

A Tale of Two Trees is not a throwback to Tolkien but to much earlier—all the way to *The Beginning*, and the family trees that we can choose. In word and song, and with a pile of friends, Matthew Clark narrates our daily choices to live into a ground system of small evils or to be grafted into a great Family Tree of Life. Neither will keep us from suffering, but in one we will be companioned. Will we listen to the wild song that beckons?

—Julie Canlis, author of *A Theology of the Ordinary*

Rarely do we see a rich book companion full of wisdom from a collection of thoughtful writers alongside an equally brilliant and melodically well-crafted album! Often, when we hear a record we love, we build a connection with it after repeated listens, longing for more because the music becomes a friend of sorts. Matthew Clark gives us a scratch for our itch, a place to dive into when the pull of curiosity meets our deep connection to the music.

—Rachel Wilhelm, singer/songwriter, minister of music and worship arts at Apostles Anglican, Knoxville, TN, and associate movement leader, United Adoration.

More than anything, this book is an invitation to the reader to embark on holy pilgrimage with a band of fellow travelers—to share conversation, tears, laughter, insights, and story, and to become friends along the way. Buoyed by a bright poignancy and full of gentle insight, *A Tale of Two Trees* will reward readers willing to travel the footpaths of these essays at a wondering, pondering pace.

—Douglas Kaine McKelvey, author of *Every Moment Holy*, Volumes I & II

The centrality of the Psalms in Christian life and liturgy over the centuries reminds us that the very best sort of theology is the sort that captures our imagination, engaging our hearts as well as our minds. In a similar vein, these songs and the stories that accompany them transport us authentically into the snarl-up of good and evil that grow up alongside each other in the life of faith, making faith-keeping a matter of struggle and suffering. According to Scottish theologian Thomas Erskine of Linlathen, God came to be with us in Christ not so that we might not have to suffer, but so that our suffering would be made one with his and occasioned by the same struggles. Matthew Clark and friends deserve our thanks for clothing these words with flesh and giving them a pulse, showing us how this reality plays out in the exigencies of actual Christian living.

—Trevor Hart, Rector of Saint Andrew's Episcopal Church, St Andrews; Canon Theologian of St Ninian's Cathedral, Perth; Honorary Professor of Divinity at the University of St Andrews; author of *Confessing and Believing: the Apostles' Creed as the Script for Christian Life*

With characteristic wisdom and grace and honesty in the midst of struggle, Matthew Clark invites us to go on pilgrimage with him and his friends. Even by the rivers of Babylon, the lover sings.

—Jonathan Rogers, author of *The Wilderking Trilogy* and *The Terrible Speed of Mercy: A Spiritual Biography of Flannery O'Connor*; creator of The Habit Membership (thehabit.co)

They say that beginnings and endings are the hardest parts of writing a good story, a good song, a good movie. That may be true for art, but for life, it's the middle part that's often the hardest. Frequently, it's the middle part where we lose the plot of our lives and wander into dead and deadening ends. But if we know to *Whom* we belong, we won't get completely lost, I don't think, even if we can't see the way forward. Matthew Clark and his marvelous family of friends invite us on a beautiful journey of song and story that enables us to feel lovingly found in the middle of things, and to know all will be well in the end by God's grace. That's good news that *many* of us need to hear today.

— W. David O. Taylor, Associate Professor of Theology
and Culture at Fuller Theological Seminary and
author of *Open and Unafraid* and *A Body of Praise*

A TALE OF TWO TREES

Part Two of *The Well Trilogy*



Meditations on Faith-Keeping
• in STORY and SONG •

MATTHEW CLARK

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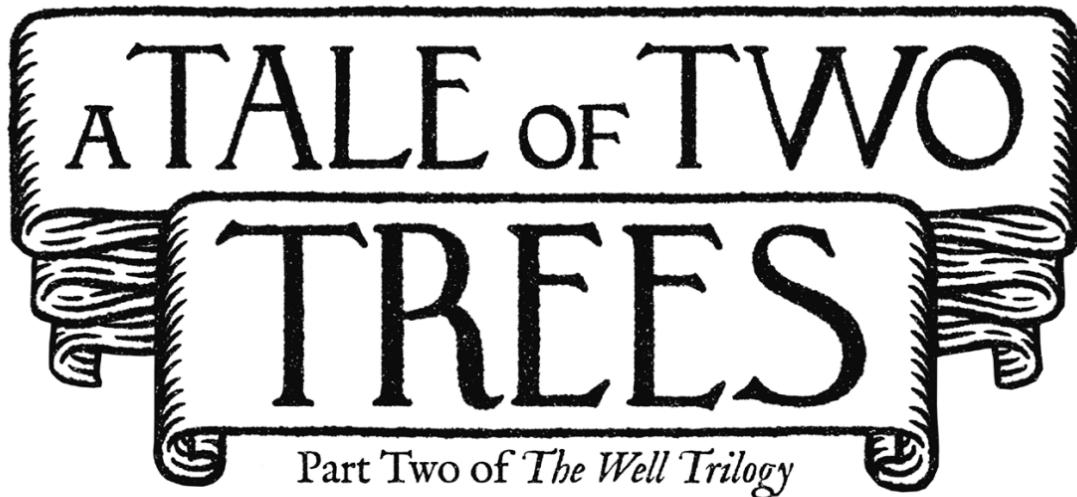
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A TALE OF TWO
TREES
Part Two of *The Well Trilogy*

by Matthew Clark

Emily Verdoorn

Heidi White

Benjamin Holsteen

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Steven Elmore

John Barnts

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Susan Cowger

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Edited by Elisabeth Adams

For those who wait and keep watch.



I have seen a wicked and ruthless man
flourishing like a luxuriant native tree,
but he soon passed away and was no more;
though I looked for him, he could not be found.

P S A L M 37 : 35 - 36

The righteous will flourish like a palm tree,
they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon;
planted in the house of the Lord,
they will flourish in the courts of our God.
They will still bear fruit in old age,
they will stay fresh and green,
proclaiming, "The Lord is upright;
He is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him."

P S A L M 92 : 12 - 15

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Welcome

Hi there. Welcome to *A Tale of Two Trees*, book two of The Well Trilogy. It could be that you're here for the first time and you didn't even know there was a book one? That's okay; I'm very glad you're here, and when you get a chance, you can go back and read *Only the Lover Sings: Meditations on the Woman at the Well in Story and Song*.

In that book, I told my own story of trauma and sorrow in the wake of divorce. In the midst of that bewildering grief, the meeting between Jesus and the Samaritan woman became, for me, a hand to hold. The best stories become habitats where a kind of meeting can take place, and that's what happened for me with John 4: Jesus met me there, bringing the light of his shining (smiling) face into my darkness. I felt like I'd been lowered down, corpse-like, into a musty grave and covered over in black earth. The surprise was, that when I got down to the bottom of that pit, Jesus was already there, calmly smiling, genuinely glad to be with me. While that experience didn't magically erase everything that had gone wrong, it meant there was no place Jesus wasn't glad to go in order to bring his love and life within reach. *That* realization changed things. I could live through this experience, if Jesus was willing to be my companion on my pilgrimage through the valley of death.

Only the Lover Sings, both the album and the book, are working to trace out that story. I mean, we're all like the woman at the well, having to navigate this awkward conversation about our screwed-up lives, while trying not to make eye contact with a God we're so sure hates us. If you had told the Samaritan woman that morning that at noon she'd have to go to the well and face God in the flesh, I bet she would've stayed in bed. I sure wouldn't have gone. But here we are facing Jesus, who sits there tenderly beaming at us, fully aware of our worst. By the end of that meeting, the woman who had had five husbands and was working on number six, gets a sort of marriage proposal from Bridegroom number seven. The number seven is meant to remind us of God's gift of Sabbath rest. Jesus is inviting a whole world of weary sinners to walk down that aisle and discover the joy that is the antidote to everything that has so thoroughly worn us out: the smiling face of the One who calls us "Beloved."

When the song in us has died, he knows how to create in us a new one. Only the lover sings—only the one who dares to risk truly showing up to meet Jesus, learns to sing again.

That's what's going on with the first book and album. Now with *A Tale of Two Trees*, we're in the middle of a trilogy, and it is very much a book about being in the middle. If *Only the Lover Sings* was about meeting Jesus and being forgiven and redeemed, this one is about what happens next. Well, what happens next is that we come down off that mountaintop experience to discover, frustratingly, that we still have all the old garbage to deal with. Wasn't becoming a Christian supposed to fix everything? We begin to worry, "Did I imagine all that? Does the name 'Beloved' really belong to me?"

