

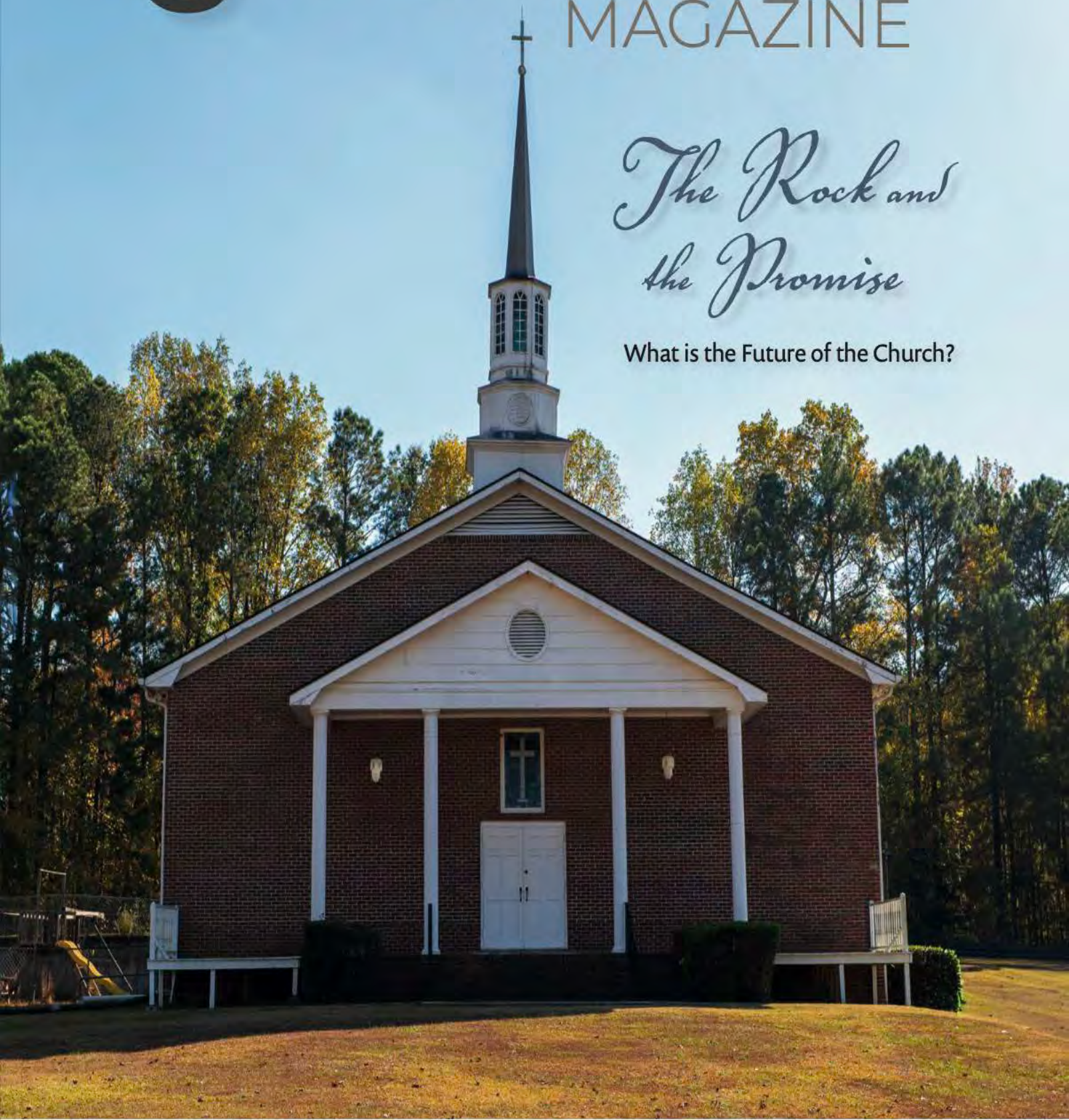
january-march 2026

goodfaith

MAGAZINE

*The Rock and
the Promise*

What is the Future of the Church?





A SERMON FOR EVERY SUNDAY*

SUN



MON

TUE

WED

THU

Good Faith Media's "Preaching to Inspire Initiative" recognizes the significant impact great preaching offers the world.

Good preaching invites people into a spiritual conversation between the preacher and listener. Sermons allow audiences to consume sacred language to challenge the mind and inspire the heart in hopes of pursuing a better self and world. ASFES features lectionary-based video sermons by America's best preachers for use in worship, Bible study, small groups, Sunday school classes, or for individual use. All you do is push the button. ▶

*ASFES for short

FROM THE EDITOR

"Please cancel the subscription for our church, effective today. The church is closing. Thanks."

That was the simple, matter-of-fact email we received last fall from a congregation that had used Good Faith Bible Studies as its Sunday school curriculum for some time. Although we know the data and hear the stories, reading a line like "The church is closing" is jarring.

Just as news of an individual's passing prompts us to consider our own mortality, the dissolution of a congregation can cause those of us whose spiritual lifeblood is the church to shudder. For me, it can also make me a bit defensive about my own relationship to the institutional church.

Several years ago, pastor Lillian Daniel caused a stir with an essay she wrote for *The Huffington Post* titled "Spiritual But Not Religious? Please Stop Boring Me." She shared that when people sit next to her on a plane and find out she's a minister, they often feel compelled to let her know they don't bother with church because they feel God in sunsets and rainbows.

Daniel wrote that these people always tell her this "as if it is some kind of daring insight, unique to him, bold in its rebellion against the religious status quo," as if religious people don't experience God in nature as well.

She continued with an admonition to those who seem to spend every Sunday morning finding God on the beach or in the mountains:

"You are now comfortably in the norm for self-centered American culture, right smack in the bland majority of people who find ancient



Craig Nash

religions dull but find themselves uniquely fascinating. Can I switch seats now and sit next to someone who has been shaped by a mighty cloud of witnesses instead? Can I spend my time talking to someone brave enough to encounter God in a real human community? Because when this flight gets choppy, that's who I want by my side, holding my hand, saying a prayer and simply putting up with me, just like we try to do in church."

In retrospect, I see why Daniel's essay resonated with me and others who were still holding on to our love for the church, even as institutional religion was beginning to show deeper foundational cracks than we had once thought. (I also see how my being on a ministerial staff — with an income dependent on the health of the church — made her writing so appealing.) But in the decade and a half since that essay was published, with all that has been revealed about religious trauma and clergy sexual abuse, I can also see how defensive and dismissive her tone was toward people's lived experiences.

I still have hope for the church. And I still grieve when I hear that another congregation has closed its doors. But I've also witnessed those who have found spiritual community in pubs and parks, reading Scripture and wrestling with theological truths alongside people who put up with one another.

If I am to believe that "the gates of hell will not prevail" against the church (Matthew 16:18), then I must loosen my grip on my insistence that the church operate the way it always has — even as I wonder what casserole I'll bring to the next fellowship-hall potluck. **GFM**

WHO WE ARE

OUR TEAM

GOOD FAITH MAGAZINE STAFF

Craig Nash, *Senior Editor*

Stephanie Brueggeman, *Data and Sales Manager*

David Cassady, *Church Resources Editor*

Cally Chisholm, *Creative Coordinator*

John D. Pierce, *Editor Emeritus*

Walker L. Knight (1924–2019) *Publisher Emeritus*

Jack U. Harwell (1932–2019) *Editor Emeritus*

Directors Emeriti: Nannette Avery, Thomas E. Boland,

R. Kirby Godsey, Guy Rutland III, Mary Etta Sanders,

Mel Williams, Winnie V. Williams, Ann Roebuck

GOOD FAITH MEDIA

R. Mitch Randall, *Chief Executive Officer*

mitch@goodfaithmedia.org

Stephanie Brueggeman, *Data and Sales Manager*

stephanie@goodfaithmedia.org

Cally Chisholm, *Creative Coordinator*

cally@goodfaithmedia.org

Craig Nash, *Senior Editor*

craig@goodfaithmedia.org

Roderious Phillips, *Associate Media Producer*

rod@goodfaithmedia.org

Missy Randall, *Program Director*

missy@goodfaithmedia.org

Starlette Thomas, *Director of the Raceless Gospel Initiative*

starlette@goodfaithmedia.org

Cliff Vaughn, *Media Producer*

cliff@goodfaithmedia.org



Good Faith Magazine
amplifies Christian values
of justice, inclusion, and
freedom while celebrating
God's fingerprints in
Scripture, culture, and the
witness of God's people.

Good Faith Magazine is part of the Good Faith Media family of platforms. GFM's mission is to amplify freedom, inclusivity, and justice for people and partners, utilizing multiple media platforms as a catalyst to produce and publish thoughtful, engaging, and inspiring content.

GOVERNING BOARD

Michael Cheuk, Charlottesville, VA (Chair)
Renée Lloyd Owen, Marietta, GA (Past Chair)
Mica Strother, Little Rock, AR (Chair Elect)
Bill McConnell, Knoxville, TN (Treasurer)
Cynthia Holmes, St. Louis, MO (Secretary)
Jack Glasgow, Zebulon, NC
Kevin Heifner, Little Rock, AR
Rob Marus, Washington, DC
Greg Milligan, Austin, TX
Jackie Baugh Moore, San Antonio, TX
Skye Perryman, Washington, DC
David Turner, Richmond, VA

ADVISORY COUNCIL CHAIRS

Gary Skeen, Duluth, GA (Development & Marketing)
Laurie Weatherford, Winter Park, FL (Experiences)
Jake Hall, Macon, GA (Videos & Podcasts)

For a complete listing of the Strategic Advisory Board,
visit goodfaithmedia.org.

*Good Faith Magazine (ISSN 3065-3983) is published quarterly by:
Good Faith Media PO Box 721972, Norman OK 73070.
Subscription Rates for organizations: 1-24 copies \$4 per issue / 25-99
copies \$3 per issue / 100+ \$2.50 per issue. For individuals: a yearly
donation of at least \$50 qualifies for a 1-year subscription. Periodical
postage paid at Macon, GA 31213 and additional mailing offices.
POSTMASTER: Send corrections to PO Box 721972, Norman OK 73070
- 6156277763 COPYRIGHT 2026 Good Faith Magazine all rights
reserved*

40

FAITH & DEMOCRACY

**The Urgency of the
Moment: The Christian
Witness and Democracy
are Depending on Us**
By Mitch Randall

42

RACELESS GOSPEL

**Still Separate and
Unequal: A Decolonizing
and Desegregating
Spirituality for Life in
Christian Community**
By Starlette Thomas

44

FAITHFUL PRIDE

**New Year's Resolutions
for Trans Advocacy**
By Kali Cawthon-Freels

12

GOOD FAITH BIBLE STUDIES

**Dig Into Old and New
Testament Bible Studies
for January-March 2026**



IN THIS ISSUE:

VOL. 44, ISSUE 1 // JANUARY-MARCH 2026

FEATURES

- 4** **People of Good Faith** featuring Candice Wynn and Heather Mustain
- 46** **Preaching to Inspire: Dirty Money**
by Rev. Antonio Vargas Jr.
- 48** **Intern Profiles:** Hayoung Park and Luke Emerson
- 50** **The Rock and the Promise: What is the Future of the Church?** by Craig Nash
- 60** **GFM On the Go** by Cally Chisholm

COLUMNS

- 6** ***The Buena Vista Social Club: Like a Good Church***
by Brett Younger
- 8** **Holding on and Letting Go** by James Ellis III
- 58** **Wild Churches** by Craig Nash
- 62** **Do Not Besmirch the Name** by Wanda Kidd

The cover for the January-March issue features Anointed Vision of Hope Church outside of Atlanta, Georgia. *Photo by Rod Phillips, Associate Media Producer at Good Faith Media.*

Candice Wynn

FOUNDER OF BOON
ATLANTA, GA

Once upon a time, the big innovation in Church-based Next Gen ministry was expanding the idea of faith formation from just the church to include the home. That was radical, inviting parents into the discipleship process and giving them tools to shape their kids' spiritual lives. That shift changed how ministry leaders approached everything.

However, over 20 years later, that same model — church and home — is still where many churches and organizations stop.

BOON, “Born Out Of Necessity,” is built on the belief that youth are discipled every day by more than sermons and dinner-table devotions. They're shaped by coaches, teachers, mentors, aunties, media, music, policy, and peers. They learn faith through a teacher who tells them they belong, a coach who pushes them to believe in their voice, a neighbor who reminds them they're more than their mistakes.

Those people are influencers. And not in the hashtag sense. They're the ones youth run to and say, “I'm sorry I'm late, Coach.” The ones who whisper, “College apps are due soon.” They're present in the ordinary, sacred moments of formation.

We take seriously the role of everyday people in the spiritual formation of Black youth. We equip the village to see their role, own their impact, and steward their influence with care. The African proverb is true: “It takes a village to raise a child.” But sometimes, the village needs a village. At BOON, we invest in influencers who disciple Black youth (ages 0–19).

Our current focus is on developing a Discipleship Framework for Black Teenagers (Framework 1.0). Through our research, we are centering Black youth, not as passive recipients of ministry, but as meaning-makers whose stories shape how we understand faith, culture, and discipleship. We treat each story as sacred data, letting it guide us as we reimagine discipleship that fully integrates faith and life. When Framework



1.0 is complete (expected in fall 2026), we will resource the web of influencers who do the day-to-day work.

Until then, we're sharing some of the things we're processing and learning through *The Ville*, a podcast for anyone influencing the faith of Black youth. This first season challenges the idea that discipleship is the sole responsibility of the church. Together, we examine influence, wrestle with the beliefs we pass down, and embrace our collective role in helping Black youth experience abundant life.

BOON reminds the village of its power. And when the village remembers, healing looks different. Our goal is for Black youth, for generations to come, to live a John 10:10 abundant life — fully embodying their faith, surrounded by a village equipped, empowered, and committed to walking with them. **GFM**

Candice Wynn is the founder of BOON, a community of Black Children's and Youth Ministry Faith-Leaders. She is an Invested Faith fellow.

WILSHIRE BAPTIST
DALLAS, TX

Heather Mustain

Some people climb corporate ladders. I assemble committees. Fifteen-member ones, to be precise — thrice over. It's not for the faint of heart. While others lead board meetings with PowerPoints, I lead them with prayer, purpose, and an agenda that dares to balance justice, budget, and volunteer opportunities.

As Minister of Missions and Advocacy, I've learned that "strategic vision" is equal parts theology, diplomacy, and improvisation. It's knowing how to translate "Kingdom of God" into "action items" and how to turn good intentions into measurable impact — preferably before my second cup of coffee. I oversee partnerships that stretch from local nonprofits to global initiatives, which means my inbox is a curious mix of city policy updates and photos of schools being built in Tanzania and the children who benefit.

Budgets, you ask? Yes, there are budgets. Stewarding a grant-making program has taught me that generosity thrives best with spreadsheets, evaluative matrices, and 990s. There's a holy rhythm in moving money toward meaning, whether funding

an after-school meal program or launching a county-wide rental assistance initiative. And nothing says "miracle" quite like volunteers completing the paperwork and agreeing to spend the night at the church so a few unhoused women could find quiet moments of respite.

Advocacy is my other pulpit. Sometimes it's testifying at the Texas State Capitol. Other times, it's convincing a congregation that justice is not a trend, but a calling. I've guided teams through policy priorities on education, gun violence, predatory lending, housing, and food insecurity — proof that the gospel does, indeed, scale.

Still, my work is less about programs and more about people. Every coalition meeting, every cross-sector collaboration, every late-night planning session has one goal: building a community that looks a little more like the vision we pray for every Sunday. The magic happens somewhere between the spreadsheets and the stories — the place where a good idea meets a good neighbor.

My job title may sound lofty, but most days it's equal parts logistics coordinator, translator, counselor, and optimist-in-chief. It's a strange vocation — one foot in the sanctuary, the other in school board rooms — but it's where I've learned that faith isn't a feeling; it's a framework for getting things done.

So yes, I drive strategy, steward resources, and lead with conviction. But really, I just help people remember that love, properly organized, can change the world. **GFM**

Heather Mustain has led Wilshire Baptist's missions and advocacy work since 2013. She is passionate about connecting people with service opportunities and feels called to help the church think about its mission as both compassionate and justice-seeking. As associate pastor, Heather also oversees operations, congregational life, pastoral care, and communications.



The Buena Vista Social Club:

Like a Good Church

Brett Younger

The bandleader begins: “Some of what follows is true. Some of it only feels true.”

The feeling turned out to be the point, but it took me a while to get there. I went to the Broadway musical *The Buena Vista Social Club*, in part, because the history is interesting. The story starts in 1950s Cuba — Ricky Ricardo, Guys and Dolls, and Ernest Hemingway. Ava Gardner honeymooned with Frank Sinatra in Havana and described it as an “American playground, complete with gambling houses, whorehouses, and brightly lit cafes, every other one boasting a live orchestra.”



The more than 130 social clubs in Havana were divided by ethnicity, neighborhood, and race. *The Buena Vista Social Club* was a nightclub for working-class Afro-Cubans, who were the victims of terrible racial discrimination. When Nat King Cole sang in Havana, he did not stay at the same hotel as Sinatra.

In 1959, Fidel Castro took power and closed the social clubs.

In 1996, 20 elderly musicians — the stars of Cuba’s pre-revolution “golden age” — recorded an album of Cuban music that celebrates the styles of the old Havana nightspot, sons, boleros, and guajiras. This album, which was made on a shoestring budget, surprised everyone by selling 12 million copies and winning a Grammy.

In 1998, the band that recorded the album performed at Carnegie Hall and at some major venues in Europe.

In 1999, they were the subject of a documentary that was nominated for an Oscar and has a 92% rating on Rotten Tomatoes. The story is great, but the story is not the point.

The Broadway musical, which won five Tony Awards in 2025, is set in two time periods: 1958, leading up to the revolution, and 1996, when the album was made. One cast is young and the other is, as the script puts it, “less young.”

The musical is not concerned with facts. The fictional plot centers on two sisters divided by their musical

tastes. Haydee wants to go to the whiter, more upscale El Tropicana. Omara loves the Buena Vista, saying, “There are no tourists. They’re playing for us!”

The Buena Vista Social Club is not people imitating the culture; it is the culture. Nearly all of the musicians on Broadway are Cuban.

The bandleader says: “My professors would ramble about important composers, about Mozart and Bach and Rachmaninoff, as if the greatest music always comes from somewhere else, never from here. Mozart isn’t better than us.”

I am a tourist whose education taught me to admire Mozart. I love violins more than maracas and steel drums more than bongos, but that would probably not be the case if I had grown up in Cuba.

The dozen musicians at Buena Vista made me feel like something other than a tourist. I love the songs, even though Duolingo fails me. I can’t keep up with the lyrics, which are in Spanish, but the music is the story. I can feel the love, betrayal, and joy in the songs. (I appreciated one song less after I learned what the lyrics are about.) I usually cannot tell the difference between bad dancing and good dancing, but I can tell this is real dancing.

I have not been to Cuba, but I have been given a taste. The show does not make us think nearly so much as it makes us feel. We give ourselves to its sounds. We lose ourselves in its spirit.

We do not go to *The Buena Vista Social Club* for the story. We go for the good of our souls. We go to feel less pretentious, artificial, and impassive. We go because we are usually too sensible, efficient, and practical.

We need to hear other languages. We need to remember the world is bigger than we usually see. We need to feel the Spirit beyond words.

On a good Sunday, good churches help us with that. We think in worship, but in the best moments we experience God’s joy. *Buena Vista* reminds us that we need to feel what’s true. **GFM**

Christ has set us *free*...

Together

– Gal. 5:1; Heb. 10:24



cbf
North Carolina

Annual Gathering

March 19–20, 2026
Hayes Barton Baptist, Raleigh



Register at cbfnc.org/AnnualGathering

Annual Gathering 2026 Schedule

THURSDAY, MARCH 19

- 9:30 a.m. Leadership Forum Registration Opens
- 10:00 a.m. Leadership Forum
- 1:00 p.m. Registration & Exhibit Hall Open
- 2:30 p.m. Welcome Gathering
- 3:30 p.m. Workshop Session 1
- 5:00 p.m. Dinner & Fellowship (*on-site*)
- 6:15 p.m. General Session & Worship
- 7:30 p.m. Exhibit Hall Ice Cream Fellowship
(*featuring Howling Cow ice cream*)

FRIDAY, MARCH 20

- 8:00 a.m. Registration & Exhibit Hall Open
- 9:00 a.m. Ministry Showcase & Business Meeting
- 9:45 a.m. Workshop Session 2
- 11:00 a.m. Workshop Session 3
- 12:15 p.m. General Session & Worship
- 1:00 p.m. Annual Gathering Concludes
(*Networking and fellowship lunches on your own are encouraged.*)

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS



LEADERSHIP FORUM & THURSDAY EVENING WORSHIP

Andrew Root
Carrie Olson Baalson Professor of Youth and Family Ministry at Luther Seminary, USA



THURSDAY WELCOME GATHERING

David Hailey
Pastor, Hayes Barton Baptist



FRIDAY AFTERNOON WORSHIP

Kristen Tucker
Pastor, First Baptist Smithfield

Holding On and Letting Go:



Church in a Season of Change



By James Ellis III

Last spring, I spent a good chunk of time away from my church — seven weeks to be exact. This was not due to a scandal or an attempt at a makeshift sabbatical. Rather, divine timing was to blame — a combination of study and vacation leave that I had yet to use. In the rhythms of parish ministry, where pastors are constantly completing an endless litany of tasks, in this season, taking this time off just fell to the wayside: “out of sight, out of mind.” As an ordained Baptist clergyman serving a Reformed Church in America (RCA) congregation, I am subject to their polity. Although the congregation can hire someone like me free and clear, I am ineligible for official installation, so we relate through a renewable annual contract. It runs from March 1 to February 28, with my leave functioning on a “use it or lose it” basis.



