SOJOURNERS

‘HIGH’ CHURCH

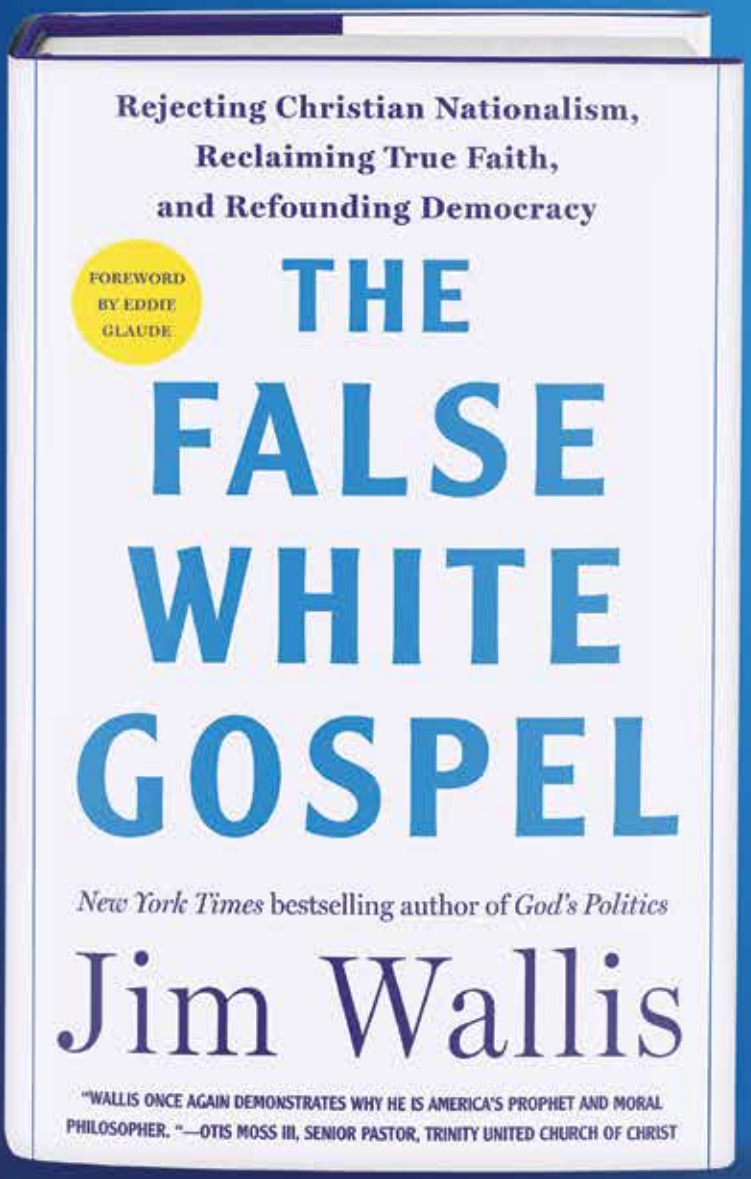
WHAT CHRISTIANS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT EMERGING RESEARCH ON PSYCHEDELICS.

BY BEKAH MCNEEL

faith in action for social justice

U.S. Can.
$ 5.95
05>
0 74470 74678 2
May 2024
sojo.net
Vol. 53 No. 4

A major new work about bad religion, true faith, and what we need to refound democracy.



ON SALE 04·02·24

"Everyone needs to read this book."

—Margaret E. Atwood

"A balm, Wallis wants to understand the divine truths and how to live them."

—Bono

"Wallis demonstrates why he is America's prophet."

—Otis Moss III, senior pastor, Trinity United Church of Christ, Chicago, Illinois

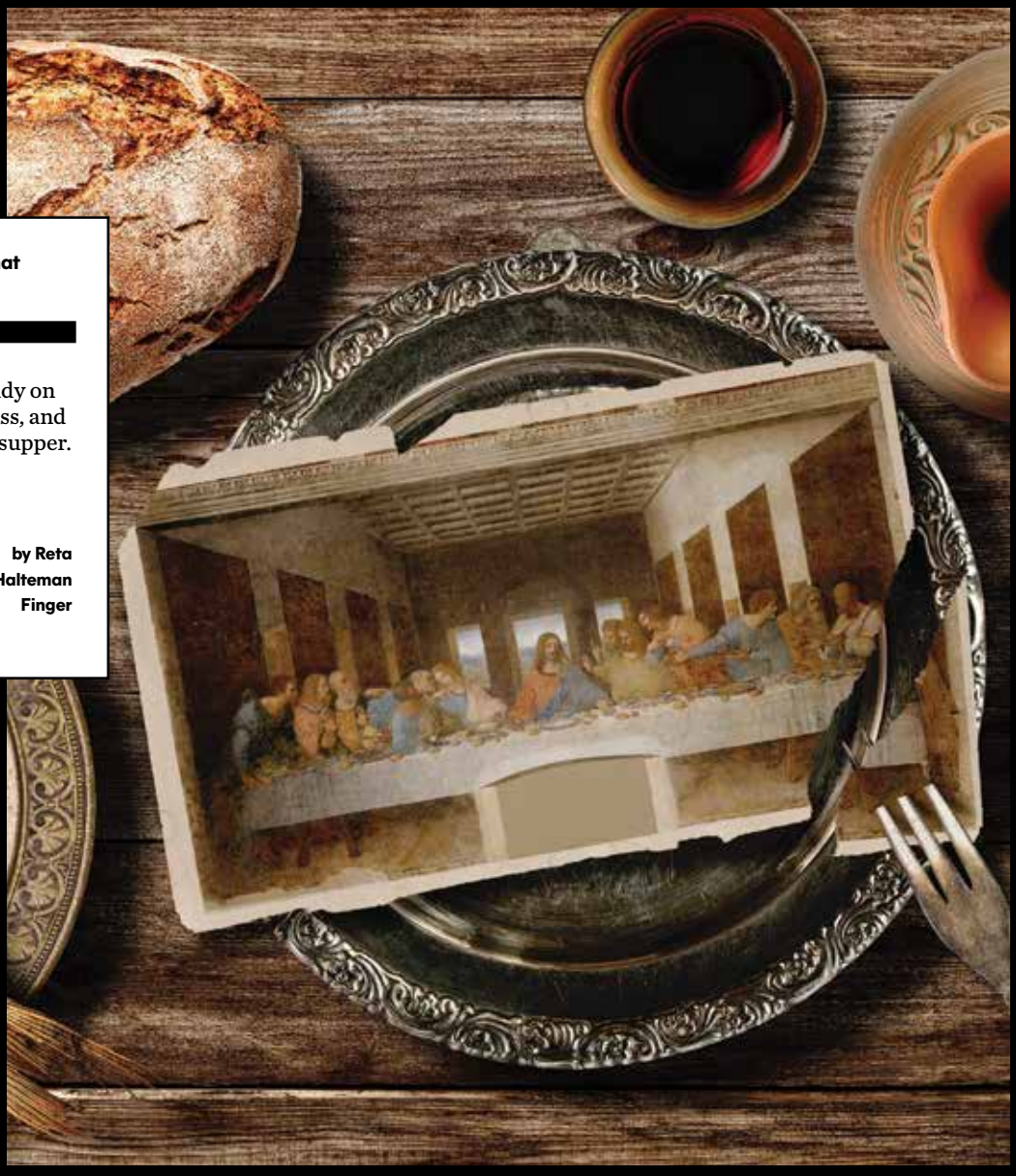
"Using religion to bless hate is the supreme blasphemy. If you don't believe that, read this book. If you do, urge others to read the book."

—Garry Wills, author of *What the Gospels Meant*

AVAILABLE WHEREVER BOOKS ARE SOLD

ST. MARTIN'S ESSENTIALS

"PAUL'S HOUSE-CHURCH VISION UPSETS THE ROUTINE."



You Are What You Eat

A Bible study on wealth, class, and the Lord's supper.

by Reta Halteman Finger

32

CONTENTS

41

Voices

46

Vision

Sojourners magazine (ISSN 0364-2097) is published monthly, except February-March and September-October are combined, at 408 C Street NE, Washington, DC 20002. Periodicals Postage Paid at Washington, D.C., and additional mailing offices. Canadian Publications Sales Agreement #257494. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Sojourners, PO Box 48, Congers, NY 10920-9856.

Prelude

A Prayer for Pentecost

God, your Spirit comes with unstoppable force to set our lives on fire.

Come, Holy Spirit, descend on us with power and truth!

When all, near and far, poor and rich, are welcomed to the table—only then is the kingdom in session.

Come, Holy Spirit, that we may delight in the feast of God's welcome table!

God, at your feast there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female.

Come, Holy Spirit, give us courage, patience, and love to cross every border!

On Pentecost, the Spirit moved the people of God from fear to bold witness in the street and marketplace.

Come, Holy Spirit, take away every fear and set our hearts on fire!

Come, Holy Spirit, come!

Amen.

From the editors of *Sojourners* for "Preaching the Word," an online resource for sermon preparation and Bible study, available at sojo.net/ptw.

Bernardo Ramonfaur / Alamy

From the Editors

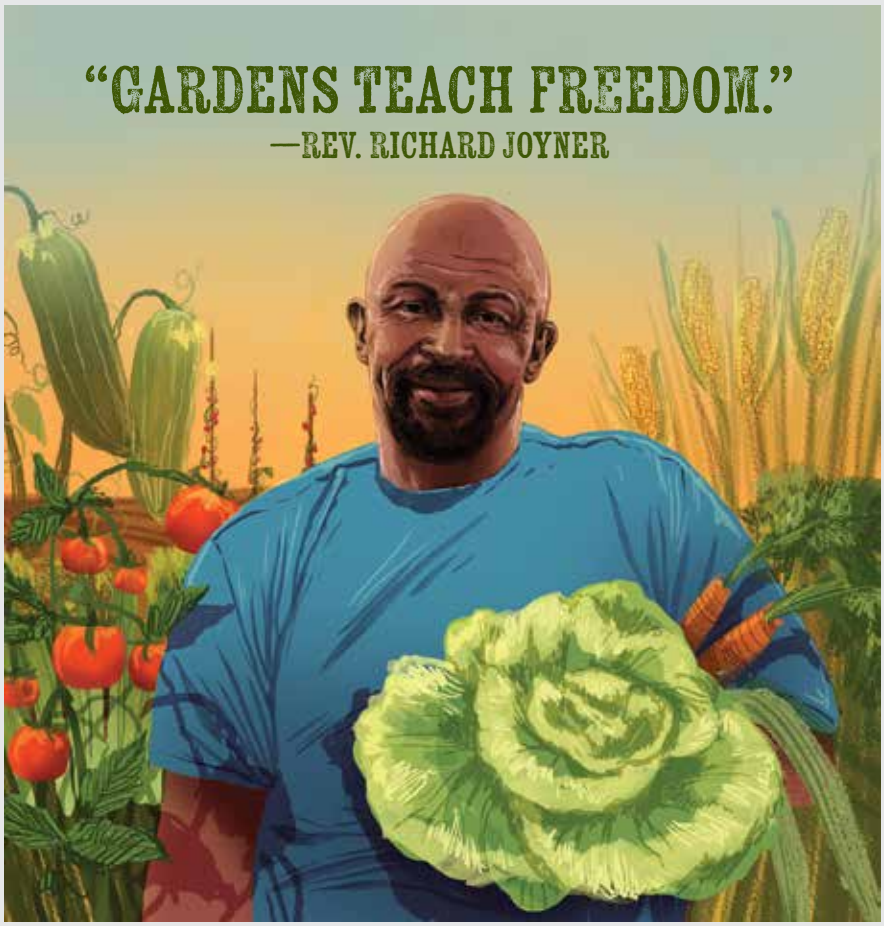
English mystic Julian of Norwich had a busy 24 hours on May 13, 1373, during which she experienced a series of vivid and visceral visions. At a time when the church preached that suffering was God's punishment on sinful people, Julian interrogated the crucified Christ: "Lord, how can all be well when great harm has come, by sin, to your creatures?" Jesus replies to her, "I *am* able to make all things well and I *shall* make all things well." In this issue, reviewer Ezra Craker and columnist Sarah James draw on Julian's wisdom for our own time.

Reports of transcendent visions and spiritual experiences have also been noted by researchers who are studying treatments using psilocybin and other organic or synthetic psychedelics. It's such a pronounced feature that some scientists have invited religious professionals into their research studies, as reporter Bekah McNeel writes in our cover story. This year the Johns Hopkins Center for Psychedelic and Consciousness Research is expected to release the results of a multiyear study into what happens when clergy take psychedelics. McNeel's piece explores questions that people of faith may be asking in light of this research. Whatever the study results may be, Julian reminds us that God always seeks to love us and nurture our deepest healing.

RESPONSE

Keep On Pushing
In "To Be Everywhere and Nowhere" (Feb/Mar 2024), Kristin T. Lee wrote, "Will we choose the wide, comfortable path of upward mobility, or will we follow Jesus in eschewing centrality and privilege?" Mark Hess responded, "Before *Sojourners,* one of my favorite sources was *The Other Side.* A favorite article began: 'When you finally make it to the bottom, it's hard to stay there … but maybe that's where I can best work for justice.' Lee's article reminds me of it. Thanks to you all." Curtis Yee reviewed Justine Triet's *Anatomy of a Fall* (Feb/Mar 2024), inspiring Tom Edmondson to muse on how public narratives can be manipulated. He wrote that "we need to keep pushing back against" false narratives, despite, as Yee wrote, "the insufficiency in all our stories."

Write us: response@sojo.net



Rev. Richard Joyner is pastor of Conetoe Chapel Missionary Baptist Church in North Carolina and founder of the Conetoe Family Life Center, a 25-acre community garden and nonprofit. / Illustration by Hazel P. Mason

"PLASTIC IS A SACRAMENT FOR OUR GOD OF CONVENIENCE."

Stephanie Allen
Episcopal priest and founder of Zero Waste Church

CONTRIBUTING

Ezra Craker
Originally from Michigan, Ezra Craker (p. 43), editorial assistant for sojo.net, is passionate about "trustworthy journalism, pop music, nature, history of religion, and literature." As a Sojourners Fellowship Program member, he has been enjoying "going to art museums, exploring D.C. on foot, and trying new recipes." A recent favorite was homemade pad thai, which, he says, "turned out pretty good for my first time!"

Olivia Bardo
"I've been learning how to intentionally practice hospitality," says Olivia Bardo (p. 44). "It's important to me exactly how someone takes their tea or coffee. I don't just want to make someone a cup of tea. I want to make *their* cup of tea." She searches for wisdom in all things, no matter how unlikely, and believes "some of the greatest lessons are found in fiction," which "helps us find the divine in ourselves and others."

