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COMMUNITAS is a term anthropologist Victor Turner uses to describe the temporary but intense community that develops among pilgrims for the duration of the journey (remember the pilgrims of the Canterbury Tales). For us in the church, it might describe the community we develop with the successive churches we serve, or the community of cohorts of the College of Pastoral Leaders, gathering to study together for a brief period of years.

Turner also employs the concept of liminality to describe that pilgrim experience of leaving the domain of the familiar to travel and to experience new potentialities and powers that lie afield. We leave home, travel light, expose ourselves both to the unknowns in the world of the horizon and the unknowns within our own souls, now freed to be heard in the silence of the road. Again, the cohorts of the College of Pastoral Leaders leave the parish momentarily to hear the experiences of colleagues and to contemplate the ministries seeking to emerge from their own souls. So we are pilgrims in the College, our experience shaped by communitas and liminalities.
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Welcome to your time and your place. Think about it, just in these moments that you are reading this first page of *Communitas*, before you go on to the following pages which delve deeper into a fascinating examination of both time and place. For you—just now—what time is it? And where are you? Whatever your answer to these two questions, just know this: your time and your place are gifts from God.

Garrison Keillor said somewhere that God gives us both the gifts of time and space. God gives us time, so that everything doesn’t happen at once. And God gives us space, so that everything doesn’t happen to you!

But both of them—time and place (or space)—are definite gifts of God.

Marva Dawn challenges us with how Sabbath helps us remember the God-giftedness of time. If you’ve grown up thinking that Sabbath is a sort of punishment (as a kid, I, for example, was not allowed to go any further than my back yard on the Sabbath), you will love the way Dr. Dawn enlarges and celebrates a faithful notion of Sabbath and its relationship to the larger issue of keeping time.

Similarly, Kristin Saldine will enlarge and lift up a faithful notion of place. She will move you past the categories of social location, which we sometimes confuse with place, to a consideration of true place—the sort of place which, perhaps with difficulty, can be pinpointed on a topographical map of the country (or the city in which you live). If we are believers in the Incarnation, how might a deeper understanding of place help us understand ourselves and our ministry?

Not to be missed are the fabulous essays and reflections from various representatives of our CPL cohorts. Whether you are standing at the Wailing Wall with Chris Bistline or are watching Hunt Priest’s mother mow her lawn, you will ultimately find

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I am one of the most egregious sinners I know. Many a month goes by with not a single day of rest. I know I am not alone in this frenzied, sinful lifestyle. In all our goodness, in all our work and busyness, we all seem to forget that to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy was not a suggestion or hint for better living. It was a commandment, right up there with not killing. It is something that occurs at a particular time in all places.

“Time and Place” is our theme this year. Years ago I worked at Loma Linda University Medical Center. This was the flagship hospital for the Seventh-Day Adventist Healthcare System. All my chaplain peers and most of the people who lived in Loma Linda were Seventh-Day Adventist and lived strictly by Sabbath time. I watched my peers prepare meals for Sabbath on Friday afternoons and work with their children to organize Sabbath prayers and readings. Each work week ended with a festive feeling of anticipation, a bit like Christmas Eve. They asked me how I prepared for Sunday Sabbath. They wanted to know how my family celebrated each Saturday night. They wondered how strict I was regarding the use of television or other sources of entertainment on the Sabbath. I was embarrassed to tell them that I spent the weekends mowing the grass, washing the dog, paying bills, driving an hour to church followed by lunch at a local restaurant. I worked, worked, worked, then, I called on others to work for me.

It was from these people that I learned the rich rhythm of Sabbath time. It was from these friends that I learned how important it was to attend to my places … my home, my work, my yard … so that I could participate in the gift of Sabbath rest.

I learned from my friends, but I do not live in a sectarian community that supports Sabbath rhythms, so I need constant reminders of how God works in time and how God is present in all places.

May this collection of writings be a reminder to you of the Sabbath, wherever you are.

Janet Maykus
Principal, The College of Pastoral Leaders
Within the College of Pastoral Leaders Annual Conference theme of “Time and Place,” I would like to focus on God’s great gift of Sabbath Time. I will not spend precious space in this article entering into the debate of whether God’s commandment to “Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy” requires a Saturday Sabbath. Let it suffice to say that, because Jesus Christ rose on Easter Sunday and the Holy Spirit was given on Pentecost Sunday, I am convinced that these central elements of Christian faith can be combined with the commandment’s emphasis on “ceasing” (the basic meaning of the biblical word Shabbat) to celebrate a Sunday Sabbath.

It seems to me that the preeminent core of the meaning of the seventh day—to focus life entirely on God—can be fulfilled on any day of the week. This is especially crucial for working clergy, who usually have too many responsibilities on both Saturday and Sunday and therefore need to find another day to pull away and focus on God. The key is to set aside a day (preferably all twenty-four hours of one) that can be kept as one’s holy day every seven days in the constant rhythm of six days of work and one without work (Exodus 31:15) that leads to genuine, penetrating rest, and spiritual renewal.

THE SABBATH FREEDOM OF TIME

Ponder the congregational pressures, personal expectations, calendar requirements, and societal misconceptions that keep you as a minister away from truly resting in God’s grace. Then we realize what an enormous gift it is that God commanded us to observe a Sabbath Day. For our well-being, God called us to keep such a holy rhythm that every seven days we could completely escape the tensions and necessities that take such a toll on our selves!

An internationally renowned theologian, author, and educator, Dr. Marva J. Dawn serves as teaching fellow in Spiritual Theology at Regent College in Vancouver, BC, Canada. A scholar with four masters degrees, and a PhD in Christian Ethics and the Scriptures from the University of Notre Dame, she is also a popular preacher and speaker and is the author of more than a dozen books.
Since the two major causes of death in the U.S. are heart attacks and strokes, and both are precipitated by stress, we are fools not to take seriously God’s perfect gift of that holy rhythm. Plenty of research studies show that we actually can get more work done if we refrain from work and worrying about it one day out of seven.

I like to theorize that, after the intense strain of Holy Week and the enormous burden and pain of taking away all human sin in suffering on the cross, Jesus kept the Sabbath by crying, “It is finished!” before sundown on Friday and then remaining in the tomb until Sunday morning. The Creator Christ subjected Himself throughout His life and death to His own law for the repair and renewal of human vitality.

It seems that God intended the practice of Sabbath keeping to give us an entirely new sense of time!

The first creation account is a liturgy composed around the recurrent refrains, “God said,” “it was so,” “it was good,” and “the evening and the morning, the [first] day.” After human beings were created, their first day was the Sabbath—and then out of the Joy of that rest they began their labors of gardening. What a difference it makes in our lives if—instead of working until we are exhausted and have to stop—we begin with rest and do our work out of that repose. I know that it has changed my life, and I pray that all clergy could enjoy such a holy rhythm.

