

“Lord, to whom can we go?” by Erica Lloyd



August 25, 2024

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Let's pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts make us closer to whom you mean us to be. Amen

I will start with a confession that's hopefully not going to make you *too* worried about the next 15 minutes: for months, I've been struggling because scripture has felt stale to me. I'd been growing impatient every time I cracked open the Bible, only to find the same old words and same old stories. Even worse, I had the same old reactions, as if I, too, was growing stale. In the midst of this struggle, I made the

counter-intuitive decision to say yes when Deborah reached out to see if I would preach, in the hopes that forcing myself to engage would bring some life back into my relationship with scripture. I chose today because three years ago this gospel reading really touched a nerve. A crowd of Jesus' followers, once hopeful, become befuddled, distressed, and ultimately disenchanted with him. As they drift away one by one, Jesus turns to his disciples: "Do you also wish to go away?" He asks.

"Lord, to whom can we go?" answers Simon Peter.

Three years ago I wrote an Inward/Outward reflection about that question – one that the gospel writer probably meant to be rhetorical, but was a real question for me back when I was living in Haiti, at a time when holding on to my faith in God felt painful, like holding a pot that was burning my hands but I had nowhere to put it down. "Lord, to whom can I go?"

Reading the passage again, this question was still the part that hooked me. The problem was, I had nothing new to say about it. That Inward/Outward piece was it.

As the discouragement began to creep in, I was reminded of the chapter on the Long Night of The Soul in Barbara Brown Taylor's book *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. She writes, "... even my sense of God's absence can be a token of God's presence if I let it." After paging through to find those words of encouragement, I decided to re-read that whole chapter, then the whole book. There is so much wisdom that I have clung to in this little book – it saved my faith at a time when I almost walked away from God completely. I pick it up frequently when I or someone I care about is going through a particularly hard time. Her words feel so true to me, it is as if I wrote them myself, and yet they are far wiser than

anything I could have composed.

I figured, in the absence of my own words and reflections, maybe I could bring you some of hers. After all, she's a former minister – surely her words can preach! So here are three of my favorite excerpts:

From Chapter 3, in which she and her husband help rescue a loggerhead turtle stranded on the beach: *I buried her in cool sand while Ed ran to the ranger station. An hour later she was on her back with tire chains around her front legs, being dragged behind a park service Jeep back toward the ocean. The dunes were so deep that her mouth filled with sand as she went. Her head bent so far underneath her that I feared her neck would break. Finally the Jeep stopped at the edge of the water. Ed and I helped the ranger unchain her and flip her back over. Then all three of us watched as she lay motionless in the surf. Every wave brought her life back to her, washing the sand from her eyes and making her shell shine again. When a particularly large one broke over her, she lifted her head and tried her back legs. The next wave made her light enough to find a foothold, and she pushed off, back into the water that was her home. Watching her swim slowly away after her nightmare ride through the dunes, I noted that it is sometimes hard to tell whether you are being killed or saved by the hands that turn your life upside down.*

From Chapter 4, in which she talks about psychotherapist Miriam Greenspan's work in helping patients navigate "dark emotions": *It is the inability to bear dark emotions that causes many of our most significant problems, not the emotions themselves.... There are no dark emotions, Greenspan says—just unskillful ways of coping with emotions we cannot bear. The emotions themselves are conduits of pure energy that want something from us: to wake us up, to tell us something we need to know, to break the ice around our hearts, to move us to act.*

And lastly, from Chapter 7, that chapter on the Long Night of the Soul I referenced earlier: *I cannot say for sure when my reliable ideas about God began to slip away, but the big chest I used to keep them in is smaller than a shoebox now. Most of the time, I feel so ashamed about this that I do not own up to it unless someone else mentions it first. Then we find a quiet place where we can talk about what it is like to feel more and more devoted to a relationship that we are less and less able to say anything about.*

As I read, suddenly it registered: when Peter asks, “Lord, to whom can we go?” I actually had an answer. This book is the good news according to Barbara, and it is a part of my personal canon. The Council of Nicea may have decided 1700 years ago that the window on divine inspiration had closed, but in this congregation one of our unifying beliefs is that God is still speaking. Reading these passages makes me feel stronger, freer, more compassionate with myself and the world. What else should a gospel do?

