



**THE ROAD AWAY**  
*from* **GOD**

HOW LOVE FINDS US  
EVEN AS WE WALK AWAY

**JONATHAN MARTIN**

# THE ROAD AWAY *from* GOD

HOW LOVE FINDS US  
EVEN AS WE WALK AWAY

JONATHAN MARTIN



**BakerBooks**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2022 by Jonathan Martin

Published by Baker Books  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Martin, Jonathan, 1978– author.

Title: The road away from God : how love finds us even as we walk away /  
Jonathan Martin.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing  
Group, [2022] | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021052316 | ISBN 9781540902160 (paperback) | ISBN  
9781493437559 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Spirituality—Christianity. | Non-church-affiliated people. | Faith.  
Classification: LCC BV4509.5 .M31155 2022 | DDC 248.4—dc23/eng/20211118  
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021052316>

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations labeled CSB are from the Christian Standard Bible®, copyright © 2017 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Christian Standard Bible® and CSB® are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers.

Scripture quotations labeled ESV are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ESV Text Edition: 2016

Scripture quotations labeled KJV are from the King James Version of the Bible.

Scripture quotations labeled MSG are from *THE MESSAGE*, copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson. Used by permission of NavPress. All rights reserved. Represented by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Scripture quotations labeled NIV are from THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations labeled NLT are from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007, 2013, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

To protect the privacy of those who have shared their stories with the author, some details and names have been changed.

The author is represented by the Christopher Ferebee Agency, [www.christopherferebee.com](http://www.christopherferebee.com).

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and post-consumer waste whenever possible.

22 23 24 25 26 27 28      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# Contents

1. The Road Called *Godforsaken* 9
  2. God on the Road Away from God 39
  3. When the Story Gets Too Small 57
  4. Your Pain Is Real 89
  5. It's Good to Be a Fan 105
  6. The Moment of Recognition 131
  7. People of the Burning Heart 153
  8. The Way Home 175
  9. What Had Happened on the Road 187
- Acknowledgments 201
- Notes 204

# 1

## The Road Called *Godforsaken*

**THERE IS A ROAD** called *Godforsaken*, leading from the place you came from and stretching to the place you are now. It's the long road from idealism to hard reality, from innocence to knowing. There was a time when you knew a sacred space, but that sacred space became unsafe long ago. It might have been a building with a steeple, a sanctuary or a temple, or a place that wasn't religious at all but felt sacred to you—a house, a room, a secret hideaway. It could have been any place, anywhere, but it was a place that felt like home, a place where you first came to feel joy, delight, wonder.

But then something happened in that sacred space that broke your trust, and the place that once felt like a dream turned into a crime scene. Maybe it was

the ugliness of evangelical politics, the hidden then not-so-hidden hypocrisy of a leader being revealed, or the dissonance between someone worshiping God on Sunday and then posting dehumanizing slogans on Facebook on Monday. The place where you once found faith became the very place where you lost it. You may never feel like you know exactly how to grieve the death of a person or a relationship, but where do you even begin to learn how to mourn the loss of *belief*? Somewhere along the way you became disillusioned with an institution, with an authority figure, or with yourself (at least the self everyone expected you to be), and so you took off walking—not knowing where you were going, only knowing there was no going back to where you came from.

This is more than a metaphor. The road is terribly real, as you know from the hard miles it puts on your mind and body. But at the same time, it doesn't exist on a map. The shape of it, the contours of it, bend in the shape of your heartbreak. The most common, universal experience of the road is that it is long and lonely. And while it clearly seems to lead away from one place, it doesn't seem to lead you any place in particular. In fact, you wonder if it is leading anywhere at all.

If you haven't yet physically left the building, don't let that fool you into thinking you aren't already on the road. If the time has already come when the house is too small for you, when the system and structure no longer work for you, and the beliefs that kept your life

purring aren't holding you up anymore, then your soul knows this: you are already out walking.

I have written about shipwreck, but this is not that book again. This is not about failure and loss in general but about the very particular unraveling of belief, the undoing of hope. This is for those disillusioned disciples I talk to every day for whom faith feels less like an anchor for the soul and more like a piece of shrapnel they can't remove. This is for the pastors and church leaders I know who are already bloodied from these deepest questions of the soul, but fear they'd be utterly torn to shreds if they were honest about what they really thought.

