

“Ahead”

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Presbytery of the James

Old Testament: Genesis 50:19-21, Exodus 1:8, 3:7-10

New Testament: John 14:1-7

“I will travel to you, Lord, through a thousand blind alleys.
You want to bring me to you through stone walls.”¹

There is such a diversity of emotion captured in these two brief lines, scribbled down in the journal of Thomas Merton, the 20th century Trappist monk. Devotion and confusion, hope and despair, longing and courage and determination. His reflection on the life of faith echoes the disciple Thomas’ question to Jesus: “Lord, how can we know the way?”

God’s people have been asking this question throughout time. How could Joseph know the way to save his people from famine? How could Moses know the way to deliver his people from slavery? How could Esther know the way to protect her people from genocide? How could Mary know the way to protect herself from pregnancy outside of marriage?

And how can we know the way? How can we know the way to heal our poisoned planet, our poisoned hearts? How can we know the way to foster peace between nations locked in decades of conflict? How can we know the way to offer shelter, support, and solidarity to the refugees among us? How can we know the way to share our true and authentic selves with one another, coming out as gay or lesbian or transgender? How can we know whether we should take the new job, pop the question, go back to school, go forward with surgery, try for another child, run a marathon, run for office, offer a word of forgiveness, move across the country? How can we know the way to hold fast to our faith when everything in the world seems to say that faith itself is utter foolishness?

¹ Thomas Merton, *Dialogues With Silence*, HarperCollins, 2001, p. 23.

“I will travel to you, Lord, through a thousand blind alleys.
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We’re facing a time of great change in our presbytery. Today we’ll recognize the faithful work of Carson Rhyne, vote on extending a call to Fred Holbrook, and elect a Strategic Planning Team to help envision our future – something we’ve been trying to do for several years, in our presbytery and denomination. Given the current religious landscape, that future may seem as impossible as passing through a wall of stone.

Diana Butler Bass has written extensively on the decline of Christianity, especially in American culture. From the 1966 cover of *Time* proclaiming “God is Dead” to the 2009 *Newsweek* story titled “The End of Christian America,” the news media has recognized, along with countless sociologists and theologians, that we are solidly entrenched in what Bass calls “days of doubt and discontentment, of wondering why everything has changed and the fear that ensues from loss.”² A 2017 Gallup survey reported that more than 20 percent of Americans identify with “no religious affiliation,” an increase of about 15 percentage points over the course of 20 years.³

Certainly we have seen the signs of this decline in our own congregations as well: attendance is down, giving is down, volunteers are harder to come by (of course, this is from my perspective as the outgoing moderator of the committee on nominations). But I have to tell you, from my perspective as a chaplain at a Level-1 trauma center: even among those who would choose “no religious affiliation” on a survey, there are still deep spiritual needs. There is still a hunger for the transcendent and mysterious Truth to which the Church is a witness.

I think of a couple I met a little more than two years ago. I’ll call them the Smiths. Neither one of them would ever set foot in a church building, I’m sure, but when they learned their baby had died before he was born, they wanted a blessing for him. They wanted to name him and give words to what he meant to them. They wanted to acknowledge before God that they loved this child and were grateful for him, even though they had never met him. Surrounded by grandparents and aunts, in a delivery room rather than a sanctuary, the Smiths gave witness to the hope that their son’s brief life would touch this world in ways they couldn’t yet imagine. In the time since, they have reached out to other couples experiencing pregnancy loss, accompanying them

² Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, HarperCollins, 2012, p. 27.

³ Gallup: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1690/religion.aspx>

along the difficult and isolating journey of grief. Everything I've just described *sounds* like the Church to me. But it doesn't *look* much like the Church we're used to.

My daughter, Norah, is three years old. Like many three-year-olds, she will take on mini-obsessions every few weeks. Several months ago, it was *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* – we read it every night at bedtime, the book went in the car with us, it was everywhere. For a long time, that book informed just about everything I knew about the transformation from a caterpillar into a butterfly (Now that I think about it, I probably owe an apology to my eighth-grade science teacher). If you know the story, you know there are plenty of details about the type and quantity of the food he eats, prior to spinning a cocoon around himself. But then, on the next page, he emerges as a butterfly – fully formed. I realize Eric Carle wasn't trying to write a scientific textbook, but there's nothing in there about what happens while he's *in* the cocoon!

How can he know the way to become a butterfly?

It turns out the process is fascinating – and a bit icky. While the caterpillar is inside his cocoon, he releases enzymes that dissolve nearly all his tissues into proteins; essentially, he digests himself. “If you were to cut open a cocoon ... at just the right time, caterpillar soup would ooze out.”⁴

But not *every* part of the caterpillar liquifies. Earlier in his life, before he even hatched out of his egg, he developed what scientists call “imaginal discs.” These discs remained inside his body throughout his life as a caterpillar, and while he's inside the cocoon, they awaken, using the protein soup to build the structures he will need for his new life as a butterfly – eyes, wings, legs, antennae – everything.

Somewhere, this took a left turn and became a bit of a science lesson; sorry about that. I have just been so captivated by this process. The caterpillar comes almost completely undone. Author Cynthia Ocelli writes, “For someone who doesn't understand growth, [caterpillar soup] would look like complete destruction.”⁵

And in a way, it is. The creature that emerges from that cocoon has been transformed in almost every conceivable way. His plump, green body has converted into a slender, yellow abdomen with vibrantly colored wings. Rather than eating leaves and other plant matter, he drinks nectar from flowers. He can't even move through the world in the same

⁴ Ferris Jabr, “How Does a Caterpillar Turn into a Butterfly?” *Scientific American*, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/caterpillar-butterfly-metamorphosis-explainer/>

⁵ I can't find the exact source for this quote, and Ocelli is actually talking about the process of change a seed undergoes.

way as before; rather than crawling on dozens of tiny feet, he uses wings to travel through the air. His old life is gone. A new life has begun.

