

Eyewitness Gospel

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King of Peace

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Cover photo by Frank Logue
Thanks to Maris Cato for editing the text

For Victoria, the love of my life.
She helped me find my voice.

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He came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

—John 4:5-14

That Day at the Well

John 4

I REMEMBER THE HEAT that day. The blazing hot sun beat down mercilessly. I didn't mind at all. The heat was fine with me. The heat was why I went to the well at noontime anyway. No respectable person went to the well in the heat of a Palestinian day. That's why I was there then. It was easier that way. No sideways glances. No odd looks and whispered remarks. They might have talked about me, but they would not have spoken to me anyway.

I was the wrong person in the wrong place at the wrong time.

As I approached, I could see that someone was already at the well. A traveler no doubt. Who else would be at the well at this time of day? As I got closer I could see, by his manner of dress, that he was a Jew. A Jew, heh? Well that settles it. I wouldn't have to worry about this one. No need to draw water for him, or even speak to him. Jews and Samaritans don't mix. Especially not Jewish men and Samaritan women. It is simply not done.

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The Jews view us Samaritans as beneath them. It had been so for hundreds of years. We worshipped the same God, but disagreed on where the Temple should be located. But there was more to it than that. Two hundred years earlier, the Samaritans had fought with the Syrians against the Jews and the Jews had destroyed the Samaritan temple. There was bad blood between us and Jews.

I looked more closely at the man as I got to the well. He was obviously hot and sweaty from a morning on the road. He must belong to the group of Jewish men I passed on the way out of town. As I began to draw water the man did the most amazing thing. He asked me for a drink. That was not right. It simply wasn't done. What was the man thinking?

I wanted to put this Jewish man back in his place. I asked, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"

The man smiled. I didn't expect that. I did know that any food or drink touched by a Samaritan was unclean for a Jew. The way he was acting was scandalous. And yet I was surprised. Others seemed to see me as insignificant. Not worth wasting their time on.

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But this man was different. I know what you are thinking. It wasn't like that.

He asked me for a drink of water. A simple request. He had nothing to use to draw the water. It was a hot day. He was obviously thirsty. It was only natural. But this natural act went against everything I was raised to believe. I knew that somehow in drinking water drawn by me it would place this Jewish Rabbi at some risk. What if the men who had been with him came back? What would they think of their teacher then?

Then the man said the oddest thing. He said, "If you only knew the gift God has for you and who I am, you would ask me, and I would give you living water." I didn't understand. I look back on it now and laugh, but I really had no idea what he was talking about. I said, "But sir, you don't have a rope or a bucket and this is a very deep well. Where would you get this living water?"

But that wasn't enough. I thought back to our common ancestor, the one who dug the well. I said, "And besides, are you greater than our ancestor Jacob who gave us this well? How can you offer better water than he and

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his sons and his cattle enjoyed?" I would come to realize that Jesus was much greater than our ancestor, Jacob. But I didn't know that yet.

Jesus replied so lovingly, "People soon become thirsty again after drinking this water. But the water I give them takes away thirst altogether. It becomes a perpetual spring within them, giving them eternal life."

Living water. That sounded wonderful. Living water would be much fresher than well water. I got excited about this living water. The man has promised that he can give me water so that I would never thirst again. Never again would I come to this well in the heat of the day. This living water is just what I needed. I had no idea yet that he was speaking of the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit is the life giving water that will quench our spiritual thirst. Once that thirst has been quenched, we will be spiritually thirsty no more. I know that now. But at the time, I was just thinking of not having to go to the well again.

That's when everything unraveled. Jesus asked me to go and bring my husband back with me. The question cut me down. It was

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the same old problem again. I was so ashamed. I looked down at the ground. I waited. I didn't dare look him in the eyes. I just kept staring at the ground and said, "I have no husband."

He smiled again. He looked pleased. It was as if I had passed some test. Later I realized he was just glad that I had told the truth. The truth that he already knew. Jesus said, "No you have had five husbands and the one you have now is not your husband."

This is the point in the story where everybody gets it wrong. They hear my story and wander off down the wrong path. Because of Jesus' comments about my husbands, I have been branded a sinner, a tramp, insignificant.

But that's not what Jesus did. Jesus never dismisses me. Jesus did not pronounce me a sinner in need of repentance. Jesus did not denounce me as a tramp. The Bible tells you that I had had five husbands, but it never mentions divorce or infidelity. I might have been on the margins of my own society. I might have been afraid to mingle with the women from my own town. But Jesus never said that it was my fault. He knew. He knew me better than anyone.

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That is why I found the courage to say what came next, “Lord, I can see you are a prophet,” and then I asked him the burning theological question of my people. I said, “Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you people claim that the place where one should worship God is in Jerusalem.” This was really important. I knew that this man could point me to the true worship of God.

Then Jesus explained that where we worship God is not as important as how. He told me that we are to worship God in Spirit and Truth. And if we open our spirits to worship God in Truth then where we worship doesn't matter. We can worship God anywhere.

I was amazed at what the man, the prophet, told me. I knew in my heart that he was speaking the truth. I could feel it. I said, “I know the Messiah is coming and he will announce all things to us.” But what I really meant was “Are you The One? Are you the Messiah?” Jesus knew my statement as a question and answered me saying, “I who speak to you—I am he.”

Just then, the disciples came back to the

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well. But that didn't matter to me anymore. I had spoken to the Messiah. He was right there at Jacob's well. I couldn't contain myself. I ran from the well, leaving my water jar hanging on the edge of the void, where I had been only moments before. I went to town and gathered people together. I began shouting excitedly, "Come and see a man who has told me everything I have ever done! Could this be the Messiah?"

They believed me. Notice this. They believed me. Me. The woman who didn't go to the well when others were drawing water? They believed me? Maybe they never despised me. It was my own self esteem that was so low that I was the one who didn't dare be around them. But now it was different. The Messiah had come. I couldn't be afraid. The message was not about me. The message I had for my people was about God. And they did listen and believe.

Amazing. Jesus' own disciples had just come to this town, yet they didn't evangelize the people. They came and went without changing a thing in my town. But me, the woman who no one noticed changed

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everything. I was empowered by the spirit of God to proclaim the good news of God's kingdom to my own people. Though I would never have guessed this could have happened as I went out to the well that day, I became a leader of my people. I led them to God, in the person of Jesus, the Christ.

What about you? Do you think that God can't or won't use you? Or have you, like I had, forgotten your own worth as a child of God? If so, you are in danger of surrendering yourself so completely to others, that you have no life of your own.

Don't get me wrong, Jesus did teach that we are to serve others and put others needs ahead of our own. But putting others ahead of yourself is not all that Jesus taught. He also taught that all of creation is valuable to God. All creation has a unique worth in the eyes of our creator. When you don't value your own worth as a unique and special creation of God, it can lead to sin. Not valuing yourself as God values you can lead to neglecting your own inner life and burying the unique talents God has given you.

See how Jesus responded to me when

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others ignored me and when I avoided them as well. Jesus saw the truth in me. Jesus saw me as a priceless gem—a child of God. Jesus revealed his Kingdom to me and invited me in.

I arrived at the well considering myself worthless. But I heard and responded to Jesus' call and in doing so regained my own sense of identity. Then, I didn't just follow Jesus; I led my people to him.

We are all God's children, loved and adored by our creator who is calling us home. Not one of us is insignificant to God. Not one of us is unworthy to lead God's people.

Because your worth as a human is not about who you are in the eyes of others. Your worth as a human is determined by who you are in the eyes of God. And to God, you are a beloved child. You are fully known and deeply loved. This I promise you.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!"

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

—Luke 2:8-19

Emmanuel: A Shepherd's Story

Luke 2:8-19

“SEVENTY FIVE, SEVENTY SIX, seventy seven. They're all in.” Moshe called out.

“Pull those bushes in close and then gather some wood for a fire,” Samuel commanded.

“Not yet, Samuel,” came the voice from the gathering darkness.

What now, Samuel thought. That old man is never content. “Why not Eleazar? The sheep are all in. It's getting dark. You're the one who likes to set up these brush walls.”

Surrounding the sheep with a wall of tangled brush was Eleazar's way of tending sheep. None of the other shepherds did it, at least not anymore. The brush walls did get the sheep to settle down easier, but it was too much work, just to save one, maybe two sheep a year. Joel bar Amoz knew they would lose some of his sheep to wild animals, every sheep owner did. If the owner didn't care, why should the shepherd? But that wasn't Eleazar's way.

“We have seventy-eight sheep now, Samuel,” Eleazar said. “I have reminded you of this every night for the three nights since

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the new lamb was born, and I will keep on reminding you until you can get it into that thick skull of yours. It's not too much for a shepherd to remember the sheep in his care."

Eleazar did not understand other shepherds. The flock is not merely how a shepherd makes his living; the flock is a shepherd's life. Eleazar had been watching sheep for forty-two years. He had no other life. Would have no other life.

"Watch the opening on the enclosure while Moshe gets the firewood," Eleazar said. "I'll handle this one."

Not a lamb. Eleazar was sure of that. The ewes were usually good about keeping their lambs close. He had counted all twenty-nine lambs anyway. The one three days earlier was a late lamb, the last one of the season.

Nearly half the flock were lambs by year's end. They were timed just right for Passover. This was a trick of Eleazar's that made a good profit for Joel bar Amoz and assured Eleazar that he would always have a good flock to tend.

It would probably be Jonah. Eleazar named the young ram who tended to wander Jonah,

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for the prophet who headed west when God called him to go north. Eleazar wandered back along the path they had followed in the late afternoon, trying to get his eyes to pick out the landscape in the blue dark. Only the evening star yet shown in the night sky.

Joel bar Amoz always bragged in Eleazar's presence that he was the best of shepherds because he thought like a sheep. He was pretty sure that the wealthy man meant it as a compliment. Eleazar knew that the truth was something deeper, something hidden from most of the men and boys who called themselves shepherds.

Ever since he could walk, Eleazar had lived among sheep. His father had been a shepherd and when his mother died giving birth to him, Eleazar had gone to live with an aunt. But just after his third birthday, his father had come for him.

"A shepherd should grow up among the sheep," his father had declared, cutting off the arguments of his wife's sister and her husband.

So Eleazar had grown up among the sheep. The rhythm of their lives was the rhythm of his life. He knew their hopes and fears

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instinctively and could not understand why the other shepherds were so unknowing about the herds they guarded.

The shepherd's job was straightforward enough. Make sure they get the food and water they need and protect them from wild animals and thieves. That summed it up. But most of the shepherds Eleazar worked with over the years watched the sheep without really noticing them. They pushed the sheep too hard. They didn't care when they lost a few sheep each year to their own carelessness. Eleazar realized long ago that the key to tending sheep was not to watch them, nor to think like them. The key to tending sheep was to become the sheep. He knew he could not really become a sheep, but it would be the best way to care for them. The shepherd who was both sheep and shepherd.

When Eleazar was a boy, running to keep up with the herds, he learned to know when the sheep were hungry, or thirsty, or frightened. He never had to watch the hillside to see if any animals posed a danger to his flock. He watched the sheep. Most of them would not know danger until it was too late, but if you

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knew the sheep to watch, there was always a wiser ram or ewe who just knew when danger was in the air. After watching those wise sheep for enough years, Eleazar could feel it as well. He did not wonder when danger was present. He just knew. Eleazar could sense it on the wind.

Sometime over the last forty-two years, Eleazar had set becoming the sheep as his goal. He wasn't there yet. The herd still had a surprise for him every once in a while. But not on this night. For there is where Jonah would be. Eleazar was sure of it. He could see a little side trail leading down to the wadi, a dry riverbed. Just the sort of place where a sheep daydreaming of lying down beside still waters would head.

Eleazar picked his way down the rocky hillside and soon found his Jonah. He shooed the ram ahead of him and the two started back to camp. Jonah was a good ram, he knew to go where the shepherd led him, at least when darkness was settling in. By the time they got back to their makeshift sheep pen, the night was dark and the stars shown brightly even over the fire Moshe had blazing.

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“That same ram?” Samuel asked.

“Yes, our Jonah headed west again,” Eleazar answered, noting that Samuel knew their flock better than he let on some times.

With the last sheep in, the shepherds ate their own meal. Moshe and Samuel close to the fire, Eleazar close to the sheep pen. They had run out of things to say on a night like this the first year they had worked together. But that was now three years ago. Joel bar Amoz had felt fortunate to find any shepherds willing to work with Eleazar, whose reputation as a demanding head shepherd preceded him with every shepherd in Judah.

