

PRISM

Incarnation & the Humanities

One of Us

BY DAVID O. SEAL

The whole history of these books [the Gospels] is so defective and doubtful that it seems vain to attempt minute enquiry into it: and such tricks have been played with their text, and with the texts of other books relating to them, that we have a right, from that cause, to entertain much doubt what parts of them are genuine. In the New Testament there is internal evidence that parts of it have proceeded from an extraordinary man; and that other parts are of the fabric of very inferior minds. It is as easy to separate those parts, as to pick out diamonds from dunghills. — Thomas Jefferson

*What if God was one of us
Just a slob like one of us
Just a stranger on the bus
Trying to find his way home. — Joan Osborne*

I didn't know what she was saying when she moved her lips in a Baptist church or a Catholic cathedral, or, less often, in a synagogue, but it was obvious that God could be found anywhere....

Lillian Hellman

Don't look now, but the nineties are more than half over. Another couple of vacations, one more set of tires, and we roll into a new thousand years. It's tech week for the millennium, folks, and we still don't know our lines—the ones about the man whose disputed birth gives our calendar leverage. The late nineties may not be the apocalyptic porch of eternity that some people wish. But it is a stage of sorts, and even now, with the theater all but empty, we can see a mute, ghostly presence. He is silent, like Hamlet's ghost, or the victim of the Grand Inquisitor's imperious lecture in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*. He stands still. He looks at us with piercing eyes. But his hands betray him. They jerk, almost spasmodically, but they are really suppressed gestures of healing. We're going to have to work this out on our own. The Age of the Fish is over; the Age of the Water Carrier is about to begin. We're going to have to figure out who Jesus, or Joshua or Yeshu as he was also called, really is.

I don't know about you, but I've got my script. Call it a working draft. It and a copy of my health insurance policy are filed under Peace of Mind; but then, my sense of irony has always been out of control.

Jefferson had his, too. It should not surprise us that a genius like Jefferson was a hundred years ahead of German biblical scholarship; or that the nation he would help to found would be two hundred years behind his realizations, and counting.

What follows comes from the house and lineage of Jefferson. Call it, if you must, a fantasy filtered through several layers of scholarship. Biblical scholars have been busier than software writers these last few years. But their codes are at least as arcane, and no one seems to know what they've been up to. Least of all the Church. And getting the lapsed or unchurched public

"Put two cups of coffee in front of you. This will be our sacrament of sorts."



continued ▶

A Word From the Editorial Board

"There is no historical task which so reveals a person's true self as the writing of a Life of Jesus." So said Albert Schweitzer at the beginning of this fading century.¹ Many phases of theology and christology have come and gone in between. Mainline churches struggle with their moldering theological legacies, while fundamentalist churches offer authoritative panaceas. Some worry over the emergence of new authorizations, others about preserving freedom; many struggle with deep-seated ennui.

Nevertheless the interest and intrigue surrounding Jesus of Nazareth continues unabated, as David Seal reminds us in "One of Us." In fact, "What if God was one of us," the poignant line from a popular song by Joan Osborne, weaves a scarlet thread through this issue's offerings. The theme, of course, touches upon one of the deepest implications of the Christian message—about God's incarnation, Emmanuel, God-with-us. The enclosed explorations of this theme indicate that imagination underwrites the vitality of contemporary faith, even as potent images of God's presence abide.

David Seal leads with a fascinating glimpse of recent developments in historical Jesus research and modern gospel criticism. Richard Jones' witty rejoinder to the ravages of biblical criticism evokes Renaissance emblems for the occasion. Modernism continues to bring historical and biblical criticism, but we all have entered some variety of postmodern epoch. Dennis Sepper, a PLU campus pastor, explores the incarnation of ministry among today's "postmodern" undergraduates.

Douglas Oakman writes about the "withness" of God in the biblical witness appearing most surprisingly and creatively on the margins of society. God-on-the-margins "with us" is explored within the El Salvadoran context by Kathy Ogle. Elizabeth Brusco ponders the foci of new religious energies in Latin American, and other, pilgrimages.

The poetry of Jason Thompson, a recent graduate of Pacific Lutheran University, lays bare the bodily character of incarnation. Recalling the poetic fires of William Butler Yeats and Nikos Kazantzakis, Thompson incarnates God radically in relation to human love and bodily concern. Daniel Erlander, former campus pastor at PLU, delights us once again with a graphical exposé of humanity's unease and continuing rebellion against the implications of the incarnation.

The whole provides a lively mix. We must confess to you, dear readers, that we have been delighted and challenged by some of the views expressed in the following pages. There is enough to suggest the "real presence" of Jesus, whether in ecclesial memory or the intellectual exchanges of a church-related university. The promising words of Jesus remain, "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20 NRSV). The haunting words of Schweitzer too, "He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: 'Follow thou me!' and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is."² ∞

1 *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (With a new Introduction by James M. Robinson; Macmillan, [1906] 1968) 4, edited slightly for the sake of inclusivity.

2 *Ibid.* 403, slightly edited.

to take religion scholarship seriously seems to have become a lost art.

That leaves Jesus in a tight spot. Half the culture inflates him beyond recognition; the other half, embarrassed by all the excess, politely ignores him. The poor guy probably thought that crucifixion was the last of his suffering—and he's in heaven, right?

What if God were one of us? What if he were in fact—or should I say, in reconstructed, deconstructed historical/literary fact—a stranger on the bus of our imagination? Can we help him find his way home into our ordinary lives, while they still are ordinary and while we aren't having to read the end of them apocalyptically, through the lenses of panic?

One more thing: Put two cups of coffee in front of you. This will be our sacrament of sorts. Take one from the ten-gallon percolator in any church basement; take the other from some friend with a French press and whole beans, and who is generous in her pursuit of wakefulness.

Enough of the parables; on with the show.

II.

Jesus said to them, "You've missed the point again, haven't you...you're constantly missing the point."

—Mark 12: 24,27

The man Jesus can be confirmed from independent historical record. Tacitus, the Roman historian, writing around 115 C.E. about Nero's persecution of "a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians," mentioned Jesus indirectly, by presumed name. "Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilatus, and the pernicious superstition was checked for the moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue."

The Jewish historian Josephus mentioned both Jesus and John the Baptist. But Josephus, a Jewish general captured by the Romans in the war, read Jewish messianic claims in favor of Roman imperial power, most historians conclude.

Still, these secular sources ground a couple of biblical principals in history. "That Jesus was baptized by John was as historically certain as anything about either of them ever can be," says the religion historian John Dominic Crossan. And that's precisely where the first of the canonical gospels begins: Mark 1:9 says, "During that same period Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John." No infancy pageantry here, no Herodian massacres, no flight to Egypt. Mark gets down to Jesus' business. This first canonical episode, like a first dream in analysis, has a plangent ambivalence that will be insistently felt down through later commentaries. Writer Michael Ventura summarizes it nicely:

"Scholars believed in Yeshu's encounter with John the Baptist because the church was so embarrassed by the event. If Yeshu was perfect, why did he need to be baptized by John? The church invented all sorts of explanations, but Mark doesn't. His account rings true: that Yeshu was attracted to John's teachings, baptized by John and in the process had a stunning revelatory experience... This vision changed him from the peasant he had been to the teacher and healer he would be."

Poet Stephen Mitchell, who himself has provided a new translation of the gospels, finds this first historically authenticated episode at the heart of what Jesus was. Mitchell theorizes that Jesus' mission was born in the shame of illegitimacy—Mark calls him the "son of Mary," which is tantamount to "bastard"—which itself would have been compounded in a small town like Nazareth. "Few of us, though, can feel the intensity of what Jesus meant when he said *ABBA* [father]." Mitchell imagines "a sincere young man who, on some unconscious level, was still struggling with the pain of his childhood" when he encountered the "ferocious intensity" of John. "...something broke open, not in the heavens but in his own heart. He felt an ecstatic release, a cleansing of those painfully hidden childhood emotions of humiliation and shame, a sense of being taken up, once and for all, into the embrace of God." Mitchell goes on to argue that this episode feels like one of Jesus' own parables, the Prodigal Son, which Mitchell, a Jew, calls "beyond praise... its economy and pathos are unsurpassed in the literature of the world."

After the baptism, Mark puts Jesus in the wilderness for forty days of temptation—Ventura notes that drastic spiritual transformation can be terrifying, and says, "Yeshu went crazy"—and then he emerged preaching what is variously translated as "the kingdom of God" or "God's imperial rule." The wilderness may be Mark's invention, and not historically verifiable, but it certainly fits a general shamanic pattern of a prolonged time in the world of spirits, followed by a return to reality and a subsequent healing vocation. Henri Ellenburger calls this a period of "creative illness," noting that Freud and Jung also endured one. What we do know is that Jesus emerged as a healer. Mark then has Jesus healing and driving out unclean spirits.

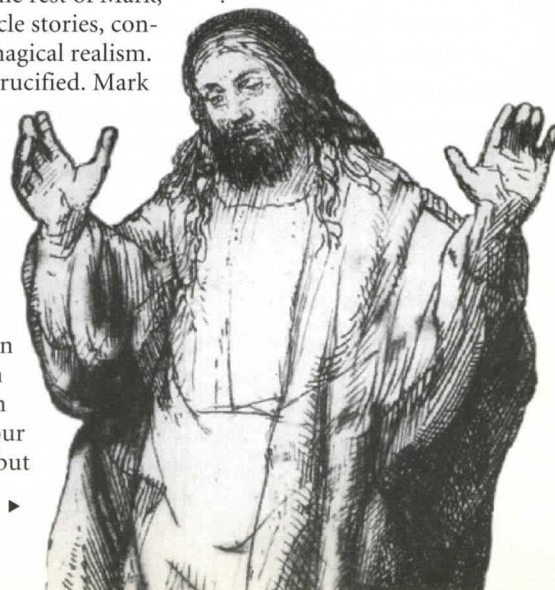
Karen Armstrong, in her *History of God*, puts her gloss on what "the kingdom of God," or what she calls "the exact nature of Jesus' mission," was:

"...faith healers were familiar religious figures in Galilee: like Jesus, they were mendicants, who preached, healed the sick and exorcised demons." For Armstrong, Jesus' ability to heal was but one of several "powers" that he exercised. Jesus never claimed that these powers were confined to him alone, but were available to others if they cultivated "an inner attitude of surrender and openness to God." Ventura has no problem acknowledging Jesus as a healer. "The witnessing of them is too consistent, from too many sources." Ventura is particularly persuaded by the fact that Jesus had problems healing in his home town. Mitchell, who sees Jesus as a sublime and poignant storyteller, is sufficiently impressed to include an appendix from "my friend Laura, who is a healer," about how Jesus' healings may have gone.