Sometimes, as you try to drive far enough into the horizon to forget yourself, the road feels bleak, a long, desolate, forgotten route through the heartland with occasional stops at a no-name motel. Sometimes the road is full of novelty, like an old seaside carnival, with a Ferris wheel, funnel cakes, and mermaids. But even when the road goes from desert into Las Vegas, populated by people and spectacle, the loneliness of feeling exiled from your people never really goes away.

There is a voice in your head that tells you on repeat, "You're on the wrong path," and if you were so brave or so foolish as to ask, there would be more than enough people in your old life to confirm that this road is surely the wrong road. This road is surely the wrong road because it has been so difficult. This road is surely the wrong road because it has felt so lonely. This road is surely the wrong road because you don't

know where you're going, and leaving on a trip without a destination surely means you are headed nowhere. This road is surely the wrong road because it's cost you nearly everything you have, and all you have is way too much to pay for a road to nowhere.

Whatever the reason you left, whatever made you do it, whatever got you started, whatever you are walking away from, or whoever you are running away from, this is where you are now. If the reason involved the death of a dream or hope turning to heartbreak or sacred space becoming an unsafe space, I have good news for you: where you are is precisely where you are supposed to be. Perhaps that sounds unreasonable to you, seeing as how you may not know how you feel about matters of God and destiny. You did, after all, pick up a book titled *The Road Away from God*. I don't know all the particulars or complexities of your story. But here's what I do know: contrary to what anybody might be telling you or you might be telling yourself, this is not a detour. You are walking the main artery. Even if you feel like you missed an opportunity somewhere along the way—to take the job, mend the relationship, make the different choice that you think would have made life so much better—that doesn't mean you missed your turn.

Because you've been walking for a long time, and because you've had so many voices in your ear saying that you should have gone this way or that way, please lay down that bag of stones on your back, take a breath, and let this wash over you for a minute. As you will see,

self-help clichés and denial are not what I do, so this is not coddling. Dare to believe this might actually be the ground beneath you for a minute, dare to believe this is what's really real:

You did not make a wrong turn.

You did not miss your turn.

Whatever heartbreak got you here, whatever caused you to question if you screwed up the master plan, know this: you are precisely where you need to be.

If you had only gone this way and not that—well, then you wouldn't be where you are now, with the sweet, throbbing, tender grace of this moment. If you had only known better—well, it's impossible to time travel back to your former self and tag out your former self like a professional wrestler and do it differently. You know what you know now. Or hey, better yet . . . you don't know what you don't know now, which means the world is open to you in this moment and there is now possibility.

No, you are not too old to find yourself in a new narrative. No, it's not too late to find a place or a people where your soul can finally feel at home.

I really don't know how you are going to feel about this, especially if your particular disillusionment with faith or with a faith system has caused you to question the existence of God altogether—which is not only a

normal but also often a necessary part of walking this road. But imagine for a moment walking all these miles of dusty, barren road until the vast emptiness fully matches the vast emptiness of your soul. You are fully adjusted to the reality that, at least in a cosmic existential way, you are out here all by yourself. It was your decision to leave on the road called *Godforsaken*; you have walked all this way on your own, and wherever you decide to stop and settle and build something new, you will do that on your own too.

Then in the distance, you see something that looks like a street sign. This is a road without markers, a road you have walked by instinct and intuition, with no maps and no GPS. Wiping the salty sting of your sweat out of your eyes, you wonder if it is a mirage, an illusion, an invention of your imagination. But the closer you get to the dust-covered sign, the more you know you didn't dream this up. The road you've been traveling all this way, the road you called *Godforsaken*, has a name. You take another step in, peering for a closer look. The sign doesn't read *Godforsaken*. It reads *Godsent*. You blink and look again, and it reads *Godinhabited*. You wipe your sweat, blink, look again, and see these words:

*Godishere.*

*Godishere.*

*Godishere.*

If you did in fact miss the exit back somewhere, then God missed the exit too. God, as it turns out, is where

you are. And if where you are is where God is, then where you are is right where you're supposed to be.

## **Leaving the Sacred City**

Before anything went sideways—before there was a story about a religion to tell, before there were any stories about priests and preachers, about church councils and doctrines and traveling evangelists—there was a simple human story about two men grieving the excruciating loss of a friend. They weren't trying to start a new religion; they were devout Jews who saw themselves as part of a reform movement within their tradition. They had become students of the Rabbi Jesus, who they believed to be the Messiah, the anointed One, the One who would restore their people to their former glory and help engineer the overthrow of an oppressive Roman imperial regime. Their little homegrown movement was far from the face of an empire. They were under the boot of it—they were brown-skinned, persecuted people.

