The Stories We Hear, the Stories We Tell
Richard T. Frazier

Knowing Our Stories
Christopher H. Evans

Wrestling with the World
Lucy Lind Hogan
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Introduction

Stories and the Inner Landscape of Faith

As a pastor, whenever I have administered the Lord's Supper, I start out by saying, "As we share in the Lord's Supper, we remember a story about that night when, just before he was betrayed and arrested, Jesus gathered with his closest friends—his disciples—in an upper room for a meal..." Then I proceed to tell the congregation that story from memory. Many parishioners have shared with me that in some way the telling of the story connected with them inside—spiritually—in ways that the more formal liturgy of The Book of Worship has not.

Father William J. Bausch has observed:

"Propositions are statements on a page; stories are events in a life. Doctrine is the material of texts; story is the stuff of life. "He was rejected" is a clear and firm statement of fact and there it rests. "He came unto his own and his own received him not" is a bit more catchy and poetic. But "there was no room for them in the inn" with its contextual richness of cave, angels, Magi, shepherds, and an exotic star, is story. It will not let us forget, as time has demonstrated, the person written about: his life, rejection, and death. Theology is a secondhand reflection of such an event; story is the unspeakable event's first voice."
Quarterly Review seeks to be a forum where church and academy intersect and interact. For the most part, the articles in this issue have an academic touch and analyze stories for us rather than tell stories to us. The stories are there, however—in the background or in other sources or still waiting to be told to us or by us. As you read, watch for the stories and how they seek to reach something inside your spirit and speak to you about matters of faith.

Richard T. Frazier invites preachers and other persons of faith to consider the nature of stories. He warns against telling stories as transparent devices for making distinct points with an audience. Rather, we should ponder how good stories told well might engage persons at deeper levels of mystery and power.

Christopher H. Evans encourages us to see God's providential hand in the stories that make up the richness of United Methodist history. As we do so, we can guide congregations to "plan for a future that is informed and nurtured by the voices and stories from the past."

Amanda Carson Banks and Hal Dasinger take us in a different direction and ask us to contemplate the spiritual yearnings beneath the stories of encounters with angels that have arisen within American culture over the past several years. They alert us to troubling ways in which these stories may diverge from biblical and doctrinal understandings of angels.

The next two articles take a literary turn. John G. McEllhenney introduces us to the poetry of contemporary Welsh poet and priest R. S. Thomas. In Thomas's poems, we can find "the experience that helps the unbelief of turn-of-millennium believers." Karl A. Plank commends to us the novels of Reynolds Price. In them, "we, the witnesses of story, find revealed in clear pictures insight into our own condition."

Lastly, Lucy Lind Hogan guides us through the lectionary passages for the season after Epiphany and especially notes for us ways in which Paul's advice concerning particular problems facing Christians in Corinth may become a part of the greater Christian story speaking to our faith today.

Stories can reach our spirits deep inside and "make sense" in ways that few other things can. As Elie Wiesel has noted:

In Jewish history, all events are linked. Only today, after the whirlwind of fire and blood that was the Holocaust, do we grasp the full range of implications of the murder of one man.
by his brother, the deeper meanings of a father's questions and disconcerting silences. Only as we tell them now, in the light of certain experiences of life and death, do we understand them.

And so, faithful to his promise, the storyteller does nothing but tell the tale: he transmits what he received, he returns what was entrusted to him. His story does not begin with his own; it is fitted into the memory that is the living tradition of his people.

The legends he brings back are the very ones we are living today.2

Gary L. Ball-Kilbourne
Interim Editor
Fargo, North Dakota

Notes

A few months ago I received a letter inviting me to speak to a group of ministers on the subject of story-telling. It was a good letter and posed a number of thoughtful questions such as: How do you use stories effectively in sermons? How do you use a story to put a point across? To what degree do you make the point of your story clear to your listeners instead of leaving them to work it out for themselves? And so on. They were all perfectly reasonable questions to which I think useful answers can be given, but the more I thought about them and how I might set about trying to answer them, the more I found that something about them gave me pause. The trouble was that they were all questions that had to do with how to tell a story instead of what stories to tell and to what end; and the kind of stories they rightly or wrongly suggested to me were stories as anecdotes, as attention-getters, as illustrations, stories to hang on sermons like lights on a Christmas tree. Maybe I did the letter-writer an injustice, and that isn’t what he had in mind at all, but if so, all I can say is that that’s the kind of stories I have often heard in church myself. And why not? They have their place. They can help make the medicine go

Richard T. Frazier, Th.D., was a pastoral counselor in Charlotte, North Carolina, and Rock Hill, South Carolina. He was a member of the Western North Carolina Annual Conference. Tragically, Dick died unexpectedly shortly before this issue went to press.
down. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that
even if I believed I could get some helpful literary advice along
those lines, that was not what basically interested me.¹

For some time I have wondered why I do not hear more good
stories coming from pastors and persons of faith in preaching,
teaching, or writing. Too often the stories that are told are predictable
and sentimental, if not shallow; they say little that is important. Or
perhaps they are good stories, but moralized in ways that choke the
life out of them. They entertain without satisfying.

By contrast, the richer stories ring with the mystery and fullness of
life. Rather than being deliberate vehicles for deeper truths, they have
a life of their own. They raise questions rather than provide someone
else’s answers. They speak to the complexities and richness of human
experience. They open people up. They invite. They surprise.

And while many wonderful stories do flow from pulpits and the
religious press, they are told too infrequently—or overtold, in ways
that diminish their mystery and power.

The Creative Tension of Good Literature

What can storytellers do to engage the minds and imaginations of
their listeners? The answer, I would suggest, involves selecting stories
that carry tension within them and finding ways of telling those stories
that communicate that tension.

Robert Coles provides some clues for storytellers in his book The
Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination. Coles says that
the great writers who speak to moral issues (for example, O’Connor,
Eliot, Dickens, Tolstoy) provide two functions with their narratives.
First, the stories hold up a mirror that exposes the hypocrisy and
moral shallowness of contemporary society. If we are receptive, our
vision is expanded; if we “have ears to hear,” we become aware of
how things really are.

Secondly, the stories show us people struggling with their own
personal tensions, such as a choice to be made or a path already taken.
As we identify we let those fictitious characters inside our defenses
and, thus, have to tend more directly to the unacknowledged tensions
in our own lives. Our defenses may begin to crumble, for we have
identified with a person in personal crisis. Coles writes, “The whole
point of stories is not ‘solutions’ or ‘resolutions’ but a broadening and even a heightening of our struggles—with new protagonists and antagonists introduced, with new sources of concern or apprehension or hope, as one’s mental life accommodates itself to a series of arrivals: guests who have a way of staying, but not necessarily staying put.”

A good story is open-ended as it provides these two functions, holding up a mirror to society and revealing people who struggle in and with society. In this regard consider the stories of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan, in which nothing is prepackaged or expected. As listeners or readers we are shown the moral poverty of society. We are urged, in our own way and time, to go deeper and deal with similar situations and tensions. We are engaged.

By contrast, consider the major source of the stories of our culture, Hollywood. Many would criticize the movie industry for its presentation of stories without values. My sense, however, is that good-enough values permeate most North American movies—justice and loyalty especially. The “good guys” generally treat those people who are marginal with respect on the silver screen. Honesty and the work ethic are embraced, and a teleological ethic rigorously upheld.

My concern is that so many Hollywood plots are the same: someone is wronged. The “good guy” is moved by a blend of compassion and talionic impulse to set matters right, leading both to the movie’s predictable plot and to its appeal.

Values are present; the problem is that the values are limited and the plot mediocre. Those who watch are gratified as they identify with the protagonist’s heroic efforts at retaliation. (The struggle is with evil out there, not with self.) Viewers are not encouraged to grow, however, only to cheer and be glad they are on the winning side, as right and might prevail.

Hollywood action movies present mediocre morality plays that comfort and entertain rather than challenge. Coles’s criteria are not met, not by these movies.

We storytellers are influenced by the cultural genres of our time. If our people expect such simplistic fare, how easy it is to provide it in baptized form. Two-dimensional remains two-dimensional, however, regardless of the symbols used. We need other models.
The Literary Forms of the Christian Tradition

As much as ministers value the biblical sources of faith, we undervalue the traditional forms that have been used for understanding and communicating the gospel. I suspect that we are too familiar with the content to appreciate the creative, dynamic nature of the literary forms of faith. But those forms are with us, dynamic liturgical and teaching devices that engage listeners and stir tensions without invoking external authority in the effort to effect change. And they provide clues for the stories we would hear and tell.

1. Metaphor. Sallie McFague says that metaphor puts "two thoughts in permanent tension with one another," in a way that redescribes reality. Consider the following poem by Carl Sandburg, a metaphorical exercise in elegance and economy:

The fog comes on little cat feet.
It sits looking over harbor and city on silent haunches and then moves on.

The reader pairs off cat and fog, seeing the latter in terms of the former, coming "on little cat feet" and sitting "on silent haunches." The juxtaposing of the two thoughts presents a tension that stretches and deepens the imagination, for fog will always now be understood in stealthy, feline-like ways.

In a paraphrase of Victor Turner, metaphor's power is to "dissolve all factual and common sense [understandings] into their components and 'play' with them in ways never found in nature or in custom." Out of that play arise new associations and understandings too potent for ordinary language, new wine that cannot be carried by old wineskins.

With metaphor the writer/speaker plays with images and passes them on in ways that invite the listener also to play with those images and their tensions, based on similarity and difference. Linear thinking is bypassed and imagination teased into action as past experiences are remembered and future possibilities anticipated. Yet the one who
offers a metaphor is no more in control of the process than the one who receives.

Kathleen Norris writes, “When I stumble across metaphors in the course of writing, it feels much more like discovery than creating; the words and images seem to be choosing me, and not the other way around. And when I manipulate them in the interest of hospitality, in order to make a comprehensible work of art, I have to give up any notion of control.”

When metaphor is successful the listener is under the spell of imagination, making connections, going deeper into self, coming to more dynamic and intuitive understandings, moving back and forth between memory and possibility. James Joyce once referred to metaphoric action as “epiphany because a metaphor reveals itself as in a burst, a celebration, and draws the participant in as celebrant.”

We should note that metaphor provides the building material for other forms of religious discourse; for example, aphorism, proverb, parable, and parallelism. The structure of those forms intensifies the inherently dynamic quality of metaphor, concentrating the effect in ways that intensify the listener’s experience of tension. Metaphor is powerful enough in itself. In the service of a literary form that maximizes tension, however, the effect is profound.

With regard to the limitations of metaphor, Frederick Buechner’s comment is apt:

And of course metaphors are, God knows, all any of us have of him. We know Jesus only in broken, fragmentary ways. “A little while, and you will see me no more,” he said, and it has been many a long year since anybody saw him plain, least of all the likes of you and me. Shadows, echoes, dreams, odd moments in our lives that speak at best ambiguously and brokenly of him—they are the most we have seen of Jesus.

Metaphor is the language of imagination and experience.

2. Aphorism and Proverb. Aphorisms are short, provocative sayings that tease the imagination and suggest different ways of understanding. Although more than a hundred of Jesus’ aphorisms are collected in the Gospels, Marcus Borg suggests that we imagine them said one at a time in the original setting, so listeners would have the opportunity to take each in and digest it. “You cannot serve two
masters." "If a blind person leads a blind person, will they not both fall into a ditch?" "You strain out a gnat and swallow a camel." The images are strong, dynamic, and metaphorical, the structure based on irony.

Proverbs, while similar to aphorisms, are generally less connected to a particular situation or speaker. Proverbs express "a more general and public truth." They also suggest that more is going on than is apparent—and the listener would do well to reflect further. Paul Ricoeur says, "Without being a narrative, the proverb implies a story." The listener is pushed to imagine the original circumstances behind the saying while also encouraged to imagine future situations when its wisdom will apply. Conventional wisdom is challenged.

Many proverbs have a two-part structure "in which the second part intensifies the thought of the first or extends it in time." For example, "In the fear of the LORD one has strong confidence, and one's children will have a refuge" (Prov. 14:26). The second phrase parallels the first and provides a beautiful, poetic resonance that deepens the original thought and makes it memorable.

The preacher or religious writer would do well to remember the power of short, pithy sayings that, through the use of metaphor, command attention and carry significant tension, one-liners that slip into the listeners' imagination to carry on their subversive work long after the original reading.

Interspersing the quotations of others in sermons and written pieces can help one's own presentation. Fresh voices provide change both of pace and of focus and create a sense of dialogue. The purpose, though, is not to bolster homiletical authority by bringing in the heavy guns of expert opinion. The imaginative and playful experience of reflecting with those who have gone before is significant in itself. Well-placed quotes sharpen up the metaphors at hand while underscoring the listener's authority as a worthy conversant.

3. Parable. Dynamically, parables, like aphorisms and proverbs, are also invitational and subversive, but they are in story form. (McFague describes New Testament parables as extended metaphors.)

Jesus' use of parables typically presents characters who invite identification. Listeners imagine themselves also leaving home and demanding their share of the inheritance or wanting to pull the weeds in a field or . . . . Eventually the story line takes a turn, however, so that listeners find themselves in a world that differs markedly from the world of their expectations: Not only is the prodigal accepted back,
but his return is celebrated; weeds are not battled obsessively at the
time of discovery but allowed to grow; an outcast, one who is unclean,
has compassion on the traveler left for dead and, thus, fulfills the
deeper law.

If God's world really does operate by different laws, the laws of
parable, then the listener's assumptions and expectations must be
wrong. The spiritual world has a different foundation than that which
was assumed.

An effective parable invites listeners into a world that is familiar
and comfortable, then shifts to a new world, one that operates on
different principles/values from those imagined. The listener is left
with a significant personal tension as two worlds, familiar and
unfamiliar, are allowed to stand in juxtaposition.

I have been helped by John Dominic Crossan's typology comparing
parable with other types of story (myth, apologue, action, and satire.)
While myth and apologue serve to establish and defend the
conventional view, parable moves to subvert conventional wisdom.
("To live in parable means to dwell in the tension of myth and
parable."15) Things are not as they appear, and God does not operate in
ways that women and men expect.

Borg says that the appeal of Jesus' parables and aphorisms "is to the
imagination, to that place within us in which reside our images of
reality and our images of life itself; the invitation is to a different way
of seeing, to different images for shaping our understanding of life.
This emphasis upon seeing runs throughout his message."16

How are preachers and writers to use the model of parable?
Primarily by cultivating their own capacity to recognize parable as it
occurs—in literature, movies (many films are not only excellent but
subversive as well), the happenings of everyday life, anywhere a
"story" opens a person to the experience of God's reality. The story
need not be pious or inspirational—better if it is not, in fact. The story
does need to be at least somewhat subversive and, thus, leave the
observer with a significant tension. As we are able to see parables, we
will be better able to share them with others, along with whatever
tension they carry.

The preacher/writer would do well to use strong, dynamic images
in presenting stories—visual scenes that stay with listeners, play with
their imaginations, and invite new, parabolic ways of understanding.

4. Parallelism. "Everyone utters lies to his neighbor," says the
psalmist (Psalm 12:2). The subsequent phrase, "with flattering lips

THE STORIES WE HEAR, THE STORIES WE TELL
and a double heart they speak," not only parallels the original line but extends it with the power of poetic elaboration. The strategically placed metaphors let us know the writer's exact concern. The first phrase points the direction, setting the stage for the power and richness of the more right-brain images that follow.\(^7\)

Parallelism is a poetic device frequently used in the psalms. (Actually, we would have a hard time finding a psalm that did not employ parallelism.) Often the two phrases are a basic restatement of each other. Always, though, we find rich images positioned in ways that amplify the powerful, metaphorical effect. Sometimes, as in the case of Psalm 12:2, the first phrase sets up the second for a poetic knockout. (My belief is that the power of parallelism comes from the creative positioning of left-brain logic/structure with rich right-brain imagery. The whole person is engaged sequentially and on an in-depth level.)

How can parallelism be employed in contemporary preaching and religious education/writing? Primarily as the speaker/author is able to juxtapose two images or stories that resonate with each other and extend or elaborate on the basic theme. Parallelism is a sophisticated use of metaphor based on poetic structure and placement.

5. Dialectic. Dialectic involves two opposites grounded in a basic unity. (The Greek roots \(\text{dia}\) [with each other] and \(\text{legein}\) [speak] suggest conversation, the basis of the English words \textit{dialectic} and \textit{dialogue}.\(^8\)) Two voices, speaking back and forth, each understood only against the backdrop of the other and the resulting tension of their conversation. The two are not at war (as in dualism), nor are they divided in ways that leave them mutually exclusive (dichotomy).

The basic Christian dialectic involves the relationship between law and grace, as stated by Paul and elaborated by Martin Luther. As basic and powerful as grace is, the dynamic has limited depth or meaning considered apart from law and the tension that exists between the two.

While Scripture hints at dialectic, the great theological systems from Søren Kierkegaard on through the twentieth century have refined its use as a significant theological form. The crisis theology of Karl Barth comes to mind, as does Reinhold Niebuhr's creative juxtaposing of spirit and nature. Other dialectic pairings include light–darkness, sacred–secular, transcendence–immanence, individual–communal, theological–mystical,\(^9\) pastoral–prophetic, self–others,\(^9\) certainty–doubt,\(^9\) faith–belief, dependency–independence, spirit–body,\(^9\) and male–female.\(^9\) One pole may be preferred, but neither is superior.
Truth is found only as both are taken seriously and the ensuing tension
is nursed and explored.

How can preachers and religious writers make use of dialectic?
Primarily by remembering that, just as God cannot be nailed down by
one creed/affirmation, religious truth is not to be found in a single
perspective. Those who would search for truth need many perspectives.

Stories that illustrate different dimensions of an issue can be
juxtaposed in ways that encourage listeners to deal with both sides of
their ambivalence and whatever tension they would avoid or deny.

Parallelism and dialectic are actually more than literary forms. They
are dynamic ways of organizing metaphors and ideas so as to intensify
those thoughts in the listener's imagination. Two ideas are juxtaposed
and allowed to stand with some degree of tension between them. How
the tension is handled differs, however.

With parallelism two images or statements are juxtaposed in a way
that lets them resonate with each other, often magnificently. As the
tension is generally mild, resolution comes easily and the listener
moves to a deeper, more satisfying understanding. The effect is subtle
but striking.

With dialectic the tension is more typically dissonant. The ideas
held in juxtaposition are apparent opposites. Not only is no resolution
offered but the listener leaves with an experience of ongoing tension
that continues to disturb, pushing him or her to struggle and move
toward personal resolution/integration. Dialectic involves crisis more
than subtlety or satisfaction.

Speaking to the Unconscious Mind

The genius of the literary forms of faith lies in their appeal both to the
conscious and to the unconscious minds of listeners/readers. While the
conscious mind is engaged by image, plot, and content, contact is also
made on a deeper level as various needs and tensions are touched,
stirred, and nudged to resolution.

I believe that the power of Charles Frazier's Cold Mountain, for
example, is as dependent on the metaphor of journey as on the rich
description of the hero's adventures along the way. Inman's journey is
the obvious one, as he moves with stealth and care from a Confederate
hospital to his mountain home in Western North Carolina. Ada's inner
journey, as she travels from naive, dependent girl to resourceful
woman, is the subtle one. Both journeys speak to the reader's unconscious, touching memory and inviting identification.

