

The Preaching Life

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a shell. No living thing remained inside, and we were free to explore.

Arriving at the main portal, I stepped through and was swallowed up by the sheer size of the space inside. Very little of the roof had survived, but the massive walls still held plaster frescoes with the shadows of biblical scenes on them. There were lambs of God carved on the stone capitals and medieval saints with their faces chipped away. Some of the best stones had been plundered for other purposes, but those that remained testified to the care and expense that had been lavished on this house of God.

Poking around, I found evidence of campfires in one side chapel. The other had been turned into a garbage dump, where rats prowled for scraps. From the transept I heard the sound of children and returned to find them playing soccer on the green lawn that covered the floor of the central nave, while a couple of sheep grazed under the apse. In the dome just above, it was still possible to see one outstretched arm of the Pantocrator who had presided over the eucharist; the rest of him had flaked away. Sitting down under what was left of his embrace, I surveyed the ruins of his church.

It is one thing to talk about the post-Christian era and quite another to walk around inside it. Christianity died in Turkey—the land that gave birth to Paul and that he found so fertile for the sowing of his gospel—the land of Ephesus, Galatia, Colossae, Nicaea. The last Armenian baptisms were recorded as late as the 1890s, but today the Christian population of Turkey is less than one percent of the total. Churches that were the jewels of Byzantine Christendom have been stripped of their altars, fonts, and crosses. Many have been turned into mosques while others are open to tourists as museums and still others have been left to rot. Looking around that magnificent Georgian cathedral that had been abandoned for almost a thousand years, I imagined my own parish in its place: the beautiful wooden rafters rotted out and the ceiling collapsed, shards of stained glass hanging from the windowpanes, the carved stone altar removed to some museum along with the processional

cross-vestiges of an ancient faith no longer practiced in the land.

Such a thing is not impossible; that is what I learned in that ruin on the hillside. God has given us good news in human form and has even given us the grace to proclaim it, but part of our terrible freedom is the freedom to lose our voices, to forget where we were going and why. While that knowledge does not yet strike me as prophetic, it does keep me from taking both my own ministry and the ministry of the whole church for granted. If we do not attend to God's presence in our midst and bring all our best gifts to serving that presence in the world, we may find ourselves selling tickets to a museum.

As best I can figure, the Christian era ended during my lifetime. When I was eight years old in small-town Alabama, there was nothing to do on Sundays but to go to church. Everything else was closed, because decent people both observed the Sabbath and removed temptation from those who did not. All my friends wore mustard seed necklaces and most of us owned child-sized New Testaments bound in white leatherette, given to us by our parents at Easter. In school we prayed to God as routinely as we pledged allegiance to the flag, and we memorized the Ten Commandments alongside our multiplication tables.

By the time I reached high school, God was dead. Pictures of Kent State and the My Lai massacre were tattooed on people's minds, and they turned their outrage on what they had been taught about God. God was not good. God did not answer prayer. God, for all practical purposes, was dead. All bets were off. Human beings were free to construct their own realities from any materials at hand and to express themselves any way they pleased. When lightning did not strike, their confidence grew along with their fear: that perhaps they really were alone in the universe after all.

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Organized religion remained one of the many choices available to human beings in their search for meaning, but it was a lame one. On the college campus where I spent the early seventies, my peers let me know that only the unimaginative still went to church—the stuck, the fearful, the socially inept—while those with any sense committed themselves to more relevant causes, like the anti-war movement, or the environment, or the arts. Church-like communities formed around such causes, giving their members identity, purpose, and support. They had their own ideologies and codes of behavior as rigid as those of any religion, but no one seemed to notice. We gave our allegiance freely; it was not required of us, and whom we gave it to was each other.

Those with a spiritual bent sought revelations of God outside the Christian tradition, allying themselves with Krishna, Meher Baba, or Bahauallah, while others practiced transcendental meditation as faithfully as monks. From time to time, evangelical groups like the Navigators or Campus Crusade for Christ would launch offensives, sending teams of healthy, dean-cut young people to infiltrate the counter-cultural ranks. We never knew where they came from. They were our age but they were not students; they spoke English but they did not speak our language, using hard words with lots of consonants like "sacrifice," "conviction," and "hell."

A few of us bounced between both extremes and landed at the university chapel, where we found a kind of refuge from the chaos outside. It looked like a church. It smelled like a church. It had pews and candles, an altar and a cross, but we were as likely to hear a rock concert on Sunday morning as a sermon, and the

prayers encompassed every cause on God's green earth. All of us who sat there barefoot in our embroidered blue jeans got the message: Jesus had dropped his requirements. It was no longer necessary for us to pretend to be something we were not in order to win his attention. He would come to us on his own, and he would come to us where we were.