That's normal, since what's true for the Master is true for the apprentice, and life was a slog for Jesus so much of the time. I can imagine him coming down from the heights of his own Mountain

of Transfiguration, to what? The frustration of real life. Even Jesus was discouraged after his descent, asking how much longer he was going to have to endure life in a faithless world. But just a few sentences prior, he had received supernatural reassurance of his Father's delight in him, and this gave him joy enough in suffering to faithfully carry on.¹

I don't mean this cynically, but the honeymoon wanes, and life becomes about faith-keeping, as we slowly, painstakingly grow into a new kind of life. We've been given a new song, yes, but our instrument is out of tune, the guitar strings hurt our fingertips, and—What were those lyrics again? It takes deliberate effort to stay with the process of learning to love and be loved. That's not a bad thing, but it does help to get our expectations straight. It's true that life doesn't magically become effortless and easy; the difference is that now we have a companion in our suffering. The world's Creator is *with* us, grafting us back into the Family Tree of Life where we drink from the sap of joy at reality's center: the life of the Trinity.

Still, we live in a world that doesn't work the way it should. Creation itself was thrown off-kilter at the Fall; we stumble around like landlubbers trying to get our sea legs under us. Terrible things happen that we have no control over and can't make sense of. Jesus enters into those places too, not because there's any sense to be made of them, but because there's nothing that, if God enters into it, he can't co-opt for good (see: the crucifixion).

Traditionally, three things constitute the evil that frustrates us: our own sin, a malfunctioning Creation, and a literal Enemy: the Devil. Now, I love any opportunity to show my nerdiness, and I'm a huge word-nerd. If you look up the etymology of "devil" you'll find out that the whole idea behind it has to do with "putting asunder what God has joined together." In Greek, "devil" (*diabolos*) means

¹Matthew 17

to separate, divide, or pull apart something that ought to be joined in a loving union. At any given moment, we're having to deal with the tension our own sin introduces within ourselves, a world on the fritz, and a team of diabolical entities bent on pulling apart any good thing God knits together.

You may be asking, "Okay, okay, but why is this book/album called *A Tale of Two Trees*?" Good question: to answer it, several strands of imagery have to be braided together. The song that only the lovers sing has intricate harmony and rhythm, and like apocalyptic literature in the Bible, the metaphors and images in this book have had a tendency to pile and mix.

In *Reversed Thunder*, his book on Revelation, Eugene Peterson likens John's use of imagery to change ringing, the traditional and incredibly complex musical interweaving and overlapping of notes played on church bells. Interestingly, the title of Peterson's book comes from a George Herbert poem called "Prayer" in which Herbert floods us with a "cascade of images" as Malcolm Guite says, "not the honing and concentration of a single image, but a kind of rainbow refraction of many insights."² It may help to know that this book has tended in the same direction, with images of faces, trees, families, songs, rivers, wells, roots, light, smiles, pilgrimage, feasts, faith, grief, joy and more all sounding at once. Rather than seeing them as a puzzle to solve, allow the images to ring together, overlap, commingle. My hope is that we might be moved to keep faith as a little of the rich, complex resonance of the Lover's song—the song our Lord is singing over us³—wells up inside us.³

The two trees in the title, then, aren't just a dorky allusion to Tolkien's mid-trilogy book title, *The Two Towers*. They represent

²Malcolm Guite, *Faith, Hope and Poetry: Theology and the Poetic Imagination* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 20.

³Zephaniah 3:17

two family trees: the Family Tree of Evil and the Family Tree of God. We get to choose our heritage, moment by moment. Will we root ourselves in this or that family? Abide in the True Vine, Christ, or be pulled apart diabolically from our union with God? Will we forget the light of that smiling face that called us “Beloved” by Jacob’s well, or fix our eyes repeatedly on Jesus, the Living Water who came looking for us in our darkest, most desperate thirst?

I want to say that faith-keeping is not for the faint of heart, but maybe that’s exactly who it’s for. The call—to keep trusting the One who showed us such unimaginable love when we were at our very worst—implies that we’re feeling pretty faint and exhausted. Who hopes for what they already have? If faith is a virtue like courage,⁴ then, the time to stick with it is precisely when we don’t feel like it.

That’s the kind of decision the Hebrew exiles had to make by the rivers of Babylon. In Psalm 137, their rusting instruments are languishing on the willow branches, they’re forgetting the lyrics to the song of belovedness, and they’re seriously considering tossing out their connection to God’s family and adopting these enemies as their people from here on out. I mean, why not? They can’t imagine that, at the bottom of a grave-pit like this, the LORD could possibly meet them with any kind of hope. It certainly looks like the Tree of Evil really has managed to chop down God’s Family Tree. But they make their choice to stand and sing anyway. They take back their harps from the writhing branches of Babylon’s Tree. They keep faith, and as they do, the song comes back to them, like a music welling up from invisible depths, rising up through buried root-tips and coursing through their withered, thirsty souls.

⁴“Courage is almost a contradiction in terms. It means a strong desire to live taking the form of a readiness to die.” G. K. Chesterton and Trevin Wax, *Orthodoxy* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2022), 133.

So, again, welcome. These songs and stories, written by me and my friends, are offered here in hopes that as we all walk this way of faith in the middle, we can carry the Lover's tune together. When I forget the lyrics, remind me. When you break a guitar string, somebody will have an extra one. When we forget the face and the smile of Jesus who died for us, we can each offer our best imitation of Christ to help each other remember that this is real. We are a family, after all, and as we sit around the Table God has prepared—right in the middle of enemy territory—we can help each other keep the Feast of Joy set so beautifully before us.

Keep those dinner candles lit and on their stands; we can all recall how starved we were before we caught sight of that flame and finally took a seat here—back before enemies became brothers and sisters in the household of Jesus.

Introduction

There were long stretches of road when each footfall was nearly painful enough to call tears to my eyes. As my two friends and I walked across southern England last summer, I thought a hundred times along the way that I would have quit miles ago, if I'd been walking alone. The visceral pain and mental exhaustion got to me at times. Aside from the fact that it hurt more than I could've imagined, I regularly felt ridiculous to be going through all the trouble to hike those eighty-five miles over eleven days, when a cozy car ride could close the distance in a few hours.

But it had been a dream for years to do the Canterbury Pilgrimage, and, finally, here we were sauntering through the English countryside on our slender footpath. The slow pilgrim way has its own rationale that diverges wildly from the hurried highway. That contrast became a sort of parable of the life of faith for us as we went. Foolish as we felt, and in spite of the pain and inconvenience, we began to discover that, by its very nature, pilgrimage afforded us a peculiar sort of contact with the kind of life God dreams of for his beloved children. The little wild plums, red and yellow, that winked brightly at us from along the footpath would have gone unseen, untasted. Those shy fruits were like a quiet song that would have been unheard and unavailable to us had we opted

for the louder, more obvious way. Certainly there was an easier and less painful route, but not one so beautiful and sweet as this.

Walking together, my friends and I learned as we went, helping each other recognize when we needed rest, and encouraging one another when we were tempted to give up. We passed around bandages for blisters and sang hymns in the sheltering coolness of empty village churches. We'd sit around the dinner table at the end of each day, feet throbbing madly, and laugh from a kind of joy that only comes with having been miserable together.

Recently, I read that joy is not about removing suffering. Instead, joy is what grows when you look up to discover someone is glad to be with you even in the most miserable of places.⁵ When he gave himself so gladly to blaze a trail home to the heart of God, Jesus revealed something astonishing about what's at the core of reality; he gave us a peek into the center of things. What a surprise to find that God, who you'd expect to skip over the misery of pilgrimage in his private jet, loves instead to walk so closely with us along the narrow way of grief and sorrow, revealing great beauty along the way.

The poet Malcolm Guite reminds us that the obvious gods of our own invention always stand "Aloof from birth and death and pain." In contrast, the surprising, true God was "born to these burdens, borne by all / Born with us all 'astride the grave' / Weak to be with us when we fall, / And strong to save."⁶

Jesus is our fellow pilgrim, accompanying us along a painful, but more beautiful way. I once heard an African professor say that the pain and the beauty are not enemies; they walk along holding

⁵Jim Wilder and Michel Hendricks, *The Other Half of Church: Christian Community, Brain Science, and Overcoming Spiritual Stagnation* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2020), 54–56.

⁶<https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/2012/12/25/descent-a-christmas-poem/>

hands.⁷ Likewise, Jesus' suffering was one of the central qualifications for the job of Savior.⁸ He was walking with me in the valley of death after my divorce. His face, glad to shine upon me even there, proved that his love could not be overwhelmed by all that had so overwhelmed me.

Jesus has made himself so clear, demonstrated such an astonishing (even embarrassingly strong⁹) desire to be with us, that we have every reason to rest. Clearly, he wants to be with us no matter where we find ourselves—that's the definition of joy.

Before You Give Up

"I could never have imagined life could be this hard," my friend said.

Glad to be there, even if I was unable to maintain eye contact, I nodded silently.

What is there to say? What is there to do but sit in the proverbial sackcloth and ashes, to lay yourself down beneath the waves of the way things are? At many points along our pilgrimage, we find ourselves staring blankly at the blackened timbers of what used to be our home, and what is there to do but grieve?

