

Life Together Christmas
2021



Photo Credit: Geoffrey W. Sutton (Vermont 2021)

Reflections

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>iii</i>
<i>Reflections on Christmas</i>	<i>1</i>
A Tale of Two Sisters	<i>2</i>
Ruth Vassar Burgess	2
Not a Christmas Baby.....	<i>4</i>
Lois E. Olena	4
Christmas in Muslim West Africa	<i>6</i>
Conrad Bell IV	6
<i>Reflections on Jesus (Summer 2021 LTET Series)</i>	<i>8</i>
Yesterday, Today, Forever, Jesus is the Same (Musings on a Hymn of the Modern Church).....	<i>9</i>
Stanley Milton Burgess	9
The Connective Tissues of My Faith in Christ.....	<i>11</i>
Doug Olena	11
Jesus and the People’s Sabbath	<i>13</i>
Geoffrey W. Sutton	13
Jesus is My Brother	<i>15</i>
Don Tosh	15
<i>Poetic Reflections</i>	<i>16</i>
Poetic Ruminations on <i>The Living Flame of Love</i> by St. John of the Cross	<i>17</i>
LaDonna Friesen	17
Two Meditations upon the Speaking Creation	<i>19</i>
Nathan Nelson	19
A Short Theodicy in the Shadow of Death: Five Poems	<i>21</i>
Julianne Nelson	21
<i>Final Reflections</i>	<i>26</i>
Turning: The Insistence of Symmetries in a Personal Narrative	<i>27</i>
Bob Hanson	27
God through Science	<i>31</i>
Conrad Bell IV	31

LIFE TOGETHER 2021: REFLECTIONS

Copyright © 2021 All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission from the individual chapter authors.

Preface

Once again, our dear friends, Drs. Stan and Ruth Burgess, founding members of the Life Together Sunday school class at Evangel Temple, have invited the class to present written offerings for a Christmas volume. With a heart for the intergenerational transmission of faith and the passing on of heritage and story, they generously offered to publish the contributions of Life Together class members in celebration of Christmas 2020 and now have offered publication of a 2021 volume. This year we offer not only Christmas stories but also reflections on our Summer 2021 Jesus series as well as other poetry and reflections.

Without a doubt, Life Together has served as a place of great joy, love, learning, encouragement, motivation, peace, and sharing—a haven and a safe place for expressing ideas, working through issues, and thinking together as Spirit-filled Christ followers. We all feel so grateful for the opportunity to love Jesus together in this place.

Life Together began decades ago by Stan and Ruth Burgess and has had the quality stewarding over the years of Michael Palmer, Jim Edwards, Marty Mittelstadt, and Doug Olena. The class has met in the main Evangel Temple church building, the “Corner House” across the street (July 2018), and “The Barn” (August 2019). On March 29, 2020, as COVID-19 raged, we had our first online Zoom gathering. After a brief return to the church facility in mid-2021, we are now again on Zoom (and enjoying a wonderful series on Romans with Bob Berg) in hopes of one day returning to the church facility again.

Through all the changes and challenges, our commitment to one another and to walking together in Christ remains. With great thankfulness, we celebrate the relationships we hold so dear and offer these writings in celebration of Christmas 2021—rejoicing in *God with Us II*.

Reflections
on
Christmas

A Tale of Two Sisters

Ruth Vassar Burgess

It was December 1970. Sister Teresa quickly used the white cards for speechreading practice while Sister Mary fumbled with her green and brown rectangle shoulder bag. From deep within, her small hand eagerly withdrew a small package wrapped in red and green Christmas wrappings.

“It’s for you, Mees Burgess. Merry Christmas. May you have a blessed holiday.” Sister Mary spoke with a heavy French accent. Her black eyes shined with excitement as she gave me the box.

As a novitiate, Sister Mary had joined a group of teaching nuns in the United States. As the years passed her position had eroded until now, she was a ward at the convent.

After much coaxing, Sister Mary had convinced Mother Superior to enroll Sister Teresa and her in speechreading classes at the local speech and hearing clinic. Both nuns had progressive hearing losses. Sister Teresa, a serious, solemn-faced lady, was conscientious. She practiced her lessons faithfully and thoroughly. Sister Mary talked and talked; smiled and smiled. Their progress was surprising even though the study habits of the dear ladies were opposite.

Sister Teresa abruptly stopped and said, “Now, Sister, have you spoken that today is our last session? Our funds are depleted, but we have learned enough so we can practice on our own.”

“Have you heard that the orders are changing?” Again, her black eyes sparkled as Sister Mary continued. “Imagine wearing habits this short!” She lifted the swirling black material to just below her fragile kneecaps.

“Sister!!” The staccato voice of Sister Teresa sounded.

“And I can let my hair grow. You should have seen me as a girl. Oh, I had thick, long, black hair. Yes, yes. I was very, very young.” Sister Mary’s head bobbed, accenting every syllable.

“Really Sister Mary, we must go. We have stayed too long.” The somber nun grabbed the arm of her smaller peer and steered her toward the waiting room door. All the while the little French nun was giving blessings to me and the staff.

The weeks seemed to accelerate from frosty November to the whirlwinds of the Christmas season. My husband, Stan, was in the final throes of a doctoral program, plus teaching a full college load. Our son, Bradley, was learning to cope with life with a zest found only in third graders. It was my first year of college teaching, and I was completing clinical hours on Tuesday afternoons at the Speech and Hearing Clinic. Our commitments one to the other had become institutional. It seemed we became cogs in crank shafts wound by conflicting purposes.

It was the Tuesday before Christmas. The weather was grey, cold, and damp. The red, drippy noses of the children sprayed in rooms as we drilled for articulation perfection. The secretary had just left to pick up the bonus ten-pound frozen turkeys. A heavy, stuffy odor closed in as the gaudy lights blinked on and off on the donated eight-foot ill-shaped fir. Mingled with this was the musty scent of dull popcorn, wet rubber boots on the straw, and leaky diapers as faithful parents waited for their wards to complete their sessions.

