

Advent Meditations for a World On the Brink



Larry Hart

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An Omega Project Book



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Epigraph

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!

By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

—1 Peter 1:3

Oh, the light is shining

I can feel it warm and glowing

Oh, the day is breaking

Waking here inside my longing heart

—Twyla Paris

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**Turtles All the Way Down
and the Prophetic Quandary**

Introduction

This little book attempts to be a serious Advent meditation for readers who hold their faith thoughtfully and honestly. By serious I certainly do not mean humorless. Indeed, there are few things more comic than the somber antics of modern academic theologians and biblical scholars. Alfred North Whitehead asserted that "the total absence of humor in the Bible is one of the most singular things in all literature."¹ But poor Alfred was a professional mathematician and although toward the end of his life he became a professor of philosophy he never quite escaped looking at life as if it were a mirthless syllogism rather than "divine comedy." Had he read the Bible as a believer he might have recognized the laughter that can be heard in its pages. Humor is a prerequisite for humility, and most often flourishes among the poor who refuse to give suffering the last word. So, this meditation is also for the poor and the poor in spirit who have no choice but to take their trouble seriously; but, who, nevertheless, maintain an appreciation for life's strange ironies and humanity's comic absurdities.

This is a book that takes seriously the questions raised by critical scholarship and historians about such matters as the virginal conception and the nature of messianic prophecies; while at the same time opening the readings up for anyone who wants to think with some depth about the spiritual reality of mystical hope, of humility, of endurance, of grace and glory. My simple intention has been to provide a way of thinking about such matters that is comprehensible to contemporary men and women while remaining thoroughly orthodox.

¹ S. Lucien Price, ed., *Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1954), 199.

There are four chapters and an addendum, one chapter for each week of Advent. The addendum is more of an academic discussion focused on messianic prophecies and their contribution to the Advent consciousness. The actual chapters are based on four Scripture readings traditionally related to this holy season of waiting:

1) COME BE OUR HELP — Revelation 20:11-21:5

2) AN ANCIENT PROPHECY — Isaiah 7:10-17

3) WAITING IN HOPE — Romans 5:1-5

4) AND MARY SAID — Luke 1:46-56

Each chapter explores the technical and exegetical questions presented by the text where that is necessary to understanding its meaning, but the primary focus is on what the text has to say regarding the soulful life. I would suggest you read each chapter slowly with a kind of holy leisure. By reading three to four pages a day you will easily cover a chapter for each week of Advent. At the end of each chapter you will find a set of questions you can use either for your own personal meditation or in group reflection. Please note that the questions focus on spiritual content rather intellectual theories. It is my opinion that the latter tend to distract from "the one necessary thing."

We live in a time of both acute and chronic crisis. By the time you can read these pages we will be well past the 2020 general election day. As I write many are anxiously wondering and speculating whether after that November day the United States of America will still be a democracy? Will some semblance of stability and competency have been restored; or, will chaos and cruelty and tyranny have expanded? How much worse will the ravages of the COVID 19 pandemic be? Will we be any better prepared physically, mentally, emotionally, or spiritually for the future pandemics that are certain to come? Will there be any relief from the epidemic of violence—domestic, community, or personal that is

engulfing us? Or, how about the millions in America who are hungry, or without medical care? Or the tens of millions who will become climate refugees? What about the ecological destruction of the planet which continues unabated, and which may very well ultimately bring the destruction of humanity— or at least of human civilization? Will we, maybe like a patient at the brink of death whose fever finally breaks, begin to recover from the affliction of racism, hatred, and bigotry that runs rampant in our society? Or will we just impotently witness our own demise on TV?

Well, I need to stop adding to this list of horrors for the simple reason that there seems to be no end to the magnitude of what is euphemistically called the "existential threat" confronting us personally, culturally, nationally, and globally—the deadly crises that are becoming the arena in which most of us must live our everyday life. If you have any intelligent awareness at all you know that all this is already upon us—that we may very well have already entered an "apocalyptic" age. However, that is not what this book is primarily about. Nor is it primarily about the very personal crises, tragedies, and troubles most of us face as an often sad but quite ordinary part of living.

This book is about that mystical *Way* of hope which does not find the final *word* in heartbreak, or suffering, or death, or even naïve optimism; but, in the *Word* who is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, "the mystery of the ages, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1(colon) 27 NIV).

Chapter One

Come Be Our Help

The one who loves the coming of the Lord is not the one who affirms that it is far off, nor is it the one who says it is near, but rather the one, whether it be far off or near, awaits it with sincere faith, steadfast hope, and fervent love.”

— Augustine of Hippo

The Reading: Revelation 20:11 - 21:5

20 ¹¹ Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. ¹² And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. ¹³ The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. ¹⁴ Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. ¹⁵ And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.

21 ¹ Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. ² Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with humankind, and God will dwell with them, and they shall be God's own people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.” ⁵ Then the One who sat on the

throne said, "Behold, I make all things new." And said to me, "Write, for these words are true and faithful."

Come Then Lord

Advent is waiting. Advent is waiting on what is and what is to come. Advent is waiting for, anticipating, the judgement that is to come and that already is. It may seem like a strange notion to hope for the judgment of God, to wait for it as much as the night sentinels of a fortress or city under siege wait for the light of dawn, but here it is, the very theme that runs throughout *Revelation*. "How long, O Lord," the souls of the martyrs in John's vision cry out, "before you judge those who dwell on earth and give us justice?" And the *Te Deum Laudamus*, Cantic 10 in the *Book of Common Prayer*, a magnificent song of praise affirming Christian faith (probably written in the fourth century by Saint Augustine and Saint Jerome for Augustine's ordination) embraces the mystery of Christ in these lines:

You Christ, are the king of glory,
the eternal Son of the Father. . .
You overcame the sting of death. . .
You are seated at God's right hand in glory.
We believe that you will come and be our judge.
Come, then, Lord, and help your people.

Suffering in a world of injustice and cruelty, of hunger, pestilence, plague, poverty, and mass enslavement, living with violence, exploitation, oppression, and devastating wars, Christians in those early centuries did not fear, but welcomed, John the Revelator's vision of the return of Christ as the judge who would right every wrong, who would expose every lie, who would put an end to a world system that used people like one of the Minoans disposable clay cups, and establish instead God's order where people are

loved because they are human beings and not for their utility; the *Pantokrator* who would heal sorrow, and whose every pronouncement would be a triumph of life over death. Yes! "Come, then Lord, and be our judge. Come and help your people."

I have always been intrigued by Henri J. M. Nouwen's observation, that in working among some of the poorest and most oppressed people of the world in South America, he discovered that unlike middle-class North Americans they showed little interest in the philosophical question of why God allows suffering and evil to exist. Instead, they felt the suffering Christ in solidarity with them, and longed for him to return in judgment of "those who dwell on the earth."

When Jeremiah Wright, the Black Christian pastor who became a political liability to Barack Obama, thought about the racism, the misogyny, the bigotry, the desperation of the poor, police brutality, the cruel injustice of the criminal system, the level of corporate and political corruption, wars of aggression and history of genocide, slavery and the U.S. bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, he appears to have grasped the vision of John. "God bless America? No! God damn America." "Come, Lord, and be our judge." We wait, Lord, we wait for your coming.

Dreading God and Fearing Vice

For many, particularly for those raised in conservative churches or in religiously abusive homes and families, the thought of divine judgement often elicits fear, terror, and dread. As William Barry, S. J. notes, they may grow to adulthood thinking of God as cruel and tyrannical, a sadistic God always relentlessly scanning them for the slightest thing that can be used against them. Such people, says Barry, may grow up hating vice rather than loving virtue, and rejecting or repressing their every healthy spiritual impulse. This too, Jesus says, will be weighed in judgement:

If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes! (Matthew 18:6,7).

While Jesus's words here are figurative and dramatic they take evil, real unmitigated monstrous evil, with unflinching and uncompromising seriousness.

The Monster That Devours

Evil, real evil, cannot be glossed over or easily dismissed as of no great consequence. What happened to Ann Frank and Emmett Till has not been dislodged from the Divine memory, and remains on the books to be adjudicated. The grizzly rape and murder of the little five-year-old girl in Sierra Leone was a matter of some indifference to the authorities, but remains of great concern to God. And do not doubt that the 1,000,000 children under the age of five who perished in Iraq because of American sanctions remains on the court docket; as is every little brown child ripped from its mother's arms at the southern border of the U.S. Physical and sexual abuse, all prejudice, and every act of greed and unkindness, private or public, will come to divine judgement. Evil, simply and straightforwardly put, is anything that diminishes, impoverishes, or destroys life in any of its manifestations—physical, psychological, emotional, intellectual, or spiritual. Evil is the monster that devours the innocent, the vulnerable, and the unwary. Satan has, from the beginning, been a murderer and liar (John 8:44). That's what evil does, it murders and kills, and then attempts to hide it all with lies. In C. S. Lewis's novel *The Screwtape Letters*, the malicious intent of the devil, is to devour the human soul. "Your adversary the devil," wrote the Apostle Peter,

prowls around like a lion seeking someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). That's what real evil does—it devours the vulnerable.

The Criterion of Judgment

What separates the sheep from the goats in Matthew 25:31-38, the criterion of the final judgment, turns out not to be what is written in a literal book, such as one might find in a modern film of magical fantasy, nor is it the written text of the Bible, but rather it is written in the character of Christ himself. Each judgement in Matthew is a revelation, a revelation of how the quality of our inner relationship with Christ has determined our relationship with those who are vulnerable and powerless.

"I was hungry and you gave me something to eat:" Globally, 690,000,000 people are hungry, meaning that they go days at a time without eating. Between 37,000,000 and 40,000,000 Americans, almost a third of them children, are food insecure—a euphemism for not knowing when or from where their next meal is coming. Our response as a nation has been to cut assistance, like food stamps, to families, and eliminate school lunch programs for children.

"I was thirsty and you gave me drink." Worldwide 2,000,000,000 people lack access to clean drinking water, and 2.7 billion face water scarcity at least one month a year. By 2025 two-thirds of the world's population will likely face water shortages; and, about 1.6 million Americans do not have running water or indoor plumbing.

"I was a stranger and you invited me in." In the Old Testament the stranger is the foreigner, the alien, the immigrant, the non-Jewish resident. Strangers must, according to the Torah, be given the same protections of the law as the people of Israel (Leviticus 24:22); the sojourner is to be loved because the Hebrews know what it is to live as unloved suffering strangers in a hostile land. This is highly significant typology for the postmodern believer. Of all people, Christians ought to feel sympathy for the literal stranger, for they are, after all, as people who spiritually are in the world but not of the

world, strangers in a strange land—resident aliens whose real citizenship is in the Kingdom of Heaven (Philippians 3:20).

"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers," writes the unknown author of the New Testament *Book of Hebrews*, "for thereby some have entertained angels unawares" (Hebrews 13:2). To show hospitality is to invite the stranger in. Henri J. M. Nouwen has a wonderful Eucharistic meditation based on the story of the "walk to Emmaus" as told in Luke 24:13-35. In this passage, a follower of Jesus of Nazareth named Cleopas and an unnamed companion (thought by some scholars to be his wife) are walking to their home in Emmaus on the Sunday after crucifixion—the day of the resurrection. They are despondent. All their hope seems to have come to nothing. As they talk they are joined by a stranger, who is really Christ unrecognized. The stranger then begins to explain from the Scriptures their experience of Jesus and his tragic death. When in the evening they arrive at their home in Emmaus and the stranger starts to go his own way, they stop him and invite him to come in and stay with them—eat with them. As he took bread, and blessed it, and broke, and gave it to them they recognize that the stranger is no stranger but Jesus himself. Now, this is what Nouwen writes: "They want to be his hosts. They invite the stranger to lay aside his strangeness and become a friend to them. That is what true hospitality is all about, to offer a safe place, where the stranger can become a friend. There were two friends and a stranger. But now there are three friends, sharing the same table."¹

"I was naked and you clothed me." I read of a teenage giving out socks to the homeless. At first I smiled. But then I read where warm, well-fitting socks can help prevent frostbite in very cold weather. And that in warm moist weather clean, dry socks can help prevent serious infections and blisters. For those with diabetes and other

¹ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *With Burning Heart: A Meditation on the Eucharistic Life* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 60.

circulatory problems, good socks can provide important protection for their feet and limbs. When I read that I thought what a kind, simple and practical help that teenager gave to those people.

"I was sick and you looked after me." Or as the old KJV puts it, "You visited" me. Before going any further it is important to note that the word "visit" does not refer to making a pleasant social call or two friends getting together to talk for no reason other than that they enjoying each other's company. To "visit" in the biblical sense is to go to the aid or help of another. In 2018, 27.9 million nonelderly individuals were uninsured, an increase of nearly 500,000 from 2017. Since 2016, when the number of uninsured reached historic lows, the number of people who lack health insurance coverage has grown by 1.2 million. Today, "I was sick and you visited me," might mean I was sick and you worked for universal health care. These people are nonviolent offenders whose problems stem from mental illness and drug addiction needing treatment. And, it has become clear that the racist atmosphere of the criminal justice system has resulted in a disproportionate number of people of color being sent to prison.

By the time you read this the statistics will have changed—probably dramatically. At least I hope there will be vast improvement. But right now the average daily population of detained immigrants is somewhere near 40,000. Detainees are so crowded together that often there is no place to sit or lie down to rest, water to drink, or a toilet to use. Over 3000 children have been separated from their parents at the border. They live in cages, and sleep on the floor covered by thin 68¢ plastic blankets. They cry, and having been ripped from their mothers and fathers; there is no one to comfort them. Six children have died—something that did not happen in the entire preceding decade. "Come, then, Lord, and be our judge.! Come and help us." As I write credible horror stories of forced hysterectomies of detained immigrant women are being reported. "Come Lord, and be our judge."

I heard Joseph Tellow, S.J. tell a story about his brother, a psychologist who does a lot of work with inmates at Angola Prison in Louisiana. He said that his brother not only visits individual inmates but also exchanges letters with them. The writing of one prisoner was so bad that it was almost impossible to decipher. When Tallow's brother met with this inmate personally he said to him: "You know, your hand writing is really awful—you might want to try to do something about that. The inmate angrily shot back, "If you don't like my handwriting get me a (expletive) typewriter!" Later Tallow's brother remembered he had an old typewriter in his garage. He sent it over to this prisoner who the guards said after the typewriter came wept, and wept, and wept because: "No one never gave me nothin'!"

If You Didn't Notice

In your own meditation you will want to notice several things. Notice that Jesus makes no effort to provide any sort of an exhaustive list of right and wrong, but rather tells us of the kind of thinking and concrete actions that separate good and evil. Anyone with any insight at all will immediately grasp how this sketch applies to the whole of life. No detailed list, regardless of how long or meticulous, will do those without awareness any good. Notice, love for God cannot be separated from love for others. "If you do not love all the people around you who you can see, you most certainly cannot love God whom you have not seen" (1 John 4:20). Mother Teresa took this passage so seriously that she believed that when she cleaned the maggots from a beggar's sores or touched a leper she was touching Christ. This is what she meant in saying, "God is in the work." Notice that no self-justification or judgment of others is possible, for the verdict is left to the Son of Man alone. Notice, that the basic issue is the *will of God* as known and practiced in, by, and through love. And finally, notice that the passage is obviously metaphorical, allegorical, parabolic, written in rich and figurative apocalyptic language; however, that should not be understood as meaning judgment is unreal.

Metaphor for the Really Real

Both *Matthew 25* and our passage from *Revelation*, as well as other biblical texts about the end of the world and judgment are obviously to be understood metaphorically, poetically, symbolically, or, as parables. As soon as Matthew writes of the Son of Man (which is an allusion to an apocalyptic vision in the Old Testament Book of Daniel), a glorious throne, or separating sheep and goats and speaking to them we know he is using imaginative language. Jesus's favorite word for hell is "Gehenna"—the stinking, smoldering, burning, rat infested garbage dump outside Jerusalem. The first word John writes in *Revelation* is that this vision was not only given to him by God, but that God "sent and signified" it—communicated it by signs or symbols. So when John paints surreal pictures of a beautiful, perfectly symmetrical, city descending from heaven as beautiful as a virgin bride covered in jewels and wearing an expensive gown, a water spring of eternal life, or that lake of fire, only the most obtuse mind could fail to recognize such language as symbolic, figurative, apocalyptic. But to reiterate, what it describes in imaginative language is nevertheless something real and substantial.

Describing the Really Real

John Knox, the modern theologian (not the Scottish Presbyterian reformer), referred to this sort of language as imaginative. Meaning language and stories that are written in figurative, or poetic, language, yet, are about something quite real and true. Here are just five well known nonreligious poems about very real people and events that you could look up and read on your own as examples of this use of language: "The Charge of the Light Brigade" by Alfred, Lord Tennyson; "The Blue and the Grey," by Francis Miles Finch; "Boston," by Ralph Waldo Emerson; "O Captain! My Captain!" by Walt Whitman; and, "The Eve of Waterloo" by Lord Byron. When attempting to speak

of the deeper meaning of events, life and reality, and especially when exploring the spiritual significance of an event, an experience, or unseen forces; or, when contemplating the divine mystery that enfolds us all the only serviceable language we have is imaginative language.

Many scholars have used the word "myth" to mean untrue, false, or fictitious—an unbelievable fantasy such as Cinderella, or Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. Scholars of this type would say that the truth contained in Scripture is primarily emblematic; that is, it has a moral to it, teaches a philosophical principle, or an ideal worthy of our commitment—kindness, love, compassion, justice.

