Teach Us How to Pray:
A Review of New Books by Episcopal Women

K. JEANNE PERSON*


In Luke’s Gospel, in the days when Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem and has begun to tell his disciples that he must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the religious leaders and be killed and then on the third day be raised, his closest circle of followers ask him to teach them how to pray. He had just gone off by himself to a certain place to pray, alone with God, as was his spiritual practice. His followers notice, and when Jesus finishes praying, they confess to him their need to pray as he did: “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples” (Luke 11:1).

I like to think that, in that moment, Jesus learned something about his vocation. From the earliest days of his public ministry, Jesus

---

* K. Jeanne Person is Canon for Pastoral Care in the Episcopal Diocese of New York. Previously, she was Director of the Center for Christian Spirituality at The General Theological Seminary and a priest in two New York City parishes. For two trienniums, she served on the Episcopal Church’s Committee on the Status of Women.
had understood the purpose of his life and ministry to be about healing and proclaiming good news. After his discernment in the wilderness, he had returned to his hometown of Nazareth and stood up in the synagogue, full of the Holy Spirit, to reveal his mission. He would teach about the reign of God, what it was like and what it could be like on earth. He would proclaim that it was coming and already very near, especially for those most in need of it, the poor, the imprisoned, the blind, the oppressed. He would help to bring about the reign of God by his preaching and by his healing of lepers and paralytics, blind and deaf people, and those possessed by demons. He would also help to usher in the reign by suffering and dying. But it may not have been until this moment of expressed need, desire, and perhaps some gentle critique by his disciples of his leadership compared with that of his cousin John the Baptist that Jesus realized his mission also was to be a teacher of prayer.

He himself was a man of prayer, in close relationship with God his Father. It is no coincidence that, in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus is praying in the moment of his baptism, when the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descends upon him. His prayer and his power in the Spirit for mission are interwoven. His prayer emboldens and strengthens him for proclaiming and healing. But when he commissions his disciples also to go forth into the villages to bring the good news and cure disease of every kind, Jesus may not have realized that they needed instruction in prayer for this ministry. They needed to know how to pray as he did. They needed a relationship with God as intimate as his. When his disciples begin to learn that the mission of Jesus also will involve suffering and death, they become more aware of their need for prayer and beg Jesus to instruct them in nurturing intimacy with God. “Lord, teach us to pray.” And so Jesus does, starting with the suggestion that they address God with a name of tender endearment, one used by beloved children. Abba.

Because Jesus instructed others in the art of prayer, teaching people how to pray is arguably one of the mission responsibilities of the Christian community. Not everyone within the community can be a teacher of prayer, for the Holy Spirit gives gifts for all kinds of different ministries. But some are so called.

Interestingly, from the very earliest days of Christianity to now, women as well as men have significantly participated in this mission of Jesus, from the desert mothers and fathers, to Christian mystics of the medieval age, to spiritual directors and teachers of prayer in more
recent times. The gender balance is manifest in the Anglican tradition. Julian of Norwich is as influential in Anglican spirituality as the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. In the Episcopal Church today, Margaret Guenther and Barbara Cawthorne Crafton are as important teachers of prayer as Alan Jones and Martin Smith. Indeed, women may have been able to serve as teachers of prayer from the beginning precisely because one can do so without being part of patriarchal structures of society and church. I cherish a description of people who pray authentically once offered by Evelyn Underhill:

> What then are real people of prayer? They are those who deliberately will and steadily desire that their intercourse with God and other souls shall be controlled and actuated at every point by God Himself; those who have so far developed and educated their spiritual sense, that their supernatural environment is more real and solid to them than their natural environment. Men and women of prayer are not necessarily those who say a number of offices or abound in detailed intercessions, but they are children of God, who are and know themselves to be in the depths of their souls attached to God, and are wholly and entirely guided by the Creative Spirit in their prayer and their work.¹

This description resonates for me both because it speaks of an intimacy with God as beloved children, the intimacy Jesus knew and taught his disciples, and because it affirms the ordinary mysticism possible for all Christians, which I have experienced in my own spiritual life. But also, as one who has studied and advocated for gender equality in the Anglican Church, I also confess to being amused that Underhill, a lay British woman, offered this understanding of authentic people of prayer in an address to men studying for the priesthood at a seminary in England.