In C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe,* the young Lucy discovers a wardrobe that lets her move from everyday reality to another land. In the reader's mind the wardrobe becomes a metaphor for the threshold needed to move to a different realm, especially that of spiritual experience. Openness and the willing suspension of disbelief are important if a person is to find and negotiate the threshold. The crossing is intentional but unforced. Again, the writer touches and informs the unconscious mind of the audience. Whether they can articulate it or not, sensitive readers know more about the spiritual life because they understand (on some level) the need for a wardrobe.

In my formative years of post-seminary parish experience, the common wisdom I heard was, "Preach in a way that lets people take something home to think about," which usually meant an alliterative, three-point sermon with a poem at the end. While such homiletical techniques are memorable, they usually address only the conscious mind of the listener. How much better to preach in ways that leave one's people with a few powerful images—images that continue to work and subvert on both conscious and unconscious levels long after the actual preaching event.

Consider, too, the telling of stories, which, when done with enthusiasm and sensitivity to the audience, communicates something different and deeper than when those stories are simply read by preacher or teacher. The words of Bruno Bettelheim, referring to fairy tales, apply to storytelling in the religious setting:

To attain to the full its consoling propensities, its symbolic meanings, and, most of all, its interpersonal meanings, a fairy tale should be told rather than read. If it is read, it ought to be read with emotional involvement in the story and in the child, with empathy for what the story may mean to him [sic]. Telling is preferable to reading because it permits greater flexibility.

It was mentioned before that the folk fairy tale, as distinct from more recently invented fairy tales, is the result of a story being shaped and restyled by being told millions of times, by different adults to all kinds of other adults and children. Each narrator, as he told the story, dropped and added elements to make it more meaningful to himself and to the listeners, whom he knew well. When talking to a child, the adult responded to
what he surmised from the child’s reactions. Thus the narrator let his unconscious understanding of what the story told be influenced by that of the child. Successive narrators adapted the story according to the questions the child asked, the delight and fear he expressed openly or indicated by the way he snuggled up against the adult. Slavishly sticking to the way a fairy story is printed robs it of much of its value. The telling of the story to a child, to be most effective, has to be an interpersonal event, shaped by those who participate in it.26

When storytelling becomes an interpersonal event, the listener’s whole person is engaged. The narrator is empathetically involved with the audience, altering the story’s telling in subtle ways according to listeners’ perceived responses. The unconscious minds of narrator and listener are deeply involved, with each other and with the story that links them.

The Contemporary Context for Storytelling

Preachers and religious writers have other resources besides stories. A well-crafted sermon or essay that develops an argument in orderly fashion can provide a beautiful, stretching experience for its audience.

Generally speaking, though, logic and argument are not as effective today as in an earlier age when oratory and the printed page were more highly valued. Today’s television and computer generation expects to be entertained more than enchanted.27

Stories, however, seem as popular as ever—which presents the preacher and religious writer with both opportunity and dilemma. The modern (or postmodern) religious seeker is engaged by stories. If we are careful, the stories we tell will be sufficiently metaphorical and parabolic to stick in listeners’ minds, then shift in unexpected, subversive ways that invite an encounter with God. If we are not careful, our stories will simply entertain another audience of consumers, with the church’s blessing—no challenge, no depth, no tension.

The popular market is hungry for stories that entertain. The deeper yearning, though, is for stories that satisfy; thus, the opportunity for stories chosen and told after the model of the literary forms of faith—metaphor, aphorism and proverb, parable, parallelism, and dialectic.
Litdeary Form and God's Parabolic Activity

What distinguishes all of these literary forms or devices is their creative use of tension. Each form carries its own tension(s) but is structured in a way that puts the tension into the listener, to be dealt with on a personal level over time. Like the Trojan horse, more is brought inside the walls than is immediately apparent. The effect is subversive.

Those of us involved in the ministry of the church tend to focus on the content of the message to the exclusion of form. We concentrate on the meaning of words and phrases so much that we lose track of their function, of what words and phrases can do with a person's imagination. Sometimes our precise but stilted use of words interferes with the imaginative process of both teller and hearer.

The form of proclamation is as vital to the message as its content. Words can be clustered in dynamic ways that fashion and carry those words and give them incredible power. Paradoxically, as we take form seriously, we find the form influencing the content of our message.

When the form is successful, the hearer must deal with the tension that has been taken in—or, rather, the hearer cannot avoid dealing with his or her own tensions, whatever they are.

The form does not convert its hearers. Rather, the more creative forms circumvent the hearers' defenses by means of subversion and surprise, thereby making it difficult to avoid God's Spirit. (Lessened defenses do not necessarily lead to spiritual transformation, but they are a prerequisite.)

Borg writes that the authority of the parables "rests in themselves—that is, in their ability to involve and affect the imagination. Their voice is invitation rather than imperative." Note the irony—authority rests in the issuing of an invitation that, ultimately, cannot be refused. Such is God's way of working in the world.

The literary forms of our tradition operate in ways that parallel the divine activity. God's world runs on irony, paradox, and surprise, regardless of what we think is right or proper. (Sallie McFague goes so far as to describe Jesus as a parable—a profound metaphor in itself.) God's activity is sublimely parabolic.

God surprises and subverts, challenges and overturns, using whatever experiences, relationships, and stories are available. Metaphor and parable, aphorism and proverb, parallelism and dialectic are effective means of religious communication precisely
because they parallel God's activity and, thus, invite and facilitate God's activity—which is undoubtedly why these forms were chosen and used and their expressions eventually canonized by God's people. 

The dynamic inherent in the literary forms of faith makes it difficult for listeners to avoid God's presence in their lives.

We do not have to replicate the traditional forms in our preaching and writing. We would do well to understand the dynamic that undergirds the literary forms of faith, however, and let that dynamic inform our choice of stories and how we tell them.

I would suggest that Christian preachers, teachers, and writers look to the literary forms of the Christian tradition as they consider the stories they see or hear and would tell to others. Questions that would help in the choice and preparation of particular stories include:

- What is the story's appeal? What will my audience hear?
- Is the story open-ended enough to invite exploration? Does it invite identification?
- What metaphors are involved? What tension(s) does it carry?
- Does it surprise? Does it work on irony? Is it subversive?
- Does it leave a strong visual image in the hearer's imagination?
- Can I find a way to let the story tell itself? Can I let the literary form do its own work?
- Can I trust God to use my telling of this story?

We cannot expect to change people ourselves. Influence them, yes, as we use words to play with their defenses and their imaginations, seeking ways to facilitate God's subversive activity in their lives.

Our task is to find stories that invite, then present them as well and as simply as we can, trusting the power of the sacred process in which we participate.

Notes

3. I speak here of explicit Christian literary forms; that is, those forms used in...
Christian Scripture and tradition. Relevant literary forms from other traditions would include Jewish midrash, Hasidic stories, and Zen koans.


6. I have appropriated Victor Turner's description of liminal phenomena as he compares that dynamic with the subjunctive mood of a verb. The quote is found in Tom F. Driver, *The Magic of Ritual: Our Need for Liberating Rites That Transform Our Lives and Our Communities* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 159. Metaphor and the experience of liminality both pull the person to subjunctive, "as if" thinking and being.


12. Quoted in Long, 57.

13. Ibid., 60.


16. Borg, 74.

17. Long, 48-49.


23. Cf. Ibid.


The administrative council of Anytown United Methodist Church is in an uproar. The worship committee chairperson has put forth a proposal to introduce a Saturday night contemporary worship service. The council is evenly divided between those who favor the proposal and those who are against it. "The trouble with The United Methodist Church today is a lack of grounding in tradition," says Molly, a respected pillar in the church. "How much longer are we going to tolerate people who have no respect for the church’s traditions, and no sense of what it means to be a United Methodist? Somehow, the church needs to get back to basics!" "That’s just the point," interjects Robert, a newer member of the administrative council. "How do you expect people nowadays to come to church if you don’t create the kind of atmosphere that touches them where they’re living? It’s not tradition that brings people to church anymore; it’s finding spiritual meaning—how God makes a difference in their lives." The debate continues, when suddenly you realize there is a pause, and you sense that everyone in the council is looking to you, the pastor, for an answer...1

This scenario is fictitious. The circumstances described, however, are very real. On the surface, the debate in Anytown United Methodist

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Church is a simple matter of whether to add a second worship service. The deeper issue, however, centers upon a more serious rift. It is a struggle over what kind of story that congregation wants to tell about itself.

At one time in American religious history, mainline churches counted on the passing down of denominational loyalties from generation to generation. As Molly indicates, to be a good United Methodist was displayed by how you were faithful to your denominational heritage and how you passed that heritage down to your family. Robert, on the other hand, reflects the interests of what sociologist Wade Clark Roof calls a "generation of seekers." Instead of emphasizing denominational loyalties, Robert believes that churches must court faith seekers who willingly cross denominational boundaries to find churches that satisfy their spiritual hunger. One person sees the church's future primarily through the language of tradition, in which a doctrinal past brings clarity to the church's mission in the present. The other person seeks fulfillment through the language of experience, in which the past is viewed as an impediment to the future. Are the two visions of the church irreconcilable? I think not, for the seemingly disconnected voices within Anytown United Methodist Church reflect in common upon one very critical question: How does our shared heritage speak to the renewal of The United Methodist Church?

As a professor of church history, I encounter many students like Molly and Robert. These people often see the study of history as a choice between embracing the past uncritically or rejecting the past altogether. Historical study is judged by many students either as embracing objective "facts" concerning the past or as simply learning a series of dates and events that have little bearing on the church's future mission. In both cases, students pass over the opportunity to interpret how United Methodist history can shape a faith community's self-understanding of its ministry and mission at the close of the twentieth century. Like many pastoral leaders in United Methodism today, the pastor of Anytown United Methodist Church has the opportunity to enable a congregation to synthesize two disparate visions of the church. That pastor has the chance to enable a local church to begin to embrace a new paradigm of history—a paradigm that reminds us that the past does offer transformative visions of the future.
The Place of History in Contemporary United Methodism

Why is the study of church history important to the future of United Methodism? Quite simply, history empowers Christian communities to gain renewed clarity about their past, take account of where they are in the present, and anticipate where they hope to be in the future. History is the means by which Christians are able to measure over time their faithfulness to God's larger vision of justice and reconciliation. The study of church history does not look glowingly upon a nostalgic past but reflects critically on what the church has done, or has failed to do, as a community of faith. History is a core hermeneutical discipline that serves as part of the contemporary church's critical conscience. In Sidney Mead's words, "Church history is a continuous meditation on the meaning of the incarnation." Mead's comment raises the crucial need for United Methodists to do more than know the "facts" of their tradition; it calls upon us to interpret how the past reveals the living presence of God in the life of the church. Mead's words make us recognize that God is acting in history and that part of our task is to discern how women and men wrestled with God's Spirit at different times in the church's history.

The future of church history as a discipline depends on the ability to develop models of teaching history that go beyond transmitting the methodological skills and vocabulary of the professional historian. Few seminary students and parishioners in local churches are interested in acquiring the research expertise of the professional historian. Therefore, the future of United Methodism rests with those who understand how historical study, written by scholars committed to the recovery and interpretation of that tradition, influences the shape of ministry—leaders who can address the varied concerns expressed by laity like Molly and Robert. Specifically, many people in local churches today ask a central question of historical identity: How do our faith stories breathe life into the contemporary church? Church history gives us a knowledge of our stories—even those aspects of our stories that may be difficult to confront. Hope appears as we retell the stories of our past, recognizing signs of renewal in the present and future.
A Critique of Current Paradigms of United Methodist History

How to connect the faith stories of local churches to the larger historical narrative of United Methodism should be at the forefront of how current seminarians interpret United Methodist history. However, many leave seminary thinking of United Methodist history more as the chronicle of an institutional giant than as a living faith tradition. This tendency relates, in part, to how denominational histories have been written over the past several generations. Russell Richey observes that the predominant theme for many twentieth-century Methodist historians, like William Warren Sweet and Frederick Norwood, was to show how Methodists forged the prototypical American church. These narratives commonly fall into the pitfall of telling the Methodist story in a triumphalist fashion—how the Methodists "conquered" America by virtue of the denomination's sheer size.

Even Norwood, a historian who resisted this romanticism, saw institutionalization as a central motif in his seminal 1974 study, The Story of American Methodism. For Norwood, as with other Methodist historians of his generation, the point of historical inquiry centers largely upon macro-institutional movements. For example, what happened at the General Conferences? Who were the major theological apologists after John Wesley? How did institutional leaders stave off schisms from groups like Holiness Methodists? At the same time, stories of women, African Americans, evangelicals, and the traditions of the Evangelical United Brethren are used primarily as sub-narratives that surround the periphery of this larger institutional story. As Richey points out, Norwood demonstrated how United Methodists forged the prototypical American church—a church that conformed to the canons of a secular culture.

From the perspective of our time, Norwood's history reads as a story of United Methodism's triumph over the cultural and theological forces threatening the church's institutional stability. Norwood's thesis represented an important contribution toward understanding Methodism's identity during an era of "Protestant establishment"—a time when Protestant churches assumed a degree of cultural hegemony in America. In our era, however, Norwood's text can read as an account of how Methodism lost a cohesive and unifying theological identity in the face of a secular culture. Dennis Campbell observes that United
Methodists are living today through an era of "residual establishment." Although the church's structure resembles aspects of an earlier institutional past, that past often lacks a binding authority on the lives of those in the church. In effect, it is the denominational perspective of Norwood that many faith seekers find irrelevant to their experience.

Are there alternatives to Norwood's understanding of United Methodist history? Over the past two decades a new historiography has emerged that has had a growing influence on the interpretation of United Methodist history. Using R. Laurence Moore's theme of religious "outsiders," an eclectic group of scholars such as Nathan Hatch, Gregory Schneider, Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, and Russell Richey see Methodism as offering a compelling religious and cultural narrative that distinguished the movement from its mainline competitors. Unlike Sweet and Norwood, these scholars do not describe Methodism's success in terms of institutional status; that is, in terms of how Methodism became a prototypical American denomination. Rather, Methodism—especially in the early nineteenth century—presented Americans with a clearly defined evangelical faith that powerfully transformed the character of American culture. The works of these historians vary greatly. However, they share the belief that church history is not primarily a story about the church adapting to a secular worldview (as Sweet and Norwood argue). It is a story of how religious movements succeeded, or failed, in making Americans embrace specific theological visions of the gospel.

These recent studies have done a great deal to alter the way United Methodists look at their past by placing United Methodist history (and religious history, in general) at the center of the American historical canon. Instead of seeing denominational history as a matter of reacting to the currents of a secular worldview, these new historical studies demonstrate how religious traditions, like United Methodism, shaped American social and cultural history. They depict America as a society with many religious cultures that constantly competed against one another for the hearts, souls, and minds of Americans. In particular, they make Methodist history not just a story about ecclesiastical elites but a story of how many people, including women and African Americans, shared in creating vibrant faith movements that transformed nineteenth-century American culture. This perspective also echoes many current renewal voices in United Methodism, which highlight the theological clarity and clear
missional objectives pursued by early Methodist evangelism as a model for the contemporary church. By downgrading United Methodism's institutional history, especially that part of United Methodism associated with the liberal Protestant tradition, this newer historiography can impart an equally false romanticism of the past to students preparing for lay and ordained ministry. It can create a false dualism between Methodism's vibrant "evangelical" phase of the first third of the nineteenth century and its institutional "liberal" phase from the mid-nineteenth century through our time.

Another problem with the newer historiography is that it can play uncritically into what I see as the "free-market" thesis of church growth—a belief that ministry is about "growing" bigger and better churches. This goal is viable for some congregations, but how does this emphasis give hope to a denomination that is made up primarily of churches with fewer than 200 members? How does this model speak to someone, like Molly, whose faith strongly embraces the conventional institutional identity of United Methodism affirmed by Sweet and Norwood?

Church historians must exercise care. We face a culture obsessed with finding clarity and meaning, often at the expense of rigorous thinking and critical reflection. At the same time, the opportunity for pastors and laypersons to use history to add depth to the imperative for church renewal has never been greater.

God's Providence and a New Paradigm of United Methodist History

A time is at hand for constructing a new paradigm for studying United Methodist history. Russell Richey points in the direction of this new paradigm. He suggests that United Methodists need to reclaim, in some fashion, the vision of American Methodism's first historian, Jesse Lee. Analyzing Lee's 1810 work, A Short History of the Methodists, Richey observes that Lee emphasized divine Providence, in which Lee pointed "concretely and specifically to the presence of God among the Methodists." Lee's account is rich with stories of dramatic conversions and the Spirit-filled utterances of Methodist folk—hardly the kind of style that fits conceptions of objective historiography! To speak of a providential history in our time can
conjure images of an outmoded nineteenth-century Protestantism, in which divine Providence was associated with an imperialistic vision of American culture. However, I believe that to speak of God’s providence at the close of the twentieth century affirms the covenant we have with God to be an inclusive church.

United Methodist history highlights how diverse people engaged their times with the great Wesleyan admonition “to reform the continent, and to spread scriptural Holiness.” Pastors need to enable their congregations to understand how these words still apply to the ministry of the laity in the twenty-first century. For the church to embody these words today, we must interpret how this charge was understood at different times in the church’s history. In a narrow sense, to “reform the continent...” signifies a shortsighted vision of Providence, in which Methodist history becomes consumed within a domesticated vision of a Christian America. In a broader sense, however, this Wesleyan charge provides contemporary United Methodists with an amazing historical tapestry of individuals and faith communities committed to visions of inclusiveness, social justice, and spiritual renewal. This latter interpretation of Providence accentuates what I believe is a defining mark of United Methodist church history: to challenge the church to understand how people in the past wrestled with God’s Spirit to gain a larger vision of God’s ongoing activity in history.

This newer understanding of a providential history also resonates powerfully with people as different as Molly and Robert. History shows the passion of diverse people striving to experience the power of God. To study history from this perspective conveys more than a chronicle of church growth or an account of the “heroic” actions of institutional church leaders; it discerns how the church as a diverse community of faith and witness came to value both its successes and failures. It moves history to the forefront of theological reflection, so that our history informs our faith in the present and enhances our vision of the church’s future. A providential reading of United Methodist history would convey a strong message of theological identity that can move beyond the walls of the seminary. It would challenge pastors to see United Methodism’s past in a way that relates to the renewal of local churches in the present, specifically, fleshing out the meaning in our time of the words “to reform the continent, and to spread scriptural Holiness.”

What would a providential history look like for United Methodists...
as we approach the twenty-first century? First, a providential history can help the contemporary church better understand what we mean by the term *ministry*—especially the ministry of the laity. Loren Mead observes that no concept in the church carries as much vagueness as does the term *lay ministry.* Yet historical study can help the church by giving us clear pictures of what lay ministry looks like. It can remind us that Methodism, at its core, has always been a lay movement. The new historical paradigm would focus less on the story of clergy elites and more on how a variety of people—especially laity—tried to discern God's Spirit through their sense of divine call.

I have found that students are drawn to the ways United Methodist history illustrates innovative models of lay ministry. The story of lay ministry is especially tied to the story of women in United Methodism. Since the time of Wesley, numerous women served Methodism in the roles of class leaders, teachers, missionaries, preachers, and prophets. Women like Mary Bosanquet, Phoebe Palmer, Frances Willard, Amanda Berry Smith, and Georgia Harkness remind the contemporary church that the ordained ministry is only one component of the church's ministry. At a time when reviving lay ministry is a consistent theme for church renewal, the United Methodist heritage reflects upon leadership models that are instructive today. In this regard, United Methodist history supports a major emphasis for many faith seekers in the church today—a belief that the function of ordained ministry is to turn laity loose and fan the flames of their callings.