Knox, however, saw a biblical myth as something much more than this. Knox believed that mythological stories and language in the Bible, that poetic language, that imaginative language, conveys, communicates, or expresses the felt reality or concrete meaning of something in our existence. But there is also another element of equal importance. The mythological also accounts for or explains this "something," this felt reality, in our existence; it does so by relating it to an actual objective act of God. Knox explains by referring to eschatology, the very thing we are discussing here. He writes:

We are bound to recognize the figurative, the highly imaginative, character of the language in which the Church has expressed its hopes for the ultimate future. The rich diversity of the images it has used. . . if taken with any literalness--makes this character particularly clear. Moreover, it is manifest in this area especially, the only alternative to such imaginative language speech is silence. Either we speak of our dead as "in Abraham's bosom," as "being with Christ," as "asleep in Christ" awaiting the "general resurrection" the "Lord's return," or some similar way, or else we refrain from speaking. But this last we cannot do; our hopes are real and they clamor for expression. We *must* say that God will save us from

death, that he will redeem our life from destruction, that by his mercy our partial broken selves shall be made whole, that we shall see God. We actually expect this in our own future; we are convinced that it belongs to the future, or to the already realized present, of our dead. . . To be sure, we cannot speak of what God will do for us "in the last day without using language which belongs almost entirely to the imagination, but this does not mean we are doubting the actuality of his doing it."²

Yes. Come, Lord, and be our judge. Come and help us. We wait for your coming.

When Spiritual Imagination Fails

The famous Process theologian John Cobb, says something quite interesting for someone as religiously skeptical and liberal as he is. He writes:

In polite circles the idea of hell is, in fact, much worse than unfashionable. What remains in the liberal Church is a vague assurance that all will be well. Since no content is ever suggested for the imagination, the assurance is for many, not very reassuring. The result tends to be that Christians cling to a rather miserable existence here rather than eagerly anticipating a blessedness beyond. . . To affirm the goodness of life here and now and deny that God imposes suffering on anyone does not require an end to the discussion of life after death. . . What has really ended all such discussion in respectable society is the materialistic world view.³

As Cobb reflects in his theological reminiscences on what death may mean for us all, he suggests that for those whose sense of satisfaction in life has been primarily

² John Knox, *Myth and Truth: An Essay on the Language of Faith* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1964), 30-31.

³ John Cobb, *Theological Reminiscences* (Claremont, CA: Process Century, 2014), 302-305.

sensual, their loss would be overwhelming. And those without empathy or compassion, and who have used others for the fulfillments of their own personal life agenda or satisfaction, a dimension in which that is no longer possible might indeed be hellish. Also it may be for those whose experience has been limited to the material, to the physical, that there is no continuation of life at all. But for those whose dominant experience has been the very presence of God it may be, as Christian Scripture asserts, that to die is to become more fully alive to the beatific vision for which they have waited and longed for.

Waiting for the Presence of God

But strangely, the judgment and help we wait for is already occurring in this very moment. We wait for what already is. Judgment is not only future, it is now. The Son of Man whose advent we await is continuously coming and entering every open and longing heart. Here are two verses that point to this multiple dimension of Advent:

For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel. (1 Peter 4:17)

When the Holy Spirit comes, he will expose the secular world's erroneous perception of sin, of justice, of the right path, and judgment: He'll show the basic sin of those who refuse to believe in Christ; that wisdom and goodness come from above (John 16:18).

Peter may have any number of Old Testament passages in mind as he writes. For instance, in Malachi 4 God's coming in judgement and help is certain, but it can only be realized by a preparatory and purifying process of judgment in the present. The prophets, in a number of instances, made it clear that God would deliver the people and make them fit for the Divine presence in the sense that a runner becomes fit to run a

marathon; after that, God would deal with the wicked in a final and decisive judgement. This is the principle the Apostle Peter references in 1 Peter 4:17. It is what scholars refer to as the paradox of the already and the not yet. The presence of Christ created a crisis, revealed truth and exposed the darkness. In the Fourth Gospel Jesus speaks of this same process of judgment and purification from the perspective of the Spirit's work. The Holy Spirit, working in the present, illuminating the present, exposes the world darkness and in that way brings it to judgement. And notice in all this that judgment is understood as something that is integral to the presence of God.

More than anything else in Advent it is this presence of God for which we wait—a presence that was at the nativity, is here now, and that will be. We wait for peace, for harmony, for joy, for ultimate satisfaction and fulfillment. We wait for an end to tragedy and sorrow. We wait for justice—the vanishing of the sea (symbolic of a great reservoir of monstrous evil, chaos, violence, greed, and cruelty). We wait for an end to starvation, disease, and death. We wait for forgiveness—the healing of our fragmented selves. We wait with yearning hearts to know love, to experience loving intimacy. But all of this is already encompassed in the presence of Christ—in God, "in whom we live, move, and have our being." We have everything we need in this moment, if we can see it, to experience life fully, to live the new life in Christ, and to be in conscious communion with God (2 Peter 1:3).

Notice how our text from Revelation, verse 3, says: "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and God will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God." In the Old Testament Hebrew the tabernacle (*mishkān*), means a "residence" or "dwelling place," usually a tent or tent-like structure that is easily moved about by nomadic people. In the Bible the Tent of the Congregation or Tent of Meeting was the portable sacred dwelling place of Yahweh (the God of Israel). As the Hebrews journeyed through the desert wilderness they carried the tabernacle with them wherever they moved. They believed that while God's

presence could not be confined to any one earthly location, God's mysterious reality filled the Tent of Meeting and was most accessible to them there. The "tabernacle" itself literally means "tent," "residence," or "dwelling place." Before the temple was built by Solomon in Jerusalem, and during the time of nomadic wandering in the wilderness under Moses, the life and worship of the Hebrews was centered around this exquisitely beautiful and portable tent-like structure. The tabernacle was where God resided, dwelled, or tented among the Hebrews. Now notice John 1:14: "And the Word became flesh, and lived (*tabernacled*) among us; and we saw God's glory, the glory as belonging to the only begotten Son of the Father." All those translations that say the *Word*, or *Logos* (the eternal mind, truth, reason, or power of God in which the whole world coheres), "dwelt among us in the person of Jesus Christ are correct, but the image itself is actually that of someone pitching their tent among people with whom they are taking up permanent residence. Christ has already pitched his tent among us—already dwells among us individually, and in the community of faith. And, in this we see, feel, and experience the glory or presence of God.

Waiting For What Already Is

If this all sounds a little strange, it may be because you are used to hearing *Revelation* explained as if it were a chronicle of events on a linear calendar extending into the future; when it would actually be more helpful to think about it as if the past and the future were two great rivers rushing into the sea that is the present. We pray, we watch, we wait for God to come and be with us; to come and be our judge, to be our help, to be that mysterious awe-filled transcendent presence that at the same time is closer to us than we are to ourselves, loves us more and better than we love ourselves, and who is and will be our beginning and our unending end. But all our waiting is for the Advent that already is.

Questions for Personal and Group Reflection

- 1) How does Advent waiting, spiritual waiting, differ from waiting as we normally think of it?
- 2) In what way is the longing for justice a cry for help and an expression of hope? In what way is the practice of justice, championing the cause of the poor and vulnerable (Isaiah 1:17)—both the personal and community practice of the biblical spirituality of love?
- 3) In this chapter evil is described as that which kills, destroys, or diminishes the life of another. What then would be the opposites of evil? Note that true evil is not one single or isolated event in someone's life, but it is a repetitive pattern of destruction. What, then, would be the opposite pattern?
- 4) What do you make of Jesus's criterion of judgment given in Matthew 25?
- 5) What is the difference between a metaphor or imaginative language about something that is real and figurative language about something whose meaning is entirely emblematic?
- 6) Is death the end of everything? There is no doubt, even scientifically speaking, that the world will end, as the poet Robert Frost suggested, either in fire or ice. But do you think it will end in despair or hope? What is your own personal desire and hope? What is your hope founded on (1 Peter 3:15)?

Chapter Two

An Ancient Prophecy

This world, is no mere shadow of an ideal in an upper sphere, it is real, but not absolute; the world's reality is contingent upon compatibility with God. While others are intoxicated with the here and now, the prophet has a vision of an end. . . . The prophet is human; yet employs notes one octave too high for us, and experiences moments that defy our understanding.⁴

— Abraham Joshua Heschel

The Reading: Isaiah 7:10-17

Isaiah 7 ¹⁰ Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹ "Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as *Sheol* or high as heaven." ¹² But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test." ¹³ Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. ¹⁵ He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶ For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted. ¹⁷ The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria."

⁴ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets: An Introduction Volume I* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 10.

Prophetic Wisdom

The prophets were not fortunetellers or prognosticators of the future. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos and the others were people convinced they had been given a message that had not originated with them—a word that had not been derived from their own mind or imagination. Even the casual reader quickly grasps the passion of the prophets for justice and their courage in confronting corruption, political deceit, and the exploitation of the poor and vulnerable by the wealthy. What does frequently elude the more accidental reader is the deep mysticism of the prophets, so that few people recognize the prophets represent one of the great mystical traditions of the world. The difference between the Old Testament prophets like Elisha, Elijah, or Isaiah and other mystics is that the prophets were able in their meditation to obtain a clear message of wisdom. Those who sought to prepare themselves for prophetic ministry were known as "the sons of the prophets," and normally spent years in intense training and spiritual discipline. "The true prophet," writes Aryeh Kaplan, the Jewish scholar and mystic, "is able to channel this spiritual power, focusing it clearly enough to obtain an unambiguous message."⁵ The insights gained by the prophets, as Heschel notes, were gained by "knowing what they saw rather than seeing what they knew."⁶ Like the prophets, our own ability to know what we see will grow only as we become willing to become personally involved in the passion of what they have written. "The moments that passed in the prophets lives are not now available and cannot become the subject of scientific analysis. All we have is the consciousness of those moments as preserved in words."⁷ And their words have about them the ring of truth, the sound of clear authenticity. I was sitting at a quiet retreat center on the San Francisco Bay with sixty other men and women in morning prayer. The Old Testament lesson was Isaiah 43:1-7.

⁵ Aryeh Kaplan, *The Bible and Meditation* (York Beach: ME: Samuel Weisner, 1978).

⁶ Heschel, *The Prophets: An Introduction*, xi.

⁷ *Ibid.*, ix.

One of the women read it in a soft gentle voice—slow enough to feel each word and phrase as it flowed but close enough together that it all still cohered and made sense as a whole. Although, to say it made sense that morning is not descriptive of what I experienced. It was like I was an ocean swimmer wading out into the surf, and when a large wave came I was not afraid, but let its power and beauty wash over me. It was one of those moments which come every so often in which I experience the truth of W. E. Sangster's words: "The most sublime moments of the life of faith are those in which we come to know in our heart what we may have understood in our mind all along."⁸

Now, if I had sat there as the text was read and thought about the indications that this portion of Isaiah was, according to many scholars, probably written by the disciples of First Isaiah (after the Babylonian Exile, but before Third Isaiah, and the rebuilding of Jerusalem), I would not have had that transcendent experience—experienced that moment of enlightenment. Prophetic wisdom, like all of Scripture, can only be truly understood by reading and listening for transformation more than information. Reading the prophets is not easy work. We may very well find ourselves resisting the radical spiritual justice, compassion, and consecration to which the prophets call us, or struggling intellectually with their certainties and extravagant claims; yet, if we have listening hearts the words of the prophets may become alive to us.

Messianic Consciousness

Very conservative Christians frequently attempt to use the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament as evidence to prove with some sort of scientific or mathematical certainty that Jesus is the Messiah. I recently saw messianic prophecies listed as predictions and assigned statistical probabilities like 1 in 10^5 , 1 in 10^{20} , or 1 in 10^{11} in an

⁸ W. E. Sangster, *Power In Preaching* (London: Epworth Press, 1958) 95-96

attempt to demonstrate the overwhelming statistical probability that Jesus was in fact the messiah. Now, while I unequivocally believe Jesus to be the Christ, and at times find myself blurting out in utter astonishment as Saint Thomas did when he encountered the risen Jesus in that upper room, "My Lord, and my God!" I do not believe that this appeal to formal logic with its own serious limitations is the use the prophets intended to be made of their work, or the way the writers of the New Testament anticipated their being understood. I believe the messianic prophecies do point to the advent of Christ, not as detailed Nostradamus-like predictions superseding the need for genuine faith, but as a flow of prophetic consciousness converging and recognizable in Christ.

The Crisis

The golden age of Israel ended with the death of Solomon (731 B.C.E.). After Solomon's death the ten southern tribes rebelled against his arrogant and oppressive son Rehoboam, who was supported by the two northern tribes of Judah and Benjamin, along with the priestly Levites. The nation was now divided with the Kingdom of Judah, and its capital Jerusalem in the north; and, the ten tribes of the south centered in Samaria. The kingdom was never again united, or as wealthy and powerful as it had once been under David and Solomon.

The events referred to in this reading from Isaiah 7 occurred nearly two hundred years after the kingdom's violent division. Ahaz, the son of Jotham, became the twelfth monarch of Judah when he was only twenty-years-old—the young and inexperienced ruler of a small and weak kingdom under immense pressure.

King Pekah, the northern kingdom of Israel (Ephraim), and Rezin King of Damascus (Syria) have formed a coalition to "tear Judah apart." When Ahaz learns of this he and the people panic. "They are shaken as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind" (7:2). Isaiah arranges for a clandestine meeting with Ahaz at the end of the aqueduct of the Upper Pool on the street that leads to Launderer's Field. In this secret

meeting Isaiah tells Ahaz that God has revealed to him that if Ahaz does not lose heart and instead trusts God rather than becoming entangled in alliances with evil powers, all will be well. "Be careful, be calm, don't be afraid. . . If you don't stand firm in your faith you will not stand at all" (7:4, 9).

At this point notice that Isaiah's reassuring word is conditional—all being well depends on whether Ahaz "stands firm in his faith." Ahaz is confronted here with an existential decision—a life and death choice for himself and the people. At its deepest and most foundational level it is a question of who and what he will trust with his very existence and the life of the nation. It is a question that we each are asked often although we may not hear it—or wish to hear it. "Stand firm in your faith, or you will not stand at all."

A Secret Meeting

Standing there at the end of the aqueduct, hidden from political conspirators, but not from God, Ahaz rejects Isaiah's guidance. Isaiah then tries to persuade Ahaz by inviting him to ask for a sign that will convince him that this is a true prophecy. Ahaz's answer sounds more pious than it is. He will not "test God." It is a ludicrous response because the reality is that Ahaz is the one who is being tested. It is his faith being tried in the crucible of this crisis. Ahaz already knows what he is going to do. He will trust his own political savvy, and play the game of manipulation, greed, selfish-ambition, and intrigue. He will appeal to Tiglath-Pileser, the powerful Emperor of Assyria, for help, and pay for it by looting the sacred Temple of Yahweh. So, "No," he wants no sign from God that would require him to do anything other than what he already intends to do.

The logical guess would be that Ahaz was pleased with his solution. It must have seemed to him that he had a better idea than God. That is, of course, our tendency as human beings—to think we can create our own security, and "wrest satisfaction from life if only we manage well." Consequently we trust ourselves and rely on our own

ingenuity more than on God. Through Assyria's intervention, and as a result of its invasion and subjection of Damascus and Israel, Ahaz escaped the deadly plot of Pekah and Rezin; from then on Tiglath-Pileser controlled Ahaz and Judah.

Ahaz sold his soul, and the soul of his nation, to the glamour and prestige of Assyrian both religiously and politically. In 732 he met with Tiglath-Pileser in Damascus where he was so impressed by one of the pagan altars that he had one built for the Temple in Jerusalem. At the Emperor's insistence he acquiesced to Assyrian rituals in the Jerusalem Temple; he even sacrificed his own child in the fire of the idol Moloch. In light of the teaching of Jesus I do not think it too strong to say that there are situations and circumstances in which the courageous acceptance of annihilation is the more honorable and profounder spiritual way.

The Immanuel Sign

Isaiah replies that Ahaz will have a sign whether he asks for one or not; indeed, while the sign remains as a verification of the truth of this prophecy, it is no longer one of reassurance but of ruin:

Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted. The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria.”

Matthew's Use of Isaiah 7

Before meditating directly on Matthew's use of Isaiah 7 notice the following:

1) The sign and message of Isaiah is not for Ahaz alone, but for the Davidic line, for the whole house of David. They are, in spite of bearing God's name, the people who weary Yahweh.

2) *Almah* simply means a sexually mature young woman for whom marriage and child-bearing is natural and expected. It is not a technical term for a virgin. The Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, uses *parthenos* to translate *almah*, and it does mean virgin as someone who has not engaged in sexual intercourse. However, the Septuagint is known in many instances to be more a paraphrase of the Hebrew than a translation; and calls Dinah a *parthenos* even after her rape (Genesis 34:3).

3) "*Immanuel*" is an incomplete phrase meaning "God with us." It is not the personal name of an individual but a throne name—a name that describes who the person is to his or her people. Like, for example, Richard the Lion Hearted or Saint Hildegard, Sibyl of the Rhine.

4) Isaiah does not refer to a miraculous event, if by miracle is meant an event that violates the laws of nature, but rather to one that is providential—both natural and involving divine influence and foresight. In verse 21 Matthew emphasizes two things: (1) the Jewish expectation that the Messiah will be the savior of the people; (2) that Jesus is the fulfillment of this expectation. Just to be clear, Matthew does not say Isaiah predicted the coming of Jesus in Isaiah 7, but that Jesus is the "fulfillment" of Isaiah's prophecy. Fulfillment is a much larger and more comprehensive term than "prediction."

Virginal Conception

The inevitable question we come to is, what are we to make of all this, what are we to make of Isaiah, in reading Matthew's narrative of Jesus's birth? In working through Matthew I will first take up the matter of the virginal conception, not because it is the most useful for spiritual reflection, but because, being the central and most puzzling question in the minds of most people, it is a distraction that needs to be dealt with before we go on.