Jerusalem for them was the holy city, the sacred city, the center of the universe as they knew it—the city that shaped their language and their dreams. But hours before, the sacred city had been the very place where they saw Jesus of Nazareth tortured and killed, mangled and disfigured in front of them. The sacred space was not a safe space for them anymore. The city of dreams had become ground zero for all their nightmares. So they did what a lot of people do when the worst thing

happens (well, except of course for the women, as the Gospels draw for us in stark relief): they fled the scene. They got away as quickly as they could from the place that now held nothing for them but trauma.

To walk from Jerusalem toward Emmaus is not just to walk away from the city. It is to walk away from the temple and the God they met in it. It is to walk away from the faith that nurtured them and told them they were part of some larger story that might change the world. To walk away from Jerusalem is to walk away from God—or at least from the God they knew then. Luke 24 is unclear as to the exact reason for their journey. Perhaps they are walking home for the night or for a meal. Whatever logical reason they would have given for their journey, the theological reason is not unclear at all: their hope is dead. They are leaving hope behind and abandoning whatever had a hold of them before. They are walking away.

They are walking on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus, from certainty into the unknown, from the sacred into a disillusionment that feels profane. Where they are going is less clear than what they are leaving behind. They are walking away from the holy city, away from the temple, away from the God they worshiped in it. They are walking away from the people and the places that had made them. They are walking away from the place where they learned to pray as children, walking away from the One whom Moses met in the center of the flame—walking away with no return address.

The ground that was hallowed to them before is haunted now. The temple at the center of all their hoping and dreaming and worshiping has been desecrated. The holy city itself has been desecrated because it is now known as the place where they watched God die. They saw hope strung up like an animal, bleeding out onto the ground.

It wasn't just their friend who died—Love itself died. Their own life's meaning and their dreams for the future are now swaddled with the limp body of God inside a rented tomb. Their dreams are locked inside death's cellar, the entrance sealed with a rock heavy as grief.

When the hurt is great enough, you don't have to have a particular destination; you just know intuitively you can't go back *there*. And intuition is about all you have when you don't have your teacher or your lover or your home or your old-time religion. You walk, only because it hurts too much to stand still.

And so they walk . . . deeper into disillusionment and despair. They are walking right off the edge of the map of the known world. They wonder if they can walk far enough or long enough to escape the taunting demon of false hope in the rearview mirror.

## **An Accidental Church**

So these two men are out walking down their own lonely road, looking like no one in particular. If you had passed them as the day turned to dusk, you might

not have noticed the haunting. From a distance, it's hard to tell the difference between the gait of a person walking to somewhere and the gait of a person walking away from something. These are weathered, working-class men, used to burying any unwanted emotions well behind their eyes. You would have had to walk closer to feel the death that hung heavy in the air between them.

Heartbreak hung between them too, like the man stretched out between two thieves. They are grieving the loss of every dream they ever had—the loss of religion, of tradition, of promise, of yearning. It is as if all their desires bled out with him, so that now all they have is the road ahead of them, all they have is the walking.

To stand still would be to let the horror catch up with them, and that is not an option. When the leather of their shoes starts to rub their feet raw, the sores are a welcome distraction from the harsh rub of reality against their open wounds.

They walk in silence those first few miles because what is there to say, really, while walking away from the city where they watched Love die?

The day grows as heavy as their hearts, the dam breaks, and they finally begin to speak of the unspeakable—they begin to speak of what happened. Tears finally pour forth from these weathered sailors. Torrents of grief upon grief upon grief. The men have lost their appetite for holy things, so there are no pretensions of piety or God-talk. And yet in the simple act of sharing

their deepest pain, their sacred grief, something undeniably holy happens between them.

But they are not building altars to any gods here, only to their own grief, only commemorating the holiness of their own pain. They are not talking about the power of God but the spectacle of watching God die. Their ancestor Jacob gathered stones to commemorate his wonder of the Almighty. Why not gather some for their sorrow now, when sorrow is all they have left?

Most who walk the road called *Godforsaken* walk it alone, at least for a little while. But in that moment, the men feel something powerful binding them together, like a hymn binds people together, like stories passed down bind father to son. But this is not heritage or hope holding them close; this is the shared sensation of primal grief. The things they saw and felt, they saw and felt together, the hope and faith they lost, they lost together—as a kind of shared sacrament.