The curriculum in the religion department told us the same thing. While courses in Bible and church history continued to be listed, they fell into the cracks between brave new offerings: feminist theology, liberation theology, theology and ecology. The tables had turned. The old theology that placed humankind in the service of God had failed; the world was still a mess. The new theology placed God in the service of humankind; perhaps we would do better. But if the tables had turned, only a few of us sat at them. Religion majors were a rare breed in the seventies. Students who wanted to make a real contribution prepared for law or medical school, not seminary, while the rest enrolled in business school. They might not change the world, but at least they would be able to pay their bills.

That was almost twenty years ago, and while there must be a dozen different explanations for what went on in those days, the trend has continued. Faith in God is no longer the rule; it is the exception to the rule, one "option" among many for people seeking to make sense out of their lives. A large number of them have been so wounded by their religious training that belief in God is too painful to consider. Not long ago I heard a mother defend her grown daughter's ignorance of Christianity. She herself had been schooled in a French Canadian convent, where nuns had bullied her for years in the name of God. When she escaped them, she vowed to protect her own children. "My daughter doesn't know Moses from Goliath," she says with some pride, "but at least she grew up without *guilt*."

Others feel betrayed by a God whom they believe to have broken an implicit promise. According to their Sunday school teachers, God made a bargain with each one of them the moment they were born: do what I say and I will take care of you. So they did, and for years it seemed to work. They obeyed their parents, their teachers, their coaches, and they were taken care of, but one day the system failed. They did everything right and everything went wrong. Their prayers went unanswered, their belief went unrewarded, their God went AWOL, and the lie was exposed. One man I know, mourning the death of his infant daughter, confessed the depth of his loss. "I don't know what to believe anymore," he said. "I don't know whom to pray to, or what to pray. I tried to be a good person; I did the best I knew how, and it didn't do a bit of good. If God is going to let something like this happen, then what's the use of believing at all?"

His disillusionment is emblematic of the post-Christian era, when the perceived promises of Christendom lie broken and the existence of God—never mind the omnipotence of God—seems a fantasy. Television evangelists are indicted for fraud and parish priests for child molestation; churches pour their resources into institutional survival while their numbers dwindle; religious wars are waged around the world while children's bellies bloat and whole species disappear off the face of the earth. These are grim times, in which the God of our fondest dreams is nowhere to be found.

But down in the darkness below those dreams—in the place where all our notions about God have come to naught—there is still reason to hope, because disillusionment is not so bad. Disillusionment is the loss of illusion—about ourselves, about the world, about God—and while it is almost always painful, it is not a bad thing to lose the lies we have mistaken for the truth. Disillusioned, we come to understand that God does not conform to our expectations. We glimpse our own relative size in the

universe and see that no human being can say who God should be or how God should act. We review our requirements of God and recognize them as our own fictions, our own frail shelters against the vast night sky. Disillusioned, we find out what is not true and are set free to seek what is—if we dare.

Many of the disillusioned do not have the heart to pursue such freedom. The pain of their loss is too great. They have been robbed of the God who was supposed to be, and their fear of the God who might be makes it impossible for them to move. Anger becomes their best defense—anger at the hardness of their lives, anger at those who led them to expect more, anger at their own gullibility. Some are able to use their anger as a bridge back to God, but many more set their bridges on fire, denying the presence of God with all the fury of a rejected lover.

But there are also people who have let the idea of God go as easily as an old pair of shoes. They seem to be people who never expected much in the first place, who are so used to being let down—by parents, by friends, by life—that discarding their hopes comes as naturally to them as breathing. They learned early on that belief is nothing but a shortcut to disappointment, so they saved themselves the trouble, retiring belief in God along with belief in Santa Claus, Lady Luck, and the Tooth Fairy.

I say "they" but I also mean "we," because everyone who passes through the wilderness of disillusionment passes through these places where the wild beasts of wrath and resignation stalk their prey. There is a lot of attrition along the way, but for those who elect to go on the best advice is to keep moving. Putting one foot ahead of the other is the best way to survive disillusionment, because the real danger is not the territory itself but getting stuck in it.

For those willing to keep heaving themselves toward the light, things can change. What has been lost gradually becomes less important than what is to be found. Curiosity pokes its green

head up through the asphalt of grief, and fear of the unknown takes on an element of wonder as the disillusioned turn away from the God who was supposed to be in order to seek the God who is. Every letdown becomes a lesson and a lure. Did God fail to come when I called? Then perhaps God is not a minion. So who is God? Did God fail to punish my adversary? Then perhaps God is not a policeman. So who is God? Did God fail to make everything turn out all right? Then perhaps God is not a fixer. So who is God?

Over and over, my disappointments draw me deeper into the mystery of God's being and doing. Every time God declines to meet my expectations, another of my idols is exposed. Another curtain is drawn back so that I can see what I have propped up in God's place—no, that is not God, so who is God? It is the question of a lifetime, and the answers are never big enough or finished. Pushing past curtain after curtain, it becomes clear that the failure is not God's but my own, for having such a poor and stingy imagination. God is greater than my imagination, wiser than my wisdom, more dazzling than the universe, as present as the air I breathe and utterly beyond my control.

