueggemann writes: “Multitasking is the drive to be more than we are, to control more than we do, to extend our power and our effectiveness. Such practice yields a divided self, with full at-

tention given to nothing.” Amos’ merchants are expert multitaskers. But they keep Sabbath externally while violating its purpose internally. Their dishonest scales and inflated prices expose what divided attention produces: exploitation justified as efficiency. As Jesus later warns, “You cannot serve God and wealth” (Matt. 6:24). Amos would agree.

ALL CREATION WAITS

The passage concludes with God swearing an oath that these actions will not be forgotten. Divine memory becomes an instrument of justice. What the powerful hope will fade away is held firmly in God’s remembrance. The land itself responds. A common theme in the prophetic books of the Bible is that injustice affects all of nature (Carroll R., 456). Amos says that creation trembles. It rises and falls like the Nile. Creation reacts because injustice is never merely social; it is cosmic. Paul will later echo this conviction when he writes that creation groans under the weight of human sin, longing for liberation (Rom. 8:22). Amos anticipates that insight: exploitation destabilizes the world.

This shaking also exposes false security. Those who believed their practices were sustainable discover that they have built on unstable ground. Jesus’ parable of the houses — one built on rock, the other on sand — belongs to the same tradition (Matt. 7:24–27).

Structures erected without justice cannot endure.

PURITY OF HEART

At its heart, Amos 8:1–8 is a Sabbath text. It reveals what happens when rest is treated as expendable and worship is reduced to a formality. Sabbath is not merely about stopping work; it is about reclaiming attention, trust, and presence. The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard wrote that “Purity of heart is to will one thing.” When we are able to focus our time, attention, and worship upon God, we are no longer divided, but an integrated, whole self. Brueggemann’s description of the “divided self” helps name the danger Amos exposes. When attention is fragmented, compassion erodes. When productivity and wealth are worshipped, injustice breeds. When everything becomes transactional, people are reduced to commodities. The gospel calls disciples into purity of heart, an undivided life — one centered on love of God and neighbor.

Practicing Sabbath becomes an act of resistance. It proclaims that God, not productivity, defines value. It aligns us with Jesus, who embodied a life attentive to the margins and unhurried by fear. The basket of summer fruit warns that injustice has a shelf life. But it also offers hope: awareness can still lead to repentance. To attend fully — to God, to neighbor, and to our own limits — is not a retreat from faithfulness. It is the way of life Jesus himself walked.

Note: Carroll R., M. Daniel’s commentary on Amos informed much of this study.



AMOS 9:11-15

The Farmer's Final Word

By Tyler Tankersley

Amos has never pretended to be anyone other than who he is. When confronted by Amaziah the priest, Amos famously refuses the professional prophet's mantle: "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees" (7:14). Amos speaks as one whose hands are calloused by labor, whose calendar is shaped by seasons rather than ceremonies, and whose theology has been learned in fields more than in sanctuaries. He is a prophet formed by dirt under his fingernails and weather in his bones. That matters for how his book ends.

After chapter upon chapter of judgment — judgment against exploitative markets, hollow worship, and political arrogance — Amos closes not with abstraction, but with images drawn from the soil itself. Kingship is restored, but not as imperial spectacle. Creation is renewed, but not as fantasy or escape. What Amos imagines is concrete, earthy, and embodied. His vision of hope is not removed from the world's wounds, but grows directly out of them.

The final oracle of Amos (9:11–15) offers two interwoven promises: the restoration of Davidic kingship and the renewal of creation itself. These promises emerge not from royal ideology or temple theology but from the perspective of a farmer who knows what it means for things to break down — and what it takes for life to grow again. Amos knows that healing takes time, patience, and care. He also knows that neglect, ex-

ploitation, and injustice always leave marks on both people and land.

For Amos, discipleship — faithful response to God — is never merely spiritual or internal. It is lived out in the way power is exercised, resources are shared, and land is treated. The book's final vision suggests that any hope for the future must involve both just leadership and healed soil. The two cannot be separated.

THE RETURN OF THE KING (9:11–12)

Amos's first promise is political, but it is intentionally restrained. "On that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen, and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins." The image is striking in its modesty. The "house" or "palace" of David might suggest grandeur, but Amos chooses *sukkah* — a booth, a temporary shelter, something closer to a shepherd's hut than a king's court.

For a farmer-prophet, this makes sense. Amos is not imagining a return to imperial dominance or territorial expansion. He knows that unchecked power corrupts, and he has spent most of the book naming the moral failures of Israel's leadership. What God promises to restore is not monarchy as usual, but kingship reimagined — authority repaired, not glorified.

The language of rebuilding — repairing breaches, raising ruins — suggests careful, patient work. This is the kind of work Amos would recognize: mending fences, shoring up walls, restoring what has been damaged by neglect or misuse. There is no triumphalism here. God's restoration of David's line is not sudden or violent; it is deliberate and attentive,

more akin to stewardship than conquest.

Verse 12 widens the scope further: "in order that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name." The restoration of Davidic kingship is not for Israel's sake alone. It is oriented outward, toward the inclusion of other peoples within God's covenantal purposes.

This vision stands in sharp contrast to the nationalism that Amos has repeatedly critiqued. True kingship, in Amos's imagination, is not secured by domination but expressed through equity and justice that makes space for others. Power is healed when it becomes hospitable. For Amos the farmer, kingship exists to serve the flourishing of the whole field — not to strip it bare for short-term gain.

In this passage, the New Testament will later hear a blueprint for the church itself. In Acts 15:16–17, James, a leader of the Jerusalem church, cites Amos 9 to argue that Gentiles need not adopt Jewish law in order to belong to God's people. The rebuilt "booth of David" becomes a symbol of a community no longer defined by exclusion but by grace. Authority is redefined not by control but by welcome.

Further, the New Testament portrays Jesus as the coming King that the world has been waiting for. Too often, however, this image is domesticated into Jesus as merely the "king of our souls," detached from economic, social, and ecological realities. Amos resists such abstraction. According to Donald Gowan, if Christ is King, then discipleship necessarily involves the ordering of our common life — how neighbor-

hoods are shaped, how resources are shared, and how creation is treated.

To follow Christ as King, then, is to participate in the repair of what has been breached. It is to resist forms of leadership that exhaust communities and landscapes alike. Discipleship takes shape not in domination but in patient, restorative care — care for people and care for the places they inhabit.

THE HEALING OF THE LAND (9:13–15)

If the first promise concerns leadership, the second concerns the land itself. And here Amos's agrarian imagination comes fully into view.

"The time is surely coming... when the one who plows shall overtake the one who reaps, and the treader of grapes the one who sows the seed." This is not the language of economics or politics; it is the language of harvest. Seasons collapse into one another because the land is so productive that scarcity is no longer the governing reality.

Amos knows how fragile this vision is. Farmers understand drought, blight, and failed crops. They know how easily abundance can vanish. Throughout the book, Amos has portrayed the land as suffering alongside the poor — fields taken, vineyards seized, harvests enjoyed by those who did not labor for them. Injustice, for Amos, is never merely social; it is ecological. When the powerful extract without restraint, the land bears scars alongside exploited bodies.

Now, at the book's conclusion, the land responds to restored justice with renewed fruitfulness. Mountains drip sweet wine. Hills flow with abundance. This is not escapist fantasy; it is covenantal theology rooted in the belief that when human rela-

tionships are healed, creation itself breathes easier. Right relationship with God spills outward into right relationship with soil, water, and creaturely life.

Verses 14 and 15 deepen this promise. God restores fortunes, ruined cities are rebuilt, vineyards are planted and enjoyed, and gardens yield food for those who tend them. Importantly, the people who labor are the ones who benefit. Exploitation is replaced with enjoyment; extraction with cultivation.

Most importantly, the people are planted — rooted securely in the land, never again to be uprooted. For a herdsman and tree dresser, this is the ultimate sign of peace. Uprooting is trauma. It is exile, displacement, and loss. To be planted again is to belong — to know where one's life is anchored.

Old Testament theologian Ellen Davis has written extensively about the ways Scripture is meant to be read with agrarian eyes, with hope for the land. She describes Amos's ministry as "soil-centered." Indeed, the restoration of the land is both the starting point and the ending place for Amos's prophecy. Judgment begins when the land is abused; hope arrives when it is healed.

This has profound implications for discipleship. If salvation includes the healing of land, then faithful following of God cannot remain indifferent to ecological degradation. Discipleship invites attentiveness — to seasons, limits, and interdependence. It resists the illusion that humans can flourish while the earth is exhausted beneath them.

The New Testament echoes this vision in different registers. Jesus speaks of seeds falling on good soil and of vines tended by careful hands. Paul describes creation groaning

for redemption, bound up with humanity's own liberation. Revelation imagines a city where trees bear fruit every month and leaves are for the healing of the nations. The farmer's hope that animates Amos continues to shape Christian imagination: God's salvation is not escape from the world but the healing of it.