They have no hope for resurrection, only memories in which the dead seem as likely to haunt you as help you. They have no hope at all, only the shared sensation of their hearts having been ripped out. The only thing redemptive about their pain is that it is not solitary; it is shared. It is not the sometimes performative grief of funerals but the savage, unpolished agony only those who have had someone they loved more than life ripped from them can truly know.

There is a kind of grief so bottomless that it, like love and wonder, is transcendent, big enough to get lost in. It's the kind of space that's left when a true

believer believes no more. As with making love and speaking in tongues, there are no words for it. There are no prayers to pray and no hymns to sing, only two humans abandoning manners, going all the way into a pain too deep for words, letting themselves get carried away in the cadence of mourning. . . . *Do you remember when this happened? . . . Do you remember how it felt when that happened? . . .*

There is no other word for what was happening between them but . . . *holy, holy, holy.*

So as these two companions walk away from home, they do the only brave and noble thing for no brave or noble reason: out of sheer desperation, they name their searing pain. They do not contain their heartbreak, their rage, or their questions. Faithfulness and fidelity won't sustain them now; honesty is the only remaining virtue. Sorrow gushes from their open mouths like the blood, water, and gore that poured out from Christ's wounded side. They speak the unspeakable to each other on the long, hard road away from God.

This is where the story gets strange, because the story they are telling themselves and each other is not the story God is telling of their lives. More often than not, perhaps, our lives tell a different story than the one we think they tell. As they are walking away from the holy city, away from God, away from God's people, away from their community, as they risk vulnerability and partake of the sour sacrament of shared pain, these two disillusioned disciples are becoming a community. In walking away from the temple, they are becoming

a temple—a place in which the Holy of Holies dwells. It takes only two people to make a community possible. You don't have to share piety to have one—in fact, piety is often the biggest obstacle to community. Nobody really bonds over shared piety anyway, but over shared pain.

In a story soon to brim with aching human hilarity, they set out on the road away from God, but their shared brokenness is an invocation to the God they left behind. Vulnerability and shared pain draw the presence of Love, even when they are trying to walk away from it. In the very act of naming their sorrow to each other, in the very act of leaving church behind, they are becoming a church.

Jesus said it long before, but he said a lot of things, and this is no time for remembering his promises or Beatitudes—all the words are running together. But later, in a clearer moment, they will remember: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matt. 18:20). The numbers he named were not accidental. The idea was that “Whenever two are gathered together, I will come and be the third among them.”

Two people share the sanctity of grief, and suddenly, a third joins them on the lonely road. Unbeknownst to them . . . God walks with them, unannounced. When you add one person's despair, another person's disillusionment, and mutual empathy, sometimes you create

**Nobody  
really bonds  
over shared  
piety but over  
shared pain.**

an accidental church, whether you mean to or not. A third man walks along, in the guise of the stranger, and then there are three. Despair, experienced alone, is the deepest and darkest hell. Shared, grief and longing build a holy cathedral, a place for the Spirit to dwell.

But pain also has a way of blinding you to holy things, of keeping you from seeing the inherent holiness not only of the stranger but also of a friend, and the sacredness of the dark path you are walking. So for the time being, these two disciples cannot see God on the journey with them. They cannot see grace or love or mercy walking with them in the valley of the shadow of death.

No matter. Love does not need a permission slip to follow you into the heart of darkness. God doesn't need to be believed in to accompany you where you are going. You can choose whatever path you need to, wherever it might lead you. But you can't choose to walk it alone, no matter how hard you try.

Two disciples set out on the long road away from God. And their story is a microcosm for the stories all our lives must ultimately tell—of how the path of tears, of loss and regret and death, is actually a collision course with resurrection.

### **Strange Overtones**

The men are lost in the sacredness of their shared pain when all of a sudden a stranger walks behind them, breaking the spell. How long has he been there? The road had been empty for miles, untroubled by a single

sound save the crunch of the ground beneath their feet. How did they not hear him before? He doesn't look like an intruder, but his presence in their ritual of grief is deeply intrusive, an imposition. The man comes uninvited into the midst of their pain, as if it is their shared vulnerability that drew him there, like a moth to a flame.

The events the two men have been talking about are headline news in their little corner of the world, but this conversation is not political or academic. They are talking about the deepest, rawest, most profoundly personal events of their entire lives. And the stranger, oblivious and open-faced, asks them a seemingly trivial question in light of the weight of their grief: "What's this you're discussing so intently as you walk along?" (Luke 24:17 MSG).