Second, a providential history should enable United Methodists to recognize recurring themes of theological continuity visible in times of discord and schism. Students are often challenged to choose between so-called “liberal” and “evangelical” perspectives of church history. A new historiography would neither gloss over theological and cultural differences that fragmented the church at different times nor discount schisms that have ruptured United Methodism over the past two centuries. But a careful reading of United Methodist history may enable the church to recognize how God spoke to the consciences of different theological constituencies in the church.

I find an examination of the mid-nineteenth-century Holiness movement especially instructive in terms of reminding the contemporary church of its dual commitment to personal faith and social justice. The intense belief in entire sanctification affirmed by Methodist leaders such as Orange Scott and Luther Lee was
inseparable from their commitment to social justice, especially their
staunch antislavery advocacy and support of women’s and lay
leadership in the church. As Jean Miller Schmidt observes, the
tendency to distinguish between so-called “public” and “private”
spheres of the church has led to a fragmented view of United
Methodist history in which we have lost sight of John Wesley’s dual
emphasis on personal and social holiness. We live in an era when
many find it difficult to use the words liberal and evangelical in the
same sentence. However, a new paradigm of church history needs to
affirm that both labels have their place in our history. At times the two
words complement, rather than contradict, each other.

A new providential history would also downplay the tendency to
look for “winners” and “losers” within the historical landscape. Instead, we would learn from those who modeled what Thomas
Bandy calls the metaphor of the sentinel. The sentinel, Bandy
explains, “is the ‘watchman’ on Habakkuk’s rampart, proclaiming a
vision that awaits the right time. The sentinel proclaims an experience
of proximate holiness that is just over the horizon, a message of
destiny to keep those who are running . . . from fainting.” The
sentinel embraces the prophetic by recognizing the existence of
injustice in the world. But she also expresses a willingness to live in a
world filled with ambiguities and contradictions.

A central theme for John Wesley—and a concept that emerged over
and over again in American Methodism—was how Methodists
modeled the precepts of a primitive Christianity that affirmed an
inclusive vision of community. Amidst the backdrop of institutional
schisms, United Methodist history is filled with individuals who were
sentinels—those who proclaimed visions of truth that awaited
fulfillment in God’s time. Individuals like African Methodist
Episcopal Church founder Richard Allen, abolitionist Orange Scott,
Holiness crusaders Phoebe Palmer and Benjamin Roberts, missionary
Belle Bennett, and social prophet Georgia Harkness never saw the
fulfillment of the visions they sought. Yet the contemporary church is
challenged and inspired by the visions they proclaimed and modeled
in their ministries.

The sentinel image guards the church against a false romanticism of
the past by taking account of not only the church’s successes but also
its failures. It reminds us that even the church’s most visionary leaders
had their blind spots that limited the scope of their visions. Like all
church history, United Methodist history can read as a failure of the

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church to realize God's larger vision for an inclusive community. Or United Methodism can attest to how God fueled generations of people with powerful theological visions that moved the church into the future. I am drawn repeatedly to the words of the prominent Methodist minister, Ernest Fremont Tittle, who noted in 1944, "It is not required of us to save the world. It is required of us to say what the world must do to be saved. The event is in the hands of God." These words speak to those who believe that faith, like the sentinel, is manifested through persons who proclaim and model visions that await their fulfillment in God's time, leaving behind foundations on which future generations can build.

Third, a providential history of United Methodism needs to pay more attention to what the church did rather than to what the church thought. Nathan Hatch observes that if we were to understand fully the Methodist heritage, “we would more readily understand religion as experience and community rather than as abstract ideas.” Future historians must take into account how church history is more than a chronicle of theological-doctrinal writings. It also studies how faith communities struggled to discern God's voice in their midst—how communities, in Sidney Mead's words, were faithful to the incarnation. An immediate consequence for United Methodism is to place the stories of women and African Americans at the center of the United Methodist tradition. A further consequence will be for the church to continue to expand its definition and understanding of ministry for the twenty-first century.

Robert Wuthnow notes that the question of community identity will perhaps be the central one for faith-seeking people in the next century. Current emphasis on small-group ministries within so many growing United Methodist congregations indicates that the hunger for community identity has never disappeared from the United Methodist story. Church leaders need to realize that the hunger of people to be a part of some type of community is not just a late-twentieth-century urge. It is a deep hunger within the church, reflected throughout our denomination's history, that deeply touches the experiences of people like Molly and Robert.

The question of how United Methodist pastors understand faith through what David Hall calls "lived religion" is central to a recovery of the teaching office within the local church. Perhaps the greatest resource pastors have for chronicling the church's historical voice comes through United Methodist hymnody. The corpus of
hymns sung in United Methodist congregations not only highlights unique theological movements in history but also challenges us to think of how voices from different eras of the past give us theological clarity in the present.

Fourth, a providential history needs to enable persons to integrate history and theology in their critical reflection. Challenging people to apply theological reflection to their study of history is risky because it can lead to a simplified portrait of the past. Church history always risks turning into hagiography, in which figures of the past can be divided into easily identifiable heroes and villains. Yet the study of the past, like the practice of ministry today, can make us confront ambiguity—in our culture and in the church. We easily lift up Francis Asbury as a great evangelist and an architect of Methodist expansion in the early nineteenth century. It is more difficult to acknowledge Asbury’s concessions to the slavery of African Americans in order to accommodate the church’s growth at a critical time in early American Methodism. Such an example suggests the ongoing human dilemma of reconciling God’s theological vision for justice with pragmatic questions of church unity. As United Methodists continue to struggle today with a number of social-justice issues that challenge our institutional identity, we would do well to remember that our history tells the stories of many exemplary persons, none of whom were perfect.

We can easily see the church’s historical failures in addressing a variety of social-justice issues—especially the ongoing struggles of United Methodism with racism and sexism. However, we can also look at our heritage in ways that give hope, discerning God’s truth in both what the church did and what the church is doing in our time. To return to the sentinel image, our history often points to figures who, in Bishop Francis McConnell’s words, saw the church’s purpose as “raising disturbing questions—ahead of time.”

McConnell’s words can instruct United Methodists as we struggle with the ramifications of the contemporary ecumenical movement. The explosive growth of congregations in Africa and Asia reminds United Methodists that our history is no longer only about the stories of an “American” church. United Methodist history must explore how our historical faith has moved beyond the theological and cultural domain of the West to ignite fires in indigenous communities throughout the world. We find ourselves in an era in which United Methodist growth outside North America challenges many
assumptions about our denomination’s past—especially those related to how we interpret and understand the history of missions. North American United Methodist leaders are challenged to enable local churches to see ecumenism not as a threat to our identity but as a potential reservoir of renewal.

Church history not only studies theologies of the institutional church; it also discerns God’s presence within communities that worship and work together—communities that sought a vision of the future. Ultimately, church history should enable people to make theologically centered judgments about the past. Some scholars lament what they see as the loss of a distinctively Wesleyan tradition within the history of United Methodism. Yet I am aware of no church tradition that has ever lived up to the doctrinal standards laid down by its founders. In the study of United Methodist history we do not view exemplary people seeking to be perfect; we see the quests of fallible people who seek after the holy.

Barbara Tuchman lamented what she called “the anti-excellence spirit” among historians who were afraid to make value judgments about the past.23 Obviously, historians can easily tell students about the mistakes made by particular leaders, movements, and institutions at different time periods. Historians find it more difficult to help them discover a cogent theological identity that carries into our era. Here is where church history can balance the competing perspectives presented by the Mollys and Roberts in our churches. Many contemporary voices that speak of church renewal are based upon the common assumption that God wants the church to grow. I share this conviction. But I also believe that God wants us to tell the truth. Moreover, discerning the truth biblically, theologically, and historically takes precedence over numbers for the sake of numbers.

To look at United Methodist history providentially at the dawn of a new millennium is to examine how passing generations have sought larger truths through faithful witness. We need to instill in the seminary and in the local church this passion for truth seeking—and for lifting up moments in history when people were not afraid of that challenge.

Finally, a providential history of United Methodism will focus attention on the fact that God’s voice is far from dead but calls upon us to discern what God is doing in our time. Like many pastors today, John Wesley was at times more reactive than proactive in his ministry. Also like those of us in the church today, Wesley knew the heartbreak
of failure. Yet Wesley reflected critically on what he did. Consequently, he offered to successive generations a new way of being the church. The results of Wesley’s critical reflections gave birth to a revival centered upon outdoor “field preaching,” lay preaching, creative worship, the class meeting, and new doors of ministry for women and underrepresented groups. These innovations continue to impact what The United Methodist Church does in our time.

At a time in which many aspects of our lives, including how we learn, are compartmentalized into isolated categories, our study of United Methodism calls us to see ourselves as part of a larger terrain. We study history not because we are spectators in God’s story; we study history because we are shapers of that story. We study history not because we hope to reach a final theological consensus on what is relevant to our faith today; we study history in the hope that we can discern the presence of God’s activity in history and in our lives. To grasp these points is to lay a foundation for future generations of United Methodists to hear the words to reform the continent, and to spread scriptural Holiness as a call to mission—not as an arcane echo from a bygone era.

Conclusion

Church history, at its best, provides two things that the contemporary church desperately needs. We need to provide local churches with constant reminders that they are part of a legacy that feeds them and, like the sentinel, contributes to a faith that can keep people like Molly and Robert from growing tired and discouraged. History also needs to remind us that amidst the church’s successes and failures we are yet given glimpses of God’s perfect vision for the church, revealing a continuity between the past, present, and future.

Ultimately, we need to remind the contemporary church that ours is not the only unique era in church history. Moreover, history’s verdict upon our era is far from complete. However, the central question for future historians of United Methodism may very well be a providential one: What did United Methodists of the late-twentieth century say about the presence of God in their lives? This shared concern unites the different stories played out by Molly and Robert in Anytown United Methodist Church—a belief that faith identity forms
when it originates in a deeply felt need for both personal and communal renewal.

Loren Mead noted in his book *The Once and Future Church* that the mission frontier for the local church begins at that church's front door. As United Methodists wrestle with the meaning of this assertion, we need to take stock of how the church's historical legacy informs what we do when the church's doors are opened to a world often oblivious to the meaning of the Christian faith.

Finally, church history can help us challenge a parochialism that often sees little need for critical reflection beyond what is encompassed by our immediate experience. H. Richard Niebuhr wrote, "Understanding is not automatically given with faith; faith makes possible and demands the labor of the intellect that it may understand." We find ourselves living at a moment in history when many people want to grasp hold of anything that promises spiritual vitality and renewal. In the midst of such an era, we would be wise to remember that faith, like the study of our historical and theological past, reflects the renewing of both our hearts and our minds. With that purpose at the center of our callings, congregations like Anytown United Methodist Church can plan for a future that is informed and nurtured by the voices and stories from the past.

Notes

1. This illustration models a case-study teaching approach that explores the relationship between religious history and contemporary parish ministry. My fictitious illustration was inspired by Timothy Fulop's "American Religious History" course syllabus, used at Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia.


3. The issues framed in this introduction regarding the interpretation of history roughly parallel the questions raised by Grant Wacker in his essay "Understanding the Past, Using the Past: Reflections on Two Approaches to History," *Religious Advocacy and American History*, ed. by Bruce Kuklick and D.G. Hart (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 159-78.


5. See Russell E. Richey, "History as a Bearer of Denominational Identity; Methodism as a Case Study," *Perspectives on American Methodism: Interpretive*


8. For an excellent example that shows how church history influences the character of American culture see Mark A. Noll, A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).


10. Richey, "History as a Bearer of Denominational Identity," 484; see also Jesse Lee, A Short History Of the Methodists (Facsimile edition, Rutland, VT; Academy, 1974).

11. Ibid., 496-7.


20. See, for example, Hatch, *Democratization*, 106-7.


24. Loren Mead, 6ff.
Someone to Watch over Me: 
Contemporary Religion and America’s 
Fascination with Angels

Angels have become big business. Popular magazines and news shows, religious journals, novelty stores, and upscale boutiques have all devoted time and space to the growing popularity of angels. A recent search for angel-related items on the web-based auction service eBay produced 4,496 hits. (By comparison, “Beanie baby” brought back 5,795 items, “Elvis” turned up 3,772 matches, “unicorn” a measly 876.) The prime-time television drama “Touched by an Angel” portrays angels actively intervening in the lives of those in physical, emotional, and spiritual need. The show continues to garner huge ratings and has encouraged new programming, such as “Teen Angel” and “Promised Land,” designed to appeal to the angel audience. In the book industry, sales of religious titles have grown more than 40 percent from 1990 to 1996 and now bring in more than $1.1 billion each year.

But while the angel fad is encouraged by directed consumerism, it also indicates a popular acceptance of the concept of angels as spiritual agents. A Time magazine poll reveals that 69 percent of

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Americans believe in angels while only 25 percent state they do not. In fact, almost half of all Americans (46 percent) believe that they have a personal guardian angel.

Does intense interest in angels signify a popular longing for mysticism? To answer this question it helps to explore the popular religious imagination of late-twentieth-century America—specifically, the American search for mythic transcendence in the face of the impending millennium. We will compare traditional and biblical accounts of angels with contemporary American religious expressions that form the background for popular angel lore. We will also look into the role of experience in religious thought. What is the religious value of experiential encounter with angels? How should theologically aware Christians regard the fascination with angels? What are the implications of such popular sentiments for the future of Christianity?

Angels and Popular Religion in Late-Twentieth-Century America

The popular interest in angels cannot be deciphered in strictly theological or traditional religious terms. We can assume that angels meet a need in the American psyche, recognizing that there are gaps in the applicability of organized religion—places where it is ineffective, or is perceived to be ineffective, at satisfying basic human needs. These gaps are places of spiritual ardor, where powerful and different kinds of religion are practiced and felt. Contemporary popular religion can be defined as "views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion." Such beliefs and practices give a sense of immediacy to the daily lives of practitioners and believers. They reshape or reinterpret church dogmas and institutional forms so that they become usable and practical for believers who may not understand or wish to explore the subtleties of traditional theology and polity.

Popular religion, however, does not necessarily stop at the boundary of official religion. The "angel cult" in the late-twentieth century is not simply a reinterpretation of traditional religious elements. Instead, it represents a melding of popular religion and popular culture. The combination of Judeo-Christian belief with New Age experiential
approaches and understandings serves our need for a simpler, more flexible type of religious reflection and assuages our fear of both the mundane and the unknown.

The Biblical Foundations of Angel Belief

Angels have graced human households and minds since long before they wrestled Abraham's grandson. Depicted as intermediaries and intercessors, angels have figured prominently and consistently in our Judeo-Christian relationship with God.

The Anchor Bible Dictionary defines angels as "heavenly beings whose function is to serve God and to execute God's will." In the Hebrew Bible, angels are primarily messengers of God. Other passages present "angels"—cherubim and seraphim—as surrounding the throne of God, worshiping and guarding as in Exodus 25. The Scriptures do not offer standardized portraits of angels, but they are certainly not the chubby, endearing little cherubs we see today. Rather, they are magnificent, terrifying, sublime beings who evoke the power and terror of God in believers' hearts and minds. Acting as agents or messengers of God, these beings bring news, speak the word of God, and enact divine wrath and blessings.

Angels began to appear in Christian art as early as the fourth century. To distinguish these heavenly beings from mortals, artists gave them luminous bodies. The early church father Tertullian provided guidance to artists by stating, "Every angel and demon is winged. Consequently, they are everywhere in a moment." By the Renaissance, artists began to alter the perception of angels, combining them with the classical "Putti" and transforming them into our chubby cherubs.

Angels are not a Hebraic invention. During their time of captivity in Babylon the Jews appropriated angels from the Ancient Near Eastern pantheons. Mysticism was particularly significant during the time of the Hellenization of the traditional Jewish homeland, and angels were a primary part of this. The apocryphal books of the Hebrew Bible, such as Jubilees and the books of Enoch, are examples of how the tradition was incorporated and enlarged within Jewish tradition, belief, and culture. Later additions of Zoroastrianism appeared in late-apocalyptic Judaism, Gnosticism, and in early Christianity. Philo
of Alexandria's Philonis Judaei Anecdota graecum de cherubinis is a contemporary example of this.  

As Morris Margolies, a contemporary Jewish scholar, points out in *A Gathering of Angels*, the belief in angels as active and somewhat independent agents of God arose in Judaism during the Exile and was amplified during foreign political dominance when the Jews felt God had withdrawn from them. Angels acted as intermediaries between the people and their God, helping to close the perceived gap. Angels appeared at a period of cultural angst when the feeling of spiritual separation was acute.

With time, Christians embraced a belief in angels engendered by a mixture of Ancient Near Eastern traditions, Greek imagery, Jewish mysticism, and local folklore. The writer of the Letter to the Colossians cautions new Christians against being mislead by mystical teachers who, among other things, treated angels as divine beings: "Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking" (2:18). But by the time of Jerome, Christians believed that each human soul had an angel to guard it from birth. From the post-Constantinian era to the early medieval church, various Christian writers, including Pope Gregory the Great (540–604), Dionysius the Areopagite (c. 6th century), Isidore of Seville (560–636), and John of Damascus (c. 8th century), also turned their attention to the topic, gathering all the scriptural references to angels.

In general, the church divided angels into nine choirs: the Seraphim and Cherubim, whose highest duty it was to worship God; the Thrones, to bring justice; the Dominions, to regulate life in heaven; the Virtues, to work miracles; the Powers, to protect humankind from evil; the Principalities, concerned with the welfare of nations; and the Archangels and Angels, to serve as guides and messengers to individuals. Thomas Aquinas backed up the assertion of individual guardian angels in the thirteenth century, stating, "On the journey to heaven . . . man is threatened by many dangers. Therefore, an angel guardian is assigned to each man as long as he is a wayfarer." The official church teaching about angels was given at the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) and was most recently confirmed in the First Vatican Council in 1869–1870. Vatican II makes only passing reference. The official position is that angels are purely spiritual beings with intelligence and free will. Later Protestant tradition encouraged a perception of angels
in the lives of believers to lead them to better living in the path of God, although as a movement, Protestantism stressed the importance of a personal relationship with God. While not explicitly defined as a matter of faith, in Catholic tradition belief in angels is classed as a proximate teaching of faith, and therefore worthy of credence. After all, Pope Clement X (1670-1676) established a Feast Day in their honor (Oct. 2); and while the doctrine of guardian angels is not a defined matter of faith, it has remained a rather deeply rooted tradition.

The host of angels that have descended on America and the roles in which they have been cast differs strikingly from the biblical prototypes. We still sing about the angel choirs in the familiar hymn: “Ye Watchers and ye holy ones / bright seraphs, cherubim and thrones, / raise the glad strain, Alleluia! / Cry out, dominions, princecomings, powers, virtues / archangels, angels’ choirs: / Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.” But angels are now more commonly depicted as separated from God’s heavenly court. This new manifestation presents questions regarding monotheism and the new interpretations of angelic power and identity. American popular religion has altered the perception and regard for angels, and it has done so to fit the special needs and individual demands of late-twentieth-century America.