Suddenly the telephone began ringing. When I completed the routine phone protocol, a small voice asked, "Please, let me talk to Mees Burgess." It was the voice of my delightful, little Sister Mary.

"Yes, this is Mrs. Burgess," I replied.

"I must hurry because this is the only phone that I have found unguarded, and I have to tell you something." There was a pause, and the sweet voice continued.

"God loves you."

The muscles of my throat contracted, my eyes began filling with water, and my vocabulary faded as the sweet Sister Mary bade me good-bye. I attempted to thank her for imparting joy by sharing our Savior's birth in beautiful simplicity.

"God loves you."

Not a Christmas Baby

Lois E. Olena

Monday, February 12, 2018, was quite a day. Doug and I had been serving Congolese refugees in Springfield for almost a year—a transformative experience of welcome, learning, hard work, adventure, and dealing with ambiguity. Little did I know the surprise that would come to my life that day.

After a usual full day of work at the seminary, I stopped by the home of one of our Congolese families around 5:00 p.m. to drop off baby clothes for M,¹ the younger sister of A, and to see how she was doing. M was eighteen, pregnant, and overdue by one day. Since I was her designated ride to the hospital, I was eager to keep tabs on how this young mother-to-be was feeling. I walked in the door and spoke with A, who said M was in the back room resting. I asked how M was, and A just smiled and said, “She’s good.”

After a brief visit I headed home down route 65. As soon as I walked in the door, my phone rang at 5:26 (apparently after two missed calls while driving). It was A, saying she needed me to come and take M to the hospital since she was in labor. I was surprised she could have gone into labor so quickly in the few minutes since I’d left, but I said, “I’ll be right there!” I jumped in the car but then decided before getting on the highway to swing through the drive-through to grab dinner because I figured we had a *long* night ahead of us.

As I was on my way north, my phone rang again at 5:42. I realized I had missed another call from A in the meantime, too. “Are you *coming*? Baby is coming *fast!*”

“I’m almost there!” I said. I was on 65 almost to Kearney by that point.

When I got to the house, I left my phone in the car since I figured I was just running in for them then taking off to the hospital. I climbed gingerly up the four ice-covered steps—a product of a storm just days before and of our new friends not knowing about rock salt.

“Where is she? Is she ready?” I asked as I walked in.

“She’s back here,” her sister pointed, leading me to the back bedroom.

When I walked in, there on the floor was a startling sight. I looked down and saw M on the floor—with her amniotic sac bulging out!

I dropped to my knees in front of this remarkably calm young mother who was simply moaning quietly in front of me and said to her sister, “Give me your phone!” I called 911, and as the phone was ringing, the next thing I know, I’m seeing a thick head of black hair coming!!! The baby was crowning, and everything was happening! Within seconds, WHOOSH! OUT SHE CAME onto the floor!

¹ To protect the privacy of the individuals in this story, I will use their first initials only.

A had just enough time to get a thin dress underneath her, poor kid, and there I was on the phone with 911, trying to get their help. They were *great*, but I was worried that the baby wasn't breathing or crying. I was so worried she was dead. *Don't let this baby die on my watch, God*, I prayed. Holding the phone in my left hand, I used my right hand to just keep rubbing her back, trying to get mucus out of her nose and mouth, and moving her around so she would breathe.

"Find something clean, dry, and warm," the 911 woman said. I looked around, seeing *anything but* something clean, dry, and warm. All I could see was the plastic bag full of baby items I had just brought to the house less than an hour before, so I tore it open and pulled out a pink baby sweater and used it to wrap and massage the baby. Finally, she had a few bubbles come out of her nose and made a few hiccups, but I was so scared she wasn't going to make it. I didn't know what to do next as she lay there still attached to her mother.

Her time of birth was 5:55—literally *minutes* after I had arrived at the house! Suddenly the little 8x10 room filled with paramedics, who had gotten there in astonishing time. THANK GOD! As several of them piled into that tiny room, I backed into the corner (my right leg shaking involuntarily from adrenaline!). Between the paramedics in the room and the others outside the door helping, they cleared the baby's passages, got her breathing, got her oxygen, and got her all checked out. Finally, I was relieved that she was OK! Some of them bundled the baby up and took her in one ambulance, while others got M cleaned up and carried out the door to the other ambulance.

Suddenly the house was quiet. I cleaned up the room, gathered up M's two sisters and their array of kids, and headed to the hospital, taking turns watching the kids in the foyer of the hospital while the three sisters visited until about 9:00 p.m. when another volunteer took them home. When I got back in my car, I realized I had to return to the house anyhow to find my glasses, which I had apparently whipped off in the fray of childbirth!

Surprises: Zacharias, Mary, and Joseph surprised by the angel of the Lord, Elizabeth surprised by pregnancy in her old age, baby John surprised by the proximity of his cousin Jesus, Elizabeth surprised by the Holy Spirit, Zacharias surprised by his returned voice, the people surprised by John's name, the shepherds surprised by the angelic visit and perhaps by the humble birthplace of a Savior and Messiah, and on and on it goes. God surprises us. He has His own way of doing things, and rarely does His way coincide with our expectations.

I had no idea I was going to deliver (or rather, "catch") a baby that night. I thought I was just a young Congolese refugee girl's ride to the hospital.

As astonished as I was, the three Congolese sisters all just seemed to take the whole event in stride—no big deal, just an everyday occurrence. Me? I was riding high for days!

This was no Christmas baby, but her arrival certainly continues to give me pause as I reflect upon the intersection of my expectations and God's surprises in my life.

Christmas in Muslim West Africa

Conrad Bell IV

Below are excerpts from the journal I logged on my iPhone during my first missions trip. We went to a village in southeast Senegal. Jeremy was the father of a missionary family living there. Mohamady was our interpreter. I was the trip photographer and chosen to share my testimony.