Crossan gives the most complicated defense of Jesus' ability to heal. He draws a distinction between illness and disease. "Disease" is a narrow, Western notion, taking reality to be biological; illness, on the other hand, includes a social and psychological, indeed mythic, dimension, and is much more "realistic." This distinction helps Crossan formulate "the central problem of what Jesus was doing in his healing miracles. Was he curing the disease through an intervention in the physical world, or was he healing the illness through an intervention in the social world?" For Crossan, Jesus healed the illness without curing the disease by refusing to accept the disease's ritual uncleanness and social ostracism. Crossan does say that Jesus may have been an "entranced healer," because he was accused of possession. He prefers to leave the question open. For him, "miracles are not changes in the physical world so much as changes in the social world." Crossan reminds us that such healing measures were subversive; Jesus cut across the bow of society's usual boundary-keepers.

Healing, then, is probably an historically accurate picture of what Jesus did, but what it consisted of is open to imagination. The first half of Mark, the earliest canonical gospel, is a human story; he heals and teaches. The second half is divine. By 8:27, "Who do you say I am?" and Peter answers variously, the Christ or the anointed one, we are well into "the creation of the storyteller in the early Christian movement," according to the Jesus Seminar commentary, and not Jesus himself. The rest of Mark, which is distinguished by its miracle stories, continues on in this vein of Semitic magical realism.

We also know that Jesus was crucified. Mark has the body given to "Joseph of Arimathea," a "respected member" of the council, who buries it in his family tomb. The next day, two women, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James, find no body, but instead, an angel, who says, "He was raised, he is not here." Crossan maintains that this is an invention of Mark. Crossan, who has written the definitive historical Jesus for our time, may shatter some illusions; but



continued ▶

particular point, he does not mince words. "What actually and historically happened to the body of Jesus can best be judged from watching how later Christian accounts slowly but steadily increased the reverential dignity of their burial accounts." Crossan examines the historical record for burial procedures at that time. Jesus, a "peasant revolutionary" in the eyes of the Romans, would either have been left on the cross or buried in a shallow grave. "In either case," Crossan says, "the dogs were waiting."

So there was an historical Jesus. And Mark caught at least some of his brilliance. Jesus was a healer/teacher who, rightly or wrongly, was perceived as a rebellious threat during troublesome times, and executed. Since Mark was a major source text for Matthew and Luke, and since Mark was, if not the earliest gospel, the earliest narrative gospel, it has prominence in the quest for the historical Jesus. Through it, we glimpse the man.

But what if this is a dead end? What if there is less to the historical Jesus than meets the eye? We know, after all, very little about the man. But scholars increasingly know how the man is portrayed. They can delineate the Pauline Jesus, the Johannine Jesus, the Markan and Lukan and Matthean Jesus, and even the Q Jesus—enigmatic Q, the text without a name, without a personified face. This gets to the heart of things. It's the dirty little secret of the Bible. Q gives us Jesus unadorned. It helps us see how the canonical gospels dress him up.

This should not surprise us. We're dealing, after all, with talented writers. Poets, even. Remember, Plato threw poets out of the Republic. They were dangerous. Writers embellish. Writers imagine. From Mark to Milton, from Luke to Blake, from Paul to the man who fell off the horse of his sanity, Nietzsche, Jesus has become a set of overlapping fictions, including the ones we author idly in our own imagination—our own, like Osborne's, "what ifs."

III.

We kept the dead alive with stories. —Tim O'Brien

Who is this Q? Why haven't we heard of him before? And how can we trust him if he wasn't canonized to begin with?

Actually, he is canonized, in a way. He's buried in Matthew and Luke. Scholars have known for over a hundred years that Mark was a source for Matthew and Luke; but a second source was also hypothesized, since there is material not contained in Mark that both the other gospels share. Burton Mack calls Q "the lost gospel," in his book of that name. It has never existed in our day as an extant text, as have the synoptics and John, or the gnostic Thomas. But like the planet Neptune, which was predicted before it was discovered, Q, which stands for the German *Quelle*, or source, began in theory before it was confirmed in fact. It had to be constructed as a unified text from two different sources. Furthermore, the text didn't resemble any other text. It was not a life of Jesus, as the other gospels seemed to be. Instead, it was a collection of sayings. Mack says that scholars were so preoccupied with the question of

identified as Q languished.

All that changed in 1919. A German biblical scholar named Schmidt broke Mark apart and showed how the transitions were Mark's doing. Mack says that that ended the "unexamined assumption" that the narrative gospels were historical record. Mark, to put it bluntly, was not just writing history, but also fiction. The material that was Q had been thought to be one of a congeries of matter—parables, miracle stories, pronouncement stories, small collections of sayings—that were ensconced within the constructed narrative frameworks. But the discovery of Thomas as an extant text in 1945 drew more attention to Q: Here was another "sayings gospel" that had no narrative framework. Not only that, but thirty-five percent of Q showed up in Thomas. It was time to treat Q as a text in its own right. That's been the work of the last twenty years.

But the most important fact about Q may be its date of origin: It is contemporaneous with the earliest writings about Jesus, the epistles of Paul, which means that it probably circulated as a document as early as 50 C.E. It predates Mark by more than twenty years. By reading Q carefully, Mack says, it is possible to catch glimpses of the earliest followers of Jesus. It is complete enough to give us a record of the history of the time between Jesus and the post-Jewish-Roman war period that saw the emergence of the familiar gospels. And hold on to your socks: This is not the usual picture of Jesus. There's no mention of the Messiah or Jesus as the Christ. His teachings were not considered to be an indictment of Judaism. His death was not regarded as a divine event. The Q people did not, as Mack says, "imagine" the resurrection. And they did not gather together to worship in his name.

Instead, they thought of him as a teacher. "The people of Q were Jesus people," Mack says, "not Christians."

Scholars pressed on; the explosive consequences could wait. Q itself was problematic in other ways: It seemed to have a built-in contradiction. One part of it was full of sharp, poignant sayings, the sort familiar to all of us from the Sermon on the Mount. But another had a tone of apocalyptic judgment. Albert Schweitzer's pursuit of the historical Jesus had led him to conceive of an apocalyptic prophet; Schweitzer effectively buried the nineteenth-century paradigm of Jesus, that of a liberal reformer. Would Q replicate the tensions of the theological community?

Then, an American scholar named John Kloppenborg elaborated the idea that Q took shape in stages. The earliest layer was wisdom sayings. Some time later—historians now guess that social and political tensions had ratcheted way up—a more strident tone filled with apocalyptic threats began to emerge. This later Q, called Q2 by scholars, was the product, Kloppenborg and Mack think, of failed expectations. The earlier layer, Q1, sees Jesus as a sage; Q2 saw him as a prophet. The noncanonical gospel of Thomas, written about the same time—perhaps by a group that broke away from the Q people, resembles Q1's thoroughly non-apocalyptic tenor.

*"Who is this Q?
Why haven't we
heard of him
before? And how
can we trust him
if he wasn't
canonized to
begin with?"*

So Jefferson was aptly named. But the rest of us might want to hold on to our socks again: The Jesus quoted at us is probably a later fiction; the Jesus quoted for us is probably the real thing.

The issue is obvious: If the resurrection, or the virgin birth, or the disciples, or the triumphantly martyrological march into Jerusalem are so crucial to the core beliefs of Christianity, why don't the Q people, the first to record Jesus' message, even mention them? Mack draws his conclusions: "The first followers of Jesus could not have imagined, nor did they need, such a mythology to sustain them in their efforts to live according to his teachings." In fact, the Q people weren't much interested in the person of Jesus; they were interested in his teachings. This is as close to Ground Zero as we have so far been, and the "historical Jesus" is not even an issue. Crossan agrees. "My proposal is that Jesus' first followers knew almost nothing whatsoever about the details of his crucifixion, death or burial. What we have now in those detailed passion accounts is not history remembered but prophecy historicized."

Mack says further that religion scholars for years have talked about how much the teacher Jesus, not Jesus the Christ, resembles those itinerant Greek gadflies known as Cynics. Crossan agrees, calling him a "Jewish peasant Cynic." Sarcastic, witty, counter-cultural, Cynics criticized established values, and never hung around one place long enough to found schools or to co-habit with abstract intellectual systems. They were not anti-Jewish, and they were not interested in social revolution. Leave Rome and Jerusalem alone; change your own heart instead.

The Q people were Galileans, from Jesus' own region. Up north in Syria and what is now Turkey, among the Gentiles, Paul was creating something entirely different. Paul was inventing the Christ. Paul was inventing the church as we know it today. We should probably say we live in a Pauline culture; it would make the source clearer. Paul focused on Jesus' death as the saving event. "Christ" was the person crucified and raised from the dead. That Christ "died for us" is called the *kerygma*, or proclamation. Paul took this spiritual cult and formed it on the model of a Greek mystery religion, with entrance baptisms, ritualized meals, and the notion of the spiritual presence of the lord. It took Asia Minor, Greece, and eventually the whole Roman world, by storm.

It needs to be given its due. It was an enormously inventive moment in history. Paul helped people break free from cultural traditions; he gave them the means or the power to have personal experiences which transcended social constraints. He gave them Greek myth. Christians swallowed it whole, literalizing it with a vengeance, and transformed their lives. As Mack says, "The Christ myth created a much more fantastic imaginary universe than anything encountered in the Jesus traditions." When Joseph Campbell, like Henry Adams before him, pointed to the cathedral at Chartres as an instance of the power of myth, he was understating the point.

Which brings us back to Mark. The world might have been divided, and stayed divided, along the lines of Jesus and Christ, of Q and Paul, if it weren't for Mark. It should be Jesus M. Christ, not Jesus H. Christ, in honor of Mark. Mark should get a retroactive Nobel Prize, for literature if not peace.

He should also get a Nuremberg sentence, too, but genius invites both demons and angels to its copious feasts.

When Mark began writing, the Romans had just finished destroying the Jewish temple state. The Jewish community was in an uproar. Splinter groups were forming right and left. Mark, a Jew, thought that the destruction of the temple was exactly what the Jews deserved. The Markan community had some sympathies with the Jesus people of Q1. But that sympathy was not shared among most Jewish leaders. Meanwhile, the Christ cult up north was picking up momentum. It was too Greek for the Jewish Markans, too much a cult, too mythical and not historical enough. So Mark employed what scholars call a "wisdom mythology" to mediate between the Jesus people and the Christ cult.

Mark's particular wisdom tale was the trial and vindication of Jesus. He focused on the historical circumstances surrounding Jesus' death. The Jesus people had had no need of it, while the Christ cult had not used it. Mark used "messiah" politically, not divinely. He told the story of Jesus' crucifixion as if it were a plot on the part of Jewish leaders—the ones who didn't listen to Mark's own Jewish Jesus people—to get rid of Jesus, because he had challenged their religion, law, and authority.

Mark wrote a narrative of Jesus' life. He was the first to do so. He created a compelling Jesus. His Jesus healed, yes, and taught; but he also walked on water and fed the five thousand and confronted the temple authorities of Jerusalem. Looking back on it today, we might even say that Mark gave the Christian Church its charter. He certainly gave it its patina of history. Paul must have been a compelling figure. But he was out there with the gnostics in some ways, seeing his visions, proclaiming a theology. Mark grounded him in what seemed to be real life, the life of Jesus. It is not a Jesus that would be familiar to Jesus. But it is great art, wearing the clothes of history.