Eleazar could hear Moshe snoring softly by the time he pulled aside the brush and slipped into the sheep pen. They watched the flocks at night, but Moshe was still a boy of twelve and they let him drift off without reproach. They never discussed it, but Samuel and Moshe knew that Eleazar watched the flock each night from their midst.

“It might be easier to tend the sheep if you stayed with them, but who wanted that?” Samuel had told Moshe more than once so that Eleazar could overhear.

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Yet Samuel was not as bad as some of the men he had worked with. He might even make a good shepherd one day. If Samuel would just realize that a good shepherd is concerned not with the flock as a flock, but with every single ram, ewe, and lamb. For the shepherd, there is not an insignificant sheep. That's why Eleazar always loved the scripture that talked about God as a shepherd.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want, he thought. Everyone in Israel could quote that line of Hebrew text. So why did they treat shepherds like something you scrape off your shoes when you step out of the sheep pen? Because of the bad shepherds, who sold off a lamb every once in a while without the owner knowing it, all shepherds were distrusted. Shepherds were assumed to be liars, or thieves, or worse.

Eleazar's musing was cut short by a blinding light in the night sky. He bolted up, throwing off his cloak and raising his staff against the unknown threat. As his eyes adjusted, he saw that a six-winged seraph flying was the source of the light. He had heard heavenly creatures described in the synagogue,

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but not like this. The seraph had a power about him that brought Eleazar to his knees. He was frightened, in a way that fending off a hungry lion could never scare him. He covered his face and did not dare look up.

“Do not be afraid!” the angel said in a voice that soothed the raw fear. “I am bringing you Good News of great joy for all people: to you is born this day in the city of David a savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

The Messiah, Eleazar thought. A son of David in David's city at last.

“This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger,” the Angel said. And with these words there was suddenly an innumerable band of seraphim filling the sky singing:

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those
whom he favors!”

Eleazar watched dazzled. The night sky blazed with an unearthly brightness, while the flock around him was oddly peaceful. The sheep sensed no danger. Neither did Eleazar,

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and for the first time in his life, he left the sheep. No harm would come to them this night. The Great Shepherd was born among the animals, for he was lying in a manger, a feed box. Was this even possible?

“Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place,” Eleazar cried out to Moshe and Samuel as he pushed the brush wall back in place and started down the hill toward Bethlehem. Samuel and Moshe were fast on his heels, each stunned by the heavenly messengers and their news.

Could this actually be happening? Eleazar thought. Eleazar knew how to find every stable in town and this was an important skill as they found well over half of them before they got to the right one. With the census taking place, herd animals were not the only ones in the stable that night. Most every stall in town had a family tucked in among the animals.

But they did find it. A smallish cave with the walls carved out to make more room for the few cattle, not unlike a dozen other stables they had stumbled into already. But in this one they found him. The mother and father were still staring with wonder at the tiny

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person in the manger. That same awe Eleazar had felt at a thousand calvings when he saw the perfect little lamb.

The stillness of the perfect little scene was already broken by their hasty entrance, then Moshe blurted out, “It’s the anointed one! The Messiah.”

“What’s he doing here?” Samuel said, but no one answered.

Eleazar stepped forward and looked at the baby boy. The mother, just like a good mothers, had taken the strips of cloth and bound him tightly so that he would grow straight and tall. He was a perfect little baby like hundreds of other perfect little babies all around Israel that same night. Yet Eleazar knew that there was something about this boy that made everything different. This was not just a baby, this was the Messiah, God’s promised child. *Emmanuel*, he thought.

“Yes,” the woman said, “*Emmanuel*” and then Eleazar realized that he had said the word rather than thought it. *Emmanuel*—God with us. That was it. All those years he had been taught to expect the Messiah to be a king, but Eleazar could see this humble stable was

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as far as one could get from a grand palace. The couple here for the census was surely descended from David, but so was Eleazar and so were at least a quarter of the people in Judah.

Eleazar held out his hands and then pulled them back. His shepherd hands were far too rough for the baby Messiah; what was he thinking? But the man lifted the child and placed him in Eleazar's outstretched hands.

God had had a surprise for his people Israel after all, Eleazar thought as he held the Christ child. God had not sent a shepherd. God had sent a lamb. This little lamb is God.

Emmanuel meant so much more than Eleazar had been taught or ever dreamed. God did not come to earth in power and glory, but in weakness. This little boy in his arms was going to change everything. God knew and loved his people more than Eleazar had ever imagined. God did not want to tend the sheep, protect the sheep, not that alone, Eleazar knew. God had become the lamb.

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

—Luke 2:15-19

Christmas
The Counter-Revolution
Luke 2:15-19

WE HAD PLANS for every possible attack and counter attack. We had plotted and planned, for centuries really, until every eventuality had been carefully called into account. We knew how every possible move He could make could be thwarted. Yet, we never saw *it* coming.

But I get ahead of myself. Best to go back to the beginning. It started when our leader, Lucifer, led a revolt against God. We were cast down, for the time being, but Lucifer had a plan and while we had lost the battle, the revolution had begun. We could win the war for heaven and earth. We just needed to wait and watch, for the right time.

Sin came into the world effortlessly enough. It only took a single choice to get humans to turn away from God. It didn't matter that the choice was the knowledge of Good and Evil, it could have been the knowledge of where to get the perfect Cappuccino. Ask a human to deny his or herself a choice and soon enough he or she

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will do the very thing that is forbidden.

And so humans learned to turn away from God. But we knew that was not the end of the matter, for God cared for the miserable little creatures so much that he kept working at it. God sent prophets and kept sending them. It was all too easy to get those whiners put to death. You don't even need to dispatch a demon to sit on someone's shoulder for a job like that. Try to disturb the *status quo* and soon enough you'll pay. And the prophets were made to pay. Isaiah might have instilled hope in humanity for a time, but he was sawn in two in a hollow log. Then up would pop another prophet, like Zechariah who was slain in the Temple of all places. Again and again the prophets called on the people to turn back to God. Some people would listen, while others would kill the prophet.

This is when we started running all the scenarios, playing them out in the minutest detail. We knew the prophecies better than any Hebrew scholar. But we never saw the bigger picture. We knew the Messiah would be born to a Virgin. We knew he would be a descendant of David. We knew to look in

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Bethlehem. We knew it all. But the piece of the puzzle that we never comprehended was that that baby boy would *be* God.

Not like God, not some adopted child of God, but God. That infant wrapped in swaddling clothes in a Bethlehem stable was the fullness of the Trinity. God become human. Incomprehensible. Emmanuel—God with us. Who would have ever thought that God had really meant that literally? Hah! The maker of all that is enters into the creation itself. We never would have done that. Lucifer himself would have never deigned to have anything to do with creation if he could have helped it.

It was an elegantly simple approach in retrospect. There was a problem within creation and so God entered the creation to repair the fabric of the cosmos from the inside.

But come on. How could we expect such an attack on the way of the world? Why would God care so much? Why would God bother? That question is the one I've never gotten my mind around. And yet, it happened. Incomprehensible or not, it happened.

Of course, we thought it meant our victory was assured. We were cocky in those days.

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With God made man, we only had to snuff out the God-Man Jesus. Herod nearly pulled it off too, in killing all the babies around Bethlehem. Weakling, he should have killed every baby they could find anywhere. Didn't he understand what was at stake? No, of course not. Like most of them, he couldn't see beyond his own power, his own interests. Herod never saw the larger picture.

But we knew in time that Jesus would be brought down. It was as inevitable as the death of any other prophet. Becoming God among humans would naturally mean a lot of people would want him dead before too long. And eventually it happened. On that battered hilltop called Golgotha—the place of a skull—he died without his closest followers, abandoned it seemed by God and man.

Oh how we celebrated that Friday. And on the Saturday we thought would never end, we rejoiced. God had played the final hand and we were holding all the aces.

By Sunday, we knew the truth. The death of Jesus was not the end. The death of Jesus was the beginning of a counter-revolution against the way of the world—our ways. Jesus'

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resurrection turned the whole world upside down. The most degraded of victims became the ultimate victor.

We had revolted against God and Heaven. But now with Jesus, the last became the first. The humble were exalted. It was everything he had babbled on about for three years made visible. The counter-revolution had begun.

Well, maybe not exactly. The problem was that the counter-revolution really started that night in Bethlehem. A poor mother, a hapless step father, and some grubby shepherds crouched around the maker of heaven and earth—the birth of that one baby in a stable in Bethlehem was like wrenching loose the cornerstone of my scheme. Sooner or later our great plans for humanity's destruction would come crashing down. That baby changed everything.

Emmanuel—God with us. Amazing. And God remains with them still. Even now.

We've already lost. We don't talk about it. But we know. Now it's only a matter of time. You've read the final book, you've seen the last reel. Good wins. Evil loses. Over and over again. But, how could we have known? We never saw it coming.

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus him by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, must be born from above. The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?...For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

—John 3:1-10,16

Nicodemus

John 3:1-17

I WAS NAMED NICODEMUS. Nicodemus means “conqueror of the people.” Ironic. I was the one who was conquered. Vanquished, liberated really, in the fullest sense of that word. I was conquered quite willingly by the spirit of God.

I went to Jesus at night. It had to be night. Jesus was a noted Rabbi to be sure, but I was a member of the Sanhedrin, the select inner circle of Jewish leaders. I could not afford to be seen with Jesus. Not yet anyway. So I went to him under the cover of darkness. It strikes me as funny all these years later. I went to the Light of the World at night.

I went to Jesus because I was intrigued by the signs and wonders he was doing. I knew that no one could heal the sick, exorcise people of demons, and do the other miracles unless God allowed it. Some wondered if Jesus was a trickster, a charlatan. But this was no sleight of hand. Jesus was the real thing—miracles happened wherever he went. Lives were changed for the better and they stayed

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changed. Paralytics walked. The blind saw. The deaf heard.

I went to Jesus because I knew in a spiritual sense I was lame, blind, and deaf. I wouldn't even have admitted it to myself at the time. I was supposed to be the one with the answers. But deep inside I knew I needed peace and healing.

Jesus immediately caught me off guard. He said, "No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born..." Well that next word was the problem. The Greek is *anōthen*. It can mean "from above" or "again." No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again or from above. I assumed born again and then before I could take it back I had already said, "How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born!" Like I said. I was blind.

Born again. Born from above. Either way, Jesus was talking of a spiritual rebirth. It sounded preposterous. I came for a down-to-earth chat with the Rabbi Jesus and the next thing I know he's off in space somewhere with philosophical babble.

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Then Jesus, rather than grounding our conversation in reality, said, “Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.”

The wind. The Holy Spirit. The breath of God that blew on the waters in creation. That wind of God that blows through the world to this day began to blow anew through my life that night. I had been so busy trying to understand God. All I was really doing was trying to control God, to contain God, as if I could put the divine essence in some safe box and take God out when I wanted.

Jesus opened up a shaft of blazing light into my darkness that night. Jesus told me, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

God so loved the world. Those words were the new thing that came blowing into my life. God loved the world. I didn't. I saw the world

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as broken. Fallen, with no hope for repair. I was waiting for the Messiah to come take us faithful away while bringing judgment to all the rest. And here was Jesus, doing these amazing miracles and then telling me that the spirit of God would blow wherever it wanted.

God so loves the world that the spirit of God is still out there creating. The spirit of God was making all things new. I could be born again, from above. I could be made new and get the peace I so desired. But, this new teaching was a bit too much to take in. My eyes were opened to be sure, but I couldn't quite yet see. Not clearly anyway.

Many months passed. I kept up with Jesus. I tried to get word of his teaching and miracles. Then, about six months before Jesus was put to death, he created a big stir in the Temple. It was the end of the Tabernacles feast and the Temple priests were pouring out the water libations by the altar. Jesus called out for all to hear, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him."

Jesus proclaimed himself as the source of

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living water. Jesus was as good as proclaiming himself on the same level as God. The Temple police reported the whole thing to us at the Sanhedrin. Most of our members were angry that Jesus had not already been arrested. Mob rule was in danger of taking over the Sanhedrin.

I couldn't help but speak. I said, "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing, does it?" Some accused me of being a Galilean, of being a follower of Jesus. But the move toward mob mentality stopped. If nothing else, you could always count on the Sanhedrin to follow the letter of the law. I was the one most changed by my own words that day. I was accused of being one of his followers and didn't mind the accusation. The Spirit was blowing where it would.

I tried in my own way to be faithful to Jesus. The trial I asked for came six months later in the dead of night. I did not say enough, nor do enough to save Jesus. The Sanhedrin decided that he deserved to die. Later I could see that while I was working behind the scenes in the dead of night to save him, Jesus worked in the light of day to save us all.

