

ALL SAINTS

THE SURPRISING STORY *of* HOW
REFUGEES *from* BURMA BROUGHT LIFE
TO A DYING CHURCH

MICHAEL SPURLOCK *and*
JEANETTE WINDLE



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For my wife
and children

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But Jesus answered them,
My Father worketh hitherto,
and I work.

Saint John 5:17

Preface

As I write this, my family and I have just returned from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. As we visited many of the holy sites in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth, and other places, I was more deeply aware of how present Jesus' life seemed to me. Present in the sense of incarnate. The wonder and joy of our faith is that God did not despise the places and times he created, but humbled himself to come among us in time and place and act. It was curious to stand in the Jordan and tell my children that we were at the place, or very near to it, where the heavens were torn open, and the Spirit descended upon Jesus, and God's voice was heard from heaven declaring that Jesus was his Son. Or to stand in the place where the Temple stood and recall that when our Lord was presented there as an infant the glory of the Lord filled the Temple as in days of old. Or even to see the stalls of the money changers near the Jerusalem gates and know that in some ways times haven't changed much since Jesus' days. But more than curious, being in those places gave me a sense of well-being that made it difficult to leave. In another time and place, Jesus was there in that same place where I was now, and when he was there he had been about his Father's business.

The story told within the pages of this book is a story I am on intimate terms with because I lived much of it. I will admit that as the converging stories of Ye Win and Father Bu Christ, and many

other men and women you will meet within these pages, came to life in the stark witness of words on page, I see that I have lived the most staid and bourgeois portion of this story. My own existential crises seem pitiful in comparison to the life and death struggle my brothers and sisters from Burma have endured. And yet, God used that convergence to his own good purposes.

Some years have passed since the events at the heart of this story. But it still lives within me, even though I have moved on to live in a different city and minister in a different church. It lives within me because it is a living story, and it is ongoing. When I was right in the midst of it I had a difficult time telling it, and as I was often asked, I found it difficult to explain what lessons to take away from it. I have come to know that there are many lessons or insights that can be derived from this narrative, and they keep revealing themselves to me like a spring that wells up from within, refreshing my understanding of what I experienced while vicar of my small, but growing, Tennessee parish.

Despite my difficulty explaining it or teaching from it, even when I was in the midst of the events, they resonated with me because the events were so familiar to me. They were familiar because they lived like the Bible reads. It was easy to recognize God's hand at work in our midst because God is as constant as our needs are constant. At certain points in this story we needed water. How many times in Scripture have I read about God providing water to his people when they were in desperate need of it? So when we were in desperate need, and water appeared in unexpected ways from unexpected sources, we could readily say, "Ah, God is here doing what God has always done." At certain times we needed a particular kind of human giftedness, and God sent us just the right man or woman to fulfill our need, and to help fulfill their sense of vocation. How many times in Scripture do a people in need receive a messenger that brings them the word or gift or skill just right for the moment?

At one point we confronted such a dearth of resources, we thought we might as well light a small fire, prepare our last meal, and lie down and die, yet God caused our meager provision to last far beyond our

calculations. Indeed, those meager resources still endure even to the present, and they have always proved sufficient to the needs at All Saints, Smyrna. Our living echoed the lives of other men and women recorded in the Bible and provided comfort and encouragement to those of us living under God's very present providence. Our story, though new and alive to us, is part of the old, old, but ongoing story of God's life and work here on earth. We were living it during the events recorded within these pages, and we are still living it.

In a world where our fellows often ask, "Where is God? Is he real? Does he notice? Does he care?" I can attest that he is very real, he does notice, he does care, and he is right here, right now, alive and well and very much about his business. There was no reason for All Saints to have survived, much less thrived, after it imploded because of human pride and willfulness. If there is no God, what would it matter anyway? But there is one, and only one, and he was in our midst binding up the wounds, commanding us to take up our mats and walk, and leading us through valley and shadow into a place of light, peace, purpose, work, and resurrected life. Why? Because that is what God does for people who long for him, love what he commands, and submit to being led and transformed by him.

What you will find here is a story about a living God, speaking, calling, and seeking to relate to ordinary men and women. You will also find ordinary men and women speaking to God, crying out to him, hearing him, and then trying to live out what they were hearing God ask them to do. You will read about people relating to one another and to God as if it really does matter. What resulted from those relationships is miraculous, but also familiar, and ordinary. Ordinary in the sense that God has always lived, breathed, and moved in these ways. To me, that is a great comfort. God is alive, well, and still at work in his creation and with his people.

"But Jesus answered them, 'My Father is working still, and I am working'" (John 5:17 RSV).

