



STILL DARING
TO HOPE

JOHN REGEHR

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FOREWORD AND DEDICATION

To know Mary was to know her by and through her eyes. Two memorable encounters of mine with Mary and her eyes are the brackets within which our journey of sixty-five years unfolded.

We first met in the aisle of the North End Mennonite Brethren church after an evening service. I was on my way out, and Mary suddenly stood in front of me barring my way. She wanted to sell me a subscription to the student paper of Mennonite Brethren Bible College, the college she was attending at the time. Her voice already was compelling. But those eyes! They were luminous, clear, striking, alive. They were the open windows of a guileless soul. It was a moment I have treasured, and all the re-runs over the years we spent together. That's the one bracket.

The other was the day Mary died. She had been moved from emergency to the ICU ward at Concordia Hospital the day before. She now had a harness on her head that held the mask snugly in place over her mouth and nose to force oxygen into her lungs. Her breathing was labored, and communication was all but impossible. We exchanged brief written notes, and at times we could understand a word or two as she spoke.

Mary knew she was dying. Her notes said so. When she was told that the next twenty-four to thirty-six hours would be critical, she wondered if that was as much time as she had left. When she heard of all the people who were coming to Winnipeg, she asked if they were coming for her funeral. She wondered if the pastor's visit was indicative. And she insisted I take back the clothes I had brought for her coming home. And then this: "My life...it's ending...I can't breathe."

It was now Thursday evening just before nine o'clock. I promised to be back in the morning, said goodbye, stroked her cheek the best I could, and took my walker past the curtain. Then I turned again. There was a gentle goodbye wave of the hand. But those eyes! More than bright. They were alive. Bursting with light. Her soul aflame. The final gift of love to say goodbye. She died quietly three hours later.

Those are the two brackets. Between them lie our sixty-five years together. And always those eyes. There were times when of necessity that piercing blue turned to steel—no less compelling as a corrective. No less impressive as

an indication of grit that would not quit. A dogged determination to work through to resolution some dead end wall we had hit. The eyes held. “We’ll deal with this together,” they said.

Mary, I think, began our life together with a hope both naïve and realistic. I do believe that she simply expected good to happen. Yet she knew very well that life would not be a cakewalk. I think she trusted the strength in herself, and she did expect the best from me.

I entered our marriage not so much with hope, as with the expectation that all would be normal. Marriage, after all, is normal. So are children. It’s been that way for a long time. And as for pregnancy, that’s normal too. Millions of women have been pregnant and have given birth. What’s the big deal? Adoption too. Of course that’s what you do if you want a larger family. As for work? Very normal. And equipping oneself to do the work is the expected thing. You just do it. You do what needs doing, and if it gets tough, you just push harder. It doesn’t take hope to cover the miles, you just keep walking. I have never stopped regretting the unfeeling way I navigated our family ship through those first fifteen years together or so.

It was when Mary emerged from two years of severe depression that hope was re-kindled in Mary and kindled in me. This was hope grounded in understanding and a will to change. Our pastor, I. W. Redekopp, and a family doctor turned psychiatrist, Henry Guenther, teamed up to help us both understand how it was that Mary had gotten to this disastrous place. In particular, I learned to see and own my own part in it.

Hope became more than expecting to receive what we asked for. That would be limiting God to our wish list. In time hope spilled to the horizon, learning that God is at work, that he honors our commitment to change and grow, and that he accomplishes what keeps on surprising us. Again and again along that path it was Mary’s eyes, with either a glint of grit or glee, like a vise on steroids, that held us to the task. Like a mother bear with cubs.

And so in the providence of God and by his grace, we became a team. And through the forgiveness offered by our wonderful children, there came a newness into the family. What a wonderful place to get to, and to discover that this place is large: it still stretches to the horizon, and allows for growth that enriches and delights. It was the place to which we had all come when Mary died, October 23, 2014. No wonder all my thoughts of her are clothed in gratitude. It is to Mary, this icon of hope, I dedicate this volume. We offer it together as a gift to you, as our life together was, and is, a gift to us.

John Regehr, August 2015

INTRODUCTION

Back in seminary days we learned that hope is the assurance that there is resource available outside our life space, a resource that will break into our troubled situation and bring help. The assumption is that things are less than good, and the resource will make it better. Such hope does not so much require daring as patience. When there is nothing I can do, I just wait for help to show up, to return the situation to normal, to heal, to mend, to restore.

The hope that requires daring is called on when we choose to step into the unknown with the wish to grow, expand, change, mature. To let go a current certainty, a kind of security, is a scary move. We step from a trusted foothold into space, the unknown. The hope is for becoming what we have not yet been, a way of seeing and being which is unfamiliar.

James Fowler told us years ago that this was a normal process, a growth of faith in seven stages or so. Even an infant learns to trust. By four a child becomes aware of the reality of the unseen. Then there is the assurance that life is linear and fair: good is rewarded and evil is punished. The adolescent sees faith as a loving relationship with God, and as we establish a family, we choose a way of life and moral values we trust are right and dependable. Then our adolescent children destroy our fortress, and we learn that truth is at least paradoxical, if not multidoxical. Eventually we come to know that, in the end, love is all there is.

It is this last uncharted life space from about age sixty-five and beyond that presents us with invitations to dare. The temptation is, of course, to think that we have arrived. So we settle in to where we've come. "This is what I believe, this is my opinion, don't rattle that." It takes some daring to be open to new thinking, new understanding of biblical texts, new ways of seeing people who are different from ourselves, even very different from ourselves. Wouldn't it be great if the thinking that underlies the "freedom 55" ads were driven by that possibility, rather than by the release from obligation and performance obligation?

The sermons in this collection are not a chronological account of our journey of faith, and our process of change and growth, but you will find some indication of that. You will also find indications of resources breaking into our trouble spots with healing and restoration. My wish is that you will find

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both of these encouraging, and that you will open yourself to such a journey or happening, wherever you now are on the road. Dare I hope for that?

And now words of thanks. A huge bouquet to Bill and Margaret Fast. They have affirmed us over the years, and it is they who prompted, and then prodded and enabled this project. Without their generosity it would not have happened. And a very warm thanks to Gerry Ediger, who consented to be the consultant, and then became much more: navigator, helmsman and editor. He gave the project direction and impetus when I drew a blank, and provided encouragement when my tank was near empty.

And, of course, deep gratitude to the many who over the years have appreciated our work and have told us so. Which means Bert Campbell gets a bouquet. When he was church custodian, he on one occasion said to me, "You did good, John. There were no crucified cups." He gauged the people's attentiveness to the sermon by the number of mistreated styrofoam cups were left for him to gather up.

John Regehr
August 2015

WHEN PILLARS TOPPLE

*We will find our faith floundering
when pillars of faith we trusted
totter and topple.
When that happens,
we will have to find ways to deal with it
and find our balance again.*



I had gone to sleep. Then through flaky darkness I heard it, “John!” I was alert enough to guess the content from the cadence. It didn’t augur well. I assured Mary that I had tuned her in. She spoke of her despondency of the past fortnight. It bordered on despair.

“How can I retain my Christian faith if I lose faith in Christians?” And then Mary took me on a tour of what she saw as toppled pillars. There was the letter from a missionary whom she had long known and loved much. The letter was all bitterness and pious phrases. There was a column of pillars from her more distant past. Faulty, tottering, toppled saints leading churches. And then, the most recent experience of Christian brothers very close to both of us. Men we had looked up to, now estranged from each other, and unable to find their way back together.

“Aren’t we supposed to be able to lean on men of God?” Mary asked. And then, “Had I better read David Augsburg and Keith Miller with less relish? Maybe they will disappoint me too.”

And then, the thrust that turned my marrow cold: “I’m so afraid, John. In so many ways you are not different from any of them. Please, don’t let me down.” Silence. Too long silence. Negation, and defense, and correction, and clarification pounded in my brain.

Mary then kindly changed the subject a degree or two, to say, “You are

going to Vancouver. Please be honest when you preach. Preach only what you are living out.”

Here was my chance to escape into the theoretical. “My proclamation must be bigger than my attainment.” I thought that was both humble and realistic.

“OK,” Mary conceded, “but at least preach only what you are honestly striving to live out.” Another shift. I felt some leeway, some relief—a slow thaw in my marrow. Certainly I could affirm a true desire for honesty, for genuineness. But the iodine sting in my marrow remained: “I want to lean, John, and I’m afraid; please don’t let me down.”



You know, of course, that Mary was not speaking of a Christian leaning on the devil’s crutches, like Judah leaning on Egypt, that splintering staff that breaks and pierces the one leaning on it (Isaiah 36:6). Nor was she talking about being lured by a way-out group hypnotized by some fly-by-night evangelist who gets picked up for rape and embezzlement in the next city.

Mary was identifying with sincere young Christians, back in the life of the early church, whose faith reeled when they heard Peter being reprimanded by Paul in Antioch for hypocrisy (Galatians 2:11-13). She was looking at Paul and Barnabas parting company because they couldn’t find each other after a nasty argument (Acts 15:36-40).

But she was thinking too of the tender girl, whose Christian boy friend had lifted her up, then conned her, and then rejected and abandoned her. And she was thinking of the professor, whom she respected and emulated, whose moral jello seemed to melt when things got too warm. And she recalled the youth leader whom people admired and imitated, who weighed in light for the fight against wrong.



Mary is not unique. It is likely that none of us will be spared her experience. In lesser or greater degree we will find our own faith floundering when pillars of faith we trusted, totter and topple. If and when that happens, we will have to find ways to deal with it, to find our balance again. There are less than helpful ways of doing that.

We could resolve, as a matter of principle, that we will trust no one ever again. “All flesh is grass,” the Bible says, and we believe that. All saints wear

When Pillars Topple

muddy shoes. No halos are tarnish proof. So, we will live in safe isolation. Keep detached emotionally. A rather conscious rejection of community. But there is that in us that resists. This would be an outright denial of the body of Christ, and we do know in our hearts that we were made for community.

We could make a resolve to trust only with reasoned reserve. We'd make only very cautious commitments. And always with the back door unlatched. A kind of fencing fellowship, our guard up, seeing the brother and sister as a potential opponent. But this would be a refusal to be genuine. It would be making fellowship a chess game with moves and countermoves. Very un-Jesus like, really.

Perhaps I could acknowledge that I see things very subjectively, and that therefore I have no right to make a judgment. I'd move to a deliberate indifference. Pillars topple; that's what they do. No big deal. Whatever happens, happens. And anyway, I'm not always so steady myself. But this would be a refusal to do brother and sister duty. After all, God has made us accountable to, and responsible for, each other. So that won't do.

So why don't I just promise myself that I won't become a recognized pillar. I'll live half hidden, so I won't be available when there is someone who needs to clutch or lean in a crisis. And then, no one will ever say to me, "I'd fear for my faith if you fall. Don't let me down." But that would stop the Spirit dead in her tracks, since she is in me to help me grow to my full stature. God seems intent on making pillars, and these are made for bearing loads, and for leaning.



So where do we go from here? It seems to me these four unhelpful responses point to two positive ones: one personal, and one relational.

We will place our personal faith, our unreserved trust, in Jesus Christ himself. In his death, I have died. In his resurrection, I have been made new. None can add to what he has accomplished in me, and no one can rob me of any of it, no matter what. This personal bonding is as secure as the love of God itself. My redemption, my regeneration, my nurturing is intensely personal, and is anchored in nothing less than the love of very God himself. Even toppling pillars can't undo that.

At the same time I am totally committed to making this faith relational. I am part of a fellowship, both worldwide and local. I am essential to the whole, both in receiving and giving. In this body we both lean and support. We have needs met and we make contributions. We are both dependent and dependable. We no longer demand of others what we cannot attain. We are willing to

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accept our common humanity, our common weakness, our common tendency to totter, our common need for steadying.

Let us then humbly and confidently make this two-fold affirmation:

My faith in Jesus Christ is total, and deep, and personal... an unqualified commitment.

My faith in Jesus Christ moves me to a genuinely caring and receptive involvement in this fellowship to which I belong.

Both affirmations are made on the unshakeable truth that God is for us, and his commitment to us is secure, no matter what. Thanks be to God!



When Pillars Topple

What God provides will be enough

to hold you when you need to lean.

He's ancient and dependable,

as strong as he has always been.

He will not ever let you down,

this loving Father of us all.

He is committed to your care;

He answers when the needy call.

John Regehr, ca. 2006

TWO

WE HAVE A SECURE HOPE

PSALM 130

*Many know the depths of illness and pain.
We may not know what God will do with it all,
but he is as attentive
as only holy love
can be.
So we have hope.*



PSALM 130, IN FOUR STANZAS

STANZA I

*We have hope
not because the journey is all daisies and roses,
but because God hears and is attentive.*

Hear these words; they could be yours:

“Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord;
O Lord, hear my voice.

Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.”

Psalm 130:1, 2

I hope we never lose the capacity to see roses amid the thorns, or daisies in the rubble. But for all our efforts to be positive, and to smell the roses and the coffee, life is home to thorns and rubble. There are those depths out of which we cry: weather gone berserk, flooded fields and basements, rivers disobedient to their banks, farmyards shredded by tornadoes, crops hailed out, coastal towns whipped to submission by hurricanes. We feel the depths and we cry out even if it isn't in our own back yard.

Many of you know the depths of illness and pain. You know the fear of the unknown when medics can't make a diagnosis, or miss it. You know the depths when you have to admit that this is it; it won't get better, and death will come knocking.

And many of you know the depths of loneliness and disappointment: the loss of a job, or of a friendship, or of the family closeness you worked so hard to maintain.

You know the bereavement that keeps on aching, the abyss of helplessness, the lead weight of uselessness, and the dagger thrust of rejection and betrayal.

And if you have the courage to enlarge your heart, to let it beat for the pain of a world gone insane, you know of the depths of an agony you can't plumb. Bombs in subways, on buses, and at security check points. And AIDS, a disease that orphans children by the hundreds of thousands and then condemns them to a life of misery. And it doesn't really help to say that life is like that, because such cynicism only deepens the abyss. But it is. Life is like that.

And so we cry, and cry out, and shout, and scream. And God hears, and is attentive. No sigh escapes him. No groan goes unnoticed. No tear is uncounted. The ear of God is everywhere, and where his ear is, there his heart is. God pays attention, personally. No answering machine: "If you're calling from five fathoms depth or more, don't panic. For more options, press zero."

God interprets every whimper, every outburst, every slump of the shoulders or tightness in the chest or turmoil in the gut, every voiceless scream. He does not insist on the right words, or even words at all. His ear and his heart are one, and his heart is open to our cry. We may not know what he will do with it all, but he is as attentive as only holy love can be. So we have hope.



We Have a Secure Hope

STANZA II

*We have hope
not because we are so good,
but because God forgives.*

Hear these words; they surely are ours:

“If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins,
O Lord, who could stand?
But with you there is forgiveness;
therefore you are feared.”

Psalm 130:3, 4

We are not so good that the universe owes us one—or so good that our child owes us, or our parent, or our spouse, or the boss, or an employee. Only those who are afraid to look inside boast of being good. Not that we are totally depraved, as we were taught six decades ago. The nobility of the Image in which we were made is there. That’s a given. And yet, we are infected throughout, like a heart that is diseased but keeps on beating. Our noblest deeds are tinged with selfishness. I want nothing more than to serve God, but pride is in the mix. There is competitiveness in Christian service. There is laziness and slovenliness in doing my duty. There is a lack of integrity in my sacrifice. Nothing is utterly clean. We call it ministry, but much is ego run.

And then, of course, there are those truly ugly things we keep under tattered wraps: greed and cruelty, indifference and prejudice, lust and betrayal. Let’s face it; we don’t have hope because we are so good that the cosmos owes us a good outcome.

And yet we have hope, despite the sin virus. Why? Because God forgives. All our sins are fundamentally sins against God. The essence of sin is that it destroys. And it always destroys something of the creation—myself, or the ecosystem, or other people—all of which God loves deeply. All sin is sin against God. And so he is the only one who can deal with it ultimately.

And he does. How amazing! He doesn’t keep score. He has no list that he checks twice at the close of the day, or of the night. If he kept a list and kept adding to it, we’d be undone. He erases the errors, sponges out the contaminants in the noble things, and simply forgives. He lets it go. No record.

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Invoices shredded. Wickedness entry deleted. Guilt expunged. Gone. Eradicated. Unimaginable... and yet believable. How amazing! It seems a lifetime is not long enough to let the truth in. But we'll believe it. In that hope we will stumble forward with courage and confidence. God has forgiven!



STANZA III

*We have hope
not because help is just around the corner,
but because we can wait.*

Hear these words, and take heart:

“I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,
and in his word I put my hope.
My soul waits for the Lord
more than watchmen wait for the morning.”

Psalm 130:5, 6

It would be nice if help were always just a click away. And if the result was not instant, then I could at least blame myself for pressing the wrong key. But you phone up a prayer and you hear, “Thanks for calling. All my angels are presently busy with other struggling saints. But please stay on the line. Your call is important to me, and will be answered in good time. My time.”

It does seem strange that in this instant, globally connected, hurry-hurry age, the word we keep hearing or seeing on the screen, is “Please wait!” Just maybe there is a lesson to be learned. The God who is intimately engaged with absolutely everything, in every moment on the earth and in the universe, actively present everywhere, able to do in an instant anything he chooses to do—this God says, “Please wait! It’ll be good for you.” He is no errand boy: “For immediate delivery, press 3.”

Did you notice that the stanza uses the word “wait” five times? “I wait!” the psalmist says. Not, “I have to wait! I hate waiting!” “My soul waits,” he says. So he is at rest, a trusting rest, even though the answer has not yet come,

We Have a Secure Hope

and he's still in the depths. "I wait like a watchman," he says. I may be somewhat anxious; I may dislike the dark and the danger, but the morning will come. It can't be hastened or halted. It will come in its own good time. So will God. At the right time.

To wait is an act of trust. To pout anxiously, is not. So let your soul be quiet, and enjoy the Presence of the one you're waiting for. He is in the night hours with you, and he waits with you for the right moment to bring you what you need. And so we have hope. We can wait. If there is no waiting, there is no need for hope.



STANZA IV

*We have hope
not because we manipulate God,
but because he does what only God can do.*

Hear these words; they are for us:

"O Israel, put your hope in the Lord,
for with the Lord is unfailing love
and with him is full redemption.
He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins."

Psalm 130:7, 8

God is a God of unfailing love, utterly dependable, though unpredictable. If I don't recognize the love, it is because of my poor vision. I can't yet see the good outcome of what is now a painful disappointment. Or perhaps I have a thimble-sized expectation. Perhaps I am looking at the wrong things for evidence of God's love. If he answers immediately, then I know for sure that he loves me, and I will keep on trusting. It pays, I can tell. Of course, we do keep asking for what we need, but mature trust doesn't count on constant instant wish fulfillment. He is Father, not an indulgent grandpa. He is our heavenly Father. That's huge. His love is strong and durable, sometimes tough—sometimes tender, sometimes protective—sometimes daring... always caring—always unfailing, always on target to achieve our good. So, we have hope.

God achieves a full redemption. We are still very unfinished compared

to what God intends to make of us. At age nine or ten I was prodded into fighting a poor withdrawn lad. I think it was at Vacation Bible School. What a bully I was! A year later I had what we called a conversion experience. And yet, much later, in my first pastorate I was intent on cleaning up the church membership list, and we removed an old couple from membership. They weren't attending any more, but wanted a place to be buried from. I was a bully still. How distressingly slow, this redemption process.

But I must tell you, just in the last several weeks I've noticed one small change. All through our marriage when Mary asked me a question, I felt under attack. Three thousand times I've bopped my head and said, "Muzzle it, man. It's just a question." Would you believe it? Just several weeks ago I noticed an inner change. Mary asked a question, and I didn't go into tsunami alert. Slow? Yes. But it happens. I have no idea how God will go about it, but he will accomplish full redemption. That's my hope.

T H R E E

MID-COURSE CORRECTIONS

2 Timothy 3; 1 Corinthians 3, 14;
Galatians 5; 2 Thessalonians 3; James 2

*If I have looked,
and thought that I have seen,
and therefore have not looked again,
I have not seen.*



Several weeks ago we were eating the stew that I had made, and amid the meat chunks I found a piece of string. Mm! Had Public Meat been less than scrupulous? I decided to look again. Closely. Oh, it was a stem from one of the green beans I'd put into the stew. Aren't you glad I didn't get into a stew and call Public Meat before I looked again?

But beyond string and stew, could it be that maturity is to be measured not in the tenacity of my grip on an opinion, but in the joy I find in having new light break in, a new insight that makes me change my mind about something, even something important, even something I've preached?

Maturity at any age could mean to love to look again and change one's mind.



Let me repeat the text that is engaging us this month:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:16

So what is the book good for? Not for clever debating about whether dunking or pouring is the truest baptism. What is it good for? Not for splitting us into nice homogeneous opposing camps of differing interpretation on matters of church governance, or conversion, or atonement, each claiming to be right by the book and making the other out to be the enemy. Surely such fencing off into combative clusters is not what these scriptures were designed to achieve.

So, what is it good for? To equip us to do good work. Yes, the letter was written to a young pastor, and like all young pastors, Timothy needed tons of wisdom to shepherd those early flocks of stumbling saints. But then we all have our little worlds in which we carry responsibility for the welfare of other precious fellow earthlings. And by now we know that we too need tons of wisdom to do it well. That wisdom is what the book is designed to give us.

So these mute words on a page want to be translated into the way we live. What we do and how we do it. Good work. Very ordinary good work. Even tedious good work. From the feeding of impatient infants to the spooning of tapioca pudding into the slow mouth of a senile grandfather. From kissing the knee scrape of a toddler to the replacing of his knee joint when he is seventy-seven.

So what is the book good for? To teach, and rebuke, and correct, and train us to do good work. Or to say it in another way, to teach, and rebuke, and correct, and train us to follow Jesus really closely in our ordinary everyday living, and in the larger ventures we dream about and undertake.

The Word is designed to help us do well what needs doing, perhaps to do it as Jesus would do it. No, it won't give us the hands-on skill for massaging a scalp, or creating a computer program, but it will shape the attitude and the purpose of the doing, and will provide wisdom about whether to do it at all. Would Jesus be a cardiologist, and if so, would he do healthcare for profit, or would he be happy with a livelihood? Or would he go to Ethiopia and help the scores of children who suffer from spinal deformities? Would Jesus be a farmer? And if so, would he go organic?



We have tended to think of scripture as a tool for keeping us close to God, to be nurtured by his love, and to be re-affirmed again and again that we belong to him, and are safe in his care. And that is good. Very, very good.

However, the scriptures call us beyond that, to the carrying out of the purpose of our living, our calling, our reason for being. Good work.

And yes, this is a faith position. There is mystery here. To think that God

chooses to form and guide us by this book, written by people with human flaws and foibles, recording history that makes us shudder, and by his Spirit offer us wisdom through it so we can live life well—that boggles the mind. But then, God does that sort of stuff. After all, what kind of God would he be if he didn't boggle the mind?

We have already heard that Scripture will teach, that is, will write on our blank slates what we didn't know. And what a delight to discover, like a child, what we had no inkling of. And we heard that scripture rebukes us when we have followed examples that are patently destructive, or done stuff to others that is incontrovertibly wrong.

Today's perspective: Finding in scripture the correction to a way of thinking and doing that we really thought was right. Scripture is useful for that too, getting us to look again at what we thought we had already seen.



I heard just recently that this kind of correction is least likely to happen in religious and academic settings. Perhaps that shouldn't surprise us, since religious people tend to elevate opinions into faith statements, and then, make them identity statements. I am a Pharisee. I am an Orthodox Jew. I am an Atheist. I am a Vegetarian. I am a Methodist. Or as I heard recently, I am a Mennonite Brethren through and through. Something like that. When we put a halo on an opinion, or a preference, and make it our identity, there is the danger that the halo morphs into blinders.

*If I have looked,
and thought that I have seen,
and therefore have not looked again,
I have not seen what's there to see.*

Have you noticed that the one whom Jesus told that he must be born again was a staunch religious man? Nicodemus was a teacher of the faith. He had it all together. And Jesus calls him to a radical change. To look again as for the first time. And Saul, the man who was thoroughly convinced that he had it right, and therefore considered himself called to stop by any means possible the religious movement that wasn't on his track. It was this religious man whom God smote with blindness on the Damascus road to get him to pay attention, and look again. It was this rigid religious crusader who needed to be converted. He needed to take another look.

And have you noticed that much of what we read in the New Testament

epistles is for our correction? Alongside the teaching, as in Romans, and the rebuking for what is clearly ungodly, as in Corinthians, there is correction. Jewish folk who became followers of Jesus thought it right to bring their Moses traditions with them. They needed correcting:

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself in love.

Galatians 5:6

In Jesus Christ, wearing a suit and tie for worship, or not wearing a suit and tie, has no value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself in love.

New Christians going hog-wild about spiritual gifts, need correcting.

Now siblings, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you? ...So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church.

1 Corinthians 14:6, 9, 12, amended

So fervor alone won't do it. I must speak, and read, and sing, and pray, so people can understand the words, else what I offer is not a gift.

Believers who identify too strongly with this leader or that, and so form antagonistic clusters, need correcting.

So then, no more boasting about men! All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas [or Luther or Menno or John Howard Yoder or David Ewert] or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.

1 Corinthians 3:21-23, amended

So no more boastful, exclusionary aligning.

Believers who get tunnel vision on salvation by grace through faith, and make believing a thing of the head, need correcting.

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?

James 2:14

Faith that doesn't translate into works isn't worth a dime, no matter how compelling the argument.

Believers who were so focused on the Lord's return that they lost touch with the immediacy of daily living, need correction.

For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: If a man will not work, he shall not eat. We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy, they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat.

