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Nourishing Narratives

THE POWER *of* STORY
to SHAPE OUR FAITH



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Complicated Narratives and Important Failures

I STILL HAVE THE HANDMADE BIRTHDAY CARD my fifth grade teacher gave me—an enormous piece of folded yellow construction paper with a big orange bookworm (wearing a festive birthday hat, naturally) drawn on the front. Somehow that flimsy relic of forty years ago survived the many moves of my childhood and found a snug home at the bottom of the cedar box a great-uncle made me as a repository for my “treasures.”

Perhaps it's no surprise I safeguarded it so carefully: after all, it's certainly an unusual year when one is celebrated for being bookish—celebrated, more importantly, by the fabulously named Anquanita Ash. I mean, if that doesn't sound like a name straight out of some wonderfully magical story, I'm not sure what does. And Mrs. Ash *was* magical—one of those teachers who becomes an indispensable feature of childhood lore. Goddess of the fifth grade, she strode effortlessly through the halls of Carriage Hills Elementary School, cooler than most anyone else we had ever known.

One of the most memorable aspects of her classroom was how she handled reading. To be sure, she read aloud to us each day

after lunch, and we had instruction in reading and spelling and the rest. But the great privilege was to be allowed time in the “reading tub”: an old claw-foot bathtub that sat in one corner of the room. Its sides were lined with a vibrant red faux-fur material whose only other natural habitat appeared to be the dashboards of certain very groovy cars. The tub itself was filled with seemingly endless pillows of all sizes and varieties. So when our work was done, we were encouraged to luxuriate with a book, there among the pillows: reading as pleasure and reward. It was an important lesson: to read, according to Mrs. Ash, was not a grim chore of mastering subjects and verbs, but a task to be sought and savored and enjoyed.

This was a lesson of which, even at eleven years old, I’d been an eager pupil for a long time. For one thing, I had a grandmother who was well-known for her devotion to books. Other people might have Proustian memories of the smell of their grandmothers’ cookies; my Grandma Kline’s house smelled exactly like a very lovely used-book shop. Most rooms in her house featured floor-to-ceiling bookcases, with volumes overflowing the shelves’ bounds. In her basement, each room was filled with canning shelves so that the books could be placed two-deep on them. Many of her books were from the nineteenth or first half of the twentieth century, and on my family’s visits, I would spend hours combing the shelves, discovering all manner of Victorian literature, tales of faraway missionaries and theological treatises, histories of places and events of which I had never heard, cookery books, and more: a whole library’s worth of subjects. She had so many books that she kept at least one grocery sack by her front door with those she had either read or of which she had inadvertently bought doubles. Visitors to her house always spent time finding at least one volume to take with them: reading as hospitality.

As a beloved grandchild, I was not limited to choosing from this front-door stash but had the full run of her collection, though my mother always insisted that I ask my grandmother for any book I wanted to have. I was never refused: reading as love. Indeed, I learned from my Grandma Kline that books could serve as vital companions on the journey; her wise, and typically wry, advice to me: “Always have at least one book in your purse at all times.”

But it wasn’t just my grandmother and Anquanita Ash who taught me these practices of reading; so did a family life characterized by nightly, communal novel and Bible reading, church and Sunday school experiences replete with both tale and interpretation, and scads of Bible memorization. Indeed, I had a story-shaped childhood. It is, doubtless, little wonder that I became an English professor.

But no matter what one’s childhood—even if one was not or is not really much of a reader—we are *all* profoundly story-shaped people. We live in a world that, for better or worse, most often seems to process through narrative, not facts.

Think about it: from the time we are children, we use stories to imagine the possibilities life may offer us. Consider the stories you have told yourself over the years about what you would like to be or hope to do, what job you would have, where you might travel, what your wedding would look like, how many children or grandchildren you would have. Right now, I’d wager, you could tell me a story about what you think this next year will bring. We know the reverse is true as well: we can probably all think of examples of people whose lives get stuck because they can’t imagine a different narrative for their lives, can’t imagine living out a different story line. Think how many times you’ve heard someone say, particularly after a disappointment or a sudden tragedy or in the middle of a midlife crisis, “That’s not what was supposed to happen.”