To be disciples, then, is to practice a form of faith that notices where the land groans and asks why. It is to recognize that environmental concern is not an optional add-on to faith but a response to the God who plants, tends, and delights in creation's flourishing.

THE GOD WHO SERVES

Amos ends his prophecy the way a farmer might end a long, difficult season — not with denial of hardship, but with confidence in the One who governs the cycles of life. Judgment has come. The field has been stripped. The soil has been worn thin by injustice. But that is not the end of the story.

God raises fallen leadership not to dominate, but to serve. God heals the land not as reward, but as renewal. Kingship and creation are restored together, because neither can flourish without the other. When leadership is just, the land breathes. When the land is healed, communities take root.

The final word belongs to the God who plants and tends: "says the Lord your God." For Amos, that is not a theological abstraction. It is the assurance that the One who calls prophets from fields also knows how to bring life out of soil that has been trampled and worn thin.

Hope, in Amos, grows from the ground up.



PHILEMON

Nurturing Reconciliation

By Christy S. Edwards

Is today a good day or a bad day? Are you grieving or grateful? Does the situation feel stressful or joyful? In a binary-focused culture, we are quick to choose one thing over the other, when the truth of the human experience is found in both/and. Many of our days are both good and bad. We often hold both grief and gratitude at the same time. How many life events create a combination of joy and stress? Life is complex and cannot be captured with “either/or” descriptions.

The same is true for how we read Scripture. At first reading, it can be tempting to place Philemon into our binary structure and label it as either good or bad, helpful or unhelpful. Doing this, however, robs us of the depth and meaning we find beneath these words. Philemon is both problematic and a crucial, endearing story of our faith.

Paul writes the letter to Philemon from his prison cell, where he had met Onesimus, an enslaved man who had run away from his master, Philemon (Paul’s friend). Paul writes to Philemon asking him to welcome Onesimus back, not as a slave but as a brother. For decades, white scholars have characterized Onesimus as a thief, painting the enslaved man, rather

than his enslaver, as the criminal. Yet there is nothing in the text that identifies Onesimus as a thief, aside from his decision to run away. Sometimes people run away to escape being caught for something they did. Other times, people run away because of the wrong being done to them. Why do we so quickly assume this enslaved man ran away because he stole from his master and neglect to consider the physical, mental, and spiritual trauma he endured as a slave?

While it is true that in Paul’s time enslaving people was as common as owning a car today, this commonality does not negate the damage the practice inflicted on real, living people. The common practice of something certainly does not make it right. In our current context, we would also be remiss to read Philemon without acknowledging the ways Paul’s words contributed to the transatlantic slave trade.

Paul’s words are problematic in that they do not denounce slavery. Paul assumes his friend Philemon will continue owning enslaved people and will treat them as he wishes. In this sense, I wish Paul had done and said more. Yet, at the same time, Paul sees Onesimus as human and advocates for his humanity in his writing to Philemon. Both things are true.

PAUL’S ONESIMUS CONNECTION

How was Paul able to see the humanity of Onesimus? Was it their shared experience of imprisonment? Perhaps, but I think there

was more to it. Paul, locked in a cell away from friends and family, was living a life in which his freedom and autonomy were stripped away. He did not have autonomy over his body or many of his choices. He meets Onesimus, whose whole life is dictated by the whims of someone else, and Paul recognizes something familiar in him.

In his experience, yes — but also in his emotional response to that experience. Paul is not enslaved, and Onesimus is not a free man, and yet these two men form an emotional connection grounded in empathy.

There is a current movement, led by right-wing evangelicals, to convince people that empathy is toxic. This emphasis is not based on the truth of what empathy actually is. Empathy is the ability to understand and share another person’s feelings. Empathy does not mean we must agree with one another, believe the same things, or act the same way. Empathy means we see the humanity in each other and treat one another with respect. Paul sees Onesimus not as a slave but as a human being.

Empathy isn’t toxic. Dehumanizing other people, all created in God’s image, is toxic.

THE MISSING VOICE

It is a true loss that we do not get to hear Onesimus’s voice in Paul’s writings. What was his voice like? What did he say? How did he feel about being enslaved? What was his emotional response to the traumas inflicted upon him by his

master? We will never know the answers to these questions. Too often, the voices we most need to hear are silenced. What we do know is that the conversation Paul and Onesimus shared led Paul to empathize with Onesimus in a way born out of shared emotion. They recognized their humanity in each other.

When Paul recognizes this shared humanity, his empathy pushes him to action. He writes his friend Philemon, urging him to welcome Onesimus back not as a slave but as a brother. He is, in effect, asking Philemon to welcome Onesimus as if he were welcoming Paul himself. This is a letter about reconciliation, diversity, and shared humanity.

LEARNING FROM PAUL AND ONESIMUS

In a time of division, what might we learn from Paul and Onesimus? Our phones constantly update us with news stories about Black and Brown bodies being raided, targeted, and terrorized by ICE, and one quick scroll through social media highlights deep division among those both for and against these actions. When I listen to our political leaders, I pay special attention to the language used to describe groups of people — words such as “illegal aliens” and depictions of people as apes. Aliens and apes are not people. Aliens and apes are not human. The language

we use to describe people is powerful and should not be taken lightly.

I noticed this within myself as I began to characterize those who seemed excited about this cultural “cleansing” as “monsters” and “snakes.” Only after reflecting on my own response did I realize that I, too, was part of the problem. In my anger, I joined in the very behavior I want to end, and I dehumanized groups of people.

Paul reminds us that groups are made up of individual, real human beings. When Paul sees Onesimus, he does not see a group of people who are lesser than. He does not see people who deserve to be treated as property. Instead, Paul’s friendship with Onesimus opens his eyes to the reality that Onesimus is a person who laughs, cries, feels pain, and hopes for a better future. Paul loves Onesimus and recognizes their common humanity.

How might we learn from Paul and Onesimus and use their shared humanity to nurture reconciliation as we attend not to groups but to individual human beings? When we demonize the “other” side of an argument and label that group negatively, we should recognize that the qualities we abhor — hate, greed, lust for power, anger — are also human qualities that dwell within us as much as they dwell within those with whom we strongly disagree. Part of why we detest those who dehumanize others is that we see what we ourselves could become

if we choose to feed that part of our humanity.

Paul had the choice to feed his anger and fear and treat Onesimus as property, but he chose differently. He chose to recognize, through empathy, the shared emotional reality between them and to honor their mutual humanity by advocating for equality and equity.

How might we incorporate Paul’s example this week and view those we disagree with as humans who grieve, weep, and laugh? We do not have to agree with someone’s politics or theology to respect their humanity and see them as a person. Who comes to mind as someone with whom you might work toward recapturing a spirit of shared humanity this week?

To go deeper into the text, check out the Good Faith Bible Studies podcast wherever you like to stream. Hosted by Craig Nash and Hayoung Park.



Quick to Listen, Slow to Speak

Principles for Interfaith Dialogue and Action

By Craig Nash

Apart from a few brief moments in the Old Testament, nowhere in the Bible do the people of God occupy a position as the dominant faith group in their surrounding communities. They are mostly minority groups living in occupied lands. At various times throughout their story, their beliefs and practices were ignored, tolerated, or met with violent persecution. Because of this, there is minimal guidance in scripture on how Christians are to approach interfaith dialogue.

One of the best examples we have in the New Testament comes from Acts 17, when Paul was sharing the gospel with the people in Athens. But the example here comes not from Paul, but from the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who were listening to him. After declaring that “he seems to be proclaiming strange deities” (17:18), we are told that they took him to the Areopagus and asked him: “May we know what this new teaching is that you are proclaiming? For you are bringing strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean” (17:19).

The purpose of this story’s inclusion in Acts is likely to document Paul’s missionary strategy. But in the questions of the philosophers, we see a curiosity and inquisitiveness necessary for anyone engaging in dialogue with people who hold differing beliefs. They are not looking to convert or to argue, but to understand.

There are, however, numerous verses that encourage followers of Jesus to adopt a posture essential for anyone seeking to engage in interfaith work. In Paul’s prologue to the famous hymn of Jesus’

self-emptying in Philippians 2, we are told, “In humility regard others as better than yourselves; look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others” (2:3–4). This guidance grounds any dialogue in “emptying ourselves,” rather than in the defensiveness and aggression that often accompany conversations about faith.

Perhaps the clearest word of guidance comes from James, where we are instructed to “be quick to listen, slow to speak, [and] slow to anger” (James 1:19). Active listening without speaking is, for James, a spiritual discipline we are called to cultivate.

It is interesting that these scriptural admonitions against defensiveness, anger, and aggression are given to believers who had very little power in relation to their neighbors. For religious minorities living under the threat of empire, humility and gentleness were not really options. But they become choices we must make when we no longer practice a faith on the margins.

Even with the decline in Christian influence in the United States, Christianity remains the dominant religious voice in society. Granted, there is no single approach to our faith, but we still “hold all the cards” in interfaith dialogue. Because of this, humility requires us to be especially mindful of our place in the world.