That is, in short, what makes me a Christian. As the creature of a God like that, I need a mediator, an advocate, a flesh-and-blood handle on the inscrutable mystery that gives birth to everything that is. While Jesus is, in his own way, just as inscrutable, he is enough like me to convince me that relationship with God is not only possible, but deeply desired by God, who wants me to believe that love is the wide net spread beneath the most dangerous of my days.

To believe that is an act of faith—not a one-time decision, but a daily and sometimes hourly choice to act as if that were true in spite of all evidence to the contrary. Sometimes it feels like pure make-believe. I read the weekend newspaper, full of stories about

violence, addiction, corruption, disaster, and I wonder whom I am kidding. Or my own life begins to spring leaks and I lie awake in the middle of the night faint with fear. I want a safer world. I want a more competent God. Then I remember that God's power is not a controlling but a redeeming power—the power to raise the dead, including those who are destroying themselves—and the red blood of belief begins to return to my veins. I have faith. I lose faith. I find faith again, or faith finds me, but throughout it all I am grasped by the possibility that it is all true: I am in good hands; love girds the universe; God will have the last word.

Believing that, I interpret my life and the life of the world in a different way. What appear to be death throes may be the strenuous pangs of birth. Human grief may be the ax that breaks down the door of human isolation. That brown bird with the sweet song and yellow eyes may be an angel of God sent to rouse me from my self-absorption. Every moment of my life offers me a choice about how I will perceive it—as happenstance or revelation? As one more blind accident of time and space or as the veiled disclosure of a present and compassionate God? When all is said and done, faith may be nothing more than the assignment of holy meaning to events that others call random.

On one hand, this changed perspective is the most valuable gift in the world, with power to save souls and change lives, but on the other hand it is the most difficult to defend. There is no proof that it is true. On the contrary, life is full of evidence that it is *not* true, at least not to the naked eye. While fame and fortune deliver their instant rewards, faith sows its seeds much deeper down. Its roots may grow a long time in the dark before anything shows on the surface, and its leaves may be mistaken for crabgrass or thistle. When its fruit finally appears, there may not be much demand for it, since those who eat it do not become fat but thin, thin and somewhat daft by the standards of the world.

This is the food that the people of God have been given to live on. It is not what most of us would have ordered. It is nothing we can grow all by ourselves, and no one may stockpile it for his or her own use. Day by day by day we are given not what we want but what we need. Sometimes it is a feast and sometimes it is swept crumbs, but by faith we believe it is enough to sustain us, if only because it comes to us from the hand of God. Reaching out our own hands to accept it, we learn that it is not our food alone. It is also the food we are meant to share with the world, a hungry world that is nonetheless suspicious of our food, having been fed both junk and poison in the name of God.

That, it seems to me, is where we are at the edge of the twenty-first century—"we" being the church of God, the body of Christ on earth. In this age of a million choices, we are the remnant, the sometimes faithful, sometimes unfaithful family of a difficult and glorious God, called to seek and proclaim God's presence in a disillusioned world. It is a world that claims to have left us behind, along with dragons and maps of a flat earth, but meanwhile the human heart continues to hunt its true home. Today it is crystals and past-life readings; tomorrow it may be travel to Mars. Ours is a restless and impatient race, known for abandoning our saviors as quickly as we elect them for not saving us soon or well or often enough.

Those of us who call ourselves Christian belong to that race. We are fickle and flawed, but we are more than that because we believe in a God who believes in us. God looks at us and sees the best: sees beloved children, sees likely allies, sees able partners in the ongoing work of creation. In faith, we set out to see the same things in ourselves and to live into them, trusting God's vision of us more than we trust our own. This is the work of the church, not only for our own members but for the whole world, work that is more important now than it has ever been, and more difficult.

Because I am a preacher, it is through a preacher's eyes that I tend to see that work, but because I am a baptized Christian too, it is from that perspective I write. Either way, my job remains the same: to proclaim the good news of God in Christ and to celebrate the sacraments of God's presence in the world. Those two jobs are described as clearly in the baptismal vows as they are in the ordination vows, which gives all Christians a common vocation. Our job is to stand with one foot on earth and one in heaven, with the double vision that is the gift of faith, and to say out of our own experience that reality is not flat but deep, not opaque but transparent, not meaningless but shot full of grace for those with the least willingness to believe it is so.

That is our common call. It comes to each one of us in a different way, calling for the particular gifts of our particular lives, and each of us is free to respond or play deaf. But God never stops calling. Lay any life out for close inspection and the truth becomes clear. God called us from the womb and calls us still, the tireless shepherd who never stops calling us home.

1951

BBT
born

1973

Emory
BA

1976

YDS
MDiv

1984

Episcopal
priesthood

1966 — Time magazine: Is God Dead?

68 — My Lai massacre

1970 — Kent State shootings

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