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After he died, I went with a fellow member of the Sanhedrin, Joseph of Arimathea, to claim Jesus' body. I bought up every spice I could find, seventy-five pounds of burial spices and the burial clothes to go with them. We took Jesus to what was to have been Joseph of Arimathea's tomb. We prepared Jesus for burial in a way befitting someone of a high station of life. It seemed the least we could do. Jesus had come into the world that the whole world might be saved. Look at how we treated him. I was ashamed.

Finally, in Jesus' death, Joseph of Arimathea and I took a stand. We never wanted anyone to know that we were Jesus' followers too. In placing Jesus in his tomb, we boldly proclaimed to anyone watching that we were not ashamed of Jesus. It was too little, too late. We had not saved Jesus. I could see now how the Father had given his Son, but I could not see what Jesus' death had to do with eternal life.

I had no idea in what way the spirit of God can move through creation. I still did not understand that all things can be made new. The wind of God was blowing, but none of us

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could feel it yet. Even those of us who considered ourselves his disciples could not hear the breeze that Friday and Saturday.

Three days later, I finally learned the lesson Jesus tried to teach me that night I first came to him. On the third day after we placed him in the tomb, Jesus rose from the dead, setting aside the burial shroud I bought for him. The women and then Peter and John found the two pieces of cloth neatly folded in the empty tomb. Jesus rose from the dead to die no more. He would never need those burial clothes again.

When I saw the risen Jesus, I fully understood those words, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” The light of Christ came flooding into my darkness. A peace that passed all understanding flooded into the very core of my being. The experience was like being born again, this time born from above—born of God.

I never thought that I could pass that experience along to others. I wondered if any of us who had been there and experienced

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Jesus could somehow convey the wonder of it all. How could we share what we had experienced with the ones who never saw Jesus, heard him, touched him? Those who had seen and heard and touched did not just know *about* God, we knew God in person, through his Son, Jesus of Nazareth.

But Jesus was right; the wind blows where it will. After his resurrection and ascension, Jesus was no longer limited to a given place in Palestine. Through the untamed spirit of God, Jesus became available to everyone. Jesus was and is for the whole world. The peace that I gained through his passion is available to everyone.

So much time has passed and that wind still blows. God's spirit goes where it will breathing life into a world turned from God. And here's what I've learned along the way. We only have to throw open the windows of our souls to let the breeze blow in. Just say to yourself, "Spirit of the living God, fall fresh on me" and trust the untamed spirit of God to do just that.

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

—Matthew 15:21-28

Food for the Dogs

Matthew 15:21-28

I KNEW THAT WOMAN was going to be trouble the moment I laid eyes on her. She was not one of us that was for sure. Her clothes, her jewelry, everything about that woman was Canaanite. As soon as we saw her, all of us disciples worked to keep ourselves between her and Jesus. Making sure her type doesn't get too close is part of what a good disciple does for his Rabbi.

Not that I was surprised to see a Canaanite. We were walking near the border of Israel. In that area we often saw pagans in the towns and on the road. But good Jews knew to steer clear of people like that. And the Canaanites left us alone for the most part. They didn't care for us and we certainly didn't care for them. Canaanites were lower than Samaritans. That's why we all called them dogs. Dogs. Wretched little dogs nipping at your heels.

Don't look so shocked. You just don't understand the bad blood between us Jews and those people. After all, Canaanites were the

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remnants of the evil tribes who had lived in our land before Moses brought our ancestors out of Egypt. Canaanites were the nasty idol worshipping scum Joshua conquered as we took possession of the Promised Land. Those people were depraved. You don't know what sick practices they found normal. Canaanites sacrificed their own children to their idols! I don't know the half of what those people did in their rituals myself and it still makes me sick.

The Canaanites were the ancient enemy who now lived on the borders of our land. The disgust I felt on seeing a Canaanite was mixed with a bit of fear, an ancient apprehension. A Canaanite always got the hair on my neck standing on end. Even the women, but especially that woman.

You always knew that Canaanites had no idea about how a decent person was to behave, but this woman was unbelievable. As soon as she saw Jesus through the pack of us disciples trying to keep her at bay, the Canaanite started calling out to him. Yelling like an idiot. What did that cur think she was doing? A woman talking to a Rabbi was strange enough, but

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we knew Jesus didn't bother with that tradition. He always spoke with women as well as men. But this woman was bellowing through the crowd, yelling the strangest thing:

“Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David!”

“Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David!”

She had her words so perfectly right when she was so completely wrong. It's like hearing a precocious child explaining some complicated bit of learning. The words are all right, but you can't quite believe the one saying them has any idea what she just said.

Lord, could mean “sir” but it was also what we Jews said instead of the name of God when reading scripture. So when you surrounded the word “Lord” with “Have mercy on me” and “Son of David” it was as good as calling Jesus God's Son.

This was before any of us disciples had dared to name Jesus as God's Son ourselves. I suspected it, knew it in my bones really, but I hadn't dared say it yet, not even to my brother, Andrew.

Sure, we had seen some mighty miracles. Stuff that is hard to believe even when you

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see it with your own eyes—paralyzed people get up and walk, lepers made clean, the blind receiving their sight and the deaf hearing. Even with all of that, I think most of the disciples still thought of Jesus as a great prophet like Elijah. And here was this foul beast crying out over and over, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David!” As if she could even possibly know what those words meant. It was blasphemy!

She said her daughter was tormented by a demon. At least those words were true. “Your daughter’s a Canaanite, of course she is tormented by a demon. Woman, that’s what happens when you take part in those idol worshipping rituals.” That’s what I would have told her if I had bothered to speak with her at all.

But the woman got in close. Jesus heard her incessant mewling. He said nothing. He didn’t even look her way. Good. But the woman kept up her howling. So I told Jesus, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.”

Then Jesus turned to the woman, looked her right in the eyes and said, “I was sent only

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to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

Yes! Put her in her place I thought and I could tell the other disciples felt the same way. But the *chutzpah* of this woman was astounding. She wouldn't leave. Instead, the Canaanite knelt down at Jesus' feet and said, “Lord, help me.”

But Jesus had grown a backbone and he put her back in her place once more saying, “It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.”

Perfect! Jesus referred to her as a dog. Even with that kind look in his eyes. This would show her that Jesus had just come for us Jews.

Then she said it. The most bizarre line in that oddest of encounters. “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.”

I saw the look in Jesus' eyes and I knew it was all over. Of course he healed the Canaanite woman's little girl. Jesus loved encounters like this one. You could tell that he was delightfully amazed. There was no doubt that Jesus had loved every second of that little drama.

Why not? The woman believed. *Really*

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believed. It was like she *knew* who Jesus was and what he could do for her and she was going to ask until she got it. I can't blame her really. Her daughter was hurting. What parent wouldn't do everything he or she could in a situation like that?

Yet, if I were honest with myself, I was still at the point where if I were in her shoes I would have asked, "If you are the Son of David, command my daughter to be healed."

The thing that galled me most in the whole scene was not that she could out faith me, though that did rankle me a bit. No, what really got me was that Jesus changed. There is no way around it; he was changed by this woman.

That was not what I wanted him to be like. I think that is why he called me *Cephas*, the Rock. That's what Peter means and I lived into it. I was steady, solid, and in those days often steadily and solidly wrong. Hey, at least I didn't change. If nothing else, you could count on me. Even if you could only count on me to get it wrong.

Yet there was no way around it, Jesus was changed by this woman. He was dead set

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against taking the gifts that were by rights for the children of Israel and giving them to some pagan Canaanite. Then she cried out to him; he heard her and acted in a way that surprised all of us.

But time changes even a rock head like me. Within time I would come to see that the Good News Jesus had given to us Jews was for the whole world. I would even have to give that church-persecuting Saul his due. After his conversion and naming by God as Paul, he started really reaching out to the Gentiles and things changed. I hated it at first, but God showed me that it was all part of the plan all along.

My rough edges have eroded a bit with time and experience. Now I realize how much I have always counted on my words and actions having some effect on God. After all, if God will always do the same thing no matter what you say or do, why do you pray?

But God can be changed. It was right there in the scripture all along (Exodus 32). Moses goes up to get the Ten Commandments; the people below wait forty days and then Moses' brother Aaron makes a golden calf and all fall

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back into idol worship. God is ready to strike every one of them down and then Moses speaks to God, imploring mercy for God's people and God relents.

In the Book of Jonah, God declares destruction for Nineveh. The people repent, turning from their evil ways and God relents again.

I could go on with other examples, but you get the idea. Prayer changes things because God hears us when we call out, even if the answer isn't always the one we had in mind. Prayer changes things. It's not that prayer changes God from mean into nice, or from thinking one thing to thinking another, but there is a change.

Do you think it's all a coincidence that life goes better for you when you pray? Stop praying. See how many coincidences like that occur.

The Canaanite woman yelled after Jesus and his mission of love and grace came to a small part of the rest of the world sooner than Jesus had thought would happen. Not only did that woman I thought of as a dog get what she wanted, but Jesus told her, "Woman, great

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is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.”

The twelve of us disciples were more than a little jealous of that last line, I can tell you that. Can you imagine? In just a few moments, we went from thinking she was beneath contempt, to being jealous of a Canaanite woman of all people. So her words might have had an effect on our Rabbi, but you would have to admit that the whole thing was a very Jesus encounter. How very like him to make room at God’s table for an outcast, after all he had already made room for the likes of me.

Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they should be found trustworthy. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.

Therefore do not pronounce judgement before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God.

—I Corinthians 4:1-5

Rose-Colored Glasses

I Corinthians 4:1-5

AGNES WAS A YOUNG GIRL who visited her grandmother every week in an assisted living facility, which was at the other end of a short bus ride from her home. She enjoyed the visits very much. While there she came to know the other residents with whom her Granny lived. She was not precocious exactly, but more of an old soul who while fully the young girl she was, sometimes seemed more perceptive than her years. Many of the residents looked forward to Agnes' weekly visits. Yet with her grandmother pushing the backside of her nineties and her health failing, they knew the visits would come to an end soon enough.

Agnes was twelve years old when her Granny died. The next week Agnes got ready to go as usual. She announced to her Mom that she was off for her visit. Her mother didn't understand at first, but decided that it was Agnes' way of grieving for her Granny and she consented. Without the visits with Granny, she wasn't sure at first what to do. She had

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read to Mr. Brooks on one occasion and he seemed to enjoy it. So when she saw him off to one side of the large common room, which was the hub of social life in their home, she went to him at once.

“Mr. Brooks, would it be all right if I read to you again?” she asked.

He beamed back, “Yes, that would be nice.”

Noticing no books nearby, Agnes asked, “What shall we read?”

“Have you ever read *The Little Prince*?” He asked.

“No, but I’ll read it to you now,” she offered.

She walked patiently with Mr. Brooks as he shuffled back to his room. He readily found the tattered paperback among the scores that lined the shelves in his private room.

“You must be going on thirteen now,” Mr. Brooks said. “When I taught English at the Junior High, the girls always fell in love with this book. The boys too, truth be told,” he said and handed her the book. He sat in his well worn leather chair. Agnes sat on the ottoman, opened the yellowed pages of the

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slim volume and began, “Once when I was six years old I saw a magnificent picture in a book...” She quickly found herself lost in the story.

Just as when she had read to him before, Mr. Brooks’ attention never wavered. When Agnes looked up from time to time, he seemed just as transfixed by the tale as she was. They were both startled by an upbeat dance tune that suddenly burst into their story just as Agnes was reading of the businessman who thought he owned the stars in the night sky. It took a moment for her to realize it was her own cell phone ringing. Agnes’ mother was worried about her. Agnes apologized, not realizing how much time had passed as she had read nearly half the book to Mr. Brooks. After hanging up, she read to a stopping place and promised to return the next week to finish the story.

“Take the book with you,” he offered. “You can finish it tonight.”

“I would rather read it with you.” She said. “It can wait until next week.”

The following Sunday afternoon, they did indeed complete *The Little Prince*. On other

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visits there were to be other books. And, as Mr. Brooks was not a selfish man, Agnes spent whole visits with other residents, talking or reading, and sometimes singing. A year passed. Agnes was feeling down, remembering that it was at this same time the previous year, that her Granny had died. She enjoyed visiting the others, but she missed her Granny something fierce.