Get free email updates at sojo.net/newsletters.

OUR MISSION

The mission of *Sojourners* magazine is to inspire hope and action by articulating the biblical call to racial and social justice, life and peace, and environmental stewardship.

BUSINESS AND EDITORIAL ADDRESS

Please send all business and editorial correspondence to Sojourners, 408 C Street NE, Washington, DC 20002.

SUBSCRIPTION AND CHANGE OF ADDRESS

Subscribers: Visit sojo.net/subscribe to manage your subscription or print change of address on a card with old address label attached; send all subscription correspondence and address changes (except countries listed below) to Sojourners, PO Box 48, Congers, NY 10920-9856, call 1-800-678-9691, or email us at sojourners@cambeywest.com (allow six weeks to process any address change). POSTMASTER: **Send address changes to:** Sojourners, PO Box 48, Congers, NY 10920-9856.

SUBSCRIPTION RATES

U.S.: $39.95 one year print (for first-class mail, $50). Digital subscriptions to Sojourners are available for $29.95 at sojo.net/subscribe. **Australia:** $78 one year (via air mail, paid in Australian currency, and sent to MediaCom, PO Box 610, Unley 5061 SA). **New Zealand:** $97 one year (via air mail, paid in New Zealand currency, and sent to MediaCom, PO Box 9483, Wellington, NZ); email admin@mediacom.org.au. **Canada:** $49.95 one year (paid in USD). **All other international** (six to eight weeks delivery): $59.95 one year. **Air service overseas** (two to three weeks delivery): $69.95 one year. Except where noted, payable in U.S. currency.

NEWSSTAND CIRCULATION

Newsstand circulation through Disticor Magazine Distribution Services. For more information, call (905) 619-6565, fax (905) 619-2903, or email mraucci@disticor.com.

ADVERTISING

Advertisement in *Sojourners* does not imply editorial endorsement. For information on display advertising in *Sojourners*, please write to: Advertising, Sojourners, 408 C Street NE, Washington, DC 20002; advertising@sojo.net; or visit sojo.net.

SUBMISSIONS

Submission guidelines can be found at: sojo.net/write. Please direct poetry to the Poetry Editor at poetry@sojo.net and books, music, and reviews to the Review Editor by post (address below) or at reviews@sojo.net. No submissions will be returned.

1

MOBILIZING HOPE BY ADAM RUSSELL TAYLOR

'THE THINGS THAT MAKE FOR PEACE'

When the precursor to *Sojourners* magazine, *The Post-American,* was founded in 1971, it was in large part as a Christian response to the Vietnam War. While Sojourners was also a countercultural community equally opposed to the evils of racism, sexism, and materialism, a commitment to peace and nonviolence has always been at the center of our work.

Very few people have embodied that mission more than Jim Rice, who recently retired from our staff after more than four decades of faithful and courageous service. Readers may know Jim best as a long-serving member of the editorial staff of *Sojourners,* including 16 years as the editor, a tenure marked by many best-in-class awards for the magazine. Yet Jim's time at Sojourners was also defined by a commitment to

* * *

A COMMITMENT TO PEACE AND NONVIOLENCE HAS ALWAYS BEEN AT THE CENTER OF OUR WORK.

Photographs by Ed Spivey Jr. and D. Michael Hostetler

"THE FREEZE CAMPAIGN REDEFINED THE DEBATE AROUND NUCLEAR WEAPONS."

peacemaking, both before and after he joined the magazine staff.

As Jim explained in a 2022 interview, he first connected with Sojourners in 1981 through peace work he did while serving in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps at Georgetown University. That work was on the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign—in fact, Georgetown played host to the first national conference of the Freeze movement. Jim joined the staff of Sojourners and continued this vital mission, becoming head of our peace ministry as the Freeze Campaign rose to national prominence and redefined the terms of the debate around nuclear weapons at the height of the Cold War. He also helped create the New Abolitionist Covenant that same year, which brought together several prominent Christian organizations to commit not just to a freeze but to work toward the total abolition of nuclear weapons as a matter of Christian faith. To do all this, Jim had to keep abreast of geopolitics, sensitively help diverse religious leaders and activists find common cause, and be an expert in meeting practical challenges, such as how to safely shepherd thousands of people marching through the streets of D.C. from a prayer service to a civil disobedience action.

Another aspect of Jim Rice's legacy as one of Sojourners' foremost champions of peace is his insightful, often courageous, writing about war, peacemaking, and the necessity of nonviolence all over the world. Since 1984, hundreds of articles, columns, and interviews with Jim's byline have reached readers in the U.S. and beyond with Christ's message that war is not the answer—not in El Salvador, not in Somalia, not in Iraq, not in the Gaza strip, nor anywhere else where wars have inflicted such suffering and horrific loss of life. He has fearlessly called to account U.S. administrations of both parties and foreign governments—both adversaries and friends of the U.S.—for their shortsighted and fatally flawed logic of violence. He has powerfully articulated to our readers the call to nonviolence for those who follow the Prince of Peace.

As Jim settles into a new season in his life, we know that his example as a Christian activist, writer, and editor for peace will be difficult to live up to. Yet we're also comforted that he is just one of many Sojourners—past, present, and future—who have taken up this sacred commitment to build a better world. We hope and pray that Jim's words and activism will continue to be seeds sprouting in fertile soil to produce the good and abundant fruit of a peaceful and just world. ⊗

Adam Russell Taylor is president of Sojourners.

COMMENTARY

BY HEATHER BRANDON-SMITH

WHAT WORKS TO REDUCE TERRORISM

The U.S. has reached a tipping point in its military-first approach to international terrorism.

2

Following the Hamas attacks on Israel last October, President Biden drew a parallel to the Sept. 11 attacks on the United States. He remarked that in the aftermath of 9/11 "we felt enraged" and "we made mistakes." The U.S. response in 2001 serves both as a cautionary tale to Israel and a reminder of the failures of the military-first approach the U.S. has taken to international terrorism.

After 9/11, the U.S. responded with war. This choice was just that—a policy choice. The U.S. could have used effective models of international policing to bring Osama bin Laden's transnational criminal network to justice—and many countries stood ready to help. Instead, ex-President Bush chose a military strategy against nonstate actors. Thus began the Global War on Terror. This choice employed a war-based framework that permitted killing people suspected of terrorism as a first resort; allowed for indefinite military detention; and trained foreign forces to respond to threats of terrorism with lethal force. In 2023, according to the Costs of War Project, the U.S. was conducting militarized counterterrorism operations in 78 countries.

wenjin chen / iStock

Twenty-three years of this approach has not defeated terrorist groups. Instead, these groups are more dispersed and recruitment has increased. This policy choice has resulted in up to 432,000 civilian deaths and cost U.S. taxpayers more than $8 trillion. The post-9/11 period has seen a fourfold increase in terrorist groups and terrorist attacks have increased fivefold per year globally. Part of this growth relates to the high numbers of civilian casualties caused by U.S. military operations, including drone strikes, which groups such as ISIS and al Qaeda exploit to bolster recruitment.

Do we want a fifth U.S. administration to inherit and manage this failed and damaging military framework? Scripture calls on Christians to "seek peace and pursue it" (Psalm 34:14)—wisely and effectively. We live into this calling by addressing the root causes of terrorism and utilizing effective, nonviolent tools to mitigate, contain, and respond to terrorist violence. We have an opportunity and duty to make a new policy choice that prioritizes using critical nonmilitary tools to create the conditions for stability, peace, and the protection of human rights.

First, we must demand that Congress increase funding for the State Department and U.S. Agency for Development Aid (USAID) to support economic development and peacebuilding programs. These nonmilitary agencies can work with local populations to break cycles of violence and build community cohesion while strengthening the rule of law. For example, when violence erupted between militias in the Central African Republic in 2013, USAID was able to leverage its Complex Crises Fund to train a diverse cohort of community leaders in mediation, conflict analysis, and conflict resolution. At the end of the 18-month program, community cohesion across difference had increased 178 percent and 220 fighters voluntarily disarmed.

Prevention programs are extremely cost-effective. Every dollar invested in peacebuilding saves up to $16 in the cost of responding to war. In 2023 the Biden administration released, as part of the requirements of the Global Fragility Act (GFA), 10-year country plans for some nations at high risk of violent conflict. These plans are built on effective anti-violence approaches, not militarized counterterrorism efforts. Effective implementation of the GFA plans depends heavily on funding. Congress should appropriate $200 million per year for the Prevention and Stabilization Fund (one of the key accounts supporting GFA implementation) and $60 million per year for the Complex Crises Fund.

Second, it's time to take seriously President Biden's 2021 assertion that diplomacy is "back at the center of our foreign policy." In the context of international counterterrorism, this means investing in a State Department workforce with expertise in core elements that strengthen state stability, including capacity-building and governance. It also requires a State Department that can cultivate partnerships in other countries with local nongovernmental organizations, which hold intimate knowledge of regional dynamics. Following the Trump administration's gutting of State's experienced diplomatic corps, there has been a scramble to rebuild. Ongoing failure to invest in our diplomacy infrastructure has led the government to delegate such civilian-led functions to the military, which lacks the necessary expertise.

Third, we must shift to an international law enforcement approach, grounded in human rights law, that puts the use of force against suspected criminals as a last resort and brings to justice through the federal courts system those planning violence against U.S. citizens. At least 113 international terrorism suspects have been captured abroad and convicted in U.S. federal courts, resulting not only in justice but in actionable intelligence to prevent further crime.

It should be noted that international terrorism prosecutions in U.S. courts have raised human rights concerns—in particular concerning due process violations and conditions of confinement. Far better that we work to strengthen our judicial system than to maintain a strategy of targeted killings of suspects that inflames terrorists, endangers civilians, and weakens international law.

The tipping point away from a war-based counterterrorism strategy to one using international law enforcement and intelligence resources is now. It's hard to imagine a response to the scourge of terrorism that doesn't involve more violence. But Christians can help envision a different way toward peace. We have a vast nonmilitary toolbox for effectively countering terrorism. Let's invest in it.

Heather Brandon-Smith is legislative director for foreign policy at the Friends Committee on National Legislation.

COMMENTARY BY AVERY DAVIS LAMB

WORSHIP OF BOBBLE-HEAD JESUS?

Single-use plastics put "eternal life" in a whole new perspective.

Despite what dashboard Jesus figurines might suggest, there is no plastic in the Bible. None. It's a 100 percent plastic-free zone. Jesus does, however, promise eternal life. While Christians have a wide array of interpretations about what that means, we generally agree that Jesus did *not* mean through polyresins and microplastics, which have a nearly eternal life of their own.

Christians are on the forefront of the battle to reduce fossil fuel use and address climate change. We understand that God has given us a mandate to serve and protect the Earth and its communities. Churches have divested from fossil fuels. Christians have risked arrest for effective legislation. Youth are leading the global defense of our planet and people.

But, as the pressure to transition to renewable energy increases and fossil fuel demand drops, the CEOs of petrochemicals want to keep their money pipelines open.

Over the past 70 years, annual production of plastics has increased nearly 230-fold, reaching 460 million tons in 2019. China, with weak human rights and environmental regulations, is now the world's largest plastics manufacturer, accounting for nearly one-third of global production. If trends in oil consumption and plastics production continue at the current rate, plastics will make up 20 percent of fossil fuel consumption by 2050.

Studies track with increasing accuracy the total mass of microplastics found in adults around the world. It's a lot. You may as well just chew on your credit card. Microplastics are linked with a variety of human health issues, including reproductive disorders, organ damage, and developmental impacts on children.

It's time for churches to kick out plastic Jesus. "Plastic is a sacrament for our god of convenience," says Rev. Stephanie Allen, founder of Zero Waste Church, a ministry of Church of the Nativity in Raleigh, N.C. Like most environmental justice issues, plastics production and pollution disproportionately impact low-income communities and communities of color. If single-use plastics are indeed an obscene sacrament, then places such as "Cancer Alley" in St. James Parish, La., (where the community has been fighting against Formosa Plastics' 2,400-acre petrochemical complex) are, quite literally, our sacrifice zones.

Like the "good luck" Jesus on the car dashboard, plastics have become an idol in our personal and cultural lives—and recycling is not the answer. (Less than 10 percent of all the plastic ever created has been recycled.) We have a much deeper problem.

"Idolatry always reduces to the worship of something 'made with hands,'" writes farmer and essayist Wendell Berry, "something confined within the terms of human work and human comprehension." Like the golden calf described in Exodus 32, plastics are a human-made invention that we substitute for true worship of God. Producing and disposing of single-use plastics places a huge toll on creation and future generations. With their use, we are turning our backs on life and life's true source.

But each one of us can make a different choice. Together our actions can have a transformative effect. Individuals, families, and churches are taking the plunge to go plastic-free. These choices help us see plastics differently. Every small step to get rid of plastic food containers, cups, bags, water bottles, cutlery, coffee stirrers, and fake Easter eggs cultivates a better

EdnaM / iStock

PLASTICS WILL MAKE UP 20 PERCENT OF FOSSIL FUEL CONSUMPTION BY 2050.

understanding of the spiritual, political, economic, and environmental dimensions of plastics.

This year's Earth Day (April 22) theme focuses on eliminating plastics usage, with a goal to phase out all single-use plastics by 2030. Churches across the United States are teaching, preaching, and taking action to push plastics off the pedestal this year and forever. Here are some ways you can too.

1. Start with a plastics-free pulpit. At its best, Christian worship is a counter-liturgy to the tacit worship of extraction and consumption in our capitalist economy. Concrete actions, such as avoiding use of disposable plastic communion cups and providing congregants with cloth grocery bags, are commendable. But also consider how preaching, song, and liturgy shape people on Sunday mornings. Discuss the theological and ethical implications of plastics. Consider how to approach texts with a lens of plastics justice: What does the story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9) teach about the limits of consumption? What does Psalm 23 teach about microplastics in local watersheds?

2. Support plastics-free families. Churches are one of the few places where intergenerational relationships are molded. Education around plastics—both pollution and solutions—benefits not only kids and parents but can also impact local politics. Research has found that kids are great evangelists on environmental issues. In a project in North Carolina, education on plastics and marine debris led by youth had a significant impact on adults. Somehow the students managed not to trigger the identity politics of adults and the response was positive. This was true even among local government officials who showed a marked increase in knowledge on marine plastics after seeing students' presentations. Empowering young people in your church to be plastics educators (not just the educated) may resonate beyond the steeple.