Without dismissing the shock and sadness of these situations, I suggest it is telling that such a comment implies the existence of a story we all narrate to ourselves constantly—and how strongly it shapes our own responses. I still think about an example from many years ago: how Elizabeth Edwards, wife of the disgraced presidential candidate John Edwards, framed her answer when she was recovering from her husband’s infidelity. In an interview she explained: “It’s an ongoing process of finding your feet again, re-telling your story to yourself. You thought you were living in one novel, and it turns out you were living in another.”¹

And it’s not just the stories we tell—it’s the ones we listen to, it’s the ones we value, it’s the ones we engage with and spend time interpreting. Through stories we come to understand the expectations and norms of others around us—our family, community, church, and larger culture. Indeed, stories define those expectations and norms—and signal to us whether our lives are successful or not (at least according to those doing the telling). That’s no surprise—from at least the British Romantic poets, like Percy Shelley, we’ve been explicitly told that poets, storytellers, and people who control the imagination are the “unacknowledged legislators of the world.”² Such a claim wouldn’t have surprised Socrates, who saw the power of poets and, unlike Shelley, warned of their pernicious influence way back in the fifth century BCE. And of course, thinking through narrative is Jesus’ primary pedagogical mode: a man goes on a journey, a woman searches for a coin, a son goes astray, a servant makes a bad investment. Whatever the perspective, there is ample evidence that societal attitudes—on whatever issue, whether toward smoking or politics, war or sexuality—are affected more by story than by law. Thus, stories both encourage and constrain us, depending on our ability to critically interpret and respond to these narratives.

This book, then, is not just for bookworms like me: it is for everyone hoping to think more deeply about what it means to be fundamentally story-shaped people, people hungry for narratives that are life-giving. Many wonderful books exist already to persuade you of the merits of reading certain books (often the “classics,” for example) or journeying with certain writers. All good. But though the coming pages will invite you into a conversation with the work of many writers, this is not a book so much meant to prescribe *what* or *who* to read, but more about *how* and *why*. I am not going to claim that reading makes you somehow “better,” but rather that becoming a better reader—more attuned to narrative assumptions and strategies and expectations—is critical.

And for people of faith, for people of the Book, this book considers how the larger story to which we give allegiance, the gospel—the overarching story of God’s good creation; humanity’s fall; and our redemption through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ—interacts with the smaller stories in which we participate. Not only because, as critic Henry Zylstra has argued, the discernment of stories should generally give us “more to be Christian with”³ but because the old, old story must be fundamental to our very understanding of the world.

I once attended a conversation between the poet Christian Wiman and the theologian J. Todd Billings, both living with incurable cancers. At one point, the moderator asked why they were both interested in poetry. Billings responded by noting that he had turned to the Psalms because they were Scripture first, rather than because they were poetry. But then he framed what he called the “more interesting question”: “Why did *God* choose poetry with the Psalms, with Job, with other parts of divine self-revelation in Scripture?”⁴ Yes, why *is* God a literary God? In *Beyond Words*, Frederick Buechner begins to suggest at least one answer:

It is absolutely crucial, therefore, to keep in constant touch with what is going on in your own life's story and to pay close attention to what is going on in the stories of others' lives. If God is present anywhere, it is in those stories that God is present. If God is not present in those stories, then they are scarcely worth telling.⁵

Surely, then, it's good work for us to carefully examine the multifaceted stories of all of our lives and learn to notice the infinite richness of the story of the Word made flesh.

BY NAME

Our stories begin with a name—our own—each with a tiny etymological tale built in. I've always loved hearing the roots of names, whether in the Scriptures or in cultural practices. How cool is it, for example, that the day of the week on which a Ghanaian is born is reflected in their name? Or that the name Deborah in the Bible means “bee” (oh, the metaphorical possibilities!)? The meaning of my own name, Jennifer, confounded me a little bit as a child. I mean, I could easily see (and hear) the connection to the first meaning, the earlier name of “Guinevere,” (even if she wasn't the most admirable person in the Arthurian story). But what of the second meaning from Cornish, “white wave”? What could it possibly mean to be named after ocean surf? But the ancient Cornish folk found a crashing breaker winsome in its comely command. What I came to love is how my name preserves in miniature a story from a culture who loved and thrived off the sea, who saw that beauty and power could be present together—and wanted to capture it in the hopes they had for their daughters.