The virgin birth, which I think more correctly referred to as the virginal conception, is the doctrine that Jesus was conceived and born by his mother Mary through the power of the Holy Spirit and without sexual intercourse with her husband Joseph—or anyone else. This is meant to be understood as the creative energy of the Holy Spirit and not in the Greek mythological sense of the Spirit becoming Mary's sexual partner. There are only five places in the New Testament (four in the Gospel of Matthew and one in Luke) which give any support to the idea of the virginal conception. Here they are:

Matthew 1¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit.

1^{20b} Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.

1²² Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

1²⁴ And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, ²⁵but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus.

Luke 1³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be (that she will conceive and bear a son), since I am a virgin?" ³⁵The angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will

come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God.

If we read these verses paying attention only to what they actually say, they are far more ambiguous than what most people think. As you read them now observe the following:

1) Mary and Joseph were betrothed. The betrothal was, from our modern Western perspective, a rather strange arrangement. It was like being married without "benefits," and could only be broken by a formal divorce. The betrothed woman usually lived with her parents and went to her husband's home when they were fully ("officially") married. However, it is known that some women lived as part of the extended family in the home of the man they were betrothed to, but again without engaging in sexual relations. The expression "before they came together" can therefore mean before Mary went to live with Joseph, or it can mean before they had permissible sexual intercourse.

2) "With child by the Holy Spirit," to repeat, simply means by the power of God. Sarah conceives and bears her only child Isaac long after she is past child bearing age. Everyone in Abraham and Sarah's world would have said: "Yes! What is beyond human possibility is possible with God. There can be no doubt that this child is the child of promise." Or a modern-day homilist might say, "Isaac was conceived by the power of the Spirit."

Certainly verse 22 can be interpreted as saying that Joseph need not be anxious and tied in knots over whether Mary has committed adultery or been raped, a serious problem in a culture with a strict purity, honor, and shame code. He need not worry because the child is the child of promise—a gift of the Spirit.

3) Verse 24 raises the question of in what sense Joseph kept Mary as a virgin until she gave birth. It could mean that they did not officially marry until after she gave birth. Or, it could mean as normally understood, that they did not have sexual intercourse during Mary's pregnancy. It is interesting that as Joseph and Mary make the journey to Bethlehem for the census, with Mary obviously pregnant, Luke 2:24

says Joseph is engaged (betrothed) rather than married to Mary. If nothing else this points to a highly complex and, to us, ambiguous, social relationship of becoming husband and wife in the first century world of Judaism.

Luke 1: 34-35 says nothing more definitive, or other than, what has already been noted, that on the day and in the hour that the angel Gabriel spoke to her Mary was a virgin in the sense that she had never experienced sexual intercourse. A twenty-first century girl might say it this way: "How can that be, I am not sexually active."

There is not much on the level of physical facts, then, that we can say with absolute certainty on this question. On the deeper spiritual level, in regard to the transcendent life, we can say a good deal more. John A.T. Robinson, Cambridge New Testament Scholar and later Bishop of Woolrich, wrote:

To say that new life was fathered and quickened in Mary by the Spirit of God is a profound way for expressing an inner truth about Jesus. It is to say that his birth and life cannot simply be thought of as biological events: its significance lies much deeper than that. . . This is not to say that all the traditional stories about Jesus's birth are to be swept away as outgrown fairytales. On the contrary, they speak to us of something marvelously true about Him Nor do I doubt that they are built around memories of actual events.⁹

What both Matthew and Luke emphasize is not the possibility of a physical, or literal virginal conception, but that the Holy Spirit was somehow, in a very real sense, involved in the birth of Jesus. "Mary was found to be of child of the Holy Spirit," the birth of Jesus is the working of the invisible power of the Holy Spirit. Precisely what that means remains veiled in mystery.

⁹ John A. T. Robinson quoted in Larry Hart, *The Annunciation* (Eugene Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2017), 135-136. Also see: William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* Volume 1 (Edinburgh Scotland: Saint Andrew Press, 1975), 20.

Adversity is Real

Matthew, in referring to Isaiah's prophecy, uses an ancient form of Biblical interpretation that may seem somewhat strange to us today, but is a perfectly legitimate principle of rabbinic exegesis. Stated very simply it is an argument from the lesser to the greater. Matthew is saying something like this, "If this prophecy was true in the time of Isaiah, it is even more true and significant for us now." Isaiah's prophecy, remember, is not to Ahaz alone, but to the people. "Jesus came to his own people, but his own people did not receive or recognize him" (John 1:13). God came to his own, but they couldn't recognize God even when they were staring God right in the face. Matthew does not say that Isaiah's prediction has come to pass, but rather that the birth of Jesus "fulfills" the sign Isaiah gave. A prediction and fulfillment are not the same thing. We like predictions, we like to use the reliability of predictions as evidence. Scientists and mathematicians spend a lot of time determining how often and how closely we can predict outcomes. If only we could be sure of the accuracy of the prophets concerning the coming of the messiah, could be mathematically certain, then we could believe with confidence. We are like the character of Herod in the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* who sings to a wicked boogie beat, "If you're Jesus Christ, then come walk across my swimming pool." Such evidence, of course, would never really satisfy us. It would have to be repeated continuously and endlessly, because we are looking for a kind of certainty that does not exist—not even in the material world.

Actually, it is when we are without faith that we live with a lack of sufficient evidence; evidence for why ideals of justice and compassion are anything more than the powerless, the weak, and the incompetent wishing things were different than they are; evidence that there is a transcendent dimension to reality; evidence that all love does not come to nothing; evidence that in the end we are more than a handful of dirt or ash; evidence that there is any more meaning to life than what we can fantasize in our own imagination. Life has a way of calling our epistemology into question—how do

we know what we think we know? How do we know love is greater than hate, justice better than injustice, fidelity better than faithlessness, or that life is stronger than death? Spiritual progress requires a strong tolerance for ambiguity.

Several months before my mother's death, when she was still able to sit in her big green chair in her own living room, I was talking with her about something unexpected that had occurred. I said, "Well Mom we never know what is going to happen next do we." And she replied in her quiet and dry way, "No we don't." She sat there for a moment and then added, "That is why I pray every day that no matter what happens God will give me the courage to face it in a way that I don't need to be ashamed." So, in Isaiah's words: "Be careful, keep calm, and don't be afraid. . . Stand firm in your faith, or you will not stand at all."

There are many things in life to reasonably fear—pandemics, random gun violence, bigotry sexual assault, raging wild fires, devastating earthquakes, tornadoes, and hurricanes, unending wars, the destruction of the planet as a livable habitat, an economy that can collapse at any moment, along with a democracy that we now know is far more fragile than any of us ever thought. When I was practicing psychotherapy in a large Christian counseling center, I frequently saw people, usually middle class or affluent fundamentalists, who were confused when bad things happened to them—when they were sexually betrayed by a husband or wife, when a son or daughter addicted to drugs stole from them, when they were diagnosed with cancer, or when a family member was paralyzed in a freak swimming accident—diving into shallow water. They could not understand how God could do such a thing to them when they had put their faith in God—had lifted their hands in praise of God every Sunday in worship. This, I want to say as gently as I can, is more akin to the practice of magic than it is to biblical faith. Magical thinking is the idea that if I believe the right things, if am a moral person in either the conventional sense or as prescribed by my pastor, and if I

follow the correct formula God is under obligation to see to it that none of the things that frighten me ever happen.

However, the word that comes down to us through Isaiah and Matthew, and the writings of the New Testament is not that by being Christian we can prevent the things we fear from ever happening, but that if we trust God as ever present none of them can do us ultimate harm. What we will discover at a very deep level is that none of the things that frighten us are anything of which we need to be afraid. You might pause here and reflect on: John 16:33; 2 Corinthians 1: 8-9; Philippians 4:13; and Romans 8: 35-39. Each morning my wife Brenda and I say a morning prayer which ends with, "Preserve us with your mighty power that we may not fall into sin, nor be overcome by adversity." I find that, in light of all my life experiences, to be totally realistic—not that I will never suffer adversity, but that I will not be overcome by it.

Fulfillment

We would all like to be able to predict the future so as to be able to control it. In our Isaiah text Ahaz is, in a sense, given that opportunity—and is presented with two possible alternatives. But forgetting that, in the words of E. Stanley Jones, "We are free to choose, but we are not free to choose the results of our choosing," Ahaz made a decision that eventually led to the destruction of himself, of the people for whom he was responsible, and of the Jerusalem Temple. So much for using prophecy to predict the future. But Matthew does not write about predictability, he speaks of fulfillment, which is a much larger category than prediction. Fulfillment has to do with the realization of something—a dream, a longing, a hope. In fulfillment there is, therefore, a sense of satisfaction, gratification, happiness, and even ecstasy. True fulfillment in the Isaiah prophecy is found in the throne name of the child, *Immanuel*—God is with us. Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment, the realization, of Isaiah because Jesus Christ is himself "God with us."

For Ahaz and the people of Judah the immediate and explicit meaning of the prophet's message is clear and accessible. The answer is "Immanuel"—God is with you." Stay alert but remain calm. Be loyal and trust Yahweh, and you will experience God's peace, power, and presence. This was actually a new message only in the sense that the crisis they faced was new and immediate. The solution itself was and is universal and timeless. The poet who wrote Psalm 27 had already discovered and absorbed it into his own soul before Isaiah met Ahaz :

The Lord is my light and my salvation;
Whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the defense of my life;
Whom shall I dread?
When evildoers came upon me to devour my flesh,
My adversaries and my enemies, they stumbled and fell.
Though an army comes against me,
My heart will not fear;
Though war arises against me,
In *spite of* this I shall be confident.

Psalm 27: 1-3

Simple trust in God will accomplish for us what no amount of scheming, manipulating, plotting, or fretting can ever manage. This is difficult wisdom to learn. Time and again the crucial question emerges out of the darkness and confusion—the darkness and confusion which is largely of our own making. We are confronted with the repetitive challenge: "Will we trust Christ (Immanuel, God with us), or will we trust and rely more on ourselves—on our own ingenuity and illusory ability to manage the inevitable small and large crises of life?"

In this covert meeting between Isaiah and Ahaz at the end of the aqueduct of the Upper Pool on the street that leads to Launderer's Field, there is a still deeper mystery, a more unfathomable secret hidden in the prophecy than that of how to best face the political or personal contingencies of life. However, we see this only when we

contemplate Christ as the *fulfillment* of Isaiah, and recognize that *Immanuel*, meaning God with us, is not merely another proper name or title for Jesus, but rather speaks of who Jesus Christ is to us in the great unknown depths of our being—unknown often even to ourselves but not to God who is, "the one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:6).

As soon as we have entered the contemplation of Christ as Immanuel we have crossed the threshold into "the region of awe," the mystical realm in which we begin to claim as our one desire the longing to know God (Jeremiah 29:29); to experience God as intimately as two lovers (John 17:3); to be fully conscious that it is in God that "we live, move and have our being" (Acts 17:28); that our life is mysteriously hidden in Christ in whom we live, and who lives in us (Colossians 3:3; Galatians 2:20). In this region no words will suffice. All superlatives are clichés. We either know Jesus as God with us, or we do not. It is as the great Chinese Christian martyr, Watchman Nee wrote:

Life cannot be explained. When we touch it we know it is life. But how? Not by thought or feeling or a "sixth sense." Those who know, know. Those who don't know, don't. Those who know can never explain to those who don't--until they themselves know. Those who know life recognize it in others. Those who have death in themselves recognize neither life nor death. The natural person may discern between warmth and coldness, good doctrine and bad, but not between life and death.¹⁰

I would add that those who recognize life recognize it everywhere it occurs, including in Scripture for ultimately Christ is himself the *Word*—the divine *Logos* ever present to us, in us, and with us. And so we pray: "Lord Jesus, be our companion in the way, kindle our hearts, and awaken hope, that we may know you as you are revealed in Scripture and in the breaking of bread. Grant this for the sake of your love. Amen."¹¹

¹⁰ Watchman Nee, *What Shall This Man Do?* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1965), 121-122.

Question for Individual and Group Reflection

- 1) What is prophetic wisdom and how is it developed? What is "prophetic consciousness—particularly in relation to the future Messiah?" How can we participate in or become a part of this spiritual state of awareness?
- 2) At any moment in life we may find ourselves in circumstances over which we have very little or no control at all. In such moments what choice always remains for you and you alone to make?
- 3) Explain in your own words what is meant by the statement: "It is actually when we are without faith that we live with a lack of sufficient evidence."
- 4) What is the difference between "prediction" and "fulfillment?" What is the difference between the popular, or common, understanding of a miracle as "God altering physical reality so as to make the impossible possible;" and, miracle as that in which God is "involved," and astounds, and which makes known the reality and character of God? 5) Is it more important to believe in a literal virginal conception; or, in the words of the "liberal evangelical" William Barclay (1907-1978), author and professor of divinity at the University of Glasgow, "to believe that the birth of Jesus was in some mysterious sense the work of the Holy Spirit?"
- 6) What insight is suggested for living in a world of crisis and fear? Why do you answer as you do?
- 7) What is the "Immanuel sigh?" and why is it seen as such crucial significance here?

¹¹ *The Book of Common Prayer*, 139.

Chapter Three

Waiting in Hope

In human beings, knowledge of the "living God" awakens a thirst and hunger for life, It makes them dissatisfied with what they are, and impels them to look for a future in which more life will enter the lives they already have. . . Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it. Peace with God means conflict with the world, for the good of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present.¹²

—Jürgen Moltmann

The Reading: Romans 5:1-5

5¹Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. ³And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces ¹perseverance; ⁴and perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

¹² Jürgen Moltmann, *The Living God and the Fullness of Life* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2016), 23. And, Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 21-22.

Waiting Without Hope

Navigating the sea of hope is a strange and difficult adventure. The currents often flow in seemingly contradictory (paradoxical) ways. The Christian poet and contemplative T.S. Eliot therefore wrote:

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing;¹³

In these two lines Eliot offers both an insight and an invitation. An insight and invitation to realize the radical transformation that can come from hope. But this discovery of the power of mystical hope requires waiting in prayer—prayer that is without hope. What Eliot meant is that we often think we are waiting in hope when we are actually waiting for God to meet our personal expectations. We not only want God to rescue us or those we love; we not only want God to heal and save us, or them, from defeat, disaster, or ruin; but, we pray and hope firmly fixed in our imagination and thoughts on just how it is we expect God to save us or our family and friends. We know what it will look like if God's work is done correctly.

Real hope, mystical hope, to the contrary, is willing to be surprised by the creative activity of God. In explaining the prerequisites for discovering sobriety with serenity the Eleventh Step of Alcoholics Anonymous says: "Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood God, praying only for knowledge of God's will for us, and the power to carry that out." This is waiting without hope, waiting without trying to control the details of our lives, or the lives of others. Waiting in prayer without hope, letting all our hopes disappear until nothing but our hope in God alone remains. It is this sort of waiting that deepens and enriches our conscious contact with God—that opens us to the experience of mystical hope.

¹³ T. S. Eliot, "East Coker" in *Four Quartets: The Centenary Edition* (San Diego - New York - London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1943, (renewed 1971), 28.

There is a profound scene of desperate human questioning in one of the *Fargo* episodes, *Gift of the Magi*, in which Lou, the Sheriff, is escorting the campaign bus of the Ronald Reagan character across part of rural Minnesota. The bus makes a rest stop at a place where there is hardly more than a gas station. It may seem odd to refer to a scene set in a restroom of urinals as profound. But isn't that where the deepest questions of life most often arise? They emerge, welcomed or not, in the midst of ordinary, everyday life. There at the urinals the congenial Reagan asks where Lou served in Vietnam and Lou responds that it was in the Mekong Delta. Without considering the sheer absurdity of comparing a fictional movie with what combatants endure in a real war, and unable to differentiate between fantasy and reality, between real and imaginary heroism, the self-absorbed Reagan character begins to reminisce about working on *Operation Eagle's Nest* for Paramount Pictures. He explains how in that movie he parachuted behind enemy lines in order to rescue Jimmy Whitmore and Laraine Day from this SS commando. He then becomes confused about the ending of the film and can't remember if they made it out, "but it was a hell of a picture," he concludes.

Lou, whose wife Betsy has stage three lymphoma cancer, and who as the Sheriff, is responsible for finding a way out of the psychopathic violence, chaos, and destruction that has engulfed the people in this little corner of Minnesota, opens up to Reagan about his inner turmoil, his doubts, and his own anxious questions about where all this darkness, evil, and chaos come from. He agonizes over the possibility that this "sickness of the world" might have somehow become the cancer inside Betsy and is insidiously growing inside all of us. Lou then questions Reagan about *how* America is going to pull itself out of the mess it's in, to which Reagan responds: "Son, I honestly believe there's not a problem in the world an American can't solve." "Yes," says Lou, "but how?" The Reagan character simply smiles, gives that characteristic tilt of Reagan's head, an empty gesture perhaps meant to suggest sagacity, sympathy or reassurance, clasps

Lou's shoulder and walks away. Reagan's hope, as portrayed in this film, is hope in the American myth, the American dream, the illusion of what is now frequently referred to as *American exceptionalism*—the belief that America has some special inner quality that makes it different from all other empires and nations. But this sort of illusory hope is of no help to Lou who knows the cruel reality of a dying wife, and a little daughter to raise without her mother, the meaninglessness and brutality of violence in the Mekong, and now at home in Minnesota.