The other gospels tell stories that are almost as compelling. John was an even more imaginative variation on the Markan theme: Jesus took on celestial significance as the incarnation of Light in battle with Darkness. Matthew tried to bring back the Q1 Jesus as patient teacher whom Mark, with his more dramatic imagination, had upstaged. Matthew also softened Mark's anti-Jewish polemic, but not, obviously, enough. And Luke, "a daring genius for his time," in Mack's words, imagined the church under a single authority in Rome. Like Mark, he sensed the danger of the difference between a Jewish Christianity with its roots in the Jesus movement and a Gentile Christianity with its roots in the Christ cult. His gospel and his Acts of the Apostles set up two figures, Peter and Paul, as emblems of both forces. His apostolic mythology was particularly helpful to the nascent Catholic Church.

"Strong texts attract strong readers," Mack says, "and strong readings intentionally subvert the original meaning of a text in the interest of creating a new vision...." So Mark, Matthew and Luke each misread Q, a source gospel, in his own way. Each "imagined" a different Jesus. Along the way, Q was hidden—out in the open. It was eclipsed by our love for bizarre stories.

References

Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography by John Dominic Crossan. New York: HarperCollins, 1994. Start here. The historical Jesus. Trenchant, bold, a good read.

The Historical Jesus by John Dominic Crossan. New York: HarperCollins, 1991. The longer and more scholarly version of the above.

A History of God by Karen Armstrong. New York: Knopf, 1993. Readable if you have a general sense of the history of philosophy. A particularly good defense of mysticism.

The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins by Burton Mack. New York: HarperCollins, 1993. The foundation is scholarly, but the edifice is a sharply argued piece of persuasion. It is religion scholarship that is boldly out of the closet.

The Gnostic Gospels by Elaine Pagels. New York: Random House, 1980. This book won a National Book Award and a National Book Critics Circle Award. A decisive look at the social and political processes behind the selection of the canonized gospels.

Pagels' other books are almost as compelling. *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* examines sexuality in the Judeo-Christian tradition. *The Origin of Satan* looks at how "the other" is demonized, particularly "the other within," which is to say the ally who is not quite pure enough.

Other Peoples' Myths by Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty. New York: Macmillan, 1988. A historian of religion specializing in India, Doniger is persuasive on the need for stories to take up where philosophy leaves off.

"Jesus is Yeshu" by Michael Ventura. *LA Weekly*, April 17-23, 1992.

The Bibles

The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus by Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar. New York: Macmillan, 1993. Includes the Gospel of Thomas. The Jesus Seminar is a consortium of scholars who have seized the high ground, and put the others on the defensive. This is the famous "color-coded" edition, with the words of Jesus colored according to the probability of him having actually said them.

The Complete Gospels ed. by Robert J. Miller. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992. All twenty of the known gospels from the early Christian era.

The Gospel According to Jesus by Stephen Mitchell. New York: HarperCollins, 1991. One reviewer calls it "spiritual entertainment." Highly praised by writers and a few theologians, the introduction alone is worth the price.

an Emblem: Remembering Quarles

Board in A211b, 17 February 1994

R. P. JONES

Mark wrote the gospel
according to Moffatt
and made for himself
a tidy profit

Monetary
commentary

yes, Virginia,
ays to prey
he efficacy of
Word

Santa Claus
omething else again
again I will tell you
ospel and a worthy
the worthies
nd worthy
elief

Hindsight is golden
Foresight adamant

nd I have seen...
were you there too
the jeweler peened
to the windy thinness
a tissue of lies
d held his kite of carets
the high nether end
a golden thread
hered by an alchemist
so it is said
the right of Jerusalem's gate

esight Religious
always justified Right?
d ever since Luther
rned to read
gospels according to Martin
er Johann Gutenberg
hand to tray
give us moveable type
word could be broken
ore the ink dried out

what is always right
eft
ustify the word
d the immutable future
whatever
amantine creed
- and pre- scription demands
dhere to

Sticky business this
thing we call belief
at present
believing in
the future and the past
and past present future
structure of experience

if the present is not perfect
was the past
or could the future be

progressive
if the past and present aren't

and if the present is perfect and
progressive
could the past have been
or would the future become like
the present

it's enough to make a mind go
tense

Now I lie me down to sleep
and pray no god or grammar keep
me from the promises that leap
like foul prevarications deep
from my forked tongue and seem seep
like low tide at its lowest neap
into your ears to make you weep

Foresight is like that
Hindsight too

And the right foresight
is so inextricably
tangled and entwined
with an uncontradictable
absolute obsolete
sense of a perfect past
progressives
sometimes wonder
some times maybe
weren't that way
at all

Maybe John got his feet wet
walking on water

John?
Before
Jesus?
Or John pre-peating
the gospel?

"I want his head on a platter"
Herod's brother Philip's wife Herodias
his lover's dancing barefoot daughter said
and it was so

John B
for Jesus'
sake
lost his head
all for the sake of
some light footed
platter puss
who ducked out of the picture
shortly thereafter

Even a good man
can lose his head
over a woman

What gets left behind?
Two
the year two
AD after
death and God is gone

the legions
still there
washing their hands
of the whole affair
and the cave empty
the adamantine rock
rolled to its side
a little to the left
lying in the dust

Mary the mother
and Mary the other
gone their separate ways
generous Lazarus in a daze
and neither here nor there

Some few and small
bands of believers
adamant in their belief
and golden in their certainty
of having seen
Him
their gospel
looking foreword and back

This sort of thing
has a way of taking off
from the ashes of midnight
fires where old stories are told
harbinger or happenstance
a long kite on a thin thread

Believe it or not
the ripples of these rumors
of the gospels of belief
lap all the shores
we walk on
synoptically

But what of John
Thomas

and the gospel of Peter
and all the chatter
innuendo and lies
performing Lady Jane of Thighs?

What have we
had we
did we
here?
Him to her
from him
to her
of him
to her
to her from him
in her from him
of her by him
and in and of them both
the gospel of John
Thomas

and Lady Jane
The gospel according to Peter

Q-1, Q-2
derive what gospel pleases you
to read whatever turns you on
Matthew Mark and Luke or John
Thomas and Peter

It is all a matter of interest
the principal hardly counts

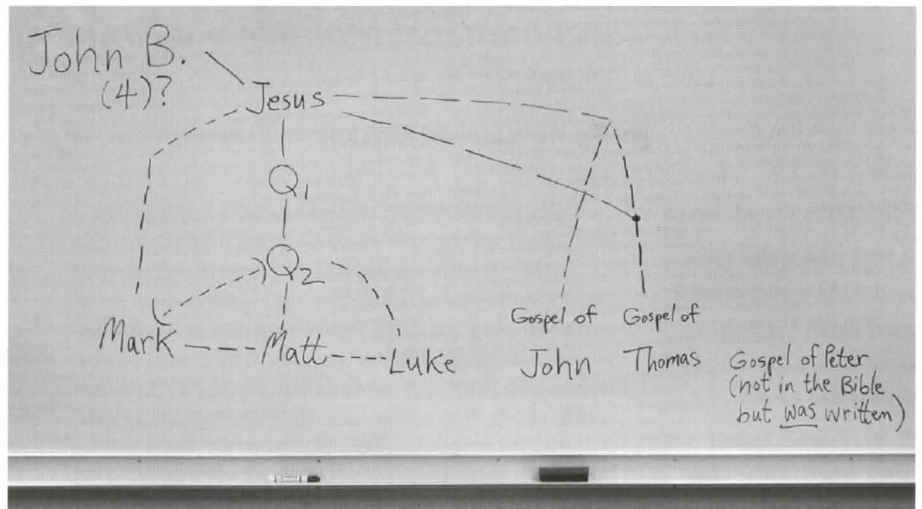
What's left? Right?

The left
and whatever small diversities
turn them on
ecumenically

My god's cousin to your god
Your god's cousin to mine
and if we both must be mod
both of our godlets are fine

We need
in this age
all the help we can get

if it's aids you're looking for
call 'em how you see 'em
call it what you will
the happy plague
the joyous jaundice
the pricey liberation
ten years or life
whichever comes first
call 1-800-728-3465
or at the cellular level



where all the fixed stars roam
punch out h-e-l-p
and pound on your phone
if you see someone
driving the fast lane
or pursuing the ever-loving possibility
of reading something backwards

An Irish poet said it
so it must be true
"They know that Hamlet and Lear are gay;
Gaiety transfiguring all that dread."

Now that's foresight
justified by hindsight
insight and godsight
anything but clear sight

Decon is rat bait
Recon is dangerous
structure what you will

And there's the rub
—the will—
adamant as truth
golden as hope
and harder than the diamond
of belief

At the last trumpet
thunder and lightening will enter
from opposite sides
as the fanfare sounds in the wings
and the king of glory descends
deus ex machina
on golden ropes and pulleys
over the hell-mouth
smoking
from the stage below

And some lucky duck
gets to tell us

that's all there is
to it
folks ∞

**Much Madness is divinest Sense —
to a discerning Eye —
Much Sense —
the starkest Madness —**

Emily Dickinson

The Word Made Flesh:

Incarnational Ministry to a Postmodern Generation

BY DENNIS G. SEPPER

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us... full of grace and truth. — John 1:14

[Galatians 4:4-5]

4. But when the time had fully come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the Law,

5. to redeem those who were under the Law.

Note carefully how Paul defines Christ here. Christ, he says, is the Son of God and of the woman. He was born under the Law on account of us sinners, to redeem us who were under the Law. In these words Paul has included both the Person and the work of Christ. The Person is made up of the divine and the human nature. He indicates this clearly when he says: 'God sent forth His Son, born of woman.' Therefore Christ is true God and true man. Paul describes His work in these words: 'Born under the Law, to redeem those who were under the Law.'

Martin Luther

The incarnation of God in Jesus and many of the traditional interpretations of its meaning are invaluable in ministering to a generation raised on postmodern thought. Often called "Generation X," young adults born after 1960 bring a unique world view to the table of ministry. The Gospel can respond to them, particularly the Good News of the incarnation. While there are many nuances to what is called postmodern thought and while there are many descriptions of Generation X, a few common characteristics arise in regard to the traditional Christian view of the incarnation.

It has often been noted that the current generation of young adults are suspicious of authority and reject tradition. This generation has experienced scandal in every presidential administration they know. They view institutions as being flawed and untrustworthy. Also, denominational loyalty is a thing of the past with this generation. Often, they are not willing to "hang in there" if their church leadership is ineffective or morally compromised. Traditions that do not speak to them in a real way are rejected.

What this generation of young adults seeks and desires is authenticity. They want leaders and institutions to be "real" and to take an interest in them. They desire pastors who will share their experiences of God in the world as opposed to those who share doctrine or tradition. Prayer for them must be from the heart, not something abstract. They do not look for moral perfection, but they do look for integrity.

As this generation seeks authenticity, the God who becomes flesh and dwells among us can be a strong Gospel word. One can come to know Jesus, and thus God, in a personal way. The Jesus of the Gospels (and not of our Sunday School cleansing) is one who shows forth authenticity. Jesus cares for the individuals he meets, he takes the time to learn their life story, he is tolerant of their differences, and he touches their lives in a deeply personal way. Jesus shares his experience of God, so that the people can come to know who God really is and what God really intends for His creation.