The two men look at each other in the knowing way you do when suffering fools, shooting each other a look that says, *Which one of us is going to have to tell him?* The one named Cleopas breaks the stare first with a bit of a side-eye to look back at the stranger and asks—with as much artificial politeness as he can muster but still unable to veil his incredulity—"Are you the only one in Jerusalem who hasn't heard what's happened during the last few days?" (v. 18 MSG).

And the stranger, in that moment, has a comically goofy face right out of a Monty Python sketch, the New Testament's single greatest account of trolling. The man, whom they do not notice has holes in his hands and his feet and a puncture wound in his side, deadpans and says, "What things?" (v. 19).

Exchanging another quick glance between them, the two men still cannot believe the insolence of the stranger, the lack of self-awareness on display as he interrupted such an intense conversation to begin with—much less that the man can somehow live here and have no idea of the bloody events that happened in the last few days that ended the world as they knew it.

But with an ever so slight roll of the eyes and an even less perceptible sigh, they proceed, then, to tell God all about how God has just been tortured and crucified.

### **What Sent You on the Road?**

The story of these two disciples on the road is an extraordinary one, a story that I will contend captures all the major movements of the spiritual life—from the inciting incident that sets us on the path, to the solitary grief that breaks us open so that we have to find a community to learn how to bear it, to the moments of clarity when we actually do see that there is life on the other side of dying, to the bittersweetness of feeling those moments of clarity slip away, to feeling the longing inside that is left in the aftermath. This story is big and broad enough to contain each of our own stories. My hope is that in the pages ahead, you will step into it, come to trust it.

But the object here is not just to tell you a story but to get you to think about the story your life is telling. Whatever you believe about the Emmaus road story in Luke's Gospel, which actually has a lot of room for am-

biguity, uncertainty, and unknowing, the movements of the story are relatively clear in a way that life sometimes is not. All of life tells a story, but most of life is not like literature—or film or TV, for that matter. Life isn't plotted so all the movements are linear, telegraphed, obviously related. It's much more chaotic, clumsy, and ambiguous than that. We rarely know what's happening at the time, or really what we are doing or why, much less what anything actually means. But for most people I know who have been on the road, there has been a particular moment when they realized, with some kind of deep knowing, that there was no going back to the world as it was, the world as they knew it before. This was the moment that sent them out walking.

For my friend Tosh, a Black woman who has spent most of her life leading worship in mostly white evangelical spaces, it was the silence of the church in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. It was a revelation to see that in the spaces where she had loved and felt loved, she was not necessarily safe. A shattering came with the realization that the people who celebrated her talent did not take seriously her witness, or the fear that she felt as a Black woman living in small-town, rural Indiana in a racially charged climate. Tosh has not walked away from her faith, but she has had to walk away from some of the spaces that once seemed to nurture it. As she became more open about how she really felt about her own experience of being Black in America, the leaders who loved her singing voice hated

the stories she told and branded her and her husband radicals, dissidents, backsliders.

Then there's Nicole, who was in the process of finally coming to terms in therapy with her experiences of sexual assault and abuse that dated back to early childhood. She showed up to a large Methodist church on a Sunday morning for the first time, a church culturally different from the charismatic spaces that marked her, feeling bright and hopeful based on the kind people she met and optimistic about trying a faith community that was unlike the only ones she had known. Halfway through the sermon, the pastor put up a picture on the screen of then Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh and gave an impassioned defense of him, preaching about how the righteous are falsely accused. Between the lines, she felt her own crushing experiences of past sexual trauma belittled. She grabbed her purse and her kids before the benediction and quickly hurried out the narthex door into a wide, ambivalent Oklahoma sky. She tweeted a line about how alienated she felt due to the experience. Immediately, family and friends labeled her a troublemaker, a malcontent, a complainer, and a pastor-killer.

For many folks I know, January 6, 2021, is a day they have never fully recovered from, a day in which toxic ideas and language about God that had seemed implicit became painfully, terrifyingly explicit. The express use of Christian images and words in the Capitol attack was traumatizing for people who already felt a deep seasickness from watching their religion be

hijacked in a way that was not just misguided but vile. That kind of religion was publicly exposed as being not just unlike the Jesus we read about in the Gospels but like the antichrist, corrupt to its very core. The insurrection seemed to be a public climax to a story that had been developing for generations—of a white American evangelicalism that was racist, violent, misogynistic, homophobic, a false religion, and unconcerned about creation and the poor. The rot seemed to be not at the periphery of this movement but at the core, not only ambivalent but also an active enemy of the nonviolent One Christians call Messiah. The cross of Jesus of Nazareth, which is ostensibly the symbol of the prophet of Love who revealed to us the universal truth of death and resurrection, was openly used as a symbol of nationalism, racism, militarism, and white supremacy.