Real hope, mystical hope, hope in its deepest and most incomprehensible form most often emerges out of pain, suffering, and desperation, and is given to us when all our strength, our every resource, all our confidence has been completely depleted. That is what is happening to Lou in the *Gift of the Magi*. The Reagan character has hope (shallow hope, false hope, idolatrous hope, superficial optimism) in abundance. It spills out of him in well-honed platitudes as he plays the role of wise leader as if he were starring in a fictional movie. But hope is best discovered by those who have abandoned hope—like the Apostle Paul:

We don't want you in the dark, friends, about how hard it was when all this came down on us in Asia province. It was so bad we didn't think we were going to make it. We felt like we'd been sent to death row, that it was all over for us. As it turned out, it was the best thing that could have happened. Instead of trusting in our own strength or wits to get out of it, we were forced to trust God totally—not a bad idea since God is the one who raises the dead! And God did it, rescued us from certain doom (2 Corinthians 1:8-10 MSG).

I am sure there are people who come to this deeper hope by an easier and more pleasant route, perhaps people of unusual spiritual insight, compassion and gratitude for whom this mystical hope is their natural habitat. Albert Schweitzer, besides being a

theologian, concert organist, author, and physician, was one of the greatest humanitarians of the early twentieth century. He wrote of his early life as one in which he was well loved, cared for, and happy. His personal philosophy of "reverence for life" was derived, he said, from the conviction that those who have had a life free of difficulty and trouble have a responsibility to bear their fair share of the world's suffering. But my own personal experience is that it is most often in times of desperation that we encounter God.

Hope's Door

Hope that is genuinely Christian and mystical arises out of trust—trust that at the center of reality is something; or, rather someone, ultimately good and trustworthy, and therefore finds all despair groundless (Romans 5:5). It is the confident expectation of a future good. It is the conviction that although our own resources may be inadequate to our circumstances there is a strength and help available to us that we can neither explain nor prove other than in our own living. When it comes to us, even for people without religious faith, it is often experienced as an energy or power coming from "somewhere" beyond. In fact, we now know that hope, to put it in psychological terms, is a psychic energy necessary for both our continued well-being and our very existence. I remember hearing, in a psych class for second year medical students, how in one hospital with an especially high mortality rate in its Intensive Care Unit, a program was set up to instill a greater sense of hope not in the critically ill patients, but in the nurses who cared for them. The survival rate of the patients in that ICU went up dramatically simply by surrounding them with nurses and caretakers who were themselves inwardly hopeful. The evidence from the Holocaust, from the Nazi death camps, and from Alexandr Solzhenitsyn's ten-year ordeal in the Gulag Archipelago, as well as from the prison camps of the Korean War, is that human beings literally cannot live without hope. In the Korean War, imprisoned American soldiers who lost all hope

curled up in a fetal position and died. They may have technically died from dysentery or some other disease, but it is well established that hopelessness destroys the body's immunity—they had succumbed to hopelessness. Existence is unsustainable without some measure of hope.¹⁴

The Threshold of Hope

Faith is the threshold, the doorway through which we enter the sphere of God's grace. Grace is the gift of divine love, it is the giving of God's very own self to us. Grace is beautiful. Grace is so beautiful, so glorious that in those moments in which it is truly glimpsed it overwhelms all thought, all speech, and all senses so that it cannot be taken in or processed in any usual way. Maybe that is why we are tempted to give one dimensional theological and doctrinal definitions for "grace" like: "Grace is God's undeserved favor;" or, "Grace is God's unmerited gift of forgiveness and eternal life—salvation." I am not saying that such definitions are all wrong, or that there are not varying intensities of the experience of grace, just that no definition or explanation is the reality itself. And that all descriptions of grace tend to become mere clichés, making what is large small. Following is a story of grace I hope may be helpful. It is from Paul Brand's book, *Pain: The Gift Nobody Wants*.

When John Karmegan first came to the Schieffelin Leprosy Research and Training Center at Karigiri (the Vellore district of India), he was in such bad shape that the pioneering hand surgeon and researcher Paul Brand could do little for him surgically. But John was offered a place to stay and employment in the New Life Center—the center Brand and his wife Margaret Berry, who was also a physician, established with the help of a wealthy donor in 1950. The center itself furnished a

¹⁴ Larry Hart, *The Annunciation: A New Evangelization & Apologetics for Mainline Protestants and Progressive Catholics in Postmodern North America* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017), 94-95.

village environment in the residential area of the Christian Medical College and rehabilitation center for Hansen's disease patients. John was a troublemaker. As a dark skinned Indian he had felt the cruelty of racism before ever contracting leprosy. His skin hung on him in disarray, and because of partial facial paralysis any attempt to smile made him look as if he were giving a menacing sneer. Margaret stitched one of his eyelids partially closed to protect his sight, which further contributed to his bizarre appearance. People meeting John frequently reacted with some gesture or sign of fear. John was bitter, resentful, cynical, and angry. He was constantly involved in fights with other young men in the village, and was repeatedly caught stealing. He even organized hunger strikes against the center. Nearly everyone avoided John all they could. Nearly everyone except Granny Brand. Granny Brand, Paul's widowed mother, was born in India and along with Paul's father had worked as a missionary. She had come to help with the center, and made John the special object of her love. Eventually John became a Christian and was baptized in a cement tank used for construction materials.

However, while John's conversion modified his behavior it did not have much effect on his personality. He was still cynical and oppositional toward all nonpatients. He frequently argued with all the health workers that the only reason they cared was because they were paid to. At worship services in the church on the leprosarium grounds he would assert accusingly, "You're paid to take communion with me. It's your job. What would happen if I went to town? Do you think those people would even let me in their church?"

So Dr. Paul Brand went to the leaders of the Tamil church in Vellore. He told them about John, that his face was deformed, his hands clawed, his appearance somewhat frightening. But that his leprosy had been arrested, and John posed no threat to anyone's health. He asked them if they would let John visit their church. They easily agreed John could visit. He then asked, knowing this church used a common

communion cup, "Can John take communion with you?" This time they were hesitant and took more time to discuss it, but finally agreed John could take communion.

A few days later Brand took John to this simple church of whitewashed bricks and tin roof. It was an incredibly tense moment for Paul Brand, but absolutely traumatic for John. Brand says they stood there at the back of the church with John's paralyzed face showing no emotion, but his trembling giving away his anxiety. Brand prayed that none of the church members would show John outright rejection.

As the congregation stood to sing the first hymn a man seated toward the back turned and saw the two of them standing there. The man put down his hymnal, gave a warm smile, and patted the place next to him on the bench inviting John to come and sit beside him. Brand writes of that moment of grace like this: "That one moment proved to be the turning point of John's life. Medical treatments, compassionate care, rehabilitation—each step had helped, but it was a stranger's inviting a deformed Christian brother to break bread with him that truly changed John. He emerged from the service shining with joy."¹⁵

Years later after the Brands had moved to America, Paul visited a factory in Vellore set up to employ the disabled. The manager said he wanted to show Brand a new machine that made very small screws for typewriters, and to have him meet his prize employee. The employee had just won an award from the Swedish company with which they had a contract for producing the most parts with the fewest errors. Brand writes:

When we arrived at the prize employee's work station, he turned to greet us and I found myself looking at the unmistakable crooked face of John Karmegan. He wiped the grease off his stumpy hand, shook mine, and grinned with the ugliest, loveliest, most radiant

¹⁵ Dr. Paul Brand and Philip Yancey, *The Gift Nobody Wants* (New York: Zondervan, 1993), 329-331.

smile I had ever seen. Then he held out for my inspection a small handful of the small precision screws that had won him the prize.¹⁶

I suggest that you pause here and see if you can identify all the places in which you find the presence of grace and its source in the story of John Karmegan.

Exulting in Trouble

Exulting or rejoicing in trouble, affliction, tribulation emphasizes a triumphant, jubilant, attitude of confidence. It is a joy and a confidence that transcends those times when our life is running smoothly and we feel optimistic about the direction in which things are headed. When faith, faith as profound trust, is rooted in Christ, then, hope does not depend on outward circumstances. Karl Barth, one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century, was a pastor in Safenwil, Switzerland during World War I. He could hear the devastating fire of artillery in the distance—savaging the earth, mangling the bodies and ending the lives of thousands upon thousands of young men. Barth reflected on what might be helpful to his congregation in a world gone mad. And so, he wrote his famous commentary *The Epistle to the Romans*. In writing on these verses before us now he said: "There is suffering and sinking, a being lost and a being rent asunder, in the peace of God. . . Redemption occurs in the midst of upheaval and amid the chaos of unredeemed humanity. . . The merry people of God are merry when there is no merriment: and this is the boasting (exulting) of the one who is righteous by faith."¹⁷

In times of hurt and desperation, when our suffering may feel like more than we can bear, and we feel disappointment with God—disappointment that God, or so it may seem to us, is not acting as God ought to act. In those moments we may feel very

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 331.

¹⁷ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Translated by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 155.

much like we are Jacob wrestling with God, wrestling with the angel, by the River Jabbok. And, yet, even when the struggle is intense some rudimentary faith and hope remains beneath it all. And when we finally emerge it may very well be to discover that our growth as a person has been in direct proportion to the difficulty of the struggle in which we have been engaged. In fact, "character" is more precisely "tried" character. It is the character like that of a warrior who has experienced deadly combat, and who has fought in many battles. It is the person tried or tested in the crucible like some precious metal in which all the dross is melted off. This is the reason for exulting or rejoicing even in hardness and suffering and heartbreak where our only boast ("boast" is actually the better translation for "exult" or "rejoice") is in God's transformative work in us. We hurt and are in confusion and doubt and disappointment; and in it all, although often only known in hindsight, God is with us "changing, as the old Celtic song *Strange Boat* goes, "flesh and body into soul."

Perseverance

Perseverance, endurance, or patience is waiting, but it is a special kind of waiting. It is courage or fortitude, but it is a particular kind of fortitude or courage. It is not gritting our teeth and clinching our fists until they turn white as we wait for something to be over, rather it is to wait creatively, it is to exercise a kind of patience that changes things for the good. When I was a graduate student at the University of Santa Clara there was a cross near the old mission, and on the cross beam it said: "Those who endure to the end will be saved." That is, of course, from Matthew 24:13. Christ on the cross is the meaning of endurance.

Peggie and Joey were brother and sister, and both were born with cystic fibrosis. They both coughed constantly. Their mother, Meg, had to pound on their chests twice each day to clear the mucus so they could breath. As they grew up they spent many days in the hospital every year, and they both knew it likely they would die before

reaching adulthood. Joey did in fact die at age twelve. For a while Peggie seemed to get stronger. She survived several health crises in high school and even went away to college, but there is no cure for cystic fibrosis. There was no miracle for Peggie; although, her mother, family, friends and church desperately prayed for one.

The weekend before Peggie went into the hospital for the last time she came home from college excited by a quotation her minister had used the Sunday before from the popular Bible scholar and commentator William Barclay. The quotation she had written down on a 3 X 5 card said: "Endurance is not just the ability to bear a hard thing, but to turn it into glory." Peggie told her mother that her minister must have had a difficult week because after he read it he had banged the pulpit, turned his back to them, and cried.

Meg said that as Peggie's hospital stay lengthened and things were not going well Peggie would look around at all the medical contraptions she was hooked up to, what Meg called "the paraphernalia of death," and she would say, "Hey, Mom, remember the quotation?" Then she would look around again at all the tubes and wires, says Meg, "stick the tip of her tongue out the corner of her mouth, nod her head, and raise her eyes in excitement at the experiment to which she had committed herself."

I do not want to sentimentalize this story because it is not sweet. It is awful. Meg in her account tells of Peggie's shrill, piercing, primal screams that started a few days before her death. And of her own feelings that God chose to sit on his hands and let Peggie's death top the horror charts. However, I do want you to be aware of the following words Meg wrote about Peggie's death: "Peggie." Meg wrote, "never complained against God . It was no pious restraint: I don't think it ever occurred to her to complain. And none of us who lived through her death with her complained at the time either. We were upheld. God's love was so real, one could not doubt it, or rail against its ways."¹⁸

¹⁸ Meg Woodson in: Philip Yancey, *Disappointment With God: The Questions No One Asks Aloud* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 156-159.

Meg says that Peggie's commitment held as long as anything—held to the end. By that she meant Peggie's commitment to taking the Barclay quote—"Endurance is not just the ability to bear a hard thing, but to turn it into glory"—and living it as a real-life experiment. Meg's heartrending story of her daughter with her beautiful soul leaves me thinking of the discovery of both Job and the poet who wrote Psalm 73. Both are nearly overwhelmed by grief, by injustice, by trouble. Then in the depths of suffering and doubt they experience the presence, the glory, of God and while nothing changes outwardly, at least not immediately, everything is different. The answer given by both Job and the poet is a nonacademic, non-intellectual answer; and, therefore is understood by only the very few—the *anawhim* and the Peggie Woodsons.

Character

Originally the Greek term translated here as "character," the character produced by endurance, was the name for a sculptor's tool—the chisel used in the shaping of statuary. Gradually it came to mean not only the tool used, but the tooling process itself; and, then, to the peculiarities or "characteristics" of a particular piece of sculpture. Character can, therefore, be defined as the distinctive moral, psychological, and spiritual qualities seen in the life of any individual man or woman. Viewing a sculpture we might describe it as ornate, abstract, delicate, raw, refined, or primitive. In doing so we would be saying something about the characteristics of that sculpture. Similarly, we might say someone we know, or think we know, is selfish, generous, dishonest, truthful, loyal or disloyal, and in doing so we are talking about that person's character.

I wish I could give you a good explanation of how all this works—how it is that endurance shapes and forms a wise and deep person. However, it is probably just as well I cannot do so, otherwise the temptation would be to discuss the theological and psychological merits of the theory and that would be a distraction. What I am confident

of after decades as a pastor, counselor, spiritual director and human being, is that things do, in fact, work as Paul outlined them here in his Epistle to the Romans—endurance produces character.

I met Ruth Johnson and her husband, who was affectionately known as Mugs, when I went to teach in a congregational school for ministry. Ruth and Mugs were both personable, well educated, and affluent leaders in their congregation. But it soon became evident that there was something much more than that about Ruth—some special quality of gentleness, kindness, and wisdom. One day I remarked to someone how Ruth seemed to have some unique quality about her. The person I said this to, it turned out, had known Ruth and Mugs for many years. She agreed with me about Ruth, and then she told me that Ruth actually had a son about six years older than the daughter they had at home. His name was Roger, and he was about my own age. Shortly after Roger's birth in a tiny hospital on the plains of West Texas he had gone into convulsions. The seizures continued to occur periodically through the first years of his life, and each time created further brain damage. Eventually, the Johnsons were told that Roger could come home for visits but that he needed to be permanently hospitalized. Ruth went into severe depression. Her friends thought she would never recover, nor would she ever be herself again. But she did recover, and in time those who knew her at all knew there was something uniquely strong and good about her. Endurance produces character.

Organic Hope

Growth in any one character virtue will bring growth in all the spiritual virtues. Actually, scientific research has demonstrated that the qualities of faith, hope, and love have real physical effects on our bodies, and on the people around us. That aside, if we grow in trust (faith), we will also grow in gratitude, if we grow in gratitude we will also grow in faith and gratitude, and love. If you grow in love you will grow in wisdom and in

purity of heart. If your heart is pure (unmixed in its motives and desires) you will be full of faith, and love, and gratitude, and wisdom—and hope.

Now, how do I know that? Look at Galatians 5:22 which begins, "The fruit of the Spirit is . . ." Notice that the word "fruit" is in the singular and not its plural form. Paul's analogy is not that the Spirit produces various spiritual characteristics in our lives comparable to different types of fruit like apples, and bananas, and oranges, and peaches, and nectarines, and kiwis. But rather that the different characteristics he names are like the various characteristics of one type of fruit. For example, a peach might be described as a round fruit (roughly 20 cm), yellow with some pinkish-red tint, a somewhat fuzzy skin, and with soft sweet and juicy flesh around a hard pit. Here is the Galatian text:

But the fruit which the Spirit produces in our lives is unconditional love and *charity*, joy, tranquility of heart and mind, creative waiting, encouraging words and constructive action, compassion, loyalty, a willingness to learn, consideration and empathy for the legitimate needs of others, self-discipline, a conscious connection to God—consecration to the cruciform life (Galatians 5:22-24).

I like how these verses are translated in the *Message* so as to suggest how natural, how organic, the whole process really is: "But what happens when we live God's way? God brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—" (5:22).

In Hope of the Glory

This hope, which Paul describes as growing naturally out of the rich soil of spiritual character, is not vague or general, but it is specific and definite. It is not at all like saying, "I hope this year will be better than last year." It is not an insubstantial or blind optimism. It is "in hope of the glory of God." Simply stated "the glory of God" is the radiant presence of God. To say that God is glorious is to say that God is beautiful.

Even if we define glory as praise given for great achievement, or as that which is a source of honor, like a heroic act on the battlefield, we are still saying God is beautiful—beautiful in power, beautiful in every action, beautiful in character and essence, beautiful in love. Radiantly beautiful in presence. The quality of beauty is one of those things which cannot be defined. Those who know what beauty is know; those who don't know, don't. When Ronald Reagan was governor of California the State Highway Department wanted to build a highway right through a beautiful grove of old Redwood trees. When people expressed their dismay, Reagan answered: "Well, if you have seen one Redwood tree you have seen them all." Poor man! Poor man! Well, if you have little sense of the presence of God my suggestion for you is that you go on a quest, not for esoteric knowledge but for beauty. Beauty is found everywhere: "The heavens are singing the glory of God; and the skies shout the beauty of the Lord's handwork" (Psalm 19:1). Viktor Frankl tells how even in the brutality, deprivation, and death of Auschwitz men who had given up all hope of life and liberty had incredibly intense experiences of the beauty of art and nature. How much beauty is there where you are sitting right now?