How can pastors keep the Sabbath? They probably have to choose another day in the midweek, a whole day when they can set all pastoral work aside to enjoy these Sabbath gifts: Resting, Ceasing, Feasting, and Embracing. This article will look briefly at each in turn (and more can be found in my two books, Keeping the Sabbath Wholly and The Sense of the Call, both from Eerdmans).

**SABBATH RESTING**

The most important kind of resting that we can have on our Sabbath Day is spiritual. Congregations put a wide variety of expectations on their pastors and measure them by their performances, but Sabbath is a day instead to rest in grace. It provides a special time to bask in God’s love and, in turn, to grow in love for God.

We can be unshackled from the urgencies and exigencies of daily life and liberated for stillness and harmony and peaceful wholeness.

What activities (or lack thereof) on Sabbath could bring you this grace best? What teaches you thoroughly that you are unremittingly loved by God in spite of yourself?

Moreover, what frees us from the things that overwhelm us emotionally? Perhaps we need God’s remedy for Elijah—enabling us to laugh, sleep, eat, and hear the Spirit’s “small whisper” (I Kings 19:1-12) as forms for the emotional rest we crave.

Another profound deprivation typically is for intellectual rest. Most clergy spend inordinate amounts of time solving problems, thinking rationally about congregation-al business, analyzing Scripture, writing sermons. Sabbath grants us instead time away from left-brained work. It is a day to recover a sense of mystery and awe, a day for poetry and fairy tales, art and architecture, concerts, play and plays, and walks in nature.

Of course, Sabbath rest includes the physical, but for pastors that might mean a day to get away from the desk and play basketball. It probably includes the requirement...
for extra sleep. Perhaps it might incorporate a long walk with one’s spouse. Some enjoy mowing the lawn; for others, that is work. We each have to figure out what is work for us and what releases us instead for genuine physical restoration.

Resting socially might mean different things to people of different personalities. I love to have dinner parties on my Sabbath day. Sometimes I hunger for unrestricted time to be with close friends in a non-work atmosphere. After a very busy week, alternatively, I need to be quiet without any company or only with my husband. Resting socially also is important for strengthening my trust in God and God’s people.

Financial rest is an easy dimension of Sabbath to observe. We do not go shopping on our holy day. My husband and I even rearranged our honeymoon so that we wouldn’t have to buy gasoline on Sunday during our trip. We have found that it is a relief not to mess with money matters on the Sabbath, but it is an immense pleasure on that day to give gifts to the poor and needy through various relief organizations.

I encourage each pastor to ponder what kind of rest she or he longs for the most and why. Contemplate what aids to rest might be the most helpful. Maybe we need a book to put us to sleep; sometimes we might require a previously scheduled time for tennis with a friend. Taking the phone off the hook or going away from home for a day might be necessary until congregants have learned that we are not to be bothered on our Sabbath days—unless it is a life-and-death matter. It is interesting, however, how willing church members are to preserve the pastor’s Sabbath when we are trying intensively to teach them to take Sabbath seriously in their own lives.

There are multiple means to enable the congregation to help us keep the Sabbath. We can ask the church council, the vestry, the elders, the administrative assistants, or any other leaders to protect our holy day. We can enlist others to take the business for us as we greet people after worship if we have chosen to celebrate Sabbath on Sundays. If we prefer another day, we can ask the whole congregation to help us keep it inviolate, and, thereby, we offer them the model that they need to establish their own Sabbath Day.

Many years ago, I wrote this hymn to summarize my Sabbath goals:

Come away from rush and hurry  
to the stillness of God’s peace;
From our vain ambition’s worry,  
come to God to find release.
Come away from noise and clamor,  
Life’s demands and frenzied pace;
Come to join the people gathered  
here to seek and find God’s face.

In the pastures of God’s goodness  
we lie down to rest our soul.
From the waters of His mercy  
we drink deeply, are made whole.
At the table of His presence  
all His saints are richly fed.

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TIME AND PLACE

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With the oil of His anointing
into service we are led.

Come, then, children, with your burdens—
life’s confusions, fears, and pain.
Leave them at the cross of Jesus;
take instead His kingdom’s reign.
Bring your thirsts, for He will quench them—
He alone will satisfy.
All our longings find attainment
when to self we gladly die.

SABBATH CEASING

When I first began practicing Sabbath keeping more than twenty-five years ago, I discovered that I couldn’t truly rest until I first did what the Hebrew word *shabbat* means—to cease, to stop. In a technological society characterized by overstimulation, chaos, intense competition, anxiety, overwork, and meaninglessness, our culture yearns for genuine Sabbath. We can tell this by frequent articles in journals on slowing down, finding our natural rhythm, and giving up on speed.

The first kind of ceasing that we must do is to stop work. Since we live in an atmosphere of solving problems immediately with the right fix, we are plagued with an incessant demand to work. It will necessitate a deliberate choice on our part to decide that we definitely want to follow God’s ordering for our lives. But the rewards of such a decision will be bountiful.

Once we decide not to work one day a week, we also will want to give up the pressure to accomplish. Since our culture determines our worth according to our achievements, we will look to the overflowing grace and perfect love of God to know our value instead.

Other aspects of ceasing in order to know the Joy of Sabbath keeping include eliminating for a day our anxiety, worry, or tension about work (and then our freedom from them spreads out into the rest of the week!). We can cease our striving to be God and give up our need to exercise power, control, authority, or coercion. As we do, we will discover the sublime bliss of seeing how God provides for all our needs!

You might have particular aspects of personality that continually challenge you and call you to discover means to keep those traits in check. Possibly it might be arduous for some of us to resist consumerism or possessiveness. That is one of the most important reasons for Sabbath keeping in our age. Perhaps we have become too enculturated and easily get caught up in the gimmicks and glitz that surround us. Sabbath keeping thus provides us a deliberate way to be very conscious of how the Christian community provides an alternative society — choosing to live in the Kingdom of God and resisting the principalities and powers of this age.

To avoid the nihilism and frenzy, the despair and incoherence of this postmodern society, it is good if clergy can work together with other pastors to discover what they need most to cease and what can help them learn to stop.
Our culture does not know how to fast, but Christians know the importance of, and practices for, repentance. We have Lent to meditate on Christ’s sufferings so that we do not take the victory of Easter for granted; we claim Advent’s call to prepare so that the meaning of Christmas is not swallowed by tinsel.

In the same way, we live more simply the rest of the week so that we can thoroughly celebrate the feasting of the Sabbath day. The most important feasting occurs as we make use of various instruments for spiritual nurturing. Especially worship sets us apart from the surrounding culture as a people who rest in the fullness of the Triune God’s grace. Worship is eschatological, a foretaste of the feast to come. Worship enables us to feast on, in, and with the presence of God and God’s truth, beauty, and goodness.

Those who keep the Sabbath on another day besides Sunday face the challenge of finding some sort of worship in which to participate. Long ago, the clergy members of my course on the Sabbath decided that they would all take their holy days on Friday so that they could meet together and celebrate festive meals and worship with their spouses and each other.