For some readers, interfaith work may be as simple as a desire to learn more. Others have years — even decades — of experience talking with, working alongside, and cultivating deep friendships with people of other faiths. Regardless of where you are, a few principles can be helpful when considering going deeper into interfaith and interreligious dialogue and work. The following insights emerged from an interfaith workshop led by the team at Faith Commons during a recent session at FaithWorks’ Compassion and Justice Conference in Austin, as well as from research into the Tri-Faith Initiative story featured in this issue.

Leave Room for Holy Envy

In recounting his history with interfaith work, Rabbi David Rosen speaks of learning from Krister Stendahl, the former bishop of Stockholm and dean of Harvard Divinity School. One of Stendahl’s principles of interfaith work is to “leave room for holy envy.” This includes discovering elements of other religions that are similar to our own. More than that, however, it asks us to leave space for something in another person’s faith tradition that we admire or even envy. “There is nothing wrong with seeing something special and even unique to different traditions and being able to admire it,” Rosen writes in *The Power of Interfaith Dialogue*.

Never Judge Another Person’s Religion by Its Worst Adherents

For Christians living in a dominant and diverse Christian society, we want people of other faiths to understand that

not every action done by someone who carries the name “Christian” reflects our faith. When members of Westboro Baptist Church protest funerals and concerts with signs saying the worst things imaginable, we assume that Sikhs, Jews, Hindus, Muslims, or people who hold no faith at all will not equate us with them. Yet when an act of injustice is committed by a member of another faith, there is always the temptation to ascribe those actions to the faith itself. It is imperative that we practice the Golden Rule in these situations, extending the same grace to others that we hope will be extended to us.

A corollary to this principle is that the best person to teach us about another faith is someone who practices that faith. We have all heard claims about other religions from Christian leaders that practitioners themselves would be surprised to learn they supposedly believe. We must assume that a Muslim knows more about Islam than we do, just as we would want them to assume that we know more about Christianity than they do.

Interfaith Work Is Best Done with a Common Pursuit of Justice

All the stories that demonstrate healthy interfaith relationships share one thing in common: they move beyond conversation and dialogue and put boots on the ground and hands in the soil together in pursuit of justice. Whether Egyptian Muslims forming a protective circle around Coptic Christians at prayer after the 2011 terrorist attacks, or Jews in Omaha, Nebraska, encircling a neighboring mosque after the 9/11 attacks, interfaith work requires something of us beyond talk.

Evangelism Must Be Set Aside

Perhaps the greatest challenge for many Christians in interfaith dialogue is addressing the reality that much of the story of our faith includes a missionary impulse. There are numerous Christian beliefs and approaches to evangelism — the practice of seeking to “win over” others to our faith. Healthy interfaith work does not require us to accept or reject any particular theology of missions or evangelism. It does, however, ask us to set aside the practice of proselytizing, at least temporarily, as we seek to understand and live in unity with neighbors who practice other religions, or none at all.

In the end, interfaith work asks us to cultivate a virtue that is severely lacking in our emotionally defensive world: curiosity. As we encounter the stories of people who practice different faiths — and those who practice no faith at all — may we be quick to listen and slow to speak. **GF**



the **Creator's Game**

*Originators of Lacrosse Seek
International Recognition*

Photos by **Maya Perera**

Lacrosse has been an official sport in only two Olympic Games — St. Louis in 1904 and London in 1908. In both events, Canada won gold. After a 120-year absence, the sport will return in 2028 at the Los Angeles Games. It will feature six men's and six women's teams vying for medals. One nation seeking an opportunity to qualify for Los Angeles is the one that invented the game: the Haudenosaunee Nation.

The Haudenosaunee is a confederation of “Six Nations” tribes whose territories encompass lands in what is now upstate New York, southern Ontario, and Quebec, Canada. (The colonial name for these tribes is “Iroquois.”) In the 17th century, Jesuit missionaries in modern-day Canada observed Native Americans playing a well-established version of the game. Legend tells of a figure known as the “Great Peacemaker,” who brought warring tribes together between the 12th and 15th centuries CE. It is also believed that the Great Peacemaker gave them the game of lacrosse, which the Haudenosaunee sometimes refer to as “the Creator's Game.”

The Haudenosaunee's quest to compete in the 2028 Olympics is an uphill journey. Qualification requires significant



"I believe this story offers significance, particularly as conversations continue around Indigenous sovereignty, representation, and the future of lacrosse on the international stage."

— Maya Perera,
Marist University student



funding and a national Olympic committee, which in turn requires recognition in at least one other sport.

In 2025, Maya Perera, a Marist University student, completed a short documentary and photo essay about the story of lacrosse, from its origins to its current celebration among the Haudenosaunee. According to Perera, "I believe the story offers timely athletic significance, particularly as conversations continue around Indigenous sovereignty, representation, and the future of lacrosse on the international stage."

The Haudenosaunee believe that lacrosse is their game, but that it can be medicine for all people. **GFM**



Hana Bendcowsky



Rossing Center, Jerusalem

Every year, when I begin working with a new dialogue group of religious leaders, together with my colleague Husam, a Palestinian Christian from the biblical town of Kafr Kanna, I sense the room holds people of different faiths — and one large elephant. Our challenge as facilitators is first to allow participants to walk around it, to build trust, develop mutual sympathy, and practice mindful listening before turning to the most painful issues.

We use a method developed at the Rossing Center for Education and Dialogue that draws on the field of spiritual counseling. Through a “spiritual questionnaire,” participants are invited to discuss a spiritual or moral dilemma that weighs on them as they live with the realities of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. This conflict shapes daily life for everyone in the Holy Land and has deepened divisions since the October 7 massacre and the devastating war that followed, which has claimed tens of thousands of lives.

They are also invited, through the questionnaire, to address additional questions about their past, hopes and dreams, and even their relationship with scripture or God, recognizing the need to see each person holistically, beyond the conflict-related dilemma alone.

The rest of the group is asked to listen attentively, setting aside the urge to explain, advise, or judge. For many, this proves more challenging than expected.

Participants then reflect back what they heard, without interpretation. Hearing their story echoed by others allows the speaker to feel seen and held, and to reflect on their experiences through the group.

Once a safe space for emotional sharing is established, it becomes possible to turn toward the elephant in the room—the issues people avoid because they fear hurting

others, being hurt themselves, or destabilizing the group. For instance, Palestinians speak about an experience of being silenced and the fear of expressing empathy with their people in the West Bank and Gaza. Jewish participants talk about fear, insecurity, and deep mistrust.

Everyone stays in the room. No one is required to respond, justify, or explain. We do not argue positions; experience shows such debates are often unproductive, nor do we rush to focus on common ground. Instead, we make space for pain and trauma without competition over whose pain is greater.

Everyone enters the dialogue by choice and with sincere intentions. As religious leaders — Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Druze — participants carry responsibility not only to one another, but to the communities they serve. Dialogue does not erase realities or unequal power relations, nor does it guarantee agreement among participants. And yet, something meaningful happens. Through listening and presence, empathy takes root, relationships form, and a shared commitment emerges to keep engaging and, where possible, to act so that life in this place becomes more humane, more just, and more livable for all who call it home. **GFM**



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Rossing Center, Jerusalem

American Christians are often surprised when they learn that I am a Palestinian Christian. This is unusual to me, given that my home is the birthplace of Christianity. But the average person is often unfamiliar with the diversity in Palestine. The religious landscape of Palestine is ancient, layered, and deeply alive. For Christians in the United States, Palestine is often encountered primarily as a biblical setting — the land of Abraham, the birthplace of Jesus, the hills and villages named in Scripture, or as a place in constant turmoil on the news. Yet Palestine is not only a place of memory or war. It is home to living religious communities whose faith is practiced daily amid political conflict, social fragmentation, and deep hope.

Palestine is religiously diverse, though predominantly Muslim. The majority of Palestinians are Sunni Muslims, even though Islam in Palestine is not monolithic; it ranges from traditional village practices to urban religious movements, and from deeply spiritual expressions to culturally embedded faith. There is no single version of Islam in Palestine.

Alongside Muslims, Palestinian Christians form an Indigenous community that traces its roots back to the earliest centuries of the Church. We are not recent arrivals or remnants of Crusader history, but descendants of the first followers of Christ. Today, Palestinian Christians belong to a rich mosaic of denominations: Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Melkite Greek Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Syriac, Coptic, Anglican, Lutheran, and Evangelical communities. Though small in number — less than 2% of the population — Palestinian Christians play a significant role in education, healthcare, civil society, and interreligious engagement.

Judaism is also part of the religious landscape of the land, though its presence within Palestinian society has changed dramatically over the past century. Jewish religious life in historic Palestine existed for centuries in cities like

Jerusalem, Hebron, Safad, and Tiberias. Today, however, Judaism is primarily present through the State of Israel and Zionism. This reality profoundly shapes how religion and power intersect, particularly when biblical language is used to justify oppression, settlement expansion, or exclusion.