To be pastoral to this generation, one must commit oneself to entering their world. One must take the time to know them and to know their struggles. To use some rather old language for ministry, one must be "incarnational," embodying the presence of God in this time and place. Preaching has to be from the heart, praying has to be honest and sincere. Traditions can still be effective, but they must be explained, and they must touch this generation where they live.

As you might expect, personal relationships are important to Generation X. In their book, *A Generation Alone: Xers Making a Place in the World*, William Mahedy and Janet Bernardi make a case that what defines this generation of young adults is their experience of being "alone." Many come from broken families and find it difficult to trust their parents. They live in an age when an education or a job is not a "given." They are also the first generation to know that their standard of living will be lower than that of their parents' standard of living. This generation knows brokenness and pain. All of this combines to make them feel very alone in the world and unable to trust.

The traditional Christian belief that God in Jesus enters our brokenness and pain, not with "quick fix" answers but with the very presence of a loving God, can touch the emptiness felt by this generation. These young adults need to know that God will suffer with them, give room for their doubts and questions, and give them hope to face the uncertain future. The people of this generation desire deep personal religious experiences.

The implications for ministry are again incarnational. Personal relationships need to be developed. On the PLU campus, small groups abound and grow. Students desire discipleship groups where they can experience the loving support of community and wrestle with the bigger issues. The experience of care and community is very important to them.

Finally, for the members of Generation X, truth is not absolute. Truth is experiential. Something is "true" if it is true for the individual and his/her experience of the world. Some believe that this approach to truth has been precipitated by the pluralism of values and the conflicting claims for truth in our modern world. People of this generation seek the truth and are not afraid to hold paradoxical truths as long as those truths are grounded in experience.

In many ways, this generation can see themselves in the incarnate Jesus of the Gospels. Jesus questioned the assumed truths and values of his day. If those truths and values were an impediment to the people's relationship with God, Jesus rejected and attacked them. Jesus was guided by the overriding principle of the love of God and neighbor. When Jesus taught this principle he did so by the use of stories and parables so that his audience could experience the truth he was talking about. This personal experience of God's love and God's truth is a point of contact with today's generation.

The gospel ethic of love lived out in a life of service means a lot to today's young adults. As we minister among them, we must seek to help them experience the truth of the Gospel. Ministry or preaching that is rooted only in doctrine or reflects a shallow moralism will not fly with today's generation. This generation believes they can make a difference in the world, but they are more interested and concerned with doing so on a local, even one-to-one, basis.

Ministry to a postmodern generation is a challenge. It calls for some radical rethinking about

how we approach the Gospel, tradition, worship, and being the Church of Jesus Christ. It is a time-intense ministry, it is an incarnational ministry. As we move through the Church-year seasons, the traditional Christian beliefs concerning the incarnation of Jesus can help us approach ministry with Generation X. It will take some creativity and continued conversation, but as God has affirmed the people of the world in the incarnation of Jesus, so must we affirm this new generation of young adults as we seek to incarnate God's love among them. ☺

Reference

- William Mahedy & Janet Bernardi, *A Generation Alone: Xers Making a Place in the World* (InterVarsity Press, 1994).

Mary Wrings Out the Towel

BY JASON THOMPSON

Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' — Luke 1:34

I have kept still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant. — Isaiah 42:14

**A God so angry none utter His name;
I dared not even think of it. But I
have smelled His sweat, felt it drop like blame,
have seen Him fumble through his first time —
a howling jackal, an accuser's grin:
carrion wedged between yellow teeth; jaws
nipping — in darkness — my hair, lobes, chin;
thick paws pinning shoulders back with claws;
then gone.**

**I rip sheets, soak up what I can, rinse
the rest out.**

**To know it is passed, to try
and make clean, I scrub skin raw, burn incense,
pray. I hang the rags outside to dry,
then rest.**

**The night stays hot with one damp cloud
of rolling strips: a piecemeal shroud.**



IV.

Is this another parable, or just a subtle joke?

—Crash Test Dummies

So how will we read Jesus? What will we say to him on the stage of our imagination? What especially will we do with all these clouds of fiction and myth that surround him?

I tried this out. Here's my script:

"I want to tell you a story, Jesus. Please forgive me if it begins to break down into a belief.

"It starts, oddly enough, with a committed Christian. J.R.R. Tolkien is more familiar in his role as storyteller. But he also wrote a long essay, 'On Fairy Stories,' which defends fantasy and includes a coda on 'the greatest story ever told.' Tolkien loved fantasy. It consoled him, helping him escape from the trenches of the First World War. But most of all, it gave him a sense of the Creator, because literary creation imitates godly creation. God created our 'primary world.' But artists create a 'secondary world,' which, when done well, stimulates in us a kind of secondary belief. We don't just 'suspend our disbelief,' as Coleridge argued, but we are actively moved. Tolkien's word for this is 'enchantment.' Enchantment, or 'faerie,' is a timeless realm, filled with familiar things like wood and wine and strange things like elves or giants or green suns. It is not factual—this is crucial—but it is true. It is true partly because we wish it to be true with all our hearts. But it is also true because a great artist has taken the trouble to make our wish the most natural thing in the world.

"For Tolkien, the best stories are stories in which bad things threaten, but at the end comes a 'eucatastrophe,' a sudden joyous turn of events. Look at your story. You preached your truths. People flocked to you. You healed their wounds, surprised them with sharp stories. And then you

were crucified. Your disciples betrayed you. You yourself had moments of doubt. And then you rose from the dead. It is the greatest story ever told. 'The Gospels,' Tolkien said, 'contain a fairy-story...which embraces the essence of all fairy stories.'

"But for Tolkien, it is even more than that; it is a glimpse of a far-off truth, a glimpse of 'evangelium,' in which we see through this world into the texture

of the next. Enchantment is a fragment of heaven. That is a notion worth keeping.

"The kingdom of God is upon the earth and men do not see it,' you said. And I take you at your word. We can't see the kingdom of God because it is invisible. It is enchantment. It is not seen with our eyes, but with our imagination. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. But it also is the story of the mustard seed. The kingdom of God is present when we imagine it present. Maybe even when we imagine, period. After all, the after-life is not just what happens after death. It is memory, which means, of course, images. Events have their after-life. After they happen, we go over and over them in our imaginations.

"The hell with creeds. Beliefs are nothing but frozen imagination, images which have lost all of their life and flow. You spoke of 'living water.' Creeds are dead water. What's better are stories. Your story—as story, mind you. It's partly history, but not much. And that's okay. Myth is natural. We're not so naive as to believe that we can live in a demythologized world. Keep the myth—just don't take it literally. Enchantment, unlike creeds, has the good sense to know it is transitory.

"I was reading Karen Armstrong this summer. *A History of God*, she calls it. Great title. She defends the mystics of all three Levantine faiths, and has fun at the expense of philosophers and theologians and authoritarians. Here's what she concludes: 'Today many people in the West would be dismayed if a leading theologian suggested that God was in some profound sense a product of the imagination. Yet it should be obvious that the imagination is the chief religious faculty.' Wendy Doniger, the historian of religion who specializes in that greatest of all imaginative cultures, India, puts it even more strongly: 'Art allows us to watch ourselves having the illusion of life.'

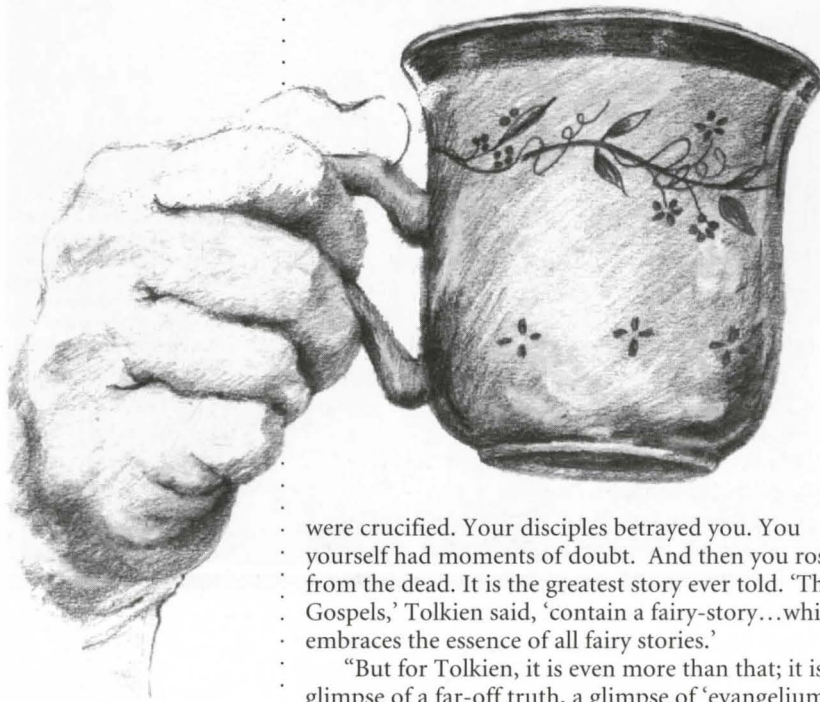
I remember pausing here. I said what I'd come to say. I took a deep breath, and dropped my shoulders. I was, after all, looking at the person who, along with Prince Siddhartha the Buddha, may be the most storied individual in history.

Suddenly, Jesus began to move. Toward me. I tried not to stiffen as he leaned in and whispered something. Even today, it feels like a dream.

"My middle initial is not H," he whispered. I leaned back a little. This is not exactly what I had expected. But he had a smile on his face. This can't be a parable, I thought. "Can you forgive the Church?" He drilled that one in. I tried to nod, although my neck didn't seem to respond, and just then I felt a warm spot on my cheek. I remember a cool breeze fluffing my hair, and there seemed to be a light far away, a far-off gleaming, a radiant light around a body—

"Somebody get him some coffee, quickly," a voice yelled. A hand reached under my shoulder and lifted me up. Something warm and moist touched my lips. And the instant before the taste, I thought, what will it be? What do I need to wake me up? Something anorectic and safe? Something rich, thick, and strong?

They're hauling me off. Grab your script. Now it's your turn. ☺



Marginality in the Biblical Witness

BY DOUGLAS E. OAKMAN

[In the wilderness, at Horeb, the mountain of God] Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." — Exodus 3:13-14¹

You shall make this response before the Lord your God: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey." — Deuteronomy 26:5-9

The Bible is such a central text within our culture that it is difficult for some of us to remember how deeply its message is about the margins—about a marginal God, working through questionable human leadership, dealing with fringe people in history.

In this brief essay, I undertake the task of sketching how this theme—marginal God, marginal leaders, marginal people—meets us at critical junctures in the two testaments. For Lutherans, the good news of Jesus Christ has been understood to be the center of the biblical witness. If so, we are impelled to the margins, even as the margins impel us to Christ.