2 Thessalonians 3:10-12

Clearly, then, from the very birthing of the Christian church, even devout, sincere, committed believers have needed correcting. And then there are the gospel writings themselves that keep correcting us about who we think Jesus is, and what it means to follow him in life. Perhaps you have noticed that the last piece in John's gospel is a corrective on the misunderstanding of one of the last words of Jesus. You may want to look it up. (John 21:22-23)

I do hope that we will look to the scripture not only for affirmation of the loving embrace of God, but for correctives of our thinking, our attitudes, our way of seeing, so that the way we live more and more closely resembles Jesus, our Lord.

Let's face it humbly: The need for correction is native to our humanness. Being corrected is a necessity of life. Fifty years ago I would have taken that to be a despairing statement. But that was when I still thought I needed to be perfect, or at least have a near perfect grasp of the truth.

Now I find it a freeing statement. I live by correctives. Mary will tell you that I still don't bend easily to them, but truly I welcome corrective insights. After all, if I can get confused by a bean stem, then what chance do I have with truth about God and his dealing with us earthlings? Needing to be corrected is not a blight on me. It is rather a grievous flaw if I think I don't need correcting even about things I think I have comprehended. Perhaps, as I said earlier, maturity is to be measured not in the tenacity with which I cling to convictions, but in the joy I find in being corrected about what I thought I had already learned. So, humble down, and enjoy your mid-course corrections. Without them you'll miss the airport.



I'll let you in on some of my correction journey. Even as a child I heard the words of wisdom: "Train up a child in the way that he should go, and he'll stay in it for life." Or something like that. I heard this too: "Spare the rod

and spoil the child.” So I accepted how our Dad interpreted that wisdom. No problem. To be sure, others of our siblings responded differently.

So when our first son was born, I did the right thing and got myself a tool that was wide enough to avoid damage, and firm enough to be effective. Don't worry, I have long since regretted the use of it, and have repeatedly apologized in words spoken and written to our children. I heard the corrective. “Don't exasperate them,” says the apostle. Train them up. Keep so comfortably close to them that they will see you walk the Way, see you stumble, and recover. Let them see from you that the Way is joyful, fulfilling, life giving. Demanding, yes, but wonderful. That's the first mandate: to bring up our children to love the Way, and commit to walking it. Help the child to follow you, so that you hunger and thirst together to get it right. That's our task. Isn't it wonderful that we get a second crack at it with our grandchildren! And isn't it wonderful that our grandchildren have chosen not to use the tool, even though they admit that at times they think it would settle things more expeditiously?

I'm still in the process of being corrected on that. There have been times when my blood has boiled (at 80 plus it mostly only simmers) to hear about the Winnipeg car thieves. Surely you have to stop them from doing it before you can talk sense to them. If you are afraid to make the consequences hurt, you only enable them. So hisses my simmering blood.

And then I was handed a little booklet in preparation for a recent assignment. The book deals with peace-making and says that “peace is itself the way.” Which is to say, that in seeking to create peace, we must exercise during the process the same virtues that we hope to achieve in the other person at the end of the process. So, if I want the young fellows to develop into persons of respect, compassion, love, humility, co-operation, responsibility, and dignity, then I must practice those very virtues in the process. So it can't be vengeance, or a top-down justice. And then in a recent conversation I was informed that most of these repeat offenders are probably persons who are saddled with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, which may well mean that they are incapable of connecting the pain of consequences with their behavior. That turns peace making into an enormous challenge. How to achieve peace by living out peace in that process? Not naiveté, but peace. Not weakness as in “peace at any price,” but true costly peace. Not spineless love, but peace. I haven't got it all clear in my own head and heart. I must look again.



Sometimes it is a large cultural shift that makes us aware of our uncritical thinking, and pushes us to look again. That's my second personal story. I tell it with some trepidation, because most of you, being younger and having been born into a culture very different from the one into which I was birthed, may find my journey foreign. My sense of history, however, suggests that each of you will have a similar need to be born again out of one kind of cultural blindness or another. So bear with me.

I had read the first chapters of Genesis the way they were read to me. God made Adam, and gave him the job to tend the garden and care for its occupants. When God saw that Adam was overwhelmed by the task, God made a helper for him to enable him to do his job better. Something like that.

The women's movement, despite its flaws and foibles, was the impetus to make me look again at the text. And, sure enough, it didn't say what I thought it said.

What is clear from the text is that Adam and Eve were the same, and different, and equal. Both carry the image of God. The mandate to populate the earth and to take care of it is given to both. Ours is a shared task in regard to both raising children and being custodians of the earth. But to reduce equality to a measurable sameness as in employment opportunities and wages and the like, is to miss some significant component of our calling. Equality is not sameness. Equality has to do with honor, and value, and recognition, and ascribing worth, which includes the treasuring of our differences. Yes, we are much more alike than we are different. After all, we are human, with all the human needs for nurture, and compassion, and care, and purposeful work, and companionship, and with the human capacity to respond to another's fear, and hurt, and co-operation, and love.

But we are different, and the difference invites us to stand back in wonder and awe. Those differences are not to provoke us to make the other over into our own image.

There have been wonderful new light times for me in my journey with Mary, and by the time I was age fifty, I thought I had looked often, and had made helpful changes. We spent my first sabbatical year in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, back in 1976-77. We studied together half-time at the School of Pastoral Care at the Baptist Hospital, and I took other courses at Wake Forest University with two wonderful biblical scholars. They were both brilliant of mind and warm of heart. I'd come home bursting with excitement about some truth that had ignited me. Mary would listen, and say in effect, "Yes. So?" And I'd reflect and remember: Oh yes, she had expressed something very similar long since, and without fanfare. Mary was a kind of intuitive,

matter-of-fact theologian, but I hadn't really seen that before.

And at the School of Pastoral Care the instructors wished for Mary to come back and do a complete program with them. They recognized her intuitive skill in dealing with human personal issues. A new world was opening up for her, and I was beginning to see that.

When we returned to Winnipeg, Mary took courses at the Interfaith Pastoral Institute at The University of Winnipeg and then was encouraged to pursue a Masters program at the University of Manitoba. And sure enough, after a year as a special student, and the advocacy of a couple of the professors, the admissions department allowed her to come in on the strength of a Bachelor of Religious Education degree from 1949 at Mennonite Brethren Bible College—something truly precedent setting.

A highlight for me during that time was the year Mary took three 3-hour classes on Wednesdays. I'd meet her for a late supper at the *Creperie* on York Street. She was aglow with enthusiasm, bubbling with stuff to share, and I rejoiced with her. The memory of it still lifts my spirit.

Turns out, I still had to look again. When we did week-end events for couples or families, we did what we had seen other wonderful couples do. I did the teaching, and Mary told the stories, our stories. That was before we understood that the story is the real thing, and everything else is commentary.

It seemed to me that Mary could do the teaching very well. But when she was invited to offer a lecture or a seminar, she'd go into a bit of a panic. Facing a topic was like facing a stone wall. So, of course, John to the rescue. For me the mention of a topic activates the brain and out comes an outline. I gave Mary the outline, a kind of skeleton she could hang her ideas on, and she went upstairs to the study. "Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones." She came back frustrated.

So, again, John to the rescue. I suggested we sit down leisurely after breakfast, and she would just talk unhurried. Let the mind wander around in the garden of the topic. Mary would talk, and I took notes. Good stuff. And then I organized her ideas and hung them on the bones of my skeletal outline. It worked, sort of. But it was still restrictive, like coloring inside the lines.

So I looked again. What Mary did in leisurely talking after breakfast was not only appropriate for a presentation, but actually preferable. Let her mind work the way it works best. The Spirit speaking from her head and heart unencumbered by my skeletal correctness. Back off, bless her, and watch in awe.

I'm glad I was able to look again, and withdraw my "dry bones." I heard the word of the gospel: "For freedom Christ has set her free. Don't let her be enslaved again by another's unwarranted narrow requirement" (Galatians 5:1).

Mid-Course Corrections

Something like that. And the bottom drawer of our filing cabinet has reams of her work, silent reminders now of meaningful encounters.

*If I have looked
and thought that I have seen,
and therefore
have not looked again,
I have not seen what's there to see.
Indeed I've chosen to walk blind.*

*Let's not.
Let's rather look again
and again,
until we know the joy
of seeing what God sees.*



*You always knew the world was huge,
that life in many guises,
and thousands of surprises,
is bursting out like a deluge.
And so your books were friends.
Your learning knew no ends.
Each book a door
that opened up to more
of countless wonders to behold,
and treasure rare, both new and old.
Strange people who would welcome you
to think on things they thought they knew.
And then the Spirit, faithful guide
to treasure troves where wisdoms hide.
He nurtured you, restored your soul,
He'd mend you, build you, make you whole
when you were bruised
and felt misused.
And all the while your likeness grew
to match the God who lived in you.*

John Regehr, May 2015

FOUR

WHEN FORWARD IS ROUNDABOUT

Exodus 13, 14

*Sometimes...
forward for God
is roundabout.*



We move easily from understanding that we are unique, to thinking that we are very important. It follows then that we see our problems to be as great as our importance. And we forget how wee they actually are in relation to God's capability. When we look at the great thing God did for Israel when the problem was really large, we might be comforted. And yet it is not the size of the problem that determines God's intervention. But even when the problem is great, the way God chooses to resolve the matter may be quite confusing. Sometimes forward for God is roundabout.

*Sometimes
God stops us
when it seems that the road is clear.*

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Tell the Israelites to turn back and encamp near Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea. They are to encamp by the sea, directly opposite Baal Zephon. Pharaoh will think, 'The Israelites are wandering around the land in confusion, hemmed in by the desert.' And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them. But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD." So the Israelites did this.

The light is green when it had always been red. Pharaoh had finally yielded. Now the road is clear, and God stops them.

Actually God has good reason for his delaying tactic. We would not have been ready to face what would have come on the direct route. Israel had been a slave nation, ill equipped to do battle. Joshua had not yet trained his drill sergeants. Imagine the frustration. They proceed to the threshold, Etham, on the passageway between two necks of water. They are on the doorsill of their cage, and they can smell the freedom. Then God calls a halt. Almost as though he wants to think it over for a spell. Emotionally they had said goodbye. They were carrying the bones of Joseph with them. The delay, and the roundabout way is for our good. The Philistines are a military power. And yet it is difficult to understand that God has time. But he does. And his presence with us while we wait is a comforting thing.

*Sometimes
the roundabout route
seems as though God is putting us in a trap.*

When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds about them and said, "What have we done? We have let the Israelites go and have lost their services!" So he had his chariot made ready and took his army with him. He took six hundred of the best chariots, along with all the other chariots of Egypt, with officers over all of them. The Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, so that he pursued the Israelites, who were marching out boldly. The Egyptians—all Pharaoh's horses and chariots, horsemen and troops—pursued the Israelites and overtook them as they camped by the sea near Pi Hahiroth, opposite Baal Zephon. As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the LORD. They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!"

Exodus 14:5-12

God leads them back into Egypt a piece, and then circles them around and into the crook of the sea. Strategically this seems utterly foolish, and it would be, but for the superior wisdom and power of God. Indeed God is the super

strategist. Pharaoh will think “strategically,” and will himself get caught. What seems like a trap for his people turns out to be a trap for their foes. It turns out that this is the higher strategy. It would be terrible indeed to have the Philistines and the Egyptians sandwich the people of Israel.

And sure enough, Pharaoh catches the scent, and follows like a brown bear on a whiff of pork and beans. God isn’t afraid of difficulties. Actually they are part of his plan. But Israel can’t see it from God’s perspective either. Not yet. Listen again to their angry complaint:

Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn’t we say to you in Egypt, “Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians”? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!

Exodus 14:11, 12

Strange how we turn against God and our leaders when things get tough. Well, maybe not so strange. We can identify. “We told you it wasn’t all that bad in Egypt, with the meat and garlic and all. We told you to leave us alone. Better to be slaves and have a ration of hotdogs, than to be free and die in a massacre.” It really isn’t easy to be at peace, and be trusting, or even be rational, when we feel caught, and have someone to blame.

*When we feel trapped,
we need help
to keep our faith rooted.*

Moses answered the people. “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.”

Exodus 14:13, 14

This is the task of the leaders. “Do not be afraid!” Unrealistic? It certainly requires faith in the power of God, and the love of God, and the intention of God. “Stand firm! Be still! Don’t panic. Don’t break ranks and run in a dozen different directions. Don’t flail and fuss and fret and fume, or you’ll be getting in God’s way.”

Essentially we are stepping aside, and watching God work. “You will see the deliverance. The Lord will fight for you.” So there is no need for us to close

our eyes in a panic, the way I used to on the school's fastball team. Keep your eyes open, and see how God works. And, of course, we can help each other to root our faith. Leaders can be helpful, yes. But brothers and sisters, especially the quiet ones, the serene ones, can help.

*Even leaders
need to have their faith
repaired at times.*

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on. Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground. I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them. And I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen. The Egyptians will know that I am the Lord when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen."

Exodus 14:15-18

Sometimes spiritual leaders speak boldly in public, and they cry out to God later. Nor is this hypocritical. But when Moses launches into blaming the people, God stops him. Don't blame them; just assume your own task responsibly. "You tell them to move!" Sounds ludicrous. Every option is cut off. There is no way out but up, and God says, "Move forward!" Moses can't see how. And then God lets Moses know his mind. God assures Moses that he will destroy the Egyptians. That helps, although Moses can't see far enough ahead to know how God will do it. And then Moses is told to use what tools he has, namely his staff. God is not limited by the scantiness of our resources, only by our refusal to use them. With this very average tool, God will do the exceptional. Moses has the option: he can flail with it in frustration and fury, or he can hold it out in faith. His choice of options will determine Israel's destiny: He can hold back in disbelief, and become a prey, and go back to Egypt, or he can point his staff forward, and move ahead, and see the foe defeated and God honored.

*Even at the height of the danger,
God is not in a hurry.*

Then the angel of God, who had been traveling in front of Israel's army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also

When Forward is Roundabout

moved from in front and stood behind them, coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other side; so neither went near the other all night long.

Exodus 14:19-20

One reason God delays action is to prove both to his people and to the foe that, when it comes to resolution, it is God himself who is doing it. In the delay God is protecting his people. The cloud settles in behind them, creating darkness on one side and light on the other. What a God! Resolute, relaxed, never in a panic. While God is protecting his people, he is preparing for his next move. The wind! He could have had it ready, but he didn't.

*God uses natural means
miraculously
to move his people forward.*

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.

Exodus 14:21-22

This is not surprising. After all, the creation of the earth is itself a miracle. So God can use the natural things of the earth to do surprising things. The wind blows, and the water separates at the crook of the sea. Faith sees the miracle in the event; unbelief sees a coincidence. No less so in the way God does natural things in our lives, putting pieces together, timing separate incidents. Such miracles follow the obedience of faith. Perhaps it is largely the leaders' responsibility, but followers can help leaders become serene again. Leaders need to learn again to use the staff for pointing the way, not wielding it as a scepter and ruling their little kingdoms.

And finally God destroys the destroyer.

The Egyptians pursued them, and all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and horsemen followed them into the sea. ...[The Lord] jammed the wheels of their chariots so that they had difficulty driving. And the Egyptians said, "Let's get away from the Israelites! The Lord is fighting for them against Egypt." Then the Lord said to Moses,

STILL DARING TO HOPE

“Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen.” ...The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen—the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived. But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. That day the Lord saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians.

Exodus 14:23-31, selected

Unbelief cannot walk in the way of faith. What seemed a difficulty was a way to greater blessing. God not only protects us from the enemy, but also destroys the enemy. So don't be afraid of God's delaying tactics. Don't be afraid of following God back into the crook of the sea. Don't be afraid when the enemy closes in. God has moves up his sleeve, and he will move on time.



When Forward is Roundabout



*Take heart, dear one,
don't come undone!
World towering tall
makes you feel small
and all but lost?
Too high a cost
to let your fear
and scalding tear
now blind your eyes
and paralyze
your muscles all.*

*There is through all this maze a path,
and though it is a narrow swath,*

STILL DARING TO HOPE

*though you can't see what's up ahead,
you'll see where you are next to tread.
Though oft 'twill seem there's stuff to block
the path, you'll find it as you walk.
Don't come undone!
Take heart, dear one.*

John Regehr, ca. 2006

FOUR FACES OF FAITH

John 11

We're in a mess, an impossible mess?

Hang in there.

Have faith in God.

New life will emerge

from the ugliest compost heap.



Poor Martha! In most sermons I've heard she's been so maligned. And yet we keep going back to her table: a little guilty, but not complaining. It seems to me that Martha is exemplary in more than being an exquisite hostess. Hers is a no-nonsense faith. But this startling story has video clips of three other styles of faith as well. There is a 'Mary faith', a 'corporate disciple faith', and a 'Thomas faith'—all good and appropriate.

There is a lovely, soft, sensitive, devoted 'Mary faith'. We have met this contemplative woman earlier. You may recall the story of Jesus' visit to the home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus as Luke tells it (Luke 10:38-42). It is Martha's house it seems, and Martha has planned a somewhat elaborate meal, which, of course, takes time and effort to prepare and set out. Mary has better things to do, she thinks, than to scurry about fussing with food and finery. She sits on the hassock, elbows on her knees, chin in her hands, eyes riveted on the young rabbi, and her heart absorbing his teaching and his stories, and melting in love and awe in the process like soft butter on warm toast.

What a wonderful contemplative faith! Looking with awe, listening with wonder, absorbing in love, enjoying the Presence. Enveloped by grace, transcending the noise of the traffic, the swish of the dishwasher, the whine of the fax machine, the soprano cawing of the telephone. Nurturing the soul by being fully present to the Presence. Nothing else matters here: dust on the dresser,

smudge in the sink, lumps in the mashed potatoes, kids' coats crunched in the corner, unfinished bookwork on the coffee table. These don't matter here. And sure enough, Jesus honors that. He likes it when we prefer to be with him rather than having to get done what doesn't need doing. He won't send us off with a worried whisper to make the gravy and steep the tea, as though he would have a need to pacify martyring Martha.

Contrary to what you might think, this Mary faith is not cheap faith. And there is nothing selfish about it either. The sequel is evidence of this. At another meeting of Jesus in their home, (John 12:1-3) while Martha is serving, again, uncomplaining this time, Mary takes her pint bottle, that's like two cups of Chanel No. 5, and pours it on Jesus' feet, and then wipes those feet with her hair. The same fervor, with which she takes in the love and the teaching of Jesus, now compels her to expend herself in this costly perfume, a year's wages worth, in one lavish gesture of love and gratitude. Jesus accepts the outpouring of her heart, and tells the rational, critical disciples to hush up, and mind their own business, and tend to the poor without this woman's contribution.

In the story of our text this contemplative style is evidenced again. When word came that Jesus had arrived at the edge of town, Mary didn't run out to meet him, but stayed at home. Being alone is her necessity. Staying with her pain is essential. Not only the pain of losing a brother in death prematurely, but also the pain of the abandonment she felt at Jesus' lack of response to their request when Lazarus' illness worsened. How could she now face this Jesus whom she had loved so deeply and trusted so much? How could she ever get beyond this profound knifing betrayal? Perhaps this is the hazard of the contemplative person. Giving our soul away to one we love makes us utterly vulnerable, and thus open to devastating disappointment. Such is the Mary faith. Fully engaged. Fully given. Fully enveloped. Fully abandoned to love. Utterly vulnerable. No defenses in place, having risked everything in self-giving to the one she loves.



And then there is the 'corporate disciple faith' of the disciples (John 11:12). "If he's sleeping, he's getting better. And anyway, the Jews wanted to kill you the last time you were there, so why would you go back there again?" I know. You want to clobber these stout men. They're scared, you say. Wimps, all of them. Well, maybe. I'm thinking that fear and faith can co-exist together in my heart. Not a peaceful co-existence, mind you, but such is my reality. Of course they are afraid. The religious scorpions in Jerusalem are nothing to be toyed

with. They are shrewd, and they are ruthless, and they have clout. Best to keep your distance. Stay away. Play it safe. Don't stir that hornets' nest to fury again.

From this place of fear it is easy to latch onto shreds of evidence to support the choice not to get mixed up with that viper brood again. "He's sleeping, you say? Oh, goody! Then let's just leave it be. Things will improve. Sure they will. Just let the illness take its course. It'll be OK in a while." Oooh! What relief!

That is a faith stance, isn't it? God is somehow at work in the normal process of the illness, isn't he? So we can leave it alone. You can take vitamins if you like, or hot lemonade with honey, but the cold will run its course, and leave on its own. Go to sleep! Leave it alone! Trust God, and go to sleep!



Mary, (my wife, that is) and I were advised to discontinue our weekly visits to Winkler come the end of October, and leave the winter driving to younger counselors. So October was a tapering-off month. Mary didn't want to drive all the way to Winkler for only one client on a particular Wednesday, and the receptionist couldn't get hold of the woman to change her appointment. So what to do? Call all her relatives, and the church office, and her work place in a frenzied effort to contact her? That may well stir up a nest of wasps. Best leave it alone. Don't panic. It'll turn out OK. And sure enough, a half hour later the woman called the office because she needed to change her appointment. Yes, leaving it alone was an act of faith. After all, the timekeeper of the universe does have exquisite timing.

You're in a relationship that is less than your dreams had envisioned. But it is functioning. You are going places together, the bills are getting paid, and you do make decisions about the house and the kids, decisions you can both live with. Yes, you're disappointed. Life isn't idyllic. You've hinted now and then that your soul is thirsty, but he doesn't understand. Seems he's emotionally asleep. Not mean, just asleep. Not really a soul mate. Asleep. You could blast him for his inner ineptitude, and crush his spirit more than it already is. You could give him force-fed lessons in caring and responding to emotion, and make him feel even more inadequate than he already does. Or you could say to yourself, "Heh, he's sleeping. It'll get better. Waking him with a jack-hammer to his ego won't improve the relationship."

Yes, you're afraid. So faith whispers through your fear, "Let it be. He's sleeping. It'll get better." No sense breaching a dike because you're mad about a dripping faucet. Go to sleep! Let him sleep! It'll be better in the morning.



And then there is this ‘Thomas faith’. When Jesus finally tells them that he’s decided to go to Jerusalem and to Lazarus, the man who was sick and died, Thomas says, “Let us also go, that we may die with him” (John 11:16).

That sounds a whole lot like resignation. Actually it is a combination of commitment and resignation, with a pinch of cynicism. We are committed to Jesus. We’ve staked everything on him. He’s all there is now. And if he dies, we may as well die too. At least it’ll be with him. With him in life; with him in death. That’s quite a faith statement, despite its cynical edge. Thomas has faced the odds. The power people in Jerusalem, and in all other apexes of hierarchical power structures, hate our Lord. And if we walk blithely into the mouth of their cannon, we’ll get blasted all right, but it will be with him. We certainly won’t turn coward now that the crunch is on. Let’s go. If this is the end, then so be it. We’ll stick with him to the end, even a bitter end.

Do you connect that sentiment with Jim Elliott and his comrades in the jungles of South America? Perhaps you’re too young to have read *Through Gates of Splendor*. I recommend you read it. Do you connect this sentiment with the young Roman Catholic priest who chose to live among the poorest of the poor in Calcutta? Or perhaps you are too busy to have read *City of Joy*. I recommend you read it. “Let us also go,” these humble heroes said, “even if in going we die. We will at least be dying with him.” And they did. That too is a noble face of faith.



And then there’s Martha. Here is a no-nonsense faith that bears emulation. “When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him....” (John 11:20). Martha has questions, agonizing questions, and she’ll raise them. She’s upset with Jesus, and she’ll tell him so. Martha takes initiative. She won’t stay stuck in her pain. Sounds like sound advice. Get up. Move. Talk to someone. Express your disappointment, your anger, your frustration. Maybe there is a way of understanding this event, this illness, this death, this calamity. Don’t just stuff it and brood in isolation. That’s faith that says, “There must be answers somewhere.”

“Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (John 11:21). That’s a blunt blame statement. You could have prevented this, and you didn’t. We even sent for you, and you didn’t come. We prayed, God, and you were silent. We trusted you, trusted your love, trusted your power to intervene. And you didn’t. I don’t understand, and I’m hurt. I

know you are loving and capable. You've proved that again and again, with Tom, and Dick, and Harry. So how come you ignored me?

Yes, there's blame here. But it is faith. Martha doesn't write Jesus off. She doesn't conclude that Jesus doesn't have the power she expected him to exercise, nor that he doesn't have the love she expected him to demonstrate. But she doesn't understand. Jesus' behaviour simply doesn't make sense. How can one who loves deeply not be moved to help when he has the capacity to do so? This is faith: it locks in on Jesus even if what Jesus is doing—or not doing—is utterly confusing.

"Martha said to Jesus... But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask" (John 11:22). Now this is faith! Faith understands that God is not limited by my expectations of what he can and should do. Faith allows God to be greater than my past or current experience of him. Faith allows God to be at work in what is unknown to me.

Such faith can trust in the midst of pain, disappointment, abandonment, grief, and death. "God, I can't see beyond this pain of mine, but I entrust myself to you. You will do something different from what I expected and hoped for. Your repertoire is greater than I can imagine. You are never stuck for options. You can find a way where I see only jungle. You can see possibilities I have not dreamed of. I trust you." This is faith: being willing to be stretched in my understanding of God and of how God functions in his world and with his people.

"Jesus said to [Martha], 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha answered, 'I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day'" (John 11:23, 24). Wow! This is stretching all right. Yes, Martha has said that she trusts God to work beyond her expectations. But this? A promise of coming to life again? Lazarus coming back to the dinner table and the rooftop balcony evening conversations? Hardly!

So Martha does the only sensible thing: she pushes this stretched reality about the resurrection out to the distant bye-and-bye. Strange? Perhaps not so strange. Into that distant time beyond our reality we can imagine the impossible. Anything is possible in that large, luminous, nebulous, leisurely bye-and-bye.

And sure enough, we discover that latching into that distant hope is a way of surviving in the present painful reality. Quite legitimate, that. Suffering saints have done it through the centuries. Just listen to the heaven songs of the black slaves who helped, by their misery, to create heaven on earth for their plantation owner masters. Quite legitimate, this latching on to a distant hope.