And names are a big reason why I love graduation day. Of course, I like volunteering at the senior picnic and seeing my students with their delighted families. I like meeting the parents and siblings,

cousins and aunts and grandparents. I like putting on my gaudy “Husky Purple” robe (go, University of Washington!) and my funky Ye Olde English Hogwarts tam, even if, as I often joke, I most resemble the grape from the Fruit of the Loom gang in my getup. I like assembling with my peers, all snazzily dressed up as well, and marching in to the strains of “Pomp and Circumstance,” even if I do feel bad every year for the band, forced to repeat the song eighty-seven times.

At Calvin University, we’re still of a size that we call out the names of each graduate. It takes a while to get through them all, but my colleagues who read do so with such care and attention, reaching out to students to request phonetic renderings so they get each name just right. They know how critical that is—how much identity resides in every name.

Most years I know a good number of students—and as I hear their names and see them walk across the fieldhouse floor to accept our president’s congratulations, I see them again as they were in my classes. It’s not all sunshine and puppies, of course; though I often warmly remember their talent or intellect or personality, sometimes I am also bemused that they made it through to graduation at all.

But as I hear the litany of names, I hear not just a reminder of the stories of those I know. Clearly, in a class of a thousand or so people, many students are strangers to me. No, it is the very names themselves that move me. I am fascinated by how each name carries with it histories and genealogies and the chronicles of many generations. I imagine how each name was a name that parents wondered about and deliberated over, practiced saying fondly to each other aloud, perhaps intended with it something that honored folks who had come before them. That great Adamic privilege of naming, of imbuing another being with a hope and a future. Each name, to paraphrase Walt Whitman, then, “contains multitudes”—

the community of family and friends and church and teachers and so many others who surround that student as he or she journeys onward. The recognition of that, the understanding of the way we are part of a much bigger story than ourselves, is moving, indeed.

I thought of the graduation ritual the other day when I was at church. I typically sit farther toward the back, but because I was one of the readers in the service, I had to sit in the front row. When it came time for Communion, which we took by intinction—coming forward to dip the bread into the cup—I realized I could hear the pastors administering the elements. What particularly got my attention was that as each person approached to receive the bread, the minister would say his or her name:

“Sally, the body of Christ broken for you.”

“Hiroyuki, the body of Christ broken for you.”

“Yaa, the body of Christ broken for you.”

And on and on through the many people in our large congregation. In the course of that Communion service, I heard the names of the entire church—and heard again and again, too, about Christ’s death for each of them. I was surprisingly affected by what seemed to me to be a wonderfully holy moment, a reminder that even if our parents took no care with our names, we are still absolutely beloved of the God who calls us by name (Is 43:1) and died for each of us by name too. There’s a reason for all those genealogies in Scripture: God’s story is no tale of abstraction, but a richly detailed one. The story begins, then, with our own absolute particularity. In fact, part of God’s work as “author and finisher” is not simply knowing our names, but inscribing each of them, too, into God’s own book (Heb 12:2 NKJV).

The significance of inscription makes me think of Diet Eman, a member of the Dutch Resistance whose work in World War II included rescuing Jews, gathering intelligence, and surviving stints

in concentration camps and as a fugitive herself. It was my privilege to host her many times in my first-year writing class. On her visits, she would bring items from her time in prison: a metal cup, some of her identity papers, and a piece of rope.

I think of that rope often.

Diet made the rope in a concentration camp, where one of the prisoners' jobs was to take long shreds of paper and weave them into braided cords. But this one was a little different: on the strips of paper, Diet wrote down the names and addresses of all the women in prison with her, before she wove the strands together. She swore to them that, when she was released, she would unravel the rope and go to each address to give their families an update. Until she was released, however, she wore the rope as a belt, telling the guards (in her typical, cheeky way) that she needed something to hold up her underwear.

Diet never undid the rope.

She didn't have to because she enacted the words of Proverbs 3:3, "Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart." She had memorized every name and every address. After her release, she visited every family, as she had promised, to deliver her news. And every time she came to my classroom, Diet brought herself and every one of those women who had suffered with her, bound in that fragile cord. What a powerful image of grace and remembrance—and how comforting to think about our names and the names of all who we love and every other name ever emblazoned on the vast tablet of God's own heart.

WHAT LANGUAGE SHALL I BORROW?

That all sounds wonderfully capacious, but life often doesn't feel like that. Instead, it feels like we are presented with a limited

number of available narratives—or at least narratives we can allow ourselves. Have you ever felt trapped in a story presented to you by family or church or community?