To the church and unchurched populace, our situation seems precarious, which it is. It may also seem abnormal, which it is not. On one hand, yes, it is uncommon for an African American to even apply to be hired by an 84-year-old church whose members reside

in a small, predominantly Caucasian town beside Lake Michigan. It may sound pedantic, but saying “Desperate times call for desperate measures” is partially accurate. After four years enduring pandemic life in British Columbia, Canada, I returned to Holland, Michigan, to walk alongside Maplewood Reformed Church as their pastor, having been unacquainted with them when my wife and I were residents there during 2016-19, just before our adventure 2,350 miles north to the Vancouver suburbs began.

Because of that, we knew the town and its people. We’d already heard the saying, “If you ain’t Dutch, you ain’t much,” which can be not only found on a few scattered signs, but even more is tattooed into the psyche of some long-time locals. We understood that while the people are generally kind, their niceness can veer into a malformed, debilitating fixation. They sometimes do not grasp that surface-level gestures or too personal questions asked too soon do not make people feel seen or valued. But again, this wasn’t our first rodeo. We knew the harsh truth of Lake Effect winters. Having served as a Christian college chaplain here, the Spirit led me back to this group of saints who are well into

life's third act. They became a burden God placed on my heart.

On Sundays, the same approximately 25 people gather to worship in a stunning sanctuary full of stained glass that, including the balcony, comfortably seats nearly 500. Within this sleepy, historic town of just over 30,000 people, with a downtown celebrated for its heated sidewalks, there are something like 170 churches — this is not a typo! It is saturated with Christianity, particularly of the Calvinist or Reformed flavor, but certainly and unsurprisingly not bustling with people who look like me. Melanin is not in abundance. I don't mention this with any judgment. But as we learned from that great 80s sitcom with Natalie, Joe, Tootie, Ms. Edna Garrett, and Blair — these are simply *the facts of life* in these parts.

The verdict is still out on whether my church will live another day to fight the good fight of “Inviting disconnected people to belong to Christ and each other” (as our mission statement asserts), or if the most faithful move will be to shut our doors once and for all. Each option has its own difficulties and advantages.

It seems to me that, in general, our present epoch is both a blessing and a problem. We benefit from unparalleled technological and societal innovations that enhance life. However, they come at a high cost, often hidden beneath the surface, and their negativity is incredibly difficult to reverse. As the pace of progress accelerates, the dynamics of past generations become harder to recreate or reclaim.

Unbelievers, as they have throughout history, exist like they always do and will. Yet, unlike in the days of yesteryear, they are far less inclined to engage in even the most earnest attempts at relationship-building. It is as though they have adopted the mantra from the 1993 Reebok commercial featuring Shaquille O'Neal in Super Bowl 27: “You can't fake the funk on a nasty dunk.” In other words, authenticity is non-negotiable, even if its results are inconsistent. As we rub shoulders with a world that is ever more skeptical of any conception of faith or truth, we are reminded that the Gospel itself cannot be faked. It demands integrity and the guts to face a hostile world that is comfortably and confidently unimpressed with the message we carry.

If individuals are not interested in God, in you, or in what your church does, they will not come to church — period. Even those who express a passing interest may still prefer to indulge in the consumerist convenience of podcasts or streaming the sermons of

celebrity preachers from several states away. These figures, whom they have never met and likely never will, are mistakenly considered to be their pastors.

Closer to home, the trend is equally troubling. Many professing Christians no longer regard the local church as the primary, though not exclusive, means of corporately facilitating holiness, discipleship, worship, service, and fellowship. Despite their deep loneliness, they avoid the in-person messiness of spiritual community. Instead, other commitments are prioritized: shuttling children to ballet and AAU basketball and consuming streaming television programming.

None of this sits well with me, but it is, nonetheless, the way of the world nowadays. The shift in priorities is pretty conclusive, and though I lament it, it remains the backdrop against which the church must work and witness.

Once again, I do not possess clairvoyant understanding about the future of good old Maplewood. I often tell them — and anyone else who will listen — that we are “small but mighty.” These people, nevertheless, personify grit, discipline, sacrifice, humor, and usefulness that mark a generation whose investment in faith and works has carried us. Despite being well established in retirement, many of them continue to outpace those who are decades younger with their stick-to-itiveness, spirited moxie, and steady vigor for Jesus.

In the church's heyday, they led Bible studies, opened and closed the doors of the church, managed a fruitful teen moms ministry, repaired almost anything that broke on the property themselves, served on committee after committee, and to this day continue to bake, quilt, paint, host block parties, and organize funeral receptions with a level of excellence few can match. They are, in every sense, inspirational and exceptional. Yet, I also recognize that they mirror what many churches look like: a remnant of a few faithful workers, holding on to the hope of seeing another plentiful harvest in their lifetime (Matt 9:35-38).

To us, some larger ministries have felt like the wolf from *Little Red Riding Hood*. According to their SWOT, KPI, or other fancy analytics, we are a church that did something wrong, can no longer cut the mustard, and needs to let the “big boys” take over. The trend of these churches manipulating or inflating attendance numbers, or buying up struggling churches as if playing a game of religious Monopoly to rebrand

them as one of their coveted satellite campuses, is exasperating and sketchy.

In recent years, we've been approached with a few such offers, pitched as divine renewal and collaboration. Each time, we have politely declined. I do not think the decision stems from pride, either. Should the church close, whatever the RCA does with the building is entirely at their discretion, as is the case with any property-holding denomination. But for our part, respectfully, fog machines, video-venue preaching, and corporate-speak reflect a smoke-and-mirrors missiology that's misaligned with who we are and aspire to be.

Jackson W. Carroll, Duke Divinity School's Williams Professor Emeritus of Religion and Society, now 93, has been retired for a good while. Upon revisiting his influential work, *God's Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations*, I reached out to him. During our video chat about the state of ministry in an age that has changed rapidly — sometimes not for the better — he reflected: "I'm not pessimistic about the Church's long-term future, but I guess I am a bit pessimistic about the short-term...everyone is, we are, so divided." In this season, part of what I hope we are learning — or relearning — is that God's plan is always greater than ours. He knows what He is doing.

This truth, however, never exempts us from investing our time, talents, and treasures in service to God's incarnational aims. The Spirit's expectation is that we will do our part with persistence and conviction, leaving the rest to providence. As those birthdays accumulate for each one of us, the decisions we make are hopefully shaped more by their potential impact on generations yet unborn — those who may never know our names, yet whom we pray will one day fall deeply in love with our God. We want to faithfully serve the world in Jesus' name, knowing that our labor is not in vain and His kingdom is in transit even when we do not readily see it.

Sticking your head in the sand, dejected and defeated, yielding to helplessness or worthlessness, as if old age renders you obsolete, is absolutely counterproductive. It is wrong. If God is in charge, then we must act like it. One of 1987's better ballads was "Seasons

Change" by the female group Exposé. The refrain goes like this:

*Seasons change, feelings change
It's been so long since I found you
Yet it seems like yesterday
Seasons change, people change
I'll sacrifice tomorrow
Just to have you here today*

A fair bit of contemporary American Christianity needs to be reconsidered and, in many instances, reformed or altogether abandoned, where it stands in contradiction to Scripture. We are called to learn from one another, even amid disagreement, and to engage in conversations marked by maturity, not childishness.

A good place to begin this process of regeneration is by reading literature that confronts assumptions and makes us work at better understanding what a life of faith is truly about. Books like Mekdes Haddis' *A Just Mission: Laying Down Power and Embracing Mutuality*, Heather Holleman's *The Six Conversations: Pathways to Connecting in an Age of Isolation and Incivility*, and *Urban Apologetics: Cults and Cultural Ideologies: Biblical and Theological Challenges Facing Christians*, edited by Eric Mason, provide valuable insights for moving toward deeper, more considerate engagement in and beyond the body of Christ.

While it would certainly be gratifying to have more butts in the seats (and who knows, perhaps that will come in due time), that can't be our only or most prized focus. Our deepest need is for spiritual repair and revival. We must invite God to dismantle the idols that have distracted us and raise up new Ebenezers — stones of remembrance that testify to God's deep dependability. We need each other and, above all, we need the Lord. Yes, churches will face struggles and undergo change — that is a natural part of the human experience. Yet, we find great comfort in knowing that our God remains steadfast, active, and watchful through it all. **GFM**

—The Rev. Dr. Ellis holds degrees from Western Theological Seminary, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological Seminary, and the University of Maryland. An ordained Baptist pastor and assistant professor of practical theology at Winebrenner Theological Seminary, his latest book is *In Those Days as Today: Preaching through the Book of Judges*. Learn more about him at www.jamesellis3.com

A NEW ERA...

This issue of *Good Faith Magazine* marks a turning point in the history of Good Faith Bible Studies. For many years, we have learned from the faithful scholarship and pastoral sensibilities of Tony Cartledge, and last year, Kathy and Nathan Maxwell provided us with incredible insights from the biblical text that continued to expand our understanding of our place in God's story. We are forever indebted to the prayer, time, and energy these three fellow travelers have poured into our understanding of the Bible.

This year, we are tapping into our vast network of writers, pastors, and scholars to offer readers a wider range of perspectives and curriculum-writing styles. We are excited about this new approach to Bible studies and hope it keeps you engaged and inspired each week to open the scriptures.

Regarding the scope and sequence of studies: During the holy seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter, we will remain close to the lectionary. Outside those seasons, the lectionary will help inform our offerings, but we will not strictly follow the lectionary calendar.

In addition to the changes you see in the print publication of *Good Faith Magazine*, we are also making minor updates to the supplementary resources available to you. First, we will continue the Good Faith Bible Studies podcast that the Maxwells started last year—but with a slightly different twist. The new podcast will feature Senior Editor Craig Nash alongside a co-host. The format will be slightly longer and more conversational than before, including the co-hosts' initial thoughts on the text, a discussion of the curriculum, and ideas for facilitating small-group conversations. Each new episode will be available at least 11 days before the lesson date.

We will continue to offer discussion questions for the curriculum, but these will now be available to teachers in a single document shared online at the beginning of each quarter.

These changes are intended to honor the legacy of Good Faith Bible Studies while also reaching out to new generations of people interested in studying

our sacred texts. We hope you find our new approach equal parts challenging and encouraging. **GFM**

JANUARY–MARCH 2025 CURRICULUM WRITERS:

Jennifer Garcia-Bashaw is a professor, minister, author, and public scholar. She is the associate professor of New Testament and Christian ministry at Campbell University in North Carolina. She is also the “Nerd-in-Residence” for The Bible for Normal People podcast.

Rev. Dr. Jason Edwards is the pastor of Second Baptist Church in Liberty, Missouri, where he has served since 2009. Before that, he was a pastoral resident at Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, and also worked among immigrants and refugees in France and Thailand.

Rev. Joy Martinez-Marshall is the pastor of First Baptist Church in Ottawa, Kansas. She is a two-time graduate of Baylor University and previously served as pastor of First Baptist Church in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Dr. Stephen Reid is an Old Testament scholar and retired university professor and administrator. In 2022, he was appointed vice provost for faculty diversity and belonging at Baylor University. He is an ordained minister in the Church of the Brethren and has ministered in churches around the country.

Mike Smith is a Ph.D. student at Fuller Seminary with an emphasis on systematic theology. He is an ordained minister with a special interest in ecclesiology—how we understand and practice church life.

Rev. Mary Alice Birdwhistell has served as pastor of churches in Texas and Kentucky. She is the author of *Hard and Holy Work: A Lenten Journey Through the Book of Exodus*.

Craig Nash is senior editor of Good Faith Media. He has served in faith-based nonprofit organizations and churches.



BIBLE STUDIES

January 4
Matthew 2:1-12
Matthew's Brilliant Birth Story

January 11
Matthew 3:13-17
Beloved Before You Begin

January 18
1 Corinthians 1:1-9
Called to be Saints

January 25
1 Corinthians 1:10-18
Same Mind, Same Purpose

February 1
1 Corinthians 1:18-31
Good Foolishness

February 8
Psalms 112
A Call to Praise and Practice

February 15
Matthew 17:1-9
The Transfiguration in Matthew

February 22
Exodus 12:29-42
Troubling Contradictions

March 1
Exodus 14:10-31
**"Do Not Be Afraid, Stand Firm,
and See What God Will Do."**

March 8
Exodus 16:1-30
The "Hangry" Israelites

March 15
Exodus 17:1-7
Is the Lord Among Us, Or Not?

March 22
Exodus 19:1-20
A Full Circle Moment

March 29
Matthew 21:1-11
Palm Sunday

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.

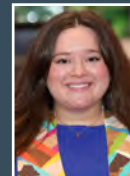
FEATURED IN THIS ISSUE:



Rev. Jason Edwards
Liberty, MO



Rev. Mary Alice Birdwhistell
Louisville, KY



Rev. Joy Martinez-Marshall
Ottawa, KS



Rev. Mike Smith
Durham, NC



Dr. Stephen Reid
Dallas, TX



Jennifer Garcia Bashaw
Buies Creek, NC



Craig Nash
Waco, TX



MATTHEW 2:1-12

Matthew's Brilliant Birth Story

By Jennifer Garcia Bashaw

The birth narrative (sometimes called the infancy narrative) in Matthew is a literary work of art. Each Gospel writer emphasizes their own aspects of Jesus's ministry when they introduce their narratives, but Matthew's may be the most deliberately designed, both thematically and theologically. It has four distinct but interconnected episodes that serve to set the scene for Jesus's identity and impact.

Matthew 2:1-12 is the third section in the infancy narrative, after Jesus's genealogy and Joseph's visionary encounter with an angel, but before the story of the holy family's escape to Egypt and Herod's attack on Bethlehem's babies. The genealogy kicks off the story of Jesus' birth by outlining his mixed pedigree. Contrary to popular practice, Matthew includes women in his carefully crafted lineage. But the women he names aren't the typical mothers in the faith we would expect (like Sarah, Leah, or Miriam). The women of the genealogy — Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah — are foreign women from Israel's story who have to fight for control of their destinies in contexts where male power and privilege dominate.

Whereas the genealogy shows the human roots of Jesus, the next

interlude makes it clear that Jesus also has divine origins. The angel who appeared to Joseph tells him that Jesus had been conceived by the Holy Spirit and that he would represent Emmanuel, or the presence of God in the world. With these first two passages, Matthew has introduced us to the idea that a divine power is about to engage a world complicated by ethnic tensions and destructive patriarchal power.

ENTER HEROD AND THE MAGI

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem... (Matt. 2:1)

The magi are curious figures in this story. They are foreigners, and yet they alone seem aware of the momentous event taking place in Judea. We aren't entirely sure what Matthew means by calling them magi. They could have been members of the Persian priestly caste who advised the king, or they might have been priests specializing in astrology and dream interpretation. Although the Hebrew Scriptures condemned divination of that sort, dream interpretation and astrological insight had become a part of Jewish practice and thought by the first century CE. Their God, many Jewish people reasoned, had jurisdiction over the stars, so why couldn't God speak through heavenly signs?

So, for Matthew's audience, following a star to the birthplace of the Messiah would not be as

far-fetched as it would be to the contemporary mind. But the fact that these were foreign astrologers and they played such a key role in the birth story of Jesus might have ruffled a few feathers, especially for the Jewish Christian readers of Matthew. In the context of the story, Matthew seems to be implying that even if Israel and its leaders will not worship Jesus, the Gentiles will.

But Matthew is communicating even more with his inclusion of foreign pilgrims and their Eastern entourage (and for such a long, treacherous journey, they surely had an entourage!). When Matthew was writing the Gospel, sometime between 70 and 90 CE, nascent Christianity was already on its way to becoming a multi-cultural, multi-national world movement. This magi storyline demonstrates that from the prelude of the Jesus movement, God had welcomed the wisdom and contributions of people from around the globe and from those who were outsiders to the faith.

That, in fact, had always been the case, as Matthew's inclusion of the foreign women in the genealogy shows us. Matthew's recognition of contributions of foreigners must have spoken volumes to early Christians who struggled with the practical challenges of their diverse body of believers.

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him...(2:3)

The Magi from afar are not the only intriguing personalities in

this part of the infancy narrative. Herod, the self-proclaimed king of the Jews, is certainly not an obvious character to include in the story of baby Jesus. He was a jealous, murderous ruler who, history tells us, would not hesitate to eliminate any threat to his throne. But, as Matthew will solidify in the fourth movement of the birth narrative, Herod is there to draw a sharp contrast between the current ruler of Israel and the future one, the one that was just born in Bethlehem.

In his frantic fear that a child might usurp his power, King Herod (read the title “king” in a sarcastic tone, which is probably what Matthew intended) runs to the chief priests and scribes to inquire about the Messiah’s birthplace. Their answer to him, which is a mash-up of 2 Samuel 5:2 and Micah 5:2, highlights connections to David’s anointing at Hebron and the anticipated role of a future Davidic or messianic king. These kingly allusions work in tandem with references to the tiny town of Bethlehem and the modest profession of a shepherd. Matthew is trying to paint Jesus as a royal but unassuming messiah. The messiah who is coming will be the complete opposite of Herod — humble where Herod is proud, meek where

Herod is power-grabbing, caregiving where Herod is homicidal.

When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy...

Matthew’s infancy narrative does not just contrast Herod to Jesus; it also juxtaposes the despotic ruler with the magi. The last half of this passage demonstrates how the actions of the foreign wayfarers set an example for later followers of Jesus to emulate, while Herod’s actions warn readers what they might face with the rulers of the world.

Herod secretly calls for the magi, hiding his intentions and learning information from them that he will end up using against them and Israel. He sends the magi to Bethlehem rather than going himself, and then he blatantly dupes them, saying he intends to pay homage to the child after they do. This ruler’s modus operandi is deception, reflecting the default settings for the political powers of empire.

The magi, on the other hand, are paragons for the faithful. They set out determinedly to follow the heavenly beacon, and when they arrive at their destination, they become overwhelmed with joy. Then, they kneel down in homage to the baby king and shower him with gold, frankincense, and myrrh, the most extravagant and exotic gifts Bethlehem had ever seen.

What a scene Matthew sketches here! Respected magi from a priestly class bow down in worshipful

abandon, proffering lavish treasures... but this takes place not in a cosmopolitan city at the foot of a palace throne but in a backwater town in front of a small child. Later in Matthew, we will hear how Jesus preaches about the upside-down kingdom where last will be first and the meek will inherit the earth. But we get a glimpse of that kingdom here in the magi’s adoration not of Herod, but of a baby.

The magi’s response to Jesus paints a picture of exuberant faith and serves as a model for how Matthew hopes his readers might follow Jesus — with more regard for the lowly than the powerful and with a pressing desire to give Jesus the most precious and valuable gifts they have to give.

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod... (2:12)

The end of our passage does not tie up the magi’s story with a shiny bow and move on to Jesus’s baptism. Instead, a divine intervention ominously sets up the next part of the infancy narrative. Matthew’s birth narrative may have given us a hopeful scene of worship that foreshadows the counter-cultural ministry of Jesus and illustrates the invaluable contributions of foreigners to salvation history, but there is tragedy on the horizon. Herod, a king chosen by empire and loyal to its ruthless ways, is about to unleash a horror on innocent families that will make the need for a humble, servant king more apparent than ever.

To go deeper into the text, check out the Good Faith Bible Studies podcast wherever you like to stream.



MATTHEW 3:13-17

Beloved Before You Begin

By Jason Edwards

There are stories that explain what happened. And there are stories that explain who we are.

The baptism of Jesus is one of those rare stories that does both. It shows us what happened: Jesus wading into the Jordan River, submitting to John's hands, the heavens tearing open like a curtain at intermission, and the voice that says what every child longs to hear: *"This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."* But it also reveals something more profound, not just about Jesus, but about the way God names us before we have proven anything. About how identity is bestowed, not achieved. About how grace meets us at the water's edge and calls us "beloved" before we've done anything to deserve it.

THE RESISTANCE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

It starts with Jesus insisting on being baptized. It's a strange move. John's entire ministry was built around repentance and cleansing — turning from sin and starting over. But Jesus didn't need that kind of start. So, when he shows up, John

balks. *"I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"* (v. 14).

It's a perfectly reasonable question. In John's world, and in ours, righteousness is usually about moving up the ladder. Who's holier? Who's higher? Who's in charge? But Jesus resists that kind of righteousness. He doesn't grab the microphone or the spotlight. He doesn't hover above the crowd like a superhero coming in for the save. He steps into the same muddy water as everyone else, stands in line, and waits his turn. He lets himself be lowered, like one of us.

In Matthew's telling, Jesus' insistence on baptism is framed as fulfilling "all righteousness" (3:15). That phrase carries a distinctly Jewish resonance. Righteousness here is not just personal piety but covenant faithfulness, living in right relationship with God's purposes. By entering the waters, Jesus steps fully into Israel's story. The Jordan River itself was already freighted with meaning: it was the crossing place for Joshua leading the people into the Promised Land (Josh 3), a symbol of deliverance and new beginnings. To stand in that river was to stand in continuity with God's saving acts in history. For Matthew's community, Jewish followers of Jesus wrestling with continuity and change, this scene assured them that Jesus was not discarding the old story. He was fulfilling it, embodying Israel's destiny in his own life.

