SOJOURNERS

SPORTS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

RANDALL BALMER AND KAELEY McEVOY ON ATHLETES FIGHTING FOR A BETTER WORLD

FEEDING OWLS ON GOOD FRIDAY
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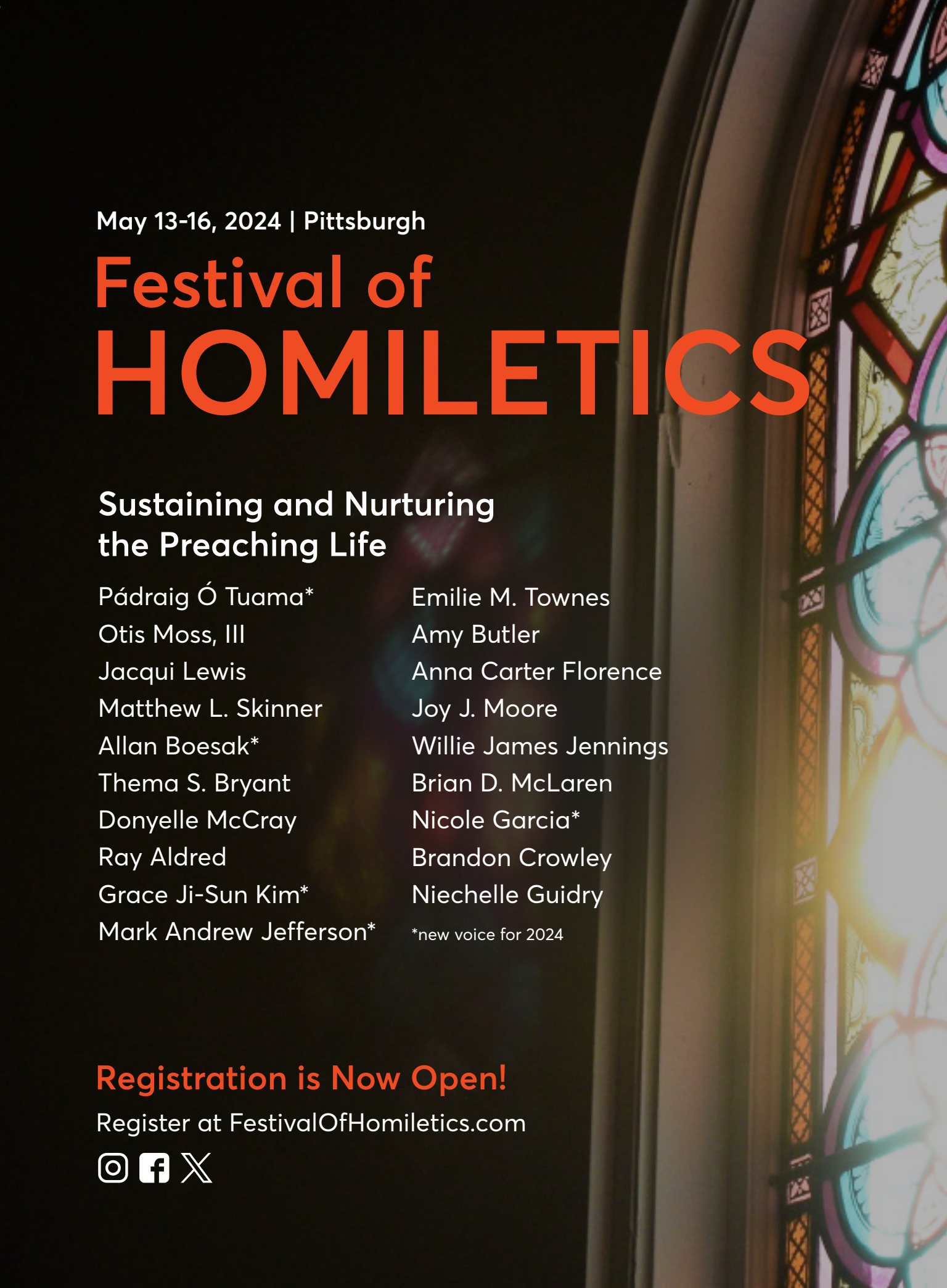
faith in action for social justice



May 13-16, 2024 | Pittsburgh

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Sustaining and Nurturing the Preaching Life

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"RETHINK YOUR HEALING MINISTRY."

Welcoming Our Whole Selves

The church is still learning that "full personhood is compatible with the experience of disability."

by Bekah McNeel

Cover design by Tyler Upchurch / This page, Morgan Hyatt

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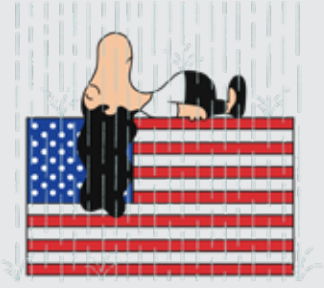
Voices



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Vision

So let us pick up the stones over which we stumble, friends, and build altars
Let us listen to the sound of breath in our bodies.
Let us listen to the sounds of our own voices, of our own names, of our own fears.
Let's claw ourselves out from the graves we've dug.
Let's lick the earth from our fingers.
Let us look up and out and around.
The world is big and wide and wild and wonderful and wicked,
And our lives are murky, magnificent, malleable, and full of meaning.
Oremus.
Let us pray.

Pádraig Ó Tuama, from *Daily Prayer with the Corrymeela Community,* Canterbury Press, 2017. Reprinted with permission.

Bernardo Ramonfaur / Alamy

From the Editors

At first glance, the congruence of Valentine's Day and the beginning of Lent seems, well, incongruent. The first is culturally associated with hearts and chocolates, the latter with fasting and spiritual examination. But it turns out that the two have some deep overlays. The Feast of St. Valentine honors a third-century bishop who defied the Roman emperor and married young couples in secret, for which he was imprisoned and later executed, and for which he is remembered as the patron saint of love.

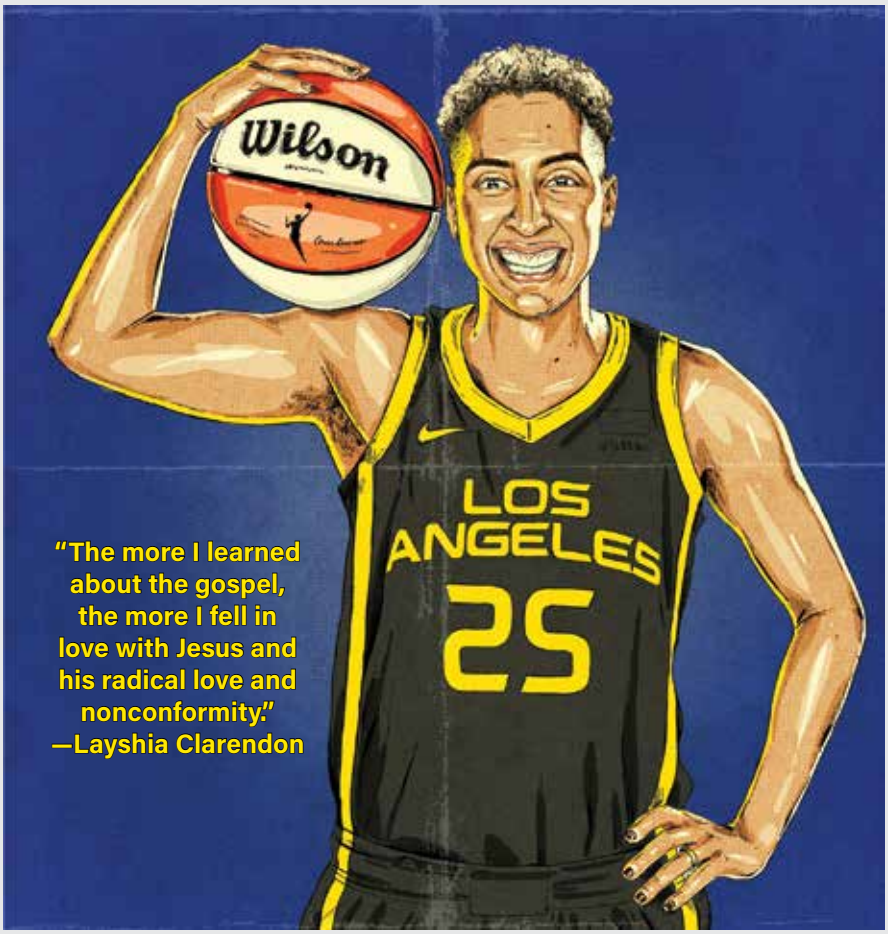
Lent is more often associated with "the dark night of the soul," the title of St. John of the Cross' 16th-century essay and poem about spiritual doubt, mystical contemplation, and the journey of faith. But, as Sarah James explains in her column this month, quoting Barbara Brown Taylor, "For [John], the dark night is a love story, full of the painful joy of seeking the most elusive lover of all." Both Valentine and John, who was also wrongfully imprisoned, stood up against abusive power on behalf of an ethos of love, as did many of the people highlighted in Randall Balmer's and Kaeley McEvoy's pieces on activist athletes. They stand as role models, for Lent and beyond.

RESPONSE

A Radical Message of Rest

Our December 2023 cover story, "All Is Calm," by Julian Davis Reid, resonated with many readers. Bickley Wilson from Winter Park, Fla., responded, "Beautiful! Touching and full of thought-provoking messages!" Sally Bailey, a musician from Wake Forest, N.C., loved its final paragraph, which concludes: "As we celebrate Jesus this Advent, may the body of Christ listen for the notes of rest from the One who has come to give us rest eternal." In response to "God's Economy of Generosity," by José Humphreys III (November 2023), Amundsen Kroll commented, "What if I didn't consider my property as mine but instead made it available to the community?"

Write us: response@sojo.net



Layshia Clarendon is a 10-year WNBA veteran, a Christian advocate for social justice, and the league's first trans and nonbinary player. / Illustration by Keith Vlahakis

"HUMAN LIFE HAS ALWAYS BEEN LIVED ON THE EDGE OF A PRECIPICE."

C.S. Lewis
Writer and theologian

CONTRIBUTING

Kristin T. Lee
"In both my medical practice and in my writing, I'm listening for stories," says Kristin T. Lee (p. 30), a primary care physician by day and a writer by night. She is "passionate about decolonizing all the things, especially the literary canon and Christianity," and about the reintegration of Asian American ethnic identities with faith. As a parent, she often feels like a failure and wants struggling parents to know that "I see you and I'm cheering for you."

Tyler Huckabee
As a child, Tyler Huckabee (p. 37) forbade his family from going to Burger King because he found their ad comparing their larger hamburger size to McDonald's "unsportsmanlike," a moment he now considers his first cultural critique. He believes in the importance of lament, because "there are some parts of God you can only learn by worshipping God in that space." He says that, for him, music is the best tool for practicing lament.

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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.

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MOBILIZING HOPE BY ADAM RUSSELL TAYLOR

A GATHERING OF THE GLOBAL CHURCH

International advocacy for peace and justice has long been central to our work at Sojourners. We participated in the nuclear freeze movement, the anti-apartheid struggle, the sanctuary movement, and more recent efforts to achieve the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, combat climate change, and end the wars in Ukraine and Israel-Palestine.

In April, I will travel to Accra, Ghana, for an important gathering of emerging Christian leaders from around the globe. Sojourners is one of several Christian organizations and church bodies that are collaborating under the auspices of a key ecumenical partner, the Global Christian Forum (GCF), to bring together a new generation of Christian leaders. We're thrilled for the opportunity these leaders will have to

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THE CHRISTIAN DECLINE IN WESTERN COUNTRIES IS PRIMARILY DRIVEN BY YOUNG PEOPLE CHOOSING TO NO LONGER AFFILIATE WITH CHRISTIANITY.

Illustration by Poan Pan

"CHRISTIANITY'S CENTER OF GRAVITY HAS SHIFTED AWAY FROM THE WEST."

share their faith stories and discuss the connections between Jesus and justice in their local, national, and international contexts.

This convocation of young emerging leaders will immediately precede and directly feed into the Global Christian Forum's fourth gathering of Christian leaders from around the world. Since 2007, the GCF has convened leaders from every major branch of the church, including mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, evangelical, Pentecostal, and more. The goal of these gatherings has been to look beyond the myriad of things that divide the global body of Christ—which since the Reformation has split into 45,000 separate denominations and counting—and instead gather an incredibly diverse group of followers of Jesus around what we all have in common: shared belief in the lordship of Jesus Christ. As GCF leader Casely Essamuah puts it, the gathering is about "seeing Christ in one another and one another in Christ." The GCF has acknowledged that it needs to do better at including leaders under the age of 40.

Sojourners is keenly interested in supporting the GCF's effort to engage younger Christian leaders from around the world, for two reasons. First, as authors such as Wes Granberg-Michaelson have noted, Christianity's center of gravity has fundamentally shifted away from the West in the last century or so. In 1900, 80 percent of Christians worldwide lived in North America and Europe. By 2000, nearly two-thirds lived in the majority world (Africa, Asia, and Latin America). Even in the West, patterns of human migration combined with the explosion of Christianity in the majority world means that the fastest growing churches in North America and Europe today are those with roots in immigrant communities from the majority world. Second, the Christian decline in Western countries is primarily driven by young people choosing to no longer affiliate with Christianity (or any other organized religion).

It's time to be even more committed to strengthening relationships with Christians from the majority world and with people under the age of 40. Supporting emerging leaders' participation in Accra this spring is an important step in that direction. Our hope is that this gathering will bear good fruit in the form of new and deeper relationships between younger leaders, planting the seeds for a potential network that can collaborate in an ongoing way to make the vital connection between Jesus and justice more real and urgent for Christians around the world. ⊗

Adam Russell Taylor is president of Sojourners.

COMMENTARY

BY JULIE POLTER

WHY CHRISTIANS SHOULD CARE ABOUT PRESS FREEDOM

The first month of the Israel-Hamas war was the deadliest for journalists in at least 30 years.

In October, nearly a week after the brutal Oct. 7 attack by Hamas militants on Israeli citizens, an Israeli military tank crew at the Israel-Lebanon border fired at a group clearly identified as press. Reuters' journalist Issam Abdallah was killed, and six others were injured. Israel denied targeting the journalists.

While the Israeli government continues to say that the incident is under review, in December, human rights groups Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, along with wire services Reuters and Agence France-Presse, released the results of their own investigations into the Oct. 13 missile strike.

The journalists were reporting on skirmishes between Israeli forces and Hezbollah militants. They were wearing blue helmets and flak jackets, most marked "Press." One of their vehicles had "TV" on the hood. They had been on a hilltop on the Lebanon side of the border for around an hour before the attack. An Israeli helicopter hovered above them for 40 minutes of that time. Their identity as members of the press—

Nesterenko Maxym / Shutterstock

civilian journalists—should have been clear.

Journalists are not a separate protected class from other civilians, but international humanitarian law recognizes their role in covering conflicts and states that "civilian journalists engaged in professional missions in areas of armed conflict must be respected and protected as long as they are not taking a direct part in hostilities." Members of the armed forces who intentionally target civilians can be prosecuted for war crimes.