3. Engage in plastics-free politics. As of 2023, more than 30 countries have passed national bans on some of the top five worst single-use plastics, including bags, utensils, straws, cigarette filters, and foam food containers. Australia has cut its plastic bag usage by 80 percent—using paper, cotton, and jute bags as alternatives. In the U.S., more than 500 cities and 12 states have passed bans on plastic bags—and these bans are working, generally reducing plastic bag usage by a third. But bans are a stick rather than a carrot and generate opposition. As of 2021, 20 states had passed laws preventing local municipalities from passing such bans. How can churches offer more "carrots" to support local transition away from plastic bags?

At the federal level, the Rewarding Efforts to Decrease Unrecycled Contaminants in Ecosystems (REDUCE) Act and the Break Free From Plastic Pollution Act make corporations bear the cost of pollution rather than individuals and engage market-based mechanisms to make single-use plastics economically undesirable. Churches can host community conversations on how to fight climate change, reduce plastics through building new habits, and organize support for well-designed policies that reorient our physical and economic relationship with plastics.

Bobble-head Jesus is not the living Christ. Jesus offers true freedom from systems that demand we sacrifice the intricate web of life to idols. And the notion of eternal life is much more expansive and abundant than the thousand-year afterlife of a plastic bag. ⊗

Avery Davis Lamb, a former Sojourners fellow, is a co-executive director at Creation Justice Ministries, a collaborative to equip Christians to protect, restore, and rightly share God's creation.

THE HUNGRY SPIRIT

BY ROSE MARIE BERGER

PURSUING TRUE SECURITY

3

When my wife and I moved into our new house, one of the first things we did was tear out the surveillance system. The Ring cameras, the security keypads, the wires arming windows and doors—all of it. Previous owners, according to neighborhood lore, had run a small meth lab out of a camper on the property (until they caught themselves on fire and burned much of the house down). They survived, but the "all-seeing eyes" of an ADT Smart Alarm did not protect them from themselves.

As we envisioned how our house would become a home, we did not desire the kind of security and protection that depends on surveillance products. More importantly, we wanted to order our lives in a way where true security is based on neighboring—not false security sold by techno-corporations.

In *God, Neighbor, Empire,* Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann identifies three characteristics of ancient and contemporary empires: wealth extraction from the vulnerable to the powerful; policies of commodification in which everything and everyone can be bought and sold; and willingness to use violence "on whatever scale was required" to secure the first two.

The Bible is a story of empires and so it's full of spies, surveillance systems, and commodifying fear.

In Numbers, Moses sent 12 spies to surveil Canaan for 40 days. Intrigue spiked when 10 of the spies brought back fabricated data to the people of Israel—and the people believed it. God punishes the Israelites by condemning them to wander for 40 years in the wilderness. Torah scholar Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg writes that this is "the critical point, the great failure, that radically changes the future history of the people."

The book of Ecclesiastes is written from inside a totalizing imperial system in which all hope is crushed, and every move is watched. "Even in your thoughts, do not curse the king, nor in your bedroom curse the rich, for a bird of the air will carry your voice, or some winged creature tell the matter" (10:20).

* * *

THE CRUCIFIED GOD IS IN SOLIDARITY WITH ALL SUBJECTS OF SURVEILLANCE.

DrAfter123 / iStock

In the New Testament, Jesus is the target of surveillance from infancy. Herod attempts to use the Magi to track Jesus' location (Matthew 2:7, 16). While Jesus taught in Jerusalem, spies "who pretended to be sincere" were sent to entrap him (Luke 20:20). And finally, the authorities appear to flip one of Jesus' insiders, leading to his arrest (Luke 22:1-6) and eventual death sentence.

The next thing my wife and I did when we moved was to print out a map of our neighborhood—then we started walking. We walked at varying times of day. We nodded and waved to neighbors, introduced ourselves to the dog-walkers, and started marking down the names of neighbors on our map. We put chairs in the front yard as an invitation for others to stop by for a chat. We attended the local elementary school open house, even though we don't have children attending there. On Epiphany, we delivered baked goods to the neighbors nearest us. For us, this is what "neighboring" looks like. This is all part of our multilayered relational security system.

But what about when it doesn't work—when people steal packages or the hub caps off the car? This is part of the paradox of trust. "Justice, mercy, and the public good all find meaning in relationship—a relationship dependent upon fidelity, but endlessly open to the betrayals of infidelity," writes Brueggemann. Just as we break God's trust, so others break our trust. Repairing broken promises to restore justice can build deeper relationships. Tending to neighborliness requires generosity, vulnerability, stability, and a willingness to sustain relationships. It means keeping our eye out for kids walking to school and elders living alone—not installing a Ring camera to catch porch pirates.

Baptist theologian Eric Stoddart writes, "It is the crucified God who frees us to suffer (and to celebrate and to protest) and it is he, who was under others' watchful gaze seeking to entrap him, who is in solidarity with all subjects of surveillance."

We are inheritors of an ancient narrative that shapes our lives if we let it. Under whose watchful gaze do we choose to live? ⊗

Rose Marie Berger is senior editor of *Sojourners* magazine.

FROM THE DUST

BY LIUAN HUSKA

BORN FOR THESE TIMES

It's partly the times and partly my own overthinking, but lately my mind keeps going toward the ways it could all fall apart. American democracy feels fragile, like a teacup on a saucer that's partly hanging over the table's edge. And companies and governments, though fully aware of what they're doing, continue to tug voraciously at the threads that hold our ecosystems together, permitting more pipelines and drilling and business as usual.

Some have called our current era "the dying gasps" of late capitalism. The bubble of exponential economic growth, powered by the extraction of millions of years of decayed organic matter stored as carbon-rich fuel beneath the ground, can't last forever. Neither can our living beyond the Earth's means, though the endless options on e-commerce sites suggest otherwise.

* * *

I WANT TO GET MY HANDS DIRTY IN THE COLLECTIVE CREATION OF A BETTER WORLD.

simplehappyart / iStock

It is too easy to surround myself with shiny new things to ease the sense that the world as we know it is ending, to buffer my sense of self with what feels familiar and safe. But then I wouldn't be awake to what is being birthed in the wake of the dying colonial project. As much as it's terrifying and full of risks, I want to get my hands dirty in the collective creation of a better world.

As an icebreaker, I sometimes ask others, "What historical era and place would you prefer to live in?" My yearning always goes to Native North American communities, centuries before the Europeans came. To know you are embedded in a tribe and in a broader community of creatures and live as such seems like sweet relief from our current state of alienation.

Yet a voice, which I believe to be the Spirit, whispers, "You were born for such a time as this." Similar words were spoken to Esther in the Hebrew Bible, suggesting that her appointment to queen at the time of King Xerxes was divine intervention to save the Jewish people in Persia from massacre.

I'm no Esther. But inasmuch as we believe in God's purpose for each living being, that our every breath is sustained by the goodness and love at the center of the universe, then we too can trust in our unique callings in these turbulent times.

It means that though I learn from the wisdom of past generations and grieve all that we are losing today, I also draw strength in knowing that there is work to do. I am here—and you are here—to be part of a worldwide transition. Activist Joanna Macy calls it the Great Turning: a transformation on all levels, from structural to personal, from death-dealing to live-giving ways.

Call it the kingdom or kin-dom of God. Call it the Beloved Community. Here, in the middle of the crucial decade to steer the planet away from climate apocalypse, months before another absurd yet pivotal presidential election, I roll up my sleeves and face the headwinds. Join me. We were made for this. ⊗

Liuan Huska is a freelance journalist and author of *Hurting Yet Whole: Reconciling Body and Spirit in Chronic Pain and Illness.*

EYEWITNESS

4

* * *

"THEY TOOK MY BIBLE."

Kenny Smith's wife Deanna (center) and family sign "I love you" in January after Smith became the world's first inmate executed by nitrogen suffocation at Holman Correctional Facility in Atmore, Ala. / Photo by Lee Hedgepeth / Tread

WE ARE NOT ALONE

We were married for two years. He was full of love, compassion, didn't hold grudges or anything like that, quick to forgive, just an amazing man. Loved his family, not just us here, but his family there at Holman [Correctional Facility]. He's not a monster. Kibby was my nickname for him: "Kenny" and my "hubby" mushed together. This doll I am holding became Kibby Bear. It's made from his pants. One of the guys [on death row] made it and dyed it green because that's my favorite color. It's got a lock of Kenny's hair in it. It helps me feel close to him.

Halfway through [one of our last] visits, they confiscated my Bible. They had let me have it before. I asked if they could provide us with one. I was told no. I brought it so we could look up verses and go over them together, like, "I am the head, not the tail. I'm above only and not below," "I'm blessed coming in and blessed going out," "Everything I put my hand on, whether work or play, it prospers us." We would go through those on our hard days. "I am fearfully and wonderfully made," "My name is written in the palm of his hand," "No weapon formed against me shall prosper." We took those as our affirmations to lift each other up.

I wore the same shirt in November 2022 [when the state tried to execute Kenny before]. He was strapped down to the gurney for four hours. He mentioned that the lights above him made a cross, and he kept singing the Kari Jobe song, "I Am Not Alone." I can't even listen to the song. It just hurt too much. I wasn't going to wear that shirt. But as I looked at it, I needed—we needed—that reminder that we're still not alone. God's still with us. He's still in control.

Deanna Smith is the widow of Kenneth Eugene Smith, executed by the state of Alabama in January 2024. She spoke with *Sojourners* assistant editor Josina Guess.

‘HIGH’ CHURCH

As research on psychedelics booms—including studies focused on clergy—and more people begin using them, what do Christians need to know?

By **BEKAH MCNEEL**
Illustrations by **SIMONE NORONHA**

It was dark. Totally dark and empty. Andrea Smith felt a familiar hopelessness. "Of course I'm all alone," she thought. "It's my greatest fear."

Smith, a pastor in the United Methodist Church, was at the Johns Hopkins Center for Psychedelic and Consciousness Research in Baltimore, in the first moments of a psilocybin trip designed for clergy.

"I didn't know crap about psychedelics leading into it," Smith told *Sojourners*. Through work with the center before her 2019 experiment with psilocybin (a psychoactive ingredient found in some mushrooms), she was prepared to possibly meet her greatest fears—some participants even reported seeing their own death. At first, that's exactly what happened.

Smith's profound childhood trauma—her mother suffered a fatal aneurysm in front of her at age 9—had instilled an existential fear of being alone, she realized, which had led her to the brink of self-destruction. Burnt out in ministry, avoiding the truth about her husband's infidelity, and grieving the death of her father, Smith entered the Johns Hopkins study in a fog of depression. She was considering returning to the antidepressants she'd stopped years before. "I was broken," Smith said. "I was just exhausted and spent."

During Smith's psilocybin treatment, something shifted. She described moving "in and through" increasingly abstract and light-filled imagery that led her on what was ultimately, she said, a journey of redemption and forgiveness. She never got back on antidepressants, because the depressive fog lifted almost immediately after her psilocybin treatments. Smith credits the psilocybin experience with her ability to make major life changes.

The scientists at Johns Hopkins paved the way for contemporary research into the unique pharmacological properties of organic and synthetic compounds known collectively as "psychedelics." In 2000, the Johns Hopkins team obtained the first regulatory approval in the U.S. to restart research into psychedelic use with healthy voluntary subjects. In 2006, the team published the first wave of results on the "safety and enduring positive effects of a single dose of psilocybin," which helped catalyze a worldwide resurgence of psychedelics research.

Because so many research subjects—even those who are nonreligious—have reported "spiritual awakenings" among treatment outcomes, some researchers recommended anticipating these spiritual outcomes and integrating spiritual care *into* the therapeutic research setting. This has led to a multidisciplinary approach between researchers and religious professionals. In 2015, the Johns Hopkins team launched an investigation into the effects of psilocybin on the psychology and effectiveness of religious professionals, such as Smith. The results of that research are expected to be published this year.

Smith continues to draw upon and feel deeply connected to the source of light she encountered during the treatment. "It saved my life," she said.

'TURN ON, TUNE IN, DROP OUT'

Psychedelics research and unsupervised experimentation boomed in the 1950s and

1960s—a period before the U.S. Food and Drug Administration placed regulations on drug approval or monitoring. Notorious examples from that era include illegal experimentation with psychedelics by the Central Intelligence Agency in search of a potential weapon for mind control and torture. CIA operation Project MK-Ultra bought up much of the world's supply of LSD and brought it to the U.S, according to journalist Stephen Kinzer, and then tested it on human subjects without their knowledge or consent. The illegal program became public in 1975.

In the same era, Harvard psychologist Timothy Leary became a cultural icon for the promise of psychedelics as a gateway to expanding consciousness and mystical experience. Leary's famous 1966 speech framed the use of psychedelics in spiritual terms: "Like every great religion, we seek to find the divinity within and to express this revelation in a life of glorification and the worship of God. These ancient goals we define in the metaphor of the present—turn on, tune in, drop out." This resonated with a youth movement yearning for meaning and disenchanted with the religious and social establishments—and led to a rise in recreational use with no regulation.

The social and political backlash against excesses led to sweeping regulations on drugs and to a set of global drug policies led by the U.S. Since 1970, hallucinogens—such as organic psilocybin and mescaline as well as manufactured synthetics such as LSD and MDMA—have been classified by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency as Schedule I drugs, which the DEA defines as having a high potential for abuse and no currently accepted medical use.

CHANGES IN THINKING

Recent years have seen the beginnings of a regulatory and research shift. State by state legislation to decriminalize or legalize some psychedelics has opened a patchwork of wellness centers and spiritual retreats that legally obtain and use these products in a controlled setting. (In 2020, Oregon became the first state to legalize psilocybin for therapeutic use.)

Along with the regulatory approval gained by Johns Hopkins in 2000, government-funded research has picked up in other countries as well—particularly in Canada, Switzerland, Israel, and the United Kingdom. In the U.S., private funding has helped establish psychedelic research divisions at several universities and institutions. In 2021 Johns Hopkins received the first federal funding for psychedelics research in more than 50 years, specifically to study the potential medical use of psilocybin on tobacco addiction.

A growing body of clinical research on psychedelic therapy supports part of Smith's experience. Psychedelic treatments work by resetting neural processes and patterns of thinking that are often the root of mental health issues, changing the way patients process memory and information. Studies have found a variety of psychedelic drugs to be effective in reducing debilitating symptoms of depression, anxiety, PTSD, and addiction.

Research published in 2022 followed patients who received psilocybin treatment for major depressive disorder. Twelve months after receiving a second dose, most participants still experienced relief from depression symptoms, showed no use of psilocybin outside the study context, and rated "personal meaning, spiritual experience, and mystical experience" after the sessions as having increased their sense of well-being. Because of findings like these for medical use, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in 2023 produced provisional guidance on psychedelics for clinical research and for commercial purposes.

For Smith, one reason she joined the study was to see if it offered hope for people she regularly encountered in pastoral ministry, especially those struggling with end-of-life depression, severe PTSD, and eating disorders. "I've seen people wrestle with those," Smith said, "and if there are things out there that can help people heal in a transformational manner, we need to check that out."