Before we lament the impoverished messages of our larger culture, we need to have a good look at Christian cultural narratives. Many of my students, for example, are particularly fond of the classic “virtue is rewarded,” believing that Jane Austen’s Mr. Darcy is just around the corner if they can behave “properly.” Ring by spring, anyone? What happens, though, at age twenty-five or thirty-five or (even!) forty-five, when Darcy has seemingly gotten lost in Derbyshire? The narrative gets a little wobbly. *Was one not virtuous? Or is God not giving what one is owed?* As it turns out, that particular story can’t provide the “happily ever after” it promises.

More than that, the church has a tendency to send the message that some people’s stories are more important than others. Or if not more important, perhaps, at least much more interesting, and surely much more valid in showing God’s work in the world. Think about how the Christian genre of “testimony” has traditionally been presented.

The first time I was asked to give my testimony when I was in high school, I found the whole process of putting it together rather trying because I didn’t seem to have much of a story. I became a Christian as a very young child, grew up in a strong Christian family that was at church whenever the doors were open (and sometimes, given my parents’ volunteering, even when they weren’t), and was a hyper-responsible, academically achieving student. No big traumas, no big catastrophes, no “big sins.” Seemingly nothing more to narrate than “Woo-hoo—I’m a nerdy good girl.”

I even teased my mother that perhaps I should go out before I had to speak and “spice things up a bit.” I was suffering—as perhaps

some of you are—from Boring Testimony Syndrome. Sure, my story was fine and all. No one would have said otherwise, but I secretly believed it couldn't compete with the *really* good testimonies. From years of going to church, I sensed that what was valued were two dominant narrative paradigms: the “super Christian” or the “miserable sinner.”

The “super Christian” for me growing up was Elisabeth Elliot. When I was six years old, I saw the movie *Through Gates of Splendor*, based on her book about her husband and his fellow missionaries who died in the Amazon in the 1950s. Elliot's story was not just one of missionary martyrdom, but one in which Elliot returns to live with many of the same people who had killed her husband. In my 1970s and 1980s childhood and young adulthood, she was presented as the epitome of Christian discipline—never shrinking, always dutiful, fiercely all in. And it wasn't just Elliot: in the Christian comics we were given in Sunday school, we had stories about missionaries who smuggled Bibles behind the Iron Curtain and the like. Child of the Cold War that I was, I was so inspired that in late elementary school, my best friend, Jo Lynn Carter, and I would spend endless hours planning what we would do on the mission field, how we would customize our cars to be able to smuggle the maximum numbers of Bibles or help the most destitute people groups. Together, these stories set my expectations about what a successful Christian life needed to look like: heroic, epic, dangerous. Certainly never anything ordinary.

On the other side, the “miserable sinner” model was even more popular. The guest speaker invited to church to tell of a life of crime and drugs and all manner of depravity until he or she was converted. The dark-to-light quotient was very high indeed here with the “miserable sinner” now doing amazing, often heartwarming things.

These days, the dominant narratives may look a little different, but examine them and you'll see these roots showing. Admittedly, there is great validity present in both narratives. But we need to also admit that the majority of Christians' lives will never conform to those patterns. My students tell me they struggle with this. They're still suffering from the Boring Testimony Syndrome I experienced in my own adolescence: they think because they don't have an "exciting" life or some "big" sin to confess or a dramatic work of God in their life—a miracle or some triumph over adversity—that they don't have stories worth telling.

The consequences go beyond simply a dearth of available narratives: one significant result is that we develop a skewed sense of virtue and an equally skewed sense of sin. We subtly come to believe that there are people for whom faith is easy (at least easier than it is for us). We come to believe that faith needs to look a certain way and happen in certain contexts. We come to believe that there are people with "real" sins that need forgiving, but that our sins are minor in comparison and not worth talking about.

All of it wrong.

We also begin to believe, erroneously, that our stories have to have a demonstrably, conventionally dramatic plot line—because otherwise, we fear, there is no proof that God is working dramatically (or perhaps at all) in our lives.

The result of these faulty narrative expectations is we deny that God needs to transform our lives at every moment. Ironically, by tending mostly to these two extremes of the Christian story, we reduce God's power to accomplishing only the "big stuff." Instead, we urgently need to hear the stories of people who, no matter their background, are living a faithful life every day. Because the challenge of being kind and patient and forbearing and loving and generous and everything else we are called to do—loving the Lord our

God with heart, soul, strength, and mind and neighbor as ourselves (Mk 12:30-31) is very, very difficult—and only accomplished by the minute workings of God’s grace.