Wednesday 12/22

10:30 am: Jahango language lesson (their tribal tongue); fascinated, I am driven to learn it and take copious notes.

11:45 am: At Khedegou market purchasing our contribution to the Christmas feast.

2:10 pm: I am exploring the village before the welcoming ceremony, asking questions about the language and furiously typing on my phone. The villagers constantly hear me say “mah kono dondee” (slow down) and “sah gee ah mah” (say it again). They laugh at me; Mohamady says it is with joy and appreciation because it shows I care about them.

Christmas Eve

1 pm-6:30 pm: We are setting up to show the *Jesus* film and spent hours on what should have been a short task. We are seemingly beset by the devil; the generator will not start! We tried several things, and we finally got it started more from prayer than anything. I'm the audio/video guy; I got a DVD player and projector hooked up, but there was no signal. Again, I tried several things, and it finally worked; however, the generator cut out again! Praying...

11:05 pm: God honored our obedience, though it took four hours for a two-hour movie; I am exhausted. I crashed on a bedroll in the hut.

Christmas

9 am: We made the rounds greeting the elder women of the Chief's household (a show of respect).

10:05 am: The village contributed a goat, two rams, and a cow to the Christmas feast. The Chief spoke, then the Imam. Jeremy said they thanked Allah and prayed for prosperity in the coming year. They laid each animal on the ground, bound it, and slit its throat. Blood pumped out of the neck artery and pooled on the ground. I'm forty-eight years old, and this is the first time I have seen a large mammal killed. I never imagined it would be as part of a pagan sacrifice. I must put down what I'm feeling and go into a detached, photographer mode. I will process it all later...

Sunday 12/26

10:50 am – There are still only kids with us, but six to seven young men are watching from afar. Jeremy says they watch us and will report back to elders. I cannot give my testimony; it is against tribal law to proselytize with no adult present. I am simultaneously relieved—as I feel woefully unprepared—and disappointed because this is why I came. Jeremy instead leads a Bible study about the paralytic lowered through the roof. He especially likes this story as a witnessing tool because it shows Jesus has the power to forgive sins (important to Christians) and the power to heal (important to Muslims).

I left with what may be the most comprehensive documentation of the Jahango language. I cannot remember this trip without recalling how deeply it changed me and my desire to go back. I am so thankful for God’s mercy, grace, and providence, both to me personally and to our nation. Yet, I am equally torn over how much we take Him for granted. My prayer this Christmas is for renewed vigor in us to be salt and light, delaying Jesus’s return until as many as possible accept His gracious invitation to believe and receive eternal life.



Treated like high-ranking government officials and given gifts at the Welcoming Ceremony. My son Rad stands just left of the young woman in the center.

Reflections
on Jesus
(Summer 2021 LTET Series)

**Yesterday, Today, Forever, Jesus is the Same
(Musings on a Hymn of the Modern Church)**

Stanley Milton Burgess

For much of my early Christian life, I served as a church pianist or organist, but I also enjoyed singing along with the congregation. One of our favorite hymns, and still one of my favorites, was Albert B. Simpson's 1890 version of "Yesterday, Today, Forever, Jesus is the Same." We sang with great fervor the four verses, obviously based upon Hebrews 13:8. I loved it and still do.

As time passed, and I became a student of Christian theology and its history, I began to wonder how and why we forgot the promise of Jesus, recorded in John 14:16: "I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, *that he may abide with you forever.*" Again, in John 15:26 Jesus says, "But I will send you the Comforter from the Father. When he comes, he will give evidence about me. He is the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father."

Of course, we also sang the hymn, "The Comforter has Come." It occurred to me that numerous Protestant historians of Christianity had sung this song while also falling into the notion that the Holy Spirit (the second Comforter) had deistically fallen asleep for eighteen centuries (AD 100-1900). This of course was most popular among early twentieth century Pentecostal historians, who explained their uniqueness from the first years of the twentieth century onward as a renewal of the Holy Spirit—with the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles, the outpouring of the Spirit in Pandita Ramabai's Mukti Mission in India, and many other places worldwide.

My professional writing soon centered on the role of the Holy Spirit in Ancient (1984), Medieval (1989), and early Modern Christian history (1997), the trilogy published by Hendrickson Publishers (later reprinted by Baker Press). To my amazement, a different picture emerged about the so-called absent Holy Spirit. During every intervening century, the Holy Spirit clearly was wonderously active. For example, Eastern Christians taught that all members of the Holy Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—were involved and present in the activities of the others.

A record of miracles exists throughout virtually all churches in all centuries, including even the raising of the dead (see Father Albert J. Hebert's *Saints Who Raised the Dead: True Stories of 400 Resurrection Miracles* <1986, 2004>, which convincingly proves this point).

This Christmas season, we celebrate the activity of all three members of the Trinity—the Father sent the Son, and the divine Spirit provided the Incarnation of Jesus (Matt 1:18, 20). Yes, God Almighty—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—have been present eternally, faithfully abiding with us, *without interruption*, and will continue to abide with us throughout eternity to come. *They are the same, yesterday, today, and forever. Praise God's Holy Name!!*

Yesterday, Today, Forever

Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever. Heb. 13:8
I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Mt. 28:20

1. Oh, how sweet the glo-ri-ous mes-sage sim-ple faith may claim: Yes-ter-day, to-
2. He who was the friend of sin-ners seeks the lost one now: Sin-ner, come, and
3. Oft on earth He healed the suf-frer by His might-y hand: Still our sick-ness-
4. As He walked once to Em-ma-us, with them to a-bide, So through all life's

day, for-ev-er, Je-sus is the same; Still He loves to save the sin-ful, heal the sick and lame,
at His foot-stool pen-i-tent-ly bow; He who said, "I'll not con-demn thee, go and sin no more,"
es and sor-rows go at His com-mand; He who gave His heal-ing vir-tue to a wom-an's touch
way He walk-eth ev-er near our side; Soon a-gain we shall be-hold Him—has-ten, Lord, the day—

Refrain

Cheer the mourn-er, still the tem-pest—glo-ry to His name!
Speaks to thee that word of par-don as in days of yore. Yes-ter-day, to-day, for-ev-er,
To the faith that claims His full-ness still will give as much.
But 'twill still be this same Je-sus as He went a-way.