As a Palestinian Christian theologian working in interreligious peacebuilding, I encounter religion as both a source of deep division and a powerful resource for reconciliation. All three Abrahamic faiths proclaim a God of justice, mercy, and compassion. Yet religion can be distorted when it is fused with nationalism, fear, or supremacy. In Palestine, the challenge is not religion itself, but how religious narratives are mobilized — either to sanctify injustice or to resist it.

Interreligious work in Palestine is not about erasing differences or pretending that conflict does not exist. It is about building relationships rooted in truth, mutual dignity, and shared moral responsibility. Muslims, Christians, and Jews who engage in this work do so because they believe faith must serve life, not death; liberation, not domination.

For American Christians, understanding the religious landscape of Palestine requires listening to local voices — especially Palestinian Christians whose faith has been shaped by both the cross and the resurrection in very concrete ways. Our theology emerges not from abstraction, but from lived experience: checkpoints and church bells, Ramadan and Easter, lament and hope. We invite you not only to remember the land of the Bible, but to stand in solidarity with the people who still call it home. **GFM**



*John Munayer is the Director of International Engagement at the Rossing Center for Education and Dialogue in Jerusalem. Along with his brother, Samuel, he is the author of *The Cross and the Olive Tree: Cultivating Palestinian Theology amid Gaza*.*

How a Buddhist Walk for Peace Gave Me Hope for the Church

By Scott C. Ryan

A line from Jason Isbell's song "Cast Iron Skillet" often replays in my mind: "This town won't get no better, will it?"

I have little hope these days that humans will act in the interest of others rather than themselves. I find it difficult to muster the confidence that people will resist the temptation to gain more and instead do what serves the common good. An event earlier in the year shook me out of my pessimism, even if only for a short time. My flirtation with optimism came from an unlikely source.

On Saturday, January 10, a Sangha of Buddhist monks, along with their Indian Pariah rescue, Aloka the Peace Dog, arrived in Columbia, South Carolina on their 2,300-mile "Walk for Peace" from Fort Worth, Texas to Washington, D.C. While I knew the monks' mission had gained attention on social media (their Facebook and Instagram pages just hit one million followers), I never dreamed of the reception they would receive in a deep red state.

From town to town, law enforcement assisted the venerable monks as they walked. Officers rode alongside the travelers to protect them from vehicles, exchanged warm welcomes with everyone, and shared updates on progress and safety concerns on social media. Police forces, sheriff's departments, EMS squads, and fire stations offered badges and pins that Venerable Bhikkhu Paṇṇākāra attached to his robe. Some even gave badges to Aloka.

Christian churches provided space for rest, meals, and peace talks. The monks reciprocated the help with expressions of gratitude. *The Post and Courier* reported that the arrival of the monks to the capital brought one of the largest crowds the city of Columbia has ever seen. The monks invited anyone who desired to meet them at West Columbia Riverwalk Park, then to walk with them across the Gervais Street Bridge

into Columbia before convening at the State House just up the road.

Many accepted the monks' offer. A sea of people swelled one step at a time, flanked by crowds offering signs of respect. Once at the State House, the monks and Aloka ascended the steps and offered a blessing and a peace talk. The Mayor of Columbia, Daniel Rickenmann, and State Senator Deon Tedder issued city and state proclamations and designated January 10 as "Walk for Peace Day."

It is hard not to be hopeful when an event like this occurs with diverse people coming together in a time of political division and rampant violence. Thanks to a group of Buddhist monks meditatively walking halfway across the country, Saturday offered South Carolinians a chance to witness a peaceful way of being in the world and to hope that together we might build a better future after all.

Christian communities can learn something here.

I recalled over the weekend one of Stanley Hauerwas's mantras: "The first task of the church is to make the world the world." The church, he argued, should serve as an alternative community to the patterns of life around it. Followers of Jesus of Nazareth should create communities characterized by love, reconciliation, and non-violence. For Hauerwas, peace and non-violence always remained essential to the witness of the church Jesus established. He also noted pacifism is not passive; rather, it is a legitimate political position.

For me, the Walk for Peace serves as a witness to the world of a different way of life that calls others to embody peace in their communities. The monks show us one example of a community that rejects the human desire to dominate and resists the intoxicating pull of violence. (I also recognize, of course, that there are problematic power dynamics at play in all traditions).

That example aligns with the kind of community and witness followers of Jesus of Nazareth should



be. I also believe the response to the monks' message shows that it is, in fact, an effective practice. The turnout for the walk across the Gervais Street Bridge, the throng of people who showed up at the State House, and the thousands who appeared along the roads and at rest stops along the way testify to the power of the monks' witness.

Most of the people who attended events on Saturday do not participate in the same religious tradition as the monks. I doubt many can recite the Four Noble Truths or the Eightfold Path, or define what a Sangha or an Arhat is. But they showed up. The message of peace transcended religious commitments and compelled thousands to walk with a group of men whose tradition differed from theirs, as a sign of peace and unity.

The Walk for Peace offers Christian communities a chance to consider whether gaining political power and imposing beliefs and practices on a people is a prudent step. Moments like this call the church to rethink the impulse to unleash culture wars at every turn. They remind the church that embodying a loving and peaceful community is not just a more effective way to communicate a message. It is also faithful to Jesus' call.

The way of discipleship demands that Jesus-followers foster communities of peacemakers who resist the temptation to dominate, that communities recognize the destructive practices and systems in which we participate and seek to dismantle them, and that communities seek the good of all people and offer an alternative path of peace.

My optimism might wane in the coming days, but after this weekend, I am a little less pessimistic about making our towns and the world a bit better.

—Scott C. Ryan is Associate Professor of Religion and Biblical Studies and Acting Chair of the Department of Humanities at Claflin University, South Carolina's first HBCU in Orangeburg, SC.



A Bridge over Hell Creek



By Craig Nash

Christian children who grew up attending Sunday School or Vacation Bible School know the tune “Father Abraham” as a musical earworm that evokes memories of motions that progress from lifting one arm to lifting both arms and then, eventually, to marching in place and in a circle. It was a fun song that told a simple biblical story about the patriarch of three of the world’s most prominent religions. If you know nothing else about Abraham, you know that he had many sons, and many sons had Father Abraham.

For children, the song’s physical motions can be fun. But the older you get, the more work it becomes. This can be an apt metaphor for relationships between the religious sons (and daughters) of the legendary Bronze Age figure whose journey led him from modern-day Iraq to modern-day Israel/Palestine. The tune is catchy, but embodying it is hard.

And then there’s the problematic story of Pierre Kartner, the Dutch songwriter who penned “Father Abraham.” Kartner’s right-wing nationalism fueled his disdain for many groups of people, none more so than Arabs, whom he blamed for the worldwide oil crisis in

the 1970s. One of his songs, translated as “What Do We Do With the Arabs Here?” claimed, “They can’t be trusted with our pretty women here.”

It seems that even a children’s song about Abraham’s descendants is destined to be fraught with problems.

Regardless of what anyone believes about the practices and beliefs of Christians, Jews, or Muslims, all three traditions see themselves, in one way or another, as heirs to the promise made to Abraham by the one God, whom they all name and describe in three distinct ways. As a result, interfaith cooperation comes most naturally to adherents of these three religions. But as anyone who has been caught up in conversations and negotiations between distant family members over issues such as land and succession will attest, it also carries a high risk of misunderstanding and conflict.

Abraham’s Children in Middle America

Three faith communities in Omaha, Nebraska, have been testing whether this relationship can not just



withstand the ups and downs of life together, but thrive in the midst of it.

The events that would serve as a catalyst for the Tri-Faith Partnership — the genesis, if you will — were the September 11 attacks on the United States by Islamic extremists. As the nation was reeling in fear and rage, Temple Israel in Omaha was thinking a step ahead. Leaders there knew the backdraft of American anger would find its way to their Muslim neighbors, who were equally horrified by the attacks on their country. Led by Rabbi Aryeh Azriel, members of the temple surrounded and locked arms around a local mosque in a symbolic gesture of protection and solidarity. From this simple act, relationships between members of the two religious communities began to form and were nurtured over the following decade.

The relationship deepened over a very practical need that most religious institutions understand far too well — parking. In the years after 9/11, Temple Israel, the largest synagogue in a city of around a million people, was located in a congested area of downtown Omaha. During holiday services, congregants often had to borrow parking from their neighbors — a community theater on one side and a Methodist church on

the other. The congregation's leaders began exploring options to move to West Omaha, where many of its members lived. At the same time, an organization that would later become the American Muslim Institute was looking to build a mosque in the same neighborhood.

Because of their already established relationship, leaders of the two congregations began to explore possibilities. Conversations about the practical concerns of property and buildings transitioned into discussions of shared values and dreams. This gave rise to the question: What if religious groups in Omaha representing the three Abrahamic faiths entered into a formal partnership designed for deeper understanding and community? The answer became the Tri-Faith Initiative.

