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God with a Human Face by John C. Purdy

John C. Purdy is a retired minister of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A), which he served for 26 years as an editor of curriculum resource. He is also the author of Parables at Work (Westminster) and God with a Human Face (Westminster/Knox). God with a Human Face was published by Westminster/John Knox in l993 and is used by permission of the author, who also prepared the text for Religion Online.

Presents the life and work of Jesus, from birth to resurrection. Employing passages chosen from all four of the Gospels, it explores the idea that the human face of God is turned to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Chapter 1: God is a Grown-up (Matt. 1:1-25; Luke 2:40)

God knows at first-hand the mysteries of childhood, youth, and adulthood.

Chapter 2: God Can Take the Heat(Mark 1:9 - 11; Luke 4:1-13)

God does not turn away in the face of evil.

Chapter 3: God is a Visionary (Luke 4:16-21)

God has a vision of a better world for all of humanity.

Chapter 4: God Freely Forgives (Mark 2:1-12)

God freely forgives sins, which are not to be regarded as cause for illness.

Chapter 5: God Feeds the Hungry (Mark 8:1-9)

God feeds the hungry; it would be inhuman of God to do less.

Chapter 6: God Cares About Money (Matt 5:1-2; 6:19- 21; 24-33)

If we care about the things God cares about, God will take care of the money.

Chapter 7: God Is a Peacemaker (Mark 4:35-41)

God works in mysterious ways to bring peace on earth.

Chapter 8: God Allows All Prayers (Mark 11:15-18)

There are no prayers that God will not allow.

Chapter 9: God Loves Beyond Betrayal (John 13:1-11)

God's love runs the risk of betrayal.

Chapter 10: God Is an Ex-Convict? (John 18-19, selected verses)

It would seem that God knows first hand what it is to be in prison.

Chapter ll: God Undertook Death (John 19:1 6b-1 9, 31-53, 41-42)

In the crucifixion, God took death upon God's self.

Chapter 12: God Goes Ahead of Us (Matt.28:1-8)

God is up ahead of us, waiting for us to catch up with what God is doing.

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Chapter 1: God is a Grown-up (Matt. 1:1-25; Luke 2:40)

Eduardo, a child of the Rio de Janeiro slums, stood looking over the city. He said to Robert Coles: "If I had a choice, to pick the way I'd die, I'd choose to be carried off by the wind over to the ocean. I'd be made clean twice before I saw His face." When the psychiatrist turned to the boy with a quizzical look, Eduardo said in a voice so quiet it was almost a whisper, "God's face" (Coles, *The* Moral Life of Children, 1986, p. 135). That ten-year-old Brazilian whispered the greatest of all hopes: that one might see the face of God.

The message of Christianity is that such hopes are not fancies: The human face of God is turned to us in the person of Jesus Christ. The Presbyterians declare in their Brief Statement of Faith: "We trust in Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God." The apostle Paul wrote: "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). This book is about that face and the story it tells about God.

The story begins with Jesus' birth:

> *Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:*

"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,

and they shall name him Emmanuel,"

which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. (Matt. 1:18 - 25)

The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him. (Luke 2:40)

God acquired a human face in the same way you did: God arranged to be born into the world. The Creator slipped into Creation as a baby. But not an ordinary baby. Before the child's mother came together with her promised husband, she was found to be pregnant. The father of the child was not the man to whom Mary was engaged. Rather, the child was conceived in her by the Spirit of God. In a way beyond our comprehension, God arranged to be born of a woman without the agency of a man.

How innocent it sounds! "She was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit." Nobody got zapped, nobody got displaced. Mary was not raped by a demon, like the mother in Rosemary's Baby*;* nor was she seduced by a god, like Europa of Greek mythology. Nor was an otherwise ordinary fetus taken over, as it were, by a superior being. One day Mary was a young, inexperienced virgin; the next day she was pregnant with the Messiah.

If you find that outrageous, consider Joseph. How hard must it have been for him to accept the fact that his betrothed was pregnant - and not by him. But God had chosen wisely. Joseph was a righteous man, kind and gentle, patient, forgiving. Many men, in outraged masculine pride, would have kicked the woman out into the street. Most men would have allowed her to suffer the public disgrace she had apparently brought on herself. But Joseph was not compelled to do the "macho" thing. He set aside wounded pride and offended values, and planned to put a quiet end to the engagement.

Was Joseph merely shielding his own reputation? Was he thinking of the innocent child? Who knows? Let us rather suppose that God had chosen this couple with great foresight. Joseph was a model of restraint and compassion - a fit role model for a growing boy. Strong, yet tender - the sort of adoptive father who might help a boy to grow up feeling good about being male.

However, before Joseph could act on his own and arrange for a quiet annulment or divorce, something greater was asked of him. He had a dream. An angel of God appeared with a most remarkable message: "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his

people from their sins."

The whole enterprise suddenly was shot through with mystery. It is not uncommon in our day to know the sex of an unborn child. And many babies have names waiting for them when they are born; witness all the "juniors" in the world. But this baby had a remarkable genesis - he was conceived by the Spirit. And he had an equally remarkable destiny - he would save his people from their sins. Some dream!

When Joseph woke, he was faced with a momentous choice. Should he trust the dream as being more than a fantasy? If so, should he do what was asked? Should he let the marriage go forward, as though the child were his own?

Upon Joseph's choice everything now depended. Would the child be born to a single parent or to a stable couple? Would the child have a lineage, be a son of a son of David, or would he have to wonder where he came from? Would he be named Jesus, his people's savior? Or would some other name be given him - James or John, perhaps? All rested on the obedience of Joseph. God had entrusted the whole enterprise to the obedience of this one man. If Joseph was generous enough not to put Mary to public disgrace, would he be even more beneficent? Would he take her as wife and claim the child as his own?

Let neither pro-choice nor anti-abortion folks rush in to claim Joseph as patron saint. Let it be said on the side of anti-abortionists that from the moment of conception this baby had an identity, a name, and a destiny. Let it be said also that Joseph was given a choice. God did not zap Joseph any more than God zapped Mary; Joseph was free to continue with his plan to put Mary away and leave her to deal with the unborn child. Possibly she would have been driven to despair and would have sought an abortion. Other women have been driven to that solution by men who abandoned them. But Joseph could also choose to take Mary into his family as his wife; he could let the child be born as if it were his own.

"When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus." Joseph not only "did the right thing" by Mary, but also did not claim any sexual rights until after the baby had been born. He also followed the angel's command and named the child Jesus.

Joseph seems a bit unimaginative. He might have called the baby Jesus Emmanuel. For the storyteller informs us of an ancient prophecy about the birth of a son to a virgin. It was said by God through the prophet that the child's name should be Emmanuel, which means "God is with us." But Joseph was obedient to the heavenly dream; he did what he was told, no more, no less. The child was born and was named Jesus. In every way the son of Mary and Joseph was a wanted child.

God Knows Childhood

But Jesus was a child, not yet a man. God not only knows what it is like to be born, God also knows the mystery of childhood. God is a grown-up. God knows the secret way that leads from infancy through childhood and youth to maturity. All that is implied in the terse statement: "The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor [grace] of God was upon him."

If this were an ordinary biography, we would insist upon knowing much, much more about Jesus' childhood. How is it possible to know a person unless one knows in some detail about his or her early years? For it is in infancy that the person is formed. In The Hurried Child (1981), psychologist David Elkind says that our favorite metaphors for childhood are the growing plant and the raw material. As a plant grows and develops from a seed, so a child follows a developmental path laid down in advance by nature. And as a lump of clay is shaped by the sculptor's fingers and then hardened in the heat of the kiln, so the child is shaped and toughened by the hand and furnace of circumstance. Between the dual actions of nature and nurture, the person is formed.

How did Jesus respond to the challenges of each stage of growth, we wonder? And what were the forces of circumstance and necessity that bore in on him at each stage?

"The child grew," we are told. Jesus successfully negotiated the infinite number of steps between babyhood and maturity. Do you remember from childhood the riddle of the frog and the well? If a frog falls into a well, so the riddle went, and with each jump covers half the distance remaining to the top, how many jumps will it take the frog to escape? An infinite number, of course. And if one asks how many steps lead from infancy to maturity, we have to say the same. We know that children grow up, just as frogs jump from wells. But we cannot chart the path with scientific and numerical exactness.

Tell me, if you know, just how many steps there are in the process by which the child proceeds from saying "mama" and "dada" to pronouncing "semiconductor" and "anthropomorphic." And how many learned responses lead from a baby's first cry to the singing of an operatic aria? And how does the toddler, who has difficulty putting one wooden block on top of another, over time learn to build a house with lumber, hammer, nails, saw, chisel, and plane?

Jesus managed to complete this complex, intricate, mostly mysterious process of growing up. From being a helpless baby he progressed to adulthood, where he was capable of holding down a job, getting married and having children(should he so choose),making and keeping friends, earning and spending and saving money, respecting confidences, theorizing about the origins of things, separating fancy from fact, getting angry without having to hurt others, caring for others without needing to possess them. In him both nature and nurture did their necessary work.

It all sounds so matter-of-fact. But how a child grows to responsible maturity is one of life's

awesome mysteries. In her novella Good Will, Jane Smiley creates what seem ideal circumstances for the growth and development of a child. Bob and Liz Miller choose to raise their one child on a Pennsylvania farm. They do nearly everything for their own survival and nourishment: raise food, care for animals, sew, weave, hammer, can vegetables, cut ice from the pond, butcher, chop and burn their own wood. They have no car, no TV, no phone. Tommy works alongside both father and mother, sharing warmth and chores and conversation; he is the opposite of the "hurried child" that David Elkind worries so about. And yet, the Millers are finally driven from their Eden by the destructive behavior of their son toward a black schoolmate. When Tommy sets fire to the other child's house, the Millers must move to town and take up regular work to pay for the damages. Despite their careful horticulture, the twig was bent.

Unlike Tommy Miller, Jesus reacted positively to every demand. Scripture says that "the child ... became strong." Jesus evidently thrived on stress - physical stress, mental stress, moral stress. He was not bent, lamed, or shamed by what he experienced. Rather than being used up by stress, he used it to become stronger.

He grew up among the usual demands and strains on a child and youth: In his life there were bullies, thunderstorms, hungry times, illnesses, losses. He knew times of hunger as well as feasting, deserts as well as gardens, work as well as play. He saw sex and religion being peddled; he was no stranger to the outcast, the leper, the lame, the corrupt. He knew that the strong abuse the weak, politicians lie, men beat their wives, wives manipulate their husbands. He encountered occupying soldiers, rapacious tax collectors, venal public officials, frightened priests, thieving beggars.

Somehow on all of this Jesus thrived: He acquired the stamina for going days without food and water; he gained the courage to stand his ground when attacked by superior force. He learned to wait out storms, to be amused by the meddling of officials, to accept weakness in his friends. Although Jesus knew the helplessness of childhood, there was in him no self-pity. He knew nothing of the weakness of Tiny Tim in Dickens's Christmas Carol. When Bob Cratchit brings the little crippled boy home from church on Christmas, he says to his wife: "He told me, coming home, that he hoped people saw him in the church, because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant to them to remember upon Christmas Day, who made lame beggars walk, and blind men see." Jesus learned sympathy for the lame, but not because he himself had been lamed by life.

Also, "the child ... [was] filled with wisdom." Jesus discovered that a fool and his money are soon parted, that the love of money is the root of many evils, that you cannot tell a book by its cover. He learned that power corrupts, that an army marches on its stomach, and that if you would teach a hungry man, first you had better feed him. He knew soon enough about fools' names and fools' faces always being seen in public places. He learned that sin and sickness are not always the two sides of the same coin, that the devil can quote scripture, that a smile

sometimes is a mask for hate.

Wisdom is no rarer in children than in adults, but it is harder to detect. A good deal of wisdom consists in not showing off one's intelligence, and children are often too smart to appear to be wise. The Diary of Anne Frank appeals to generation after generation, not only because Anne was wise, but because her insights were kept secret. She comes to us, not as a child described by adults, but as herself. If Jesus had kept a diary, it might have been like that of Anne Frank - the record of one who learned to be discriminating in what she revealed.

And, finally, "the favor of God was upon him." It was evident to Jesus' contemporaries that he was one whom God loved and blessed.

In The Hurried Child, David Elkind marvels at what he calls "the invulnerables" - children who cope successfully with unusual stress. They exhibit these qualities, he says:

1. *Social competence.* Invulnerables seem at ease with peers and adults and make others at ease with them.

2. *Impression management.* Invulnerables are able to present themselves as appealing and charming....

3. *Self-confidence.* Such children have a sense of their own competence and ability to master stress situations. Accordingly, they see problems as a challenge rather than as evidence of their incompetence....

4. *Independence.* Invulnerables are independent and are not swayed by suggestion.

5. *Achievement.* Invulnerables are producers. .. . Many are exceptionally original and creative. (p. 181)

Jesus may well have seemed to his contemporaries to be one of Elkind's "invulnerables." That is what "the favor of God" suggests.

Life is not always fair; some children seem to be favored by God, some not much favored. Chris Zajac, the fifth-grade teacher in Tracy Kidder's Among Schoolchildren (1989) knows both kinds. Among the minority children in her class are Judith and Clarence. Judith is pretty, friendly, responsible, intelligent. When she is not doing top-quality work in class, Judith works on her novel, a feminist tale called Shana and the Warriors. After reading an essay that Judith wrote about a certain sadness shared with her mother, Chris says to herself: "This girl is about as mature as I am. . . . And smarter" (p. 86). But then there is Clarence, who proves so disruptive Chris has to accede to his being sent to a special school. "Chris gazed at the boy,

looking for words that might improve that empty feeling she had about him, that he was like a calendar with no numbers on it, a future without hope, already determined" (p. 158).

But Jesus "grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him." He escaped the crippling of Tiny Tim, the wasted anger of Clarence, the self-destruction of Tommy Miller. Like Anne and Judith, he thrived on challenge. He made his way surely and successfully along the narrow bridge that leads from infancy to maturity.

Our story describes that bridge in a very sketchy way; we have only the barest outline of it - growth, strength, wisdom, favor - nothing more. We have to fill in that outline with what we know about childhood. But the only childhood truly accessible to us is our own. The human face of God who lived a childhood looks back at us from the mirror of memory.

What were the critical events in your growing up? What were the defining moments? Listen to a fourteen-year-old, the first white youth to speak to a black youth in one of Atlanta's desegregated schools:

"I didn't want any part of them here. They belong with their own, and we belong with our own - that's what we all said. Then those two kids came here, and they had a tough time. They were all by themselves. The school had to get police protection for them. We didn't want them, and they knew it. But we told them so, in case they were slow to get the message. I didn't hold back, no more than anyone else. I said, 'Go, nigger, go,' with all the others. I meant it. But after a few weeks, I began to see a kid, not a nigger - a guy who knew how to smile when it was rough going, and who walked straight and tall, and was polite. I told my parents, 'It's a real shame that someone like him has to pay for the trouble caused by all those federal judges.'

"Then it happened. I saw a few people cuss at him. 'The dirty nigger,' they kept on calling him, and soon they were pushing him in a corner, and it looked like trouble, bad trouble. I went over and broke it up. I said, 'Hey, cut it out.' They all looked at me as if I was crazy, my white buddies and the nigger, too. But my buddies stopped, and the nigger left. Before he left, though, I spoke to him. I didn't mean to, actually! It just came out of my mouth. I was surprised to hear the words myself: 'I'm sorry.' As soon as he was gone, my friend gave it to me: 'What do you mean, "I'm sorry"!' I didn't know what to say. I was as silent as the nigger they stopped. After a few minutes, we all went to basketball practice. That was the strangest moment of my life." (pp. 27 - 28)

Later on he confided to Robert Coles: "Something in me just drew the line, and something in me began to change, I think."

When did something in you draw a line? When did you discover that God is a grown-up? that God does not want you to remain forever a child?

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Chapter 2: God Can Take the Heat(Mark 1:9 - 11; Luke 4:1-13)

A decisive battle of the Civil War took place in the heart of Robert E. Lee. After the firing on Fort Sumter, President Abraham Lincoln offered to appoint Lee as commander of the Union armies. Lee decided that his first loyalty was to his home state, so he accepted instead the appointment as head of the state militia of Virginia While Lincoln searched for a general who could match wits and arms with Lee, the war was nearly lost for the Union. What if Lee had accepted Lincoln's offer? Quite possibly the struggle would have been quickly settled, secession defeated, and the culture of the Old South preserved. Today Robert E. Lee might be hailed as the savior of his people - in both South and North.

Jesus' appointment as savior of his people took place in the following way:

> *In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased. "(Mark 1:9 - 11)*
>
> *Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread. "Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'*
>
> *Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority, for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written,*

'Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.'"

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son o[God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you,
to protect you,'
and
'On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'

Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' "When the devil hail finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

(Luke 4:1 - 13)

Many of us bring to this narrative vivid images of the Spirit as a bird and of the devil as a man with horns and a tail. Some may sympathize with the woman in the limerick:

There was an old maid from our region,
Who had no use for religion.
To the day that she died,
She always denied
The Father, the Son, and the Pigeon.

Others may find the figure of the devil equally ridiculous. They can't shake off the notion that he belongs with scarecrows, goblins, and white-sheeted ghosts.

But the biblical narrative does not say that the Spirit took the form of a dove, nor that the devil appeared to Jesus as a living being. The story says only that Jesus had a vision of the Spirit coming down "like a dove"; the devil is represented only by a voice. The question of whether the devil actually exists lies outside the scope of this study. Martin Luther, premier Protestant forebear, believed that indeed the devil exists. But Luther insisted that the devil cannot take corporeal shape, and he never said the devil was to be feared - only resisted! In "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," he taught us to sing:

The prince of darkness grim,
We tremble not for him;

His rage we can endure,
For lo! his doom is sure,
One little word shall fell him.

With those cautionary comments about doves and devils in mind, let us turn our attention to the story of Jesus' appointment and testing.

The Baptism

The story begins with a baptism. Jesus leaves his hometown and goes to the Jordan, where John baptizes him in that river. There is nothing about Jesus' baptism to distinguish it from yours and mine, except that apparently he was immersed, while many of us were sprinkled. But this ordinary event is the signal for extraordinary events to follow; the baptism is not the explosion, but rather the fuse.

Immediately after the baptism a remarkable vision is given to Jesus. There is a sudden rent in the dome of the heavens arching over his head - as though a melon had been sliced open with a knife. And through this rent, like a bird fluttering to earth, comes the Spirit of God. And like a bird alighting on its nest, the Spirit lights on Jesus.

There is nothing in our own experience to help us understand what this was like, nor is there anything comparable in literature or science. This may explain why the arts have had such a free hand in fashioning symbols for the Spirit - why there are so many stained glass windows with upside-down birds. In Jesus' vision the dove was an outward sign of an invisible occurrence: Henceforth Jesus would be the Spirit-filled man. In, with, and under the human spirit by which he was moved would be the Spirit of God.

The gift of the Spirit is not to be understood as bestowing some kind of magical power. If you have observed mourning doves in your backyard, you know that these creatures are hardly symbols of dominance. The descent of the dove signifies only that the Spirit has come down from God to anoint and equip Jesus as Savior.

For the human spirit, however noble it may sometimes be, is not equal to the task of salvation. We human beings cannot be saved by the best of our genius, courage, wit, heart, or sympathy. If Lee's refusal to accept the appointment as head of the Union armies was one pivotal moment in the Civil War, so was his decision to send Pickett's division across the fields of Gettysburg. After the failure of that charge, Lee went among his troops and confessed his culpability. His spirit had failed him and his cause.