Je-sus is the same, All may change, but Je-sus nev-er—glo-ry to His name! Glo-ry to His name!

Glo-ry to His name! All may change, but Je-sus nev-er— glo-ry to His name!

WORDS: Albert B. Simpson, 1890. MUSIC: James H. Burke, 1890. Public Domain.

The Connective Tissues of My Faith in Christ

Doug Olena

Without intending to, my offerings for the Summer of 2021 were a larger percentage of the time allotted than I imagined they would or should be at first. The gracious request of the class—that I continue an additional week to cover the Hans Küng introduction taken from *On Being a Christian*—was generous, and I really enjoyed the responsiveness of the class and our conversations. I want to thank Lois for suggesting the topic and say that our eclectic offerings were a constant surprise and joy.

On reflection, that introduction was largely a negative impression of all the things that Jesus Christ probably was not. Küng's realism in recounting how the Church, in fact, took Christ was a stark reminder that it is not a trivial exercise to interpret the Scriptures and the histories surrounding them, to produce an image of Christ for ourselves that reflects Christ himself instead of some reflection of our self-centered desire for a Christ that is cripplingly caricatured by our parochial interests.

I am struck by my anxious agony at the possibility—no, the probability—that I have gotten my personal portrait wrong and that the Christ I worship is merely a construct of my wishes instead of the God of the universe on whom the saints of old focused their attention. But I am jolted by the fact that the saints of old are in the same position we are. Their apprehension of Christ was, as ours is, a temporal reduction of the true universality of Christ. They looked through their window onto the revelation of God even as we do, with prejudices and personal perturbations intact. Our only advantage may be that we can see the limitations of our visions in general by reflecting on the previous ones offered by our godly predecessors, and in particular by reflecting on the limitations of our adherence to the Scripture, and the hopeful garden of virtues we have planted with Christ in our lives.

My sorrow at the gap widening before me between reality and my perception of it is mollified by the ever-present grace of God himself who has provided the connective tissues of my faith, assuring me that I am really connected to Him in Christ and to His body in the world through the practices we have retained over the ages in worship, study, and charity.

The puzzle is real. My anxiety is real. I am not inventing an artificial quandary to satisfy my need as a philosopher to glory in the immensity of the paradox and the improbability of its solution and use that as a substitute for faith on which to grind my teeth. Instead, I am reminded of the Scripture Lois has found great surcease in for the last few years—“Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Matt 11:28-30, BSB).

I announce to the patterns of my existence that the Holy Spirit has provided the way to live in Christ, to follow Christ, and to become like Christ under the caveat that my personal limitations, damages, and transgressions are both known and compensated for in the body and blood of Christ. This is the flesh that makes my life possible, that prevents my hope

from being extinguished, that creates in me a form of life that can learn and grow and find the calm assurance of a child of God. The tears that are so often a mingling of joy and despair are proof positive that I am not abandoned to the vicious, interminable, and inevitable death that faces me more each day but am adopted and welcomed into the arms of God in Christ as are my compatriots who hold this vision of the divine—a precious light and warmth to ward off the darkness and cold of a world without God. I am one of the lucky ones.

I don't know how else it is supposed to be. I neither have the imagination nor the strength to suppose a world free from this goring paradox. It faces me at every turn. My intellect and physicality press its persistence. My logic forces the abandonment of alternate readings of the inscription of experience. Though I have enough wealth to avoid hunger and homelessness for which I am deeply grateful, I now have confidence that I will have enough. Though I am not afraid of being without, I see so many who already are and am thus in distress over their need and their want. And yet this identification with them is itself a paradox in that though I could offer my substance in its entirety to satiate their necessity, I would imperil my family and friends with the need to care for me ever after. That is more than I believe Christ would ask, and for me it would be a transgression that would wear us all out. Christ is not a maker of ruin, but of life. I am to do nothing that would promote my own death though death in the end is inevitable. Paul said, "If I give all I possess to the poor and exult in the surrender of my body, but have not love, I gain nothing" (1 Cor 13:3).

Life itself is defined as an organism that sequesters energy for use in preserving and promoting its own endurance against entropy, and so allowing my life to drain out in unbelief is an effective suicide and contrary to Christ's purpose "that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). The only way I have found to emulate this is to permit the Holy Spirit to guide me with the strength God has provided me in Christ. For this I am grateful. And for you, Life Together I am also grateful, the embodiment of Christ on earth for me.

Jesus and the People's Sabbath

Geoffrey W. Sutton

In a bygone era, Christians observed the Lord's Day as if it were a Sabbath. Throughout America, stores were closed, well-dressed people went to church, and savored home-cooked meals rather than support greedy restaurant owners. Although many contemporary Christians attend services, few refuse to work or engage in activities that require others to work. And the after-church restaurant rush seems like a tradition. Nevertheless, Christians remain divided about what it means to honor the Sabbath by keeping it holy (Exod 20:8-11). In this essay, I look at how Jesus's Sabbath comments may encourage another perspective on biblical laws and teachings.

The Old Sabbath

Jews who keep the commandment observe the Sabbath (Shabbat) from sunset on Friday evening until Saturday evening. Some Christians like the Seventh-day Adventists also observe the Friday-Saturday Sabbath. The Adventists' justification is positive and fits with psychological research supporting the value of rest (Sutton, 2019). However, the seriousness of the Sabbath can be seen in the threat to life itself.