Trouble is, we can't comprehend how a promise so obviously pointing to

the bye and bye can have any relevance for the here and now. “Your brother will rise again,” Jesus says. And Martha grabs her binoculars. “Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life.’ ... ‘Yes Lord,’ she told him, ‘I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world’” (John 11:25-27).

And then Jesus does a remarkable thing. Not unusual, mind you, but still remarkable. Worth noting. God has done it often. When things seemed impossible, when the obstacles seemed insurmountable, when the road seemed impassible, then God said, “Look away from that, to me.”

And Martha looks. And in that look of faith all that seems impossible slips away from her gaze. Not from his. But now we see only him, and we say in the simplest child’s language and child’s trust, “You are the Christ, you are the Son of God. You are the one who came. You are God present in this world.” Jesus fills her whole horizon. At this place of trust and peace, we can leave the whole mess to him. Because he is who he is, I can let go of my fear, my anxiety, my stress, my need to make things happen. It is now no longer a question of what I wish would have happened, or what I wish would happen. It is simply a matter of recognizing who God is. When I do that, I can leave it all to him. Everything. Absolutely everything. Faith means I can take this stance even before I know what Jesus intends to do.

Martha was lucky, you say. Jesus actualized the promise quite literally for her. Lazarus did actually walk out of the tomb, and showed up for supper. Weird, or what? Maybe Martha was lucky. Maybe not. Imagine facing your brother’s death a second time. The one grand miracle wasn’t designed to make him indestructible. Which means that even for Martha this event had implications for the rest of her more ordinary life. I think Martha would say to us that the promise she saw fulfilled literally, she would have to cling to figuratively, for the rest of her life, just as we have to.

We’re in a mess, an impossible mess. And Martha will remind us: “New life will come from it. Only believe.” We’ve failed. The relationship is in tatters. The children are in revolt. The taxman’s claws clutch tightly. The boss threatens lay off. And all the apples are worm-eaten. And Martha says: “Hang in there. Have faith in God. New life will emerge from the ugliest compost heap.”



Four Faces of Faith

HYMN TO BE SUNG TO THE TUNE OF “O BLESSED FAITH IN GOD”,
WORSHIP HYMNAL, HYMN 321

1. Like Mary's

We meet God face to face drawn by our longing.
Find in his love's embrace secure belonging.
Dispelled life's haste and noise through love's emotion;
replaced by tender joys, faith's full devotion.

2. Like the disciples'

On darkest days when fear dulls our believing;
nowhere do signs appear cold fear relieving.
Don't fret! Just let things rest when trouble's sleeping;
God's timing will be best: all's in his keeping.

3. Like Thomas'

When Christ determined goes where hardship's waiting;
dark hatred of his foes death's traps creating;
we have no other choice, though death invites us.
We're following his voice: naught else incites us.

4. Like Martha's

When anguished questions rise, and disappointment,
we cry out to the skies our pained resentment.
Yet always we still know God does not blunder.
We'll yet see blackness glow, awed, and in wonder.

John Regehr, 1998

HOPE REFINED IN THE SMELTER

1 Kings 18, 19

Depression

*is not a measure of our love for God,
any more than an empty gas tank
is the measure of the tractor's ability
to pull a plow.*

*Those dark places we have come to
are not the measure
of our hope, and faith, and love.*



You probably know what depression looks like.

The student has written a major exam. It was tough, and he failed it. He is discouraged, goes home, and hugs the couch all that day and the next. “God,” he sobs, “I thought I understood your call. I took college seriously, even gave up my business for it. I tried so hard. It’s no use. Why don’t I just quit?”

The young wife knows now that they had two strikes against them when they married two years ago. They are now in a fighting rut. Strapped for finances, the baby is cranky, and she is tired. Very tired. She has moved from impatience, to anger, to despair, and now she can’t get herself to do ordinary housework. “God,” she wails, “I tried. I really tried. Even trusting you didn’t help. Why don’t I just give up?”

Would you believe that the prophet Elijah had such a bout of depression too? Only worse?

He went a day’s journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. ‘I have had enough,

STILL DARING TO HOPE

Lord,' he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the tree and went to sleep."

1 Kings 19:4-5

Some of you are surprised that the prophet, a minister of God no less, should have gone through that too. And I'm thinking that if his experience is a lot like ours, we might find some help from looking at his story.



If you've been there yourself, you have probably judged yourself harshly for getting into it at all. You've beaten yourself up with guilt. I want to sound three positive notes out of the Elijah story to begin with. Perhaps you can identify.

Look at Elijah's courage:

After a long time, in the third year, the word of the Lord came to Elijah: "Go and present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land." So Elijah went to present himself. . . . Ahab went to meet Elijah. When he saw Elijah he said to him, "Is that you, you troubler of Israel?" "I have not made trouble for Israel," Elijah replied. "But you and your father's family have. You have abandoned the Lord's commands and have followed the Baals. Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table." So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. Elijah went before the people and said, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him."

1 Kings 18:1-21, selected

That is bulldog courage, resting firmly on the hope that God is alive and accessible, and that God will break in and do a new thing. In that hope he faced the political power, godless as Ahab was, and called him to account. That's like putting your hand into a hungry lion's mouth.

He also faced the religious powers, the priests of Baal and Asherah, who had sold out to the political regime, and he called them to account. That's like putting your head in a nest of angry hornets. Clearly, Elijah's depression came not because of a lack of hope or courage.

Look at Elijah's faith:

Hope Refined in the Smelter

Get two bulls for us. Let them choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the Lord. The god who answers by fire—he is God.”

Then, after the futile prayer to Baal, this:

Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come here to me.” They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the Lord, which was in ruins. Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob. . . . With these stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord, and he dug a trench around it. He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, “Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and the wood.”

1 Kings 18:23-24, 30-33

That’s faith—faith that God will win the contest with Baal. Elijah remembers the entering into Canaan, and the twelve-stone altar. He replicates that. This is faith that God will vindicate himself again, no matter the odds. So, no, his depression does not indicate a lack of faith, any more than the sound produced from limp strings indicates the quality of the violin.

Now look at Elijah’s commitment to the cause of God:

At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: “O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so that these people will know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.”

1 Kings 18:36-37

This is the passion of his life. Therefore the depression is not a measure of his love for God, any more than an empty gas tank is the measure of the tractor’s ability to pull a plow.

I hope this lifts from you the tendency to condemn yourself, or others, when you or they experience depression. That dark place you have come to is not the measure of your hope, and faith, and love.



Now before we look at how Elijah got to this awful place, look for a moment at his self-portrait, in his own words:

I have had enough, Lord. Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors. ...I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. ...I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me to.

1 Kings 19:4, 10

Clearly, Elijah is exhausted. So tired that death seems like a relief. His life has narrowed down to himself. But strangely he paints himself in two colors. On the one hand, he is no good, like all his forebears, but on the other hand he is still the very important one. He is the only one left that God could count on, so with him God's cause dies. There is no other zealous one. That self-portrait has clues about how he got there.

Certainly there are monstrous elements outside Elijah that have the potential to bring on depression. Ahab and Jezebel, that ungodly team, rule the land. And there is that nation wide compromise of religion. We know about that. There is corruption in high places. The people want to do evil, so they find a religion that supports them in this. In wartime, Christian ministers bless the bombs. In peace there are men of God who label things like free enterprise as Christian, so that the religious system assures the multinationals of its, and God's, support. The people of God get embedded in the political web, and claim they are building the kingdom of God from there. The wrongs are enormous and tangled; no wonder we get depressed.

As I said earlier, Elijah's self portrait suggests how he contributed to the disaster. He pits himself personally against the enemy host. "I have been very zealous" is a badge of honor. Almost you can hear him say, "If you want to see how God will get the job done, just watch me. I'm doing it." His ego is totally invested in the cause of God. He is God's pivot. "Have all the people and the prophets come to me," he called. He has forgotten that this is God's project. So he takes God's burden on his shoulders. That's a recipe for disaster.

Not surprisingly, his faith morphs into bravado. 850 prophets of false gods? Bring them on. Even football penalizes taunting but Elijah does it on holy ground. He has yet to learn that a bravado-fed high is short-lived, even when God steps in to safe guard his own name. As he comes to the end of himself, he still looks for comfort in being able to blame others. His ancestors for one—they weren't much good either. And the people? They have rejected the covenant. You can't move them.



But now, let's walk with Elijah out of the darkness and into newness. It's worth the trip. Amazingly, God does not scold his man for his anger, or his blaming, or his fear and despair. He lets Elijah pout, and then lets him go to sleep. The man is exhausted after all. As it happens, sleep is a symptom of depression, and also part of the healing for depression. Then God provides a lunch: fresh bread and fresh water. He'll need energy. Then more sleep, and more food. God is prescribing a long hike, forty days worth. Time to think, but also a different place from which to gain a new perspective.

First off, Elijah needs to learn that over-reaching, power-driven zeal is not God's instrument of choice for calling his people back home to him (1 Kings 19:11-14). The mighty wind screams it. God doesn't need a cyclone prophet. The earthquake thunders it. God isn't into shake-em-up preachers. The fire hisses it. God's kingdom doesn't come through brimstone crusaders. When God has our attention, and we get to feel small, and our heart has become still, then God can whisper his love, and we cover our face in awe and come out of the cave to meet him.

But are these *not* vehicles that God uses? Did God not send a wind to help dry up the Red Sea to give Israel a path to cross over? And did not Sinai tremble violently when God came down to give his people the commandments? And didn't Moses meet God in the burning bush? And don't you think God wants us to hear from him when a tornado demolishes a town? Or when Haiti is shattered? Or if California is burning up in fire and drought? Can it be that in a crisis, when we come face to face with things that silence us, we become still enough to hear his whisper of love?

Finally Elijah is ready to work with God in God's way. And, like a patient father, God sends him back the way he came, and puts him to work. He is to anoint a new king here, and another there, and so help the transition happen in those two little kingdoms. And he is to anoint Elisha to become his own replacement. And Elijah, a much humbler man now, obeys. God's work will go on without losing a beat when Elijah punches the clock for the last time, and takes his leave.

And just in case Elijah has still a smidgen of pride left in his bones, God lets him know that there are 7,000 others who are as staunch as he in their commitment to God. They are quieter about it, but with no less trust in this God who whispers love.

So, when depression clouds you in, and all is dark, don't condemn yourself. Give yourself some care, and then some distance. You'll find new perspectives on yourself, on God, and on God's kingdom. And then take on the next assignment even before the hurt is all gone. The hurt's the gift that keeps hope humble as we go.

STILL DARING TO HOPE

HOPE AND FAITH AND LOVE RESTORED

HYMN TUNE: GLORIOUS THINGS OF YOU ARE SPOKEN,
WORSHIP TOGETHER (1995), NUMBER 422

We had dreamed in vivid color
How the people gone astray
Would repent in dust and ashes
And return to God's true way.
Lord, forgive our haughty spirit,
That with weapons of the night
We had thought to conquer evil
And install your rule with might.

We had thought our reckless daring
Was of faith a measure true,
And in pride we flaunted sharing
Of God's glory, his own due.
Lord, forgive our vaunted greatness
Which could put you to the test.
Let us be your humble servant,
Trusting that you know what's best.

Lord, we thought our love was stellar,
So committed to your cause
That we brooked no other passion,
Craving only your applause.
Lord, forgive our self-importance,
Boasting which knows nothing of
Resting quietly, receptive,
Awed to hear your whispered love.

John Regehr, April 2015

SEVEN

IMMANUEL: GOD WITH US IN THE DARK PLACES

Matthew 11; 1 Peter

*Comfort is not an end in itself.
Comfort is designed to be an enablement,
so we can do what we are called to.*



Having read the theme, you probably expect me to speak comfort to those among us whose life is less than happy. And you are right. I want to do that. You probably expect me to offer a comfort that is warm and soft, so that those who are in dark places, in pain, in despondency, can nestle back into the arms of God and come to rest. And you are right. I want to do that... for just a moment.

This is how Immanuel puts it: “Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). That’s what you want to hear if you are in a dark place. And, yes, you ought to hear that. It is Immanuel who says it. “God with us” means that in our dark times he will be with us to provide rest, and refuge, and comforting. He tucks us under his mother hen wing, and we can know again that we are safe, and that the universe is in good hands.

Comfort, however, is not an end in itself. It is designed to be an enablement, so we can do what we are called to. Now that we have come to rest in him for a while, what do we do with our new energy, our renewed strength, our renewed vision?

Immanuel tells us: “Now take my yoke upon you, and learn from me how to pull your load” (Matthew 11:29, JR’s paraphrase). I want to read parts of an epistle today that will help us move beyond the cozy comfort under the wing

of the mother hen God, and on to living responsibly in the hard places, the dark places, which constitute so much of our lives. God with us in the dark places calls us to live with Immanuel, and like Immanuel, through our dark days.



Usually when we have said “God with us,” we have focused on ourselves and our life-world, and have seen God come to us to help us with the living of our lives. The texts I will read will invite us to a larger perspective. “God with us” is God coming into the world, the whole world, doing his redeeming work through the life and suffering of Jesus Christ. “Us” is the world. “God with us” is God come into the world, and we in our small life-world are enabled to identify with him and his purposes. God is working out his world redemption with us and through our suffering too. That is a large shift in thinking. That is a profound mystery.

There are those who think that the letter of I Peter was used as a baptismal sermon, designed to prepare believers for the hardship of living the Jesus way in a pagan and hostile world. Perhaps, then, it is appropriate to use this epistle in our congregation today. I will read four brief sections from the epistle. As I read them, remember our theme: God with us comforts us, and enables us to live responsibly in the dark places of our lives.

*Living responsibly
as Christians in the dark places
means to keep joy alive
even in the suffering.
Immanuel,
God come among us,
enables us to do
that.*

In this [salvation] you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see

him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

1 Peter 1:6-11

Yes, suffering does seem incongruous. It doesn't seem to fit into the wonder of salvation. But we have cause for joy. In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope (v. 3). He has given us an inheritance that will not perish (v. 4). We are encouraged to keep rejoicing in this good news reality, "even though" we may have to suffer for a while. The Spirit acknowledges that the two don't seem to fit together, at least to us.

The Spirit does not suggest that if we would only rejoice enough the hurt wouldn't hurt at all. The suffering is real, and it is at enmity with our joy. Yet Immanuel, God with us, means that we can keep the joy alive despite the suffering. Immanuel enables us to put the two incongruous realities together.

How? Immanuel helps us remember that the suffering is for a little while only. Yes, a sleepless night with a toothache, or a heartache, seems long. And it is. Yes, a lifetime of grief because of some one's fifteen-second carelessness at the wheel, or at handling a crane, or in landing a plane, seems very, very long. And it is. But even ninety years is short in retrospect. And alongside the eternal One, Immanuel, even a lifetime of suffering is a little while. So we can keep our joy alive. We'll make it!

How to keep the joy alive? Immanuel helps us accept the fact that God has chosen suffering as a way of preparing us for our inheritance. "You may have to suffer various trials" (1 Peter 1:6, JR's paraphrase). It is this God with us, not a God at a distance, who chooses which trials, and how many, and how severe, will achieve his purpose for us. Not all of us are given the same suffering, or equal amounts of it, and that may make it even more difficult for the more afflicted ones to accept their overload of agony.

Accepting the suffering is a faith stance. I may complain now and again, but in the end I will trust the God who chooses this route to my goal. I will submit to what is. I can do so more easily because Immanuel is right with me. He points me to the goal, and keeps my joy alive.

How to keep joy alive in the suffering? The Spirit keeps us aware that our personal path of pain is like that of our Lord's. We suffer trials, our faith is made genuine, and glory follows. That is the pattern: Jesus suffered, and glory followed later. Suffering becomes the way by which we identify profoundly with Immanuel, and this sustains our joy.

STILL DARING TO HOPE

*Living responsibly
in the dark places
makes suffering a means
of enhancing our witness.*

Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened. But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to every one who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

1 Peter 3:13-17

It seems suffering is an excellent medium for enhancing our witness, especially if the witness is to the very ones who cause the suffering. That witness would be snuffed out promptly if we repay evil for evil. How can we speak glowingly of the Lamb of God taken to slaughter carrying the sins of the human race, when we cope with one other person's sins against us by paying him back in kind, even doing him one better?

There is some little comfort in knowing that usually we will not be punished for doing right. Mostly the right is acknowledged, and even appreciated. Except maybe, well, we can think of exceptions I suppose in media, labor, finance or politics. However, when we suffer for rightness, and in that circumstance are challenged to speak of our faith and our hope, that witness is by the very suffering made the more powerful. The price we pay in pain gives credibility to our words.

In that way, then, we can exploit even injustices done to us. It means, of course, that we must think away from ourselves, to Immanuel, God in the midst of the injustice. And we need to think away from ourselves and to the world, to people whom Immanuel wants to address through our witness. You know how it is, I suspect, that when we are hurting, especially when we are hurting unjustly, we get stuck on thinking about ourselves. Self pity, perhaps. God with us sets us free to think away from ourselves, and enables us to keep doing right, a light in the world. Bearing injustice nobly gives credibility to our witness.

And then the Spirit flips the coin.

Immanuel: God with Us in the Dark Places

*Living responsibly
in the world
is to allow our suffering
to become a way of effecting
our own cleansing.
Immanuel enables us to do that.*

Since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in the body is done with sin. As a result, he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God.

1 Peter 4:1-2

It would be presumptuous to think that our suffering is only, or even primarily, for the sake of others. To think thus would be to close ourselves to the work of grace that God wants to do in us through our own pain. Our suffering does turn us in on ourselves, and so it should. This is not to be a self-pitying, egocentric inwardness. Rather it is to be the opening up of ourselves to the scrutiny of God, to the house cleaning of the Spirit.

Let us not be sullen, or stoic, sufferers. That would be to fortress our souls against God's detergents and scouring pads. How we view our sufferings will determine whether they cleanse us or harden us. Here is the principle: As Christ suffered in the flesh to free us from our sins, so we, too, suffer in our bodies in order to set us free from our own sins. Suffering is liberating. It sets us free from our bondages, both subtle and crude ones. There is the sickness that sets us free from our addiction to work, or success, or from being controlled by others' expectations. Immanuel links even our little misfortunes to wrong thinking and wrong pursuits, and sets us free.

Thus, though we may at times suffer at the hands of others for doing right, we do not immediately interpret all our suffering as a confirmation of our rightness. Not every sliver is a sign of our saintliness, nor every rash a symptom of our righteousness. And even if we are mistreated by others, it may be because we reflect Christ so poorly, not so powerfully. When we speak our faith and are jeered, that may reflect our inconsistency, or our insensitivity, more than our Christ-likeness. Suffering is God's detergent, so we ought to remain open to making a linkage between our suffering and our inner life; open to letting our dark experiences be indicators of the dark realities in us to which Immanuel wants to bring the light.

STILL DARING TO HOPE

*We come, then, in time,
to understand
that suffering is an important component
in the way God has chosen
to run his universe
and therefore we submit...
to live responsibly.*

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.

1 Peter 5:6

Our stance in the dark places is a faith stance. We submit to God. He rules his universe with his "mighty hand," and we yield to it. We stand humbly, in awe, under God. We will not challenge him, as the serpent seduced Eve to do. We will not raise a clenched fist against him as Cain did. We will take a faith stance and submit, even to our suffering, reverently.

Oh, yes, we will plead with God. We will weep in our pain, and over the injustices and anguish of others, and we will remind God of his promises, at times vehemently so. But we will not, in the name of aggressive faith, let our pleading turn to demanding, or to presumption, or to defiance. Ultimately our faith, particularly in the dark places, is a faith in Immanuel, the God of the universe is with us.

So we believe, and submit, and worship. If he has chosen to run his universe, now that our sin has defiled it, in a way that makes suffering a large component of his method of redemption, then we will accept our suffering, too, as a part of that process. We won't understand it fully, but we will bow in acquiescence to that mighty hand that moves all history toward the final glory.

We submit to the mystery, and discover again that Immanuel is truly with us, here in this dark place. And to our surprise, he takes a little of the light of the final glory to warm our little life-world and light our way. Thanks be to God!





*May He
who is as present
in the dark
as in the day,
hold firm your hand
and take from you
all paralyzing fear
when blackness looms
and makes each step
a threat.*

John Regehr, ca. 2006

REMAINING SANE AND RESPONSIBLE WHEN NOTHING IS GOING RIGHT

Exodus 3–12

*God
is always purposefully engaged
in everything that happens,
so there can be no true failures,
only pauses,
or turns in the road,
to get us to where God wants to take us.*



You'll find the entire "Moses versus Pharaoh" saga in Exodus 4 to 12. From it I'd like us to learn this: How to retain our sanity, our inner composure, when things go really badly, and remain responsible even when nothing seems to be going right. The two lock arms: Sanity and responsibility. When we panic, and lose it, we may well behave irresponsibly. When we remain steady in the storm, we remain capable of doing what it is right to do, being righteous when nothing goes right.

Would you believe that remaining sane in the chaos depends on our thinking? It is faith-based thinking that keeps us steady in the storm. The story of Moses versus Pharaoh can help us establish, or maintain, such faith-based thinking. First off, God is concerned that Moses regain a long linear perspective. It is good for me, too, to remember that I am part of a very long history of God with his people.



Moses had just experienced a very serious setback. Pharaoh had turned nasty and vengeful when Moses issued his request, God's order: "Let my people go!" Pompous egos do that; they turn nasty and vengeful. So petty, petulant Pharaoh made life even worse for his Israelite slaves, and the Hebrew foremen who were in charge of the work force turned hostile against Moses and Aaron. "Bright helpers you are," they shouted. "You've only made horrible things even worse. What were you thinking?"

So Moses goes to God for a complaining session, and God reminds him of past history—of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob, and other past bearers of the promise, a kind of spiritual ancestry (Ex.6:14-25). 'Moses, you are part of a larger and longer story. Don't think that the drama starts and stops with you. God revealed himself as El Shaddai to his people in ages past, and led them through thick and thin long before you came on the scene. True, God will now be known by another name as well, Yahweh, I Am, but the newness in your lifetime, Moses, is part of an ancient narrative, a story that will go on and on when you are gone.'

So, let's keep perspective. I am not the apex, as though now, finally, with my arrival, the world will come of age. That kind of thinking belongs to my arrogant past. In truth, I am but a wee part of a long and lengthening story. And God was as real and as active in every preceding part as he is now, and ever will be.

Therefore, keep sane. Remember that your part in the divine drama is not the whole play. Significant? Yes. But superlative? No. Don't be self-inflated. Inflatables don't survive in a storm. So, if we get this perspective right, this long linear perspective, we can be restored to humility, and sure, it takes humility to be both sane and responsible when life is in disarray.



But we also need to think big. The conflict is God's, not ours. That is another critical perspective. It helps our sanity to keep thinking that God can trump any card the enemy plays. Now and then, methinks, God actually chuckles a bit when he plays his trump card. Aaron's shepherd's staff becomes a snake. The magicians toss their staves to the ground too, and, to everyone's surprise, they become a slithering reptile platoon. And then Aaron's snake gleefully gobbles up theirs. That's God's kind of joke.

In time the magicians can't keep up copying Moses' signs and wonders. And in fact, when the boils hit, even the magicians become victimized. God trumps every card the enemy plays. So, thinking that, and trusting him, you

Remaining Sane and Responsible when Nothing is Going Right

can remain steady in the skirmish, and be both sane and responsible.

Now, if it is God's conflict, then I can assume that he has a purpose in waging it. Clearly, we earthlings "see through a glass darkly" when it comes to deciphering God's purposes. But it helps to read the text carefully.

The obvious purpose in this plagues drama has been clear to us since we were kids in Sunday school. God wants to get his people out of Egypt, out of slavery, and set them on the way to the Land of Promise. God wants to set his people free. That's his purpose.

We've heard it clearly in God's call to Moses:

I have seen the misery of my people in Egypt. So I have come down to rescue them and bring them into a good and spacious land. So, now, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt.

Exodus 3:7-10

That is clear. Moses and Aaron get that, and shout God's order into Pharaoh's stopped up ears: "Let my people go!" And God speaks encouragement to the people:

I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them.

Exodus 6:6

God's further purpose is that he wants to be recognized as his people's God from here on and through the generations:

I perform all these miraculous signs of mine among you to set you free, so that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I dealt harshly with the Egyptians, and how I performed my signs among them, and that you may know that I am the Lord.

Exodus 10:2

Telling this story will help that happen... for Israel then, and for us now.



If we remain sane and responsible in our hard times, we will have stories of God's providence to tell our children and grandchildren. Yes, we will tell them our regrets, and we will be candid in our confessions of the wrong we did, but the stories that are to dominate the telling are the stories of the marvelous things God did to see us through the truly hard times. These stories will shape

our children and grandchildren at their core. That's God's purpose in the wonderful things he does.

I have been wondering what mixed feelings the people of Israel might have had when they became aware that the flies do not infest their own settlements. Their livestock does not die. The hail destroys nothing in the land of Goshen where they live. And, they have light while all Egypt is in utter darkness. Here they are, a downtrodden people, with the resignation of a slave mentality, getting this amazing special treatment. Their feelings? Awe about this God they hadn't heard from much? Glee at the plight of their harassers? Superiority in their exclusive specialness? Disdain for the wicked ones who were now getting it in the neck?

Well, if it is God's conflict, then we might do well to think about God's purpose regarding the Egyptians. I was prompted to re-read the text because of something Christine said at the conversation evening of the summer "preachin' crew". Christine quoted one of her seminary professors, who was quoting a Jewish rabbi.

Please hear what I read when I went back to the text:

God speaks:

The Egyptians will know that I am the Lord, when I stretch out my hand.

Exodus 7:5

Moses' words to Pharaoh:

So that you may know that there is no one like the Lord, our God.

Exodus 8:10

The baffled magicians speak to Pharaoh:

This is the finger of God.

Exodus 8:19

The Lord speaks to Pharaoh:

So that you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth, because by now I could have wiped you from the face of the earth. But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.

Exodus 9:14-16

Moses to Pharaoh:

So you may know that the earth is the Lord's.