Jesus' righteousness is not a climb but a descent. Not a flexing

of power but a surrender to love. If you're looking for God in this story, that's where to start — not in the thunder or the sky-splitting spectacle, but in the humility of Jesus submitting to a baptism he didn't need, to fulfill a mission the world had forgotten how to recognize.

THE VOICE THAT SPLITS THE SKY

Then comes the moment. Water runs down his face. Maybe the sun catches the river just right. And suddenly, the sky breaks open — not with lightning, but with language. A voice. A declaration. *"This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased"* (v. 17).

It's worth pausing there. Because that sentence, that sacred naming, has echoed through the centuries like a tuning fork for the soul. Before Jesus had healed anyone, before he had taught a parable or turned over a table, before he had done a single miracle, he was named. Claimed. Loved. What would it change if we really believed that about ourselves?

We live in a world that demands résumé virtue and performative spirituality. Everything's a competition. Even faith can become a kind of hustle: be good enough, believe hard enough, pray long enough, achieve holiness. But here is Jesus, beginning his public life not with achievement, but with acceptance.

Not with proving, but with being named.

It's the voice of God, yes, but it's also the voice we spend our lives longing to hear from somewhere, anywhere: *"You are my child. You are beloved. I delight in you."*

Across the centuries, Christians have heard that voice in different ways. Irenaeus, a second-century bishop, taught that when Jesus was baptized, he sanctified the waters of the earth, making creation itself capable of bearing God's grace. Augustine emphasized the humility of Christ in submitting to baptism, seeing in it a model for every believer's surrender to God. Later, in the Reformation era, debates about baptism sharpened: while Catholics and Orthodox traditions affirmed infant baptism as a mark of God's eternal grace, Baptists and other Free Church communities emphasized believer's baptism as a conscious response of faith. Each tradition, however, has returned to this same moment on the banks of the Jordan to say that baptism is never just a ritual. It is God's declaration of identity and belonging.

The contemplative writer Henri Nouwen once said that the spiritual life is, at its core, the struggle to believe this voice and resist all the ones that say we are what we do, what we have, or what people say about us. But this story dares to offer a deeper truth. You are beloved *before* you begin. *Before* you've made a difference or made a

mistake. You don't earn the name. You inherit it.

BAPTISM AS BEGINNING

In Matthew's Gospel, this moment is the threshold. Jesus hasn't preached yet. He hasn't called disciples. This is the start. And what does God give him? Not a strategy. Not a sword. A name.

It's tempting to see baptism as the culmination of faith — what you do when you've made a decision, turned a corner, figured things out. But in the early church, baptism was never the end of the journey. It was the entrance, the launching point. It marked your identity before you had much to show for it.

And baptism has never been only about the individual. In the early church, being baptized meant being claimed by a community — a family that transcended the boundaries of ethnicity, class, and status. Paul would later write that in baptism we are clothed with Christ, erasing the old divisions of Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female (Galatians 3:27–28). To be named "beloved" is not simply a private comfort but a public vocation. It calls us to live as people who see that same belovedness in others, and to work for communities where dignity, justice, and compassion flow like living water.

This text offers a quiet revolution for anyone who has been conditioned to believe that God's love must be earned. It says, instead, that your deepest identity

is not something you achieve but something you receive. And that the work of faith is less about striving and more about remembering who you are.

THE MUDDY RIVER STILL FLOWS

If you stand on the banks of the Jordan today, you'll see a brown, slow-moving current, hemmed in by reeds and birdsong. Pilgrims still go there, white-robed and barefoot, stepping into that same water, remembering this same scene.

But you don't have to fly to the Holy Land to hear the voice.

Because the river is never just geography, it's the place where you come to the end of yourself and find that God is already there. The water is always near — whenever you feel unworthy, uncertain, unready. The invitation to remember your name, your worth, your place in the story, is always flowing.

The baptism of Jesus doesn't just tell us what happened to him. It tells us something about what's happening to us.

You are not your past. You are not your performance. You are not your productivity.

You are beloved.

Before the work. Before the wounds. Before the wilderness that will surely come.

You are beloved.

Let that be the name you answer to this week.



1 CORINTHIANS 1:1-9

Called to be Saints

By Joy Martinez-Marshall

Calling ourselves “Christian” should come with a disclaimer. When we share our faith with someone, we often emphatically provide the necessary caveats. We tell them that we follow Jesus, but not in a Christian nationalist way, not in an “anti-DEI” way, or not in a yelling on the street corner kind of way. If we don’t elaborate, then the conversation can go downhill. These polarizations will only continue as politicians, for-profit religious entities, and religious shame continue to monopolize the meaning of the term “Christian.”

A CHURCH DIVIDED

The faith community in Corinth experienced such division. It was marked by cults of personality and dysfunction. As a port city of ancient Greece, it was revived by the Roman Empire. Its residents experienced thriving commerce, diverse spiritual traditions, and varied cultural backgrounds. Though this sounds like every church planter’s dream, the church struggled to get along. Not surprisingly, the issues with the church in Corinth still endure.

It’s not difficult to imagine the scenario that prompted Paul’s letter. Gentile Christians sought to explain to others what it meant to believe Jesus Christ was the Messiah, and some in the church

wanted complete control over the narrative. Paul writes to them as someone “called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God.” (v. 1:1) Paul was emphasizing his apostleship as divinely inspired, and while Paul might be writing about existing schisms within Corinth’s community, it calls to mind our own divine callings.

CALLED TO BE SAINTS

Paul addresses the church as “sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints.” (v. 1:2) He does not scold the leadership, but reminds them of their role as being set apart. The New International Version renders saints as “[God’s] holy people” (v. 2).

We are called to be saints in the world. Not necessarily to perform miracles, but as ones sanctified in Christ. Too many voices seek to control who is and isn’t deemed “holy,” creating unnecessary division amongst churches and people. We feel the pressure to be the “right type of Christian.” Instead of embracing diverse perspectives, we allow others to dictate what faith looks like.

Paul reminds the church that we are set apart for something greater — to be counted among “all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours” (v. 1:2). This challenges our worldview when we recognize that Christ’s name is proclaimed in places and contexts that may surprise us — at the Mexico–Texas border, in public schools that haven’t yielded to religious pressure, and even in the realm of public health, to

name just a few. Our calling, as those made new in Christ, is to discern God’s movement in the world. Paul grounds his letter in the reality that we are part of a vast mosaic of God’s activity and intervention. Paul’s greeting — a salutation that introduces themes he will expand upon throughout the letter — gives us some of the tools we need to live as saints.

GIVING THANKS

Every Wednesday afternoon, when I gather for prayer with the faithful women who attend, one of them always gives thanks for the church staff. At first, I felt embarrassed to be included as a “bullet point” on the prayer list. But when I learned that her father once pastored this same congregation, I began to see her prayer as a recognition of God’s faithfulness — then and now. Her gratitude became a bridge, linking God’s ongoing activity to her own story.

To express thankfulness in a world where so many feel forgotten is to affirm our connection to one another and to the past. Paul grounds his words in thanksgiving for *charis* — grace — as it relates to the gifts within the community, which are expressions of God’s grace. This is what saints do: they recognize and give thanks for God’s gifts, knowing those gifts make a difference within the community of faith. The Corinthians were not without problems, but Paul knew that thanksgiving could still exist amid conflict, because

God's work continues even in the midst of struggle.

ENRICHED IN TESTIMONY

The Corinthians' spiritual gifts were clearly evident within their fellowship — so much so that Paul later addresses them with both frustration and a desire to redirect their understanding of the Holy Spirit's work. From the start, Paul establishes that the holy ones of God must recognize that their gifts come from God, including “speech and knowledge of every kind” (v. 5), which serve to communicate Christ's presence among them.

If we, too, are called to be saints, then we must remember there is no hierarchy of spiritual gifts within the body of Christ. Perhaps we should consider how “spiritual gift assessments” have sometimes been used not to enrich the testimony of Jesus, but to assign value, demand service, or draw lines of who belongs and who does not.

As in Corinth, the good news of Jesus, not the particular spiritual gifts of his people, must remain at the center of the church's life. Yet the church still struggles to live this out, often excelling as much in pride and division as in spiritual zeal. Paul reminds us that the true strength of the fellowship is not found in our abilities, but in the enduring testimony of Jesus Christ and his abiding presence among us.

BY WHOSE WORK?

“He will strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on

the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (v. 8)

Our saintly work is made possible through our relationship with Jesus. It is through his mercy and grace that we are moved to extend mercy and grace freely to our neighbors. The idea of blamelessness comes from a legal metaphor, one that conveys the state of being found without guilt. God's faithfulness makes all the difference for the Corinthians — and for us — by continually interceding on our behalf.

We are invited to recognize the ways Christ has not cast us aside, even when others might have. Our hope is not found in rigid lines or hierarchies, but in the grace given to all who are called to be saints. As B. J. Oropeza writes, “...they are being transformed through the continued fellowship in Christ.” Our own calling, then, is to allow Christ to transform our hearts and minds to be more like his.

We know this is our charge because of Jesus' own words in his hometown sermon:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”
— Luke 4:18–19

This is the calling of the saints — to join with all Jesus followers in embracing his ministry and mission. Perhaps our grace is to see that the poor still need good news

and active compassion. Perhaps our gifts are to proclaim release to those bound by religious trauma and dogma. Perhaps our testimony is to declare that Jesus desires freedom for the oppressed — freedom from predatory lending, from mass incarceration that disproportionately affects people of color, and from the burden of guilt and shame.

God's holy ones are called to proclaim this good news — in Corinth and beyond — for it is the same grace and peace we ourselves have received.

The opening words from Paul to the people he loved teach us how to reframe and reground our understanding of sainthood. We are called to embrace our identity as saints even when others insist we are mistaken. We do so by bearing witness to God's movement “together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 2), through thanksgiving, enriched testimonies of Jesus, and the power of God at work within us.

Let us not allow others to define the grace we receive, for we are “sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints.” (v. 2)





I CORINTHIANS 1:10–18

Same Mind, Same Purpose

By Joy Martinez-Marshall

If you've ever joined a Baptist church, you may have heard two histories of the congregation: pre-split and post-split. Sometimes there are more. The church in which I spent my youth divided three different times — over votes, covenants, and leadership — all before I graduated from high school. These splits rarely produce the “holy remnants” that churches hope for. More often, they leave behind wounded people, fragmented relationships, and a community struggling to remember who they are together.

You may have your own stories of church division. They have a way of becoming part of our identity, sometimes quietly dividing God's people long after the dust settles. These breaks in fellowship, often connected to pain or abuse, can become ingrained patterns within a congregation's spiritual DNA, setting the stage for more fractures later.

Today's passage invites us to examine the timeless cult of leadership, to seek unity rather than uniformity, and to pursue restoration through the power of Christ.

The church in Corinth offers us a mirror. Their congregation, comprising both Jewish and Gentile believers, provides us with language for navigating division within the fellowship of faith. Corinth was

a thriving port city filled with temples to Roman and Greek gods, surrounded by trade, culture, and wealth. Yet even amid prosperity, division crept into the church. Their beginnings were promising: an official of the synagogue came to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, and as Acts records, “many of the Corinthians who heard Paul became believers and were baptized” (Acts 18:8). Paul stayed with them for a year and a half.

Over time, as the community grew and strong personalities emerged, tensions surfaced, causing divisions that prompted Paul's letter.

THE CULT OF LEADERS

Paul urges his family of faith “to be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you” (v. 10). The conflicts had been reported by “Chloe's people” (v. 11), who spoke of quarrels — translated also as schisms. The quarreling was “exacerbated by using various teachers as rallying points” (Fee, 1987).

Those cries of loyalty — “I belong to Paul,” “I belong to Apollos,” “I belong to Cephas” — were doing the opposite of creating a united family in Christ. They mirrored the competitive philosophies of their city, where followers of different teachers prided themselves on status and sophistication. Paul saw how that same spirit threatened to infect the gospel itself.

We see it too. “I belong to this TikTok influencer.” “I follow that podcast pastor.” “I'm part of this megachurch's online community.” It's natural to gravitate toward

voices that resonate with our experiences, theological leanings, or worship styles. But when our loyalty to personalities overshadows our loyalty to Christ, we risk fracturing the very body that makes us whole.

The accessibility of gifted preachers and beautifully produced online services can lead us to compare our local congregation's “ordinary” worship to a polished highlight reel. When we do, we miss the holiness that exists in imperfection — in a congregation of real people, not curated moments. If we are not careful, our biases toward style and presentation can keep us from seeing the Spirit's work in front of us. Those “sanctified in Christ Jesus” (v. 2) are gifted not because they have perfect lighting, but because the Spirit dwells among them.

Commentators suggest that the leaders Paul names did not intentionally encourage these factions, but even unintentional comparisons can be corrosive. As pastors and ministry leaders, we often find it easy to hear criticism in every comparison, and the exhaustion that follows can deepen division. To this, Paul asks, “Has Christ been divided?” The Voice translation phrases it more vividly: “Has the Anointed One been split up into many small pieces?” (Ecclesia Bible Society, 2012).

UNITY, NOT UNIFORMITY

When friction arises in the life of a church, it's tempting to retreat into our corner of the kingdom — to take our favorite ministry, theol-

ogy, or worship style and hold it up as the essential part of following Christ. Once we've claimed that corner, we can insist that everyone else should also see it as the most important. But this posture keeps us from seeing the fullness of God's work in the world and the diversity of the body of Christ.

Paul is not calling the Corinthians to reject their teachers; instead, he calls them to find harmony in the truth that unites them — the message of Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected. That message bridges the gaps between factions and invites freedom to move and grow together in faith.

Still, we shouldn't confuse unity with uniformity. Paul's vision is richer: a harmony that does not erase difference but tunes it toward a common purpose. Our shared life together becomes a testimony to a fractured world when we live as people "knit together in the same mind and the same purpose" (v. 10).

Of course, not every disagreement is unhealthy. There are holy boundaries worth keeping: refusing to deny anyone's humanity, challenging theology that harms, and speaking truth when injustice occurs. These are not acts of division but invitations to deeper conversation and growth. The gospel of Jesus Christ can still be proclaimed while we seek understanding; in fact, that is when it shines most brightly.

Doing this work requires humility and restraint, especially when the easier route is to complain, gossip, or "bless their hearts" behind closed doors. Yet even here

Paul's reminder holds firm: "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the partnership of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (v. 9). The faithfulness of God, not our flawless agreement, keeps us bound together.

RESTORATION

Of all the hobbies I have tried, mending — whether with needle and thread or with paint and repair tools — has never come naturally to me. I tend to replace what's broken or call someone else to fix it. Maybe it's impatience. Maybe it's the quiet fear of failing at something that requires slow, careful attention. Perhaps that is why restoration is so difficult for us in the church. It takes time, humility, and a willingness to look closely at what's torn.

Mending is the image Paul uses to urge the Corinthians to be "knit together" (v. 10). Boykin Sanders observes that the Greek word *katartizō* can mean "to restore or to be restored to a former condition." Restoration calls us to remember where we came from — to reflect on the past and rediscover the harmony we once shared, even as we learn to live together in new ways.

Interestingly, the same word appears in Mark's Gospel when James and John are described as "mending their nets." Whether Paul meant to echo that passage or simply used a familiar term, the connection is powerful. Jesus met those fishermen in the middle of their mending. They may have been repairing their nets, but Christ invited them to a deeper kind of restoration — to mend re-

lationships, communities, and hearts.

That is the same invitation Paul extends to the Corinthians. The family of faith must knit, restore, and mend itself despite existing divisions. To mend means to bring our frayed edges — our vulnerabilities, grievances, and regrets — and let them be joined again by the thread of Christ's love. It requires courage to expose those torn places to one another, trusting that Christ's hands are gentler than our own.

This kind of restoration is countercultural. The world tells us to cut our losses, to leave behind what is broken, to replace rather than repair. But the gospel calls us to something different: to stay, to mend, to forgive. The "same mind" that Paul describes may look like loving God and neighbor through acts of justice, mercy, and compassion. The "same purpose" is "to proclaim the gospel — not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power" (v. 17).

The message of restoration might sound foolish to a world accustomed to division, but to those "who are being saved it is the power of God" (v. 18).

Paul's call to the Corinthians is the same call to us: to make the effort, however imperfect, to minimize divisions and live into the same mind and same purpose. The mending may never be complete, but it is holy work. Christ himself is the thread that binds us together, holding the torn fabric of our communities in his hands until it becomes whole again.



I CORINTHIANS 1:18-31

Good Foolishness

By Joy Martinez-Marshall

It seems we would rather listen to people we don't know than to the person in the pew beside us. I'm not sure much has changed in the realm of church division since Paul wrote his first letter to the church in Corinth. With the congregation's constant arguments and Paul's recurring reminder of the cross, he insists that the power of the cross appears to be foolishness — utter foolishness to those surrounded by Rome's military might and political dominance, and to the Greeks who prized philosophy.

The church had forgotten that what seemed foolish was, in fact, Jesus' grand reversal of human understanding of wisdom and strength. That is the scandal of the cross: to transform how we see and understand. Paul reminds the Corinthian believers that “the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (v. 18). Those hearing the letter — those being saved and believing Jesus is the Messiah — should equate the cross with power. In this paradox, foolishness becomes wisdom, and human wisdom cannot comprehend the power of God. So what does that mean for us sitting in the pews all these years later?

Let us consider Paul's more sarcastic tone as he quotes the prophet

Isaiah, who warned that the people's hearts were far from God (Isaiah 29:13). Paul asks a series of piercing questions: “Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scholar? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” (v. 20).

If we translated those questions for today, they might sound like this: Where is the influencer? Where is the podcaster? Where is the preacher from TV or Facebook? Where is the news pundit or the sportscaster? What does the news say about this? What voices are you consuming and listening to? We elevate these distant voices over those we share life with. When we lock ourselves in echo chambers and only engage with content that reinforces our worldview, we, like the Corinthians, risk relying solely on human wisdom. We begin to judge everything through that lens — wisdom fed to us by an algorithm designed to profit from our attention — and in doing so, we miss God in the midst of conversation.

That feels like perishing: the perishing of our ability to talk meaningfully about faith. What also perishes is our faith's impact on our citizenship, political action, and social justice. We lose the sense of fellowship, becoming known only for being polite on Sundays without ever scratching the surface. If we don't have space to ask questions about wisdom, the cross, and the world, where else will those conversations happen? I fear they don't happen at all, or, if they do, it will only be in angry, all-caps internet posts. This

deepens the divides in our congregations and small groups because we listen to stereotypes instead of stories, caricatures instead of siblings in Christ, and our discernment suffers.

RETURNING TO THE CROSS

The text invites us to return to the foundation of faith: the cross. Paul writes, “but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (v. 18). We must consider the message of the cross — the message the world once dismissed as foolishness but which revealed God's unexpected work of salvation. The cross is grace, liberation, healing, restoration, and reconciliation with the Creator. For those who follow Christ, that is the power of the good news that meets people where they are. People still long to hear a message of healing, even if they think it sounds foolish at first.

Paul continues by addressing the cultural and social diversity within Corinth's congregation and how they sought to define wisdom. He writes, “Jews ask for signs and Greeks desire wisdom” (v. 22). The Jewish people longed for prophetic confirmation that Jesus was the Messiah, while the Greeks, skilled in rhetoric, wanted to be reasoned into faith. It's not so different from online debates among Christian apologists or the “Gideon-like” tests we create, hoping one will prove our faith valid. But Paul insists that Christ's life contradicts both approaches. The power of God revealed in the cross must be our focus. If we find that to be a stumbling block,

then we won't like the next part of Paul's letter.

"Nobodies" is how biblical commentator Gordon Fee paraphrases Paul's words about the Corinthian believers. The church in Corinth wasn't made up of the wise or powerful — "not many were of noble birth" (v. 26). While it might sound harsh, Paul isn't bullying the gathered community; he's reminding them that the church is made up of all kinds of people. Rather than competing for wisdom or privilege, they should recognize their diversity. Their unifying cry is the cross. If the good news of Jesus Christ is preached to the poor, then the Corinthians are its recipients. Commentators suggest that while some members of the community held wealth or influence and helped fund the ministry, the majority were ordinary people.

That remains good news for us. In a society that overvalues wealth, power, and status, the gospel reminds us that Jesus has always invited "nobodies" to be "somebodies" in God's realm. The Gospel of Luke repeatedly shows that God uses the unknown and unlikely to advance the story of salvation. The same was true in Corinth and remains true in our churches today. Fee notes that God's choice of "nobodies" proves that what the world calls foolishness is precisely what God uses to confound the wise.

"God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to abolish things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God" (vv. 28–29). If we look closely, we can still see God teach-

ing us through such humble things: the bluebonnet on a forgotten Texas highway, the child laughing on a swing, the immigrant praying despite fear of detention, or the unhoused man sharing what little he has. Each of these reminds us to see wisdom through the lens of the cross.

If God's weakness is stronger than human strength (v. 25), then this is what we are called to boast in. God's ways are not our own, and for that we give thanks. The Corinthians were not to boast in their teachers, such as Paul, Apollos, or Cephas (v. 12), but in God's wisdom. Paul calls us again to remember that the message of the cross is the powerful hope that binds us together in faith and relationship. It's up to us to hear one another, stand in solidarity with our siblings, and boast only in God's power to transform our lives — perhaps sparing us from needing a letter like this ourselves.