In 2011, the board of directors of the Tri-Faith Initiative acquired a plot of land on what had once been Highland Country Club, the only golf course in Omaha that admitted Jewish members. By that point, the Jewish and Muslim communities had formed a partnership with an Episcopal church to serve as the initiative's official Christian partner. Temple Israel built its synagogue in 2013, and the American Muslim

Institute completed its facility in 2017. In April 2019, Countryside Community Church, which had replaced the Episcopal congregation in the partnership, completed construction on its church building. Rounding out the Tri-Faith Commons, the shared Tri-Faith Center opened in 2020.

Each partner in the relationship — American Muslim Institute (AMI), Temple Israel, Countryside Community Church, and the Tri-Faith Initiative — is a completely autonomous organization responsible for its own building and land. Rather than serving as a coordinating entity, the Tri-Faith Initiative operates its own programming to enhance interfaith understanding and cooperation in Omaha. “A common misunderstanding is that we are like Hootie and the Blowfish, with us being Hootie and the religious communities being ‘the blowfish,’” said Roni Gosch, the Tri-Faith Initiative’s marketing and communications coordinator. “But it’s more like we are the Beatles, with each of us doing our own little thing, but connected by the music.”

Parking is shared, and a circular walking path connects the buildings, creating both a literal and symbolic link between the religious communities and their common spaces. The symbolism doesn’t end there. A stream of water known for generations as “Hell Creek” passes through the property. The Tri-Faith Initiative has named the walking path over the creek “Abraham’s Bridge.”

Swords Into Plowshares

It would be a disservice to the story of the Tri-Faith Initiative partnership to tell it in a way that over-romanticizes its early days. In *Abraham’s Bridge*, a 2025 documentary about the project, Rabbi Azriel stated that “every congregation had groups of people who disliked the idea.” All three religious communities had members who didn’t quite understand the concept of interfaith work and relationships. Some wondered aloud whether their leaders were trying to create a “fourth religion.” In the process of deciding to move to the Tri-Faith property, Countryside Community Church lost around 400 members. And then there were the longstanding issues of relationships between Muslims and Jews as they relate to the politics and land of Israel/Palestine, as well as the dynamics of LGBTQ+ affirmation.

The founding principles of the partnership act as guideposts for navigating these challenging issues. In

the original memorandum of understanding that formalized the relationship, each organization agreed to respect the beliefs and practices of the participating organizations, as well as other belief systems. Although autonomous, each religious community is asked to consider the beliefs of the others when conducting activities outside its own buildings. Any effort to proselytize members of the other communities is forbidden.

If these principles are metaphorical lines in the sand that guide the partnership, literal hands in the sand have helped nurture relationships between members of each religious community.

The 2020 opening of the Tri-Faith Community Center was intended to be an exciting opportunity for each congregation to have a “fourth space” where they could gather to continue nurturing their friendships with one another. But, as with so many other well-made plans, the COVID-19 pandemic stifled those possibilities. As a catalyst for strengthening relationships, however, social distancing and limited indoor activities proved beneficial, as members of each community walked out of their buildings to work in a community garden on the Tri-Faith Commons. Produce from the garden is used in a community food pantry, also operated by Tri-Faith. At the height of the pandemic, the garden produced more than a ton of food for local residents.

The Setback

Since its inception, the partnership has encountered numerous roadblocks. Each religious community is no longer led by its original pastor, rabbi, or imam. They have all struggled with the shifting dynamics of institutional faith communities after the pandemic. Each community is dealing with its own generational dynamics. For various reasons, the board and leadership of the Tri-Faith Initiative have disbanded and reconstituted themselves several times.

But none of these realities has come close to disrupting the relationships between each community more than the October 7, 2023, Hamas attacks on Israel and Israel’s subsequent war of retaliation. A powerful segment of *Abraham’s Bridge*, which weaves together statements from leaders of AMI and Temple

Israel, recounts the pain and setbacks of those cataclysmic events:

"[It was] unbelievable violence, especially on Gaza," said Kharim Khayati of AMI. "The emotions have been very high and very difficult."

"When you are in pain, there is a limit to how much pain you can take in," said Joanna Alexander, cantor at Temple Israel. "And you are much more able to take in the pain of people you are close with and that you relate to."

Khayati added, "So it's one thing to watch it on the news and see, oh, that's someone else, another name. A lot of our congregants have immediate family who have died as a consequence of this war."

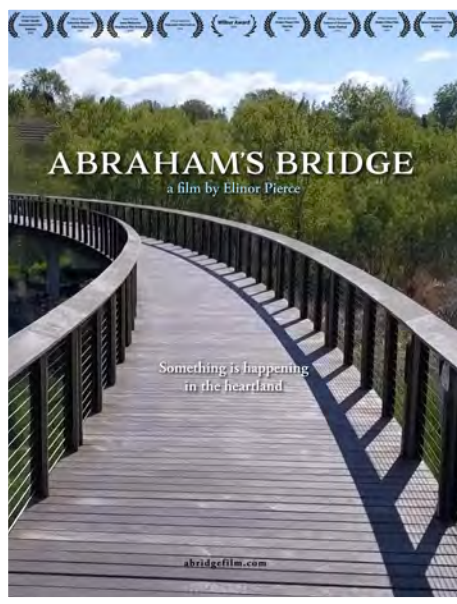
Alexander said, "The war that started with the massacre of Israelis on October 7. To me, with cousins and family and a place that I had visited less than ten months before, the pain of Israelis and of Jews around the world was one I identified with more, even though I could see the pain of the Palestinians."

Moving Forward by Sitting Still

The pain associated with October 7 and the ensuing war for AMI and Temple Israel is still raw. The raw-

ness can be exacerbated by the Christian impulse to "talk it over" and move to a place of "hope" too soon. "Not doing something is the best thing we can do right now," says Jennifer Shultz-Thomas, the current pastor of Countryside Community Church. "We should just sit there and think about our feelings and sit in the discomfort of not doing something. That is the most honest and faithful response we can give to our neighbors right now."

There is a sense in which the relationship among the three religious communities that comprise the Tri-Faith partnership is held together by a bridge, a garden, a shared parking lot, and the legal and fiscal commitments they made to one another almost 20 years ago to maintain close proximity. Perhaps Father Abraham's children are learning that the point of that old children's song was never the motions or the tune, but a nod of recognition that we belong to each other. We may all be singing out of tune and out of step, but maybe the song is enough. [GFM](#)



An Unlikely Retreat, at the Right Moment

By Raj Bhala

An accelerating desire for peace and quiet prompted my wife and me to join a Buddhist meditation retreat at a Catholic center in Kansas after Christmas. Nuns and Jesuit priests facilitated the retreat.

We forecast that the news wouldn't improve before or after Epiphany. We were confident our country club would still have the best French fries when we reintegrated into the reality of our privileged life near the Kansas City Country Club Plaza after the weeklong retreat. Munching on those fries and digesting recent news stories proved us right.

Plus, the interfaith angle intrigued me. My wife is a Malaysian-Chinese Buddhist and a Catholic school alumna. I grew up in Milwaukee in the Hindu-Sikh tradition. I was received into the Catholic Church at the Easter Vigil in 2001, which was 12 years after my wife and I were wed by our family's Methodist pastor at the United Nations Chapel in New York.

What I didn't expect at the \$600-per-person, all-inclusive retreat was a joyful revelation. What I experienced was generalizable — a disclosure that could resonate beyond the American heartland. Indeed, as a university distinguished professor specializing in international law, I'd recommend this revelation to help flip the news in 2026 for the better and advance world peace.

The Revelation: “No Self” and the Heart of Peace

The foundation for this proposition is the Buddhist teaching about awareness of a reality that is widely denied or evaded: many international and domestic legal conflicts have no enduring legal solutions. The answers are not in treaties or statutes, but in the heart. The heart never divides, but the mind does.

The hearts of our Buddhist lamas (teachers) and host Catholic nuns and priests were all in to support our small sangha (community) during the retreat. We observed noble



Photo by Rod Phillips

silence, eschewing our iPhones. We filled the resulting secular void with sacred meditation and dharma (teaching) talks — and, in my case, daily Mass as well.

What was my revelation? It was seeing Pope Leo XIV's episcopal formula embraced in relation to the third of the three characteristics of existence according to Buddhist teaching. The motto of his pontificate is: *In the One, we are one (In Illo uno unum)*.

That third characteristic is “no self” (*anatta*), or “not self.” It is the most challenging, yet the most essential, to understand if world peace is to be achieved. “Understanding,” says Vietnamese monk Thích Nhất Hạnh, “is another word for love.”

“No self” is integrally related to the first two Buddhist identifications of our shared human reality: suffering (*dukkha*) and impermanence (*anicca*). Suffering results

from our ignorance of “no self.” Impermanence arises from our “no self.”