In recent years in the United States, there has been a flourishing of writings by Episcopal women on the art of prayer. Now that women can be ordained as deacons, priests, and bishops, we are seeing such works teaching people how to pray from both lay and ordained women. Some are scholars, while others are pastors in practical ministry settings, such as parishes and hospitals. Some write from within the church and academy, while others have left these institutions and

moved on to new settings for their work. This article aims to present briefly four recently published books and examine what they teach about prayer.

**With Scripture**

When Jesus stood in the synagogue at Nazareth and proclaimed his mission, he revealed both his familiarity with the Jewish sacred texts and an ability to draw upon them for fresh images. In revealing his self-understanding as a participant in God’s good purposes, he did not say to the gathered congregation that he was the Messiah, or Son of David, or King of Israel, images for the One who would bring about God’s salvation they knew well. Instead, undoubtedly rooted in both his lifelong study of scripture and his prayer and discernment in the wilderness, he gathered images from Isaiah to offer a different vision. *I shall be a Proclaimer of good news to the poor and the imprisoned, of recovery of sight for the blind and acceptability to those who are outcast, marginalized. Proclaimer.* One who speaks, as God spoke at the beginning of creation. One who offers, indeed One who is, a Word to usher in the restored creation. Although scripturally based, this image of Proclaimer was a new image in Jesus’ day for Israel’s understanding of the One who would free them.

Such searching of scripture for non-traditional metaphors is the endeavor of Lauren Winner in *Wearing God: Clothing, Laughter, Fire, and Other Overlooked Ways of Meeting God*. An Episcopal priest and professor of Christian spirituality, Winner seeks fresh biblical images for God and God’s activity, after a “salty” season in her own life during which she felt very far from God (Winner, 4), in order to gain a new spirituality. Different images of God, she explains, lead to different kinds of relationships with God and with another, and also shape our prayer.

Each chapter of the book is an extensive look at a particular biblical metaphor for God or God’s activity that a reader may not have previously known and, even more likely, may not have used for contemplating or speaking with God. The metaphors are exciting—friend, clothing, smell, bread and wine, laboring woman, laughter, flame. Winner has done extensive research and draws deeply from the well of scripture, ancient teaching, and current scholarship. Throughout the book are quotations from this research, set apart from the main text for their careful consideration. Her endnotes are lengthy, appealing to
any serious student of the Bible. Yet while *Wearing God* is manifestly the work of an academic, it is also a meditative piece. The book’s very design is revealing: despite the extensive endnotes, no endnote numbers appear in the body of the text. It is as if Winner wishes you to enter upon an undistracted spiritual experience as you read.

As she explores the biblical metaphors, Winner offers guidance about how to pray with them. Each chapter concludes, for example, with a written prayer from the Christian tradition using the metaphor. Most helpful for me, though, are her accounts of her personal experiences when praying the metaphors.

I was profoundly moved, for example, by her confession of shame in a moment of prayer, in her chapter entitled “Clothing.” She is describing her experience of imaginative prayer with the story in Genesis 3 of God clothing Adam and Eve after their disobedience. As she prays, and encounters Adam and Eve’s shame, she realizes that she, too, is feeling shame about her own body.

I so rarely even name this shame to myself; layers and layers of feminist politics and willed insistence that I love my body as it is keep me, most of the time, from a direct encounter with the shame. But the shame is there. It weighs exactly twenty pounds. It is about ten years old. The body I would feel unashamed of, the body I believe I could delight in, is twenty pounds thinner—what my body looked like a decade ago. (Winner, 58)

I imagine almost every aging woman in America feels this shame at some point. I certainly do. I often obsessively weigh myself.

But as Winner continues to pray with the biblical metaphor of God as Clothing, and of followers of Jesus as being clothed with Christ, she begins to feel the possibility of her shame being transformed by grace.