One of my favorite Benedictine prayers says: *May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you really can make a difference in this world, so that you are able, with God's grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.*

That kind of godly, holy foolishness is the message of the cross. Despite all that is hard, bleeding, and tenuous, the cross may look like foolishness — but to us, it is power. Let us be blissfully foolish enough to believe in the liberation of the cross and its invitation to share that good news with more "nobodies," for God's glory and the good of our community.

WE REVAMPED THE BIBLE STUDIES PODCAST!



The updated Good Faith Bible Studies podcast will now be hosted by senior editor Craig Nash and Hayoung Park. Available now as a helpful resource for Sunday school teachers or simply for personal enrichment. Now available to stream wherever you get your podcasts!



PSALM 112

A Call to Praise and Practice

By Stephen Breck Reid

The Book of Psalms is really a collection of smaller collections. Altogether, it contains five books, mirroring the Torah — the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. Psalm 112 appears in the last of these. Both this psalm and the book it appears in open with an exclamation: “Hallelujah!” It’s more than a word. It is a call to respond with heart, mind, and soul. The English “Hallelujah” comes directly from the Hebrew words *hallelu*, meaning “praise,” and *Yah*, a shortened form of *YHWH*, the divine name. When we say or sing “hallelujah,” we are expressing the very essence of a life of faith.

For the psalmist, “Praise the Lord” — *Hallelujah* — is a statement of confession. Praise in these psalms is grounded in the power of a God who is near, not distant. Because God’s power is present now, not just in some distant future, the psalm calls for faithful behavior in the present moment.

Psalms 111 and 112 both begin with “Praise the Lord,” as do the psalms in the Egyptian *Hallel* (“Praise”) collection. Together, Psalms 111 and 112 introduce the later Passover *Hallel* (Pss. 113–

118), which continues today to be sung during the Passover Seder. Psalms 113 and 114 are prayed before the meal, and Psalms 115–118 afterward.

Both Psalms 111 and 112 are acrostic poems, with each line beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Because Hebrew and English differ so greatly in structure and rhythm, it’s difficult to convey this alphabetical pattern clearly in translation.

Psalm 112 is a wisdom prayer, an instruction in the kind of life that honors God. Like Psalm 1, it describes the qualities of a good person whose behavior reflects divine wisdom. As an acrostic, it uses the alphabet as a framework for teaching values: learning one’s ABCs alongside learning the way of righteousness. In modern English, acrostics are often used in early learning or devotional writing, but their use in ancient Hebrew poetry reflected a creative engagement with language and faith, not simply instruction for beginners.

The psalm’s structure contains more than the acrostic form. Functionally, it unfolds in five sections:

Verses 1–3 begin with a call to praise (“Hallelujah”) and a blessing on those who revere the Lord. Their faithfulness leads to tangible blessings: descendants, stability, and prosperity. The psalm emphasizes that the demand for right behavior and the promise of bless-

ing are both immediate realities, not distant hopes.

The psalm opens with the Hebrew word, often translated as “blessed,” “happy,” or “content,” which echoes Psalm 1. These psalms remind us that joy and contentment belong to those who live according to divine wisdom. No single English word fully captures the Hebrew idea — it encompasses blessing, happiness, and contentment rooted in devotion to God’s law. The “pursuit of happiness,” as we might call it, is the life found in reverence for God and delight in God’s commandments.

THE FEAR OF THE LORD

In Western culture, the idea of “fearing the Lord” is often misunderstood or minimized. Yet Scripture consistently reminds humanity to recognize its proper place before God (see Ps. 33:8; 34:11; Prov. 5:7; Eccl. 12:13). In contrast to the easy comfort of what some call “moral therapeutic deism,” Psalm 112 insists that God’s holiness remains awe-inspiring, even dangerous. To fear the Lord rightly is to respond with reverence, humility, and obedience.

Verses 2–3 also describe the external signs of blessing familiar in an agrarian culture — family, wealth, and stability. Those who fear the Lord and delight in God’s law experience abundance not

merely as material gain but as evidence of divine favor.

Verse 4 serves as a hinge, contrasting the fate of the just and the unjust. The righteous are described as “a light in the darkness.” This image of light appears throughout Scripture and symbolizes hope, salvation, and the presence of God. Isaiah 9:2 and Psalm 89:15 link light with divine deliverance. In the New Testament, Jesus calls his followers “the light of the world” (Matt. 5:14–16), while John’s Gospel portrays Christ himself as the light shining in the darkness (John 1:4–9; 8:12; 12:46). Those who live in Christ are transformed, moving from darkness to light (Eph. 5:8), carrying that light into a world still shadowed by despair.

Verses 5–9 describe the deeds of those who fear the Lord. The righteous show favor, lend generously, and act justly. In a world

obsessed with scarcity, where the richest 10% hold nearly 90% of global wealth, Psalm 112 envisions a different kind of economy: one marked by generosity and inclusion. The “good person” described here parallels the “blessed” person of verse 1, blending reverence for God with compassion for others.

Israelite law sought to prevent lending from becoming exploitative. The Hebrew parallel between “showing favor” and “lending” highlights that loans were meant to uplift, not oppress. The idea endures today in practices like microloans, where small investments empower individuals and communities to flourish. Psalm 112:5–6 embodies that same vision of generosity as divine partnership.

The psalm’s moral framework insists that wealth is never an end in itself. The righteous person’s stability — “their hearts are

steadfast, trusting in the Lord” — comes not from possessions but from confidence in God’s justice. Their generosity is rooted in trust, not fear. They “distribute freely” because their lives reflect the abundance of God’s grace.

Verse 10 concludes the psalm with the fate of the wicked. Like Psalm 1, it draws a sharp contrast between the righteous and the ungodly. Those who reject God’s ways face frustration, anger, and ultimately ruin. The psalmist’s image of “gnashing teeth” evokes deep anguish — the recognition that the way of the wicked cannot stand. The wicked see the stability and joy of the righteous and wither under their own envy and futility.

Psalm 112 closes the circle opened in verse 1. The one who fears the Lord and delights in God’s commandments lives with joy, confidence, and generosity. The one who rejects that life fades away, consumed by resentment. The psalm doesn’t speak of abstract theology — it speaks of lived wisdom, the way of righteousness made visible in daily actions.

In the end, Psalm 112 defines “Praise the Lord” — *Hallelujah* — as a spiritual discipline rooted in reverence for God’s nearness and justice. To fear God and delight in God’s commandments is to build a life, and even an economy, of inclusion and light in an otherwise dark world. Praise is not a feeling but a way of being — a life oriented toward God’s purposes and grounded in generosity, reverence, and joy.

WE REVAMPED OUR BIBLE STUDIES PODCAST!



The updated Good Faith Bible Studies podcast will now be hosted by senior editor Craig Nash and Hayoung Park. Available wherever you enjoy podcasts.



MATTHEW 17:1-9

The Transfiguration in Matthew

By Michael T. Smith

In the Gospel of Matthew, the Transfiguration follows an important conversation about suffering and glory (16:21–28). As the Messiah, Jesus will suffer and die, but He will also be resurrected and return as the glorious Judge. The Transfiguration underscores these themes by giving a foretaste of Jesus's future glory and revealing his Messiahship in the face of impending suffering.

More than Mark and Luke — the other Gospels that include this story — Matthew recounts the Transfiguration in light of Moses's experience on Sinai. This parallel is most striking when Matthew writes that Jesus's face “shone like the sun” (v. 2), an allusion to Exodus 34:29–35, where Moses's face also shines with divine glory. Once this connection is made, other parallels come into focus: the mountain setting, the mention of six days (Exodus 24:16), and even the inclusion of three companions (Ex. 24:9). Matthew highlights these details in preparation for another allusion later in verse 5.

The appearance of Moses and Elijah (v. 3) has prompted a range of interpretations. The most

common equates these two figures with the Law and the Prophets of Jewish Scripture. If this is the case, Matthew demonstrates that Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament expectations. Another interpretation emphasizes their end-time significance (Deut. 18:15; Mal. 4:4–6), in which case the focus is on Jesus's role in bringing about God's ultimate purpose for the world.

Peter's proposal to build tabernacles (v. 4) seems to be an attempt to prolong the experience. More importantly, by offering to make one dwelling for each figure, Peter unintentionally places Jesus on the same level as Moses and Elijah. When the cloud and the voice interrupt Peter (v. 5), Jesus alone takes center stage. Without even mentioning Moses or Elijah, the voice affirms Jesus as God's beloved Son. These words echo the baptism (3:17), but an extra phrase is added: “Listen to him!” — a command drawn from Deuteronomy 18:15, where Moses says that God will raise up a prophet like himself, to whom the people must listen. This is the culmination of the Moses and Sinai allusions introduced earlier. Jesus is the prophet like Moses, but he is also *greater* than Moses.

In verses 6–9, the divine voice provokes fear among the disciples (v. 6), but Jesus quickly comforts and reassures them with word and touch (v. 7). When they look up, only Jesus remains (v. 8), again emphasizing his centrality and prominence. Though the disci-

ples have seen Jesus's glory, they are not yet allowed to speak of it — perhaps to allow Jesus to continue defining his mission and identity.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

When considering the Transfiguration, it's best to begin with its impact on the disciples. As noted, Matthew's account follows Jesus's words about suffering, death, and resurrection — categories the disciples did not associate with the Messiah (see Peter's rebuke in 16:22). Jesus's prediction that he would return in glory to judge the world when the kingdom comes in fullness was much more in line with their expectations. The Transfiguration serves as a foretaste of that coming reality, functioning as both an anchor and a signpost for disciples who follow Jesus on the way of suffering.

As an anchor, it testifies that Jesus is indeed the Messiah. As a signpost, it points beyond moments of suffering to God's promised future, when everything will be set right and made new. The faith of those who trust the testimony of Peter, James, and John — who eventually did share this experience — is strengthened by that vision.

After considering the effect of the Transfiguration on the disciples, we must also consider what Matthew is saying about Jesus. As already noted, Matthew's telling of the event relies heavily on Mosaic

imagery to highlight Jesus's identity as the prophet who is both *like* and *greater than* Moses. The former is clear in the reference to Deuteronomy 18:15. The latter appears in the difference between Moses's and Jesus's mountaintop experiences.

As theologian Stanley Hauerwas puts it: "Moses's face shines from the reflection of God's glory, and Paul tells us that the radiance on the face of Moses eventually faded (2 Cor. 3:7). But the radiance of Jesus will never fade because Jesus is God's glory."

Furthermore, the flow of the story brings Jesus to the forefront: the voice speaks only of him, he alone is called the beloved Son and prophet like Moses, and in the end, he alone remains. Matthew emphasizes Jesus's preeminence. Moses served as mediator of the covenant at Sinai; Jesus now serves as mediator of the new covenant, which he establishes through his own person and ministry.

This brings us to the importance of Moses and Elijah. As noted earlier, the most common interpretation identifies Moses with the Law and Elijah with the Prophets of Jewish Scripture. Jesus, then, is the fulfillment of both. Rather than negating the importance of Old Testament Scripture and figures, this interpretation upholds their significance as forerunners and witnesses to Jesus. In fulfilling the Old Testament, Jesus both re-

interprets it in light of himself and affirms its continuing value.

LIVE LIKE IT IS TRUE

Jesus calls his followers to live lives of cross-bearing self-denial and then promises to return as the glorious judge in the fullness of God's kingdom (16:21–28). The reference to coming glory is meant to shape how we understand moments of suffering and continual self-denial — not as calls to extreme self-criticism, but as calls to deny anything in us that resists the way of Jesus.

We pursue this life in faith, trusting that Jesus is indeed the beloved Son of God. Yet full confirmation of that truth awaits future glory. The Transfiguration stands as a testimony to the disciples and the early church of the reliability of that promise and the kind of life it demands.

To see Jesus transfigured in glory is also to hear the command, "Listen to him." This recalls Jesus's role as a prophet like Moses, but even more, it is a call to discipleship. We are invited to let Jesus define the good life and to follow his way. We are called to listen to him in the present as we await his future glory.

TREASURE THE SCRIPTURES

In affirming Jesus as a prophet like Moses and as the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, Matthew demonstrates that Jesus' life and

ministry are the continuation of an older story — one that unfolds throughout Israel's history and Scriptures. Christians are called to know that story well.

Because of our faith in Jesus, we often read the Old Testament differently from the Jewish community, and that reality requires humility and care. Yet, through Jesus, this shared story becomes part of our own. It shapes and forms us and is continually referenced throughout the New Testament. As Christians, we have the privilege of treasuring both Testaments and reading them in light of each other.

JESUS ALONE

How startling it must have been for the disciples to experience something so overwhelming, only to look up and find Jesus alone. As noted earlier, this moment expresses Jesus's preeminence. We are to "listen to him" as the ultimate authority.

We might then ask ourselves: what other voices are vying for our attention? Who or what seeks to define our understanding of the good life? In our technological age, we are surrounded by voices that demand our devotion, shape our attention, and direct our actions.

Can we heed the voice on the mountain — to listen to Jesus above all others? Can we take him seriously as the Truth and the Way?



EXODUS 12:29-42

Troubling Contradictions

By Mary Alice Birdwhistell

Today's Scripture reading is part of an important story — not only in our Christian tradition but also for our Jewish neighbors. This story is so significant that it is retold annually during the Seder meal at Passover. Each year, Jewish communities invite one another to experience again how God delivered the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt.

On one hand, it's a beautiful story of God's deliverance — a reminder that God can meet us on the darkest nights of our lives. Sometimes, that's when God shows up best.

But it's also a deeply troubling story of great pain and loss. Despite numerous plagues, Pharaoh still refuses to release the Hebrews. Finally, something horrific happens that forces his hand. God would strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, but those who had put blood over their doorposts would be kept safe. The Hebrew people followed God's commands and were rescued, but on that same night, every Egyptian household was struck with the unimaginable loss of their firstborn child.

As honest readers of Scripture, we cannot gloss over the deeply troubling parts of the Exodus story. What do we do with a story where the freedom of one people comes at the expense of an-

other? What do we do with a story in which innocent children are killed in the middle of the night? As scholar Terence Fretheim puts it, "it seems almost blasphemous that God is the one who 'drops the bomb.'" We must sit with the pain of the Exodus and feel "the loud cry in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead" (12:30).

And why firstborn children? In the ancient world, the firstborn belonged to the gods. In Exodus, Pharaoh had once tried to claim Israel's children for himself. Now Yahweh demonstrates ultimate power over Pharaoh, overturning his violence.

Debra Mumford observes that the Exodus story is filled with "stunning contradictions," not unlike those in our world today. We see policies that privilege some at the expense of others. Practices that benefit one community while harming another. We can't ignore those contradictions in the biblical text, just as we can't turn away from injustice in our world.

And yet, for all its difficulty, Exodus is still a story of a God who sides with the oppressed and works on their behalf. Pharaoh had fooled himself into thinking that he held absolute control over the world around him, but the truth of this ancient story reveals that all life belongs to God. Confronted with the loss of life and his own loss of power, Pharaoh finally summoned Moses and Aaron in the night and said, "Take all the Hebrew people and go."

On that night, after 430 years of slavery, more than 600,000 Is-

raelites left Egypt on foot. God keeps watch over them, which is why our Jewish friends keep watch during Passover still today.

The good news of Exodus is that whenever God's people cry out under oppression, liberation will come. It may not come on our terms, on our timeline, or even in our lifetimes, but as people of faith, we are invited to trust in the God who sees us in our suffering, and we cling to the hope that God will always make a way.

LIBERATION NOW!

The liberative news of the Exodus story has long been recognized — and feared. In 1807, British missionaries published what became known as the *Slave Bible* for use among enslaved Africans. It deliberately omitted passages considered "too radical," especially those that could have inspired dreams of freedom and new life among enslaved people. It intentionally left out Exodus 1-17, omitting the entire story about the Israelites' escape from slavery under Pharaoh. Even the modern-day Pharaohs who sought to oppose its message recognized the undeniable power of God in this story.

And yet, enslaved people still discovered it. Over time, Exodus became a heartbeat of the Black church, shaping spirituals like "Go Down, Moses" and fueling movements for freedom. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. often preached from Exodus. In 1968, he had even planned to take part in a Passover

Seder with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Ten days before the meal, King was assassinated. His death ignited uprisings across the nation, followed by military occupation in many cities.

During this time, a Jewish activist named Arthur Waskow was working to deliver supplies to protestors. Passing a military vehicle one evening, he felt as if he were staring at Pharaoh's army itself. That experience completely transformed his understanding of Passover and its implications for the world today.

The next year, on April 4, 1969 — the first anniversary of King's death and the third night of Passover — Waskow led what became known as the Freedom Seder that would weave together the freedom struggles of Black America and of other marginalized peoples alongside the Israelites' struggle for freedom against Pharaoh. Held in the basement of the oldest African American Congregational church in Washington, D.C., it gathered more than 800 people: Black and White, Jewish and Christian.

They sat at long tables with candles and matzah, read from a new Haggadah that connected Israel's bondage to racial injustice in America, and lifted their glasses with the cry: Liberation now! Together they sang "Go Down, Moses."

News cameras captured the moment, and the tradition spread. Since then, communities have adapted the Seder to highlight struggles for freedom across the

world — refugee Seders, LGBTQ Seders, feminist Seders, environmental Seders, and more. Each reaffirms the dangerous hope of Exodus: that God's liberation is for *today*.

PLENTY GOOD ROOM FOR US ALL

The Exodus story still plants hope in our world and in our lives. So, where do you find yourself in the story today?

Maybe you, like the Hebrews, have been trapped for far too long and are crying out in the night for God to remember you when it feels like you have been forgotten.

- Maybe you are like Moses, praying for the courage to speak truth to power when you've never been one for speaking out.
- Maybe you are an Egyptian — only tangentially involved, yet complicit in unjust systems that rule the land.
- Perhaps you are more like Pharaoh than you realize, and your heart has grown hardened to the injustices around you, until the pain becomes impossible to ignore.

Wherever you find yourself, there is room for you among God's liberated people. As the Israelites marched out that night, we are told "a mixed crowd" went with them (12:38). Many non-Israelites joined in, seizing the chance for freedom, too.

Fretheim notes, "God's redemption is not for the chosen few; it is for the sake of the world. Would

that every community where the people of God are gathered could be called a 'mixed crowd.'"

The Exodus reminds us that liberation is never for one people alone. In God's world, there is "plenty good room" for us all.

A STORY OF PAIN AND HOPE

As Walter Brueggemann writes, "when we tell this story and celebrate what God has done in the past, we are indeed sojourners dreaming of a better land, filled with God's abundance. The engaged memory of pain evokes hope for a transformed world. And the children of this community cannot afford to be protected from either the pain or the hope of it all."

And so may we remember the pain and even the troubling contradictions of this story, for they remind us to pay attention to the pain and troubling contradictions so prevalent in the world today.

May we cling to the hope of a God who hears our cries and always, always sides with the oppressed. A God who reminds us that we are not forgotten.

And may follow the brave faithfulness of the Hebrew people who kept watch on that long dark night, hoping and praying for God to make a way in the wilderness, and ready to leap into action when God called.

Because the hope of the Exodus is that sorrow may last for the night, but joy comes in the morning.



EXODUS 14:10-31

“Do Not Be Afraid, Stand Firm, and See What God Will Do.”

By Mary Alice Birdwhistell

Last week, we read about how God delivered the Israelites in the night from Pharaoh, but as history has painstakingly taught us, the end of slavery does not equate to freedom. The Israelites still have a long journey ahead of them.

Camped by the sea in the very place God told them to go, they suddenly see dust rising from Pharaoh's advancing army. Six hundred chariots bear down from one side, and the Red Sea blocks the other. “In great fear,” the people cry to Moses: “It would have been better for us to be slaves in Egypt than to die here in the wilderness” (14:12).

In moments of significant anxiety, we often can't see beyond what's immediately in front of us. Fear often limits our responses, and we become gridlocked in dualistic types of thinking. We are so quick to pigeonhole ourselves and others into either-or scenarios. And in the heat of the moment and their understandable anxiety about what might happen, the Israelites can only see two outcomes: slavery or death. They cannot

imagine anything beyond their immediate terror.

But notice that Moses does not scold them for their anxiety or frustration. Instead, Moses turns to the people and says, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today” (14:13).

The words “do not be afraid” echo throughout Scripture. They are spoken whenever God is calling a person or people forward: Abram (Gen. 15), Hagar (Gen. 21), Joshua (Josh. 1), Isaiah (Isa. 41), Mary and Joseph (Matt. 1; Luke 1), the shepherds in the fields (Luke 2), and the women at the empty tomb (Matt. 28). In all of these instances, “Do not be afraid” is a message that God is about to do something completely unexpected – something we might miss out on if fear and anxiety are at the forefront of our minds.

Their next instruction is to stand firm. They may be tempted to fight back or flee from Pharaoh's army, but God instructs the Israelites to stand firm and to keep still. If they run or if they fight, they may completely miss out – they may even get in the way. Instead, they are to watch expectantly for what's about to happen next.

Notice how many times the word “see” is in this passage: “Stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again” (14:13). Whatever God is about to do, it will force the

Israelites to see things differently than they do now. God challenges them to see beyond their fear and imagine a future not yet visible.

When you and I feel stuck in anxiety and non-productive, either-or thinking, these words can be an important reminder for us, too, to set fear aside, ground ourselves, and challenge ourselves to broaden our thinking – to “wonder anew what the Almighty can do.” I don't think anyone imagined what God would do in the Israelites' situation, and while most of us know the rest of the story here, the Israelites did not. They had no clue what was about to happen next, yet they were called to stand firm and trust in God anyway.