> "We have a mental health crisis ... and the therapies we've used for many years have not increased the results."

BIG MONEY

Political advocates—and funders—have been enthusiastic, even evangelistic, about the potential benefits of psychedelics. In 2019, the Steven and Alexandra Cohen Foundation, technology investor Tim Ferriss, hedge fund founder Craig Nerenberg, WordPress co-founder Matt Mullenweg, and Toms founder Blake Mycoskie raised $17 million to launch and fund the first five years of the Johns Hopkins Center for Psychedelic and Consciousness Research.

Last summer, Mycoskie made public his $100 million pledge (a quarter of his net worth) to further medical and mental health psychedelics research. On CNBC's *Last Call* in July 2023, Mycoskie said, "We have a mental health crisis in our country, and the modalities and the therapies that we've been trying to use for many years have just not increased the results, and we need to look to something different ... that's why I'm very bullish on this from a philanthropic basis."

While the medical potential may be high, there's also big money to be made in the commercial sector. According to a recent report by BrandEssence Market Research, the commercial psychedelic pharmaceuticals market is poised to soar to $11.8 billion by 2029. As individual states legalize or decriminalize some psychedelics for use in medical, therapeutic, spiritual, or traditional wellness programs, along with unsupervised recreational purposes, market demand is expected to increase, driving up the value of related companies. With such big money behind marketing, some people are concerned that the public perception of psychedelics as good remedies for mental health may lead to unsupervised

self-therapy before safety regulations are fully in place.

CAUTIOUS MOVES BEYOND "JUST SAY NO"

In November 2023, the American Academy of Religion hosted a panel on Christians and psychedelics. Jaime Clark-Soles, a field researcher with the Center for Psychedelics and Spirituality at Emory University and a New Testament professor, raised concerns, even as she welcomed the therapeutic potential of psychedelics and its relevance to those engaged in healing ministries.

Clark-Soles emphasized how drug law enforcement falls disproportionately on communities of color. State-level changes on policies concerning the use of any Schedule I substance must keep the most impacted communities at the forefront. Therapeutic psychedelic treatments are also expensive, Clark-Soles said, creating an economic barrier. Currently, most therapeutic treatments take place in private clinics with hefty price tags, and many of them feel culturally white. Affording treatment is one hurdle, Clark-Soles said, but another obstacle, especially for women and people of color, is unease about submitting to being in an altered state in an unfamiliar environment. Bringing psychedelics into culturally sensitive contexts could help, she said.

"Psychedelics can be and are part of astonishing ... healing and transformation. These are powerful substances—and they also need to come with a warning because they are powerful," Clark-Soles said in December. "All of us are concerned that, more and more, anybody can just hang out a shingle, offer a 'spiritual' psychedelic retreat," Clark-Soles said. "We have new psychedelic 'churches' starting up. This should be an area of concern. And we should be part of educating folks to protect vulnerable people from abuse of power."

Part of the CIA experimentation on nonvoluntary human subjects included illegal testing of LSD on prisoners and hospital psychiatric patients—many of whom were African Americans. While current psychedelic medical research includes more rigorous ethical and safety protocols, 82 percent of recent psychedelics research subjects are white. Only 2.5 percent are Black and 4.6 are of Indigenous origin. Because of this, current treatment outcomes cannot be generalized.

"The psychedelic community is in need of some civil rights action," argued Kufikiri Imara, a plant-based health advocate and organizer, in a documentary titled *A Table of Our Own*. Imara sees a white culture looking to capitalize on traditional medicines that should be accessible to all. "We cannot let some corporation that is disconnected from these Indigenous practices turn this plant medicine into the next 'happy pill,'" said Imara.

CHRISTIANITY, COLONIALISM, CEREMONY

Parts of the peyote cactus, which grows in the American Southwest and northern Mexico, contain mescaline, a powerful hallucinogen. For generations, traditional peoples in that region have incorporated peyote into sacred ceremony.

> "We do not go into ceremony to talk *about* God. We go into ceremony to talk *with* God."

Even though the federal government classifies peyote as a Schedule I drug, Ramón J. Vásquez of the Native American Church of North America said his community doesn't consider it a psychedelic. "You don't 'do' peyote," Vásquez said. "It's a sacrament." Vásquez said the plant is a direct sacred presence: The Native American Church recognizes peyote as the embodied presence of the Creator. Paraphrasing Quanah Parker, the last chief of the Quahadi Comanche people, Vásquez said, "We do not go into ceremony to talk *about* God. We go into ceremony to talk *with* God."

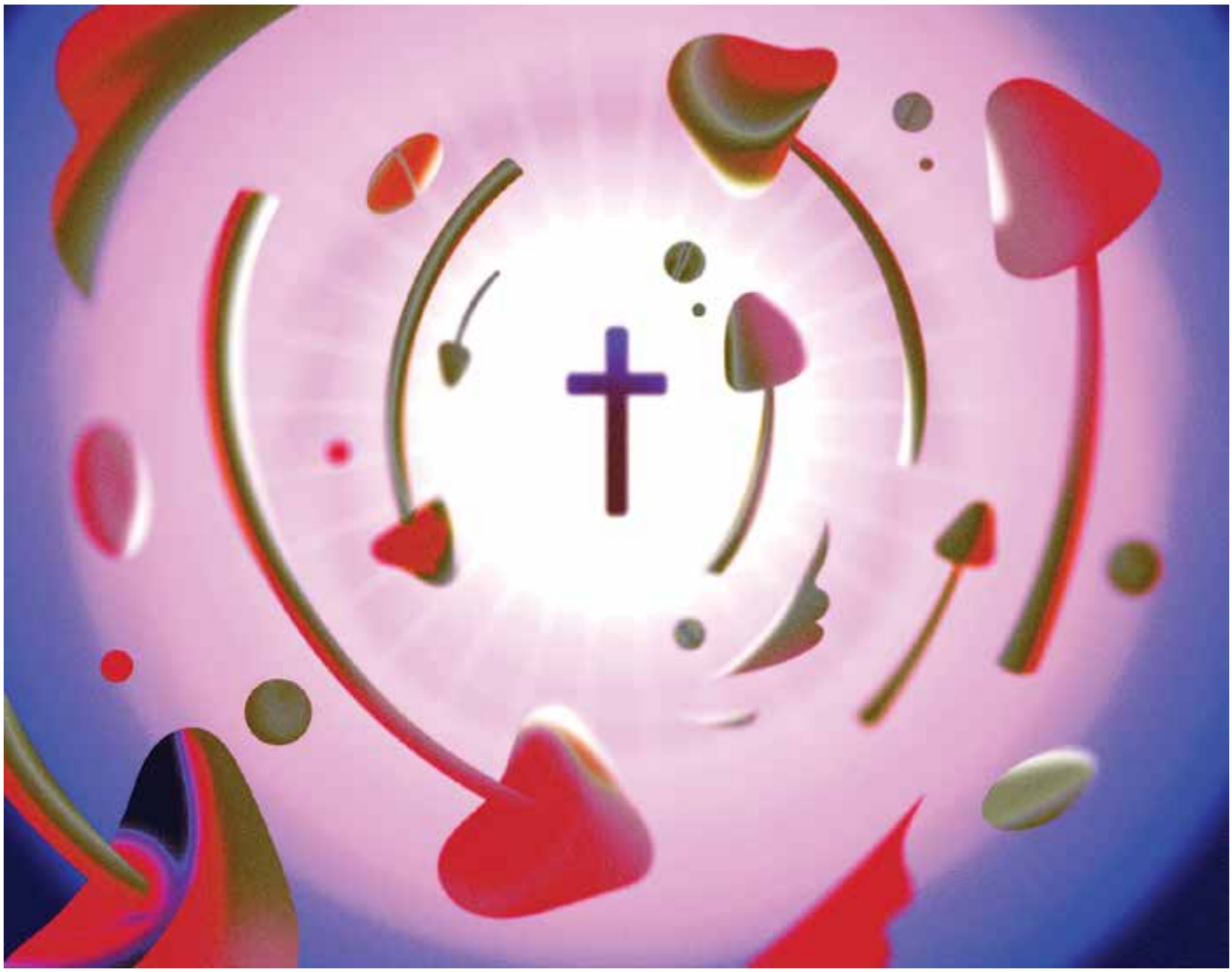
As executive director of the nonprofit American Indians in Texas at the Spanish Colonial Missions, Vásquez negotiates the fraught relationship between the Christian church, the U.S. government, and all aspects of Indigenous culture, including sacred practices. Peyote only grows in a specific region, and stewards of the crop say that expanded use would endanger the supply for Native American Church members.

The United Nations is also monitoring the rising industry in psychedelic-related tourism, including the impact on Indigenous communities. In Central and South America, the plant-based hallucinogen ayahuasca is deeply rooted in Indigenous cultures. But as it has gained popularity among Americans and Europeans, a "spiritual tourism" industry has arisen, requiring travel to Peru or Costa Rica to use the drug. The more tourists have sought out ayahuasca-based psychedelic experience, the more crime, charlatanism, and overharvesting have followed, leading Indigenous groups to call for increased regulation to protect the integrity of cultural practices and the safety of communities where ceremonies take place.

"Once it's gone, it's gone," Vásquez said, particularly of overharvesting. The struggle to preserve the peyote plant—and the Native American Church's right to use it—has made many in his community wary of current conversations about renewed interest in psychedelics. "The fear is that, eventually, if peyote is not protected and regulated for the use of the aboriginal people it was intended for, you risk depletion, commercialization, and hybridization," Vásquez said.

SEEKING A HEALING COMMUNITY

Clinical and regulatory oversight may improve safety and limit exploitation, recreational use, unsupervised self-medication,



and cultural appropriation. The growing body of data continues to contribute more predictability to what patients might expect in a medical-use setting. But now, as a movement to legalize certain psychedelic drugs for medical use has grown, so has curiosity about the spiritual dimension of these substances.

In 2016, Episcopal priest Hunt Priest participated in the Johns Hopkins clinical trial for clergy. He believes the therapeutic benefits are not separate from the spiritual experiences. Priest said he had mystical experiences as a child, but the process of seminary and ordination had left him "pretty disembodied," he said. "I got very focused on how to figure things out intellectually." Meanwhile, he struggled with anxiety and his ministry felt heavy to him. He decided to join the Johns Hopkins study when a friend recommended it—and was surprised by the layers of spiritual and religious awakening he experienced under the influence of psilocybin. Afterward, Priest's anxiety abated.

But he realized he was craving something else the Christian church has historically provided: a healing community. What's missing, Priest said, are regular and predictable avenues for people who have been helped by psychedelic experiences to find one another. That's why he started Ligare, a ministry to encourage education, spiritual development, and support for the expansion of legal and safe psychedelics use within the context of the Christian contemplative tradition. (A Sojourners employee with a role separate from the magazine currently volunteers with Ligare.)

Those more skeptical of including psychedelics among sanctioned religious practices point out that contemplatives have reached higher states of consciousness for thousands of years without psychedelic assistance. As Benedictine contemplative David Steindl-Rast wrote in a 2001 essay, "A primary religious experience is no more (though no less) than a seed for a spiritual life. A genuine encounter with the Ultimate does not guarantee a genuine spirituality."

Pastors such as Andrea Smith may not be preaching the gospel of psychedelics, but she has integrated the seeds of her experience into her view of ministry. Deep in her psilocybin trip, she said, she felt the release of many of the burdens she'd been carrying, things she'd thought were just a part of her. As the weight was lifted, she said, she saw and felt herself filled with light. Ministry wasn't about simply carrying burdens anymore, Smith said. "My role here is to share light." ⊗

Bekah McNeel is a freelance journalist living in San Antonio.

Liturgy of Flowers

Meet Catholics fighting climate change with native plants.

By Annelise Jolley


sojo.net

I **begin in** the garden, which sounds biblical but is literal. It's the day after the spring equinox, and I'm standing outside the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. The National Shrine is the nation's largest Roman Catholic church. It's stuffed to the vaulted ceilings with religious art, but I'm not here for the soaring mosaics and gilded icons.

What I've come to see—the Shrine's Mary garden—turns out to be underwhelming. A statue of the Virgin presides over an empty reflection pool; the garden's central fountain is also dry. The circular stone terrace is flanked by cherry trees and dormant bushes. The rose bushes are pruned back, and the tulips have yet to open. Except for cherry blossoms unfurling overhead amid a hum of bees, much of the garden still sleeps from winter. I expected a profusion of tangled plants and lush greenery, but this early in the season, nothing much is blooming.

I came to the garden looking for evidence of a movement. Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical "Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home" called for a global ecological conversion. Inspired by a faith that views humans as Earth's caretakers, and guided by the science behind native gardening, Catholics around the world have heeded the pope's call by planting native habitats. Parishes, backyards, and schools are restoring land with local species. Some habitats take the form of Mary gardens: devotional spaces that both honor the Mother of God and enhance biodiversity. Other habitats convert manicured landscapes into pollinator gardens.

The gardeners who tend these spaces range from Girl Scouts to a pair of Instagram-savvy nuns; what they share is a belief that planting native species is a practical way to integrate their faith and environmental values—and to respond to the climate crisis.

KNOWN BY NAME

Mary gardens, designed to honor the world's most iconic mother, have roots in medieval Europe. Some—like the one at the National Shrine—function primarily as contemplative spaces. Traditional versions include a statue of the Virgin flanked by plants symbolizing an element of her character: white lilies to represent purity, maidenhair fern to reflect her hair. Mary gardens began spreading in the United States after 1951, when two Catholic laypeople, Edward McTague and John Stokes Jr., publicized the concept by distributing plants that were native to Europe. Designs for European Mary gardens still abound online, but recently Catholics have started designing devotional gardens using plants endemic to their local region. Organizations like the Marianist Environmental Education Center in Ohio and Saint Kateri Conservation Center offer suggestions for plants with Marian associations that reflect diverse U.S. regions.

Annalise Michaelson is a horticulturist and Catholic convert who specializes in helping parishes and schools identify native alternatives for their gardens. She's particularly interested in designing Mary gardens around species that reflect both Mary's nature and the local climate. Like Mary, gardens give birth to new life. Michaelson says that designing Mary gardens with native species is an intuitive way to combine reverence for Mary's life-giving nature with environmental action.

The traditional names of Marian plants, Michaelson tells me, originated from an intimacy with creation. The monks and nuns who created the first European Mary gardens were deeply familiar with their local landscapes. They knew what plants bloomed around the feast of the Ascension and what flowers resembled Mary's veil. "The act of naming is so rooted in our role as human beings," Michaelson says, pointing to Adam's first charge to name the inhabitants of Eden. Identifying native plants for a Mary garden can be a spiritual exercise as well as a way to grow in intimacy with the natural world. She encourages gardeners to walk through their local landscape and study the qualities of native species, meditating on how they might reflect or illuminate Mary's character.