It is one thing to feel awkwardly early to the party, a little misunderstood or a little out of place. It is another thing to cross that line where you know that the people you thought were your people are really not your people, the place you called home is really not your home. It is one thing to have some questions you do not know how to answer. It is another thing to know that you have seen something you cannot unsee and that the world you thought you knew is not a world you know or in which you can be seen or known any longer.

For many of us, those experiences became the start of long, isolated roads—like the landscape of US Route 50 in Nevada, known as the loneliest road in America,

or like the soundscape of Bruce Springsteen's bleak *Nebraska* album. Most of us start on this kind of journey not as a pilgrim on some kind of spiritual quest but as an exile who knows nothing more than that the place we left is not a place to which we can return. I never cease to wonder at the ways people are labeled rebels who walk the road of disillusionment and despair not because they hate the people or places they come from but because they love them too deeply to bear the heartbreak and horror of watching them exposed as something less than sanctuaries.

### **Shaken Loose**

I understand how becoming disenchanted with the people and places that have shaped you can lead to bitterness, but the faith spaces that made me still shape the language of my dreams. Flannery O'Connor called the American South "Christ-haunted,"<sup>1</sup> and I suppose that the illusive figure of Jesus of Nazareth will never stop haunting me. Jesus always came to me in the shadow of men I revered as giants, as I come from a long line of long people. One of my grandfathers was a pioneering Pentecostal preacher, six foot four, a voice loud and crackling with the thunder of Mt. Sinai. My other grandfather was also six foot four, a man's man of the Johnny Cash variety, not a preacher but an entrepreneurial small business owner who started a furniture business in rural Asheboro, North Carolina. He was a serious man, not given to frivolity exactly so much, but

he had a tender heart—and sometimes would just say the most unintentionally hilarious things. He wasn't a hard or judgmental man, but his religion was strict. The other day I remembered him trying to describe a gentleman he knew was a churchman, but Paw found his faith to be peculiar. There was something about the way he said it: "Well . . . he's some sort of a Christian." It was one of those random lines that just kind of stuck in our family, and we laughed about it over and over.

I think if my Paw were still here, he'd love me as much as ever, but perhaps now he would also describe me as "some sort of a Christian." I'm enough of a mutt now that it's never easy to describe in short just what sort of a Christian I am, or aspire to be. The Catholics taught me how to pray, the Eastern Orthodox taught me the deeper mysteries of the Spirit, the Episcopalians opened my heart up wider to the table of God, and the Methodists taught me how to bridge the world between the wildness and the liturgy. The stand-up comedians taught me the timing I needed to learn how to preach. What's for sure is that I'm still S. D. Martin's grandson and I have some of that Sinai electricity burning hot in me too, for God and other things. I'm definitely still a product of the terror and the wonder, perhaps even have almost too much of a wanderlust to find the glory on whatever mountain glory might still be found.

I'll always be Pentecostal enough to be a sort of accidental mystic, and that has served me well the further I've come to recognize the Spirit in the beauty

of liturgy. Given my chaotic mind, showing up at the same place at the same time doing the same thing has largely saved my life. When I was a young preacher, I couldn't have imagined preaching being "led by the Spirit," unless I somehow "came up" with the sermon from start to finish. When I started preaching from the assigned lectionary texts most every Sunday, though, I was shocked by how conspicuously, and consistently, the Holy Ghost seemed to get into the proceedings. The lectionary was like a mix tape, and the Spirit was the DJ, and every time I'd be staggered in some way by how relevant the given text was to whatever was happening in the world that very moment.