“TELL THE ISRAELITES TO GO FORWARD”

In an act of desperation, Moses turns to God for help, but the Lord quickly responds, “Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward” (14:15). At first, it might sound like a harsh response – what's wrong with asking God for help? However, perhaps God is reminding Moses that divine power and human action go hand in hand. It's as if God is saying to Moses, “I am already doing my part – but there are parts that only you can do here, too. Why do you cry out to me? Only you can take the next step forward.”

I've always thought of this text as a miraculous story of God's

divine intervention, and it absolutely is. But it is also a miraculous story of a people who are willing to trust God – and a people who are brave enough to take the next step and to follow God into the waters when they have no idea what will happen next. As Old Testament scholar Terence Fretheim puts it, “As has been the case throughout the exodus narrative, God does not work alone; God works through the instrumentality of human powers to accomplish divine purposes.”

In the Jewish tradition, one version (or midrash) that rabbis have imagined of this story is about one of the Israelites, called Nachshon, who stepped into the waters first, wading in until he was nearly submerged. Only then did the sea part. The miracle required someone to take the first step.

Ultimately, the text tells us that the Israelites went forward together. No one turned back. And it was then, and only then, that the waves began to part, and the water began to recede, and a path forward began to emerge. That’s when we realize that this miracle is a joint effort. It’s a people collaborating with God, stepping out in faith together, and trusting God to lead a way forward.

HARRIET TUBMAN, THE MOSES OF HER PEOPLE

This kind of active faith echoes in the life of Harriet Tubman, often called the Moses of her People.

As a child, she endured brutal treatment. At age 12, she stepped between an overseer and an enslaved man, taking a blow to the head that left her with lasting injuries. Yet she pressed on, daring to imagine freedom.

When two of Harriet’s brothers discovered that they were going to be sold, Harriet soon began formulating a plan for the three of them to escape. However, halfway through their escape, her brothers became scared of what might lie ahead. The risk, they said, was just too great, and they decided to go back. Harriet remarkably made the rest of the journey on her own, eventually crossing into Pennsylvania. But freedom for herself was not enough — she returned again and again to guide others. Nineteen times, she risked her life, helping more than 300 people to freedom, including her elderly parents.

Oral tradition tells us that Harriet sang the song “Wade in the Water” to communicate to freedom seekers on the Underground Railroad when to jump in the river. Its coded language warned them to “wade in the water” whenever people were out hunting them, so that even the dogs couldn’t trace their scent. She called people forward — into water, into danger — trusting that God would make a way.

We don’t have many quotes from Harriet’s lifetime, because not much was written down about the life of a Black woman at the

time, but the following words attributed to her powerfully capture this story from Exodus: “I always told the Lord, ‘I trust you. I don’t know where to go or what to do, but I expect you to lead me,’ and He always did.”

THE SEAS THAT HAVE NOT OPENED TO US

Many of us know too well what it feels like when the sea has still not yet opened before us. When we feel stuck between bad or worse options, and there’s no hope of liberation or a path of freedom in sight.

And yet, like the Israelites, and like Harriet Tubman, perhaps we are called to trust before the waters part. Brian McLaren points out that, “The call comes not after the way is clear, but while it still seems impassable. The call comes not when we have everything figured and settled and made certain, and not when all obstacles have been removed, but before, when chaos, uncertainty, and turmoil prevail, and when the tumultuous sea shows no sign of parting. Only in that impossible, uncertain, disruptive place does a new depth of faith in God mysteriously become possible.”

Even when the path seems impossible, may we stand firm, and may we find the courage to wade into the waters, trusting that God will lead the way.



EXODUS 16:1-30

The “Hangry” Israelites

By Mary Alice Birdwhistell

Two months have passed since that incredible night when God parted the waters and allowed the Israelites to escape Pharaoh’s army on dry ground. However, they are no longer “riding the high” of that magical moment. Instead, they find themselves stranded in the wilderness — hungry, tired, and uncertain if or how they’ll survive. Their situation is dire, and they begin to complain to Moses for getting them into this mess in the first place.

As Terence Fretheim puts it, “They wish they had stayed in Egypt. If it is finally a choice of places to die, satiety with oppression — an idealized and selective memory — is preferred to starvation with freedom.” And true, they seem to have an overly optimistic memory of slavery, an idyllic time when they supposedly ate their fill from “pots of meat” and overflowing bread (16:3). From the outside looking in, we might wonder if these people have already forgotten everything that they have been through, and how God miraculously delivered them from slavery. Do they not trust God to take care of them any longer?

Of course, that’s easy for us to say from a place of comfort or privilege — when you and I aren’t in the

wilderness with the Israelites, in the unbearable heat, traveling by foot, with no food. The Israelites aren’t weak — they’re human. Or, as the Urban Dictionary might describe it, they’re hangry: so hungry that they have become irritable and desperate. You or I would be no different if we had even made it this far!

Let’s also remember that even in their “hanger,” the Israelites are bringing their honest complaints to God, and they’re not alone in this act of vulnerability before the Holy One. The Psalms are filled with similar statements of lament, fear, anger, and doubt cried out to God. Job freely protests his own suffering. Even Jesus cries out from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

As Dr. Elna Solvang reminds us, “At its core, complaint is a turning to God — not away from God.” And as they turn toward the Holy One, God listens to them! The text reminds us four times that “God hears” their cries for help (vv. 7, 8, 9, and 11). If you find yourself lamenting today about your own wilderness, know that complaints and honest cries for help serve an important role in the greater story of the people of God.

MANNA: WHAT IS IT?

God hears the Israelites’ cries for help, and God responds by providing quail in the evening and manna in the morning. Notice in verse 15 that the Hebrew word for manna,

man-hu, literally means “What is it?” Like a child eyeing a strange food, the Israelites wonder what God has put before them, and you might be surprised by what it actually was.

According to a discovery almost 100 years ago, a 1927 article in *TIME Magazine* describes manna, the thin, flaky substance that appeared each morning as the secretion of plant lice that feed on certain shrubs in the Sinai desert! These bugs excrete juice that dries and becomes a flaky substance rich in sugars and carbohydrates. It decays quickly, and it tends to attract bugs, so you wouldn’t want to gather more than a day’s worth. To this day, people continue to harvest it and bake it into bread, which they call manna.

Some might say this explanation removes the miracle from the story. But as Barbara Brown Taylor asks, “Does manna have to come out of nowhere to qualify as a miracle? Or is the miracle that God hears hungry people and feeds them with bug juice — food it never would have occurred to them to eat?”

She continues, “If your manna has to drop straight out of heaven and look like a perfect loaf of butter-crust bread, then chances are you are going to grow hungry a lot. If, on the other hand, you are willing to look at everything that comes to you as coming from God, then

there will be no end to the manna in your life.”

Perhaps the miracle is not what manna is, but that God keeps showing up to feed us — again and again — in simple, yet sustaining ways.

What has God been sending you to eat lately? What has kept you going through hard seasons? Or have you been so busy looking for butter-crusted bread that you’ve missed the manna that is all around you?

Often, we only recognize God’s provision when we look back and begin to understand how God was there all along. Perhaps it’s like what we see at the end of *The Wizard of Oz*. After surviving the tornado, the wicked witch, and the evil monkeys that fly, Dorothy asks Glinda to help her get back home to Kansas. And Glinda simply smiles and says, “Dorothy, you don’t need to be helped. You’ve had the power all along, my dear.” Perhaps the Israelites have, too. Maybe they only realized in hindsight how faithfully God had been by their side, feeding them all the way.

RESTING IN GOD’S ABUNDANCE

God’s provision isn’t only about food — it’s ultimately about trust. Each day, the Israelites are instructed to gather just enough for that day — no more, and no less. It’s simple but profound: trust in God’s care one day at a time. Jesus echoes this wisdom when he teaches us to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.” Not weekly check-

ins, not annual security, but daily sustenance. The Israelites learn to depend on God through this regular rhythm. But soon, the people begin to hoard. They stockpile extra “just in case,” and by morning, it rots and smells.

As Walter Brueggemann puts it, “When they tried to bank it, to invest it, it turned sour and rotted, because you cannot store up God’s generosity. God’s abundance transcends the market economy.”

To break this cycle of striving, God gives them the gift of Sabbath. They are allowed to gather up two days’ worth of manna on the sixth day — this time trusting that it won’t go bad and that God will provide enough food for them to eat the next day as well, allowing them to rest on the seventh day.

It’s a radical command — so significant that it becomes one of the Ten Commandments. Yet today, many of us treat Sabbath as optional. The idea of setting aside time and space to rest, to stop what we’re doing, to quit working, and to be unproductive — is completely counterintuitive to the way most of us live our lives and to the way the world around us operates.

And yet, as Wayne Muller writes, “All life requires a rhythm of rest. There is a rhythm in our waking activity and the body’s need for sleep. There is a rhythm in the way day dissolves into night, and night into morning. There is a rhythm as the active growth of spring and summer is quieted by the necessary dormancy of fall and

To go deeper into the text, check out the brand new Good Faith Bible Studies podcast wherever you like to stream.

winter. There is a tidal rhythm, a deep, eternal conversation between the land and the great sea. In our bodies, the heart perceptibly rests after each life-giving beat; the lungs rest between exhale and inhale.”

Somewhere along the way, in the relentless busyness of modern life, we lost this rhythm. We live as though the rules governing tides, seasons, and our very breath no longer apply to us. We have become Pharaoh’s people all over again — driven by scarcity and fear that there will never be enough.

Walter Brueggemann points out that we actually have no evidence that Pharaoh ever rested or that he ever gave his people a day off. Instead, he continually pushed them harder, consumed by anxiety over production and control. The Israelites knew this life well. So when God calls them to rest, it’s not just an invitation — it’s liberation.

In the wilderness, they (and we) must decide: will we trust the patterns of empire, or trust the God who provides? Will we cling to fear and overwork, or rest in divine abundance?



EXODUS 17:1-7

Is the Lord Among Us, Or Not?

By Mary Alice Birdwhistell

Last week, God solved the Israelites' food problem, but this week, their situation is just as dire. Though they are following God's directions in the wilderness, they now have no water to drink. It might sound like the same song, new verse — but imagine their reality.

Without water, the human body can only survive about four days. In the heat of the Sinai wilderness, traveling long distances on foot with livestock, children, tents, and heavy belongings, their window is likely much shorter. One long, hot day could finish them! So if God is with them, as they ask in verse 7, *why is there no water?*

It's a good question — one most of us have asked in our own ways:

- If God is with us, why do mass shootings continue?
- If God is with us, why did the cancer return?
- If God is with us, why did I lose my loved one?
- If God is with us, then where is God in the midst of this mess?

If we're not careful, you and I can be tempted to fit our theology into the narrow constraints of dualistic thinking and human logic. If X, then Y. If God is with us, then here is a lengthy list of things that "aren't

supposed to happen." They simply don't fit into our "God equation." We can't reconcile how both could plausibly be true at the same time — it has to be either one or the other. And so when X does happen, it begs the question that the Israelites ultimately ask, "Is the Lord among us, or not?"

Perhaps the Israelites' question echoes our own.

LIMINAL SPACE IN THE WILDERNESS

The Israelites are no longer slaves under Pharaoh, yet they're not free in the Promised Land. They're trapped somewhere in between in the wilderness. It's what Richard Rohr calls liminal space, where we are "on the threshold (limen, in Latin) between the familiar and the completely unknown."

Liminal spaces are uncomfortable, even excruciating. We don't have a five-step plan, and we don't know what's next or how the story ends. Yet, liminal spaces are also profoundly sacred, because they are where transformation happens — where our certainties are stripped away and we learn to trust again.

Rohr continues, "Get [to liminal space] often and stay as long as you can by whatever means possible. It's the realm where God can best get at us because our false certitudes are finally out of the way. This is the sacred space where the old world is able to fall apart, and a bigger world is revealed. Here we are taught openness and patience

as we come to expect an appointment with the divine Doctor."

For the Israelites, the wilderness is the threshold between despair and hope, death and life, slavery and liberation. For us, these in-between places might look like a diagnosis, a job loss, a longtime systemic injustice, a season of uncertainty, a move, a grief, or a long unanswered prayer.

What liminal space are you standing in these days? And what might God be teaching you on this threshold between what was and what could be?

THE NEXT RIGHT THING

When the people cry out from the threshold of the wilderness, it's Moses — not God—who grows impatient. When the people complain to Moses, Moses complains right back to them. But when Moses cries to God, God responds immediately. And notice how God responds to their complaints. God doesn't say, "*I just parted the Red Sea and sent you plenty manna — what more do you want?*" Just like we see in Exodus 16, God hears their cries for help and tells Moses what to do next.

God instructs Moses to take some elders with him, to bring the staff he carried at the sea, and to strike the rock before him. God literally tells Moses to hit a rock with a stick! And suddenly, water flows out, and the people drink. The Israelites may not be in the Promised Land yet, but God does show them the next right thing to do so that

they can make it through another day.

In her book *The Next Right Thing*, Emily Freeman observes that Jesus often did this in his ministry, too. He didn't hand out five-year plans — he gave clear, simple next steps. To the leper: “*Go show yourself to the priest.*” To the paralytic: “*Get up and walk.*” To Jairus's parents: “*Give her something to eat.*”

“At first, that seems like a waste of a captive audience,” Freeman says. “Rather than a life plan, a clear vision, or a five-year list of goals, the leper, the paralytic, and Jairus and his wife were given clear instructions about what to do next, and only next. He made the next right thing unmistakably clear. Not the next big thing. Not the next impressive thing. But the next right thing.”

Perhaps that's the real miracle of this story — not just water from a rock, but a God who shows

us how to keep going when the path ahead feels dry and uncertain. Sometimes God doesn't part the Red Sea. Sometimes God just gives us enough water to take one more step.

WE EACH HAVE PARTS TO PLAY

This story also reminds us that divine help and human action often go hand in hand. God provides, but the people must still act — lifting the staff, gathering the elders, striking the rock, and ultimately, trusting God to make a way.

God rarely does everything for us. Instead, God does everything with us. And the resources are often already in our hands: the people beside us, the tools we are carrying, the rock right in front of us. Sometimes, we become so fixated on trying to see and understand the big picture that we don't move or take any action at all. The wilderness reminds us that perhaps our

continued work is to discern and do the next right thing as God is calling us, one day at a time.

Anne Lamott puts it beautifully: “Again and again, I tell God I need help. And God says, ‘Isn't that fabulous? Because I need your help too. So you go get that old woman over there some water, and I'll figure out what we're going to do about your stuff.’”

When we do the next right thing, we join God's ongoing work of creation and redemption. That's where grace often meets us — right in the middle of what we can do next.

WHEN GOD FEELS ABSENT

Even with water in the wilderness, the people still ask, “*Is the Lord among us or not?*” Their question is painfully honest — and deeply human.

Faith doesn't mean we never ask or wonder where God is. Faith means we keep paying attention, keep reaching out, and keep doing the next right thing, even when the journey is messy and complicated. Like the Israelites, we can bring our frustration and fear directly to the One who hears.

The wilderness isn't a punishment; it's a classroom. It teaches us to trust that God can meet us even here — between the already and the not yet.

Maybe that's what this story is really about. About a God who is still among us — right here in the dry places, still providing what we need for the next brave step. Ultimately, that will take us all the way home.

WE REVAMPED OUR BIBLE STUDIES PODCAST!



The updated Good Faith Bible Studies podcast will now be hosted by senior editor Craig Nash and Hayoung Park. Available wherever you enjoy podcasts.



EXODUS 19:1-20

A Full Circle Moment

By Mary Alice Birdwhistell

This week's text feels surprisingly uneventful compared to the dramatic scenes we've encountered so far in Exodus, so much so that I had to double-check that I had written it down correctly! Like a child looking ahead in a storybook, I found myself reading ahead, anticipating when the "real action" would begin. However, there are no parted seas, plagues, or miracles of manna and water in the wilderness in Exodus 19.

It's tempting to gloss over a passage like this and skip ahead to the next chapter, but if we do, we risk missing something vital. Because most of life doesn't happen in the dramatic mountaintop moments or burning-bush encounters. Much of it happens in the quiet, more ordinary spaces in between, where transformation is taking root beneath the surface. Perhaps that's what's happening here in Exodus 19 as the Israelites pause at Mt. Sinai — waiting, listening, and preparing themselves for what comes next.

But, while the drama may not be significant in this text, the setting is. This moment brings us back, full circle, to the same mountain where Moses first heard the voice of the Lord call out to him from the burning bush. When God called him to

deliver his people from slavery in Egypt, God promised Moses, "I will be with you... and this shall be the sign: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain" (Ex. 3:12). There have been plenty of obstacles, roadblocks, and challenges along the way, but in this seemingly unremarkable part of the story, God's initial promise to Moses at the burning bush is finally fulfilled.

PREPARING FOR THE THIRD DAY

Moses instructs the Israelites to prepare themselves for the third day, when God will speak to them. They are to wash their clothes, clear out any distractions, and consecrate themselves for this sacred moment.

We may not follow these same sorts of rituals today, but the principle still matters: preparation shapes our capacity to encounter the divine. Just as we prepare our bodies for a physical challenge or our minds for an important exam, we prepare our souls to be attuned to the voice of God. And yet, in a world addicted to speed, efficiency, and instant satisfaction, I wonder if we have lost this sacred act? How often do we want our spiritual sustenance to arrive pre-packaged and ready-to-go without any sort of intentionality or preparation on our part?

The Israelites' actions at Mt. Sinai remind us that even today, part of hearing from God involves the spiritual work of grounding ourselves to receive from God. What would it look like for us to protect

time and space in our schedules to listen, meditate, and be still? What can you do to better prepare your mind, body, heart, and soul for the Holy One?

DOES GOD PLAY FAVORITES?

When Moses meets God on the mountain, God calls the Israelites a "treasured possession out of all peoples" (v. 5), a "priestly kingdom" and "holy nation" (v.6). These are significant statements for those who believe in God's preferential treatment for the modern nation-state of Israel. However, I believe that a deeper theological question is worth wrestling with: Does God play favorites? And what is God really saying to the Israelites here in the wilderness?

A story about my uncle Jack helps me think about that question. Jack was a beloved religion professor and campus minister who encouraged my calling in ministry when few others did. He sent me constant notes of encouragement, finally supported me to participate in mission trips, and continually bought me books he thought I would appreciate. It felt like he was my #1 fan.

When Jack passed away several years ago, tributes poured in from former students and friends. A common thread between them was this idea that "Jack made me believe that I was his favorite." Of course, we all couldn't be — yet remarkably, hundreds of his former students felt that we were, myself

included! Because Jack had an extraordinary gift for making people feel uniquely seen and valued, and many of his former students are carrying his light and legacy into the world, years after his death.

What if God's treasured love for Israel was never about picking one people as a favorite or at the exclusion of others? Instead, what if it was about calling people to be a light to the nations? God was raising up a priestly people who would reveal God's character to the world!

The danger comes when God's love for us leads to a sense of entitlement. When we imagine that God is only "on our side," or that divine love is reserved for people who think, vote, or worship like we do. When our lives (and churches) reflect this sort of exclusionary stance toward our neighbors, we can look like a community we've created in our own image, instead of a people all created in God's image. As Anne Lamott puts it, "You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do."

The more we try to limit God's love to our categories, the more we discover that God's is far bigger than any boundary we try to build. God's "favorite" isn't a select few of us — it's the whole world (John 3:16).

LIMINAL SPACES

This text also continues the thread in Exodus that much of faith is lived in the liminal spaces of our lives be-

tween what was and what will be. The Israelites are no longer slaves in Egypt, but they are still not in the promised land. They are free, yet still learning how to live as God's people.

We live in those in-between spaces, too, and like Israel, we are invited to trust that God meets us there. This quieter chapter in Exodus invites us to pause before the next movement of the story, offering us a moment, alongside the Israelites, to prepare, reflect, and remember who we are. It's also a chance to ask hard questions about the kind of people we are becoming:

- Do we feel forgotten by God in our own wilderness moments and need to remember that God is still with us?
- Do we feel stuck in an in-between kind of season? What are the unique lessons of this liminal space?
- Do we need to prepare ourselves for a new chapter God is calling us toward?
- Are we looking for God in flashy, mountain-top moments, when God is trying to speak to us in more quiet, ordinary ways?

BECOMING GOD'S PEOPLE

In seminary, one of my favorite professors, Dr. Hulitt Gloer, would begin each class by praying for us, that we might "hear what God wanted us to hear," so that we might "do what God wanted us to do," so that we might "become who God

wanted us to be." His prayer continues to carry me years later. I'm not sure if it was inspired by any particular biblical text, but it seems to embody the covenant relationship between God and God's people in Exodus 19.

Israel is chosen not for privilege but for purpose — so that they might embody God's justice and compassion for the sake of the world. The same is true for us. We are invited to listen to God's words so that we might do God's work of love and justice, so that we might live as God's people in the world — continually pointing others to the boundless love of God.

Often, that doesn't look like dramatic miracles or heroic acts, but day-to-day faithfulness in the quiet, ordinary spaces of our lives. Perhaps that is the gift of this "unremarkable" text: It reminds us that God is still present even when nothing spectacular is happening. That faith is forged not only in the fire of crisis but also in the slow, intentional work of becoming God's people — right here, in the waiting, in the wilderness, in the space between.

To go deeper into the text, check out the brand new Good Faith Bible Studies podcast wherever you like to stream.