Aspects of The First Testament Witness

Gerhard von Rad once argued that the Deuteronomy 26 confession, "A wandering Aramean," was the framework behind the Hexateuch (Pentateuch + Joshua).² If we begin with the Ancestors of Israel, we recall that Abraham left settled life for a wandering nomadism through the Fertile Crescent. Abraham was to become the head of an enormous family in the history of Western religion; he is regarded as the ancestor of Christians, Jews, and Muslims. Down to the period of historical Israel, Abraham's wandering continued in the activities of the Hapiru/Hebrews. The religious experience of this whole range of marginalized people in Pharaonic times leads to a distinctively new historical development.³

Moses

The biblical witness crystallizes around Moses and the Israelites in Egypt. We will not try to sort through the innumerable theories on the historicity of various components of this narrative. Moses' experience in the record of Exodus 3-4 provides important clues for our theme.

Moses had barely escaped death as an infant. He was rescued by none other than Pharaoh's daughter and given an Egyptian name. Moses, however, did not forget his origins. He declared his loyalties when he rescued a slave by murdering an Egyptian and then being forced to flee into the wilderness of Midian. There in the wilderness, on the margins, God summoned a leader.

In Israelite memory, God is not to be found in the inner sanctums of Egypt or in its high culture; God is not known to Pharaoh at this point; Moses does not know this God. God has to reveal the promise made long before—God remembers. Even the name of God is mysterious: What is his name? The four letters! YHWH. This is the name Moses is to speak to the enslaved Israelites. Commentators regularly point to the relationship of this noun to the Hebrew verb *HaYaH*, "to be." Yet translators are not in agreement as to how to construe the Divine Name, as the New RSV marginal notes indicate. Should it be, as the Greek Old Testament has it, "I AM"? Such a rendering well suits the Greek preoccupation with Being, yet does not get at the implications of the Name in terms of the historical consciousness of the Israelite people. Much better, it seems, is the rendering "I will be what I will be."⁴ This understanding of Yahweh (older: Jehovah) brings out God's freedom to get involved in history with a no-account people. God could have stayed uninvolved, but did not. That is the powerful implication of the Name.

Why Moses? It would be interesting to know more, historically speaking, about him. He is larger than life in the Pentateuch. As we first meet him, he has been rescued from extinction and schooled in the center of Egyptian society. Something draws him away—first outrage at the indignities visited upon the Israelite slaves, then a burning bush.

Moses finds God, and his own vocation as leader, out in the wilderness. Moses had not really known himself before. He becomes self-conscious for the first time, and finds himself speechless. What shall he say? Moses, like Paul later on, has "contemptible speech" (2 Cor. 10:10). In the view of the tradition, Moses seems an unlikely leader. When he finds his voice, however, it seems to come out of the very experience of marginality.

The Deuteronomy 26 confession spells out the implications of a message inspired by this marginal God. God, through Moses, leads a liberated people out of Egypt to the Promised Land. Israel comes center stage, leaves the margins of history, enters the land. The next three-quarters of a millennium, witnessing the imperialistic rise of the Israelite

The nub, the nucleus, of the biblical message, we have said, is in the relationship between God and the poor. Jesus Christ is precisely God become poor. This was the human life he took — a poor life. And this is the life in and by which we recognize him as Son of his Father.

Gustavo Gutierrez

1 All biblical translations are drawn from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted. This essay, written in 1993, played a small role in the dialogue between the ELCA and the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and is used with permission.

2 G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (Harper & Row, 1962) 1:280-281.

3 Norman Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh* (Orbis, 1979) gives an excellent account of the disparate groups in early Israel.

4 B. W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* (4th ed.; Prentice-Hall, 1986) 63.

What if God were one of us?

People of Christian faith are the spiritual descendants of ancient Hebrew storytellers...



who told beautiful stories of God, awesome in majesty and power, creating heaven and earth.

They also told stories of this "consuming fire" stooping down in compassionate love...

- molding a human out of dirt.
- making promises to an aging couple.
- hiding in a burning bush, revealing a name to Moses, a runaway.

With Moses (and Miriam + Aaron) this God liberated an entire oppressed slave people from Egypt!



Remembering a saving event, the story tellers spoke of God as a tender mother or father - or as a passionate lover.



Once again humans were offended by a passionate God of love this close.

1. Greek philosophers were offended by a teaching that mixes the spiritual (good) and the physical (evil).
2. Just about everybody was offended by a God this close, with us in the ordinary.



And the community heard the word of God:

I forgive you.
I love you.
Now...

"Love one another as I have loved you."

- in a water bath
- in human speech
- in community
- in all people - especially the poor and hungry
- in sorrow + joy
- and in all creation!

The little community practiced justice + mercy and walked humbly with God



Joyfully they met God in the risen one who was present in the earthly, the common...

- in a simple meal of bread + wine.

Soon Christians (members of the community of God-in-flesh), embarrassed by their own message, joined the human project of moving the sacred from flesh, from the ordinary.



Some Christians taught Jesus only looked human. He really wasn't.

DOCETISM

we need a message that will sell. (right!)



Others taught Jesus was an "emanation" between the physical and spiritual worlds.

GNOSTICISM

Other Christians, offended that the risen one is present in mundane bread and wine, decided that the "essence" of these elements changes into the body and blood of the ascended Christ during the communion meal.



TRANSUBSTANTIATION

Some, offended that God would speak through a human book, invented an inerrant and infallible Bible transcribed by God.



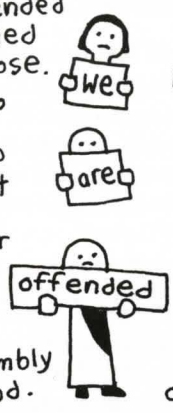
FUNDAMENTALISM

These and other movements pushed God and sacred things to the "God Realm," far removed from the flesh, from the ordinary - a safe distance from God who is with us and one of us, loving us and calling us to love.



Many were offended and threatened by a God this close. Such intimacy, such love, demands too much - a heart which wills what the lover wills...

- justice
- mercy
- walking humbly with God.



A God of burning love, especially for the oppressed, made it uncomfortable for the elites to gain wealth and power at the expense of the poor.



So humans thought of an ingenious idea, a...

GOD REALM!

They pushed God up into a "God Realm," far removed. Then by correct rituals they sought to manipulate God into giving good luck, good crops, etc.



According to the story-tellers, the loving God chose not to appear directly to these people. (people who see God face to face die.) Instead, God spoke through PROPHETS saying...

"Return to the Lord, for God is merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."



Most would not listen, but God refused to give up. Then...

Once upon a time, a little group of mostly poor people experienced the God of majesty coming very near.



Read "backwards!"

They told a story of God enfleshed in a baby named Jesus, hiding in a feedbox.

After Jesus died, his followers experienced his living presence. They called him the risen Christ (Messiah). With boldness they proclaimed...



Threatened, the elites executed him.

God-with-us trod the godforsaken depths of human pain and misery.



The poor one preached the reign of God on earth, evident in the sick made well, outcasts received, good news to the poor, and the forming of a community of justice + mercy.

* like Hebrew!

"He is risen!"



Here are some possible results of pushing God and the sacred into a "God Realm":

2. separating God and the spiritual life from earthly things like politics and economics.

3. magic - using prayer + religion. (and clergy) to manipulate the deity.

4. hierarchy - the following are closer to God (better):



clergy, men (women are more tied to earth), the pure, clean, rich, moral, elite, religious.

5. an earth-negating attitude - seeing God and spirituality far removed from flesh; sexuality, plants, animals, water, air.

SURE MAKES IT EASIER! THANK GOD!



The old story-tellers continue to speak. They remind us that God never fits our expectations. God surprises us by hiding...

in flesh, in Jesus, in humans, in water and bread and wine, in speech and music, and in all creation.

There God whispers, "I love you."

"Will you walk humbly with me - in mercy, justice, and peace?"

Micah 6:8



Biblical Witness (continued from page 11)

Monarchy and its tragic decline in the face of Assyrian imperialism, cause the priestly and royal traditions (e.g., Leviticus, 1-2 Kings) to focus less on the marginal and powerless.⁵ Only the lonely voices of the prophets keep that original memory really alive. The memory is brought to an exquisitely poetic height during the experience of exile, when a new vision of God's marginality and its implications for humans comes into focus.

The Second Isaiah and Exile

The great prophet behind Isaiah 40-55 speaks out of a wilderness experience. Three aspects of his prophecy deserve comment here: The understanding of God, the Servant who suffers, and the people of the exile.

Second Isaiah speaks from a wilderness in terms of exilic experience (Isa. 40:3, 6, 8):

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord" ... A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field ...

The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

Through this wilderness experience, the prophet receives a new understanding of God's radical difference in the midst of idols: "To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him? An idol?—A workman casts it..." (Isa. 40:18-19).

This experience is given utterance through great oracles of salvation: "But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine" (Isa. 43:1).

Within this exilic prophet, we find the famous Servant Songs. The identity of the Servant has long been debated by historical scholarship.⁶ The role of the Servant, however, is clear from the poems: He establishes justice in the earth (42:4); he is a light to the nations, to bring salvation to the ends of the earth (49:6); he sustains the weary with a word (50:4); he is wounded for people's transgressions. Perhaps the most powerful of these poetic passages (Isa. 53:7-11):

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth... By a perversion of justice he was taken away.... Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

The Servant will not seem, to the powerful, anybody of importance (Isa. 52:13-15). He will seem to come, as it were, out of the blue! His message and work will reverse the injustice of the powerful. Their mouths will be stopped. Conversely, the word of salvation shall go forth to all the nations. All the peoples, marginalized by idolatries, are to hear the liberating truth (this seems to be the implication of Isa. 41). Within the oppressive experience of exilic marginality, the Second Isaiah receives word of this unknown leader from a God who has been pushed off of the map of known deities. It is no accident

that this prophetic vision influences the Second Testament as no other Israelite tradition.

Aspects of the Second Testament Witness

Paul and Mark represent the earliest canonical theological understandings we have of Jesus of Nazareth. Each of them has a unique contribution to make to the theme of marginal God working through marginal leader for people on the margins.

Jesus in Mark

The key that unlocks the "good news of Jesus Christ" in Mark is surely John the Baptist's comment in Mark 1:8: "I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."⁷ Jesus' own experience crystallizes around the reception of the Spirit through his baptism.

John's baptism takes place in the wilderness, on the fringe of Judean society. Unlike the other gospels, Mark does not tell us why Jesus comes for baptism. There is not a disclaimer here as in Matthew—Jesus really didn't need it (Matt. 3:14-15). For Mark, Jesus is wholly identified with the penitent. Yet his experience is different. As he comes up out of the water, the heavens are torn open, the voice comes, and the Spirit descends upon him (Mark 1:10-11). In his anointing with the Spirit, Jesus as the "Spirit-Baptizer" has been identified. This is how Mark understands the word "Christ," God's Anointed is at the same time an Anointer of others.