I've lost count of the times I've spun my wheels over some sorrow only to get even more stuck in the rut of confusion than before. Some knots just won't untangle; some problems you just

⁷"Joy and Sorrow are twin sisters; they walk down the street holding hands." Paraphrasing St. Augustine, Dr. Emmanuel Katongole said this at the Duke Reconciliation Conference in 2010. I'm also reminded of George MacDonald's book *Lilith* and the character Mara, who initially seems to be an enemy but proves an ally, equipping the protagonist, Mr. Vane, by way of sorrow.

⁸Hebrews 2:10

⁹Crucifixion was such a shameful death; Jesus was more than willing to make a fool of himself for us.

can't figure out. They can only be grieved until they take their place in our stories. I think that's part of what grief must be about: not solving things, *per se*, but learning how to understand ourselves, now that *this* has come to inhabit our stories with us. How do I live in the house of my own life with *this thing* perched in the attic, asleep in the basement, or showing up unwanted at the dinner table again? Or, as is the case when a grief is brand new, when this thing takes up all the space in every room like fire and smoke.

Grief would be the death of us, if Jesus had not been willing to join us in it. But the light of his face transforms every wearisome road, every grave, every pit, every heart he enters.

In the years since my divorce, I've been fitfully learning, as Doug McKelvey says, "how sorrow and hope were never enemies, but co-laborers. For it is sometimes the work of our grief to hew out deep cisterns where the sustaining waters of eternal hope might afterward pool."¹⁰ Grief, rather than being a pit to avoid, proved to be one more opportunity to discover Jesus' steady, tender presence accumulating.

And so, this middle album and book are about learning to hold on to Jesus and, in him, to hold on to each other. Maybe that's another way of saying it's an album about grief and learning to suffer well, finding that joy accompanies us on our pilgrimage. To suffer well means to die, maybe not happily, but never alone or without hope. Our hope for the future is in Christ himself, of course, yet, even here and now, we have every reason to expect to be surprised by good things we couldn't have imagined;¹¹ a miraculous joy is woven through all our grief.

¹⁰Douglas Kaine McKelvey and Ned Bustard, *Every Moment Holy: Death, Grief, and Hope* (Nashville: Rabbit Room Press, 2021), 319.

¹¹"I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living" (Ps 27:13).

Living through the Gap

But why do we have to deal with grief in the first place? Because there is a gap between how the world presently is and how it ought to be. Heaven and earth were torn asunder by the Fall, but Creation's King is mending the rift.

In the last book, we saw the woman at the well meet Jesus, and I shared how that meeting opened a way to discover Jesus's love for myself in my time of deepest grief and loss. But what happened next for the Samaritan woman? Everything changed for her, and she lived happily ever after, right? A fairy-tale ending! If we're honest that's not how the story usually goes. More likely, what comes after the initial relief of that first long drink of Living Water by Jacob's well is a shock of disappointment. Yes, everything changed *for* her but not everything changed *around* her, or *within* her.

But wasn't meeting Jesus supposed to fix everything? It's as if Beauty and the Beast kiss at last, but instead of the Beast instantly transforming back into a handsome prince, nothing appears altered. Ironically, there's comfort in that; it means that Jesus loves us like Beauty loves the Beast: while we are still big, hairy sin-monsters. G. K. Chesterton says, "The great lesson of 'Beauty and the Beast,' [is] that a thing must be loved before it is lovable."¹² The love of Christ is not blind; he sees with the eye of God's prophetic imagination, choosing us in light of who we will be and allowing that image to work steadily backward into the present.

Someday the gap between how things are and how they ought to be will close. Meanwhile, we wait here in the present, feeling impatient and maybe more than a little frustrated. Is it supposed to be this way? What is going on here?

¹²Chesterton and Wax, 68.

The Wheat and the Tares

There's a little parable in Matthew's Gospel that helps me get some context for that frustration. As it turns out, there really is something about the world that isn't working the way God intended.¹³

Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared."

The owner's servants came to him and said, "Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?"

"An enemy did this," he replied.

The servants asked him, "Do you want us to go and pull them up?"

"No," he answered, "because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn" (Matt 13:24–30).

According to this parable, what's our situation? It looks like we're in a world that has been corrupted by an enemy of God. "An enemy did this," says the farm owner. An Enemy who prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking whom he might devour—a bent Enemy, a thorny growth on a mission to steal, kill, and destroy. Much that is growing and proliferating in this world is opposed to God, does harm to his work, and was not sown by God. Then

¹³I'm making a distinction between what God intended and what God allowed. God allowed for a world in which the choice to love was possible, which allows for the possibility of the opposite choice. However, God desires and wills no evil.

why not yank up the weeds and get rid of the problem of evil and pain? Interestingly, the weeds are called “tares” or “darnel,” and the idea is that these weeds look a lot like wheat while they’re growing. That’s why the servants are told not to try to sort them out, because they may not be able to judge accurately between what’s a weed and what’s wheat. Only the harvesters at the end of the age are judges clear-eyed enough to untangle this confused mess.

Until then, it is a mess, isn’t it? All manner of evil seems to happily reproduce and flourish with wild, wicked abandon, while the little flowers of God struggle to take root and open their faces beneath a canopy of ever-spreading briars. That’s the way it is, but that’s not the way it will always be. These are the conditions under which we have been asked to keep faith until the time of ripeness.

Like every analogy, this one can only go so far. There’s another thing, beyond the natural farming imagery of this parable, that the wider context of the gospel of redemption suggests to me: one more thing that might cause the Farm Owner to allow the weeds to keep growing till the End—namely, God’s merciful patience.

If we set this parable alongside images where wild branches that would otherwise be destroyed are being grafted into God’s Vine, we’re reminded that the Farmer sees possibilities for redemption that those in a hurry to pull up the weeds couldn’t imagine. People, unlike plants, *can* be converted, healed, transformed. Yes, the disease of evil has been mixed in with the good soil; tares have been sown alongside the wheat, but with God all things are possible, and Jesus can supernaturally transform a willing weed into a golden stalk of wheat.

In fact, isn’t this the story of every Christian? By God’s mercy, we who were not by nature children of God have been born again and made his children, and we who were not God’s people are now called the people of God. Enemies have been transformed into

friends, strangers into family, slaves into freemen. This is new birth, new creation: a supernatural, miraculous conversion from one kind of thing to another kind of thing. At any point, any weed in the world may turn to Jesus and say, “Uproot me from the domain of death, and plant me in your kingdom of life. Graft me into the Tree of Life that I might bear the glorious fruit of everlasting joy.”

A Tale of Two Family Trees

I’m from a small town in Mississippi. In fact, I’m the fifth generation to live in the same town. So you can understand why it wasn’t unusual for me growing up to be stopped someplace by an older person and asked if I was Joe and Susan’s son. That was usually followed by, “I could tell you were a Clark.”

It’s fun to have that kind of rootedness in a place for so long, but it also means you can’t get away with much of anything. There’s no anonymity. Beautifully, there is a sense of belonging to a family, a story, and a history that stretches far beyond yourself. Families provide much of the context we need to help us locate ourselves in the world. Certain families have peculiarities that set them apart and deepen the sense of particularity that gets attached to a name. “I could tell you were a Clark” meant they recognized something *Clarkish* about me that even I may not have been fully aware of. I have noticed that my laugh sounds like my uncle’s. And as I’ve grown older, a love for silence and the outdoors that is clearly from my dad has come to the fore. I can’t help but think of Gandalf telling the homebody Bilbo in *The Hobbit* that his latent sense of adventure was due to his Tookish blood.

The Bible is not the story of everything God ever did. Instead, it is the story of a particular and very peculiar family called Israel, through whom he would provide a Messiah to bring salvation to the whole world. Now, before Abraham was called, there were

no such things as Israelites or Jews. They simply didn't exist. God invented them by calling Abram (later Abraham) to leave his land and family and become the starting point of an entirely new people. Throughout the Old Testament, God multiplies Abraham and Sarah's descendants until they become a giant family, eventually called "Israel" (the name given by God to Abraham's grandson Jacob at Peniel). And one of the main things about them is that, when you run into one of them, you can tell who their daddy is. They talk a certain way. They look a certain way. They bear the namesake—the family likeness—and follow the peculiar household ways of an unusual deity called Yahweh.

When you get to the New Testament, you see the family tree get even bigger, as Jesus opens the doors of his Father's house to the Gentiles. He offers them a place in God's family through faith. Paul says faith was how Abraham became a member of God's family in the first place. In fact, Paul's letter to the Romans is largely an explanation of how both Jews and Gentiles have been called to respond in faith to the same graceful invitation to take on God's family name, as we're grafted into Christ. To be called by God's name in this world (and in the world without end that's coming) is what locates us within the fabric of a grand family that contextualizes our very existence through the beautiful interweaving of holy love. Peter even goes so far as to say that we have been enabled and invited to participate in the divine nature of the Trinity: to become more *Trinity-ish*.