One of the highlights of the Sabbath for the Jews is feasting physically. Their traditions include wonderful tales about celebrations and customs for special foods, new clothes, spiralled candles, and so forth. Play is a prominent part of the feasting and for that our children can teach us.

Feasting auditorily is a compelling part of worship and the rest of our Sabbath days. In worship we rejoice in a diversity of music, in contemplative silence, in the spoken Word of God. During the day we eliminate distracting sounds like constant cell phone rings and choose instead those sounds that bring us festivity, like conversing with loved ones, our favorite music, reading aloud with our spouse, or attending symphony concerts.

We can also commemorate our Sabbath days with visual feasts, like praying with an icon, walking in nature, lingering in art museums, focusing on the beauty of books, films, flowers, or seasonal decorations. Choose a devotional place in your own home that you can fill with beauty through sculptures, paintings, candles, symbols, or other accoutrements.

Above all, the Sabbath day imbues in us the feast of a new sense of time. We realize that God does not call us to work in order to receive the reward of rest, but that God grants us rest first. Then out of the Joy of that rest and celebration, we do our work. That enables us to revise our week and deepen our experience of grace. Our Sabbath day becomes the focus; everything in life flows from its gifts.

To keep the Sabbath engages us in the spirituality of the “Alternative Community.” When we cease all our entanglements with what in the culture is inimical to our faith, the seventh day becomes healing for our vision, spirit, and calling. We choose deliberately to get off the culture’s merry-go-round, to deny the tyranny of the urgent, and, instead, to embrace the values of God’s Kingdom.
We elect (by grace) to follow the way of Jesus, to be committed intentionally to God’s purposes in the world. We ache to be formed by the Trinity’s metanarrative rather than by the violent and oppressive accounts of a power-wielding culture. We hunger to pray and praise, to confess and receive forgiveness, to intercede for others even as we petition for ourselves. Above all, we embrace God’s grace poured out for us and respond with love and adoration. By observing Sabbath, thereby, we unlock our true selves and discover genuine Shalom with our self, our neighbor, the congregation we serve, and God!
You and Marva Dawn spoke at the annual conference about time and place. In the religious world we often talk of time, but it seems we forget place unless it is in regards to environmental ethics or “spiritual” places. Yet we are people who believe in an incarnate God, so I wonder where you first go when you think of place in theological terms?

I start with the absence of place. If you look at the Apostle’s Creed, it’s all about time in terms of Jesus. Jesus was born, he suffered and was crucified, he died, he was buried, resurrected. But between the birthing and the dying, all this activity happened in places. We know from the Gospels that Jesus had a real ministry that occurred in particular places. Not just the epic places like when he ascended the mountain, but in little places: villages, streets, outside the city gates. These are vernacular places; places where people worked and lived; places where people raised their families and encountered all of life.

Realizing this is what caught my attention when thinking of place theologically. Lots of work has been done on sacred landscape … the wilderness, the temple mount, Calvary … but we have not given much meaning or credence to everyday landscapes; the vernacular landscapes of daily living.

Are you saying that in your understanding of place, the vernacular is sacred?

In my theological tradition, we understand that God is at work in all places. So I’m wary of the sacred landscape movement. All of us know places that we consider more sacred than others … “thin places,” as they are called in Celtic spirituality, where it might seem easier to know the divine. I don’t deny that. But I am disturbed by the bifurcation of sacred and vernacular because many of us consider sacred places sacred because they are far away from us. There is an element of the unattainable, the exotic. But if you’ve ever lived near a place that by many is considered a sacred landscape, you learn that life there is just as ordinary and as hard as in other places.

What I mean by vernacular stems from my idea of a complete understanding of

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context. Many of us today are interested in context, but when you ask people about their context they usually talk about their social location. For instance, when people are asked to describe their ministry settings they often say something like, “middle class suburban” or “city center” or “urban intergenerational.” Those phrases may sound as if they are talking about context, but they are describing their social locations. I contend that there is no context without geographical place. Therefore I encourage people to attend to their geographical place because it is in place that we find the fullest description of context.

Robert Sack is a favorite author of mine. He argues there are three realms of context: the realm of meaning, the realm of social location, and the realm of nature. He is not talking about nature in the sense of wild things. He’s talking about anything that makes up our three-dimensional world. We usually talk in terms of meaning and social location, for instance “conservative” or “middle class,” but we do not have a complete context until we include the actual three-dimensional location.

So you mean we need to say something like conservative middle class in a downtown high-rise in a mountainous city subject to hurricanes?

We are very practiced in describing the social locations of our places of ministry, but we lack the words to talk about place. It seems obvious when we talk like this, but it is more difficult for people to talk about place than it is for them to talk about social location.

When I talk about place or landscape theory I often ask people to describe where they grew up, and I ask them just to use words that describe the physical location of that place. “I grew up by a river” or “I was raised near mountains” or “I lived on a great plain.” I often put a map of North America on the wall that is a satellite image from space. There is only terrain, no towns, no borders, etc. Participants are only allowed to use the kinds of descriptors they might have learned in natural geography. People in the room must guess where each other comes from by the descriptors of each person’s “place.” What’s great about this exercise is everyone soon realizes they came from a “place.” Physical location mattered. It is different from social location because it is universal.

Recently at my son’s “science night,” a representative from the Lower Colorado River Authority had a rainwater runoff display. He told me a parent asked why in the world he would bring something like this to an elementary school. He pointed out that the kids do live over a very big aquifer. The parent replied, “Well, why would that matter to kids?”

EXACTLY! That’s perfect. It is hard for people to understand that place matters because it is place. We want to describe it in social, human terms, which are utilitarian. We often describe nature, the physical, in one of two ways: that which is spiritual or as something to manipulate or shape. We know we shape place. This is obvious, for instance, every time we mow our yard, work in the garden, repave the road. But we forget that place is shaping us. We don’t have a human existence outside of place that is shaping us. So it’s not just utilitarian, place is formative. I’m trying to find a way for people to understand how place shapes them.
Do you think we have a hard time defining place in terms that are not utilitarian because of some sort of chauvinistic desire to be in charge?

One of the nice things about thinking of place is that we realize we do not dominate as much as we think we do. We live in a blended world, we’re world travelers; we have seen ourselves from space. That photograph of the little blue marble changed us forever. Yet as global as we are, there is still a human desire for the local. We spend our whole lives on the Internet, but people still have their favorite coffee shops. People still want a place that is theirs, a place where they hang out. We cannot get away from this desire, and I say we should not try.

A complex factor in an understanding of place is the concept of aesthetics. As long as we think we shape place without place having the ability to shape us, then places we create might remain ugly. Think of all the schools and hospitals you have been in that are ugly and sap you of energy. If we remember how much place shapes us, then I think we would care more about the beauty of our surroundings. I’m talking about something that is accessible to all. Fundamental to all should be the ability to shape space that is beautiful.