Perhaps, if I sit inside Genesis 3 long enough, . . . I will come to know that God is in fact intimately pressed up against my body, as near as a camisole or a neon running shirt. That God is as close to my shame as this shawl is to my shoulders. That God is pressed up against all the corrosive shame in my life—not just the shame I feel about my body, but all my whatever-else shame, all the many pockets of curdling shame and regret I carry. While I feel cloaked with shame, God is tenderly stitching me a suit of clothes. The clothing is God’s own self. (Winner, 59–60)
In her chapter entitled “Laughter,” Winner describes her practice of praying the entire Psalter each month. The Psalter, she notes, contains sustained accounts of God’s laughter, and it is not pleasant. Most often, in the laughing psalms, including Psalms 2, 37, and 59, God’s laughter is scathing and deriding, as God scoffs at the wicked. Winner confesses that she finds the psalms “hard to pray, because prayer breeds intimacy, and intimacy with the God of this menacing laugh is not something I want” (Winner, 187). What transforms her prayer, at last, is a blend of biblical scholarship, cultural observation, and spiritual practice. First, upon study and reflection, she comes to realize that God’s laughter in the psalms is consistent with—indeed, inseparable from—the biblical proclamation of God’s justice. God laughs in the face of injustice as a powerful expression of the reversal toward justice that is to come. Then she remembers the occasions and use of humor and laughter by human advocates for justice. She smiles at today’s Raging Grannies: “As far as I can tell, the only requirements to join are that you have to be old enough to be a grandmother, you have to wear clothes that mock stereotypes of dried-up old women, and you have to lustily sing protest songs. . . . I want to be like these women when I grow up” (Winner, 194). Finally, she prays the psalms again and, as she prays, she thinks she can hear God laughing gently at her. “It is a touch rueful, as though God appreciates that I cannot do it any better but wishes that I could” (Winner, 199). God’s laughter in that moment of prayer, judgmental and forgiving, filled with both disappointment and love, causes her to chuckle also, and she begins to welcome God’s laughing at her as an invitation to transformation.

Such very personal accounts about intimate moments of prayer are what make Lauren Winner’s presentation of new biblical metaphors so alive, inviting, accessible. By her experiences of them, she encourages me to try them, too, in my own prayer.

As Poets

Especially if one were to define the beginning of Anglicanism by the English Reformation, one could easily argue that poetry has always been constitutive of Anglican spirituality and prayer. From the metaphysical poems in the early seventeenth century, such as the divine poems of John Donne with their mystical sexuality and the liturgical, sometimes quaint poems of George Herbert; to the fiercely intelligent works of twentieth-century poets, such as T. S. Eliot and...
Geoffrey Hill, replete with literary reference; to the landscape spirituality of Anglican poetry in recent decades, including the poems of Rowan Williams that reflect Anglicanism’s indebtedness to the Celtic religion and Phyllis Tickle’s portrayals of her life on a farm in Tennessee: poetry has long expressed and deepened the prayer of Anglicans, both those who write and those who read and pray with it. These poets are just a few of the many who have shaped Anglican spirituality over the centuries.

With the movement for gender equality in the twentieth century, we begin to see published volumes of poetry from Anglican women. One of my treasured possessions is a signed first edition of *Dark Testament and Other Poems*, a collection of poems by Pauli Murray, the first African American woman to be ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church. Published in 1970 just a few years before she entered seminary, while she was still working as a human rights attorney, this volume of poetry, written throughout her life thus far, especially her years in Harlem, reveals both her concern for racial justice and her Anglican prayer. Her poem “Collect for Poplarville,” for example, in which she grieves the lynching of Mack Charles Parker in 1959, is an expansion of a collect in the Evening Prayer liturgy of the *Book of Common Prayer*:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord;} \\
\text{Teach us no longer to dread} \\
\text{hounds yelping in the distance,} \\
\text{the footfall at the door. . . .}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{And by thy great mercy defend us from all perils} \\
\text{and dangers of this night;} \\
\text{Give us fearlessness to face} \\
\text{the bomb thrown from the darkness. . . .} \\
\text{Teach us that most difficult of tasks—} \\
\text{to pray for them,} \\
\text{to follow, not burn, thy cross!}
\end{align*}
\]

Into this new stream of published volumes by Anglican poets who are women comes *A Lot of the Way Trees Were Walking: Poems from the Gospel of Mark* by Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, an Episcopal priest.