So imagine there is a tree whose roots extend, not downward through the soil, but backward through the ages until they somehow penetrate the rear wall of time itself, reaching back before the cosmos was even created to the Original Family: the Holy Trinity. The uncreated Family of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit overflows with such a fecundity of joy that only something as vast, mysterious,

and beautiful as an entire ever-expanding universe could possibly be a fitting manifestation of that generative love.

There in the womb of the Trinity's imagination, a dream takes shape and grows to a realization. Light breaks, falling like water upon the pristine floor of time. A new name is named, and in the naming its entirety is ratified, truthed into being. The Original Family sends a sapling up through the fertile soil of their love and bodies-forth a universe-worth of good fruit. The crowning of this whole bursting-forth of generation is humankind.

This is where things get really strange. It makes sense to me that a vast cosmos would be an appropriate expression of God's glory—but humans? Us little folks? Even more bizarre is that humans were specifically created through the Son to eventually serve as the perfectly fitting thing for Jesus to become when he would be born into his own Creation in order to unite it to himself. That is what humans are. That is our peculiar capacity. By the will of the Father, in the Son, through the Spirit, humanity was created to be married into the Godhead.

This is wild stuff, y'all. The destiny—the destination—God dreamed up for every human from before the creation of the world has always been to be *with* and *like* this Jesus who came to be *with* and *like* us. He in us and us in him, in a world without end.

Or... not. God is no trespasser. He won't force us, and the Family Tree of God ain't the only game in town anymore. There's another tree. I hate to even call it a tree; it's really a sort of anti-tree, an un-family. It bears fruit for death and decay, as its ragged, thorny branches ever clutch and claw at the Family Tree of God, working to strip it bare, to break off its beautiful branches, and wither its roots. But those roots extend far deeper than the reach of any cold, bitter frostbite that evil can manage, because they extend beneath and beyond Creation itself to the almighty heart of the ever-living Trinity.

Wait... I'm So Confused

To catch us up to speed, God creates a beautiful, good world into which an Enemy sows evil. The Devil is always working to put asunder what God has joined together. Ever since humanity ingested that diabolical lie back in the Garden, this poison has remained an inextricable part of us. Now goodness, which is Creation's true nature, is *fused* together with evil (which by now has become second nature to us). In fact, we've gotten so used to it that it's easy to think that evil is somehow primary, rather than an unnatural, invasive (and temporary) disease. This fusing-together leads to an incredible tension that we live with: *confusion*. We, and everything we know, have been mixed with the sticky, sickly sap of the Family Tree of Evil, leaving a red stain on every hand, ever since we were ousted from Eden.

The LORD of love, however, was not about to abandon his dream for his family. He calls Abraham, and slowly shapes a custom-made people who will preserve the memory of his Name, and through whom he will carefully craft a cultural context for a coming Savior. Any good storyteller sets up context for things that he knows will show up later in the storyline, so that when they happen, the reader will have been prepared to make sense of them. You know how it is: in the right group of friends, a single word or gesture can ignite a wave of knowing looks or laughter. That's why when John the Baptist says, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world," the darkened imagination of every Israelite in earshot suddenly bursts into brilliant color as John's words put flame to a long fuse, igniting the carefully laid array of fireworks God has been setting up through nearly two thousand years of culture-making. The Lamb of God? Boom. They get it.

The history of God's people is long and complex, beautiful and heartbreaking, at times strange, at other times painfully familiar. From the very start, God's people were called to make a choice between two family likenesses, two family names, *two family trees*. Will they exit (exodus) one "family" to enter a new, promised one? Or will they confuse the two family lines by trying to somehow fuse idol-worship with Yahweh worship? In that sense, the opposite of holiness is confusion. Holiness is about purity of purpose; confusion is about a mixture of purposes. That's why holiness is meant to be a relief—a cure for the anxiety of endlessly being torn in different directions. The lying adulterer who tries to maintain a second family on the sly can never relax. On a less extreme level, anyone can relate to the stress Paul confesses in Romans 7: he experiences the conflict within his own heart between wanting to do good and failing to do so.

Interestingly, Paul *is* a Christian at this point! Again, why didn't meeting Jesus do the trick? Maybe because there is no "trick" when you're talking about eternal human souls; there's only the long, slow pilgrimage of daily steps—ordinary choices between whether to plant yourself in this or that family tree. A million cumulative decisions that either increase holiness or exacerbate confusion. Paul seems to be saying that even Christians have to keep fighting to choose to abide in this new family tree Christ has grafted us into, but if we are in Christ we don't have to beat ourselves up about the fact that the tension remains, since, as far as God is concerned, "there is now no condemnation" (Rom 8:1).

The condemnation is gone, but the weeds and wheat are left to grow together until the end of the age, so the call to keep faith in the midst of a confusing world remains. Now, here is the Joy set before us: one day the Only Unconfused One will come to judge his cosmos. Jesus is the only one qualified to untangle what's been so thoroughly confused. He's the only one who even knows

what all this would look like in a pure state.¹⁴ Judgment will set the groaning cosmos free from its bewilderment and frustration. Evil and its adherents will be removed entirely. This is God's Rest, God's promised Sabbath.

It may even be that, once we're born again of the Spirit through baptism, our spirit is new but we have the same old body. We are waiting for our body to catch up with our spirit: to go through its own baptism into Christ's physical death by actually dying, which will be followed by resurrection. Once nestled in the ground, the acorn of our present body will be ready to be raised up a mighty oak of righteousness. Once we're reborn, first spiritually then finally materially, all conflict within ourselves will be resolved into purity. Can you imagine the relief?

The Lover's Song Deepens

In the meantime, remaining in the love of Jesus, keeping that vision of the loving face that quenched our thirst by Jacob's well ever before us, does not happen without a lot of effort and the help of fellow pilgrims. Once the honeymoon is over, the steady day-to-day business of staying tender, attentive, faithful, and durable deepens. Where has the water gone? The luxurious spring rains that nourished young love now alternate with seasons of drought. We stand, panting, by an empty riverbed and hear the call to send our roots down ever deeper in search of unseen waters. The lover who sang with such ease by Jacob's well, will find her throat parched during these desert seasons. She may doubt whether the old song of love can endure such withering heat. Some days, singing doesn't come easily. On these days, choosing to sing feels rote, dead, even dishonest.

¹⁴When the blueprints have been destroyed, only the original architect can reconstruct the burned-down house. I'm thinking of how God's holiness, rather than being an occasion for him to "rub our nose in it," means he's qualified to heal us. His purity has not been compromised; therefore, a reliable resource for our healing has been lovingly protected.

We've not been abandoned, however; there is Living Water to be found in the deep, unseen reservoirs toward which our thirsty root-tips reach. This is a work of faith-keeping, of perseverance.

The problem compounds when you consider that the Bride of Christ has plenty of nagging old lovers constantly trying to insinuate themselves into the situation. I'm thinking of Penelope, whose husband Odysseus has been lost for twenty years. She waits in faith, but is plagued by suitors who hang around all day trying to get her attention. She must keep the face of her true husband in her mind. She must not let her love grow cold. Penelope is committed to a particular family tree, but she's surrounded by groping branches and creeping vines, always trying to overwhelm her house like kudzu.

Looking for a Place to Belong

I was a blues and classic rock devotee when I first started playing guitar. I wanted to be the next Jimi Hendrix (this was before I found out about Phil Keaggy, Mark Knopfler, Rich Mullins, and David Wilcox), and so I'd come home from school every day and sit in front of my guitar amp, put on a Hendrix album, and do my best to play along with everything. I'd do this for hours and hours. My parents' poor ears!

Like all of us as we're growing up, I was working hard to get inside an identity. I had friends who followed certain jam bands around the country for a while; they even got the tattoos. We all want to belong; we want to get inside of something we love—to be encompassed by it. If we can do that, we'll feel located meaningfully in some way. We'll be able to point in one direction and say, "I came from there," and in another direction and say, "I'm on my way there."

Corporate imagination is a term I learned from Joseph C. Atkinson. It describes the Israelite's way of seeing himself in the

world as profoundly encompassed, rooted within a specific family identity. The Hebrew cannot imagine himself in any other way apart from his embeddedness in the “body” of Abraham.¹⁵ To be an Israelite is to be “in” Abraham, “in” Isaac, “in” Jacob. This is dramatically different from our current sense of self, since we have inherited an *individualistic imagination*. Because we each see ourselves as a self-determining, autonomous unit, the Hebrew’s relational self-understanding can be very difficult for us to wrap our minds around. It’s even likely to feel offensive. At the same time, we long to find ourselves lovingly bonded within a storied body that can supply a sense of past and future. How else can we hope to develop a context of meaning and purpose in the present? Hope lives or dies on this context.¹⁶

Context for the Israelite was being 1) a child of Abraham, 2) a covenantally bonded child of Yahweh, 3) in the Promised Land, 4) with God dwelling in your midst in the temple. Those are the four points on their compass of reality; that’s how they located themselves meaningfully in the world. You can imagine how devastatingly disorienting it was for that same Israelite to find himself exiled to Babylon: his biological link to Abraham is threatened by assimilation among the Gentiles, the covenant that ratified him is damaged beyond recognition, he’s kicked out of Abraham’s land, and his God has abandoned the temple, now a far-off desolate ruin.