For Christians, those first two hallmarks should be intuitive.

First, every time Christians contemplate a crucifix or cross, they are aware of the greatest suffering ever endured by God incarnate, who bore the worst degradations to save all of us. Yes, all. Buddhists, too.

Don't forget the doctrine of universal salvation. Ideally, this awareness of Christ's sacrifice is of Buddhist quality: clear, continuous, and present in the moment. There is no grasping at the thought of checking the score of the Jayhawks basketball game during Mass on the ESPN app. Indeed, grasping and hanging onto that thought would be ironic. We would bring about our own suffering. Maybe the Jayhawks lost, but in any case, we'd miss the opportunity to enter more deeply into the Paschal mystery.

Second, every time Christians hear that this world is passing away (Matthew 24:35; 1 John 2:17; and 1 Corinthians 7:31), we share in the Buddhist insight that nothing in this plane of existence endures forever.

“Do not be afraid” is the most repeated advice in the Old and New Testaments. Afraid of what? That the status quo will shift.

The crucifixion was the disruptive event that had to happen for the resurrection to occur. So, in Buddhist terms, let the thought of fear pass, accept the inevitability of change, and know there is a truer reality yet to come.

In the One, We Are One

Now we come to Pope Leo's motto and “no self” in Buddhism. To the extent this third characteristic of existence can be understood, start with a familiar question: “Who am I?” This inquiry requires awareness, or consciousness, of one's state, as does an examination of conscience before the sacrament of confession.

Impermanent, pleasurable distractions and fear of what the answer might be make it tempting to evade this question. Our entire true self is never fully visible, no more than we can, as Buddhist scholar Alan Watts puts it, turn our eyeballs 180 degrees and look inside. What we think of as our “self” is not necessarily who we really are.

But if we set aside our ego, cut out self-deceiving clutter, and pursue this Socratic “know thyself” inquiry with equanimity — or open-heartedness — we get a glimpse of our true self. The inquiry leads us to become selfless.

That's suggestive of the inquiry Mary and Joseph undertook, and of what they became. At the Annunciation, Mary said yes to the Archangel Gabriel. Thereafter, Joseph said yes to the angel in his dream, taking the infant Jesus from Bethlehem to Egypt. Thus, in the first year of Christ's life, the Holy Family was homeless in its homeland, and all three were refugees in a foreign land. This was the

consequence of two mindful, selfless choices that would change the world, serving all people everywhere for all time.

In Buddhism, the endpoint of this journey is the discovery that there is no self, because all is in each one of us, and each one of us is in all. None of us is distinct as a separate self from the larger universe. John Donne's “No Man Is an Island,” from *Meditation XVII*, sets this tone: a church bell tolling for one person tolls for all, because we share mortality.

Human rights law embodies oneness, proclaiming in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights that all persons enjoy universal principles, regardless of who they are.

Is Pope Leo's motto, “In the One, we are one,” akin to “no self”? Yes. The answers from the retreat suggested it would seem so — or at least worth exploring. Human dignity in Catholicism is founded on the precept that each person is unique, priceless, and unrepeatable, created in the image and likeness of God.

That's not in the Buddhist canon, but unity is — and it's what the motto expresses. There's a complex synthesis out there, and up there, which the Holy Father and the Dalai Lama grasp.

Diamond Reminders

With spring training not too far off from the retreat, I envision a simple version of the synthesis in Major League Baseball. Stars from Buddhist countries — Japan, Korea, and Taiwan — play alongside Christian American teammates. Each one swings at his chosen pitch. Some are mindful of a fastball down the middle. Others are aware of a low-and-outside breaking ball. Each pitch presents a different path to a shared goal: circling the bases to return home. Unless they're enlightened enough to hit a home run, they rely on their interfaith sangha to help them home.

So, if you've never experienced meditation juxtaposed with Christian worship, try it. What a force multiplier — or one-two punch — ancient Buddhist practices are for Christian prayer. Forgive the violent analogies.

At the retreat, not a word of the *Our Father* escaped my attention. The Eucharist was a conscious blessing to receive internally and radiate to the world. The nuns and priests commented on how much they loved having Buddhist retreat participants among them.

They thanked me for worshipping with them. I cried. A lot. **GFM**



Raj Bhala is University Distinguished Professor at the University of Kansas, School of Law. The views expressed herein are his own and do not necessarily represent those of KU or the State of Kansas, nor of the Buddhist Temple and Catholic Center or their clergy and associates involved in the retreat.

What Do We Have in Common?

Practicing Interfaith Dialogue by Focusing on Values and Virtues

By Craig Nash

It is no secret that we live in divided times. Social media algorithms are designed to reinforce our biases, keep us angry, and foster distrust of our neighbors. Cable news is even worse. Panelists vie for the title of loudest, most passionate defenders of their beliefs. There isn't even an assumption on the part of viewers and consumers of content that listening will be involved in whatever passes for "dialogue."



There are, however, grassroots and organizational efforts to change this. One such initiative in recent years has been the work of public deliberation, which moves beyond the practices of debate and dialogue and toward a more conversational, yet action-oriented, process. Public deliberation isn't about getting a group of people with differing opinions in a room to try to win each other over with the strength of their arguments. Rather, it brings people together to consider how personal values play into public decisions. It begins by asking people to agree on how a problem is to be framed and then locate their shared values before asking them to state their opinion on a solution. Public deliberation forums have become popular on college campuses and in "democracy conversations" around the country.

There are different ways to operate these forums, but a key element in all of them is that participants identify their values before proposing solutions. For example, a conversation that focuses on the rising cost of healthcare in the country may propose three broad approaches: reducing the threat of financial ruin, restraining out-of-control costs, and providing healthcare coverage as a fundamental human right. Each approach would come with its own solutions. But before anyone can propose a solution, they must first identify and rank the values they hold most dear in approaching the conversation.

These values can include freedom of choice, market competition, equity, equality, fairness, and the government's duty to serve its people.

What often occurs in public deliberation is that participants learn their differences of opinion aren't on proposed solutions, or even the values they bring into deciding which solution they believe is best. Instead, what they discover is that they hold similar values to people they disagree with; they just hold them differently. For example, one person may value a government's duty to serve its people, but it may be third or fourth on their list, behind, say, market competition. For others, the responsibility of government is at the top of their list.

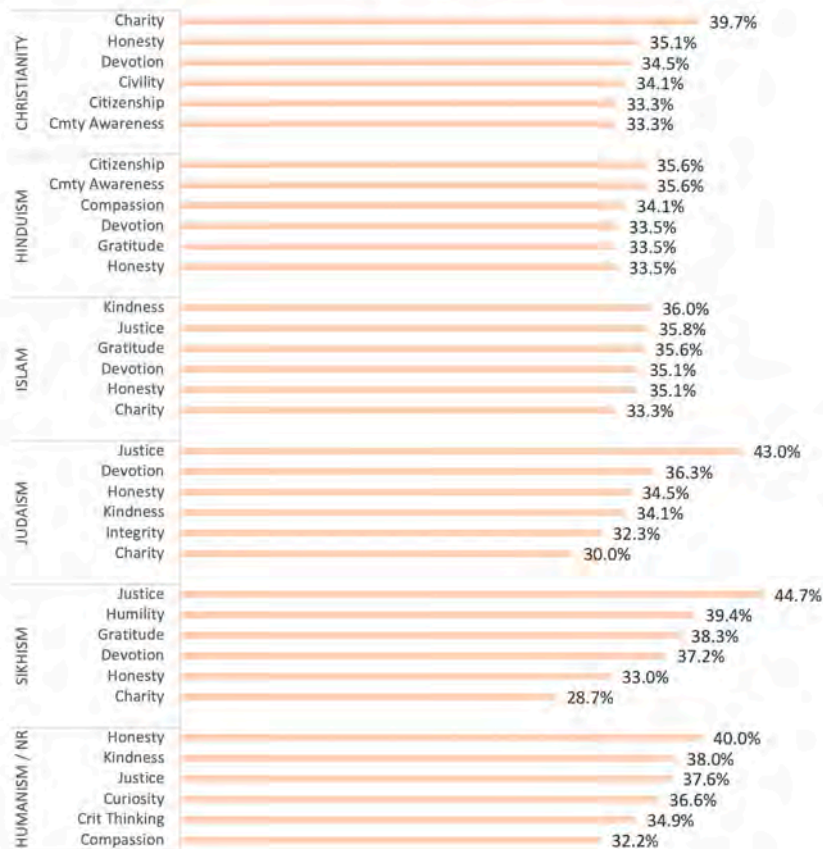
The goal of public deliberation is to practice decision-making on very complicated social challenges. The result, often, is that conversation partners discover that people who disagree with them aren't unintelligent, uncaring, or evil. They simply have a different set of values — and a different ordering of those values.

Religious Virtues

The public deliberation approach to civic engagement can be incredibly relevant to interfaith dialogue and understanding. Having a dialogue about what someone values can be a more hospitable way of beginning a conversation than asking what they believe. But from an interfaith perspective, understanding isn't restricted to conversation. We can "do the work" of understanding through study.