In Numbers 15:32-36, a story of a man caught picking up sticks on the Sabbath reveals the high risk of violating this commandment. He was placed under guard while Moses talked to God about the penalty. Perhaps ironically, based on the law written in stone, the man was stoned to death. As Friedman and Dolansky (2011) note, the twenty-four-hour time period of the Sabbath was a sacred boundary, and—like boundaries of physical space such as in the temple—the boundaries of time should not be violated.

Jesus and the Sabbath

“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”

Jesus was a Jew. I say that because I think Christians forget that Jesus kept the Jewish Law. However, the Gospel writers report times when He violated what the Jewish teachers of His day decided about allowable practices on the Sabbath (e.g., see Mark 2:23-28). As Enns (2014) observed, when Jesus's disciples were caught picking grain on a Sabbath, Jesus referred the accusers to a story about the respected King David illegally taking holy bread. Thus, the focus on human need became the primary way to interpret the Sabbath rule. Jesus's progressive teaching focused on the importance of the Sabbath to people's well-being. He didn't do away with the principle of the Sabbath, but He certainly offered a new perspective—one that may be extended to other rules written for ancient Jewish or early Christian communities.

Commandments for People

You would think the Ten Commandments were set in stone the way some Christians follow biblical laws. But then again, the same Christian group can be rigid about some rules and dismissive of others as if Paul wrote “you are under some laws and some measure of grace” (Rom 6:14). I haven’t seen any Christians slaughtering bulls and offering a sacrifice aside from the occasional church bar-b-que; but I have observed Christians preach against alcohol, women in ministry, men with long hair, and tattoos. Of course, Christians remain rigidly divided over other matters like abortion, birth control, divorce and remarriage, and same-sex relationships as I’ve discussed at some length elsewhere (e.g., Sutton, 2016).

If the Sabbath was made for man, then perhaps it’s worth engaging in moral thinking about how old laws and teachings qua “Christian commandments” may be evaluated in terms of how the rigid application of an old or recent law or custom violates the principle of loving one’s neighbor, caring for those deemed unclean (see Beck, 2011) and thus marginalized by society, or those oppressed by secular or religious institutions (e.g., Althouse, 2016; Tisby, 2019).

References

- Adventist (n.d.). What Adventists believe about the sabbath. *Seventh-day Adventist Church*. Retrieved October 11, 2021 from <https://www.adventist.org/the-sabbath/>.
- Althouse, P. (2016). Jesus, empire, and Christian ethics: Implications for the moral critique of mass incarceration in the United States. In G. W. Sutton and B. Schmidly (eds.). *Christian Morality: An interdisciplinary framework for thinking about contemporary moral issues* (pp. 62-80). Eugene, OR: Pickwick.
- Beck, R. (2011). *Unclean: Meditations on purity, hospitality, and mortality*. Eugene, OR: Cascade.
- Enns, P. (2014). *The bible tells me so: Why defending scripture has made us unable to read it*. HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.
- Friedman, R. E. and Dolansky, S. (2011). *The Bible now* (p. 132). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.
- Sutton, G. W. (2016). *A House Divided: Sexuality, morality, and Christian cultures*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick. ISBN: 9781498224888
- Sutton, G.W. (2019). *Living well: 10 big ideas of faith and a meaningful life*. Springfield, MO: Sunflower. ISBN-13 978-1796320169
- Tisby, J. (2019). *The color of compromise: The truth about the American church’s complicity in racism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Jesus is My Brother

Don Tosh

“Now if we are children, then we are heirs—
heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ”
(Rom 8:17).

I was raised in a Christian family and always believed that God was my Father. The way you think of a father, however, depends greatly on what your experience with your own father was like. My father was somewhat distant, and I viewed him as the enforcer for those times my mother would say, “Just wait until your father gets home.” I can recall very few times my father praised me for my accomplishments. So, I slipped into the mindset of thinking that God was waiting for me to slip up and punish me for my mistakes.

I had an older brother (and a younger one), but when I thought of being a joint heir with Christ, it was natural to think that the relationship I would have with Christ would be similar to the relationship I had with my older brother. He was a type A personality and very competitive. He was bigger, stronger, and faster than me. I was competitive as well, but any competition with my brother ended in my defeat, usually a painful defeat. He also did not have any problems letting my parents know when I did something wrong. I never saw him as someone who would protect or support me. These circumstances hindered me from appreciating the relationship that God and Christ wanted to have with me.

A breakthrough came when our daughter was born. I remember holding her for the first time and feeling an overwhelming sense of love and responsibility. I was speechless as I experienced waves of powerful emotion. I remember wondering if that was the way God felt about me. Over the years, that wonder has turned to complete certainty; God really does love me and wants to protect me and help me to prosper. I never had that kind of breakthrough when it came to accepting Jesus as a joint heir, though. I continued to view Him as a competitor; and He was bigger, stronger, faster, more loved, and more virtuous than I was. There was no point in competing with Him because I would surely lose. When I fell short, I thought of Him reporting me to the Father as needing discipline.

Over the years I have tried to grow in Christ and mature as a Christian, but I never could fully embrace Jesus as a brother who loves me, supports me, and intercedes for me. I wish I could point to some moment when some sort of amazing revelation of who Jesus really is would flood my spirit, but for some reason Christ has chosen to let this be a lesson that comes gradually. Our studies this past summer about the nature of Jesus have given me food for thought, and our study of Romans shows how Christ’s sacrifice has justified me, rather than condemned me, before the Father. The growth process is continuing.

I will let this Christmas season be a time of reflection on the birth of a Savior who truly is my big brother, in the finest sense of what that relationship could be.

Poetic Reflections

**Poetic Ruminations on *The Living Flame of Love*
by St. John of the Cross**

LaDonna Friesen

St. Peter's steps in Rome are beside my bed. They are made of books, and one step will warm your feet to death before they are baptized in flames and rise, rose-hued for the next step. It is the 1912 edition of *The Living Flame of Love* by St. John of the Cross, and inside the front cover is my father's name, Raymond Branscom, who ascended into new life when I was six.