When choosing native alternatives, Michaelson thinks about several things. First, she looks for "a visual similarity in form or color that evokes an analogous aesthetic response—finding an appropriately sharp native for something like crown of thorns." She also thinks about symbolic or liturgical applications—for example, swapping an Easter lily for a native flower that blooms in the spring. Instead of a red Oriental poppy—traditionally associated with the blood of the crucifixion—Michaelson recommends that West Coast gardeners plant native California poppies. Marigolds (Mary's gold) can be replaced with desert marigold in the Southwest or golden alexanders in the Midwest. On a practical level, she also selects plants that gardeners can access at a nursery.

Depending on the region, a native Mary garden might include anything from cacti to prairie grasses. In other words, these gardens take as many forms as devotion itself. The Mary garden at Saint John Neumann Catholic Church in Reston, Va., reflects the parish's Hispanic population. A statue of La Virgen de Guadalupe stands at the center, surrounded by swamp milkweed, black-eyed Susan, and blue aster. When the garden was complete, the church blessed the space with an outdoor service held in both English and Spanish.

FROM FIELD TO FLOURISHING

Mary gardens are just one expression of a larger movement among Catholics to use native plants to prevent biodiversity collapse. At Saint John Neumann, "Laudato Si'" inspired parishioners to form a group called Care for Our Common Home. The group focuses on education, advocacy, prayer, and sustainability initiatives within the parish. One of these early initiatives was to plant a native pollinator garden in a grassy area on the church's grounds.

Thanks to the work of ecologists like Douglas Tallamy, who promotes conservation measures that can start with your yard, there's a growing public understanding that native species increase biodiversity and climate resilience. Manicured lawns and ornamental plants, coupled with endless urban development, destroy healthy ecosystems. Native plant species provide food and habitat for local pollinators and wildlife. When native plants replace lawns, they also benefit people by cutting back on pesticide and herbicide use. Many native species are also adept at sequestering carbon, which reduces atmospheric carbon and builds soil health.

Ed Sabo, a founding member of Care for Our Common Home, helped oversee the Saint John Neumann pollinator garden's design, collecting advice and ideas from Tallamy's research, an Audubon Society ambassador, and a local group that provides information about Northern Virginia native plants. Sabo also turned to the Saint Kateri Conservation Center, founded in 2000, which offers educational resources and practical help for people who want to restore native habitats.

The pollinator garden is now a flourishing web of relationships. There's the soil, with all its microorganisms, and the native

plants like mountain mint and red bee balm that grow from it. These days, Sabo says, it's filled "with an amazing variety of bees" as well as beetles. Monarch butterflies and eastern tiger swallowtails pass through. The garden also draws people: staff members eat lunch on the benches surrounding the garden and parishioners visit after Mass. On days when the church hosts a farmer's market in its parking lot, Sabo notices kids and their parents wandering down to play by the garden.

Sabo says his faith spurs him to care for and appreciate the more-than-human world. "When you go back and read the Bible, both the Old Testament and the New Testament, you really get a sense that God is part of creation, and part of us, in us, through us. Creation is there to be enjoyed and viewed on its own, not as a resource—just to appreciate nature and God's creation for what it is, on its own."

ABUNDANT CONVERSIONS

The growing interest in native plants isn't just happening on church property. When ecologist Bill Jacobs converted his suburban lawn in Long Island, N.Y., into a riotous garden of native plants, his neighbors were baffled. But for Jacobs—who founded Saint Kateri Conservation Center—this was an obvious decision. "Relationships are essential to our faith, beginning with God, who is a relationship of three divine Persons," says Jacobs. "The science of ecology is also about relationships—the relationships between living organisms and their environment."

Heather Wilson first transformed her backyard into native habitat while living in a 1906 bungalow in Portland, Ore. The plot was postage-stamp-sized, but that didn't stop her from tearing out the miniature lawn and replacing ornamental plants with species native to the damp Pacific Northwest. When she and her family moved into a house with a larger yard, she began the process again. A fig tree growing outside the new house reminded Wilson of her parish's scripture garden and inspired her to consider plants' spiritual symbolism.

Wilson was already familiar with the connection between certain flowers and the Virgin Mary. She decided to incorporate some native Mary plants into her yard. After removing most of the lawn and adding a native hedgerow, she selected native groundcover with Marian resonances, like the Western maidenhair fern and lady fern.

Around the same time, Wilson learned that her local parish was engaging in a similar effort. With the help of Annalise Michaelson, Portland's Madeleine Parish started transitioning its manicured gardens into native habitats. Wilson's priest encouraged parishioners to adopt and tend sections of the new garden. "I lead a Girl Scout troop, and in Girl Scouting, anytime you see anything you think, 'Is there a badge for that?' And generally there is," Wilson says. Last Earth Day, she and her scouts joined a planting effort at Madeleine. This year Wilson plans to adopt a section of the garden with her troop. Together she and the girls will transition their small section of parish grounds from ornamental to native species.

With stewardship of around 177 million acres, the Roman Catholic Church is one of the world's biggest landowners. If even a fraction of these churches converted land to native habitats, the decision could have a ripple effect of restoring biodiversity and building climate resilience. "My dream is to see Catholic-owned land flourish with restored native plantings stewarded by faithful parish communities," Michaelson says. This effort would mean removing invasive plants, coordinating planting days for native species, and forming small groups "to spread ecological literacy and contemplative devotion via Mary gardens."

Since the publication of "Laudato Si'," Sabo has watched ecological interest grow among local churches. "I would say it's slowly building—but it *is* building," he says. Saint John Neumann is now part of a diocese-wide group of Care for Our Common Home teams. Within this group, a handful of other parishes have planted native gardens on church grounds.

Michaelson cautions that native gardens aren't a fix-all solution. "Native plants are not a magic potion to reverse the damages of habitat loss and biodiversity collapse." She believes that lasting change hinges on humans truly seeing and attending to the world around them. The more we become intimate with the other members of our ecosystem—touching them, smelling them, learning their names—and the more we contemplate their beauty and diversity, the more we will be compelled to preserve biodiversity and build resilient ecosystems in our own backyards.

"True climate resilience is downstream from an invested, ecologically literate, spiritually enlivened humanity," Michaelson adds. "This is the power of learning, growing, and sharing the joys of native plants." ⊗

Like Mary, gardens give birth to new life.

Annelise Jolley is a San Diego-based essayist and journalist covering food, ecology, faith, and the terrain between.

YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT

A Bible study on wealth, class, and the Lord's supper.

By *Reta Halteman Finger*

Illustrations by *Matt Chase*

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it, he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." —Matthew 26:26-28

Climbing rocky hillsides and wading across gurgling streams lined with thistles, a friend and I walked the Jesus Trail in Galilee a few years ago. After about 8 miles of vigorous hiking each day, the trail led to a hostel or home with a hot meal we shared with other travelers. Our common identification with Jesus on this journey from Nazareth to Capernaum made these bread-breaking events seem to us almost like a "Lord's Supper"! We were strangers from different countries, but our hunger and our common passion for walking where Jesus walked drew us together.

If eating together helps create a bond between diverse people, what compelled the Apostle Paul to write these words to his house churches in the city of Corinth: "Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together, it is not for the better but for the worse." (1 Corinthians 11:17)?

How does eating a bread cube and drinking a swallow of juice with other church members make things worse in the congregation? What divisions are keeping people apart from each other? Let's dig into the context.

The Apostle Paul came to Corinth around 49 CE, on his second missionary trip. After he had founded several house churches in various parts of this busy, cosmopolitan trading center, he left Corinth to preach in the city of Ephesus in Asia Minor.

However, Paul may have left prematurely. After some time, several men from Corinth sailed east across the Aegean Sea to visit him and to ask for help with various problems that had developed in the churches (1 Corinthians 16:15-18). Abuses occurring at their common meal was only one of many troubling issues. Focusing on these meals associated with their worship may give us insight into other concerns Paul had with his infant house churches in Corinth.

ARE YOU HUNGRY—OR DRUNK?

It is natural to read into the text our own experiences of sharing communion. Thus, when Paul describes the Corinthian believers' behavior in verses 20-21—where some leave the meeting hungry, and others are drunk—we are appalled. We'd never act like that at an ordinary church potluck, let alone at our sacred communal commemoration of Jesus' death! Are these rude, uneducated people who have no concern for each other?

But Paul does not give up on his house churches. After a hearty scolding, he reminds them of the reason they began eating together in the first place. Verses 23-26 describe Jesus' last meal before he was arrested and executed. Written a few decades later, Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record this powerful, symbolic event. "Do this," Jesus says, as often as you eat bread and drink wine together. In other words, share this bread and wine with each other.

According to Paul, these new believers do not yet understand that meeting together makes them a part of the body of Jesus. Without that understanding, they "eat and drink judgment against themselves. "That's why many of you are weak and ill," says Paul, "and some have died" (11:29-30). It's not just *spiritual* oneness. It implies being responsible for every believer in your "body"—your house church—so that everyone has enough to eat!

THE COST OF "BODY" DISCIPLESHIP

As Paul proclaims the good news about Jesus, he struggles with the rigidity of social class in Greco-Roman urban culture. It is even more pronounced in a raunchy, international city such as Corinth. Yes, this city had both rich and poor people, just as we do today in Western culture.

But our way of life is vastly different. Today, we have the space, transportation, and many other technologies that allow people of different classes and races to live separate lives even in the same community. Low-income people live (and rent) in low-income neighborhoods, while middle-class people experience a much wider range of options. They socialize with people of their own class and attend events or belong to churches and social groups that share their values and level of education. If you are reading this article and

can afford a subscription to *Sojourners,* you are probably somewhere in the broad middle class of the Western world.

But the ancient Greco-Roman culture in which Paul lived and preached had none of our essential technology—automobiles, electricity, cell phones, indoor plumbing, supermarkets, and so many other conveniences. Instead, the ruling classes were heavily dependent on people socially beneath them to do their "scut-work" of all kinds.

Roughly a third to a quarter of the population were slaves forced into servitude through poverty or as captives of war. Slaves had no rights, not even to their own bodies. Poor free or freed people worked from dawn to dusk to survive, feed their children, and rent tiny, bare, upper-story tenement rooms.

Barely 10 percent of the population could be considered upper-class. These families held onto their wealth through inheritance, arranged marriages, and professional connections. From their perspective, people in lower classes existed for their benefit. Although this arrangement meant that all kinds of people rubbed shoulders with each other, class rigidity was necessary to keep them "in their place" at all times.

This was the stratified world in which Paul, an educated Jewish man, preached a message of radical equality between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female (Galatians 3:28). His Damascus road vision of Jesus as God's incarnate son sent for all humanity changed everything for him.

Paul and his co-workers preached in many cities of the Greco-Roman world—first in Jewish synagogues and then to anyone who would listen. Often synagogues would attract a few Gentile God-worshippers as well. Paul's meth-

These new believers do not yet understand that meeting together makes them a part of the body of Jesus.

od of bringing about this new age of oneness through Jesus was to establish small groups of believers within walking distance of each other. After a day's work, they could meet regularly to eat, study, and worship together. Thus, they would demonstrate their calling as unified Jews and Greeks, rich and poor, slaves and freepersons "proclaiming the power and wisdom of God" through the crucified Christ (1 Corinthians 1:24-26). They would put into practice Jesus' vision of equality.

That, at least, was the vision. Living it out was another story.

KNOW YOUR PLACE AND BE CONTENT

The rigid socioeconomic divisions in 1 Corinthians 11:18 are further complicated by differing religious and political perspectives among Jews and formerly pagan Greco-Romans. Just after Paul's greetings and thanksgiving for all the believers in 1 Corinthians 1:1-9, he refers to divisions within at least one of the house churches he had established (verses 10 to 17). "Chloe's people" reported to him that four factions within her house church each identify with a different Christian leader.

Apollos is a Christian preacher from North Africa, probably well-educated and attracting wealthier Corinthians. "Those of Paul" are likely his converts from lower classes who support social equality. "Those of Cephas" (Peter) are Jews with distinctive meal practices that lead to criticism of others. And "those of Christ" are likely slaves with no human patron but who draw their sense of worth from the shamefully crucified Jesus.

So where can such a diverse group eat and worship together? The only people whose homes were large enough to host groups of 10 or more persons were from the upper classes. But that's also where the local Jesus-groups run into social class rigidity. "When the time comes to eat the Lord's Supper, each of you goes ahead with your own suppers, and one goes hungry, and another becomes drunk" (11:21).

Visitors entered a wealthy, freestanding villa of that time through the *atrium,* or roofed porch. If the male owner invited friends for a meal, they went inside to eat in the *triclinium* (dining room), named for the table with couches on three sides found there. If a wife came along, she would sit on the couch beside her husband.

Wealthy men were able to stop work in the late afternoon and enjoy a relaxed evening together. First, they thanked the god or goddess in whose name they were meeting. After the food was eaten, another blessing was prayed over the cup, followed by the ritual of mixing the drinks.

Although eating together created a special bond among the diners, even within the same group people sat or reclined according to their rank. Those of higher status received food of higher quality. In the Roman mind, this made perfect sense. It contributed to the stability of the empire by reminding all people they should know their place and be content within it.

> Because of his encounter with Jesus, Paul has a radical, equalizing theology that is a threat to anyone with social privileges.

CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO

But now Paul's house-church vision upsets the routine. Lower-class tradespeople and slaves had to work until sunset, so by the time they arrived in the atrium, the meal in the dining room would be over (verse 21). Perhaps a few loaves were passed to those in the atrium, after which the house church would gather there for worship. Paul wants everyone to wait until all are present so they can eat together as a house church (verse 33).

Unfortunately, most translations of 11:34 give a wrong impression to modern middle-class readers. Both the NRSV and CEB say, "If you are hungry, eat at home." This suggests that believers in first-century Corinth had homes with kitchens like ours, and that the Lord's Supper was only symbolic. But the Greek word translated "at home" is *oikia,* which literally means "house." Paul wants

the believers to eat in the house where they are meeting as a house church!

You do not tell slaves or other low-income people to "eat at home"! Slaves have no home and pick up food where they find it while at work. Poor persons—free or freed—have no place to store food in tiny tenement rooms or if they are homeless. (This may also be a time of famine; see 8:26, where Paul speaks of "this present crisis.")

To Paul, the purpose of a house church is that everyone brings what food they can and shares it with others. In this way, all can be fed both spiritually and physically. Because of his encounter with Jesus and Jesus' followers, Paul has a radical, equalizing theology that is a threat to anyone with social privileges in that culture.