But for the Hebrews the glory of God, the beauty of God's presence, was especially in the Temple. The ancient rabbis frequently referred to the *shekhinah* glory. "*Shekhinah*" is derived from a Hebrew root word meaning "to settle, inhabit, or dwell." In the verb form, it is often used to refer to the dwelling of a person—or of God. Although no one in the Old Testament thought that God could be contained in a physical structure, they did believe that God's mysterious and radiant presence was most easily encountered in the Jerusalem Temple. The Celtic Christians of Ireland talked about "thin places," transparent places where the spiritual realm is most visible and accessible to the physical world. For Judaism it wasn't so much that the temple was a thin place as it was one in which the Numinous One, the *Mysterium Tremendum* was truly present and in which the self could be offered up like smoking incense.

"The Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court; and behold, the glory of the Lord filled the temple" (Ezekiel 43:5).

"When Solomon had finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices; and the glory of the Lord filled the temple" (2 Chronicles 7:1).

The glory that fills the temple here is obviously the Divine presence. The same sort of language and imagery is found in John's vision in the *Book of Revelation*:

"And after that I looked, and, behold, the temple of the tabernacle of the testimony in heaven was opened. . . And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God, and from his power" (Revelation 15:5,8).

God is glorious so that where God is found is filled with glory—with beauty. Hold this in mind as we look at Revelation twenty-one.

In John's vision heaven and earth as we know it have passed away, and there is no longer any sea—what in the Jewish imagination was a great churning, tumultuous reservoir, a deep black water abyss, in which every sort of evil lurked. All that is gone—everything is clean and pristine. There is no more pain, or crying or death. "The striking visual features of the city," as Eugene Peterson notes, "are its symmetry, its light and its fertility. It is perfectly proportioned, it is light-filled, and it is life producing."¹⁹ Just as remarkable is that John "saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple (v 22). The city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminates it and the Lamb is its light." The symbols are multifaceted and somewhat overwhelming. There is no light of sun or moon because God is the sun and the moon that illumines everything. There is no temple in which to worship and seek God, for God is the heavenly temple itself. God is our light. Everything is radiant. God is our dwelling. God is our temple in which we pray and commune. God is our glory.

¹⁹ Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John & the Praying Imagination* (New York, San Francisco: Harper - Collins, 1991), 177.

God is our bliss and our heaven. It is in this that we glory--the hope in which we rejoice.
The Holy Trinity is the singularity of our existence.

One thing I have asked from the Lord, that I shall seek:
That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,
To behold the beauty of the Lord
And to meditate in God's temple.
(Psalm 27:4)

Beauty is the house where hope lives.

The Ground of Hope

"Now hope," writes Paul in verse 5, "does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us." The Apostle Paul has completed the mystical circle. "By faith we have access to grace in which we stand." The beginning and the end of the continuous and unbroken circle is grace—the gift of divine love, life, and peace, that is God's very own self. Grace is the ground of our existence in two senses. Imagine yourself, as if you were in some science fiction movie standing in some field of powerful energy; or, standing on solid granite rock. Grace is the field of spiritual energy in which we stand, and it is the foundation of everything that makes hope possible and life worthwhile.

Grace is the ground of real hope, mystical hope, *Advent* hope. Pseudo hope is built on the notion that we can create our own security. My favorite Tom Hanks movie is *Joe and the Volcano*. Joe (Tom Hanks) is on a sailboat to a south sea island where he is to jump in a volcano. The yacht is sailed by Patricia (Meg Ryan). One idyllic evening on the Pacific Ocean in a quiet and pensive conversation Joe asks Patricia if she believes in God. Her response is a good modern and postmodern answer. She says, "I believe in myself." "What does that mean?" asks Joe. "It means, she says, "I have confidence in

myself." Immediately a fierce storm begins to blow. As the yacht is battered by the wind and the waves a boom breaks loose and hits Patricia in her back knocking her unconscious and into the sea. Joe dives deep into the ocean and saves Patricia.

Every time I see that scene I think: "So much for self-confidence—faith in ourselves." The number of things we can make the ground of our hope, as any therapists knows, is extensive—human intelligence, syllogistic like evidence for believing in God, politics, money, status, power, managerial or manipulative skills, religious dogma, complex philosophical, theological or psychological systems, or the latest self-help scam. You can, no doubt, think of more.

After reflecting on verse five for several days I thought to check my own exegesis in light of some of the Bible commentaries I have on my bookshelf. Somehow I didn't find most of them terribly satisfying. Many of them contained a good deal of technical information but, although new and sophisticated, were somewhat abstract and obtuse, and not much focused on understanding the spiritual meaning. I eventually pulled Adam Clarke's volume on *Romans*. Adam Clarke (1760 - 1832) was a British Methodist theologian and Biblical scholar. His six-volume commentary on the whole Bible took him 40 years to complete and was a primary theological resource for pastors for nearly two centuries. It was one of my first two commentaries when I was a young ministerial student. I haven't consulted my set on anything for decades. The pages even smelled musty. I mean no one today is going to be impressed with a quotation from Adam Clarke. But while Clarke's style is dated and his language now sounds somewhat stilted, his comment on Romans 5:5 is clear and goes direct to the point. "But our hope is of a different kind; it is found on the goodness and truth of God; and our religious experience shows us that we have not misapplied it; nor exercised it on wrong or

improper objects."²⁰ I would elaborate on Clarke to say God is truth and goodness, God is grace and love. It is all there in the prayer of Saint John of Kronstadt:

O Lord, You are everything to me:
You are the strength of my heart
and the light of my mind.
You incline my heart to everything good;
and You strengthen it;
You give me good thoughts;
You are my rest and my joy;
You are my faith, hope and love;
You are my food and drink,
My raiment, my dwelling place.

When the ground of hope is God's loving presence poured into our hearts how could it ever disappoint or let us down?

Of course, what Paul has in mind here is not hope as a theory, or theological explanation, or a mental idea, but hope as a personal, lived experience. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn survived ten years in Stalin's Gulag Archipelago. And because he did he was sentenced automatically to another ten. Prisoners were not expected to survive the cold, the starvation, the deprivation and the brutality of the first ten years. In his massive trilogy Solzhenitsyn talks about the dehumanization many prisoners experienced, but then he makes a sharp turn and speaks of the amazing spiritual transformation that occurred in others. It was in the camps that Solzhenitsyn, an atheistic intellectual and communist, became a Christian, not by way of clever argument, but by way of wisdom experienced in the crucible of terrible suffering.

²⁰ Adam Clarke, *A Commentary and Critical Notes Volume II--Romans to Revelation* (New York, Nashville: Abingdon Press), 66.

In his book he notes that many reformers and activist have given their opinions on prison life and what it may do to a person, and then he says something absolutely astounding. He says:

In the intoxication of youthful successes I had felt myself to be infallible, and I was therefore cruel . . . It was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good . . . That is why I turn back to the years of my imprisonment and say, sometimes to the astonishment of those about me: "Bless you, prison!" I . . . have served enough time there. I nourished my soul there, and I say without hesitation: "Bless you, prison, for having been in my life!"²¹

How did Solzhenitsyn come to know this *Advent* hope and—this glory, this presence? Not by thought alone for it encompasses something greater than thought. Not by feeling alone for it is larger than feeling. And not by intuitive insight alone for it is bigger than human intuition. It is mysteriously and ineffably more than all these. It is grace—sheer gift. The gift of God's own self. We cannot make grace happen, what we can do is to enter the Advent Season as a time of prayerful waiting, attentiveness, openness and receptivity. "The heavens are shouting the glory of the Lord; and the heavens are singing of the beauty and wonder of God's handiwork" (Psalm 19:1). Yes! Yes! Yes! Can you hear it?

²¹ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Thomas P. Whitney (trans.), *The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation, Volume 2* (New York, Evanston, London: Harper and Row, 1974), 615-617.

Questions for Individual and Group Reflection

- 1) Why is it necessary, in T. S. Eliot's words, to wait without hope? And, how does waiting without hope paradoxically become waiting in hope?
- 2) What is grace? What is the supreme gift God offers? Why is faith as complete trust essential to the reception of grace; and, therefore, the threshold of hope? What does it mean, then, to say that the grace of God is the chief glory of life? What is glory and how is it related to grace?
- 3) A character in one of Solzhenitsyn's novels says that suffering should be considered a treasure, especially when it comes from those who want to hurt us, and that the spiritual growth of the person is in direct proportion to the suffering encountered. Do you believe that? What has been your experience?
- 4) Do you know anyone whose patience, endurance, fortitude or perseverance has turned something hard or tragic into something beautiful and glorious?
- 5) Which do you think is most important, our experiences or what we do with our experiences? What is character? And how is it shaped by what you do with your experiences?
- 6) In what two ways is grace described here as the ground of hope? How do you experience, if at all, grace as the ground of your hope and being?
- 7) If we have faith in God and still nothing changes in our outward circumstances how can we say hope does not disappoint us? Do you agree that hope includes the wi

Chapter Four

And Mary Said

But I want now to access the positive dimensions of the "great joy" in the wide spaces of the God who is closer to us than we can guess. Joy is strength for living, the empowerment to love, the delight in a creative beginning. It wakes us up, and makes us alive from within. How do we experience this force in the presence of Christ? How do we so tune our lives that they resonate with the inexhaustible joy of God? Are we capable of happiness at all?²²

— Jürgen Moltmann

The Reading--Luke 1:46-56

1⁴⁶ And Mary said:

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.

⁴⁸ For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant;
For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed.

⁴⁹ For He who is mighty has done great things for me,
And holy *is* His name.

⁵⁰ And His mercy *is* on those who fear Him
From generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with His arm;
He has scattered *the* proud in the imagination of their hearts.

²² Jürgen Moltmann, *The Living God And the Fullness of Life*, 88.

⁵² He has put down the mighty from *their* thrones,
And exalted *the* lowly.

⁵³ He has filled *the* hungry with good things,
And *the* rich He has sent away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped His servant Israel,
In remembrance of *His* mercy,

⁵⁵ As He spoke to our fathers,
To Abraham and to his seed forever."

⁵⁶ And Mary remained with Elizabeth about three months, and returned to her house.

The Reed of God

Mary is pregnant and unmarried, and so she does what countless girls in her situation have done when they can no longer hide they are carrying a child, she hurries off to stay with family. She goes to her cousin's house in the hill country of Judea where she is not well known. As she enters the home of her cousin Elizabeth and Elizabeth's husband Zechariah, the baby inside Elizabeth, who is also pregnant, "leaps" in what Elizabeth believes is a sign of divine joy. The two pregnant women are ecstatic. Elizabeth blesses Mary, "And Mary said," perhaps reciting part of a Jewish hymn of praise, "My soul magnifies the Lord, And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior." Mary's response to the Angel Gabriel's message is one of complete trust: "Yes, I see it all now: I'm the Lord's maid, ready to serve. Let it be with me just as you say" (1:38 MSG). To serve God, in the words of the *Book of Common Prayer*, "is perfect freedom"—it is perfect freedom, confidence, and joy. In astonishing simplicity Mary makes herself entirely available for the accomplishing of God's great, and to her, unknown mysterious purpose. We should not miss the paradox here: Mary who is full with child is entirely empty and surrendered. Poor, powerless, and vulnerable Mary is not only given freedom, is not only saved, by God; but, God is her freedom, is her joy, and her

salvation. Mary would not be the first woman to be blissfully happy even though she is unmarried and pregnant. Motherhood is for many a state of bliss in and of itself. Mary finds in her pregnancy a promise, a hope, a meaning that extends beyond herself. The life quickening in her is the life and light of the whole world (John 1:4). God is not only mysteriously involved in the lives of individuals; but, through individuals at work in the life of the world.

In a retreat presentation in the little English village of Pleshy, the twentieth century British Christian mystic and author Evelyn Underhill said to those gathered: "Our whole life is to be poised on a certain glad expectancy of God; taking each moment, incident, choice and opportunity as material placed in our hand by the Creator whose whole intricate and mysterious process moves toward the triumph of Charity, and who has given each living spirit a tiny part in this vast work of transformation."²³ Underhill's words certainly speak of what was characteristic of Mary, but beyond that they are meant to be taken as universal in their application. Mary has been called "the reed of God." A hollow reed can be made into a simple flute which when the breath is blown through it produces music. When we are open, simple, and empty we too become the reed through which the Spirit may blow and the *magical* music of God play.

Mary's Song

Scholars employing modern "critical" methodologies, such as Redaction Criticism, do not think that Mary could have possibly composed a song as sophisticated as the *Magnificat* with which Luke says she responded to her cousin Elizabeth. And that may be. It could be that Luke, as was common in the ancient world, made notes of what Mary, or her family told him, and then composed a song he thought fit the emotional depth of the moment. But we also know there were actually many such songs, or

²³ Evelyn Underhill, *The School of Charity: Meditations on the Christian Creed* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1991), 108

hymns, of praise, awe, and hope that the people of the time sang—most of which are now lost to us. The Magnificat of Mary is very likely one such song; or, more accurately part of one such song known at the time. Many, many, years ago two elderly women in a church where I served as pastor decided to go on an Alaskan cruise. One of them became ill and was unable to go, but the other, Rita, a Jewish Christian refugee from Dusseldorf Germany and fiercely independent, decided she would make the cruise on her own. When she returned she was still in ecstatic wonder at all the beauty she had seen. She told me that as the ship had sailed into a glacial bay and she saw the ice tumbling into the blue sea, she began to sing at the top of her voice:

O Lord, my God, when I in awesome wonder
Consider all the worlds Thy Hands have made
Thy power throughout the universe displayed
Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!

"People probably thought I was crazy," she said, "but I couldn't help it." The only appropriate response to moments of awe, wonder, grace, and mystery, whether large and dramatic or subtle, is gratitude and praise. Without a sense of gratitude and wonder there is no such thing as Christian spirituality. To be spiritually awake is to be capable of experiencing immense gratitude. Without gratitude there may be conformity to the doctrinal formulation of a particular church group, but there is no spiritual depth or reality. Notice that Rita did not compose a hymn on her own, something that would have been well beyond her musical ability, but rather sang one she already knew that expressed her feelings of the immensity of Divine beauty. There is no reason to think Mary did not do the same sort of thing that day in the home of Elizabeth and Zechariah. But, in my opinion, such questions are a distraction from the spiritual meaning of the text.

A Song of Awakening

Mary's song expresses the joy of being loved by God: "Rejoice, my spirit, in God my Savior; so tenderly has he looked upon his servant, humble as she is. . . . So wonderfully has he dealt with me, the Lord, the Mighty One" (Luke 1:47-49); and, it asserts confidence in the future—faith in a new reality which is literally awakening in her. There is nothing, absolutely nothing, that has the power to do you good like knowing you are loved by the "Mighty One," the One "by whom all things visible and invisible were created, and in whom all things subsist" (Colossians 1:16-17). This is not merely some transitory sentimental notion like, "If God had a wallet your picture would be in it." It is, recognized or not, the ground and reality of your very being. But it is not only the truth of your own personal existence, it is the reality of every man and every woman who has ever lived on earth. So, not only is there nothing that has the power to do you good like the love of God, nothing, absolutely nothing, has the power to do good to all others through you like the love of Christ.

Radical Spirituality

As a song of hope and confidence in the future, in a new order of existence, the *Magnificat* is both a radical statement of personal spirituality and social revolution. During the British occupation and rule of India, even though the English church and state are one, it was forbidden to read or sing the *Magnificat*. In 1980 it was banned in Guatemala as a subversive document. And the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo—whose children were "disappeared" during the 1976-1983 Dirty War of Argentina, put up posters with the words of the *Magnificat* all over the capital plaza.

The political, economic, and social dimensions of Mary's song are obvious. It upends everything. We know that we have correctly understood it when it leads to a *transvaluation* of all our values. "The hungry God has satisfied with good things, the rich

sent away empty." Christian spirituality is a spirituality of a justice that is political as well as religious, for ultimately the practice of justice transcends such categories as political and religious. "The future," it has been said, "belongs to the poor and exploited."²⁴ The work of liberation has its basis in in the spirituality of the *anawim*.

Anawim (pronounced ann-a-weem) is a Hebrew word from the Old Testament which describes the "poor ones" who remain faithful to God in times of great difficulty. They are the poor of every sort: the vulnerable, the marginalized, and the socio-economically oppressed. They are what the Scripture means by the "humble and lowly." Without status, influence, or the resources to deal with violence or famine, their only option is to trust God. The *anawim* actually live all over the world and are as contemporary as they are ancient. What these poor and oppressed of every time and place see in the *Magnificat* is a beautiful blessing given to the hungry, the homeless, and the powerless.

Mary is herself one of the *anawim*, one of the humble and lowly ones (1:48). Luke Timothy Johnson observes:

Mary holds no official position among the people, she is not "righteous" in terms of observing Torah, and her experience does not take place in a cultic setting. She is among the most powerless people in her society: she is young in a world that values age; female in a world ruled by men; poor in a stratified economy. Furthermore she has neither husband nor child to validate her existence. That she should have "found favor with God" and be "highly gifted" shows Luke's understanding of God's activity as surprising and often paradoxical, almost always reversing human expectations.²⁵

²⁴ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 120.

²⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke, Sacra Pagina Series Volume 3* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1991), 39.

Mary is humble and lowly in that she is free of the self-will and arrogance that afflicts those who are proud in the imagination of their own heart, she is "the servant of Yahweh" (1:51). She lives, as will her son, only to do God's will. In this she is blessed.