In the preceding chapter, we heard that Jesus grew to be strong, filled with wisdom, and favored by God. But that, in itself, was not sufficient for the work to which he was called. The Spirit of

God was needed.

"My Son, the Beloved"

When Jesus saw the Spirit descending on him, there was more. The vision was accompanied by a voice. Through the rent in the sky by which the Spirit came sounded these words: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." This was not so much a call as it was a certification. When you go to your doctor's office, you see on the wall a certification of her right to practice her specialty - evidence that she has earned the right to be called an internist or a neurosurgeon. The voice from heaven was Jesus' certification. He might now act on God's authority, as God's Son, in confidence that he had God's blessing. The voice was no license to act like God, to play at being God, any more than the certificate on your doctor's wall is an ironclad guarantee that you will be cured of cancer! But it is the doctor's validation to perform her work in the confidence that good things will happen.

The voice from heaven gives Jesus a similar confidence. Henceforth he knows his Father's voice. He can distinguish between that voice and the murmurings of the id, the ego, or the superego. The voice of conscience is notoriously unreliable: As his defense for killing Jews, Adolf Eichmann said that he was only carrying out his duty. Jesus may also know when it is God who speaks to him through scripture - and when it is the devil who is whispering to him in scriptural words.

For it is tormenting to the willing spirit to hear voices - to have urgings and impulses - and not to know from whence they come. The young person wonders, Am I obsessed with God's cause, or am I possessed and driven by personal ambition? I feel that there are things I ought to do, things that would benefit humankind. But is it only the siren song of success I hear? Or am I in tune with God?

After his baptismal experience, Jesus may trust his inner ear; he may know that the voices are not merely lust or hunger or the need for glory. He may listen for the true, insistent, familiar voice of the Father, prompting him as he enacts his role as savior.

Passing the Tests

The first prompting of the Spirit sends Jesus into the wilderness, where for forty days he is without food. And during that time, he is allowed to be tempted by the devil. Does the devil come to him only as a voice? Does he have a vision of the devil, comparable to that of the dove? We are not told, nor are we told all that transpires. We are privy only to the final three temptations.

A controversial film of 1988 was Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ,* based on a

novel of the same name by Nikos Kazantzakis. The film follows - with some fidelity - the biblical story of Jesus up to the crucifixion. There Jesus' ultimate temptation is revealed: He has a dream in which he is taken down from the cross, marries his sweetheart - Mary Magdalene - and enjoys a normal life, with children, and grandchildren.

Perhaps Jesus was tempted with the option of a normal life. Perhaps, like Goethe's Faust, he was tempted with adventure, beauty, economic power, endless excitement. The Gospel story seems to invite us to regard the final three temptations as a kind of final exam, covering all the other temptations that have been encountered in the course of the forty days.

We are told that Jesus was terribly hungry by the time these three final temptations were offered. Our physical needs are not, in themselves, temptations. Our hungers for food, sex, and shelter from the cold are not temptations. But they make us more vulnerable to temptation. C. S. Lewis's The Screwtape Letters (1943) purport to be written by a demon in hell to his nephew on earth. In one letter Screwtape writes to Wormwood:

> "I once had a patient, a sound atheist, who used to read in the British Museum. One day, as he sat reading, I saw a train of thought in his mind beginning to go the wrong way. The Enemy, of course, was at his elbow in a moment. Before I knew where I was I saw my twenty years' work beginning to totter. If! had lost my head and begun to attempt a defence by argument I should have been undone. But I was not such a fool. I struck instantly at the part of the man which I had best under my control and suggested that it was just about time he had some lunch. The Enemy presumably made the counter-suggestion (you know how one can never *quite* overhear what He says to them?) that this was more important than lunch. At least I think that must have been His line for when I said 'Quite. In fact much *too* important to tackle at the end of a morning,' the patient brightened up considerably; and by the time I had added 'Much better come back after lunch and go into it with a fresh mind,' he was already halfway to the door." (pp. 12 - 13)

The devil is an expert counselor. Note the first temptation. Jesus is famished - likely not far from death. The psychic powers of humans are always at their weakest when physical powers are low. And the suggestion the devil makes is fiendish in its relevance: "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." And why not? What good is faith without food? How is one to be the savior of one's people if one cannot provide them with bread? And what does it mean to be the Son of the God who created the universe if one has no control over the forces of nature? Besides, to allow oneself to starve to death - when the means of securing life are at hand - is a form of suicide.

Jesus counters with a verse from scripture: "One does not live by bread alone." Jesus knows with whom he has to deal; he is not going to do anything the devil suggests, no matter how practical or therapeutic. So he says, in effect: I do not have to save my own life; to end my life or to continue it is not my choice to make.

The devil then shifts the grounds of the attack. Jesus is taken up on some high place, where the whole earth is spread out beneath him - where the various nations appear to him like multi-colored states on a map. The devil offers Jesus their kingship - with both its power and its glory. Such a prospect has lured other young men: Alexander, Napoleon. Any youth with great confidence in destiny and imagination enough to see the whole world may dream of being its exalted ruler. The reach for power by the young and strong is just as human as the reach for bread when one is famished.

Is it a bona fide offer? Is the devil offering Jesus something that is within his powers to give? Martin Luther thought so. According to a biographer: "Christ and the Devil were equally real to him. . . . Christ and Satan wage a cosmic war for mastery over church and world. .. . Satan's power is not unlimited; he must stay within specified bounds, but until doomsday they encompass the whole world" (Heiko Oberman, "Luther Against the Devil" *Christian Century* 107/3,Jan. 24, 1990, pp. 76, 79).

Note that Jesus does not challenge the right of the devil to make the offer, which has a dual hook - glory and authority. Not only is Jesus offered a shining place in the sun, but also he will have the power to do great good. He can be the world's Judge, who sets right what has been wrong, settles old scores, creates new systems of justice, pulls down the mighty from their thrones, and lifts up the wretched of the earth. The devil is a clever politician: He knows how to offer power in such a way that it does not appear so much as a grab for glory as a chance to do great good.

But the devil's asking price is too high: "If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." To this Jesus makes a simple reply, again quoting scripture: "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Humans have the choice between God and idolatry. There is no Third World of the spirit, a neutral zone that offers refuge from both God and the devil. Who does not choose God choose false gods.

Then the devil shows that he is also a skilled theologian; he knows his Bible and how to quote it. He takes Jesus to the highest point of the temple in Jerusalem and says, in effect: You have been throwing scripture at me; here is some for you. And then he cites verses from the Bible which promise that God will send angels to rescue one who is in trouble. He challenges Jesus to test the validity of that promise by jumping off the roof.

Jesus counters scripture with scripture: "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' "Believing the truth of the Bible and demanding proofs of its veracity are two different things. A God whose promises have to be tested is not a very reliable Father.

And so the devil, having tried every test in his repertoire, packs up and goes away - until a better opportunity shall present itself.

Jesus has successfully passed every test. His appointment is complete. He is equipped, certified, and thoroughly tested. He has proven himself able to resist the temptations that lead to sin and its evil consequences: pride in human self-sufficiency, idolatry, doubt of God's promises.

During World War II, I worked one summer in a factory that made high-speed steel for aircraft. Bars of metal were heated red hot, and then hammered into yet smaller bars. These were heated again and then rolled into rods and strips. Similarly, by his wilderness experience Jesus was hammered and hardened for the work that lay ahead. The Beloved Son showed that he could take the heat.

When we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one" (Matt. 6:13), we are not addressing ourselves to one who does not know what we are up against. God has been exposed to the heat of battle, the hammering of opposition, the very fires of hell. God will not turn away at the approach of the enemy, God will not back down in the face of evil. God can take the heat. At least one Jewish philosopher explains the Holocaust as God's turning his face away. Was this evil too much even for God? Surely God can take the heat even of the ovens of Auschwitz.

An Opportune Time

The story of Jesus' testing ends with the enigmatic statement, "[The devil] departed from him until an opportune time." The statement foretells a continuing presence of evil in this world. In Flannery O'Connor's story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," a family encounters evil in a deserted place. Father, mother, and three children are driving from Tennessee to Florida, with grandmother as a very unwilling passenger. Under the promptings of the old woman, the children bedevil the father into turning up a side road into lonely territory. A cat, smuggled on board by the old woman, escapes and startles the father, who drives the car into a deep ditch. Three men come along - escaped outlaws, led by the Misfit. At first the criminals plan only to take clothes and the car. But when the grandmother recognizes the Misfit and blurts out his name, the entire family is shot and killed. Before he shoots the grandmother, the Misfit explains his name: His various punishments at the hands of society by no means fit his crimes. She invokes the name of our Savior:

> "Jesus!" the old lady cried. "You've got good blood! I know you wouldn't shoot a lady! I know you come from nice people! Pray! Jesus, you ought not to shoot a lady."

Like the devil in the Gospel story, the Misfit is a student of scripture:

> "Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead ... and He shouldn't have done it. He thown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but thow away everything and follow Him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do

> but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can - by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness."

From such cruelty, infantile behavior, fecklessness, and downright stupidity surely God is tempted to turn away! But if the Gospel narrative is to be trusted, God does not turn away in the face of evil. God can take the heat. Yet when have you been sorely tempted to think that God's face has been turned away from you?

16

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God with a Human Face by John C. Purdy

John C. Purdy is a retired minister of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A), which he served for 26 years as an editor of curriculum resource. He is also the author of Parables at Work (Westminster) and God with a Human Face (Westminster/Knox). God with a Human Face was published by Westminster/John Knox in l993 and is used by permission of the author, who also prepared the text for Religion Online.

Chapter 3: God is a Visionary (Luke 4:16-21)

On the morning of December 22, 1989, friends came to the Bucharest home of the dissident poet Mircea Dinescu. "Ceausescu ran away, Ceausescu ran away," they told him. Carrying a revolutionary flag and weeping, Dinescu made his way to the city's television station. He entered a studio, where sympathetic technicians patched him into the national network. The first sign most Romanians had of the overthrow of their tyrant was the appearance on TV of the tear-stained face of Dinescu. He told them, "God has turned his face toward Romania again."

Two millennia earlier, there was this dramatic moment in Roman-occupied Judea:

> *When [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:*
>
> > *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me*
> > *because he has anointed me*
> > *to bring good news to the poor.*
> > *He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery 0/sight to the blind,*
> > *to let the oppressed go free,*
> > *to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*
>
> *And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:16-21)*

This manifesto has inspired generations of socially conscious Christians. At the time of his

retirement at age eighty-seven, Dr. David M. Cory of Brooklyn, New York, was the oldest active Presbyterian clergyman. He was an avowed advocate of the notion that Jesus came to inaugurate radical social betterment. To the *New York Times* reporter who interviewed him, Cory cited chapter four of Luke. This he called "the first recorded sermon of Jesus Christ." And he said: "If ever there was a proclamation of the Social Gospel, that was it" (Peter Steinfels, "Beliefs," *New York Times,* Oct. 27, 1990).

It may be an overstatement to call Luke 4:16-21 the proclamation of the Social Gospel, but it certainly reads like a social manifesto. If it is not a full-blown vision of a new society, it is something well on the way to that. It is an expression by a young man, in physical and spiritual prime, of his dreams for humanity.

Others of comparable age have voiced social visions. Thomas Jefferson was thirty-three when he wrote:

> "We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness -- That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed." (Declaration of Independence, 1776)

In 1951, twenty-six-year-old William F. Buckley, Jr., startled America with God and Man at Yale. He said of his battle to have Christianity and individualism frankly espoused at his alma mater:

> "I myself believe that the duel between Christianity and atheism is the most important in the world. I further believe that the struggle between individualism and collectivism is the same struggle reproduced on another level. I believe that if and when the menace of Communism is gone, other vital battles, at present subordinated, will emerge to the foreground. And the winner must have help from the classroom." (p. xvii)

Martin Luther King, Jr., was thirty-four when from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963 he said:

> "When we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and hamlet, from every state and city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children -- black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Catholics and Protestants -- will be able to join hands and to sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last, free at last; thank God Almighty, we are free at last.'" *(*A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr., 1986, p. 220)

There is no intention here to ground any or all of these visions of human freedom in Jesus' pronouncement at Nazareth. But they provide a background against which we may set that pronouncement: It is the manifesto of a young, courageous social critic, who had been given a powerful vision of the kind of world that God intends.

In the verses that Jesus selected to read from the Hebrew scriptures -- and which he applied to himself and his mission -- four societal groups are singled out as objects of God's intention: the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed. What do we know of such folk in our own time and culture?

The Poor

We know that the poor are not defined by lack of money only; they are not even those who fall below the poverty level. Rather they are those who belong to the culture of poverty. In this world there are millions upon millions who are born, grow up, live out their lives, and die in a state of want and deprivation. They are the folks described in Oscar Lewis's The Children of Sanchez. In the 1950s Lewis went into a slum tenement in Mexico City and did a series of extensive interviews with two generations of one family. He was one of the first to teach us to think of the poor not as those who are temporarily out of work, or the victims of a recession, layoff, or bad harvest, but as those who know nothing but deprivation. We have begun to realize that there is a culture of poverty.

We had once thought that the poor were merely those who had not yet found a decent job. In John Steinbeck's novel The Grapes of Wrath we read about three generations of the Joads. They are rural folks from Oklahoma who lose their farm in the dustbowl years of the '30s and trek to California to look for a new life. But when they reach that land of orange groves, they find that they are treated with hatred arid suspicion. Their desperate struggle for work to earn daily bread is painful. Nor is their plight relieved. In the final scene, Rose of Sharon -- whose baby was stillborn -- gives her breast to a man who is dying of hunger.

When that novel appeared in 1939, we thought it was a heart-breaking description of the poor. But we knew that, given some luck and their own history of hard work and success, the Joads would not remain poor. So they do not fairly represent *the* poor -- those doomed to live out their entire lives in poverty. That whole class of people is something other than what Steinbeck described. They are those who know nothing but poverty and hope for nothing but daily bread. Surely it is possible to yank a few such persons up and out of their misery; but the mass of the poor will remain. There is no realistic hope for them to be anything but poor all of their lives!

The Captives

We have come to think differently of the poor; we have also learned to think differently of

captives. Some of us, as children, thought of captives as white children taken by Indians, or Germans taken prisoner in World War I, or those thrown into prison for robbing or murdering. Then we read first-person accounts of those held in Nazi concentration camps; captivity took on uglier aspects. In the Korean War we learned that men can die from being held captive, even when given food and clothing and fairly decent treatment. In 1980-81 Walter Cronkite daily reminded us of Americans illegally held captive in Iran. In September of 1985 the whole nation was spellbound when Benjamin Weir was released by his terrorist captors and came home to tell about it. In 1988 we saw pictures of the Kurds of Iraq who had been gassed by their own leader, and we knew that an entire people could be held captive. We no longer think of a captive merely as one who has, for a time, been deprived of liberty; we know how captivity compounds evil.

We have begun to think differently about the captives in our prisons. We acknowledge the failure of reformatories to turn out reformed citizens and the failure of penitentiaries to cause men and women to be sorry for their crimes. Psychiatrist and social reformer Karl Menninger wrote The Crime of Punishment, which many of us read as an indictment of our criminal justice system. We have begun to wonder if depriving men and women of their liberty must not necessarily become cruel and inhuman punishment. Instead of an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth, we take a pound of flesh for an ounce of offense.

Also, we have begun to wonder: When some deprive others of their liberty, who are the captives? Is not the whole nation somehow captive to a criminal justice system that makes people worse, not better, citizens? Is it only the slave who is enslaved? Those who hold others captive are often themselves captured - like Br'er Rabbit stuck to the Tar Baby. The ex-slave Frederick Douglass writes in his Narrative of being given as a young boy to a woman who had previously held no slaves:

> "Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me. When I went there, she was a pious, warm, and tenderhearted woman. .Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities. Under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness."

The Blind

And what of the blind to whom Jesus promised sight, whom we may assume to represent many classifications of those whom we call disabled persons? A person who cannot see is classified with the blind, just as one who cannot hear is classified with the deaf. In his speech Jesus might have referred also to the deaf, the lame, the retarded, the leper. There are millions who, because of some mental or physical difference, are lumped together with others and treated as a special social group.

Just how unthinkingly cruel this process can be is the subject of the 1986 movie, *Children of a*

Lesser God, which tells about James Leeds and Sarah Norman. James, about the age of Jesus when he made his synagogue speech, comes to teach at a school for the deaf. He is told by the head of the school, "Nobody's trying to save the world around here. We're just trying to make things a little better for a few deaf kids." But that's not good enough for Leeds; he believes he can lift his students to a higher level of social competence. He meets and falls in love with Sarah, a 25-year-old former student who is employed as a janitor. She quits her job and goes to live with him. James wants to teach Sarah how to talk, even though she does not want to learn. She wants to be prized for who she is - deaf though she may be. Only after she runs away to live independently does James realize how she feels. And in the closing scene, he asks her in all love and humility, "Is there a place, not in silence nor in sound, where we might meet?"

The film teaches us that disabilities, like deafness and blindness, are social as well as individual misfortunes. They create a class, which in turn creates attitudes that are anti-human, hurtful, imprisoning. So that proclamation of "recovery of sight to the blind" means a great deal more than a few people being able to see again, just as cleansing lepers would mean more than healing some sick folks, or restoring hearing would mean more than fixing the ears of some who cannot hear.

The Oppressed

And, finally, who are the oppressed? The Communist Manifesto begins with these words: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebian, lord and serf, guildmaster and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another." Yet a generation ago we would have said that the most oppressed were those living under the system based on Karl Marx's ideas! Living through that generation has led us to widen our understanding of who is oppressed. Some would want to define "the oppressed" as all persons of color, all women, many children, all those living in third world nations, all those who work on assembly lines, disabled persons, and the aged.

In Korea in the 1970s a new way of describing the oppressed came into being. It is called Minjung Theology. It grew out of the struggles of Christian students, pastors, laborers, farmers, and intellectuals for human rights. "Minjung" is based on two Chinese characters meaning "the people" and "the mass." The

Minjung are described by one Korean theologian as "those who are oppressed politically, exploited economically, alienated socially, and kept uneducated in cultural and intellectual matters." A more vivid description is provided by Kim Chi Ha in "The Story of Ando," written when the poet was twenty-eight:

> "Ando was a young man who lived in a small rented room in a slum area in Seoul. He was unsuccessful in anything he attempted. Whenever he tried to stand up on his two

> feet, he saw visions of a crime he was about to commit. In order to avoid the crime, he had to run endlessly. He had to run all day and all night. As a result, Ando was restless and tired all the time.
>
> But his trouble was more than just running and restlessness. He had bad luck in whatever he did and wherever he went. If he earned one dollar, ten dollars were taken away from him. He was robbed and beaten wherever he went until finally he was near starvation. Thus, on one evening he stood up and said, "Damn it! This is a doglike world!" Because he said this, he was taken away and beaten up by the police. He was then taken to court where he was pronounced guilty. His head and legs were chopped off, but he survived with his trunk only. The court issued him a sentence of five-hundred years in prison. In the prison house Ando hit the walls by rolling his trunk. Every time he hit walls, it made a bumping sound which made the powerful people shiver and the wealthy people tremble. This was the sound coming from the minjung. "(Quoted in Jung Young Lee, ed., An Emerging Theology in World Perspective, 1988, p. 1)

God's Favor?

When Jesus preached hope for the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed, did he have in mind such persons as Ando? Sarah Norman? Frederick Douglass? the Sanchez family? Certainly he had in view those in the Empire who were marginalized, outcast, abused -- the unfortunate, the underprivileged. For those whom he named belong to societal groups; they are not merely unfortunate individuals. Nor are they allegories of spiritual conditions, that is, the poor in spirit, captives of ideologies, those blinded by ignorance, those oppressed by neuroses or severe depressions. You may read them that way if you choose to; some have insisted on doing so. But that goes against the plain sense of the biblical story, and it confirms the Marxist charge that religion is the opiate of the people.