Is all of nature beautiful?

Our common ideal of sacred landscape is beautiful. I would say nature is neutral on that. I prefer the term “sublime.” When we see places like Yosemite or the Grand Tetons, those photographs are usually taken on summer or fall days when the day looks so inviting. We allow ourselves to forget that nature kills. There are reasons we shape place. There are reasons we don’t live in wilderness. We need protection in the wilderness.

When something is sublime it must have elements that inspire awe and terror. It cannot have one without the other. One of the amazing things about sacred landscape is that it is fraught with terror. So that’s a long way of saying nature is beautiful, it’s ugly, it is in the eye of the beholder. Just as is our vernacular landscapes of alleyways, yards, and strip malls.

We live our lives in strip malls, hotel rooms, schools, and it is as if we have accepted that they are the way they are when we would really rather be some place else. In other words, we have decided that sacred landscapes are beautiful and our own vernacular landscapes are ugly. My wish is for us to find a way to embrace vernacular landscapes, create them as beautiful, and infuse them with as much meaning and beauty as those mountaintops.

It sounds like you are saying that for us to have a deeper understanding of God’s working in the world, we need to start looking at where we live. We need to look at the nail salon and yogurt shop in the strip mall because if the gospel were written today, Jesus might be getting a pedicure.

Right. I think what I am saying is simple. We cannot fully understand our context until we consider place. And I go one step further, place is the fullest expression of context. If people describe their contexts with no mention of place, it is not a full expression of those contexts. For instance, “My ministry is with the Mexican immigrant population in Austin east of I-35” is different from saying “My ministry is with the Mexican immigrant population in the Rio Grande Valley.” Some aspects of these settings are shared,
some things are not, and place is one of the major factors that helps us understand how some things are unique.

How does that help you understand God?
I think in two different ways. First, if in our ministerial vocations, we work with and speak to people about God, and we don't have the language to talk about how God is working in this particular place, then we are not aware of how God is at work in our lives. I often hear sermons about mountaintop experiences. We tend to want people to draw away to a place where we are certain God lives. Unfortunately this gives impressions that there is nothing worth God's work right here.

The second way is something I learned from Jonathan Edwards. That is, God's grace is beautiful. It is a characteristic of God to be overflowing and bounteous. This abundance inspires me to strive for that kind of grace and beauty in my own life, and in my own ministerial setting.

What does it tell me about God? We talk about God desiring to be in time, that's salvation history, but God desires to be in place. Being in time and place, we cannot have one without the other. I love the Confession of 1967. It is a Presbyterian confession, and it was the first time in a confession that place has an address. It says that Jesus was a Palestinian Jew. He was in Palestine. I'm grateful for that one sentence. It is not just that he was born, died, rose again. He LIVED. He had an address. You could have sent him a letter. He might have moved … but his mom would have forwarded it.

As a preacher and teacher of preachers, are you saying that we have to stop and take an assessment of what we are in the midst of where we are?
Artists, poets, writers will say this is obvious. I am trying to remind people in other disciplines why place is so important. Often in our readings place is just the backdrop for the human drama unfolding. We have to remember that place is not just scenery. Place is a major character in the drama because it shapes and affects the human drama.

Once you recognize place as a character, you will see it everywhere. You will gain a better understanding of your context. You will find more fitting ways to describe who you are, what you are, and where you want to be. In your worship you will use more fitting images to relate the Gospel to those you serve because those examples will be contextually relevant.

When you teach your students to interpret scripture … how does this factor into your teaching or what you hope for them?
Thinking about landscape adds new dimensions to exegesis that we often overlook. For instance students will preach on John the Baptist. They will have done a lot of research on the words, but they will not be able to tell you where the River Jordan is located in comparison to Jerusalem. Is it north, south? Elevation change? And that's just spatial awareness. That's not even worldview. These are pieces of basic information that will open new insights to exegesis.

Sometimes the virtual world makes us think “there is no there, there,” as Gertrude Stein said in her autobiography. But when people talk about working virtually, they usually want to do this because they want to do the work in a different place. It is important to always remember that the choice to be some place rather than another
might be freeing for some but not for others. For instance, we cannot forget the infrastructure that is necessary for someone to have this experience. Someone must boot the server. Someone has to clean the offices where payroll is run.

**So is there an element of justice inherent in paying attention to place?**

Yes. I think so. There is a pharmacy near where I live. It is one of the busiest in Central Texas. University of Texas students, upper middle class central Austin residents, and numerous homeless people who are outpatients at the nearby state mental hospital all conduct business here. While waiting for medicines, I have watched the pharmacists treat each person in line with the same respect and calm courtesy as the next. It does not matter if the client is a homeless person with numerous bags of belongings or a homeowner with a fancy designer bag, each person has all his questions answered and is sold his medicines. Just watching the people, watching the interactions, seeing what they buy makes me realize the place where I live. Now I see all these people in my neighborhood. I see them in the park under the trees, in their yards trimming hedges. I see them riding their bikes on the roads and on the trails. I know my neighbors in our place. We all make it what it is, and we are all where we are because of this particular place, and it is here that I see God working in the world.
For centuries generations of worshipers have heard the words “at all times and in all places” Sunday after Sunday in the first sentence of the preface to the Eucharistic prayer of the Book of Common Prayer: “It is very meet, right, and our bounden duty, that we should at all times and in all places, give thanks unto thee, O Lord, holy Father, almighty, everlasting God.” At all times and in all places were the words Thomas Cranmer found to express in English the terse words of the Latin Mass, semper et ubique, which in more modern English language versions have returned to the terseness of the original Latin: always and everywhere.

The words remind us that our gratitude to God is to be ubiquitous and, for lack of an existing word, let us say “omnitemporal.” Our thanks to God for all the divine blessings are not to be limited in time or space, but by divine intention are meant for every time and for every place, no matter when, no matter where. That gratitude is ideally a part of our state of being, constant, going with us wherever we go 24/7. But here as elsewhere we fall short of God’s intention for us, we miss the mark, we give way to the Bad Hair Day and become the cranky, napless child God does not intend us to be. For this reason we need those special times and special places to remind us that we are to be thankful at all times and in all places.