She had brought the book *Stranger with My Face* to finish reading it with Mr. Brooks. He was intrigued that he had never heard of the book, which was part of Agnes' required summer reading. They had both been enjoying it, but Agnes didn't even take the book out of the large purse she had slung over one shoulder. She just slumped down on the ottoman.

"How do you do it?" she asked.

"Do what?" Mr. Brooks replied not aware that he had done anything.

"Stay so optimistic." Agnes replied.

She paused for a moment. He let the silence build between them naturally, not forcing the conversation forward, not wanting to derail her from her course.

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“Well, I’ve only lost my Granny, but you’ve lost so much. Your wife, your youngest daughter, the other residents here who have died since you came...I don’t even know who all you’ve lost...and yet you seem so cheerful.”

“Agnes, it’s not that I don’t grieve, I do,” he said. “But I mourn as someone who knows that there is more than this.” Then he broke into that smile she had come to so enjoy bringing to his face. Every line that etched through his skin seemed to have been first creased while he was smiling.

“That’s exactly what I mean. You just did it again. I brought up the people you have lost and now you’re smiling like a fox who just got placed in charge of the hen house. It’s like you have a secret that you aren’t sharing.”

“Now Agnes, that’s not fair,” he said, but she knew he wasn’t angry.

“I’ve checked up on you,” Agnes said, ready to reveal a secret of her own. “I used to think I was a bit of a bright spot in this place. I liked that thought, that I was bringing light here. But I pale in comparison to you. Everyone talks about the little things you do for them, the kindness you show. They don’t

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talk to each other about it. No one seems to know what all you do. But I listen. They tell me what no one tells each other. I know that you work behind the scenes to build people up when they are feeling down.”

Agnes felt smug. She knew she had him now. He had been working at pulling strings like some puppet master and she knew it. Now it was her turn to let the silence build. She waited. He paused at length, then said, “Okay. You’ve found me out. I like to do nice things for people and prefer it when no one knows. But don’t go making me out to be some saint. I’m just a guy who likes to share the love that’s been shared with him.”

Agnes felt a little embarrassed now. She had cornered him with an accusation of kindness as if he were a cat burglar she had caught in the act.

“You are right about that secret though,” he said a bit mischievously. “There is something I’ve been hiding.” He leaned forward and picked up a small wooden chest that sat next to his chair. Agnes had seen it before. Mr. Brooks had shown her some old family photos tucked in there, his father’s

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pocket watch, his oldest son's bronze star that he had brought home to his dad. This time he pulled out an odd pair of sunglasses. The pink lenses in tarnished silver frames looked older than seemed possible. Agnes didn't know they had made sunglasses so long ago.

"These glasses changed my life," he said matter of factly.

"It was 1937 and I was just a seventeen-year old kid helping out at my uncle's funeral home. He was short handed and I helped him go pick up a body at the hospital to prepare for a funeral.

"The body was that of Old Simeon. Everyone knew Simeon. He was a homeless man who lived under a bridge and spent his days on Broad Street. He was a kindly old beggar. Everyone knew he was a bit touched and they looked out for him. From time to time, someone would try to get him better clothes or a better living arrangement, but Simeon seemed to prefer his lot in life. He seemed happy living on the street. He was always talking with someone, laughing, joking.

"Now Old Simeon was dead. No one had seen him on the street that day and a

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perceptive police officer realized he should check under the bridge. That's where they found him, with his few possessions. Possessions that I was charged with boxing up for the next of kin we all knew would never come.

“That's when I found the glasses. I tried them on and my uncle told me that if no one claimed them within the month, I could have them.

“I don't know what intrigued me about those glasses, but I counted the days until I could claim them as my own. I already had the silver polish ready and I shined them up before putting them on and going out into the world. What I saw took my breath away.

“With those glasses on, everything was different. Just a few degrees off for the most part, but sometimes disconcertingly strange. Some people positively glowed, more radiant than seemed possible as if they were made of light. For others, that light was dim and it was as if a mask had been removed. The smiling man out front of the diner on Broad Street looked impossibly dark and gloomy through the sunglasses. Some people who looked

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innocent enough to my naked eye seemed positively malevolent through the rose-colored glasses.

“I began to look more into Simeon’s past and what I discovered amazed me. Old Simeon seemed like some beggar who depended on the town to take care of him, but the real story was quite the opposite. Once I started checking, I found how much Simeon had done. There was hardly a person who had been in need who hadn’t found Simeon able to help. He had provided a listening ear to those in distress. He had offered the new boots someone had just given to him, to the man who needed them to work the construction job Simeon told him how to find.

“No one knew of the kindnesses he had shown others, but everyone seemed to have a story of how the homeless man had changed his or her life for the better. Of course, by then I understood why. Through the rose-colored glasses I could see the world as Simeon had seen it. It was like looking into someone’s heart and seeing what was true, rather than just seeing the façade they put up for others.

“I also saw people pursuing things that

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didn't matter. The new car they wanted so bad they seemed hungry for it, just looked old and rusted through the glasses. The fur coats and other fancy clothes, diamond rings and all the rest just looked cheap and tawdry. All those things that seemed to dazzle looked like so much junk through the glasses. It was the people that shined. Some brightly. Some less so. Some seemed not to realize they had light within them. Others seemed determined to snuff it out.

"The glasses changed me. The glasses taught me what mattered and what didn't. What was lasting and what was passing away. They are how I came to be a teacher. I found that no one else was paying attention to teenagers. Really paying attention. And so I got my master's in literature and ensconced myself in junior high, a place that seemed to need someone with Simeon's touch.

"At first, I needed the glasses a lot to know who was hurting. But after a while, I developed a sort of second sight all my own. I haven't put them on in years," he said finishing his story.

Agnes was amazed. There was a secret

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behind Mr. Brooks' care for the residents at his home. She sat in silence, letting the story sink in for a moment more, then asked, "But why didn't you share the glasses with me, Mr. Brooks? Why did I have to corner you before you told me your secret?"

"Why I should think that would be obvious, dear girl. You didn't need the glasses." Mr. Brooks beamed again with that smile that engaged every line on his time-worn face, "You already see the world as God sees it."

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "speak." "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly..." Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven..." And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

—Luke 7:36-43,48,50

Go in Peace, to Where?

Luke 7:36-50

*A*S DINNER PARTIES GO, it was a disaster. Jesus was a Rabbi with a great reputation also known to be welcoming to lepers. As both a Pharisee and one cured of leprosy, how could I go wrong? Jesus was my kind of guy. He was interested in Moses' law and yet accepting. As it turned out, Jesus was a little too accepting. Not discriminating enough for my tastes. I had hoped that Jesus was something more, a prophet at least, maybe even The One we await. But let's face it, for a so-called humble teacher, Jesus was rude.

I thought inviting Jesus would do each of us some good. He, the up-and-coming teacher, me the established religious leader. I even let Jesus bring along that fishy-smelling band he calls disciples. I'm not sure what more could be expected of a host.

The dinner started well enough. Everyone was reclining at table, settled in nicely. Then she arrived. The way the women's entrance to our courtyard works, you wouldn't exactly

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say that woman broke in, but she sure barged in where she wasn't needed, wasn't wanted. This, other than Jesus and his band, was to be a gathering of the local religious elite. A chance to get off to ourselves for some alone time. Just the ones who know how to follow Moses' law to the letter.

Don't get the wrong idea. I'm no holier than thou sort. I give to the poor. I just don't want the lesser desirable types showing up for dinner. It's just not done.

Remember everyone is in place. The prayers for bread and wine are behind us. Time for the meal. That's when this "woman of the city" barges in. We all tried to ignore her groveling. She was weeping over Jesus. Pouring oil on his feet, wiping it with her hair. Disgusting. Embarrassed that Jesus did nothing to prevent the woman's actions, I was also deeply disappointed that this so called holy man could not just somehow know with whom he was consorting. All of *us* could tell she was no good.

Why would that man even permit her to be in the same room with us, much less touch him? The whole event was scandalous. What

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was I to do? I wanted to be a gracious host. Open up my house to some friends and an intriguing teacher. And then this!

Jesus asked to speak and added unspeakable insult to injury. He told us all of two debtors—one owing five hundred denarii, the other fifty. Neither can repay their debt and the creditor forgives both debts. He asks which one loves the overly kind creditor more. Well, anyone could see that it was the man who owed five hundred denarii. A common laborer works more than a year and a half to earn that money. Who wouldn't be grateful for that sort of largesse?

Of course, the story was a trick. Jesus dropped the net into the water and I swam right in. As the net tightened around me, I knew I spoke too quickly. Somehow this person was the one forgiven the great debt. I couldn't see the point, but I knew answering was a mistake. After all, I'm no fool.

But Jesus couldn't just have his little story. No. He had to point up my shortcomings. My shortcomings. I was the host!

Jesus pointed out to everyone that I had not welcomed him with respect, washing his

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feet and giving him the kiss of peace. Of course, I just let the rebel rabbi and his dusty disciples file in and sit down. What did he expect, really? I'm the man with the nice house, the servants, and the fine clothes. Why grovel to the would-be prophet from Galilee? No one gets anything for nothing. Earn my respect and I will give it to you. I offered the meal. Did he demand the royal treatment as well? Well too bad. Considering how things went, I'm glad.

Jesus ended the whole fiasco with blasphemy; before the main course arrived I might add. He told this sinful thing that her sins were forgiven. Forgiven? Her! He released her. Let her go. Who did he think he was anyway? Forget the parlor trick with reading my mind. Even an idiot could see that I was scandalized by their behavior—the woman and Jesus both.

I had hoped Jesus might be accepting enough to dine with me. Some still call me Simon the Leper. I have trouble getting away from the stigma of the disease. But acceptance can go too far and this woman went way too far. Who did Jesus think he was anyway? Only

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God can forgive sins. The audacity was astounding.

But the thing that really sticks in my mind about the whole disastrous evening was Jesus' parting shot. I probably could have laughed it all off, but then he said those final words, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Go in peace. Really! The nerve. Go where? Where could that woman ever find peace? If she really did want forgiveness, if that woman really did want to turn toward God, then she would never be welcome back in this city again. Her old crowd wouldn't know what to do with her and neither would we, the religious ones. Where could this weeping thing go? Who would offer her peace except for that gaggle of Galileans?

This Jesus needs to think it all through. If God's love and forgiveness is for everyone, then there is going to have to be some sort of community to receive those forgiven sinners, and the unforgiven ones too.

The Kingdom of God will never be a here-and-now reality unless there is a place where those fallen folks can congregate, support one another. Those forgiven sinners certainly can't

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come to my house, or church, until they have proved themselves and I suspect they won't be welcome in yours either.

Let's be honest. Jesus was too accepting. If he was more like you and me, this movement of his might go somewhere. But I promise you. This is the last time, and I mean it the very last time, I let the likes of him in my gate. And I would advise you to steer clear of this irresponsible teaching. Jesus' words sound good at first, but this reckless rabbi would turn the world upside down if anyone actually practiced what he preaches.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." Immediately her haemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, "Who touched me?" He looked all round to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

—Mark 5:25-34

A New Relationship

Mark 5:21-43

MINE WAS A STORY destined not to be told. I was the one to die unknown, unremembered, unremarked. Then I got it into my head that all I had to do was reach out and touch the hem of Jesus' garment. Nothing more, nothing less.

I had heard of Jesus. Everyone had by then. He was the healer from Nazareth who had set tongues wagging from the Decapolis to the Negev. I traveled more than most, and heard of Jesus everywhere I went.

I had begun seeking healing with sacrifices offered at the Temple. But as soon as the priests found out what my problem was, I was declared unclean. I was no longer fit to be in God's presence. I was no longer welcome in the Court of the Women at the Temple in Jerusalem.

Feeling cast out by my God, I turned to everything anyone ever heard of doing. I sought out healers and magicians. I recited incantations in languages I couldn't understand, to gods of whom I had never

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heard. But mostly I sought out the care of physicians, any physician, all physicians. I ate every conceivable combination of herbs. I applied creams and ointments. I did anything they asked and paid everything I had.

As for me, the hemorrhage continued as did my spiraling descent away from others. They don't tell you how sickness cuts you off from others. Oh get some quick fever that either kills you or leaves you spent but recovering and the family will rally around, but get some slow wasting disease and watch how others gently pull back all contact. No one wants to speak to and certainly no one wants to touch you in case the illness should rub off on them. I don't think it was conscious, but it was predictable. As soon as anyone found out I had been bleeding for five years, seven years, ten years—whatever it was by that point—he or she would pull back, withdraw.

I didn't realize that being cut off from others was worse than the haemorrhage. But it didn't matter anyway, because my health problems and I were one. I let my sickness define me and then so did everyone else.