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), an independent nonprofit that promotes press freedom around the world, reported 63 journalists and media workers confirmed killed in the first two months of the Israel-Hamas war. Of those killed, 56 were Palestinian, four were Israeli (killed on Oct. 7), and three were Lebanese. In addition, 11 journalists were reported injured, 19 journalists arrested, and three missing.

Why focus specifically on attacks on journalists in a war in which, by early December, more than 18,000 people (more than 90 percent of those are Palestinians) have been killed and evidence of war crimes (including the original attack on civilians by Hamas) is mounting?

Without context, 63 dead journalists could seem predictable for a dangerous profession. But for comparison, CPJ documented 68 journalists and media workers killed worldwide in *all* of 2022. That was a 50 percent increase over deaths in 2021 (driven in part by journalists killed after Russia invaded Ukraine and the increased targeting of journalists in Mexico). There were "more journalists killed in the first month of the Israel-Gaza war," according to CPJ, than in any similar period of conflict since the organization began collecting data in 1992. With Palestinian journalists being killed in record numbers and independent journalists unable to enter the territory, a full picture of the conflict is impossible.

Journalism provides information that people need to make decisions, whether reporting on school board meetings or reporting on a war. A healthy press undercuts propaganda and exposes government and corporate corruption, bearing witness to the truth. It provides diverse angles of sight into a situation and perspectives beyond "official accounts." One key journalism function, according to Rebecca Sinderbrand, director of Georgetown University's journalism program, is "bearing witness to the full spectrum of humanity's capacity to affect change."

* * *

LEADERS WITH AUTHORITARIAN TENDENCIES USE HARASSMENT, DETENTION, AND VIOLENCE TO STIFLE JOURNALISTS.

A healthy press provides a counterweight to communication strategies that cross into misinformation. Governments and powerful entities attempt to define and control "truth" through spin and deflection. More cynically, some heirs of Pontius Pilate shrug their shoulders and say, "What is truth?" (John 18:38)—encouraging passivity and distrust of all information sources. Leaders with authoritarian tendencies denigrate the free press and journalism outright, or use harassment, detention, or violence to stifle journalists.

The targeting of journalists by the Israeli military is egregious. But press freedom is under increasing pressure worldwide. In 2023 journalists were detained in countries including Azerbaijan, Iran, Ethiopia, and killed in Mali and Mexico.

While U.S. press protections are traditionally strong, defenders of press freedom have raised concerns about recent law enforcement actions against local journalists. Police raided the offices of a small-town Kansas newspaper in August 2023, seizing computers and phones. In October, police in Escambia County, Ala., arrested *Atmore News* publisher Sherry Digmon and reporter Donald Fletcher for publishing leaked grand jury information. They were indicted Dec. 1.

Reporting, investigating, and bearing witness to the facts, as impartially as possible, is vital, noble work. It can testify to that "which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched" (1 John 1:1). For Christians, protecting journalists and freedom of information should be as important as protecting freedom of religion.

Julie Polter is editor of *Sojourners* magazine.

COMMENTARY BY KAELEY McEVOY

ROSE ROBINSON'S RACE FOR JUSTICE

Sixty years before Colin Kaepernick, another athlete refused to stand for the national anthem.

Prophets use words to encourage or condemn. The biblical prophet Micah's command "to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (6:8), for example, has rung in the ears of many. Language is a powerful tool for social change. However, some prophets don't use words at all: They use their bodies.

Social prophets today that use their bodies often stand arm-in-arm in front of police barricades or walk miles for justice. But some prophets have used their bodies in another arena: athletics. And many of these prophets are women.

How many know the story of track and field star Eroseanna ("Rose") Robinson? Some recall in 2016 when football quarterback Colin Kaepernick took a knee during the national anthem in protest of police brutality and in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. Few remember that in 1959, nearly 60 years before Kaepernick's action, Rose Robinson refused to stand for the U.S. national anthem at the Pan American Games in Chicago because, to her, "the anthem and the flag represented war, injustice, and hypocrisy," according to historian Amira Rose Davis. By refusing to stand, Robinson used her body to speak for justice.

But Robinson was a full-time activist on and off the field. Throughout the 1950s in Cleveland, she was a leader in the Congress of Racial Equality, an interracial group of students founded by the Fellowship of Reconciliation that paved the way for nonviolent actions in the U.S. civil rights movement.

Robinson led several direct actions at racially segregated skating rinks in Cleveland. Davis acknowledges historian Victoria W. Wolcott for preserving Robinson's story in *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters: The Struggle over Segregated Recreation in America.* In an interview Wolcott told Davis, "Rose Robinson's athleticism was always central to her political practices. ... When she darted around White skaters while attempting to desegregate Skateland she demonstrated her athletic skill in the face of an aggressive White mob determined to trip her." Robinson left the Cleveland protests battered and with a broken arm, but she continued her work.

Robinson was, in part, influenced by the post-World War II pacifist organization Peacemakers, a nonviolent grassroots movement that advocated radical action to undermine the war system. Its founding members included A.J. Muste, Bayard Rustin, and Juanita and Wally Nelson. Each member discerned a specific action they would take to step away from the "war-making state."

War tax resistance became a primary tool for raising awareness about the vast percentage of U.S. taxes that fund weapons production and the military. For several years in the 1950s, Robinson refused to pay federal income taxes as a statement against the U.S. government's propensity for violence and war. "If I pay income tax, I am participating in that destruction," she said.

In January 1960, Robinson was arrested and detained in the Cook County jail by Chicago police. She refused to comply with her arrest or recognize the court system. "I will not compromise," Robinson said, according to *The Catholic*

Track star Rose Robinson refuses cooperation with police when arrested in 1960 for war tax resistance. / *Jet* magazine

"WE HAVE A DUTY TO CONTRIBUTE TO LIFE CONSTRUCTIVELY, AND NOT DESTRUCTIVELY."

Worker (March 1960). "I see the military system and the jail system as one thing." Before the judge, Robinson confirmed that she had not filed income tax returns and then spoke about the dangers of nuclear weapons, tests, and fallout. "We have a duty to contribute to life constructively, and not destructively," she said.

In February of that year, Robinson was sentenced to "a year and a day" on the charge of criminal contempt for her noncooperation with the court system and the Internal Revenue Service. Upon arrest, Robinson engaged in a hunger strike for more than 100 days until she was finally released.

According to Davis, Robinson likened a hunger strike to "an endurance test, much like athletics ... The discipline needs are the same; a maintenance of form with no wasted motion, detachment from distraction, never leaning toward the finish prematurely."

In August, after Robinson's release, she led nonviolence trainings at the Peacemakers gathering in preparation for peaceful direct actions at the nuclear submarine base in Groton, Conn. (The military base there continues to host the largest U.S. nuclear submarine contingent.) Robinson continued her activism until her death in 1976.

In the world of athletics, we now observe many female athletes standing for causes they believe in. Black women in particular follow the legacy of Robinson, who advocated for multiple justice causes. In 2016, days after Philando Castile and Alton Sterling were killed by police, members of WNBA's Minnesota Lynx wore black shirts that read "Change Starts with US: Justice and Accountability." The entire WNBA has continued its leadership in the Black Lives Matter movement. Allyson Felix, the most-medaled U.S. athlete in track and field history, and Olympic star Alysia Montaño both took risks to demand labor rights for working mothers by breaking their nondisclosure agreements with sports companies who failed to protect and in fact penalized their sponsored professional athletes who were pregnant. Washington Mystics guard Natasha Cloud has used the power of her platform to advocate for gun safety, especially for children. Most recently, Cloud voiced her support for justice for Palestinians—a move that may cost her sponsorships. Black female athletes are embodied and powerful prophets.

Before Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1967 declaration that the U.S. military is "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today," there was Rose Robinson. Before track stars Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fists in the 1968 Olympics in support of the Black civil rights movement, Robinson used her body and role as an athlete to be a prophet for justice.

In our technological and social media-centric world, embodied prophecy is not the norm. It's easier to make statements than to take action. Instead of fickle phrases, how can we use our flesh for freedom?

Kaeley McEvoy is director of the Sojourners fellowship program and a United Church of Christ minister.

THE HUNGRY SPIRIT

BY ROSE MARIE BERGER

FEEDING OWLS ON GOOD FRIDAY

In her most famous poem, "Not Waving but Drowning," Stevie Smith offers an unsentimental vignette of standers-by on a beach watching a man drown. Is he waving to us or drowning? The title holds the dead swimmer's response.

I recalled Smith's line this fall when one image from the carpet-bombing of Gaza pinned itself to my memory. A girl's hand in the rubble, waving around, trying to attract the attention of rescuers. We stand speechless before our own human brutality. We are all complicit in this supply chain of suffering.

Lent is a time of great silences. Silence can be duplicitous. Silence can be traumatic. Silence can be holy.

Last Lent, I was feeding owls on Good Friday at the raptor rehab center where I volunteer. Wings in flight across the mews are felt, not heard. A ripple of air. A slow shadow. The warning clack of a beak.

The prophet Isaiah names owls as one of the first to return after the Lord has laid waste to empires that God had found guilty of hoarding wealth and acting like there was no God. Isaiah describes the rubbled landscape: "They shall name it 'No Kingdom There,' and all its princes shall be nothing" (34:12). Owls are birds of desolation. In the half-light of the aviary, a great horned flicks its ears, stretches one wing, turns its yellow eyes to me.

Lent is a penitential season—an invitation to bear our souls, to take our layered defense systems offline, to give God consent to look deeply within us. "Penance" is the action we take to acknowledge and repair harm. While it's important to act to repair the harms that we *know* we've caused in our relationships and communities, the Christian tradition also recognizes that we are all part of sinful systems.

Every institutional sin or social injustice has roots in individual choices, in each one's conscience. This doesn't mean that we take responsibility for everything (hubris)—but we do track down and repair our part in the supply chain (humility). "Principalities and powers," as Paul diagnoses them, are systems that become distorted into little gods, wreaking havoc on the lives of innocents. More than that, the disfigured (some would say demonic) spirituality of these powers tempts us to despair by constantly advertising that we have no moral agency and are complicit in harms we can't repair. *Why not just give up?* whisper the powers.

The traditional Lenten acts of penance are prayer, fasting, and giving aid to those who are poor. The genius here is in restoring our moral agency. We may be complicit in some systems, but one can pray in any circumstance, one can choose vulnerability and dependence on God (fasting), and one can always share what one has with someone who has less. Prayer, as Ched Myers unpacks it in *Binding the Strong Man,* is the struggle to face both the demons within us and the darkness of our historical moment so that we can summon the courage to stay on the Way of the Cross.

Prayer opens our imagination. Fasting restores our agency. Giving restores relationship.

Lent is a season for reclaiming our identities as free people liberated by God. Not because we are perfect, but because God called us, and we followed.

In Isaiah, the owl that flits over the rubble is also a bearer of wisdom. She hovers like the Holy Spirit, silent and brooding over chaos. She is a reminder that, even in utter destruction, there are *refugia,* small pockets where life thrives.

From under the collapsed buildings of the tomb, a hand reaches out. Perhaps it is neither waving, nor drowning—but rising. ⊗

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

Anastasiia Ovsiannykova / iStock

FROM THE DUST BY LIUAN HUSKA

DANCING IN WARTIME

A week after the Hamas attacks on Israel in October, I found myself dancing the Cha-Cha Slide.

The setting was the Matthew 25 Initiative Gathering, a group of Anglicans walking in their communities alongside the most vulnerable, from refugees to the elderly. We had just heard from members of Telos, a peacemaking group with contacts on the ground on both sides of the Israel-Palestine divide. Shock, uncertainty, and grief hung thick among us. And now, we were invited to dance.

From Sufi whirling to Albanian folk dancing to krumping, dancing is an outlet used by many people, especially those who have been oppressed, to express longings and outrage that go beyond words. As one of Alice Walker's poetry books declares, *Hard Times Require Furious Dancing.*

Like other intense physical activities, dancing brings us from the realm of the mind, where images and memories swirl and ruminations loop endlessly, to the body—the realm of breath, beat, sweat, sound, and movement. It gives us something to do with our terror, anger, and confusion. It grounds us in the here and now.

Other activities can do the same. After I read the news, I'm haunted by images of Palestinian children with terrified faces dusted white from bombed-building debris. And then I chop onions and carrots and celery for dinner. My husband, in a pandemic cliché, took up bread baking. Mixing flour and water and kneading dough became his dance.

But how can we go on doing such ordinary things as people are dying?

* * *

HOW CAN WE GO ON DOING SUCH ORDINARY THINGS AS PEOPLE ARE DYING?

"Human life has always been lived on the edge of a precipice," wrote C.S. Lewis in a sermon preached to Oxford University students in 1939. Lewis interrogated the value of studying literature, art, or math as Hitler amassed troops for genocidal invasions. For those who aren't scholars, the question still applies. How can we carry on with vocations and activities that have no direct impact on staving off the immense evil that seems to build in all corners of creation? Do we?

We do, Lewis argued. A person obsessed with lifesaving in the sense of giving it their total attention at the cost of all other activities would become a monomaniac. "The rescue of dying men is, then, a duty worth dying for," Lewis said, "but not worth living for."

So how could I dance in the days following the Hamas attacks? My friend and the director of the Matthew 25 Initiative, Christine Warner, quoted the line of a popular worship song, "We 'dance upon injustice.'" She added, "Death does not have the final word." Christine and I, and a ragtag group of others, danced not in spite of what was happening in Israel and Gaza but on behalf of all those caught in a war not of their making. We embodied a protest for those who couldn't dance—or bake, or chop onions—at that moment, because the trauma was too raw, or because their lives were literally caught in the crossfire.

Beauty and goodness and joy still exist, our movements proclaimed. And they will continue to, just as a meadow of wildflowers will grow over the site of an explosion. This reality is worth living—and dancing—for. ⊗

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

inspiring.team / Shutterstock

EYEWITNESS

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* * *

"THIS WAR HAS CAUSED MILLIONS TO FLEE THEIR HOMES."