Exodus 9:29

Do you remember what Allan Labun told us when he spoke recently of the Scripture as a means of reproof, namely that with every reproof, God issues an invitation? If we see from God's perspective, and get it clear in our heads that all people of the earth are his children, and that therefore, these Egyptians, for all the cruelty and stubbornness of their leaders, are also God's children, as the rabbi said, we may be able to grasp the truth that the plagues are God's persuasions to bring the Egyptians back home to him.

The Egyptians are to recognize the God of all the earth, and worship him, just as the people of Israel are called to do. So the plagues are invitations to turn, to return to him who is God alone. Do you remember the promise of God to Abraham? "All the peoples of the earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:3). Or as Isaiah puts it: "The Gentiles shall come to your light" (Isaiah 60:3).

So even the punishment of God is an invitation to turn round right. And the people of God are the light to prompt and guide the turn, so the nations will know whom to turn to. The conflict is God's, and the ones he is in contention with are also his children. That thinking should help us remain sane and responsible in our attitude and behavior toward the enemies of God. At the very least we should want for them nothing less than what God wants, namely, their return to him.



Another point: If it is God's conflict, and God's project, you can expect that it will take time. Which is not to say that God can't do instant stuff. He can whip up a stiff wind in the nick of time and blow-dry a marching lane through the Red Sea. But the whole process of setting his people free from Egypt was agonizingly slow, and he got going on it only after they had been in Egypt 400 years, when many generations had already been birthed into a slave mentality, when freedom had become a relic of history, or a dream without legs.

God is not in a hurry. So, if it takes a decade or two to achieve this deliverance or that, don't panic. And don't doubt his hearing of your groaning. And, who knows, it may just take the thousand years the last book of the Bible speaks of to repair the earth after we've messed it up with oil in the sea, and

poison in the air, and sickness in the soil. Timing is everything, you say. So, chill out, and wait for his.

If it is God's conflict, then it is quite possible that I won't be able to figure out what he's doing. We really can become discombobulated if we try, by our wee minds, to make sense of God's handling of things, and his designs with this strategy or that. I have always stumbled over the fact that after Pharaoh hardened his heart, God does it for him. And then God totally ignores Pharaoh's feeble attempts at confession. But then, I do not want to back away from obedience just because I can't figure God out. God in his wisdom will do what he needs to do, and I can let it be, and be at rest. It is, after all, God's conflict, and God's project. I'll keep on trusting through times of puzzlement.



I will conclude with three elementary mini-sanity tips:

One:

Remember that even incontrovertible evidence will not persuade those who choose not to be persuaded. It is ours to obey instructions from God, to live the truth, and to tell the truth. It is not ours to make persuasion happen. Let God deal with a Pharaoh, or a Pharisee, or a corporate executive, or a government bureaucrat, or our children, for that matter, when the days of our persuading them are past.

Two:

Remember that things often get worse before they get better. The first results of your obedience to God may, in fact, be disastrous. And truly, it will require wisdom to know if you ought to continue, or wait, or change course. Don't expect reason when petty power is threatened.

That's what we used to say to couples seeking to work their way out of a conflicted or stale marriage. Don't panic when things get worse. Threatened egos are fragile, so remain sane and responsible. Deliverance is on the way.

And three:

Remember that obeying God may lead to a lonely life, since even those close to you, your own family, your colleagues, may turn against you. The very people you are serving the best you know, may deride and abandon you.

Exodus 5:21

There will be times when you will want to yell at God for making life so difficult. Go ahead. He can handle it. And when you've complained some, you'll be able to hear God's orders again, and carry on, sane and responsible.



*When you are tempted to look at dark fates
that loom as an ominous threatening foe,
then raise your sights higher and see what awaits
when you are well past where you now fear to go.
Yet see what is near and the promises kept,
by which God encouraged and strengthened resolve
through long hours of wakefulness while the world slept,
and you felt your fear and disquiet dissolve.*

John Regehr, ca. 2006

STILL DARING TO HOPE



PICKING UP THE PIECES

Genesis 1, 3; Jeremiah 18, 19, 29; Romans 8; Colossians 1

*We can bravely dare to hope
that our shattered treasures and marred memories—
and so much else—
can be restored,
and even lent a greater beauty,
because God has ever been graciously insistent
that the broken can be mended.*



Mary's parents owned a beautiful coffee grinder. It is a wall model. The metal grinding unit with the crank is inscribed "Java." The porcelain hopper for holding the coffee beans has the English word "Coffee" written on it in gold script. The grinder is mounted on a 5/8-inch board measuring about 5 1/2 by 16 inches. A small metal plate fastened to the board with two minute nails bears the logo, "Java," and the German words, "*Garantiert geschmiedetes u. gefrästes Mahlwerk,*" that is, "Guaranteed forged and machined grinder."

The coffee grinder is quite a treasure. Mary had long wished that it would be willed to her, and when her mother, just prior to moving into a personal care home, designated her few earthly belongings to her eight children, she assigned the coffee grinder to Mary. That was about six years ago.

Shortly after mother had vacated her home, Mary and her sister Anne flew to Leamington to visit mother and sort through all the stuff mother had left behind. How now to bring the coffee grinder back to Winnipeg? Mary was worried, and wanted desperately to do it right so it wouldn't be damaged. Taking it on the plane seemed risky to her, so she found a card-

board box, packed it carefully, and sent it back home by rail.

When the package arrived a week or so later, Mary was beside herself with excitement. Here was the treasure that would grace our kitchen. She had the place already selected at the end of our dividing cupboard.

She opened the box, and burst into uncontrollable sobbing. The beautiful porcelain hopper had been shattered, some of it into very small pieces, even slivers. Mary's heart felt the same.

My attempts to comfort her were futile. Words like, "It's OK, Sweetheart," seem terribly trite and thin in such a moment of pain, and regret, and self-flagellation.

After a quarter hour or so I inspected the damage. It was a pitiful mess, to say the least, but I thought I could glue it back together with some degree of success. "I think I can mend it," I assured Mary, but it seemed to her like a hollow promise. How could it ever be the same again?

In her remorse, Mary could have found people to blame. She could have blamed the Canadian Pacific Railway and sued for damages. She didn't. She could have blamed her brothers who had been near enough to look in on what she was doing, and could have advised her. She didn't. After all, she didn't ask them for advice then, so why should she blame them now?

No, she took the responsibility on herself. Now in looking back, and getting belated advice, she knew she should have removed the porcelain hopper from the wooden mount, and carried it home in her flight bag. But she didn't know that. She did the best she knew. So she acknowledged her mistake, worked her way through the grief and remorse, and allowed me to repair it the best I could.

In time Mary has been able to forgive herself, and the keepsake now graces our kitchen cupboard. When we look at it now it reminds us not so much of Mary's mistake, although we can't help remembering, but of her parents and the goodness of God toward them, and through them toward us. It is this that we remember deliberately, and talk about. The more so since we buried mother just a week ago yesterday.



Mary's story reminds us that we can bravely dare to hope that our shattered treasures and marred memories—and so much else—can be restored, and even lent a greater beauty, because God has ever been graciously insistent that the broken can be mended.

Picking up the Pieces

*In the beginning
God demonstrated
that he can reconstruct chaos
into beauty*

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep.

Genesis 1:1-2

Let's assume for a moment that the correct reading is, "The earth became void, chaotic." Could it be that what God made orderly at first was damaged, distorted, even destroyed by his archenemy? After all, God is a God of order and peace, not of disorder and confusion.

So, when what God made orderly is ruptured, and messed up, God does not stalk through the cosmic darkness, venting his anger, screaming at the enemy who wrecked his handiwork. Rather, he begins resolutely to speak words—words designed to recover the wonder and the beauty that had been lost. "Let there be light," he said, and the course by which the cosmos was restructured was underway. There was no hurry, certainly no panic, but a deliberate, purposeful creative process by which God puts back together the pieces of his broken handiwork.

*Within human history
God is doing it a second time,
that is,
bringing beauty and order out of ruin.*

The sad story of the fall is told in Gen. 3:1-24. God had got it all back together again beautifully, and had put man, male and female, in charge to exercise the creator's rule over the cosmos. Dominion, the scripture calls it—stewardship.

Again the enemy enters to bring blemish and blight. Eve and Adam listen to his deceptive voice—they still do, we still do—thinking that they, we, can make the world better if we live by principles other than God's. The result was then—and still is—pain, broken relationships, and enmity. That one blames this one, and this one blames that one, and both blame the serpent. Each hides from the other, fearing discovery and vulnerability, and both hide from God in the futile attempt to keep their dark secrets.

But God has gone to work again to put the pieces back together, to right

the awful wrong. He promised that a serpent destroyer would come, the seed of the woman. So God set out to prepare the stage for his redeemer Son, and when all was ready, he brought him on centre stage in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the Lamb of God, the Christ of the universe.

In the life of Jesus, God models what he intends to do with human history. The agony and death, consequences of the serpent's intrusion, are turned to glory and life in the resurrection. Here in Jesus, the "first fruits," is the promise for us.

Listen to the triumphant tone of scripture:

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through the Spirit which dwells in you.

Romans 8:11

And now listen as this triumphant tone takes on a cosmic sweep:

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

Colossians 1:15-20

The pieces are all coming together, and as the redeemed look back from the vantage point of God's ultimate accomplishment, they remember not each other's wickedness, but the wonder of God's grace.

*This cosmic design
of making whole again what we have destroyed,
God has shown his people earlier.*

Whatever means God needs to employ, he will use—affirmation and rebuke, support and confrontation, vindication and discipline. Always he will put things right, and allow us to start over again clean and fresh. Even a lament-

Picking up the Pieces

ing, weeping, heartbroken prophet sees God in these grace terms. Listen to Jeremiah's words of judgment to his people and to us:

This is what the Lord says: "Go and buy a clay jar from a potter. Take along some of the elders of the people and of the priests and go out to the Valley of Ben Hinnom, near the entrance of the Potsherd Gate. There proclaim the words I tell you, and say, 'I am going to bring a disaster on this place that will make the ears of everyone who hears of it tingle. For they have forsaken me and made this a place of foreign gods. Then break the jar while those who go with you are watching, and say to them, 'This is what the Lord Almighty says: I will smash this nation and this city just as this potter's jar is smashed and cannot be repaired.'"

Jeremiah 19:1-4, 10-11a

And yet this same Jeremiah hears the promise of God that assures his people and us that we can start over again. God will pick up the shards, and make us whole again.

This is what the Lord says: 'When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you, and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.'

Jeremiah 29:10-14

*That same prophet assures us, however,
that God wants to work redemptively with us
before everything breaks apart.*

From the garbage heap outside Jerusalem where Jeremiah smashed the earthen jar, I want to take you to the potter's workshop. We are in process, in God's creative hands:

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: "Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message." So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him.

Then the word of the Lord came to me: “O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does? Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.”

Jeremiah 18:1-6

What good news! We are in God’s hands, in process, and God will punch us back to the starting lump, if, because we are giving him a hard time, we become flawed in his hands. The scary part is that we are at work shaping each other. It is one Christian sinful person seeking to shape another. It is one person who is himself subtly caught up in the systems of this world trying to shape another into a person who is free of these very systems.

Scary? Yes. But hopeless? No! Because God is working with us and he has given us of his spirit. Therefore, we can, in fact, come to see each other not from the human point of view, but from the perspective of Christ. That does not mean, of course, that all will always be sweetness and light. There is need now and then to say to this brother and that sister that they have flaws, even serious flaws.

But we do not discard the clay. The flaw does not make the clay useless. Clay does not lose its value or its potential just because at the moment it is not shaping up to the wishes and expectations of the potter. Nor is there any shame in having to back up, and start again. We are all clay, and we are each other’s potters on behalf of God. As the clay yields to the potter, so we yield to each other; we “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:21). As the potter accommodates his expectations to fit the clay, so do we to each other. Grace is to be allowed to start over again. Being gracious is allowing another to start over again, in our caring hands, fresh, free, and forgiven.

Sometimes we have waited too long to start over, and have needed to be shattered. Even then, God’s grace and our graciousness can put the pieces back together and allow for a new start.

It is wiser, of course, to be at work with each other, and to submit to the punching back and starting over, while the clay is still shapeable.

But, either way, let’s keep our hearts compassionate, and our hands firm and gentle, and our sleeves rolled up, and let’s keep at work with each other on Christ’s behalf reshaping with affection, and, when destruction has done its worst, picking up the pieces and putting them back together again with tenderness and care.

So help us God.

MEETING GOD OUTSIDE MY TOWER

The book of Job

*If we want to meet God honestly,
he'll wait for us outside our tower.*



The metaphor I am using may puzzle you. Actually I'll be introducing an additional metaphor later. Please stay with me. The fog will clear.

Strange how we've come to think that the closer we are to God, the surer we will be of what we know about him, and about life, and about all things important. Almost as though closeness to God fosters arrogance. Actually, coming to think about it, we ought to expect that a deepening awareness of God would bring us to admit that what we know better than we know anything, is that we don't know. Perhaps such humility is a truer indication that we have met God for real, that our soul is aware of the Presence, the awesome, overwhelming, unspeakable Presence.

I quote from Scott Peck. These lines appeared in one of those tear-off daily reading calendars. It comes from Peck's book, *Further Along the Road Less Travelled*: "Virtually all the evil in the world is committed by people who are absolutely certain they know what they're doing. It is not committed by people who think of themselves as confused. It is not committed by the poor in spirit." What a helpful insight: the evil in the world is not committed by the poor in spirit.

Perhaps it is a symptom of the sinfulness of humankind that we bolster and measure our status by the certainty with which we clutch our ideas, our understandings, our opinions. Preachers are not immune. We hold up the Book, and then give our opinion, almost equating the two. We do so even though we have already learned from our history—if we are fifty or more—that any idea we accepted as the newest insight, had to be revised in a decade

or two, often less. We could have learned this when we were grass green college students. After all, what the academic world had accepted twenty years before we got there was now being critiqued, corrected, or discarded by our profs. We could have learned it again in seminary. In that setting the ones who were being critiqued were creative thinkers just three decades ago, and now were made out to be in error.

We did learn it again while we were parenting our children. Dr. Spock was the guru. Permissiveness, valuing the children, listening to the children, removing physical punishment—these were the newest insights, the new truth, the new revelation that humankind had finally come to in the enlightenment of this, our new and improved generation.

Well, now, these decades later, we recognize that we didn't know, and that Dr. Spock's insights were half-truths. We were so sure, so certain of what we believed. Now we know that what we thought we knew became error because we didn't allow our new insights to be immediately critiqued and corrected, to be balanced with counter truths, paradoxes.



We humans have always built our Babel Towers, our monuments to certainty, to knowledge, to superiority. We have built Newtonian Towers, Freudian Towers, Mennonite Towers, Evangelical Towers, Charismatic Towers, Democracy Towers, Capitalist Towers, Socialist Towers, Concrete Towers, Classical Music Towers. Always we have built them high, above other mere mortals, into the heavens, as a way of demonstrating that we now finally have the truth, the whole truth, in our grasp. We are sure now, sure of ourselves, sure of the future, sure of our understanding of reality, sure of our worldview, sure of our status with God, sure of our grasp on God. We are certain, and that very certainty gives us our sense of rightness, even of worth, of superiority. In that certainty we anchor our identity. This is who we are. We identify ourselves with our Towers. I am a Conservative Capitalist Evangelical Mennonite Brethren. This corporate conglomerate Tower gives me both my identity and my assurance.

Strange how even in the church, in this marvelous, mysterious community of sinning saints, we have built community itself into a Tower. Is community at its best not at heart a bonding, living cluster of loving openness? And have we not made of it a Tower, an exclusive club of certified rightness? What we in this cluster believe is right. It has to be, otherwise we wouldn't have agreed on it. We find our identity in the rightness of our group. And so we have made our own group a Tower. The height of our error comes when we read some-

thing like the faith affirmation of the Psalm, and hear in it a divine endorsement of our Tower. “God is our tower and strength.” We read it and rejoice, and understand that God is identifying himself with our very own Tower.

I was taught, or I caught, this error as a child. There were seven churches in our little hometown. The others were all teaching error. If anyone in one of those other churches ever became really saved, they’d join the Mennonite Brethren’s. And there were tangible cases to prove the point. The United Church was dead. The Lutheran Church was in darkness. The Roman Catholic church evoked fear in me. There were strange ungodly things going on there. I recall walking by the church one time, and becoming aware that the door was standing open. I turned my eyes away lest I see the evil inside. And when a charismatic group got started in town, we couldn’t seem to talk enough about the awful things that happened in their meetings. We were right. Exclusively right. We had our Tower.

In the summer of ‘94 my brother and I drove back to the little prairie town for the fiftieth anniversary of my high school class. My family had moved away after my grade 10 year, but it was that class that graduated in 1944. As it happened, I was asked to participate in the Sunday morning service. It was held in the very building that had been the Mennonite Brethren church building. The MBs had built a new sanctuary, and the old one had been moved a half block down the street and was now being used by the United Church. I was able to tell my classmates and the other attenders that it was in that very building that I had been taught that I was right and they all were wrong. I was also able to tell them that I was no longer at that place. And, of course, they were all at different places too. So here we were, all of us coming out of our towers and clustering together in a hallowed hour of gentle bonding, and re-bonding.



The Bible is full of correctives to this our human error. Take Job as a case in point. God approaches the hurting Job with some brusqueness. Job was convinced that he knew how the world should be run. He was so sure that he actually accused God of messing up. Job had built his theological Tower. His accumulated certainties were mortared together into a structure he trusted more than he trusted God. So when God seemed to be managing his universe in ways that contradicted Job’s Tower, Job was convinced that God needed straightening out. Hardly different from preachers who have their theological worldview Towers in place, and then are compelled to force the words of

Scripture into their Tower formulation. We Evangelicals, Mennonites, are not immune to this error, even though we boast that we are a people of the Book.

Do I really want to meet God in his book? Well, then I'll need to come out of my Tower to read it. If I read it inside my Tower, then I'll be looking for endorsement for what I am certain of. If I leave my Tower to hear from God, I may hear something new, some good news I hadn't heard before. Or perhaps some corrective of what I thought I was certain about.

There is ample material in the New Testament to keep us humble in regard to what we know. Didn't Jesus say with respect to the Spirit, specifically with regard to being born of the Spirit, "You do not know whence it comes or whither it goes"? We have read that for years, and yet we map out the plan of salvation, or the four spiritual laws, or the seven steps to freedom, or how to be filled with the Spirit. We map out a route, and build a gate, and presume to monitor the Spirit's entry into a person's life. And yet Jesus said, "You don't know."

Didn't Jesus say, "You don't know the day or the hour of the coming of the Son of Man"? And yet we write books on the signs of the times so that we can know. And the fine old preacher saint still thinks he knows, and insists that he won't die before the Lord returns. And the books sell by the truckload, books about reading the signs so that we may know. We hear Jesus, but we go to Daniel, because we think we can know. We hear Jesus, but we go to the Revelation, because we want to know. And we read stuff into Revelation because we think we should be able to know. But Jesus said, "You don't know."

We hear the apostle say, "We see in a glass darkly." But we hear that same apostle speak with bold confidence about important stuff, and we like that, so we explain away the darkened, unclear glass.

And even when we learn that the glass the apostle is speaking of is the Scripture itself, that this very Book is unclear, that it allows us to see only indistinctly, we still go to it to find certainty more than guidance. We crave for support for our theological arguments more than we desire correctives to our thinking. We expect God to support our Tower, not to demolish it. Yet, if we want to meet God honestly, we'll need to meet him outside our Tower.



It is hard to accept that all of life is the crucible of God to crush us to the place where we admit that we don't know. Here is a lovely, energetic, enthusiastic woman, a grandmother by now. Let's call her Sara. Sara's husband of some three decades had left her for another woman. Sara trusted God for a

half dozen years to bring the man back. It didn't happen. But at the time of crisis, when the hope of a reconciliation was utterly snuffed out, Sara found God. In her new joy she helped all her children come to a jubilant faith. Together they founded a vibrant church. Sara was ecstatic. In her talks to women she would say, "No, God didn't bring my husband back, but my children are all in the faith. And we are doing now what before was unthinkable. God works things out beautifully. Just trust him."

And now? Some of the children have left the church, and perhaps the faith, she fears. Sara is devastated. A daughter left her husband for a man the couple was doing ministry with. The daughter has now left the ministry, and the church, and is wobbling in the faith. God is not stepping in to set everyone straight. "I can't accept it," Sara screams. She still wants to meet God in her Tower. But God isn't the way she thought he was. God doesn't do what Sara thinks he should. And Sara is crushed. Just like Job. Can it be that all of life is God's crucible to crush us to the place where we let go all we know.



If I want to meet God honestly, I'll have to leave my Tower. I'll have to let go what I know. I'll have to come naked and vulnerable, open and receptive, humble and unpretentious. Essentially I need to come to God now the way I will come to him in the moment of my death. In that awesome moment when I face God, I will let go everything. I will let go my wife, my children, my friends, my work, my unfinished sermons, my wishes, my demands, my opinions, my influence, my understandings, my control, my worldview, my certainty about what I have believed. I will let go everything, and entrust myself solely to God. That's all there will be, just God and me. Wouldn't it be helpful for me and for my life here, now, if I could do before the end what I will have to do at the end? I think so.

I remind you again of Job. Job believed God from inside his Tower. He knew how God should act. And when life turned out to be different from this expectation, Job, rather than coming out of his Tower to talk to God, stayed inside his Tower and accused God of injustice. Job's experience became the painful crucible to crush him to the place of humility where he could admit, "I don't know."

God drags Job out of his Tower of certainty: "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations? Have you ever given orders to the morning? Can you escort light and darkness to their places? Do you know the laws of the heavens? Will you contend with the Almighty and correct him? Will you fit the

Almighty into your paltry Tower?"

Job thinks he's already been crushed enough, and offers God a truce. He'll just zip his mouth shut. But God isn't about to let up. He continues to speak to Job out of the storm. Job is still in the crucible. "Would you condemn me to justify yourself? Can your voice thunder like mine? Can you capture the sea monster and put a rope through its nose? Then how do you think you are able to stand against me? Do you have a claim against me that I must pay? Everything under heaven belongs to me."

The crucible proves to be effective. Job finally responds with a new knowledge, a knowledge that is not the certainty of knowing, but the relinquishing of all knowing. "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted. Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know." Job came out of the Tower, and into the crucible, and came in time to the place of un-knowing. Fortunately, he was able to let his not-knowing become a new trusting.



Strange how we have fused this certainty of knowing together with our faith. We believe, we say. We believe that God will do this or that, will give us that or this. We are sure of God. God keeps his promises. And we know precisely what those promises are. God answers prayer. And we know what and how to pray. We make a list of prayer requests, and write the dates of both the asking and the receiving. God is good. So, of course, we expect him to do what we ask for. In fact, we know he will. If I don't really know that, then I fear that what I have is not faith. Faith and knowing what God will do are fused. And sometimes God does give us what we want and expect, even demand, of him. He is good. The problem is that this goodness of God, rather than leading us to repentance, (Romans 2:4) the changing of our minds, actually leads us to solidify our minds into certainty. If God answers my prayer, I must be right.

It could be scary to come out of our Tower to meet God. We'd have to let go all control over him. God is God. That's scary if our sense of security is built on the certainty of our knowing. And being preachers and all, we are expected to know. Our people like our certainties. They find comfort in our knowing things for sure. And so we feel we are letting them down if we don't know. We add to our uneasiness when we recognize that in our town the church that is growing fastest is the one where the pastor is absolutely certain of his particular view, absolutely certain that he knows what he's doing. His certainty wins adherents. "He tells it like it is," people say. Many people prefer

leaders who claim they have grasped the whole truth to leaders who share themselves humbly and point to the truth.

Your life, too, is a crucible. Life is painful. Life is disappointing. We've already had to give up so many expectations, opinions, views, understandings. We've given up our pre-teen view that the world is fair because God makes it fair. We've since discovered that the world is not fair. Not even the church is. We've given up our adolescent view of God as a friend who always only says supportive things. We've since discovered that God can be brutally confrontive. We've given up our early adult view that truth can be formulated in ways that are for always. We've since discovered that our own adolescent children can shake the very foundations of our Tower. All of those shifts, those givings-up, were crucible experiences.

And the crucible goes on. Illness here, accident there. Betrayal here, bereavement there. Loneliness here, depression there. The crucible goes on. The crushing goes on. Relentlessly we are brought to the unknowing which we need to attain if we want to meet God honestly.



So let the hurt, hurt. The crucible is redemptive in its purpose. Don't let the pain of the crucible drive you back into your Tower in the futile attempt to make life simple again within your structured knowing. If we attempt to do that, we need to keep at bay all the questions and the doubts that the crucible evoked. And when we keep the pain, and the questions, and the doubts out, we also keep God out. Or at least we are left with a God in our own image. The best boast we'll be able to make is, "The God is My God!" God in my image is a false god, no God at all. Only those who endure the crucible can in the end say with utter trusting relinquishment, "God is God." In the end that is all we'll have, and all we'll need. In the end we will meet God outside our Tower, because our Tower stays here.

ALONE WITH GOD: SOLITUDE OR LONELINESS

1 Kings 19; Psalm 139; Isaiah 6

*Tremble when you must,
and let the trembling
point the way to newness.*

*And be comforted
as you can,
and let the comfort
bring you joy.*



JOHN

Mary and I were asked to talk about prayer. And Pastor Herb Kopp suggested we weave in the ideas of solitude and loneliness. We've attempted to do that. A part of me is afraid to be alone with God. There is probably nothing that makes me more vulnerable. To be alone with God is the ultimate in psychic nakedness. I squeak out the words of Adam in marred Eden: "I am afraid, because I know now that I am naked" (Genesis 3:10, paraphrased). This is the anguished loneliness of being found out.