Of course, I did hear of Jesus—everyone

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did in those days. There was talk of Jesus teaching with great authority. There was talk of how he could be the Messiah. Many hoped he would overthrow the Romans so that Jews could once more rule Israel on their own. But for people like me—the real sufferers—there was only one tidbit about Jesus that mattered. Wherever Jesus went, he healed people. Jesus touched the blind, the deaf, the lame and they could see, hear and walk.

I knew I had to get to him, but even that proved a disaster. First, it was hard to pin down where he was. Jesus was always crossing back and forth around the Sea of Galilee and then he traveled down to Jerusalem for the festivals too. It seemed that he was everywhere at once and never where I was. Then I did find him one day and even got close enough to speak, but I lost heart. I couldn't dare to speak to him. If the stories were true, then I couldn't risk speaking with him. After all, God his Father's own priests tossed me out of the Temple as unclean. I couldn't bear for Jesus to reject me too. Where would I turn then?

But I did hear him speak that day, with such power. I also watched eagerly as he

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reached out and touched others, healing them, making them whole. Jesus was God come to live among us as a human. If Jesus wanted, he could heal me so effortlessly. *I knew* he could do it.

A week passed. Once more on the seashore, I gathered with a large crowd of others, all bent on hearing Jesus, many others wanted healing as well. I slowly worked my way through the crowd. I no longer needed to speak with Jesus. You see, I had worked the details out in advance. If Jesus had the healing power in him, I reasoned that I just had to bump against him in the crowd to be healed. But touching him would be too much. Then I figured that if bumping against him would work, and that wouldn't even require a touch of his hands, perhaps just touching his clothes would be enough. And so it went until my plan was distilled to the simple idea of touching the barest hem of his clothes.

An important religious leader named Jairus came to implore Jesus to heal his daughter. I worked around the crowd to get close to Jesus. As he started toward Jairus' house, I knelt down and reached out for the

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barest edge of his robe and I grabbed hold as if touching the very throne of God. I knew Jesus' robe well by this point from watching it in the crowd and I knew that life and healing from the one God could flow through it.

Then the moment came. I reached and almost fell short, but then I stretched up and briefly grabbed hold. As I touched the homespun cloth, I could feel it even more powerfully than I had imagined, the power of God flowed through me, touching me and making my body whole. The bleeding stopped. I knew my body was healed.

Then everything went wrong. Jesus stopped. He stopped everyone. The whole crowd. Jesus cried out wanting to know who touched him. His disciples couldn't believe the question. With such a great crowd crushing around, a lot of people had been bumping into Jesus. Jesus kept looking. I could feel his eyes searching the crowd for me. I was terrified. Jesus was going to take it all back. I wasn't worthy of the healing I had stolen from his cloak. Once more, I was to be humiliated. But I was desperate and so I threw myself at Jesus' feet and I babbled out my whole story, my

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twelve years of suffering. Trembling with fear, I told Jesus the whole truth down to the hem of his garment.

Jesus lifted me up, he looked into my eyes and he said the most beautiful words which made my healing complete. Jesus looked into my eyes with his eyes of love and he said, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.”

I savored every word. “Daughter.” My God called me daughter. How could that be? “Your faith has healed you.” Jesus knew what great faith I had come to have that even the very hem of his robe could heal. “Go in peace,” he said. Peace, Shalom. It means health and well being, but mostly it means wholeness or completeness. I knew then that if Jesus had not stopped to speak with me, only my body would have been healed, but Jesus was so much more interested in healing my mind and soul, complete healing. And then he set me free from my suffering. Set free. How marvelous. I hadn’t even known that I was imprisoned until he set me free. I had let my sickness define me. Instead of being a woman who was sick, I had become my illness. Then

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Jesus set me free to be a daughter of God.

I didn't continue to follow Jesus that day, at least not physically. I cut away from the crowd, confident that Jairus' daughter would be healed. Instead, I began the journey to Jerusalem. I wanted more than anything to offer the sacrifices for thanksgiving for healing and to be allowed once more into God's Temple. I wanted to live into being a daughter of God.

For I came to realize that being cut off from God, my family and others around me was far worse than the haemorrhaging alone. I wanted, needed, the bleeding to stop, but what I needed more—and Jesus knew it—was to be accepted once again. To have God look into my eyes and call me “daughter.”

I don't know where you have been, what you have done, how you have marred the image of God within you. But I do know that God wants to reach out to you, look you in the eyes and call you “daughter” or “son.” For you are God's beloved child too.

You don't have to even touch the hem of his garment. You only have to reach out your heart in prayer and offer God your pain and

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suffering. God will take that hurt and give you shalom, the health, healing and wholeness he gave me that day.

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity....

Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

—Luke 10:25-33,36-37

Defining Myself

Luke 10:25-37

IT WAS A MATTER OF DEFINITION. That's why I went to see Jesus. It's why I asked him, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" and more specifically, why I asked the follow up question, "And who is my neighbor?"

I wanted to know, "Who is in?" "Who is out?" and "Where do I stand?" More precisely, and I was always one for precision, I wanted to know where Jesus drew the boundaries. I knew how I defined myself. I knew that my actions were always justified. I wanted to hear his definition, before I made up my mind about this new prophet who was setting the countryside ablaze with his teaching.

As long as we are getting our definitions straight at the outset, I was not a lawyer. Not in the plain sense of that word. I did study law, but the law I studied would not land me alongside anyone in a Roman court. I studied the Law of Moses, the Torah. It was this law that I knew inside and out. It was this Law of Moses that defined the world for me—telling

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me who was in, and more importantly who was out.

In answer to my follow up question, Jesus gave a story. I must say I was quite impressed at first. The setup was perfect. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho. A man robbed and left for dead. It was all too realistic. Everyone knew that road was dangerous. It's why I travel it, as most do, with others in a group. The man is lying there near death. First a temple priest goes by. Temple priests couldn't touch a dead body or they would have to undergo a lengthy purification rite before being able to serve in the temple.

This is how I could really appreciate Jesus' precision. Like a good rabbi, he had an eye for details and he noted that the priest was going down, literally downhill. Everyone knows that downhill means away from the Temple and so away from service. He was off duty and could have helped.

Then a Levite, a priest who lives in the countryside did the same. This was no problem for me. I am all about strict observance of the law, which applies to all, not just a priest. I could see where Jesus was

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going. The hero of the story would be a good Torah observant Jew, someone who knew the law and acted on it. This was perfect.

That's when Jesus brought in the Samaritan. The Samaritan came near, saw the injured man and was "moved with pity." Well, what Jesus actually said was the Samaritan felt *Splanchnisomai*.

Splanchnisomai. There's a word in need of definition. The root word meant "womb." *Splanchnisomai* is a verb from the plural form of the noun. It meant literally "to womb" someone, to treat someone as a mother would treat the child in her womb. I knew the word well for it was a common biblical word for God's compassion and mercy, but it was a rare word otherwise. *Splanchnisomai* was reserved to describe God's compassion and mercy. Before that day with Jesus I had not once heard any Jew ever use this word for God's compassion used to describe the actions of any human.

It really got under my skin that Jesus would attribute this sort of godly compassion to a Samaritan. After all, Samaritans were the ones who had intermarried with Assyrians and

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others bringing other religious practices to create a form of Judaism that was not only wrong, it was evil. That's why Samaritans were so bad. It was because of people like Samaritans, or worse, the Romans, that we had to create clear boundaries. These are the people who made us need to clearly define ourselves.

Yet the care Jesus had the Samaritan show the man in need was quite amazing. He cleaned his wounds, got him to an inn and paid the cost for his recovery and then left, leaving what followed to the injured man. The man would owe the Samaritan nothing. He wouldn't even know who his roadside savior had been if he didn't seek him out.

So when Jesus asked his question, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The only possible answer was, "The Samaritan." But I wasn't going to fall for that set up. I was quicker on my feet and better with words than that. I said, "The one who showed him mercy." Let's at least keep definitions clear. It wasn't being a Samaritan that made him good; it was the godly compassion that

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made him a neighbor to the injured man.

“Go and do likewise,” Jesus said. Well I got the “go” part right. I walked away. Disenchanted. Disappointed. I had hoped for a great teacher, but Jesus clearly didn’t understand the way the law works, or the way the world works for that matter. Jesus would *not* make a great lawyer. Jesus overstated the case.

He gave a preposterous example. A Samaritan with godly compassion? Really! It was like basing an argument on water running uphill. Maybe it *could* happen with the right force, but it didn’t happen. No one had seen either a compassionate Samaritan or water running uphill. No one I know anyway. We wouldn’t even look at a Samaritan, much less speak to one. Why make a Samaritan the hero of the story? The logical hero of that morality play of his was a good Torah observant Jew. He needed someone who kept the letter of the law as the example of what God expects humans to act like. Someone like...well...honestly speaking, me. I’m just being honest here.

At least that’s what I thought. But I

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couldn't get our encounter out of my head. That story kept running around in there. The story wouldn't let me go. It was like a hoard of termites were working away on that blockhead of mine. They were let loose on my tightly constructed façade as well. I knew that if I took Jesus' way of seeing the world seriously, my whole way of living would come crumbling down to dust.

That's why, later, when I heard he had been put to death, I wasn't surprised. Saddened, but not surprised. Jesus had upset people. He even had the Pharisees joining forces with King Herod's followers and the Sadducees, the Temple priests, to bring him down. Those guys would hardly talk to each other. They would yell at each other. But not work together. It showed how much Jesus bothered them all.

Jesus was breaking down the dividing walls between who was in and who was out. People in power like their divisions. Breaking down barriers between people didn't help Rome any more than it helped the elite of Israel. The problem wasn't just his story about the compassionate Samaritan, this was in

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everything he taught and everything he did.

Some weeks after his death, I wanted to get the story straight. I talked to Nicodemus, a Pharisee I respected. I knew he would tell me the truth about Jesus' crucifixion. After all, he had a front row seat as he was on the Sanhedrin. I sought Nicodemus out one evening for something more than a casual chat. He quickly confirmed most of the rumors. Jesus really did have a lot of people working together to silence him and his disciples. But Nicodemus said more. Much more. Nicodemus had become a part of The Way.

I learned that's what they were calling themselves, the people who still followed The Way of Jesus. I was a bit confused at first. Jesus was dead. His movement had ended tragically. Why would anyone follow him now?

Of course, I had heard that Jesus' body was gone. I had even heard that some claimed he was resurrected. I would never have thought someone of Nicodemus' standing would fall for that. Nicodemus was a leader among our people. Well respected. And so when he looked me in the eyes and told me

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that he had seen the resurrected Jesus with his own eyes, hugged him with his own arms, cried on his shoulder, I was shaken. I thanked him for his time, but I left.

I had to get away and think. I went away deeply troubled by our nighttime encounter. Either Nicodemus was crazy or I had been wrong about Jesus, dangerously wrong. I thought through everything I knew about Jesus. Everything I had seen and heard that wasn't wild rumor, fit perfectly into one neat picture. And all of it fit with that encounter of ours. Jesus taught people to, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and soul and love your neighbor as yourself." No Jew could fault him on that teaching. It was how he defined "neighbor" that got Jesus killed. For Jesus, the word neighbor meant everyone, even our enemies.

I could see that in this way Jesus redefined everything. Jesus' way of looking at the law turned the whole equation inside out. I started with me. I always started with me. I knew that I followed the letter of the law and so I defined myself "Good." Jesus started with God and then defined the one who acts like God would

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act to be good.

Starting that way, it is not about me and who I am obligated to love. It doesn't work that way. It starts with God and coming to know God. I come into the equation by having a relationship with God and recognizing the love God has shown me as a gift to be shared. Shared with whom? Well everybody. Especially, the poor, the needy, the outcast. Everyone I had defined as being on the outside were the ones to be shown the most love.

Late that night after my talk with Nicodemus, well on toward morning, I could see the truth clearly. Everything Jesus did fit with everything he taught and all of it pointed to the truth of what Nicodemus had told me. Jesus was the Messiah. He had been put to death and rose from the grave. I knew this was true because I could feel him there with me as I thought it all through. I also knew what it meant for Jesus to be the resurrected Lord. By definition I had to change.

Change was easy at that point. I looked back on my encounter with Jesus with tears in my eyes. I cried for shame. I had been so full of myself, so arrogant. I had been so

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overflowing full of my own self-righteousness that I hadn't noticed how Jesus looked through all my pretension and loved me anyway. I thought I deserved God's love more than anyone, and that night after speaking with Nicodemus, I was humbled.