Hundreds of South Sudanese returnees wait at Paloich Airport in South Sudan to board a government cargo plane. Since April 15, 2023, more than 5.4 million people have been forcibly displaced by conflict in Sudan. / UNHCR / Andrew McConnell

GETTING BACK HOME SAFE

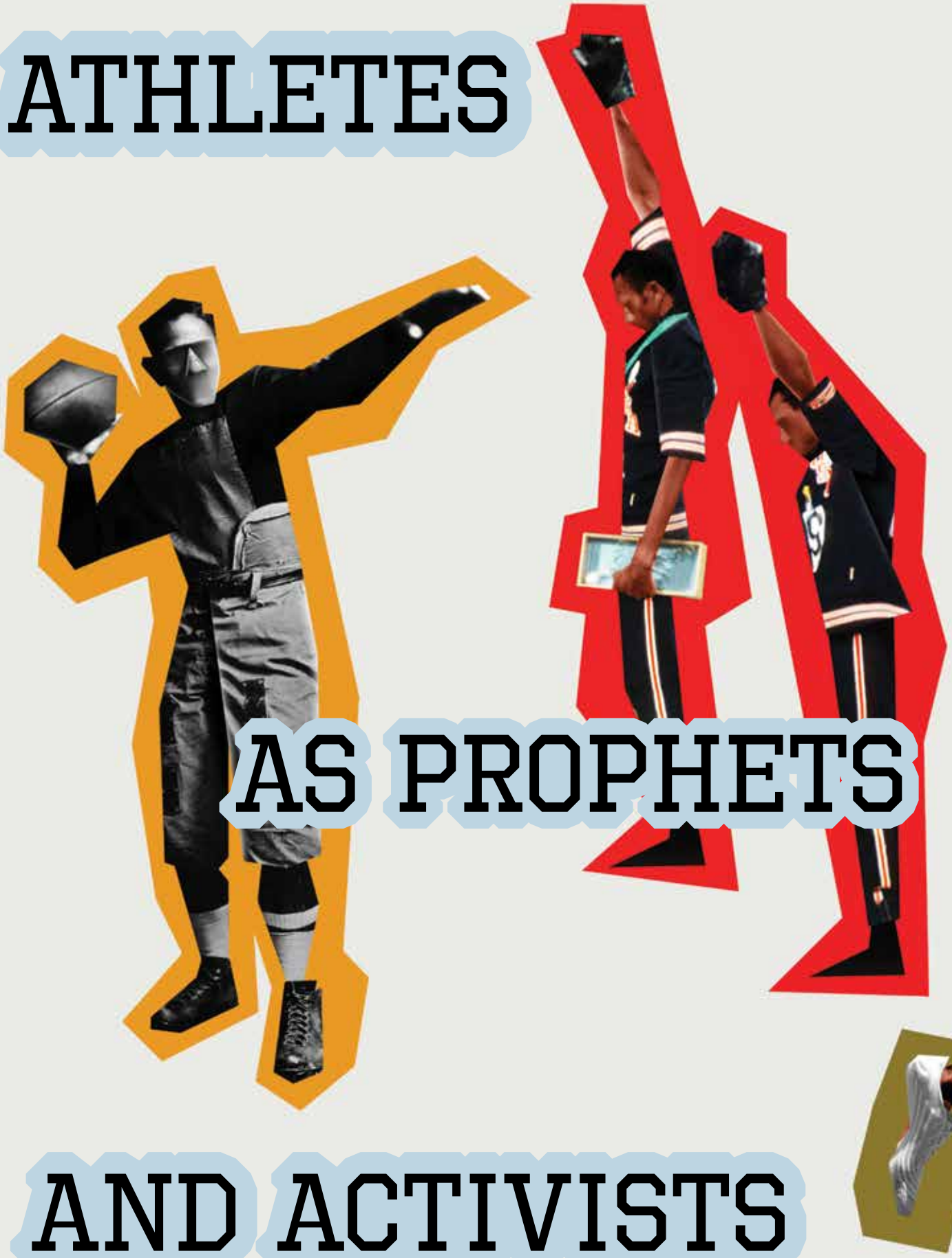
I am South Sudanese. I went to Khartoum [Sudan] in 2019 to study at the Comboni College of Science and Technology. I was working at a hospital at night, and in the morning I went to school. That's what I was doing when the war broke out in April 2023. There in Khartoum, Christians and Muslims were living normally. I was studying with them. I used to play soccer, basketball, and chill with them anytime. On Saturday morning, I was at home and we heard some big ammunitions. We saw a jet flying in the sky, shooting. It was terrible. For two days, from morning until 6 p.m., the guns never stopped. Everyone was shocked.

I was living with my uncle's wife and kids in Khartoum, and we came by bus to South Sudan together. It was a tough journey. Guns were being fired between Rapid Support Forces and Sudan Armed Forces. When we came to Renk, there was no access to clean water because of the floods. In Paloich, there were no shelters. The airport terminal was too crowded. People covered themselves with tarps for protection from the rain. The U.N. refugee agency distributed food and buckets for drinking water. The South Sudan government hired a plane to bring civilians to Juba for free. Thank God I've come back home safe.

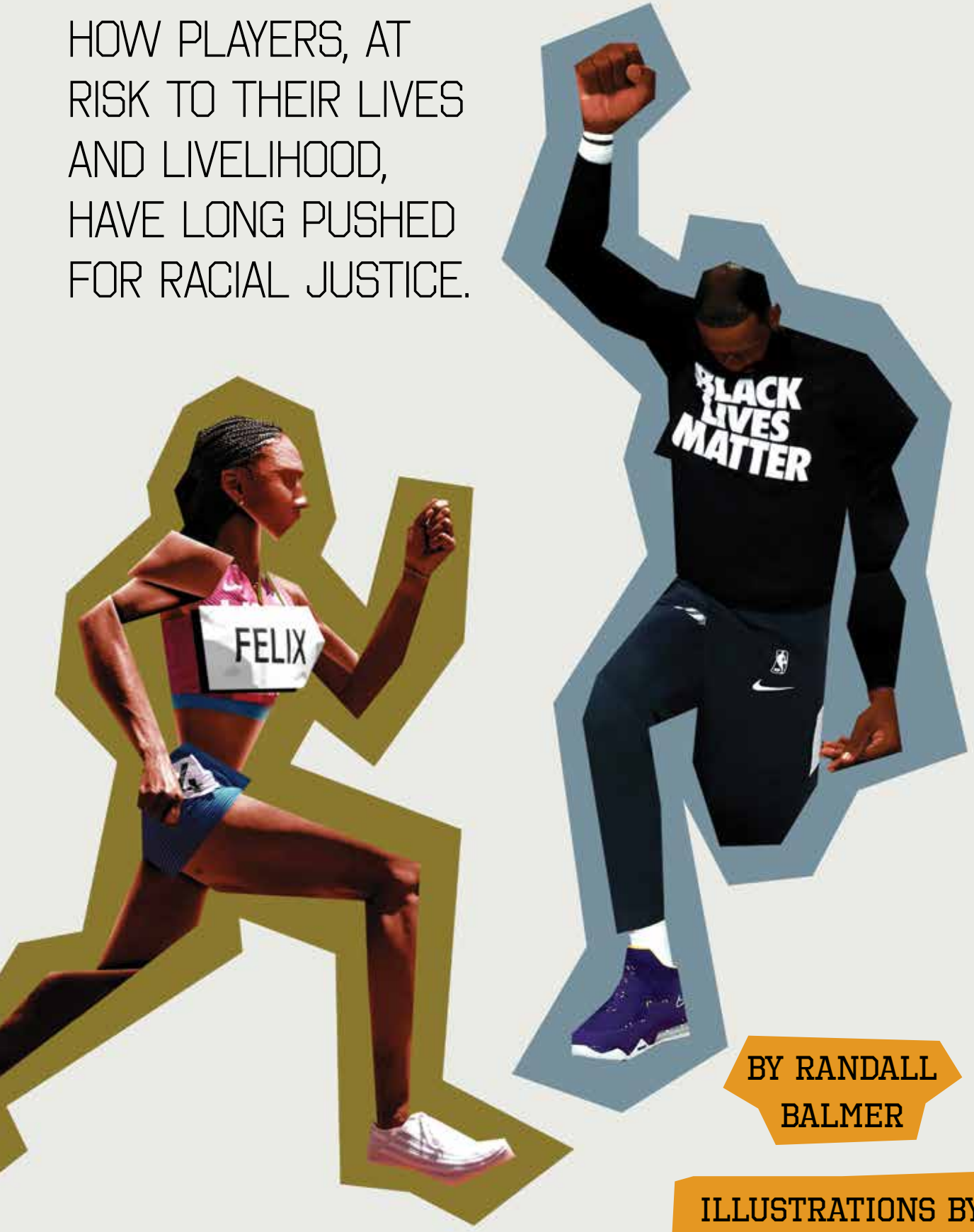
I am 25 years old and a Christian. I want to tell Christian leaders in the world to contribute to the needy, so they can have hope that they are human. Support human rights. Bring the message of peace. This war has caused millions of people to flee their homes to neighboring countries like Chad, Ethiopia, and Egypt. Most children being displaced are not studying. They lack hospitals, food, and water. I am continuing my studies so that the generation that comes after me will not see what I've seen. Everyone loves peace. No one hates peace. Whether you are a Muslim or Christian, peace is good.

Kaman Malek studies information technology at Starford International University College in Juba, South Sudan. He spoke with *Sojourners* assistant editor Josina Guess.

ATHLETES AS PROPHETS AND ACTIVISTS



HOW PLAYERS, AT RISK TO THEIR LIVES AND LIVELIHOOD, HAVE LONG PUSHED FOR RACIAL JUSTICE.



BY RANDALL BALMER

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TYLER UPCHURCH

From left, quarterback Frederick Douglass "Fritz" Pollard; Olympians Tommie Smith and John Carlos; sprinter Allyson Felix; NBA great LeBron James

Even six years later, it reverberates as one of the most striking segments on cable television in recent memory. Near the conclusion of her show on Feb. 15, 2018, Fox television personality Laura Ingraham chose to upbraid NBA stars LeBron James and Kevin Durant for their political commentary. She framed her comments as a "jumb dock alert" about the athletes' "barely intelligible" and "ungrammatical" observations on how then-President Donald Trump was fanning the flames of racism.

"Must they run their mouths like that?" Ingraham asked rhetorically. "It's always unwise to seek political advice from someone who gets paid $100 million a year to bounce a ball." Protesting that "millions" voted for Trump to be "their coach," she continued, "so keep the political commentary to yourself, or as someone said, 'Shut up and dribble.'"

The segment was remarkable for many reasons, not least because Ingraham later praised NFL quarterback Drew Brees for stating that he "will never agree with anyone disrespecting" the United States flag, a reference to Colin Kaepernick and other athletes who knelt during the national anthem to protest police brutality. Ingraham's full-throated defense of Brees in the face of criticism? "He's allowed to have his view about what kneeling and the flag means to him," she declared. "He's a person."

The obvious inference is that neither LeBron James nor Kevin Durant is a person. And when we pause to remind ourselves that Brees is white and James and Durant are African Americans, we plunge once again into the cauldron of sports, race, society, and politics.

Aside from the inherently racist nature of Ingraham's remarks—she later denied any such intent—the segment is remarkable for the simple fact that a television personality who typically traffics in conspiracy theories and ideological rants devoted an entire segment to sports figures. That attention speaks to the cultural capital of athletes in our society, some of whom have assumed the role that religious figures once played in American life, that of moral conscience.

SPORTS AS AN ENGINE FOR CHANGE

The four major team sports in North America—baseball, football, hockey, and basketball—all trace their origins, at least in part, to a 19th-century movement called Muscular Christianity. Amid a general concern about men toiling in factories or sedentary office jobs, clergy in the Church of England, noting that women far outnumbered men in the churches, sought to associate Christianity with sports, drawing on the Pauline metaphors of athleticism and militarism—running the race, finishing the course, putting on the full armor of God. A passel of organizations began promoting the affinities between religion and athleticism.

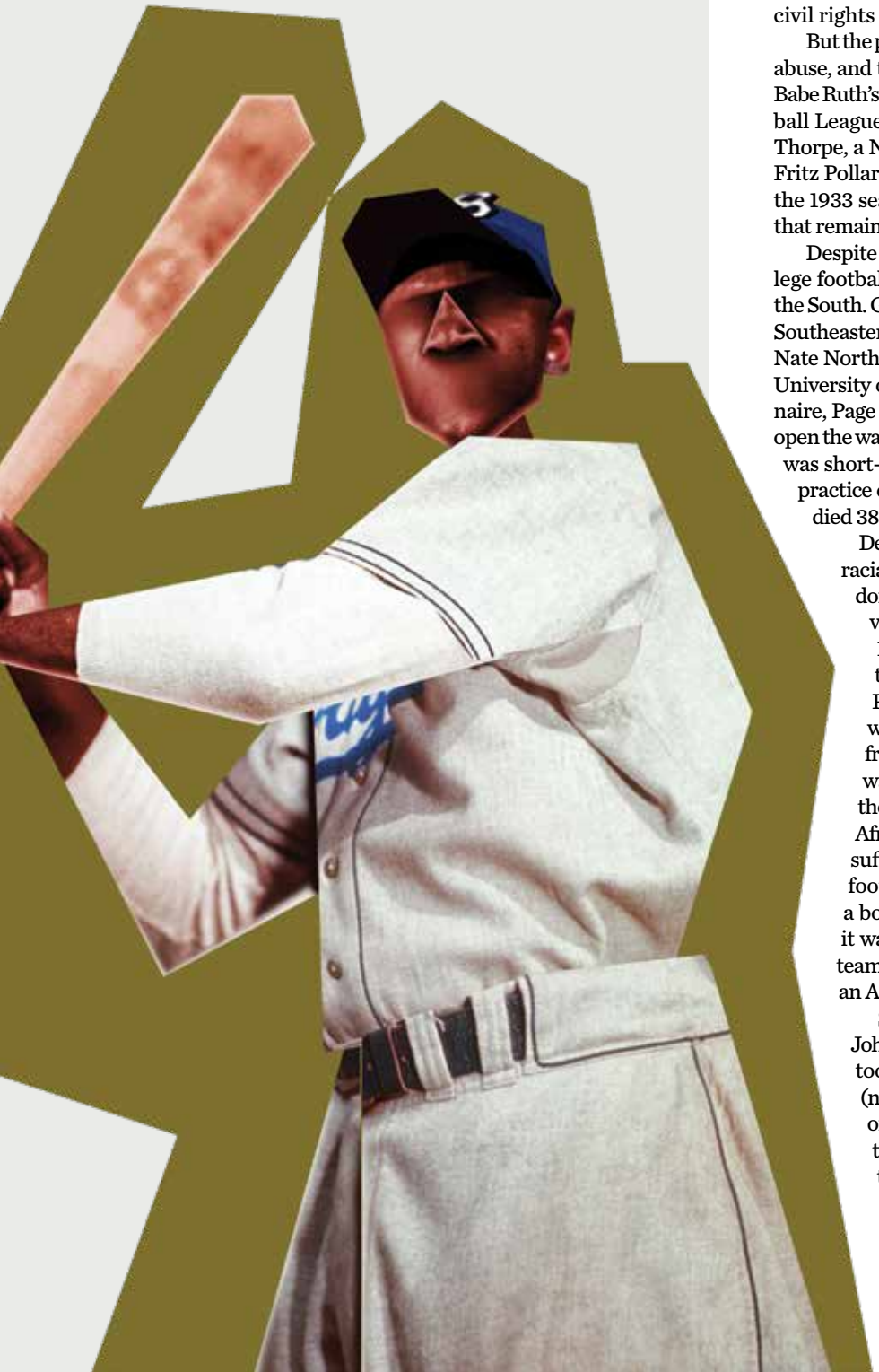
The most familiar group was the YMCA—Young Men's Christian Association—which began in England and migrated to North America in 1851, first in Montréal and then to Boston later that same year. Christianity and virility took many forms late in the 19th century, including camping and organized team sports. But the best example of Muscular Christianity was James Naismith, a football player at McGill University and a Presbyterian minister who invented the game of basketball while an instructor at the YMCA Training School, now known as Springfield College, where he also played football alongside Amos Alonzo Stagg on a team dubbed Stagg's "Stubby Christians."