MATTHEW 21:1-11

Palm Sunday

By Craig Nash

In recent years, if you read Christian books and articles or listened to sermons from more progressive writers and preachers, you may have noticed a shift in how some of them communicate the biblical term *kingdom*. They replace the “g” in the word with a dash. The result — *kin-dom* — gives a nod to the original term but transforms it. The connotation of control over an established realm gives way to a more gentle, familial image. (It also addresses that pesky gendered-language issue we struggle to reconcile between the Bible and our lived experience with God.)

At first glance, and depending on your tolerance for deviating from traditional concepts, this may be jarring. On one hand, the discomfort you may experience when reading the word *kin-dom* isn’t altogether unfounded. “King” and “kingdom” are, after all, images firmly rooted in our sacred scriptures and have thus been incorporated into our worship and devotional practices. They paint a picture that can’t quite be replicated with any other words.

But if you feel discomfort when you see *kin-dom* replacing kingdom (as I still often do), as with

any discomfort, pay attention to it. Question the discomfort. Where is it located in your body? What is its relationship to fear? Obviously, we want to be faithful to the Bible, but is it possible that we are more afraid of our conceptions of reality being challenged?

This dilemma is at the heart of the Palm Sunday story found in Matthew 21.

SIGHT AND POWER: SETTING THE STAGE

Two important stories are found at the end of Matthew 20 that help set the stage for Jesus entering into Jerusalem.

In the first, the mother of James and John asks Jesus for her sons to be seated to his right and left when he comes into his kingdom. This was after Jesus had told them that he would die by crucifixion, so he reminded her that she didn’t really know what she was asking for. Jesus also had to address the other ten disciples, who were angry at James and John for their mother’s request. “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them,” Jesus said. “It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave” (Matt. 20:17–28).

In the second story, just preceding Jesus’ entry into the city, two blind men sat on the side of the road, begging for mercy. The

crowd — including the disciples who had just been given a lesson by their rabbi on how greatness is defined by service — tried to silence them. They grew louder, though, and asked for him to “let our eyes be opened” (20:33). Jesus touched their eyes, and Matthew tells us, “Immediately they regained their sight and followed him.”

Think of these two stories as the literary prologue for Matthew 21. Or imagine a director walking onto the theater stage and telling these stories to the audience before a play. They aren’t accidental but tell us something about the picture that is about to be revealed. Matthew is telling his reader, “Your eyes can only be opened to what is about to occur if you reimagine what you thought you knew about kings and kingdoms.”

FULFILLING PROPHECY

Matthew doesn’t explicitly state that Jesus entered Jerusalem during the Passover celebration. However, he alludes to it in later chapters (26:2), and his Jewish audience would have connected the large crowds and shouts of “Hosanna!” with Passover. Matthew is more concerned with the geography and symbolism of Jesus’ Jerusalem procession than he is with giving an exhaustive list of details of what occurred. He isn’t telling his readers, “Here is everything that happened.” He is telling

them, with poetic subtlety, “Here is how Jesus fulfills prophecy.”

What Matthew does in the following verses can be seen as the stitching together of a beautiful mosaic of prophecies from the Hebrew Bible that his readers would have recognized instantly.

The location from where Jesus began his journey hearkened to Zechariah: “*On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives, which lies before Jerusalem on the east. And the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley...*” (Zechariah 14:4). Notice the imagery of division. Matthew wants his readers to know that Jesus presents a choice between two ways of understanding the world.

Zechariah also provides the imagery for Jesus’ mode of transportation: “*Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey*” (Zech. 9:9). Whereas Mark, Luke, and John record Jesus entering only on a colt, Matthew is making a Hebrew literary choice to paint a picture of strength through humility.

In verses 4–5, Matthew directly connects the unfolding scene to Isaiah 62:11: “*Say ye to the daughter of Zion, Behold, thy salvation cometh; behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him.*”

As the crowd shouted “Hosanna!”, they were echoing the

liturgical cries for deliverance that are spread throughout the Psalms (118:25–26).

The crowd laying branches on the road and waving palm trees held echoes of the Levitical command: “*And you shall take you on the first day the boughs of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and the boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days*” (Lev. 23:40).

From all this to the bestowment of the title “Son of David” in verse 9 (2 Sam. 7) and the entering of the city in verse 10 (Mal. 3:1), the scene that fills only eleven verses for modern readers explodes with prophetic meaning for Matthew’s Jewish audience.

Matthew is telling his readers, “You have known about this story all along. It is now being fulfilled.”

FLIPPING THE SCRIPT

The prophecies that converge in Matthew 21:1–11 would have been well known to Matthew’s original readers. Yet by the first century CE, many in Judea had come to expect that the Messiah, once he appeared, would bring political deliverance from Rome. Zechariah 9:9 promised a peaceful king “riding on a donkey,” but that image was often treated as a poetic prelude to what he would ultimately deliver. “Yes, the Messiah may come humbly,” people reasoned, “but his humility

will give way to triumph. He will still drive out our enemies.”

But Matthew flips the script on their expectations. The king does come, but he is unarmed. The crowd demands, “Save us!”, but Jesus delivers their salvation through death, not conquest.

In a way, Matthew shows the fulfillment of prophecy while also offering a parody of what the people thought those prophecies meant.

THY KIN-DOM COME?

Matthew ends this story with the city of Jerusalem being in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” and with the crowds replying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.” What’s interesting here is that the crowd, who had just named him as “the Son of David” (a messianic title), only referred to him as a prophet from a small backwater town. It was a correct label, but incomplete. It was as if they didn’t fully understand just yet.

Still, it captured the dual nature that is at the heart of who Jesus was and is. He is Lord and Messiah, king and conqueror. He is God in flesh. But he is also of earth and dirt. He is both fully “other,” and he is also like us.

He is king, but he is also kin. His task is both to deliver us — from our oppressors and our sin (including our sin of oppression) — and to bring all of us together into a divine kinship that isn’t based on power but on humility and service.

THE URGENCY OF THE MOMENT:

The Christian Witness and Democracy are Depending on Us

By Mitch Randall

As this new year begins, we look forward with cautious optimism, hoping in the resolve of our faith and the strength of our democracy. Not since the Civil War has America been so divided and polarized, but if you look carefully within the cracks of those divisions, a unifying balm is emerging from the shadows.



America has long cherished the ideals of freedom, liberty, and justice. While our country has not always lived up to those ideals for all its inhabitants, the true greatness of this democratic experiment of self-governance lies in our efforts to reverse injustice and include more people. Whether it was Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, Female Americans, Queer Americans, and other Americans, the country has been open to moving forward with more citizens participating in the democracy and basking in the beauty of justice.

America is not perfect, nor will it ever be. Still, if we are to prosper in the future, we must hold to the democratic ideal that every person is “created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

If America loses these ideals, then authoritarianism will take hold, with tyranny and persecution to follow. An often misattributed quote to Edmund Burke said, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.” What Burke actually said was, “When bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle.”

When bad actors combine, good actors must associate. This reminds me of Marvel Comics icon Captain America, “Avengers, assemble!”

At the close of 2025, the Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis, Senior Pastor at Middle Church in New York City,

convened the Freedom Rising Conference. Pastors, statisticians, artists, and advocates converged on the Big Apple to discuss the current state of the country and how a Christian witness for justice can reroute the current path towards authoritarianism. The theme was “The Fierce Urgency of Now,” based on comments from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who said, “This is a time for vigorous and positive action.”

The Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III kicked off the conference, encouraging the audience not to give in to despair but to lean into the creativity that this moment demands. He proclaimed, “Not everyone will be in the streets, but everyone can be a part” through creative means of resistance and mobilizations.

Moss gave several examples of how Southern African American women courageously and effectively challenged segregation and championed justice. Jo Ann Robinson was part of the Women’s Political Council in Montgomery, AL. While the male leaders were arguing about how to begin the Montgomery Bus Boycott after Rosa Parks was arrested, Robinson and other women decided to use their influence to start a revolution.

The women walked to Alabama State University, where Robinson worked. They created a flyer and used the memograph machine to make copies. They cranked out 55,000 flyers by hand while organizing paperboys to deliver them to every black person in Montgomery. However, as the paperboys were distributing the flyers, Moss declared that the Spirit of God was at work when the wind picked up, scattering the flyers across the city that morning.

When Dr. King woke up that morning to read the paper, he, along with the other male leaders, learned that the boycott was already underway. The women and the Spirit of God had already been in motion.

Creativity and determination, when harnessed by a few, can ignite a movement for equality and justice.

As Dr. King and the men went to work on the streets, another group of women, known as the Club from Nowhere, began their efforts. As the boycott got underway, black citizens were being arrested by the Montgomery police. The boycott needed funds for bail, but cash was running short. The Club from Nowhere, led by Georgia Gilmore, devised a secret plan to utilize their baking skills to raise money for the boycott. Gilmore made some of the best pound cake in Montgomery, so she started spreading the word that she would make pound cake for white families (most of them were part of the White Citizens Council) if they paid her in advance.

Her pound cake was so good that the families handed over the cash. Other members of the Club from Nowhere followed suit. In a matter of weeks, White Citizens Council families were eating pound cake and funding the bus boycott at the same time, having absolutely no idea what they were doing.

Robinson and Gilmore are exemplary figures, combining creativity and determination to drive social change for the greater good. At this moment, we need more people like Robinson and Gilmore thinking creatively to combat the rise of authoritarianism, while being committed to bringing about positive outcomes for the future.

Rev. Lewis and the congregation at Middle Church are doing just that for their community. A fire almost destroyed Middle Church on December 5, 2020. Flames raced through their historic sanctuary in the East Village. The sanctuary was a complete loss, but Lewis and the church would not let their despair set them back. Middle Church doubled its efforts to serve its community, providing a safe space for LGBTQ+ neighbors and immigrants fearful of deportation. They fed the hungry and went to the streets demanding racial justice. They put their money where their mouth was by creating a reparations team and allocating \$200,000 from their budget to reparations ministries.

Danita Branam, Reparations Team member, told a group of conference participants, “Middle Church supports Indigenous and African American efforts outside our church walls in various activist campaigns and to persons, organizations, and events



Freedom Rising Conference at Middle Church in New York City. Photo by Mitch Randall.

such as rental assistance during the pandemic, cultural sponsorships that offer acceptable repair.”

In her book, *Life Begins at the End of Your Comfort Zone*, Lewis wrote, “Keep your eyes on all that’s good and beautiful and possible in the world, because the stories we tell create the people we become.” A story is being told right now, with each of us playing a character in the narrative unfolding before our eyes. The question posed to us all persists, “What role are we playing right now?”

Are we the bold leader?

Are we the meticulous organizer?

Are we the creative helper?

Are we Jo Anne Robinson or Georgia Gilmore?

Whoever we are in this cosmic drama, the moment is upon us, and the time is now for everyone to associate, assemble, and engage. The Christian witness and American democracy depend on us. If we choose to ignore the moment, then authoritarianism will win the day with tyranny and oppression soon to follow. That cannot happen on our watch!

I still believe in the resolve of good people coming together for a greater cause. As Rev. Walter Rauschenbusch, the founder of the Social Gospel Movement in New York City’s Hell’s Kitchen during the 1900s, declared, “Every great movement begins in the hearts of a few.”

The movement is rising again, so please join the effort! **GFM**

STILL SEPARATE AND UNEQUAL:

A Decolonizing and Desegregating Spirituality for Life in Christian Community

By Starlette Thomas

“What church are you a member of?” she asked. “I’m not a member of any church. I’ll join a church when the North American church desegregates,” I responded. Her assuming smile quickly faded. Slowly, she began to nod her head. “I understand,” she said. Seminary-trained and ordained, I never imagined myself saying this. But then again, I am called to bear witness. I just assumed it would be for the salvation of souls, not against the church’s hypocritical social positioning.



Separate and unequal is a direct reference to racial segregation, epitomized by the U.S. Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and later, the Civil Rights Movement. While legal segregation has ended, as the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. pointed out, 11 a.m. on Sunday remains one of the most segregated hours in America. The proposed solution or spiritual path forward calls for actively confronting and dismantling the racial and colonial biases embedded in Christian worship, doctrine, and practice. Only then can North American Christians dismantle the legacies of colonialism, white-body supremacy, and racial segregation within the church. In fact, much of North American Christianity is shaped by European cultural norms and defined by relegating all other people groups to theological margins.

Consequently, the remedy does not include quoting scriptures like this one: “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!” The writer of Psalm 133 waxes on with one positive comparison after another. When suggests it has already happened, and perhaps on several occasions. What a difference a conjunction makes. As for North American Christians, this observation remains aspirational, though we are all God’s children.

The psalmist does not tell us how it happened. We don’t know the timeframe for this display of

togetherness. We are not privy to the hard work, the difficult and perhaps even awkward conversations that preceded a reality that comes with a sigh of relief. Because how hard and distressing it is *for* kindred to live together in unity!

Before contentious presidential elections, we, North American Christians, had our differences, but now they are hyper-politicized, hyper-racialized, and hyper-divisive. “Both sides,” the national dialogue and reckoning over the sociopolitical construct of race, white Christian nationalism, police brutality, immigration, and the criminality of certain bodies have many families taking sides. Or worse, they have decided to stop speaking to each other. Choosing to skip fellowship opportunities at both Thanksgiving and Christmas, what can the church in North America say and do about this? The short answer is nothing.

Because the conundrum I face every Sunday is segregation. After “trying seven ways to Sunday,” what of unity can Christians bear witness to? How does the church in North America continue to describe itself as the body of Christ, as members of one other, and yet, this body remains segregated in its lived expression? What kind of spirituality supports this one day a week show of disunity? What kind of Christian community, rooted in fellowship and called to a ministry of reconciliation, does not require its members to reconcile their differences?

Jesus said, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35, NRSV). If — not because — you love one another, Christians are known primarily for not doing what Jesus would do. You’ve heard the cultural critique: “There’s no love like Christian hate.” Pointing out the hypocrisy of judgmentalism and rationalized bigotry, the satirical observation is most apparent when it comes to race and its dueling identities. Ironically,

it's on Sunday morning that Jesus' followers are most divided. Woefully, the church most often reflects societal divisions rather than offering an alternative way of existing in community.

Still separate and unequal, the church in North America offers no shared vision and few hints of a "kin-dom" coming. Christian believers point instead to their holy writ and to a handful of "diverse" or "multicultural" churches as proof of an inclusive and unconditionally loving community. But neither adjective defines most Christian communities, and the reason why is a part of America's history, a forced new community. As a practice of discipleship, North American Christians must engage in truth-telling, naming the institution's multiple roles in the country's oppressive and genocidal beginning, the centuries-long campaign against indigenous peoples, as well as the enslavement of Africans and later African Americans. Instead of blame-shifting, the church in North America should confess its sins and make reparations to the families of its victims. Only then can the church in North America begin to talk of conciliation and, much later, begin to situate itself as a transforming community, offering a decolonizing and desegregating spirituality for the sake of ontological authenticity.

Naming oppression is ongoing. Challenging authority and questioning dominant racialized narratives within our faith tradition is continual. Calling persons back to their bodies, fragmented by oppressive conditions and prejudicial experiences while in community, is a daily ritual. While a description of his own experience and exchange, Howard Thurman names the goal in *The Creative Encounter*: "We were no longer under the necessity to defend anything but were free to be to each other what was most fundamental to each."

Ecclesiological discontent is not a new reality but one that must be addressed with each generation of disciples and begins with the stories we are told. Christian spiritual formation occurs through the biblical narrative, which is why getting our story straight is so important. David Anderson Hooker concluded, "If people live their lives by narratives and if organizations and communities are formed through narrative, then it is my belief that they can be transformed with the intentional development of narratives that support a preferred experience; they

can determine relationships, resources and structures that would support the construction of that preferred reality." Christian believers consider the "kin-dom" of God this "preferred reality."

And we are not without witnesses of its existence by stalwarts of faith. They march for it, inspiring others not to go along for the same old status quo ride. They write it out, forcing the truth out of keystrokes. They run toward it, taking all those who share a desire for this freedom movement. They just couldn't wait for the church or our laws to catch up. While America tells itself one story, these persons have called into question its myth-making machinery and, in so doing, tell another. We must get our story straight, because whoever controls the narrative determines our fate. The first step is the hardest. If we can't hear each other out, then we will likely walk away.

More than a potluck meal, this isn't about coming together, but staying together. Gordon Allport, author of *The Nature of Our Prejudice*, offers critical criteria for our meeting: "equal status, common goals, cooperation, authority support and the ability to create friendship potential." This is a walking alongside. This is Jesus on the Emmaus road, walking and talking with us along the way. This is an invitation to share deeply over the course of our lives.

This is not about striking the right balance or finding the right tone, but making our home an expression of the church. This is Acts 2:44: "All who believed were together and had all things in common." "Whosoever will, let them come," but not for conversion — just conversation, trusting that the words that need to become flesh, God will ensure during our gathering. It's about opening the doors of our homes versus "Jesus is knocking on the door of your heart." Because segregation begins at home and with our divided lives.

No Sunday selves but Sunday people, the spiritual life is lived in community and is a call to unify our many selves in service to our baptismal identity in Jesus. It is a call to live into the new community every day and at whatever time of day the invitation comes to become new people. But we must work up more than an appetite for food, but for truth and justice. And if we cannot unify around this, then how hard it will always be for Christians to call for unity! **GFM**

New Year's Resolutions for Trans Advocacy



By Kali Cawthon-Freels

As we start the new year, there's one major event that will be on most people's radar: the mid-term elections.

I live in a state that has elections every year, and if the campaign ads I saw leading up to November are any indication, one thing that will be at the center of the far-right's attacks on their political opponents is transgender rights. They will continue to falsely turn trans and nonbinary people into the proverbial boogymen hiding under your beds. What is our response as people of faith?

Those who know the work of the Faithful Pride Initiative know that we aim to be a project by queer people, for queer people. The question above sounds like it's directed to allies outside the queer community, which seems to go against our goal of focusing on queer people. But the queer community isn't necessarily one whole cohesive group. There are plenty of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people who are either transphobic or allies but uneducated about trans issues. When I ask how we can provide meaningful support to our trans and nonbinary siblings this year, I'm asking all



of us – queer or not – to get involved. No one person or group should be sacrificed in our quest for equality in both religious and public life. If those of us who are Christians truly believe we are one unified body of Christ, then we must protect the whole body.

So what can we do? Here are a few tangible ways you and your faith community can support trans and nonbinary people in your community.

Support local trans groups.

Even in small towns, there are LGBTQ+ groups that are offering support to trans and nonbinary folks right now. A good place to start might be finding out when your local chapter of PFLAG, Free Mom Hugs, or other groups meets, and start attending meetings.

If there are no local groups near you and you don't have the capacity to start one yourself, consider donating to national groups like Trans Life Line, PFLAG National, and so on.

Ask your church to take a clear, public stance.

If you think your congregation is welcoming of trans and nonbinary people, but it's not clearly stated on

your website, social media, or other avenues of communication, you're not providing a warm welcome. Your communication needs to explicitly say so if you hope to be a safe space for these folks.

Pastoral care professor Cody J. Sanders also encourages congregations to use language and symbols that are clear to people outside of your faith community. In a lecture of his I attended during the COVID-19 lockdown, he reminded us that “welcoming and affirming” is language that church people made up to explain to themselves how they feel about queer people. It's beautiful language, but it doesn't mean anything to anyone outside of the context of faith communities, especially Christian ones. In lieu of that phrasing, use language that's less “churchy.” Phrases like “Trans lives are sacred” and “we include trans and nonbinary people in all levels of church leadership,” as well as symbols like the trans pride flag, clearly communicate your support of the trans community in ways that are recognizable beyond your church's walls.

But what if it's not a supportive public stance?

Even if your congregation is non-affirming of trans and nonbinary folks, insist to your leadership that they make that stance clear publicly. That way, trans people know that your congregation is not a place they can safely bring their whole selves. As Brené Brown says, clarity is kindness. That clarity, no matter how harsh it may sound to you, will save trans people from considering your congregation, preventing much heartache as they look for a spiritual community to call home. There are few pains that equal the pain of falling in love with a community only to find out later that they believe you are an abomination.

What if we haven't decided?

If your congregation isn't sure what it believes about trans and nonbinary people, state that clearly, too. Don't put the emotional labor of figuring out trans affirmation on guests and new people. That's work you and your congregation need to do together.

There's also something incredibly brave about a congregation publicly saying, “We don't know, but we're willing to do the hard work to discern for ourselves.” In a time when mainstream media prompts us

to draw our lines in the sand and refuse to listen to other narratives, communicating that you are open to conversation is a hopeful thing.

Stay informed, be an informant.

The news cycle is exhausting, but we need to stay informed so we know how best to support our neighbors. Identify some trustworthy news sources, perhaps even outside the United States (such as the BBC), for an account of current events. As always, make sure to follow Good Faith Media for commentary on those events.

Also, make sure you're listening to trans people themselves about their experience with current events and what a helpful response is. Follow trans clergy and educators like Dr. Roberto Che Espinoza, Junia Joplin, Jae Bates, and others on social media to stay informed. I also strongly recommend reading the book *Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians* by Austen Hartke to deepen your own understanding of trans affirmation, should you find yourself in the position of needing some biblical support.

Call your legislators.

This action may feel like the most obvious, but it's also one of the most impactful. You have the power to tell them how you want them to represent you, not various corporations, with their political decisions. Let them know that you support fundamental human rights for trans and nonbinary people, including, but not limited to, access to life-saving medical care in the form of gender-affirming care, marriage, legal name change, and everything else a citizen has access to to actually claim the US's promise of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Don't give up!