¹⁵Joseph C. Atkinson, *Biblical & Theological Foundations of the Family: The Domestic Church* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 161.

¹⁶*Context* is a word that has to do with fabric. *Textile* and *texture* are sibling words. Our lives are threads woven together in meaningful patterns. The patterns, the stories, that make up the fabric situate otherwise *stranded* strands within a texture of hope. As we begin to pick up on the patterns of God’s dream for this world, we discover intention and promise calling us forward toward a beautiful destiny, giving us strength to keep faith in the present.

Because he had taken it for granted and failed to care for it, everything by which he understands himself has sunk to the ocean floor. He is stranded. Torn from the cloth of context. Shipwrecked and lost alone in the waters of chaos. Our exiled Israelite is undergoing a profound crisis of meaning. His past has been nullified, his future eradicated.

This is where our psalmist is, as he writes from beside the rivers of Babylon in Psalm 137.

By the Rivers of Babylon

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.
There on the poplars
we hung our harps,
for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
How can we sing the songs of the LORD
while in a foreign land? (Ps 137:1–4)

There’s only one thing worse than losing everything (especially when it really is your fault), and that’s to have some jerk rub your nose in it.

Here’s our exiled psalmist being kicked, when he’s already down, by a smirking, sarcastic Babylonian slave driver. Can’t you just hear the feigned pathos in the voice of the tormentors as they jeeringly shear away every last bit of dignity? “Oh, how it would bless our little Babylonian hearts to hear one of your Promised Land songs, if it wouldn’t trouble you. Yes, sing a little more loudly, if you please. It really is a sweet sound to our ears.” Humiliating.

Israel collapses in a weeping heap. *From now on: no more singing.*

We are not lovers; we are not beloved. We are divorced, family-less. We are no one and nowhere. Hang up those harps. God has hidden his face from us and we are utterly lost.

Lest we think our psalmist is throwing a pity party or being overly dramatic, we can be assured that he is not. Babylon and the other bullies of the ancient world really were cruel. Jeremiah, the prophet sent by God in an effort to save Israel from this mess, writes Lamentations after everyone has been deported.

Look, LORD, and consider:

Whom have you ever treated like this?
Should women eat their offspring,
the children they have cared for?
Should priest and prophet be killed
in the sanctuary of the LORD?
Young and old lie together
in the dust of the streets...
those I cared for and reared
my enemy has destroyed. (Lam 2:20–22)

Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, prophesied for twenty-six years before Babylon laid siege to Jerusalem, where mothers grew desperate enough to eat their offspring. Twenty-six years of eyes and ears decidedly closed to God's pleading. This is an unimaginable sorrow. The book of Israel's story has been brutally shredded; where is there to go from here? How do we live, now that this grief has filled the house? *Hang up those harps. How can we sing those old Yahweh songs in this hell?* Those songs must've seemed quaint. The word of the LORD by then could only leave a bitter taste on the tongue, quite unlike honey, and sour the stomach. Every good thing that came before must've felt like a cruel farce. *No, this "lover" will never sing again.*

But then.

Then, something astonishing happens. Some kind of miraculous hope is let down in these bitter waters like an anchor from an unseen ship; a vision of an Ark stirs in his beleaguered heart, and our psalmist rallies. He makes a decision to take up the song of faith. Right here. Right where it feels most foolish and idiotic.

If I forget you, Jerusalem,
 may my right hand forget its skill.
May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
 if I do not remember you,
if I do not consider Jerusalem
 my highest joy. (Ps 137:5–6)

The lamenting lover shall sing.

They spread a net for my feet—
 I was bowed down in distress.
They dug a pit in my path—
 but they have fallen into it themselves.
My heart, O God, is steadfast,
 my heart is steadfast;
 I will sing and make music.
Awake, my soul!
 Awake, harp and lyre!
 I will awaken the dawn.
I will praise you, LORD, among the nations;
 I will sing of you among the peoples. (Ps 57:6–9)

Old Testament scholar John Oswalt points out that among the many nations subjugated by Babylon and later taken over by Persia, the southern tribes (Judah, Levi, Benjamin) are the only

people we know of who responded to Cyrus's invitation to return to their respective homelands. Why? Perhaps because they were the only people who had refused to make themselves at home in a foreign land.¹⁷ They stayed strange, clinging to their *Jew-ishness*. The southern tribes of Israel were the only ones to keep the songs of Zion alive, refusing to be assimilated in exile by handing over their harps to an alien family tree.

Psalm 137 ends on a famously disturbing note, calling for the Babylonian babies to be “dashed against the rocks.” Two things are worth mentioning here. One is that God invites real people in real pain to be painfully honest, rather than saying what they’re “supposed to say.” If you’ve read them, you’ve noticed this is basic to the scriptures; God is interested in engaging us as we actually are. God can handle it. So, the psalmist is just being brutally forthright: he wants Babylon wiped off the face of the earth.

Second, I think this call for God to stop Babylon from reproducing can be read in terms of this whole family-tree theme that we’ve been talking about. Israel is God’s Family Tree in the world, and Babylon represents the rival Family Tree of Evil. Babylon’s wicked limbs keep sprouting and breeding oppression. The psalmist is begging God to chop down the family tree that’s chopping down Israel.

A Joy Hidden in Grief

The lover’s song wells up, durable even in the withering places where the bruised branches of God’s Family Tree droop like faces heavy from weeping. It wells up because we are loved by a God whose love endures forever. Luthier Martin Scheske points out that we follow a God who suffered even as he created the world, because to create something and give it freedom to reject you is to

¹⁷John Oswalt, from a sermon series on Nehemiah I heard at Indian Springs Holiness Camp in July 2021.

choose vulnerability.¹⁸ Christ simply continues that trend at the cross. Then we too pick up our crosses to walk in this world as holy fools. We are assured that this is the way to life that is truly life: those who sow in tears shall reap in joy;¹⁹ those pilgrims who pass through the valley of weeping make it a place of springs.²⁰

That doesn't mean the hard things aren't really hard or the sad things are less sad. But it does mean they aren't the only things. They don't have the final word. A Christ who dies on a cross is a realist about the pain of being a human in a broken world, so we are right to lament and grieve. At the same time, followers of a Christ who has outlived death can afford to sing, laugh, and feast without fear of our hope being mere escapism or sugary sentimentality, no matter how foolish we may feel as we hold to the hope of an everlasting, joyful life.

But you can bet that keeping this kind of faith will feel foolish. It always has. Perhaps the three temptations of Christ in the desert have to do with rejecting ways the world proffers a pseudo-salvation. Jesus passes that test by rejecting escapism, spectacle, and power.²¹ There's so much pressure to either numb-out, perform to earn love, or seek dominance. It is exhausting. Jesus offers relief by laying out a different approach to life, a fitting yoke that won't rub us raw. He is the Man of Sorrows who yet carries a vision of a mysterious and indomitable joy. He doesn't check out when life gets painful, put on a show to purchase anyone's affection, or intimidate his way to the top of the heap. He descends to the dead. And, as Paul sings in Philippians, the way down *was* the way up

¹⁸Martin Schleske, Donata Wenders, and Janet Leigh Gesme, "The Parable of Jesus" in *The Sound of Life's Unspeakable Beauty* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 166–167.

¹⁹Psalms 126:5

²⁰Psalms 84:6

²¹For more on this idea, visit: <https://thecultivatingproject.com/when-i-lay-down-then-i-awaken/>

all along, as Christ, for his humiliation and death, is given a name that is above every name. His is a name you can love for its beauty.

The Feast of Faithfulness

Throughout my childhood, I was a complete non-athlete. I took refuge either behind the covers of a book or the wooden shield of a guitar. Yet I recall having a little bookmark in my Bible that pictured a charging football player accompanied by the verse, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil 4:13, NKJV). Perhaps this was just one more sign of how we tend to frame life as a ladder of success we are to climb, a competition we are to win, with God injected into the muscle like some steroid to power our ambitions. Even as a kid, I sensed some irony that I couldn’t put my finger on.