But living into *that* story (and giving up on the dominant narratives as the only possibilities) may mean that we need to revise the story we thought we were living in or perhaps thought we needed to live in, even if it looks boring from the outside. It should help us revise, too, our narrative expectations so that we can begin to look for a fuller imagining. And that starts right where we are. In her beautiful meditation on Psalm 8, Marilynne Robinson puts it like this: “So I have spent my life watching, not to see beyond the world, merely to see, great mystery, what is plainly before my eyes. I think the concept of transcendence is based on a misreading of creation. With all respect to heaven, the scene of miracle is here, among us.”⁶

What if we began to imagine our ordinary lives as “scenes of miracle”? How would that transform our sense of ourselves, our sense of God at work?

“COMPLICATED” NARRATIVES

Changing our narrative pattern to embrace “scenes of miracle” doesn’t mean, though, that our stories should be chirpily naive or triumphalistically positive. Can we find better examples? In talking with many of my church-raised students, I’ve often heard them complain about how they heard the same handful of Bible stories again and again in their childhoods. Mostly, the “nice” stories—or if not exactly “nice” in reality, presented to them defanged of any problematic content. Typically, we conclude these discussions with much wise nodding and sage remarking on our preference for “complicated narratives.” All very true, but I’ve found that our theoretical love for the “complicated narrative” is never quite as vigorous when we’re actually faced with one. In real life, they’re hard to tell, hard to interpret, hard to hear.

And seldom is that truer, especially for the literature professor in me, than when I'm the storyteller once a month to a large group of Sunday school kids who range from kindergarten to fifth grade. That's already a challengingly wide age range with whom to communicate. But recently, my church changed its curriculum to cover the whole Bible in-depth over a three-year period. Initially (see attitude above), I was pretty pleased: finally, something grittier and more honest. No cotton-ball lambs allowed here.

Until I started to get all the hard stories. Seriously—I was assigned Job. The whole book. Take that, Dr. Complicated Narrative.

I also got the story from Numbers where Moses sends the twelve spies into Canaan to assess it before the Israelites are supposed to go in. Except that when ten of the spies come back and tell about the fortified cities and the giants (along with the amazingly massive grapes), the people get freaked out and don't want to go in despite Moses' urging from God, and so most of that generation of people have to die by wandering in the desert for forty more years. Good times.

Now, I'm always down with a spy story (and who doesn't love giant grapes?), but what do you do with the rest of it with a group of elementary school-aged kids in front of you?

I don't think the answer is as important initially as the hermeneutical method—in other words, how do we learn to be better interpreters? I've begun to ask myself,

- Why does this story seem hard to me?
- What makes it hard? What makes me uncomfortable?
- What does that discomfort reveal about my actual theology (instead of my professed one)?
- Does my theology need an adjustment? Or is this a tension I need to embrace more fully?

- What is at the essence of this story? More specifically, what is the takeaway for me today? Is this something I can share with the kids? If not, what of the essence is age appropriate?
- How can I use this story to help kids feel open to asking their own questions, to normalizing that interrogating the text is what we *should* be doing as Christians?

My moral obligation to teach these stories well means I have to come to at least provisional terms with them myself (or discover why I can't): not just asking why the Israelites were afraid in this situation, but why am I afraid? What are the giants and fortifications that face me and that face the children I'm teaching? Surely, we understand that fear, that hesitancy, even as we ourselves are told of God's providence. What parts of ourselves need to die in the purifying wilderness before we can move more fully into God's promises? Are there ways that our attitudes (particularly perhaps our generational ones) are holding others back? Am I keeping folks in the desert because I'm too afraid to move forward in faith?

And what of our interpretation of our lives? Whatever the story line we're currently in, I wonder how we can be more generous readers every day. What would it take to not automatically assign motives to the characters who inhabit the story with us? What would it take to be empathetic, not so quick to always identify villains? What would it take to not flatten our lives' plot lines into easy goods and bads? What would it change if we were protagonist, not hero or heroine?

Maybe the truth of the matter is that we need to admit that they're all hard stories.

THE BLESSINGS AND THE CURSES

And then what?