This is how one of the moments came for me: It was fall of 2016, two days before the climactic showdown between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. The world both inside and outside the church couldn't have felt more tense or more fractured. The storm was already in the pews. I wasn't interested in partisan politics as a kind of team sport, and I'm still not, but I was very aware that all spirituality is political, because spirituality ultimately determines how we actually choose to live in the world. The reality that ran deeper than the personalities was a sense of reckoning around race in America, of people grappling with whether or not they could or would trust the perspective of neighbors who didn't look like them, who didn't see the world through the lens of their own self-interest. To crib language from the apostle Paul, it wasn't just personalities we were coming to terms with but "principalities"—

governing forces in systems and structures in the world that were greater than the sum of their parts, determinative ideas that shaped how we see the world.<sup>2</sup>

I was already a long way from my home state of North Carolina, but I was coming to feel further and further away from the spaces I held sacred. In Tulsa, Oklahoma, where I lived then, the city was still reeling from the unprovoked shooting of a Black man, Terence Crutcher, by a white cop, at the same time that my native city of Charlotte was having riots following its own police shooting. Everything was shaking, not least of all me. And while I am no dime-store prophet, my sense all along about that election cycle was that it was a defining time for the church in North America—a time that would have implications for generations to come.

I grieved all that I was hearing and feeling. Whatever sort of a Christian I was, the house I had grown up in had long ago become too small for me. My Pentecostalism now is a big-tent spirituality, the way I'm convinced it was meant to be. This big tent was always a sacred circus, more suited to being outside in the field than inside the cathedral. It was diverse and colorful, without walls. The Pentecostalism that laid claim on me is a peace church tradition that takes seriously matters of justice and peacemaking. But in the cultural landscape in front of me in the middle of America, it was nowhere to be seen. Our churches were just as nationalistic, as full of fear and fearmongering preachers, as anyone else's. Instead of being a movement for people on

the margins, the way Pentecostalism was in the beginning, we were actively scapegoating and demonizing the poor, the refugee, the immigrant. Straight Bible language of justice and mercy was suddenly politically loaded and controversial. Anybody I knew who could discern sensed deep down that we were driving over some kind of cliff together.

I was desperate for a word from God. I didn't need a sermon but to climb the mountain the way my grandfather learned to do it, stay until the power came down, and bring a word from God for the people of God. The lectionary took me to the Old Testament book of Haggai, the minor prophet, and reading it, I found a word that was perhaps not what I was looking for but had just the kind of otherness and particularity that I needed. These were words written at the time when Israel was coming out of seventy years of Babylonian exile, tired and broken by a regime that had actively tried to stamp out their language, their culture, and their religion. The Persians had just conquered the Babylonians, and optimism was high that this could be a new chapter for the chosen people. When Haggai was written, the first handful of exiles were returning from Babylon to Jerusalem, the holy city. They weren't walking away from it but finally back toward it.

Yet what they saw when they returned gutted their newborn hope. The temple was in ruins, worse than they had imagined. As it had been for the disciples on the road to Emmaus, the holy place had been desecrated. These captive sons and daughters, raised on

the mythology and the hymnody of the temple in all its glory, returned to a sacred site emptied of its former splendor. After seventy years of exile, there were few Jews remaining who could even remember what the glory of the temple was like, much less knew how to recapture it.

It is within this context that the word of the Lord comes to the prophet Haggai: “My spirit abides among you; do not fear. For thus says the LORD of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the LORD of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the LORD of hosts” (Hag. 2:5–8).

This was not precisely the sort of “word” I had hoped for. People seemed tired and restless, agitated. I was on edge from all the rhetoric as much as anyone else. I desperately wanted a word to bring back from the mountain that told everybody it would be fine, and to calm down, and that things would get easier rather than harder. I was still shaking from all the transition in my own personal life, from leaving home and going through divorce. Even in my immediate world, nothing had ever really stopped shaking. In the midst of so much that was already shaking, I wanted a word that would tell me the shaking would stop.

I’m sure Haggai would have rather delivered a word of stability too, especially to a people who had already endured seventy years of captivity. But instead, there

was this more provocative word: to a people who were already shaking, God said, “I will shake all the nations.” They would not be exempt from it. They would shake like everyone else, just like all the rest of the nations. And yet the word was that in the shaking that came to all the nations, God would have a particular purpose for his own people: God would shake the nations “so that the treasure of all nations shall come” (v. 7). There was a particular treasure God had buried inside this particular people so deep that, as it is with most treasure, the only way for it to come forth was for it to be shaken out. It was buried treasure that would have to be dislodged, shaken so that it might be shaken loose.

This is the promise that Christian faith offers: not that you will be less likely to get cancer or have a car accident, not that you will be less likely to struggle in any of the noble or humiliating ways that created things struggle, but that there might be some purpose of God to be discerned in the struggle. Which is not to say it will make sense to us or entirely redeem all our suffering in this moment.