Mark's framework of thinking is dominated by Jewish eschatology. The coming of the Spirit marks the beginning of eschatological struggle with evil. The Markan temptation story, brief though it is, announces that the campaign against Satan and the forces of evil has begun. It will continue in the narrative as Jesus is recognized by and casts out the demons. Its most insidious aspect is indicated when Jesus himself is accused by powerful Jerusalem scribes of being in league with Satan (3:22). The struggle for God's kingdom cannot be straightforward when powerful interests and leaders oppose it.

Jesus is particularly concerned with the outcast and powerless. He has a word of power for them. The Greek noun and verb forms for "power" (root *dyna-*) make significant appearance in this Gospel. Especially noteworthy are the following instances: (After the hemorrhaging woman is healed) "he perceived that power had gone out of him" (Mark 5:30); "such powers are coming about through his hands" (6:2); "until you see the kingdom having come in power" (9:1); "if you can! All things are possible to the one who believes" (9:23); "all things are possible with God" (10:27); etc.⁸

Jesus does not shoulder the work alone. He calls disciples and empowers them with the Spirit. Like Elijah of old, Jesus anoints others as well: "So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them" (Mark 6:12-13). Even those who are not in Jesus' immediate entourage can join the struggle (Mark 9:39).

Summoned from a seemingly ordinary existence (Mark 6:3) by a God on the fringes, Jesus powerfully injects the Spirit of God's kingdom into the dynam-

For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

1 Cor. 1:25

They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.

Mark 10:26-27

ics of his contemporary society. A new community dedicated to the coming of the kingdom is born.

Jesus in Paul

For Paul, as for Mark, the life of Jesus (as much as Paul knows of it) represents a distinctively new experience of God on the margins. For Paul also, the encounter with God leads to intensive involvement with the marginal—this time in Greco-Roman society. As Paul says, “not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise...” (1 Cor. 1:26).⁹ Paul’s God remains unknown to the wise of the world; God’s wisdom is foolishness to the world, because it is revealed in the preaching of the cross. What was Paul’s experience that led to this account of God?

Paul’s understanding of God undergoes a dramatic development through the revelation that comes to him about Jesus. The Damascus episode is not easily understood, because it tends to be read from the standpoint of the theology of the Acts of the Apostles. This procedure obscures the radical nature of Paul’s insight into Jesus.

Before Damascus, it is essential to remember that Paul “as to the law” was a Pharisee (Phil. 3:5). This statement suggests that Paul was rigorously concerned to observe the purity laws of Torah in daily life. Such observance meant respecting God’s Sabbath, concern for cleanliness, abstention from certain foods, etc. Paul based his relationship to God on such observances.

As Paul himself tells it in Galatians, a point came when he realized his understanding of Torah was inadequate in the light of the Christ. How are we to understand this turning point?

Paul says in Galatians 1 that he received a “revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:12). In contrast to the dramatic and graphic account in Acts 9, Paul’s own statement is muted: “God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son...” (1:15-16). At this moment, the exegete is faced with a decision. The Greek literally reads “in me,” but English versions regularly substitute “to me.” The matter is usually argued that the Greek preposition *en* can in Koine Greek also mean “to.” This reading seems, therefore, to posit some sort of experience as is recounted in Acts. However, there are interesting grounds for not moving too quickly to vision or external experience. What is revolutionized for Paul through this revelation is his understanding of Christ, and thereby of the God who has called through grace.

Three incidentals in Galatians lead to the translation preference “in me.” In Galatians 3:1, Paul is regularly translated as saying, “It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified!” The Greek is ambiguous. *Kat’ ophthalmous* could as well mean “eyeball by eyeball” (i.e., in respect to Paul’s eyes). In chapter 4, Paul says in passing: “For I testify that, had it been possible, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me” (4:15). Evidently, Paul’s eyes had some affliction at that time. Perhaps this is the “thorn in

the flesh” to which Paul refers in 2 Cor. 12:7. Finally, in Gal. 6:11, Paul seems again to allude to his afflicted eyesight: “See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand!” What was it that Paul really “saw”? Our thesis is that Paul came through his affliction to an understanding of God’s Christ, and thereby of God’s purposes for the marginal generally. Keep in mind that for Paul this revelation was “gospel” and that it led directly to his mission to the uncircumcised.

The key to Paul’s understanding of Christ lies in 2 Cor. 4:4, “Christ, who is the image of God.” Behind this brief statement is implied Paul’s entire understanding of the significance of Jesus. For Paul undoubtedly alludes to Gen. 1:26-27 and to the belief that Adam and Eve originally bore the “image of God.” Paul calls this image (*Imago Dei*) “Christ.” So in 1 Cor. 15:49 he can say that “as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.” Paul insists in 2 Cor. 4:11 that suffering is necessary in order to make visible the “life of Jesus.” While this phrase could refer to the resurrection, it is more likely a literal reference to the kind of life the earthly Jesus exhibited.

Phil. 2:5-11 brings these considerations into focus. Paul wants the Philippians to have Christ’s mind in them. This mind was also in Jesus. When the Christ Hymn (vv. 6-11) is read through the Genesis story, here is the result:

[Christ Jesus] who though being in God’s image did not think being like God was something to be seized, but he emptied himself by assuming the image of a slave.¹⁰

Jesus, unlike Adam, did not try to be like God. Because of this obedience, Jesus still bears the original *Imago Dei*. This exegetical result is corroborated by the fact that Paul consistently contrasts Adam and Christ, not only in 1 Corinthians 15 but also in Romans 5.

As Paul continues his extrapolations, he comes to see that Jesus’ life and image is what all will share (1 Cor. 15:49). This idea is strikingly stated in Romans 8:

When we cry, “Abba, Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ ... [God] also predestined [us] to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. Jesus is the elder brother of the new family of Adam.

How did Paul come to this insight? Jewish eschatology certainly played a role. However, Paul’s own experience seems to have been decisive. While this is speculative, it makes sense of the evidence to hand: Paul’s eye-affliction disqualified him within the Pharisaic understanding of right-relationship to God. Paul became impure, and in wrestling with this shame and veritable extinction, he came to see God in the accursed Jesus (Gal. 3:13). “For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).

5 Robert and Mary Coote, *Power, Politics, and the Making of the Bible* (Fortress, 1990) discuss this issue thoroughly.

6 B. W. Anderson, op. cit. 488-502.

7 Herman C. Waetjen, A *Reordering of Power* (Fortress, 1989) 67-68; Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man* (Orbis, 1988) 127.

8 My translations in this paragraph.

9 See discussion in Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (Fortress, 1983) 51-73.

10 My translation. For additional argument, see Jerome Neyrey, *Christ Is Community* (Paulist, 1985) 219-227; Brendan Byrne, “The Letter to the Philippians,” in R. Brown et al. (eds.) *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Prentice-Hall, 1990) 794.

Paul finds a radical God of mercy, a God intent on showing mercy to the marginal and the lost, in the obscurity of Jesus' life. Paul's understanding of Jesus replicates in a number of respects the hidden Servant of Isaiah 52-53. It also bears uncanny resemblance to Plato's understanding of the perfect, just man:

We must take away his reputation, for a reputation for justice would bring him honor and rewards, so that it wouldn't be clear whether he is just for the sake of justice itself or for the sake of those honors and rewards. We must strip him of everything except justice and make his situation the opposite of an unjust person's. Though he does no injustice, he must have the greatest reputation for it, so that his justice may be tested full-strength and not diluted by wrong-doing and what comes from it. Let him stay like that unchanged until he dies—just, but all his life believed to be unjust. In this way, both will reach the extremes, the one of justice and the other of injustice, and we'll be able to judge which of them is happier.¹¹

Conclusion: The Biblical Witness and the Quest for Racial Justice

The God of the Bible appears on the margins of society. God's chosen leaders are often seen to be "questionable." Even the Christ comes from no-account Nazareth in Galilee; his life was nothing spectacular! Paul renounces everything in the "privileged center" of Pharisaism for the "surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:8). God's wisdom, the folly of the cross, is foolishness to the world (1 Cor. 1:20-23). Yet this is where the call to the redeemed community of the final days goes forth. The gospel begins from the margins.

Can these insights help us today? Might they contribute to the healing our broken urban communities so desperately need? Can they overcome the ugliness of racism or the hatred that fuels so many conflicts around the globe?

A sickness inheres in white society growing out of its complacent centrality. Many white, middle-class churches today are beset by individualistic self-preoccupation. Evangelical and fundamentalist churches especially manifest this character; the televangelists mark the extreme. Bellah and colleagues have called this "utilitarian individualism," because the communal purpose of social institutions is subverted through manipulation by individual interests for private ends.¹² Affluent white youth do not seem to be inspired by ennobling social visions or socialized to value service to others. In their alienation, they increasingly seek escape in drugs and sex, or lose all hope and commit suicide.

The parallel epidemic of young people murdered in the inner cities reveals the full extent of the abusiveness and sickness within American society. The inner-city horror of facing so many dead-ends—little education, few jobs, drugs, crime, gangs, death—is difficult for suburban complacency even to imagine. There is a sense in which our inner cities have become concentration camps. Simplistic moralisms ("God helps those who help themselves")

should not be allowed to obscure the systematic political and economic reinforcement of inner city realities. Racism, as Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* depicted so well, is a social-systemic sickness, not a mere moral prejudice.

These two marginalizations are so very different, yet so interlocked: The one, characteristic of individualistic white America, a sickness of the soul within. The other, destructive of proud African-American solidarity, an invasive sickness from without that literally attacks bodies, including the social body. Can God speak to/within these margins? How shall we hear the word faithfully? Can we move on and out with hope?

Recently, a group of students and I watched a video of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous "I have a dream" speech. There is a moment in the speech, toward the end, when Dr. King says, "Suffering is redemptive." I asked the students what they thought of that notion, realizing that the words were said by one who would be required to live out his creed. Most did not seem to comprehend what I was asking—except for an older, Hispanic man whose experience "comprehended" the question.

A young African American man of my acquaintance, a former student, was recently accepted into law school. I had written letters in his behalf, so he stopped by to celebrate. We talked about his hopes and dreams of serving his people through the practice of law. I thought about the scene from *Malcolm X*, when the insufferable white teacher tells the young Malcolm that he cannot be a lawyer, that he must work with his hands. I wondered whether any real progress had been made.

Malcolm and Martin were called to bear the image, to assume the mantle of Plato's just man without esteem, to pay the price of Isaiah's ancient Servant Song. Perhaps it is when we—I mean we white folk—look for God speaking through them, or when we look for God speaking through the experience of someone like Rodney King, or the most recent victim of a gang shooting, that we will begin to reach out of our terrible isolations to take responsibility for a system that is grinding people to pieces.

Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote in his last book: "Love is the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality."¹³ He speaks out of the biblical witness, which attests to the God who stays involved with the marginal, who raises up from the margins powerful voices pointing the way toward salvation, and who "calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth."¹⁴ ∞

11 Plato, *Republic* II, 361b-d (transl. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve; Hackett, 1992) 37.

12 Robert Bellah (et al.), *The Good Society* (Knopf, 1991) 115, 161.

13 *Where Do We Go From Here?* (Beacon, 1967) 190.

14 *Luther's Small Catechism*, explanation of the Third Article of the Creed.