I admitted at this chapter's opening to my childhood status as a bookworm. One of my fondest childhood memories is the weekly

bringing home of an enormous stack of books from the library and heaping it next to the yellow easy chair in my bedroom. The progress of my reading was easily charted as the mound of books was shifted from one side of the chair to the other—only to be carted back to the library and returned for a whole new stack.

What I don't remember is my parents ever restricting what I wanted to check out, though they were incredibly committed Christians. I read widely, never afraid that God was too small to go with me into whatever bookish land I traveled. But that hasn't always been the way Christians have responded to the issue of censorship. Each September brings Banned Books Week, an event established over thirty years ago because books—in schools, libraries, and bookstores—were being increasingly contested, and the organizers wanted to call attention to issues of censorship. Unfortunately, we know that these challenges are often from people of faith. If we are people of the Book, we have not always been the people of the books.

In her marvelous 1957 essay “The Church and the Fiction Writer,” Flannery O'Connor begins by identifying the way the “average Catholic reader” approaches texts, dividing them into rigid, but inadequate, categories of “nature and grace.” Inadequate because, as O'Connor argues, neither gives a full enough picture: “He has reduced his conception of the supernatural to pious cliché and has become able to recognize nature in literature in only two forms, the sentimental and the obscene.”⁷ In particular, O'Connor's provocative notion here that sentimentality and pornography are equally distorted readings is an important and challenging (maybe even surprising) claim, especially in the large parts of Christian culture that often only sees the “obscene” as objectionable. Instead, O'Connor argues that both are equally unfit representations because they are not grounded in

the world in all its complexity. Both are reductive. Christians, then, should be as worried about the sentimental (and the bad theology that undergirds it) as they are about the more obvious problems of the obscene. This means that accepting the assumptions of the romantic comedy on the Hallmark Channel can be as damaging to our ideas about love and romance as the diminishment and dehumanization apparent in X-rated fare. It means recognizing and rejecting the “pious cliché” at work in so much of what Christians consume.

According to O’Connor, we can only gain a truer picture of reality by being committed to learning how to read in a more nuanced way. In her words, “Catholic readers are constantly being offended and scandalized by novels they don’t have the fundamental equipment to read in the first place.”⁸ If we can acquire that “fundamental equipment,” however, we can recognize the transcendent in unexpected places, in works that might surprise us because, O’Connor notes, they are often “permeated with a Christian spirit.”

And with this orientation, in turn, comes what I find most encouraging about O’Connor’s essay: her conviction that this robust engagement with fiction—with stories that offer “an honest fictional representation of life”—is a measure of strong faith, not evidence of a weak one, as is so often asserted.

It is when the individual’s faith is weak, not when it is strong, that he will be afraid of an honest fictional representation of life, and when there is a tendency to compartmentalize the spiritual and make it resident in a certain type of life only, the sense of the supernatural is apt gradually to be lost. Fiction, made according to its own laws, is an antidote to such a tendency, for it renews our knowledge that we live in the mystery from which we draw our abstractions.⁹

And this is not just O'Connor's idea. In Joshua 8:34-35, we get this paradigm of reading:

Afterward, Joshua read all the words of the law—the blessings and the curses—just as it is written in the Book of the Law. There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded that Joshua did not read to the whole assembly of Israel, including the women and children, and the foreigners who lived among them.

Thus, the Scripture itself invites us to read *all* the words. The blessings and the curses alike. Without both, the story is incomplete.

THRILLED BY LOVE

I once heard a speech by Katherine Paterson, the extraordinary children's writer, in which she argued that “the consolation of the imagination is not imaginary consolation.”¹⁰ I've thought about that phrase a good deal, especially as the violence—both rhetorical and actual—of the twenty-first century seems to be only worsening. After Newtown and Orlando and Virginia Tech and Columbine and Charleston and Atlanta and Uvalde and and and—that brutal never-ending list—I have found myself both voluble and oddly inarticulate. There is so much to say—and yet so little. How can nothing change? I find that my own words feel insufficient. Paterson's assertion makes a radical claim: that our Christian hope is a deeply creative act where, in our gathering together, we continually narrate the promises of a God who loves us and is making all things new. Of course, we only see part of the story—and then dimly, and the challenge is that we must imagine the “what is to be” in the midst of the horrific “what is.” But nevertheless, the invitation to live into a different story—to imagine something so diametrically opposed to most of the lessons that everything around us seems to be aiming to teach us—is not a call to false hope. Indeed, it is the only way to any sense of peace.

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