No doubt he is telling the truth in 1:26-31 when he writes, "Brothers and sisters, not many of you were wise by human standards, or powerful, or of noble birth." The cost of discipleship was probably too high for most higher-class Corinthians.

WHAT THEN SHALL WE DO?

Was Paul's vision of an egalitarian community realistic in his hierarchical Greco-Roman world? He must have learned much from the early Christian communities in Jerusalem and Antioch. According to Acts 4:32-36 and 6:1-7, believers shared "all things in common." This practice of eating meals together and pooling resources continued. We read an example of this in the story of Tabitha and a group of widows (Acts 8:36-43).

Many of us share a concern for low-income people around us and in many parts of the world. We probably also "take communion" in our respective churches from time to time. But does a bread cube and sip of grape juice remind us of local low-income people who lack sufficient food? Instead, we take literally the mistranslation, "if you're hungry, eat at home."

Should not our communion services be a time to connect our sharing in Jesus' body and blood with contemplating how we might share food, justice, and community with people in need of them? Christ's body given for us is sign and symbol of the body of believers—from all economic statuses—in our communities. That's the vision Paul lays out, and a central aspect of the gospel. ⊗

Reta Halteman Finger, a retired associate professor of New Testament and freelance writer, lives in Rockingham, Va.

THE CHRISTIAN LEFT

In 2009 We Realized We Were Part Of An Underserved Community. We Made It Our Life's Work To Change That.

We are Christians and we are progressives. We make no apologies about it. If fact, we think organized Christianity in the United States has lost its way over the last 50 years. When the so-called "Christian Right" emerged and took over, everything went wrong. None of it seems to have much to do with what we value the most, Jesus and his teachings.

When we looked around in 2009 we couldn't find many resources for people like us. We decided to "be the change" we wanted to see in the world. We made it our life's mission to create and sustain more resources for Christian progressives. Social media had emerged as an effective way to organize and gather, so we created a Facebook group. Several months later we added a Facebook page, a blog, and a website. 15 years later we've grown to almost 400K members on our Facebook page.

We offer a haven where Christian progressives can gather any time of day, 7 days a week, no matter where they live.

Our Facebook page is where most of the action happens. We discuss daily news, enjoy fellowship, and take action on behalf of 'the least of these.' The counternarrative we offer echoes the words and actions of Jesus, which we place front and center. In addition, we carry out direct, in-person social justice action with Pastor Doug Pagitt and our action partners at Vote Common Good. We represent our members at locations where oppression of vulnerable people is taking place. Join us today!

We're member supported. We've always operated on a shoestring budget. We're not sponsored by any church or corporation. The media ignores us and we often struggle to keep our mission alive. Become a supporter of our mission. Make it monthly if you can. Any amount helps. All our website and social media contact information is provided on our secure donation site. The address to that site is **donorbox.org/friends-of-tcl**

The Christian Left is Founder and Executive Director, Charles Toy; Rev. Dr. Mark Sandlin; Rev. Dr. Chuck Currie, and a revolving team of dedicated moderators. We carry out direct social justice action with Pastor Doug Pagitt and Vote Common Good. At the end of the day The Christian Left consists of our members. Be a part of it today.
thechristianleft.org

A NEW FILM POSITS THAT A BIBLE MISTRANSLATION FUELED CHRISTIAN BIGOTRY AGAINST QUEER PEOPLE. BUT THAT'S ONLY PART OF THE STORY.

By Mitchell Atencio

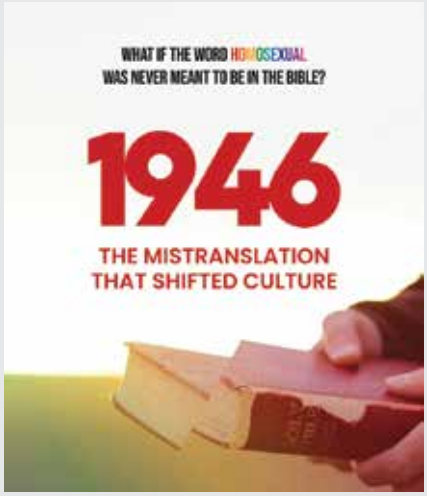
When the full Revised Standard Version of the Bible was released in 1952, the translation used "young woman" instead of "virgin" in Isaiah 7:14, which so enraged conservatives like Rev. M. Luther Hux that he publicly burned that page of the Bible. This would not be nearly the most impactful RSV translation, however, as the new film *1946: The Mistranslation That Shifted Culture* seeks to explain.

Documentary

1946 (named for the year the RSV New Testament was released) aims to measure the drastic effects of the RSV being the first Bible translation to use the word "homosexual."

The film follows the research by Kathy Baldock and Ed Oxford on the RSV translation, with supplementary scholarship from other academics who help explain the RSV's rendering of the Greek words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* as "homosexual." It also traces the cultural ripples of this translation, which the film asserts helped anti-LGBTQ+ Christians demonize and ostracize queer people. Finally, it shows the relationship between the film's director Sharon "Rocky" Roggio, a lesbian, and her father Sal Roggio, a conservative pastor.

Translating portions of the Bible can be tricky business. As scholars note,



arsenokoitai is a word with few other uses across the ancient world and may have been invented by the apostle Paul. Literally, it is a combination word that means "man who beds with males," connotating a sexual usage. *Malakoi* means "soft," and is understood as referring to "effeminate" men.

In the American Standard Version, a common translation that preceded the RSV, the translation used for *arsenokoitai* is "abusers of themselves with men." The RSV later changed its translation to "sexual perverts," though at the time, this was code for LGBTQ+ people. After the RSV, the New International Version used "men who have sex with men," while the New Revised Standard Version used "sodomites." The NRSV's Updated Edition, released in 2021, uses "men who engage in illicit sex," while noting that the meaning of the Greek is uncertain.

1946's central thesis is this: When the RSV translation committee erroneously chose to translate those two Greek words as "homosexual," they gave conservative Christians (like Roggio's father) a weapon to wield against queer people. That weapon multiplied (into the six so-called "clobber passages") and restricted the possibility for Christians to follow along with the growing societal understanding and acceptance of homosexuality and other orientations and identities beyond heterosexuality.

The film is well-paced and produced, and it is grounded by a soundtrack from Mary Lambert, a Grammy-nominated artist and gay Christian writer and advocate. The film shines when it illuminates the complex work of translation teams.

Historically and theologically, the work of Baldock and Oxford is compelling, especially their archival research into the RSV translation team and the gay seminarian, "David," who challenged that team's use of "homosexual." The academics featured in *1946* help develop a richer understanding of the "clobber passages," especially 1 Corinthians 6:9, although at times, the film (or perhaps the academics) overstate their case. Theologians continue to debate precisely how these verses ought to influence Christian sexual ethics. There is not one clear and obvious answer, despite the film's presentation.

***

IT IS IMPORTANT TO SAY CLEARLY THAT THE WORD "HOMOSEXUAL" DOES NOT BELONG IN THE BIBLE.

Unfortunately, by wrapping the movie in Roggio's relationship with her father, *1946* awkwardly straddles a historical drama and autobiography. Worse, *1946* oversimplifies what is wrong with using the word "homosexual" in the Bible. In doing so, it offers a thin defense of queer people that anti-LGBTQ+ Christians will find easy to knock down.

It is important that today we say clearly that the word "homosexual" does not belong in the Bible. As scholar David Bentley Hart writes, "the ancient world possessed no comparable concept of a specifically homoerotic sexual identity." The Bible does not condemn any sexual orientation as we understand it today. As Hart says, in 1 Corinthians 6:9 the word *arsenokoitai* would "refer to a particular sexual behavior, but we cannot say exactly which one." On this alone, *1946* makes a critical injunction against the misunderstandings of biblical sexual ethics. But this is where the usefulness of documenting the "mistranslation" ends.

For example, *1946* papers over how the definition of "homosexual" has changed in the 80-plus years since the translators worked on 1 Corinthians.

The RSV translation team started work on 1 Corinthians in the 1930s. At the time, "homosexuals" were widely believed to be predators and potentially mentally ill. As gross and incorrect a characterization as that is, it is close to what translators would have seen when trying to translate *arsenokoitai*. Baldock told *Sojourners* that contrary to how it may seem, "there was no malice attached" to the translation team's decision.

Just as we must read the Bible in the context of ancient Greco-Roman society, we also must read different translations in the context of the culture from which they were produced.

Of course, not everyone bought into this period's vilification of queer people, particularly not queer people themselves. David, the gay (privately at the time) seminarian, challenged the RSV translation in the 1950s, using in part his better understanding of LGBTQ+ people. David had an important dialogue with Luther A. Weigle, head of the translation committee, and the decade between his challenge and the second edition of the RSV is worth unpacking, as it helps explain both the **cont'd on page 45**

INDIFFERENCE, A CURSED HEIRLOOM

By Curtis Yee

The remaining Lisbon sisters are sprawled in their bedroom when the priest knocks on their door.

"Hello girls, I thought we could talk. Do you feel like talking?"

Their returning stares are vacant and unknowable, and the priest wears only the pretense of concern. Both parties maintain their false decorum, neither fully able to acknowledge their shared grief: the suicide of Cecilia, the youngest Lisbon sister, only 13 years old.

Sofia Coppola's 1999 film *The Virgin Suicides* (based on Jeffrey Eugenides' novel of the same name) is peppered with such moments of dissonance as a neighborhood tries to grapple with the untimely deaths of all five Lisbon girls. Premiering 25 years ago, Coppola's debut film is a snapshot of American decadence in decline, a moment not unlike our own: a society in cultural, environmental, and economic upheaval.

But rather than expose the sorrow of the other Lisbon girls and their strict Catholic parents, the director withholds the girls from us, situating the lens from the perspective of the neighborhood onlookers, particularly a group of teen boys. Adults in their tidy Detroit suburb project their own anxieties upon the Lisbons, laying the burden of Cecilia's death at the feet of her and her family so as not to implicate themselves, to not infer her death as endemic.

"Those girls have a bright future ahead of them. The other one was just going to end up a kook," quips one mother to her kids.

Thus the boys are well taught to paint the girls as blank canvases, drawing inspiration through stolen diaries and schoolyard boasts about who got lucky with whom. The girls are set dressing, with Coppola hinting at their psyche only in hazy ambiance.

In this way, *The Virgin Suicides* portrays the callous ways we distance ourselves from the grieving. We unshoulder the burden of community care for the easier load of judgment, denying the reality that the pain of our neighbors is ours to bear as well. Such isolation ultimately can damn the bereft and unbereft alike.

Between 2007 and 2021, suicide rates among Americans ages 10 to 24 rose by 62 percent. This rise has paralleled the blossoming sense of ennui in the decades since the film's release, as religious leaders and politicians and even neighbors have failed to fully reckon with our growing existential ills.

Toward the film's end, one of the boys notes in recollection how the adults shrug off the horrors of the suicides, "returning to their tennis foursomes and cocktail cruises, as though they'd seen this all before." Such indifference is an inherited ailment, one we pass down like a cursed heirloom. And in time, if left undisturbed, it bears a grief of its own.

Curtis Yee is a reporter and critic living in Washington, D.C. If you need help, call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.

From *The Virgin Suicides*

DISPATCHES OF DEVOTION

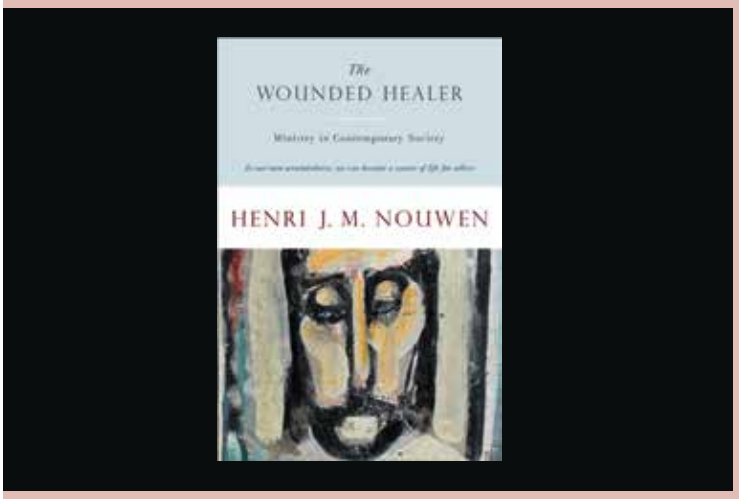
The BBC weekly podcast *Heart and Soul* dissects religion's ubiquitous and misunderstood presence in public life. Imbued with a refreshing human sensitivity, weekly episodes cover a range of faith topics—from Russian Orthodoxy in Kenya to a Sikh music revival.
BBC

In Whose Image?
In *When God Became White,* prolific theologian Grace Ji-Sun Kim untangles the ways white supremacy has shaped global Christianity. To shed this twisted version of the faith, Kim argues that the church must turn to the "liberative and embracing" Spirit.
InterVarsity Press

Outside Looking In
"Queer is the way I turn my head to look at the world," writes Cassidy Hall in her book *Queering Contemplation.* Drawing connections with the contemplative tradition, Hall explores the power of turning to one's "inner sanctuary," especially when faced with social marginalization.
Broadleaf

THE QUIET WISDOM OF THE WOUNDED HEALER

By Sarah James



Light & Air

In *The Wounded Healer:* *Ministry in Contemporary Society,* Catholic theologian and priest Henri J.M. Nouwen analyzes how the church fails to address the heart of our collective pain and longing. Nouwen presents a paradigm for renewed Christian leadership and care founded on the archetype of the "wounded healer." More than 50 years after the publication of *The Wounded Healer* in 1972, we continue to struggle—both individually and societally—with the "wounds" Nouwen names: alienation, separation, isolation, and loneliness. Whether we're ministers or not, we need the gentle wisdom of the wounded healer to build a more loving, just world.

While the concept goes back at least as far as Plato, the term "wounded healer" was coined by psychoanalyst and doctor Carl Jung. To demonstrate the link between personal suffering and the capacity to care for others, Jung draws on the Greek myth of Chiron. Chiron is a centaur who, due to severe physical pain, becomes an important healer and teacher. Nouwen extends this principle to ministry, calling for church leaders to cultivate "a deeper understanding of the ways in which [they] can make [their] own wounds available as a source of healing." For both Jung and Nouwen, this work develops depth and compassion. Nouwen writes, "For a compassionate [person] nothing human is alien: no joy and no sorrow, no way of living and no way of dying."