How can we be so sure that the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed are representative of social groups? Why is Luke 4:16-2 1 best read as a social manifesto? Look at the final line of the quotation from Isaiah: "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." The scripture promises that a time is coming -- near or far off, who knows? -- when God will turn God's face to such as the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed -- when the light of God's face will shine on the dark corners where they live. "The year of the Lord's favor" is an historical event, not something that happens only within the mind or spirit of individuals. It was of such an event that Dinescu spoke when he said, "God has turned his face toward Romania again."

When we hear Jesus speak such phrases as "good news," "release," "recovery of sight," and "let.. . go free," they are to be interpreted as promising social changes. Whether these changes are to come about through revolutionary, reformist, or evolutionary means is not said. There is no way Jesus' manifesto can be converted -- or perverted -- into a political program. However,

Jesus does declare a social dimension to his historical mission: He has received God's Spirit in order to bring about a new society as well as a new humanity. Although he may be seen to be feeding hungry individuals, comforting those who are in prison, healing the blind, and lifting the burdens from the shoulders of those who are oppressed, his *mission is not merely to individuals.* The feeding of the hungry is a blow in the War on Poverty; the healing of the blind a skirmish in the fight against disabilities.

Does Jesus, then, belong in the same league with Thomas Jefferson, Bill Buckley, and Martin Luther King, Jr.? Was he a radical social critic and reformer? Are we to see him in the Nazareth synagogue as a young man with a clear social vision and keen, prophetic insight? Or should we reverse the question: Do Jefferson, Buckley, King - and Kim Chi Ha - stand in the train and tradition of Jesus Christ? Did his Spirit-inspired preaching, like a match set to gunpowder, set off a train of social criticism, which in every generation afflicts the comfortable and comforts the afflicted?

Those questions are hotly debated in every generation; there is no final answer. But this much is sure: The face of God is not turned away from the poor, the blind, the captive, the oppressed. God sees beyond their present afflictions to a new and better day. God is a social visionary.

In the 19th century, Norfolk Island -- 1,000 miles east of Australia -- served as a prison colony for incorrigibles. One of these was an Irishman, Laurence Frayne; he left a written account of his captivity. He was sent originally to Australia for theft. For attempting to escape, he was sentenced to death. That sentence was commuted and he was sent to Norfolk. As he lay at night chained to the stone floor of his cell, his back scarred with hundreds of lashes, his mind numbed with months in solitary confinement, he despaired. Because he had been reared a Catholic, suicide was unthinkable. For comfort he clung to verses of the Bible that he had memorized as a youth. Night after night, over and over, he recited the words of Psalm 88. The fourteenth verse reads:

> "O Lord, why do you cast me off
> Why do you hide your face from me?

How can we believe that God is blind to the Laurence Fraynes of this world? How can we say that God has no vision of a better world for them?

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John C. Purdy is a retired minister of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A), which he served for 26 years as an editor of curriculum resource. He is also the author of Parables at Work (Westminster) and God with a Human Face (Westminster/Knox). God with a Human Face was published by Westminster/John Knox in l993 and is used by permission of the author, who also prepared the text for Religion Online.

Chapter 4: God Freely Forgives (Mark 2:1-12)

Our pastor was fighting a desperate battle against a malignancy of the liver. One Sunday morning his wife came to the lectern to give the congregation a progress report. From my vantage point in the choir loft I was watching both her and the congregation. Standing in the very place from which her husband had often pronounced the forgiveness of our sins, she said bravely: "God wants Jack to get well. There can be no ifs, ands, or buts about that!" A shiver went through the congregation. This was heavy stuff! Church members, who Sunday after Sunday seemed unmoved when the pastor pronounced the forgiveness of their sins, sat straighter in their pews.

Jesus had quite the opposite experience in his home in Capernaum. There, in the face of a desperate malady, it was the pronouncement of forgiveness that sent an electric shock through the assembled:

> *And when Jesus returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. And many were gathered together, so that there was no longer room for them, not even about the door; and Jesus was preaching the word to them. And some people came, bringing to Jesus a person who was paralyzed, carried by four men. And when they could not get near Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and when they had made an opening, they let down the pallet on which the person lay. And having seen their faith, Jesus said to the one who was paralyzed, "My child, your sins are forgiven." Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, "Why does this man speak thus? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, "Why do you question thus in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the one paralyzed, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your pallet and walk'? But that you may know that the Human One has authority on earth to forgive sins" -- Jesus said to the one who was paralyzed -- ' 'I say to you, rise, take up your pallet and go home. "And the one who had been paralyzed arose, and immediately took up the*

> *pallet and went out before them all; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We never saw anything like this!" (Mark 2:1-12;* An Inclusive Language Lectionary: Readings for Year B**,** *rev. ed. 1987, p. 69)*

Can you think of any circumstance, *any* circumstance, in which you would say to a sick friend, "My child, your sins are forgiven"? Of course not. That is the last thing we want a sick friend to hear from us. It is grim enough to suffer illness without being reminded of one's sins. Long ago we carried up to our mental attic as outworn the notion that sin is responsible for sickness.

But what if the friend were nevertheless convinced that her illness was a punishment for her misdeeds? What if she pleaded for absolution? Still we would hesitate to say, "Your sins are forgiven." Even to imply what we do not believe might bring some kind of punishment on us. So we would bite our lips and be quiet. We would not pronounce forgiveness.

Yet Jesus did. When friends brought a paralytic for healing, .Jesus said to that unfortunate one, "My child, your sins are forgiven." The scene is so dramatic, with the friends ripping open the roof to get to Jesus, that we are diverted from the scandal. But certain theologians who were present were not so diverted. They said to themselves, "It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

In the understanding of these scribes, Jesus was playing with divine fire, which most surely would consume him. According to Greek mythology, Prometheus went to the heavens and brought back fire for the use of humankind. For stealing what was properly the gift of the gods to bestow, Prometheus was doomed to eternal punishment; he was chained to a rock, where an eagle tore at his liver. Jesus' claim to forgive sins was of the same order of audacity. He was claiming a gift that is up to God alone to bestow. If that wasn't blasphemy, it was something very close to it. Wasn't Jesus risking God's ire?

That question makes us squirm. We moderns are cool to blasphemy; we'll tolerate almost any degree of human presumption. We live and let live; our credo is, "Do your own thing." But even we supercooled people wish that Jesus had not said to the paralytic: "My child, your sins are forgiven." Let Jesus speak forgiveness to prostitutes, tax collectors, or even to women caught in adultery. After all, Joseph was promised by the angel that Jesus "will save his people from their sins" (Matt. 2:21). And, of course, let Jesus cleanse the lepers and open the eyes of the blind and make the lame to walk. But please, dear God, let us not get things confused. Sin is one thing; sickness is quite something else. So we have some sympathy for the scribes, whose inner voices sounded a loud alarm.

Jesus' Response

The cure for our uneasiness -- and the key to the story -- is in Jesus' response to the scribes. But before weighing that response, let's speculate about how Jesus might have responded. He had

several options open to him.

Jesus the Jewish Rabbi might have given the scribes a lecture on the relationship of sickness and sin. He might have pointed out to them that paralysis is a telling metaphor for sin. What better symbol for a sinner than one who is paralyzed? Is not sin a freezing of the will that keeps us from doing the good that we know God wants? And is not paralysis, like sin, mysterious? When an innocent child is stricken with polio, we ask: Why was this one chosen, who never did anyone harm? But we could just as well ask at the appearance of evil: From whence does an Adolf Hitler come? a drug lord? a serial killer? a rapist? a child-abuser? We have no more final answers for the flowering of evil than we do for the multiplying of cancer cells. Does not sin, like paralysis in its more severe forms, resist all efforts at cures? Do any of us believe that hardened criminals, amoral youths, and venal politicians can be transformed into model citizens?

Jesus might have given the lecture. Or, Jesus the Compassionate might have shown to the crowd around the paralytic the same tenderness he would later display to famished thousands in the desert. There he was faced with people who had not eaten for several days. Out of pity, he made a meal for all of them from a few pieces of bread and fish. But first he raised a thankful face to heaven, to the One who sends rain to water the earth so that it might be fruitful and feed humankind. In his home in Capernaum Jesus might have appealed to that same generous God. When he perceived that the scribes were offended by his words to the paralytic, he might have chided them for their hardness of heart. What do mere words matter when a human being’s wholeness is at issue? What must God think of people who argue theology over the tortured body of one of God’s creatures?

In responding to the scribes, however, Jesus plays neither the role of the Rabbi nor of the Compassionate One. He does not discuss with his critics the relationship of sickness and sin, nor does he appeal to them to be merciful to a tortured fellow being. Instead he asks the scribes a rhetorical question: "Which is easier, to say to the one paralyzed, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your pallet and walk’?" It doesn’t take a learned scribe to answer that question: It is much easier to pronounce the forgiveness of sins than to tell a paralytic to pick up a mattress and carry it away. For once forgiveness has been pronounced, who can ever say for sure that the sins were or were not forgiven? Forgiveness is an invisible gift. But if you tell another to take up a bed and walk -- and the other cannot or does not do it -- then your words are proven empty.

After asking his question, Jesus says defiantly, "But that you may know that the Human One has authority on earth to forgive sins," turns to the paralytic, and says, "Take up your pallet and go home." And the one who had been paralyzed does as Jesus commands. And all who see it are astonished. And so are we. For neither have we ever seen "anything like this." Those of us who saw the 1990 movie *My Left Foot* thought it marvelous that a paralyzed boy learned to write with the only part of his body over which he had control. How much more astonishing that a

paralyzed man gets up and walks out of Jesus' house!

We are not told how this happens; we are only told why. Surely the key words are "that you may know." The liberation of the paralytic points beyond itself. And to what? What is it that we are to know? Jesus tells us plainly: "That you may know that the Human One has authority on earth to forgive sins." This word is addressed both to the rebellious, unbelieving hearts of the scribes and to the naive, trusting hearts of those who brought their friend on the pallet. That word is this: Emmanuel brings forgiveness; God freely forgives sins. That is the primary meaning of the story of the paralytic.

Oh, there are secondary meanings to the story. Sickness is an apt metaphor for sin, and healing is always and everywhere a reminder of divine mercy. But in reading scripture we must be careful not to mistake secondary for primary meanings. Surely the face of God we see here in Jesus is that of the Redeemer, who frees us from the bondage of sin. God's chief business with us is not healing, but forgiveness.

Modern sensibilities rebel. We are more taken with the image of God as the Divine Physician than as the One Who Forgives. In fact, we rather desperately want to believe that God is in the healing business. That was why there was such a stirring of hope in our congregation when the pastor's wife said, "God wants Jack to get well." We do not want to abandon the search for the God whose primary concern for us is that we live well-adjusted, germ-free, cancer-free lives. Our pursuit of happiness and pursuit of God are scarcely distinguishable.

But humankind suffers from a sickness more profound than medical science can even describe, much less cure. It is what scripture calls sin. It is the malady to which Karl Menninger referred when he wrote a book called Whatever Became of Sin? Sin is that "universal neurosis" which Jesus came to heal. Emmanuel is Redeemer; the human face of God is that of one who freely forgives sins.

Sin and AIDS

It is difficult to listen to the story of the healing of the paralytic and not to hear echoes of contemporary debates and discussion about AIDS. AIDS is the acronym for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. It is a medical condition caused by a mysterious virus (HIV), for which there is as yet no sure antidote. This virus has the effect of diminishing the capacity of the body to fight off infections. AIDS is one of those scourges that come upon humankind from time to time, like the Black Death in the fourteenth century. The native peoples whom Europeans met when they arrived on this continent had no immunity to the diseases carried by the whites. Whole villages, even whole tribes were wiped out by smallpox. AIDS has something of the character of the diseases that decimated Native American peoples - it wreaks havoc because people have no resistance to offer.

The AIDS virus seems most often transmitted through intimate sexual contact and through transfusions of already infected blood. Although millions of heterosexual persons in Africa have AIDS, in the West there is in the public mind a strong suspicion that AIDS is a punishment on persons for promiscuous sexual behavior or for drug abuse. The American Council of Christian Churches -- which claims to represent two million "Bible Christians" -- went on record as affirming that AIDS is God's wrath visited on homosexuals and drug addicts *(New York Times,* November 19, 1989).Jerry Falwell said bluntly, "AIDS is God's judgment on a society that does not live by His rules." And so a stigma is attached to AIDS, no matter how the condition may have been acquired. Children who acquired AIDS through blood transfusions have been hounded from public schools. An AIDS victim risks being treated as a leper was in biblical times -- considered unclean and required to keep a certain distance from others.

The public response to AIDS proves the tenacity of the notion that illness is divine punishment for wrongdoing. We should not toss away as outgrown the belief that sickness is retribution for sin. The notion survives - and with alarming vitality - among us so-called modern, rational, and scientific people.

Is God Two-Faced?

In view of the public reaction to AIDS, the account of the healing of the paralytic is startlingly relevant. We may have thought to have banished bashing the victims of illness; we may have thought it ridiculous to blame the patient instead of the pathology. Epidemics and plagues revive the belief that sickness is not accidental, rather some kind of divine judgment. In AIDS and Its Metaphors (1989) Susan Sontag says, "It seems that societies need to have one illness which becomes identified with evil, and attaches its blame to its 'victims,' but it is hard to be obsessed with more than one" (p. 16).

With the need to identify illness with evil goes hand-.in-hand this belief: The god who visits on us illness as a punishment for sin can revoke the punishment and heal the sinner. This god has two faces, that of the Kindly Healer and that of the Dread Avenger. If we pray hard enough and with sufficient faith, this god will turn to us the countenance of the Kindly Healer.

One of the deities of the Romans was Janus, the god of doorways and of beginnings. In sculptures Janus was pictured as two-faced -- like a doorway, which can let you i_0 or let *you* out. Over time the expression "two-faced" lost the neutra1 meaning of in and out. It came to take on the idea of double-dealing. A two-faced acquaintance is one whom one can never trust; we cannot be sure that that face she shows to us is the same face that she shows to others. A two-faced god is one who also cannot be trusted: Sometimes the face of the Kindly Healer will be turned toward us, sometimes the face of Dread Avenger.

This two-faced god is well known in folklore and in popular religion. This is the god who has to be cajoled to heal. This is the god who just might, if sufficiently badgered or appeased, turn a

smiling face toward the unfortunate. But if all prayers fail and that kindly face is not turned, then the supposition is that the afflicted deserves his fate -- or that his friends and relatives are being punished for being not sufficiently faithful.

This two-faced god is an idol -- a fabrication of the human imagination, a projection of fear and guilt. The countenance of God revealed in Jesus is not that of one with two faces: Dr. Spock for some and Sock-it-to-them for others. Rather it is the face of One who looks upon us with unwavering compassion.

True, Jesus healed the sick. But such acts point away from themselves. They point to the God who heals humankind of what the Bible calls sin. Jesus said this plainly enough in justifying his cure of the paralytic: "That you may know that the Human One has authority on earth to forgive sins. . . take up your pallet and go home." The God whom this story reveals is the one who freely forgives.

A True Witness

Our pastor, whose illness was reported in the opening paragraph of this chapter, died several months after his wife made her statement to the congregation. The malignancy won out, leaving behind a legacy of confusion. We were all numb with grief and guilt. What are the faithful to believe when a gracious and gifted leader is struck down in his prime? Did Jack work himself to death? Did we demand too much of him? Were our many prayers half-hearted? Or did we hammer too noisily upon the doors of heaven? Were we Promethean in our demands that this dear man be healed? And was his wife presumptuous when she said, "God wants Jack to get well"?

No. She was a true and faithful witness. How can we believe that the one who freely forgives does not also freely choose to champion victims of disease and disability? Are *we* not being two-faced if we affirm that God freely forgives, but doubt or deny that God wants us to be whole?

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God with a Human Face by John C. Purdy

John C. Purdy is a retired minister of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A), which he served for 26 years as an editor of curriculum resource. He is also the author of Parables at Work (Westminster) and God with a Human Face (Westminster/Knox). God with a Human Face was published by Westminster/John Knox in l993 and is used by permission of the author, who also prepared the text for Religion Online.

Chapter 5: God Feeds the Hungry (Mark 8:1-9)

In 1943 in a tuberculosis sanitarium near London a young Frenchwoman lay dying. Her name was Simone Weil - teacher, philosopher, writer, and political activist. The only known therapy for tuberculosis was bed rest and hearty meals, but Simone refused the rich diet. Her physician was quoted by a local newspaper as saying, "I tried to get her to take some food. She said she would try. She didn't have any, however, except for some tea and water. The reason she gave r not eating was that she couldn't eat when she thought of the French people starving in France." To her friends Simone must have seemed one more victim of the madness then ruling the world.

The scene shifts to a wilderness in first-century Palestine:

In those days when there was again a great crowd without anything to eat, [Jesus] called his disciples and said to them, "I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way - and some of them have come from a great distance." His disciples replied, "How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?" He asked them, "How many loaves do you have?" They said, "Seven." Then he ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground; and he took the seven loaves, and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute: and they distributed them to the crowd. They had also a few, small fish; and after blessing them, he ordered that these too should be distributed. They ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. Now there were about Jour thousand people. (Mark 8:1-9)

Questions pop up like reporters at a press conference:

"Yes, you in the back row."

"I'm the science editor for CBS-TV. Agronomists are looking for ways to increase the food

supply without cutting down trees or adding petrochemicals to the soil. Can we have more data about the multiplication of available resources?"

"You in the second row, waving your tablet."

"International affairs for the *Times.* I was in China in the ‘50s, observing the effectiveness of the Five Year Plan. Many call it an amazing achievement. But in its final year, population increased at twice the rate of grain production. Are we looking here at an economic miracle?"

"You there in the first row. Yes, you."

"Drama critic for *Newsweek.* Hunger and homelessness are in. The Grapes of Wrath won the Tony Award in 1989. Is anyone planning to make a play or film of the feeding of the four thousand?"

"You, in the glasses."

"I’m from the *London Economist.* Bread and riots go together. The French Revolution was triggered by a doubling in the price of bread in two years. What is the possible political fallout from this handout?"

Such questions suggest that the feeding of the four thousand is a mysterious and complex event, pregnant with many meanings. In the context of this book, however, its meaning is straightforward: *God feeds the hungry.*

Compassion for the hungry is what we should expect of any human being. A dispossessed tenant farmer in The Grapes of Wrath says: "If a fella’s got somepin to eat an’ another fella’s hungry - why the first fella ain’t got no choice." Simone Weil wrote:

> "Thousands of years ago, the Egyptians believed that no soul could justify itself after death unless it could say, 'I have never let any one suffer from hunger.' All Christians know that they are liable to hear Christ Himself say to them one day, 'I was an hungered, and ye gave me no meat' Every one looks on progress as being, in the first place, a transition to a state of human society in which people will not suffer from hunger. To no matter whom the question may be put in general terms, nobody is of the opinion that any man is innocent if, possessing food himself in abundance and finding someone on his doorstep three parts dead from hunger, he brushes past without giving him anything. *(*The Need for Roots, 1952, p.6)

Attention must be paid to Simone Weil; her words and works were wholly consistent. As a child during World War I she refused to eat sugar because French soldiers had none. As a

young teacher she would eat no more than what those on unemployment allowances could afford. When she visited America in 1942, she told her parents, "I will eat no more than in Marseilles." When first hospitalized in England she refused to drink milk - partly because she did not like it, but also because French children could not have any. When she died, the certificate attributed her death to a combination of tuberculosis and starvation.