MARY

Although the temperature was seven degrees above zero, the humidity-laden wind chilled me to the bone. The street was busy with last minute Christmas shoppers. It was December 22. I walked slowly down the sidewalk, putting in time. Fear gripped me as I walked. I wasn't sure whether John would be sleeping as he was supposed to do, when I got back to the motel, or whether

another attack would have snuffed out his life. The hurt of losing yet another brother was acute. The funeral was the next day, December 23. Would John be able to do the service?

I stopped at Tim Hortons for coffee and a doughnut. Here in Winnipeg such a stop gives me great pleasure; there on Erie Street South, in Leamington, Ontario, it did nothing for me except to add to the fear, the ache, the loneliness.

It was one of the loneliest hours I have spent in a very long time. I didn't need to be alone to be lonely. I didn't need quiet around me to feel lonely. My loneliness was in here—my heart. I couldn't share it, I couldn't pray it away; I couldn't pretend it didn't hurt; it did. I had to go through it; I had no other choice. As you can now see, John did make it. He did do the funeral the next day and though Christmas for him that year was a wipe-out, now after two years, he is just fine.

But, loneliness is not the same as solitude. I love to be alone, often. I choose solitude. In times of solitude I can read, I can think, I can pray, I can write. Here I can talk to God, I can listen, here He can talk to me, here I seek and receive guidance. In solitude I come to rest inside.

Jesus went out “in the morning, long before dawn to a lonely place to pray,” we are told (Luke 4:42; 5:16). If Jesus needed to withdraw from activity and “ministry” in order to be alone to pray, then that model is good for me too. Henri Nouwen says, “A careful balance between silence and words, withdrawal and involvement, distance and closeness, solitude and community forms the basis of the Christian life”.¹

Solitude is not a popular topic in our goal-oriented society. I wonder if we feel worthwhile only when we are busy and/or successful? In the counseling office where I work, I hear about fears from those who ask, “Will someone someday discover the emptiness I feel, the emptiness that is covered by my busyness?” This nagging self-doubt is at the basis of much depression in the lives of those who struggle in our competitive society.

A life without a quiet centre can become counter-productive. In solitude we can unmask; we can, hopefully, discover that being is more important than doing or having. In solitude we can listen to the voice of Him who speaks to us. I can listen to the voice that speaks to me.

JOHN

But that is precisely why I am afraid. My past experience of being alone with God is not unlike that of the prophet Elijah. He had just had his so-called

¹ Henri Noewen, *Out of Silence: Three Meditations on the Christian Life* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1974), 18.

success at Mt. Carmel. He had called fire down from heaven, fire that lapped up the barrels of water in the moat around the altar, and then gobbled up the sacrifice, and struck terror into the mob. Elijah, now super-charged with the adrenalin of victory, had the four hundred prophets of Baal slaughtered in the final bloody triumph of a magnificent day. Then Elijah makes the journey that puts him alone face to face with God, alone.

MARY

Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. He ran into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. 'I have had enough, Lord,' he said. 'Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.' Then he sat down under the tree and fell asleep.

All at once an angel touched him and said, 'Get up and eat.' He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again.

The angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him and said, 'Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.' So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. There he went into a cave and spent the night.

And the word of the Lord came to him: 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' He replied, 'I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.'

The Lord said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face."

1 Kings 19:3-13a

JOHN

The journey for Elijah, and for us, to that critical moment of being alone with God is a journey through depression, or despondency, or despair, or all three. We too know the desolate desert place where we crashed. We too know the feeling: “Lord, take my life. I’m really no better than my sinful Dad.” We know, as Elijah learned, that God doesn’t coddle us simply because we are crushed. He still prods us away from the whirr of life’s pavements, away to our Mount Horeb, to some lost memory of an earlier encounter when we found our core, and found God, the unmistakable, surprising, compelling God.

Why back there? We did what we all do, namely give God the shape of our latest learning from our latest experience of Him. We are comforted to know that we have finally come to know Him. Or so we think. At Horeb Elijah discovers that God is not a deity to be managed. Horeb smashes the image of a trivialized God. Elijah thought he had the prophet’s prerogative to set the stage and put God to the test. God would surely come through and prove Elijah right. Horeb crushes that image. God is not in the wind, or in the earthquake, or in the fire that fell from heaven at Carmel. Oh, yes, God sent fire alright, but not to confirm Elijah. God did it to honour his own name. And when Elijah read self-validation into it, and in the rush of that misinterpretation set about lopping off four hundred heads of misled guides, he was violating God, not honouring him. Still small whispers don’t spew sarcasm at misguided worshippers. Still small whispers don’t sever heads from bodies.

Perhaps it is the very religious who are most at risk in regard to trivializing God. When we are very religious we are prone to think we are right. And the more we think we are right, the more we whittle God down. When we thus diminish God, we can be alone with him and not tremble, because we are alone with a miniature, a God confined by our mind.

I used to be comfortable alone with a Mennonite Brethren God, only to discover there isn’t one. I used to be complacent in the presence of an Evangelical God, but there isn’t one. I was even chummy with an Anabaptist God. I know now there isn’t one. The very religious don’t tremble in the presence of their miniature Gods. They only tremble in fear lest the ornament be broken.

Tom is very religious—very, very religious. So religious that he does not quake in the presence of God. But his children and his wife quake when Tom flexes his religious muscle. They live in fear as he parades his righteousness. They tremble as he enforces his God, his rightness, on them. Tom may be religious, but he won’t get redeemed until he finds his way to Horeb, and all

his religiosity turns to dust.

How can one be alone with very God and not quake? He is the Holy One, the Judge, the One with eyes of fire and a voice like that of the ocean in gale. From his mouth issues the sword that cuts both ways. He has no favourites. He does not look kindly on either arrogance or iniquity.

To choose to be alone with God means that we are willing to let go of all our pre-notions of him, to be ready to re-think our most nostalgic thoughts of him, to re-examine even our most cherished understandings. As Jesus said to a religious one, "You must be born again" and then again. No such birthing is ever the last one, except perhaps that moment of our birthing death when we let go all our ideas about God, and entrust ourselves baby-like to the God we don't know. So, yes, I quake when I am alone with God, as a baby shudders to be born.

And yet, and yet.... But then, Mary is not so much religious as she is spiritual.

MARY

It was a Jewish therapist with whom I took a seminar many years ago, who taught me how to listen to God. Near the close of our last day she took us through a guided meditation. Though that was not new, the way she did it was a new experience for me. It opened my eyes to something invaluable. It fit for me and it worked for me.

She gave us all the option when she began, as to who our Higher Power would be, since we were all from many different faiths. Mine, of course, was Jesus Christ. At the end of this guided meditation I met with Him and He with me.

I have used that method for my personal devotions ever since. I ask questions. I wait. I listen. I hear. My questions do not always have answers but that's okay. I ask for guidance, for comfort, for very specific advice at times and I get it. Some years ago I had a very specific question I wanted to discuss with my brother who lives here. I wasn't sure I should, because it didn't feel right, so I asked God about it when I spent time with Him. The answer was so clear. He said, "wait." Only a few months later their only daughter died. My question then was totally irrelevant. Since it takes time for me to settle down into quietness of heart and mind, I don't do this every day, but I don't need to, because I do a lot of praying while on my early morning walks.

JOHN

There is another reason I find it scary to be alone with God. Hear the word from the pen of the prophet poet, Isaiah:

STILL DARING TO HOPE

I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty."

Isaiah 6:1-5

We stand with Isaiah here in this sanctuary. We hear the sounds, the words. We see the symbols, the graphics. And in those moments when we can get beyond the sounds and sights, and sense the Presence, we too see and hear the angels cry, "Holy, holy, holy!" And we tremble.

The words are honest words: Woe to me. I am unclean. I have unclean lips. I speak with double tongue. I speak from a divided heart. I am sinful right down to near my centre. I am impure. To be pure in heart is to will but one thing, to seek first the Kingdom of God. But I am selfish too. My best intentions are flawed. I commit too much to things that are less than the Kingdom of God. Not only is there error in my thinking as Elijah discovered at Horeb, but there is evil woven through me as Isaiah discovered in the temple. And I actually entered this temple, this holy place of the holy God. I dared, and I tremble. Who am I, a sinner, to stand here before this holy God?

And yet, and yet....

MARY

In 1984 and 1985 we spent a year in Pasadena, California, at Fuller Theological Seminary. As part of the course work in Spirituality we were asked if we would like a spiritual director. Edith Drury was assigned to me. Some of you may have read books by Agnes Sanford. Edith was her companion after Mrs. Sanford's husband died. Having had that experience propelled me into wanting to continue this when we returned to Winnipeg. I called Sister Catherine from St. Benedict's Monastery, just north of Winnipeg. She had been a classmate of mine earlier in my training. She agreed and another excellent year followed. We met twice a month.

Sister Catherine taught me a new and different way to read Scripture. It was so refreshing and so rewarding, and again, it was the right fit for me. Although I have always had devotions fairly regularly since becoming a Chris-

tian, though often, it was too often, my devotions were a duty and therefore dry and at times meaningless. Now a short verse, or perhaps a few, as Sister Catherine taught me, gave me life. I read the verses. I read them again. I wait for them to say something, to open up to me and it always happens. I write furiously in my journal as new thoughts and new ideas emerge. Here's just a brief example. I worked through Psalm 139 and the verses 7–10 seemed brand new to me. Let me read them:

Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.

Psalm 139:7–10

This became alive; it was God talking to me. I didn't hear it with fear as I did growing up, as though God was following me with a big stick in his hand. Like the little German ditty I learned as a kid: "He hears what I say, and he sees what I do. My loving (some paradox, that) God writes everything down." These verses became brand new to me. I write in my journals what I feel, what I think. I write out my gratitude. I name my children and my grandchildren and in July I will name my first great grandchild. My writing is my praying. It is my communion with God, my time of worship.

One of my clients, whose story, in part, has been told elsewhere, with full permission, just recently had a heart attack. When I shared the phone call with John, he said, "Hasn't she had enough already?" Indeed she has. I visited her in the hospital. I talked to her on the telephone after her release just two days before Christmas. This is what she said to me: "This experience has made me realize how badly I want to live." She had been very suicidal earlier in her recovery. I asked her the question I often ask of those who are suffering: "Can you find a gift out of this painful experience?" To that she said, "I have time to read, to write, to think, to pray... time like never before."

God's gift to all of us, to me, is the invitation to go off alone to spend time with Him.

STILL DARING TO HOPE

JOHN

So we tremble, and we are comforted when we are alone with God. If we don't tremble, we may well have chiseled God down beyond recognition. If we are not comforted, we do not yet know grace and love. So, tremble when you must, and let the trembling point the way to newness. And be comforted as you can, and let the comfort bring you joy.



*Look long and slowly till the calm
of this tranquility
will help you see
that you're as safe within the palm
of God's rich charity
eternally.*

John Regehr, ca. 2006

T W E L V E

FORGIVENESS: HEALING FROM INTIMATE WOUNDS

Matthew 18

*God has provided a way
for us to be set free from another's injury toward us.
God has shown us the painful art of forgiving.
And that is good news.*



I will be looking at the words of Jesus a little later. In the meantime some of you may recognize that I am leaning on the thinking of Beverly Flanigan.¹

The hazard of being human is that we can inflict and receive intimate wounds. Perhaps no other creatures injure, rape, pommel, abandon, cheat, betray, humiliate each other as humans do.

You will argue, of course, and so you should. You have seen a litter of pigs pick one sickly little fellow to chew up. You have seen a cow refuse to let her calf suckle. I don't know the reasons for those behaviours. It may be that hidden in some lower layer of their survival software they hear instructions to do this for the common good, for the survival of the larger family of their species. That is an intriguing possibility.

Humans, it seems to me, do these things not from some unconscious drive to better the race, but from a willingness to destroy the larger good for some distorted drive to pursue an immediate individual benefit. While the litter of piglets may have some instinctual sense of the greater good of the species, humans wear blinders that keep them from seeing beyond the narrow emotional selfish passionate urgency of the moment.

¹ Beverly Flanigan, *Forgiving the Unforgivable: Overcoming the Bitter Legacy of Intimate Wounds* (New York: Wiley Publishing, 1992).

The heightened tragedy of this destructiveness is that we do this wounding not to our enemies, but to those closest to us, to those to whom we have committed ourselves, to those to whom we have an irrevocable obligation. Our enemies we are nice to. Those who exploit us, we are polite to. Those at whose mercy we are for the job we have, we pander to. But our spouse, our children, our parents, these to whom we are bonded in the intimacy of love and commitment, these are the ones we hurt, even indelibly, permanently, and at times with finality. And so, because we inflict and receive them in intimate relationships, it is intimate wounds that we inflict and carry.

The good news is that God has given us the model and the means of dealing with the severest of intimate injury. He has provided a way of being set free from another's injury toward us. God has shown us the painful art of forgiving. And that is good news.

I don't know if Canada Geese feeding and fussing and fighting on the lure crop at Oak Hammock Marsh ever forgive each other, or even need to. I don't know if sparrows chattering and chuckling and chasing each other off their perch at the feeder outside our kitchen window ever forgive each other, or need to. I don't think they get a legal territorial separation. Tomorrow life seems to go on with the same chitter and chatter, and on the same perches. But we humans can forgive and be forgiven, and we need to.



Forgiveness is among the most difficult of human undertakings. What is it that makes intimate injury well nigh unforgivable? Let me suggest three reasons.

Intimate injury is the result of a monstrous personal betrayal.

"I trusted you," we say. "I gave myself to you, for your sake, and you betrayed my trust."

Intimate injury happens in the context of intimacy.

"I was so close to you and so open with you," we say. "I was transparent. I made myself vulnerable, and you trampled me." The very intimacy makes the humiliation so intense.

Intimate injury is also a moral wound.

It violates the sense of uprightness and morality that we both shared. "I thought we were Christian together," we say. "I thought we were committed to

loving, to being accountable to God. Now everything I believed is thrown into turmoil. I can't trust God anymore. My very worth as a person is being called into question."

Such intimate wounds are outrageous, monstrous. Well nigh unforgivable. For that reason they engender an emotional cyclone. The immediate aftermath of intimate injury is normally an intense cycle of feelings that storm around in the one who was injured.

What is normally the immediate aftermath of an intimate injury?

Normally, the first of these is self-blame.

We need to make sense of the event, so we look for the cause in the place to which we have easiest access, within ourselves. Self-blame gives some hope, because it offers some control about the outcome. I do have control over the changes I make. If I change, the situation will change, and the relationship will be restored. This is, of course, a partial truth. After all, I too am a part of this relationship, and so it is fair to assume that I had a part in affecting the other's behavior, even if I don't take responsibility for it.

Then follows rage.

When I look at it again and realistically put the responsibility where it belongs, then I will become angry. And so I should. The anger can be expressed in an outward direction, and can even be harnessed toward righting the wrong. Or rage misdirected can be turned inward, with the result that the self-blame will be deepened to self-hatred and/or depression.

And yet, love struggles to survive.

That is the third in the cycle of emotions. After all, love is inherent in the commitment and the bonding of the intimate relationship. To let that go would be like losing oneself. Love moves beyond placing the responsibility where it belongs to seeking reconciliation and a healing of the relationship. Yes, love misguided can deepen self-blame. But love creatively engaged through anger will seek to move on through the hurt to forgiveness and toward a new life together.



Let us look now at the journey toward forgiving. We will be walking through Matthew chapter eighteen.

The entire chapter seems to hang together as a unit. Therefore the rela-

tionship of its parts is probably important. I'm assuming that the writer, Matthew and/or the Spirit, had/have some purpose in putting the unit together in the way it now stands.

Verses 1 through 14 make it clear that God feels very strongly about wrongs done to the weak and vulnerable ones. So, whatever may be said about forgiveness later, the message is unmistakable that forgiving does not mean a minimizing of the wrong. Nor does forgiveness come before the wrong is dealt with.

Let's read verses one through nine:

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come! If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.

Matthew 18:1-9

The disciples ask a question about vertical structure. Who is over/under? Who is the greatest? The assumption seems to be that the greatest is the one with status and power, the prerogative to determine what happens, and the ability to make it happen.

Jesus turns the assumption on its head. It is the weak, the powerless, the dependent, the vulnerable who are the models for the rest of us. It is the one who is like a child, who is the kingdom person.

And then the warning: If I exploit rather than respect the vulnerable one,

then I violate God and his kingdom. God holds me responsible for the harm I do to the weak and the helpless one, and issues a veiled threat if I should exploit or harm the little one. It is veiled in the sense that he does not explicitly say what the punishment will be. What is not veiled is God's intense feeling about any abuse I inflict.

The preventive/interventive action that God suggests indicates the seriousness with which he regards the harm done to a helpless one. It is better to gouge out an eye or chop off a hand than to use those organs and limbs to harm another. Better to mutilate myself than to violate another. The implication seems to be that if we do not see and face the wrong as the horror that it is, we cannot move on to genuine forgiveness. That is true in regard to both the forgiveness we receive and the forgiveness we offer to the offender.

Let's continue with verses ten through fourteen:

[Jesus continues:] See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.

What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.

Matthew 18:10-14

If I do not respect the child, and thus put the child at risk, I have God's angels poised against me. They may not prevent the harm I inflict. I am, after all, created free to act, even destructively if I choose. But nothing I do will escape the scrutiny of God. And God will never abandon the little one. The angels intercede and carry. God will go to long lengths to restore the child I have damaged.

The last part of the chapter consists of the story Jesus tells in answer to Peter's question about forgiveness. The story makes the painful point that grievous wrongs cannot be repaid. In the end, the only way to deal with them is by forgiveness.

In the middle of the chapter is the little "how to" section. It is the process that moves toward forgiveness, and, if possible, to reconciliation.

Let's read verses fifteen through nineteen.

STILL DARING TO HOPE

[Jesus continues:] If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.

Matthew 18:15-19

When the harmed one is able, s/he is instructed to confront the wrongdoer. If necessary, the harmed one is advised to find help in doing the confrontation and the dialoguing that results from that. If, given time, the harming person does not “turn,” then that person is to be exposed in and excluded from the community. The harmed person can, in relationship with a caring person or two, be helped to recover life. God is creatively and redemptively present in that caring association.



I'd like to walk through Matthew 18:15-19 more slowly now as a journey in five phases.

Taking ownership of the injury.

We acknowledge that wounding has happened. We take the wound into ourselves and let it hurt. We don't justify the wounding, or pretend it didn't happen, or pretend that it doesn't hurt. We face the injury and the damage as a reality. In Jesus' words, "Your brother has sinned against you."

Naming the injury.

We put into words what the person did to us, what kind of wrong it was, how it violated us and the moral rules we live by. To avoid stating it in words may mean that we are not facing the reality of what was done to us. To say it, in some way objectifies it so that we can deal with it. It puts into focus what it is that we will have to forgive. In Jesus' words, "Show him his fault."

Placing the responsibility on the injurer.

We move from the initial self-blame to a responsible other-blame. It is the one who did it who bears the responsibility. This placing of responsibility is done in a way that invites dialogue, rather than simply forcing capitulation. Jesus says, "If he listens to you." The implication is that a verbal exchange is taking place.

If we do not move to this phase, but simply receive the injury into ourselves, and protect it and the wrongdoer with our self-blame, then we are setting ourselves up both to be hurt again and again, and also to inflict the same injury on others later in our life. We move through the process, then, for our own sake and for the sake of all those with whom we live, and will live.

Balancing the scales.

We move now from a self-designation of victim to a position of strength. We are making choices now. The inner strength of the injured allows an openness to the injurer even while confronting the injury. If it turns out that we are both in some way to blame, we can both acknowledge our wrong and consider the injury over and done. We can let it go. This is where the witnesses Jesus speaks of are helpful.

If, however, the one who injured us is truly to blame, some restitution may be possible that in some way balances the scales. In this way there may be some benefits from the injury that can achieve a kind of justice, a balance.

And yet all intimate injury, even when the scales are balanced as best we are able, requires that we move on to phase five. No complete balance ever happens in intimate injury.

Choosing to forgive.

When balancing does not work, or does not take away the pain, we come to a place where we no longer expect a balance. We recognize that the debt can never be repaid. At that point, if we ourselves want to become free of the injury, we must set the injurer free in the sense that we stop expecting him/her to accept the responsibility for the injury, or do anything about it. In this freedom we have the option of renewing the relationship with the one who injured us. However, forgiving does not automatically put us back into the relationship the way it was. Rather, it sets us free to enter it again, or to remain in it if we so choose, but it assures that the relationship will be new. That presupposes, of course, that we have adequately dealt with the injury before we forgave it and let it go.



The larger portion of the text up to this point has not focused on forgiveness, but on putting the responsibility where it belongs, and on putting life back together cut loose from the violator. Then follows the story that has to do with forgiveness.

Let's read verses twenty-one through thirty-five.

[Jesus continues:] Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"

Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.'

But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Matthew 18:21-35

We have usually read and preached the story Jesus tells as a self-contained unit, quite separate from the first part of the chapter. Thus we have coaxed and pushed harmed ones to forgive too soon. We've directed them to forgive without helping them first to plod through the large and long task of putting the responsibility where it belongs, of holding the harming person accountable. Much less have we helped the injured one to become emotionally differentiated from the relationship, and to find other appropriate relationships that nurture.

And yet, when we have done all this, we are still up against the reality that the injurer cannot possibly make amends, cannot restore what was robbed. The debt cannot be repaid. Money won't do it, although that may in some way acknowledge accountability. Imprisonment won't do it, although that may in some way force the accepting of responsibility. Community service won't do it, although that may be a helpful way of turning the person-damager around.

It seems then, that if I want to be free from another's enormous wrong, I will have to let it go. Nothing the wrongdoer can give can ever replace what was taken away in intimate wounding. I must let go the fantasy that I can recover from the abuser what he wrenched from me. Letting go is an end-stage in the process. To forgive means to let go.

Cancelling the debt is a deliberate act that indicates that I cannot retrieve what I lost. In letting the person go I declare my freedom from the wrong and from the person. If I find it hard to do, it may help to pity the person who inflicted the intimate pain. After all, s/he is a victim too.

This letting go is not a device to make the wrongdoer a better person. Indeed, it may not. He may still see his wrong as quite minor, measurable, repayable, and thus less grievous than its impact on me may indicate. Or he may see my graciousness in letting it go as his inherent right. The kindness of forgiving may not change his heart at all. Therefore, I must finally forgive the violator for my sake. I need to become free of his wrong if I want to get on with my life in freedom. If a true turn-around does happen, then my forgiving may well be for both of our sakes, and for the sake of the relationship.

Which is to say, that the letting go does not in itself imply the openness to resuming the relationship. Whether or not the relationship is recovered depends on what kind of person the wrongdoer becomes in the process.

STILL DARING TO HOPE

Perhaps some of our resistance to forgiving had to do with this misunderstanding, namely that we saw forgiving as a device that kept me in bondage and vulnerable in the relationship, rather than a way of becoming free of the person and the wrong, and being enabled to become my own person in and under God.

In the words of Forrest Gump, “That’s all I have to say about that.”

FACING THE QUESTION THAT HURTS

Luke 5; John 21

*There is good news
for those of us who have difficulty
in letting helpful hurt, hurt.*



A little later I will tell you a story of Dave and Daisy, but I'd like you first to hear the story of the disciple Peter's remarkable restoration. It is good news for those of us who have difficulty in letting helpful hurt, hurt. Instinctively we resist pain, and do anything that will stop it, from grabbing an aspirin, to cracking a joke, to retaliating with hateful words. Here is the story:

Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way: Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. "I'm going out to fish," Simon Peter told them, and they said, "We'll go with you." So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.

He called out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?"

"No," they answered.

He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.

STILL DARING TO HOPE

When the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, “It is the Lord,” he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.

Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish you have just caught.” So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” None of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”

“Yes, Lord,” he said, “You know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”

Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”

The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my sheep. Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”

John 21:1-19

You've heard a very similar story from an earlier gospel record. Listen to it again:

One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret; the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God. He saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch."

Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets."

When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signalled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners.

Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people." So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

Luke 5:1-11

So, here, after Jesus' resurrection are some of those same men, on the same lake, in some very similar circumstances. They've been at work all night, again, and have caught nothing, again. And then follows the miracle catch of fish, again. After Jesus told them how to do it, again. Three years ago these men were impressed with the miracle and the fabulous preaching. They were compelled, overwhelmed, convinced, by what they heard and saw. And they simply left their boats and followed Jesus. They anticipated that they were setting off into a unique adventure. And it was that. They were made special by Jesus. They were revered by the people. They were empowered to do amazing things. They were called to be announcers of the kingdom of God that was breaking out all over Israel.

Now, three years later, everything is different. There is the bloodthirsty menacing presence of the religious and political establishments that put Jesus to death. What is more, their doubts and disillusionments about Jesus sit like cold lead in their stomachs. Had they been naive in choosing to follow Jesus? What had all that kindness, and compassion, and commitment to the Kingdom of God netted Jesus? And how could they even think of continuing their commitment to the Kingdom of God as Jesus had taught them? There was just too much disappointment and confusion to overcome. Maybe just going back to their fishing career would be better after all.

What would it take to make it possible for them to respond with continuing obedience to the calling they had heard three years ago? The miracle catch of the 153 large fish would help, again. They were being assured that they'd be taken care of as they sought first the Kingdom of God. And, of course, beginning to recognize that the Jesus who had been with them, and who had died, and who had been buried, was now alive and with them in ways they had yet not understood—that would help. Everything was still very perplexing, but the Presence seemed very reassuring. But Peter needed something quite particular. He was still carrying this knot in his stomach because of the unthinkable wrong he had done to Jesus. Somehow he'd need to have that removed. Peter remembered, of course, his naive and arrogant assertion, "If they all abandon you, I will not." And he remembered Jesus' prediction. And he remembered his threefold denial. And he remembered the rooster. Peter remembered very well.



Dave remembered, too. He remembered the gallant promise he had made that he would love and cherish forever, no matter what, this time. Dave and Daisy have been married for ten years. To both of them it seems now like a lifetime: so much pain, so much bitterness. They are now at what feels to Daisy to be a dead-end alley.