Lastly, keep going. We've got a long road ahead, and we can't stop now. Find people to run this race with so you can keep each other motivated to continue this necessary work. Stay connected with those folks. None of us can do this alone, but we can do much good together. **GFM**

"Dirty Money"

It's the winter of 1940, and inside the gold-drenched halls of the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York City, five thousand of the nation's most powerful industrialists have gathered for the National Association of Manufacturers' annual meeting. Executives from General Motors, General Electric, Standard Oil, Sears. Even J. Edgar Hoover is in the room. America is still limping through the pain of the Great Depression, and public trust in corporate America is in ruins.

But the closing speaker of the night is not a CEO. He's not an economist. He's a minister known as the Apostle of Millionaires.

His name is Rev. James W. Fifield Jr. Fifield, a Congregational pastor from Los Angeles, steps up to the podium not with a prophetic word of warning — but with a sermon of salvation... for capitalism. He declares that the real threat to the United States is not greed or corruption, but government programs that dare to disseminate resources to the poor. He insists that free enterprise is divinely inspired, and that the true Christian gospel blesses those who prosper — and leaves the rest to figure it out. It was a stunning message — radical, yet persuasive. And it worked.

Fifield became a kind of spiritual spokesperson for big business, launching a nationwide movement called *Spiritual Mobilization* to defend the "freedom" of corporations. In his hands, the pulpit became a PR platform, and

the gospel was repackaged as a divine endorsement of self-reliance, private wealth, and market freedom. Fifield would work with a new evangelist on the American scene, a Rev. Billy Graham, to push Spiritual Mobilization's ideals and goals.

He preached that wealth was a sign of God's blessing. That poverty was the result of personal failure. That corporations were not just innocent from the Great Depression and low national pride—but *holy* and *revered* place.

Here's the twist: it only worked because people wanted it to. In a time of political fear, economic instability, and hardship, this message offered comfort, order, and a kind of economic salvation. It wrapped worldly success in spiritual language and gave people permission to believe that the pursuit of profit was the pursuit of God. It injected itself into the soul of these United States.

But here's the question we're here to wrestle with: Is that true? Is wealth really the best evidence of God's favor?

Because in the economy of God — the holy economy described by the prophets, embodied by Jesus, and echoed throughout Scripture — money doesn't work the way Fifield said it did.

It feels quite eerie to bridge the spiritual mobilization movement and today's passage of scripture, especially in the days we find ourselves in. Jesus is speaking to his disciples after sharing time with

tax collectors and Pharisees, and tells a story, that, at first glance might bring more questions than answers. Jesus tells a strange parable.

A manager—already known to be corrupt—is told he's about to be fired. So before he's officially dismissed, he cooks the books to win favor with his master's debtors. He reduces what they owe and secures for himself a stable status and condition if he's unemployed.

At first glance, the parable feels like a riddle: Why would Jesus seem to praise this dishonest man?

Even more confusing, Jesus says: "And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of *dishonest wealth* so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into eternal homes."

Is Jesus being sarcastic? Ironic? Cynical? I believe Jesus is doing something deeper. I believe he's holding up a mirror of truth.

He says: "The children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light."

In other words: *Even dishonest people know how to position themselves for survival. Even the unjust know how to build systems that benefit themselves.*

But what about you and me—the so-called "children of light"? Are we using our money to build the commonwealth of love and



**By Rev.
Antonio
Vargas Jr.**



justice God dreams of? Or just the one we benefit from?

This parable isn't a celebration of corruption. It's a confrontation with complicity. The manager in the story isn't some poor field hand. He's a company man. A middleman. He has access and status. And when he sees his job slipping away, he doesn't repent. He doesn't make restitution. He repositions himself and just makes another deal. He protects his reputation and ensures he still belongs in the world of the powerful.

It's survival, sure—but it's also self-preservation. And Jesus ends the story with this: "You cannot serve God and wealth. Notice: Jesus doesn't say money is evil. Money, yes, is used for good in a variety of ways. However, Jesus says you can't serve money.

Because money is a tool, not a master. It's meant to serve God's purposes, not replace them. And what happens when we do serve wealth? What happens when money becomes our measure of success, security, and salvation?

We begin to spiritualize self-interest. We begin to confuse blessing with accumulation and building storehouses. We begin to forget the poor—and justify it. And when that happens, our theology becomes nothing more than an elegant disguise for greed.

In the economy of Jesus—the *oikonomia* of God—the bottom line is not profit, but people. The

bottom rung is not ignored, it is lifted up. In God's economy:

*The last are first.
The poor are blessed.
The rich are warned.
The hungry are fed—
not charged interest.
Fields are left unharvested so
the stranger can eat.
Jubilee comes every 50 years,
and debts are forgiven.*

The kin-dom of God is not a trickle-down system. It rises from the margins. It dignifies building generational faith over generational wealth.

It does not protect power. It disrupts it. It does not hoard. It shares. It does not make idols of money. It sets people free from them.

And Jesus shows us again and again what this economy looks like. A little boy gives up his fish and bread—and a crowd of thousands is fed. A widow drops her last two coins in the temple treasury—and Jesus says she gave the most.

A rich young ruler walks away sad—because he cannot let go of his possessions. And a tax collector named Zacchaeus gives half his wealth to the poor—because salvation has come to his house.

So what do we do, today, Beloved, in a world still shaped by the gospel of James Fifield?

What do we do with dirty money? We make it clean by giving it away. We allow what was used to oppress to also be redeemed and reimagined through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus

Christ. We use our resources not to protect our reputations—but to restore our neighbors.

We tithe not to preserve an institution—but to expand God's household. We donate, we invest in justice, we redistribute, we forgive debts, we open our homes, we raise our voices, we divest from greed and invest in grace.

Now, I know this is a hard word. I'm still figuring this out, and I'm far from perfect. We live in a world where money is necessary. We have rent to pay. Families to feed. Medical bills. Loans. And I'm not here to shame you for surviving in a system you didn't choose.

But I am here to ask: Whose economy are we living in? And whose are we called to build?

Jesus isn't just giving us financial advice. He's giving us a spiritual mirror. Because wealth is not just an asset. It is a test. As Jesus would say, if we, if I, cannot be faithful with little—how can we be trusted with much?

If we cannot be trusted with money—how can we be trusted with justice? If we cannot be trusted to release power—how can we be trusted with the kin-dom?

Let us be the ones who do not serve wealth, but use it for God. Let us give with joy. Share with freedom. Spend with purpose.

Let us build an economy of grace, where no one is discarded, and everyone is dignified.

And let us remember: in the end, you cannot serve both God and money. But when you serve God—your money will serve too. Praise be to God.

FALL 2025

MEET THE INTERNS:

Hayoung Park

Master's Student of Social Work at Baylor

I think the future church in the U.S. will probably see a significant bifurcation in traditions, such as when the desert fathers and mothers in the patristic era withdrew from the Roman empire to devote themselves to a more unbridled, zealous expression of faith. As Christian nationalism continues to thrive, there will be churches that continue to receive the gospel of American abundance with open hands. But I also think (and hope) there will be a movement of minority Christians who find creative means to work alongside the poor, worship in innovative and contextual ways, and practice radical hospitality with those different from them.

I'm seeing undercurrents of this kind of "church," especially among youth who are a part of marginalized communities, like the disabled community and queer people. These are young people who often have little to gain from the more mainstream versions of American Christianity. Because of this, I've seen how they are more willing to challenge broken systems in the church and imagine healthier ways of doing church.

I've seen that young people tend to be pretty conscious and empathetic about their neighbors. Most of us have directly experienced the isolation that comes with a social media-frenzied world, so we're highly motivated to go out of our way to practice mutual care and empathy. I think this is a gift that we can offer to churches today.

I hope that the church can offer intergenerational friendships to people my age. Many of us feel deep anger or sadness about the state of the world, but we also feel like we are the first to experience it. The re-

ality is that generations have gone before us and have stood in our shoes. I've grown so much and gained a lot of perspective from hearing stories from my older church friends. **GFM**

—Hayoung Park is a master's student of social work in the Diana R. Garland School of Social Work at Baylor University. She is pursuing a dual degree and has already completed her M.Div. coursework for Truett Seminary. She was born in South Korea and moved to the United States as a child. She is currently co-hosting the Good Faith Bible Studies podcast with GFM's senior editor, Craig Nash.



We asked for their thoughts
on the future of the church...

Luke Emerson

Junior at Centre College Studying Business

I am optimistic for the future of the church, even though, I am optimistic about most things! Right now, I can see the church fulfilling its most important responsibility: caring for others as Christ taught us. With many Americans facing uncertainty about receiving SNAP benefits, small congregations in particular are working to bridge the gap. Several churches in my college town are hosting extra food drives and serving additional hot meals for those in need; religious affiliated student groups have done the same. Even though the catalyst for this kindness is less than ideal, seeing the church step up is empowering.

My generation has an incredible opportunity ahead of us. We have tools at our disposal that were once unheard of. We have the gift of connecting with others from all over the world: learning their stories, collaborating, and ultimately extending the reach of the global church! There is a collective excitement among young Christians and a readiness to be involved. I worked at a Lutheran Bible camp last summer and was continually amazed by the drive of my coworkers — high school to college aged young adults — ready to change the world together.

I occasionally worry my generation will lose hope. It is easy to become disheartened, when division abounds and there is a never-ending stream of heartbreaking news that is hard to ignore. Young adulthood has become intertwined with social media, and many are now hesitant to immerse themselves in the work of hope (that is, the work of the church). They do not believe change is possible, so they disengage, and I do not blame them. Despite this, I am

confident that young Christians will stay the course. I look forward to seeing how we inspire and challenge one another to advance the mission of Christ. **GFM**

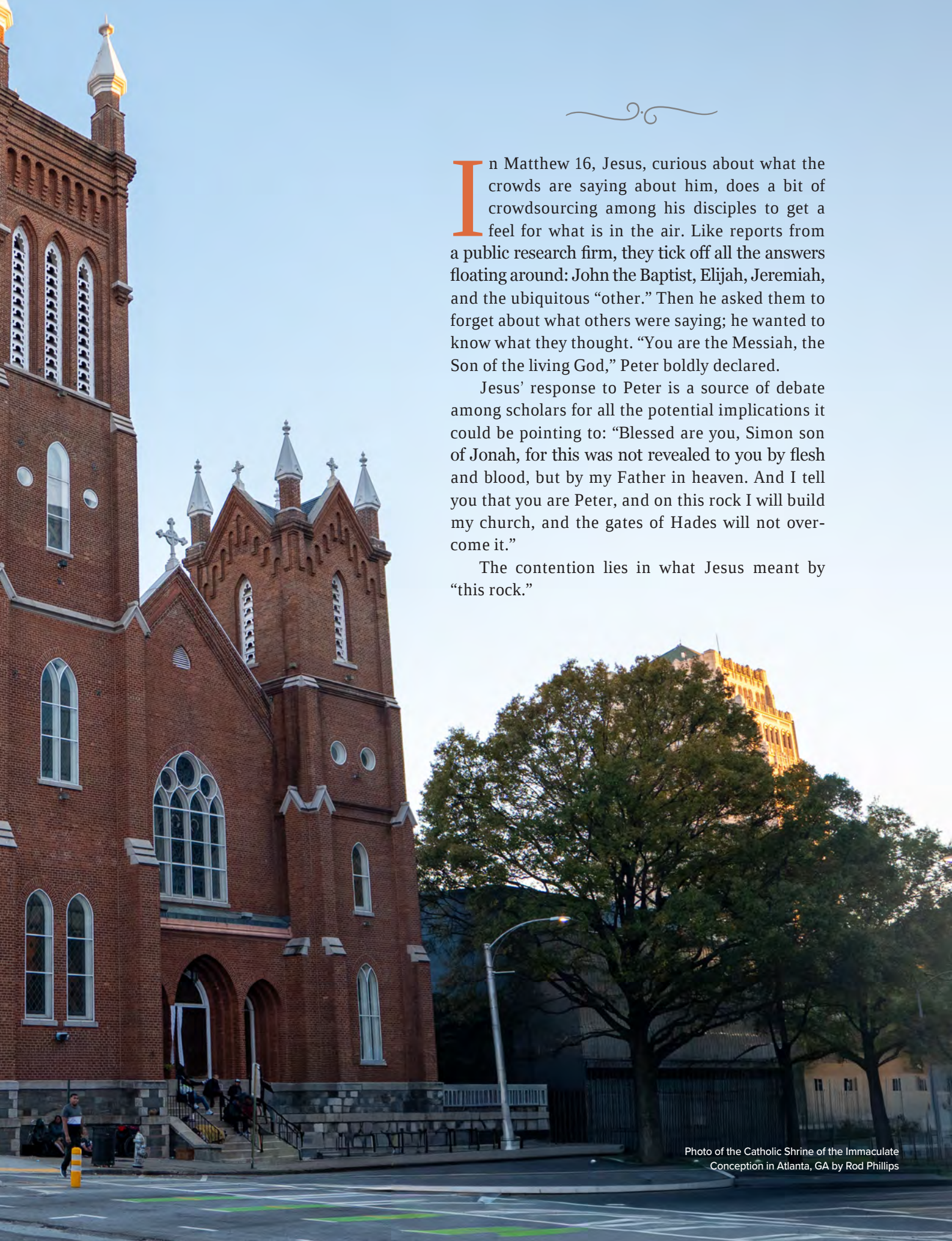
—Luke Emerson is a junior at Centre College in Danville, Kentucky studying business and education. He is a member of the varsity swim team at Centre and enjoys spending time with his parents, brothers, and friends. Luke was a Fall 2025 Good Faith Media intern, where he wrote biweekly articles and helped create a marketing plan for the organization.



What is the Future of the Church?

by Craig Nash





In Matthew 16, Jesus, curious about what the crowds are saying about him, does a bit of crowdsourcing among his disciples to get a feel for what is in the air. Like reports from a public research firm, they tick off all the answers floating around: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, and the ubiquitous “other.” Then he asked them to forget about what others were saying; he wanted to know what they thought. “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” Peter boldly declared.

Jesus’ response to Peter is a source of debate among scholars for all the potential implications it could be pointing to: “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”

The contention lies in what Jesus meant by “this rock.”

"Will the North American Church survive?"

For Catholics, "this rock" refers to Peter himself. There is a good reason for this, as the name "Peter" (Greek: *Petros*) literally means "rock." Roman Catholics have built their entire church system on this declaration of Jesus, seeing each pope as the successor of Peter.

Orthodox and most Protestant believers hold a different view. For them, Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah, God's Son, is the rock upon which the church will be built. Peter, though essential to the grand story of the Church, is simply a messenger of the core tenet of Christianity: that Jesus is Lord.

For some early church fathers and Reformed Christians (Calvinists and many Lutherans), it is neither Peter nor his confession that is the foundation upon which the Church is built. Instead, they believe Christ was pointing to himself as the cornerstone. Although this may seem to some like a thin distinction from the belief that Peter's confession of "Christ is Lord" is the rock, Reformed teachers will insist that it is completely different, as it removes the human element altogether from the equation.

Regardless of how one interprets the meaning of "the rock," there is much wider agreement on Jesus declaring that the "gates of Hades" (or "hell" in many translations) "will not overcome it." Though there have been numerous variations within this interpretation, Christians across time have taken Jesus' words here as an enduring promise that the "body of Christ," or "the Church," or whatever you may call the gathered community of those who follow Jesus, will last into eternity.

For Jesus' disciples, this promise was challenged almost immediately by Jesus himself. Matthew situates the story of Peter's confession and Jesus' teaching

on the endurance of the church just before Jesus tells the disciples that he will go to Jerusalem and die. Peter, perhaps emboldened by Jesus' recent praise of his declaration of faith, rebuked Jesus. "Never, Lord," he said. "This shall never happen to you" (Matthew 16:22).

Jesus quickly shifts his attitude toward Peter, demanding, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me." He then teaches the disciples that the way to true life is through death.

ARE THE GATES OF HELL PREVAILING?

The faith of Christians in the Church's eternal status was put to the test almost immediately. At first, the gatherings of those who followed the resurrected Christ flew under the radar of the powers that be. But as their numbers began to spread beyond a small movement in Jerusalem and into Europe and North Africa, Rome took notice. The empire tolerated any number of religious teachings, as long as those teachings left room for its subjects to declare, "Caesar is Lord." This, of course, was a problem for Christians.

Beginning with a few localized, targeted persecutions in the first century CE and eventually spreading throughout the empire, it seemed to many that the Jesus movement was destined to be short-lived. (On top of external challenges from Rome, internal theological disputes also threatened the unity of the fledgling Church.) Fears of the Church's extermination led early Christian writers to defend the faith against "the gates of hell." The early persecutions of Christians led to Tertullian's famous line: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church."

The line proved to be true, as the Jesus movement continued to grow despite attacks against it. It eventually merged with the power of Rome, becoming the empire's official religion. But this new status didn't end the anxieties over the death of the church. In fact, it heightened them by tying the Church's survival to that of the state.

After Rome was sacked in the early fifth century, pagans blamed the Christians for its defeat. It was from this that Augustine reframed the crisis, drawing clear dividing lines between the sacred and the

"Beginning with a few localized, targeted persecutions in the first century CE and eventually spreading throughout the empire, it seemed to many that the Jesus movement was destined to be short-lived."

“In 2000, 45% of survey participants labeled themselves ‘practicing Christians.’ By 2020, that had fallen to just a quarter (25%) of respondents — a 20-point decline.”

secular. He argued that regardless of the state of the “earthly city,” the “City of God” would endure any momentary setback. This set the stage for a long period of confidence in the endurance of the Church.

The anxieties didn’t end, though; they just shifted to focus on purity rather than survival. The schisms of the Middle Ages that produced the Eastern/Western divide, the Protestant Reformations of the sixteenth century, and the modern controversies around faith versus reason were mostly struggles over what constituted the “true Church,” and whether it would survive over “false believers.”

Recent years, however, have seen a revival of the enduring question: “Will the Church survive?” But after two millennia of growth — whether by confession or coercion — and with our more fully developed awareness of what is going on in the world than early believers had, the question is now a more regional one.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, almost 80 percent of the world’s Christians lived in Europe or North America. By the turn of the twenty-first century, over two-thirds (69 percent) lived south of the equator, marking the most dramatic geographic shift in the history of the Church. The implication of this is

that the “average Christian” in the world today is no longer a European-descended man but a woman in sub-Saharan Africa or Latin America.

The causes of this massive reconfiguration of global Christianity are complex and intricately tied to colonialism. But the Jesus movement still endures, with the Church taking on more charismatic and indigenous forms, far removed from the centers of empire that aided (or forced) its spread throughout the rest of the world.

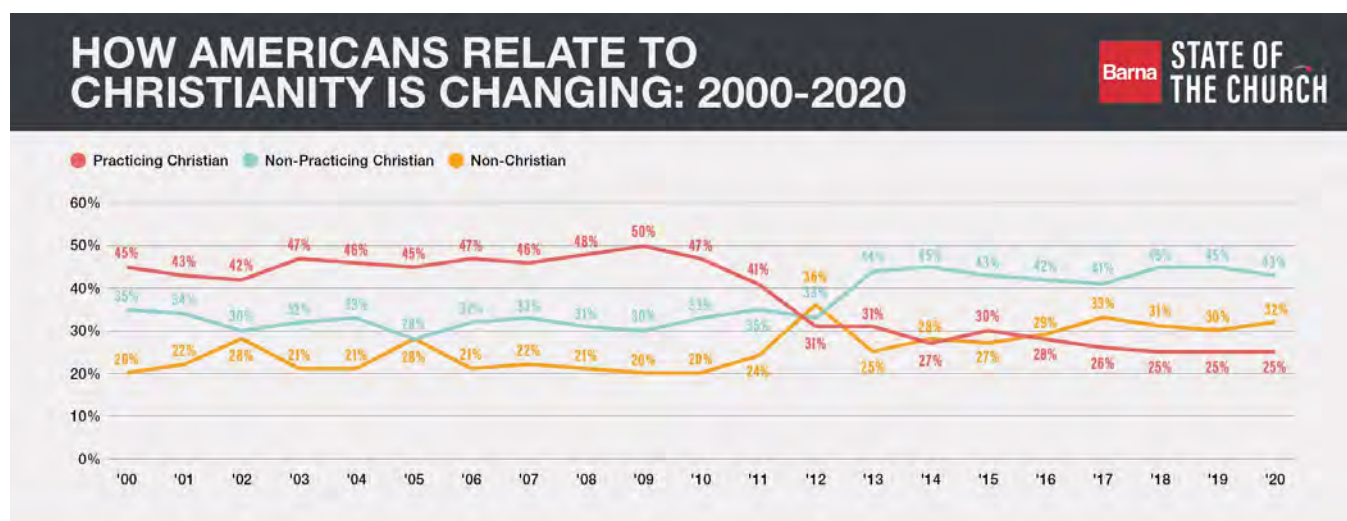
OUR CONTEXT

The question, then, is no longer, “Will the Church survive?” It is instead, “Will the North American church survive?” To this question, there is no shortage of reading material.

The Barna Group has followed congregational and cultural trends for over four decades. One of its longitudinal studies addresses how U.S. adults relate to Christianity — whether they are “practicing Christians,” “non-practicing Christians,” or “non-Christians.” Though each data point is helpful for understanding the relationship of Americans to Christianity, those who identify as “practicing Christians” tell a more accurate story of the health of U.S. churches, as church attendance and membership are components of “practicing.”

In 2000, 45 percent of survey participants labeled themselves “practicing Christians.” By 2020, that had fallen to just a quarter (25 percent) of respondents — a 20-point decline.