The Reverend Michael Spurlock
Lent 2017

Prologue

The smell was among the worst elements of this never-ending war, even for a battle-hardened soldier like nineteen-year-old Ye Win. The beauty over which he stood guard made the contrast even more stark. Those who compared southeastern Myanmar's hill country to the biblical garden of Eden were not far off. Flowering trees and orchids in yellows, oranges, pinks dotted the scrub jungle. Crystal-clear streams and waterfalls fed mountain folds and valleys, where villages of thatch and bamboo nestled among food crops, fruit trees, and banana palms. Massive teak trees and other hardwoods raised emerald umbrellas to the heavens.

But now the floating mists of a cloud forest served only to provide cover to Burmese troops inching their way uphill. Constant gunfire had frightened off the chitter of monkeys and harsh calls of jungle peafowl and parrots. And the odor! No more the smell of cool damp and crushed vegetation, but of rotting bodies, spent gunpowder, and burning homes.

The odor caught in Ye Win's sinuses, coated his lungs until it seemed he could no longer remember any other scent. Just as he could no longer remember a time before the fighting and killing. Before lying hungry and thirsty on the mountainside in the hope that one more nightfall would hold the Burmese soldiers from further advance.

This particular skirmish had been going on for three days. Like

the rest of his unit, Ye Win had been ordered to dig a foxhole into the mortar-loosened soil of the mountain slope, from which vantage the small guerrilla force could harry government troops attempting to capture the mountain village that served as the Karen National Liberation Army's (KNLA) regional command post. But now dusk had fallen, locking both sides into their current positions, since the pitch black of scrub jungle under a rain-cloaked night sky made any movement suicidal.

By now Ye Win had had enough of the foxhole. The loose soil might be an asset when digging a hole, but all day he'd had to keep one eye out for the enemy while bailing out dirt and pebbles that spilled down on his head. Attempting to sleep down here would be futile. Fortunately, a tall patch of bamboo stood only a short belly-crawl from his foxhole. Nightfall covered his hasty scramble. Now he'd stretch out for just a few hours' sleep, returning to his foxhole in ample time before fighting renewed at dawn.

But Ye Win slept longer than he'd intended. He was awakened by the deep bark of a large artillery gun no more than fifty meters away—and by pain. Just what was wrong he realized only when he heard the rain-patter of machine-gun fire striking the bamboo on all sides of his hiding place. Then he saw the blood. He'd been hit in the leg. No, the abdomen. No, both!

“I've been shot! I've been shot!” Ye Win screamed out.

Around him, KNLA resistance forces were driving the Burmese battalion back down the mountainside. Once the enemy had retreated far enough to permit the deploying of stretcher crews, Ye Win was carried back to the KNLA outpost. Triage divulged that Ye Win had, in fact, received three bullet wounds. A field medic administered morphine and removed the bullets. At least temporarily, the fighting was over for Ye Win.

Over the following days, then weeks, Ye Win lay in the crude thatched shelter—the meager outpost field hospital. With no antibiotics available, infection set in, then malaria. Was he going to die? Ye Win faced the possibility squarely. If he died, what would be his eternal destiny?

Ye Win did not doubt there was a God in heaven who watched Ye Win's every move and ultimately controlled his destiny. A majority of the Karen people, Myanmar's largest ethnic minority, remained animist by religion or had converted to the Buddhism of their Burmese conquerors. But Ye Win's own family was among a sizeable percentage who could trace their Christian heritage back four generations to Adoniram Judson and other foreign missionaries who'd first brought the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Karen, Kachin, Lisu, and other hill peoples of Burma, as Myanmar had once been called. Ye Win's father was a seminary graduate and pastor. Two of his older siblings were evangelists.

But Ye Win himself had turned his back on that life when he'd first joined the Karen resistance army at age thirteen. He couldn't remember the last time he'd set foot in a church. His world, his heart had been so filled with hate, with killing. How could he call out to God with so much blood on his hands?

By the end of three weeks, it had become clear that Ye Win was not healing. That was when his commanding officer came by with new orders. The refugee camps across the Burmese border in Thailand had better medical care available. Their own command post was now overrun with refugees burned out of their homes during the most recent skirmish with government troops. Ye Win's assignment was to guide these refugees across the border into Thailand and remain there to seek medical attention for his own festering wounds.

The distance was less than fifty kilometers. But reaching the refugee camps necessitated maneuvering through Burmese army lines, navigating dense jungle, and crossing a river. Ye Win himself was weak from unhealed wounds, while the refugees included women, small children, and the elderly, many of them sick, starving, or weak from malnutrition, so the trek took three full days. When outlying scouts alerted Ye Win by Walkie-Talkie that Burmese troops were approaching, the group would dig into the thick underbrush, freezing in place until the all clear was given. Even small children and babies learned quickly to maintain complete silence.