But Paul, when he wrote those words, was not climbing a ladder of worldly success; he was climbing Jacob’s ladder, which is Christ; he was climbing “foolishly” downward into the sufferings of Christ. This Christ who humbly, willingly climbed up²² the thorny iron rungs of that proud emblem of the Family Tree of Evil itself—the cursed tree: the Cross. From there, Jesus burrowed beneath the roots of evil and uprooted wickedness and death at their deepest point. In the greatest narrative twist to date, the picture flips and we see that Jesus crucifies the Evil Tree against his own body, mercilessly pinning death to himself until the craven wood of wickedness is emptied of its sickly substance and converted from a sign of despair to an emblem of unshakable hope.

That is why, like those sorrowing travelers on the road to Damascus, Paul was ever accompanied on his pilgrimage by the

²²Ironically, Jesus willingly climbs up the cross as a way of enacting a humble downward movement into suffering. He goes “up” to bring down pride, and “down” to lift up humility.

surprising, indomitable joy of Jesus burning in his heart. Come what may, Paul's joy was a fixed, constant reality, stabilizing him in the midst of every manner of instability.

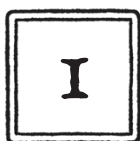
Dietrich von Hildebrand describes faith-keeping in terms of constancy.²³ Will I change as things change? Shift as things shift? Move with the shadows in this land of shadows? Will I drift with the wandering stars that blink and sway upon the branch-tips of that Wicked Tree like the lure of an angler fish? Or might an immovable core of joy accumulate in the vault of my heart, guarded there by a supernatural stillness, until it becomes as fixed as the Absolute Mirth at the heart of reality? Will I walk in the warm light of that dear smiling face that remains always and ever beyond the reach of any moth, beyond the gnawing rot of any rust? Is there a holy song, durable and enduring beyond imagining, that may somehow abide even in this restless flesh? A holiness that both encompasses from without and abides within the entire cosmos, breathing forth a ceaseless song of unchanging love? A Polaris, unmoving, anchoring every sea-thrashed sailor to his unseen, longed-for homestead?

Like the woman at the well, Paul has seen the face of Jesus and he is persuaded that in a shaking world, this One Thing is utterly unshakable. If this one unshakable face has set his claim of love upon us, nothing and no one on either side of the grave can break our Lord's beautiful, gladdening gaze. It is the constancy of God's love that accumulates at our core, his fidelity that enables us to endure—to sustain the lover's song on our long pilgrimage through both sweet-scented forests and valleys of decay.

To lift up our hearts and sing in faithful lament or grateful praise, whatever may come, is the call of the pilgrim who presses

²³Dietrich Von Hildebrand, *The Art of Living* (Steubenville, Ohio: Hildebrand Press, 2017), 9.

on to that final unveiling, that final blessed facing of Bride and Bridegroom. Every small step, every enduring note of the lover's song, every ordinary act of prophetically imaginative obedience keeps the peculiar savor of a holy feast amidst the confusion. Like a lamp on a stand, a beacon-city grows like a Great Family Tree in the distance, beckoning the faith-keepers (and their neighbors) Homeward.



You Belong

In this solitude we encourage each other to enter into the silence of our innermost being and discover there the voice that calls us beyond the limits of human togetherness to a new communion. In this solitude we can slowly become aware of a presence of him who embraces friends and lovers and offers us the freedom to love each other, because he first loved us...

Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out*

*God sets the lonely in families,
he leads out the prisoners with singing;
but the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land.*

Ps 68:6



Monday nights were for family dinner. For a while, I lived in a community house with friends in Memphis. We decided to set aside one night every week, committing to sharing a meal. We often ate together at other times, too, but around this meal we made a sort of pact. We knew that if we expected to create a habitat of real belonging and hospitality, we had to be serious about maintaining a particular quality of companionship.

To this we added a Thursday morning household prayer time, establishing a rhythm we could build the rest of our week around. As we worked our various jobs and kept up with other friends, we could return to a solid core back home. That home, those people, and our rhythms together kept me stable during one of the most frightening and unstable seasons of my life. So much was exploding to pieces, but there was a center that held, that held me. I hate to imagine what might have happened to me had I not had that little group of friends who kept me repeatedly, routinely in contact with a good, loving reality that differed so sharply from much of my circumstance.

Life is rhythmic like that, isn't it? We eat, but just a few hours later, we're hungry again. We sleep, wear out, and the need to sleep returns. It shouldn't surprise us when our heart-needs repeat like the physical patterns of hunger and relief. Someone loves us with certainty, and before we know it, sad imaginings, like brambles, cover over the confidence their affection had given us. Then, the next day, we sit across from them at the table and their smile, their talk, clears away the overgrowth; we remember what's true.

Maybe we wish it wasn't that way—or maybe it's part of a generous design of need and provision that offers repeated opportunities for us to enjoy the same good thing over and over. That sounds like abundance. I mean, I'm glad I get to eat more than a single good meal in my life. One thing is for certain: good things take repeated, hands-on, deliberate maintenance.

It seems we're created to enjoy a kind of glorious repetition, like the child in G. K. Chesterton's *Orthodoxy* who asks his daddy to "do it again" because like God who daily says "Do it again" to the sun, he still has the "eternal appetite of infancy." So, if I read the Bible every day, it's not because it's the right thing to do, but because otherwise I will lose my grip on reality; the voice and face of the one who has loved me will drift into a fog.

The same pattern holds everywhere. Just like I need to sleep, eat, and move every day, I need to hear the voices, see the faces, feel the touch of the ones who loved me yesterday, again today. The repetition makes a joyful recognition possible: we are abundantly loved into a fabric of belonging.



You Belong

Wait, wait, before you give up
Breathe, breathe, and remember what's true
When you feel like you're a stranger
And you can't find a friend

You belong to someone who loves you
You belong to someone who loves you
You belong, you belong
You were made to belong...to someone who loves you

Some days the clouds will not part
Most days there's a fog on your heart
But you've been around enough
To know the daylight will come

You belong to someone who loves you

Someone who's written your name on his hands
Someone who laid down his life
Someone who waited with tears in his eyes
And kept watch down the road for his runaway child

I know with the world like it is
Hope tends to slip through your fists
But the truth is the truth
Though the whole world tell lies
You belong to someone who loves you



Rain

Emily Verdoorn

Wait.

This is a hard word. A hard action because it seems like inaction.

I spent nine months in central Texas a few years ago, participating in a fellowship through a local Anglican church while teaching art at a private school.

I was a Midwest girl transplanted to the plains of Texas.

In my native Midwest, fall comes first with the smell of rain. Yes, there are clear, crisp days where the blue sky sings a piercing and impossible song, but beckoning these autumnal days forward is a deeper smell: regular rain fronts signal the air to become crisp and cool. They are a signal to me as well: the squinting brightness of August, the tense sound of the air conditioner, the sticky heat will soon let up. With the first *pat pat* of rain I can feel my shoulders rest and my forehead unclench. That little irksome headache I didn't consciously recognize lifts.

Late September and early October in central Texas are very different from my hometown autumn. To a native Texan and to many wholehearted lovers of sunshine, I do not doubt that these months have their late summer graces. But for me as the days and

weeks stretched on with no hint of rain, the feeling of desert grew heavy. Words from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* rattled around in my head: "Here there is no water, only rock / Rock and no water."²⁴ I felt like moss, displaced and dry, "straining toward the scent of rain," as Robin Wall Kimmerer described it in her book *Gathering Moss*.²⁵ I found myself yearning for the smell of rain, for the relief that rain brings to a hot and heavy day.

Day by day, October rounded into November without the scent of rain. The sun pressed down on tired baked sidewalks that glared back its brightness. I continued doggedly through the days, teaching at school, reading for my fellowship classes, and longing for rain. Late one evening in November, the air grew electric and bristled with the tenseness of lighting before a storm. Working at our dining room table, I heard the sound of distant thunder. I started up to peer out of the small kitchen window into the lamplit apartment parking lot in time to see faraway lightning deep in the night sky. As the air pressure rose, I seemed to hold my breath in anticipation of the *pat pat* upon the roof—all my senses poised in readiness for the tense air to open up into droplets of rain. I waited, and the rain did not come.

Rain did not come now, nor would it for many weeks yet. I returned restlessly to my seat at the table to tackle more work for the evening. I hadn't known how much changing seasons mattered to me until I felt like a stranger in this desert landscape, searching for a kind of belonging as I waited for the rain. But this time felt so sharp to me because it echoed a thirst in my own heart. It was a long and lonely thirst, a thirst that had begun some time ago. This thirst had prompted my move to Texas to participate in a

²⁴T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ed. Michael North (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), "What the Thunder Said," lines 11–12.

²⁵Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Gathering Moss* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2003), 36.

fellowship involving formational spiritual practices, life together, and day-to-day life deep in participation with the local church. God felt distant and harsh, glaring like the sun, washing out the colors of green grass, fading the paint on buildings. I thirsted for living water, longed to feel the gentle presence of God, but day after day the rain did not come. Had I been forgotten?