Dave is genuinely confused. He fumbles for words that are intended to be conciliatory. Daisy merely rolls her eyes. Words are empty, she says. And then, Dave risks putting words to his confusion. He could act and speak his normal boisterous off-handed self with his brothers and his friends. With them he could even use his evasive humor to side step important issues. They simply shrugged their shoulders. It was no big deal. Why should Daisy give him such a hard time? Couldn't she just put up with it?

Daisy is quite pitiless in her surgical question: "Did Darlene put up with

it?” Darlene was Dave’s first wife. She had left him. Deliberately. Without fanfare. For Dave, quite inexplicably. Dave was still smarting from that rejection.

That question did it. “Did Darlene put up with it”? Dave was hurt. Crushed. His face tightened, and blotched white and pink. His eyes brimmed, and stared down unseeing. The question brought his past before him in an instant. His past with its colossal failure. A marriage suddenly ended. Until recently quite inexplicably ended, he had thought. Now he knows better. Daisy has seen to that. She has chiseled into his consciousness his insensitivity, his blindness to another’s need, his indifference to the damage of his words and of his silences, his refusal to change, and his insistence that he be accepted just the way he is—brusque, brash, and boisterous.

The question is like a frontal assault: “Did Darlene put up with it?” Dave takes a moment to brace himself against the question’s thrust, and then begins his usual tumble of hurried words designed to derail the question.

The pastor puts his hand on Dave’s arm. “Dave,” he says, “let the hurt, hurt. Take the question in. Accept the pain. Let the question do its surgery. Let the pain force you to face your wrongs, and you will be healed.”

Perhaps Peter’s restoration was easier than Dave’s, because the question that exploded Peter’s woeful past on the screen inside his head was not venomous. Jesus didn’t snap, “Did the God of Sinai put up with what you did?” He asked almost at a whisper, “Simon, do you love me?” He asked it in tones increasingly soft and intense, three times. “Do you love me?”

As you know, there are different ways of asking the question that hurts. We can ask it so that the remembering of the wrong does the hurting, or we can ask it vengefully, so that we personally do the hurting. As Daisy did, we can lace the question with our own venom. That may be less than helpful, because Dave’s response will then be to the venom, not to the question.

Dave may say, “You have never yet been able to let my past go, have you? You are being totally unchristian.” The focus shifts, you see. It centers now on Daisy, not on Dave’s wrong from which they both need to be healed.



Jesus is the master surgeon. Oh, he asks the question that hurts, all right, because it needs to be asked. Nor does he try to make it painless. Peter needs to face the wrong of his past so that he can be made whole, and pain is a necessary part of that. But Jesus asks the question in a way that enables Peter to respond with a positive affirmation. Jesus, in asking the question, also looks beyond the wrong to what he would now like from Peter. What Jesus wants is

Peter's love, his loyalty. That's what Daisy wants too, but she asks the question so as to focus only on the wrong, not to look beyond it.

So Jesus asks: "Do you love me?" True, the question connects Peter to his wrong. In fact, Jesus makes very sure that Peter makes that connection. Three denials, three questions. Peter can't miss the connection. But by now Peter does not need a question to force him to acknowledge the enormity of the wrong. He has already felt the full weight of his wickedness. Dave may need to be asked a question that prods him to acknowledge the wrong, and perhaps to recognize that his sins are much larger than he thought.

Nor does Peter need a question that induces or intensifies his remorse. He has already wept bitterly. He has grieved the awful wrong. Dave may well need to face a question that awakens remorse, a question that forces him to face the hurt he has caused others.

Since Peter has acknowledged and grieved his wrong, Jesus is now free to ask the question so as to enable Peter to stand tall while he is being reconciled. And yet Jesus does not let Peter off the hook easily.

Our English translation misses a significant turn in the story. We know, of course, that Jesus spoke Aramaic, not Greek. But we assume that the turn in language in the Greek is the turn that Jesus intended. Here it is: When Jesus asks first, "Do you love me?" he uses the word *agape*. We, of course, don't know the whole of what the Greeks meant when they used it, but the New Testament consistently uses that word to convey a love that is utterly self-giving, unconditional, sacrificial. This is love like the love of God for us. Jesus' first question, then, is heavy: "Do you *agape*-love me, Peter, and is this *agape*-love of yours for me greater than the *agape*-love of these other men for me?"

Only arrogance could say yes to that. Peter has learned a good deal of humility because of his awful error, and is not about to claim that his love surpasses the love of his comrades. Nor does he even claim to have this magnanimous *agape*-love for Jesus. So he answers with the lesser word *philia*, the friendship word.

"You know, Jesus, that I am your friend." That is a modest response. But it is positive. Maybe Jesus will accept that.

But Jesus pushes the humbled man further. In the second question Jesus again uses *agape*, but leaves out the comparison with the others. Jesus is saying in effect, "The love of these other men aside, do you yourself really *agape*-love me?" And again Peter answers with *philia*. "Jesus, you know that I am your friend." His humility holds. So does his genuineness. Then Jesus does the turn. In the third question Jesus uses the word Peter has used. In effect Jesus is asking, "Peter, are you sure you are even my friend?"

Peter is hurt at the third question. The insinuation cuts like a scalpel. *Agape*-love would never stoop to denial, of course, but even friends do not deny and abandon friends. Of course Peter is hurt. In the turn of the question his sin stares him in the face. Even though Jesus asks the question so that Peter can respond positively about his love to Jesus, Peter is forced to make the affirmation in full view of his sin. In that way the affirmation of Peter's love becomes a response to the greater forgiving love of Jesus.

In that connection, let me make another comparison between the two stories. You recall that in the earlier event Peter was overwhelmed by the miracle of the catch of fish, and like Isaiah in beholding the glory of God, Peter cried out, "Woe is me, I am undone. Go away from me Jesus, I am a sinful man." That confession of sinfulness makes it possible for Jesus to say to Peter, "OK, now follow me, and I'll put you to work netting people."

Then follow the three years of life with Jesus, and Peter becomes less aware of his sinfulness. Indeed, he becomes rather arrogant. A spiritual pride, perhaps.

Most of us can identify with Peter, I should think. As we move ahead on the spiritual journey, we become rather complacent about ourselves, and think we're really quite a credit to Jesus. Just look at our activity and what not. No, we wouldn't deny our Lord. No, we wouldn't be cowardly and seek cover in the half dark of the world in which we live and work.

Did you notice in the later event that Peter is forced to acknowledge that his sinfulness is more subtle and serious than he thought? And did you notice that only in the face of that humbling awareness, and in the subsequent embrace of Jesus' forgiveness, and in the warmth of the modest declaration of his love for Jesus, can Jesus say again, "OK, Peter, now I'll say it again, follow me. I've got work for you!"

The message seems clear: unless in our spiritual growth there is a corresponding deepening awareness that our sinfulness is more profound than we thought, we will become worse than useless for Jesus in the work of the Kingdom. How many accounts of the fall of spiritual stalwarts and leaders do we have to hear before we believe that?

And this leads us to another ironic turn in the story. You would have thought that Peter should be so humbled that he would forever see himself as a worm. He should never again be bold, or self-assured, or self assertive, or confident. His hideous wrong should prevent him from ever again standing tall.

As it turns out, Jesus is ready now to load Peter with tremendous responsibility. "Feed my lambs, and my sheep. Do what I did while I was with you."

Such a responsibility is not a task for worms. Humility yes, but it takes inner stature to do what Jesus is asking him to do. Strange as it may seem, Jesus actually reinforces the very boldness and self-confidence that were the occasion of his fall a week and a half ago.

There is another similar turn. In that awful Gethsemane night Peter had boasted that his loyalty to Jesus could withstand prison and death, even if it should be coupled with abandonment by his friends. He had bragged then that he could stand true quite alone, and unassisted, and unsupported.

That is now the very thing that Jesus calls him to. When Peter, perhaps out of fear of losing his colleague John, asks Jesus about John, Jesus says in effect, "Never mind John. You follow me. That is your calling. Just do what it is yours to do." No, Jesus is not advocating some wild west individualism. He had, after all, taught much about how we belong together, and are to care for each other. But Jesus is making it clear that whatever profound meaning there may be in community, my commitment to Jesus must be my own. Quite independent. Quite self-chosen. Quite solitary. Peter alone facing Jesus and making his choice to follow for life. Strange as it may seem, Jesus again reinforces in Peter the strength that was the occasion for his pitiful failure.



Don't you wish Daisy could learn to ask the hurting question in a way that allows for a positive declaration of love, and that then affirms in Dave the good and the strength of the very qualities that caused his failure?

So, let me ask you: What questions bring back your own painful past, the wrongs you did that hurt another? Are they questions about the secret squandering of money? Or about gambling? Or about decisions that led to bankruptcy? Or about an extra-marital affair? Or about lies you told your spouse about where you were and what you did? Or about the neglect of your children? Or about the sneaky deal you hatched with your lawyer?

Or about the way you used your power to crush the spirit of your child? They may be questions about your selfishness, or intolerance, or disrespect. Though you may dread the questions, I hope someone is asking them. And if they are being asked, please face them squarely. Don't evade them. Don't minimize your wrong. And if no one else has the courage to ask them, as Daisy did, just ask them yourself.

Though the questions feel cruel, they are "a severe mercy," kindness with a sting. Don't run from the pain. Face the question that hurts. Only then can you heal. And please don't vent on to the questioner the anger you feel toward

Facing the Question that Hurts

yourself. And don't make the questioner the culprit because the question doesn't follow the Jesus model. Let the hurt move you to deep contriteness and remorse, and let the remorse move you to full confession and let the confession open you to forgiveness and let the acceptance of forgiveness set you free to turn the page and start again clean. Peter did. Dave can, if he chooses. So can you.



*You gave in love what you could give;
all that you had, you lent.
Now, platters empty, dishes soiled,
you, like your coffee, spent,
you wonder if 'twas worth your while.
Had what you hoped been won?
Or is reward restricted to
just one more duty done?
What others fail to say in words,
nor trouble to impart,-
that it was love that moved your hands,-
you know within your heart.*

John Regehr, ca. 2006



HOPE IS NOT A HAMMOCK

Proverbs 26, 29; Jeremiah 27, 29; Ezekiel 18

*Let's make choices
about how and what we want to be now
and from here on.*

*God says we can change.
We are human, fully human.*

*We are able to make choices
that point in new directions.*

We are free.



Proverbs are strange little animals. Sometimes they belong. They fit. Like Sheba, the queenly cat, snuggled into the stuffed chair. Sometimes they need to be shoed away, like grackles at a finch feeder. And sometimes they become pets. They are appropriate for a while, but they stay too long, like a bear cub grown to adolescence.

Here's one almost at random from the book of Proverbs in the Bible. It sometimes belongs and sometimes doesn't:

He who meddles in a quarrel
not his own
is like one who takes
a passing dog by the ears.
Proverbs 26:17

The wisdom of this proverb wants to guard us against sticking our noses inappropriately into business not our own. There are times when those in a quarrel are best left to fight it out. When they are exhausted and injured enough, they

will work out some functional solution. Some of you may well have wished that the United Nations had let this proverb give guidance in Bosnia.

But there are times when this proverb needs to be shooed away. It is because we haven't shooed it away that so many women have suffered abuse in secret for so long. We have sensed that something is terribly wrong, but we have said, "It's none of my business." And yes, to meddle might mean to take a mad dog by the ears, and that can be unpleasant. So we let it alone. We used the proverb when we should have shooed it away.

There are actually other proverbs from that same book in the Bible that may have served us better:

The righteous
care about justice
for the poor.
Proverbs 29:7

Clearly, it requires wisdom to know when a proverb is appropriate and when it is not. It also requires wisdom to know when a proverb has served its usefulness, like the pet bear cub, and when it is time to stop keeping it as a pet.

The story of Israel in exile serves well as an example for us. Let me try to set the stage for those of you who are unfamiliar with the account, or have forgotten it.

The nation of Israel had broken up to form two independent countries, Judah in the south, and Israel in the north. In time both nations lost their godliness. Consequently, God sent judgment in the form of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. God clarifies his action through the prophet Jeremiah:

With my great power and outstretched arm I made the earth and its people and the animals that are on it, and I give it to anyone I please. Now I will hand all your countries over to my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; I will make even the wild animals subject to him. All nations will serve him and his son and his grandson until the time for his land comes; then many nations and great kings will subjugate him.

Jeremiah 27:5-7

We can understand the confusion and complaint of the exiles. They look over the history of their people and recognize that it is the sins of their ancestors that have put them in this present mess. The proverb makes good sense: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." The

Hope is not a Hammock

proverb helps them understand themselves and their situation. In the midst of that sad state of affairs comes that same prophet with a message of hope:

This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens. Marry and have sons and daughters. Increase in number there. Also seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you to bring you back to this place. For I have plans to prosper you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you and bring you back from captivity to the place from which I carried you into exile."

Jeremiah 29:4-14

So, restoration will come, but not simply when the seventy years are up. Restoration will also come when those very children, those who were victimized by the sins of their parents, seek and find the core and purpose of life, God himself, and when they follow him and honor him with their lives. And what prompts the turn-around of those victimized ones? It is the call of another prophet, a contemporary of Jeremiah, who was living with the exiles in Babylon. Here are Ezekiel's words:

The word of the Lord came to me: "What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel: 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'?"

As surely as I live," declares the sovereign Lord, "you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. For every living soul belongs to me. The soul who sins is the one who will die."

"Suppose there is a righteous man
who does what is just and right.
He follows my decrees
and faithfully keeps my laws.
That man is righteous;
he will surely live,"
declares the sovereign Lord.

"Suppose he has a violent son,
who sheds blood

STILL DARING TO HOPE

or does any of a number of other wicked things,
though the father has done none of them.

Will such a man live?

He will not!"

"But suppose this son has a son
who sees all the sins his father commits,
and though he sees them,
he does not do such things.

He will not die for his father's sin;

he will surely live.

But his father will die for his own sin."

"Yet you ask, 'Why does the son not share the guilt of the father? The way of the Lord is not just'."

"Hear, O house of Israel: Is it not your ways that are unjust? Repent and live."

Ezekiel 18:1-32, selected

What will effect the children's turn-around? Their decision to stop using the proverb. But it is a proverb, you argue, which means that it has elements of truth. So it does. When the parents eat sour grapes, the children's teeth will be set on edge. When the mother misuses alcohol during the pregnancy, the child may well come to birth with fetal alcohol syndrome. When the child is misused, abused, neglected, because of the parents' pursuit of personal goals, even lofty goals in church ministry, the child may well be screwed up.

Yes, the proverb is true. It speaks a powerful word of responsibility to parents. We had best take very, very seriously our task of caring, training, raising, guiding our children. What we do and don't do, and how we do what we do, has an enormous effect on our children.

However, it is possible to misuse the proverb. We can use it not so much as a way of explaining how we got to where we are, but as a way of justifying our staying there. We can use it as an excuse for not changing. There is real comfort in not being responsible for the way we are, behave, think, feel, react. If I am not responsible, then I can maintain my attitudes, my resentments, my selfishness. If I can't be held responsible, then I don't have to change.

It helps to be able to blame someone else for the mess we're in. That way we can feel sorry for ourselves, and that feels better than feeling guilty. And we can become angry with our forebears, and that feels better than feeling help-

less. So we get to use the proverb, and like it. It becomes a pet that helps us cope with the bad situation. Again and again we rehearse it. We call siblings and friends on the Babylon Telephone System, and repeat again and again the sad history that brought us to this unfortunate state. Again and again we run down the list of our parents' sins, and what they did to cook this bitter soup we are forced to eat. And each call ends with the same benediction lament: "Our parents ate sour grapes, and our teeth are set on edge."

God recognizes the reason for my wanting to keep on shoving the responsibility for my life onto my parents. It is not so much that I am appalled at the terrible thing that they did to me, but that I want to stay in the place to which their error brought me. In some twisted way I am paying them back for their sin. "That's what you made me, so that's what I'm going to be! So there!" By that irrational reasoning I have justification for remaining irresponsible, or lazy, or hostile, or addicted, or a failure, or just plain mean and ugly.

So, yes, let's look at our family of origin, at the history that brought us to where we are. Let's discover the pressures and the pains that shaped us. Let's bring into consciousness the ways in which we are reacting to life, to people, to authority, to love, to anger, to work—ways which have their roots in our early life with our parents. Then let's make choices about how and what we want to be now and from here on. God says we can change. He calls us to change toward his way. He holds us responsible for our choices, now that we have grown into adulthood ourselves.

Yes, use the proverb. It has important truth. Use it to help you understand. But then stop using it so you can become responsible. Use it to help you understand what it is that you need to be redeemed from, and then stop using it so you can become redeemed. Use it as a mirror to help you recognize the undesirable stuff that is in you and was also in your parents, and then stop using it and move on toward healing.



The word of the prophet is good news in two directions. It is good news for the child. Though the parent's influence is enormous, there is nothing deterministic about the way we develop from that. We are human, fully human. We are able to make choices that point in directions other than those in which our training turned us. We are free. Free to become what we choose. We can become loving even though our parents despised us. We can follow our calling even though our parents thought we were good-for-nothings.

The word of God through the prophet is good news for the parent too. Of course, we made mistakes. Still make them. And of course we grieve the

negative impact our errors have had, and still have, on our children. But there comes a time when we can let go of those mistakes. In effect it is accepting forgiveness for those mistakes. Forgiving ourselves, if you like, even though the children find it difficult to forgive us. We can now actually place on the children the responsibility for what they do with what they experienced from us. They are now, as adults, responsible before God for the choices they make. Our acknowledging our errors may help the children make the move to letting the proverb go, but whether or not they can move beyond the proverb is now up to them. The parent does not need to crawl and grovel, pine and stew, any more. God is holding our children responsible for themselves just as he holds us responsible for the way we were and the way we are now.

What a strange question the victimized people in Babylon asked: “Why should I not suffer for my parents’ sin?” Strange that we should want to. Strange that we should make the damage done to us a part of our identity, and that we should want to preserve it. This is not only *how* I am; this is *who* I am: nervous, irritable, phony, aggressive, mentally ill, emotionally unstable, cynical, materialistic, irresponsible, lazy. So, if this is my identity, who I am, I can’t change that. And, then, quite obviously, I can’t be held responsible.

The proverb really is a comfort, isn’t it? The parents were jerks, so if I walk unsteadily, you can’t blame me. My parents controlled me with guilt, so you can’t blame me if I’m not free. My parents were cruel in their punishment, so you can’t blame me that I hate those who have power over me, and that I grasp for power myself. My parents were legalistic about their religion, so you can’t blame me if I’m a lifetime rebel against the church. It is comforting to know that people simply have to accept me the way I am.

But God is telling us to quit using the proverb. There is encouragement in God’s instruction. Yes, the wrong of our parents has damaged us. But it is not the damage that defines us, nor does us in. The damage may have affected and shaped my sense of self, the way I feel about myself; the shame in which I clothe myself, the low self-esteem by which I know myself.

But none of these is essentially me. My self-esteem isn’t me; it is only the way I feel about me. My pervasive sense of shame is not me; it is only the deep anguish about what I fear is me. It is not my self-esteem that invokes God’s judgment or his praise. God’s judgment comes in response to my sin, the destructive things I do. It is my sin that kills me. That is the judgment. It is my destructive attitudes and actions that destroy my soul, my core, my self. That is the judgment. It is my destructive set of heart that keeps me from becoming my full potential. That is the judgment. It is my sin, not my parents’ sin that suffocates me.

Hope is not a Hammock



Please hear the good news in the word of God through the prophet. Of course we've been damaged. Of course our parents were imperfect, very imperfect. They missed so much in regard to our upbringing. At times what they thought was right, was wrong. At times what they thought was righteous, was rotten. Of course they scarred us. And of course there were other destructive forces at work in our formative years, anywhere up to forty or so. But we can re-decide. We were created with the capacity to be self-authorizing. We can re-choose our direction at any time. We can switch tracks. We can choose to be righteous in all those areas in which we were trained to be crooked.

That is an amazing capacity, to re-choose, to recognize an error and make a turn. It is not the damage that keeps us from choosing well. It is hardness of heart. To accuse God of being unjust when he holds us responsible is to admit that we want to remain the way we are. That is hardness of heart. Let's honor God by accepting responsibility for our own lives. To do that is to grow up, to mature. As we thus stand tall before God accepting our responsibility for making our own choices, we will discover that we are standing shoulder to shoulder with our parents, who are facing God too.

BLESSED ARE THE MEEK

Numbers 12; 1 Kings 4; Psalm 27; Matthew 5, 11, 21

*We wear ourselves out in burnout
when we carry another's responsibility as well as our own,
or if we presume to carry God's task
in that we make ourselves responsible for the outcome.
The meek can trust God for the outcome,
and so carry their own obligation lightly,
even joyfully.*



Early on in preparation for this sermon Mary and I were in conversation about it. I had begun a word study, in which I take particular delight, but Mary said, “Think of a person whom we know, or knew, whom you would consider meek.” She has this exquisite way of rescuing me from getting stuck in academic pursuits, and provoking me toward the reading of scripture for the purpose of personal transformation. I love words but Mary is more into people and life. The Bible is not merely to provide us with information, or God forbid, ammunition, which was an earlier ungodly delight of mine.

We both quickly came up with a name: B. B. Fast, Bill Fast’s father. Most of you didn’t know him—a godly man with a firm gentle hand in a kid glove. He was part of the leadership arrangement of the North End Mennonite Brethren church back in the forties, before our conference had moved to a paid pastor system. And he lived briefly across the street from us on Bredin Drive. A truly wonderful man: gentle, humble, with integrity like granite. We admired, and respected, and loved him. So all through the preparation of this sermon, B. B. Fast was sitting on my shoulder.

Jesus said:

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Matthew 5:5

It turns out Jesus is quoting directly from Psalm 37, a psalm that he likely knew well and perhaps had memorized as a boy in synagogue school.

I wonder whether at the time David was writing this psalm, the inheriting of the land conjured up the image later articulated during Solomon's reign:

During Solomon's lifetime Judah and Israel from Dan to Beersheba lived in safety, each man under his own vine and fig tree.

1 Kings 4:25

Both Micah (4:4) and Zechariah (3:10) pick up that idyllic image later. There is the dream of peaceful contentment, each enjoying unmolested a piece of land on Rothsay Street or Roberta Avenue, and all of us together from the Disraeli Freeway to the Perimeter Highway, re-making paradise, a community in harmony, and at peace. That reality, which the image denotes, comes to us as an inheritance, a gift, not an achievement that we earn or accomplish. "The meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace," says the psalm.

Now here's my bit of logic. Eight times the psalm makes mention of inheriting and dwelling in the land, and with each mention of it there is a moral condition. For example, verse 9: "Evil men will be cut off, but those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land." Jesus picks up one of those moral conditions, meekness, and I'm thinking he means this to be an umbrella to cover all the other moral qualities mentioned in the psalm. So, to understand what Jesus means by being meek, we might look at the other virtues the psalm sees as conditions for inheriting this little nest in which we want to live in peace. I'm picking out three of the moral portraits of the psalm that I think look very much like being meek, and would therefore feel quite at home under this umbrella, meekness.

Do not fret, but trust God.

We are meek. We have given up fretting, this anxious pursuit of the good life, this upward climb for personal enhancement from McPhail Street to Bredin Drive, and beyond. Trusting God means contentment, not fretting about what we don't yet have, and others do. Not fretting when things don't go my way, but trusting that God is at the helm, so all will be well. And if all will be well, then all is well. So we will not fret.

Blessed are the Meek

Do not be angry, but be still and wait for God.

We are the meek ones. We have given up this compulsion to set to rights what we see as wrong, and have given up the use of our own anger to mount a crusade because something simply must be done, and we know what it is.

We are the meek ones. We are able to let our anger fizzle, and wait for God to act. The meek can admit that they don't know what God is up to, and can wait to find out. The meek know that God has a wonderful way of creating something new even out of what has gone terribly wrong. And therefore we can live with chaos, even error, and wait. Patiently wait.

*Turn from evil, do good, be righteous,
and keep to God's way.*

To be meek does not mean, as Mary says, to be a wet noodle. There is strength in meekness: strength to stand for what is noble, and right, and just, and to not be destructive in our pursuit of the good. The meek can keep firmly to God's way of truth, and honesty, and compassion, when the false wisdom of the culture mocks such naiveté and claims that you cannot be both meek and successful—certainly not in business, or profession, or sports, or politics.

So then, according to the psalm that Jesus quotes, this is what meekness looks like: being still, waiting patiently for God, not fretting, not driven by anger, doing good, being generous, keeping to God's way no matter what. I still think that looks like B. B. Fast, who was in both business and leadership. And truly that is the way I would like to be in these my latter days.



I want now to skip back in time to that story of our brother Moses, the story that you heard read earlier from Numbers 12:1-15. Here's the surprising line again, a sort of bracketed statement:

Now Moses was a very meek man [translate humble], more so than anyone on the face of the earth.

Numbers 12:3

Really? As our granddaughter would say, he had his moments. He yells at God a time or two when God has strong-armed him into the mess he's in. And he gets exasperated now and then, and is driven to whack the rock that is supposed to give the people water, when he was told to use words.

Of course we understand. Obligated to lead and care for this grouching,

grumbling bunch of people who are living with uncertainty and monotony in this arid wasteland—of course he is peevish and irritable. So are the people. Any parent knows about the urge to whack when we ought to be using words.

So what is it in this story that makes Moses out to be a meek man? Two things.

One: He doesn't jump to his own defense when he is being challenged by his sister and brother. "Who do you think you are?" they say. "You think God speaks only to you and through you? Hey, man, God speaks to us too." Moses doesn't retaliate. Doesn't counter-attack. He lets God deal with the presumptuous ones.

And two: When God strikes Miriam with leprosy, and brother Aaron remorsefully pleads for Moses to intervene with God, Moses does so, and asks God for his sister's healing. No glee. No "I told you so." No "You had it coming, brassy girl." Moses' heart goes out to the one who hurt him. He remains a loving brother when he could have arched his neck and responded from his place of authority, the more so because it was God himself who put him in that place.