St. John of the Cross (1542-1591) was a Spanish Carmelite priest and poet regarded as a patron saint of mystics. In *The Living Flame of Love*, he wrote an image that profoundly illustrates the transformation of the soul in God, and my poem is based on this image:

When a log of wood is set on fire, and when it is transformed into fire and united with it, the longer it burns and the hotter the fire, the more it glows until sparks and flames are emitted from it.

So too the soul when transformed, and glowing interiorly in the fire of love, is not only united with the divine fire, but becomes a living flame, and itself conscious of it. The soul speaks of this with an intimate sweetness of love, burning in its own flame (2-3).

St. John shaped this image in a poem that begins with a cry of the soul:

O Living Flame of Love,
That woundest tenderly
My soul in its inmost depth!
As thou art no longer grievous,
Perfect thy work, if it be thy will,
Break the best of this sweet encounter.

O lamps of fire,
In the splendours of which
The deep caverns of sense,
Dim and dark,
With unwonted brightness
Give light and warmth together to their
Beloved!

O sweet burn!
O delicious wound!
O tender hand! O gentle touch!
Savouring of everlasting life,
And paying the whole debt,
By slaying Thou hast changed death into life.

How gently and how lovingly
Thou wakest in my bosom,
Where alone Thou secretly dwellest;
And in Thy sweet breathing
Full of grace and glory,
How tenderly Thou fillest me with Thy love.

I wrote my own version, not that I could improve on St. John's, but so my soul may be surrendered to divine love through poem making. Through this prayer-writing, I laid my soul in the poem to be transformed until my soul's flame burned within the flame of divine love.

The Soul as “Living Flame”

By LaDonna Friesen, inspired by St. John of the Cross

The log is only wood

until fire tempers the bark

and wounds the inner embers.

The stiff sinews curl into ash,

like transparent wings suspended in the haloed dark.

The log would never have known it could flame in glorious agony

if the fire had not tendered its being.

So the soul is only a void

until divine love burns through flesh

and illumines a cavernous interior.

And the soul, in pained delight, bows

into love’s intimate wounding

tendering tissue and tendon

searing into the heart of the soul’s inmost darkness

settling love’s white-hot fire in ventricles like a pulsing orb—

and the soul’s flicker *is* the divine fire

“Burning in its own flame.”¹

The dark night of the soul would never have known

a burning bush within, never have marveled

that the soul could become nothing but divine love,

emanating warmth from the whole body, a tongue of light wind on the skin,

if love had not annealed the heart with its sweet flame.

¹ St. John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love*, trans. David Lewis (London: Thomas Baker, 1912).

Two Meditations upon the Speaking Creation

Nathan Nelson

An Apotheosis in the Garden

- An enthusiastic, nearly free sonnet

Constrained by a tomato cage, the crookneck squash
plant reaches valiantly for the sky, occasionally
hanging yellow fruit like balloons in midair nodding
at light breezes and bobbing uncharacteristically
above the startled basil. The prolific cherry tomatoes
rise from adjacent containers in witnessing clouds
around the gourds, wide-eyed like holy paparazzi
scooping the competing peppers down the row.

Sailing now above the zucchini, their earthbound cousins
satisfied with soil and shadow, the bright dirigibles lift
into the empyrean, their horizon widening and buzzing
with pollinators spreading the good news
of teleological triumph: untethering into union
with the gardener who saw them as transcendent beings.

The Philosopher Returns for Homecoming

Bemused, she sat under the leaves
that fell like the fallen years, some dark
as hunger and some bright
as the one that dropped gold into her lap.

Like weightless gold, she thought,
watching the vaguely familiar couples
floating by in their bubbles of iridescent joy
at meeting again to reinflate
the old conversations of success,
now about husbands, wives, and children—
and, of course, the golden jobs,
the market killings,
the third car.

The weekend's program promised golden words
from alumni made prominent by their gold—
the fast-food franchiser, the political climber,
the financial speculator, the money-multiplier:
not a philosopher or poet among them.

How weightless my wealth, she thought,
and how far beyond assay. I could not sell
a sliver here.

She stood, and the leaf fluttered to the cooling earth
near an approaching child
gilded with mere laughter.

A Short Theodicy in the Shadow of Death: Five Poems

Julianne Nelson

Grounding Hope #1

Where do I ground my hope?

Not in my words.

They don't possess power to raise the dead or
prevent the living from going to the dead.

Not in my knowing God's will.

I do not presume to know it except in
generalities and generalities do not
apply to my brother in all his specificity.

Not in particular scriptures plucked out of
particular contexts and applied
speciously to his context.

Where do I ground my hope?

Nowhere,
except in the nature of God
which I have felt in my bones
to be love
that accompanies one through
whatever,
whenever,
wherever.

Not Knowing

“Ring the bells that still can ring;
forget your perfect offering.

There’s a crack in everything;
that’s how the light gets in.”

Leonard Cohen sang that.

“Ring the bells that still can ring”
and I wonder,
just what are those now?
Are they the bells that intone life or
those that toll impending death?

“Forget your perfect offering”
and I realize I don't know what
perfect hope looks like here but
I certainly don't want perfect despair.

“There’s a crack in everything”
and I say,
oh yeah, I know that well
when a man in his prime
is targeted twice by
miniature assault microbes.

“That’s how the light gets in”
and I want to pray, O God,
may the light be
in the east, not the west
but I do not know the direction of the light
nor the movement of the wind
so I am left to trust the Spirit
animating both.

Grounding Hope #2

I want you to pray hope, he asserted, and

I said, “yes I will”

but how do I pray hope here? Because

I’m not going to be claiming and demanding

though I *am* wrestling.

I’m not going to be believing

unequivocally that he will live long,

like three cups of faith and no other

ingredients in the mix.