Pride had been my chief sin. I looked down on everyone. I wore my own holiness like a crown. I had actually spoken to God's Son, the Holy One of Israel, and acted holier than thou! Can you imagine it? I wept until there were no tears left. Then I prayed to Jesus. I asked him for forgiveness for my pride and arrogance. Forgiveness for those I had cast out. Forgiveness for those I failed to love because I saw them as worthless. Forgiveness for everything.

I poured out my heart completely. But I didn't feel empty. I felt full. Full of love—the love God was showing me. I wanted to share it. I first thought of finding Nicodemus and telling him the news of my change of heart. But by dawn, I just wanted to head north from Jerusalem straight to Samaria. I heard there was a village there that converted to faith in Jesus after a woman met Jesus at a well. I

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wanted to meet these good Samaritans.

But I hadn't even cleared the city walls before I realized the love I felt was expanding more. I didn't need to find that particular village. Because when I looked at Samaritans with God's eyes, I realized they were all good, or could be, as God loved each Samaritan as much as he loved me.

So as the morning rays lit the tops of the city walls, I headed out of Jerusalem like an arrow shot from a bow. I was walking north to Samaria to find a Samaritan or two to hug and to tell them that Jesus loves them and so do I. I was a nut. I was crazy that morning with God's love. But I didn't care. I had my whole world redefined and it felt great.

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

—Matthew 22:15-22

Render Unto God

Matthew 22:15-22

MY TIME TO SHINE. That's what that day in the Temple was supposed to be. I was going to have a big showdown with Jesus. By the time I was done with him either the crowd or the Roman Empire would be turning on him. Either way, I would win.

It started the night before. I was in a strategy session with other Pharisees plotting to entrap the Rabbi. We had first wanted to dig up some dirt on him to discredit Jesus as a teacher. But no one had anything on this guy. You couldn't fault him on the way he lived out the scriptures, that was for sure. That should have been enough to stop me in my tracks. But I was looking at the bigger picture. I was still a young man and I wanted to make a name for myself. I wanted to impress the religious elite.

At least I did that. When we started kicking around ideas on how to snare Jesus, I knew we needed a question with no possible right answer. I wanted him to be stuck no matter what he said. That's when I came up

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with my taxing solution. Taxes were perfect. The people hated taxes. Rome loved them, lived for them.

As soon as I thought of it I spoke above the person who had the floor, “Ask him if he thinks we should pay taxes to Rome.” The room got quiet. I was scared. I shouldn’t have just spoken up like that. In the quiet, my mind realized I practically shouted down Rabbi Moshe in my exuberance. Not the impression I wanted to make.

Fortunately it was the venerable Rabbi who spoke first saying smiling as he did so, “He’s right, no matter what Jesus replies, we’ve got him.” He continued following my line of reasoning, “There is no way a good Jew actually wants our money going to Rome, but if he speaks against the tax, we can turn him into Pilate. If he sees that trap and claims we should support the Romans, the crowd will be finished with him. And if he remains silent, we’ll let them know that Jesus doesn’t have all the answers.”

There was general agreement that the plan would work. Moshe said that as it was my idea, I should get to question Jesus

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personally. They would send along some other Pharisees with me and a few hangers on from King Herod's court would be found to go as well. We needed the Herodians as Romans were not allowed in the Temple. No soldiers would be there to hear it if Jesus spoke against the tax. But the Herodians had a stake in the Rome's taxes. Herod was Rome's puppet king. He could be counted on to come down hard on anyone speaking out against Rome lest it threaten his deal with the empire.

All was set. We gathered in The Court of Israel, the part of the Temple reserved for the men, then we'd go find Jesus. That part was easy as Jesus was teaching in the Temple.

I walked up and laying it on thick began by flattering Jesus. I know how teachers are; they are all conceited and easily flattered. I had practiced the lines, learning them by heart, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality."

So far so good. I knew he would never see the trap until it was too late. I finished by saying, "Tell us, then, what you think. Is it

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lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

Then I did my best to look as if I were hanging on his words like a dog searching for some piece of meat tossed from the table. Jesus looked provoked. He didn't even pause but looked deep into my eyes as he asked of us all, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?" Then he asked for the coin used for the tax.

I had a denarius hanging in a bag under my outer robe, but I didn't reach for it. Roman coins were prohibited in the Temple. That's why we had the money changers, to take the Roman money and exchange it for Temple coins. That way we didn't bring in the coins with the image of Caesar on it and an inscription saying "Caesar Augustus Tiberius, son of the Divine Augustus."

We all knew the coins were blasphemous. The coin itself claimed that Augustus was a god and it had an image of that god on the coin. But I kept the coins on me because I came and went at the Temple so often, that I couldn't take the time to change out my coins every time I visited the Temple courts. Jesus was a Galilean. He only visited the Temple

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for festivals, he would never understand.

But in the time it took me to think not to reach for my coin purse, Judah Halevi was holding up a denarius. It didn't even dawn on him that what he was doing was wrong. Jesus asked Judah, "Whose image and inscription are on it?"

Now it was coming. Jesus was going to blast us for blasphemy right there in the Temple and there was nothing I could do to stop it. We had marched right in secure in our own self-righteousness to dispatch the Rabbi and now we were being humiliated steps away from the Holy of Holies.

Judah had caught on to the predicament as well and his voice carried a trace of fear as he answered, "Caesar's."

Jesus replied, "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's."

I was stunned. Not only had we been knocked down, but his rebuke was not the vicious diatribe I would have let loose if roles were reversed. No, Jesus had looked thoughtful and uttered a pithy saying worthy of remembering and passing down.

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The Herodians were shaking their heads as we walked away. They had been pulled into the promised showdown, but Jesus' words seemed to support the emperor. It had been a waste of their time. But we Pharisees were genuinely amazed. The Herodians missed the point entirely, of course. They thought Jesus had said pay taxes to Caesar and that was that. They were only interested in collecting their share of the money rendered unto Caesar. But Rabbi Jesus also said to give to God the things that are God's.

What is God's? Well I am, to start close to home. And so are you. And so is everything I own and you own. The earth is the Lord's and the fullness of it. Everything belongs to God.

Paying tax to Caesar. Who cares? Let the baby have his milk. Caesar can only demand some of his own coins back. The point is to give your life to God. All of your life. Then what little comes and goes from the hands of Caesar is of no importance.

This was a saying worthy of a great teacher. Jesus sounded like a good Pharisee. No wonder some Pharisees had come to follow Jesus. After all, we taught that one should keep the

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scriptures faithfully. We valued clear cut sayings that pointed back to keep God's word. And Jesus' words on what we are to render to Caesar and what we are to render to God cut clear through me. I was ashamed that I had gone to the Temple to ambush such a good and godly teacher. No wonder some of my fellow Pharisees were always standing up for Jesus while others considered themselves his followers.

I went back to my shop and worked out the rest of the day. I tried to explain to my wife what had happened, but she didn't understand my embarrassment. Thankfully she hadn't been there to witness the spectacle.

The next morning I was back in the Temple wanting to hear Jesus. Our leaders were trying to test him once again and they asked him to tell which commandment was the greatest. But they didn't mean the Ten Commandments, they meant the 613 commands which Moses gave us to follow. These were the rules that included things like not committing adultery, but also included commands to not sow a field with two types of seed and gave us food laws and other commands.

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Jesus said the first commandment was to love God with our heart, mind and soul and the second was to love our neighbor as ourselves. It was so simple when he said it, but I also knew that he was as correct and orthodox as he was clear. Blazingly clear. Jesus' teaching cut loose the weight of human made burdens to get to the heart of a godly way of life. He finished by saying that we are to be servants and that all who exalt themselves will be humbled. How true! I had tried to exalt myself as a leader among the Pharisees. I had spoken up over Rabbi Moshe only to be humbled by Rabbi Jesus with his words of wisdom.

Two days later, I was shocked and saddened beyond words when I learned that Jesus was sentenced to death. I had stayed home that Thursday evening to celebrate Passover and wasn't there for the farce they called Jesus' trial. But I made it in time to Golgotha, the place of the skull, and saw Jesus hanging on the cross. He cried out with a loud voice, "*Eli, Eli, Lema Sabachthani!*" "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me!"

I wept openly, bitterly. How could our Lord

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God abandon Jesus, the teacher who not only taught God's word clearly, but followed it fully? Where was God as the sky over that ancient trash heap turned black? It was as if all the air had been sucked out of the cosmos. I couldn't breathe. I stumbled away bewildered by the turn of events. How could the righteous be so utterly forsaken?

I heard of Jesus' body being moved by his disciples. Everyone was saying they had somehow bribed the guards to let them steal away his corpse. I knew no Roman soldier would risk his life like that, but I didn't understand. More than a month passed. I tried to find out what I could. Jesus' disciples had been in hiding somewhere. Then they said he came back to life.

What I remember was that Pentecost morning. Fifty days after that fateful Passover. I heard the commotion and went running into the crowd. It was the most amazing scene. Those timid, unschooled disciples of Jesus were teaching the crowds and they were doing it each in the language of persons in the crowd. Languages the disciples hadn't studied and could not have known. And in Aramaic I

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could understand plainly enough how they were proclaiming the risen Jesus as Lord, the Messiah, The One Who Is to Come, the Son of God. It was miraculous.

When the disciple they called the Rock asked who wanted to be baptized, I was pushing my way to the front. Jesus had told me to render unto God the things that are God's and I was ready to surrender all. I wanted to stop holding back on God. I wanted to be his from the hairs on my head to the soles of my feet.

I knew that even though I tithed, I was still holding back on God. I was holding back my heart, my life, my own will for my life. I was holding back practically everything.

Tears were streaming down my face once more. But this was not embarrassment anymore, or confusion. I was crying tears of joy. Peter was right, even after I had looked God in the eye in the person of his son Jesus and denied who he was to his face, Jesus was still calling to me. I could feel it in my heart.

As Peter pushed me down under the water in baptism, I felt my old self dying. I let go of my will for my life. Whatever it was that God

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wanted, that's what I wanted. And as I came up out of the water, I felt positively resurrected.

Now I look back on that showdown in the Temple and it doesn't shame me the way it once did. I am thankful that Jesus put me in my place, thankful that I got to hear him teach. But I'm most thankful that I was able to not just hear of his resurrection from the disciples, but to experience death and resurrection through my own baptism.

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by two of his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me."

—Matthew 11:2-6

*The One Who Is to Come:
A Parable of the Old West*
Matthew 11:2-11

AT SOME POINT, we all have to decide what we can trust in and where we place our hope. Is this the thing I trust or a person I can trust? What gives me a reason to hope for a better future? These are questions worth asking. Consider this story of a wind-blown Texas town in the decade after the Civil War. It's a once upon a time kind of story, but the lesson is one that is both true and timeless.

Buffalo Ford was hardly a wide spot in the road. If it weren't for the dependable means it offered of crossing the Brazos River, there would have been no reason to pass through this part of the Texas prairie. But the ford was reliable and the Brazos needed crossing and so a town developed.

Among the couple of hundred residents were the usual array of a blacksmith, a wheelwright, a livery, a tailor, a saddle maker who also cobbled shoes, a butcher, some hide dressers, a hotel keeper, a couple of saloon

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keepers who kept rooms above for women of questionable virtue, a preacher, a school teacher and the rest of hangers on who kept coming. The big rush for Buffalo hides that hit in the mid-1870s brought a lot of money and more than the usual share of vices with more gamblers, whiskey peddlers and prostitutes choosing to stay rather than pass through.

The once quiet river ford town would hit peaks when buffalo hunters would end a spree with a drunken night on the town. By morning you could cross the main street stepping on one passed out drunk after another without dirtying your feet by stepping on the road.

One day a hot summer wind blew in with it one of the more unique individuals in a town that seemed to be made up solely of unusual characters. Jack was a wild-eyed apocalyptic preacher whose favorite word was “repent.” But he didn’t just say, “repent.” He said, “REPENT! Change your evil-livin’ ways while there’s still time.”

Dressed in his rough buffalo hides, with long, wild and wooly hair, he looked like a figure who had survived the apocalypse and

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staggered back to warn the rest of us. Jack took to blasting away at passers by from the river bank down on the Brazos edge of town. He shouted at everyone coming and going with a warning of a hanging judge on the way and little time left for change. "Judgment is coming and it will be swift and sure when it arrives," he warned.