Basketball, invented in 1891 as Americans were flocking to the cities, is the quintessential urban game because it asks players to maneuver in a constricted space without impeding the movements of others—like negotiating Fifth Avenue at noontime, Times Square in the evening, or Michigan Avenue at rush hour. Naismith also saw basketball as a force for moral instruction, social amelioration, and inclusion. In addition to developing "skills and agile movements," basketball would foster initiative, cooperation, self-sacrifice, and self-control.

Basketball, and team sports generally, could also function as an engine for social change. Within months of its invention, basketball was played by the women of Smith College, much to Naismith's satisfaction. While he was both athletic director and dean of the chapel at the University of Kansas—thereby embodying the twin emphases of Muscular Christianity—Naismith mentored John McLendon, an African American and Native American student who would go on to become one of the most successful coaches in college history and the first Black coach of a professional basketball team.

At right, baseball icon Jackie Robinson

IN MANY CASES RACIAL INCLUSION ON THE ATHLETIC FIELD PREFIGURED INTEGRATION IN THE LARGER SOCIETY.



THE DANGEROUS WORK OF INTEGRATION

Racial integration in team sports did not always go smoothly, but in many cases racial inclusion on the athletic field prefigured integration in the larger society. Jackie Robinson, for example, broke the color barrier in Major League Baseball more than a year before President Harry Truman's executive order integrating the nation's armed forces. The National Basketball Association drafted its first Black player two years after the Harlem Globetrotters defeated the NBA champion Minneapolis Lakers in an exhibition game and five years before the murder of Emmitt Till, generally considered the catalyst for the civil rights movement.

But the path was never easy. Robinson endured insults, abuse, and threats, as did Hank Aaron as he approached Babe Ruth's home run record. Although the National Football League was integrated from its earliest days—Jim Thorpe, a Native American, was the first president, and Fritz Pollard the first Black player—at the conclusion of the 1933 season, the NFL owners instituted a color line that remained in effect until 1946.

Despite episodic advances in the desegregation of college football, Jim Crow maintained a tenacious hold in the South. Greg Page helped break the color barrier in the Southeastern Conference when he, along with teammate Nate Northington, walked onto the practice field for the University of Kentucky in 1967. In filling out a questionnaire, Page wrote that he had chosen Kentucky "to help open the way for more Negro athletes." But Page's triumph was short-lived. His teammates piled on Page during a practice drill, breaking his neck; he was paralyzed and died 38 days later.

Defining the line between honest competition and racial targeting is always difficult in any sport, but doing so is especially challenging in a sport where violence is embedded in the game itself. In a 1903 Ivy League game, for instance, a crushing tackle broke Mathew Bullock's collarbone. A Princeton player acknowledged that the tackle was meant to remove the Dartmouth receiver from the game—not, he insisted, because Bullock was Black, but because he was the best player on the field. Twenty years later, Jack Trice, the first African American athlete at Iowa State University, suffered fatal injuries in 1923 during his initial football game. Author Steve Jones, who wrote a book about Trice, has said, "We don't know if it was an accident or if it was because he was his team's best player or if he was hurt because he was an African American."

Sometimes the attacks were blatant. By the time Johnny Bright and his Drake University teammates took the field to play Oklahoma A&M College (now Oklahoma State University) in Stillwater on Oct. 20, 1951, the home team was gunning for the Bulldogs' star quarterback, who had broken the NCAA's career rushing record the previous year and was a favorite for the Heisman Trophy, college football's highest honor. According to some accounts, the Oklahoma A&M coaching

assistants enjoined their players in the week leading up to the Stillwater game to "get that n-----." Both the local newspaper and the student newspaper reported that Bright was a marked man. Three times in the opening seven minutes, Wilbanks Smith, an Oklahoma A&M lineman and team captain, crashed his forearm into Bright's face—after the quarterback had handed off the ball and was observing the play. The third hit shattered Bright's jaw. The *Tulsa Daily World* reported that Smith "hit Bright with such force that both his feet were off the ground." A sequence of photographs published the following day in *The Des Moines Register* established both the intent and the effects of the blow.

"You never hit a person that many times unless you do it on purpose," Bright said. Piling insult on top of injury, a ticket agent at the Stillwater station refused to allow the injured Bright to sit with his white teammates on the ride home.

The success of the Alabama Crimson Tide in 1961—11 consecutive victories and a 10-3 win over Arkansas in the Sugar Bowl—took place against the backdrop of the civil rights movement, especially the violent clashes between segregationists and Freedom Riders in Anniston, Birmingham, and Montgomery, Ala., during the summer of 1961. Not a few white Alabamians reckoned Alabama's success on the gridiron that fall as validation for the "Southern way of life," a euphemism for racial segregation, and they applauded the legendary Crimson Tide coach, Paul "Bear" Bryant, for holding the line against integration. "Your men stood like Stonewall Jackson," Frank Boykin, a member of Congress from Mobile, wrote to Bryant at season's end. "There was so much joy, there was so much pleasure that you gave all of the home folks and people all over the South and people all over this Nation that want us to keep some part of our way of life."

Even after George C. Wallace's failed histrionic "stand in the schoolhouse door" in Tuscaloosa on June 11, 1963, which resulted in federal troops arriving to integrate the University of Alabama, Bryant still refused to integrate the Crimson Tide. The 1965 team was voted national champion for the third time in five years—but the Crimson Tide finished third in the voting the following year, despite another undefeated season.

Toward the end of the 1960s, Bryant moved slowly toward the integration of his football team. In 1967, he invited Black high school coaches to his summer coaching clinic in Tuscaloosa, although he also assured the university's president that he would not sign African American athletes anytime soon. "We have not actively attempted to recruit any colored athletes in the State because we have none that we felt qualified both academically and athletically," he said. By 1969, however, with his own program in decline, and with five of the 10 Southeast Conference teams having signed Black players, Bryant needed fresh talent. Wilbur Jackson, of Ozark, Ala., became the first

Quarterback Colin Kaepernick

THE WORLD OF SPORTS, THE CLOSEST THING TO A MERITOCRACY IN OUR SOCIETY, FUNCTIONS AS BOTH A BELLWETHER AND, AT ITS BEST, A CATALYST FOR SOCIAL CHANGE.

African American recruited to the Alabama football team in 1970, the same year that Reuben Askew of Florida, Dale Bumpers of Arkansas, and Jimmy Carter of Georgia were elected governors of their respective states and emerged as the face of the New South.

The tide of racial integration finally washed over college football in the Old South. Bryant's approach to integration was cautious and tepid, and in choosing that course he missed a prophetic opportunity. As fellow Alabamian George C. Wallace dispatched Alabama state troopers to the Edmund Pettus Bridge with orders to stop the march from Selma to Montgomery, Bryant considered inviting Black coaches to his coaching clinic in Tuscaloosa. As Wallace was gearing up for his "states' rights" campaign for the presidency, Bryant instructed his players to comport themselves as Southern gentlemen in their Sugar Bowl game against the integrated University of Nebraska team.

Yet, just as sports fans like to conjecture about counterfactual scenarios—what if the referee hadn't called pass interference or suppose the running back hadn't fumbled on third and goal—it's tempting to speculate about how the history of Alabama, or the South in general, might have unfolded differently if Bryant had taken an earlier, more courageous stand for racial integration. The Crimson Tide coach had risen to the status of demigod by the mid-1960s. His would have been a powerful voice in a racially troubled time.

PROPHETIC MODERN ATHLETES

Whereas Bryant missed his opportunity to exercise a prophetic voice, many athletes in recent years, especially athletes of color, have stepped into that role. At a time when Americans are turning away from religion, sports fandom, judging by the metrics of attendance and television and sports radio ratings, has arguably emerged as a new religion in North America. Many athletes have become arbiters of morality. Not so long ago, we looked to religious figures—Dorothy Day, Reinhold Niebuhr, Martin Luther King Jr., Abraham Joshua Heschel, and others—for moral guidance. Now we hear from sports figures like LeBron James or Colin Kaepernick, who must surely be regarded as a martyr for having effectively sacrificed his professional career to stand against racial injustice.

The parallel is not entirely accurate. Unlike the earlier prophets, whose voices were rooted in theological reflection and religious conviction, the new oracles of the arena respond to injustice as though it were a physical assault, something they know well. Their actions may be premeditated, but they are also at some level visceral and tactile, speaking and enacting a truth similar to that in the opening verse of 1 John—something "which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched." They proclaim "what we have seen and heard."

The world of sports, the closest thing to a meritocracy in our society, functions as both a bellwether and, at its best, a catalyst for social change. It also increasingly provides a forum for prophetic voices, albeit different from those of the past.

The congregations are different as well—larger, louder, more devoted, and more connected. No wonder ideologues like Laura Ingraham regard these athletes as a threat. No wonder she wants them to shut up and dribble.

Randall Balmer, an Episcopal priest, is the John Phillips Professor in Religion at Dartmouth College and the author of *Passion Plays: How Religion Shaped Sports in North America.*

WELCOMING OUR WHOLE SELVES

THE CHURCH IS STILL LEARNING THAT "FULL PERSONHOOD IS COMPATIBLE WITH THE EXPERIENCE OF DISABILITY."

BY BEKAH MCNEEL

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MORGAN HYATT

The past decade has been replete with calls for the church to examine the barriers it often places between spiritual community and racial minorities, women, and LGBTQ people. While that work is ongoing, Christians with disabilities are issuing and answering a call of their own: to embrace a vision of healing and wholeness that includes people of all abilities.

As Rebecca Holland set out to find a career as a young adult, she felt that her gender, her Filipino ethnicity, and her visual impairment were seen as barriers to her calling. After facing discrimination and being told her disability would prevent her from being a teacher, she went on to gain certification in teaching English for middle and high school, an accomplishment of which she is proud. But then she felt the call to ministry, and the journey began again. In seminary, still smarting from the discrimination in her first vocation, she said she did her best to hide her disability. On top of discouraging attitudes about her call, Holland said she faced an added layer of alienation when Christians would tell her that if she had faith, her physical eyesight could be restored.

Holland's story of facing discrimination, discouragement, and harmful expectations of healing echo the stories of many disabled Christians and their advocates. And they are urging the church to examine its assumptions about disability, healing, and inclusive practices.

In her first church internship, Holland let people think she was absent-minded when she missed visual cues and clumsy when she knocked things over (because she was walking without her cane). She made up excuses for not driving and went without the accommodations she often needs, like large-print text or screen readers. When it was discovered that she was hiding her disability, she said her mentor was profoundly disappointed in her. Her ministry would be hindered, the mentor said, not because she had a physical disability but because she was living a lie.

Holland committed to be honest when she received her placement as a minister. To her relief, the small congregation joyfully and generously welcomed her as her whole self.

"Being open from the beginning has served me well," she said, while acknowledging that "other people have had different experiences."

She said it's tempting to overperform to make up for the inconvenience of not driving or the days off she needs for occasional eye surgeries. But as she was honest about her needs, the congregation blossomed into new expressions of generosity. When the screen reader she was using stopped working for her, the congregation replaced it without hesitation. She'd assumed they would take it out of her paycheck, but they didn't. They worked around her walkable radius and helped out when she needed transportation.

"I don't bleed on my congregation; I think there's a line," Holland said. "But I'm open. I'm a real person; I have struggles."

This summer Holland transferred to a new posting in Hawley, Pa., but she knows that at least some of the changes at her previous church, Christ Community United Methodist in Altoona, Pa., are lasting. With her guiding presence, the congregation realized that physical accommodation is something everyone will need eventually, and they made accessibility a priority. When a congregant left a large bequest to the church, Holland said, they decided to invest it in making the church building more accessible—which included installing an elevator.

'JUST PART OF THE FABRIC OF OUR COMMUNITY'

For St. Andrews United Methodist Church in San Antonio, creating space for people with different ranges of ability did more than expand a church's ministry. It completely revitalized it.

In 2016, St. Andrews had dwindled to the point that the congregation had to seriously consider closing their doors. Their languishing was something of a mystery. The church is located on the edge of one of the most affluent areas of the city, surrounded by modest single-family homes where young families flock to take advantage of a good school district. The location alone should have kept a steady stream of new families flowing in.

The congregation opted for one last "curveball" before calling it quits, said Michael Crocker, the pastor sent by the denomination to minister to the less-than-50 people still attending. Seven years later, around 600 people attend one of the three services at St. Andrews each Sunday, and despite the pandemic, Crocker said, membership has steadily risen to around 700. In addition to its rapid growth, and perhaps bolstering it, the church has gained a reputation in the disability community in San Antonio. It's a place where children and adults with disabilities are not only welcomed but accommodated, celebrated, and integrated into the life of the church.

At the 11 a.m. service, a band and modern lighting design make the traditional chapel feel like an evangelical praise and worship service. Families file in for singing and announcements before Crocker begins his sermon and children are dismissed to age-specific groups. Disabled children are welcome to stay with their parents in the service, attend Sunday school groups with their age group, or attend a special class for young people of any age who need one-on-one assistance. That group, "Special People whose Identity is Eternally Significant" (SPiES), usually draws a small group of five people ages 13-19, though sometimes older, said Hannah Beever, the staff member in charge of St. Andrews' disability ministry.

Beever's son has cerebral palsy, and it started to really affect his peer relationships after elementary school, she said. She could tell he needed something different than what the other middle school students were doing in the youth group. She started SPiES as an attempt to create a quiet, less stimulating place for kids like her son to connect to God and each other. Beever doesn't choose infantilizing activities for the group—the kids let her know when something reminds them too much of their occupational therapy—and she trusts that the teens, most of whom have limited speech, are taking in far more than they can communicate. They regularly find ways to show her and their parents how much they are internalizing lessons on the armor of God, the death and resurrection of Jesus, and other themes.

On a recent Sunday, they were making a collage about the Holy Spirit and talking about the analogy of the Holy Spirit as wind. "This is different from teaching, it's connecting," Beever said.

The room is always staffed with a one-to-one volunteer ratio, she said. On the day of my visit, every SPiES kid had a same-age peer who volunteered to make a collage with them. Teenagers are her most enthusiastic volunteers, Beever said, and many of them have family members with special needs. When one of the SPiES teens grew frustrated and decided to lie down on the rug, the teen who had been working alongside her lay down next to her, and soon the two were talking quietly, playing with a soothing toy.

During the week, the church is also host to SA Life Academy, a day program for adults with intellectual disabilities. Every day, St. Andrews is open, serving people with disabilities, Crocker said. "It's

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL ABILITY ARE NOT REQUISITE FOR INCLUSION IN THE FAMILY OF GOD.

just part of the fabric of our community."

On Sundays, vocalizations, stimming (repetitive motions), or dancing don't sound like interruptions, Crocker said; they're just part of the soundscape of the service. "We hold things loosely that other churches hold tight," he said.

He does this in part because he and his wife, Ginna, were determined that their daughter Grace would be part of their ministry—participating in worship, church events, and discipleship. Grace can often be found in the back of the sanctuary where there's enough open space for her and others to dance and for kids in wheelchairs to congregate and move freely with or without assistance.

"Having a daughter with special needs has shaped my ministry completely," he said.

RETHINKING 'HEALING' MINISTRY

Families are flocking to St. Andrews in part, one visiting parent told *Sojourners,* because there are so few churches where a wheelchair, stimming, or a joyful vocalization is welcome. Most often they are treated like a disruption or an inconvenience—like a flaw in the church's vision of itself as a place of healing and wholeness.