Time and Place is our theme this year. When we think about time, we do well to remind ourselves of the two different ancient Greek words for time, chronos and kairos, the former being countable time, divided up into units, small and large, flowing incessantly and inexorably and with cyclical markers, and the latter referring to those special times in our lives, times which become milestones when we look back on them, because they were the right time for something significant to happen. While chronos plods along its measured way, quite indifferent to what is happening, kairos only comes when some fullness of chronos has been reached, when some mysterious gestation period is over and newness breaks forth. Although we cannot control, slow down or stop the flow of chronos, we can and do in fact control how we fill it, what we do in it and with it. Over kairos we have no control at all; we cannot bring it about or prevent it. We all have chronos, but kairos has us. Is there a sense in which place also has a similar duality? Chronos-place is perhaps that place which is defined by function: we live in one place, work in another place, play in yet another place, and reflect in quietness in
another place. Kairos-place is perhaps not defined by the function we give it, but rather becomes what it is by what we were given there. Jacob comes to such a kairos-place, that “certain place” he lighted upon in which the vision of the heavenly ladder occurs, is given to, happens to him. It’s the place where he not only sees a divine vision but hears the divine words, “Behold, I am with thee and will keep thee in all places wither thou goest.” It’s the place of Jacob’s profound “Eureka,” his great “Aha”: “Surely, the LORD is in this place and I knew it not.” Kairos-place is not defined by us; we are defined by it. We can and do in fact create all kinds of chronos-places for ourselves and we define them. Kairos-places on the other hand are pure grace and serendipity; they define us.

Whether chronos or kairos, whether places we define or places in which we are defined, we need special times and special places in which our thanks to God is expressed intentionally in community, i.e. we need ecclesia. We need the sacred times of worship in its weekly and yearly cycles. We need the sacred places of worship freeing us from the distractions of functionalized places in our lives.

We need the gathering, the assembly at regular times and in agreed upon places to give us focus, to allow a rediscovery of essentials, to reinforce our identity, to remind us who we are and whose we are. Thank God for the special times and the special places. Because of them we can at all times and in all places, always and everywhere, give thanks to the Holy One who fills every time and every place with love and light and who fills our hearts with thanks and praise.
Discovering the Communion of the Saints: Reflections from the Wailing Wall

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uations and struggles in my family life. I lifted up my church. I lifted up myself. I lifted up the world. I prayed for peace in Jerusalem, as so many asked that we do when they heard we were going to “The Wall.” And as I am in this holy space and presence before the Lord, I feel an arm pressing on my arm to my left. There is no effort to move away to allow more personal space. This unnamed woman and I stand connected in prayer at the wall, hot and sweaty skin to hot and sweaty skin, for what seems to be an eternity. I center again in prayer, thankful to be invited back into that holy space. Then I begin to hear the low moaning of the woman in prayer to my right. It’s a soft moaning, but I am suddenly aware of it. I recognize the depths of that unspoken grief, and tears well up in my own eyes as I continue to pray for my children and the issues that they face.

Every thing, every issue, every concern, every morsel of despair is laid before the Lord at the Wailing Wall. For this instant in time I am aware that we are all this gathered sea of women and children, drawn together in prayer in what used to be a wall of the holy temple of God. Century upon century, the pilgrims still come to be in this place, to be in prayer before the Lord. There is a deep hunger to meet God face to face. The flow of pilgrims is unending and it is ongoing. This flow of people seeking to stand in the presence of the Lord, in this particular holy place, will undoubtedly continue well after I am gone from this earthly life. This eternal gathering of pilgrims is now how I now envision the communion of saints in communion with God: an ever-flowing stream of humanity.

How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts!
My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.

I give thanks to God for all who made this opportunity of pilgrimage available to me and for all who shared in the common journey. Truly this was and continues to be amazing grace.

NOTES


2. Psalm 84:1-2
I have come to know myself as a person deeply connected to place, a person who has occasionally to make pilgrimage to places I have lived before because I came to understand how they formed me. Although I have lived more than twenty-five years away from my old Kentucky home, mostly in the big city of Atlanta, and for the last eighteen months in Seattle, my trips “home” always include a long solitary walk around the yard of the house I moved into when I was eight months old, and where my mother continues to live.

I walk on top of the bluegrass and fescue she continues to mow at 73, under the walnut trees in the side yard and along the back fence that divided our yard from one neighbor’s tobacco fields to the south and another’s hilly, scrubby little pasture to the east where a few cows often loitered. I remember the tree house that we camped in, climbed on, and jumped from, sometimes remembering the grape arbor and peach tree and blackberry bushes and the rabbits we kept for a time. If it’s late fall or winter, I see the latest generation of mistletoe whose long-dead ancestors my father would occasionally—or maybe it was just once—“harvest” with a shotgun.

I also remember some of the hard stuff, mainly around the pain of my father’s alcoholism, his far too early death and the negligence of relationships and resources that so often accompany addiction. And I also remember our garden with way too much corn and tomatoes and onions and the joy he got from surveying his crops on summer evenings. And I always smile and finally remember fondly and sometimes with sadness.

While, as I said, I have come to know myself as a person deeply connected to place, I went to Israel and Palestine fairly convinced that place, that particular place, did not matter any more than any other place, except perhaps as a point of historical reference. Christianity, I thought, transcends place and exists and thrives in the cultural soil into which it is planted like so much corn and tomatoes and onions. I did not need the particular place to have my particular faith. And besides I knew enough about ancient conflict over that place, those places, that I thought, for the sake of the future of humankind, we might be better off caring less about that and other chunks of desert in that particular part of the world.

Now I know I was wrong. So dry and hot, so battle-scared and water deprived, you have to wonder why anyone would want it at all. And yet, the stories of the Abraham-
ic faiths were first told and forever remembered there. For some reason, God has a particular affinity for the people who have called it home—and I certainly don’t just mean our Jewish sisters and brothers who began to resettle there in 1948. I mean the Palestinian Christians who have always been there and are forgotten. I mean the Muslims who pray on the Temple Mount and who are humiliated at check points. And I mean the Jews who stand at the wall: to pray in spoken and written words, to celebrate, to wail.

Now, three months after the pilgrimage, I feel as if I have gone home. Not because grand cathedrals have been built over particular caves where tradition tells us that Jesus was born, or lived, or buried, or because “Jesus walked there,” but because the people who have loved Jesus down through the centuries have walked there too. From the disciples sent out two by two to the women who ran ahead to Galilee to spread the News, to our own band of faithful followers, our own stories of God’s presence in the world get all wrapped up in the stories of our spiritual mothers and fathers. And for those of us fortunate enough to get to those places of the story, we have breathed it in.

In the two weeks there, I only make a return trip to one spot. It was the place our group had first seen the Galilean hills and the lake that, for some reason, we call a sea. From Mt. Arbel you can see Magdala and Tabgha and Capernaum, and over your shoulder you can see the Horns of Hattin where Saladin and his armies gave a final blow to the Christian crusaders. You can see a trail that would have been used by 1st-century peasants walking from Nazareth to Magdala or Capernaum and a spring where they would surely have refreshed themselves and their animals with water.

There is no giant cathedral there, no 14 stations of the cross, no gift shops. The shrines a pilgrim finds there are cave dwellings, dry windswept trails, spindly trees, and reticent goats. If I ever return to Galilee, I will hike back up to the cave dwellings: to wonder about Nazarenes who walked there, to gaze out over the Bedouin village, to listen for calls to prayer and then to answer it with psalms, prayers of thanksgiving and intercessions, and a prayer for the peace of Jerusalem.