---

New Testament scholar, and seminary dean. Whereas her usual approach to scripture is close reading of texts for careful analysis, Kittredge chose for the writing of this cycle of prayers a non-scholarly methodology of personal immersion. Early in the morning, she would take up Mark’s Gospel, reading from where she left off the previous morning and staying open to the inquiry and wonder the text might arouse within her. “I read the gospel from the beginning; I tackled whatever puzzle or detail seized me; and I set out to play it out in a poem” (Kittredge, xi). Her daily practice was something akin to lectio divina, which like Kittredge’s methodology involves slow reading of scripture and a response informed by knowledge about a biblical text, the various nonscriptural images and associations the text evokes, and openness to a word from God which the reading offers. Similarly, Kittredge allowed herself to use her imagination. “I read from the point of view of animals. I thought about plants. I mixed up the gender of characters. I read myself into the text” (Kittredge, xii). In her introduction to the book, Kittredge never uses the words lectio divina or imaginative prayer or Ignatian spirituality, but clearly she was influenced by these ascetical traditions. In other words, each morning, she was praying.

It is risky for a biblical scholar not to follow the rules of her academic field. It is even more daring for her to publish her poems. For they offer not just new insights in Mark’s Gospel, but also glimpses into Kittredge’s interior life. In the first poem of the cycle, “What Shall I Cry?” we might at first think the protagonist is John the Baptist:

Way before I reached that turning point
of not knowing what to cry
I had to ask for years and years,
shall I?

But then, Kittredge reveals herself as the one crying out:

Can I?
Dare with trembling ink
to spill to mark the soil
blank white wilderness
erase the possibility
for anything else to grow
there but that. But you.
Indelible. (Kittredge, 3)
The one who is wondering what to cry is someone who has long waited, or resisted, or been afraid to put pen to paper, in hope of raising up “you.” Is that “you” Kittredge herself, in self-discovery? Or God, newly known? Or both?

Throughout the cycle of poems are many cultural references that help Mark’s Gospel become relevant for readers today—Johnny Cash’s lyrics to “Folsom Prison Blues,” William Golding’s Lord of the Flies, L. Frank Baum’s The Wonderful Wizard of Oz. Also throughout the poems are lovely recurring images, for example, of falling and of the heavens tearing open. In the poem “Fierce Industry,” based on Mark 2:1–12, friends of a paralytic (“She got the mallet / he brought the awl”) cut a hole in a housetop roof and lower their friend to Jesus: “Jesus looked up, ceiling torn open, / down came the man suspended, / descending like a holy bird” (Kittredge, 16). In the poem “Where to Look,” based on Mark 4:1–20, Kittredge discovers a new place to look for the reign of God:

You can look up to the heaven and hope it opens
or lower your gaze to the soil
see what the seed is doing. . . .
Somewhere she beats the odds
germinates—
the galaxy is born. (Kittredge, 19)

Such resonances among the poems suggest that the cycle is best read in its entirety. Indeed, my own approach was to read the poems as Kittredge wrote them, from the beginning of the cycle to the end. Doing so, I found myself deeply moved by the integrity of the cycle and the power of the hope that, at the last, emerged from them. The poem cycle itself became a gospel of Jesus, a relevant gospel for today.

A final note: One characteristic of Kittredge’s poems I especially appreciate is that, contrary to what I have indicated so far, the scripture passages to which the poems refer are not always immediately apparent. For years I have prayed with an anthology of poetry entitled Divine Inspiration: The Life of Jesus in World Poetry\(^3\) and have been able to do so mostly without having the Bible also at hand. Almost always the titles and texts of poems responding to scripture reveal the

---

underlying passage or story without my having to go searching. With Kittredge’s poems, however, although she does group them according to sections of Mark’s Gospel, I often found myself not always immediately sure and thus curious about what scripture passage caught her attention and led to her writing. This led me to open the Bible and read closely the Gospel alongside her poems. That is, Kittredge became a teacher for me of both Mark’s Gospel itself and of slow reading, pondering, and praying with scripture.

When We Suffer

In the opening chapter of her best-selling book of guidance for prayer, Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers, author and memorist Anne Lamott teaches that prayer is best when it is honest, when it describes situations, feelings about them, and desires arising out of them exactly as they are. “My belief is that when you’re telling the truth, you’re close to God.”4 She also writes that authentic prayer is such honest expression reaching out to “that which surpasses understanding.”5 It might be called God, or as easily, Goodness, Life, Grandmother, Love, Mystery. Or Light:

It is us reaching out to be heard, hoping to be found by a light and warmth in the world, instead of darkness and cold. . . . Light reveals us to ourselves, which is not always so great if you find yourself in a big disgusting mess, possibly of your own creation. But like sunflowers we turn toward light. Light warms, and in most cases it draws us to itself. And in this light, we can see beyond our modest receptors, to what is way beyond us, and deep inside.6

Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest and, like Lamott, a widely ready author on the spiritual life, holds a different perspective on light and darkness. In her new book Learning to Walk in the Dark, she intentionally turns toward darkness, not light, for self-discovery and for deepening her relationship with God.