But we do want to hear from Jesus himself, and we do want to watch him. Here again is Jesus' condensation of Psalm 37: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

I'm not sure about this, but I think Jesus has enlarged the picture a thousand fold. If Psalm 37 sees our plot of land in the 300 block of Roberta Avenue as the reward of being meek, that is, righteous, and patient, and trusting, then Jesus envisions the earth, the whole of it, as the scope of his kingdom, and the blessing is spoken to his people, his followers, his far flung world wide church. Jesus' vision is global. The nations shall come to this light, this light of the world, this city set on a hill. The nations of the earth will acknowledge that the light of this believing community is indeed the true light by which we walk and live in peace.

And that grand reality comes to the people of God as an inheritance. It becomes a reality not so much through what we achieve, but because of who we are, the meek ones, the ones who stand with God, those who do not propel themselves and their interests, but have yielded themselves heart and soul and body to the interests of God, and who live out this commitment in their everyday very ordinary life, in the home, on the job, in the gym, on the phone, on Face Book.

Blessed are the Meek

In this connection I turn your attention to another word from Jesus, a word to which we have often gone for comfort, but which may well be a profound corrective. We've gone to it when we were sighing, "Oh, Poor me!" The text may want us to exclaim, "Oh, Silly me!" Here it is:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Matthew 11:28-30

Jesus declares himself meek, gentle, humble of heart. Doing with soul strength what he needed to do, and then leaving the outcome to his Father. That is what he wants us to learn from him. Carry only what we are called to carry, and not more. The yoke which God gives Jesus to bear, the one he gives us to bear, fits well, and so is easy, that is, it doesn't rub us raw. We wear ourselves out in burnout when we carry another's responsibility as well as our own, or if we presume to carry God's task in that we make ourselves responsible for the outcome. The meek can trust God for the outcome, and so carry their own obligation lightly, even joyfully. Now there's a really good lesson to learn from Jesus. Mind you, that doesn't mean they won't crucify him anyway, but even then he leaves the outcome to his Father.



So that's what Jesus says about himself, namely, that he is meek. Now what does that look like? Here is a piece of the story:

As they approached Jerusalem, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me."

Matthew 21:1-5

There you have it. Our Messiah. Our king. He knows who he is, but he chooses a donkey colt for his entry parade. A donkey colt, not a Dodge Caravan. Not a war horse. Not a stallion with proud arched neck. Not an armored vehicle, let alone a fire spewing tank. A lowly donkey colt.

Oh, Jesus had his moments, as our granddaughter would say. He tossed some tables, scattered some coins, freed some doves, and sent some bewildered

young bulls bellowing out of their pens. But his angry shouting proclaimed what these religious ones themselves professed to believe. "What are you thinking? This place is God's house! This is a place to pray, a place to re-align yourself under God!"

But then he left them to re-assemble their inventory. He didn't have his disciples handcuff the hustlers and set up a kangaroo court. He left them. Left them in the hands of God. Actually he left them to do their worst, and then from the cross he prayed for their forgiveness. Like Moses. Perhaps, like B. B. Fast.

And, yes, we will choose to be meek, even at that price. So help us God.

TAKE AWAY THE STONE, UNBIND HIM, AND LET HIM GO!

John 11

Tragedies do happen.

Unfair traumatic things do happen.

Untimely death happens.

Abuse happens.

*Depression and illness
and suffering and wars and famines
do happen.*

*Even being a special friend of Jesus
is no guarantee against that.*

*As much as we might wish it,
God does not always step in to prevent
the disaster, the death, the depression.
Jesus in our story models God in that.*



Hear the words of power and grace, spoken by Jesus in the story of the resurrection of Lazarus: “Take away the stone, unbind him, and let him go.” And in the midst of that the word to Lazarus, the dead man himself, “Lazarus, come out!” There surely is a life-giving word of power and grace. But let me take you back to the story itself. I’ll paraphrase verses 1 to 31, and then read the text verbatim from verse 32 to verse 44.

Lazarus was sick, at Bethany in Judea. His sisters Mary and Martha sent for Jesus. Jesus delayed his response, but then decided to go to Bethany. The

disciples warned him of the danger, but eventually decided to join him. On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had been buried four days earlier. Martha went out to meet Jesus and complained that he wasn't there to prevent the death. Jesus reassured her with his great assertion: "I am the resurrection and the life." Martha returned to the house and called Mary: "The Teacher is here and is asking for you."

When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.

"Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. Jesus wept.

Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance.

"Take away the stone," he said. "But Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man. "By this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone.

Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I know that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

John 11:32-44

Tragedies do happen. Unfair traumatic things do happen. Untimely death happens. Abuse happens. Depression and illness and suffering and wars and famines do happen. Even being a special friend of Jesus is no guarantee against that.

As much as we might wish it, God does not always step in to prevent

Take Away the Stone, Unbind him, and Let Him Go!

the disaster, the death, the depression. Jesus in our story models God in that. When Jesus hears that Lazarus is ill, he does not catch the next flight to Bethany to prevent the worsening of his condition. He holds back, and lets the illness run its course to its ultimate end: death. His purpose is God's glory, even though his disciples don't understand that.

Like Martha and Mary we complain to God that he didn't jump to our cry and halt the spiraling disaster before it got out of hand and hurt so badly: "Where are you when I need you?" we shout.

*Just because
a thing gets worse, and worse,
doesn't mean
that it has moved
out of God's ballpark.*

According to our faith and our understanding we plotted God in on our chart, and made an X to mark the spot where we expected to find God. But God wasn't there. God held back and let the bad get worse, with the view that his glory would come through beyond the worst, and knowing full well that we wouldn't understand that. And when in the midst of what got worse, and now seems utterly hopeless, we do finally meet God and complain; he says quite patiently, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

I think Jesus said it patiently to Martha, even though it was a reprimand. But I think he was hurt too, and sad. There is a repeated sequence in the story. Mary says, "Jesus, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." What follows? "He was deeply moved in spirit and troubled." Then some people say, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" What follows? "Jesus, once more, was deeply moved."

What troubled Jesus? Both of those statements that sound like statements of faith are in fact statements that indicate the limits of our faith. We've seen Jesus do marvelous things. He gives sight to the blind, and he cures illness. But this? This is beyond him. He can keep the catastrophe from happening if he chooses, but once the bad has become worse, there's nothing more he can do. So we limit God to what we have seen him do. Our faith can't reach beyond our earlier experience of God's intervention. And so Jesus is deeply moved in spirit, and troubled.

Just because a thing gets worse, and worse, doesn't mean that it has moved out of God's ballpark. No place where we can ever be in our own experience of life's hurts and bondages is ever outside the sphere of the miracle of God.

That miracle happens when we hear the word of power and grace, “Lazarus, come out!” Many of you have heard it from time to time. You’ve been hemmed in. You’ve felt trapped. People have put you into boxes and stifled your freedom. And then you’ve heard the word of power and grace, “Peter, Pamela, Joe, Josephine, Anne, Andrew, come out! Be alive! Be free!”

That is the miracle part of the story. That’s the part that God does. He re-vitalizes. He gives new vigor, enthusiasm, dynamism, energy, life, joy. That’s God’s job. And by his word of power and grace he accomplishes that. It would be presumptuous, indeed preposterous, for us to think that we achieve that.

*I can soar like an eagle
even when I
live with turkeys!*

And yet the story of Lazarus also points to our responsibility both for others and for ourselves in becoming free, re-awakened, alive. I’ll tell you parts of the story of a couple I know, and I tell it with both joy and pain because it is so much like the story of Mary and me.

At some point in their relationship the woman experienced severe depression, severe enough to require time away from the family where she could be cared for. It had become clear to me and to the husband that there were blockages. The woman felt she was up against a stone wall, not unlike the inside of a tomb. Some of these blockages we were working with, and the husband felt OK about that. After all, they were out there. He wasn’t implicated. But I was quite sure that even if those other blockages were removed, the woman would still not be free. I suggested on one occasion when I was seeing him alone that he himself might be the stone that blocked his wife’s way out of the darkness.

That did not sit well with him at all, even when I confessed to him that I understood him well because he reminded me so vividly of the time in our marriage when I in fact was the stone that kept Mary trapped. Perhaps entombed is not too strong a word. He would have none of it, and yet I keep hoping that in time he will see the light so that his wife can come out into the light.

In our peer consultation group I related a few words from the wife’s journal. At the bottom of a page she had written in bold letters: “I want to fly, to soar, to explore!” One of my witty colleagues suggested a T-shirt with the words, “How can I soar like an eagle when I’m married to a turkey?”



Take Away the Stone, Unbind him, and Let Him Go!

It does take a great deal of courage and humility to acknowledge that I am the one who is keeping another in bondage. Please take a look at yourself in all of your relationships—on the job, in the marriage, in the family, with your siblings, with friends. Is it possible that I myself am the stone that needs to be removed? And would I have the courage to ask my spouse, my children, my employees, if they experience me as the stone that blocks their way to living joyfully, purposefully, freely? “Take away the stone!” says Jesus.

And what if I am the one entombed, trapped, unable to break free? Must I wait in the dark until the one whom I experience as the stone recognizes that he is, and chooses freely to move aside? No! You can find someone to take away the stone, or help you find another way out.

Back in those years when Mary wanted “to fly, to soar, to explore” and couldn’t, she found our pastor, I. W. Redekopp. He helped her see how I, and my family, were cramping her in. And hearing God in I. W. calling to her, “Mary, come out!” she made the choice by small steps that she would not allow the stone to determine who she would be. By God’s grace I did come in time to recognize that I was the stone, at least one of them, and I have tried over the years not to block Mary’s path to her life in God and with God.

Back to the T Shirt: I’ll put it as a question this time; that way it doesn’t sound so hopeless: “Can I soar like an eagle when I’m married to a turkey?” That’s a yes/no question. So let me re-phrase it again as a statement of hope: “I can soar like an eagle even when I live with turkeys!”



The words of Jesus, of God, to us continue: “Unbind him and let him go!” The removing of obstacles is in itself not enough. When I have accepted and declared my freedom from trappedness, or bondage, or addiction, or sick dependency, then I still have much to learn in the living of the new life to which I’ve been re-born. The problem is not only in others who block my way, chain me, categorize and stereotype me. The problem is also in myself.

Yes, I may experience resistance from others in regard to my changing, my new life, my freedom. People who have gotten used to me as I was—boxed, trapped, helpless, spineless—may very well want me to stay there. If I change, everyone in my relationship network has to change too. If I become free to express my opinion or my feelings, all those in my network have unfamiliar stuff to deal with, and they will give me a clear message to change back, to be the way I was, so they know what to do with me. “Remain weak, sick, depressed, mousey,” they say, “otherwise we have to find new ways of relating to you, and that’s a bother.”

In the story we read the words are varied, but the message is repeated several times, namely, “Jesus, leave Lazarus alone. It will only create problems if you mess with him now.” The disciples did it. They tried to persuade Jesus not to go to Bethany at all. Mary and Martha did it. If Jesus had done something earlier, it would have been fine, but now it’s too late. Let it be. And when Jesus pushed on, Martha was quite insistent. “He’s too far gone, Jesus. He stinks. Leave him alone.” It really is difficult to accept someone back into our circle as a dynamic contributing member when we had already written him off.

Fathers find that resistance in the family when they want to come out of bondage and into the light. “We’ve heard it before! Nothing will come of it. Shut up, Dad.” And so Dad gets pushed back into the tomb. It seems easier to do that than to unbind him and walk supportively with him through the first new steps of the new life.

Kids do it at school. The girl has been away for a while, a year in fact, and has heard the call to “Come out!” She has begun to walk in newness of life. Then she comes back to her school, and the classmates refuse to accept her as the new person she is. They whisper behind her back, remain distant from her, and distrust her. Finally the girl says to her mother, “I think I’ll just go back to being the person I was. It will be easier that way, and that’s what they expect of me anyway.” “Unbind her and let her go,” Jesus says. “Don’t push her back into the dungeon!”

Yes, there will be resistance from others, but if you look and wait you’ll find someone who will help you unwind the restrictive bands, help you deal with the light, and walk alongside you in the new way of life.

But there may also be resistance in me to live my new life freely. There is fear—fear of what people will think and say, fear of failing in this new venture, fear of the potential itself and the awesome responsibility that comes with it. So I must be helped to become unwrapped, unbound inside. And the unbinding may be a long slow process. The joy of this newness may come not as a fireworks explosion, but in slow tentative increments as when the dawn undoes the darkness of the night.

“Let him go!” says Jesus. Yes, help him walk the first steps to assure he has his balance and his muscle. But then let him go! He is free. Don’t dictate the way he is to live his new life. He is free in Christ. Don’t circumscribe how he is to express his faith in God. He is free in God. Don’t handcuff him now if he wants to serve his God. Let him go! Let go your control over him. When Lazarus was ill, you could control him. When he was dead you could put him where you chose. But now he is newly alive, unbound, free in his newness. Let go of your control over him.

Take Away the Stone, Unbind him, and Let Him Go!

There you have them, words of Jesus, words of power and grace: To the one in darkness and the trapped-ness of the tomb, Jesus' word is, "Lazarus, Lydia, Leander, Linda, come out!" And to those of us who form the network in which Lazarus will live his new life, Jesus' words are no-nonsense divine orders, "Take the stone away, unbind him, and let him go!"

Amen!

THE CROSS: LIFE'S GREATEST ACCOMPLISHMENT

John 1-12; 1 Peter 2; Hebrews 12

*We are never through
making directional decisions as life intensifies.
Duties grow heavier,
responsibilities become ponderous,
resistance mounts and becomes ominous
and we must decide again and again
whether to follow the call,
whether to stay with a commitment we've made.*



What do you do when the direction of God's call to you, or circumstance, becomes more and more difficult, and suddenly another road seems to open? What do you do when life with one person becomes increasingly unbearable, and "providentially" another affection beckons? What do you do when work with your colleagues becomes painful, and restrictive, and joyless, and suddenly another school, or firm, makes an attractive offer?

What do we do when the growing family increases impossible burdens, when teenage children cause duties to become penitential labor, when God's call to us becomes a narrowing alley, when the slim budget faces increasing prices, when friends say we are crazy to carry on, when the commitment we've made seems to promise heartache, and suddenly an escape hatch opens? What do we do?

The answer may lie in what Jesus did:

STILL DARING TO HOPE

If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that we should follow in his steps.

1 Peter 2:20-21

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross.... Consider him...so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Hebrews 12:2-3

It will be instructive to follow the life of Jesus as John tells it in the first twelve chapters of his gospel account. Note especially these two things: the movements toward and away from Jerusalem, and the increasing hostility in Jerusalem over against a possible greater acceptance elsewhere.

Here is a quick fly past from John chapters one through twelve:

- 2:11 Things seem to be going well in Galilee.
- 2:13 ff. Jesus goes to Jerusalem for the Passover, and cleanses the temple, evoking hostility.
- 3:22 ff. He moves into Judea, baptizing alongside John, and people raise questions.
- 4:1 ff. Off to Galilee again, but travels through Samaria where many believe.
- 5:1 ff. To Jerusalem, where Jesus heals the man at the pool, and stirs up the hornets' nest because it was on the Sabbath.
- 6:1 ff. Back to Galilee, the feeding of the 5000 and the people's push to make him king. It is safer here (7:1).
- 7:1 ff. To Jerusalem for the feast of the tabernacles, teaching in the temple, attempts at arresting him, the argument about Abraham's children, the healing of the blind man, and the wish to stone Jesus.
- 10:40 ff. Move across the Jordan, where many believe in Jesus.
- 11:1 ff. Back to Bethany, near Jerusalem, the raising of Lazarus, and the hostility that follows.
- 11:54. Withdrawal to the wilderness for respite.
- 12: 1ff. Back to Bethany and Jerusalem, the "triumphal" entry. Now the enemy is desperate.

It seems we are never through making directional decisions as life intensifies. Duties grow heavier, responsibilities become ponderous, resistance mounts and becomes ominous, and we must decide again and again whether to follow the call, whether to stay with a commitment we've made.

The Cross: Life's Greatest Accomplishment

Our pattern is Jesus. He kept making decisions that moved him onward toward the cross.

- 1:29 Jesus hears John announce him as “the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.” Then follow baptism and the time in the wilderness and the temptations to choose another way.
- 3:14 Jesus talks to Nicodemus about being lifted up like the snake in the desert.
- 6:51 Jesus unsettles the crowd by speaking of being the bread from heaven that he will give for the life of the world.
- 8:28 Jesus explains that his being lifted up is the Father's plan.
- 10:17 The good shepherd will lay down his life for the sheep, Jesus says.

If we look at Jesus intently, we will hear God's life principle more clearly: Life's greatest accomplishment comes through the cross. There is a sense, of course, in which this reality is unique for Jesus. The cosmic scope of that reality in him will never be duplicated. But there is in the words of Jesus a hint that this “cross principle” is indeed the pattern by which God redeems the world. The clincher for us comes after the resurrection, in Jesus' words to his disciples:

As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.

John 20:21

That is as compelling as it is ominous.

So, the question again: What do we do when suddenly, at times seemingly providentially, sweet alternatives present themselves as a substitute for this cross principle? Here's an alternative that presents itself to Jesus:

Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the feast. They came to Philip with a request. “Sir,” they said, “we would like to see Jesus.” Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.

Jesus replied, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am my servant will also be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.”

John 12:20-26

What an opportunity! Greeks were inquiring. Perhaps Hellenistic Jews. Perhaps proselytes. In any case, they are from another world. We can identify with Jesus here. Jerusalem is angry, malicious, dangerous. Galilee has been turned off, largely. Samaria is unpredictable, and too close. What a chance! The Jews in the dispersion may not be as threatened as Jerusalem. The Gentiles, perhaps fed up with their polytheistic religion and their immoral gods, would be open to the truth. Here's a chance to make it big, fulfill life's purpose, conquer the world!

And he could have defended such a move from his own teaching. Had he not said he was the bread of life for the world, the light of the world, the truth and the way designed for the whole world? And had he not advised the teams he sent out into the villages that if they persecute you in one place, move on to the next? We know ourselves well enough, and have seen and heard others, to know how easy it is to call "the way out," God's will. The easiest seems to have "divine calling" written over it.

What is Jesus' response?

The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.... Unless a kernel of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains a single seed.... The one who loves his life will lose it.

John 12:23ff.

When Jesus is faced again with the purpose of his life, and the stark reality of the cross comes into sharp focus, he sees it aglow with glory. What awaited him, the cross, was not a surprise. He had heard John say it at the Jordan:

Look, the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.

John 1:29

Jesus had said it to Nicodemus:

As Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up.

John 3:14

He had preached it to the arguing crowd at the Sea of Galilee:

This bread is my flesh, which I give for the life of the world.

John 6:51

He had said it clearly to his disciples:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

John 10:11

But as clearly as he saw the cross, so clearly he saw the glory as well. The cross was not the end. It was the means to a purpose greater than life itself. The cross was the gateway to glory. How we rejoice! We are a wee part of the glory that Jesus' cross achieved. We are a wee part of the many seeds that the death of that one seed made possible. We rejoice, and give thanks.

But we are jolted to silence when we recognize that the pattern is not singularly for Jesus, but is in fact the way God's redeeming work gets done. Jesus' words are generic: "Unless a kernel of wheat falls into the ground and dies.... Whoever serves me must follow me." And we recognize that Jesus is talking to us.

We really prefer not to hear that. We love hearing it as good news, the wonderful way in which that principle took shape in Jesus. Even in face of the cross, God's purpose in the death of Jesus glows with glory, beauty beyond words. The cross is not evidence of the Father's indifference, or impotence. But is the painful mystery of God's redeeming love. We hear it with awe, "If I be lifted up, I will draw all people to me. If the kernel dies, it will bear much fruit." We were drawn, and we are part of the fruit. We are thankful beyond words.

But there it is. Inescapable. The principle is generic. That's how the kingdom comes. We are called to a readiness to let it happen to us. The seed lets it happen, as Jesus allowed the world to do to him what it chose. And we are asked to choose the willingness to follow, whatever shape that falling into the ground may take with us.

*We are called
to a readiness
to let it happen
to us.*

We can choose to cling to life, to love it above all else. Do all in our power to prolong it, grasp all its benefits along the way, seek what is easiest and least demanding, and in the end see it and all it offered us, trickle through our fingers.

Or we can choose to see our life as expendable. A gift to be given up for a purpose greater than itself, moment by moment, or day by laborious day, or

year by year in a cycle of service, or in one conclusive cross event, and in the end see it glorified eternally.

Aren't you glad that Jesus chose as he did? It is humbling to think that there may be those who would be glad that we chose to follow him. It may well be a lonely road, this road of ultimate obedience. But the Father will speak words of encouragement to sustain us.

Some of you will still remember the awed reverence with which we read *Through Gates of Splendor*, the story of Jim Eliot and his four companions who were driven, called, to carry the good news to the Aucas of Ecuador. They died from the poisoned spears that greeted them. It was 1956 when those seeds fell into the ground and died. Those very men who did the killing became leaders in the church that has taken shape there. The seeds are bearing fruit; that is the glory.

Perhaps some of you have read the story of Maximilian Kolbe, in *A Man for Others*. He was a Polish priest who volunteered to take another's place in the prison camp in Auschwitz in 1941, when the deputy commander of the camp, in a rage because three men had escaped from the prison, picked ten men to be sent to the dungeon to be starved to death. The man Kolbe replaced had a wife and children. We marveled at the courage, the composure, the faithfulness to the call of being a priest in those last two weeks to the men condemned to death. And no wonder. While reading the story, we knew we were on holy ground. A seed fell into that ground and died. And the fruit? Who knows?

People of faith have heard the words of Jesus, and have followed his example, through the millennia. They have sealed their faith with their death. Most of them unheralded then, and long forgotten since, except that the fruit has been the kingdom of God taking shape in the world that is hostile to it. A glory largely *incognito*, except to those with eyes to see.

We hear him still in this our century, as strong, and direct, and personal as it was then—and no less demanding. And the glory none diminished. “Unless the seed falls into the ground and dies.” Where it falls is holy ground. Fear not the ground; it is alive with glory bursting to be revealed.



The Cross: Life's Greatest Accomplishment

HYMN: HOLY GROUND, FRUIT ABOUNDS

(TUNE: "FOREVER WITH THE LORD," *WORSHIP HYMNAL*, PAGE 482)

Lord Jesus, you took on
The task your Father gave,
You walked with courage and resolve
Despite the cross and grave.
And when the tempter lured,
Showed you an easier way,
You spurned the offer, choice secured,
You heard your Father say:
If the seed fall and die,
The fruit will be assured.
And when the end loomed dark,
And terror gripped your soul,
And other options beckoned still,
You held fast to the goal.
You knew, though high the cost
In scorn and wounds sustained,
The life surrendered is not lost,
Its fruit is glory gained.
Seed that dies is not lost,
Its fruit is glory gained.
O Lord, we hear your call,
Hear love's compelling voice.
We've seen seeds die and live again,
Seen glory crown their choice.
We will not shun the ground
Where our seed falls and dies,

STILL DARING TO HOPE

We'll hope for fruit that will abound,

Your glory's glad surprise.

Holy ground, fruit abounds,

Your glory's glad surprise.

John Regehr, April 2015

CLOSING WELL—THE FINAL YEARS

We will always be unfinished projects so hope never shuts down.

Matthew 5

*The good news
is that there is another way to live life,
God's way,
and that in Jesus
we have both the model and the means
to live that way.*



“Closing well.” That is the way your pastor stated the theme. Hearing it was both a jolt and a jab. The jolt? I’m near the closing, the shutting down. I’ll soon be saying, “It is finished.” The jab? Hey man! You may still have years to journey. I find both the jolt and the jab very sobering.

I sometimes recall the sixteen-year-old I used to be, and remember the seriousness with which our “*Schredegehr*” quartet sang, “We are going down the valley one by one, with our faces toward the setting of the sun.” Oh, I knew about death and dying. Lived right beside the cemetery in prairie town Herbert, Saskatchewan. When we were young kids, our Mom took us through that cemetery now and again on summer Sunday afternoon leisurely walks. Death had a poetic, almost romantic feel about it. And on funeral days the bell in the town hall tower rang out the number of years of life that had been granted the one who was being buried. We counted. Those numbers were sobering even then. And I wondered if I would be granted enough years to make it to the year 2000.

But now that I am past that, and near closing time, I must tell you that

I am no expert on this part of the journey. I haven't been on this road before. I don't have a GPS. Not even a road map. So I expect to have surprises, both happy and disconcerting ones. But I do have a work order, a kind of 'to-do list'. Well, actually it is more like a 'to-become template'. There is still significant spirit work, soul work, I need to do now that I am eighty-five, and counting. However, it is not a new work order, only an unfinished one.

I have always been intrigued and prodded by the beatitudes. It is part of Jesus' template of a kingdom of God person. For me it brings into sharp focus, now more than ever, the one thing I truly want to reach toward, and the things I need to let go in order to be able to do the reaching. Many of you are very familiar with these classic words of Jesus. In fact, you recently enjoyed a sermon series on them.

Here they are from Matthew 5:3-9:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

There is an intriguing structure in the way those seven "blesseds" are put together. It's a familiar ancient pattern, a pre-Gutenberg pattern. Indeed, much of the New Testament has the pattern, especially the letters of Paul. Here's the pattern: The heart of the message is in the middle of the paragraph. What comes before it leads step-wise to this central message, and the statements that follow the central thought, relate closely to the steps that came before. Or they may be a restatement of what went before. Like this: A B C D C B A.

That's why, when you have read letters of Paul, you have on occasion said to him, "Paul, you are repeating yourself." And he'd say, "Of course I am. I'm glad you're paying attention. That's how this ancient Greek rhetoric works."

At the heart of the beatitudes, then, is the call to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied." This is what Jesus announces as good news:

The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.