In those Galilean hills, I experienced holy ground, traveling with a band of holy people. It is ground that I realize was calling me home to remind me of who I am, where I came from, keeping me honest and grounding me in a story bigger than myself. In that way it is land like those two acres of freshly mowed bluegrass, walnut trees, and untilled garden plots. Those dry dusty hills, like other ground holy to me, remind me that I am loved and known by name.
**C O H O R T R E F L E C T I O N S**

**Timely Theology**

**K I T T Y H O L T Z C L A W**

BERE'SHIT: When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, a first day.1

Genesis is filled with stories of beginnings. In the ancient Hebrew culture, beginnings were considered crucial because the way things began was thought to reveal their purposes and their characters. So this tale was an attempt to understand the nature of the creation and their relationship to it. The very first verse of the very first chapter of their story shows time itself as created by the One True God that said, “It is good!”

A strange creature time is. It comes out of the darkness into the light within a wind that is the breath of God. Yet for all its mystery, time is perhaps our most intimate partner of creation because it is constantly with us. It is so much a part of who we are that we struggle to imagine a life beyond it when the past, present, and future are all the same.

It is our human nature to live according to the way we construct our ideas. In their book *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson say the language we use reveals how we make meaning of a concept. They contend that we experience the concept by the metaphors upon which we construct it. A major North American metaphor for time is, time as a commodity.2 We say, “Time is money.” We have and spend and lose time. We choose and reject options to budget our time, allocate, invest, and use it profitably. Time is a limited and valuable commodity, so a major selling point of new technology is that it saves time and gives us more time. Some of us even live on borrowed time.

As practical people, we mark off time, number it, put it into hours and minutes and then define it in little boxes on a calendar page. We continue to subdivide minutes into seconds, milliseconds, and nanoseconds as if we are astute enough to know them when we experience them.

Let’s not get carried away. We are not lords over time. Time seems to have a life of its own and bends uncontrollably depending on the situation. We have no say so over time when it seems to slow down when we stumble toward the ground. On the other

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hand, we can make no demands on time when we wish certain moments would last just a little longer. We say we have time on our hands but we really can’t even touch it. We can draw upon the past but we cannot bring it back. We can anticipate tomorrow but we cannot rush it. Tomorrow will come when it will.

Time even has a mysterious power over us. Time can convince us that an event may seem like it was yesterday when in reality there have been many yesterdays since. Not only does time have power over us, we are so strongly influenced that we call ourselves products of our time. Cultural moods shift and affect the way people are viewed and, therefore, how we live our lives within the days we have on earth.

Not only does time influence us corporately, it has the power to shape us individually. Human beings all around the world move through remarkably similar stages of mental growth and development. Our bodies are marked with its passage. Hard times show up in lines on our faces and declining health, while good times flaunt laugh lines. If we allow it, time may bring healing to both body and spirit.

However, ours is not the only possible way of conceiving time. After the tsunami struck the coast of Asia on December 26, 2004, Bob Simons of the television show “60 Minutes” reported on a group of seafaring people of the Andaman Sea who call themselves the Mokan. They are so attuned to nature that they sensed the tragedy coming and fled to higher ground before the first wave struck. The island did not suffer a single casualty. Another surprising thing about the Mokan is that they have no notion or words for time. The Mokan do not know how old they are. The word for “when” doesn’t exist in their language. They have no problem waiting. There are no hellos or goodbyes. You stay, then you go.3

One of our callings as Christians is constantly to evaluate our theology to ensure our values are in keeping with scripture. A question to consider then is whether or not our attitude toward time is based on the founding theology of our faith. As attached as we are to our metaphor of time as a commodity, are we willing to reconsider in light of the first story in the lives of our people? Our first creation story is sparse, abstract, and eerie. In awe-inspiring majesty, the sovereign God engages in creative labor, opens the curtain to the heavens, and switches on the spotlight creating the first day. Does our metaphor of time as a commodity even come close to this Genesis account of the creation of time? Can we construct a new concept of time as our partner within creation? What if time is a friend whose sharing offers us an opportunity for wisdom? Would a new way of understanding of the nature of time give us a new way of experiencing our own character?

Two things are for certain. Time for us began, and time as we know it now will end for each of us. In the meantime what we have is now. Every day is a genesis that waits to be unveiled and is ready to be embraced.