At night the group huddled together in the jungle, unable even to light a fire for cooking and safety, since their human enemy was a far greater threat than leopards, pythons, venomous snakes, and other predators. By the third day, all food and water was gone. Land mines were another constant danger.

At last they reached the Salween River that marked the border between Myanmar and Thailand. Canoes were waiting to ferry them across the river to a small refugee camp that catered mostly to displaced Karen. Only after delivering his charges to safety did Ye Win himself collapse. The camp clinic administered antibiotics and malaria medicine, but for more than a day, Ye Win lay unconscious.

By the third day, the malarial fever was gone, but Ye Win remained too weak to walk. The only available food was rice, with no protein to help him recover strength. Contaminated water left him with giardia, a parasite that causes extreme diarrhea. Even worse, he felt completely alone. Friends who'd been sent here to recuperate from their own battle wounds had either returned to the front lines or died. The death rate was, in fact, so high that bodies were simply dumped into the river and left to float out to sea.

By this point, Ye Win was certain he would die. Not that he felt any real desire to keep living. Now that the constant fighting, running, and hiding was over, he had nothing to occupy his time or his mind. As he lay sleepless on his thin mat, his thoughts drifted to the God his parents and grandparents and great-grandparents had worshiped. The God he had once prayed to in simple faith as a child. Thoughts became prayers.

But Ye Win did not pray for healing or even to live. Instead he prayed, *God, I am so tired of fighting. I am so tired of killing. I have seen so many people dying. I want to start walking with you. If you will make it possible for me to stop fighting, to stop killing, I will serve you with the rest of my life.*

Little did Ye Win know how soon God would answer that prayer or how far from home it would take him. Or how many lives would be impacted by his simple commitment to God.

I

Would today be his last time to walk this aisle? To preach God's Word or serve the Eucharist of Christ in this sanctuary? Father Michael Spurlock took his place in the procession wending down the center aisle, his own green-and-gold vestments contrasting with the white surplices of the acolytes and lay servers.

All Saints Episcopal Church in Smyrna, Tennessee, was not a large structure. But its steeply slanted gray roof and rustic redbrick exterior topped by a Celtic cross had captured Michael's heart at first glimpse. Completing its resemblance to some English or Scottish village church was its location atop a green hillock, commanding a glorious view of fertile countryside, thick with trees and threaded by a creek.

Indoors, the cherry-stained beams of a soaring ceiling contrasted with the simplicity of white walls, clear glass windows, and plain wooden pews. Above the altar at the front was an eighteenth-century Belgian painting of Christ on the cross with Adam's skull at its base, a reminder that "as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one [Christ] shall many be made righteous" (Romans 5:19). Opposite it at the rear of the sanctuary, a round stained-glass window depicted the Lamb of God triumphant from Revelation, chapter 5.

But Father Michael's favorite detail was the stained-glass window in the fellowship hall, a depiction of St. Polycarp, first-century

bishop of the original Smyrna in Asia Minor. Its border was inscribed with Polycarp's courageous response when ordered to recant his faith or be burned at the stake: "Eighty-six years have I served him [Jesus], and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?"

It was not just the serene loveliness of this place he'd miss. This was his church, his congregation, and Father Michael Spurlock was beginning to realize just how much he wanted to stay. But the emptiness of the pews as the procession threaded past, a sparse scattering of worshipers across the front as Michael turned to face the congregation, were a reminder of the stark reality. Sure, there were more faces than when he'd preached his first sermon here only nine months prior. Perhaps there were forty in attendance this morning instead of twenty-five. But not nearly enough to maintain a church infrastructure, much less pay a vicar's salary. Especially with the additional burden of an \$850,000 mortgage with a monthly interest-only payment of \$5,500. Hardly an easy assignment for any seminary graduate's first parish.

But Michael had been forewarned. Once among the fastest-growing congregations in the Tennessee diocese, All Saints was a relatively new parish, the result of an intentional church-planting effort by the diocese. Its beginning had been a Bible study meeting in a storefront. The church had been incorporated in 1997, this beautiful building consecrated in 2001.

But just months before Michael's arrival, All Saints had undergone a major split. Most of the congregation had left, along with bank accounts, furnishings, even the vestments, chalices, and other communion ware. The wrongs of the split itself were not pertinent to Michael's mission. In fact, the tiny remaining congregation he'd inherited was as divided in opinion as those who'd left. But what those who'd stayed did agree on was that All Saints was their church, schism was not the way to solve their problems, and they simply were not leaving.