I think Simone would agree that in feeding the four thousand Jesus acted out of that most basic of human obligations - to feed the hungry neighbor if she is famished and you have bread. I wonder if Simone would agree with my conclusion: Not only does God forgive sin and heal the sick; God also feeds the hungry. A humane God can do no less.

Why Starvation?

That, of course, raises the question: If it is a human obligation to feed the hungry, is it monstrous of God to let people starve to death? Think of the pictures of the emaciated bodies of Ethiopian children and the stricken faces of their parents that suddenly appeared on our TV screens in the fall of 1985. Think of the anguish of the Kurdish refugees, who in the spring of 1991 lined the mountain roads leading from Iraq to Iran. Or the children left homeless by the cyclones in Bangladesh that same spring. Only the most callous among us were not moved to contribute money to the Red Cross, CARE, Church World Service, World Vision, or some other relief agency. Was it inhuman of God to let this happen? If *we* can be moved to act, why not God?

That is the kind of question the devil loves to pose. Recall from chapter 2 the story of Jesus' temptations in the desert. He had been in that wilderness for forty days without food; and if the four thousand that came to hear him were famished after three days, imagine how he must have felt. The devil's first proposal was: "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." The devil is a shrewd philosopher: If A is true, and B always follows A, then must not B be thus? If God is both all-powerful and loving, should God not turn stones to bread to feed the hungry?

There is a sentimental response often given to that question. It is offered in the form of a poem, which contains the lines: "God has no hands but our hands, to do His work today." The verse implies that God's hands are tied by the decision to turn over to us the work of caring for one another. God is not farmer, miller, baker, grocer, or domestic help. If the hungry are to be fed, it is us who must do the feeding.

That same notion is the basis for a folktale about a man who died and went to the place of souls. He was shown a banquet hall, where tables were loaded down with rich food. He was certain he had gone to heaven. At the ringing of a dinner bell, the inhabitants of that place rushed into the room. But all had long spoons tied to each hand, so that they could not feed themselves. Nevertheless, they tried frantically to get the food to their mouths, until attendants came to drive

them from the hall. The newcomer understood that he was in hell, and he begged to be shown heaven. He was taken to another place, where the scene was repeated. There was the banquet hall, the food, the inhabitants with spoons strapped to their hands. But here each fed his or her neighbor!

But poems and stories cannot stifle the question: Why are all the hungry not fed? The devil's query about stones and bread hangs over the scene in the desert like a small, dark cloud. If Jesus fed four thousand with a few loaves and fishes, then why doesn't God feed everyone out of the world's abundant resources? One answer sometimes given is that God provides the abundance, but it is up to us to provide a proper distribution system. Jesus got the hungry folk to sit in orderly rows; he quickly organized his followers to distribute the available food.

But surely the story of the feeding of the four thousand is not about our need for better distribution systems or a more orderly society. It is about God's response to hunger: God feeds the hungry. It would be inhuman of God to do anything else. We must not think of God as watching in transcendent holiness while children's bellies swell and their arms and legs shrink and their lives dry up under an Ethiopian or Bengal or Iraqi sun.

But whatever the narrative of the feeding of the four thousand teaches about God, children do in fact starve to death in our world, even with its great surpluses of food and its technological and organizational wizardry. Children die of malnutrition in refugee camps, even though it is possible for a government to get food to them in a matter of hours. And it will not do to repeat the cant that after all war is hell. Listen to what Simon says about the feeding of all the world's children - Arthur Simon, who for years was director of Bread for the World:

> "Imagine ten children at a table dividing up food. The three healthiest load their plates with large portions, including most of the meat, fish, milk and eggs. They eat what they want and discard the leftovers. Two other children get just enough to meet their basic requirements. The remaining five are left wanting. Three of them - sickly, nervous, apathetic children - manage to stave off the feeling of hunger by filling up on bread and rice. The other two cannot do even that. One dies from dysentery and the second from pneumonia, which they are too weak to ward off." (Bread for the World, 1957, p. 14)

To that there can only be one of two responses: Either God does not feed the hungry, or God's efforts are thwarted by other agents. If the feeding of the four thousand is to be believed, then the second answer is the proper one: Something or someone gets in the way. What is mysterious about the story is not how four thousand were fed with seven loaves and a couple of fish. The story points beyond itself to the mystery of sin and evil in God's world. If the hungry are not fed, it is not God's fault; the blame lies elsewhere.

A Second Look

The narrative merits a second look. The bare outline of the story is this: Jesus saw that the crowd had foolishly neglected to bring enough food for several days - or had faithfully expected him to provide meals! In either case, he felt responsible. He canvassed the disciples and found there was only a little bit of food. But he was somehow confident that this would do. He got the folks to sit down in orderly fashion. He thanked God for the bits of bread and fish, acknowledging that God feeds the hungry. Then he gave the bread and fish to the disciples to distribute. Lo and behold, there was enough for everyone to eat and be full. And when the broken pieces were recovered, they filled seven baskets - more food than there was to begin with. And about four thousand people had eaten.

There is nothing in the story to suggest that Jesus intended to work a miracle. Rather there is a breathtaking innocence in his actions. Although a few sandwiches are insufficient for an army, he invited the crowd to sit down to a meal, blessed the bits, and passed them out. That has got to be one of the greatest tight-wire acts of all time. What if the few loaves and fish don't begin to feed everyone? There could be a first-class riot, with heads broken, perhaps people killed. In the winter of 1863, three thousand housewives in Richmond rioted over the price of bread; President Jefferson Davis went out into the streets and took the money that was in his pockets and threw it to the rioters to try to get them to stop. Folks who are in the desert with no food cannot be counted on to be rational and restrained. It was a pre-revolutionary, not to say a pre-riot, situation. And Jesus calmly invited the crowd to dinner, said grace, and told the disciples to pass the food around.

One has to have respect for the disciples: If the food didn't stretch, they could have been torn to bits. People in comparable circumstances have been trampled to death. In cases of mass deprivation it is not uncommon for the desperate to wreak vengeance on the distributors: to rob the grocer, to attack the bread truck, to raid the farmer. Recall from the spring of 1991 the scenes of hungry Kurds mobbing the relief trucks.

Give the Judean crowd credit - or give credit to Jesus' charisma. Somehow the hungry folks sat down in orderly fashion, *expecting* to be fed. Whence came that child-like confidence? Maybe some of them had been present at the healing of the paralytic; a man who could make a paralytic walk could certainly multiply bread and fish. Or maybe they were so hungry for a hero that they let their hearts rule their stomachs. Or maybe some of them had been present in the synagogue in Nazareth when Jesus said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18). So they were expecting some kind of economic miracle, *perestroika* and all that. Perhaps that's why so many of them were present with him in that desert place - leaving jobs, family, friends, to go after him. Maybe they hoped he would lay out a Five Year Plan, by which hunger would be eliminated, the working poor triumphant, the hated overlords driven away, land reform instituted, inflation curbed, bread prices brought down, fishing rights restored. Perhaps they came out to hear a new manifesto, the declaration of the rights of humans to decent food and clothing and wages.

Whatever the expectations of the four thousand, it is hard to imagine that they were prepared for what ensued. They got a free lunch. An acquaintance of mine who spent five years in the Washington office of our denomination summed up all he learned in one phrase: "There is no such thing as a free lunch." If one wanted to sum up all the conventional wisdom of the twentieth century, it could be stated in that same phrase: "There is no free lunch." Oh really? Tell that to the four thousand who were with Jesus in the desert. They got a free lunch.

And that, surely, is the meaning of the story. God feeds the hungry. That most minimal of human obligations, God undertakes. Our philosophy, technology, science, and systems to the contrary, God feeds the hungry. It would be inhuman of God to do less. As Simone Weil rightly said, "It is an eternal obligation toward the human being not to let him suffer hunger when one had the chance of coming to his assistance." In the next chapter you will hear Jesus say, "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?"

A Final Question

Suppose that you had a chance to visit Simone Weil in the last weeks of her illness. Suppose that you were her father or mother, who supported her generously and gently in her unconventional life. Or suppose you were one of her former students, who had learned from her to love Plato and Descartes and Rousseau. Or suppose you were a trade union member who had worked and marched and argued with her. You knew from her physician that her only hope of recovery was to stuff herself with butter, cream, and meat - the things that millions could only dream about. As you looked into that ravaged but resolute face, would you want to tell her: "Child, God helps those who help themselves"? Or is there something you would want her to tell you?

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God with a Human Face by John C. Purdy

John C. Purdy is a retired minister of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A), which he served for 26 years as an editor of curriculum resource. He is also the author of Parables at Work (Westminster) and God with a Human Face (Westminster/Knox). God with a Human Face was published by Westminster/John Knox in l993 and is used by permission of the author, who also prepared the text for Religion Online.

Chapter 6: God Cares About Money (Matt 5:1-2; 6:19- 21; 24-33)

A classic movie - *It's a Wonderful Life - is* about a man who runs a Savings and Loan. George Bailey, played by Jimmy Stewart, is the town's favorite son; he gives up his dreams of adventure to stay home and take over the family bank. One Christmas season a large deposit of cash is mislaid; there is a run on the bank, and George faces ruin. He is saved from suicide by an angel, who shows George what the town would have been like had he not lived. His bank is saved from judgment by the generosity of the townspeople. The movie teaches us that friends are more important than money.

Jesus taught his disciples that friendship with God was more important than money:

> *When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:...*
>
> *"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*
>
> *"No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.*
>
> *"Therefore! tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do*

> *you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you - you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you as well." (Matt. 5:1-2 6:19-21, 24-33)*

Here we see Jesus in the role of charismatic teacher. His disciples follow him away from the crowds and up onto a mountain. And there he initiates them into the Way. He shares with them the secret of successful living.

Teacher of the Way

The Teacher of the Way, surrounded by devoted disciples, is for us a familiar figure. In every generation one or more such persons burst upon the scene. The signal of the arrival of a new Teacher is the publication of a best-selling book. In 1936 the country went crazy about How to Win Friends and Influence People, by Dale Carnegie, a public speaking instructor. In 1952 the Rev. Norman Vincent Peale authored The Power of Positive Thinking - *a* wildly popular sequel to an earlier book, A Guide to Confident Living. In 1968 from psychiatrist Thomas Harris came I'M OK - YOU'RE OK: A Guide to Transactional Analysis. Today, any sale of used paperback books will include at least one of these.

Carnegie and Peale and Harris did more than write bestsellers: Each was - and remains - a Teacher of the Way; each attracted millions of disciples. People still subscribe to *Guideposts,* the inspirational magazine that Peale helped to found. Dale Carnegie courses in Effective Speaking and Human Relations are still well-attended. Many still join therapeutic groups led by disciples of Thomas Harris.

You may not be familiar with the teachings of all three of these men. When their books are encapsulated and cast in the form of Jesus' teaching from the mountain, they read as follows:

Carnegie on "How to Win Friends"

You have vast personal resources that you are not using: Either you do not know - or you are not practicing - the basic principles of human relations. If you will learn these, you will increase enormously your capacity to succeed in work, in family life, and in society.

There are rules for handling other people: don't criticize, condemn, or complain; give sincere appreciation; and arouse in the other person an eager want. There are ways to make others like

you: become genuinely interested in them; smile; remember names; be a good listener; talk to others about their interests; make them feel important. Others can be won to your point of view if you will follow such practices as avoiding arguments, showing respect for the opinions of others, and trying to see the other's point of view. Learn to lead by changing the attitudes and behaviors of others. You do this by such techniques as beginning with praise, calling attention to mistakes indirectly, and letting others save face.

If you will learn and practice these common-sense, life-tested rules, you cannot help but succeed in whatever you undertake.

Peale on "Positive Thinking"

Do you want to be successful? Then you must start thinking positively; you will then set in motion forces that will bring to pass positive results. This is the great law of life: If you think in positive terms you will achieve positive results. In short, believe and succeed.

But doesn't the Bible teach righteousness? Certainly. But one of the meanings of righteousness is right-thinking. And if you think rightly, you will achieve happiness, health, prosperity, and peace of mind. Believe in yourself - have faith in your own abilities. You have within you what it takes to be successful.

Learn to live a quiet, patient life; take time for prayer and meditation and Bible study. You can reduce stress and tension. Also, there is within you a reservoir of boundless energy, waiting to be tapped - if you make spiritual contact with God, who is the source of Divine energy. You can have good health, if you want it. Faith is a powerful factor, both in overcoming disease and in keeping the body free from illness. Put your trust in God; purge yourself of the anger and resentment and other destructive emotions that contribute to illness; pray for healing and restoration. You can get others to like you, if you become a comfortable person, cultivate an interest in others, pray for them, and don't harbor grievances and resentments.

The potential for a happy, useful, productive, prosperous life is within your reach and within your abilities. The key is your attitude: You must learn to think positively, thankfully, affirmatively.

Harris's "I'M OK - YOU'RE OK"

You are unhappy because you think poorly of yourself. You think I AM NOT OK, while you think others are OK. From such an attitude come self-destructive games of life, in which you are always the loser. No wonder you are unsuccessful in your marriage, your work, your family life. You won't be happy until you learn to think better of yourself.

What is the source of your negative self-image? Look into yourself. What do you find? - three

states of being: a Child, a Parent, and an Adult. The Child represents how you feel about things; the Parent, what you have been taught as right and wrong; the Adult, your capacity to think for yourself. It is in the Child that the not-OK feelings were lodged when you were dependent upon parents and other adults.

Once you become aware of these states of being and what they represent, you can begin to respond to others in a more free, less self-destructive way. You can respond in ways that do not simply recapitulate encounters out of your past.

Get to know the Child, the Parent and the Adult within you. Then you can begin to work with and to love more freely the children, adults, and authority figures you meet every day.

Looking in a Mirror

To those of us who lived through the ‘30s, ‘40s, ‘50s, and ‘60s, reading those summaries from Carnegie, Peale, and Harris is like looking into a mirror. We recognize ourselves as those who want to be liked, who want to rid ourselves of negative thinking, who yearn to be more adult in our relationships. Carnegie, Peale, and Harris attack our basic insecurity; they treat the anxiety that hobbles and torments us. They show us how to live more creatively and successfully in our society.

That society, in turn, is mirrored in another book, written a couple of centuries before How to Win Friends or The Power of Positive Thinking. Without a knowledge of this book, the teachings of Carnegie and Peale and Harris are like snapshots not yet placed in the family album. The book is Adam Smith’s The Wealth of Nations. It lays out the values and assumptions that underlie most of our day-by-day activities.

Smith reminds us that the wealth of our nation is the sum total of the necessities and conveniences of life, which are produced by our collective labors. It is from the distribution of that wealth to the various parts of society that we are fed, clothed, housed, and granted various services. What makes such wealth possible is the division of labor, by which the collective output of our nation is greatly enhanced. This division has come about through our propensity to exchange one thing for another. It is in this exchange that your work benefits me, and mine you; as each of us pursues his or her own advantage, the good of all is served.

It is to facilitate exchange that money has come into being. The natural price of any commodity is made up of three parts: the quantity of labor required to produce it, the rent due the owner of the land, and the profit which the stock or capital must have. The market price, however, is determined both by the supply of goods and the demand for it in the marketplace. Where there is free competition - with no attempt to monopolize production or to withhold labor - the market price will be the lowest possible price that allows landlord, capitalist, and laborer to subsist. Only as profits and capital increase, however, can wages increase: That is where the increase of

the national wealth comes from. Wages can only rise as the national wealth increases. The promise of increased wages is the greatest incentive to the laborer.

Was Jesus Against Capitalism?

Does the Way that Jesus teaches lead us out of the system that Smith has described? Is Matthew 5-7 an appeal to us to drop out of society, to refuse to compete, to despise wealth? Does God care nothing for money? When Jesus told his disciples, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth," was he attacking the economic system upon which our material security depends? Was he cutting the vital nerve between work incentive and work results? Was he pointing an accusing finger at the owners of the land, the holders of capital, or the organizers of wage-laborers?

Stored-up treasure drives our economy. Adam Smith said:

"Parsimony [saving], and not industry, is the immediate cause of the increase of capital. . . . It puts into motion an additional quantity of industry, which gives an additional value to the annual produce." To the high priests of commerce, which one sees on "Wall Street Week" on Friday evenings, these are sacred truths. In 1929 America saw what happened when the nation forgot these truths: Profits on the trading of stocks became more important than corporate profits. The economy went into a tailspin, people were out of work, the factories stood idle, mortgaged farms were lost, banks closed, futures were blighted. The nations of Eastern Europe are now being put through an economic wringer because, evidently, they thought Smith's dicta about markets, profits, land ownership, and wage incentives were smoke and mirrors.

How are we to interpret Jesus' teaching on the mountain? What is the effective, dynamic force of his statements about anxiety and money? How can we apply what he said *then* to the system of production and distribution in which we find ourselves *now?* If Jesus were writing a contemporary best-seller, what might it be called and what would be its thesis? Might it be something like this?

J. Emmanuel on "Stress-Free Living"

The Grand Illusion of our times is financial security: Everybody wants it, nobody gets it. It is like the horizon - the more eagerly you approach it, the faster it recedes. You say that you would be happy if only you could attain financial security, if only you never needed to worry about bills or taxes, or how to afford a new car. And so you try to earn all you can and to put aside all you can for tomorrow.

Foolish folk! That secure tomorrow never arrives. What comes instead? Inflation, recession, bank failures, crime, illness, environmental disasters, war, layoffs, takeovers, forced retirement. The harder you try for financial security, the less secure you are!

Why do you persist? Why do you court stress by seeking greater security? The effort only produces more stress, which in turn produces worry; and worry saps your ability to make good decisions and to work properly. So you are on a treadmill: The faster you run, the sooner you will have a heart attack and be unable to work, and then where will you be?

Foolish, foolish folk! Look around you at the world God created. Lilies do not work; birds have no savings banks. And yet they survive as well as you do. If God cares for them, how much more will God reward your work with enough to eat, to wear - and a roof over your head.

Look at the godless, who do not know your heavenly Father. They worship material success. And what is their end? But you know God and what God wants: Love for neighbor and enemy alike, justice, mercy, kindness, fidelity. If you will make these - and not wealth - your priorities, then food and clothing and shelter will be there for you in sufficient supply. Let God worry about money; that's God's business.

No Heavenly Bird-Feeder

Generations upon generations have read into the Sermon on the Mount a description of a divine Provider - a kind of heavenly Bird-Feeder. This God daily scatters food for us - God's creatures - much as some of us put out seed for our feathered friends in winter. Well, it may provide some of us with a feeling of God-like omnipotence to feed the birds in winter, but the face of God that is reflected in Jesus' teaching from the mountain is not that of a kindly Feeder of Birds. That image may have been acceptable in a hunting and gathering culture, or even an agricultural one. It seems hopelessly sentimental for the twentieth century.

What Jesus teaches is this: If the birds of the air and the flowers of the field - who know nothing of purposeful work - manage to survive, then what is the source of our pervasive insecurity? Is it not that we are mistrustful of the Creator, that we seek to pile up wealth, even when we know it is perishable?

Trust in the Creator does not mean that we do not have to labor to provide food, shelter, and clothing. Trust expresses itself in obedience to the will of the Creator, whose aim for the created order is justice, mercy, and truth. If our trust is expressed as obedience, then we will not worry unduly about food, shelter, and clothing. If we take care of the things God cares about, God will take care of the money. God really does care for money - in the most practical, matter-of-fact sense.

A Field of Dreams

Field of Dreams, a favorite movie of 1988, is a companion piece to *It's a Wonderful Life.* Jimmy Stewart is replaced by Kevin Costner; Amy Madigan replaces Donna Reed as the faithful wife.