Last year, Good Faith Partnership, along with the University of Birmingham and the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, released a study titled *Virtues of Faith*. (Good Faith Partnership is a UK-based organization devoted to multi-sectoral and multi-faith collaboration and is not affiliated with Good Faith Media.) The study provided results of a 2023 survey that asked participants from various faith and

Top 6 Virtues by % of the Religion or Belief



"Virtues of Faith" infographic by Good Faith Partnership, the University of Birmingham and the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtue. (2025)

nonreligious traditions to rank a list of 24 virtues. There was also an option to list their own virtue. Participants included Christians, Hindus, Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, and those who identified as humanist or non-religious. The results can be extremely useful in understanding differences between faith groups.

For Christians, charity — defined as the act of giving money or goods to people in times of need — was the top virtue, chosen by 39.7% of respondents. That is followed closely by honesty (35.1%), devotion (34.5%), civility (34.1%), citizenship (33.3%), and community awareness (33.3%).

Among each group surveyed, including humanist/non-religious participants, honesty is the only virtue that appears in the top six of all of them. Devotion appears in the top six of all faith groups, but not among those who identify as humanist or non-religious.

Although values and virtues are somewhat different in definition, the study on virtues among various belief systems can be instructive in inter-faith dialogue. How? Regardless of who you are in

conversation with, it seems you could never go wrong bringing the idea of honesty to the table. And if you are speaking about religion with anyone who practices a religion, asking questions about their devotional practices can be helpful.

Analyzing the Good Faith Partnership study can also provide some helpful tools in thinking through the ways dominant religious groups in a society prioritize their values and virtues differently from minority groups. For example, the virtue of civility doesn't appear in the top six of any of the survey's subgroups except for Christians. Yet in every group of religious minorities, except for Hindus, the virtue of justice appears in their top six.

Does this mean that Christians don't care about justice or that religious minorities don't care about civility? Of course not.

Justice comes in the number seven slot among Christians, and civility is ranked high among all other groups, just not in their top six. But it might say something about how our relative dominance or non-dominance in a society determines the relative importance we place on certain values and virtues.

Two statistically significant pieces of data in the survey are notable. One is that, for Christians, the virtue of charity is dominant over all the others. There is more than a four-point gap between it and honesty on the list of top virtues. The other regards the virtue of humility, which is number two on the list for Sikhs but nowhere in the top six for any other subgroup.

How might all this help us come to a greater understanding of various faith groups? For one, it gives us an idea of our common ground, which can help reduce the idea that the person sitting across from us is an "other." Second, it asks us to measure what our religious texts and traditions ask of us against the virtues and values we actually embrace.

Mostly, though, it invites us to practice curiosity as we seek to understand and love our neighbors better. [GFM](#)

The Lion King: How Big is the Circle?

By Brett Younger

Actors in colorful animal costumes and giant bird puppets have been dancing eight shows a week since 1997. *The Lion King* is Broadway's third-longest-running show, with more than 11,000 performances. It is also the highest-grossing production of all time, with more than \$2 billion in profits. If a show is that successful without using profanity, Christian preachers will certainly raid the story for sermon illustrations.



The magical musical, based on the 1994 film, won six Tony Awards. The opening song might have been enough to win Best Musical on its own — which it did. Rafiki presents the lion cub Simba as the heir apparent, and the “Circle of Life” begins: “*Nants ingonyama bagithi Baba / Sithi uhm ingonyama.*” The English translation, “Here comes a lion, father, oh yes, it’s a lion,” is not as awe-inspiring as the Zulu makes it sound.

Mufasa’s brother, Scar, laments his lost chance at becoming king. Simba’s uncle sends his nephew to the forbidden elephant graveyard. The hyenas are about to eat Simba and Nala when Mufasa rescues them. In *Hamlet*-like fashion, the king’s brother plots to overthrow him. Scar raises an army of goose-stepping hyenas, traps Simba in a wildebeest stampede, and kills his brother after Mufasa saves Simba. The wicked Scar convinces Simba that it was his fault, so he should run away. Scar sends hyenas to kill Simba, but he escapes. Scar rules as an evil, paranoid king who does not understand why he is not loved, even as he destroys everything good.

Timon the meerkat and Pumbaa the warthog, the comic relief, show Simba the carefree, worry-free, problem-free Hakuna Matata way of life. Pumbaa says, “It’s times like this my buddy Timon here says you got to put your behind in your past.” Nala comes to persuade Simba to return to the now-devastated Pride Lands. Mufasa’s spirit tells Simba to take his position as the

true king. Rafiki sings, “The past can hurt, but you can either run from it or learn from it.”

When Simba sees Scar attack Sarabi, Mufasa’s widow, the fight begins. When Simba seems to have won, Scar begs for his life, blames the hyenas, and then, when Simba offers mercy, attacks again. Scar falls off a cliff. The hyenas end up tearing Scar apart, and the Pride Lands celebrate.

The Lion King is too good for preachers not to take it for parts. The opening scene, in which the new prince is consecrated and presented to the community, is reminiscent of baptism — especially when a beam of light breaks through the clouds.

Some ministers think Simba is the Prodigal Son. In a pivotal scene, Simba looks into the water, sees a reflection of his father, and returns to be faithful to his calling. Simba’s realization that he can go home — and that he is still connected to his loved ones — is a picture of conversion, restoration, and grace. Preachers point out that the Bible calls the promised messiah-king a lion, like Aslan in Narnia, but the Bible also depicts Satan as a lion, like Scar. Sermons suggest that Simba runs away to a desert as Moses did, hears a call as Samuel did, and saves those who are suffering as Jesus did.

As a preacher, I understand the temptation to use every good story as a Christian story, but I am also beginning to recognize that treating others’ stories as subservient to our own is not true to the Christian understanding that God is bigger than our understanding. Being inspired by *The Lion King* reminds me to appreciate the truth in others’ stories without treating them as my own.

*There's more to see than can ever be seen
More to do than can ever be done
There's far too much to take in here
More to find than can ever be found*

Not everything wonderful is contained solely within the Christian story — especially not God’s redemption. **GFM**

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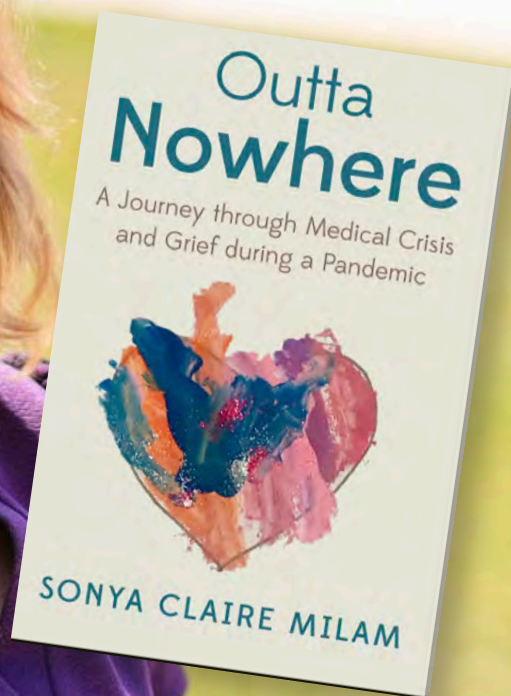
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(accommodations at the Hawthorne Inn)



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Now Available from the Good Faith Bookstore

Enjoy this excerpt from Sonya Milam's new book, "Outta Nowhere: A Journey through Medical Crisis and Grief during a Pandemic."

Perhaps nine can be deemed “our number.” Bob and I met in summer 1991. Nine months later, we began dating. Nine months later, we became engaged. Nine months later, we had our dream wedding. Nine months later, I was pregnant with our first son, thus experiencing parenthood for the first time nine months later. Nine months (times two) later, I was pregnant again. Nine months later, we had our second son. Nine years later, our third son, “our bonus baby,” entered our lives, unplanned by us but no doubt planned by God! Some might call our life together a whirlwind.

Indeed, life for Bob and me was often chaotic, but joyfully so. Just as often, our life was blissfully ordinary. We loved our ordinary and simple life and

intentionally savored the many gifts of the ordinary days and even the joyfully chaotic ones during the “for better” seasons we were blessed to have. Even our “for worse” seasons brought lessons learned, love grown, and resilience formed.

It wasn't love at first sight. I kept Bob at arm's length for a good amount of time while we got to know each other in group settings at church events and group meals after such events. I agreed to another double date and then a solo date only because my friend Dan, part of that first date, said he would never speak to me again if I didn't accept another date. I postponed that date a few times, then invited others to join us! I was scared! I had been deeply hurt by love before. All my life I'd been, as the song says, “looking

for love in all the wrong places,” not knowing it could be like this new experience of love; not knowing there was a special person who would so intensely and intentionally give his heart; not knowing I didn’t have to settle for anything less. Maybe it’s because much of what I had witnessed and experienced to that point in my life was that love was hard and people are complicated. Some will take your love and mishandle it and manipulate you. I had experienced and witnessed that love can bring heartache and drama. But thanks be to God, it wasn’t that way with Bob and me. I guess I also believed the lies of the world—that everything had to be taken with caution, manipulated, and dramatized. No thanks to that!