Yet this shift in perspective is no small one. I am shaking as much as anyone else. I am subject to the same frailties, calamities, and temptations. I am exempt from nothing that is human. And yet in all that shakes, what might the Lord of hosts be shaking loose? In all that rattles my insides, what treasure buried in these depths might yet bring some beauty to the world?

Keep in mind that anything good God ever did for the sake of Israel was always for the sake of the world.

Election—being chosen by God—was about vocation, not salvation. The people of God were chosen, as they always are, to bring God’s light to bear in the nations. Thus, it is not as if God exploits the nations to teach his people “a lesson.” It’s only that in the same shaking that Israel would feel alongside all her neighbors, all the pain and chaos and ruins, this same calamity would bring out of them shimmering treasure, ancient beauty and yet some unspeakable newness.

Faith does not offer a qualitatively different experience of being human. We are all dealt the same splendid, sorry hand. But it does offer us a different lens through which to see this experience. And as the Emmaus road story will so vividly illustrate, seeing is not just believing. Seeing is everything.

Feeling my own insides shaking as much as anyone else’s, I got up to preach that Sunday morning in Tulsa with a word of comforting warning, or peculiar comfort: The shaking is not going to stop; it may have in some ways only just begun. It is shaking not just for us but for all nations. But take heart! The treasure of God will be shown forth in us even so. Just not until that treasure is shaken out.

**Seeing is not  
just believing.  
Seeing is  
everything.**

It was not that something fundamentally new or different was happening in the world in 2016. As it was in the days of the prophet, it was an apocalyptic time, a revealing time, a time in which the world that already existed was being revealed for what it had always been,

and what it was now. The illuminating and excruciating thing was the way this season was revealing both skeletons in the closet and monsters under the bed—trauma from long ago that had not yet been reckoned with and menacing forces that posed an existential threat to the world even now.

There was a fire within the words of the prophet that burned in me, and I preached about all of it the only way I had been taught and the only way I knew how—with my coattails more or less on fire. The message went over about like you would think it would. Some folks heard it with a kind of relief, with pangs of recognition; others experienced the same words as an ominous, unsettling warning, as an overreaction.

What became startlingly clear was that, whatever reasons people wanted to ascribe for this, whoever they wanted to blame or absolve, sharp divisions were being revealed, both in the world around us and in the world inside of us. For the vulnerable among us, those realities were terrifying. I will never forget that Tuesday night of the election, eating sushi in a restaurant while watching the results trickle in. There was a palpable sea change even in the air that night. The waitress, who had been warm and relaxed, seemed tense and nervous. I asked if she was okay. She said that as the results had become more clear, several of the Mexican guys working in the kitchen had started crying, and even walking out, saying they would not come back to work the next day for fear of how the election results would affect their legal status.

The following Sunday I was speaking at a church in Houston that was richly diverse, culturally. I had no other words to offer for the moment but what I had come to see in Haggai about the shaking, so I poured out my heart on the text again. Between services, greeting people and signing books, I was moved and unnerved by the number of people of color who told me that just in that week alone, they had some kind of demonstrative experience with a white person who seemed to feel suddenly empowered to unleash whatever latent feelings of hostility and resentment they had been repressing. A Black woman in her forties told me that a man threw a cup at her and used a racial slur while she was in line at Starbucks. I heard comparably disturbing stories from Asian Americans and Latinos that day.

It can seem impossible that people can live in such close proximity to us and yet experience reality so differently. In Jesus's parable of the rich man and Lazarus, a beggar experiences the comfort and bliss of being in Abraham's bosom, while the rich man begs the man he once ignored to bring him water to quench his thirst while he is being tormented by flames in Hades. The two men are close enough to see and hear each other, so however deep or wide the chasm is between them, the geography that separates them is not great. It is a parable of the afterlife, but the way it actually functions in the text is to illumine the great divide between us: how some people experience heaven and others experience hell within a city block of each other. It is

ultimately less a story about the world to come than a challenge to how we live in the world that is: Will we believe the account of our neighbor who experiences life differently than we do, even from a few feet away?

For those who are deluded by false comforts of wealth and influence, the world may still feel like a paradise. But for those who have been on the underside of this reality, recent years have been a time of searing revelation. Some among us have realized that a world that builds artificial paradises, like model homes, across the street from present-day suffering, is no paradise at all—and the unease of this revelation has set them out on a different path from any they have walked before, a road of doubt, questioning, unlearning, and discovery. If you have been unsettled by the reality that what was once handed to you as tidy truth is not true, then the Emmaus road is the road you can and must walk—and likely already are.