But the message is the same: Money isn't everything. Costner plays Ray Kinsella, an Iowa farmer who plows up part of his farm to make a baseball diamond. He says that voices have bid him to do so. And, in due time, angel-like baseball players appear to play on the field. Ray persists in keeping the field, even though he comes within an ace of losing his farm to the bank. In the climactic scene, his father appears to play the game; reconciliation with his father is the key to the dream.

What is your field of dreams?

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God with a Human Face by John C. Purdy

John C. Purdy is a retired minister of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A), which he served for 26 years as an editor of curriculum resource. He is also the author of Parables at Work (Westminster) and God with a Human Face (Westminster/Knox). God with a Human Face was published by Westminster/John Knox in l993 and is used by permission of the author, who also prepared the text for Religion Online.

Chapter 7: God Is a Peacemaker (Mark 4:35-41)

In January of 1991 a coalition of nations mounted a swift and terrible war against Iraq. The allies wanted to drive Saddam Hussein and his occupying troops from Kuwait. After several weeks of intensive air attacks, a ground attack was launched. It lasted 100 hours - not much longer than the hurricanes that batter our coastal states at the time of the September equinox. The operation was called, appropriately, "Desert Storm."

Sudden and violent storms are not uncommon in the Middle East.

> *On that day, when evening had come, [Jesus] said to them, "Let us go across to the other side. "And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?" (Mark 4:35-41)*

In his fabulous Thomas Covenant narratives, Stephen R. Donaldson gives heroic names to his characters. A sea-loving giant is called Foamfollower; others are called Earthfriend, Hearthrall, and Farseer. The wonderful story in Mark 4:35-4 1 tempts us to borrow this literary device. Jesus - who has previously been seen as Painkiller, Breadbringer, and Truthteller - is now revealed as Stormstiiler. When he and the disciples are in danger of being lost at sea, Jesus quiets the wind and waves with a rebuke. The storm is suddenly replaced with a great calm.

The stilling of the storm has always tickled the Christian imagination. Benjamin Britten wrote a cantata about the fourth century bishop who in legend became Santa Claus. In one scene in *Saint Nicholas* the godly man is on the Mediterranean Sea, headed for the Holy Land. The ship

sails on calm waters, under clear skies. While Nicholas kneels on the deck to say his prayers, the seamen gamble at cards. When Nicholas warns them that foul weather is ahead, the sailors mock him. A sudden and terrible storm does indeed burst upon the ship, and it seems that all hands will be lost. But in answer to the prayers of Nicholas, the storm ceases as suddenly as it began. All hands are saved.

In telling his sea story Britten may have built on an existing legend. Or he may have created a legend, drawing on the stilling of the storm. Perhaps he was inspired by the fable of Jonah and the fish. For it was also on the Mediterranean Sea that great waves threatened to overturn a sailing ship until Jonah persuaded the crew that he was the cause of their peril and should be thrown overboard. In Mark's story there does not appear to be any human mischief for which the storm was punishment; it was just one of those sudden squalls that overtake inland lakes and swamp small boats.

Jesus' calming of the storm has a predictable consequence: The terror of the disciples is turned to awe. They wonder out loud among themselves, "Who then is this ...?" The question does not invite an answer; it points to a mystery. What possible answer could satisfy the disciples? Nothing in their experience prepared them for the question. What could prepare them to understand the answer? They have been privileged to witness other marvels done at Jesus' word and wave of hand. But miraculous healing and feeding are one thing; commanding the wind and sea to obey is quite something else.

The Peacemaker

This much is evident to us, who are the hearers of the story. Emmanuel means Peacemaker. "God with us" may mean much more than that; it cannot mean less. Jesus' rebuke of the disciples, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" echoes the more gentle rebuke on the mountain: "Why do you worry about clothing . . . you of little faith?" It is not fear, but faith that brings God close. God is not in the storms of life, but in the peace that follows. God is not Stormbringer. Rather God is Peacemaker.

While the tempest in the story is surely a real storm, the meaning of the story is not limited to why or how Jesus calmed the wind and waves with his "Peace! Be still!" The stilling of the storm is rich in portent. A scene so dramatic cannot be read as an anecdote. No composer sounds a trumpet call in the middle of a symphony except as a promise of what is yet to come. A smoking gun is not discovered in the middle of a murder mystery unless it bears upon the mystery's solution. Neither is the stilling of the storm incidental to our Gospel narrative. It is no accident, like a car skidding on wet pavement. It demands not only attention; it demands interpretation. *What is God up to?*

As with Jonah and the fish, the stilling of the storm has been subject to varied expositions. It would be hard to find two preachers who would interpret the story in exactly the same manner.

"Two-Faced Mother Nature"

Suppose that you went to church on the fifth Sunday after Pentecost, when Mark 4:354 1 is an appointed Gospel lection. If the preacher happened to choose that scripture passage for exposition, you might hear the storm at sea used as a metaphor for environmental disaster. Depending upon the preacher's point of view, this might be a natural catastrophe, such as a great earthquake caused by a sudden shifting of tectonic plates. Or it might be a disaster to which humans contributed, such as the superheating of the earth through the so-called greenhouse effect. Or it might be a nuclear storm triggered by the explosion of an atomic bomb, somewhat as the bombing of cities in World War II unleashed fearful fire storms.

If we think of humanity as sailing across a placid sea, under smiling heavens, in a ship steered by rational means, according to immutable laws, we are in for a rude surprise, the preacher might warn. For Mother Nature is two-faced. She is not always kind and beneficent. She can suddenly turn to us a wrathful, destructive face. Those of an earlier generation, who thought to see God's face smile back from a pleasant meadow or a tranquil sea, reasoned from too little knowledge of nature. They did not know about tectonic plates or the greenhouse effect - much less about the horrors of nuclear holocaust. Had they known about such terrors, it is doubtful that Maltbie Babcock could have written:

"This is my father's world,
And to my listening ears
All nature sings, and round me rings
The music of the spheres."

As the climax of the sermon, the preacher might raise for the congregation this question: How, in such a world, can terror be overcome by confidence in the future? Where can we find peace? How can we ride out or avert the dreadful storms that hang just over the horizon? And the answer the sermon supplies is Jesus Christ. He who calmed the wind and waves of that inland sea is also our Savior. We do not know precisely how Jesus may save us from environmental disaster, any more than we can know how he rebuked the wind or calmed the waves. But we do know that hope in him is not misplaced. He is our peace in the storm. The preacher might end the sermon as Britten ends *Saint Nicholas,* with this stanza from William Cowper's hymn:

> "You fearful saints, fresh courage take;
> The clouds you so much dread
> Are big with mercy and shall break
> In blessings on your head."

"Do the Right Thing"

If you went to another church on that same Sunday in Pentecost, you might hear a quite different sermon preached on the same text. You might find the storm at sea used as a metaphor for social unrest. The preacher might describe in vivid detail the racial hatred, class envy, economic injustice, envy, aggression, and war-mongering that threaten the Good Ship Human Enterprise. The sermon might be designed to persuade you that the natural state of society is one of conflict and unending struggle, with destruction and death never very far away. If the preacher is given to historical illustrations, he or she might liken the terror of the disciples to that period during the French Revolution known as the Reign of Terror, when passions and politics spun out of all control. The Revolution began as a voyage to Utopia; people thought to find a new and better society. But things went haywire; and the best-intentioned cried out to one another, "Do you not care if we perish?"

Or the sermon might refer to contemporary problems. A highly acclaimed film of 1989 was *Do the Right Thing*, written and directed by Spike Lee. In the movie Lee plays the role of Mookie, a young black man living in an urban ghetto. Mookie works as a deliverer for a pizzeria owned and run by an Italian American and his two sons. Throughout the film, like a fuse that burns faster and faster as it approaches dynamite, resentment of the whites by young blacks grows. A minor incident sets off a fight between the store owner and the residents of the block. In trying to subdue one of the residents, the police kill him. When the police have gone, Mookie throws a garbage can through the window of the pizzeria, triggering the trashing of the store.

What happens in the movie could happen anywhere, the preacher might say - anywhere there are Catholics and Protestants, blacks and whites, Hindus and Sikhs, rich and poor, Jews and Arabs, Sunnis and Shiites. Explosive social unrest is not the province of one society or social system. Racial differences, economic imbalance, religious bigotry - all are recipes for rioting.

Once having painted this bleak picture of how human differences are recipes for disaster, the preacher might hesitate to offer a Christian blueprint for social reform. But he or she might very well point to Jesus, who stilled the wind and waves, as humanity’s only hope. And the sermon might end with the first verse of a hymn written when American Christians were more hopeful about social progress:

"Where cross the crowded ways of life
Where sound the cries of race and clan,
Above the noise of selfish strife,
We hear Thy voice, O Son of Man."

"The Lower Lights"

In still another church, you might hear a sermon in which the preacher used the storm at sea as a metaphor for the internal turmoil from which humans suffer. There are many who are torn apart

and tossed about by emotional strains and stresses every bit as frightening as the storm on the Palestinian lake. If the congregation were quite sophisticated, the sermon might include references to Freudian psychology, which describes the self as threatened by emotions and memories that are thrust below the surface into the unconscious, from which they may break forth and destroy a fragile equilibrium.

And for those who either did not understand or pooh-poohed such notions, the preacher might tell the heartbreaking story related in Michael Dorris's The Broken Cord. Dorris adopted a child who soon displayed serious problems in development and adjustment. By digging into the boy's history, Dorris discovered that the boy's mother was an alcoholic. The watery womb in which the fetus developed was no safe world, but one in which the unborn baby was slowly poisoned.

How are we to live at peace with a world where this sort of thing happens to an innocent child? More to the point, how are we to live at peace with such children, who are sometimes disruptive and difficult? No preacher with a heart would, of course, promise that God will heal such a child of his afflictions. Nor would the promise be made that God will heal the mentally ill. But the preacher might well ask that if Jesus could still a storm in Galilee, then might we not trust God to help us to live peaceably with problems that are beyond our solving?

Such a sermon might end with the following story, which is a favorite among preachers: Once there was a small child whose mother died. To help the child through the night, the father took the child into his own bed. In the middle of the night the father woke to find the child in deep distress. "What's the matter?" the father asked. "I can't see your face," was the reply. "But l am here," said the father. Even so, Jesus is God's word to us in the darkest night and blackest storm, assuring us that we have not been abandoned.

Some might say that those three sermons don't exhaust the possibilities of the stilling of the storm. What about Jesus as the Savior of the storm-tossed soul? Indeed, when I was a small boy, I often sat on Grandmother's lap while she sang,

"Let the lower lights be burning!
Send a gleam across the wave!
Some poor fainting, struggling seaman
You may rescue, you may save".
God the Peacemaker

A perceptive critic may grumble that each of these sermons is a bit simplistic. After all, peace is more than environmental survival; peace is more than the cessation of tribal wars; peace is more than the resolution of inner conflicts; peace is more than the assurance of the soul's salvation. Granted. However, taken together the sermons create a vector that points in a single direction. In all of them Jesus is proclaimed as one who brings peace. Both the storm and the fears of the disciples are calmed by the words of Jesus. Stormstiller is Peacemaker. In the context of this

book, that means that God also is Peacemaker. God cares whether or not the human enterprise perishes. God works in mysterious ways to bring peace. The storm clouds above our heads are rich with mercy.

Operation Desert Storm was a sharp reminder of what a warlike people we Americans are. In time of war our great diversity suddenly becomes our strength; our idealism is annealed into steely resolution. Our defining moments, to use George Bush’s phrase, have been the Revolutionary War, Civil War, the two World Wars. And yet our most cherished national symbol is not a warrior, but a woman; she holds in her hand not a sword, but a torch; she was given to us out of friendship; and she faces the sea, to welcome those who have endured storm-tossed voyages. To millions of American soldiers, returning home by ship, she has been a gentle reminder that peace is indivisible from liberty and justice for all.

The Statue of Liberty is a kind of perpetual question, directed at Americans. What kind of people are we? What is the destination of that voyage on which we are together embarked? What does it mean to be "one nation, under God," when God is known as Peacemaker?

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God with a Human Face by John C. Purdy

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Chapter 8: God Allows All Prayers (Mark 11:15-18)

Following the swift victory of the allied armies in the Persian Gulf, the allied commander was interviewed on television. "Do you think that God was on your side?" General H. Norman Schwarzkopf was asked. He paused a moment and then said, "When you look at the results, how can you think otherwise?"

Abraham Lincoln was not so certain of divine favor as was the general. In the closing months of the Civil War, he said in his second inaugural address: "Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained ....Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. . . . The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully."

Does God take sides in violent encounters? We asked ourselves that during the civil rights movement; it is asked in South Africa today. It is a question raised by the Gospel story of the cleansing of the temple, in which Jesus uses strong-arm tactics on merchants and money changers. On the face of it, the answer supplied by that narrative would seem to be affirmative. But let the question hang in the air while we examine Mark 11: 15-18 in some detail.

> *Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. He was teaching and saying, "Is it not written,*
>
> *'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'?*
> *But you have made it a den of robbers."*
>
> *And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill*

> *him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. (Mark 11:15-18)*

Literary critics say of a narrative that it works at several levels. Stories are like an archaeological dig: You remove one layer of meaning and find another layer underneath. The account of Jesus' temple tantrum is like that, except that it is more helpful to think upward rather than downward. The progression of discovery is like a mountain ascent: Each new version of the story invites us to take a few steps further, and the terrain changes markedly as we progress - just as one passes through several climatic zones in climbing a mountain. And when we reach our goal, the view is panoramic.

Reaching the City

The cleansing of the temple can be told as a tale of the small-town boy come to the city. After a ministry among the villages in Galilee, Jesus comes to his nation's capital. Nazareth and Capernaum give way to Jerusalem. Mr. Smith goes to Washington, the Maid of Orleans goes to Paris. What began in a regional theater now opens on Broadway. Jesus has moved not only to Judea's capital, but to the heart and soul of Judaism - to the temple.

There he causes a ruckus. He is outraged by what he finds - commercial transactions, including the changing of money and the selling of birds, and the use of the temple grounds as a shortcut. He turns over tables, scattering money and birds, and chases out those who are involved in exchange. In the temple scene in Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* Jesus smashes through the crowd like a linebacker knocking aside blockers, trying to get at the quarterback.

And when he has wreaked all that havoc, Jesus holds a teach-in. He scolds his fellow citizens for corrupting divine worship: You have turned God's house of prayer into a den of robbers, he tells them. This invites the wrath and resolve of the religious authorities. When they see how popular Jesus is with the crowd, they take counsel with one another as to how to do him in - before he can do any more damage.

Internal Rot

What a wonderfully dramatic moment this is: the rough-handed rustic delivering a solid punch to the flabby body politic. There is something soul-satisfying about the temple cleansing; we like to see reformers go after corruption. Why should it be necessary for Jesus, as soon as he gets to Jerusalem, to go to the Temple Mount and start trouble? Because even the finest human institutions have a way of rotting from within. As Jesus teaches the crowd, the temple is intended as a house of prayer, but it has been turned into a den of robbers. Instead of a place of prayer and devotion, it is now devoted to profits. Instead of nourishing piety, it is being milked for money.

What happened to the temple has happened to every human institution, no matter how useful or inspired. If you visit our universities, you will find styles of architecture that are outright copies of Roman and Greek temples. The more-than-subtle suggestion is that they house sacred texts, that the chief priests and scribes of the nation are its professors, scientists, and archivists, and that students are worshipers at a shrine. But will anyone deny that many of these temples of learning have been corrupted by politics? Or that the primary business of higher education is now business? Ask students why they are in college and most of them will say that their education is a good investment; they are paying the extravagant tuition and other costs in order to make a good living when they graduate.

But education is too easy a whipping boy. Take another cherished American institution, major league baseball. Its claim as the Great American Pastime has rested on two pillars - tradition and sport. The true fan is horrified by innovation, just as the true patriot is appalled by suggested changes in the Bill of Rights. We like to think that when men in Civil War prisons played the game, it was very much like what we play today. And although major league baseball is professional, the game - the sport - is supposed to prevail over profits. When we were children, we used to argue about the comparative batting averages of Babe Ruth and Ty Cobb, of Joe Cronin and Jimmy Foxx. Sure, we knew the players made a good living. By Depression standards, some made a very good living. But we also knew in our hearts that the money was incidental. Today two things have changed: Tradition takes a back seat to profit, and so does sport. Heresies like the designated hitter have been introduced to lure more paying customers into the parks. What gets talked about in the "Hot Stove League" - during the winter months when there is no baseball - is whether or not a superstar is really worth $5,000,000 a year. Can anyone seriously argue that baseball deserves the worshipful reverence once afforded it?

Lest someone object that profits ought not always be blamed for social decay, then what of the downfall of the socialist regimes of Eastern Europe in 1989 and 1990? Because profits were subordinated to ideological purity, those political institutions folded under the pressures of technological culture. A perverse piety can be as corrosive as the love of money.

Perestroika, Anyone?

The state of universities and the plight of baseball may lead some to propose reforms for both institutions. *Perestroika* - that’s the answer. Bring in a zealous reformer to cleanse the temple. But there is yet another story to be recited - that of the tragic fate that awaits any reformer who sets out to cleanse a great human institution. Remember, when the chief priests and scribes saw what Jesus had done, they looked for ways to kill him. And that is what is going to happen to any young, zealous reformer - no matter how right her cause or pure his motives.

In December of 1990 a thirty-seven-year-old Roman Catholic priest, Jean-Bertrand Aristide,

was elected president of Haiti. He was an outspoken foe of corruption and tyranny, who had been removed from his parish by his superiors for his activism in social affairs. When the newspapers reported his election, one was put in mind of a young rabbi come to clean up the temple in Jerusalem. God knows it needed housecleaning, just as Haiti needs reform and renewal. But there was an element of sadness in the election of Aristide. Old and wise observers saw the first act of a tragedy, which had been played out so many times before. For every successful reformer there have been dozens who blazed like Roman candles - and then fizzled out. Some, like Castro in Cuba, were victims of their own success. Some, like Martin Luther King, Jr., were shot down in their prime. Some, like whistle-blowers in the Pentagon, were summarily dismissed.

The public does not love reformers. Ibsen's play *An Enemy of the People* is a modern version of the temple story. Dr. Thomas Stockmann is the medical officer of the baths in a southern Norwegian town. He discovers that the baths are being dangerously polluted by water from a tannery. He tells the mayor and the newspaper editor that it may take thousands of dollars and several years of work to replace the conduit. They tell him that the news of the pollution and the proposed repairs might well ruin the town's economy. And they set out to quash his report. Eventually a public meeting is called, at which the doctor is unanimously voted to be an enemy of the people.

Someone coming fresh to the cleansing of the temple can feel only pity, knowing that fierce opposition - and probable defeat - wait for Jesus. A reader who did not know the Gospels might surmise that Jesus would quickly pass from the scene and be forgotten.

Journalist Thomas Friedman quotes a shrewd observer

> "[T]here are basically two political types in Middle East history: the messiah and the merchant. The messiahs, or *mahdis,* as they are known in Arabic, come and go with the political seasons. One season it is Gamal Abdel Nasser selling Arab nationalism, another season it is Ayatollah Khomeini selling Islamic fundamentalism. But after a while, the messiahs always pass on, like hurricanes which, after stirring up the landscape, sooner or later move out to sea, leaving behind what was always there: the grocer, whose ancient and familiar culture does not come and go with the seasons but is rooted in the earth. *(*From Beirut to Jerusalem, 1989, p. 502)

Streams in the Desert

Friedman's friend suggests to us a fourth way to read the narrative of the temple cleansing - as the inevitable flowing together in the Middle East of piety, profit, and politics. They are like three streams running downhill, each seeking its own level, yet certain to combine into one larger stream at some point in their descent. There is no easy separation of church and state,

statecraft and business, business and religion. They are co-mingled, as the following incident makes plain.