It should be noted that the term “practicing” isn’t all-encompassing. There are various gradations of



"So, what are people doing on Sunday mornings now?"

what that means to people. As many pastors will testify, post-pandemic church attendance (in person) has fallen much faster than the rate of people who have dropped out of church altogether. In other words, it's not that a lot of people are necessarily leaving; they just aren't showing up as often.

A 2024 Pew Research study bears this out. It found that, of U.S. adults who say they attend a religious service in person, only 25 percent attended weekly, with 8 percent saying they attended once or twice a month. Almost half (49 percent) say they attend seldom or never, with 18 percent attending a few times a year.

So, what are people doing on Sunday mornings now?

REALIGNMENT

It would be irresponsible to dismiss the reality that the number of people who identify as Christian is declining rapidly, causing a massive shift in the lifespan of local congregations. Since there is no national registry of churches, there is no easy way to accurately measure how many churches close their doors each year. Even so, a 2019 Lifeway Research report revealed that 4,500 Protestant churches in the U.S. closed that year. They were replaced by only 3,000 new church starts.

Despite this, all is not lost. In the years since the COVID-19 pandemic, many researchers and practitioners have told the stories of a corporate faith that hasn't vanished but reorganized. Church involvement has morphed from a core aspect of believers' identity to a component of a more complex mosaic of practices and community life.

SHIFTING MEDIUMS

The changing landscape of how church involvement is defined can trip up many congregations and church leaders. If attendance is no longer the primary indicator of church health, then what is?

The same Pew Research study that found only 16 percent of Americans attended religious services in person weekly also found that around 10 percent

watch church services online or on television each week.

Dr. Heidi Campbell, a communications professor at Texas A&M University, has studied religious life in the U.S. as it has progressed through various technological advances, including radio, television, the internet, and now artificial intelligence (AI). She has researched the data and concludes that shifting technology doesn't just carry ideas about church to the masses — it also reconfigures what we understand church to be.

Campbell is sober about the state of the institutional church in the U.S. "From a sociological standpoint, the church is sick and it is dying," she said. "I know that is being blunt." She notes, however, that where the church is thriving is in more charismatic and Pentecostal expressions, as well as in churches that have navigated the new technological landscape.

Campbell encourages church leaders to approach emerging technologies with both courage and a healthy dose of skepticism. "With every new medium, some say, 'This will save us,' while others cry, 'This will destroy us,'" she says. "Churches need to see technology for the problems and the opportunities they create."

Her research suggests that congregations that saw church as a group of believers who met at a particular place and time before COVID-19 are the ones that have struggled most after the pandemic. Conversely, those who have embraced relational and hybrid models of congregational life have fared better.

Reflecting on which churches have the better chance of survival, she says, "If 'church' remains a place in time, it dies. But if it is relational and hybrid, it breathes."

A BREATHING CHURCH

Among those churches that "breathe" are some that, on paper, should have folded years ago but have



Dr. Heidi Campbell



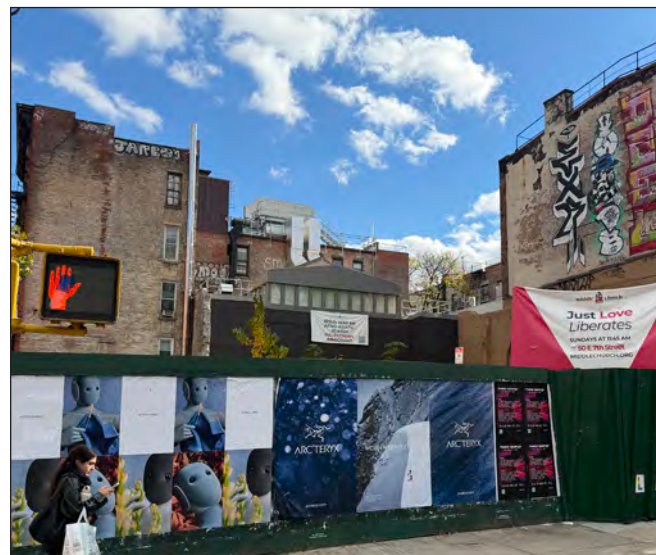
(Above) Photo of Middle Church in New York City by Mitch Randall.

found ways to lean into new expressions of ancient faith. One such congregation is the Middle Collegiate Church, located in the East Village of New York City. The church, which is part of the United Church of Christ, reflects the multicultural, multigenerational mosaic that defines the city it serves.

Middle Church's pastor, the Rev. Jacqui Lewis, acknowledged that the congregation is a bit of a unicorn. "We grew during COVID and after a fire," she said, referring to the December 2020 blaze that destroyed the interior of the church's historic Manhattan building. "Today, about 4,100 claim Middle as home." The church draws its members from the New York boroughs as well as from New Jersey and Connecticut suburbs.

Middle Church embraces the hybrid, relational model that Dr. Heidi Campbell insists is necessary for a thriving congregation. Rev. Lewis embraces

(Below) In December 2020, Middle Church experienced a tragic fire that destroyed the historic building in New York City. Photo by Mitch Randall.



all the new technological aspects of church but confesses the church's physical presence in the city matters. "I need the church — God alive in people," she says. "Hands, feet, and heartbeat."

Lewis also acknowledges that Middle Church's centuries-long, "justice-forward" mission isn't a template for every church in the United States. Still, the principles of the congregation are relevant everywhere. They include a courageous clarity of mission, nurturing a multicultural/multiclass ethos, and embracing a digital ministry that can expand belonging beyond just one zip code.

Beyond all the strategies, though — and despite her public multi-faith embrace of ministry — Lewis believes the church's future depends on whether it can return to Jesus. "What we might need to do," she says, "if we want the church to have a future, is to let go of what we think it must be and remember what it was: Rabbi Jesus picking people up and saying, 'Have you thought about it this way?' If we return to Jesus, we just might live."

A FORK IN THE ROAD

For the Rev. Dr. Justin Sabia-Tanis, the choice between in-person and hybrid models of church is just one of the decisions churches must face when think-



Rev. Jacqui Lewis

"The church has always found new ways to be itself..."

ing about their future survival. Sabia-Tanis is the McVay Associate Professor of Christian Ethics and Social Transformation at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities in St. Paul, Minnesota. He sees a moral fork in the road: whether churches will embrace Christian nationalism or compassionate community in their life together.



**Rev. Dr. Justin
Sabia-Tanis**

On the two potential paths for the Church, Sabia-Tanis says, "I think we're really at a significant crossroads in the Christian church. I think there is a possibility that the church becomes 100 percent complicit with the government, transforming it into

nothing more than an instrument of the state." The other option, he says, is that "it could be the voice that pays attention to the spiritual needs of people right now, not to doctrine."

For him, the decision is whether to become a chaplain to power or a companion to the wounded.

Sabia-Tanis sees numerous rays of hope in his seminary students, who come from diverse backgrounds and life experiences. Many of them struggle with belief and the institutional church, but they haven't given up. They have also moved beyond the shame-based religion that may draw numbers to megachurches. "Shame can coerce behavior," he says, "but it can't transform hearts."

PRACTICES FOR HOPE

Regardless of a church's current state of health, Campbell, Lewis, and Sabia-Tanis all see hope in churches returning to the way of Jesus, which is both mission-driven and relational. They encourage congregations to both know and name why they exist and to measure what matters — relationships over attendance.

The Church has survived, though often in ways that surprised its members. After the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine to Christianity in the fourth century CE, the practice of faith became intertwined with imperial power and wealth. This could have signaled the death of the Church, but instead it gave rise to the countercultural practices of monasticism, which sought purity and service outside the religious establishment. The result was the preservation of Scripture, new educational systems, and a means for true Christian witness after the fall of the empire.

By the thirteenth century, rapid urbanization and the unequal concentration of wealth gave rise to the Franciscan and Dominican orders, who took vows of poverty and preached the gospel away from the centers of power. This helped re-center the church on the poor and reenergize its compassion for the masses.

The Protestant Reformation utilized new technologies to fight against the corruption and centralized power of the Catholic Church. The



Atlanta First United Methodist Church.
Photo by Rod Phillips

movement redefined “church” itself as a local, breathing gathering of believers rather than a highly structured hierarchical system.

The Church has always found new ways to be itself, whether through monks in the desert, reformers at the press, or activists in the public square. Each new turn felt like a loss to some and a fresh breath of air to others. Each time, Jesus found new ways to embody his message of compassion, hope, and care within those who follow him.

Maybe that’s what he meant when he said, “The gates of hell will not prevail.” Not that the Church would remain unchanged, but that the Spirit would always find new ways to move and transform the world. **GFM**

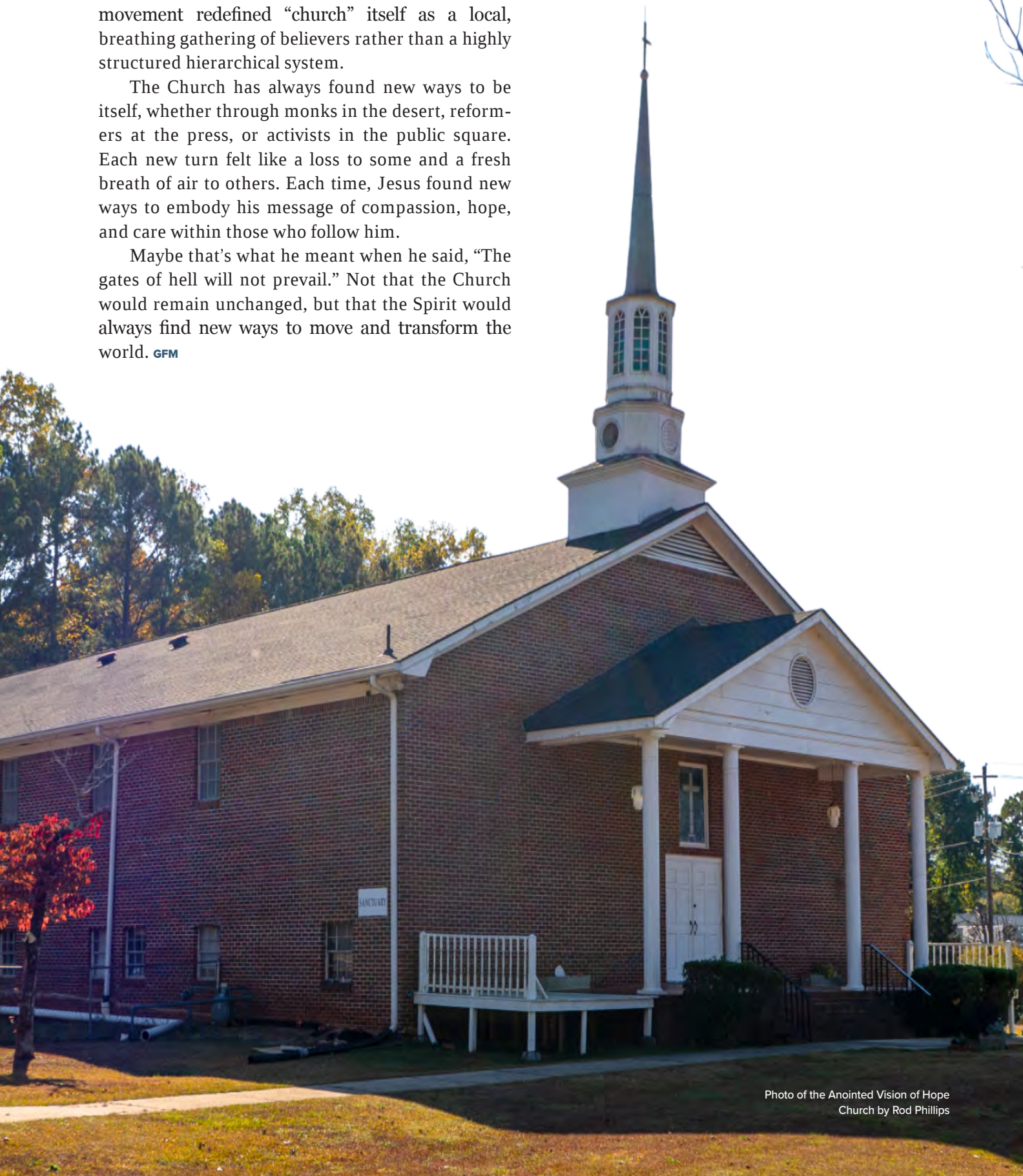


Photo of the Anointed Vision of Hope Church by Rod Phillips



WILD CHURCHES

Photo of the Hinterland Chapel in New South Wales

A look into alternative church experiences

By Craig Nash

If you've spent any amount of time in a congregation, you've likely heard some version of the saying, "The church isn't the building, it is the people." Deep down, we know this is true. When we read the stories of the early believers, something within us yearns for the simpler expressions of life together, before we tied our corporate identity to addresses and property and buildings.

Around the globe, a small but passionate movement of churches from all denominational and theological backgrounds is embracing a way of "doing church" together that removes the burden of a building altogether. They aren't even choosing to meet in members' homes, as many

small congregations do. Instead, the great outdoors is their sanctuary.

Some of these churches are decidedly missional in their approach to worship, gathering under bridges and in other locations where unhoused people gather on Sunday mornings. One of the earliest and most prominent of these is the "Church Under the Bridge" in Waco, TX, which was founded in 1992 by Jimmy and Janet Dorrell. What began as a small, informal Bible study and coffee time with their unhoused neighbors turned into a movement. In addition to their predominantly unhoused membership, the church is also made up of nearby Baylor students and families



in the Waco community. The concept has spread, with other “Churches Under the Bridge” springing up in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, Lexington, Kentucky, and Texarkana, TX.

Other congregations are meeting outside church buildings for various reasons, many of them related to creation care. These churches meet in parks, forests, fields, and beside rivers to invite all of creation into their life of worship. Some of these congregations are part of a worldwide network of “Wild Churches.” On its website, the Wild Church Network claims that: “New Wild Churches are emerging all the time, offering invitations to reconnect with the natural world. As kin. As sacred. As beloved co-participants in a larger story of grace and inter-being.”

One such Wild Church is located “down under” in Eureka, New South Wales. The Eureka Methodist Church was built in 1887 on donated land and

faithfully served its community for more than 130 years before closing in 2017. After a period of lying dormant, the church reopened in 2019 as “Hinterland Chapel.” While a church building remains on site, the congregation meets weekly under the canopy of trees on the church grounds. The building is used primarily as a wedding venue. According to its website, Hinterland sees itself as “part of the historic community of faith that sprung up around the person of Jesus, and continues to blossom wherever people are available and attentive to the Spirit’s call.”

Other Wild Churches are located in Texas, Hawaii, Virginia, and Canada, and span multiple denominations, including Lutheran, Mennonite, Methodist, and non-denominational. They are proving that the church is the people, but it also includes all of God’s creation. [GFM](#)



Photo of the Church Under the Bridge in Waco, TX



Good Faith Media was launched during the COVID-19 Pandemic. This has shaped us in many ways, chief of which is how adept we are in the digital landscape. Our team operates in various locations throughout the country and does so relatively seamlessly. You could say “the cloud” is our home base.

At the same time, there is no replacement for physical presence. Although much of our world exists online, ideas are shared, decisions are made, and community thrives “out in the streets.” Our ability to be where the action is, reporting and offering commentary on the crucial issues of our day, sets us apart. **GFM**

Mitch and Missy Randall in NYC.





Rev. Starlette Thomas and friend participating in the South Carolina Synod Convocation.
— Arden, NC



An evening with Kevin and Angie Heifner, and Annie Abrams, community activist and civil rights icon.
— Little Rock, AR



Mitch Randall, CEO, chats with Oklahoma state representative Jacob Rosecrants at the local "No Kings" Rally.
— Norman, OK



Good Faith Media at the Freedom Rising Conference with Grace Ji-Sun Kim — New York City, NY

church van trips:

“Do not *besmirch* the name.”



By Wanda Kidd

I was a youth minister during the heyday of van trips. During that era, vans were more than transportation. They were part of the experience. For every reunion gathering, there is at least one story about a van breaking down, a song on the FM radio that defined the trip, or a romance that came into full bloom while sitting side-by-side. It was before cellphones, and even those who brought a personal cassette player were teased into joining the group, rather than isolating themselves. The later vans had their own cassette players, and there was always that person who put together a mixed tape just for that trip.



Traditions were born. There were places "we always stopped," memories of seeing things together for the first time, and conversations that stuck with you for years. However, like so many youth ministry practices that have changed over the years due to safety concerns and earbuds, many of the stories live on.

We had 25 signed up for the beach trip, and the church only had one van that could fit 12 with luggage. The church secretary graciously



offered her van because we were not one of those churches that could afford to rent a nice, air-conditioned bus with a driver. I still can't imagine what that would be like.

So after church on Father's Day, 1988, we had a group prayer, parents hugged their teenagers, and we set off to Myrtle Beach for intense Bible study and sunbathing. (You cannot make this up.) This was long before cellphones, and we did not have walkie-talkies (which is a false sense of security, because more than three miles of separation means you cannot reach each other anyway). A CB radio would have been appropriate for our mountain culture, but alas, van-to-van communication was not available.

So two hours into the trip, the secretary's van blew its engine. The telltale poof of white smoke alerted the people behind us that we were not simply pulling over to the shoulder of the road to pass out water. No, we were in trouble, so they pulled in behind us. I am pretty sure the woman who came to my window to check on us had been at Woodstock. She had all the identifiers — a sleep-ready van, long graying hair, a well-worn long skirt, and an unadorned face — but she was beautiful to me that day, because the lead van was long gone and I had no way to reach them.

She took us all back to her back-to-nature homestead, but she had two things we needed: a bathroom and a telephone. I know, I thank God every day

that I made it to retirement without having a lawsuit or being fired. They were lovely people, and the group was oblivious to the dire situation we were in. She handed me the phone and a phone book, and I began looking for someone to help us.

For what it's worth, 2 o'clock on Father's Day is a terrible time to find anyone at home, much less someone to help resolve a crisis. I called back our church — no answer. I called everyone I knew in upstate South Carolina — not home. Then I just started calling Baptist churches at random. The first one on the list was Boiling Springs. I was giddy when someone answered, and I dove right into the situation: "I know this is crazy, but do you have a van you could loan us for the week?" I asked.

The voice on the other end said, "Are you the Wanda Kidd who went to seminary with me at Southeastern?"

"Maybe, who are you?"

I did indeed recognize him, and what ensued was nothing less than a miracle. Their van committee was meeting as we were talking, and they voted to let us use the van. The church was just 20 minutes from the home we were visiting, and our rescuer graciously agreed to take us all, including our luggage, to the parking lot at Westgate Mall in Spartanburg.

I have often wondered why they did not want us to come to their church. It felt clandestine. Regardless, when I got there with my group, there was a delegation of deacons and a gassed-up van. I was so grateful and effusive in my appreciation that I did not notice that they did not look as delighted as I did.

So, just as we were getting ready to pull out of the parking lot, one of the deacons walked up and knocked on my window. I rolled it down and, with a very stern look, said to me. "I just want to say one thing."

"Ok," I said.

"DO NOT BESMIRCH THE NAME on the side of this VAN."

I agreed and said it all week to the kids in that van, and I believe that our use of their van did not shame First Baptist Church of Boiling Springs. Oh, that we could all live our lives not besmirching things we say we hold dear. **GFM**





ROOTED

OASIS 2026 • MONTREAT, NC

FEBRUARY 3-6, 2026

MONTREAT RETREAT & CONFERENCE CENTER

A spiritual retreat for those who work with children,
youth, college, and young adults.



SPEAKER

Rev. Timothy Peoples



SPEAKER

Rev. Xiomara Reboyas-Ortiz



WORSHIP LEADER

Katherine Mullen

COST

\$ 365 Shared Room

\$ 450 Single Room

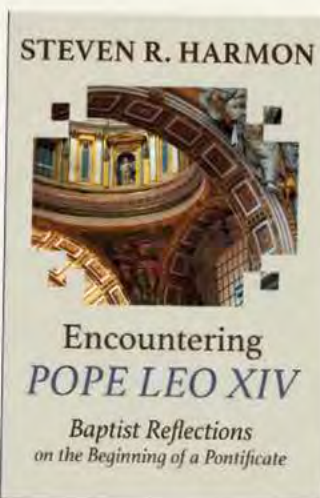
**REGISTER BY DECEMBER 15 AT
WWW.CBFYMN.ORG/OASIS2026**



good
faith
media



Available Now
for Purchase



Encountering Pope Leo XIV

Part journalistic narrative, diaristic travelogue, and theological rumination, *Encountering Pope Leo XIV* takes readers along with author Steven R. Harmon on a journey to Rome to experience the conclave and the election of American Cardinal Robert Prevost as Pope Leo XIV.





The Raceless Gospel Initiative

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



The Raceless Gospel is a proclamation of *somebodiness* for souls weary of white supremacist notions of human being and belonging and calls us back to the interior self by way of water.



Find these resources
and more on our website!



Articles



Education



Podcast + Book



Embodiment

A GOOD FAITH MEDIA INITIATIVE

FAITHFUL PRIDE

The Faithful Pride Initiative (FPI) seeks to highlight stories of LGBTQ+ people of faith doing inspiring work around the country and the world.

When oppressive voices in the public square seek to defame and dehumanize LGBTQ+ folks they've never met in order to secure votes or power, it's more important than ever to celebrate the LGBTQ+ communities that are changing people's lives for the better.



FPI is a space by queer people for queer people. As we share stories and resources, we hope to be a place where LGBTQ+ people can continue to learn ways to reconcile and celebrate both their queerness and their faith.



Led by Kali
Cawthon-Freels



SCAN ME