Taylor’s belief is that Christianity has too much divided reality into opposites, such as spirit and flesh, church and world, knowledge

---

5 Lamott, Help, Thanks, Wow, 1.
6 Lamott, Help, Thanks, Wow, 7.
and ignorance, light and darkness, life and death, and has wrongly chosen to demonize darkness, associating it with what is lower or base or evil in a hierarchical structure of reality—flesh, the female, sin, the devil, death. By this division, Christianity has contributed to the contemporary fear of the dark, a fear that leads us to do all in our power to eliminate darkness, especially through artificial light. Worse, Christianity has embraced a “full solar spirituality” that offers “a sure sense of God’s presence, certainty of belief, divine guidance in all things, and reliable answers to prayers” (Taylor, 7). This spirituality, she argues, cannot ultimately provide a meaningful resource for anyone experiencing real suffering, painful human emotions, spiritual doubt, or anything of which they are afraid. It is, indeed, a sunny spirituality that no longer works for her in her own life.

Her book, then, becomes her intentional exploration of darkness, in its many facets and how she experiences it. She pursues her exploration in a variety of creative ways. Recognizing that the experience of darkness is personal and contextual, dependent on one’s culture, socio-economic location, and family background, she constructs a personal history of what she was taught as a child about darkness. Because she is a priest, she returns to the Bible to read with fresh perspective its images of darkness. She investigates research of psychologists into what are sometimes called the dark emotions. She studies blindness and the ability of the blind to grasp the details of their world without light. She learns about the dangerous effects of electricity on the creation’s physical well-being, from the reproductive activity of sea turtles to human patterns of sleep. She remembers what she knows from the teachings of the great Christian mystics about the dark night of the soul. And throughout this intellectual journey into darkness, she also embarks on physical pilgrimage, taking her body into places of actual physical darkness. She lies down in the yard of her home in the country to observe the different stages of twilight and the rising of the sky into the darkness, sometimes brilliant with moon and stars, sometimes clouded over. She participates in an exhibition in which sighted people are guided by blind guides through various settings, such as a park and a grocery story, in a completely dark exhibition hall. She goes on a guided tour of a cave in which stones shimmer brilliantly, but only if surrounded by darkness; once she takes one out into bright light, without any shielding circle of darkness, it is a simple grey pebble. She spends a retreat night in a cabin without any artificial light.
And she prays. Taylor’s exploration of darkness transforms ways of praying familiar to me. By her study of the biblical understanding of *araphel*, for example, a Hebrew word in scripture used for the unnatural darkness signifying the presence of God, such as the darkness atop Mount Sinai when Moses receives the law, Taylor is able to re-interpret a well-known collect from the *Book of Common Prayer* that begins “Look down, O Lord from your heavenly throne and illumine this night with your celestial brightness.” God’s celestial brightness, she teaches, “transcends both wave and particle. . . . It is the light Moses saw in the darkness on Mount Sinai, where the glory of God came wrapped in dazzling darkness” (Taylor, 102). Similarly, she invites a new understanding of a prayer by the Trappist monk Thomas Merton that is well known to many students of Christian spirituality, a prayer that she keeps on her bedside table. It begins: “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me.” Is Merton speaking merely of the unknowable future? Or is he describing a current dark reality? Is that dark reality physical, emotional, spiritual? How might I pray his prayer, as I have for many years, anew?

Her spiritual experiences of darkness also teach me new ways to pray. On her night of retreat without any electricity, she learns to speak to the dark. “Since my instructions included speaking to the dark while I lie here, I try to think of something to say. ‘If there is anything you want to show me, here I am,’ I say . . . ” (Taylor, 160). What might I say to the dark? Instead of desiring from prayer “direct answers, clear guidance, specific tasks,” as she did earlier in her life, Taylor begins to be able “to accept this peaceful darkness” and even “the absence of any sense of God” as actual signs of God’s presence (Taylor, 162). Can I?