Nouwen describes two common modes of addressing the social effects of woundedness: mysticism ("the inner way") and revolution. Nouwen supports what he calls the "third way," the "Christian way," found in the ultimate wounded healer—Jesus. He argues, "Jesus was a revolutionary, who did not become an extremist, since he did not offer an ideology, but Himself. He was also a mystic, who did not use his intimate relationship with God to avoid the social evils of his time, but shocked his milieu to the point of being executed as a rebel."

This reminds me of Julian of Norwich, who saw her own suffering as fertile ground to learn about divine love. Her visions compelled her to write and counsel members of her community, as they endured the violence of war and the horrors of plague.

Elevating clear-eyed leadership and genuine care is challenging in practice, and wounded-healer leadership is not without risks. Without the qualities of compassion and humility, wounded healers can easily wound others, especially in spaces where power is unshared and top-down. Nouwen's insights, however, invite a new paradigm for leadership itself: communities where power is decentralized, shared, and rich in honesty and accountability. We are each flawed and yet possess unique wisdom, but we need each other to envision healing and liberation.

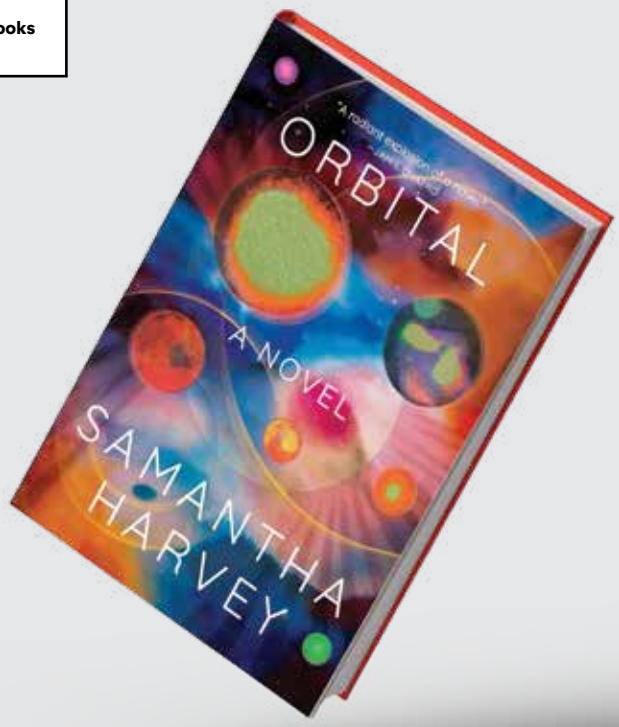
We live in a wounded world, as wounded people. This quiet work is a part of social healing: softening our eyes to see suffering, softening our ears to listen to each other's pain, softening our hearts to become more courageous and active in this time of global turmoil. As Nouwen reminds us, "nothing human is alien."

* * *

WE NEED EACH OTHER TO ENVISION HEALING AND LIBERATION.

Sarah James, a biracial Indian American woman of color, is a graduate of Yale Divinity School and the founder of *Clerestory Magazine.*

Books



'A PRIVILEGED, ANXIOUS VIEW'

Orbital,
by Samantha Harvey
Grove Press

In one of her visions, the 14th-century mystic Julian of Norwich saw all of creation in the palm of her hand. She observed that it was round as a ball and small as a hazelnut. "I marvelled how it might last," she wrote, "for methought it might suddenly have fallen to naught for little[ness]." In other words, she thought it might vanish for being so small.

This is the feeling that pervades Samantha Harvey's lyrical novel *Orbital,* which follows six astronauts as they circle the Earth and conduct scientific research. Hailing from various countries, they experience together a God's-eye view of the planet they left behind. Continents roll past, political borders disappear, and a sense of urgency emerges. In a way only astronauts can, they absorb the simultaneous vitality and fragility of their collective home and reckon with the human-caused calamities that threaten it.

Light on plot, the book nevertheless has an unsettling narrative heartbeat: An abnormally powerful typhoon, exacerbated by climate change, is forming off the coast of the Philippines, and one of the team's tasks is to monitor its development. Theirs is a "privileged anxious view." They know all too well—and are powerless to stop—the devastation that will come for those below.

* * *

IN A WAY ONLY ASTRONAUTS CAN, THEY ABSORB THE SIMULTANEOUS VITALITY AND FRAGILITY OF THEIR COLLECTIVE HOME.

But once their brief window for data collection passes, the spacecraft continues its path, steady and unbothered. They bear witness to the next part of the world, and the next. Harvey's descriptions of the revolving planet, through the stunned eyes of her characters, are a testament to the power of language to rekindle one's sense of awe. Africa is a "paint-splattered, ink-leached, crumpled-satin, crumbled-pastel" continent. The American Southwest is a "wide dry cowhide." Looking at the "buffed and brushed and burnished" ocean, one astronaut recalls Psalm 104:3, "God lays the beams of his upper chambers on the waters."

Wonder and doom, wonder and doom. *Orbital* is preoccupied with many things—hubris, progress, grief—but at the book's core is a paradox about Earth, our mighty and vulnerable home: It's both a "towering parent" and "a planet held hostage by humans, a gun to its vitals." It's "a thing of such miraculous and bizarre loveliness" and a "piddling speck at the centre of nothing." It's life as we know it and closer to death than we're ready to admit.

In orbit, the astronauts find themselves incapable of thinking anything other than "old thoughts born into new moments." They notice new topographical details as the novel progresses, sure, and they learn more about each other. But they find themselves returning again and again to the same old idea. The astronauts realize "without that earth we are all finished. We couldn't survive a second without its grace, we are sailors on a ship on a deep, dark unswimmable sea."

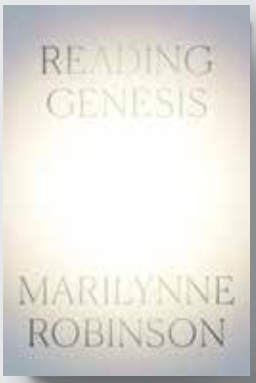
In her vision, after Julian wondered about the smallness of creation, she came to an understanding: "It lasteth, and ever shall [last] for that God loveth it." It would take considerable audacity to believe a planet as delicate as ours is built to last—and a considerably audacious faith to live as if that's true. But, as *Orbital* demonstrates in its reverent and glittering pages, if there ever was a time to have old thoughts born into new moments, it's now. ⊗

Ezra Craker is the editorial assistant for sojo.net.

GENESIS, A GRAND ADVENTURE

Reading Genesis,
by Marilynne Robinson

Farrar, Straus and Giroux



Many young Christians grow up with special "adventure Bibles" composed of a curated selection of Genesis stories. Featuring colorfully illustrated characters and simplified, "age-appropriate" plot lines, these stories are admittedly easier for children to absorb. Take, for instance, the adaptation of Genesis 3 found in Zondervan's *The Beginner's Bible*: We meet Adam and Eve walking the arcadian Earth. Their bodies are hidden behind carefully placed branches and auburn waist-length hair. Acting alone, Eve takes a bite of bright red fruit and loses paradise. It's a simple story. It's also inaccurate.

Marilynne Robinson's *Reading Genesis* presents a much more complicated portrait of the first book of the Bible. She invites us to return to these ancient tales and allow the figures to re-introduce themselves. In Robinson's telling of Genesis 3, Eve is much more dynamic. She is "the mother of all living" who, alongside Adam, "disobeyed, doubted, tried to deceive," and as a result, brought about "human agency, responsibility, even freedom."

Robinson offers context and color to the stories of Genesis, but she does not offer certainty. "The Bible does not exist to explain away mysteries and complexities but to reveal and explore them with a respect and restraint that resists conclusion," she writes.

In this work, Robinson tackles troubling texts, revisiting stories throughout the book of Genesis that have often been misinterpreted. For instance, with the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, Robinson closely examines the angel's interaction with Hagar. She challenges readers to reconsider their biases before defining Hagar's story as a tragedy, writing, "Readers can feel that Hagar is unvalued because she is a woman, a maid, a foreigner." She cautions readers not to make up their minds quite yet. "What actually matters," Robinson continues, "is the value the text finds in her, and in her life, which, humble as it may seem to us, can be called her destiny." Robinson believes that God is "giving universal meaning to obscure lives that might not feel much changed in being made bearers of divine intention."

Robinson brings new intimacy and complexity to each biblical figure. With no chapters to separate her thoughts, *Reading Genesis* flows like a great scroll, a long chain of questions to help us understand the true "Great Scroll" that is the book of Genesis.

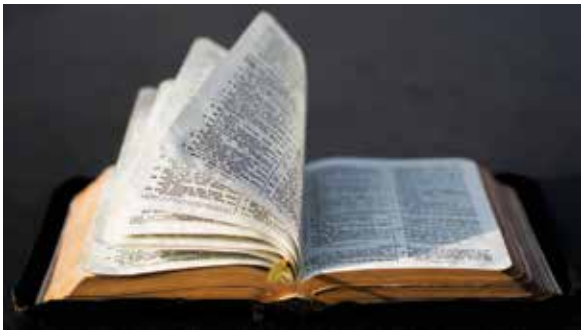
Robinson, who identifies as a Congregationalist, is no stranger to writing about religion. In her Pulitzer-Prize winning novel *Gilead,* the central character is an old pastor who thinks deeply and generously about theological matters. This lens holds true with *Reading Genesis.*

The God of the Bible, Robinson notes, is distinct from other ancient deities in one major respect: God delights in humanity. Where other ancient gods are "indifferent or hostile to humankind," she notes that "God is the good creator of a good creation."

Robinson combs through Genesis for the ones who have been overlooked and calls them blessed."The beauty of the trees is noted before the fact that they yield food," Robinson writes.

Robinson's survey of Genesis has something in common with children's Bibles: In Robinson's retelling, God and humans are on a grand adventure together—one with complicated turbulence but ultimately where God has lovingly saved space "for people to be who they are, for humanity to be what it is."

Olivia Bardo is a writer, editor, and baker from northern New Jersey.



cont'd from page 40 evolving understanding of the term "homosexuality" and the work of translation teams.

But the film drastically oversimplifies this to "David challenged the translation, Weigle admitted he was wrong, but it wasn't fixed until 1969." This is a disservice to the RSV translation team, and to Baldock and Oxford's research.

Baldock was kind in explaining the difference between her research and the film: "You can't do all of this background in a 90-minute movie." But this is charitable, since Baldock covered this same background in the first 12 minutes of our interview.

Perhaps *1946* wouldn't have flattened such an interesting history if it weren't also trying to tell the story of Roggio and her father. With respect to both Roggios—who seem to be doing their best to love each other despite their disagreements and tension—scenes between the two are often awkward and painful; it's unclear if this is intentional.

The film's crescendo is just as suspect. Built from Baldock's previous presentations, the movie compellingly connects the RSV's use of "homosexual" to the rise of the Religious Right, the scapegoating of LGBTQ+ people during the AIDS crisis, and more. But it presses too far when it suggests that, if not for the mistranslation, anti-LGBTQ+ bigotry wouldn't be more common in the church than outside it.

Whether 1 Corinthians 6:9 said "homosexual," "sexual perverts," or "abusers of themselves with mankind" as it does in the King James Version, anti-LGBTQ theology would have still existed. Then, as today, nonaffirming theologies are rooted in much more than "clobber passages." Affirming Christians would do well to understand these arguments and articulate both careful, forceful opposition and an inclusive sexual ethic crafted from what the Bible positively teaches.

If there is a hope for including queer sex in Christian sexual ethics (and there is) it must not rest on dismantling a few bad translations. ⊗

Mitchell Atencio is the associate news editor at sojo.net.

Poetry

TEACH US TO TRUST THE RESURRECTION OF *THAT* BODY

By Abby Parcell

Surely I betrayed her at least three times:
eighteen months of bone-grinding hip pain,

a list of life stories never recorded, and
leaving her exposed to suffering because

I didn't know. I didn't know it was so hard to die.
The cock's crow was just basic kidney physiology,

and like the denying disciple on the porch,
I want another version of myself—

one more hour to come to her aid.
But the stone is laid across the tomb.

———

Two years later, in a rock-walled chapel,
Reverend Blackmon speaks the words of the morning garden:

"Go tell his disciples, *especially Peter,*
that he is going ahead of you into Galilee."

The preacher adds the emphasis:
He is telling Peter: Your witness is still wanted.

And somehow, I am the one who feels forgiven,
remembering the suspended stillness of the end:

Don't stay here among the dead. Go.
Go to the place where you can see the promises of God revealed.

Abby Parcell is poetry editor for *Exponent II*. She lives in Chapel Hill, N.C.

Illustration by Ric Carrasquillo

CALLED TO BE NATURE'S GOOD NEIGHBORS

Scripture passages are from the Revised Common Lectionary, Cycle B

By Raj Nadella

Living the Word

During the COP 28 climate change conference in Dubai, participants deliberated at length on the climate crisis and rightly set ambitious goals to address the challenges. As may seem natural, much of the conversation centered on securing a planet habitable for humans. But as Christians we must wrestle deeply with sharing God's covenant with other creatures. Seeing creatures and the natural world as having no meaning other than how they serve human interest is a failure of human vision. The 2007 documentary *Earth* poignantly highlighted how an anthropocentric worldview and the human-caused environmental crisis have imperiled other creatures in a miraculously delicate system.

Perhaps out of species self-interest, much environmental work focuses on how climate shifts impact current and future human generations. But as people of faith, we can take a more wholistic view that also demonstrates commitment to the well-being of all God's creation—animate and inanimate—because all are interdependent. In the context of the climate crisis, corrective justice requires addressing the concerns of communities disproportionately affected by climate collapse, as well as ensuring the welfare of nonhuman creatures. It is incumbent upon us to challenge the anthropocentric lens and champion biocentric approaches that affirm the sanctity of all life and creation. Our scripture readings this month present nonhuman creatures as equal partners on God's planet and speak forcefully about their right to exist and thrive alongside our human communities. They feature animals dancing in open spaces, frolicking in the sea, and celebrating life in its fullness. Everything in nature reflects God's glory, participates in God's salvation, and reminds us of the divine presence.

Raj Nadella is the Samuel A. Cartledge associate professor of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary in Georgia.

* * *

VANDANA SHIVA EMPLOYS THE PHRASE "DEMOCRACY OF ALL LIFE."

MAY 5

NATURE CELEBRATES GOD

ACTS 10:44-48; PSALM 98; 1 JOHN 5:1-6; JOHN 15:9-17

Psalm 98 celebrates divine salvation by inviting all people to make a joyful noise to the Lord, but it quickly shifts focus to the posture seas, rivers, and mountains take in their praise of God. In a beautiful image that might seem possible only in a Disney movie, the hills ring out with joy, all the lands sing with trumpets, and the whole earth and rivers join the party, clapping their hands to celebrate the redemption of the Lord.