When it comes to embracing disabled and nondisabled people as a denomination, Holland said, "The United Methodist Church is making very big strides." Holland has taken on various leadership roles in the UMC Susquehanna conference, and in the broader denomination, specifically related to disability ministries and ministers who are themselves disabled. She also writes about these topics. She sees progress, but she still hears stories of discrimination and exclusion too. But churches still struggle, often seeing disabled people as people who need healing.

"If I had a drum to beat," Holland said, "it would be a warning drum: Be careful with 'healing.'"

Scottish disability theologian and Presbyterian minister John Swinton said there is nowhere that Christians' limited view of the body of Christ shows up more clearly than in healing ministries. When churches ask what they can do to be more inclusive of people with disabilities, he always starts with, "Rethink your healing ministry."

Healing ministries often focus on a physical cure—an end to a person's disability. But if you look at Jesus' ministry, Swinton said, "the curing is never the point." Instead, Jesus healed in the context of enabling the person to live at peace with God and their neighbors—shalom. Sometimes that reconnection to society might have required physical healing, and sometimes the healing was a compassionate alleviation of suffering—both are illustrated in the case of the woman with an issue of blood and the people with leprosy—but it always came in the context of an affirmation of the person's unconditional dignity, their spiritual and ethical agency. The church is still learning that physical and mental ability are not requisite for inclusion in the celebrated family of God.

Wholeness, as Swinton describes it, isn't a question of being able to run a certain speed or comprehend a certain systematic theology book. To be connected to God as a disciple will look different for everyone, rather than separating out those who our society categorizes as disabled, making them an outreach group. Swinton recommends asking, "What does it mean to be a disciple?" The church, Swinton said, must be willing to equip and embrace all disciples, not just able-bodied people.

For some, their disability will be integral to their life as a disciple, because it is part of their identity. The late disability theologian Nancy L. Eiesland wrote that she did not want to be "cured" of her disabilities in heaven because she would no longer be herself without them. She wrote that the disabling wounds on the risen Christ are evidence that "full personhood is compatible with the experience of disability."

At the same time, Holland said, some people do want to be cured. They do want to walk without pain or see the faces of their loved ones. People with visible disabilities face spiritual pains, infections and viruses, and broken relationships just like people who are currently without disabilities. When a person comes for healing, Holland said, we should never assume we know what it is they want to have healed.

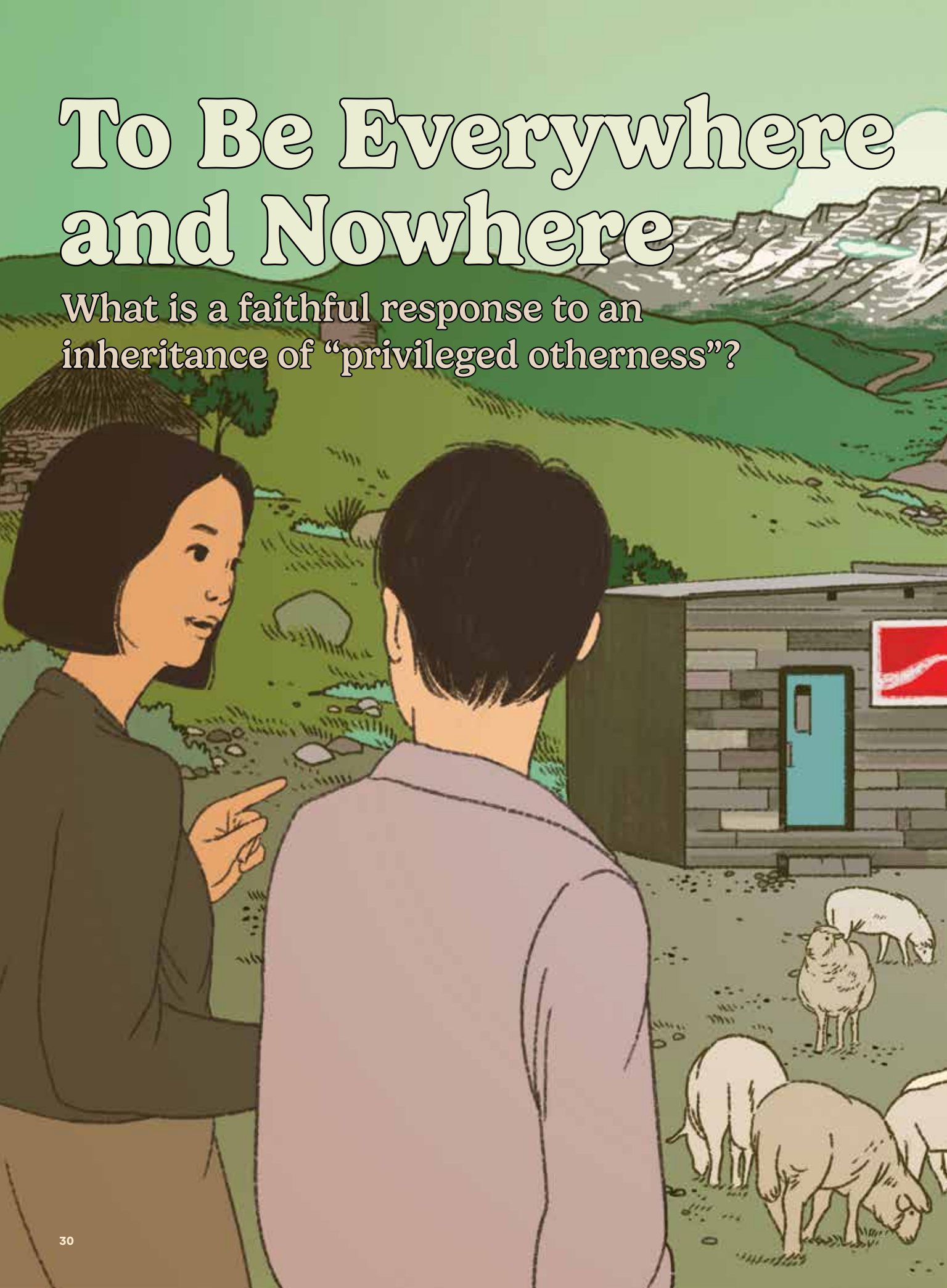
The important thing is that every person is given the agency to decide what needs to be cured and how to seek that cure, Holland said. Too often "charlatan" healers offer false, miracle-cure hope, she said, and create more alienation and pain for people who could be experiencing a healing connection to God and the church. When they are made to feel like their faith is insufficient, she said, it creates a new wound, a new alienation from God and community.

"In this life we may experience many minor cures," Holland said. "As a church, we want to put the emphasis on the healing of the soul and restoration to community and God." ⊗

Bekah McNeel is a freelance journalist living in San Antonio. She reports on the intersection of faith and early childhood for Sojourners.

To Be Everywhere and Nowhere

What is a faithful response to an inheritance of "privileged otherness"?



By Kristin T. Lee
Illustrations by Julia Kuo

To cross the border into Lesotho—a landlocked, mountainous country surrounded entirely by South Africa—my friends and I rented a 4x4 and drove up the icy Sani Pass. We switch-backed up one of the most dangerous roads in the world and almost skidded off the cliff.

Slightly shaken but unscathed, we experienced time stretching as we drove through the pastoral city of Mokhotlong, dotted with thatch-roofed mud-and-stone huts. Herds of sheep, in no hurry to make way, blocked the dirt road.

We walked along the deserted street, admiring handicrafts at a rug shop before popping into a grocery store. I was surprised when a Chinese couple greeted us from behind the counter with a warm, *"Ni hao."* As my friends and I spoke with them in rudimentary Mandarin (four of us were Chinese American, the fifth was white American), I learned that they had been living in Mokhotlong for many years, raising a family while running the store. We shared a laugh about the unlikelihood of Chinese people finding one another in these hinterlands and, after buying a couple of sodas, went on our way.

Down the road, we discovered another grocery store, staffed by a Chinese couple from a different province in China. What a wild fluke, I thought, that such an isolated town would have two Chinese-owned markets! I soon learned that it wasn't a fluke at all—Chinese people are present in virtually every nation in Africa, whether as contracted laborers or as informal migrants. Since July 2008, when I visited Lesotho while living in South Africa for two months, the Chinese population in Africa has increased to more than 1 million, including large populations in South Africa, Madagascar, and Zambia but also scattered throughout smaller communities in South Sudan, Togo, and Senegal.

The awe of meeting Chinese people in rural Africa prompted me to examine my family's migration story and my sense of otherness in the U.S. My parents left Hong Kong to come to the U.S. for college, planting roots here for the freedom and opportunities that didn't exist back home. Shortly before I was born, they became Christians through a Chinese immigrant church in the Bay Area. When I was 3 years old, we resettled near the University of Iowa, where my dad worked as a cardiologist.

While my parents were members of a small but vibrant Chinese church, by junior high I started attending a large, white, evangelical church where I could fully understand the English language worship service and have peers my age. Bathed in a white-dominant environment both at school and at church, I subconsciously believed that my differences made me inferior and that white male theologians were the arbiters of true Christianity—after all, they were the only people preaching or quoted from the pulpit. This led me to "the misguided belief," as Grace Ji-Sun Kim writes, "that white knowledge, theology, and spirituality were far greater than anything we had ever possessed."

As I started wrestling with doubts during and after college, I languished in self-recrimination. I didn't have the language or assertiveness to critique the overconfident dogmatism or the white normativity of the American evangelical church. If I didn't fit the mold, I must be the problem. I never fully belonged in Iowa, despite chameleon-level assimilation, or in the church, which I considered my second home.

I was searching for purpose amid my privileged otherness. A career in medicine seemed one way to alleviate suffering and be useful in underserved settings—which is how I ended up on a medical student research fellowship in a South African hospital filled with patients dying from drug-resistant tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS. I was struck by the absence of barriers between faith, work, and activism, such as when dissidents at an academic conference on tuberculosis held protest signs against government health policies, or when hospital nurses opened each day with a morning hymn. And although I only spent one weekend in Lesotho, the encounters with the Chinese shopkeepers stayed with me as well.

After returning to the United States, I'd occasionally relay the story of the Mokhotlong grocers. Initially, reactions were a mix of surprise and delight: "Wow, Chinese people are everywhere!" my companions of various ethnicities would ex-

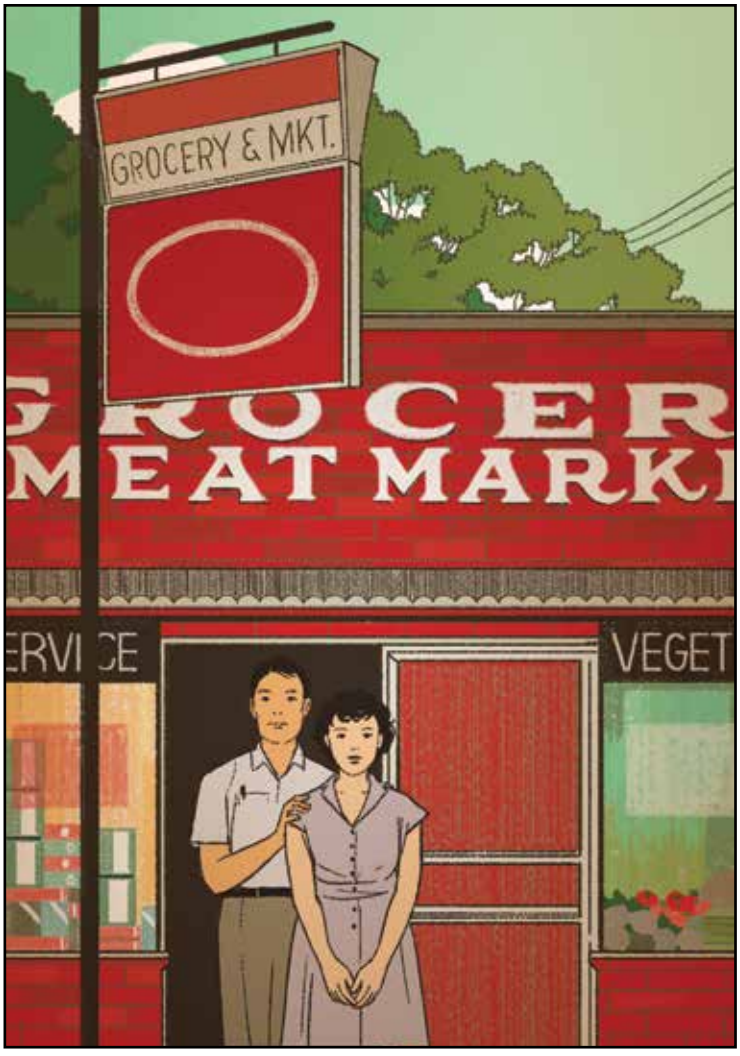
claim, smiling in awe. As years passed, though, there arose a harder edge to the comments about the Chinese diaspora, especially from certain white Americans, a tone of resentment and suspicion peppering the words: "Chinese people are everywhere." How could we be everywhere yet still struggle to belong?

INVISIBLE POWER

From our earliest days in the United States, Asian Americans have been scapegoated as disease vectors, accused of taking jobs from white Americans, and targeted with brutality. Driven out of Western towns by vicious mobs, excluded from citizenship, murdered in one of the largest mass lynchings in U.S. history, worked to death while building the transcontinental railroad, and incarcerated solely based on ethnicity, Asian Americans still suffer racially motivated violence today. The residue of this long legacy of persecution coats our presence in the United States.

But our existence in the U.S. is not a straightforward story of subjugation. Unlike African Americans, many of whose ancestors were kidnapped and enslaved, most Asian American immigrants have at least a modicum of choice, fleeing political repression, poverty, or war, while others, as in my family's case, come seeking educational or economic opportunities. Many Asian Americans have enjoyed advantages that other minoritized groups have historically not had. (Granted, the U.S. often played a role in destabilizing our homelands through armed conflict. As Korean American poet Cathy Park Hong writes in *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*, "I am here because you vivisected my ancestral country in two. ... Don't talk to me about gratitude.")

In *Asian Americans and the Spirit of Racial Capitalism*, Jonathan Tran disrupts oversimplified narratives of victims and oppressors, righteous and unrighteous, and Black-white racial dualism. Through a case study of Chinese American grocers who served a Black sharecropper clientele in the Mississippi Delta for a century after Reconstruction, Tran illustrates ways these grocers exploited a need in the system. They became financially stable while profiting from poor Black farmers. By slotting into this need, the Delta Chinese were participating in and perpetuating anti-Black structures (what Tran calls racial capitalist aftermarkets) established by the white elites, structures



The long legacy of persecution coats our presence in the United States.

designed to keep Black people destitute through debt peonage, voter suppression, and drastic underfunding of public goods for their communities.

Over time, many Delta Chinese grocers and their families converted to Christianity, recognizing that church membership lent them greater acceptability in the eyes of the ruling whites and educational opportunities via Southern Baptist-sponsored schools for Chinese children. Rather than creating solidarity with their Black customers, who were often Christian, the strain of Christianity many Delta Chinese assimilated into was more concerned with proximity to whiteness and the veneer of legitimacy it conferred. White Baptist Christianity claimed material success as a sign of God's favor, thus consecrating the Delta Chinese's business model of hard work and financial gain without compelling them to ask tough questions about their responsibilities toward their Black neighbors.