But Mary is also lowly in that she is physically, materially, one of the *anawhim*—literally poor and without status. In Luke's text she is, in fact, considered as representative of the people of Israel. The mercy shown her signifies the mercy shown to Israel being led by her hand out of slavery, through the hardships and suffering of the desert, out of the grief of exile, and rescuing her from catastrophic wars, defeats, and oppression. But to play with the words of the text, only the *humble* in heart can, of course, recognize that they are quite literally *lowly* and in need of mercy. As Evelyn Underhill put it, "It is like a quiet voice speaking in our deepest prayer: 'The Lord is with thee' . . . and calling forth the one and only answer, 'Behold the hand maid of the Lord, be it unto me according to Thy Word.'"²⁶ Humble self-abandonment creates a kind of freedom and an inner spaciousness in which we may discover and feel God's grace. Without this simplicity of soul there is no progress made in the spiritual life.

Therese of Lisieux (1873-1897) entered the Carmelite Convent of Lisieux determined to become a saint, but six years as a Carmelite sister brought to the young nun the realization that both her person and her own efforts were far too small to reach her aspiration. She saw how very far she was from the self-emptying, self-sacrificing, love of Christ. One day while meditating on the Old Testament she was grasped by Proverbs 9:6 which says, "Whoever is a little one, let them come to me." In a moment of unusual spiritual clarity she saw that the spiritual path lies along the lines of what Henri J. M. Nouwen called the path of "downward mobility."²⁷ Nouwen noted that in a society in which upward mobility is the ideal, downward mobility seems foolish, stupid, and

²⁶ Evelyn Underhill, *The School of Charity*, 42.

²⁷ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Selfless Way of Christ: Downward Mobility and the Spiritual Life* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1974), 39.

even crazy. Yet it is in downward mobility that life that really is life is discovered as we pray with simple and open hearts. It is in this *downward mobility* that the compassionate life, which is the life of Christ, is discovered. The "little way" of Saint Therese of *Lisieux* and Nouwen's path of downward mobility, then, is the way already taken by Mary of Nazareth. In it there is no ambition for money or power, nor is there the desire to be known as a saint, sage, social activist, or great contemplative. If that is the reward you seek you will need to follow a different path. This way, is harder to find and more difficult to follow in that it requires long and careful attention to the practices of self-surrender, simplicity, and servant-hood in the living of everyday life.

Demythologizing Peasant Life

The life of the ancient and medieval peasant class has often, especially in film, been idealized. The people of peasant societies are imagined as living lives uncomplicated by the small and large problems and demands of modern living. While they know nothing of fine dining, they do eat generous helpings of home cooked meals with plenty of red wine to drink; and, in the evenings they laugh and sing and dance around a bon fire to the happy music of a fiddle. Their families are close and happy, with parents and grandparents and children all living harmoniously in simple houses or cottages that are warm and cozy in the winter and open to the sunshine and smell of wildflowers and freshly mowed hay in the summer. In reality the life of the peasant class in any age is difficult and not easy or carefree.

Mary was a peasant girl. She did not live a cloistered life protected by chivalrous knights or social convention; or know the security of a stable economy and crops that never failed, or of a housewife whose husband had a good union job. Mary was a peasant girl who was part of the peasant culture of ancient Israel—a life that was always fraught with difficulties, and sometimes brutal. In many ways it was not very different from the life of the poor in our postmodern world.

The peasant class of first century Israel included persons, who regardless of their occupation, were enculturated in that way of thinking and life —landless workers in general, but for the most part subsistence farmers dependent on the last harvest for survival, some secure small farmers, and perhaps even a few larger landholders. Rome rewarded its officials and military leaders with vast holdings in conquered territories. These large holdings then tended to expand at the expense of small farmers who, particularly in times of crop shortages and famine, borrowed from them in order to survive. It is calculated that a mere one to two percent of the population may have consumed fifty to sixty-five percent of the agricultural produce, and that nine out of ten people either lived close to or below subsistence level. The Mediterranean world was Roman by this time, and the Roman system was based on inequality. The mentality into which the peasant class had been enculturated was one that assumed that this was just the way things should be; or, naturally or inevitably are.

Actually, honor (public reputation) was more important than wealth itself. However, honor was social rather than individualistic—honor of family, kind, village or tribe was more important than that of the individual. Honor granted access to resources. Becoming poor carried with it a loss of honor, and loss of opportunity. The poor were shameful, and if they couldn't pay their debts, were further humiliated and their lives endangered by imprisonment. The Sadducees were the aristocrats of first century Jewish society, and the Pharisees the rich. Both, therefore, had a vested interest in perpetuating the idea that the wealthy were wealthy because they had been blessed by God due to their goodness. This is why Jesus's disciples are so shocked by his response to the rich man and blurt out: "If the rich won't be saved then who in the world can be?" (Luke 19:16-26).

But this culture of honor and shame worked to oppress the poor in other ways as well. Purity codes like those of ancient Israel (which should not to be confused with the organized effort of modern conservative Christians to promote sexual abstinence

among teenagers), although originally introduced for sanitary, hygiene and health reasons, became, in time, a way of marginalizing people. If a woman cannot even be accidentally touched in the market place, or must be excluded from full participation in communal worship because she is "unclean;" if her testimony is not valid in a court of law simply because she is a woman, then she is pushed rather forcibly to the edge of society. If certain occupations, like that of shepherd, by their very nature render people unclean, technically untouchable, then to say that they are marginalized is a euphemism.

Rigid adherence to the purity code actually worked, as Jesus frequently observed, to defeat the higher moral demands of compassion and justice in much the same way it does among ultra conservative and legalistic Christians today. The Levite and priest who ignored the bloodied robbery victim lying on the side of Jericho Road were probably not without all feelings of compassion, but their natural human concern was nullified by their legalistic determination to strictly follow the purity code. So, they maintained their legal and ritualistic purity by not touching the bloody victim, but defied the divine imperative and God-given spiritual instinct to show love without which there is no escape from oppression.

Nothing contributed any more to oppression in the first century than onerous taxation. The first obligation even for peasants was the traditional tithes that lavishly supported the temple and priestly establishment in Jerusalem. Originally much of what was brought into the temple treasury was used for the care of the poor, but from the time of Nehemiah, and the return from Babylonian exile, more and more was devoted to maintaining institutional Judaism. It is difficult to calculate the extent of the tax burden on the Jewish people. But farmers appear to have paid, in addition to the Temple Tax, taxes levied by Herod to pay for construction of the second temple, the building of new cities, a poll tax, various tolls, and as much as forty percent of their crops in tribute taxes to Rome. Any resistance to Rome's tax demands, or tribute, was

met with ruthless brutality. Whole cities were looted, burned to rubble, and their populations slaughtered or taken as slaves for either their refusal or inability to pay. Increasingly, then, small farmers had their holdings absorbed by predatory lenders.

Richard Horsley in his book, *Bandits, Prophets & Messiahs*, connects the crushing burden of taxes and "vulture" economics, with the political oppression and violence of the time. In doing so Horsley quotes the ancient historian Josephus on Herod the Great, the murderous puppet king of the Romans who slaughtered the innocents of Bethlehem after Jesus's birth:

They resented Herod's engaging in such (oppressive) pursuits since for them it amounted to the dismantling of their religion and the changing of their customs. These matters were widely discussed because they were constantly being provoked and stirred up. But Herod treated this situation very carefully, removing any occasion for unrest and ordering them to keep their nose to the grindstone. He disallowed public gatherings, groups walking about or normal community life; all activity was watched. The punishments given to those caught were harsh, and both openly and secretly many were brought to the fortress Hyrcania and executed. Both in the cities and on the open roads there were men who spied on those who met together. . . Those who obstinately refused to adapt to such constraints Herod punished in all kinds of ways. . . and those who showed some spirit and were indignant at his forcing [the loyalty oath] he got rid of in any way possible. (*Ant.* 15.365-69)²⁸

Mary and her family, immediate and extended, her friends and everyone she knew, lived in this system dominated by the wealthy and powerful elite.

²⁸ Richard A. Horsley with John S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, & Messiahs* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 199), 33.

The "urban elite," the ruling and governing class, very rarely ever exceeded more than 2% of the population. In Palestine this urban elite would have included the religious establishment in Jerusalem. The retainer class (professional soldiers, army officers, household servants, and other personal retainers) were perhaps 5% of the population. The artisan class, skilled workers and trades people, probably made up 3% - 7% of the population, and were economically close to the peasant class, but often with lower incomes. Although some members of an emerging merchant class might have been wealthier than the lesser members of the governing class, they remained, for the most part, among the poor. The peasant class, to which Mary belonged, constituted the substantial majority of the population, and had the burden (that in the end would prove unbearable and become a factor in the collapse of the Roman Empire) of supporting the state and the privileged classes. Below the peasant class were the unclean and degraded who occupied a position inferior to that of the masses of common people; and, finally, the expendables, at the bottom of the class system, consisting of petty criminals, outlaws, beggars, and underemployed itinerant workers. Slaves, whose actual condition varied widely depending on their assigned task, were legally considered to be things (chattel or property) rather than human beings, and therefore under the sole and complete control of their owners.

This was the everyday world of Mary the mother of Jesus. Though it may sound like a difficult and often harsh world, it was not in a great many respects terribly different than that of the twenty-first century—the injustice perpetrated by the wealthy elite and the dominance of the few varying from country to country only by degree.

Mary's Magnificat as Prophetic Song

Mary's song is the sound of a prophetic voice in what has been called a "domination system." Domination systems are humanly contrived social systems deliberately

designed and built to create and maintain power by a few at the top over the many below them. They exist to perpetuate the power of dominators over those dominated. Since domination systems are inherently self-serving they provide rationalizations for why it is necessary to transfer wealth from workers up the ladder to the few obscenely wealthy persons at the top of the pyramid.

In the U.S. the people are recruited and enculturated into this mindset by the use of such images and notions as "the American dream"—which is so obviously materialistic rather than ethical or spiritual that it ought to be, but is not, abhorrent to every Christian. In 2018, the three men at the top of Forbes Magazine's list of the richest people in America —Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, Microsoft founder Bill Gates, and investor Warren Buffett—held combined fortunes worth more than the total wealth of the poorest half of Americans. Over the past three decades, America's most affluent families have added to their net worth, while those on the bottom have dipped into "negative wealth," meaning the value of their debts exceeds the value of their assets. More than 37 million people struggled with hunger in the United States, including more than 11 million children. While the coronavirus has driven millions of people out of work, the rebound in stock and other asset prices has pushed up the wealth of the rich dramatically—increasing economic disparity as well as social and political instability in America. Wealthy political and religious conservatives sound more and more like the elite of the Middle Eastern ruling class of the first, second, or third millennium B.C.E. in defining "liberty" and "justice" as those laws and policies which enable the obscene acquisition and retention of material goods and resources.

But there is still more involved in the enculturation of the poor and oppressed. There were nearly 2.2 million incarcerated persons in the United States in 2016, including hundreds of thousands of nonviolent offenders. A disproportionate number of those in our prisons and jails are African Americans, Latinas, other minorities, and the poor. Fair Wayne Bryant was given a life sentence in 1997 for stealing hedge clippers

from a carport storeroom at a home in Shreveport, Louisiana. Bryant received this harsh sentence under a habitual offender law—he had been convicted of attempted robbery in 1979, possession of stolen items in 1987, attempted forgery of a \$150 check in 1989, and simple burglary in 1992. Previous appeals of the sentence as excessive have been turned down. But Chief Justice Bernette Johnson, the only Black member of Louisiana’s Supreme Court in her dissent called habitual offender laws a modern manifestation of legislation passed after the Civil War to make it easier to convict former slaves and their descendants of minor crimes and sentence them harshly. Those laws, she said, were an attempt to "re-enslave African Americans."²⁹

There are, then, a number of indicators that the United States is itself a domination system, and like all domination systems it is critiqued and challenged by the prophetic tradition of the Bible—including the *Magnificat*.

Allusions and Echoes

Mary’s Song is a collage of biblical allusions, particularly of the hymns of praise by women in the Old Testament—Miriam, Deborah, Judith, and most importantly, Hannah. The language and motifs Luke uses evokes a strong sense of Old Testament faith in the ultimate fulfillment of God’s promises of help, deliverance, and good not only to the people of Israel, but to all humanity. Mary, like Hannah, expresses gratitude for a miraculous pregnancy, and both sing in the prophetic key of a great reversal in which the humble will be exalted and the great "high and mighty" will be brought low; and those who have gorged themselves at sumptuous tables of food to the detriment of the poor will be sent away hungry. Furthermore, Hannah’s song, which furnishes significant context for understanding the *Magnificat*, is alluded to in Psalm 113 and is intertwined with the Passover and all its prophetic and typological implications.

²⁹ [cbsnews.com fair-wayne-bryant-bernette-johnson-black-man-life-sentence-stealing-hedge-clippers-shot-at-freedom](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/fair-wayne-bryant-bernette-johnson-black-man-life-sentence-stealing-hedge-clippers-shot-at-freedom/), page (Accessed 09/04/2020).

However, before pursuing those implications something needs to be said about prophetic wisdom as the practice of the presence of God.

Prophetic Spirituality

"The prophet," noted Abraham Joshua Heschel, the Jewish scholar, rabbi, and mystic, "is a person who feels fiercely. God has thrust a burden on the prophet's soul." And that burden is the intense passion for justice.³⁰ "Frightful is the agony of humanity;" writes Heschel, "no human voice can convey its full terror. Prophecy is the voice that God has leant to the silent agony, to the plundered poor, to the profaned riches of the world."³¹ There is no society anywhere in the twenty-first century world, Heschel notes, where the words of the prophet Amos do not apply:

8 ⁴Hear this, you who swallow up the needy,
And make the poor of the land fail,
⁵ Saying:
"When will the New Moon be past,
That we may sell grain?
And the Sabbath,
That we may trade wheat?
Making the ephah small and the shekel large,
Falsifying the scales by deceit,
⁶ That we may buy the poor for silver,
And the needy for a pair of sandals—
Even sell the bad wheat?"

³⁰ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets: An Introduction* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 5.

³¹ *Ibid.*

We are all witnesses to this greed and callousness and violence and injustice; yet, we expend vast amounts of energy justifying it and arguing down, shouting down, prophetic voices of conscience. But we are all complicit—complicit in the suffering of humanity. We are complicit in the people, values, and things we *idolize*. The call of the prophets is to let all these go and return in our hearts to the True and Living God who created us and loves us.

Injustice is no trivial matter to the prophets for ultimately it separates the individual, the church, the nation, the world from the peace, power, and presence of God. In the fifth chapter of his prophecy Amos, speaking in the voice of God, says that worship separate from the practice of justice is a lie, useless, and alienates us from God's presence.

5 ¹⁴ Seek good and not evil,

That you may live;

So the Lord God of hosts will be with you,

As you have spoken.

¹⁵ Hate evil, love good;

Establish justice in the gate.

²¹ "I hate, I despise your feast days,

And I do not savor your sacred assemblies.

²² Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings,

I will not accept *them*,

Nor will I regard your fattened peace offerings.

²³ Take away from Me the noise of your songs,

For I will not hear the melody of your stringed instruments.

²⁴ But let justice run down like water,

And righteousness like a mighty stream.

Notice that Amos urges not only that we hate evil but that we love the good, that we energetically establish justice, work for justice, and let righteousness run down like a mighty stream of water. It is no longer sufficient for individual Christians, or the church as a whole, to feed the hungry or clothe the poor, substantial efforts must be made to root out the causes of poverty, racism, and injustice of every sort. Christian spirituality is not an absence but a presence—the presence of the Holy Trinity. “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of God's throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before the Lord.” (Psalm 89:14). God is peace, compassion, love. That is simply who God is, like water is hydrogen and oxygen—or wet. Evelyn Underhill wrote like this of charity (*caritas* or *agape*) as an openness to and utter dependence on God, and as the whole of our life a channel through which charity should then flow:

One part of prayer associates us with the creative and supporting Love, and requires us to give ourselves as open channels through which it can be poured out on all life; and the other part of prayer keeps us in humble awareness of our own complete dependence, plastic to the pressure of the molding Charity.³²

Justice, peace, love and compassion are not, for Christians who are Christian, abstract concepts or ideas, or higher moral principles, but spiritual realities of the Holy Spirit which is always moving through them, in them, and around them. *Ubi caritas et amor/ Ubi caritas/ Deus ibi est.* “Where charity and love are, God is there.”

The One Who Saves

Scripture nearly always means more than it says; and so, when it speaks of liberation, of deliverance, of freedom, it most certainly means actual, physical, literal political and

³² Evelyn Underhill, *The School of Charity*, 16.

social freedom. But it just as certainly means much more. Jesus teaches us to pray that God's "will be done on earth as it is in heaven" that is, the justice, harmony, peace, mutual caring and joy of heaven may be as true among human beings on earth as it is in heaven. But it is a prayer that makes sense only to those who are capable of conceiving of a reality that transcends, not only the physical dimensions of this world, but its moral, religious, and relational dimensions as well.

I think it is important to say this and to contemplate it, because any number of scholars writing on the popular level for well-educated laity advocate exactly the opposite. If we were to ask the perfectly legitimate question, "What did Jesus come to liberate or save us from?" or, "Exactly what sort of freedom is it that Christ offers?" their answer would likely be that Jesus was a political and social activist, a revolutionary, who wanted to free his people from a corrupt and oppressive system by teaching them to live by a new ethic of love. Christianity is not about "saving" people from sin, it is argued, nor does it have to do with the promise of "heaven."