On October 8, 1990, a huge crowd gathered on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. It had been rumored that radical Jews were going to use that holy day to establish a religious presence within the confines of a Moslem shrine. Thousands of Arabs gathered in protest. Stones were thrown at Jews who came to pray at the Western Wall at the base of the Mount. Israeli border police fired into the crowd; twenty-one Palestinian Arabs were killed. What might seem a local scuffle landed in the lap of the United Nations. Not incidental to the incident is the $3 billion annually contributed by the United States to support Israel - and the greater billions at stake in Arab oil. In the Middle East one cannot separate prayer, politics, and profits any more than one can separate the interests of Jew, Christian, and Moslem in the city of Jerusalem. And that is what the story of Jesus' temple tantrum is also about - the necessary interweaving of piety, politics, and economics.

Indeed, it is what all human history is about. No one of the three interests can be pursued without involving the other two. This is one of the reasons why Ken Burns' television series about the Civil War so gripped the imaginations of many of us in the fall of 1990. A war that was fought for economic and political reasons was led by men and women whose words and deeds were almost biblical. Jefferson Davis and Abraham Lincoln were the Fathers, whose respective houses needed to be purified. Grant and Lee were the temple-cleansers: One would rid the land of rebellion and slavery, the other would purge the South of the corrupt Yankee invaders.

The Civil War was a brutal, bloody affair. Novelist and historian Shelby Foote calls the battle of Shiloh "a murderous fist fight." The whole war could be called a murderous *family* fist fight - brother attacking brother in uncontrollable fury. How can one possibly think that God countenanced such unrestrained violence? Was not the very face of God turned away in pity and disgust? Our forebears did not think so. General Thomas Jackson, a devout Presbyterian, said, "It is a man's entire duty to pray and to fight." Julia Ward Howe sang, "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord; He has loosed the fearful lightning of his terrible swift sword." Lincoln wrote, "In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party; and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect his purpose. I am almost ready to say that this is probably true; that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet" *(A Meditation on the Divine Will).* In his farewell speech to the U.S. Senate, .Jefferson Davis said: "We will invoke the God of our fathers, who delivered them from the power of the lion [England], to protect us from the ravages of the bear [the Union]; and thus, putting our trust in God and in our own firm hearts and strong arms, we will vindicate the right as best we may." Ex-slave Frederick Douglass urged Lincoln to accept blacks into the Union army, so that they might fight for the freedom of their race.

Ask these our forebears if God countenances violence; surely they will counter with the question: How can human institutions be cleansed *except* by violence?

A House for All

But surely the story of the cleansing of the temple is more than a case study in the use of violence. The ultimate meaning of the narrative is revealed in the words by which Jesus justified his action. "[God's] house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations." The words "a house for all nations" might well be inscribed on every public building. They might well be displayed on every stadium, bank, theater, locker room, library, house of congress, factory, lecture hall, or temple. No human institution can survive that serves the piety, profits, or politics of one people, one sex, one tribe, or one region only.

The cleansing of the temple is the story of a God who will be known and worshiped by all people - Israelis, Iraqis, Kurds, Palestinians, Americans, Arabs, Egyptians, Russians, Northerners, and Southerners. God's house is large enough for all; Emmanuel is the savior of all. God allows the prayers of all.

It is a short step from "God allows the prayers of all" to "God allows all prayers," be they voiced by Christians, Jews, Moslems, Baptists, Mormons, or citizens of the New Age. And from there it is another short step to "God allows all kinds of prayers" - for victory in battle, for the defeat of enemies, for the smashing of a corrupt political regime, for the removal of a hated social or economic system. What else are we to understand by "My house shall be a house of prayer for all the nations"?

Although Abraham Lincoln, while president, attended worship at a Presbyterian church, it was said by some that he had no religion. Writing in response to Lincoln's Second Inaugural, Lord Charnwood wrote:

"When old acquaintances said that he had no religion they based their opinion on such remarks as that the God, of whom he had just been speaking solemnly, 'was not a person.' It would be unprofitable to inquire what he, and many others, meant by this expression, but, later at any rate, this 'impersonal' power was one with which he could hold commune. His robust intellect, impatient of unproved assertion, was unlikely to rest in the common assumption that things dimly seen may be treated as not being there. So humorous a man was also unlikely to be too conceited to say his prayers. At any rate he said them; said them intently; valued the fact that others prayed for him and for the nation; and, as in official proclamations (concerning days of national religious observance) he could wield, like no other modern writer, the language of the Prayer Book, so he would speak of prayer without the smallest embarrassment in talk with a general or a statesman. . . This man had stood alone in the dark. He had done justice; he had loved mercy; he had walked humbly with his God." (Paul M. Angle, ed., The Lincoln Reader, 1947, pp. 494 - 495)

Do you suppose that Lincoln prayed fervently for the success of the Union cause? Is there any prayer, from anyone, for anything, that God will not allow?

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God with a Human Face by John C. Purdy

John C. Purdy is a retired minister of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A), which he served for 26 years as an editor of curriculum resource. He is also the author of Parables at Work (Westminster) and God with a Human Face (Westminster/Knox). God with a Human Face was published by Westminster/John Knox in l993 and is used by permission of the author, who also prepared the text for Religion Online.

Chapter 9: God Loves Beyond Betrayal (John 13:1-11)

Text

Vachel Lindsay had this vision of the entrance into heaven of General William Booth and his salvation army:

> Drabs and vixens in a flash made whole!
> Gone was the weasel head, the snout, the jowl!
> Sages and sibyls now, and athletes clean,
> Rulers of empires, and of forests green!

.....

> Oh, shout salvation! It was good to see
> Kings and princes by the Lamb set free.

.....

> Christ came gently with a robe and crown
> For Booth the soldier, while the throng knelt down.
> He saw King Jesus. They were face to face,
> And he knelt aweeping in that holy place.
> Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?

Listen for echoes of "General William Booth Enters Into Heaven" in the following Gospel narrative:

> *Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water in a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet? "Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me. "Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean." (John 13:1-11)*

If you ever decide to write a love story, steal your plot from the footwashing: It is the perfect love story - the one by which all others must be measured. Charles Wesley's hymn says it:

> Love divine, all loves excelling,
> Joy of heaven, to earth come down.

In Jesus we see the perfect lover. Jesus knows that he will soon be killed; the Big Wheels, offended by his cleansing of the temple, will not wait long to put in motion arrangements for his removal. The festival of the Passover, when lambs are slaughtered, seems a likely time also for Jesus' death. Knowing this, he demonstrates to intimate friends the height and depth and breadth of his devotion. While they are having a meal, he gets up from the table and washes their feet. The act is shocking in its simplicity, its sensuality, its spirituality. There can be no mistaking it for anything but a demonstration of the deepest, purest, most unselfish affection. Who else but one who loves you unreservedly will - unbidden and uncoerced - wash your feet?

In an autobiographical novel James McConkey describes the defining moment in the married life of Michael and Terry Warden. Michael has arrived home after three weeks spent at his father's funeral. As he is recalling for Terry life with father, she sits mending socks.

> "He said, 'I think there is a hole in the socks I'm wearing.'
> 'Take them off, then.'
> 'They're dirty.'
> 'Do you think that matters to me?'
> 'They ought to be washed first.'
> 'Oh, Michael Peter Warden! Take them off this *minute.'*

> He liked the way she scoffed at him, as if he were a child. He sat on the floor at her feet to remove his shoes. He handed her the socks, making a pretense of their great filth by holding them by his fingertips and far from his nose. 'Whew!' he said. She tousled his hair, and for an absurd moment he thought he would break into tears. "*(*The Tree House Confessions, 1979, pp. 79 - 80)

Lest we be tempted by such an incident to limit love to an emotion, let us hear what Simone Weil wrote in her essay "Forms of the Implicit Love of God":

> "The Gospel makes no distinction between the love of our neighbor and justice. . . . Justice consists of behaving exactly as though there were equality when one is the stronger in an unequal relationship. . . . He who treats as equals those who are far below him in strength really makes them a gift of the quality of human beings.. . . He reproduces the original generosity of the Creator with regard to them. . . . On God's part creation is not an act of self-expansion but of restraint and renunciation. . . . God permitted the existence of things distinct from himself and worth infinitely less than himself. By this creative act he denied himself, as Christ has told us to deny ourselves. God denied himself for our sakes in order to give us the possibility of denying ourselves for him. . . . Generosity and compassion are inseparable, and both have their model in God, that is to say, in creation and in the Passion. *(*Waiting for God, 1951, pp. 139, 143-146)

The love that Jesus showed in washing the disciples' feet is like the love God showed for us in our creation - an act of renunciation and restraint. This is scandalous, of course. The soul does not want to be face to face with a God who is less than all-powerful. The spectacle of a kneeling God is devastating. No! Let God be seated on a throne, holding all the symbols of power; let us be the ones to kneel. No wonder Peter is horrified when he sees Emmanuel crouching at his feet.

Love as Scandal

Is it accidental that in McConkey's novel the husband's middle name is Peter? In the footwashing narrative Peter represents the redeemed - those who in Vachel Lindsay's poem are "washed in the blood of the Lamb." As Jesus was immersed by John in the waters of the Jordan, so Peter has been thrown into a heavenly river. He sounds like a man who is terrified that he may drown. And no wonder: Cleansing, redeeming, forgiving love is always terrifying. The seventeenth-century poet George Herbert captured all of that in "Love":

> Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
> Guiltie of dust and sinne.
> But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack

From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
If I lack'd any thing.
A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here:
Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare,
I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?
Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, sayes Love, who bore the blame?
My deare, then I will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.

In the presence of God's love, who does not feel "guiltie of dust and sinne"? Peter's protest that he needs a complete bath is his way of saying that he is unworthy of Jesus' devotion. Surely he had not bargained for this. Peter had hoped to be in the parade, following the spiritual leader; he did not anticipate that his own life would be turned upside down.

Love has a much different effect on Judas, son of Simon Iscariot. He has determined to betray Jesus to his killers. Who knows what motivates Judas? In *The Last Temptation of Christ,* Martin Scorsese pictures Judas as betraying Jesus out of friendship; Judas is ordered by Jesus to hand him over to the authorities, that through the crucifixion the kingdom might come. However, the comment of Jesus, "You are not all clean," leads to the more likely supposition that guilt and shame, projected outward upon Jesus, lead Judas to his betrayal.

All that is not so important as the reality Judas represents: True love on the part of one will tempt the other to betrayal. The great romantic tales testify that this is so - Othello and Desdemona, Pinkerton and Butterfly, Tristan and Isolde, Arthur and Guinevere. There is something about human beings that leads them to betray love:

Yet each man kills the thing he loves,
By each let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword!

-- Oscar Wilde, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol")

Sexual Love and Betrayal

Two of our most perceptive portrayers of sexual love are John Updike and Woody Allen. In Updike's "Rabbit" novels, Harry Angstrom - an Everyman - betrays every woman who loves him. He cheats on his wife; he deserts his pregnant mistress; he beds his daughter-in-law; and his longtime lover is forsaken in her dying hours. A flower-child dies in a fire at Harry's house while he is away bedding another man's wife. Both sexual love and betrayal are as natural to Harry as eating and defecating; he acquires, trades, and discards sexual partners as casually as his father-in-law deals in used cars. Updike wants us to believe that natural man is not capable of keeping the marriage vow "forsaking all others, keep thee only unto her, so long as you both shall live."

Woody Allen's view of love is less banal, though not much more hopeful. His 1986 film, *Hannah and Her Sisters*, shows two years in the lives of three sisters. Hannah was once married to Mickey Sachs, but divorced him after bearing twins conceived by sperm donated by Mickey's business partner. Her second husband, Elliot, has a year-long affair with Hannah's unmarried sister, Lee. He cannot finally break with Hannah, and Lee falls in love with one of her college professors, although she admits to herself, "I feel like I'm betraying Elliot." The third sister, Holly, is edged out in a contest for the affections of a married man by her business partner. She ends up marrying Mickey Sachs. All three women in various ways replicate the experiences of their parents - a show business couple who enjoy wounding each other with accusations of various affairs. Allen's thesis appears to be that infidelity, because it is inevitable, is forgivable.

It seems to be the fate of modern men and women to experience love as a transaction, where one may expect both profits and losses. C. Day-Lewis describes it:

> "'You are nice' - and she touched his arm with a fleeting
> Impulsive gesture: the arm that had held her close
> And naked a year ago. She was not cheating,
> But it falsified their balance of profit and loss.
> Her gesture saluted a magnanimity shown
> When he asked if she was happy with her new
> Lover. That cool touch scalded him to the bone:
> The ingenuous words made all words ring untrue.
> Their love had never been one of creditor-debtor;
> But he felt that her hand, reaching to him across
> The year he had spent in failing to forget her
> And all they'd shared, simply wrote off a loss."
>
> ("A Loss," from *Requiem for the Living*, 1964)

What of the Devil?

But all this is all too familiar. In our culture love and betrayal go hand in hand. Where there is one, we expect the other. In the narrative of the footwashing, Judas is no surprise. Where there is love, of course there is disloyalty and even hatred. What else would we expect in a love story but eventual betrayal? Besides, do we not betray God's love every day of our lives?

But what are we to make of the story's reference to the devil? The Gospel says: "The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him." Ah, the devil is the great opportunist. Remember how the story of Jesus' temptation ended? The devil "departed from him until an opportune time." Now that time has come. The devil has been granted his agent in the person of Judas, who is not clean, who is capable of betrayal. The devil knows that where there is great love, mischief also lurks. He comes like a vulture to a downed animal.

We think we are so smart. We laugh at the devil as we do at scarecrows. Who could be frightened by such a thing? And then in our innocence we put our trust in either the purity or the necessity of our passions. And time and again we put ourselves in positions where the opportunity for betrayal is too much for us.

A popular film of 1988 was *Dangerous Liaisons,* which was based on a 1782 French novel. The movie presents us with two of the most contemptible persons ever to appear on the screen: a wealthy widow named Merteuil and her former lover, Count Valmont. Valmont confides in Merteuil his plan to seduce a virtuous married woman; Merteuil promises him a night in her bed if he can produce written proof of his conquest. He succeeds, but his virtuous victim dies of a broken heart. Valmont, who has broken his own rules and fallen in love with her, then allows himself to be killed in a duel. Merteuil in turn is ostracized by the outraged aristocracy.

The beautiful eighteenth-century costumes and setting seduce us into viewing these affairs with a kind of horrified detachment, as though we were watching a "Nature" film on PBS showing the praying mantis being devoured by his mate in the act of copulation. And then we are struck with this thought: This dreadful story is about us. We treat sexual love as a game, where one risks winning and losing, but in which one certainly cannot be destroyed. It is we who are constantly betrayed by "dust and sinne." Oh, the devil would give a great deal if we could be persuaded that only rich, idle, unprincipled aristocrats in pre-revolutionary France played so carelessly at love. That would provide him with another very opportune time.

However fascinated as we may be by Devil the Opportunist, Judas the Betrayer, and Peter the Clean, the central figure in the footwashing is Jesus the Lover. All else serves only to frame and highlight Jesus' act. It is pure and perfect love in action. The one who had demonstrated the power to stop the waves, to multiply the loaves, to unbind the paralytic, stoops to wash the feet of his friends. If a black slave were forced to wash her master's feet, we would consider it the depths of degradation. Jesus does it as a volunteer. Not only his robe is laid aside, but with it

any pretensions to royalty. His love will not be that of a king for deserving subjects, but that of a friend who washes one's soiled and aching feet.

Dare we risk that overused word "vulnerability"? Like any lover Jesus makes himself vulnerable to rejection, scorn, misunderstanding, disbelief. This is what God does also in making us in God's image: God takes a lover's gamble, an incalculable risk. Betrayal is not inevitable, but it is possible. Love creates an opportune time for the Tempter. Yet God, like Jesus, loves beyond betrayal. God brushes aside the risk, even as Jesus laid aside his clothing and wrapped himself with a towel.

Should We Wash Feet?

The question comes to mind, of course: If Emmanuel washed the disciples' feet, should we wash one another's feet? Has Jesus given us a symbol? In our services of worship should we institute footwashing? No. The act is unrepeatable. We may commit ourselves to the kind and quality of love that is represented by the footwashing. But if the thing is done as a symbol, then it loses its nature as an act of love. It is something else - a beautiful gesture, perhaps, but not love.

True love is never a gesture. That is one of the problems we have with loving one another. We substitute gifts for affection, gestures for words, words for gestures, jewels for kindness, manners for passion. We are forever playing games of love - whether that be love of man for woman, love of son for father, or love of rich for poor.

Every attempt to make of the footwashing a pious gesture plays into the hands of the devil. The devil would like nothing better than for us to think love is some kind of game, in which there are proper gestures, words and moves - all of which can be substituted for direct, physical, unmistakable deeds of caring.

Jean Sulivan was a French priest who was permitted by his bishop to leave parish work for a career as a writer. He wrote mostly novels, because he wanted people to get past the abstractions of religion to the lived experience of faith. In his spiritual journal he wrote: "The fundamental insight of the Bible . . . is that the invisible can speak only by means of the perceptible. There is no concept that will suffice for harvests turned golden, lilies of the field, the lost drachma, the wounded man on the road to Jericho" (Morning Light: The Spiritual Journal of Jean Sulivan, 1988, p. 18). So whatever we make of the footwashing, let us not make out of it a liturgical act. Then Jesus is betrayed one more time.

No, let it be remembered that when his death was near and he was with his beloved friends, Jesus wanted to demonstrate his devotion in an unmistakable way. So he got up from supper and washed their feet. According to the Gospel story, he did this in full knowledge of who he was and where he was going. It is a revelatory deed, not a mysterious gesture. The love of God

for humans was never made so plain, so direct, so personal.

Earlier in this chapter, we quoted "Love" by George Herbert. Simone Weil, from the time she was an adolescent until her death, suffered from excruciating migraine headaches. One of her methods for coping with pain was to concentrate her mind on poetry. She once wrote to a friend about Herbert's poem:

> "Often, at the culminating point of a violent headache, I make myself say it over, concentrating all my attention upon it and clinging with all my soul to the tenderness it enshrines. I used to think I was merely reciting it as a beautiful poem, but without my knowing it the recitation had the virtue of a prayer. It was during one of these recitations that, as I told you, Christ himself came down and took possession of me. . . . [In] this sudden possession of me by Christ, neither my senses nor my imagination had any part; I only felt in the midst of my suffering the presence of a love, like that which one can read in the smile on a beloved face. *(*Waiting for God, pp. 68 - 69)

How do you cope with that feeling of betrayal that pain and sickness bring? Might it help to concentrate all your imagination upon the story of Jesus' washing the disciples' feet?

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Chapter 10: God Is an Ex-Convict? (John 18-19, selected verses)

In Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, there is an arresting scene in which Jesus and Judas come upon the townspeople as they are stoning Mary Magdalene. Mary is a prostitute, but it is not her trade for which she is being punished, but for plying it with the hated Roman soldiers - and on the sabbath. Jesus interrupts the stoning long enough to hear the indictment. Then he picks up a couple of stones and hands them to Zebedee, the spokesman for the town. Go ahead and kill her, he tells Zebedee - but be sure that you yourself are innocent. And then Jesus makes reference to a woman with whom Zebedee has been illicitly involved. Zebedee drops the stones and turns with the others and leaves the scene.