I’m not going to be thinking only

positive thoughts or praying only

positive words.

My predecessors, the Hebrew psalmists,

hurled all their humanity at the heavens—

praising, despairing, bellowing, hoping,

believing all of it safe in the

arms of God

by which they were held.

Praying

I want to pray.

But I can't pray on the mountaintop

shouting bullying words about

cheating death and

I can't pray standing invincibly tall on a rock

assailed by raging winds and

heaving sea.

But I *can* crawl into a crevice

of the rock and pray there my

doubt and faith,

hope and fear,

sadness and comfort.

I can pray there.

I have to.

Or I can't pray at all.

Time or Light

God is light
but

I've wanted God as time
in time
on time
my time
no time
to waste
or wait

for another unwelcome spasm of pain
which looks for God
to snap fingers
and
obliterate
but instead finds

God as light

unbounded by time
permeating its confines here,
misperceived as interminable delay
and

I think I have a choice:

time
or
light.

I hope I choose light.
I find more God in it.

Final Reflections

Turning: The Insistence of Symmetries in a Personal Narrative

Bob Hanson

The paradiddle: left hand, right hand, left, left; right hand, left hand, right, right. A rudiment of rhythm. Metrical and symmetrical.

Formal rudimentary drumming evolved as a solution to the problem of coordinating the movements of individuals in martial formations—menacing, serious, armed individuals in pursuit of accomplishing very specific purposes. The drum spoke the coordinating commands in a commonly understood language. The drum line projected direction, a vector. This vector may mean life or death in dangerous circumstances. More simply, as in my case, this vector could influence the direction of one's life—or perhaps, by metaphorical weight, sway the balance.

Similar to the martial drum line, the ritually oriented drum circle speaks a language that may provide inner direction. Although the common denominator may be movement, the shaman riding his drum out of the diurnal world into the territory of visionary experience is quite a different use of the most ancient of instruments. The shaman drum is a vehicle of escape. Journeys begin when the shaman drums, and the transformation of identity may be the goal. By way of the natural elements of vibration and frequency, drumming is seen as a medicine useful to the curing of dis-eases and healing of wounds and fractures: both physical and psychic.

From the military side of the equation emerges the language—the vocabulary—of the basic snare drum rudiments. This language might be seen as the equivalent of bugle calls or as a parallel means of communicating instructions and information in the midst of the chaos of battle. This is a kind of sign language, a flat directive meaningful only as a one-to-one correspondence with desired behaviors. This is the language of stop or go signs rather than a symbolic language. To the contrary, the shaman drum virtually disappears into its role as symbol, metaphor, sacrament. The shaman executes maneuvers via the drum that are not comprehensible to the practical martial mindset. Yet the shaman does, indeed achieve desired movements. The function of the shaman, like a military unit, might be seen in the tactics and strategies of out-maneuvering an opponent. In the case of the shaman, the opponent is the resistant, defensive formations of the no longer vital status quo. The shaman's role might be seen as a kind of turning. And turning, rotating from one side to the other, is a symmetrical idea. The shaman reminds us that there's this world...and another. Left hand, right hand.

Mastery of the twenty-six basic rudiments is where I began my initiation into the secret lore of the drum. At age eleven in 1962, I spent a summer in Racine, Wisconsin as a member of a junior feeder corps to the Racine Kilties, a multi-time national champion drum and bugle corps. Even at that young age, we were very good—I have the recording to prove it. And we looked good. It is not mere hyperbole to claim that the precision of a competitive drum and bugle corps is unmatched among all versions of marching units throughout all history.

The sheer force of the brass percolating compressed breath through French horn bugles, baritone bugles, bass bugles, contra-bass bugles, and soprano and alto bugles is a spiritual experience. It is, of course, literally the spirit, the breath turning in the coils of the instruments. Turning. This is the reification of breath as the facilitator of persuasion without the intermediary of verbal language. As has been remarked in many wisdom traditions, ears have no lids.

And as always, drums supply the thunder and the crash. I played the cymbals. I have the photos to prove it. Drum corps execute intricate, symmetrical maneuvers without discernable military or practical purpose. The motivation is to join in the dance. To the viewer—the audience perched high in a football stadium—the patterns executed on the field most often suggest the wheeling structures found inside kaleidoscopes. And the fascination with the symmetrical, crystalline arrays of people moving through time—in time—is as primitive and pure a pleasure as can be provided by the modalities of art. Symmetry in marching: the simplest symmetry of all. Right leg, left leg. Backward, forward. Turning.

This is where I started with the drum. In the outfields of municipal baseball diamonds converted to football-field-sized rectangles. Moving symmetries of marching individuals contained inside the geometries of game fields. Fields, not meadow designed for games played in regulated time of quarters and halves: there are intrinsic purposes in evidence here. At twilight. Under the ballfield lights. Near the shores of Lake Michigan. And in the silence between the rehearsed snippets, or in the silence of maneuvering without playing the instruments, the sound of the lake waves crashing on the breaker rocks standing guard near the shoreline—the leap and the boundary. The inescapable shushing rhythm, the sound the world makes by itself. And the source of that secret rhythm is one of the spiritual targets the shaman seeks to penetrate—riding a drum.

Entrainment was not a concept that would have meant anything to me then in 1962, but, within the next year, the Beatles appeared, and the best and worst elements of the following decade might be seen as played-out instances of cultural entrainment. For me, it was simply the opportunity to be the drummer in a rock and roll band. And the form of entrainment was simply the dance. We used to dance back then—not just watch dancing—every weekend in overheated Wisconsin gymnasiums, after basketball games. Or in narrow downtown storefront clubs with names like *The Nitty Gritty*, or *The Scene*. (In retrospect, “the scene” is not as much of a throw away as it seemed even at the time. What better pun to capture the essence of the purpose of art: to create the scene, to testify to the seen; to witness the scene; to be at the scene; to be seen; to identify the seen; to identify with the scene...) And the best role was claimed by the drummer. There, spread out across the ruled floor (the playing field once again a rule based ritual activity time insistent in quarters and halves) were dozens of people located haphazardly in space but moving to the rhythm initiated by the two hands and the two feet of the drummer: you.