The eighth chapter of the Gospel of John may furnish as good a commentary as any on this view. In the paragraph that begins there at verse thirty-one, Jesus speaks directly to a group of people who have committed to follow him, but whose belief is nominal and merely intellectual; and, therefore, unstable and passing. The people Jesus addresses here mentally agree with what he teaches, but they are not willing to accept the implications of Jesus or his teaching for themselves. Disbelief is nearly always as much, or more, of a spiritual than intellectual problem. The answer to the question, "Why do most scholars and intellectuals not believe?" is that most scholars and intellectuals do not believe for the same reason that non-intellectuals do not believe—they do not want to accept what that would mean for their life. A Jesus who was little more than a social activist tragically murdered for his idealism is so much more easily domesticated and managed than the one who is the resurrected Living Lord.

True discipleship, genuine faith, requires living with and in Christ's word. What prevents that is our reliance on mere things—as well as blind faith in ourselves. We make, in the words of the insightful theologian Paul Tillich, what is finite our "Ultimate Concern"—our family or a family member, a lover, our work, money, status, power, a substance, some set of rules, obsessive political correctness, a theological or philosophical system, a doctrine or some self-enhancing image we have of our self. The consequence is consistently the same. We are unfulfilled and fettered. Unfulfilled because our desire is for the infinite so that what is finite cannot satisfy our hunger for the something more of life. Fettered because we are either unwilling or unable to grasp the depth of our human predicament. The freedom we prize, the freedom these people prized, is illusory. "Jesus answered them," verse thirty-four, "You can be certain of this, whoever continues in sin is a slave of sin. Whoever habitually asserts their own will, those whose primary concern is with pleasing themselves, and live a self-centered life are slaves. Only if the Son makes you free will you truly be free."

The first step on the path to spiritual freedom is to acknowledge our addictions, compulsions, and obsessions; it is to acknowledge our *attachments* (literally the things to which we are nailed), and to admit our enslavement. Only the Son who exists in total freedom can show the way to freedom. Our freedom is not in a difficult to comprehend philosophy, a theological doctrine, or narrowly prescribed behaviors, but in Christ who is himself the *Word*—the divine *Logos* incarnate. Christ is our light, our salvation, our wisdom, and our freedom. When we recognize this, when we see it in our heart and not just with our mind, we have begun to make spiritual progress—to see that Christian spirituality is not about a truth but the one who is truth, and that, as John writes, the one who is truth is our liberation and our freedom.

Notice in John eight that this crowd in arguing with Jesus insists that they are the physical and spiritual descendants of Abraham and Sarah, and "have never been enslaved to anyone " (8:33). It is, of course, simply not factually true that they have

never been enslaved. They were slaves in Egypt for four hundred years. In 586 (B.C.E.) the Babylonians conquered Judea, destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, and carried at least twenty-five percent of the population into exile. The Persians came next. And while they granted all who wanted to permission and help in returning and rebuilding Jerusalem, Judea remained under the control of the Persian Empire. The Greeks followed the Persians, and while there was a brief period of independence after the Maccabean revolt, the Romans soon conquered and occupied Palestine along with the entire Mediterranean world. The very day that this crowd claimed they had never been enslaved to anyone their country was being occupied by the Roman legions. They were paying tribute (taxes) to Rome, they obeyed Roman law, and their High Priest was an appointee of Herod, the Roman surrogate who was not even Jewish. The significance of this denial of the facts of their history is that it demonstrates they understood that freedom is more than political autonomy, more than relief from excessive taxation, more than civil rights, or foreign occupation—that freedom is essentially spiritual. Otherwise their assertion would make no sense. Indeed, it is this spiritual freedom that gives the more literal sort of freedom and justice their deeper significance.

Freedom From, For and To

Freedom is salvation. If we take both the Hebrew and Greek meanings of the word "salvation" then we can say salvation is that which is spacious, large, expansive; it is rescue from danger or peril, it is healing from sickness; it is the mending of what is broken, it is being preserved in good condition; it is freedom from anything that narrows, diminishes, or constricts life. We are both saved from and saved for, given both freedom from and freedom to and for. To be free of resentment, malice, and ill will is to be free for love, kindness, and generosity. To be saved from what the Bible calls sin is simultaneously to be free for the highest to which the human mind and heart can aspire. To be saved from dark inner forces and self-destructive behaviors frees us to

live constructive and creative lives. To be freed from fear liberates us to live heroically; to be saved from death, actual physically corrupting death in which everything seems to come to an end, frees us to live.

Blessed

When Mary arrives at the home of her cousin, Elizabeth greets her with the exclamation: "Blessed are you among women! . . . How blessed is the woman who has believed, because the things spoken to her by the Lord shall come to fulfillment." There is a subtle difference in Elizabeth's first and second exuberant use of "blessed." Elizabeth first speaks prophetically. She knows that Mary has been chosen, that the child Mary carries is special, that Mary's unborn son is the fulfillments of the hope and longing of his people. But her second use is a different word, rather than *eulogoumnene* she uses *makaria* which does mean happy, but more than that denotes the peace and happiness of a life lived in the presence and grace of God. The sense of contentment, equanimity, poise and peace usually associated with Mary comes from this awareness and attentiveness to the mysterious, but very real, presence of God. The word "blessed" in verse forty-five is the same word Jesus used in the *Beatitudes* and so is the bliss of one who follows the Jesus way, and in that following discovers what cannot be told. But no blessing is ever for the individual alone. It is always, without exception, meant to be made available for the happiness and good of others. We are blessed in order to bless.

Notice that Mary's song is one of trust, confidence, certainty. She speaks of the future good, of the blessedness to come, in the past tense as if it has already occurred. Her canticle is in, what is known among Hebrew scholars, "the prophetic perfect." "But as it is written," says the Apostle Paul, "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, Nor ever entered into the human heart. The things prepared for those who love God." The bliss

we seek is beyond space and time, and the furthest reaches of human imagination; yet, it is possible to taste it, to feel it, to know it as if it had already come to fulfillment.

I end with a quote from Viktor Frankl, the Jewish psychiatrist, who survived four nightmarish years in the Auschwitz death camp. I think it can capture for postmodern people something of the feeling of the *Magnificat*; or, at least can give an additional perspective on Mary's song. I guess what I really hope is that it will do for you what it does for me every time I read it:

One day, a few days after the liberation, I walked through the country past flowering meadows, for miles and miles, toward the market town near the camp. Larks rose to the sky and I could hear their joyous song. There was no one to be seen for miles around; there was nothing but the wide earth and sky and the larks' jubilation and the freedom of space. I stopped, looked around and up to the sky--and then I went down on my knees. At that moment there was very little I knew of myself or of the world---I had but one sentence in mind--always the same: "I called to the Lord from my narrow prison and he answered me from the freedom of space." How long I knelt there and repeated this sentence memory can no longer recall. But I know that on that day, in that hour, my new life started.³³

³³ Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search For Meaning: An Introduction to Logo Therapy* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1962), 90.

Questions for Individual and Group Reflection

1) It is impossible to think of Mary without thinking of her humility, her simplicity, her purity of heart. The latter is, unfortunately, often misunderstood as sexual naïveté.

Søren Kierkegaard was perhaps more realistic when he said that purity of heart is to will one thing—the *Good*. By the *Good* he meant virtue and bliss as the Kingdom of God.

Read James 1:8; Philippians 2:1-11; Matthew 5:8; 6:33; Luke 22: 24-26, and then explain in your own words what it means to imagine Mary as "the reed of God."

2) Compare Mary's world and how it impinged on the daily lives of ordinary men and women with the world in which you live. As you contemplate the spiritual meaning of vice, virtue, ethics and morality try to see everything both in relation to your own private and personal life, and also communally, socially, politically.

3) The Magnificat is one more instance in the Bible where we see a complete reversal of the values by which human beings live. What discrepancy do you see between Mary's song along with the teachings of Jesus, and the values by which people actually live in our world today? Note that the question is not the difference between the Christian Way and the values espoused by most people, but between the values people say they have and those they actually live. In thinking about this question you might go on line and read "The Western Creed" by Charles Tart—it is only about a page long.

4) What would it mean for you to live moment by moment in the spirituality of the prophetic perfect—the already and the not yet?

5) What does it mean in the text when it says Mary is blessed? Are you blessed among humankind? From the four texts we have considered, what would you say is the essence of Christian spirituality?

Addendum

Turtles All the Way Down and the Prophetic Quandary

Pre-summary

This addendum, which seems to me appropriate for the Advent and Christmas seasons, is a reflection on the New Testament use of Messianic prophecy. Unlike the previous four chapters it is a little bit more academic as it deals with what some have seen as an intellectual problem regarding the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament—those prophecies interpreted by the earliest Christians as having to do with the advent of Christ. Frequently, the New Testament writers appear to interpret and apply prophetic passages in a way that seem more than a little strange to readers immersed in modern critical thinking. However, it is posited here that when the hermeneutical methods employed in the New Testament are seen with an appreciation for their discipline and rigor of practice, we may not only come to understand them better, but also begin to recover that sense of the "prophetic consciousness" which saturated the ancient world of Israel. It is further concluded that in a reflection on messianic prophecy it is possible to discern Paul Ricoeur's vision of a hermeneutic which possesses both intellectual integrity and spiritual depth. This, Ricoeur thought, involved three stages of faith development: precritical, critical, and postcritical leading ultimately to what he described as a "second *naïveté*." My hope here, then, is that this addendum might make some contribution to your own development of a biblical interpretation and theology that is, to use another of Ricoeur's favorite terms, "restorative"—restorative for you personally, and through you for the community of faith.

Turtles All the Way Down

In his novel *Turtles All the Way Down*, John Green's main character is an older teenage girl, Aza Holmes, who is trying to live a normal teenage life while suffering the sometimes-debilitating effects of an Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. At one point Aza's best friend Daisey, trying to understand says: "I wish I understood it. . . . You just, like, hate yourself. You hate being yourself?" Aza, who is obsessed with the thought that she is not real, replies that when she looks into herself that it's more like there is no self to hate. "It's like," she says, "when I look into myself there is no actual me." She feels like a Russian nesting doll which can be opened to reveal a hollow place inside where there is another doll and another and another until you get to one that cannot be opened and that is solid through and through. But Aza can never get to her "smallest," most real and solid self. This reminds Daisey of a "wisdom" story she has heard from her mother. It is a story that can act here in this little essay as a kind of parable—although it may not make complete sense as such until we have progressed a ways. It goes like this:

A scientist is giving a lecture to a huge audience on the history of the earth. He explains how the earth formed billions of years ago from a cloud of cosmic dust. He tells how at first the earth was very hot but over an unimaginable expanse of time cooled and oceans formed. He tells how single-celled life emerged in the oceans, how over billions of years life became more prolific and complex until 250,000 or more years ago humans evolved, and started using more sophisticated tools until eventually they could build spaceships, and cell phones, and everything.

As he approaches the end of his lecture the scientist asks if there are any questions. An old woman in the back raises her hand. "This is all very interesting," she says when acknowledged, "but the truth is the earth is a flat plane resting on the back of a giant turtle."

Amused, the scientist asks, "Well, if that is so what is the giant turtle standing on?"

And the woman replies, "It's standing on the shell of another giant turtle."

At this point the scientist, who is beginning to become a little annoyed, says, "And then what is that turtle standing on?"

And the old woman patiently replies, "Sir, you don't understand. It's turtles all the way down."³⁴

The conclusion toward which I will be moving in pondering the quandary involved in how the New Testament writers use Old Testament messianic prophecy is, that it's "*turtles all the way down.*"

Prophecy as *Heilsgeschichte*

Johannes Christian Konrad von Hofmann, the 19th century Biblical historian and theologian at Erlangen, is recognized as the person most responsible for the rise of the salvation-history (*heilsgeschichte*) school of thought as a formal approach to biblical interpretation. As a principle of interpretation, salvation-history simply asserts that God has made a progressive revelation of the divine nature and will in Scripture.

Heilsgeschichte posits among other principles, that: (1) God's salvific work begins as God acts in time, and is seen through actual happenings and in human events. (2) God's salvific act which began in time is brought to completion within the historic processes of human activity. (3) The saving work of God has past, present, and future implications.

I am not at all sure why academia so often finds it necessary to state the obvious in rather elaborate fashion, but whether we adopt the formal history of religion schema as an important way of understanding the use of Old Testament prophecy by New

³⁴ John Green, *Turtles All the Way Down* (New York: Dutton Books, 2017), 244-245.

Testament writers, or simply as a bit of helpful common sense, the historical context of messianic prophecy is of enormous significance. As noted in the basic outline above the implications are not only past, but also possess, for those seeking a faith that has intellectual integrity, ramifications that are present and future as well. What I am suggesting, is that understanding the use of messianic prophecy in the New Testament requires that we examine such usage holistically and from the perspective of salvation-history.

The Prophetic Quandary

The difficulty encountered as we read the use which the New Testament makes of Old Testament messianic prophecy is this—there frequently appears to be a discrepancy between what is clearly the intended meaning of an Old Testament author and the interpretation given by a New Testament author. Having grown up with the frequent assurance that numerous and precise messianic prophecies have found clear fulfillment in the life and work of Jesus, young evangelical students have often had their faith severely shaken by the discovery that numerous Old Testament "predictions" seem to have found fulfillment in events closer to the time and setting in which they were originally made. In fact, some prophecies, in their original setting, do not look like predictions at all. Furthermore, upon a closer reading the interpretation of a New Testament writer may seem inconsistent with what the writer of an Old Testament text intended.

Perhaps one of the best-known examples is Matthew's use of Isaiah 7:14-16 as prophetic evidence that Jesus is the Messiah (Matt.1:21-23). In Isaiah the Kingdom of Judah is about to be invaded by the combined forces of Israel and Syria. The Prophet tells King Ahaz of Judah there is nothing to fear—remain calm, focused and firm. Ahaz will know this benevolent prediction is a true prophecy by this sign: in the time it takes for a virgin (a young unmarried woman) to marry, conceive, bear a child, and for that

child to begin eating "cheese curds and honey," Ephraim (Israel) and Syria will themselves be devastated. Isaiah's prophecy was not only fulfilled some seven hundred years before the birth of Christ, but seems to make no messianic reference at all. The closest connection is that in both passages the child is named "Immanuel" (Isa. 7:14) or "Jesus" (Matt. 1:21) for God is with or saves his people. Indeed, this may be the singularity for Matthew.

Any number of other passages might serve as examples. When Matthew references the return of the Holy Family from their exile in Egypt as a fulfillment of Hosea 11:1 which says, "And out of Egypt I called my son," it is more likely to appear to the postmodern mind as a "squeezing" of the text than as prophetic fulfillment. G. K. Beale provides a chart of examples of alleged misinterpretations in the New Testament writers' use of the Old Testament:

- 1.) Ad hominem argumentation: the role of angels in revealing the law in Gal. 3:19; the exodus "veil" theme in 2 Cor. 3:13-18; and the "seed" of Gen. 12:7 (KJV) and 22:17-18 in Gal. 3:16
- 2.) Noncontextual midrashic treatments: the understanding of baptism and the "following rock" in 1 Cor. 10:1-4; Deut. 30:12-14 in Rom. 10:6-8; Gen. 12:7 (KJV) and 22:17-18 in Gal. 3:16; Ps. 68:18 in Eph. 4:8; Hosea 11:1 in Matt. 2:15.
- 3.) Allegorical interpretations: Deut. 25:4 in 1 Cor. 9:9; the use of the OT in Gal. 4:24; Gen. 14 in Heb. 7³⁵
- 4.) Atomistic interpretations, uncontrolled by any kind of interpretative rules: Isa. 40:6-8 in 1 Peter 1:24-25.

Beale goes on to note, "Thus many would conclude that an inductive study reveals an oft-occurring disconnection of meaning between NT writers' interpretations of the OT and the original meaning of that OT text."³⁶

³⁵ G. K. Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 2.

Interpretive Methodologies of the Rabbis

In wrestling with this problem, the question is sometime raised as to whether we should follow the same interpretive methods of the Old Testament as those used by Matthew, and John, and Paul and other writers of the New Testament. The reality is that our way of thinking is so different that it would be impossible to ever fully replicate their manner of exegesis. However, this does not mean that some understanding of how they went about the hermeneutical task may not be helpful. With this in mind it should be noted that their exegetical work was characterized by four basic methods: **Literal:** Particularly in regard to the interpretation of Old Testament law, Judaism frequently followed a rather literal hermeneutical methodology. Longenecker notes that even while Philo believed circumcision should be understood allegorically, he also thought it should be practiced literally.³⁷ Stranger still, is that it was seriously argued by some Rabbis, on the basis of a literal reading of Deuteronomy 6:7, that in the morning the *schema* should be recited standing up but in the evening while lying down. The intent of the early Rabbis, even when using literal methodology, was to make plain the essential meaning of the biblical text. Consequently, it is helpful to keep in mind that to this end they were comfortable in applying a variety of interpretative methodologies—both literal and nonliteral.

Allegorical: Allegorical interpretation looks for a deeper symbolic meaning to the text. "It assumes that a more sophisticated interpretation is to be found beneath the obvious meaning."³⁸ Galatians 4:21-31 is probably the most obvious use of allegory in the New Testament. There Paul uses the figure of Hagar from the Genesis story to symbolize

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Richard N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 16.

³⁸ Johnathan Lounde, *Introduction to Three Views of the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*. Walter C. Kaiser, Darrell L. Bock, and Peter Enns, contributors (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 29.

Mount Sinai and the earthly city, and therefore enslavement to the Law of Moses, while Sarah represents the heavenly city of the New Jerusalem and the people of freedom and promise.