The attack on Mary Magdalene is a familiar tale of crime and punishment. Later Jesus will find himself the central character in a comparable story:

> *After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples. So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons....So the soldiers, their officer, and the Jewish police arrested Jesus and bound him. First they took him to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person to die for the people. Then the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching....Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.....Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's headquarters. it was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover. So Pilate went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" They answered, "if this man were not*

> *a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you." ....Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews cried out, "if you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor."*
>
> *When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge's bench.... He said to the Jews, "Here is your King!" They cried out, "Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!" Pilate asked them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but the emperor." Then he handed him over to them to be crucified. (John 18-19, selected verses)*

The plot of this story is very familiar to us; we rehearse it every time we watch such standard television fare as the detective story, the courtroom drama, or the cop show. It is what Karl Menninger in The Crime of Punishment (1969) calls our "daily morality play." Says Menninger:

> "The crime and punishment ritual is part of our lives. We need crimes to wonder at, to enjoy vicariously, to discuss and speculate about, and to publicly deplore. We need criminals to identify ourselves with, to secretly envy, and to stoutly punish. Criminals represent our alter egos - our 'bad' selves - rejected and projected. They do for us the forbidden, illegal things we *wish* to do and, like scapegoats of old, they bear the burdens of our displaced guilt and punishment --the iniquities of us all.'
>
> Them we can punish! At them we can all cry 'stone her' or 'crucify him.' ... The internal economics of our own morality, our submerged hates and suppressed aggressions, our fantasied crimes, our feeling of need for punishment - all these can be managed in part by the scapegoat device. To do so requires this little maneuver of displacement, but displacement and projection are easier to manage than confession or sublimation.
>
> Hence, crowds of people will always join in the cry for punishment. Often their only interest in the particular victim is the fact that he is a labeled villain, and the extermination of villains is a 'righteous act.' The definition of villainy does not have to be a matter of common agreement or scientific investigation, it is enough that someone has been 'fingered,' accused, arraigned, sentenced. 'He, not I, is the purveyor of evil, the agent of violence. Crucify him! Burn him! Hang him! Punish him!'" (pp. 153 - 154)

If you doubt the full truth of Menninger's observations, reflect upon the "public morality plays" that are regularly offered on television. Detective stories, courtroom dramas, and cop shows have been essential to television from its beginning as a mass medium: "Perry Mason," "The Defenders," "Dragnet," "The Rockford Files," "Cagney and Lacey," "Agatha Christie," "Peter Whimsey," "Hill Street Blues," "Murder, She Wrote," "L.A. Law," "The Streets of San Francisco," "Columbo." Each of us has a list of favorites.

A popular cop show of the '80s was "Cagney and Lacey," a drama about two big-city

policewomen. A rerun, selected at random, tells this story: Elizabeth Carter is a young black woman who has been raped by four men. With the help of Mary Beth Lacey and Christine Cagney, the men have been arrested, tried, and sentenced to prison. But now there is a hitch: One man has appealed his sentence and has been released on a technicality. He is to be retried. Elizabeth is being asked to go back into the courtroom to testify against him. She comes to the two detectives, pleading that she not be put through that ordeal. The assault and the original trial have left her shaken and self-accusing. We do not have to meet the four rapists to hate and despise them; the embittered and frightened woman is evidence enough of their criminality. Christine and Mary Beth set out to persuade Elizabeth to testify, lest the man be turned loose to rape other women. The young prosecuting attorney, also a woman, threatens Elizabeth with a bench warrant if she refuses to appear. Finally Elizabeth agrees to testify, although at the last moment it is revealed that a second of the convicted rapists is also being granted a retrial.

What does that prove, but that some people do indeed commit crimes against society and must needs be punished? Otherwise we would all slide into anarchy or barbarism. If it were not for the Mary Beths and Christines of this world - and prosecuting attorneys and prisons - no woman would be safe on the streets. Fair enough. But why is it necessary for us to have this made the theme of popular drama and be constantly reenacted for our viewing pleasure? Does it not prove Menninger's point that "crowds of people will always join in the cry for punishment"?

What of Jesus?

With this in mind, read again the story of Jesus' arrest, trial, and sentencing. Is it, as popular piety would have us believe, the story of an innocent man set upon by a gang of corrupt officials and a mindless mob? Is it not rather one more enactment of "our daily morality play," with each one dutifully playing his or her assigned role?

First, there is Jesus, about whose innocence there seems to be some doubt. Nothing that we have seen or heard him do is a direct threat to public order. Nevertheless, he is branded as a criminal; it is said that he has claimed to be the king of the Jews. He is accused of the crime of insurrection - fomenting rebellion against the emperor.

Then there is .Judas, the one who "fingers" Jesus, to use Menninger's term. He is the one who brings the soldiers and police to the supposedly safe garden where Jesus has gone with his disciples. We have already probed possible motives for Judas' actions; they may have been socially acceptable. Perhaps he thought he was protecting the state from a dangerous criminal. Perhaps he thought he could force Jesus into taking a public stand against the Establishment. *The Last Temptation of Christ* shows Judas as carrying out orders given by Jesus himself.

And speaking of carrying out orders, there are the soldiers and the police. One cannot blame enlisted men for believing that their officers are always right, even though they may suspect that the one they are arresting is innocent of any crimes. We expect soldiers to obey orders. We

expect policemen to uphold the law - not to interpret it.

Also upholding law and order, according to their lights, are Annas and Caiaphas, the high priests, before whom Jesus is brought for interrogation. Caiaphas, we are told, has already decided that it is expedient that Jesus die. His very existence is somehow a danger to society. Jesus' possible innocence of specific lawbreaking is immaterial and irrelevant to Caiaphas. Like some who favor capital punishment, he has decided on high moral grounds that it is better to have the death of one than to risk the destruction of many.

The civil magistrate, Pilate, is usually depicted as a villain. But in this version of the story, he is the only one who perceives that Jesus is innocent. After a preliminary examination Pilate wants to release him. Eventually Pilate gives in to the pressure of the crowd; he allows them to convince him that Jesus may be indeed a dangerous revolutionary. Pilate decides that it is better to hand Jesus over to be crucified than to risk a riot, where many might be killed. The life of one is a small price to pay to avoid civil insurrection, when many innocents - including women and children - might perish.

And what of the larger group, sometimes referred to as "the Jews" or simply "they"? They may be driven by a kind of herd mentality, but they are certainly not acting as a lynch mob. They prove their probity: They will not enter Pilate's headquarters lest they violate God's law and be unfit to eat the Passover.

So we do not have a rascally, villainous cast of characters. We have ordinary soldiers, policemen, officials, priests, magistrates, and citizens - all doing what soldiers, police, officials, priests, and zealous citizens do every day. It is the usual "morality play," with a suspected criminal, arresting officers, prosecutors, a trial, and sentencing. With the exception of Jesus, none of the actors appear to be sterling characters. They are ordinary human beings, with a fair measure of hypocrisy and callousness. But each carries out with fidelity the role that society has assigned to him or her.

> "The fundamental reason why Jesus has to die makes the question of responsibility for his assassination pointless. Every society, Jewish or Gentile, that is founded on money, power, and law, condemns him. He puts people first, making economics and politics less important than men and women. In contrast, society, even when it says the opposite, deceiving others as well as itself, considers individuals simply as a means." (Sulivan, Morning Light, p. 75)

A Fair Trial

The suspicion lurks that Jesus might have profited with a change of venue. Wouldn't he have fared better in *our* criminal justice system? However, do you recall from the 1950s the film *Twelve Angry Men?* It shows the behavior of a jury in a first degree murder trial. When the

jurors first gather to deliberate, eleven are fully convinced that the accused - a young man - stabbed his father. One lone juror, played by Henry Fonda, is not convinced that the case against the boy is airtight. And the film shows how, through questioning and discussion, all twelve come to believe that there is a reasonable doubt that the boy is guilty. They vote to acquit.

The film attacks the notions of the disinterested juror and of impartial justice. None of the twelve knows the young man. But several have good reason to want to see him nailed. The juror played by Ed Begley is prejudiced against all persons of the boy's minority group. If you don't punish this boy, others will be encouraged to commit crimes, he says. Jack Warden plays a man who has tickets for the evening baseball game; he will vote with any majority, if the thing can be done quickly. The last juror to be convinced is played by Lee J. Cobb. He wants the boy punished because he represents his own son, with whom he has had a bitter quarrel. Would such a jury have perceived that Jesus was innocent of any crime?

The suspicion lies to hand that had Jesus come among us today instead of two thousand years ago, chances are that he would be imprisoned - if not executed.

Some of the most dogged justice fighters in this century spent time in prison: Martin Luther King, Jr., the civil rights advocate; Emmeline Pankhurst, the British suffragette; and Mohandas Gandhi, who struggled for Indian independence.

No Prisons, Then?

If criminal justice systems are flawed and if we all are guilty of needing to see others punished, is then no one a criminal? Should we tear down our prisons? Hardly. Surely some deserve to be there. In his novel Crime and Punishment, Fyodor Dostoevsky recounts the story of Raskolnikov, an impoverished law student in Petersburg. He deliberately commits a murder, with intent to steal. With an axe he disposes of an elderly woman who

runs a pawn shop. Raskolnikov's rationale, spelled out in an essay published prior to his crime, is this: There are two kinds of people in the world. First, there are the ordinary folk, who are bound to obey the criminal laws. Then there are the superordinary people - like Napoleon and like himself - who must be allowed to shed blood in order to fulfill their destinies. When his crime is discovered and he is sent to Siberia for eight years, Raskolnikov's only regret is that he acted stupidly. Who would argue that such a murder does not demand severe penalties?

Certainly there are persons in prisons whom we do not want out on our streets. For their video verité *Doing Time: Life Inside the Big House,* Susan and Alan Raymond interviewed inmates in the Lewisburg (Pennsylvania) Federal Prison. "Red" tells us - the viewers - that he went to the wrong house for a drug buy and killed three innocent people. Strickland has been transferred from another prison, where he tells us that he killed four fellow inmates in a riot. John tells us

calmly that he cut the throats of his sister, her husband, and their son - because they would not let him stay overnight in their house. After watching the film, one has to be grateful that Red and Strickland and John are put away for life.

"Crucify Them?"

And yet are we ready to say with finality that life imprisonment is what criminals like Red and Strickland and John *deserve?* Are we ready to go a step further and cry "Execute them!"? How can we be certain that in some sense they are not being punished for our iniquities? How can we be sure that any man or woman standing to hear the judge's sentence is not being made our scapegoat? Can we separate society's need to apply penalties from our individual need to inflict punishment? How do we know that in sentencing a man or woman to death we are not crucifying Christ afresh?

Some persons have responded to such questions by refusing to accept their assigned role in society's morality play. Karl Menninger used his influence as a famous psychiatrist to found a series of homes, called villages, to which young men and women may be sent instead of to reformatories or prisons. In the villages young men and women are provided with surrogate parents, a stable environment, and a chance to finish their education.

In the 1950s on the streets of Manhattan, an ex-Jesuit missionary had a strange ministry. He scooped up drunks to keep them out of the hands of the police. Cops called him The Bodysnatcher; the homeless and derelicts knew him as Father Dutch. He had reason to know the dread of incarceration: He had spent four years in a Japanese prison camp and three years as a prisoner of the Chinese Communists. Father Dutch had several safe rooms to which he took drunks for food, a shower, clean clothes, and a night's undisturbed sleep.

Edith Stein was a Roman Catholic nun of Jewish extraction. She allowed herself to be taken off to a Nazi concentration camp to share the fate of the prisoners. As one survivor wrote of Edith, she was "truly a mother - tending little children whose natural mothers neglected them; a sorrowful mother, suffering with and for her children, who, like herself, would soon be driven into the gas chambers to be liquidated like vermin."

There are thousands of women and men who are engaged in attempts at prison reform, or in prison ministries of one kind or another. They have refused to be part of the crowd that shouts "Stone her! Hang him!"

In our Gospel story, Jesus accepts the role of the accused criminal with no attempt at evasion or escape. He is as passive in the hands of his accusers as a lamb in the hands of the slaughterers. Apparently he makes no attempt to defend himself; he offers no convincing reasons why he should not be handed over to be crucified. Why? He leaves us with a mystery more profound

than any detective story ever written. *God is an ex-convict?* We pose a question rather than make a declarative statement that would seem to border on blasphemy.

When I was a theological student, I traveled one summer with the seminary choir. We stopped at the state prison in Deer Lodge, Montana, to sing for the prisoners. In our program one of us always told why he had decided to go into the ministry. The lot fell to me. I never felt quite so foolish as I did telling those stony-faced felons and murderers and rapists why I wanted to be a preacher. My discomfort was wiped away by another member of the choir, who was chosen to preach a brief sermon. Peter McKenzie told how Jesus came from working-class people in a small town. How he never held a steady job. How he was betrayed by a friend and given a shoddy trial. How he was summarily executed. As Peter spoke, I watched the faces of the prisoners. It seemed to me that Jesus' experience was closer to theirs than to my own.

Most of us think of prisons as God-forsaken jungles, inhabited by God-forsaken men and women. Is it possible, however, that precisely in such places we might be permitted to glimpse the human face of God?

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God with a Human Face by John C. Purdy

John C. Purdy is a retired minister of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A), which he served for 26 years as an editor of curriculum resource. He is also the author of Parables at Work (Westminster) and God with a Human Face (Westminster/Knox). God with a Human Face was published by Westminster/John Knox in l993 and is used by permission of the author, who also prepared the text for Religion Online.

Chapter ll: God Undertook Death (John 19:1 6b-1 9, 31-53, 41-42)

Loren Eiseley had a dream in which he was visited by Death. The dream came soon after the sudden passing of the writer's patron, his uncle, Buck Price.

> "One night he dreamt of sitting in the parlor of his uncle's home, rocking gently and waiting. A laugh came from behind a curtained door, followed by the sound of a snapped lock. The laughter resumed, deep and vibrating. The lights suddenly went out, and then he heard the mocking voice of Death emanating from Buck's favorite chair: 'We are alone now. Isn't that what you have always wanted?' Loren hurled himself at the chimera, only to be met in midair by an equally violent force. The mortal adversaries twisted and rolled across the floor like Saturday-night saloon brawlers, smashing every piece of furniture in their path. Loren gradually gained the upper hand; he had his foe by the throat and could feel something collapsing between his constricting fingers. The lights blinked to life again; in his hands was the unrecognizable form of a crumpled puppet, a papier-mâché creature 'murdered' in an imaginary moment of blind rage. (Gale E. Christianson, Fox at the Wood's Edge: A Biography of Loren Eiselev, 1990, p. 164)

Jesus' encounter with death was also terrible, but different from Eiseley's. It is reported in the Gospel of John as follows:

> *So they took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. it read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews."*
>
> *Since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross*

during the sabbath, especially because that sabbath was a day of great solemnity. So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed. Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs.

Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there. (John 19, selected verses)

As you read those words, very likely a multitude of images flash upon your mental screen. Perhaps snatches of hymns ring in your ears. You may recall a picture in a Sunday-school book showing Jesus bent under the weight of a heavy cross. A voice wails, "Jesus walked this lonesome valley, he had to walk it by himself." If you saw *The Last Temptation of Christ,* you can visualize the actor Willem DaFoe being hoisted on the cross. A Gospel choir murmurs, "Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?" You remember viewing a medieval painting of Christ hanging on the cross - possibly Grunewald's altarpiece. Isaac Watts's hymn sounds in your ears, "See, from his head, his hands, his feet; sorrow and love flow mingled down." Do you know the *Pietà,* Michelangelo's sculpture of Mary holding the lifeless body of her son? "Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?"

Even if you wished, you could not erase those images nor still those voices. So I will not ask you to do that. I will not insist that you listen to me telling you "how it really was." But I do ask that you revisit those familiar scenes and let me stand behind you, as it were, and whisper some things in your ear that you may not have thought about - or may have forgotten.

"Carrying the Cross by Himself. . ."

The Gospel account begins with Jesus carrying a wooden cross to the place where he will be put to death. He is, apparently, a willing participant in his execution. There is no display of rage, no passive resistance, no lying down on the job. He bends his will as well as his back. He accedes to the propriety of what is a being done. As with most political prisoners, Jesus' spirit is crushed before his body is broken.

This scene is all too familiar to us. Every decade brings new political executions. We have witnessed so many that our hearts are hardened against pity: Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia, Hussein's Iraq, Pinochet's Chile, Argentina, El Salvador, Brazil, China, North Korea - is there no end to the list? Will the killing never stop?

It is killing of such an awful kind. Political executions have this double-edged penalty: Before being cut off from the land of the living, one is severed from society. How desperately lonely must be the last hours for those to whom the State turns the grim face of executioner.

Betty Stam was with the China Inland Mission during the war between the Nationalists and the Communists in the 1930s. The town where she and her husband served was overrun by the Red Army. While Betty was bathing their baby, the soldiers came and arrested her husband and demanded twenty thousand dollars in ransom. When the money could not be paid, Betty and her husband were taken from their home and killed. Betty watched while her husband knelt and was beheaded; then it was her turn. Consider her feelings as she faced execution - a young wife, in a foreign country, surrounded by a hostile army, taken from her baby, her husband already dead. Could the world appear less friendly, more lonely?

But everyone faces death alone, doesn't she? doesn't he? Of course. That may help to explain the need of the terminally ill to separate themselves from their loved ones. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross tells about Mrs. W., a fifty-eight-year-old woman who knew she was dying of abdominal cancer. When she was taken to the operating room for one more operation, she became grossly psychotic - the only way she could protest the prolonging of her life. After returning to her room and recovering her senses, she asked to see Dr. Kubler-Ross.

> "When I entered the room the following day, she looked at her bewildered husband and then said, 'Talk to this man and make him understand.' She then turned her back to us. clearly indicating her need to be left alone. I had my first meeting with her husband, who was at a loss for words.
>
> Her husband said with tears in his eyes that he was totally puzzled by this unexpected change. He described his marriage as an extremely happy one and his wife's terminal illness as totally unacceptable. He had hopes that the operation would allow them once more to be 'as close together as they had been' for the many happy years of their marriage.
>
> When I asked him about the patient's needs, rather than his own, he sat in silence. He slowly began to realize that he never listened to her needs but took it for granted that they were the same. He could not comprehend that a patient reaches a point where death comes as a great relief, and that patients die easier if they are allowed and helped to detach themselves slowly from all the meaningful relationships in their life. *(On Death and Dying,* 1969, pp. 103 - 104)

"There They Crucified Him"

Let us move on to the scene of Jesus' death - the crucifixion. The site of Jesus' execution has a significant name, Golgotha, The Place of the Skull. In the absence of any explanation, we suppose that Golgotha has something to do with skulls and bones. It is a boneyard. When we have no more use for an artifact, we throw it on the dump. When society wants to express contempt for a man, it delivers him to the boneyard.

In this place of desolation Jesus is fixed to a wooden cross. Two others are nailed up with him, one on each side. Simone Weil reminds us that Christ "did not die like a martyr. He died like a common criminal, confused with thieves, only a little more ridiculous" (Waiting for God, p. 125). Jesus' crime is specified; on his cross is the indictment, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." If one assumes that capital punishment is justified as a warning to others, Jesus' blood should flash a stop sign to would-be Jewish kings.

"He Was Already Dead"

We may want to linger in awe and wonder at the spectacle of Jesus hanging on the cross. We may be moved to pity, tears, even love. But public execution, especially crucifixion, is a disgraceful way to end a life; such a death is a blot on the social record. Because the crucifixion happens on a day of Preparation for the sabbath, pious Jews come to the civil magistrate and ask that the bodies be removed. The soldiers break the legs of the other two, to be sure that they are quite dead. But they find that Jesus has already died. Sometime between his being hoisted on the cross and their coming, the breath has gone out of him. He has left the land of the living. He has passed away. The spirit has left the body. What remains is a corpse.