In Our Image

In Omens of Millennium, popular religious scholar Harold Bloom takes a comprehensive look at angels and other New Age religious phenomena in America, discussing angelology, prophetic dreams, and so-called “near-death” experiences. Bloom contends that these contemporary phenomena, “omens of the millennium,” are in fact debased forms of Gnosticism, a spiritual orientation that is at odds with orthodox religion. Gnostics advocated passing over faith in God for the discovery of the divinity of the deepest self. In this light, Bloom explores how images of angels, prophecies, and resurrection have always mirrored anxieties about the end of time, and how these images have been domesticated by popular culture. In his thinking, belief in angels is a millennial omen that has taken on American qualities in representation and interpretation. We would add such phenomena as UFO cults and the Church of Elvis as further examples.
Bloom argues that our fascination with angels is a manifestation of a New Spirituality, the expression of a need that Gnosticism has successfully filled in the past and presumably may fill again today—although he admits that Gnosticism has often manifested itself as a religion for the intellectual elite. Angels, then, are prominent figures because they are both divine and less-than-divine and therefore can function as allegories for human potential. Angels represent the possibility of finding that divine spark within.

The premise is that the imminent millennium functions as a framework within which people focus their anxieties. Predictions of apocalypse provoke reflection on the state of our world and our relationships with one another. The results of this reflection range from UFO cults and crystal worship to the New Spirituality and include the current fascination with angels. Faced with the turn of the millennium, people search for meaning inside or outside themselves and desire transcendence. For many, the easiest path to meaning and transcendence is the belief that there are miraculous forces waiting to protect, inform, and save us.

Close Encounters of the Winged Kind

Popular writer Sophy Burnham sees the attractiveness of angels as the reaction to popular notions of God's attributes: "... we have created this concept of God as punitive, jealous, judgmental... while angels never are. They are utterly compassionate." While there is only one God, there are enough angels that we can each have our own special one, devoted only to our welfare. The sense of angels as personal advocates and benefactors appeals even to people with little or no image of God. Angels represent powerful and committed allies in our struggles with poverty, loneliness, illness, and other forces that seem indifferent to our suffering.

Narrative accounts of personal experiences with angels collected by Burnham share common elements which express the feeling of personal protection experienced by the person encountering the angel. Automobile accidents or near-accidents seem to be the most common scenario, perhaps because this is the most likely danger we face daily and, therefore, our greatest immediate concern for our safety; but other, more mundane predicaments also are solved by angelic intervention in these stories.
A mother at a traffic light receives a sudden and insistent message not to move although the light has turned green. She avoids a collision with a car that has run the red light. Still receiving the message after this incident, she waits, avoiding yet another accident as a car from behind races around the stopped cars. 

A woman driving on a one-way street keeps hearing “One-way” in her head. She keeps her distance from the car in front, thereby avoiding rear-ending it as it brakes to avoid a car coming the wrong way down the one-way street.

A woman who has lost her jewelry while digging for wildflowers is told by an angel to return to the site, and that he will help her, telling her how many paces and where to look.

These narratives describe angels as more accessible than God, and certainly easier to communicate with. Devotion to God and adherence to God’s path require following a set of rules and laws that has been prescribed. Belief in angels, however, does not require belief in God and does not entail subscribing to the customary rules of behavior. Furthermore, these popular texts lead us to believe that we can cultivate, charm, and encourage our own special angel. We can cajole our angel into serving us in a relationship that is entirely one-sided. They empower us, bring us luck, fortune, weight loss, insight, and lost property; and for all this we need do nothing at all except call upon them. In “On the Tide of Angels,” Trudy Bush points out that angel accounts depict angels as helpmates created in our own image. Only occasionally do the narratives of angelic encounters transform lives or bring people to spiritual awakening. Most often in these stories, the angels are sinless spirits that differ from us only in ways that can benefit us. Very seldom do they challenge us or make demands of us.

**Angels and Traditional Christianity**

The popular conception of angels does not fit well with classic theistic belief or with traditional Christianity. Whether or not we accept the notion that angels appeal to us because of our fear and misunderstanding of God, it is apparent that the role of angels is independent of the reality of God to the extent that belief in the efficacy of prayer to angels does not require belief in a deity.

Seen in this light, belief in angels is a form of human pride and egocentrism, irreconcilable with the message of sin and redemption.
offered by orthodox Christianity. A typical message from an angel is, "Don't be afraid, everything is just fine. There is nothing but love." Angels are nonjudgmental, helpful companions. What does it mean to be protected or saved by a guardian angel when others have not received the same protection? There is a strong aspect of elitism, selection, or election over others in this picture. Was the inadvertent victim unworthy of a guardian angel? Was his angel not as good at protection, a novice at the job? The risks inherent in this fascination with angels, then, are the perception of the worthiness of some lives over others and the idea of a relationship with an advocate but never with a judge. As Nancy Gibbs wrote in "Angels among Us," "For those who choke too easily on God and his rules . . . angels are the handy compromise, all fluff and meringue, kind, non-judgmental. And they are available to everyone, like aspirin." 

Angels and the New Age

Many New Age writers insist that people are looking for a deeper spirituality. Perhaps they are really searching for an easier spirituality. The language of the books explaining how to "get in touch" with one's angels often mirrors the terminology and methods used by those searching for connection with alien beings from other worlds, transcendence of the earthly bounds, and new and enlightened knowledge. Such methods include channeling, prayer, meditation, visualization, crystals, and automatic writing. In "Close Encounters of the Celestial Kind: Evaluating Today's Angel Craze," Ron Rhodes states, "The current angel craze fits comfortably under the umbrella of New Age spirituality. These 'angels' seem right at home with Ascended Masters and the 'space brothers' aboard UFOs, all of whom seek to lead humanity into a new age of enlightenment and harmony." The mingling of angel worship and New Age religious rites depends on the premise that our own personal angels can be summoned and encouraged to grant our wishes. This manipulation is far from the biblical interpretations of angels.

John Calvin long ago wrote that the error in angelology was dealing with angels apart from the biblical witness. Because New Age interpretations of angels are being added to the understanding of the role of angels in biblical history, those who describe an active relationship with and understanding of angels—even those avowing
traditional Christianity—are cultivating this relationship to the increasing exclusion of God. Hilda Kuester states in “Looking for Angels”: “If you find yourself fascinated with angels, take it as a healthy sign. It means you’re interested in the great mysteries of life. Take it as a sign of spiritual hunger and begin to find ways to nourish yourself. Remember that first and foremost, angels are a sign of God’s desire to guide you. Develop a willingness and even a plan to receive such guidance. God will speak to you one way or another. Keep an open mind. Listen for divine messages. Look for angels.”

New Age author Terry Lynn Taylor writes, “These angels make ‘life worth living,’ so to speak. They provide us with unconditional happiness, fun, and mirth. They also help out with romance and wealth. And they help us extinguish worries that plague our lives.”

The belief that we live in a universe where all you have to do is ask an angel for help creates an easy, undemanding religious faith that is a rejection of mainstream Christian life. This approach to angels as a means of salvation or grace runs counter to the traditional Christian notion that grace stems from God and the sacrifice of Jesus. It trivializes God. Taylor moves onto more dangerous ground: “The main lesson the angels have for us is that we are love, we are God on earth, and it is time to love ourselves and open our hearts.” This at root denies the divinity of God and makes God’s angels collaborators. In essence, belief in angels as personal champions is “not necessarily a sign of spiritual awakening. As much as anything, it’s a sign of spiritual confusion.”

Missing the Mystical

The rise of secularism in the nineteenth century, with its singular focus on empirical reality, created a spiritual hunger. Scientists grew more confident and more credible in explaining the physical world, capturing the popular imagination but creating a backlash of desire for improved spiritual connection and immediacy. A number of popular movements attempted to fill the spiritual vacuum, among them revivalism, spiritualism, and theosophy. These movements sought to combine science, fervor, and the experience with the divine.

In the late-twentieth century we see a resurgence of spiritual interest in a wide variety of forms. Hospitals recognize the value of prayer in addition to medical treatment. Debates over the proper role of religion in our education system occupy our legislatures.
Substance-abuse recovery groups recommend acknowledging a higher power to find guidance, consolation, and healing. New Age religions, established churches, vigorous exercise, Internet chat rooms and Prozac—all have legions of new adherents seeking tranquility and transcendence.

Although science continually expands our ability to explain our world, many of the issues of the day—school shootings, war, individual suffering, social decay—defy explanation. We are alienated from one another and from God. Stories of near-death experiences, UFO encounters and alien abductions, angels, prophetic dreams, and New Age mysticism prove seductive to those searching for answers beyond traditional sources. When we suffer, we often question the rationality of the universe; we want to be able to have confidence in the structure and operation of some overall plan or scheme. To many people, mystical encounters and beings from other worlds represent evidence that there is something more than we can see and comprehend, that there are forces with the power to grant our wishes, and that there are answers for all our questions.

Angels, then, are more to popular culture than porcelain collectors’ items and TV characters. New Age angelology indicates a change in the American interaction with organized religion and a distortion of Christian religious orthodoxy. The fascination with angels betrays a crisis of faith, an erosion in the role of God as an active and immediate presence. We look to angels for direct encounters with the supernatural. We long for proof that spiritual encounters with the godly are possible, that someone will intervene in our struggles and elevate us from our mundane lives. Where “we are hungry for the spiritual, for the miraculous, for assurances of a realm beyond the corporeal,” angels offer consolation, a sense of structure, safety, even of power. Belief in angels who intervene in our daily challenges provides an escape from mundane concerns and the limitations of real life and offers reassurance that we are not alone.

Notes

1. In the beginning of the Fall 1997 season, eight prime-time television shows had heavenly/angelic themes. Besides those mentioned above, there were “7th Heaven,” “Promised Land,” “Soul Man,” “Good News,” “The Visitor,” and “Nothing Sacred.”


11. Unsworth, 30-33.


14. Ibid., 2.

15. Ibid., 30, 43.


18. Ibid., 270.

19. Ibid.


23. Burnham, 293.
32. Bush, 238.

For Further Reading: Popular Works on Angels


R. S. Thomas: Poet for Turn-of-Millennium Believers

Who deserves to be called, speaking precisely, a turn-of-millennium believer? Not simply someone who believes in God and happens to live at the close of the twentieth century. Rather, someone who does not curl up comfortably in either doubt or belief. Someone who, now and then, senses that the heart of the universe has stopped beating, that there is no warmth at the core of it all. Someone, too, who affirms with the father who implored Jesus to heal his epileptic son, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). Someone truly contemporary in intellect and sensibility whose belief in God arises from a sea of doubt.

The Welsh poet-Anglican priest R. S. Thomas (born 1913) is a contemporary believer who expresses his own lifelong oscillation between belief and unbelief in poetry that gives voice to the way so many people today experience at one moment the tide of faith flowing in their lives, only at the next moment to sense it ebbing away into doubt.

John G. McEllhenney, a retired clergy member of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference of The United Methodist Church, has been collecting the works of R. S. Thomas for twenty-five years and has interviewed the poet three times at his home in Wales.
The Context of Turn-of-Millennium Belief

Thomas, though he lives in rural Wales, far from the venues of modernity, has not cut himself off from the sensibility shaped by modern science.

Modern scientists discern a disconnectedness among the realities they analyze. As separate entities, these realities can be charted by researchers, whose results can be checked by other scientists for accuracy. But these accurately charted chunks of reality cannot be assembled in such a way as to obtain one perfectly coherent picture of all reality that is accepted by all scientists. Of course, there have been, and will continue to be, many attempts to develop unified explanations for all the phenomena identified by physicists, chemists, and biologists. But these efforts will seem as flawed to future researchers as Sir Isaac Newton’s unifying theories seem to us.

Thomas well knows that the unifying theories propounded by scientists may be compared to motion pictures: if there are connections, they are connections that occur in the eye and consciousness of the viewer. As a film moves at 16 or more frames per second, the viewer sees continuity, not discontinuity. Yet the reality is that there is merely one separate, disconnected shot after another. So, if scientists and philosophers were to posit a God to unify the diverse phenomena explicated by science, this Being would be a creature of the viewers of the phenomena, not some deity pointed to infallibly by the phenomena themselves. All of which, in terms of faith, is conducive to doubt about God.

Thomas studies the work of scientists and philosophers and knows their failed attempts to devise unifying theories and their doubts about God. He, too, is a doubter. But his doubts have more to do with the felt absence of God than with science’s failure to unite all phenomena in a theory that points irrefutably to God. Indeed, as we shall see, Thomas thinks that any god posited by human cogitation is a created being and therefore, by definition, not God.

To experience God, Thomas believes, one must leave the expressways along which research laboratories tend to cluster. One must turn away from things that make noise. “Progress,” Thomas writes—spiritual progress—

is not with the machine;
it is a turning aside,
a bending over a still pool,
where the bubbles arise
from unseen depths, as from truth
breathing...  

To be rightly placed for an encounter with God, Thomas suggests, we need to put distance between ourselves and ever-more-efficient machines and ever-more-raucous sounds. Then we must look into a mirror, or something like a mirror—a “still pool”—and wait for emanations of truth to emerge like bubbles caused by the breathing of One who is alive at the core of all that is. In another poem, Thomas says we must go on staring into this mirror until “the clearer becomes / the reflection of a countenance / in it other than our own.” In other words, if we would see God, we must go apart from frenetic movement and noise, and wait for One who is not a mere reflection of our desires and wishes. If turn-of-millennium doubters wish to become believers, they must discipline themselves, first, to be waiters.

The Meaning Is in the Waiting

Waiting—active, not passive waiting—is of the essence of our quest for God. Indeed, Thomas proposes, “the meaning is in the waiting”:

Moments of great calm,
Kneeling before an altar
Of wood in a stone church
In summer, waiting for the God
To speak; the air a staircase
For silence; the sun’s light
Ringing me, as though I acted
A great role. And the audiences
Still; all that close throng
Of spirits waiting, as I,
For the message.

Prompt me, God;
But not yet. When I speak,
Though it be you who speak
Through me, something is lost.
The meaning is in the waiting.
Thomas requests God to inspire him after some (deliberately unspecified) delay. Immediate inspiration means diluted inspiration, because it comes too quickly for the recipient to be prepared by spiritual fasting, by long spells of transcendental dryness, for the divine presence. This request for God to tarry points ahead to the next section's exploration of the *via negativa*, which insists that only statements affirming what God is *not* can be made with theological integrity; something is lost when we assert that God is this and that.

For now, we must ponder the meaning that becomes available through waiting for God to reveal what one is to say. Perhaps a clue is afforded by French poet Paul Valéry's phrase *ligne donnée*, which refers to the single line of a poem that is given by Nature or handed over by God. Having been granted this inspiration, this revelation, it becomes the poet's responsibility to create the rest of the poem. To do so is impossible, of course, if the poet has not read enough to have the vocabulary and lived enough to have the insights that will allow him or her to draw out the implications of the *ligne donnée*, explicating it with fresh metaphors and expressing it with words that connote more than they denote. So the time of waiting for God to speak to us is our time of having the experiences and learning the words that will enable us, when God does speak, to express in telling metaphors what God has said.

Another clue to the meaning-in-waiting may be disengaged from Thomas's transplantation of the birth of Jesus to the twentieth century. The Magi are jet-set travelers, arriving about the time the baby's umbilical cord is tied off; yet no one calls them "wise"; for they

... arrive too speedily

to have grown wise on the way.

"Wisdom," Thomas adds, "must come on foot." *Discernment* is a walker; *sagacity* strolls. *Wisdom* is the byproduct of not getting what we want too fast. If we have money to buy anything that catches our fancy, we buy all the baubles that come bob, bob, bobbing along. But when our income is very limited, when we must wait and save before making any purchases other than the bare necessities, then the time devoted to saving and waiting allows us to consider at length what we truly desire. Therefore, the meaning that is in the waiting is the realization of becoming, in Thomas's words, "surer / of what we want."
Likewise with God: waiting for God makes us surer of what we want from God, which is one of the meanings woven into the sublime poetry of the book of Job. The God-seeker imagined by the book's author wants answers from God, explanations of the divine behavior: "I would speak to the Almighty," Job tells Zophar the Naamathite, "and I desire to argue my case with God" (Job 13:3). Job thinks he wants most to have God explain the reasons behind all the deaths in Job's family, his own suffering, and his wife's curt advice that he should "curse God, and die" (2:9). But although Job pleads for God to speak, to rationalize the divine behavior, all he hears is silence. We might even say "stony silence," for the Hebrew word translated "Almighty" in 13:3 means "the God, the One of the mountain," suggesting the eternal silence of the rocks. And so Job finds himself waiting—a waiting that prepares him to understand, when God finally does speak to him, that what he truly wants is to hear God's voice.

What God says no longer carries major significance for Job; that God speaks to him becomes reassuring in and of itself.

The book of Job is poetry, of course, not philosophical or dogmatic theology. As metaphor, it hints at realities that transcend prosaic syntax and logical explication. Keeping the literary nature of the book of Job in mind, we note that its dialogues point to the truth that God remains transcendent even in the immanent act of addressing Job. The divine is an Absence in, with, and under Presence. God declines to answer Job's questions, even calls Job a man "who darkens counsel by words without knowledge" (38:2) and "a faultfinder" (40:2). Yet Job—rebuked by the voice "out of the whirlwind" (38:1) and humbled to dust and ashes (42:6)—is satisfied. All his waiting for God has made him absolutely sure about what he wants from God: just God, the divine Self.

Deus Absconditus

R. S. Thomas understands that Job's waiting is a waiting that makes the one waiting more sure of what is desired from God. But his understanding of the divine-human relationship does not stop there. He deepens it by giving metaphoric expression to his experience of the departing God. It seems to him that just when he is about to meet God, God leaves. The place where the poet-priest expects to encounter God "... is a room I enter / from which someone has just / gone, ..."
which reverses the experience of Jesus' disciples: they had gathered after the crucifixion in a room whose doors were locked, when suddenly Jesus stood among them, saying, "Peace be with you" (John 20:26). But their experience is not always, not necessarily, replicable.

Many people sense that God's departure has preceded their arrival, but they fail to incorporate that feeling in their times of prayer and meditation. They do not meditate, as Thomas has done, on the experience of God's absence. They shy away from pondering something that seems to make a negative statement about God—that God sometimes forsakes us. There is, however, a theological resource for meditating on the "departing God": the theological tradition of Deus absconditus, which looks upon God as One who hides.

Two principal tributaries flow into the main stream of Deus absconditus theology: the first takes its rise in Eastern Christendom's understanding of "the ineffable, inconceivable and incomprehensible nature of God." The second stream springs from Martin Luther's theology of the cross; that is, his proclamation of Deus crucifixus et absconditus, the "crucified and hidden God." The former view, that God is hidden behind the divine revelation, calls for closer attention now; the latter in the next section.

Proponents of God-who-hides theology remember the words of Isaiah and Jesus. The prophet of the Suffering Servant spoke to God out of his keen sense of God's absence, saying, "Truly, you are a God who hides himself" (Isa. 45:15). The Suffering Servant, echoing the prophet's sense of abandonment, cried out as he was dying on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34).

Theologians in the Eastern Christian tradition teach that authority in doctrine is that of Scripture, the decrees of church councils, and the writings of the Fathers. But behind those words—human words encapsulating God's revelation—lives the mystery that God preserves by revealing to Moses an enigmatic divine name: "I AM WHO I AM" (Exod. 3:14). God, for Eastern Christian theologians, not only transcends what humans think and imagine; God transcends God's self-revelation. That God is unthinkably and unimaginably transcendent places the theologian, a person dealing in words about God, in an almost impossible position.

Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, whose writings date from roughly 500 A.D., responded to this theological dilemma by arguing that "negative statements about divine matters are the true ones."
This *via negativa* ("way of negation") approach finds modern expression in Thomas's poem titled "Via Negativa":

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Why no! I never thought other than
That God is that great absence
In our lives, the empty silence
Within, the place where we go
Seeking, not in hope to
Arrive or find. He keeps the interstices
In our knowledge, the darkness
Between stars. His are the echoes
We follow, the footprints he has just
Left. We put our hands in
His side hoping to find
It warm. We look at people
And places as though he had looked
At them, too; but miss the reflection.  
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For Thomas the contemporary believer, there is no repetition of the experience of Thomas the first-century believer, who reached out his hand and put it in the side of the risen Christ (John 20:26-29). The first Thomas found it "warm"; the second Thomas only has that hope.

Thomas, like theologians of the *via negativa*, refuses to pin God down, to localize the Transcendent in the immanent. He says, "If the creature can comprehend his creator, his creator is no longer a creator." He "defines" God, as one commentator has noted, "in terms of what he is not, thus leaving him free to be what he knows himself to be." In a 1981 interview, Thomas speaks for himself:

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What I'm tilting at [in poems where I seem to deride, or deny, God] is not God, but the ideas of God. . . . I'm really being derisive about men's ideas of God. . . . I'm digging even scholastics and the whole tradition of Catholic Christianity, that likes to spend its hours in these councils, in these ancient councils of the early church, hacking away at the problem of God's dual nature and triple nature and this sort of thing. . . . I believe in God, I'm trying to show how people sometimes attempt to pin down this, this Being Who's not a Being.
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Thomas maintains, as Dionysius argued before him, that true statements about God are assertions of what God is not and where God is not. God is not in what we know but in what we do not know. God is not in the definitions beside the dictionary’s entry for God but in the white space around that entry.

Thomas’s emphasis on God’s transcendence does not mean that his God is utterly aloof. His God is present, too—with us—but never in an “in-the-garden” sense, as the well-known hymn would have it. Not for him a faddish fascination with angels: he knows that too often when people prate about angels there are bats in the rafters. For Thomas, God is immanent, not as a friend strolling in the garden but as the fruit of a winter tree:

To one kneeling down no word came,
Only the wind’s song, saddening the lips
Of the grave saints, rigid in glass;
Or the dry whisper of unseen wings,
Bats not angels in the high roof.

Was he balked by silence? He kneeled long,
And saw love in a dark crown
Of thorns blazing, and a winter tree
Golden with fruit of a man’s body.16

Tree in the penultimate line, instead of cross, invites us to recall the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and to associate it with the tree of salvation. Winter, reminiscent of ice and snow and death, sends a shiver up our spiritual spine. Golden, the color traditionally used by artists to announce the presence of divinity, proclaims Life behind wintry Death. On a dead tree, which has been converted to timber and cobbled into a thing of execution, hangs a dead man, like the fruit of a tree; yet, wondrously, not decaying fruit but golden fruit—alive.

Where God does not appear to be present, indeed, where God by theological definition cannot be present (“... anyone hung on a tree is under God’s curse” [Deut. 21:23]), just there, on the tree, God is present. This brings us to the second tributary of the stream of Deus absconditus theology noted above—that associated with Martin Luther.
Absence That Is like Presence

Focusing his theology on the cross, Luther spoke of Deus crucifixus et absconditus—the "crucified and hidden God." Before we explore the crucifixus part of Luther's theological formulation, we need to probe more deeply into absconditus.

Deus absconditus points to a theological tradition that contends that God transcends all categories of understanding and speech. The divine is ineffable, unutterable, indefinable, indescribable; God is unknowable. Yet (and here lies the paradoxical nature of this theology and, therefore, of the poetry of R. S. Thomas) to assert that God is unknowable is to assert that something is known about God. You cannot argue that God is beyond human understanding without understanding something about God. A paradox occupies the center of this theology: there is an absence in God's presence, a presence in God's absence. There is transcendence in divine immanence, immanence in divine transcendence. In other words, Deus absconditus, the God who hides the divine self, is also Deus revelatus, the God who reveals the divine self, whether in creative or redemptive activity.

Luther believed that God chose to reveal himself by withholding himself in the cross. In 1517, Luther remarked, "Man hides his own things, in order to conceal them; God hides his own things in order to reveal them." A recent interpreter comments:

This is an excellent summary of Luther's early understanding of the significance of the hiddenness of God's revelation. God works in a paradoxical way sub contrariis: his strength lies hidden under apparent weakness; his wisdom under apparent folly; his opus proprium under his opus alienum; the future glory of the Christian under his present sufferings.

What appears as dead fruit on a winter tree in truth is golden fruit; the crown of thorns blazes with divine glory.

"There is a radical discontinuity," a Luther scholar notes, "between the empirically perceived situation and the situation as discerned by faith. To the eye of reason, all that can be seen in the cross is a man dying in apparent weakness and folly, under the wrath of God. If God is revealed in the cross, he is not recognizable as God." But to the eye
of faith, Luther argues, is given an “ability to see past visibilia and recognize the invisibilia which lie behind them.”

R. S. Thomas created a metaphor that expresses Luther’s vision of the invisibles behind the visibles. What Thomas sees—the visible—is the painting Claude Monet created when he looked at the western facade of Rouen Cathedral one brilliant afternoon in 1894. His painting titled *Rouen Cathedral, Full Sunshine*, is one of 33 Impressionist works in the Louvre that inspired Thomas to write a series of poems. The painter saw the cathedral against a cornflower sky, in the blazing afternoon sun. Glowing, the facade loses weight, becomes light, atmospheric. Monet, of course, does not use white pigment to express light; he combines daubs of color, selected with infinite care, to provide an impression of carved stone that has been warmed and caused to vibrate by the rays of subtle-hued sunlight. Only the deep recesses of the trinity of portals and the aperture for the great rose window harbor shadows.

Thomas’s eye finds itself drawn into the dark openings. He ponders the not-seen that is inside, beyond the seen. The result is a metaphor for the invisible which may be discerned behind the visible. For Thomas here, as often, the title is the first line of his poem:

*MONE*.png

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crumbs, apologising
for their dryness, afraid
to look up in the ensuing
silence in case they have flown.21

Inside the luminosities of sense-perception, there are shadows,
darkness, and carved stone figures, birdlike, no longer as perfect as
when they came from their creator's hand. Being like chipped birds,
are they like souls that have lost their perfection? Do they suggest, in
their eroded, softened beauty, that the soul is improved by having
some of its original perfection chipped away? When humans lost the
freshly sculpted perfection of Eden, did they thereby gain something?

Monet left Thomas free to see in Rouen Cathedral, Full Sunshine
what he, Thomas, informed by all the experiences that had made him
Thomas, could see. In the same way, Thomas leaves us free, informed
by everything that has made us who we are, to follow his metaphor to
destinations of our choosing.

We have followed him as he moved from the visible Monet painting
of Rouen Cathedral to his own vision of the invisibles within. In the
poem's middle section, Thomas invites us to hear the sounds of the
inaudibles; to hear what he heard as he strained his ears in the
painting's silence. Are the birdlike carvings singing? Has their stone
absorbed so many chants over the centuries that now they, too, sing?
Or have feathers-and-bones birds flown in through the cathedral's
open windows to rest and trill in the vaulting? Whatever the fact, there
is "the excitement of migrants / newly arrived from a tremendous /
presence." There has been a coming from something that is here,
which brings us to the title of the book in which this poem appears,
Between Here and Now.

Here, of course, refers to something in space, while Now refers to
time. These are the ways we locate things. They exist somewhere in
space and somewhere in time. They do not exist somewhere between a
place that can be identified on a map and a moment that can be ticked
off by a clock. So Thomas, when he titles his book Between Here and
Now, is nudging us toward a dimension that hints at accessibility (it is
between two identifiable dimensions), but, in fact, is not accessible to
us—at least, not accessible by our usual means for placing something
in space and pinning it down in time. What is this betweenness
dimension? It is God, who cannot be identified in space and ticked off
in time. God is free from time limits and space limits. God is in a

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dimension that is close to us, yet just beyond our grasp—between our here and our now. God is both present and absent, both revealed and hidden. The sound of warbling, heard by Thomas in the interior silence of Monet's painting, seemed to the poet to be "the excitement of migrants / newly arrived from a tremendous / presence."

This calls for some response. Crusts of stale bread for real birds? Or the entreaties of turn-of-millennium believers who are unable to curl up comfortably in either atheism or theism? who admit that there is a desert-like quality in their spirituality? But who hope against hope that the sound they have heard is not mere wishful thinking; that it signals a breakthrough from betweenness into the here and now—but a breakthrough that remains tenuous, never firmly rooted in the everyday experiences of space and time.

Thomas knows that experience, sense-perception, science, perceive only God's absence when they study the world, human life. But he has meditated so long and so intently on this absence that it has become like a presence—a presence that, perhaps, does not scorn the vacancy at the core of his spiritual being, the dryness of his prayer crumbs. In a masterpiece of Deus absconditus poetry, he affirms:

It is this great absence
that is like a presence, that compels
me to address it without hope
of a reply. It is a room I enter

from which someone has just
gone, the vestibule for the arrival
of one who has not yet come.
I modernise the anachronism

of my language, but he is no more here
than before. Genes and molecules
have no more power to call
him up than the incense of the Hebrews

at their altars. My equations fail
as my words do. What resource have I
other than the emptiness without him of my whole
being, a vacuum he may not abhor?
The poet's hungering inner emptiness, his haunting sense of God's absence, may be the very place that God is present; indeed, Thomas believes that a spiritual vacuum is precisely the human readiness for revelation that God does not avoid.

In another poem, Thomas continues his confession of help-my-unbelief faith:

I pray and incur silence. Some take that silence for refusal. I feel the power that, invisible, catches me by the sleeve, nudging towards the long shelf that has the book on it I will take down and read and find the antidote to an ailment. I know its ways with me; how it enters my life, is present rather before I perceive it, sunlight quivering on a bare wall... 

In, with, and under Thomas's experience of God's absence there is an invisible power that nudges him to take down the Bible and discover there an interpretation of what is happening to him—that God is present before he, Thomas, perceives that presence. This presence is mysterious; it never quite computes, for nothing is harder to put into sentences that depend upon the logic of syntax than something that eludes logic, that is inherently mysterious.

Understandably, then, there are ambiguities in Thomas's poetry. Consider "Sea-Watching": its first \(18 \frac{1}{2}\) lines are straightforward, clear. But the final \(7 \frac{1}{2}\) lines are just beyond the pincers of our minds; they decline to be paraphrased in workaday prose.

Grey waters, vast as an area of prayer that one enters. Daily over a period of years I have let the eye rest on them.
Was I waiting for something?

Nothing

but that continuous waving
that is without meaning

occurred.

Ah, but a rare bird is
rare. It is when one is not looking,
at times one is not there

that it comes.

You must wear your eyes out,
as others their knees.

I became the hermit
of the rocks, habited with the wind
and the mist. There were days,
so beautiful the emptiness
it might have filled,
its absence
was as its presence; not to be told
any more, so single my mind
after its long fast,

my watching from praying.25

Poetry works by indirection, mystery, paradox. We respond to
poetry by murmuring, "I sense something along the pulses of my
spirit." Of course, outstanding prose may be like poetry, working by
implication, connotation, allusion. But poetry is never like the prose
that sells in airport news kiosks.

"Sea-watching" does not give us a fast-paced story, like best-selling
prose. Rather, as with Wordsworth, whose presence can be felt in
Thomas's nature mysticism,26 we

... have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.27

Among the Unhaloed Presences, Suddenly ... God

Thomas wishes his readers to meditate on lines, such as those he wrote at the conclusion of "Sea-watching," as long as he had meditated on the continuous, meaningless waving of the sea. He urges us to wait for meaning to appear. He invites us to meditate on God's absence until God's "absence was as its presence." We are to tarry, as he lingered for the "rare bird" to fly by, until, suddenly, God becomes the Presence in the midst of life's host of "unhaloed presences."

The phrase unhaloed presences appears in a poem whose title is its first line:

Suddenly

As I had always known
he would come, unannounced,
remarkable merely for the absence
of clamour. So truth must appear
to the thinker; so, at a stage
of the experiment, the answer
must quietly emerge. I looked
at him, not with the eye
only, but with the whole
of my being, overflowing with
him as a chalice would
with the sea. Yet was he
no more there than before,
his area occupied
by the unhaloed presences... .28

Thomas senses the presence of God after a long period of penetrating meditation, as the thinker senses the presence of truth—often suddenly—after a protracted time of intense concentration; as the scientist's experiment, after a protracted period of stubborn silence, speaks softly a new truth. This suddenness is not rare in the realm of the spirit and in poetry.
Thomas locates the natural genesis of his poem “Suddenly” in the weather of Wales, noting that after days of cloudy, rainy weather suddenly “the sun comes through and the whole place is transformed.” Sometimes the sun becomes Thomas’s Lord of the Dance, inviting him to spy infinity in the dust motes waltzing in the air. Sometimes there is a mysterious Presence that fills the poet’s cup to the brim, leaving him with a sense that the universe is not cold at its core, that it has a beating heart.

Windows Don’t Happen

In summary, this is what R. S. Thomas says to turn-of-millennium believers: “Do not interpret your experiences of the absent God as proof that secularists are correct when they urge you to turn into the fast lane, pick success as your destination, and assume that living well is the best revenge. Instead, interpret them as invitations to ponder the vacuum created by a sense of the divine absence. This is to be contemplated until the vacuum brims with God’s Presence. But if God is to flow into the emptiness at the core of your being, you must make a window.”

Thomas deals with window making in “Poetry for Supper,” a poem in which two old poets contrast their views of writing poetry and receiving poetic inspiration:

‘Listen, now, verse should be as natural
As the small tuber that feeds on muck
And grows slowly from obtuse soil
To the white flower of immortal beauty.’

‘Natural, hell! What was it Chaucer
Said once about the long toil
That goes like blood to the poem’s making?
Leave it to nature and the verse sprawls,
Limp as bindweed, if it break at all
Life’s iron crust. Man, you must sweat
And rhyme your guts taut, if you’d build
Your verse a ladder.’

‘You speak as though
No sunlight ever surprised the mind

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Groping on its cloudy path.

'Sunlight's a thing that needs a window
Before it enter a dark room.
Windows don't happen.'

So two old poets,
Hunched at their beer in the low haze
Of an inn parlour, while the talk ran
Noisily by them, glib with prose.

The first old poet thinks that writing poetry is a matter of being surprised by the sunlight of inspiration and then allowing the words to flow onto the page and form more or less random patterns. His friend thinks that one must work hard to make windows in one's imagination, through which the sunlight of inspiration may, if and when it wills, shine in. Then, inspired, one must strain every muscle of mind and imagination in order to share the illuminating experience with others.

In Thomas's image, people who expect God to make the windows through which revelation will enter their lives are doomed to live in darkness. Windows do not simply drop in. They must be made, according to Thomas, by prayer-book worship, time spent in nature's church, and the discipline of study.

Mother's-Milk Words

As an Anglican priest, Thomas has participated personally and led his people year after year in the annual cycle of prayer-book worship. He understands that it is a means for making windows—a way of stocking the minds of men and women with prayers and biblical passages, which, as a body of memorized material, become a window through which God's grace may, when God chooses, flow.

Many people, of course, find liturgical worship boringly repetitious. They reject it, arguing that it stifles spontaneity, binds one to forms, and quenches the spirit. Thomas, however, clings to its value. He recognizes, as John Wesley did, too, that extemporaneous worship is inadequate for making soul-windows.

Thomas values fixed forms so highly that he resists changes in the patterns and words of worship. However, Thomas's resistance to
updating the language of Scripture and liturgy resides much deeper than an aversion to the new.

As a poet, Thomas knows that we are human, not simply because a human ovum and sperm have merged but also, perhaps primarily, because we have been impregnated by words. We are word-beings. Language shapes us, makes us who we are. This shaping, this making by nouns and verbs, constitutes for Thomas the great tragedy of his life as a Welsh nationalist: he cannot write poetry in Welsh, because his mother's-milk language is English. No one, he declares, has ever written great poetry in a second language. So this ardent Welshman cannot express his Welshness in Welsh, because English was the first language he learned; the only language he spoke fluently until he was in his thirties. Now he speaks Welsh smoothly and writes books in Welsh prose. But for poetry, the most profound expression of his essence as a doubter and believer, he must use the language he sucked in with his mother's milk—English.

What has Thomas's tragedy to do with the words of Scripture and liturgy? Just this: our soul-windows are fashioned by the scriptural and liturgical words and phrases that we learned first, that stick like burrs to our memories. So when committees of Bible translators begin to mess about with the texts we have memorized—even if their translations are truer to the original manuscripts—we experience the substitution of opaque for clear glass in our soul-window. We may be stimulated intellectually and reinvigorated theologically by fresh scriptural insights, but our devotional life is diminished. We can no longer lean back, close our eyes, and have the familiar passages become windows through which God's light enters our lives. This loss is what Thomas regrets when he bemoans the depredations of Bible translators and commissions for revising the liturgy.

We may wish to counter that their work is necessary, that faith is aided by better translations, that worship is brought closer to the worshipers by contemporary-language liturgies. New occasions demand new expressions of Scripture and prayer book. But Thomas may caution us to remember that we are creatures of words—of memorized words—and until the words of the new translations and the new liturgies become like our mother's-milk language, we have forfeited the window-making role played in our spiritual lives by a large body of memorized biblical texts and well-crafted prayers.

Many turn-of-the-millennium believers will find it difficult to participate in liturgical worship, either because there are no
prayer-book churches in their area or because fixed forms of worship
simply are not for them. For such persons, a daily devotional resource
that is liturgically oriented is essential. A very useful one is David
Adam's book *The Rhythm of Life: Celtic Daily Prayer.* Adam
provides four brief liturgies for each day of the week, each one
including easy-to-remember biblical passages, prayers, and guides for
meditation. Used religiously over a period of time, Adam's materials
will stock the memory.

The first thing, then, for turn-of-millennium believers to learn from
Thomas is the value of sticking with a translation of Scripture and a
pattern of worship long enough for it to be memorized, and thereby to
shape one's way of thinking and expressing thoughts; long enough for
it to provide the words and phrases in which one is able to couch
experiences of the divine absence and the divine presence. But this
stocking of one's memory is not enough by itself; this
window-making remains inadequate unless one develops customs of
quietness, of being still, of waiting patiently and expectantly. For
Thomas, these are the customs of moor-walking and birdwatching.

Nature's Role in Turn-of-Millennium Belief

Because Thomas served rural parishes, he was free to study in the
morning, walk the moors in the afternoon, and visit his parishioners in
the evening. As a result he acquired the custom of moor-walking,
which accustomed him to stillness, waiting, and occasionally
experiencing the filling of his inner vacuum. The moor, he writes,

... was like a church to me.
I entered it on soft foot,
Breath held like a cap in the hand.
It was quiet.
What God was there made himself felt,
Not listened to, in clean colours
That brought a moistening of the eye,
In movement of the wind over grass.

There were no prayers said. But stillness
Of the heart's passions—that was praise
Enough; and the mind's cession

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Of its kingdom. I walked on,
Simple and poor, while the air crumbled
And broke on me generously as bread.32

In this poem, the liturgies of Thomas's parish church and his
custom of walking the moors combine to provide a moment when God
is a living presence for him, not a haunting absence. Shaped by
liturgical worship, Thomas perceives the stillness of the moor as a
vacuum, which like the silent emptiness of a church before worship,
God might fill. Having repeatedly broken the eucharistic bread, he
experiences the bounteous breeze as a moment of epiclesis, when the
Spirit descends upon flesh and enables it to bear the divine. Because
Thomas's memory is stocked with biblical insights, he is able to
articulate the meaning of what he feels when the moor's silence
reverberates with "a sense sublime / Of something far more deeply
interfused, / Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns."