RESIST COMPLICITY

The grocers I met in Lesotho left behind their homeland, loved ones, language, food, and cultural norms to try to make a living and, in doing so, create better lives for their families. On the surface, this seems reasonable, even admirable. Yet were the Mokhotlong Chinese grocers just like the Delta Chinese grocers? Is this racial capitalism on a global scale?

I asked Tran whether it's fair to critique the Mokhotlong grocers or the Delta Chinese grocers for having opportunistic economic relationships with Africans or with Black Americans. He points out that if we are comparing this behavior to business as usual—that is, the norms of global capitalism—then it isn't particularly predatory. In fact, these critiques of the Chinese are frankly racist when not equally applied to white Americans and Europeans, who have been profiting from capitalist structures for centuries.

However, Tran explained, "You know it's bad by comparing it to an alternative economy. Divine economy is the very opposite of exploiting opportunities. Rather, it seeks to repair them."

Tran pointed out, "There's no doctrine in Christian theology that isn't wishful thinking. Theology, by its nature, is wishful. It believes in God when there's evidence to the contrary. It believes that God is good when there's evidence to the contrary. That's why we're eschatological beings; we think in terms of God's redemption of things."

Theologian David Chao, director of Princeton Theological Seminary's Center for Asian American Christianity, argues that a significant issue with the faith espoused by the Delta Chinese in Tran's case study remains relevant to evangelicals today. "When Asian American Christians don't have a theology of their social embodied-ness, including racialization, political economy, and material histories, then none of this enters into what the gospel is, what loving our neighbors is, what our Christian practice of discipleship looks like. Because the Delta Chinese did not limn economic realities as part of their Christian faith, they had no religious or spiritual resources to call out any economic issues, exploitation being foremost," he explained.

Do we walk toward power and profit or toward marginality?

Chao hopes all Christians will take seriously, as part of our Christian identity, decisions about where we live and work and send our kids to school and the material consequences of these decisions. "Then and only then can we resist systems of capitalist exploitation," he said.

DANCING IN THE MARGINS

The faith of my childhood—both that of the Chinese immigrant church and the white evangelical church—was much like the Southern Baptist Christianity the Delta Chinese adopted. It was a faith of personal piety and respectability, a faith that declared success to be a manifestation of God's esteem. As I became more cognizant of both my privilege and my marginality, following Jesus felt hollow if it did not involve laying down that privilege. A faith that didn't speak into the margins was morally anemic. Yet the evangelical church culture I'd grown up in was concerned almost exclusively with saving souls. The carbon copy of Western Christianity I was supposed to clothe myself in didn't fit, and my soul was starved.

As much as I longed for belonging that day I drove up to Lesotho, I also yearned for justice—economic, social, political, interpersonal—a restoration of right relationship among God's children. Working alongside ordinary South Africans, I witnessed their faith in the early aftermath of the apartheid regime despite continued impoverishment and their president's HIV/AIDS denialism. The Black South Africans I met practiced a different flavor of Christianity than what I had known growing up, one that permeated all spheres of life

and gave them the mettle to face their trials. They had an awareness of the power dynamics and material realities of life, as exemplified in Archbishop Desmond Tutu's proclamation that "if you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor."

In later years, I similarly learned from Black Americans whose faith had historically equipped them to resist ongoing injustice. This is not to glorify Black expressions of Christianity as more authentic or reduce them to a monolithic entity; rather, I noticed in the faith of Black Americans and Black South Africans a sense of God's presence as immediate; God's Word on the side of the oppressed.

Although there have been important pockets of Asian American activism throughout U.S. history, including notable figures such as Grace Lee Boggs, Larry Itliong, and Yuri Kochiyama, Asian American Christians broadly speaking—along with the white evangelical church—have not considered marginality something to be embraced. We've been caught up in the American Dream: If we keep our heads down and assimilate, playing down our racial trauma, we're promised acceptance, wealth, and recognition. We too often journey through life undiscipled in matters of race and economics. We need a theology robust enough to engage with the dual truths of our status as survivors of racial hatred and our complicity in racial capitalism.

There is a daily choice that all of us, regardless of race or ethnicity, must make. The flawed logic of racial caste puts Asian Americans in an "in-between" place that sharpens the contours of that choice: Do we walk toward power and profit, or toward marginality? "The life Jesus invites," Tran writes, "involves an ellipse between two points, dispossession and joy ... Joy without dispossession is escapist. Dispossession without joy is sadist. The two together order Christian life."

When I left the central places of church and society and went to the margins seeking corporate justice, I experienced solidarity and, with it, joy. When I swayed to the sonorous hymns of the nurses at morning work meetings and danced among ululating women, incandescent with rage at a rally against sexual assault in a South African township, I didn't fit in, but I belonged. Over the years, as I've gathered my church community to write letters to incarcerated pen pals or opened our home to Afghan refugees or marched on Boston streets protesting immigration bans, it's that joyful communion with others that sustains me.

We don't have to leave our homes to embrace marginality. Each day asks us: Will we choose the wide, comfortable path of upward mobility, or will we follow Jesus in eschewing centrality and privilege and find a place where we truly belong? ⊗

Kristin T. Lee is a primary care physician who writes at the intersection of faith, identity, and solidarity on Substack at The Embers. She reviews books on Instagram @ktlee.writes.

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SOJOURNERS

IN BOTH FILM AND SCRIPTURE, SATAN IS SCARIEST WHEN HE'S SUBTLE, NOT A HORNED FIGURE BRANDISHING A TRIDENT, BUT AN INSIDIOUS FORCE UNDERMINING LOVE AND GRACE.

By Tyler Huckabee

Film

The devil is irresistible horror bait, the central figure in some of the best scary movies ever made. A tour through Satan's oeuvre finds plenty of examples of an outside force of evil, such as Al Pacino's diabolical attorney tempting Keanu Reeves in *The Devil's Advocate* (1997) or Elizabeth Hurley's sensual temptress raising hell for Brendan Fraser in *Bedazzled* (2000). These movies generally have the theological heft of a Carman music video, but occasionally, Hollywood tries an angle on Satan that's a bit more sophisticated, spooky, and, ultimately, instructive. Take, for instance, John Carpenter's low-budget 1987 box-office flop *Prince of Darkness*.

The movie follows professor Howard Birack (Victor Wong) and his students as they investigate a mysterious green ooze in a monastery's basement. The team discovers that the slime is the literal embodiment of Satan, a twisted take on the consecrated host. While we get a brief glimpse of a giant red figure with black fingernails, *Prince of Darkness* doesn't focus there. Instead, the danger is far more immediate. Anyone exposed to the slime is possessed by its essence, transformed into a mindless murderer. The true adversary remains in

the shadows, sowing mistrust and division. The only thing our heroes can attack is each other.

Carpenter was following in the tradition of better, more nuanced depictions of the devil among us and within us. *The Exorcist* (1973) is an obvious example, where a mother reckons with the devil setting up permanent shop in the person she loves most. Even more disconcerting is *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), where a woman realizes that the devil is all around her, poisoning every bond, whether professional, social, romantic, or parental. Rosemary has no one left to trust. It's a supremely effective depiction of patriarchy as a sinister force, made more jarring when the sexual violence of director Roman Polanski came to light. Movies like these are instructive about the actual nature of the devil in the world—a necessary corrective to the image we've been stuck with for centuries.

The devil's most significant pop culture glow-up came in the 1600s, when John Milton cast Satan as a tragic figure of broken majesty, almost an antihero. "Evil be thou my good," he pledges in Book IV of *Paradise Lost*, swearing fealty to evil as a way of staking his own claim on part of creation: "By thee at least Divided Empire with Heav'ns King I hold." In Milton's cosmology, Satan is God's chief competition. He may rule with an inverted moral code, but it is a code, and one that impacts our new world just as much as God's own judgment.

Milton's characterization would shape the devil in the popular imagination for centuries to come, even if that characterization doesn't really line up with the biblical account. The devil of the Bible isn't like *Die Hard*'s Hans Gruber, a malevolent genius whose sinister plots have contingency plans for their contingency plans. He's more like Tolkien's Gríma Wormtongue, a petty twerp who whines whenever he doesn't get his way.

Take the biblical book of Job, where Satan engages God in a strange human chess match. When God declares Job "blameless and upright," Satan counters that he can get Job to curse God by killing his family. God agrees to this game and though Satan loses, he keeps going back to haggle about the rules.

This sets up the depiction we have of the devil throughout most of the Bible. In Matthew 4, Jesus is 40 days into a fast when the devil shows up. Given this golden opportunity to tempt the Son of God, Satan's efforts are cartoonishly harebrained, especially his first attempt: "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread," he says, essentially offering Jesus a chance to eat rocks. We can see why the devil prefers that others do his dirty work: Showing up in the flesh has not historically been a winning move.

Sometimes, the devil's influence is more understated, like when Jesus tells Peter to "Get behind me, Satan!" in Matthew 16. We are not given any indication that Peter was possessed by the devil, but Jesus reacts to Peter's resistance to Jesus' foretelling of his death as forcefully as we ever see in scripture. It's Satan's subtlest attack—appearing to Jesus not as a horned monster or a goat thing, but in the well-meaning, entirely understandable entreaties of one of his closest friends. For the reader, it's a jump scare. We didn't even know the devil was in the room. **cont'd on page 43**

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WE FIND SATAN NOT IN OCCULT SYMBOLS OR FIERY PITS, BUT IN THE MUNDANE, EVERYDAY ACTIONS OF PEOPLE DOING WHAT THEY THINK IS RIGHT AND SENSIBLE.

Illustration from John Milton's *Paradise Lost* / Gustave Doré

IN THE ABSENCE OF PROOF

By Curtis Yee

The first time we see Samuel Maleski (Samuel Theis), he is lying in the snow outside his home, blood pooling at his head. Across French director Justine Triet's mystery *Anatomy of a Fall,* the cause of Samuel's untimely death will be debated ad nauseam. Was it suicide? Or was it murder?

Samuel's wife, Sandra (Sandra Hüller), a successful writer, becomes the state's prime suspect, and his 11-year-old son Daniel (Milo Machado Graner), who has limited vision, is the only witness. Viewed through the lens of a whodunit courtroom procedural, one might expect the film to track the facts to a clear truth. But as lawyers and experts atomize the scene—a spatter of blood here, an open window there—a lack of physical evidence pushes the prosecution to lean on emotional appeals, building a case for murder around the circumstances of Samuel and Sandra's flailing marriage.

As the prophet observes in Proverbs, "The one who first states a case seems right, until the other comes and cross-examines" (18:17). But what can an outsider really understand of someone else's marriage? As more witnesses take the stand, the court's ability to service justice grows more inadequate. Witnesses and experts are shown to be partisan, their credibility undercut by the limits of their own expertise or trustworthiness. And yet, even as reliability falters, in the binary of the court, a verdict must be reached.

"It feels as if when we lack proof to make us sure how something happened, we have to look further," says Daniel during an exchange with the prosecuting attorney. "We have to ask why it happened."

But relationships, even the healthiest ones, are often unknowable, a disparate constellation of sentiments, agreements, and coordinated reactions. Understanding Sandra and Samuel's marriage may be impossible. All that remains are stories told by the cunning and the desperate, insufficient forces looking to carry onlookers away on the winds of their own particular doctrine.

Without true knowledge, we cobble together stories built on partial wisdom and faulty logic. In her essay "The White Album," Joan Didion famously contends that "we tell ourselves stories in order to live," that "we look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or moral lesson in the murder of five. We interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices. We live entirely ... by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images."

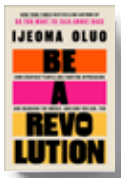
Triet beckons her audience to a similarly disquiet reckoning, one exposited and therefore subverted by the drama onscreen and the medium of film itself. It is the insufficiency in all our stories, one that God alone can rectify.

Curtis Yee is a reporter and critic living in Washington, D.C. He covers faith, society, and everything in between.

From *Anatomy of a Fall*

BODIES OF THOUGHT

In the podcast *Weight For It,* host Ronald Young Jr. explores "the nuanced thoughts of fat folks, and of all folks who think about their weight all the time." These vulnerable, reflective episodes carefully address how fatness intersects with topics such as gender and health care.
Radiotopia



An Activism On-Ramp
Be a Revolution: How Everyday People Are Fighting Oppression and Changing the World—and How You Can, Too is an accessible guidebook for people who care about justice. Author Ijeoma Oluo profiles diverse organizers, writing that "if you want to be involved in this revolution, there is space for you."
Penguin Random House

Confounding Fathers
In *Nice Churchy Patriarchy,* writer and former college campus minister Liz Cooledge Jenkins dissects the patriarchal worldview that shapes Christian communities—sometimes overtly, often subtly—and suggests "some ways we might, together, disrupt its power."
Apocryphile Press

ANOTHER KIND OF LOVE STORY

By Sarah James

Light & Air

In my first semester of divinity school, I experienced a spiritual crisis. For months, I woke every night at 3 a.m., plagued by unanswerable questions on life's meaning, God's silence, suffering, and human nature. At the time, I felt alone, but now, years on the other side of it, I see the healing that emerged from my "dark night of the soul."

While the phrase "dark night of the soul" has seeped into secular parlance, it is specifically drawn from the Christian contemplative tradition. St. John of the Cross, a 16th-century Carmelite monk and reformer, wrote a theological commentary and a poem, both titled "The Dark Night of the Soul," about good darkness, contemplation, and the journey of faith. These works emerged after John's unjust imprisonment in a monastery, where he endured physical violence and extreme deprivation. There, John discovered the richness of the "dark night" for illumination and purification. Barbara Brown Taylor, author of *Learning to Walk in the Dark,* writes, "For [John], the dark night is a love story, full of the painful joy of seeking the most elusive lover of all." While the dark night may feel like "oblivion," John contends that "The more darkness it brings ... the more light it sheds."

John ultimately names God "no-thing." This kind of God talk is rooted in apophatic theology, which stipulates that

* * *

I SEE THE HEALING THAT EMERGED FROM MY "DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL."