As yet un-expressible—if not unthinkable—the miracle of being centered in a mandala of movement and rubbing up against the miracle of acceptance as a participant in ritual behavior. Genetically programmed, as are we all, to seek out this experience and identify it as

spiritual and necessary, at that time it would have seemed to me to have been nothing more than an opportunity to be at play in the fields of the Lord. That and—being young—learning to negotiate by trial and error the delicate balance of exuberance and fear: light and dark. Shadows that came into being only because of the light. Left hand, right hand. Fitting the era (the “times”), my life was a colorful crazy quilt without a perceptible organizing principle. Yet, occasionally the shards of that quilt would turn in the light—as if captured in a kaleidoscope—and I would find myself standing my ground, rooted in the midst of unanticipated, unpredictable symmetries. My age and culture cohort—either vaguely or explicitly—may have felt that we were engaging in a countermovement to the authority ritual. But the more accurate assessment may be that the dominant culture was being cracked open a little bit at a time by radical visionaries wielding the burglary tools of art. What is unfortunate for all concerned is that the evidence of the special dispensation of that time period exists now only as artifacts unable to shamanistically beat into the bloodstream the empowering energy once present and potent. This is the arrhythmic process that turns (again that word) art into merchandise. It is the out-of-sync, the arrhythmic, heartbeat that misapprehends the echo in the cathedral. This is the process that turns the coherent sacred puzzle into the disassociated museum piece dancing awkwardly out-of-time with the muses.

But the symmetries endure, and the symmetries, like spider webs, catch and contain and won't give up. Symmetries subsist and insist. Sonic rhythm might be considered an act of persuasion so insistent as to be a form of physical bullying. Religious leaders of various stripes in various cultures at various times in history have warned against the dangers of opening oneself up to the temptations of falling into the clutches of rhythmic entrainment. Unlike other forms of symmetry, or art for that matter, an enveloping sonic rhythm seems to demand a physical response from the hearer—making the listener into a participant. What is theoretical in the visual arts (i.e., how to involve the viewer in the art process) is physically factual in the case of the sonic rhythm arts.

Rhyme is symmetry in language. The fixed-form poem, at its best, can become a mandala, a meditation device, to the well-tuned reader. Rhyme can unite the end with the beginning and middle. The scheme swallows up the content possible in the same way that a mandala defines the only possible options in the design universe it captures in its colors and geometries. Rhyme, by virtue of the requirements of sound symmetries, is the backdoor left open for disparate ideas and images to sneak-into and rearrange a pre-conceived orderly pattern. And this is the contribution of the muse. This is the inspirational light falling in a studio or caught in a photograph. Sound as light; light as pattern; stained glass as patterned light; stained glass as spider web; web as mandala; mandala as symmetry of shape and color; shape and color as quilt symmetries; quilts as mandalas; music as quilted sound—noise, vibrations, stitched into symmetries; quilt as a stitched skin, a stretched membrane; quilt as drum; drum as mandala; drum as vehicle—the moving machine; poem as drum: left, right, the metrical foot. Hence, I go once around the circular mandala and pause. I will walk the labyrinth, the maze again and again. Left, right. Turning.

I was born into a religious tradition that expected the spiritual to turn into the verbal—into sound. Pentecostalism emphasizes the experience of “speaking in tongues” as a primary gift of the Holy Spirit. Rather than seeing visions, Pentecostals hear voices. And the sound, especially in the ears of a child, is both rhythmic and flowing—a virtual groove of language—as well as verbally percussive in syllables of unknown languages. To a drummer, overhearing the sonic dimension of glossalalia can feel like the rhythmic experience of “being in the pocket.” Corporate, spontaneous prayer in “tongues” might be seen as evidence for the emotional power of entrainment. People falling into rhythm, as well as into the “moment,” with each other is persuasive testimony of the existence of the potential penetrability of a spiritual dimension into human existence.

As I anticipate the next turning for me, I recognize that what I miss in the visual arts is the experience of witnessing a performance, or better yet, engaging by physical participation. The exceptions that give me hope are exemplified by the Rose Window at Chartres. The window has discursive or narrative content contained inside a visual scheme that fires the most ancient impulses in our brains. Art history and anthropology suggest that the human brain apparently seeks symmetries and centeredness. The mandala is the image of that impulse. The drum is the sound of that impulse. The center of us is, after all, the heartbeat.

A remarkable aspect of the Chartres window is the fact that, for all its balanced stability of design ironically emerging from the material fragility of its construction, it is a constant testament to the movement of time and the changing of circumstance. The Rose Window was created with the intention to “turn” natural light. But that turning also embodies a piece of performance art. In the course of an eight- to fourteen-hour period of daylight, the quality of the light penetrating through its shard-constructed panes changes the individual images dramatically. The external rhythm of the turning earth projects down on and intersects the internal rhythm of the person being bathed in that light (and the stories illuminated therein). More vibrations; more vectors; more motes moving in an enclosed spatial structure.

Moving toward the late afternoon experience of that light in my personal life, I take hope that there is still the possibility of radiance—albeit more subdued and subtle—and a persistence of the radiating heartbeat.

God through Science

Conrad Bell IV

God is truth. God created the natural world.

Science attempts to discover truth about the natural world.

So look CLOSELY! You can find God through science.

God created you to be an observer.

Science will help you increase your powers of observation.

Inward observation promotes spiritual growth.

So look INWARD! You can develop spiritual maturity through science.

Scientists put their confidence in what they see in the physical world.

To 'put confidence in' means to have faith.

Many scientists are waiting to have their faith redirected.

So be BOLD! You can share your faith in Christ through science.