Mark 1:14

Repent. Change your mind about what your culture has taught you about principles to live by. Like: success means getting ahead; security means having more than you need; owning more stuff means having more status. Old age is exquisitely designed to help me let go these false values. Like: the more I do, the more important I am; the more important my children are in the structures of society, the more successful I've been as a parent. The good news is that there is another way to live my life, God's way, and that in Jesus I have both the model and the means to live that way. That's good news indeed. So, blessed am I when I hunger and thirst to get it right, to live rightly as God sees right, and as Jesus models right.



When I was younger, I thought that one could actually get to the place where you got it right once and for all. Take a theology course or two, an ethics course, and get it all figured out. There, that's settled. Got it. Now let's build a fortress around it, write a constitution and nail it down. Now at age eighty-five, I know that if I think I've got it right, and no longer thirst to get it right, I'll get it wrong. I have discovered, regretfully, that I have actually done damage because I thought I was so absolutely right. I know now that this attitude is the making of a Pharisee, and it is the Pharisee to whom Jesus says that he must be born again.

Fortunately, in those earlier arrogant years when I thought I had it right, Jesus rattled my cage, and told me that I needed to be born again, again. Now at eighty-five Mary and I keep reading books that at times cause us to change our minds—quite joyfully, really—about things we thought we had sort of gotten right. Good books. Exhilarating books. Lenses that help us see anew what we had seen a hundred times. And so I find that one of my one-liners comes true again:

*If I have looked,
and thought that I have seen,
and therefore have not looked again,
I have not seen
what's there to see.*

That remains the heart of my calling: to hunger and thirst after righteousness, to become, and remain a learner of Jesus, a disciple who follows, for whom Jesus is both the means and the model for being a kingdom-of-God person. Now, if that is the one thing I reach for, what must I let go to make this a

genuine wholehearted pursuit?

There are three steps that lead to this central calling:

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”*

I want to remain teachable always. Poverty of spirit keeps me open to learning. I let go all claims to have grasped truth whole, or even to have understood a piece of it so fully that I don't have to re-think. I am a learner. No matter what new and exciting insight I gain and rejoice in, I still “see in a glass darkly.” No arrogance ever about some new understanding of truth, because all understanding is partial. This human mind, for all its wonder, will never grasp the mind of God, the strategies of God's redemption, the wisdom with which God manages his universe and his stumbling, faltering children. I let go the claim to know, even a portion of truth, so as not to require more insight. And, there is something else I let go:

*“Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.”*

If I want to thirst to get it right, I must certainly recognize and acknowledge where I got it wrong. At eighty-five there is much to regret. There was quite enough that was obviously wrong, and I knew it to be wrong at the time. These things I grieve. But there is also much that I thought at the time was right, but wasn't. I mourn that. I regret so much of my early parenting, my early preaching and teaching. I regret the over-extending of myself in what I saw as kingdom work, thinking that more was better. But there is comfort. Forgiveness is such a comfort. So I let go my wrongs, and become free to thirst to get it right.

But there is also a mourning for the huge wrongs that are done in churches, in governments, in nations: such injustice in corporations; such cruelty in the name of religion, in the name of God, in the name of doctrinal correctness; such greed that crushes the poor and sickens the planet. In bygone years I'd boil my blood to think of it, and I'd want to mount crusades to counter this wrong and that, to write angry letters to the editor. But I've let go my rage and fury. I grieve now as perhaps God grieves, and I thirst for love that rights the wrongs.

And then, of course, there is the mourning that comes with the losses that are imbedded in this process of growing old. Loss of health, loss of dexterity and mobility, loss of the larger scope of life, of participating, of travel, of

hiking in the hills, of the satisfaction of strenuous work. There comes the time when I stop fighting against these inevitable losses. “*Gelassenheit*” is what our Anabaptist tradition called it. I get past being angry that it is what it is. Anger no longer mobilizes; it merely saps the joy that is still available to me. So I mourn the losses and am comforted, and I am free to enjoy less more. And then there is this soft word:

*“Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.”*

Only when I let go my demands to have my rights recognized is there an inner climate that allows for hungering and thirsting that right be done, as God sees right. Only when I let go my insistence that my will be done, am I ready to crave that God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven. The accumulation of years has helped me get to that place, and I am grateful. Here’s another of my one-liners:

*Some may die young and proud;
for the rest of us
life is a long journey
into humility.*

Or meekness. I ran across Ernest Holmes’ definition of meekness: “So at one with God that I can practice non-resistance, and can forgive with such completeness that I can give an actual good in return for an evil done to me.” That’s “*Gelassenheit*” with compassion.

No, I don’t want to grow old like a wet noodle, as Mary cautions, but I do want to be meek. Perhaps meekness is a humility that trusts God completely, regarding absolutely everything. Such meekness allows me to let go the controls and wait for God to act, without shrugging off obligations that God still lays on me, as he will keep on doing as long as he gives me breath. And even when I do what it is mine to do, I do not insist on results. Mine is to obey; results are in God’s hands. As is everything else, including the whole earth, which then, in the hands of God, becomes a resource for me, and so I inherit the earth.

So this is my to-become project. Unfinished still. In progress. Letting go everything that in any way hampers this one central calling, to hunger and thirst to live out righteousness as Jesus models right living.

There is more letting go that follows from this:

STILL DARING TO HOPE

*“Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.”*

Wouldn't it be nice if everyone else were embracing meekness as a prime virtue? But there are the un-meek, the ones who insist on their own way, and their rights, no matter how this may impact on others. Well, toward them I am called to be merciful. Whatever the sense of inadequacy that drives such people to bolster their own ego aggressively, there is in them a profound need to be valued, a need deeper than they know. So I let go my insistence that they recognize what they can't see in themselves, and I treasure them as forgiven. That is mercy, like God's mercy toward me.

And what about those who refuse to acknowledge their wrongs, who claim they have nothing to regret, let alone mourn? Those who won't admit their mistakes, but are quick to point out the errors of others? Well, I let go my urge to strike back with their methods:

“Blessed are the pure in heart.”

The pure in heart: those who want only to do right as God sees right. Pure in heart: uncontaminated by selfish interests, refusing to be sucked into reacting as the culture reacts, returning hurt for hurt, and insult for insult. I've let that go.

And what about the know-it-all who is not teachable, the one who knows nothing of the poverty of spirit, who won't admit he doesn't know, and talks endlessly thinking that thereby he is proving that he does know? Well, I will let him be where he is without writing him off. I will keep building bridges, and will remain open to a connection with him, if and when he is ready for it:

“Blessed are the peacemakers.”

However, I will ensure that the bridges I build are invitations, and not invasions. That way I will demonstrate that I am a child of God, when I recognize even the unteachable one as a child of God, and wait, as God waits, to heal the breach.

So, there you have it. There you have me. Unfinished still, and happy to be so. When in the end I will say, “It is finished,” I will not be implying that I am a finished product. I truly expect the grace of God to continue its work with me when I'm done here.

OUR FAITH JOURNEY

*The journey of doubting is tough.
Yet I would not have wanted to miss what came out of it.
To quote one of my friends,
“Me and God are good!”*

*It is better to bask in the mystery
than to muddle around in the unknowable.
There is more mystery than we thought.*



JOHN

I think it is fair to say that the scripture has been both a foundation and a guide for me through my entire faith journey. No, my very earliest sense of the presence of God was not the scripture. It was our Mom's prayer. In my preschool days she would interrupt our play mid-morning to have us pray. The three of us brothers would each kneel before a kitchen chair that would soon be re-arranged into a train again, and then in turn we would pray our "repeat after me" prayers. Each would be preceded by an expulsion of air from Mom. Like a heavy sigh, more like a slump of resignation. I learned it well. Our kids made fun of me for what they called my "prayer puff" which preceded every table grace.

Five or six years later on summer mornings while we were still abed upstairs in the Bestwater house, we could hear Mom praying in the spare bedroom on the main floor. Always the familiar prayer tone, a blend of resignation and entreaty. And even though we couldn't make out the words, we knew our names would come up, and we were at peace. Mom is talking to God, and all is well.

The scripture came into its own for me on the evening I decided to do what I knew I needed to do. I was about eleven years old, I'd think. The process was programmed: go to the special evening service, remain behind at the close, join the white brushcut Santa type Mr. J. P. Wiebe on the pew at the front of the church, hear him read words from Isaiah 53, and, sure enough, for the first time ever I understood that those words were spoken to me. "He was bruised for my iniquities." Then came Mr. Wiebe's affirming prayer. I hugged my Mom, who was also crying, assured now that I was in, a Christian. Only a slightly improved eleven year old, to be sure, but the word held. It has ever since: "He was wounded for my transgressions." The comfort of that has never left me, nor has the call of that word on my life.

I asked for baptism a couple of years later, in large part because that's what the word instructed. After that Albert and I attended mid-week prayer meetings with the older folk of the church, meetings that were largely Bible study. We were enraptured while Dad expounded the book of the Revelation according to his imposing huge dispensational canvas chart. We learned to love and trust the scripture.

That trust deepened when I heard Dad preach a sermon on Psalm 125: "As the mountains are round about Jerusalem, so the Lord is round about his people." Only much later did I understand why that sermon so impacted me. It impacted Dad. It was the mid-thirties, the heart of the depression and drought in south Saskatchewan, and Dad was hearing the text as a word to himself and that little flock struggling to survive. Dad trusted the God of the word. That trust has been a lifetime gift to me.

Since then major stations and pivot points in my life have been supported, or prompted, or guided by the scripture. This was true of career choices, like leaving music and turning to theology, or leaving the public school system for a pastoral calling. It was also true in the normal forward movement of life. My faith journey has been marked, as yours has been, by the interplay of the text and the ordinary stuff of life within our societal context. I want to tell you about some of those specifics.

One is the time when our children turned from being just ordinary kids to being ordinary teens. Two things had come together to shape my way of being: one was a strong sense of being called to church ministry, which I interpreted as seeking first the kingdom of God, and the other was a quite clear sense of what a Christian family should look like. Not surprisingly, our kids experienced my ideal as something much less desirable. They began to blast holes in the fortress.

Quite unnerved, I went to the scripture for affirmation. I found it: "Train

up a child in the way he or she should go, and they'll just keep on going in it" (Proverbs 22:6). Good plan. I just have to work harder at maintaining the fortress. But then I read this jolting text in 1 Timothy 5:18, that if I don't make my primary obligation primary, that is, my wife and children, then I am worse than a pagan. Suddenly I see it: I've been seeking the kingdom of God, thinking that this is church and conference, and I have in effect put the family outside that circle of concern. The truth dawns: If I don't do family well, nothing else matters very much. Some of you will tell me straightaway that if I had asked Mary about it, I would have discovered that she already knew that, had known it all along, and she didn't need chapter and verse to know it. She would have been an amazing "helper," if I had let her.

And that brings me to another pivot time, namely the women's issue. By now it sounds sick to say it that way, but there it was. I had my place; Mary had hers. And there was the text that stated it quite clearly (Genesis 1 and 2). It is now embarrassing to recall what I taught the student wives' group that Mary and I set up at Mennonite Brethren Bible College back then. But happily, along comes the women's movement. That prompted me to read the text again. And, what do you know?! It doesn't say what I thought it said. Isn't it strange that we can actually hear the text say what we think it should say? The two-pronged mandate is given to both equally. No hierarchy there. And the woman is the helper. Wow! That's how God describes himself in relation to us. We humans are the needy ones, the prone-to-run-amuck ones, and God says he is our helper. So is it that the male is the needy one, the one who requires a helper so that he won't bungle things so badly? Go figure.

But I had more to learn about that. It was 1976. We were on our first sabbatical in Winston Salem, North Carolina. Mary and I were both enrolled in the pastoral care program at the Baptist Hospital, and I was taking a Bible course at Wake Forest University—a wonderful course on the epistle to the Romans. Amazing insights! Fascinating stuff! I bubbled with enthusiasm and came home to share my excitement with Mary. Her response was more like a polite ho-hum. Nothing new there for her. Certainly no seismic shift. I pressed the memory button. And sure enough, places I had come to in the study of the text, Mary had already been, even though she couldn't give you chapter and verse.

MARY

From what John has said, you might think that I just parachuted into places of understanding and composure. You need to know that it was a journey for me as well, a journey that included dark moments.

I grew into a relatively free and happy teen in Leamington, Ontario. Our parents did not impose religious expectations on us. What I learned about the Christian way came from the church, worship times, young peoples, and choir.

I had two close friends with whom I sang in a trio, served in various churches, sometimes with a speaker, sometimes not. We talked about our faith, especially when we were getting ready to give our testimonies prior to baptism.

I did have questions, and at times felt guilty for having them. Where is heaven? How can it hold so many people? What is eternity? What was in the beginning? Whom did Cain and Abel marry? My parents' answers were pretty thin, and to think of asking those formidable preachers in the church scared the heebie jeebies out of me. I finally set the questions aside with a "Whatever." No big deal. The three of us were doing ministry, so we were OK with God. The questions did not grow into doubts.

From that joyous freedom of my late teens and early twenties, I moved to Winnipeg and into the rigid strictures of Mennonite Brethren Bible College in the mid 1940's. It was a culture shock. I was a fish out of water. These were all upright Christians who had long pious faces, prayed a lot, talked about God-things a lot. I was overwhelmed. Unnerved.

Again I bonded with two girls, and that helped. It was an anchor. But there were new questions, some of which did morph into doubts. I was so different from most others, so un-pious. Had God really accepted me? It helped some that I was in a small group of singers who visited churches. I loved that.

Back home in Leamington for the summer, I had to re-evaluate. I questioned my salvation. I was just not pious enough. I made a promise to myself and to God that I would do better next fall. But that felt like wanting to please others, and that didn't feel good.

From the college I moved into marriage with John and into his family, where the same kind of boxed-in Christianity sapped the life of my spirit.

When Rennie was born, my life was full. Being a Mom does that. I did get to sing in a choir some. Questions and doubts did not go away. The years of raising a family of four, often by myself, were tough, and took their toll. Then in 1964 I slipped into severe depression. "God, where are you?" I cried. Only silence...for two awful years. Until finally I. W. Redekop, who was then our pastor in the Elmwood Church, helped me understand what had happened, and helped pry John loose from those strictures that he thought were the hallmarks of the Christian faith.

After John's first sabbatical, I registered at the Interfaith Pastoral Institute at The University of Winnipeg. The group consisted of another woman and a

number of pastors from a variety of churches. The group seemed to like needling me about being MB (Mennonite Brethren). I thought I could handle it, since I was, after all, a true Christian. But some of their questions rocked my foundations: “Why don’t you assume that a person is in the kingdom until he or she opts out, rather than that they are out until they opt in?” And another, after a snowstorm and a talk about accidents: “Is God really in control of everything?” A group member said she didn’t pray for protection on the road, since safety was her responsibility. I was thrown into turmoil. Was God really in charge?

I did finally talk to John about it, but he seemed untroubled by the questions, so I was left with them. In time my prayers sounded desperate, and then hollow. But then, I was still busy in the church, and had gone back to school, so perhaps I was still OK.

A year or so later a client of mine, a fine young man who was quite active in the church, asked if I would go with him to talk to his pastor. He was gay, and was struggling with the issue. Of course, I agreed to go with him. We were both soundly lectured, and as we were leaving, the pastor said to me, “I will never ever again refer anyone to you.” That threw me into chaos, and uncertainty about myself and what I was about. And yes, the young man was dropped from church membership.

After several more units of training at the Interfaith Pastoral Institute, I worked as a hospital chaplain during several summers, filling in for those on vacation. I loved this work. In spite of the affirmation, and my joy in doing the work, I wondered what I was doing there if I was questioning so much about my faith. One day after work, walking out of the door, I stopped in my tracks, and said to myself, “Mary, you are a phony. You read the scripture, you pray with patients, and you don’t even believe what you read or pray.”

In the fall of 1984 we were off to Pasadena, Fuller Theological Seminary. It was John’s second sabbatical. I knew I needed help, and promised myself I’d ask at Fuller’s for a spiritual mentor. I did get one, a lovely older woman. She was Episcopalian. I saw her twice a month throughout the year. I talked freely. She listened, gave some advice, and then stood behind me as I sat, put her hands on my shoulders, and prayed. Intensely. She admitted that praying was exhausting, but that’s what she did. She gave me an assignment: go through the gospels and write down every statement that has to do with faith, trust, and love. It was healing for my battered self.

Upon our return, I asked Sister Catherine from St. Benedict’s Monastery to be my mentor. I knew her from one of my training units. She taught me what was for me a new way of reading scripture. That too was life giving.

The journey of doubting is tough, and yet I would not have wanted to miss what came out of it. To quote one of my friends, “Me and God are good!”

JOHN

So let me bring you up to date. The pattern continues. In the last few years we’ve been reading works of Brian McLaren, N. T. Wright, Miroslav Volf, and again and again I’ve been thrilled with the wonder of the scripture, and the joy of reading again what I had read a hundred times and thought I had understood. And often what for me was a flash of illumination was for Mary an affirmation of what in her heart she already knew. At one point she said that reading some of that stuff felt like coming home, coming to rest. Now isn’t that a wonderful place to be when you are eighty-eight!

Oh, yes, another pivot point. A couple of years ago I was prompted to read the gospels in order to discover what Jesus said was the good news. I was aware that we had mostly framed the good news in the language of the apostle Paul, and in the way that language had been interpreted over the centuries—especially from Romans.

So what did I find? Mark says it bluntly. The good news is that the kingdom of God is at hand. So the good news according to Jesus is that there is another way to live life: the kingdom of God way, a wholesome way that allows us to live in harmony on planet earth. When Jesus says, “Follow me,” he is inviting us to a new way. It requires a turn around to get onto the way, and no, we will never master it fully, but it is a way that for all it costs, is a place of rest, rest from carrying burdens we ought not to be schlepping—costly, but not burdensome. This way is now at hand. And we are invited to join Jesus in that way. It’s worth the trip. And who knows, we may have been misreading Romans.

There are still a thousand texts that baffle me. Jesus seems plain enough, and I listen with a will to follow, and then, what seems plain morphs into a riddle. And again and again I come back to one of my recent one-liners:

*It is better to bask in the mystery
than to muddle around in the unknowable.
And yes,
there is more mystery than we thought.
I’m quite sure that is by design.*



Our Faith Journey

*And when on this hike
she was utterly spent,
and she chided herself
that 'twas folly we went,
and she wished I would carry her
strapped to my back,
and her courage and will
nearly threatened to crack,
she sat, and she sobbed,
and she rested a while,
then set out to conquer
the last grueling mile.*

John Regehr, November 2014



HOW LONG? *HOW LONG?* **HOW LONG?**

Psalm 13

There are different ways of asking that question.



There is the college sophomore who has a major assignment to do. “How long do I have?” he asks. “Two weeks.” “No problem. I can do that.”

Then there’s the athlete who broke his ankle. “How long till I’m as good as new?” “Four months, could be six.” “Oh, hmm. 180 days. Well, OK. I think I can manage that.”

And then there’s the young grandmother who discovers that she has a neurological condition that has no known cause or cure. The illness will slowly debilitate all her muscles. In time she will be sentenced to a wheel chair. And then it will get worse. Much worse. “How long do I have?” she asks. “Seven years.” “Oooh! That’s long. And it won’t get better?” “Not likely.” “And in the end I won’t be able to swallow?” “True.” “That’s brutal. That’s long, and brutal.” “Yes, it is.”

And there is the vibrant senior who becomes aware that she has what is known as musicophilia. It’s quite rare, she understands. A short musical phrase keeps playing unmusically on one side of her brain. Uncontrollably. Monotonously. Irritatingly. Then simultaneously an unintelligible angry jabbering starts in the other side of her brain. Relentless. It drives her to distraction. And then a third background note sets in. It is all, unstoppable. When she is actively engaged in conversation, the noises go into hiding. As soon as there is silence around, they roar back with a vengeance.

She reads up on the condition, and discovers that some famous musicians had it, but theirs seem to have been benign. It at times even helped them in their musical compositions. But hers is anything but benign. There are times when she wishes fervently for death so the raging noises will stop. “How long?” she screams into her darkness. There is no end in sight.



There are some of you here who have experienced, or are now experiencing, your own similar version of Gethsemane. You've watched Jesus in his agony, and you heard him pray what you have prayed a thousand times, "Father, please, if it is possible, let this cup be taken away." You also heard Jesus come to a place of resignation, and submission. "Not my will, but yours be done."

You hear him, and you wonder how long it will take for you to get to that place of resolution, and resolve. And you remember the few times when you got there, almost, and then lost it again. It is so unspeakably hard to be at peace in such pain. As our pastor often says, "Christ, have mercy!"

The ancient Hebrew songbook is evidence that people of faith have been down this road before. Here is one such psalm:

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? Look on me and answer, O Lord, my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death; my enemy will say, 'I have overcome him,' and my foes will rejoice when I fall. But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, for he has been good to me."

Psalm 13

Pain can really mess up our thinking about God. He's forgotten me, we think. He's lost track of me. I'm off his radar. He's got more important things to occupy him. Actually, he's hidden his face from me, because he hates what he's seeing. I disgust him. No wonder; I disgust myself.

So what underlies this messed up thinking about God? Quite simple. It turns out God just isn't the kind of God I thought he was. I thought he was on my side, and would do whatever it takes to make my life easier, better, happier. He could have done that, if he is God, and what he could have done, he should have done.

It is not easy to grow up past our infantile thinking that if God really cares, and he says he does, he would do something to ease my life. What good is God if you can't count on him? So we turn away and scream into the emptiness, "How long?" And there is silence. So we pout. We aren't getting what we feel we are entitled to. And we feel quite justified in complaining to God about how he's running his universe, or our lives, which is about the same thing.

How long? *How Long?* **HOW LONG?**

We are aware, of course, that when we scream, “How long?” we are not looking for a numerical answer. I’m not asking for the number of days, months, or years. I’m making an accusation. Quite understandably so. I want God to shape up, into the shape I’ve designed.

So, what to do? If I can’t count on God, then I am cast back onto myself. OK. I’ll grit my teeth, and go it myself. And what happens?

How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?

Psalm 13:2

Sure enough. My mind gets into a frantic whirl, running in panic over the same ground like a gerbil in a wheel. Our wild thinking finds no solution, no resolution; it only robs us of sleep and vitality. From self-pity, we slip into lethargy, and then into a loser mentality, and on into victimhood. The enemy will win, we predict, whoever the enemy is. We will be defeated; we know that, whatever the game is. So why not just give up? To fight a useless battle only makes us laughable.

How long will my enemy triumph over me? My enemy will say, ‘I have overcome him’, and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

Psalm 2:2, 4

Truly, wrong thinking about God can make a royal mess of things. The way forward is to take another look at God.

Look on me and answer, O Lord, my God. Give light to my eyes.

Psalm 13:3

Yes, yes! Address God directly, the way you learned to do it way back, when you learned it as a child. Of course, you are older now, but just as helpless. So now you call on God from a depth you didn’t know before. “O Lord, my God.” That’s good! Say it again: “O Lord, my God.” We move from saying “MY god” like a petulant entitled child, to saying “my LORD and my GOD”

Yes, he is Lord, the master of the universe, beyond our knowing, beyond our imagining. So we join the wisdom of our ancient brother Job, “I thought I knew you,” he says, “but I don’t. I only know now that I don’t know.”

“O LORD, my GOD.” Remember those earlier moments of his presence, his help, his intervention. Remember the stories of his care for his people of old, and your own people who are also his people. Recall those moments of

amazement, resolution, delivery. Acknowledge humbly that there is a larger world than your world of pain and perplexity. Forgive yourself for making your intense time of distress the whole of reality, and for measuring God by how he responds, or doesn't, to your immediate felt need, your cry for help.



We are ready now for new learning. "Give light to my eyes," we can now say. We learn, as Job did, that God is present even when he is silent. Or perhaps he's not silent; we've just removed our hearing aids. After all, God is God no matter what, no matter where, no matter when. We will affirm that, even if we are still in our Gethsemane. God is God, and we will bow to him. "If it is not possible for this cup of agony to be removed, well, your will be done, not mine."

The outcome?

I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, for he has been good to me.

Psalm 13:5, 6

I will trust again, even if I am not pain free. God is God. I will affirm God's unfailing love even though I cannot see a way out of my mess, or the end of the ordeal.

I will rejoice again. God is here, now. I will allow him to fill my whole horizon, not let my problem and pain do that. I will hear his promise anew, "Fear not, for I am with you. Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes I will help you." No, he won't always do things for me, without my effort, but he will strengthen and help, so I can do what it is mine to do.

And I will sing again. God is good. It may not be an exuberant full-throated jubilation, but a joy down deep. A calming sense that all will be well. And if all will be well, then all is well. And even if I can't muster lung or voice for bursts of song, I will still hum along when others sing.

So I am comforted. God is God, no matter what. God is here, no matter the silence. God is good, no matter how long the dark.



How long? *How Long?* **HOW LONG?**

*We've lived enough these years that cycle round
to know that we have seen much more
than we had ever dreamed we'd come to visit and observe.
And yet, however long the journey was, or offers
yet to be, there'll always be that distant place
to which we will not ever come.
The haze has painted heavenly blue the distant
place we shall not ever see, and yet we will not fret.
We'll keep on looking out upon a vast unknown,
and trust the One we cannot yet behold.*

John Regehr, ca. 2006



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Thank you to all.

Gerry Ediger, June 2016

THE LIFE-LONG PATH OF DEEPENING TRANSFORMATION that lies open before each of us is the underlying theme of the meditations found in this book. These words come to us out of the second half of John Regehr's life, a life of seeking to do what is right, of determination to do no harm, of yearning to be a good and faithful servant, and by the grace of God, of offering oneself to others as a fellow pilgrim on the path toward transformation. John is careful to demonstrate that hope, and its realization from day to day, comes to us clothed in the love of spouse and family, the trust of one's faith community, and the fathomless grace of God's unconditional acceptance... no matter what. If we consent to God's hopes for us, we can, and will, change for the better, always Still Daring to Hope.



JOHN REGEHR, TH.D., has served as a high school teacher, pastor, professor of practical theology, and as a counsellor, both singly and in partnership with his wife, Mary. He is an ordained minister in the Mennonite Brethren Church and emeritus professor at Canadian Mennonite University.

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