Michael remembered all too well when Bishop Bauerschmidt, newly appointed to oversee this diocese, had presented him with

this assignment. With such a small remaining congregation and huge debt, options seemed limited. Logic dictated closing down the church, selling the property to pay off the mortgage, then beginning again elsewhere. But both the bishop and Michael were reluctant to see any church close its doors.

“Just go down and be a good priest to them,” Bishop Bauer-schmidt had advised.

Michael had not said yes immediately. Stepping into a deeply broken church with no practical pastoral experience and as its only full-time paid staff was not what he’d anticipated upon graduating from seminary. It seemed to be a place filled with spiritual land mines and needing an experienced hand to take over. And he had a wife to consider, along with a newborn daughter and seven-year-old son. Aimee had already carried a heavy load, working multiple jobs and caring for their son, Atticus, during three years of seminary. Not to mention the new baby. Was it fair to her even to consider such a difficult assignment?

Michael also couldn’t forget the reaction of Karl Burns, his best friend from seminary, when Karl had heard the news. “Wow!” he’d exclaimed. “If you turn that place around, you’ll be a hero. But if you don’t, no one will blame you, because that’s impossible!”

When confronted with the assignment from his bishop, Michael had asked, “What if I don’t accept the position in Smyrna? What are my other options?”

“I don’t know,” the bishop had responded, “but I want you to at least go down and take a look.”

That Michael could do. The church had been locked and empty when he finally arrived at All Saints. But when he’d stood on that green knoll, looking out over the fields, creek, and trees that made up twenty-two acres of church property, when he’d peeked through the arched glass window into the simple sanctuary, he’d felt a deep peace and happiness. God was indeed calling him to this place. This was his new home. With God’s help, he would seek to bring healing to this congregation. And somehow, if God willed, he’d find a way to keep the doors of All Saints open.

Nine months later, no such way had come to light. The church had experienced some modest growth in numbers, but they needed to triple in attendance and giving just to break even. Far more so to cover Michael's own stipend, currently a mission project of the diocese.

By late fall, the church council had reluctantly agreed that putting the All Saints property up for sale was their only option. Each Sunday since, Michael and his congregation had wondered whether or not they would still be worshiping in their building the next month. But one delay after another had allowed Michael to celebrate his first Christmas as vicar at All Saints. Then came further setbacks, and before they knew it Michael was celebrating his first Easter there as well.

But now the delays appeared to be over. An interested party was prepared to make an offer for All Saints. The bishop's council had approved the sale of the property and was prepared to accept the offer. If they did accept, the congregation's last days worshiping in their building would come soon. Michael refused to consider that this might be the end. A church was not its building, after all, but its people. They'd started once as a small group studying the Bible in a storefront. If necessary, they could start again.

If we are to grow, we will need a purpose greater than building maintenance. It was not the first time the concern had crossed Michael's mind. *We can't ask people to attend just so we can meet our debt or pay my salary or even to help us build a new building. We need to heal as a congregation. But we also need to discern the mission to which God has called us here in Smyrna.*

The procession had now reached the front of the sanctuary, the last notes of the opening hymn fading away. Turning to the congregation for the opening acclamation from *The Book of Common Prayer*, Michael noticed the visitors immediately. Not just because he had the faces of his own small flock well memorized. The three newcomers—two men and a woman—sitting in the rear of the sanctuary were most definitely not locals. Their bronze features and black hair, the men's intricately woven and tasseled vests, and

the woman's brightly embroidered blouse and skirt caused Michael to wonder whether they were of Aztec, Mayan, Native American, or even of Southeast Asian descent.

Other than the pleasure of seeing newcomers in church, Michael thought little more of the visitors as he continued through the rest of the service. After the closing organ voluntary, he returned to his office to change out of his vestments as was customary. He'd already seen his wife heading over to the newcomers, so he didn't need to worry about whether they were being made to feel welcome. A petite brunette, Aimee had an outgoing, warm personality that made every new acquaintance feel at home.

A knock came at the office door and his wife poked her head in. "You have some guests here who'd like to speak to you."

The newcomers followed Aimee into the office. As was typical, she'd already learned their names. "This is John and Daisy Kunoo," she introduced, signaling an older couple. She then indicated a strongly built younger man in his late twenties or early thirties. "And this is their son, Ye Win. They are Karen, recent immigrants to the Smyrna area. And they have a question they'd like to ask about our church."

"Korean?" Michael repeated. So his guess of Southeast Asia was correct.

"No, not Korean." Aimee quickly set him straight. "*Karen*. From Myanmar. What they used to call Burma. And they're Christians. From the Episcopal Church there, can you believe it? Or Anglican, I guess they'd call it. Ye Win speaks English, so I'll let him explain."