The most recent books by both Taylor and Lamott have to do with the spiritual life in times of human sorrow or darkness. Like Taylor’s *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, Lamott’s *Small Victories: Spotting Improbable Moments of Grace* is a collection of personal memoir and spiritual guidance. It can be viewed as a companion work to *Help, Thanks, Wow*, in that Lamott illustrates, by her personal stories, her teaching about prayer in the earlier work. Also, while being very honest about the mess and pain of human life, *Small Victories* similarly offers, in the words of its book jacket, “a message of hope that celebrates the triumph of light over the darkness in our lives.” Taylor’s

---

approach, by contrast, is to embrace the darkness, not to seek victory over it. It seems synchronicity that even the covers for Taylor’s and Lamott’s newest books reflect the differences in their faithful responses to darkness. The background colors are of the same family of blue, yet the blue of Lamott’s is brighter. Ornamenting the cover art of Lamott’s book are small, bright gold dots, arranged as though they are particles of light bursting forth from a center. Adorning Taylor’s is a scene of a forest at night, a full moon in the sky and the trees bare, dark silhouettes.

Both women are exemplary teachers of prayer, especially by their willingness to share their own interior lives with their readers. How we respond to their teaching, and how it shapes our prayer, may depend on our personalities, our confidence or shame, what our religions have given to us, our personal histories and relationships, the work we do, the losses we have experienced. Are we more drawn to the sun or to the moon? And if we think we know the answer, are we open to spiritual practices for re-orientation, a turning in our life of prayer, in order to gain new insight into God?

When Religion Changes

And when God makes a person, a star or a wave,  
A part of God stays with whatever God’s made.  
So God lives in the sky, in the meadow and stream—  
God lives everywhere, and God isn’t a dream.  
God lives in the frog and the birds and in you.  
When you’re looking for God, it’s easy to do.8

—Holly Bea

God lives in glass and is shaped by the wind.9

—Natasha, 7 years old, Christian, South Africa

One of my passions is children’s religious literature, especially picture books for young children. My interest grew from my love of imagination and story as resources for talking about God, my ministries with children as both a parish priest and as the Director of the Center for Christian Spirituality at The General Theological Seminary, where

I helped to launch the Spiritual Guidance of Children program, and my mystical Easter experiences of a ten-year-old boy in one of my Sunday school classes who died one afternoon after school while taking a nap. Today, several bookcases of a room in my home in Brooklyn hold my personal library of children’s picture books with religious and spiritual themes, comprising roughly a thousand volumes. At their best, these picture books become Word and Sacrament: to engage their simple yet often poetic talk about God and their beautiful illustrations, a visual depiction of the majesty and mystery of God, is for me an act of worship. I also cherish these books because they reveal children, and the authors who write for them based on their close listening to them are among the best theologians. Children ask very creative questions about God and offer very surprising answers.

One of the simplest questions they often ask is, “Where is God?” This question is, of course, fundamental to humanity’s broken relationship with God. In the Genesis creation story, after Adam and Eve have eaten the forbidden fruit, God’s first words to them are, “Where are you?” Ever since, in a deep yearning for restoration to Eden and right relationship with God, humanity has in turn asked this same question of God. Intuitively and unabashedly, children ask the question again and again. This has led to many children’s picture books with such titles as *Where Does God Live?* and *Where is Jesus?*. Sometimes the books reflect one particular faith tradition, and sometimes they appear within the ecumenical and interfaith realm, such as Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso and illustrator Sally Sweetland’s *God In Between*, which tells the story of a mythical village without windows or roads. One of the villagers has heard there is a God, and the townspeople decide to go looking for God for help. Eventually, they find God in the spaces between one another.

“Where is God?” is also the fundamental question of Diana Butler Bass’s new book *Grounded: Finding God in the World*. An esteemed researcher and writer about the significant changes in the American religious landscape in the twenty-first century, particularly the growing number of Nones, or people who do not affiliate with any one religion, Bass argues in this new book that a major reason for a rebirthing of faith and an emerging new era in the history of religion and spirituality is a shift in religion’s deepest questions. In recent centuries, religion mostly tried to answer the questions “Who is God?” and “What must I do to be a good person or to be saved?” Today, she
writes, questions focus on finding God and interpreting what God’s presence means.