Closely related to Thomas's custom of moor-walking is
birdwatching, of which he has said:

It's part of my life. I think it's an interesting psychological
form of behaviour. As I lost my dreams of having a kind of
Wales that was pure, that was preserved from large caravan
[recreational vehicle] parks and candyfloss-eating tourists . . . I
turned to birds as offering a kind of alternative. . . . Here is a
form of life that's been going on for 30-50 million years, long
before man was here, which has evolved into a beautiful form
of creation, and I just turned to it for consolation.33

It is a solace that we noticed him experiencing as he waited in
"Sea-watching" for a rare bird to appear. But the consolation of
birdwatching may also prove to be a challenge. Why, he once asked,
did the hummingbird decline to come?

We waited,
breath held, looks aimed,
the garden as tempting
as ever. Was there a lack
of nectar within us?

God, too? We
are waiting. Is it
for the same reason
he delays? Sourness,
the intellect's
dried-up comb? Dust
where there should be
pollen? Come, Lord;
though our heads hang
the bird's rainbow is above us. 34

Thomas suggests that "the humming bird never came" (which is the poem's title) to the garden because of a lack of nectar in those (flowers? persons?) waiting and watching. Likewise, God may decline to come, even though we suppose we are waiting and watching for God, because the expectant spirit is barren; it has not been watered and brought to blossom by immersion in Bible and prayer book. Yet overhead there is the hummingbird's rainbow-like plumage, which Thomas interprets as a reminder of God's promise of a rainbow (Gen. 9:8-22), indicating God's commitment never again to abandon humans as punishment for their spiritual and moral dryness.

Because Thomas's memory is stocked with biblical and prayer-book materials, an experience of watching a hummingbird can become a revelation of why God often fails to come and yet never withdraws the promise of coming. The experience results in a poem that holds together God absent and God present.

But where, we may ask, did the poem—the articulation of the revelation—take form? In the garden itself? somewhere else?

I Put the Book Aside and Write the Poem.

Thomas has answered our question, describing the times when his experiences take on poetic flesh. Responding to an interviewer's question, "Do you still read a lot?" Thomas recounted a routine which he disciplines himself to maintain. He usually studies a challenging book (such as a work in philosophy) every morning. But if he happens upon the idea for a poem, he puts the book aside and writes the poem.35

What Thomas has just described belongs to his life as a parish
priest in rural Wales. How, then, can it serve the needs of
turn-of-millennium believers in an essentially urban society? Can we
stock our lives with biblical and prayer-book words and images?
Undoubtedly. Can we do solid reading (whether at the lay or ordained
level) and then, when an experience begins to jell, put the book aside
and scratch notes in a journal? Certainly, if one is as self-disciplined
as R. S. Thomas. Can we city-dwellers and indoors-workers
experience in nature “a sense sublime / Of something far more deeply
interfused, / Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns”? Perhaps the
best answer to that question comes from the life of the American poet
Wallace Stevens, whose work Thomas thinks “comes nearest to
expressing the [modern] situation, in poetry.”

Stevens lived in a city and worked in the office of an insurance
company. Daily he walked through Hartford, Connecticut’s Elizabeth
Park on his way to and from his office and had experiences not unlike
Thomas’s:

... Perhaps

The truth depends on a walk around a lake,

A composing as the body tires, a stop
To see hepatica, a stop to watch
A definition growing certain and

A wait within that certainty, ...

Stevens walked because he was not a licensed driver. But one
suspects that he would have walked even if he had owned an
automobile and possessed a driver’s license. He walked because
walking is the pace of meditation. And as he walked, he was visited by
his muse. Those visits eventuated in poems.

Therefore, Thomas’s method for making soul-windows, through
which the light of God’s illuminating Presence may flow when God
wills it to flow, is available to us. No matter where we live, we can
find a place in nature where we can walk. Walk. Not jog. The faces of
joggers disclose a proclivity for masochism, not a propensity for
meditation. Walk. But first quarantine your pager, Walkman, and
portable phone. Walk, or saunter—a word which some scholars think
is derived from the pilgrims’ custom of walking slowly and
meditatively in saint terre, holy land. This sauntering does not require
a moor or the shore of the Sea of Galilee. A city will suffice, as it did for Wallace Stevens.

"Deposits of Mercy / Where Trust May Take Root And Grow"

R. S. Thomas is the poet for turn-of-millennium believers because he expresses so clearly our ebbtides of despair and our springtides of prayer:

The waves run up the shore
and fall back. I run
up the approaches of God
and fall back. The breakers return
reaching a little further,
gnawing away at the main land.
They have done this thousands
of years, exposing little by little
the rock under the soil's face.
I must imitate them only
in my return to the assault,
not in their violence. Dashing
my prayers at will achieve
little other than the exposure
of the rock under his surface.
My returns must be made
on my knees. Let despair be known
as my ebb-tide; but let prayer
have its springs, too, brimming,
disarming him; discovering somewhere
among his fissures deposits of mercy
where trust may take root and grow.39

Referring to other poems like the one just considered, Thomas says, "In pointing in the poem to what you [that is, Thomas] think is the true nature of God in the world you can, possibly, make some sort of contribution to somebody who's in doubt, somebody who's questioning 'how can there be a God?' "40 If you confess that God is often a stony silence for you, then the person for whom God is always
a rocklike taciturnity may be willing to listen when you affirm that the
divine "silence [is] a / process in the metabolism / of the being of
love." If you admit that for you God is more often darkness than light,
then the person for whom there is nothing but divine darkness may be
willing to listen when you insist that the "darkness / is the deepening
shadow / of [God's] presence."

"Many creatures," Thomas tells God,

    reflect you, the flowers
your colour, the tides the precision
of your calculations. There
is nothing too ample
for you to overflow, nothing
so small that your workmanship
is not revealed. I listen
and it is you speaking.
I find the place where you lay
warm. At night, if I waken,
there are the sleepless conurbations
of the stars. The darkness
is the deepening shadow
of your presence; the silence a
process in the metabolism
of the being of love.91

Such a theophany is worth slowing down for, worth waiting for,
worth making a window for. Because, when it comes, it helps the
unbelief of turn-of-millennium believers.

Notes

11. Ibid.
17. McGrath, 167.
18. Ibid.
22. For an extended treatment of this subject, see Shepherd, 11-12.
30. Wesley argued that the free-flowing worship provided by his preachers was a heartwarming supplement to, not a substitute for, the habit-forming Anglican prayer-book services. See Wesley's *Large Minutes: The Works of John Wesley*
36. Ibid., 56.
Reynolds Price and the Struggle of “People in Rooms”

“'The struggle to survive will begin here, in this room, where we are sitting.'
—Elie Wiesel, The Gates of the Forest

Reynolds Price closes his memoir Clear Pictures with the affirmation of his aim to go on being a picture-maker, one who "offers scenes, people in rooms or God in hearts." He concludes, "I work to clarify the salient faces and whatever sign of unseen power is pressing from inside with love or havoc, which may also be love, to move things apart or nearer." As Price's words suggest, such writing has a religious dimension. The picture-maker does the work of a priest, holding up to another the mystery of created life. We, the witnesses of story, find revealed in clear pictures insight into our own condition; for we, too, live chambered with others. The focused picture of narrative may meet our deepest need for truth, enabling us to see—perhaps for the first time—who we are and what we are to do. Such revelation occurs through the reading of a Scripture—here the narration of scenes, the clear pictures of concrete human history,

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that point not only to themselves but also to the power that "move[s] things apart or nearer."

A certain offense, however, may emerge in the revelation of stories. People in rooms may attract but also scandalize in the way that they are. The irritation of Flaubert's Emma at her husband, Charles, provides a memorable example:

She was increasingly annoyed with him in general. As he grew older his manners became cruder than ever: he whittled the corks of empty wine bottles at the end of the meal, he ran his tongue over his teeth after eating, he made a gulping sound each time he swallowed a spoonful of soup; and as he became fatter his eyes, already small, seemed to be pushed up toward his temples by the puffiness of his cheeks. . . . But it was especially at mealtimes that she felt she could bear her life no longer, in that little room on the ground floor with its smoking stove, squeaking door, sweating walls and damp stone floor. All the bitterness of life seemed to be served up to her on her plate, and as the steam rose from the boiled meat, waves of nausea rose from the depths of her soul. Charles was a slow eater; she would nibble a few hazelnuts, or lean on her elbow and idly make lines in the oilcloth with her knife.3

We stumble in stories, however, not just over the appearance of others. Because finally we are those "people in rooms," we trip over ourselves. One needs help to welcome the revelation of clear pictures.

II

To put the matter differently, we might ask, "Are clear pictures good?" Is there a sustaining help in what we see in focused images of human life; and, if so, how can we receive it when the same pictures also threaten and offend? The novels of Reynolds Price provide "clear pictures" no less than does his memoir. From his first novel, A Long and Happy Life, until the later Good Hearts, Price's fiction has offered scenes of human life in its poignancy and place.4 These two novels belong together in any reading of Price's works. Both stories focus upon the memorable characters Rosacoke Mustian and Wesley Beavers. Published when Price was 27 years old, A Long and Happy Life constitutes a young writer's viewing of this youthful couple as they take fragile but vital steps toward marriage. Published 28 years
later, *Good Hearts* finds Price looking in on Rosa and Wesley after the same time interval and with a sobriety that age affords. *A Long and Happy Life* poses a question that Price could not have answered at the time (and for the same reason he says that "a 'young novelist' is a contradiction in terms"); neither he nor his characters had lived long enough. *Good Hearts*, a story of maturity, begins to answer the youthful question.

*A Long and Happy Life* is Rosacoke's love story. The novel's denouement proceeds from the fact that Rosacoke has become pregnant with Wesley's child, the result of a disappointing love-making. At the moment of climax Wesley calls out a girl's name, but it is not Rosacoke's. Later, Wesley responds with duty:

"Listen here. We will drive to South Carolina tonight when the show is over. To Dillon. That's where everybody goes—you ain't got to wait for a license there. Then we can head on to Myrtle Beach if it ain't too cold and collect a few shells and get back here on Christmas Eve. O.K.? . . . Anyhow, we done this together and—"

Here the narrator breaks Wesley's sentence: "[Rosacoke] knew she could not bear the end of that [sentence], whatever it would be. They hadn't done *nothing* together." The act intended to hold Wesley had, in effect, now led her to question her desire and its basis. As she tells herself:

"Oh, I *held* the boy. But I don't want him now. All this time I have lived on the hope he would change some day before it was too late and come home and calm down and learn how to talk to me and maybe even listen, and we would have a long life together—him and me—and be happy sometimes and get us children that would look like him and have his name and answer when we called. I just hoped that. But he hasn't changed. He said he would ride me to Dillon tonight and take me to Norfolk after Christmas to spend my life shut up in a rented room while he sells motorcycles to fools—me waiting out my baby sick as a dog, eating Post Toasties and strong pork liver which would be all he could afford and pressing his shirts and staring out a window in my spare time at concrete roads and folks that look like they hate each other. He offered me
that. But that isn’t changing—not the way I hoped—so what I have done, I will sit home and pay for.”

Aware of the baby growing inside her and Wesley’s “unchanging” face, Rosacoke faces a disturbing aloneness.

It is nearly Christmas. Rosacoke goes to the Delight Baptist Church in Afton for the annual pageant. Ironically, she is to play the mother Mary and to hold in her arms, as baby Jesus, the eight-month-old Frederick Gupton; Wesley is one of the wise men, bearing a covered butter dish for his gift. During the pageant, Rosacoke’s convictions change or rather become truly clear to her. She receives the revelation of insight—a clear picture—among bathrobed Magi and a fussy infant who looks about as much like the Baby Jesus as does her brother Rato. She comes to see that her deepest need, consistently expressed in the desire for Wesley’s love, is to be known. She realizes the fulfillment of this need in two ways. First, during the procession of the Magi, Rosacoke comes literally face to face with Wesley, and meets the challenge of his gaze: “She stayed facing him. He held her like a chain. Then she drew one breath, hard, and said what she suddenly knew—to herself—what he had showed her, ‘Wesley knows me. After all Wesley knows me.’ And she knew that was her answer.”

If they had done nothing in the woods, here they have a different meeting, not of romance but of the simple claim of knowledge, given in the mirror of another’s eyes.

The baby Jesus, Frederick Gupton, reveals to her a second fulfillment of her need. Though lulled with paregoric, Frederick fusses and begins to reach out to Rosacoke, here no virgin statue for a crèche, but a warm, human being with the mystery of life within her. As the baby gums the bit of cambric just over her heart, she knows that she is not who Frederick thinks she is. But she also sees anew who she is and wills her maternity even as she accepts the hold of Frederick. Frederick, too, knows her and affirms her as one to be sought. Rosacoke’s acceptance encourages her will to be known. Her duty becomes her wish. She will go with Wesley to Dillon, after the Pageant. She knows her answer: “She had to speak it or drown, and who could she speak to but Frederick Gupton in her arms asleep? She bent again and touched his ear with her lips and said it to him, barely whispered it—‘Yes’—and wished him, silent, a long happy life.”

The wish culminates in question. The revelation of knowledge has enabled Rosacoke to commit herself to another and to receive
Wesley's dutiful offer. Knowledge has kindled hope for a long and happy life. But what of that future? Rosacoke and Wesley are persons of good heart. Can the knowledge of goodness in each other sustain the hope of a long life that is in any meaningful sense happy?

III

It is 28 years later—Christmas is again near at hand—when we meet Rosacoke and Wesley in Good Hearts. Rosacoke is now Rosa; she works as a secretary for the English Department at State. Wesley, "still the kind of man people watch," is a mechanic. They live in Raleigh. Their marriedness would be obvious even to the casual observer as would the goodness of their hearts.

The novel opens with a seemingly innocent scene of their ease in preparing for bed. Their ease, however, misleads—not only us, but Rosa, too:

She thought they were aging but content. . . . Wesley, though, at fifty, was in real pain. It had been part of him all his adult life, a way of walking into a day with a sense of happy blessing only to come up at four p.m. with his nose flat against a blank wall of defeat. Nowhere to go, no way back, no other human to turn to for help, nothing more awful than now except the risk of death.9

Morning does come: "With all the signs of their age plain to see, they'd come through again as what they'd been most days of their lives—people worth watching and hoping to know."10 Yet by sundown Wesley's pain will have driven him to flee without a word to anyone, a mystery to himself no less than to the wife he has left behind.

Wesley is a person of good heart:

It's been his plan since the dawn he was married to go to his grave with the same good woman he met as a boy—the woman that asked for his hand, both arms, and the rest of his life . . .

So Wesley was all but as shocked as she when, in late December, he found himself leave work one afternoon, stop by the bank, and draw two hundred dollars from the stainless-steel computer treasury. . . . Then he nosed through traffic to interstate 40 and didn't stop for coffee till five hours later on the far outskirts of Asheville in chill black mountains.11
He doesn't stop again until he locks the chain on room 1211 of the Parthenon Motel in Nashville.

He could not say what had flung him this far. It was nothing he could touch, no word he had said or heard from Rosa. No trouble with his son, none at the shop. And he'd lost all memory of last night's dream. He'd just been working that last afternoon and reached for a metric tool from his bench when his hard right hand stopped in midair. . . . [A] voice in his head said "Death is what you just reached for."12

No amount of goodness, knowledge, or duty could save him from this. Nor could the distraction of Wilson, an X-ray technician at Vanderbilt, a 26-year-old blonde with brown eyes "big enough and serious enough to stop a hot bull"13 give him more than temporary refuge from his predicament. As he writes Rosa from Nashville, "What it got down to was, I was a dead man. Everything I had ever loved to do, everything in me that I ever respected, seemed long gone."14 If not the reflections of a man in his fifties on mortality, Wesley's words show a struggle with the deadness of a life become sterile in the habit of its own everyday goodness. Created a special soul, he has become entwined "in vines strong enough to lock elephants."15 Wilson asks him the thing he's sorriest for. "I've thought that through," he replies. "I killed myself at age twenty-two."16 The knowledge of each other that had so beckoned Wesley and Rosacoke in A Long and Happy Life now seems only to portend death, at least for Wesley. He cries, "Merciful Lord, I am one scared man."17 In fear, he flees his life in a desperate attempt to avoid his death, the bondage he understands to have "nailed [his feet] to the floor since 1957, Christmas week."18

Wesley's departure from Raleigh leaves Rosa vulnerable but not in panic. She seeks to understand what has happened, chronicling her feelings and actions in a diary, in part out of the hope that Wesley will return and these days will not be lost to oblivion. The diary enables us to see the realities she is contending with and to know more than Wesley knows at this point in time. For instance, we know that on New Year's Eve a stranger breaks into Rosa's house, enters the bedroom where she is sleeping, and rapes her. She tells no one but her family and, in March, writes of it to Wesley, "by way of filling you in on friends and family, not as a set of warnings or threats or even prayers."19 In response, Wesley ends his exile. He turns toward Rosa's
house, unsure as yet, if it was in any sense a house which was also his home.

Wesley's turn begins with a sense of guilt. Driving east, he notes: "It hadn't crossed his mind that he'd be the cause, that his own fear of death and a cold soft peter might flush him off his sworn place strong at Rosa's side and leave her open to any hungry boy with the power of hate. Now it struck Wesley with the weight of a cold steel office-safe dropped on his head from a building at dawn." Yet, we know, and Wesley is beginning to suspect, that a sense of duty is no longer enough, if even welcome. The knowledge that animated their relationship in *A Long and Happy Life* has now been seen as a repetition which deadens as well as assures, which can suffocate in its claim or tedious. Would now be any different? If not, can Wesley fulfill the responsibility he senses is his? Does he know what went wrong so as to avoid its recurrence?

Wesley's heart is sufficiently good. But, if change is to occur, he needs insight, a revelation that does not transform the world but transforms his ability to welcome his place in it. Insight comes to Wesley from the wisdom of age, here mediated through conversation with his boss, Bronny. Sitting in the Top Hat Lounge, Bronny asks Wesley, "It looks like you're deep back in the groove and happy—am I wrong?" Wesley replies with characteristic honesty, "Bron, I left here feeling cold dead. I won't lie to you and say that's changed."

The perception that things have not really changed leads to a series of blustering confessions on Wesley's part: of unfulfilled "dreams old as [his] eyes, older than any ceil alive in [his] body"; of aiming high for happiness, but being unable to "face up to being grown"; of being unable to admit that he is normal, to sit back with his fine wife and count blessings once a year at Thanksgiving, because he "hurt[s] too goddamned much." Bronny answers with wisdom:

"I'm not exactly gliding on morphine. But hell, my mother warned me in the cradle. She said 'Ernest James, your dad and his brothers have ruined every woman's life that ever brushed past them. When you get grown enough to notice girls, remember your mother and let women be. They are just human beings, not angels in pearls. They can't make up to you for your bad luck. You'll be damned fortunate if you find one, in all your years, that can softboil an egg right four times in five—much less..."
mend your broke heart every night.' I remembered her too, every word all my life. It saved me a lot.”

Though these words do not strike Wesley as an epiphany, they will save him, like Bronny, a lot. Rosa’s mother, Emma, might say much the same: life does not drive to some “final gold-watch reward”; Jesus himself wouldn’t be her reward, only rest—a perception that lets life be with its plain truth, the relief that “all bets were off” and that “there was nothing else to come.” Emma knows that life need not be and cannot be any other than it is.