Typological: Typological interpretation is more of a way of viewing history than it is an exegetical method. An earlier event, person, or institution is seen as somehow "foreshadowing" a later event, person or institution—the "antitype." Typology assumes that God is at work in history, that there are reoccurring patterns that reveal the nature of God and both predict and fulfill later reoccurrences of the pattern in deeper and larger ways. From the typological perspective history itself is seen as prophetic of God's ultimate purpose. If we think of Carl Jung's concept of archetypes, the notion of typology may seem a little more comprehensible in a contemporary context. The Greek *arche* means *first* and *type* "*imprint,*" "*impress,*" or "*pattern.*" For Jung an *archetype* was therefore a basic, primordial, preexisting pattern. Jung believed there were patterns of circumstances, symbols, and thought that reoccur consistently enough to be considered as universal concepts or events. These *archetypes* represent unseen psychological (*psychic*) energy at work—the person of traditional faith would say it is the manifestation of spiritual forces. Until the Enlightenment it was thought that human beings had the capacity to receive meaning from the realm of the spiritual and form it into inner images that can then become the object of reflection and reason. The well-known Jungian analyst Robert Johnson makes this significant observation:

The disaster that has overtaken the modern world is the complete splitting of the conscious mind from its roots in the unconscious. All forms of interaction with the unconscious that nourished our ancestors—dreams, vision, ritual, religion experience—are largely lost to us, dismissed by the modern mind as primitive or superstitious.³⁹

³⁹ Robert A. Johnson, *Inner Work: Using Dreams as Active Imagination for Personal Growth* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1986), 9-10.

The point is simply that we should not too quickly dismiss typology as a reading into historical events of something that is not there; and, even more importantly, recognize how biblical typology points us to the reality of the prophetic messianic consciousness and its trajectory.

Pesher: Here a text is interpreted within the framework of an event, which is a mystery. The attempt to discover the solution to the mystery of the event, or of a person, in Scripture is "*pesher*." For example, in the New Testament, the solution to the strange and puzzling events on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:17) is found in Joel 2:28-29.

Midrash: The text rather than the event is the starting point for *midrash*, which means to seek. *Midrash* seeks to provide practical instruction in living God's Word, and shows the relevance of Scripture to daily life. Seven rules, which follow here, helped to make early rabbinical interpretation reasonably straightforward.

Qal wahomer says that what applies in a less important case also applies in a more important case, and what applies in a more important case applies in a less important case.

Gezerah shawa says that where the same words are applied in two separate cases the same considerations apply.

Binyan ab mikathub 'ehad involves constructing a family of texts from one passage. It states that where texts are similar, a principle found in one applies to the others as well.

Binyan ab mishene kethubim has to do with constructing a family of texts from two passages, so that a similar principle derived from two texts can be applied to the others.

Kaalal uferat is the principle that a general rule may be applied to a particular situation.

Kayotse bo bemaqom 'aher establishes that a text may be interpreted by comparison with another text.

Debar halamed m 'inyano is an explanation established from the context.

Klyne Snodgrass notes that these *midrashic* techniques are observable in the New Testament. "When Jesus argued that if God cared for the birds, surely he cared much more for humans (Matt. 6:26), he was arguing in good rabbinic fashion from the less important to the more important. Similarly, when Jesus justified his disciples eating grain on the Sabbath by pointing to the eating of the showbread by David and his men, he was arguing on the basis of an equivalent regulation. . . ."⁴⁰ It may very well be that when Matthew quoted Isaiah 7:14 in reference to the birth and naming of Jesus he too was interpreting the text on the basis of the lesser to the greater principle; that is, Matthew interpretation was not nearly as arbitrary as it at first sounds two thousand years later. In short, Mathew is saying something like: "If this was true then, how much more it is true now."

Testimonial: At times we find the New Testament writers using what appear to be collections of Old Testament texts for evidentiary purposes. Indeed, they sometimes not only use the same combination of Old Testament texts, but even agree in wording that is different from the Septuagint. For instance, the agreement might be noted between 1 Peter 2:6-10, which uses Isaiah 28:16; Psalm 118:22; Isaiah 8:14; parts of several other texts and a fusion of Isaiah 28:16 and 8:14; and, Romans 9 25:33 which uses Hosea 2:23, other texts from Isaiah and a combining of Isaiah 28:16 and 8:14 in the same non-Septuagint form as 1 Peter 2. This most likely does not represent one writer copying from another as has sometimes been conclude, but more likely is an example of collections of Old Testament passages being used apologetically as testimony.

⁴⁰ Klyne Snodgrass in *The Right Doctrine From the Wrong Texts? Essays on the Use of the Old Testament in the New*, Edited by G.K. Beale (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 43.

Whatever one may make of their use of the texts they quote what remains clear is they possessed a common sense of messianic prophecy and its fulfillment.⁴¹

What Manner of Person

The great Jewish Biblical scholar and mystic, Abraham Joshua Heschel, in what is certainly one of the best books ever written on the prophets, insisted that it is of crucial importance to ask the question, "What manner of person was the prophet?"⁴² Both the question and the answer Heschel provided contain enormous implications for anyone exploring the correspondence between Old Testament prophecy and claims of their fulfillment in the New Testament.

As Heschel noted, the Hebrew prophets were not only prophets, but poets, preachers, patriots, statesmen, social critics, and moralists as well. He wrote, "The significance of Israel's prophets lies not only in what they said, but also in what they were. . . The moments that passed in their lives are not now available and cannot become the object of scientific analysis. All we have is the consciousness of those moments as preserved in words."⁴³ The essential task of the prophet was to declare the word of God to the "here and now." The prophetic aim was exhortation and not merely prediction. It was to illuminate what is involved in the present; that is, to declare "truth as reflected in the mind of God."⁴⁴

⁴¹ It now appears that authors in the Apostolic Age felt more free to use various translations, or to offer their own, than what was once thought. See: R. T. France. *Jesus and the Old Testament: His Application of Old Testament Passages to Himself and His Mission* (Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent College Publishing, 1998), 25-28.

⁴² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets: An Introduction* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962) 3-26.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, ix.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 15, 18.

The literalist stressing supernatural revelation denies the role of the prophet's own self in his utterances, while an emphasis on prophecy as a psychological, or entirely inward, experience "disregards the prophet's awareness of his confrontation with facts not derived from his own mind."⁴⁵ When Heschel speaks of "facts not derived" from the prophet's own mind he means much more than the raw factuality of the literalist, he means something like the "consciousness" of the prophet. Consequently, while the prophet addresses a contemporary situation he or she "is not intoxicated with the here and now," but speaks with a vision, or consciousness, of an end.

Aryeh Kaplan, another Jewish scholar and mystic, says in regard to the person of the prophet: Those who sought to prepare themselves for prophetic ministry were known as "the sons of the prophets," and normally spent years in intense training and rigorous discipline learning to open their consciousness to the mind of God. The difference between the Old Testament prophets and other mystics is that the prophets were more specific and clearer in their messages. "The true prophet," says Kaplan, "is able to channel this spiritual power, focusing it clearly enough to obtain an unambiguous message."⁴⁶

Jesus's Use of Old Testament Predictions

The writers of the four Gospels portray Jesus as acutely aware of his words, his actions, his presence as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.⁴⁷ He is critical of the two despondent travelers on the road to Emmaus for their inability to grasp the meaning of his life among them in light of the Old Testament. "Beginning with Moses and with all the prophets he explained the things concerning himself in all the

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, ix.

⁴⁶ Aryeh Kaplan. *Meditation and the Bible*, 30.

⁴⁷ Form criticism's endless debate over what Jesus may or may not have actually said is not entered into here, since the fact of the "prophetic consciousness" renders such argumentation nearly irrelevant to this particular discussion.

Scriptures" (Luke 24:27). Jesus's consciousness of who he was, as N.T. Wright points out, arose out of his sense of vocation; that is, his belief that he was called to accomplish only what God can undertake and complete.⁴⁸ His predictions primarily looked forward to the day of Yahweh that had been prophesied in the Old Testament, the decisive act of God in which the present age would be brought to an end and a new order of peace, justice, and well-being initiated. Jesus uses Psalm 110:1 twice to accept the prophetic designation of messiah; however, in doing so he reinterprets what that means. With Jesus messianism has nothing to do with earthly dominance, worldly status, or military conquest, but with humility, with sacrificial suffering and with priestly and spiritual power conferred by God rather than gained through political manipulation. What this points to once again is the existence of a profound prophetic consciousness among the people of Israel in the Second Temple era.

The Prophetic Consciousness

Ultimately what Kaplan and Heschel are talking about is a way of thinking, a way of life, a way of being—the prophetic consciousness. "The prophet," said Heschel, "is human, yet employs notes one octave too high for our ears."⁴⁹ What I am suggesting is that in order to understand messianic prophecy we must be capable of not only engaging in literary and historical analysis, but of going beyond such analysis so as to experience, as best we can, the prophetic consciousness ourselves. We know that this spiritual consciousness, this messianic hope, this attunement to what Saint Paul called "the mystery of the ages which is the hope of Christ in you" (Colossians 1:26), was acute among the heirs of the Hebrew prophets early in first century Palestine.

⁴⁸ N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God, Volume Two* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 652-653.

⁴⁹ Heschel, *The Prophets: Volume I*, 10.

Among the sayings of the prophets that made messianic expectations burn in them we may count this short list:

- The whole world will worship the One God of Israel (Isaiah 2:11-17).
- He will be descended from King David (Isaiah 11:1) via Solomon (1Chronicles 22:8-10, 2 Chronicles 7:18).
- The "spirit of the Lord" will be upon him (Isaiah 11:2)
- Evil and tyranny will not be able to stand before his leadership (Isaiah 11:4)
- Knowledge of God will fill the world (Isaiah 11:0)
- He will include and attract people from all cultures and nations (Isaiah 11:10)
- Death will be swallowed up forever (Isaiah 25:8)
- There will be no more hunger or illness, and death will cease (Isaiah 25:8)
- All of the dead will rise again (Isaiah 26:19)
- The people of God will experience eternal joy and gladness (Isaiah 51:11)
- He will be a messenger of peace for the whole world (Isaiah 52:7)
- Weapons of war will be destroyed (Ezekiel 39:9)

How ancient Hebrew scholars may have interpreted any particular prophetic passage, or even how much they agreed as to the definitive list of messianic prophecies, is not the issue here. The point here is that among the Jewish people of first century Palestine, an intense messianic consciousness, derived from the Hebrew prophets of old, was not only manifest, but had reached that *kairotic* moment of which the Apostle Paul speaks (Galatians 4:4-7).

This prophetic consciousness is expressed in ancient Israel's eschatology. R. T. France, Principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford therefore writes:

From Amos to the Exile, and beyond, we find frequent explicit predictions of "the day of Yahweh." Expressions such as "in the day" and "the days are coming" give further evidence of a continuing expectation of the day of Yahweh, a decisive time of judgment (on the nations, and on Israel herself) and restoration. While similar phrases sometimes refer to definite acts of judgment in the near future, this cannot be said of expressions like "in the end of days," nor of the pictures of the coming golden age such as occur in Isaiah 11:1-9 or Zephaniah 3:11-20; the universal character of the work of God so described demands an eschatological future frame of reference. It may not be easy, or even desirable to separate the historical from the eschatological; the immediate and distant future are generally tantalizingly telescoped in a single perspective.⁵⁰

France argues that there can, therefore, be no doubt of a Jewish eschatology which saw a future decisive act of God resulting in a final end to the present order and a new beginning.⁵¹ Although he sees messianic expectations, in terms of references to a specific agent, as forming only a small part of this eschatological hope, it is, nevertheless, entirely reasonable to understand this eschatology as yet another angle from which to view what is here referred to as the prophetic consciousness of the people of Second Temple Israel. To anyone who thinks consciousness unreal it might be pointed out that many quantum physicists believe consciousness is the only real reality.

Miraculous Signs & Prophetic Consciousness

A further indication of the depth and reality of the prophetic consciousness is to be found in Jesus's miracles, or "signs," as fulfillment of Old Testament promise and his

⁵⁰ R.T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament*, 86.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

response to the evils of human suffering—illness, death, damnation, and cosmic catastrophe.⁵² The listing by Jesus of his miracles for the disciples of John the Baptist in Matthew 11:5 as evidence that he was indeed "the one to come," the hoped for messiah, can be linked to Isaiah 35:5 which foretells the marvels of the eschatological age to come. All the stories of exorcisms point to Christ's final victory over Satanic evil, the miracle story of the loaves of bread in which those who have followed Jesus far into the country side are fed, stir images of the feeding and sustaining of the Hebrews in their forty years of wandering in the desert wilderness, and the stilling of the storm on Lake Galilee speaks of God's presence, peace, and power in times of chaos and desperation. When Jesus gives sight to the blind (John 9:5), he shows himself to be the illuminating light of the word; when he feeds the five thousand (John 6:35) he is seen, not just as the bread giver, but the very "bread of life;" and when he raises Lazarus from the dead (John 11:25), he is known as "the resurrection and the life" itself. The prophetic consciousness then is not something confined to a particular moment of time long ago, but an awareness that travels from the prophets of ancient Palestine to every man and to every woman open to it in their own time and place. It is a river that begins in the first chapters of Genesis and flows past Revelation. Even if one is dismissive of the very notion of miracles, we still must come to terms with the substantial fact that the earliest Christians believed Jesus to be the fulfillment of this ancient consciousness.

Conclusion

Michael Langford in his *Unblind Faith: A New Approach for the Twenty-First Century*, writes simply of the complex process of coming to an intelligent Christian faith:

⁵² See: Prosper Grech, *An Outline of New Testament Spirituality*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2011, 9.

I have argued that the reflective Christian comes to the New Testament stories in several stages; first, an awareness of the extraordinary nature of Jesus of Nazareth— relying on perfectly plausible accounts of his life and character and teaching; second, a reasonably grounded belief in a personal God who genuinely conveyed a message through the prophets; third, a decision that this Jesus is the Messiah to whom the prophetic tradition looked forward; and then, fourth, a rereading of the gospel stories in the light of these steps that have been taken. In this context, without any gullibility a reflective person may be unwilling to dismiss outright the historical reality of some actual events of an extraordinary and, perhaps unique nature, even though they remain extremely puzzled about exactly what happened.⁵³

This paper has been written with Langford's four-stage process of becoming Christian in sight, in particular, and with some single mindedness, it has been an exploration of that stage which involves the belief that God genuinely conveyed through the prophets the message of the coming Messiah. However, it has attempted to do so in a dynamic rather than wooden fashion.

Those familiar with Paul Ricoeur's notion of a hermeneutic that travels from a precritical *naïveté* in its understanding, through the desert of the critical stage, and finally arrives at the springs of the postcritical, will recognize this as the journey taken here. The person of Christian faith may at first read the messianic prophecies utilized by the New Testament writers as Nostradamus like predictions.⁵⁴ This Ricoeur referred to as "the first *naïveté*." However, once problems are recognized in a text, for example the intent of the original author seems different than the way an author uses it in the New

⁵³ Michael J. Langford, *Unblind Faith: A New Approach for the Twenty-First Century* (London: SCM Press, 1982), 144.

⁵⁴ Or what they imagine the supposed predictions of Nostradamus to be like.

Testament, or multiple texts appear to have been combined in order to produce one prophecy, or the Hebrew text does not look like a prophecy at all, then one may become lost and wander aimlessly in a wilderness of hyper criticism. They may become expert at debunking the biblical narrative, and far too "sophisticated" to discover that reality inherent and discernable only in a condition of complete simplicity. But, if they are able to appreciate not only the exegetical methodology employed and its rigor, but also the magnitude and actual existence of what has been referred to here as the prophetic consciousness, there is the possibility they may enter that third stage—the post critical phase in which they recognize the sorts of problems sons and daughters of the *Age of Reason* cannot ignore; yet, simultaneously may see in them a reality that is transcendent and beautiful, and a truth that is more than merely emblematic.⁵⁵

So what, during Advent and Christmas, might be our final reply to those whose laborious analysis dismisses the possibility of Old Testament prophecy as a part of that maturing of history and spiritual consciousness which leads to that *kairotic* moment, to that "fullness of time," into which the Messiah is sent (Gal. 4:4)? Perhaps we should simply reiterate: "You don't understand. It's turtles, the mystery of prophetic Messianic consciousness, all the way down."

⁵⁵ Ricoeur has at times been criticized for moving too far towards a hermeneutic of subjectivism, or even of mysticism, in his concept of the "second naiveté, and in his insistence that a text is not truly understood until one lives into its meaning, but in what he thought of as a "hermeneutic of suspicion" Ricoeur sought to integrate both art and science, both critical analysis and experientially listening to the text. He said the interpreter must be critically open. See: G. D. Robinson, "Paul Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion: A Brief Overview and Critique" *Premise Journal* / Volume II / November 8 / September 27, 1995 / 2, 12.

About This Book

Advent Meditations for a World On the Brink is about hope – hope for individual men and women attempting to live as well and as happily as they can in a world, that although created good and beautiful, is full of difficulty and discouragement; and at the present moment clearly poised on the brink of apocalyptic catastrophe. It is a book written for Christian believers who wish to deepen their knowledge, wisdom, and awareness of Christ's presence, which is always with us on both the worst and best of life's roads; and, to do so in a way that does not compromise their intellectual integrity. The Biblical text for each of these four advent meditations is, therefore, examined in regard to those historical and linguistic elements that help shape its meaning, and that assist us in understanding the puzzling questions that swirl around messianic prophecy, the nativity, and how to live in a world on the brink. But more important, it encourages the sort of personal involvement with the texts without which no truly spiritual understanding or hope is possible.

The Author

Larry Hart is the author of a number of books and articles. His latest work, *A Grammar of Holy Mystery*, will be ready for publication in early 2021. He holds graduate degrees in Counseling Psychology, Religion, Theology and Pastoral Care. He and his wife Brenda, along with their dog Jack, live a quiet and prayerful life near the Pacific.

Larry's personal website spiritual-christian.com
and blog awakeningheart.spiritual-christian.com