The psalmist employs anthropomorphic language—"let the rivers clap their hands" (verse 8) and reveals nature's full celebration at God's party, but there is something deeper here. In the psalmist's vision of the universe, the seas and rivers are not alien elements that need to be tamed by humans but are equal partners in celebrating divine salvation. The psalm even describes nature as fully capable of being in communion with God and participating in God's joyful dance entirely apart from humans. It affirms God's reign over the earth community and the people. God will judge both with equity, placing the natural world and humans on an equal plane. The psalmist's depiction of nature as an equal partner invites us to treat God's creation with respect and to acknowledge its worth and its ability to participate fully in God's salvation. Disregard for the sanctity of nature may lull us into plundering the seas and hills in voracious pursuit of natural resources. Such avarice imperils our future and violates the psalmist's vision of nature's rightful place in God's universe.

Illustration by Lauren Wright Pittman

MAY 12

THE LANGUAGE OF TREES

ACTS 1:15-17, 21-26; PSALM 1;
1 JOHN 5:9-13; JOHN 17:6-19

The psalmist uses two literary devices—juxtaposition and simile—to compare the righteous and unrighteous. The "wicked" are those who follow sinful ways and deride others. The "blessed" are those whose "delight is in the law of the Lord" (Psalm 1:2). Tight juxtaposition makes the point that God's people are those for whom the law of the Lord is always their guiding principle. The simile stands out in the psalm. Those who delight in the Lord's law "are like trees planted by streams of water" (verse 3). Like trees, they bear fruit in due season and have leaves that do not wither. The psalmist chose trees to symbolize moral beauty, commitment to the law of the Lord, health, and positive productivity. Trees represent the many ideal qualities to which God invites humans to aspire.

Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize for literature, wrote out of his deep love of nature. For Tagore, God was revealed in and through the natural world. "Trees are the earth's endless effort to speak to the listening heaven," he wrote in 1928, already anticipating the disastrous effects of deforestation. In "Bilaser Pha'ns" from *Rabindra Rachanabali,* Tagore's deeply insightful collected works, he lamented: "The creator sent life, he made arrangements for nurturing it all around ... but man with his greed has supplied the instruments of death. ... Man has uprooted the very trees and vegetation which purify air, and falling leaves which make the land fertile." Tagore was not deifying trees or other elements of nature, but he understood our interrelatedness and that respecting their sacredness is in everyone's interest. In our own era of rapid deforestation, the celebration of trees offered by the psalmist and Tagore presents a powerful paradigm for our linked destinies.

MAY 19

A FROLICKING LEVIATHAN

EZEKIEL 37:1-14; PSALM 104:24-35;
ACTS 2:1-21; JOHN 15:26-27, 16:4-15

Affirming the sanctity of all life, Psalm 104 joyfully declares that the earth is full of living creatures who depend on the faithful provisions of God. In verse 24, the psalmist employs the Hebrew word *chokmah* ("wisdom") to signal that God made these creatures with intricate creativity, care, and potential. All creatures—even Leviathan, the much-feared multiheaded serpent mentioned in Psalm 74:14—reflect God's *chokmah,* glory, and expertise. Leviathan has been vilified in much of Christian theology and history, but the psalmist makes a point here that God made Leviathan to "frolic" or "sport" in the sea (Psalm 104:26). The Hebrew word *sachaq* ("to play" or "laugh in pleasure") implies that even this dreaded beast is capable of traits that humans cherish.

The psalm celebrates all creatures' ability to thrive in their spaces without human disruption. But in verse 26 the psalmist notes the presence of ships in the sea with Leviathan frolicking joyfully nearby. In fact, the Leviathan is said to have been made in order to take ecstatic pleasure in the ocean, its playground. In the psalmist's vision, human activity such as trade and travel did not undermine or harm the well-being of other creatures. As faithful readers of biblical texts, we have an obligation to build on these insights and ensure that the relationship between humans and the rest of creation is not defined in a zero-sum framework. Environmental activist and ecofeminist Vandana Shiva employs the phrase "democracy of all life" to encourage respect for the diversity of life and to offer a warning against attempts to tyrannize and conquer nature. She exhorts us to see nonhuman creatures as partners rather than as adversaries and to acknowledge the extent to which we are dependent on them for our survival.

* * *

SEAS AND RIVERS ARE EQUAL PARTNERS IN CELEBRATING DIVINE SALVATION.

MAY 26

PALACE OF GOD

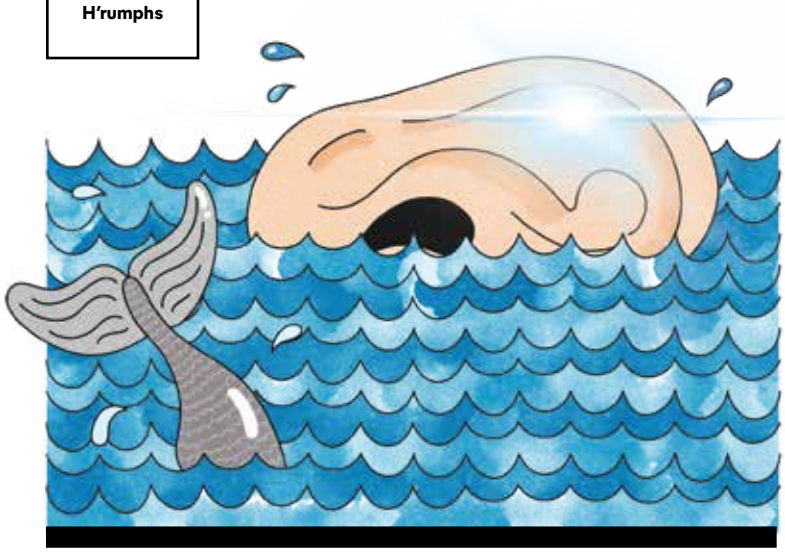
ISAIAH 6:1-8; PSALM 29;
ROMANS 8:12-17; JOHN 3:1-17

For 10 of its 11 verses, Psalm 29 celebrates the universe without mentioning human beings. God is upon the mighty waters, and the waters and flood commune effortlessly and joyfully with God. The Lord sits enthroned on the flood and God's glory is evident in the thunderstorm. As the Hebrew Bible scholar James L. Mays has noted, "Psalm 29 is the only text in the Old Testament in the which the glory of the Lord is so extensively and directly said to be manifested in what we moderns call natural phenomena." He observes that the psalm "looks to the heavenly realm and imagines the cosmic palace of God."

With so many verses describing God's mighty universe, where are the humans in the psalmist's imagination? I realized that the decentering of humans is likely not an omission, but the point of the psalm. An implication of this way of reading is that nature can exist without humans, but humans cannot exist without nature. Some Christian traditions still perpetuate anthropocentric theologies, believing that humans must be centered because we were created in God's image and therefore deserve all blessings, isolating us from the rest of creation. This way of thinking rarely calls attention to God's special relationship with nonhuman creatures, which the psalmist highlights here. Scripture invites us to acknowledge the glory of creation and grant it the dignity and respect it deserves and thereby honor its creator. May the words of the psalmist guide us in our deepening relationships with all of creation. ⊗

"Preaching the Word," Sojourners' online resource for sermon preparation and Bible study, is available at sojo.net/ptw.

H'rumphs



FROM THE MOUTHS OF BABES AND EARS OF WHALES

By Jenna Barnett

Last winter I woke up to 24 text messages on the family chain, which could only mean that someone had died, or someone was pregnant, or the San Antonio Spurs had finally decided to end their rebuild and trade four first-round draft picks for star point guard Trae Young. But I was wrong. My 2-year-old nephew Sébastien had asked his first theological question. The question arrived, according to my sister, around 6 a.m., an ungodly time for existential matters.

"What is a soul, mama?" Séb asked her. My nephew had been running through the lyrics of "Frosty the Snowman," wondering what it meant to have a "jolly, happy soul."

I FaceTimed my sister to learn more. "How did you respond?" I don't have any kids—yet—so her anecdote was equal parts thrilling and terrifying.

She laughed. "I kind of just deflected and made it about Frosty. Told him that the singer was trying to communicate that Frosty was consistently joyful. Besides, that seemed more like a question for Aunt Jenna."

Unbeknownst to me, Séb, who was off camera, heard our conversation and wanted in on it. "What is a soul, Aunt Yenna?" (The toddler is somehow too young to pronounce the J sound but not too young to stump me with questions about the invisible essence of life.)

"Wow Séb, I don't know exactly. The soul is a mysterious thing that makes you who you are. It exists inside of you now but will also exist after you. I do know for sure that you have a beautiful soul."

Once I'd inadvertently quoted Jesse McCartney, my sister stepped in to help. "People have different understandings of the soul, baby."

* * *

I AIM TO HAVE MASSIVE EARS WHEN I DIE.

He seemed satisfied, in large part because his chicken nuggets were ready. "Press the red button, mama." The call ended, and I was left wondering if chickens had souls.

My mind ablaze with questions, I turned to my favorite theologian, Mary Oliver. I had a vague memory of her saying something about souls and grasshoppers ... or maybe it was souls and geese? Or bears in the summertime? Hopefully, nothing about chickens.

Sure enough, she kicks off her poem "Bone" with the declaration, "Understand, I am always trying to figure out / what the soul is, / and where hidden, / and what shape." She goes on to describe finding the ear bone of a pilot whale. Apparently, the ear bone "is the portion that lasts longest / in any of us, man or whale." Now, it makes sense that Mary Oliver would see a fossilized ear and cast it as a soul; she has always described loving the world as listening to the world.

I'm guessing this ear-bone-soul news will be initially concerning to Séb, seeing as Frosty the Snowman doesn't customarily have ears. But we can change that with a few well-placed birch leaves.

This soul theory is also auspicious for me because I remember reading once that the ear is the only part of the body that never stops growing. I aim to have massive ears when I die—a mammoth soul. My true love, who will have to outlive me in this scenario, will release my body into the Gulf of Mexico, and a century later, a theologically curious and osteologically knowledgeable poet will find one of my ear bones on the shore and consider the soul anew. She'll scribble some verses down in her laser scroll then skip my smooth fossil across the waves. The ocean will sound so delicious to my ear bone, ASMR for the soul. ⊗

Jenna Barnett is Sojourners' senior associate culture editor.

MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR SUBSCRIPTION TO SOJOURNERS

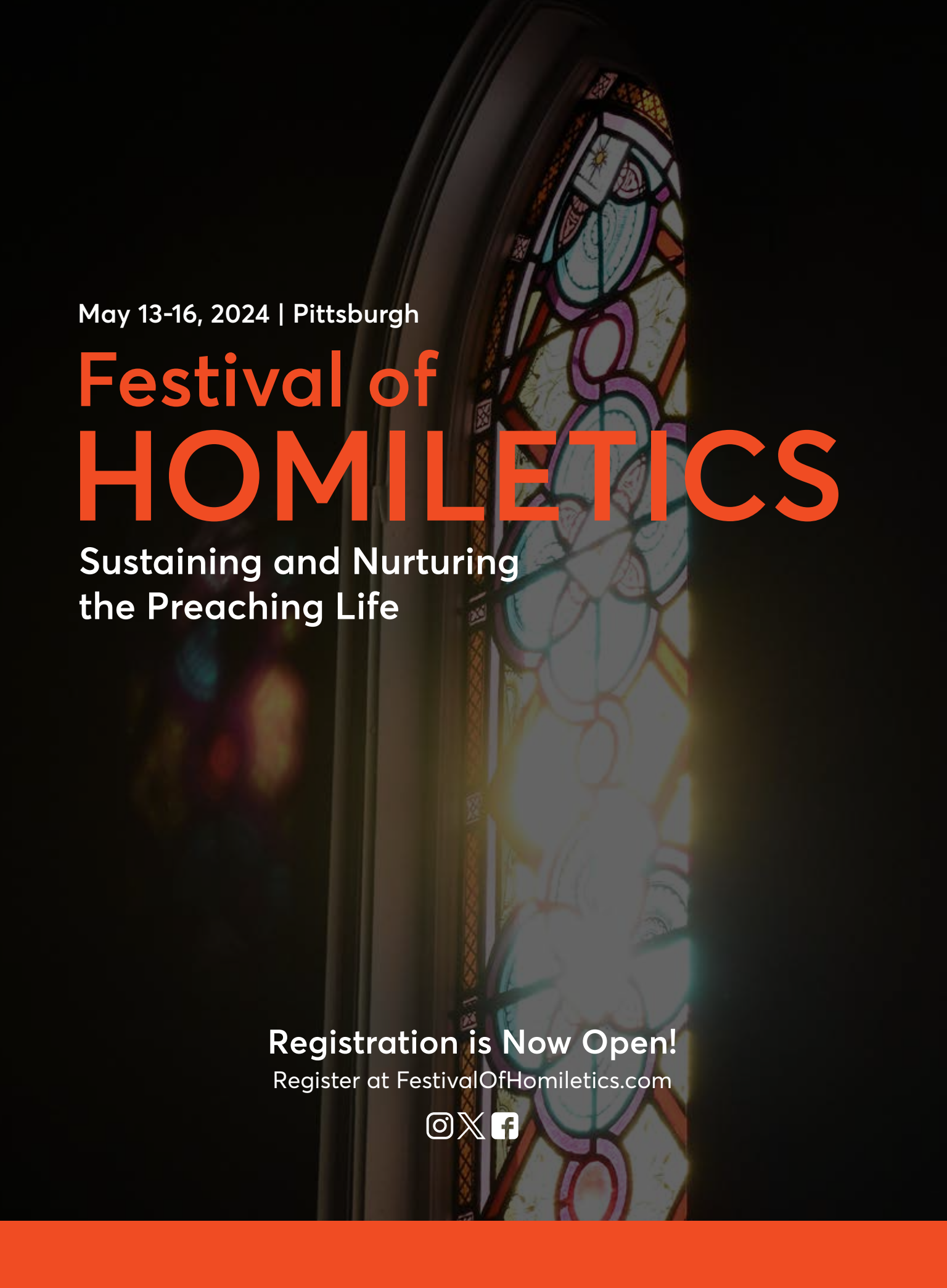
Did you know that you can read *Sojourners* magazine on your computer, phone, and tablet? With your print subscription, you get full access to every digital edition of the magazine we've ever published.

You can read *Sojourners'* award-winning stories wherever and whenever by visiting **sojo.net/register,** choosing a username and password, and entering the account number shown on your print subscription label.

Where you go, we go. Activate your online subscription: **sojo.net/register.**

Questions about your digital subscription? Email us at **magsubs@sojo.net.**

SOJOURNERS



May 13-16, 2024 | Pittsburgh

Festival of HOMILETICS

Sustaining and Nurturing the Preaching Life

Registration is Now Open!

Register at FestivalOfHomiletics.com