Why is the body of Jesus not left on the cross? Isn't the main purpose of a public execution to scare the wits out of the living populace, so that none will be tempted to crime or rebellion? Yet, why not dispose of the body, once life has left it? Death is nature's way of clearing the way for a new generation. "If nobody had to die," said Gertrude Stein, "how would there be room enough for any of us who now live to have lived? We never could have been if all the others had not died. There would have been no room." Surely all of us understand this about death: It is the end of our usefulness. What began with Jesus' conception is now ended. His song has been sung; his story has been told; the flower of his genius has bloomed.

Oh, one's influence does not end at death. Very ordinary folk leave behind the legacy of children, even grandchildren. And the works of the dead go on working. The books that Jane Austen wrote continue to be read; the music that Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart composed is still played; Emily Dickinson's poems are still memorized and recited; the speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr., are quoted on his birthday. But Jane, Wolfgang, Emily, and Martin write no more books, music, poems, or speeches.

Jesus goes to join them. No more sermons on the mountain, no more feeding of multitudes, boat rides, meals with friends, healing of paralytics. What Jesus might have done had he lived another ten or twenty years, who knows? He might have written his memoirs. Think how different the literary scene would be had he done that. He might have founded a political party. How that would have changed the political landscape! He might even have organized a religion, with a woman named Mary as its high priestess. How about that!

It is this unrealized part of a person's life that makes death so painful for those left behind. Of the death of her seventeen-year-old son, Frances Gunther wrote:

> "What is the grief that tears me now? No fear of death or any hereafter. During our last summer at Madison, I would write in my diary when I couldn't sleep. 'Look Death in the face. To look Death in the face, and not be afraid. To be friendly to Death as to Life. Death as a part of Life, like Birth. Not the final part. I have no sense of finality about Death. Only the final scene in a single act of a play that goes on forever. Look Death in the face: it's a friendly face, a kindly face, sad, reluctant, knowing it is not welcome but having to play its part when its cue is called, perhaps trying to say, 'Come, it won't be too bad, don't be afraid, I understand how you feel, but come - there may be other miracles!' No fear of Death, no fight against Death, no enmity toward Death, friendship with Death as with Life. That is - Death for myself, but not for Johnny, God, not yet. He's too young to miss all the other parts of Life, all the other lovely living parts of Life. All the wonderful, miraculous things to do, to feel, to see, to hear, to touch, to smell, to taste, to experience, to enjoy. What a joy Life is. What does not one talk of the joy of Life? shout, sing, write of the joy of Life?" (From John Gunther, Death Be Not Proud, 1949, pp. 255 - 256)

"They Laid Jesus There"

But the joys of Life are over for Jesus of Nazareth. Like Loren's Uncle Buck, like Mrs. W., like Johnny Gunther, and like Jane, Wolfgang, Emily, and Martin, Jesus must be buried. Fortunately, his place of execution is next to a garden, where there is a new tomb that has never been used. Evidently it is a cave-like space in the hillside. And so the remains are taken from the cross, wrapped in grave-clothes, and laid in this cavity. Jesus' body can then begin its slow journey back to the dust from which it came. Society's debt to the dead is to bury them, to get them underground or under a seal. Let the forces of nature now do their work.

In John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath, Grandpa Joad dies while the family is on their pilgrimage from Oklahoma to California. Pa says, "They's laws. You got to report a death, an' when you do that, they either take forty dollars for the undertaker or they take him for a pauper." The family has only a hundred and fifty dollars; they cannot afford the undertaker. So the men dig a grave by the side of the road. In a fruit jar, buried with Grandpa, is a piece of paper with his name and a verse from the Psalms, "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven." The family insists that Casy, the ex-preacher, say a few words, and he does:

> "This here ol' man jus' lived a life an' jus' died out of it. I don't know whether he was good or bad, but that don't matter much. He was alive, an' that's what matters. An' now he's dead, an' that don't matter. Heard a fella tell a poem one time, an' he says, 'All that lives is holy.' Got to thinkin', an' puny soon it means more than the words says. An' I

> wouldn' pray for a ol' fella that's dead. He's awright. He got a job to do, but it's all laid out for 'im an' there's on'y one way to do it. But us, we got a job to do, an' they's a thousan' ways, an' we don' know which one to take. An' if I was to pray, it'd be for the folks that don' know which way to turn. Grampa here, he got the easy straight. An' now cover 'im up and let 'im get to his work." (pp. 157 - 158)

Death Has Two Faces

Those are my reflections on a few of the many mental images we bring to any account of Jesus' crucifixion, death, and burial. What happens if we should combine these several pictures into a single portrait, as when several slide projectors throw their various images on a single screen? Then we may discern, as in a glass darkly, the face of death. Rather, we see the two faces of death. Or, if you prefer, we see that death has two facets. Death calls each by name; death comes for us all. It is what each must suffer alone; it is what none of us can escape.

First of all, death is the experience that each of us must go through alone. Jesus' crucifixion on Golgotha is utterly unlike anyone else's death. Each person's death is unique; no two people die the same way. And each of us is never so alone as when we go to meet our death. Just as Jesus' death was unique, so is yours, so is mine. Death never whispers, "You all come," but rather "Buck," "Betty," "Johnny," "Jesus." Each dies alone; each is never so lonely as when confronted with death.

And yet all die; no one is exempt. Even Jesus died - he who had every reason to live. If Jesus died, how can you and I hope to escape death? It is inevitable; it is common; it is necessary. Each of us wears a different shape and face; yet each is made of the same clay.

This twofold nature of death is pressed upon the hearers of Johannes Brahms's *Requiem* for the dead. In the overpowering conviction that all of us must die, the choir sings:

> "Behold, all flesh is as the grass, and all the goodliness of man is as the flower of grass; for lo, the grass with'reth, and the flower thereof decayeth."
>
> (Isa. 40:6-8)

In the next chorus, the solo male voice is heard:

> "Lord, make me to know, know the measure of my days on earth, to consider my frailty that I must perish.
> Surely, all my days here are as an hand-breadth to thee, and my lifetime is as naught to thee."

(Ps. 39:4-5)

Death comes for all; death comes for each. Death mirrors the two-fold character of human existence: We are molded of the same clay, yet each of us is unique. Such is our humility and our glory.

Where Is God?

But where is God in all of this? Is God merely a spectator at our death? Are we to think of God as the parent who sits in the audience and watches beloved sons and daughters graduate from one kind of existence into another? Does God preside over our death, like the high-school principal who stands on the platform during the commencement exercise and hands each graduate a diploma? Or is God present at our death in a more direct way?

The answer surely lies in the answer to a prior question: Where was God when Jesus died? Those who believe in a benevolent and merciful God are confronted with what seems a multiple-choice response:

(1) God took Jesus.

(2) God forsook Jesus.

(3) God undertook death.

There are those who insist on answer #1. They say that death is a doorway leading from life on this earth to life in heaven. God was waiting for Jesus to die so he might be taken to dwell with God in heaven.

In James Agee's novel A Death in the Family (1957), Mary Follett loses her young husband in a car accident. She explains to her children:

> "'Daddy didn't come home. He isn't going to come home ever any more. He's - gone away to heaven and he isn't ever coming home again. Do you hear me, Catherine? Are you awake?' Catherine stared at her mother. '*Do you* understand, Rufus?'
>
> He stared at his mother. 'Why not?' he asked.
>
> She looked at him with extraordinary closeness and despair, her severely and she went on: 'Daddy was on his way home last night - and he was - he - got hurt and - so God let him go to sleep and took him straight away with Him to heaven.' (pp. 251 - 252)

Then there are those who choose answer #2; they insist that God forsook Jesus. When Jesus died, God's face was turned away. God was grieved, God was upset, but God did nothing to interfere or intervene.

The French writer/priest Jean Sulivan reports:

> "In dying my mother taught me a lesson. She refused every word of assurance, every consolation of religion. Then I realized that it wasn't only in the novels of Bernanos that the servants of God die abandoned and apparently in revolt.
>
> As she lay dying my mother's faith, as regards its human supports, formulations, and religious objects, suddenly crumbled. This good woman lived through an agony of abandonment." *(*Morning Light, pp. 12, 36)

There are, of course, scriptural warrants for both answers. But there is also the third answer and a stunning possibility: that Jesus and God were united in death as in life; that in the crucifixion God undertook death. According to the dictionary, to "undertake" something means to take it on oneself, as a task or performance. Where was God when Jesus died? God was on the cross.

If the thesis of this book is correct, that in the human Jesus we see the face of God, then we may choose answer #3. Jesus was never more fully human than in his death. God was never more fully present to the world than in the hour of that death. Doesn't that mean that God is never more fully and truly present to us than in the hour of our dying?

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Chapter 12: God Goes Ahead of Us (Matt.28:1-8)

P>When she was "discovered," April Epner was thirty-six, single, and teaching Latin in a suburban high school. Her discoverer was her natural mother, Bernice Graverman, hostess of a television talk show. April's adoptive parents, survivors of the Holocaust, were both dead.

April and Bernice are the protagonists in Elinor Lipman's Then She Found Me. The theme of the novel is transformation through discovery. At first April hated being found--and she hated Bernice. Because Bernice pushed men at her, April invented a romance with Dwight Willamee, the school librarian. Then she discovered that she was in love with him. The final chapter describes their wedding. After the ceremony April discovered, to her amazement, that she was calling Bernice "Mother."

On a Sunday morning 1900 years earlier, two other Jewish women came back from a garden outside Jerusalem to report an amazing discovery of quite a different sort: Jesus of Nazareth had been raised from the dead.

> *After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples. (Matt. 28.1-8)*

By this story Mary Magdalene is joined forever to the select crowd of witnesses who went public with remarkable discoveries. In 1493 Christopher Columbus returned to Spain to report the discovery of the New World. In 1898 Marie [Mary!] Curie and her husband announced the

discovery of radium and polonium. In 1929 Edwin P. Hubble came down from the observatory on Mt. Wilson with an astounding message: The universe is expanding; space stretches uniformly in all directions, carrying the galaxies with it. Astronomer Allan R. Sandage said, "To cosmologists that is the most amazing scientific discovery ever made."

Mary Magdalene doesn't seem to fit this company. We should have expected one of Jesus' disciples to have the honor of discovering and announcing his resurrection. Peter would have been the logical choice. Or it might have been one of the others of that select group whose feet Jesus had washed. But it was none of them who were first at the tomb that Sunday morning. Rather it was a couple of women named Mary.

As so often happens, the great discovery was the work of amateurs. An amateur is, in the primary sense of the term, a "lover." Surely the Marys went to the tomb out of love. They may have been believers in the resurrection of the dead; they may have been hopeful of something extraordinary. But if we know anything of human nature, we know that love was the primary force that drove them there. Love is a more reliable alarm clock than Faith or Hope - more likely to get you out of bed and get you going early in the morning.

We also know that piety restrained the Marys from going sooner. Being respectful of the opinions of others - if not devout themselves - they waited until the sabbath was over before they made their visit. They did not want to break the commandment against journeys on the sabbath. Possibly they did not want to bring more disrespect on the already tarnished name of Jesus by disregarding the sabbath rule.

The accusation is sometimes made that piety is a fatal hindrance to discovery, that it puts blinders on the seeker, that it serves to conceal part of the truth. But were not the likes of Copernicus, Darwin, and Mendel pious men? Nicholas Copernicus, who discovered that the earth revolves around the sun, was a doctor of canon law. Charles Darwin, the proponent of the theory of evolution, spent three years at Cambridge studying theology. Gregor Mendel, the father of genetics, was a monk.

Don't be misled by the references to scientific discoveries:The Marys did not discover the resurrection in the same way that Marie Curie discovered radioactivity or Edwin Hubble discovered that the universe is expanding. The women did not begin with a hypothesis; they did not make careful observations and mathematical calculations. Nor was their discovery a colossal accident, like Columbus setting out for Asia and bumping into Santo Domingo. Nor was theirs a sudden insight furnished by "feminine intuition." Nor did the Muse of Poetry whisper in their ears that he whom they had loved was not dead, but lived eternally.

The so-called discovery was an act of divine revelation. The Easter journey of the Marys took them to the place where God pulled aside the curtain and let them have first peek. Knowledge of the resurrection came to those who went adventuring, true. But it came through no wit or

wisdom of their own. It was given to them, like a gift. The resurrection story is indeed that of a discovery; but that discovery might with justification be named a disclosure.

This disclosure was accompanied by some spectacular special effects. Cecil B. DeMille couldn't have dreamed up anything more stunning. (It was literally stunning for the men who were guarding the tomb.) There was an earthquake, caused by something like a sonic boom. An angel in shining raiment came plunging down out of the sky like a stealth fighter; he rolled back the tombstone and sat on it. The men who were guarding the tomb were scared to death - or at least so frightened that they passed out and lay like dead men. So dazzling was the heavenly messenger that it was reported - presumably by the women - that he flashed like lightning. One can only guess at the timbre and resonance of his voice. Charlton Heston and James Earl Jones, eat your hearts out!

How matter-of-fact is the angel's message. One might have wished for something a bit more grand, something that could be memorized and recited on special occasions by children. Something with rolling cadences, like the Declaration of Independence or the Gettysburg Address. Something that Bach or Handel could have set to music. Something more akin to "Fear not, for I bring you tidings of great joy which shall be to all people" Well, you get the picture. It does have a neon angel in it. But it lacks "alleluias" and "forsooths." Not even a single "Hail, Mary." Just the facts, ladies: Jesus is risen, as he promised. See for yourselves, the body is not here. Tell the disciples that if they go to Galilee, they will see him. He goes on ahead of you.

The one element in the story that is not surprising is the reaction of the women. They are galvanized. They dash off with their message for the disciples. The women are joined forever in history with others who ran panting with great tidings, like the first marathon runner who announced the victory at Thermopylae. Joy lends wings to one foot, fear to the other. Talk about the carrot and the stick: Dread nips at their heels; exhilaration fills their lungs.

Well, there we have it. One of the greatest discoveries in the history of humankind tersely described in eight verses of scripture. It is a wild mixture of the awesome and mundane, of beginner's luck and heavenly intention, of surprise and expectation, of spectacular special effects and matter-of-fact reporting, of fear and of joy.

What About Us?

The narrative leaves off with the women running to tell the disciples that Jesus is risen from the dead and that he goes ahead of them to Galilee. Where does that leave us? Are we, then, to run to meet our future, as it were, knowing that it has been unalterably changed for the better? Has God, in some mysterious way, rolled back the hindering stone that barred us from entering eternal life? Is the discovery by the Marys of Jesus' resurrection a kind of metaphor of the life of faith? Are we, like them, to venture into the future, knowing that wonderful surprises await

us?

Another question: Is Jesus the rabbit that God pulled out of the hat on Easter? In this Gospel story have we been led along like the audience in a magic show - so to speak - being set up for the one, great, big, final conjuring trick? Is the resurrection meant to make us disregard everything up to this point as mere preparation?

Jean Sulivan reports that one of his classmates at school, when asked what Jesus' last words were on the cross, replied:

"I should worry, I should care; on the third day I'll rise again."

If so, then what happened along the way to the poor who were to have the good news preached to them? What about the captives in prison? The paralytics, the hungry, the anxious, the storm-tossed? And what of the victims of corrupt institutions? And those whose souls need washing? Are they just some kind of stage dressing in this drama? What of the fate of humankind; does it no longer matter?

Moreover, if God can do tricks with tombstones, why may we not expect God to turn stones into bread, to feed the hungry? If God can send an angel to roll away a stone, why not send an army of angels to bear up the helpless and the orphan and the widow? If God is more powerful than our arch-enemy, Death, then how about some immediate attention to those other enemies of ours: Ignorance, AIDS, Tyranny, Racism, Alzheimer's, Child Abuse, Schizophrenia?

Why, at the end of the Gospel story, are we presented with something as irrational, unscientific, impractical, and irrelevant as a *resurrection?* What is the point of it?

The mention of "point" suggests a fulcrum, on which everything rests, as with a balance. Whatever answer we give to that question will tip the scales one way or another. A wrong answer may throw out all that we have said up to now, rendering it as merely preparatory and therefore forgettable. A right answer may make everything fall into place. So a deep breath, a pause, a clearing of the throat is necessary.

All right, the answer is ready: What Mary discovered on Easter morning is that *God goes ahead of us.* God is not in the historic past, locked into an ancient time when people believed in miracles, spirits, and demons. Nor is God shut up in our personal past, along with our sins, our youth, our wasted opportunities, our dead parents and friends, our childhood certainties, our idealism, our first love.

No. God is ahead of us - in our future - as the one who will yet forgive sins, free paralytics, feed the hungry, make peace, wash our feet, raise the dead. If fear and joy struggle for mastery of

Mary's soul, it is because she has grasped - or has been grasped by - the knowledge that God has gone ahead. God waits for her - and us - to get moving.

According to Christian legend, Mary Magdalene was a prostitute whom Jesus befriended. Then it is possible that she was the inspiration for Jesus' two best-loved stories - the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. Do you know them? The first is about a Jew who was on a journey from Jerusalem to Jericho. He was set upon by thieves, beaten, and left for dead. Two religious types saw him and hurried by. But a hated Samaritan stopped and bound up his wounds and took him to an inn to recover - like an Israeli carrying a wounded Palestinian to safety.

We may suppose that something like that happened to Mary. As a prostitute, life for her was a journey to a beating. Maybe she had been an abused wife, who had also been an abused child; she learned early to expect nothing from men but use and abuse. And she found that religious people tended to walk around her as they would a piece of carrion. But one day she found a man smiling at her - a religious type - but not like the others. This man asked only to be her friend. His friendship restored her to health and sanity.

The Prodigal Son is the story of a heedless boy who wheedles his father into giving him his inheritance. He takes the money to a distant city, where he squanders it on women and drink. Penniless and hungry, he turns again home. The father sees the boy coming and runs to meet him. Jesus does not tell us what is in the son's heart when he spies the figure hurrying to meet him. At first he may suspect that his father has sent a servant to warn him off. But then, when the boy sees that it is indeed his father, what can he think? He must expect wrath and vengeance, for he has been rehearsing a little speech about what a rogue he has been and how he deserves at best to be treated like a servant. He is ready to shoulder the burden of his past and to carry it the rest of his life. We can only imagine his shock, his wonder, his joy to discover that his father has set aside that past in the sheer delight of having his son with him again. The father's delight is mirrored in the face of his son.

Many prostitutes begin as prodigal daughters, who leave home in a huff. Once their money is gone, there is nothing to do but hustle their bodies. The final humiliation is to be led home to face the parents whose trust and values have been violated.

When .Jesus befriended Mary, it must have been like having her youth and purity restored. And the wonder with which she heard the angel's announcement would have been that of the prodigal when he heard his father say, "This is my son who was dead and is alive again, who was lost and is found." No wonder Mary runs from the tomb with fear and joy struggling for mastery. Her past truly is dead and gone; the future truly is open. Jesus is waiting for her.

Jesus waits for us, up ahead - waits for us to get moving, to catch up to him. God waits for us, up ahead - waits for us to get moving, to catch up to what God is doing.

Once we have grasped that mystery, then life is forever changed. We cannot cling to the past; the best lies ahead, not behind. Let a poet have the final word:

> Unspeakable unnatural goodness is
> Risen and shines, and never will ignore us;
> He glows forever in all consciousness
> Forgiveness, love, and hope possess the pit,
> And bring our endless guilt, like shadow's bars:
> No matter what we do, he stares at it!
> What pity then deny? what debt defer?
> We know he looks at us like all the stars,
> And we shall never be as once we were,
> This life will never be what once it was!
> (Delmore Schwartz, "Starlight Like Intuition Pierced the Twelve")

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