Peregrino

BY ELIZABETH BRUSCO

The pages of the leather-bound portfolios crumbled, no matter how carefully I turned them. In these books, a series of clerics starting in the seventeenth century had recorded the high points of the lives that had been lived in that highland Andean town: the unadorned particulars of births, deaths, and marriages in the *municipio*. In those hand-written columns of names and dates, which never added up to the totals at the end, it seemed as if every other child had been named *Peregrino* or *Peregrina*. Later, in a smoky kitchen where Apolonia melted raw brown sugar into water for the evening meal, I asked about this name, and why it had been so popular. I learned that it meant "pilgrim," and that little ones who were not expected to stay very long were often given that name at baptism.

At that time, pilgrims and pilgrimage were not much on my mind. I had gone to Colombia to study religious conversion, and the sacred journeys I was interested in were those internal ones that caused a person to leave one religion and accept another. Now, years later, pilgrimage has started to demand my attention. I began to think about pilgrimage not long ago because of *Qoyllur Rit'i*, a journey reported by Catherine Allen in her beautiful book about Quechua peasants in Peru, *The Hold Life Has*. Shortly before the feast of Corpus Christi each year, thousands of people in southern Peru make a pilgrimage to "Star-Snow" (*Qoyllur Rit'i*), the chain of sacred peaks where, in 1785, the Christ Child appeared to a shepherd boy. Since the sixteenth century, indigenous Andean people have draped their deeply-held beliefs about the cosmos and their powerful topography in the trappings of Catholicism brought by Spanish conquerors. So each group of pilgrims carries a small red wooden box containing an image of the crucified Christ. But it is the great *Apus* (Lord Mountains) that the people are visiting. The highest, snowy mountains are known, collectively, as "the Fathers." These are the watchers, the nurturers of life, to whom, it is said, the pilgrims' Inca ancestors could speak directly.

Then another pilgrimage fascinated me, documented in a film called *Flowers for Guadalupe*. In Mexico, the Virgin of Guadalupe has long stood as an important national symbol. The Virgin originally appeared to Juan Diego, a Christianized Indian, on December 9, 1531, ten years after the Spanish conquest of Tenochtitlan. Speaking to him in Nahuatl, she told him to relay a message to the archbishop of Mexico that a church should be built in her honor on Tepeyac Hill. The archbishop ignored Juan Diego twice, so Guadalupe told him to go and gather up roses that she had caused to grow in an arid, sterile place and present them to the archbishop. Juan Diego gathered the roses in his cloak, and when he opened his garment at the archbishop's feet, the famous image of the Virgin standing on a half-moon was miraculously stamped upon the fabric.

Devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe is widespread in Mexico and in parts of the United States. The film documents one aspect of this devotion, which is a pilgrimage to the Virgin's basilica in Mexico City during the second week of December. Thirty-six years ago a group of women in the state of Queretaro organized a pilgrimage exclusively for women. In the film, we follow one group of pilgrims from the town of Amealco, who cover 150 miles in eight days. As the group gets closer to its destination, their numbers swell to 30,000 women from parishes throughout the state.

An intriguing part of the film describes a marathon relay race run by women concurrently with the pilgrimage. Women train throughout the late summer and early fall to run, in relay, more than 200 miles in thirty-four hours. Although the relay race was originally started for teenage girls, one older woman who participates is interviewed, and she enthuses about how running has rejuvenated her: "What I want most from the Virgin is that she grant me life and health, to continue going towards her." The run is of pre-Hispanic origin, echoing the times when Aztec runners ascended to the Hill of Tepeyac to honor Tonantzin, goddess of the earth and of fertility, whose temple there preceded the Virgin's basilica. Yet there is also something distinctly familiar and modern about the images of the women running and training. The runners, wearing blue track suits (the color of the Virgin), pass along a torch lit from the flame on the Virgin's altar. This clearly resonates with images from the Olympic Games. And something about it also reminds me of "pilgrimages" I have participated in right here in the Pacific Northwest: the AIDS walk and the Race for the Cure.

In the United States, a proliferation of races, runs, walks, bike trips, and dances are organized to raise money for medical research, to help sufferers of particu-

continued ►

References

- Catherine J. Allen, *The Hold Life Has: Coca and Cultural Identity in an Andean Community*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988.
- Flowers for Guadalupe/Flores Para Guadalupe*. Produced by Judith Gleason with the collaboration of the Colectivo Feminista de Xalapa and Elisa Mereghetti. Distributed by Filmmakers Library, 1995.
- Eric Wolf, "The Virgin of Guadalupe: A Mexican National Symbol." *Journal of American Folklore* 61 (1958): 34-39.



That you could have the power to rally a people when a country was born, and again during civil war, and during a farm-workers' strike in California made me think maybe there is power in my mother's patience, strength in my grandmother's endurance. Because those who suffer have a special power, don't they? The power of understanding someone else's pain. And understanding is the beginning of healing.

When I learned your real name is Coatloxopeuh, She Who Has Dominion over Serpents, when I recognized you as Tonantzín, and learned your names are Teteoinnan, Toci, Xochiquetzal, Tlazolteotl, Coatlicue, Chalchiuhtlicue, Coyolxauhqui, Huixtocihuatl, Chicomecoatl, Cihuacoatl, when I could see you as Nuestra Señora de la Soledad, Nuestra Señora de los Remedios, Nuestra Señora del Perpetuo Socorro, Nuestra Señora de San Juan de los Lagos, Our Lady of Lourdes, Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Our Lady of the Rosary, Our Lady of Sorrows, I wasn't ashamed, then, to be my mother's daughter, my grandmother's granddaughter, my ancestors' child.

Sandra Cisneros

lar illnesses, or for other good causes. I have often wondered about the meaning of the walking or running which serve as the focus of these events. Yes, the activities create or reinforce community by bringing people together, but why not over a meal or some form of entertainment? In some ways, like pilgrimage, these events are about uniting contemplation with physical exertion. Sacrifice is essentially physical, and the energy, the life force that is expended is simultaneously a tribute, a reminder of the fragility of life, and a joyful celebration of the embodiment of the spirit.

Pilgrimages are complex events, layered with meaning, and the focus of analysis has usually been on the goal. Yet meaning is also found on the road, with every heartbeat and every breath expended.

It is found on the way to *Qoyllur Rit'i*. Despite miraculous appearances, despite the medicinal quality of ice blocks cut from the glacier, or the pebble houses and herds left as petitions around the shrine, the drama of the pilgrimage is contained in the walking, running, dancing, climbing, even the ride uncomfortably squeezed into the back of a truck. The meaning is embedded in and embodied by humans moving within the unique landscape they have been given for living their lives. The little peregrinos in the baptismal records in Colombia declare the fleeting nature of this vitality. We are not here for very long, and the wondrous union of spirit and body, our moment by moment animation, is eloquently venerated in the act of pilgrimage. ☽

Mary's Protest

BY JASON THOMPSON

Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. — Matthew 13:7

**When Abraham dragged Isaac up the hill,
he raised his blade in sorrow.**

Pleased, You stayed his hand: a test.

**You've dragged my boy up now,
allowed these men to raise him. Where is your sorrow?**

Who would welcome locusts? What smiles as olives split?

**I did not take Your seed
to watch You pluck the first green stem.**

I will not look away.

The Beloved

Journal Entries from El Salvador

BY KATHY OGLE

1993-1994

When I first saw Memo on the streets of San Ramón, I was afraid of him. Dishevelled, a wild look in his eyes, he would puff away on a cigarette, shifting his weight restlessly from side to side. Usually I'd see him at the microbus stand, a place already crowded with too many aggressive men. The unpredictable loco would spot me from afar and come over to walk beside me, a little too close.

I don't think he ever asked me for money. Nor did he throw out any of the typical wolfish lines that other men launched, like "Hey baby, give me your eyes. They're so pretty." Generally it was just some sort of greeting, a little too familiar...unsettling. Once when he was particularly agitated, he demanded to know why my country paid for the war in El Salvador. He was accusing. I was defensive. I kept talking to him in what I hoped was a reasonable voice, but I stepped on the microbus quickly and prayed for it to pull away.

It was later at the house of my new friends Amanda, Edith, and Noemi that I saw him again as the beloved brother—the bright sensitive brother stricken with schizophrenia at age nineteen. Memo and I were introduced, and we shook hands before he excused himself. The sisters took turns telling me about him—the day he went crazy, the trips to the psychiatric hospital, the injections, the hopes, his restless escapes from home, the times that men had beat him up, the endless cigarettes, and the attempted suicides.

"He was lost for days once. We were beside ourselves with fear. Then we heard he'd jumped off a pier at the ocean. Someone had gone in and saved him."

"There was the time when he drank bleach. I can't tell you how horrible it was to see the bleach dribbling from his mouth down his shirt. I ran to get milk, and Juan appeared out of nowhere like an angel and helped me to pry his jaws open to get the milk down his throat."

"We found him trying to hang himself once. We got him down and revived him."

"I caught him eating rat poison on his tortilla along with the beans. I made him drink pure lemon juice to expell it. That night, I lay down with him and massaged his temples until he fell asleep."

"We are so afraid he's going to do it one day."

Tears formed in their eyes. Memo had graduated from high school. There were so many hopes for his future, but now he couldn't hold a steady job. Rather, he did little errands and odd jobs for the household. The clever, funny, likeable brother was reduced to a state of frustration and impotence.

"He is such a kind person too. Even now he gives his own food away to drunks. Mamá has to scold him to make him keep his own food. And he takes in street kids if they don't have a place to stay—and here we are, thirteen people under this roof."

"Once the priest came to talk to him. I'll never forget what he said when he greeted Memo. He said, 'I understand that you have suffered more than Jesus Christ himself.' I'll never forget that."

After that day, when I ran into Memo on the streets, I greeted him. We'd shake hands. I'd ask him how he was, and he would tell me when he was feeling more desperate and restless. "What do you do when you get restless?" I asked. "I walk," he said. "I walk and I smoke." "Don't walk too far away," I said. "Your family will worry."

Shortly before I left the country, he walked me all the way home, spitting out unanswerable questions. "Why do you think I have this affliction?" he asked. "What am I being punished for?" He tried to describe the battle in him between reason and a darkness and confusion that seemed to come in the form of black horses. He was afraid that he was lost to sin and unsalvageable. He told me about a woman he loved who would never love him.

I felt unprepared to give words of comfort and encouragement to someone like Memo. While my insides panicked, I decided to take on the voice of authority. I told him as firmly as I could that he was not being punished. That he had no sins greater than those of anyone else. That he was ill and that there was no cure for his illness yet. I told him that he was one of God's children and that he was as worthy as anyone else on earth, and that even if he couldn't rid his mind of all the confusion, he could let go of at least that one tormenting thought of guilt. He looked doubtful, and I insisted. I also reminded him that his family loved him tremendously. Then I went inside, and I cried.

1995

Last year when I went back to El Salvador after being in the United States for six months, Memo was the first to greet me on the streets of San Ramón. He was sitting on the curb outside his house with his usual greasy hair and ragged pants, smoking a cigarette. Quickly he stood up to shake my hand and welcome me back. I later went to see the women.