This transformation – this resurrection – is the pattern Christ sets for our faith: the movement from life through death to new life. God is restless, not content to remain in one place or condition for very long, always going on ahead of us to prepare the way. God prepared Egypt as a place of salvation for Joseph and his brothers, but before too long, it had become a place of slavery for Moses and his kin. At some point in the past, God prepared our way of doing church – in big buildings; with full-time pastors; committees and budgets and policies and procedures. And these things are not bad. They're not! They're what has kept us alive all this time. But when Diana Butler Bass came to visit us last year, she reminded us that there's a difference between institutions and communities.

Institutions, she explained, are largely impersonal – consisting mainly of the structures we build around our faith. Because they are so intricately designed, institutions can persist, zombie-like, without much effort on our part. They survive through rule books, polities, and guidelines that lifelessly endure. Communities, on the other hand, are relational and fragile. They can only survive when we intentionally show up, again and again, to build them – to tend to them – day by day and moment by moment. It takes energy to give our hearts and minds to something, to bear with one another even when things get hard, to hope for the future even when we find ourselves asking “How can we know the way?”

So if we're going to envision the church of the future, we have to figure out what we have that's essential and what can be dissolved; what are our imaginal discs and what is our caterpillar soup?

Jesus' response to Thomas's question – “How can we know the way?” – is that *HE* is the way. If we want to know where God is going, we need to look to Jesus. For the past two years, I have been working with a team from the Presbyterian Church (USA) to develop a “guiding statement” for our denomination. Using the letters from our denomination's name – P, C, U, S, and A – we came up with a statement that challenges presbyteries, churches, agencies, and individuals to be Prayerful, Courageous, United, Serving, and Alive. While we didn't talk about caterpillars during our time together, I think the members of the team would consider these words to be the “imaginal discs” of our faith, patterned after Jesus' work in the world.

By frequently taking time to pray, Jesus reconnected to God's enlivening Spirit, renewing his strength and faith. This gave him a courage that helped him to risk shame, censure –

his very life – to share the good news of God’s unity with humankind, calling neighbors and strangers alike into unity with one another. Through words and actions, Jesus showed his disciples over and over again that the greatest among them must be the servant of all. In his death and resurrection, he made it clear that even when darkness and destruction threaten to consume us, God’s final word is Life.

Prayerful, Courageous, United, Serving, Alive – each of these themes could generate a rich discussion – and I hope that many of our churches (especially our Strategic Planning Team) will consider the General Assembly’s recommendation to study them, perhaps through sermon series’ and in small groups. How can we use these themes as inspiration to transform from the church we know now into a church we haven’t yet imagined?

I’m inspired by our presbytery’s decision, years ago, to sell the office park and use the funds to revitalize mission and invest in new worshipping communities. I’m inspired by The Joyful Feast, a new way of being church within our presbytery that seeks to recognize God’s presence around us and within us. I’m inspired by the sixteen members of our Disaster Relief Purpose Group who have gone to New Bern, North Carolina, to help with recovery efforts after hurricane Florence. I’m inspired by Cindy Correll’s work in Haiti – and our presbytery’s promise to support her – standing in solidarity and hope with people who have been devastated by natural and political disasters. I’m inspired by that ruling elder who keeps pestering you about starting a preschool or a soup kitchen or an interdenominational group of churches that invests in the community. I’m inspired by congregations throughout our presbytery that are coming up with imaginative ways to live into the truth of Jesus’ promise: “I am going ahead to prepare a place for you.”

Down a thousand blind alleys, through stone walls, and at this table set before us, Christ goes ahead of us to call us into new life. How will we respond?

Amen.

SCRIPTURE LESSONS Contemporary English Version (CEV)

Genesis 50:19-21

19 But Joseph told them, “Don’t be afraid! I have no right to change what God has decided. 20 You tried to harm me, but God made it turn out for the best, so that he could save all these people, as he is now doing. 21 Don’t be afraid! I will take care of you and your children.” After Joseph said this, his brothers felt much better.

Exodus 1:8, 3:7-10

1:8 Many years later a new king came to power. He did not know what Joseph had done for Egypt,

3:7 The Lord said: “I have seen how my people are suffering as slaves in Egypt, and I have heard them beg for my help because of the way they are being mistreated. I feel sorry for them, 8 and I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians.

I will bring my people out of Egypt into a country where there is good land, rich with milk and honey. I will give them the land where the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites now live. 9 My people have begged for my help, and I have seen how cruel the Egyptians are to them. 10 Now go to the king! I am sending you to lead my people out of his country.”

John 14:1-7

14 Jesus said to his disciples, “Don’t be worried! Have faith in God and have faith in me.[a] 2 There are many rooms in my Father’s house. I wouldn’t tell you this, unless it was true. I am going there to prepare a place for each of you. 3 After I have done this, I will come back and take you with me. Then we will be together. 4 You know the way to where I am going.”

5 Thomas said, “Lord, we don’t even know where you are going! How can we know the way?”

6 “I am the way, the truth, and the life!” Jesus answered. “Without me, no one can go to the Father. 7 If you had known me, you would have known the Father. But from now on, you do know him, and you have seen him.”