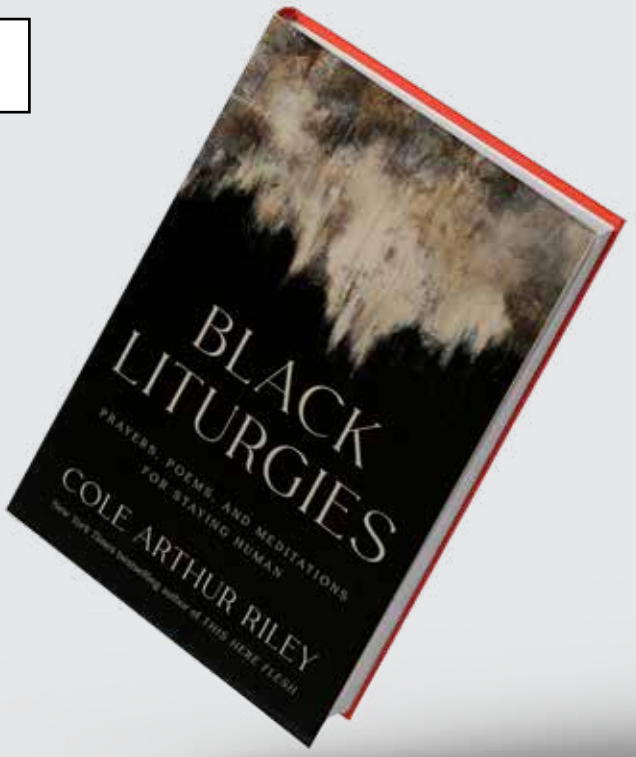
God surpasses human understanding and is fundamentally undefinable but related to through contemplation. In the 14th-century apophatic text *The Cloud of Unknowing,* the unknown author advises, "Now you say, 'How shall I proceed to think of God as he is in himself?' To this I can only reply, 'I do not know.' ... Say to your thoughts, 'You are powerless to grasp him. Be still.'" John describes this process of unknowing as alchemical, transforming "spiritual pride" into humility, ultimately making the true "love of neighbor" possible.

Taylor disentangles common associations between "darkness" and "sinister" things, but makes an important distinction between the dark night—faith obscured—and clinical depression, "a darkness designed to obliterate." Having experienced both, I can report that each is painful but unique. To me, the dark night feels like silence, while depression feels like sinking far beneath the ocean's surface. The medicine for each is different. The dark night demands silence, reverence, and stillness; depression requires therapy, treatment, and connection. In Taylor's words, "Depression can take people apart without putting them back together again, while *la noche oscura* [the dark night] is for healing." Though different paths, healing from depression and enduring the dark night have instilled the same kind of softness in me: deeper humility and greater compassion, for all human beings and for myself as well.

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

gremlin / iStock

Books



A GENTLE, AUDACIOUS PRAYER BOOK

Black Liturgies: Prayers, Poems, and Meditations for Staying Human, by Cole Arthur Riley

Convergent Books

Cole Arthur Riley never wanted to write a prayer book. But when she went looking for liturgical practices that centered Black emotion, Black literature, and Black bodies, she couldn't find much. Now, for nearly four years, Riley has been curating the Instagram page @blackliturgies, which integrates the truths of dignity, lament, rage, justice, and rest into written prayers. Her new book, *Black Liturgies: Prayers, Poems, and Meditations for Staying Human*, expands on that work. Typically, prayer books are not page-turners, but once I started reading this one, I couldn't put it down.

By interpolating corporeal language into her prayers, Riley offers a refreshingly accessible entry into contemplative literature. She has a gentle way of encouraging readers to engage with her prayers. "Turn them over in your hand. Take a deep breath," she writes. "There is no demand I will make of you, apart from staying near to yourself, your body, your own soul, and the stories that dwell there."

* * *

"PROTECT US FROM THE LIE THAT IF WE ARE AWAKE, WE SHOULD BE WORKING."

Riley organizes *Black Liturgies* around the "shared questions and longings of the human experience," such as dignity, rage, and joy. Her reflections are nuanced, complicating the categories in which we often place certain emotions. For example, in her liturgy titled "For Joy That Had to Be Hidden," she makes space for lament and exaltation to coexist. In "For Those Who Doomscroll," Riley asks God to "remind us that there is much the world needs, including our attention to atrocity—but if we watch the world burn for long enough, the fire will become our only reality."

Notably, she puts the voices of Black women front and center. Between these general prayers, which include liturgies for Juneteenth and Kwanzaa, Riley weaves wide-ranging meditations. "For Black People Who Had to Smile Through It" offers consolation, "For Black Women Who Were Taught They Were Responsible For Saving the World" provides exhale, and "For Black Twitter" makes space for gratitude.

Riley is intentional about bringing in the voices of her ancestors, from influences such as writers Toni Morrison and Octavia Butler, to her own family. Riley writes that her grandmother "had a lone poem published in an anthology that I sleep next to like its own altar." She continues, "when I told [my gramma] that the poem in the anthology changed me, she smirked softly, dipped her head, and said, *It changed me first*." Riley concludes, "Whatever audacity my gramma's artistry possessed, I hope someday it is found in me." I found myself hoping for some audacity myself. In this sense, Riley has recreated the communal liturgical experience, even for readers encountering these words in solitude.

Riley's work has always been about the liberation that comes when we pause and reclaim our rest and dignity from a world that will, as is attributed to Zora Neale Hurston, "kill you and say you enjoyed it." Riley's words remind us that liberation begins with coming home to oneself. In one of my favorite liturgies, "For Those Who've Forgotten How to Play," Riley writes "Show us what forms of entertainment and what hobbies lead us into peace. And protect us from the lie that if we are awake, we should be working." Readers will walk away from this book a little freer; even if the chains don't break, maybe they'll loosen enough for us to dance and clap.

Zachary Lee, a former editorial assistant for sojo.net, is a Chicago-based writer, artist, and film critic.

THE HUMANITY OF PASTORS

Podcasts

Six Sermons,
by Asa Merritt

Audible

Pastor Alexis (narrated by Stephanie Hsu) is a recent divinity school graduate who has been hand-selected by Pastor William Hoyt (voiced by Bill Irwin) to succeed him at Trinity Grace Church in Ohio. Alexis has been working alongside Will, learning the rhythms and rigors of pastoring a small-town church. She's young, radical, and fearless. These qualities—the very reasons Will chose her—are exactly what make a significant and influential portion of the congregation certain she's the wrong choice. Then Will dies by suicide. Alexis is thrust into the role of lead pastor far sooner than she expected, and in apocalyptic conditions. All this is merely the first episode of *Six Sermons,* a 12-episode fiction podcast written by Asa Merritt (a journalist and author of the 2015 play *True Believer* about the Arab Spring).

Six Sermons is the story of how Alexis navigates this intense crisis: How will the cause of Will's death impact the congregation? What should the memorial service entail? How is Alexis caring for her own mental health in the wake of her friend and mentor's death?

Alexis, in particular, experiences God's absence acutely. *Six Sermons* powerfully illustrates the humanity of pastors; both Will and Alexis are raw, vulnerable, and flawed. Early in their mentoring relationship, Will tells Alexis, "You don't really know God until you meet him at night." This is a story of meeting God at night.

Alexis struggles not only with grief, but with her own mental health. Rather than hide this from the congregation, she leads with it. In one of the titular six sermons, the one she preached at Will's funeral, Alexis says, "We're all sitting next to each other, but we're also swimming in our own private abyss of grief. ... Your grief is unknowable. Yet you are not alone." These pastors' faith buoys them, but it is not a magical panacea, as evidenced by Will's death.

The show's weakness arrives with the resolution of Alexis' crisis of faith. "It's not about me, is it, Jesus?" she says. "It's about you." This enables her to be the pastor the church needs to weather the crisis. Merritt, the lead writer and creator of *Six Sermons,* is not a person of faith. He wrote *Six Sermons* in response to the suicide of a close friend, and while he spent a month embedded with a congregation and solicited input from pastors, Alexis' neat resolution rings hollow.

* * *

"YOUR GRIEF IS UNKNOWABLE. YET YOU ARE NOT ALONE."

"It's really all about Jesus" is the trite sort of statement church leaders often use to silence honest questions of the type raised by tragedies. It doesn't come across as dishonest in *Six Sermons*—Alexis is certainly not trying to silence doubt and pain—but it does feel like an inelegant, ham-fisted resolution to what is otherwise a kind, empathetic, and nuanced view of faith in the context of church life.

The voice acting is terrific, and the sound design is immersive without being distracting. Such production tools are typically reserved for sci-fi epics, not intimate church dramas. But the themes *Six Sermons* centers—mental illness, suicide, dark nights of the soul—can feel as apocalyptic as an invasion of body-snatchers when you're sitting in the center of them. Ultimately, *Six Sermons* is an affirmation of the unique ability of the faith community to weather the worst kinds of storms.

JR. Forasteros is a pastor, podcaster, and author of *Empathy for the Devil.* He announces roller derby in Dallas in his spare time.

cont'd from page 38 This is probably the closest any of us will ever get to the devil, provided such a being exists. We find Satan not in occult symbols or fiery pits, but in the mundane, everyday actions of people doing what they think is right and sensible. Not on a Ouija board, but on a cable news show where we're told that these Palestinian kids had it coming. Not at a sacrifice of lily-skinned virgins, but in the swift, simple denial of medical coverage.

I understand the inclination to be skeptical of the existence of the devil. Part of the genius of Robert Eggers' *The Witch* is showing how Christian paranoia about Satan is every bit as destructive as any real demon could be. But I do believe in something like a devil, even if just as a way to think about a specific wickedness in the world that transcends the general human capacity for cruelty. Wherever there is a spirit that seeks to turn us against love and grace—wherever we're tempted to think of others as expendable—we're as close to the devil as Rosemary was, slowly finding all our connections to love and trust poisoned by hell.

In Sam Raimi's 2009 horror comedy *Drag Me to Hell*, a loan officer named Christine (Alison Lohman) is pressured by her boss to be tougher on applicants if she wants a promotion. So, when an old woman begs for an extension on a mortgage payment, Christine turns her down. It's the sensible thing to do. It's her job. And it's the beginning of her undoing, as this old woman ends up having some powerful connections.

Raimi says that he devised *Drag Me to Hell* as a morality tale about a good person whose life is ruined by one weak moment of cruelty. It was savvy of him to look for hell in a loan office, where evil often becomes a daily matter of course. "She did do the wrong thing," Raimi said, reflecting on Alison's grim fate. "But holy cow! Give her a break."

But it is not in the spirit of Satan to give people a break. Behavior like that—offering grace where none is deserved, offering mercy when it would be easier to demand payment—is left up to us. ⊗

Tyler Huckabee is a writer who lives in Nashville, Tenn., with his wife and two dogs.

From *The Witch*

Poetry

PRAYER FOR WEDNESDAY

By Kateri Boucher

Do you remember when
all that time ago last Sunday
you asked to be held
in the tension?
Said yes, I will stay
in the tension,
and the wine and pita
and big old orange moon
were your friends
and witnesses?

Well now it's almost Thursday
and you haven't even looked
for the moon all week,
much less seen it,
and the tension feels lonelier
tonight than you remembered
and half the power's out
and the mice have found the rice
and left a little trail
down to the basement.

But even now I suppose
it isn't too late to crack
a smile at the whole damn mess,
light a candle in the kitchen,
sweep up the rice, remember
that you asked to be held
because you already are,
and anyway it's just
three more days now
til next Sunday.

Kateri Boucher, a Master of Divinity student, works at St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Detroit.

Illustration by Blane Asrat

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WHAT CHANGE WOULD YOU MAKE?

Scripture passages are from the Revised Common Lectionary, Cycle B

By Raj Nadella

Living the Word
February

The central character in Octavia Butler's short story "The Book of Martha" lives at a time of heightened human oppression and environmental crisis. Martha encounters God, who invites her to help remedy the situation, to make sure "that people treat one another better and treat their environment more sensibly." Martha's fear leads her to believe that such an encounter with God was a dream, more likely a nightmare. She insists that it is impossible for her to affect change and asks God to fix things. God replies, "What change would you want to make if you could make only one? Think of one important change." Perhaps this is a question for all of us.

Martha's encounter with God turns into something beautiful and allows her to see new possibilities to change the world. Her eventual move toward facilitating the kind of world she envisioned is made possible by her belief in her own agency—her ability to generate novel ideas and take measurable steps to realize them.

Too often justice is described in terms that are broad and abstract. The realization of justice requires concrete steps. Sometimes we despair when we fail to accomplish substantive change, despite our sacrifices and work. This is part of the human condition. But we are also called to actively hope and then take the steps that are ours to take. An alternative reality is possible when we allow ourselves to be transformed by God's presence working in earlier models of liberation. We are invited to think creatively together about what is possible and pursue it passionately.

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

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JESUS WAS BAPTIZED INTO A MOVEMENT OF NATIONAL REPENTANCE.

FEBRUARY 4

SHE WAS 'DEACONING'

ISAIAH 40:21-31; PSALM 147:1-11, 20; 1 CORINTHIANS 9:16-23; MARK 1:29-39

The book and movie *Hidden Figures* tell the story of three African American women—Mary Jackson, Katherine Johnson, and Dorothy Vaughan—who made significant contributions to NASA during the space race. They were pioneers in their fields but were largely unknown until recently.

In Mark 1, the woman identified as Simon's mother-in-law plays a key role in the story. Mark suggests that she "waited on" everyone after Jesus healed her. The Greek verb *diakoneō*, often translated as "waited on," also means "to serve." New Testament scholar Brendan Byrne notes that this verb has deeper meaning in Mark and foreshadows Jesus' own service. It's also used to describe the "ministering" actions of the women who faithfully followed Jesus at the end when others abandoned him. By the time Mark's gospel was written, the nascent community of Jesus' followers was already establishing the office of "deacons" (derived from the verb *diakoneō*). The text does not offer sufficient evidence to determine if Simon's mother-in-law was serving in that office, but Mark's use of such an infrequent verb to describe her work is significant. Furthermore, Mark uses the imperfect tense of the verb ("she kept serving them") to suggest that she was continuously involved in the ministry.

All this raises the question: Why are male disciples named but not female disciples? By identifying this woman solely through her relationship with her son-in-law, Mark elevates Peter but keeps her largely hidden. Other women remained faithful to Jesus despite the risks. Most were not named. The church not only has an obligation but a need to recover these suppressed traditions so that we can learn these women's contributions and be transformed by their stories.

Illustration by Lauren Wright Pittman

FEBRUARY 11

WHEN WE CHANGE

2 KINGS 2:1-12; PSALM 50:1-6;
2 CORINTHIANS 4:3-6; MARK 9:2-9

How often do we go up a mountain and suddenly see strange sights? Jesus being transfigured right before the disciples' eyes must have been shocking. Equally shocking was the arrival of Elijah (who has been "taken up" in 2 Kings 2) and Moses. Mountains are places of communication directly with God, but here Mark describes the appearance of two central characters from the past. Elijah and Moses offered a new model of leadership in the Hebrew tradition by standing up to the powers of their time.

The Greek word *metamorphoō* refers to change in physical form but also connotes spiritual transformation. The disciples had clear ideas about what Jesus should do in his ministry and how he should deploy his power, and Jesus had just chided them for their misplaced priorities. By having Jesus appear alongside Elijah and Moses, Mark offers a flashback to the two prophets and their ministry of challenging the powers of their time on behalf of oppressed people. The "voice" coming from the cloud presents Jesus as someone who continues that legacy and invites the disciples to follow his lead. It was a moment of Christological clarity for the disciples. The transfiguration story focuses on Jesus, but it also challenges the disciples to be transformed. Their vision of the world needs to change through their encounter with Elijah and Moses and the memory of prophets who willingly paid a great price to carry out God's work, even as others accommodated to the powers. By extension, Mark reminds us of the models we are to follow so we can envision a more prophetic engagement with empires in our own time.

FEBRUARY 18

GOOD NEWS FOR WHOM?