Her answer to “Where is God?” is, basically, “Right here.” Many people, she argues, no longer believe in an unknowable, unreachable God who dwells above the world’s mountaintops or in the highest heavens, and who can only be mediated through the structures of religion. Rather, they are finding God with and within the world, for example in nature, in their relationships with others, in acts of kindness and service. God is nearby, personal, accessible. “God-in-heaven is giving way to Spirit-with-us” (Bass, 20). And because the theologies, vocabulary of worship and prayer, and spiritual practices of many religions still reflect a “vertical theology” that cannot grasp the new understandings and intimate experiences of God, people are abandoning organized religion.

In what may be a shock to some, Bass confesses she may soon be among them. Bass has long identified as an Episcopalian and has been active in the Episcopal Church. She welcomes commitment, discipline, moral passion, and a willingness to serve others—virtues one can pursue in a faith community. Yet church is becoming more difficult for her:

Much to my surprise, church has become a spiritual, even a theological struggle for me. I have found it increasingly difficult to sing hymns that celebrate a hierarchical heavenly realm, to recite creeds that feel disconnected from life, to pray liturgies that emphasize salvation through blood, to listen to sermons that preach an exclusive way to God, to participate in sacraments that exclude others, and to find myself confined to a hard pew in a building with no windows to the world outside. This has not happened because I am angry at the church or God. Rather, it has happened because I was moving around in the world and began to realize how beautifully God was everywhere: in nature and in my neighborhood, in considering the stars and by seeking my roots. (Bass, 23)

So, she is looking for God elsewhere. From her confession of growing discontent with what religion, she believes, is stuck in, Bass turns to the main purpose of her book: to discover and present new, fresh answers to the question “Where is God?” In her pursuit, she reveals that she is an able scholar of religion, a keen observer of history and culture, and quite profoundly, a woman of prayer.
Bass divides her locations for God into two main categories: natural habitat and human geography. Within each, she finds creative places for where God can be found. In the natural habit, God is in dirt, water, and sky. In human geography, God is in family roots, home, neighborhood, and commons. Each of these near, in-the-world locations for God becomes a chapter in the book.

Because I live in two places, a home in Brooklyn and a country house in the Hudson Valley, I am drawn to the variety of Bass’s images for God’s dwelling place, because they suggest God might be wherever I am. Indeed, this is Bass’s faith affirmation. Further, I appreciate that she teaches me, especially by example, how to pray to and be in relationship with God in all of the places I might be.

In her presentation of the metaphor of God’s location in dirt, for example, Bass interweaves a personal history of her relationship with dirt with a scholarly exploration of biblical images of soil, religion’s theological perspectives, the history of agriculture, the science of soil, and today’s environmental movement, including new environmental theologies and the rising number of faith communities creating gardens for local produce. She remembers her early childhood as a city girl, when she did not like to get dirty, then her family’s move to the country, where she began to discover the wonders of nature:

Those woods and farms were a sanctuary of the sacred, a place where the Bible actually spoke…. Freed from memorizing Bible verses in the church basement, I sank into the world charged with the Word of God. There I not only heard about God, but I met God while watching the tadpoles in the spring and listening to the wind-rustled golden trees in the autumn. And I would sit on the ground, by the stream or under a leafy canopy, feeling the dirt’s moist chill, where I sensed the life of soil. I left my brother and sister behind, wandering solitary through the countryside, an adolescent girl accidentally embodying the spirit of Thoreau, finding heaven under my feet as much as over my head. (Bass, 34)

Not only has Christianity viewed God’s dwelling place as heaven high above the earth, but also Christianity has been harmful, Bass asserts, by disregarding the ground itself as sinful and evil. In the theological language of the church, people who sin are soiled. They make muddied ethical choices. Bass recalls attending an Easter Vigil liturgy after spending Lent “studying soil, rediscovering what it means to be grounded in the world, and reading creation stories and articles
about the topsoil crisis” (Bass, 53), as well as working in her garden. Unexpectedly and to her surprise, she finds herself recoiling from the familiar imagery of baptism, which suggests that salvation means washing away dirt. “The metaphors of church struck with an angular force against the metaphors of the garden” (Bass, 54).