NOTES


2. Ibid., 8-9.

Some years back I traveled with my mother to the place of her earliest years, a farm in the part of Wisconsin made famous in Aldo Leopold’s classic early work on conservation and ecology, *A Sand County Almanac*. The farmhouse and barn of my mother’s childhood are no longer there, just the broken remnants of their fieldstone foundations. Where the family homestead once stood, there now are only trees, the oldest planted long ago by her parents. There was a sense of loss and the grief of human finitude in the derelict farm. But as our eyes were drawn upward by branches swaying in the wind, the trees became a sign of ongoing life and hope, a visible reminder of her parents’ love and a silent witness to their awareness of time not measured merely in days or years. I was reminded of a poem by poet-farmer Wendell Berry, titled “Planting Trees.” He begins by speaking of the “ghost” of the old primeval forest cut down by his ancestors as he now plants seedlings:

```plaintext
I become the familiar of that ghost  
and its ally, carrying in a bucket  
twenty trees smaller than weeds,  
and I plant them along the way  
of the departure of the ancient host.  
I return to the ground its original music.  
It will rise out of the horizon  
of the grass, and over the heads  
of the weeds, and it will rise over  
the horizon of men’s heads. As I age  
in the world it will rise and spread,  
and be for this place horizon  
and orison, the voice of its winds.  
I have made myself a dream to dream  
of its rising, that has gentled my nights.  
Let me desire and wish well the life  
these trees may live when I  
no longer rise in the mornings  
to be pleased by the green of them
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shining, and their shadows on the ground,
and the sound of the wind in them.¹

What Berry calls elsewhere “the resurrection of the wild” is a testament to time measured not by human standards but lived out in light of the eternal. To “wish well the life” of what comes after us is both our means of experiencing a time beyond our own and a fitting prayer for those called to be stewards of God’s creation.

NOTE
In late August, a group of “mature” academics, theologians, pastors, presbytery executives, and one professional watercolorist (not a bad assemblage, considering that there were six of us in all) struck off for a week on Washington Island, just off the northern tip of Wisconsin’s Door County. We were there to exercise our right brains a bit (“feeling our way into thought” being our mantra) and explore the creative process through a course of painting instruction led by one long-suffering and ever-hopeful member who teaches leadership at the university level and moonlights as a professional watercolorist.

Working in a medium one has not explored since third grade can produce astonishing (and sobering) insights. My moment of truth came when, laboring mightily over a couple of square inches of rocky shoreline to make it look right, I heard the encouraging voice of our instructor over my shoulder saying, “Try not to make it look contrived.” It was then that I discovered:

a) the sheer power of my “inner J,”” in Myers-Briggs terms, and
b) how hard it is to try not to make something look contrived, especially when you have a strong inner J.

The whole thing became particularly humiliating and instructive when our teacher would seize a brush with gusto, splash great gobbets of water and pigment everywhere (actually getting some of it on the paper in the process), and, with a number of broad and seemingly random strokes, add and lift off paint to produce—or rather evoke—something exquisite. And this, in turn, prompted some thoughts (and feelings) about what human creativity looks like, and what divine creativity might look like. In that spirit, and I hope in true “P” form, here are some key insights I picked up on the art of watercolor, and of creative absence—“getting out of the way” of what you’re trying to create.

**Art consists in artlessness.** We say that we favor the “artless” and “unstudied” over the “calculated” and the “artificial.” If this is true of human creativity, why not of divine creativity?

**Sixty per cent of watercoloring consists of removing pigment.**

In a culture obsessively committed to “applying” oneself, this comes as a real reve-
lation. I understand there’s a dictum among designers that “You know when to quit, not when there’s nothing left to add, but when there’s nothing left to take away.” Perhaps the necessary thing is to withhold, withdraw, hold something in reserve, to “let be.” According to Jewish mysticism, this is how God creates—through *tzimtzum*, an act of creative withdrawal that gives everything enough space to exist (in Christian terms, think of kenosis, the self-emptying of God in the incarnation). “Let there be light.” In this I hear a subtle interplay of divine command and divine permission. In Genesis 1, God stands apart and calls things into being; in Genesis 2, God grubs around in the dirt, deeply and totally engaged in the act of creation. Both are true. Go figure.

**Paint the background first. Negative space defines the object by implication.** Catholic theologian Karl Rahner used to describe humanity as always already graced. God sustains everything from the shadows. Rejoice and be glad, and if you come to stand out in some way, remember where you came from.¹

If your painting looks dull and washed out, the whole thing may need to be darkened down a bit to enable differences in value to emerge. I don’t especially like this one, but I get it.

**Leave some blank space. It gives the viewer something to do.** Give your viewer something to “fill in.” According to rabbinic thought, the white space between the letters of the Torah is the space that’s left for interpretation (and actually consisted of “white fire” in the original). This is the space in which event becomes story; by leaving such a space, God graciously invites us to fill in the divine story with our own.

What this all suggests, to me anyway, is that the classic move of natural theology to find “God’s fingerprints” in the created order may have been a “J” approach to a “P” reality. It may be that it isn’t so much through observation as through intimation (to borrow Wordsworth’s term) that we “get” the creative activity—and passivity—of God in the world, and so find God, and ourselves, by losing ourselves, in “wonder, love and praise.” Henri Nouwen used to say that the real absence of Christ counts for as much as the real presence in our celebration of the Lord’s Supper, since it reminds us of our longing for God, of God’s longing for us, and of the “not yet” that attends creation until the consummation of all things. And that may be precisely the space in which we find ourselves.²

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**NOTES**

1. “The call only makes him consciously aware of—and of course forces him to make a choice about—the grace which already encompassed him inarticulately but really as an element of his spiritual existence. The preaching is the express awakening of what is already present in the depths of man’s being, not by nature, but by grace. But it is a grace which always surrounds man, even the sinner and the unbeliever, as the inescapable setting of his existence.” —Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, v. 4 (New York: Crossroad, 1982), p. 181

2. “The great temptation of the ministry is to celebrate only the presence of the Lord while forgetting his absence. Often the minister is most concerned to make people glad and to create an atmosphere of “I’m OK, you’re OK.” But in this way everything gets filled up and there is no empty space left for the affirmation of our basic lack of fulfillment. In this way God’s presence is enforced without connection with his absence. Almost inevitably this leads to artificial joy and

Continued on page 29
Tuesday, August 11, at Armageddon. Plastic tents and canopies drape the dusty hilltop. Workers with wheelbarrows and buckets sort through rocks.

In ancient times, Megiddo was an important city-state, perched on a hill overlooking an important crossroads. Controlling Megiddo meant controlling trade routes and army roads. So over the years the place was conquered, lost, re-conquered, captured, reclaimed, and controlled. Archeologists have uncovered twenty-five layers of ancient ruins. That means twenty-six different groups have controlled Megiddo. Twenty-six different governments, twenty-six sets of norms, twenty-six different takes on religion, twenty-six different groups who—for a time—could say they had won, they were in charge.

Twenty-six different armies, with banners flying, trumpets blaring, certain of dominance. Each—in time—giving way to the next. Until, finally, dominance abandoned, Tel Megiddo belongs to the present.

In present times, Tel Megiddo belongs to the diggers and their buckets, to the cows finding few a tufts of grass nearby, to the strange multi-legged critters we see scuttling across the path. Today, Tel Megiddo belongs to us, conquerors with our rapidly firing digital cameras, our phone-posted Facebook photos (“Me at Armageddon”), our jokes, our self-assuredness that we rightly interpret this as our time and our place.

In future times, some people twist the Bible to say this place, Armageddon (the English version of the Latin version of the Greek version of the Hebrew word Megiddo), will be the site of a grand cosmic battle that will alter time. In the future, some say, Tel Megiddo will belong to an apoplectic apocalypse of a Lamb and Beast embroiled in blazing battle. It makes sense that this place—the site of dozens of military takeovers and who knows how many failed attempts—would be projected into the future as a place of ultimate warfare.

But I don't think that will happen.

Watching the rocks here at Tel Megiddo, watching the tiny flowers straining to find a place amid the rubble, watching the insects wander on their way, watching the cows munch, and watching the few birds circling in the sun-warmed air, I sense that nature always wins. Time and place win.