GENESIS 9:8-17; PSALM 25:1-10;
1 PETER 3:18-22; MARK 1:9-15

Mark's story of Jesus' baptism depicts a dramatic and seemingly scary scene. Unlike other synoptic gospel writers, Mark employs the verb *schizo* rather than *anoigo* to describe the heavens splitting. While *anoigo* simply means "to open," *schizo* indicates that the split was pronounced and even violent. I have watched several movies imagining the baptism scene, but rarely are they depicted with the force of Mark's original. Why does Mark employ such a wrenching image?

It was no ordinary time. There was rampant economic and political oppression. Herod Antipas was about to execute John the Baptist for challenging those oppressive structures. Jesus was baptized into this context, into a movement of national repentance initiated by John. When Jesus saw the heavens tear apart, he also saw the existing world order rip open—and the possibility of a new one. The image of the heavens tearing open offers the promise of a grand divine intervention and assures the arrival of a new world that would be completely different in character from Rome. This vision and heavenly voice prompted Jesus to inaugurate the reign of God. Jesus' announcement conveys a sense of immediacy but also highlights the need for swift action by all. The new reign is of divine origin but depends on humans to realize it. Jesus extends an invitation to realize the reign of God not to the most powerful people but to ordinary Galileans who were victims of the empire. To them, his message was good news. He invites them to dream of the possibility of an alternate realm and to help facilitate it.

* * *

THE TRANSFIGURATION STORY CHALLENGES THE DISCIPLES TO BE TRANSFORMED.

They are active participants in bringing this good news alive.

FEBRUARY 25

LAMENT AND HOPE

GENESIS 17:1-7, 15-16; PSALM 22:23-31;
ROMANS 4:13-25; MARK 8:31-38

The 2006 film *The Pursuit of Happyness* celebrates human resilience. Main character Chris Gardner, an unhoused salesperson, and his son, Christopher Jr., turn their difficulties into determination to actively imagine and pursue an alternate reality. Given the odds that were against them, it seemed incredible that they kept hoping for and pursuing a better future. Hope was their only way out. None of the barriers managed to undermine it.

How do we hold the tension of impossible odds and hope in God? Psalm 22 moves from crushing anguish about a current situation (verse 20: "Deliver me from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dogs") to an assurance and celebration of hope. The psalmist articulates a tension between doubt and trust but also sees them as existing simultaneously. Naming the depths of suffering does not undermine the possibility of hope for divine intervention—it may even engender it.

Commenting on how assurance and doubt alternate in human life, Old Testament scholar Kathleen A. Farmer writes that in Psalms, "the flow of human life and faith is seen to be more like an ocean wave than like a river current." That is especially true of Psalm 22. It begins with the suggestion that God has forsaken God's people but quickly turns to praise. God does not neglect the cries of the poor and ensures that they are fed and satisfied. The description of God as a king who has a bias for the poor is especially refreshing. The psalmist anticipates the possibility of change and exercises agency to realize it. Hope or assurance in divine deliverance might not always be the first response of oppressed individuals and communities, but failing to act in hope for a better reality is not an option for people of faith.

"Living the Word" continues on the next page with reflections for March.

'IT IS MIDNIGHT IN THE SOCIAL ORDER'

Scripture passages are from the Revised Common Lectionary, Cycle B

By Raj Nadella

Living the Word
March

Rarely do we see powerful people advocate for the benefit of others outside their "own" political or economic group. There is a tendency on the part of the elite to leverage their privilege for their own benefit while disguising it as public good, as the concept of "elite capture" has exposed. And the state is often complicit in reinforcing policies and practices that concentrate resources into the hands of those who already have enough. In a 1962 sermon titled "A Knock at Midnight" (see Luke 11:5-6), Martin Luther King Jr. diagnosed the state of the nation and church saying, "It is midnight in the social order." He urged the church to respond to the oppressed who "knock on the door," even when it's inconvenient. "How often has the church left [people] disappointed at midnight, while it slept quietly in a chamber of pious irrelevancy," preached King.

Despite decreasing numbers, the U.S. church wields enormous political and economic power. This month's readings showcase people—the powerful and the not so powerful—who exercise their agency for the good of those who seemingly have little to offer in return. The texts highlight the church's moral and theological imperative to employ its power to open the door to the ones who desperately knock. Will the church that gathers in the name of Jesus ignore the state's complicity in oppressive structures or will it act as the "conscience of the state," as Dr. King urged? Does the church privilege its own comfort or does it attend to the vulnerable, even at the risk of its own interests? King concluded, "the greatest challenge facing the church today is to keep the bread fresh and remain a Friend to [humanity] at midnight."

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

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ACCORDING TO SOCIAL MEDIA, MEN THINK ABOUT THE ROMAN EMPIRE ALL THE TIME.

MARCH 3

GOD LEVERAGES PRIVILEGE

EXODUS 20:1-17; PSALM 19; 1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-25; JOHN 2:13-22

Many of us watch intently as debates continue to play out over the issue of displaying the Ten Commandments in U.S. courtrooms, public schools, and other government buildings. The Ten Commandments, given in the context of divine covenant with a specific people, begin by emphasizing human loyalty to God, the dominant partner in the treaty (Exodus 20:1-2). They place greater emphasis on human well-being and articulate a strong commitment to vulnerable individuals (verses 8-17). Most of the commandments are based on negative formulations; for example, people should refrain from violent behaviors against the vulnerable. As Old Testament scholar Terence E. Fretheim notes, their main goal is "to protect [the human community] from behaviors that have the potential of destroying it." The commandments teach people to honor our human rights in gratitude for God having delivered us from bondage (verse 1). Loyalty to God is expressed in how we treat the vulnerable. God leverages divine privilege to protect the defenseless.

Georgia, Indiana, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and South Dakota are among the states with laws allowing the displays of the Ten Commandments on public property. Strangely, these are also places that most victimize the people the Decalogue seeks to protect. Four of those states are in the top 10 for implementing the death penalty. Prominent displays on public buildings not only weaken First Amendment freedoms, but too often they provide a veneer of religiosity over courts that practice retribution not mercy, deny justice to the defenseless, and rob dignity from those for whom the Ten Commandments advocate.

MARCH 10

LIVING DIFFERENTLY

NUMBERS 21:4-9; PSALM 107:1-3, 17-22; EPHESIANS 2:1-10; JOHN 3:14-21

Football quarterback Tim Tebow made headlines in 2009 when he wrote John 3:16 in his eye black during a cham-

Illustration by Morgan Hyatt

pionship game. That verse, as well as the preceding one, explicitly promises eternal life to believers. Many Christians interpret Jesus' mention of eternal life as an assurance that believers will have instant access to grace and be showered with material riches. In a cultural and religious context where consumerism has made major inroads into Christianity, the idea of a God who, in return for simply "believing," grants eternal life, provides unlimited wealth, and remedies all problems is the definition of a "prosperity gospel."

But "eternal life" in John's gospel is not about material wealth or even about living forever. The Greek word *aionios* in John 3:15-16, often translated as "eternal" or "everlasting," has a range of meanings. It contains the source of the word "eon" and, in John's gospel, refers to a quality of time and to an era that is unlike the current age. When coupled with the word *zoe* ("life"), John invokes an era not defined by the ethos of the current era. Coming on the heels of Jesus' suggestion that his exaltation lies in being lifted up on the cross of state execution for the salvation of others, this "eternal life" invites followers to embrace a new way of being in the world. We empty ourselves for others and live on by choosing to live differently, following the practices of the One over whom death holds no power.

MARCH 17

A SEED'S SACRIFICE

JEREMIAH 31:31-34; PSALM 119:9-16; HEBREWS 5:5-10; JOHN 12:20-33

In John 12, Jesus says that the hour of his death on the cross is his glorification (verse 23). He does not glorify death but suggests that his act of putting himself on the line for others is his finest hour. The grain of wheat (verse 24) shares a similar path. Jesus mentions no sower, only the kernel. The verb *pipto* ("falls") in active voice implies that the grain exercises its agency in falling to the ground. Does the grain privilege its self-interest and preserve itself, as might be the natural inclination, or does it fall to the ground and die? The grain of wheat *chooses* the latter, which requires courage and imagination. Sacrificing itself for others goes against the instinct of self-preservation. Paradoxically, by falling to the ground and dying, it extends its presence.

The Seed Underground: A Growing Revolution, Janisse Ray's prophetic book about food security, describes the ways many people across the U.S. are preserving seeds for generations to come. They are planting those seeds in order to harvest more and rebuild seed reserves. At a time when multinational companies monopolize the grain business, the idea of a seed choosing its destiny raises questions about who makes decisions about food production and toward what end? When seeds and oppressed people exercise their agency, they benefit families, the community, and the earth. All are interconnected and share a common destiny.

MARCH 24

PARADOX OF POWER

ISAIAH 50:4-9; PSALM 31:9-16; PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11; MARK 11:1-11

According to a recent social media craze, men think about the Roman Empire all the time. Maybe late-stage empires share some similarities. Only 20 years before Paul wrote his letter during house arrest in Rome to the nascent church in Philippi, the region was the site of the famous Battle of Philippi between the officers of the old imperial Republic and the faction that assassinated Julius Caesar. They were brutally violent in their quest for power. Paul's letter models a radically different type of power—one that sets aside divine privilege to become one with the powerless (Philippians 2:6-8). The Greek word *kenosis* ("emptied") in verse 7 describes Christ setting aside divine status to be in solidarity with the oppressed. He refused to mimic the empire's violence. From Paul's perspective, that story is at the core of Christian identity.

There is something paradoxical in Paul's narration. It was precisely in giving up status that Christ gained more power. Mark's description of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem similarly highlights how Jesus gained power not by aligning with the empire but by becoming one with those who were victimized by it. Power is not the problem. How one gets it and to what end one uses it can be very problematic. That's something for the U.S. church to ponder.

* * *

MARY TURNED PAIN INTO RESILIENCE, FEAR INTO DEFIANCE, AND DESPAIR INTO HOPE.

MARCH 31

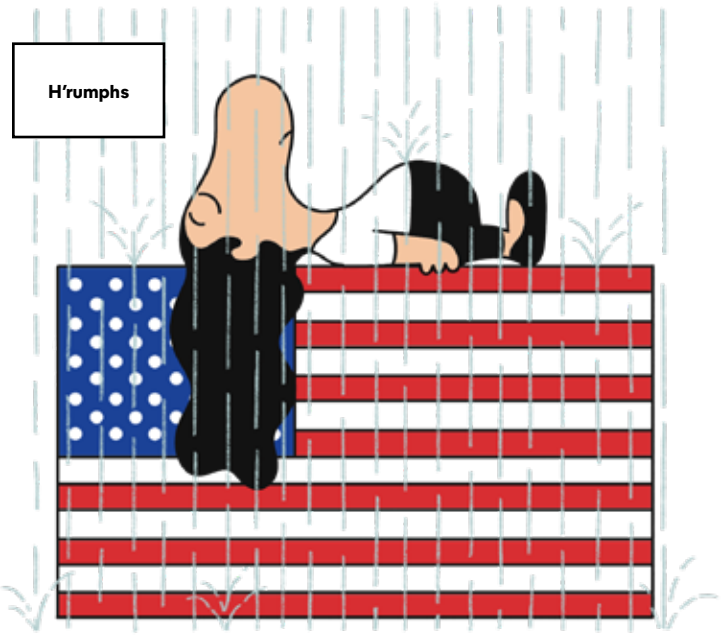
MARY'S TURNAROUND

ISAIAH 25:6-9; PSALM 118:1-2, 14-24; ACTS 10:34-43; JOHN 20:1-18

Everyone loves a great turnaround story. Comebacks, such as track and field star Sha'Carri Richardson overcoming a series of major setbacks to win the world title in the 100-meter race last summer, speak to human resilience. Mary Magdalene has a remarkable comeback in John's post-resurrection stories. Traumatized by the violence of the empire, she went to the tomb and was shaken by the seeming disappearance of Jesus' body. Unlike Peter and John who conveniently went home believing that Jesus had not risen from the dead, Mary chose the inconvenient path of remaining in risky spaces.

When Mary was first asked why she was weeping, she turned and saw Jesus but did not recognize him. After an exchange with Jesus, she turned a second time. This time she did recognize him. The Greek verb *strepho* means to "change direction, transition, turn around." Mary turned around twice before she recognized Jesus. She had to do a double take—literally and figuratively—to fully comprehend the significance of their encounter. For someone who had endured major setbacks and almost given up hope, it was nearly impossible to believe that Jesus rose again. Mary was aware of the forces of death but had a deep-seated assurance about life. Mary's ability to see the risen Jesus was initially impaired by the trauma of imperial violence. Yet she turned her pain into resilience, fear into defiance, and despair into hope. It was a remarkable turnaround moment, one which allowed her to see the seemingly impossible—that Jesus defeated the forces of death. Alleluia!

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



THE FIVE STAGES OF GRIEF WHEN YOU AREN'T SELECTED FOR A JAN. 6 JURY

By Beth Cooper-Chrismon

You thought you were going to be selected for the trial of some of the fascists who staged an insurrection at the nation's Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021. You went through jury selection and everything! But for some reason (maybe your use of the word "fascists"), they turned you down. What's next?

Here's what to expect when you're expecting Jan. 6-jury-related grief:

1. Denial
C'mon. There's no way. Why wouldn't they want me? I am a morally upright and very impressive person who has all the right opinions and does all the right things. I am a good Christian who believes that God's law is what matters most, and I will do the right and just thing even when it is against human law. I am the most law-abiding citizen of the United States re: God's law. Which is totally relevant to what the judge is looking for. Totally.

2. Anger
Burn it all down. Overthrow the system. Storm the Capitol. Not like that, though! I'm different!

* * *

SURELY GOD WOULD APPROVE THIS PETTY, SADISTIC, AND HIGHLY ILLEGAL VENGEANCE AGAINST PEOPLE I DISLIKE.

3. Bargaining
Okay, but ... what if I had lied about my beliefs to make it onto the jury? What if I decided not to check the boxes that indicated my various biases? What if I had been some kind of sneaky Agent of Justice making sure those guys went to jail? Even though I don't believe in prisons, and even though the judgment that actually matters is God's judgment? Surely God would approve this petty, sadistic, and highly illegal vengeance against people I dislike, as a treat?

4. Depression
"I say to God my Rock, 'Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?' My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, 'Get it together, this really isn't that big of a deal."—Psalm 42:9-10 (New American Angst Version)

5. Acceptance
You know what? It's fine that I'm not on that jury. Nothing else about this situation is fine—Jan. 6, the rise of fascism in America, my inability to storm the Capitol in a good way, you know, for justice. But it's fine that I'm not on that jury. Those guys will get judged when and how it matters most. And in the meantime, I'll keep being a pinnacle of good Christian morality, with no petty or vengeful tendencies whatsoever.

Beth Cooper-Chrismon is director of individual giving at Sojourners.

Illustration by Melanie Lambrick

TOP 3 BENEFITS OF PLANNED GIVING

Are you making estate plans or thinking about your legacy? Here are three reasons why planned giving could be beneficial for you and your family.

1. You leave a legacy

Make a long-lasting impact and support causes that are dear to you. When you include Sojourners in your planned giving, you help ensure that our work for justice and peace will continue.

2. You may give your family tax savings

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