Most everybody knew that the Buffalo Ford couldn't continue on the path it was on, and a lot of folks began to listen. The preacher didn't like his flock being stolen sheep by sheep, but there wasn't much he could do. A conscience is hard to run away from for long and a lot of people were feeling the guilt that came with so many mornings after. Many of them waded out in the Brazos for Jack to dunk them in what he promised to be cleansing water, despite the fact that the river was muddy brown.

When the hanging judge came, everything would be different. That's the way Jack told it and a lot of folks believed him. Of course, many people kept right on with their riotous living. Some of the decent folk just minded their own business and left Jack and the

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fanatics to the edge of town. What did it matter if they profited from the drinking, gambling and carousing? They weren't doing anything wrong.

Then the promised day arrived. Except it wasn't like anyone imagined. Manuel came to town and no one likely would have noticed him at all if it weren't for Jack. He was a nice enough fellow, but not imposing. He wasn't handsome in a way that made you notice him, or tough enough to stand out in a town like this one.

He passed straight between the cedar plank buildings, walked down to the river and right up to Jack, who was just setting fire to the brimstone of his sermon. Jack saw Manuel wade out into the water. He stopped his harangue mid-sentence, and just stared. Something passed between them that no one on the bank could quite make out and then Jack baptized Manuel.

Later, after Manuel had disappeared on the far side of the river, Jack began to warn that the hanging judge long promised was finally here. "The end is coming any time now," he said. "You better repent while there's

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still time.” Then Jack moved south along the river to other towns where the river ran smooth and the saloons were rough.

More than a month passed and Manuel resurfaced. He taught too, but in a gentle way. Unlike Jack’s rough words of judgment, Manuel brought words of change that sounded, well, loving. Manuel seemed less concerned with smashing up the saloons and clearing out the cat houses. He wanted to lift up the lowly and he did it. It was miraculous the way some people quit the booze for good. Others stopped wasting their little money on trying to outwit the professional card players. Here and there some people started to change, for good.

There was that awful scene one day where the preacher drug that poor young girl out of Mabel’s Place and threw her into the mud right in front of Manuel. They all knew what kind of girl she was and wanted to see what Manuel would do about it. This should be good. But Manuel didn’t want to be brought into the fuss until the preacher started shouting that lynching was too good for her. She just sat crumpled in the dirt crying.

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Manuel shouted to the crowd, "Who here is not guilty of greater sin than this daughter of the Texas prairies?" People just kind of looked the other way all awkward like and walked on, minding their own business. When the street cleared he leaned down, told her that God valued her far more than this town knew how to. He helped her up, dusted her off and sent her home. "No one here condemns you," he said. "Go be the woman God made you to be."

Well, that sort of talk isn't good for business. People got angry. People with the power, that is. But Jack had always been the louder, brasher preacher of the pair and landed in jail down in Young's Fort long before Manuel got into trouble. The fort was bringing in a hanging judge just to silence Jack's talk of change.

Jack looked out from the iron bars of the little jail, watching the thunderheads build out over the prairie. He got to thinking. He had been so sure that day at Buffalo Ford. Manuel had stepped out of the crowd and it was as if God almighty was shouting in his ear, "This was the hope for all mankind." But time had

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passed. Manuel hadn't cleaned out that one town, much less the Brazos River valley. There was talk of miracles, healings and the like. But, nothing had changed. Not really. Things were looking just as hopeless as ever.

Zachary was a man Jack had baptized who visited with Jack while he was in jail. The two spoke between the bars. With his own Day of Judgment looming, Jack said to Zachary, "Go to Manuel for me....Ask him for me if he's The One we were looking for....The One to bring justice."

Zachary first went looking Henry, the friend who had brought him down to the river to hear Jack. Zach and Henry had both been baptized and started trying to live right. Now the two went to find out for Jack if Manuel was going to be the hanging judge or not. The pair found Manuel talking out front of a saloon, telling people how they should care for the folks who didn't have anyone to look out after them. When he finished up, Zach said straight out, "Jack wants to know if you're him." He didn't add that he was thinking, "cause if you're not, it looks like Jack's about to face the rope for nothing."

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After Zach asked if he was The One, Manuel paused and looked at Zach and Henry long and hard with the kindest look in his eyes. “The kingdom he is waiting for has already come,” Manuel said. “Go back and tell Jack that the sick are being made well, needy folks are being taken care of, and these lost souls of the prairie are learning about the Good News that God loves them.”

Zach and Henry headed back south wondering if the news would be enough. Jack was facing a hangman for sure and he had so little to pin his hope on. They agreed about one thing. Change was coming. It was as if little bits of cool, clean air were breaking into the choking dust of the prairie. Some folks were breathing easier already. But it was nothing like the End of Times that Jack had told them to expect. What would happen now? How could Jack know that everything would be all right? How could Zach or Henry know?

They had all expected The One to call down fire from heaven and Manuel had only called down forgiveness. It was raining forgiveness now, flooding forgiveness. There

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was no doubt about that. Just ask the girl who was crying in the dirt out front of Mabel's that day when Manuel refused to condemn her.

But what about judgment? When would that come? Didn't we deserve justice? Manuel said judging was God's business and it wasn't time yet. But there's evil out on the prairie. As for the time for justice, Manuel didn't seem to know.

Thing is, Zach and Henry knew deep down that they were glad that forgiveness had been offered long enough for them to take a dip in the river and wash away all the grime of a life lived wrong. Neither of them would have wanted to die still caught up in that cycle of trying to scrape up a few hard earned coins to try to buy some happiness.

So, maybe a hangin' judge wasn't needed just yet. 'Cause if Manuel was right, then more people had something to hope for. They could still hope to get things turned around before it was too late. As they made their way back to the Young's Fort Jail, Zach and Henry weren't sure if it would sound like good news to Jack. But they both knew of lots of people scattered across the prairie, who were still in need of that hope.

Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take. It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him....

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah." And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.

Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he cried out and breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

—Mark 15:22-24a,33-39

*What Language
Does God Speak?*
Mark 15:22-39

LUKE'S GOSPEL BRINGS US today to Golgotha, the place of the skull. The reading from Luke shows the length that Jesus was willing to go to in order to reconcile all creation to God.

I want to shed some light on this bleak picture with a story from East Africa. Like a good East African tale, my story will not begin right with the point. But if you will journey with me, I promise that our path will lead us back to the darkness of Golgotha for another look at today's Gospel.

In the summer of 1998, I journeyed to Tanzania to take part in a cross-cultural internship sponsored by the Seminary. I worked in western Tanzania in an Anglican Church led by a Tanzanian priest. While there, I was asked several times, "What is your mother tongue?" You see in East Africa, everyone speaks Swahili, and many people speak English. But these are not the languages of home. Among their own tribe, their own family, most East Africans speak their tribal

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language. This language is their mother tongue. Whenever I explained that English was my mother tongue, people always felt sorry for me. They knew that I was a much poorer person for not having a mother tongue, a special language spoken only among my own people.

This concern about a mother tongue is reflected in a story told in East Africa of a man from the Dodomo district of Tanzania named Msafiri. Msafiri followed the traditional African religion of his people, the Wagogo. He believed in one God, the creator who is the source of all good things. Msafiri approached God by praying to his ancestors who he believed still watched over their people.

An Anglican evangelist came to his small village and began teaching the people about Christianity. Msafiri listened to the evangelist as he told about God sending his son Jesus to live among us. The stories of Jesus' life, his death and resurrection touched Msafiri and he converted to Christianity. He studied with the evangelist and was baptized, taking the name Simon, for Simon of Cyrene, the African

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saint who had carried Jesus' cross to Calvary.

Simon Msafiri went to church faithfully, always attending the Wednesday fellowship meetings and Sunday services. Gathered with the other Christians under the grass roof of the mud-walled church they had built together, he learned the stories from the Bible.

Simon Msafiri prayed to God in Kigogo, the language of his own people instead of the Swahili that he used in town with others. This was Simon's mother tongue and was part of Simon's ties to his extended family. Simon knew that God understood him when he spoke Kigogo, but he decided that God, too, must have a mother tongue—a language that was God's own language from before time. Simon wanted to learn to pray to God in God's own mother tongue. One day he asked the evangelist, "What is God's mother tongue?" The evangelist thought for a moment and then said that God doesn't have a mother tongue—all languages are the same to God.

Simon listened and thanked the evangelist. But as he went home, he began to wonder about the evangelist's answer. Everyone Simon knew had a mother tongue

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they learned as a child and used among their own people. If the people Simon knew had a mother tongue, then God must as well. He decided to ask some of the elders of the village to get the answer to his question. One man said that God, as the great ancestor, must speak the language of their ancestors, Kigogo. Another said that surely God's mother tongue is Swahili. These answers didn't sound right to Simon and he decided to set out on a great safari, a journey to find his answer.

He traveled around Tanzania and everywhere he went, he asked people his question—"What is God's mother tongue?" When he traveled to the west, he was told that God spoke Kisukuma. He turned north, crossing the Malagarasi River and was told that if God's mother tongue isn't Kiha, then perhaps the language is English. In the northeast, an elder told him that God's mother tongue must be Kichagga, while another was equally sure that God's mother tongue was the Latin he had heard spoken in the Catholic Church. Everywhere he went the answers changed, but in a way they were always the same; people often thought that their own

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mother tongue must be God's mother tongue as well. Simon knew that this couldn't be the true answer to his question.

As certain as ever that God must have a mother tongue, Simon decided that he should go on a pilgrimage to Israel to find his answer. Surely there, where so many of the stories from the Bible took place, he could find the answer to his question. As he walked north, he continued to ask people, "What is God's mother tongue?" In Kenya, he was told Kikuyu. As he traveled further north, many people told him Arabic.

Finally Simon arrived in Israel. Late one afternoon he walked through a large stone gate into the old town of Jerusalem. Here he used his broken English to ask people again about God's mother tongue. Most of the people he spoke with insisted that God's mother tongue is Hebrew. One man carefully explained that Moses' Law was written in Hebrew, so that had to be God's own language. But another man was equally emphatic that Jesus had spoken Aramaic, so that must be God's mother tongue, while still others said that God must speak Arabic.

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Simon was confused and disappointed. His pilgrimage had brought many answers, but none of them seemed to be the one true answer that he sought. Tired from his journey, he walked out of the gates of the city as darkness was falling. He went to a nearby olive grove and fell asleep among the trees.

As he slept, Simon had a vision. In the vision he was on a hill outside the old city of Jerusalem. But unlike the olive grove where he fell asleep, the hill of his vision was a barren, rocky place. The road from town passed by the place where he was standing. Simon was alone on the hill, but he could hear a commotion at the gate, where he could see a crowd leaving the town. The violent mob yelled loudly as it stormed up the hill.

The crowd stopped and then parted. Simon saw a dark-skinned man come forward and lift the beam off a shapeless clump of fabric. Simon knew what his vision was. The barren hill was Golgotha, the place of the skull. The clump of fabric rose and took shape. Simon could see that Jesus was rising again after the cross was pulled off of him. Jesus' back was bloody and on his brow, was pressed the

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crown of thorns. Blood trickled down across Jesus' face.

Simon wanted with all his being to reach out and help his Lord. He wanted to help, to somehow stop the madness. But he couldn't. Simon was powerless to do anything. He could only look on in shock. Simon saw the crucifixion and though he had heard about Jesus' death numerous times in church, the crucifixion was so much more grisly, more horrifying in his vision. The whole scene was all too real.

Tears poured down Simon's face as he watched the soldiers strip Jesus and lay him across the beam. He saw them nail Jesus to the cross and then raise him up into the air. Simon didn't want to watch anymore, but the vision continued. Simon saw Jesus looking down at those who crucified him and at the jeering crowd. Jesus saw the anger of the mob and looked at them in love. He said, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they are doing." The words were in a language Simon could not understand, but in his mind he heard them in his own Kigogo. Then Simon understood his vision. Deep inside his being

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Simon understood that this was the answer to his question. God does have a mother tongue, God's own unique language from before time. The mother tongue of God is love. And on the cross, Jesus spoke volumes about the love of God, not just with his words of forgiveness, but with his actions as well. Jesus stayed on the cross, experiencing the worst humanity had to offer in return for love and yet did not give up on his love for us.

The Romans intended the cross for shame and death, but through Jesus' words and actions, the cross has become for us a sign of God's love. Through the cross, Jesus speaks to us in God's own language of love showing the length God will go to in order to reconcile all creation to Godself.

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

—John 13:34

A Note about Old John

This work of fiction is set at the beginning of the second century at the time of the Apostle John's death in Ephesus. The story hangs loosely on a few beliefs about the life of John: He arrived in Ephesus after his time on Patmos; he wrote his Gospel, often referred to as the "Love Gospel," while in his senior years in Ephesus; problems of discord between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians in Ephesus had been a concern of Paul's forty years earlier; and John died in Ephesus at an advanced age sometime after the year 100 A.D.