If I were meant to be single, so be it. If there were someone out there for me, God would show me. These thoughts brought great resolve to me in my mid-twenties, and I have leaned on this kind of resolve in my current life stage.

Once I let Bob in, *outta nowhere* my heart suddenly felt at ease, safe, loved, and respected. Our souls were like magnets with opposing backgrounds, habits, and temperaments drawn together by the strong pull of shared values. This was both unexplainable and unimaginable. We were drawn together, and our lives merged effortlessly.

It’s all mysterious—miraculous really. It was easy, which I couldn’t understand: the many times I opened my mouth and words poured out without thinking; the way Bob seemed already to know exactly what I was going to say; the way he carefully and brilliantly chose just the right words to respond (or not!); the way I felt heard and seen, appreciated and respected; the way our hugs felt so natural; the way our lives seemed effortlessly to fold into one another. I had never felt anything so real. I had never met a person whose simple existence could make me feel alive, wanted, worthy. And I want to hold on to that. I want to remember that feeling. Not just til death do us part, but for the rest of my life.

Even though it was not love at first sight, the connection, respect, laughter, and values we shared were unbelievable to me. This was—this is—love!

I’ll never forget those moments when nothing and everything made sense all at once. I was pulled to him in ways I still cannot understand. I am convinced it was the hands of God resting on our shoulders, turning us into one another’s view. We were connected—mind, body, soul—and it was real, still is real, will always be

real for me. The struggle remains to make sense out of our life together and the fact it is no longer in the present tense and in physical space. No more growing old together dreams to be shared. What is left are the beautiful memories, my gratitude, and now a legacy to fulfill. That is all. This must be enough. It has to be.

We were devoted to each other—a devotion that was expressed in a covenant, still mysteriously and miraculously in force today. Each day, we woke up and made the commitment to be married, to put in the work and “do marriage.” Now, when I wake, I commit myself to honor Bob’s legacy and live my life in a way that would make him proud. Alone, I’m tasked with launching our third son into adulthood and waiting for the next chapters to unfold while cherishing each precious, joyfully chaotic memory. I am now left with the memories, the lessons learned, and the hope my hurt will one day be healed. Our marriage was neither patriarchal nor complementarian, but egalitarian. Neither of us had roles higher than the other.

We were true equals. Respectful. We competed only to show who could perform the most acts of love and kindness to each other. When we disagreed, our only option was to discuss it, pray over it, and work it out. When faced with a decision, neither of us made the decision for both of us.

There were areas where I happily and eagerly deferred to Bob, not because he, society, my upbringing, or my church said so, but because I concluded he was more interested and/or better, wiser, and experienced in those areas. Likewise, in the areas where I had my own interests and strengths to contribute more than he did, he would willingly and happily defer to me. We joked we were like a company, Milam Manufacturing, where he was co-CEO for Ways and Means and I was co-CEO for Planning and Development!

And it all just worked. What fun we had living our callings as we reared our sons into adulthood. What comfort I find in the peace and satisfaction that Bob left this world knowing all three of his sons are on the right track with this mission.

Now, when I close my eyes or peer into the home and see the sons we created together, I still feel it—the race of my heart, the way the world stops, the peace, hope, and tranquility that passes all understanding. He loved me and our boys well! To God be the glory.

GFM.



Temple Tour

Photo Essay by
Rod Phillips

Sister Hien
Tam at Tu
Vien Truc
Lam Temple
in Riverdale,
Georgia.

By Rod Phillips

On February 25, 2025, I met with Sister Hien Tam at Tu Vien Truc Lam Temple in Riverdale, Georgia. She invited me inside and offered to give me a tour.

When we entered the temple, she first showed me the shrine room, where prayers are offered for good health. Each candle had a different name inscribed on it, representing a specific prayer request. She then took me to another room where they pray to Dipankara (Past), Shakyamuni (Present), and Maitreya (Future). She explained that this is the place where the monks can connect with their ancestors — a Vietnamese tradition of remaining connected to the past, present, and future.



The Endearing and Enduring Legacy of Hospitality Committees

By Wanda Kidd

Even now, with church life rapidly changing, food remains an essential part of the church's culture. But back in the day, when church cooking was a competitive sport, a hierarchy existed in the church kitchen that everyone would have been foolish to ignore. Aside from the nursery, the hospitality committee was the only place where women held absolute sway, and they guarded it with a sacred pride. I mean, after all, they were the caretakers of the silver (even if silver-plated) punch bowls, trays, and chafing dishes.

The "Kitchen Ladies" were in charge of the homecoming meal, baby and bridal showers, and the solemn family meal after a funeral. They not only had to make sure the linens were clean and pressed, but also needed to know who to ask to bring what to each event. Only at homecoming

Photos courtesy of
Holly Racca, Director
of Family Ministries
at Southern Hills
Church of Christ in
Abilene, Texas.





"When I cook Mary Lewis' Hamburger Quiche from the First Baptist Church's 1978 cookbook, I remember teaching with her, and I smile."

to talk to one another and build community. While they cleaned the kitchen, they shared stories — things they had nowhere else to share — and swapped recipes, lots of recipes. Every decade or so, they decided to include those recipes in a fundraising cookbook, which rarely turned a profit but made

their names and recipes immortal. When I cook Mary Lewis's Hamburger Quiche from the First Baptist Church's 1978 cookbook, I remember teaching with her, and I smile.

Breaking bread together is a calling. Now women serve as deacons, ministers, and finance chairs. As they leave those meetings, they wonder what they accomplished. Maybe if men and women signed up to bring a dessert to the meeting, we would remember why we came and who we serve in those gatherings. We could leave with a different taste in our mouths. It can't hurt. Just know that on the nights the women are in charge, there will probably be matching plates and napkins. **GFM**

was there enough food that the menu was left to chance. Even then, there were whispered conversations up and down the serving table about who brought which casserole or dessert. Everyone knew what the crazy cat lady brought and how to take just enough to not hurt her feelings, but not so much that it would ruin the rest of the food on your Dixie paper plate.



I am pretty sure that unless someone had a wife on the hospitality committee or was on the staff of a church, most men did not know the drama surrounding the politics of food in church kitchens. But we girls knew. We heard about it from our grandmas, mamas, and aunts. We understood the hierarchy and what would set certain people off. More than one meal was interrupted by a purse being slung over someone's shoulder and watching them turn and walk out the door. Yet, somehow, it all seemed to work out. The next time someone had something to grieve or celebrate, the hospitality committee was there to prepare and serve their neighbors and friends.

The committee's success wasn't just because the kitchen was their domain; it was because they actually did something tangible. They had a clear mission: feed people and make it pretty. In doing so, they allowed the church





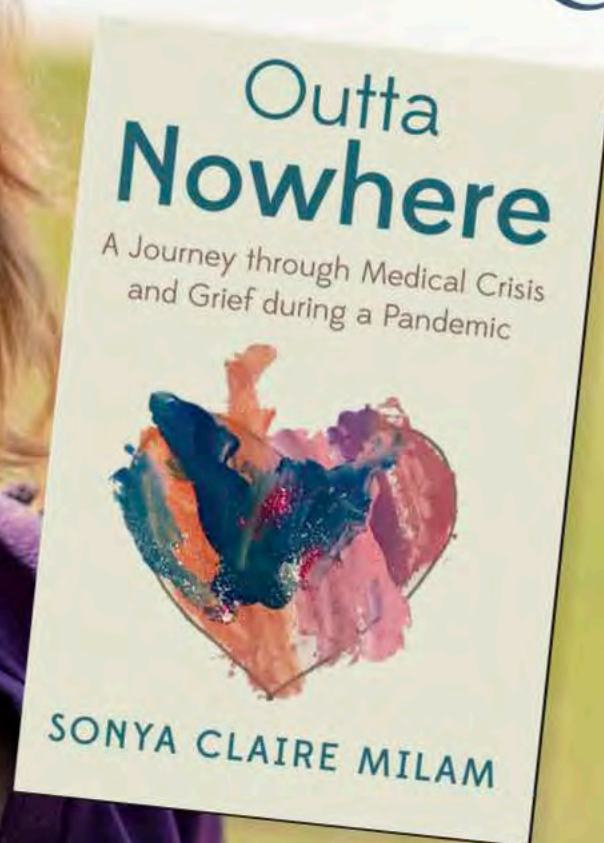
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The Raceless Gospel Initiative

Rev. Dr. Starlette Thomas is the director of the Raceless Gospel Initiative.



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Led by Kali Cawthon-Freels



SCAN ME