I think of my own particular thirst for God's presence, but I also know it is a common experience in the Christian walk. It is a difficult place to be because it is a long and unfulfilled longing in which we wait. The longing to be seen, recognized, known, and loved. Loved in spite of ourselves and, what is more, because of ourselves. Yes, there are formational practices that make us receptive to the presence of God, yet we cannot manufacture closeness. It is a difficult and frustrating in-between place. It is not a walking away from God, nor a distant numbness; it is an active (sometimes exhausting) and seemingly unfruitful search. God will answer, and yet the wait is long, years perhaps, and that is hard. What do I do when, though I earnestly seek and pray, the rain still does not come and God's presence seems as far away as distant lightning in the night? What does it mean to belong even amid this tension, in the discomfort, in the in-between?

During that fall in central Texas I was working on a mixed-media painting, bit by bit as narrow slices of time allowed between reading for my fellowship cohort and teaching at a private school. It often meant painting late at night in my second-story apartment bedroom. I worked at a small desk by my window looking over the top of a crepe myrtle tree onto Austin Avenue below, lit by pale street lamps.

Most of my work is in mixed media—materials from ink and watercolor, to pencil, pen, fabric, thread, stains, and found objects. I collect these together into intimate, intricate webs of images and abstracted marks. Over the past few years I have been forming a

voice and a language of marks that set a tone for my work, but in my day-to-day process I don't usually have a clear idea where the piece I am working on will end up.

My process often begins by staining my painting surface, paper, wood, or canvas. I pool india ink into unfolded emptied teabags. The ink works into the teabag, marking the paper with organic shapes and texture and a hint of warmth around the edges from the tea stain itself. Into and around these stains I layer drawings and marks. Over time, images of places or of bits of the natural world I've collected here and there build up into a kind of web or nest of images, marks, and textures. Sometimes I poke small holes in the paper to sew in lines or shapes. As the piece progresses, I seek to move into it with an openness for where the work may be leading or nudging me to go, paying attention to the particular, being sensitive to the day-to-day world around me, and the nudging of the Spirit within me.

During this time when I felt most dry and forgotten I was making a piece I would later title "Desert." I felt myself gathering images and materials for my artwork in a kind of thirsty search. I was looking to find and fill an emptiness I felt, to resolve the isolation and disconnection I feared. This painting in particular was an interesting process because prayer and introspection felt muffled, distant, and anxious, even painful at times. At this time the posture of listening to the work, to myself, and to the Holy Spirit felt like an echo chamber that only amplified my confused and anxious thoughts. In many ways I simply had to trust the process of the work itself, to let my hands and intuition work in spite of my mind and heart. I moved forward blindly, "vision held open in the dark" as Wendell Berry describes in his poem "Whatever is Foreseen in Joy."²⁶ In some ways my process at the time was like planting: pressing seeds into the dark, trusting that rain would come, trusting seeds would grow.

²⁶Wendell Berry, *A Timbered Choir: Sabbath Poems 1979–1997* (New York: Counterpoint, 1998), line 3.

I was actively choosing to trust in spite of the fact that hope felt overshadowed by confusion.

After staining my paper, I traced a map of ancient Roman catacombs: cold stone underground holding the heartbeat of a new Kingdom. Over these I layered an outline elevation of a Gothic cathedral: cold stone this time conspicuously placed at the center of the city, cathedral walls echoing back the voices of song and chant within. I longed to see and feel the great cloud of witnesses around me so that I did not feel alone. How could a cold heart stone hold the warmth of fellowship and friendship and song? I painted a window with a light glowing from within, a gossamer spider web, a sorrel flower, a tiny St. Francis preaching to the birds, a wind, like breath, tracing itself among the stone, and I painted rain. At that time, I did not have words for what I longed for, so I painted, unknowing.

Near the end of that Texas winter came Lent, Holy Week, and the Easter Season. On Maundy Thursday, after the vulnerability of washing one another's feet, the church altar was stripped of all its linens and paraments. In a stifled kind of emptiness, it was plunged into the darkness of Good Friday. Again the words of T. S. Eliot echoed in my head:

Through the dark cold and empty desolation,
The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters
Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my end is my beginning.²⁷

Good Friday: the day to hold our darkest night, our world-ending despair, the yet-unfulfilled longing crushed. We fasted, prayed, kept watch. It was physically and emotionally exhausting. And then came Holy Saturday.

²⁷T. S. Eliot, *The Four Quartets* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), "East Coker," part V, lines 36–38.

Holy Saturday dawned bright and clear that year in Texas. I walked to the Brazos River and felt out of place. I seemed in a separate world next to people chatting easily to one another, eating their picnic lunches by the bank on this holiday weekend. The darkness of yesterday had lifted a little, leaving a strange stillness: “the still point in the turning world.”²⁸ Amid the tension between the grave and the resurrection, between the battle and the celebration, between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, fell a long stillness.

The stillness was a poignant experience for me on this particular Holy Saturday. I slowly walked along the trail next to the brown Brazos River, thinking, *In a way we are now also in a long Holy Saturday between the conquering of sin, death, and the Devil in Jesus’ first coming, and the restoration of the new heavens and the new earth when Jesus comes again. And what does belonging here on this side of heaven, amid the tension of the Here and Not Yet mean for me, for us?*

Sometimes this long Holy Saturday is a dry and weary desert. My heart feels closed and clenched like a fist. I mumble alongside the psalmist in Psalm 42, “As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (Ps 42:1, ESV). I ask with the psalmist, “Where are you, God?” Through Psalm 42, the psalmist remembers times where he led the procession to the house of God with rejoicing, and he acknowledges that he will again praise God, but right now he feels that God has forgotten him. St. Ignatius of Loyola names this a state of desolation, a movement in our soul that feels tepid and sad with a sense of separateness from our Creator.²⁹ We long for the depths of God to call out to the depths in us: to be overwhelmed

²⁸Eliot, *The Four Quartets*, “Burnt Norton,” part II, line 16.

²⁹St. Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola: A New Translation by Elisabeth Meier Tetlow* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1987), “Rules for Spiritual Discernment,” rule 4.

with the presence of God like a waterfall, like waves, like a deep and beautiful song in the night. And yet we thirst.

I know that this will not last forever; desolation will move to consolation once again. My yearning for rain to bring in the cool autumn days again will be fulfilled. I know that contained in Holy Saturday is the hope of Easter Sunday. Even on this side of heaven there are flashes and glimpses like open windows into the new creation. What does belonging look like in a season of desert, in the in-between time? What does belonging look like when I call and hear only silence? There is no easy answer to this question. But there is the Incarnation.

Again T. S. Eliot is my companion in this thought:

For most of us, there is only the unattended
Moment, the moment in and out of time,
The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,
The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts. These are only hints and guesses,
Hints followed by guesses; and the rest
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.
The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is
Incarnation.³⁰

As I walked next to the Brazos River on Holy Saturday, I still felt displaced. I still felt thirsty. I still wanted to be planted, to sink my roots in rich soil. Like so many of us, I wanted to be received and accepted in a place and by a place. In search of belonging, I have moved around restlessly from place to place. I wanted to feel that this place or that place was my place, that I belonged. But what if

³⁰Eliot, *The Four Quartets*, "Dry Salvages," part V, lines 23–32.

belonging is not so much belonging “in” but rather belonging “to”? What if belonging is not so much a place but a person? I belong not somewhere, but to someone. Jesus is not simply a theological answer to an abstract question. He is a person. Jesus comes to my questions of dryness and belonging in this in-between space, not with an answer, but with himself. Jesus, a person who also thirsted for the presence of God, a person who also felt God’s silence, a person who entered into this in-between time.

Eastertide in Texas came with spring and a small raised-bed garden. It was not my garden, but I was welcome to it, to help weed and to eat some of the lettuce and dill. The garden was just around the corner from my house and I came by every day for the short lettuce season before the sun grew hot and turned the sweet young leaves bitter. Making artwork, making bread, cultivating friendship; all these are like that small raised-bed garden. As this long Holy Saturday continues, we do things like pressing seeds into dark ground in a kind of trust and dependence on things outside ourselves. Like an echo of Eden and a foreshadowing of the coming Kingdom, these things can feel like little wells in the desert. A friend greets me with gladness, and it too is a pool of bright water, an echo of Christ’s love for me. These are Thin Places between heaven and earth: hints and guesses among daily thoughts and prayers, discipline and action. As Jesus’ face felt far away, his voice muffled and my heart dry and cold, I felt these Thin Places preparing the way, slowly softening the hard ground in me, slowly, gently increasing my capacity to love and be loved. To begin to say, “You were there all along.”