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We can’t even agree on a name. In Hebrew it’s Tel Megiddo. In Arabic it’s Tell al-Mutesellim. For some of the busloads of Christian tour groups sure to arrive, I guess Armageddon is preferred. But those languages and names will morph and change. The people who speak them will die. Time and place will remain.

Time wins over ideologies and theologies. Place wins over armies and policies. Military might, power plays, political parties, even pilgrims and tourists find their ways into the layers of archeology. The earth remains.

The hymn-writer, Isaac Watts—his own father imprisoned for having the wrong religious views according to the conquerors of his time and place—seemed to grasp that:

Time, like an ever rolling stream,
Soon bears us all away;
We fly, forgotten, as a dream
Fades at the opening day.

Like flowery fields the nations stand
Pleased with the morning light;
The flowers beneath the mower’s hand
Lie withering ere ’tis night.

O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Still be our God while troubles last,
And our eternal home!

NOTE
1. The final three stanzas of Watts’ nine-stanza hymn, “O God our Help in Ages Past,” written in 1719. The first and third stanzas here are Watts’ words, as altered for inclusion in The New Century Hymnal (copyright 1995 by The Pilgrim Press). The middle stanza is Watts’ original language.

superficial happiness. It also leads to disillusionment because we forget that it is in memory that the Lord is present. If we deny the pain of his absence we will not be able to taste his sustaining presence either.

“Therefore, every time ministers call their people around the table, they call them to experience not only the Lord’s presence but his absence as well; they call them to mourning as well as to feasting, to sadness as well as to joy, to longing as well as to satisfaction.” —Henri Nouwen, The Living Reminder: Service and Prayer in Memory of Jesus Christ (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), 46-47
You may have heard: I am just back from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and I find that I am presently in no good shape to try and make much sense of it. That’s by design: I was just loaded up with information and ideas and reflections, and it’s going to take some time to sort through them. So rather than doing the kid-on-Christmas-morning routine, and making you wary of saying hello in the grocery store (lest you be forced to listen to another story that begins with When I was in Jerusalem…). Rather than go that route, let’s be patient with one another.

Rest assured: I have an awful lot of things I want to share with you … an embarrassment of riches, really, but first I need to pray over it all, and rest a bit more.

I might say only this for now: my faith, and my insights into my faith, have been made stronger, and I am more anxious than ever for all of you to have opportunity to deepen in your own faith.

And today’s text is just one such opportunity, because for weeks now we have been confronted by this bread business from John. And we may be about to wonder, if we haven’t already, just what exactly is the point of it.

Today’s gospel is the last lesson we’re going to read this summer concerning this episode—it is the sixth and final reading. Now’s not the time to grow faint of heart. Listen well for the Word of God.

Let’s begin by placing this reading into a wider context. Chapter 6 opens with Jesus feeding five thousand people beside the Sea of Galilee; then, when they see what he can do, they move to make him king, and he withdraws. Afterwards, the disciples try crossing the Sea, but are caught up in a headwind, and he comes to them on the water, presumably calming the seas.1

— John 6:56-69

Rock

Torey Lightcap

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Then the crowds gather again and go out to try and find him, and when they do, he rebukes them, saying that if all they really want is a little something for their bellies, they’ve come to the wrong man, because he—he himself—is the bread of life, and those who eat of that bread will live for ever.

This is scandalous to them. It’s grotesque.
And be honest: You would have had exactly the same thought, and so would I.
These words to us would very probably have offended us to the bone.
We would have scratched our heads in great bewilderment.

He gives us bread, then tells us to eat him? He says that he’s the bread of heaven?
First of all, to us first-century Palestinian Jews, God has no name, no face.

This isn’t just some sideline doctrine; it’s absolute bedrock theology.
Second, to be told to disrespect God by eating of this man Jesus—whom we all know, by the way, as that kid from down the block—to eat the flesh of this man and to drink his blood?

This disrespects our laws concerning purity and piety. If we did any such thing, we would surely not be fit to serve God as we understand best. Read it in the original Greek, and it’s even worse: Chomp on his body, Jesus says. Gulp it up, gobble it down.

Third—and this is no small point—he says all this while standing in the synagogue! Can you imagine an easier way to befoul our sacred space?

Well, of course they fall away. It’s the only sensible thing to do.
He may have given them bread to eat before, but they don’t have to stand around and listen to this. It’s morally and legally wrong. In one great unhappy drove they disperse, and suddenly it’s quiet again, just this man and his handful of friends.

You know that feeling; you’ve been there. No one is too eager to be the first to speak. Eyes are downcast. There’s a palpable question hanging in the air: Why’d he have to go and do that? We were just starting to get somewhere …

Then Jesus looks up, surveys the faces around him.
What about you? he says. Will you leave me now too?
And it is Simon Peter who speaks his heart to Jesus.

Lord, there is nothing better than you—there is no better bread. We’ve tasted the bread of the world, and compared to you, it’s all flat and dry and lifeless. We can’t go back to that! Where would we turn? You’re the only thing that makes sense anymore. Your words unlock heaven itself to us.

Brothers and sisters, if you hear nothing else this morning, hear Simon Peter.
He does not make an intellectual argument for Jesus, and when he bothers to sort through it all, he doesn’t much care either about whether Jesus says or does things that may be embarrassing to him.

The fact is that Simon Peter loves Jesus. He just loves him, needs to be with him. Nothing else matters.

He makes this confession while standing only a few feet from his own front door. He could literally be home in less than a minute and go back to fishing and forget the whole thing.

You have to love Simon Peter in a moment like this. Most of the time he’s like Moe from the Three Stooges, with eleven other Larrys and Curlys trailing behind.
But when he reveals his heart like this ... ah, now there's a servant upon whose shoulders you could erect a Church.

Well. Maybe I did see something on that trip worth mentioning now that I think of it.

Two thousand years ago, the Sea of Galilee was higher than it is today; it's actively disappearing, but that's a concern for another time. At any rate, on the north shore, the Sea came up to a large rock. This, by virtue of its shape and location, made a good place to enter the water. You could sit on that rock, look out over the sea, listen to the lake moving. It was a good place to fish from.

In 1933, the Franciscans built a church on that very rock—not the first to do so, but the ones who built what stands there today. The little church is called the Primacy of Peter.

Sitting in its humid chapel just two and a half weeks ago, turning over the words of this confession of Simon Peter, I was given, I believe, angelic assistance to see that my life would only amount to one of two things.

I could withdraw and play small and make it be about me. I didn't have to share or love or ever leave the warm satisfaction of my own ego. In short, I could eat material bread and be superficially happy.

Or. I could renounce all that, and I could stand nakedly vulnerable before my Lord, offer up myself as a testimony to Christ—Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ within me—and I might become less so that he could become more.2

I was led to understand, as you also must now understand, that to agree to help shoulder the burden of the Church is to renounce many things—pleasure, esteem, privilege, power—but that these things finally just don't matter. I was led to understand, as you also must now understand, that it will cost us everything "To do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with ... God."3

All these things I saw clearly, as though for the first time.

I was led to understand, as you also must now understand, that to give of myself, to allow myself to be lessened, until finally nothing remained but Christ: that this was no burden at all, but perfect freedom. For Christ does not give as the world gives, but he gives peace, courage, and an untroubled heart.4

The Church, my friends, was not built on a person after all, but upon a confession—Lord, to whom can we go? A confession, yes, and a promise—a promise made by the Christ: that he would be with us always, even after the very last things have passed away.5

Amen.

NOTES
1. “Presumably” because John does not say; John only says that they reached their destination right away.
2. Wisdom derived from John the Baptist, who knew about such things (John 3:30).
Welcome
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yourself in a Eucharistic prayer with Daniel G. Conklin: “It is very meet, right, and our bounden duty, that we should at all times and in all places give thanks unto thee, O Lord…” For all of it—all times and all places—is the arena of our location and our calling.

So get busy now, thinking about what God is saying to you today about what time it is for you—and where you are located, for God’s sake!

Theodore J. Wardlaw
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