Old John

John 13:34

*A*PPOLLOS KNEW OLD JOHN WAS CRAZY. He guessed everyone in Ephesus did.

Sitting on the banks of the Cayster, watching the boats sail into the harbor, Apollos saw John walking up the road talking to someone. He couldn't miss Old John's hair, white as a cloud floating about his head. John's arms waved wildly and Apollos didn't have to wait until they got close to know what the conversation was about. He could tell that Old John was recounting his vision again. Apollos didn't understand all that talk about horsemen, stars and other signs. From what he heard when the grown ups talked, no one else understood it either.

John always seemed to be in the streets somewhere talking about Jesus or his visions. He claimed to be an Apostle—one of the twelve who had been there with Jesus at the start—but Apollos knew better. Jesus had died and been resurrected before Apollos's grandfather was born. All the Apostles died long ago too, killed for being Christians.

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Old John's just crazy and that's all there is to it, Apollos thought as John and Eli's father passed by.

It was Sunday and Apollos fell in behind the two men and followed them to church. Apollos sat by his father as always.

After the service, Apollos stepped out to the stone street to meet up with his friends from church. Gigantic clouds floated across a deep blue sky and sun glinted off the water beckoning Apollos. He dashed down to the river with four other boys from church. They built boats out of sticks, using leaves for sails.

"Let's have a boat race," Demetrius said, and all the boys splashed into the shallow water along the rocky bank.

"The first one to pass that tree wins," Apollos declared, pointing to the only nearby tree. The wild fig's branches stretched out over the water about twenty feet downstream.

"Go!" Demetrius shouted.

A push on the sticks and a puff of air on the leaf sails launched the five boats. Tychicus' boat got off to the best start, sailing out in front most of the way to the tree. Just when it seemed the race was his, Tychicus' leaf turned

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to the side and his boat stalled. Eli's boat caught a gust of wind and surged past the tree. Apollos's boat reached the tree next.

"Hooray, Apollos!" Demetrius declared.

"I'll beat you next time," Tychicus told Apollos as he turned his back on Eli.

"But my boat was first," Eli protested, knowing it would do no good.

The other boys acted as if they hadn't heard Eli. Laughing, they headed back into the center of the city.

Apollos didn't really like ignoring Eli like that. They had grown up together in church and in the marketplace where Apollos' father sold the pots his family made in the stall next to the one where Eli's family sold dates, figs and other fruit. But, Apollos knew that some of the older boys in church, like Demetrius, avoided Eli because he was a Jewish Christian.

Apollos knew that Eli's family had been Christians ever since his grandfather had converted upon hearing the Apostle Paul preach, but the family still kept their Jewish customs. When the other boys weren't around he would still talk to Eli sometimes, but too often they would argue. It was always the same.

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"If you were *really* a Christian, you wouldn't worry about eating pork or any of that other old stuff," Apollos said.

"Maybe *you* don't have to worry about it," Eli would protest, "but *I* do. I'm still Jewish."

Apollos felt that Eli thought the Gentile Christians were somehow a notch below the Jewish Christians and he resented it.

The next week Apollos sat waiting for his father to come in and the service to start. His father came up and whispered for Apollos to join him at the back of the hall his church met in.

"I want you and Eli here to go check on Old John," his father said. "No one has seen him yet today and the elders want to make sure that he's all right. He lives in Cephas' old house, down the hill from the theater." Eli stood awkwardly off to the side staring at the cracks in the stone floor.

Without a word to Eli, Apollos walked off in search of the old man. Apollos was tall for his twelve years and set a quick pace. Eli had to run to catch up.

"Wait up," he called out.

"Hurry up," Apollos replied, "We haven't

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got all day to find him.” The dove gray sky was turning darker. *We’ll probably have rain before evening*, Apollos thought.

“What do you think about Old John anyway?” Eli asked.

“He’s crazy, but I guess he’s harmless enough,” Apollos said.

“I guess so. He scares me a little though.”

The boys soon passed by the theater’s massive stone columns and turned down the street to Cephas’ old house.

“What’ll we do if he’s not there?” Eli asked.

“Just go back to church. But he’ll be there. He’s been in church every time the doors have opened since he moved here when we were both eight,” Apollos said.

“You don’t think he’s dead do you?” Eli asked.

“No, he’s probably just sleeping.”

“I hope so.”

When they got to the small brick house, Apollos didn’t bother knocking. He pushed the door open and walked right in.

“Anyone home,” he said as he came into the dark house. The single room house with

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its hard-packed dirt floor looked much like Apollos's own home, only smaller. The oil lamp wasn't lit and it took Apollos a moment to realize John wasn't in the room. Through the open back door he saw Old John sitting under an olive tree in the walled back yard stooped over a makeshift table, writing.

"I don't think he heard you," Eli said.

John stacked the parchment he was working on top of the pile on the desk, set down his writing brush, and looked up at the boys.

"Come on back here, boys. I won't bite," John said.

"When you weren't in church today, the elders were worried and sent us to see after you," Apollos said.

"I guess an old man has to send word to let people know he's still with the living," John said with a smile forming on his aged face. "I've got so much to write and I feel that my time is short. I've got to get it all down while I'm able."

"What are you writing?" Eli asked.

"Nothing that needs to concern you boys

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today. But, I've got something I want to talk to you about."

He sat back and looked hard at the boys. Apollos returned the gaze and looked beyond the white mane that was John's most noticeable feature. An impossible maze of wrinkles were etched into his skin. His strong nose had a distinct bend to it that made Apollos think it had been broken once. His long boney fingers were stained black from the sooty ink he was using to write on the parchment. After a while, Apollos couldn't keep returning the old man's stare and began to study the olive tree.

"Tell me what happened with the boats last week," John asked.

"What do you mean?" Apollos asked.

"The race, of course. Why didn't this boy win the race?" John asked pointing at Eli.

Apollos stared in disbelief. He hadn't even noticed Old John last week and the crazy man was worried about who had won the race.

"The Gentile boys ignore me when our parents aren't around," Eli said.

"I know that. I want to hear why," John said.

"We're all supposed to be Christians, but

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Eli's family can't let go of their old Jewish traditions," Apollos said. "If they were really Christians, they wouldn't worry about that junk. They need to be good Christians like the rest of us."

"Oh really?" John said.

"After all, Jesus said, 'What goes into a man's mouth does not make him unclean, but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him unclean.'"

"And what does that mean?" John asked.

"It means that we don't have to worry about the old laws like not eating pork," Apollos said.

Old John gently chuckled. "What do you make of all this, Eli?" he asked. A smile spread through the wrinkles and Apollos saw him as just a kind old man. For the first time he wasn't afraid of Old John.

"Jesus said that he didn't come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfill them. So if you don't keep the Law, you can't really be a Christian anyway," Eli said.

Apollos interrupted, "Yeah, but Jesus said that the Jews would ignore the word of God for the sake of tradition. He couldn't have

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wanted Christians to keep all that tradition.”

“You boys are smart, but you think too much. Jesus said and did many things, but all of it only meant one thing—love one another. If you love one another completely, nothing else is required. If you don’t try to love your fellow man with all your heart, nothing else matters. In the end I see that all Jesus said and did were really one thing—love.”

John sat silently for a long while. Apollos was too caught off guard to speak.

“If you boys would worry less about the things that separate you and worry more about love it wouldn’t matter whose boat won the race. Now leave me to my work. Tell the elders I’m well and thank them for their concern,” John said.

He picked up an empty page, dipped his brush in ink and continued his writing as if he hadn’t been interrupted. John was soon lost in concentration and the words began flowing onto the page. He did not even looking up as Apollos and Eli backed into the house.

They topped the hill and Apollos sat on the steps of the theater to catch his breath and tighten the straps on his sandals.

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“He really is crazy,” Apollos said.

“Why do you say that?” Eli asked. “It sounded good to me.”

“That’s the problem. It sounded too good and too easy. It’s a lot more complicated than that. Old John just doesn’t have to live in the real world anymore. If he ever did. How can you believe someone who thinks he was an Apostle?”

“That’s only a rumor, isn’t it? Nobody is that crazy.”

“I don’t know, I’ve heard the elders talking and they’ve all heard the story too,” Apollos said. “The stories were around before he came to run the Asian churches; I think all that religious importance sent the old guy over the edge.”

“I guess he really is crazy,” Eli said.

When they got back to the church, the service was already over. After making their report to the elders, Apollos headed down to the river to find the other boys, but Eli headed for home. Apollos watched him walk off and thought about asking him to come down to the river. Eli wasn’t really all that bad, but he

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didn't want to have the other guys see him bring Eli along.

A month passed without Apollos seeing Old John. When he asked his father about John, he was told that John had been working on a book when he took ill. He couldn't get out of bed and could hardly speak. Now, the book was finished and Old John wasn't expected to live much longer.

"The elders wanted to have someone stay with him—a vigil—but John insisted on being alone," Apollos's father said.

On Sunday, they prayed for John in church. After the service, Apollos's father took him aside.

"I don't want you going off to play with the other boys today. I think you should go with Eli to look in on John to see how he is getting along," his father said. "He asks about you boys now and again and I think you should go visit."

With a clear blue sky overhead and a light breeze to make the heat of the day bearable, finding a better day to play would be difficult, but Apollos didn't mind. He found Eli and the two headed off to see Old John. This time

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Apollos knocked when they reached the door. When no reply came, he knocked louder.

“It’s Apollos and Eli,” Eli said and pushed the door open.

Harsh light poured through the door and the room’s spare furnishings; a bed, table and stool threw shadows against the wall. John slept peacefully in his cot. Too peacefully Apollos realized, and bent his head low to listen for breath.

“Is he dead?” Eli asked.

Apollos nodded, filled with a surprisingly deep sense of loss. Their short encounter the month before left Apollos with more respect for Old John than Apollos had appreciated before he found John dead.

Eli lit the oil lamp and shut the door. With the bright light gone, Apollos studied John’s face in the lamp light. A smile filled John’s furrowed face like the one a month before when John had laughed at him and Eli. Apollos was confident that Old John was already in heaven.

“This must be what he’s been writing,” Eli said.

Apollos picked up a sheet of sheepskin

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from the stack and looked at the manuscript. The words were written in an amazingly steady hand. He could tell at a glance that it was from the book he had seen Old John writing under the olive tree. He read aloud as Eli held the candle close.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God”

He read on and time became unimportant as the book unfolded. The light straining through the cracks in the door etched its way across the floor. The story told about Jesus’ life. Some of the stories Apollos had heard told in church, but many were new. Throughout it all was love.

“. . . Jesus did many other things as well. If every one were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.”

The manuscript ended, Apollos and Eli sat in silence.

“We better let the elders know what we’ve found,” Eli finally said.

“Go and I’ll wait with him,” Apollos said. Sitting in the dark by the old Apostle,

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Apollos wondered about the man's amazing life. Old John had followed John the Baptist and became one of Jesus' best friends. All that occurred long before his time in exile on the rocky island of Patmos and coming to Ephesus.

Apollos could hear Old John talking to him and Eli a month earlier and distilling the gospel to one word. It took one of the twelve to make it plain to Apollos that Christianity wasn't complicated at all; it all came down to love.

Apollos was busy during the week and didn't get to see Eli at all until church the following week. After the service, Apollos went down to the river with the other boys and built a boat of sticks. Eli left the meeting hall with his father and turned toward home without a glance toward the river. Apollos ran to catch him.

"Wait up, Eli," he said.

Eli stopped and slowly turned around. Apollos handed Eli his boat. He put his arm around his friend and they walked down to the water together.

About the Author

THE REV. FRANK LOGUE is the Vicar of King of Peace Episcopal Church in Kingsland, Georgia. Frank founded the new congregation with his wife, Victoria, and their daughter, Griffin.



Born in Montgomery, Alabama, where he lived for six years, Frank grew up in Marietta, Georgia. A 1984 graduate of Georgia Southern University, Frank worked first as a newspaper photographer then as a magazine art director. In 1992 Frank and Victoria went full-time as freelancers, writing books and magazine articles. Their seven books include *Georgia Outdoors* and *The Appalachian Trail Backpacker*.

Frank was ordained in 2000, the same year King of Peace was founded. He writes a

religion column for the *Tribune & Georgian*.

Victoria, Griffin and Frank continue to enjoy travel as well as photography and the outdoors.