So she begins to seek new places to pray and new ways of praying. She goes on pilgrimage to Chimayo, New Mexico, the fertile soil of which is believed to have healing properties. Each year, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims kneel and pray in a chapel there, next to a pit of sacred dirt, seeking healing. Bass does, too, and rubs dirt on her forehead “as if marking myself with holy water” (Bass, 60). She then remembers the story of Jesus healing a man born blind with mud. Her spiritual practice, she realizes, is “biblical stuff” (Bass, 60). Later, she prays while walking barefoot in her garden and recalls the poetry of Mary Oliver: “The god of dirt / came up to me many times and said / so many wise and delectable things, I lay / on the grass listening . . .” (Bass, 63). She begins to name God in her prayer as Earth-maker, Gardener, Ground of Being.

In each chapter of Grounded, Bass offers similar ideas for prayer, presenting them as she herself is experiencing them. Because in the city I am a walker, and in the country a hiker, I especially like the practices of walking prayer she teaches while exploring neighborhood as a metaphor for God’s dwelling place. Bass likes to walk in her own neighborhood and sometimes thinks of the words of Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh: “Walking with ease and peace of mind on the earth is a wonderful miracle.” For her own prayer, she changes the words slightly: “Walking with ease and peace of mind around the neighborhood is a wonderful miracle” (Bass, 229). Her words remind me of another of my spiritual mentors, Margaret Guenther, who like me once served as the Director of the Center for Christian Spirituality at General Seminary. Guenther likes to walk, too, which once led her to write a book about the many walking stories in scripture.10 As Bass teaches me new ways of walking with God in my Brooklyn neighborhood, I imagine all three of us walking together.

Jesus once taught that in order to enter the reign of God, one must become like a little child. I wonder often what he meant by this, imagining different possibilities. Reading Grounded, I remember

---

that young children are very open about their spirituality and prayer. They sing songs and pray sometimes funny prayers to God. They play with God, knowing that God is right there. They tell stories without embarrassment about their experiences of God. And they ask lots of questions about God. I remember these characteristics of children’s spirituality because I experience them in Bass, through her personal stories. She is, I discover, truly a child of God. The reign of God is, for her, at hand.

Conclusion

Eternal Spirit of the living Christ,
I know not how to ask or what to say;
I only know my need, as deep as life,
and only you can teach me how to pray.\(^\text{11}\)

—Frank von Christierson

By the time Jesus drew near to the end of his ministry and life, in Luke’s Gospel, he arguably had fully developed his abilities as a teacher of prayer. For he had learned to teach prayer by example, showing to others how he himself prayed. Early in his ministry, he was very private about his prayer. He would withdraw to deserted places and pray (Luke 5:16), alone with his Father. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus teaches that such seclusion is necessary: “Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matt. 6:6). But these words do not appear in Luke’s Gospel. Luke’s Jesus begins to let his disciples into his prayer life. He takes Peter and John and James with him when he goes up on the mountain to pray, and they witness what happens to him in that moment of prayer, his dazzling Transfiguration, his union with God. Even in his last moments with his disciples, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus continues to instruct them in prayer, by both word and example. In Luke’s Gospel, on the Mount of Olives, Jesus does not ask his followers to stay awake with him, for his comfort, but rather directs them in prayer: “Pray that you may not come into the time of trial” (Luke 22:40). Then, he prays himself, still in their sight, modeling prayer for them. See how I pray when I’m really scared, when I want God to make it impossible for me

\(^{11}\) Copyright for the words to this hymn is held by The Hymn Society of America, 1976.
to suffer, when I realize I’m going to die and my death will be painful. See me submit, in prayer, to what I believe are God’s purposes, even if it involves some sacrifice on my part. See me praying so hard that my sweat is like blood falling to the ground. Learn from me how to pray.

In the books reviewed here, the authors have similarly let us, the readers, into their personal lives of prayer. They have instructed us, certainly, by word. But through their personal narratives, they have also taught us by example, showing us their own practices of prayer. They both have revealed when their prayer has been life-giving for them and have, with extraordinary vulnerability, confessed their struggles in prayer. In this, they are Christ for me. They teach as Luke’s Jesus taught, helping me to pray as Jesus prayed. They have offered me new ways to grow in intimacy with God. For their teaching, and for their prayer, I am grateful.