Late that Texas fall, I had finished my mixed-media painting and named it “Desert.” In friendship, gardening, painting there is an intentionality and mystery, hope and surrender, work and grace. As I was making “Desert,” I felt closed and clenched like a fist. I wanted to feel the presence of God, but he felt distant and

uninterested. My dry, thirsty heart called, felt no response, and grew tired. Although I could not see it at the time, looking back I can say, “You were there all along.” In the in-between time, this long Holy Saturday, this time where we wait and pray and live and plant and feast and feel alone, cry and laugh, hold, behold, let go, carry, anticipate and wait, my questions and the ache are still with me, but so is Jesus. In truth, the beautiful thing is that the presence of Jesus does not take away the questions or the ache, but he holds them along with me. Jesus does not say that they do not matter anymore because he has come, but rather he says that they matter more than I even know, and he will help me hold them.

Waiting is long; it seems pointless, unfruitful, helpless. A seed is buried in dark ground and we wait. Jesus is laid in the tomb and we wait. The kingdom of heaven is at hand and we wait. And yet no time is wasted. God is not in a hurry; he does not force our affection. Although at times it is hard to see, waiting is far from inactive. It is a time when richness, depth, and complexity enters into the soil of my heart. It is the very soil out of which a particular kind of new life will come. In the in-between, seeds germinate and the humus of the soil grows into a rich nutritious bed. But even in the middle, when waiting doesn’t feel like a rich garden bed, but merely dry, cracked ground hoping for rain, even here Jesus is waiting and hoping too.

Contributors

Emily Verdoorn

Emily Verdoorn is a mixed-media artist from Des Moines, Iowa. For as long as she can remember, Emily has loved drawing and making things. What was unselfconscious play as a child grew into a way of paying attention: to more deeply press into the life of the world around her, to grow in affection, to be awake to the world charged with the presence of Christ. After receiving her BFA at Belhaven University in Jackson, Mississippi, Emily spent some time participating in various intentional communities and ministries such as L'Abri, Brazos Fellows, and Summit Ministries, which have also informed her work. You can find Emily's work and process online at emilyverdoornstudio.com and on Instagram (@emilyverdoornstudio).

Heidi White

Heidi White, MA, is a teacher, editor, podcaster, and author. She teaches Humanities at St. Hild School in Colorado Springs. She is Managing Editor of FORMA Journal and a contributing author, speaker, and consultant at the CiRCE Institute. She is a weekly

contributor on fiction, poetry, and Shakespeare on the Close Reads Podcast Network and the CiRCE Institute Podcast Network. She serves on the Board of Directors of the Anselm Society and sits on the Academic Advisory Board for the Classical Learning Test. She writes fiction, poetry, and essays, and she speaks and writes about literature, education, and the Christian imagination. She lives in Black Forest, Colorado with her husband and children. She also hosts The Daily Poem Podcast.

Benjamin Holsteen

Benjamin Holsteen believes that a life spent in pursuit of awe, wonder, and gratitude in the midst of the everyday is the best preparation for an eternity spent in the presence of their ultimate Source. He spends his days thinking, writing, talking, and living out of this conviction, currently as a PhD candidate in Art and Theology at the University of St. Andrews. He lives on the edge of the North Sea with his wife and two children. You can find him online at benjamin.omg.lol and subscribe to *Transcendent Mixtapes*—his forthcoming newsletter reflecting in writing on religious life in the twenty-first century, filtered through a lifetime of obsessive pop music listening—at transcendentmixtapes.substack.com.

Jason Smith

Jason Smith serves on the board of *An Unexpected Journal*, as a strategist for the C. S. Lewis Foundation, and as the senior editor for acquisitions and development at Wootton Major Publishing. In his spare time, he works a day job as a marketing director for a medical device engineering firm, where he writes about fun things like FDA

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Steven Elmore

Steven Elmore is President of the C. S. Lewis Foundation. He has over twenty years of experience working at nonprofit organizations and educational institutions, including serving as a community college adjunct professor (English composition), software instructor (basic to advanced MS Office), GED instructor (science, history), test preparation tutor, and in a wide range of office management and administration roles. His specific skill sets include event management, teaching/training, team leadership, program management, writing, communications strategy, strategic planning, and computer technology. He is also a writer for *Cultivating Magazine*.

John Barnts

John Barnts wishes he could spend all his time reading, writing, and talking about interesting things. Unfortunately, books cost money, and words are hard to sell, so he spends most of his time playing piano for schools and churches, and working as a case manager in a local Drug Court program in Madison, Mississippi. John and his family moved to Mississippi in 2011 to attend seminary, which led to five glorious years of teaching the Bible at the college level. Before Mississippi, he spent twelve years at a private K-12 in Los Angeles as a music teacher and administrator. He is

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Lancia E. Smith

Lancia E. Smith is an author, photographer, teacher, and business owner. She's the Founder and Executive Director of *Cultivating Magazine* and its discipleship and creative team, The Cultivating Project. She has served in executive management, church leadership, school boards, and art and faith organizations for over thirty years. A recovering addict herself with more than forty years of sobriety, Lancia has done extensive support counseling. Her defining life focus is discipleship, expressed through mentoring, nurturing, and teaching. Lancia and her husband Peter make their home in the Black Forest of Colorado Springs.

Amber Salladin

Amber Salladin is a conductor, pianist, worship leader, singer, organist, and educator based in Manhattan, New York. Amber has worked in churches and for professional choruses in Vancouver, Canada, and London, UK. She is the Music Director at Emmanuel Anglican Church, Arts and Ministry Director for the C. S. Lewis Foundation, Music Teacher at Geneva School of Manhattan, conductor of the Academy for Teachers Chorus, Online Leader for United Adoration, and Principal Pianist and Board Member of the New York Session Symphony. She lives in Manhattan with her husband, Jim and their two boys Caleb (boy soprano) and Peter (future electric guitarist).

Anita Palmer

Anita K. Palmer has always turned to pen and paper to figure out what she thinks, feels, and believes. That propensity launched a career when she fell into editing a Christian publication, which—unrelated to her hiring—soon went to magazine heaven. The experience failed to squelch an appetite for editorial work that included thirteen years in daily newspapers and five as a university media relations officer. For two decades she has worked with publishers and individuals on upward of 125 nonfiction books, and has written more web content, blog posts, newsletters and marketing materials than she cares to count. Born and reared in Southern California, she now lives in Colorado. She is blessed with many dear friends and one kind and brilliant adult son.

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Susan Cowger is the author of a poetry collection, *Slender Warble* (Wipf & Stock/Cascade, 2020), and a chapbook, *Scarab Hiding* (Finishing Line Press, year 2006). Founder and editor emeritus of *Rock & Sling*, her most recent publications include *Ekphrastic Review*, *Windhover*, *Perspectives*, *Crux*, *McGuffin*, *Presence*, and *In A Strange Land: Introducing Ten Kingdom Poets* (2019). She earned her MFA in Creative Writing from Eastern Washington University and her BA in Art with teaching credentials from Montana State University. Married to Dana for forty-seven years, she has four children and twenty-two grandchildren. (I know, she finds this rather shocking too.) Contact her on Facebook and at susancowger.com.

Jonathan Koefoed

Jonathan Koefoed is Associate Professor of History and Director of the Honors Program at Belhaven University, where he teaches courses in American history and the history of thought. He is particularly interested in the dynamic relationship between ideas, their historical context, and the way that any historical idea or author can illuminate the ubiquitous human quest for a good life. His previous intellectual journey involved postdoctoral work at the University of Texas at Austin, a PhD in History from Boston University, an MA in Historical Theology from Saint Louis University, and a BA in Philosophy and History from Arizona State University. His scholarly research focuses on transatlantic intellectual history, particularly the romantic movement and its influence on US thought and culture. His articles have appeared in *Symbiosis: A Journal of Anglo-American Literary Relations* and *Religions*, and his reviews have appeared in such journals as the *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* and *American Nineteenth Century History*.

Elisabeth Adams

Elisabeth Adams has lived in five states, one Canadian province, and the captivating city of Jerusalem, where she studied at Ulpan MILAH and the University of the Holy Land. As a hobbit who's happily spent a fifth of her life abroad, she's a quiet lover of new plants and people and cultures. As a freelance writer and editor for the last dozen-plus years, she loves hearing and telling new tales of God's faithfulness. Currently a cook and mentor for young adults, she's also the smitten aunt of five, and instigator of tea parties for young and old.

Matthew Clark

Matthew Clark is a singer/songwriter and storyteller from Mississippi. He has recorded several full-length albums, including a Bible walk-through called *Bright Came the Word from His Mouth* and *Beautiful Secret Life*. Matthew hosts a weekly podcast, “One Thousand Words—Stories on the Way,” featuring essays reflecting on faith-keeping. A musician and speaker, Matthew travels sharing songs and stories. Whether it’s a song, a podcast, a meal, or an essay, Matthew loves to “make things that make room for people to meet Jesus.” Matthew’s current project, *The Well Trilogy*, consists of three albums, each accompanied by a book of essays. Part One, *Only the Lover Sings* and Part Two, *A Tale of Two Trees*, are available now. Part Three, *Where the River Goes*, arrives mid-2024.

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