"Hola! Memo told us you were here! Welcome back!"

But the joy of reunion was soon overshadowed by the story of the past six months. It had been hard. Among other disasters, the worst had been that another beloved brother, Abimael, had been hit on his motorcycle and killed, leaving four daughters orphaned.

"It was Memo we were looking for! He had been gone for a week. Finally we heard he was at Rosales Hospital beaten up and with a broken leg. We were so happy he was alive! We went to take him home and found out that Abimael was also just being brought in from the accident. He was in a coma, and he never woke up. I quit my job to take care of the girls."

**I Julian, I have been
Sick, brainsick,
heartsick, mad I
thought —
I feared —
It was a foretaste of
the pains of hell
To be so mad and yet
retain the sense
Of that which made
me so.**

Julian, 1923, Act II, Sc. 1

“Memo is so angry that Abimael died instead of him. He keeps saying, ‘Why couldn’t it have been me?’”

1996

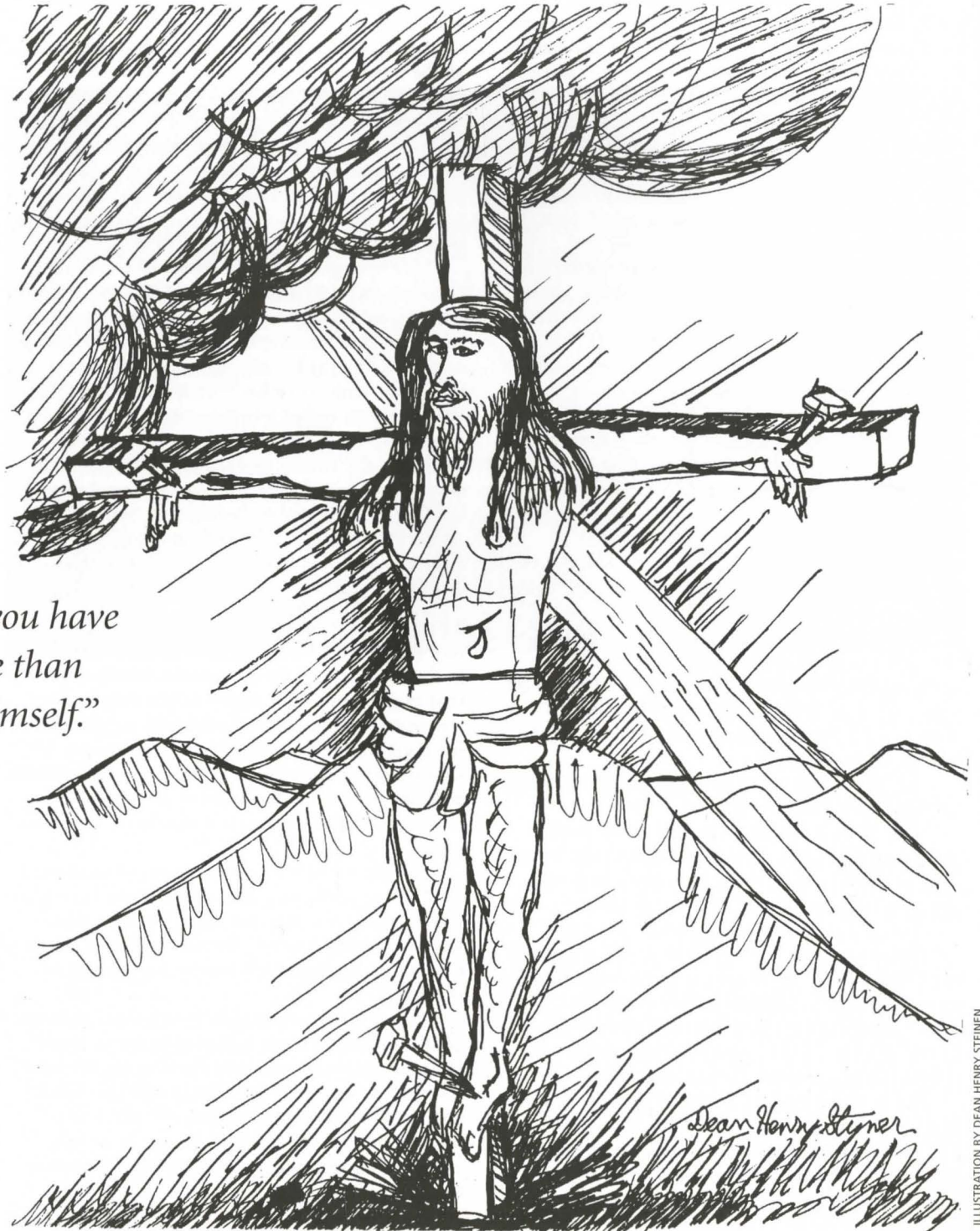
This month I’m back in El Salvador. It’s been a year since my last visit. I found out that Memo hung himself outside the house on February 18th... while his mother was cutting a piece of watermelon to give him, while his sisters were nearby doing household chores. It was a matter of minutes.

“ALBERTO! COME! Memo is hanging!” Noemi screamed. They held his body up and cut the rope.

“He was still alive when we brought him down.

His legs moved. He gave a big sigh. I held him in my arms as he went cold. He had his last breath in my arms while I kept telling my mother that he wasn’t dead, and not to cry.”

For five hours I talked and cried with the women. What didn’t we talk about? The silence around mental illness. The misunderstandings around suicide. The loss. The guilt. The hurtful misjudgements. The fact that Memo’s mass was held at home, because it wasn’t permitted at church. The miracle that Memo had survived seventeen years after the onset of his illness. The mother stood to the side at first, but then brought photos of her sons, sat down with us and let herself cry.



“I understand you have suffered more than Jesus Christ himself.”

And now

"I understand you've suffered more than Jesus Christ himself." The words of the priest comparing Memo with Christ, echo in my mind. And is it so strange to make the connection between the two? They are both men in their thirties condemned to die. They are the best and the brightest reduced to humiliation. But, finding Christ in "the least of these" is more than feeling compassion towards a pitiable person. Memo was mentally ill and he lived in poverty. But even in his condition of weakness he was ready to give away the only food he had. Even in a patched together house, built over a stream of refuse, he was willing to offer shelter to those in need. He was willing to grapple hard with the meaning of life, and was even willing to give up that life for the sake of another. He lived, when he could, with dignity and compassion. And he died when he had shouldered his burden as long as he could.

Perhaps Memo's life even challenges our notions of power and justice like Christ's life did. Memo's illness shakes our ardent desire to believe that if we follow the rules, work hard and "do things right,"

nothing will happen to us. The other side of the coin is that often unexpressed belief that if something goes wrong, we must be somehow to blame for it. Memo was tempted to believe that he was being punished for his sins through his illness. Today we continue to be tempted to believe that those who suffer in our world somehow just haven't worked hard enough or "done things right." We want to be winners in life, and having power and money feels like winning. How are we supposed to identify with a Christ that always took sides with the losers? But he did.

"I understand you've suffered more than Jesus Christ himself." and yet at the hour of his death, Memo's family was not allowed a funeral mass inside a church. Like Christ, he died outside the structures of power with only the handful of people who loved him the most there to tend to him. And they were primarily the women. Those left to pick up the pieces. Those left to live with the stigmas and the misunderstandings. Those left to gather up the contradictions. ♪

Mission Statement

Prism exists to celebrate the work and achievement of the Division of Humanities as well as to promote continuing education among our colleagues and constituents. Focusing on important issues of the day, *Prism* provides a vehicle for contemporary reflection and opinion, while lifting up the enduring values of the Liberal Arts. The magazine endeavors to address topics of lively interest, from a variety of perspectives within the university community, and with the clear understanding that "Educating for Service" requires broad vision about the human condition in order to support effective commitment and wise social purpose and action.

Policy Guidelines

- *Prism* appears each spring. Distribution includes all PLU faculty, major university offices, staff, Division alumni/ae, and selected off-campus readers.
- Although not an imperative, *Prism* issues may revolve around a specific theme, and submissions are invited both from within the Humanities and selectively outside the Division.
- The Editorial Board frames each issue by introducing the theme and summarizing the content of major articles; the Dean of Humanities provides an overall introduction, especially emphasizing the relationship between the issue's substance (including publication reports) and the ongoing aims and work of the Division.
- The Board seeks contributions that are academically sound and support educational purposes vis-à-vis the envisioned readership. Viewpoints expressed in *Prism* articles are protected under the ordinary tenets of academic freedom.
- *Prism* contents are copyrighted. However, it is understood that authors may publish revised essays or more substantial versions in other venues at a later time. Sometimes, pieces that have appeared elsewhere are reprinted in *Prism*, with appropriate permissions.
- *Prism* articles do not necessarily represent the views of the Dean, *Prism* Editorial Board, the Division of Humanities, or the larger Pacific Lutheran University community.
- Occasionally, written responses to *Prism* are published. Such responses are considered by the *Prism* Board to possess important educational or intellectual value and hence to further the purposes of the magazine.

DEAN'S COMMENTS

KEITH J. COOPER, DEAN OF HUMANITIES

Community. PLU is known for it, right? (At our last accreditation check, in 1989, the visitation team wrote that the collegiality on campus was "almost palpable.") That makes it a little embarrassing to admit we don't always have a good idea what it means.

One small part of the answer is that we in the Humanities provide a place to think about the human condition: who we are, both as individual persons and as members of multiple communities, how we got here, and who we are capable of becoming. Last year *Prism* focused on issues of gender; this year, we address one aspect of a topic that has been seen for centuries as at the very heart of the matter: our connection to our creator. "What if God *were* one of us?"

People come to PLU to join together in a community of learning, gathering around issues such as this one. We come to hear the variety of voices on these topics — and at PLU, many of those voices come out of communities of faith. (Many of us are here in no small part because thinking carefully about matters of faith is valued and encouraged.) We may come to appreciate the different perspectives we encounter, but in the end we are not willing to stop there. We come hoping to make progress in figuring out the truth. What you read in this issue should help you with that task; that (as the Editorial Board suggests in its careful statement of the purpose of this publication) is the true test of whether a piece is worth reading.

Part of what it means to live intentionally in community — a part, understandably, that faculty sometimes tire of — involves *planning*. Have we been doing that lately! As PLU anticipates the renewal of its accreditation following a site visit in April 1998, each area across the university is involved in a process of "self-study." While this provides much opportunity for celebration, it also calls us to be sober in our judgments (such as decisions about curriculum) and accountable to our students. Toward this end, we are being challenged through participation in a national program called "Pew Roundtables" to focus on two areas: how we in the Humanities may contribute to a more integrative educational program, combining traditional and contemporary themes from the liberal arts with the strengths of professional education; and how we can enable students to take greater responsibility for and be more actively involved in their own learning.

At the same time, we have begun planning for what is likely...down the road a few years...to be a major step forward for the division: coming together under one roof in a renovated Eastvold. "The Core of the Campus for the Core of the University" — think it could catch on?