No prophet could have spoken more directly to Wesley’s predicament. He has lived as if all bets were on and that there must be more to come if his dreams of happiness are to be fulfilled. He has not let life be, and thus it has become only a source of death; he has not let women—Rosa—be, and thus she has become only a bondage that does not compensate for all his “bad luck” or unmended broken heart.

Does he trust the revealed wisdom? He appears to want to, as if it were the one thing left that might make a difference. When Rosa puts to him the question of whether he wants to go or stay, he now answers:

“Rosacoke, I think this is home. When I came back last month, I couldn’t say that. Tonight though I almost think I can. It don’t make me all that happy to admit it. It’s not the real best I’ve dreamed to have; and whether you believe it or not, I’ve dreamed. I know that can’t make you glad to hear. The trouble’s not you, not the main part at least. The trouble’s just life, the way it’s made and me made in it... I think—and hope—I can trim my sails and live like a human, not an angel on fire gazing off toward God.”

To let women be, to live like a human, not an angel on fire: this is what Wesley has not done. Out of exile and return, he has come to insight. He is right: the trouble’s not Rosa, but life, the peopled room within which he must live. Life’s peculiar condition tangles every gift with a loss. He will not win that one, by himself or with Rosa. But can he come to see as well that he may not have to win, that it is finally not life but his undying expectations of life that threaten his well-being? If he could let life be, might it become possible to share with Rosacoke the long and happy life desired 28 years ago, to live together in one room?
This has been our question: Is it possible to live a long and happy life? Are “clear pictures” good? *Good Hearts* acknowledges three answers which together provide Price’s response. First, we do not know and cannot say if Rosacoke’s wish is possible. What Rosacoke and Wesley begin in *A Long and Happy Life* is a risk, fraught with inevitable pain and unable to disclose its meaning until the long life has ended. What is for sure is that flight such as Wesley’s preempts the possibility of happiness. Second, we hear, “No, one cannot live a long and happy life”—at least not in the sense that Rosacoke and Wesley might have originally hoped. To cling to the expectation of unfettered happiness leads to profound unhappiness and the fearful condemnations that incite flight. But the third answer counters the first two: “Yes, one can live a long and happy life.” If life poses the problem it may also give the solution, provided one remains present to the demands and ambiguities of that life. To flee life because of death—the fearful misery of a dead heart—banishes one from one’s true place. Happiness emerges in the long haul of everyday existence when one lets life be what it is instead of insisting that it become what it is not, the mirror of our dreams. Concrete life yet sustains. It is not our home because it is good; it is good because it is our home.

At home together. There Price invites us to imagine Wesley and Rosacoke:

> Whatever the sky was—at least the cause of birth and death (all hardness and ease)—it had secretly honored the unlikely choice of two normal creatures to work again at a careful life. They could not know they were safe till their endings, which would be hard and slow a long way off. This modest house would be home till then. It had room enough for the small calm pleasures that would not be rare. They would live here till death. Death would find them with ease.  

Their legacy Price aptly described elsewhere: “The world exists. It is not yourself. Plunge in it for healing, blessed exhaustion, and the risk of warmth.”
Notes

5. Price, Mustian, 342.
6. Ibid., 348-9.
7. Ibid., 360.
8. Ibid.
10. Ibid., 7.
11. Ibid., 55-56.
12. Ibid., 56-57.
13. Ibid., 64.
14. Ibid., 74.
15. Ibid., 63.
16. Ibid., 67.
17. Ibid., 59.
18. Ibid., 67.
19. Ibid., 148.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., 199.
22. Ibid., 199, 201.
23. Ibid., 201.
24. Ibid., 256-7.
26. Ibid., 275.
Lucy Lind Hogan

Wrestling with the World: Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians

Introduction

As the Christmas hustle and bustle give way to "winter blahs" punctuated by illness and bad weather, there is often a sense of nothing happening except work and school. There are no holidays, no vacations, nothing to which one can look forward. We settle into the ordinariness of life. During this period before we move into Lent, the Gospel readings contemplate the extraordinary fleshed in the ordinary in Jesus and people's reactions to this man from Galilee. Following the story of his baptism in the river Jordan, we hear of Jesus' preaching, teaching, and healing, as well as the stories in which he called his disciples. These lessons all explore the identity of the baby born in Bethlehem, of the man baptized by John, and of the one who called women and men to follow him. Who was he? By what authority did he speak? What would it mean to follow?

Throughout Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth, similar questions are considered: Who was Jesus? Why should we follow him? What does it mean to be a Christian? What can we do? What should we not do? Though converted to Christianity, the Corinthians were filled with questions and discord. In his letter to them, Paul

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responds to their questions and concerns and seeks to shore up a community faltering under the weight of societal pressures and internal conflict.

The Corinthians sound uncomfortably like many congregations that we know. In this "love" letter, Paul encourages the Corinthians to live the new life of harmony and service that they have received through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In doing so, he also encourages the descendants of the Corinthians, we who continue to falter.

This letter presents a challenge to any preacher not anxious to preach about abstaining from marriage, refraining from meat that has been sacrificed to idols (certainly not a pressing problem in contemporary North American society), or answering the call to become slaves. But as foreign as many of these issues seem to us, immersing oneself in Paul's letter demonstrates how current his responses are. Once one moves beneath the various presenting problems, one discerns that the Corinthians' questions are our questions as well. Therefore, during this "ordinary" time of life, living in the dimming glow of Christmas while spring and Easter seem like impossibilities, we ponder who it is we follow and how.

Reading Other People's Mail

Amidst the clutter of my storeroom are small boxes containing the letters my husband and I wrote to each other during long periods of separation. His first year of medical school was my last year of college. After we were married, his schooling and naval service meant that we were frequently apart for weeks or months. The convenience of long-distance calling and e-mail would now put us a moment away, but 25 years ago daily letters were the only way that we could economically continue to weave the connections of our lives.

Each evening I would write a letter recounting the activities of the day. After our son was born, my letters kept my husband apprised of the development of his baby, whom he missed terribly. I saved those letters because they remind me of who we were and how much we meant to each other. We poured out our joys and excitement as well as the pain and loneliness of separation. However, because of their personal nature, I am unwilling to let anyone else read the letters.

Several questions confront the Christian community as it
approaches Paul’s letters. After all, we are reading someone else’s mail. What’s more, the letters were written almost two thousand years ago. Paul was writing to a particular community, at a particular time, with very particular concerns and questions. What, if any, connection will his responses have for a North American congregation that has just entered a new millennium? Is it fair for us to rummage through the boxes in the Corinthians’ storeroom and read their treasured letters? Before we turn to the letter, therefore, a couple of hermeneutical questions must be answered: Do Paul’s responses apply to the twenty-first-century church? Can, and should, we continue to allow his counsel to shape our lives?

As the nascent church gathered the writings that it hoped would shape its future, they realized that Paul’s letters spoke to persons beyond the particular community for which they had been intended. They understood it was crucial that we, the church, read and reread someone else’s mail. Throughout the intervening centuries, therefore, Christians have continued to turn to the church’s first pastoral theologian, bringing to him the uncertainties and confusion that continue to arise as the church searches for a path through the world.

Unfortunately we have only one side of the conversation. We can only surmise by reading between the lines what the concerns and disagreements of the Corinthians were. Moreover, although we recognize that Paul’s wisdom transcends his own time and place, we also know that reading his letters requires interpretation and translation. The concerns of the Corinthians are not our concerns. Their culture is not our culture. The church is now, and always has been, grounded in a particular time and place. We bring that grounding to our reading. We must weigh Paul’s words carefully, listening for the wisdom and love that is expressed in, through, and in spite of the cultural presuppositions of first-century Corinth.

Growing Apart

Being apart is difficult, whether it is the separation of husband and wife, or of church and pastor. In spite of the separation, life goes on. Experiences, encounters, questions, and conflicts continue to shape the separated persons as they respond and change. While time apart can strengthen the separated persons, it can also cause those who once walked the same path to diverge on different roads.

WRESTLING WITH THE WORLD
Paul's journey led him to Corinth in about 49 or 50 C.E. It was a meeting of two parties that had experienced great upheaval in their lives. Fifteen years earlier, Paul had undergone a conversion in which he left behind his identity as a Jewish Roman citizen to become an apostle of the Christ whom he had persecuted. But Corinth was a city of its own upheavals.

Situated at an important crossroads on the major east-west trade route, Corinth was a relatively new community. Although it had been an important Greek center of commerce and athletics, hosting the biennial Isthmian games, it had been captured and destroyed by a Roman army in 146 B.C.E. In 44 B.C.E., the city was given new life as a Roman city populated largely by former slaves. Roman freedmen came looking for economic opportunities and social advancement. In this Roman outpost they could hope to achieve social standing that would have been unthinkable in Rome. The grandchildren and great-grandchildren of freed slaves were the ones who would listen to Paul's urging to become "slaves" for Christ.

In this city that was a mixture of Greek and Roman cultures, Paul sought to establish a community built upon Jewish foundations. Although there was a small Jewish community in Corinth, the majority of the Christians at Corinth were not Jewish. The new Corinthian Christians had formerly worshiped Greek and Roman gods and goddesses. Therefore, Paul faced the challenge of taking these people with a Gentile worldview through an understanding of the Jewish worldview to a new Christian world.

Paul spent about 18 months working in Corinth. By day he supported himself as a tentmaker—an unusual occupation for someone the Corinthians thought of as a teacher and philosopher. Nevertheless, Paul thought that it was important to ask this new church to support him only through their prayers and fellowship.

The community met in the homes of its members. At the outset, there were no buildings, no hierarchy, no established way of doing things. As a mission community, they gathered in groups of 30 to 50 around a common meal—men and women, rich and poor, slave and free. Scholars tell us that there were probably several of these house communities, which meant that each house church followed different leaders and developed different practices—a recipe for disputes and disagreements. While the community seemed to have little contact or disagreement with the Jewish community in Corinth, the letter indicates that the socioeconomic diversity of the church, with its
mixing of slaves and the wealthy, the "haves" and the "have-nots," became increasingly a problem after Paul left.

Paul traveled from Corinth to Ephesus, where he wrote the letter between 53 and 55 C.E. During the years since Paul had left, the community changed, and not always for the better. Without Paul's strong hand to guide and constrain them, the new Christians found themselves diverging from the direction Paul had established them in. Many were concerned with how they were growing apart. As a result, two things happened. First, a contingent of "Chloe's people" traveled to Ephesus to inform Paul of the situation. They were troubled by the presence of disunity and dissension in the community. Paul then received a letter from the church describing problems with sexual immorality, legal disputes, abuses of the Lord's Supper, theological controversies, and other specific issues. Should Christians be allowed to eat meat sacrificed to idols, as some were doing? Should betrothed couples marry? Time and separation from Paul had brought the community to this moment of crisis. Although he realized that it would eventually be necessary for him to return to Corinth, Paul wrote this letter in order to prevent the church from disintegrating.

Paul: The Pastoral Theologian

Before we turn to the specific portions of the letter that are in the lectionary, a brief overview of the letter and of the theological issues raised by Paul may be helpful. After a salutation and call for unity (clearly an issue of supreme importance to Paul), he first addresses the issues brought to him by Chloe's people. Chapters 5 and 6 deal with community discipline. He then turns in chapters 7 through 15 to the various issues and questions that have been raised in the letter sent to him by the church at Corinth.

The issues and questions that have been brought to Paul seem relatively inconsequential. In a time before persecution of Christians had begun, Paul was not asked to make judgments about people who have abandoned their faith to avoid death or who have betrayed fellow Christians, sending them to their deaths. Rather, the questions have to do with mundane issues: what to eat, if or when to marry, and how to support the preachers. Nevertheless, Paul did not dismiss the questions. In each question he saw an opportunity to explore more fully who Christ is and what his claim is on our lives. Paul wrote not
as a systematic theologian or ethicist but as a pastoral theologian seeking to connect the gospel message with the daily life of the congregation. He was most interested in forming community and helping these new Christians understand what it means to live lives centered in God and respectful and responsible to one another.

January 16, 2000—Second Sunday after Epiphany
1 Corinthians 6:12-20
1 Sam. 3:1-20
Ps. 139:1-6, 13-18
John 1:43-51

I was recently driving behind a dirty car with a bumper sticker that announced, "If It’s Not Fun, Why Do It?" Clearly this person did not think that washing cars was fun. I began to think about how much of life is not fun; but part of growing up means learning to do both the fun and the "not-fun." Conveying that lesson has been one of the hardest parts of being a parent. Teaching your children that work can be fun requires reorienting your thinking.

A major theme in the first letter to the Corinthians has to do with reorienting your thinking. Paul had grown up in the Jewish-Roman world. Those cultures provided him with the way that he thought, acted, made decisions, and worshiped. When he was in that world, people shared the "language" of stories, values, and assumptions. When he moved into the Gentile world of Corinth, he had to learn a new "language." Moses, the Exodus, the Covenant, the Law had no meaning for these people. Likewise, what had been accepted as permitted or prohibited in the world of the Roman Jew did not necessarily apply in this new world. Paul could not assume that he and the new Corinthian Christians were, to borrow a contemporary phrase, "on the same page." Paul had to make a major effort in his preaching and in writing this letter to ensure that everyone was on that same page. He had to understand why people were doing what they were doing, or not doing, and then help them to see their identity and actions in a new way. Paul sought what Richard Hays describes as a "conversion of the imagination."

These are the same issues and constraints that confront preachers today. People do not know the stories. They do not "speak" Christian. These concerns become particularly important if a church is con-
sidering a “seekers” or “seeker-friendly” service. People may have seen the movies *The Ten Commandments* or *The Prince of Egypt*, but they will not necessarily have the understanding that those stories are their stories.

The letter gives us the sense that Paul’s preaching must have included frequent references to the freedom we gain when we are baptized into Christ. By participating in the death and resurrection of Christ we are freed from bondage to the Law and sin. Christian *eleutheros*—freedom—meant that Christians were not bound by the cultural constraints that separated one from another. Whether one had been born a Roman, a Greek, or a Jew, born slave or free, born male or female, all could enter into this new way of living. All were sisters and brothers in Christ.

Freedom is an important theme in this letter, but did Paul and the Corinthians understand freedom to mean the same thing? The Corinthians knew about freedom. Their grandparents and great-grandparents had been slaves who had won or purchased their freedom. Living in Corinth meant freedom and opportunities not possible in Rome. It meant jobs, social mobility, and status. But clearly the Corinthians did not perceive freedom as liberation from the Jewish law. They had never lived under that law.

Chloe’s people had informed Paul that some in the community understood freedom to mean release from all constraints. As long as they worshiped with the community, they were free to eat whatever they wished and to engage in any kind of behavior, including visiting prostitutes.

In the lessons appointed for the second Sunday after Epiphany, two of the lessons—the Hebrew Scripture and the Gospel passage—can be viewed from the seeker’s point of view. Eli prepared Samuel to hear God’s message; likewise, Philip urged Nathaniel, “Come and see.” Paul, on the other hand, wrote for believers. The Corinthians were prepared for God’s presence in their lives. They had answered God’s call, but now Paul must help them to understand what freedom in Christ looks like and what a Christian’s relationship to the world is to be once one has answered God’s call.

While on the surface the controversy seems to be about sexual impropriety, the issue goes much deeper. Paul sought to show his friends that a Christian’s relationship both to God and to one another is at stake. This text is about community and our responsibility to one another, not just about “behaving.” That is why it is so important that
when we preach on this text, we emphasize the communal nature of even the most private of our behavior. To do so will not be popular in today’s moral climate. During the Clinton impeachment hearings I heard people who were angered by the president’s behavior nevertheless proclaim that it was “none of our business. It was private, not public, behavior, between him and Hillary.”

Did the people of Corinth think that it was wrong to visit a prostitute? Perhaps it was accepted and expected. Earlier in its history, before it was destroyed by the Romans, Corinth had been an infamous port town. In fact, one of the Greek words for fornicate was based on its name, korinthiazesthai.

What does freedom in Christ look like? Does it matter what we do, in public and in private? Are there things that Christians may not do, even though they are “free”? Freedom, Paul writes, does not mean being separated and independent from other people. Quite the contrary was true for Paul, who frequently in the letter employed the metaphor of the church as a body. Freedom in Christ means being intimately, almost physically, connected to the others who make up the body of Christ. Paul understood that in the act of physical love two bodies are joined and they become one body. Likewise, Paul wrote, “Anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him” (v. 17). Consequently, to put it baldly, if a Christian visits a prostitute, the whole church visits her! The actions of one affect the actions of the whole.

When Paul discovered that the Christians in Corinth were behaving no differently than the “pagans,” Paul did not just shake his finger reprimanding them, “Don’t do that. Behave.” Rather he sought to move people toward a “conversion of the imagination.” He engaged them, opposing their arguments about the rights and freedoms of individuals with the contrasting understanding of devotion and service to God and the church: “‘All things are lawful for me’ [said some of the Corinthians] but not all things are beneficial [said Paul]” (v. 12a). Christian freedom means the freedom to break down walls that separate us from each other. It means caring about and feeling responsible for others, not moving through life thinking that we have no constraints and are not responsible to anyone but God.

The issue that lies at the heart of this question has profound significance for people today. While I was in the midst of writing this section the United States was rocked by a terrible tragedy. We were hearing daily about the atrocities visited upon the people of Kosovo. Images of brutality, mayhem, and death in that far country filled the
television screen. Suddenly that brutality, mayhem, and death were right in our own backyard. Children were killing children in a high school in Colorado. We struggle to understand how people could have such hate, such anger, such disdain for their fellow classmates and teachers that they would seek to destroy the entire school.

Since its birth as a new nation, the United States has struggled to understand who is free and what it means to say we are free. Does the color of one’s skin or the birthplace of one’s ancestors "entitle" one to enslavement? Does freedom of the press mean that you can print any lie or slander that you wish? Does freedom of speech mean that you can scream messages of hate at the top of your lungs? And what happens when the freedom to bear arms means picking up those arms and murdering your classmates as they cower under library tables?

Freedom demands great responsibility. Paul was seeking to help the Corinthians understand how far-reaching that responsibility was. To be freed from death through the death of Christ Jesus meant that one no longer had to worry about what or when to eat. One was freed from those concerns so that one could become even more intimately involved in the lives of the other children of God.

To have a free press means having the responsibility to uncover and expose injustice and oppression. To have free speech means to speak words of encouragement and comfort. School classmates are to be supported, not murdered. Life, Paul tells us, is to be lived, not disdained. New life in Christ does not mean rejecting the “flesh and bloodness” of life. Rather, Christian freedom means honoring our bodies and the bodies of everyone else whom God loves passionately.

January 23, 2000—Third Sunday after Epiphany
1 Corinthians 7:29-31
Jon. 3:1-5, 10
Ps. 62:5-12
Mark 1:14-20

Time is on everyone’s mind as the 1900s give way to the 2000s. (I am not getting into the debate about whether the new millennium begins in 2000 or 2001!) The major capitals of the world are swathed in scaffolding as historic buildings are cleaned and polished to celebrate the year in style. Very early on, we were informed that if we had not already made our New Year’s reservations at the best restaurants and
best hotels, we would be spending New Year’s Eve at home. It looks like I will have spent New Year’s Eve at home!

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth only about 30 years after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. Paul and the church lived in constant anticipation of Jesus’ return at any moment. But as the years passed and life went on, people gradually realized that perhaps the eschaton, the last days, were not as imminent as they had thought. Still, many in the church felt that surely the time would be soon when Jesus would return in glory and majesty and usher in the end of the world.