Let me pause and just say, I understand that words like “gospel” and “canon” usually mean something specific in this context, they have weight. But I use them intentionally, heretical though it may be,

because it is precisely that weight that I mean to convey. There is power in naming – to just say “This is a book I love and reread over and over,” or “This book is really important to me,” misses something essential in the role these words have played in my life. Calling this a “gospel”, claiming it as part of “my canon”, opened up something in me. I quickly realized that *Learning to Walk in the Dark* isn’t the only book I think of in this way. There are other texts I hold sacred, some I’ve known since childhood such as *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* that, like the Bible itself, have grown both more profound and more complicated for me over time. Others are very recent, like Cole Arthur Riley’s *This Here Flesh*.

When I read that book, I felt like maybe it was accurate to describe myself as an evangelist for the first time since my college years, because I thought, I *have* to share this! And I texted and emailed passages to friends because I couldn't keep them to myself. So bear with me while I indulge and read a few more passages to you:.

From Chapter 8, Lament: *Lament is not anti-hope. It's not even a stepping-stone to hope. Lament itself is a form of hope. It's an innate awareness that what is should not be. As if something is written on our hearts that tells us exactly what we are meant for, and whenever confronted with something contrary to this, we experience a crumbling. And in the rubble, we say, God, you promised. We ask, Why? And how could we experience such a devastation if we were not on some mysterious plane, hoping for something different.*

From Chapter 11, Repair: *As we heal, the need for more healing becomes apparent to us. It is painful, but healing makes us better perceivers of what is still hurting.*

From Chapter 12, Rest: *It seems like anytime God is talking about salvation in the Bible, [God] makes a point to name rest. "I'll refresh tired bodies" (Jeremiah 31:25, MSG). "Find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:29). And, in Psalm 23:2, we have "[God] makes me lie down." What a peculiar answer to the valley of the shadow of death. You might expect God's response to be to have people rise, to empower them to fight. But God's answer is unapologetic care for the body. The deepest yet most neglected of needs. What does it mean that in response to the terrors of the world, God would have us lie down? To eat? To drink from still waters? ... I see the longing and despair all around me, and I think of Christ, lying in the boat with his head on a pillow while the waves toss their craft around. Everyone is frantic, thinking death itself has come for them, and the creator of the universe is fast asleep. Glory. Sometimes the appropriate response to desperation is to do the unthinkable. Close your eyes.*

Isn't that beautiful? This language lingers in my memory as much as, and right alongside, my favorite verses from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

This idea of having a personal canon has brought me comfort, as if the Spirit is saying: *right now you don't find me where you're used to looking, but come, there are plenty of other places we might meet.* It

has captured my imagination, too – made me curious. Do other people have their own canons? Who are the “gospel” writers you return to over and over again? If we were assembling the Bible here and now, what would you bring to the Council of Takoma? I can hardly imagine the riches such a convening might bring forth, and how inclusive it might be, gathering voices of wisdom from every race, culture, gender, and orientation across the millennia.

And speaking of voices, we can even get into multi-media with our gospels! There is an interview with John Lewis from the podcast “On Being” that is a part of my canon. His voice *itself* is truth – the deep Southern accent a reminder of all that he had suffered, and yet he remained so full of joy and so full of love for humanity despite experiencing some of its worst abuses. It's impossible for me not to be moved by the sound of his voice, it fills me with hope.

I would not be surprised if there were paintings or sculptures in our canons, too – works of visual art that have that same kind of pull on us. Plenty of songs, too! I think one whole testament in my Bible is a big Spotify playlist. Our [offertory song today](#) – I'll let it be a surprise, on the one hand it feels totally unhinged to play it in church – but on the other, writer R. Eric Thomas did describe it by saying, “This is church. For this song is about keeping alive the hope that you will find someone with whom you can express your joy. And isn't that worship? Isn't that a declaration?” And the more I thought about it, the more I thought it might actually be a

modern psalm of David? I mean, it might not, so take that for what you will. Anyway, yes, music in our canon! My selection of hymns today has no common theme except for evoking this same feeling in me: this is good news.

“Lord, to whom can we go?” What a wonderful question this turned out to be! Once I started asking, I became so much more aware of the truth and beauty all around me, I had so many more examples that I couldn’t include or we’d be here all day. These precious words and images and sounds that crack open my heart and pour in love, courage, wisdom, that I cling to in hard times, that help me make sense of a senseless world. This embarrassment of riches, all thanks to this one little question. “Lord, to whom can we go?” I suppose the Spirit spoke to me through scripture after all.

Amen.