Our second millennial change revived the notion that “the present form of this world is passing away” (7:31b). We had been urged to buy vast supplies of food and water. We were to hoard money, guns, and gasoline because January 1, 2000, would bring widespread collapse and catastrophe. But the source of such destruction was to be not God Almighty but rather the omnipresent computer, which would become confused and return its calendar to the year 1900. While we might be tempted to return to a simpler, more manageable time, it was still highly unlikely that life as we know it would grind to a halt permanently. After a brief disruption, we should be back in the swim of things trying to figure out what it means to be a child of God seeking to help bring in the reign of God.

The lessons for this third Sunday after Epiphany are about living out God’s call in human time and God’s time. The word came to Jonah to “Go at once to Nineveh” (Jon. 1:2a). Jonah recognized clearly that it was God who was calling him. He also recognized the consequences of what God was calling him to do. As many of us have done, Jonah turned and went the other way. In the Gospel lesson, Jesus called Simon Peter and Andrew to drop what they were doing and come and follow him.

There is always a sense of urgency in God’s call. Don’t worry about tying up loose ends or completing projects before setting off on God’s mission because ultimately they won’t matter. Everything is coming to an end. It will all be changed. God was going to destroy Nineveh unless Jonah delivered his message, so it shouldn’t have mattered if his checkbook was balanced and e-mail messages had been returned. Likewise, Mark tells us that just before calling Peter and Andrew, Jesus announced, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1:15a). We are living on borrowed time, in God’s time. To think any other way is to deceive ourselves. Jonah learned
what that meant. Simon and Andrew came to understand. Paul was trying to help the church in Corinth understand that "the present form of this world is passing away" (v. 31b).

Growing up in the 1950s and 1960s gave us a sense of living on borrowed time. Clearly visible on the walls of my elementary school were the yellow and black air-raid-shelter signs. Daily I was reminded that nuclear destruction could come at any moment. This fear was heightened by the "duck and cover" drills. We laugh now when we see the films of children scrambling under their desks. We were to shut our eyes, clasp our hands behind the backs of our heads, and cover our ears with our arms so that the light and sound of the blast would not destroy our sight or hearing. I think we always guessed that if the blast was close enough to see and hear it really wouldn't matter whether we were at or under our desks. The nuclear standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union meant that we lived every day under the shadow of annihilation.

Paul understood what it means to live in God's time, not human time. Things that are so consuming, like marriage, social position, or even religious affiliation, did not matter in the reign of God. In this week's brief passage from 1 Corinthians 7, Paul tells us not to pay attention to our marriages, our emotional state, or our business affairs. The time is so short, he wrote; don't waste your time on them. That is going to be a hard message to sell in most churches today!

But this demonstrates one of the problems with reading only portions of Scripture during a worship service. If we read only verses 29-31 of chapter 7 of Paul's letter, then that is exactly what he seems to be saying. In fact, though, he was not calling for husbands and wives to abandon their spouses. Nor was he saying not to grieve for those who have died. Rather, we need to read what comes just before this portion.

While he was with the Corinthians, Paul had taught them that time was running out. Jesus would be returning soon. Many of the Corinthians wanted to live lives that were clear and spotless. They interpreted that as meaning they should abstain not only from visiting prostitutes but also from any sexual relations, even if they were married. Reading between the lines indicates that some were teaching that one should not marry; and if you were married, you should become celibate even in your marriage. Clearly it also bothered some of the Christians that their family members had not accepted Jesus. What should they do?
Paul’s message is that you should stay where you are and keep doing what you are doing. If you aren’t married, don’t get married. If you are engaged, go through with the wedding. If you are married, stay married in the fullest sense of the word. Don’t worry if your spouse or children are not Christians. Don’t leave them; they will “catch” the holiness of God from you. Paul was not telling them to neglect or abandon their loved ones. Rather, he was telling them to put their lives in perspective.

Paul’s advice proves troubling at times. There are many times when we must accept the status quo, recognizing there is nothing we can do to change a difficult situation. However, Paul seems to tell us to accept our lot in life whatever it is, even if we are enslaved or in an abusive marriage. In fact, as we will note later, Paul urges us to become like a slave so that we can serve others. Not only is this language offensive, but the implications of being a slave pose a problem for a church that still bears the scars of human slavery. While Paul used the word, **doulos**, meaning “one in bondage” and translated in the NRSV as “slave,” it can also be translated as “servant.” This may prove less offensive. Paul believed that the end time was coming so quickly that if one were a slave, it would be for only a short time longer. By no means was he seeking to give permission for one group of people to enslave another.

God is doing great things in our lives; and we must realize that God is in charge, not we. However, we must become alert and attentive to what God is doing. Too often we become distracted and consumed by the affairs of our personal lives. We must make sure that these things do not send us off on the wrong path, away from our life in Christ. To become consumed by our daily affairs means that we are allowing ourselves to become consumed by things that are “passing away.”

Unfortunately, we are brought up short by the transitoriness of life. Earlier I mentioned the tragedies in Kosovo and Colorado. While those disasters attract national and international attention, we all daily experience loss and affliction. One of my favorite collects in the *Book of Common Prayer* reminds us that we are inevitably faced with the “changes and chances of this mortal life.” Paul’s eschatological vision may have been inaccurate, but his message that the “present form of this world is passing away” proves correct every day. To “hold on to” or control that “present form” will prove disastrous.

Living into God’s love and care, trusting God, and answering God’s call, we will find abundant life. Everything is temporary and
incomplete, awaiting God’s completion. This is an important theme throughout the letter. When one has accepted Christ and has been baptized into this new life, one is not “finished.” Paul does not tell us that we have been saved; rather, we “are being saved” (1:18b). Conversion is a process. We grow into Christ. Whether we are married, whether we are a servant, whether we are a Jew does not matter so much as where we are going and what we will be doing as we live into “being saved.” The message of Genesis is that God did not make the world instantly. God did not say, “Let there be everything.” Rather, light, earth, sky, waters, sun, moon, plants, animals, birds, people, came about slowly and deliberately. So it is with our life in Christ. We are slowly molded into this new life, testing and being tested as we seek to understand and trust.

January 30, 2000—Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
1 Corinthians 8:1-13
Deut. 18:15-20
Ps. 111
Mark 1:21-28

Abortion, homosexuality, and women’s ordination are only a few of the issues that challenge the unity of the church. However, whether one may eat *eidolothutos*—food that was sacrificed to idols—usually does not engender heated debates or letters to the editor. This portion in the letter demonstrates that one must always be attentive to context when reading Paul.

Imagine if we were walking down the street in Corinth. Many of the roads would be lined with small temples and shrines to the numerous Roman and Greek gods and goddesses. In those temples and shrines it was the custom to offer foods and to sacrifice and roast meats to the gods. When their religious purposes were completed, the foods would be sold in the market. Frequently, wealthy Corinthians would host dinner parties in the temple in thanksgiving for something the god had done. To be invited to one of these parties was a sign of one’s upward social mobility. To eat that food offered to the idol not only thanked the god but was the first-century equivalent of “networking” at the golf club. But *eidolothutos* is only the “outward and visible sign” of a deeper issue—Christian arrogance.

To whom do we listen? What voices in the culture, the marketplace,
the community, or the church convince and convict us? Who is most influential and compelling? I am often disturbed at how fickle I can be. I am amazed at my ability to agree with whomever I am listening to at the moment. I can read one book and agree with it; and then I read another, whose author is diametrically opposed to the previous author, and find that I agree with that person.

The passage from Deuteronomy makes it clear that we should listen to some people because God has raised them up and put the very words in their mouths. God has a message for the people and seeks many different ways to make sure that message is heard. Jesus was the word of God incarnate. His authority was abundantly clear to those who heard him teach and saw him heal.

During the season after the feast of Epiphany, the manifestation of God, we are reflecting upon the ways that God is manifest in our lives and upon God’s authority. This period opens with the Baptism of Jesus with the recognition, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11b). And later, when this admonition reappears at the Transfiguration, which closes the season after Epiphany, God commands us to “listen to him!” (Mark 9:7b).

To whom do we listen? When Paul lived and worked among the Corinthians, they listened to and respected him. However, Paul had been gone for over a year. While the Corinthians continued to meet and worship together, the echoes of Paul’s preaching were drowned out by the demands of work, local customs, and social constraints. They remembered what Paul had taught them, but his lessons were reshaped and contorted by the requirements of the marketplace. They began to listen more to the message of the world.

While Paul had preached a message of equality in Christ, living in a world that was clearly not equal strained relationships. Some Christians were wealthy and others were still slaves. In their day-to-day lives these people would interact only as superior and inferior. To sit together at a common table during weekly worship was a significant change. Possibly, part of the strain surrounding the eating of food offered to idols had to do with class differences. Even though Paul had taught that Christians did not have to observe any dietary laws and that we are “no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do” (8:8b), food continued to be a point of friction. That friction arose not out of concern for physically ingesting the food but out of the class distinction that it demonstrated. The wealthy were able to buy meat in
the market and were invited to eat at the temple dinners. Eating that meat was both a sign of freedom and a demonstration that one had money and status. On Sunday they listened to Paul's message of equality, but Monday through Saturday they listened to their friends.

Wealth and social standing were not the only things that separated the Corinthian Christians. As he does in other portions of the letter, Paul draws the competition's own claims into the text to serve as his argumentative foil. For some, eating this food was a way that they "flaunted" their freedom. They realized that they had been given the gift of divine gnosis-knowledge—"all of us possess knowledge" (v. 18). Through this gnosis they realized that they were not bound by irrelevant and archaic restrictions. Knowledge gave them the freedom to eat whatever they wanted whenever they wanted. They knew that since there was only one God and that idols had no real existence, this eidolothutos was ordinary food, like any other food sold in the market. Unfortunately, many of their Christian brothers and sisters could not get past the fact that it had been sacrificed in the temples. It bothered them, and they were offended.

In addressing this situation, Paul has to address two concerns. First is to disabuse the Corinthians that they will find their way to God only through knowledge. Knowledge, in and of itself, does not lead to God. While it is important to learn about God and our faith, knowledge has the potential to "puff up," making us arrogant and self-centered. Throughout the letter Paul is reminding the Corinthians that the present is transitory and incomplete. The present age is passing away and all knowledge that we have is incomplete: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly. . . . Now I know only in part" (13:12). There will come a time when we will be fully known and we will know fully, but that time is up to God, not up to us. We can never "learn" enough to find our way to God. Rather we find our way to God because God loves us and we love God.

This is a difficult lesson with which I wrestle. After years of school and spending my days teaching and writing for seminarians and pastors, the accusation that knowledge only "puffs up" cuts me to the quick. Knowledge is very important to me. I have dedicated my ministry to imparting knowledge. Is Paul telling me that I should quit my job? I don't think so. Rather, he is telling us that if knowledge is used in such a way that it offends and alienates, then it is wrong.

The other concern troubling Paul was that there were Christians
in Corinth who were not considering the sensibilities of their fellow Christians. There is strength in knowing that eating certain foods and abstaining from others will not bring us closer to God. In the process of conversion, some are farther along in their journey than others. But if the knowledge and freedom one attains in Christ are used to alienate other Christians, that knowledge and freedom become destructive.

In my preaching classes I often use the image of one car following another. When you are the preacher, you know where you are going, the final destination, and how you are going to get there. The congregation is like someone following behind you in another car. We then think of all the things the lead driver can and cannot do to make sure that the cars stay together. You need to signal your turns. You can’t race through yellow lights, and you must always keep checking in your rearview mirror to make sure the other driver is with you.

Paul tells us that on the Christian journey we can never get too far ahead of our brothers and sisters. If we “eat eidolothutos” and they interpret our actions as worshiping idols rather than as freedom, we may cause them to lose their way. If they are new to the journey and weak, they may be tempted to go back to their old life, losing their freedom. Our freedom means nothing if our brothers and sisters are not free.

Paul then introduced an important idea that is developed more fully in the next lectionary reading. As Christians we are free, but in order to bring others along the journey we may have to give up some of those freedoms. To continue the car metaphor, we may need to get out of our own car and get into the car with the other person. Knowing that eating certain foods would offend some people, Paul decided that he had to watch what he ate at all times. Throughout the chapter he has spoken about eating eidolothutos, the food offered in the temple. But at the end of chapter 8, Paul wrote that he will never eat broma “so that I may not cause one of them to fall” (v. 13). Broma is not food that has been offered to idols; rather, it refers to all solid food. Paul came to understand that Christ calls us to give up our liberty, our freedom, our superiority, our strength in order to reach out to the weak. We do not want to break a bruised reed or quench a dimly burning wick. For the sake of the weak we are to become weak. Paul will take this up more fully in the next chapter.
February 6, 2000—Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
1 Corinthians 9:16-23
Isa. 40:21-31
Ps. 147:1-11, 20c
Mark 1:29-39

In the nineteenth century, Christian women continued to bend under the restriction that they could not preach the gospel. Their hearts had been set on fire with the love of God, but the constraints of society, the rules of the church, and the weight of tradition told them that they would have to keep the good news to themselves. Women were to be silent in public and church.

Numerous women in many different denominations could keep silent no longer. They spoke out in churches themselves and sought to open a space for their sisters. One of those women was Phoebe Palmer, who, in 1859, wrote The Promise of the Father. Phoebe, a loyal Methodist, had come to understand that one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit given on the day of Pentecost, was the promise that men and women were to announce to the world the good news of what God had done in Christ Jesus. But the church had committed the sin of silencing women and was suffering for that sin. The time had come for the church to repent and open its heart and mind to hear these long-silent daughters. Throughout her text she included the testimony of women who grieved for their silence. Unlike voting, these women did not see preaching as a right to be won or a privilege to be achieved; rather preaching was something that God was commanding them to do. They were in pain because they could not respond to that call. They frequently quoted Paul's lament, "An obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!" (v. 16b).

When he was knocked off his horse and struck blind, Paul was given a great gift that carried with it a great cost. Unlike the great teachers and philosophers of the day who made money and fame through their skill and intellect, Paul saw his preaching as a commission given to him by God. He was accountable to God, and from God he would win his reward. But reading between the lines seems to indicate that not only were the people in Corinth questioning Paul's teachings, they were also questioning Paul himself. Why should they continue to listen to and follow him?

At the opening of chapter 9, Paul set before his readers his
credentials: "Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?" (v. 1). They were to listen to him because he had answered the call of Jesus. He spoke out of that call, not out of his brilliance and reason. Paul then went on to offer further proof. Unlike other preachers, he did not even ask that he be supported financially. He was willing to give up everything, even the job security that he was entitled to: "The Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel" (v. 14). He wanted nothing to stand between the Corinthians and God.

All throughout the letter Paul explored the nature of Christian freedom. *Eleutheros,* liberty, was the word that meant one was free to travel wherever one wished, free from restraints and obligations. It was the word applied to slaves who had been freed by their masters. The master gave money to a temple treasury, and the slave was "purchased" by the god. Once a slave had been purchased, he or she was the property of the god and could never be enslaved again. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, Christians had been freed from slavery to the world and could never be enslaved again—unless they chose to become like slaves.

Kenneth Burke, a twentieth-century philosopher and literary critic, has helped us to understand that a major reason why we listen to a speaker and agree to do or go where he or she asks is because we identify with that person. We accept the speaker because he or she "seems to be just like us." When a male politician campaigns in New York City, he is most likely to appear in a three-piece suit, white shirt, and conservative tie. Then, when that same politician travels to Iowa or Nebraska, the suit is likely to be replaced by casual slacks and a flannel shirt. Why? He wants to appear to be "one of the boys."

To live into the incarnation is to humble ourselves and "become all things to all people" (v. 22b). In the letter to the Philippians, Paul proclaims that "Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave . . . humbled himself and became obedient unto death—even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:5-8). To answer the call of Christ was to answer the call to empty oneself. To accept the commission to preach the gospel was to become an obedient slave, obedient to the God who had purchased his freedom. To preach the gospel meant to identify with Jews, Greeks, the strong, and the weak. Paul challenges us to do the same.

But I must add a word of caution here. Note that Paul opens the
chapter by declaring that he is free. It is one thing to be free and to choose to become obedient and to serve others. And it is another thing if one group of people oppresses and enslaves another group of people, using the excuse that to serve God means to be a humble slave. It should be only our God who "enslaves" us in a divine freedom, not human authority. Out of his strength and freedom Paul could become weak. Phoebe Palmer and all of her sisters wanted to experience the freedom of Christ that would allow them to choose to become weak.

As we proclaim the gospel, why should people listen to us? This becomes a crucial question as the church moves into the next millennium. For centuries we assumed that people would listen to us because "we are the church." Is that enough? What about people for whom that carries no weight or has no meaning? Paul needed to gain the trust and support of the people, and that is no less important for us. We have the good news, but we must win people over before they will hear it.

Epilogue

In many ways, the situation of the Corinthians was very similar to ours as we enter the twenty-first century. Unlike Jewish Christians who had often experienced themselves as sojourners or "resident aliens," the gentile Christians in Corinth were very comfortable in the world they inhabited. Many of them were successful and affluent. They were not singing their songs in a strange land, and neither the Exodus nor the Exile were their stories. They were not persecuted or imprisoned. Their parents and grandparents had founded the city and they continued to contribute to its prosperity.

Throughout his letter, therefore, Paul was reinforcing his message that in being born again as Christians the Corinthians had found themselves to be aliens in the world. Those in the world choose death over life, oppression over liberation, estrangement over equality. While he was not teaching that they separate themselves from the world, he was preaching that they understand that their ways were not the world's ways.

In this, Paul's message for us is as current and crucial as it was for the Corinthians. We North American Christians have grown comfortable with our world and are often hesitant to speak out. As
Walter Brueggemann notes, we need to be converted to "an alternative sense of God, world, neighbor, and self." By looking beneath the discussions of idol food, visits to prostitutes, and whether or not to get married, Paul sought to lead the Corinthians and all who followed after them to this alternative sense. Paul seeks to convert our imaginations to know a God who loves and forgives us and calls us to love and forgive our neighbor, living into a freedom that makes it possible for us to become servants to one another.

Bibliography


Notes

Correction

Quarterly Review wishes to acknowledge and correct a number of errors that, despite our diligence, still managed to escape the editorial eye. The errors appeared in the previous issue (Summer, 1999, Vol. 19, No. 2) in the QR Lectionary Study, titled "See the Salvation of YHWH: Lectionary Studies in Exodus," by Nancy R. Bowen.

The corrected sentences read as follows:

1. "The first to appear is a form of nsl, which occurs in Exodus 3:8." (p. 196)
2. "The most common word in the lectionary texts (3:8, 10, 11, 12) is a form of yj'." (p. 196)
3. "The last word is yf', which occurs in 14:30." (p. 196)
4. "God comes down 'to deliver' (nsl) Israel from Pharaoh. . . . In this instance, nsl is an excellent word choice." (p. 204)
5. "Are we going to assume the fortunes of liberation without [not "while"] being burdened with the guilt of the aftermath of our liberation?" (p. 205)
6. "Although there are numerous homiletical possibilities for this verse alone, I want to focus on the way this response uses one of the words for liberation, yf'." (p. 214)
7. "... the root yd' is the root that is most commonly rendered in English as 'salvation.'" (p. 214)
8. "You will need to decide if the nsv is correct in its understanding of the meaning of yd'." (p. 214)

We apologize to Dr. Bowen and to the readers for these oversights.
—The Editor
Quarterly Review is a publication of The United Methodist Publishing House and the United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry.