

RHYTHMS OF THE GOD-LIFE

**THE BOOK OF ACTS THROUGH
PARAPHRASE, POETRY, AND PRAYER**



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Rhythms of the God-Life

General Introduction

“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”

Proust

Encountering the Word

The little boy tugged on his father’s pant leg. The father bent down and his son whispered in his ear, “Daddy, why does Mrs. Smith carry such a big Bible everywhere?”

The father whispered back, “Why don’t you ask her.”

Summoning his courage, the boy asked Mrs. Smith about her Bible. With an immediate smile that the boy did not expect, Mrs. Smith replied, “Well I like to read it!”

“But why?” the boy blurted out, much to his father’s embarrassment.

“Because it’s the only book that reads me back,” was her reply.¹

Rhythms of the God-Life is an invitation to dig deeper into God’s Word. *Rhythms* is an “interpretive paraphrase” (about which I will say more below) that invites readers to read with both head and heart, to ponder the ways the Word connects to who you are and whose you are, and to respond to God’s call with actions in both the private and public sphere. Both your interior life of spirit and your public living of truth will be challenged in these pages, for you will encounter Jesus in them.

It is not enough to read Scripture without engaging and encountering the Word. As John Calvin once wrote, “Let not the Word of The Truth flit about in your mind alone but allow it to seep into the deep places, into the very marrow of your soul.” The aphorism that “the Bible is the only book that we read that reads us back” is as true for an interpretive paraphrase as for a traditional translation.

I am a pastor who believes Scripture when it says the Holy Spirit lives within each one of us who calls upon

the name of God and has been baptized according to the Triune name. As such, each of us has living within us a theological seminary of sorts: the Scripture text we are reading or know by heart, the experiences of fidelity and failure with which we have sought to live the Gospel, as well as the great communion of saints we have known and know, whose voices are our companions along the Way of Jesus. And the Holy Spirit is our Counselor who takes all this source material and shapes, forms and transforms us more fully into the image of Christ Jesus.

The above paragraph sounds grandiose. Let me rephrase it in terms of educational theory. I do not believe in the “Banking Model” of education, in which an instructor opens up the student’s brain and deposits facts and information first to be memorized, then to be regurgitated, with the assumption that such methods can be called learning. What we know about the human brain tells us learning is not linear. Instead of a one-way transmission of information, true learning happens as we engage one another in dialogue: back-and-forth, forth-and-back. True learning moves beyond the informational to the transformational.

Rhythms seeks transformation. It is comprised of three sections for each passage: an interpretive paraphrase, a poem that interprets and applies the text, and a prayer that applies the text to one’s daily life. Each of these sections intends to engage the reader with information that leads to dialogue. I do not ask you merely to receive my interpretation of the biblical text and its implications for our daily living and life together. I ask you to engage the material with mind and heart and spirit as an active learner.

¹ This story is of unknown origin. I first heard it told in the 1990’s at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary in a continuing

education seminar taught by Tom Long, who at the time was a professor of homiletics at Princeton Theological Seminary.

Interpretive Paraphrase

What will it look like to be an active learner with *Rhythms*? It starts with interpretive paraphrase, which balances scrupulosity to the Greek text and creativity to modern expressions. *Rhythms* remains rooted in the text and yet gives the text wings, to convey faithfully the Greek text of the New Testament yet do so in a way that invites the reader to see beyond the familiarity of beloved words of Scripture to experience the Word more deeply. This balancing act required choices about what words give precision and clarity for textual understanding, what words invite the reader's imagination to hear the music of Scripture, and when it is necessary to expand on the Greek text in order to convey culture and customs unseen by most modern readers. I will let you, Gentle Reader, be the judge as to whether I have made wise choices.

Early readers of the pages that follow often mistook them for Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, which I took as an extreme compliment. I have endeavored to apply the same scrupulosity to my paraphrase as Dr. Peterson famously applied to *The Message*. Where we differ is that I have taken the liberty to include contextual clues not found in the original, Greek manuscripts but which would have been obvious to the original, 1st century readers and hearers of the text. These contextual clues come from citing the Hebrew Scriptures, Roman laws, and both Roman and Jewish cultural practices. Sometimes the cultural clues are embedded in the paraphrase and other times they are in a footnote.

In Volume I of the *Rhythms* series I paraphrase the familiar passage, "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, offer them the left also" (Matthew 5:39). I show how this passage assumes cultural practices between Roman soldiers and the oppressed, Jewish populace as follows:

If a Roman soldier backhands you, essentially treating you like a dog, turn your other cheek to him, inviting him to treat you as his equal.

In Volume II of the *Rhythms* series, I provide context in a footnote when Paul references being in prison:

Paul is in and out of prison frequently during his ministry. In the autocratic and oppressive rule of the Romans, Christian ethics were perceived as seditious. Roman culture was a caste system and like all dictatorships the Romans were suspicious

when people from different castes gathered together. The Romans' presumption was that rebellion was being planned. The Romans did not care about Paul's preaching for its religious content (because he was Jewish or participated in a Jewish sect) but because his message led people to challenge the social and legal structures upon which Roman culture was built. Further, the early Christian confession that Jesus is Lord was in direct violation of Roman law and a contradiction to the foundational, political statement of Roman authority that said Caesar is Lord.

The purpose of these interpretive insertions into the paraphrase is to illuminate the Word more fully; however, it is the responsibility of each reader, as one in whom the Holy Spirit lives, to engage my words as an active learner and dialogue partner: Why did I phrase this as I did? What did I see that you did not or missed that you see?

Poetry

To assist in the work of engaging and encountering the Word, each passage includes a poem and a prayer that reflects upon the passage. Emily Dickinson wrote that poetry helps us see something "slant"² and opens us to new perspectives. Dickinson invited her readers to look upon the familiar and see new creation, to move beyond our assumptions to encounter life's mysteries with wonder and awe. To tell something slant has become a metaphor that both connects with the concrete and then amplifies and moves beyond it. The poems in *Rhythms* seek to help readers see God's Word "slant" and use three poetic styles: Haiku, Cinquain, and free verse.

Haiku poems have three lines. The first line is five syllables. The second line is seven syllables. The third line is five syllables. Here is an example of a *Haiku* from Romans 8:1-4:

*Jesus on the Cross
Battle for eternity
His heart curved outward*

Cinquain poems have five lines. The first line is one word, the second line two words, then three words, four words, but then the fifth line is one word. Here is an example of a *Cinquain* from 1 Corinthians 2:3-16:

² c.f. Emily Dickinson, *Tell All the Truth but Tell It Slant* (1886) and *There's a Certain Slant of Light* (1861).

Wisdom
spiritual mystery
wondering and wandering
learning The Truth-rhythms anew
wholeness

Free verse will be a more familiar form for most readers. I use free verse for the majority of passages and seek both to invite insights into the meaning of the text as well as provoke questions about the text. If the poems do not connect for you, I invite you to craft your own poetic response to the Word!

Prayer

Praying the Word is an ancient spiritual practice combining Scripture and prayer, often called *lectio divina*, which is a Latin phrase meaning “divine reading.” Benedictine *lectio divina* invites a reader to notice where the Spirit draws one’s attention and to remain in that place in meditation on the word, phrase, or verse. Ignatian *lectio divina*, which works well for story passages, invites a reader to imagine yourself present in the event being described. For example, imagine yourself as a disciple watching four men lower their paralyzed friend down through a roof (Mark 2:3-4). What do you see, hear, smell, and notice through your Spirit-guided sacred imagination?

In Volume I, for the Gospels of Matthew and John, I pray using the format of the Prayer of St. Francis. Here is an example from Matthew 5:3:

Lord, make me poor in spirit,
when too full, let me be poured out,
when too proud, let me choose humility,
when grasping for my own sake,
let me be spent in compassion.

O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
to live for my own gain as to love with joyful generosity,
to trust in my strength as to accept my belovedness,
to think I know best as to trust you know better.

For the act of *kenosis*³ - of emptying -
is the model of Jesus,
the giving of self the Way of the Cross
that leads to eternal life.

In Mark, Luke, and Acts in Volume I, and continuing with Romans to Revelation in Volume II, the prayers begin, “God, it’s me....” Here is an example from Hebrews 8:1-13:

God, it’s me. I long for certainty: not the kind conveyed by power and privilege, nor that which comes from market success or insurance. No, I long for the certainty that my life is built on that which endures: character and hope and a love that will not let me go. I long for the certainty that my well-being depends not on human choices but upon Divine choosing: I belong to you—body and soul, in life and in death. I am humbled and grateful, that my longing is welcomed by Jesus.

In Matthew and John I chose to mirror the format of the “Prayer of St. Francis.”

Whether through direct address or formatted to mirror St. Francis (aka, my favorite saint), the prayers are written from my personal perspective, as if I am praying. If you do not connect with my personal experience, I invite you to craft your own prayer that speaks from your heart to God.

God-Language

Writing (and reading) a paraphrase is an opportunity to challenge one’s faith or, at least, explore the spiritual life slant. Though I am absolutely committed to inclusive language when referring to humanity, when speaking of the divine I prefer personal pronouns rather than the repetition of God, as in, “God said that God would bring God’s deliverance.” For me, personal pronouns better communicate that God is relational—the Holy Trinity, Three-in-One! I am personally comfortable speaking of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as well as saying something like, “God said that he would bring his deliverance.” That’s me: my comfort zone, my customary way of speaking the faith. And that’s okay.

However, as I have participated in small groups with female colleagues and listened to their experience of being excluded by the use of exclusively male expressions of God, I found myself wanting to experiment with the language I use. The Apostle Paul’s ethical guidance in Romans 14 is germane: “charity before freedom.” In *Rhythms* I chose to be cognizant that the way I speak of

himself nothing” (NIV) to describe Jesus’ emptying of his divine prerogatives to embrace the form of a servant.

³ *Kenosis* is a Greek word that means “emptying.” It is used most famously in the New Testament in Philippians 2:7 (c.f. “made

God may impact my beloved in Jesus in profound ways, for good or ill. Insisting on my personal comfort zone when others are negatively impacted is not okay.

I experimented with several ways to be inclusive with God-language (language about the divine) in early drafts. One experiment I found particularly meaningful personally was to speak of God as *Abba* and *Imma*, which are the Aramaic endearments for Daddy and Mommy. I wondered, as I wrote, how taking turns using *Abba* and *Imma* would affect my experience of the biblical text as Word of God. I wondered how my commitment to using personal pronouns while seeking to honor inclusive expressions of the One we worship as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier might affect me spiritually and ethically. What I discovered is a sense of community with female colleagues that felt sacred and unexpected (I am now chagrined to admit). I liked this fresh expression for speaking of God; therefore, you will find *Abba* and *Imma* but only used in one letter each.

Why only once?

In sharing *Rhythms* in written form and through teaching workshops, I discovered that some readers could not move past the prevalence of *Imma*. These readers, who were both male and female, appreciated my efforts to write a fresh expression of God's Word, but, for them, the use of *Imma* prevented them from embracing the interpretive paraphrase. Having already decided that "charity before freedom" is germane, I adapted my writing and tried another experiment in the following pages.

When using the divine name, I take the Hebrew Bible as inspiration, where God is called *El-Shaddai* (The Truth Almighty) and *El-Elyon* (Lord of Heaven and Earth). In the pages that follow, I call Yahweh by a unique characteristic connected to the theology and spirituality of the particular book or letter.

Book/Letter	Divine Name
Matthew	The Truth
Mark	The Action
Luke	The Compassion
John	The I WILL BE
Acts	The Sender
Romans	Abba
1 Corinthians	The Unity
2 Corinthians	The Reconciliation
Galatians	The Freedom
Ephesians	The Mystery
Philippians	The Joy

Book/Letter	Divine Name
Colossians	Imma
1, 2 Thessalonians	The Hope
1, 2 Timothy & Titus	The Root
Philemon	The Liberator
Hebrews	The Name
James	Sophia
1, 2, 3 Peter	The Sovereign
1, 2, 3 John	The Love
Jude	The Holy
Revelation	The Glory

I am not the first to call Yahweh by a unique characteristic by the way. In Genesis 31:42, God is called "The Fear of Isaac" (Genesis 31:42). If God can be called "The Fear," why not "The Joy" or "The Glory"? Further, I use "They," with a capital "T" as God's pronoun both to convey God's trinitarian nature and remain gender inclusive.

Religious Speech

Writing a paraphrase is an opportunity to explore fresh means of expressing faith and life. I use "God-rhythms" and "God-life" because I feel they convey a jazz-like sense of musical harmony appropriate to life with Jesus. I have made other linguistic changes in my attempt to create an environment in which readers might hear God's Word as a fresh expression and to receive it with insight, imagination, appreciation, and affirmation. For example, the word grace, a word that I dearly love, is paraphrased as "loving-kindness." Please be assured, O Gentle Reader, that I love the word grace. Not only is it integral to my story of giving my life to Jesus, but *Amazing Grace* is my absolute favorite hymn!

One difficulty of crafting an interpretive paraphrase is that the Bible is so well-known and loved that the temptation is to use well-known and beloved phrases. However, a paraphrase, by definition, seeks to open new pathways into understanding the text by deliberately *not* using well-worn phrases, and this practice may cause readers confusion! To minimize confusion, I want to give you a head start on some of the vocabulary I use, especially of familiar terms:

Traditional Term	Fresh Expression
Christ	the Anointed
church	gathering or the Body
demon	unholy spirit
disciple (individual)	disciplined follower, Devoted
faith	trust
grace	loving-kindness
healed	made whole
holy	set apart
kingdom of God	kin-dom, or rule of sovereign love
Lord	sovereign above Caesar, sovereign above the cosmos, or sovereign above the Body
prophets	truth-tellers
righteousness	right relationship(s)
salvation	becoming whole and complete, becoming our true self
Satan/Devil	Accuser
spirit vs. flesh	true self vs. false self

Readers will note the names of all 1st century Jewish groups have also been modified. My intent is to describe them according to how they function within 1st century Jewish culture yet point to the truth these same characters function within every 21st century Christian church.

Traditional Term	Fresh Expression
antichrists	the Opposers
apostles	sent ones
chief priests	the Rulers
deacons	the Caring
disciples (group)	the Disciplined followers
elders	the Old Ones
false teachers	the Speculators
Herodians	the Collaborators
Pharisees	the Intense
Sadducees	the Elite
Scribes	the Scrupulous

Some of my verbal experiments will work; others will not. Please don't judge the entire manuscript if one or more of these experiments fall flat for you! Instead, continue reading in search of nourishment for your heart, mind, and spirit. I hope you will take a "water off a duck's back" approach to experiments that fall flat. Many of the footnotes compare my word choice to the choices made by English translations or suggest how the Greek text might allow for such an interpretation. (I highly recommend you read the footnotes, especially if you have a question about why I have phrased something in a particular way.)

Do you agree or disagree with the choices I have made? Why or why not? Let the dialogue begin.

ACTS

When I was a junior in high school, my parents moved from California to Texas. When I was a sophomore in college, they moved from Texas to Florida. Though not estranged from my parents, I moved away from home when I was 17, my senior year in high school. I spent the next eight years while in college and seminary driving across the country at the beginning and end of every semester, including trips to and from New Jersey during seminary. I discovered that Van Horn, Texas is west of Fort Stockton and that if I didn't gas up in Van Horn, I better do it in Fort Stockton because I'd never make it to Ozona. I, a California boy, learned the difference between Charlotte and Charlottesville (the first is in North Carolina and the second is in Virginia).

I remembered these travels as I read the Book of Acts. In Sunday School we talk about "Paul's missionary journeys" and recite the names of ancient cities as if they are magical incantations: Tarsus and Troas, Bithynia and Pamphylia, Samos and Samothrace. We read these names without the slightest clue that the first couplet are cities, the second regions, and the third islands.

As one writing an interpretive paraphrase of Acts, I could not afford the luxury of glossing over these ancient cities that have different names in our modern era, most of them. I had to learn that Paul sailed along the coast north of Israel (from the port city of Caesarea) to Syrian Antioch and then to the region of Cilicia in southeastern Turkey. I had to distinguish between Syrian Antioch and Turkish Antioch. I had to reconstruct the pivotal transition in Acts 16 in which Paul was prevented from traveling the land bridge from Turkey to northern Greece and instead island hopped to Macedonia (northern Greece) from the west coast of Turkey (from the port city of Troas) via the island of Samothrace (between Turkey and Greece) before landing in Neapolis (just south of Philippi, which I had heard of before).

Reconstructing these travels was not arduous, thanks to Google, and helped clarify something about the spread of the early Christian faith: the work *was* arduous, earthy, and gritty. It required blood, sweat, and tears—

literally. It only happened because of the passion and perseverance of those whose names we always revere but whose lives we rarely imagine. Christian faith spread because Peter, the apostle to the Jews, stood in the middle of the crowd and said, "Yeah, I'm one of the followers of the Messiah whom you crucified two months ago." (Acts 2) The faith spread because Stephen got in some "good trouble" and paid for it with his life. (Acts 7) The faith spread because Phillip listened to the Spirit's nudge and stopped a royal official from Ethiopia and asked, "May I join you in your chariot?" (Acts 8) And most of all the Christian faith spread because Jesus revealed himself to a murderer on a road from Jerusalem to Damascus. (Acts 9)

And that murderer, Paul, became the apostle to the Gentiles. Paul was sent on three missionary journeys, each of which was arduous, earthy, and gritty; required Paul's blood, sweat, and tears; and only happened because of Paul's passion and perseverance in doing the work of an evangelist. Paul could not have endured his travails except through his profound conviction that the resurrected Jesus had specifically commissioned him to this work. Thus, I call God "The Sender" in this work as I convey the reality of what Paul experienced.

I convey also the political and cultural reality of the particular moment in history. The Romans dominated life: socially, politically, legally, and militarily. They sought to tolerate their conquered people's religious beliefs but did so primarily to keep the peace. Further, the Romans gave special license to Jewish religion to practice most of their faith, though not all of it. This special, religious license was called *religio licita* and was considered a treasured right worth defending.

In the 1st century, the earliest followers of Jesus considered themselves Jews—different from other Jewish groups but within the wide and generous orthodoxy and orthopraxy of Jewish faith. The Jesus followers, whom some called "Nazarenes" or "the Way," were among the

many “Judaisms”⁴ that existed in the 1st century, including the Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, Zealots, Herodians, Qumran community, etc. However, as the Jesus movement transitioned from being exclusively a Jewish movement to a mixture of Jews and Gentiles, those that came to be called “Christians” were perceived to be different from other forms of Jewish practice and, therefore, not protected by *religio licita*.

Much of the social and political dynamic in the Book of Acts centers around the fight for the *religio licita*. Jesus’ followers considered themselves the true heirs of the covenant God made with Abraham and, in Jesus, the culmination of the covenant God made with Moses and fulfillment of the Law given through Moses to Israel. Those who practiced the other forms of Judaism disagreed.

In the pages that follow I attempt to help the reader understand some of the socio-political dynamics that are sub-text in the stories found in Acts. I believe one cannot understand the heart of Acts without awareness of the stakes at hand. More than merely being good faith disagreements of religious conscience between two siblings, for Judaism and Christianity having Rome’s *religio licita* was a matter of life and death.

The Book of Acts may be the most significant biblical work for our times. This is high praise and may appear ridiculous to say about a book combined with the four canonical Gospels in this edition of *Rhythms of the God-Life*; after all, the Gospels tell the story of Jesus: his birth, teaching and healing, cross and resurrection. What can be more significant than telling Jesus’ story?

The Book of Acts tells the story of two people’s becoming one, which we see through the calling of Paul as apostle to the Gentiles beginning in Acts 9, through Peter’s vision and being sent to the Roman Cornelius in Acts 10, and the church-wide Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 where the early Church officially became a diverse, inclusive, and welcoming Body. In Acts we see the origin story of a global movement: “the bringing together of all things in heaven and earth under Christ,”⁵ “the breaking down the dividing wall of hostility,”⁶ “the unveiling of the mystery that the Gentiles are heirs with Israel...one body,”⁷ such that “in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free but all are one.”⁸ Living in times as socially and politically divided as we live today, Acts’ message of bridge building and unity between people of different nationalities, races, and creeds is one worthy of our full attention.

⁴ Biblical scholars note the varied forms of 1st century Judaism and lack of a uniform Jewish orthodoxy and orthopraxy. In a similar way, we can speak of the significant differences between Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Mainline Protestant, Anabaptist Protestant, Pentecostal, and Fundamentalist Christians as the many “Christianities” that exist in the 21st century. If one includes Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Process theologies, et. al. as more

recent off-shoots of Classical Christianity, the trend toward different Christianities is even more extreme.

⁵ c.f. Ephesians 1:10.

⁶ c.f. Ephesians 2:14.

⁷ c.f. Ephesians 3:6.

⁸ c.f. Galatians 3:28.

Acts 1:1-12

Friend of God,⁹ in my first book, what many are calling the Gospel of Luke, I crafted the narrative about all that Jesus started and all that began¹⁰ because of his works and words. In Luke I told the Jesus Story to the point when he gave his followers their marching orders through the Divine Spirit—revealing to them their sacred purpose—and then ascended into heaven. These followers are his sent ones¹¹ whom he had personally chosen.

After suffering political and religious persecution, having been falsely accused of sedition and blasphemy, Jesus stood before the sent ones. He set boundaries for what must be believed while also revealing the goal of that belief:¹² Life conquers death. He revealed himself to the sent ones for forty days and taught them about the kin-dom. Jesus commanded them to remain in Jerusalem and wait for the gift that The Sender promised (which Jesus had already told them about). He told them, “Remember that John the Baptizer baptized with water, a symbol of renewal and rebirth, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Divine Spirit—John’s symbol will become the divine seal; the promise of renewal and rebirth will become fulfillment of new life and new creation.”

The sent ones were elated and intrigued by Jesus’ words. They asked him, “Now will you restore the kingship¹³ of Israel to our political rulers? Will this be the

time when Rome is cast out from our land?” (The sent ones did not yet understand the nature of Jesus’ kin-dom and still thought in terms popular among Israelites of that day. Nationalism and militarism were often associated with messianism.)¹⁴

Jesus replied, “Neither *chronos* nor *kairos*¹⁵ belong to you but to The Sender who is sovereign above the Cosmos and possesses all authority. What belongs to you is the assurance that you will experience the *dunamis*¹⁶ that comes from the Divine Spirit, the *dunamis* to witness—even to the point of death, if necessary. You will be my martyrs¹⁷ in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. In ever expanding circles you will go in my name to proclaim the power of life to conquer death.”

Where is the end¹⁸ of a circle?

Where the terminus of a globe?

*Around we go, always beginning, seeking the end,
a continuous pulse of dynamic energy,
like an electron encircling an atom.*

*The destiny of our purpose moves toward
our calling, to the very
ends, to our
true end.*

⁹ Both Luke and Acts are addressed to an individual named Theophilus, whose name means “God-Friend.”

¹⁰ The Greek word *erxato*, which means “to begin, commence, start,” is used in the middle voice. Greek has three voices: active (I do), passive (I have done to me), and middle (I do and have done to me). That *erxato* is used in the middle voice is significant, therefore, for it suggests the kin-dom begun by Jesus’ works and words ignited a collaborative effort. The kin-dom is not just something Jesus did/does but the dynamic, relational interaction of Jesus and his followers.

¹¹ The Greek word *apostoleo*, means “to send.” The English word “apostle” is derived from the verbal and noun forms of *apostoleo*.

¹² The Greek word *ekmerion* is used and means “to set or mark a boundary” or “fix or establish a goal or end.” The NIV translates *ekmerion* as offering “convincing proofs,” which is a reasonable translation in my opinion. I have chosen a different interpretive slant to suggest another reasonable perspective on this verse.

¹³ I use “kingship” intentionally rather than my customary “kin-dom” to highlight that the sent ones were still mired in patriarchal and political ways of thinking.

¹⁴ The sentence in parentheses is not in the text but is added for interpretive purposes to give the sub-text of the sent ones’ question to Jesus.

¹⁵ Greek has two words for time: *chronos*, which means chronological or linear time, and *kairos*, which refers to the key moment, the transformative moment, as when an expecting mother announces, “It’s time!” English Bibles that translate this phrase as “days and seasons” miss the inherent contrast Jesus makes with his word play.

¹⁶ *Dunamis* is the Greek word for power, from which we get English words such as “dynamic” and “dynamite.” I have chosen to paraphrase the Greek with the Greek in order to reorient our notions about power away from “command and control” and toward “energy, dynamism, and empowerment.”

¹⁷ The Greek word *martueso* is usually translated as “witness” but also is the English word from which we get “martyr.”

¹⁸ My inspiration for this poem is the “Great Ends of the Church.” I seek to play with the notion of “end” as both geography and purpose—being called to the ends of the earth as the great ends (or purposes) of our calling.

God, it's me. Help me to witness to your love through my work and words, through my attitudes and actions, through who I am and who I am becoming. The world needs more witnesses to Jesus—the real Jesus, not a macho caricature. People need to see the Jesus who broke down barriers between peoples, opened minds to new ways of living, and uncluttered hearts from the weight of guilt and distortions of shame. O Sender, may I witness to this Jesus, the real Jesus, who did all these things while he walked this earth—and still does today through the *dunamis* of your Divine Spirit.

Acts 1:9-11

After giving his sent ones their great commission, Jesus ascended into heaven. The sent ones perceived¹⁹ Jesus being welcomed into heaven. Their cloudy comprehension of the kin-dom cleared,²⁰ and they entertained new ideas and imagined new possibilities. Imagining these possibilities, they contemplated²¹ with deep intent, seeking the significance of the moment. This moment was a part of the sent ones' evolving *kairos*, which would influence them as they learned, under Jesus' direction, to dance the God-rhythms.

Suddenly, two celestial messengers, dressed in purity and light, stood beside them and said, "What are you waiting for? Jesus will return the same way you just saw him go: through perception and imagination, by breaking open new ideas and new possibilities, and ultimately in the flesh, his pierced hands and side an eternal reminder that he is the Crucified One." The sent ones waited no longer but returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, a walk of less than a mile across the shallow Kidron Valley.

*I saw forever from the top of a Colorado "fourteener,"
vista grand and glorious,
vision as far as the eye could see.*

*No one warned me how hard the wind blows,
fierce and cold;
there is a price to pay for the beatific vision.*

*Oxygen was scarce atop the mountain,
my lungs burned and protested,
then rejoiced with every step back toward the flatlands.*

*Life returned to "normal" when I got back to my car,
a drive home and to work the next day,
yet the vision lingered, a part of me now—and always.*

God, it's me. May I never forget in the darkness what you have shown me in the light. May the clarity of your truth, once seen, be forever the vision I seek. As you humbled yourself so were you exalted. In the same way, may I find my true life in service to your kin-dom, always aware, always trusting, always hoping for the day when I will be raised to life with you.

Acts 1:13-26

When the sent ones arrived back in Jerusalem, they went upstairs to their shared room where they were hiding. Present there were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot; and Judas the son of James. Also present were Jesus' women followers, as well as Mary, Jesus' mother, and his brothers. They were all together and constantly in prayer.

While still in Jerusalem Jesus' followers were gathered (a group of about 120). Peter stood and spoke to the gathering, "Beloved, it was according to divine necessity²² that Scripture be fulfilled concerning our brother Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus by leading soldiers to him so the soldiers could arrest him. The Divine

¹⁹ This paragraph has much interpretation within it, beginning here with the word "perceived." The Greek word *blepo* is usually translated as "to see" but can also mean "to perceive."

²⁰ The Greek word *hupolambalan* means "(a) to take up, (b) to welcome, entertain, or (c) to suppose, imagine." Most English translations choose "to take up" and describe the physical act of Jesus ascending (being taken up) through the clouds. While I believe Jesus actually, physically ascended through the clouds, my

interpretive paraphrase hints at the spiritual impact suggested by the alternative definitions of *hupolambalan*.

²¹ The Greek word *etheasasthe* means "to gaze, observe, contemplate," and has a connotation of intent: contemplate toward the goal of understanding or being influenced.

²² The Greek used is a form of *dei*, which translates as "it is necessary," with the connotation of divine necessity.

Spirit spoke through King David in centuries past that one of his own would betray the Anointed.”

Judas took the payment he received, thirty silver coins. When Judas saw Jesus arrested, he was filled with remorse, his compassion²³ for Jesus bursting from within him. He took his own life. A field was purchased with the payment. This story is known by most everyone who lived in Jerusalem at the time, so the field that was purchased is called the “Field of Blood,” which in the Aramaic language they speak is *Akeldama*.

Peter continued, “It is written in the Psalms:

What a waste! Desolation,
a dwelling place in which no one dwells.²⁴
and,
Another leader must step forward.²⁵

Therefore, it is according to divine necessity that we select another sent one to replace Judas. This one should have been among us from the beginning and be an eyewitness of all that Jesus taught and did while he was among us, from the time of John’s baptism until the fulfillment when Jesus ascended into heaven. Most of all, this new leader must be an eyewitness to the resurrection and able to tell the Story of The Sender’s new creation in Jesus.”

So, the eleven sent ones nominated two from among the gathering: Joseph Barabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. They prayed together, “O Sender, you are the knower of hearts.²⁶ You know the hearts of these two men. Whisper to our hearts the name of the one whom you have chosen for this service, which Judas abandoned to journey to his own private hell.²⁷ After praying, the sent ones played a kind of dice game called “lots.” The lots revealed that Matthias was chosen to serve as one of the twelve sent ones.

*Judas,
destroyer of worlds (within your own soul)
dreams shattered that cannot be repaired
captive in a prison of your own making.*

²³ The Greek word used is *splancha*, which literally refers to the “spilling out of intestines,” and is the image used to convey the emotion “compassion.” Usually *splancha* is translated as compassion in accord with its common vernacular; however, most English Bibles tend to translate the word literally in Acts 1:17, a sudden turn away from the figurative and toward the literal.

*Another path could have been
yours to walk
and not alone
but not of your own making.*

*Why abandon the difficult journey
of the narrow way leading to life
to pilgrimage
to a hell.*

God, it’s me. Judas is, for me, forever a mystery. Others define him through greed or power or malice. I get it. These are the most reasonable explanations of Judas. Yet my heart, unsettled, remains uneasy by such obvious (simplistic?) narratives of intimate friendship betrayed. From what hidden fissure in Judas’ soul did betrayal erupt? Does such a fissure lurk within my soul, too? O Sender, have mercy upon my fractured soul.

Acts 2:1-12

The Jewish holiday of Pentecost (also called *Shavuot* or the Festival of Weeks) was near. At Pentecost the wheat harvest was celebrated and the Israelites being given the Torah was commemorated. On the day of Pentecost, the sent ones were all gathered together in one place. Unexpectedly, a sound like that of a fierce gust of wind blew through the gathering, yet the gust seemed to come from heaven. The gathered sent ones and others who followed Jesus saw what appeared to be little tongues of fire that danced upon each one of them. Suddenly, all of them were infused with the Divine Spirit and each of them began to speak in different languages and dialects as the Spirit gave them gifts to speak in foreign tongues.

Between the fierce gust and the sounds of Jesus’ many followers all speaking at once, the racket they made attracted the attention of those nearby. Dwelling in Jerusalem as pilgrims at that time were people from among many nations who revered The Sender. These pilgrims

²⁴ c.f. Psalm 69:25.

²⁵ c.f. Psalm 109:8.

²⁶ The Greek word used is a fun, compound word: *kardio / gnostes*, from the words for heart (*kardio*) and knowledge (*gnosis*).

²⁷ The Greek word *idiom* is used, which has the connotation of “uniquely one’s own.”

had come from north and south, east and west,²⁸ to celebrate the harvest and commemorate the giving of Torah to Moses and the Israelites. When they heard the racket coming from the house Jesus' followers were in, they came to listen in on what the Spirit was saying. Amazed and awed by what they were hearing, yet also perplexed and confused by it all, they asked each other, "What the heck is this?! All these people must be Galileans. We can tell by their thick, Galilean accents! Yet we hear them speaking our own languages, not their language. How can they declare The Sender's wonders so we can understand them?" Not everyone was amazed, though. Some mocked the gathering of Jesus' followers, saying, "They must be all liquored up!"

Reversal of Babel

Languages clarified and comprehended

Division becoming union

Shared words so hearts can beat together.

Yet remaining are those

who still prefer division

who have no desire to share a common heart

and so they mock.

God, it's me. May I never mock what I do not fully understand. May I refuse to mock that which I fear: others who sound or look different, whose customs and cultures are literally or figuratively foreign to me. Instead of mocking, may I open my mind and heart to the experience of others in all their brokenness and blessedness, in all their faithfulness and fallenness. Instead of accusing others of being drunk, stupid, or corrupt, may I invite them to join me in dancing the God-rhythms that lead to the God-life, for together with a common heart is a better way to live.

Acts 2:14-21

The sent ones stood with Peter, who raised his voice above the crowd, above both those who mocked and

those who were amazed. He recounted The Sender's salvation history, saying, "My brothers and sisters who belong to The Sender, all who abide in Jerusalem's bosom, let me introduce you to what the Spirit is speaking. Listen with intent; be open to wonder. These who speak are not drunk, as you imagine. Goodness! It's still morning!²⁹ Rather this is what the truth-teller Joel proclaimed:

*Kairos*³⁰ comes,

The Sender pours out Spirit,
no one left behind,
all immersed to reverse the flood.

Sons and daughters? Yes!
Young and old? Yes!
Men who serve AND women who serve? Yes!

Truth-telling and imagination? Yes!
Hope made real, specific and concrete? Yes!
All gifts serve the good as Spirit floods the earth.

You will know *kairos* has come,

when the world is turned upside-down,
when the impossible becomes probable,
when what "can never happen" suddenly does.

That Day will be great and glorious.
In that Day, all who call upon The Sender
will be made whole and complete, their true selves.

Reversal of Flood

overcome by hope

drowning in imagination

a sacred storm of truth-telling.

Two-by-two they come:

sons and daughters

young and old

men and women.

²⁸ The nations listed in the text are Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs.

²⁹ The Jewish people of that day had not yet heard Jimmy Buffet sing, "It's five o'clock somewhere."

*Did Joel envision just one “day,”
or does the “Day” of Pentecost arrive continuously?
Ushered in by Francis, welcomed by Lincoln,
longed for by billions awaiting the Divine Spirit.*

*Come!
Come Holy Spirit!
Come Heavenly Dove!
Come and set your people free!*

God, it’s me. I pray so easily, “Come, Holy Spirit!” Then I ignore the Spirit’s nudge: to listen with care, to speak with humility, to act in the cause of justice. I long for the gifts of the Spirit: to speak a foreign language without years of study. Then I neglect the Spirit’s greatest gifts: faith, hope, and love.³¹ Forgive and renew me, O Divine Spirit, that I may welcome your gifts and use them in service of the kin-dom, for which you gave them.

Acts 2:22-39

Peter continued recounting the story of The Sender’s salvation history, saying, “Beloved of Israel, my beloved family, listen! The Sender pointed you toward Jesus of Nazareth through wonder, awe, and *dunamis* displayed—The Sender at work through Jesus. You all witnessed this, just as we did! Yet Jesus was handed over for crucifixion by leaders bent on maintaining their own power. This was no accident, nor merely the result of these leaders having human authority. Rather Jesus was handed over because it was The Sender’s set determination, knowing from before the beginning of time They would raise Jesus from death to life. The Sender loosed Jesus from death’s clutches which were helpless to hold one infused with the *dunamis* that comes from above. David wrote about Jesus:

I looked and there he was—
behind and before and beside me:
I will not waver nor live in fear.

³¹ c.f. 1 Corinthians 13:13.

³² c.f. Psalm 16:8-11.

³³ c.f. Psalm 110:1.

My heart leaps in joy and my lips rejoice—
my entire being is restored through hope:
I will not be abandoned and need not fear death.

I, your Anointed, will neither rot nor decompose,
I will make known the path of life:
I will rejoice in your presence—now and always.³²

“Beloved of Israel, my beloved family, listen! Let me be blunt: David is dead. We can see his tomb over there in the Kidron Valley, a five-minute walk from where we stand! But David was a king who knew The Sender’s heart, power and set determination. David remembered the promise that had been made to him—that one of his descendants would sit upon the throne forever. Perceiving this truth and embracing the hope borne within the promise, David foretold the resurrection of the Anointed—that he would not be abandoned to death and decay. The Sender raised Jesus the Anointed from death to life, and we speak as eyewitnesses to this fact. We saw him ascend from earth to heaven. We are eyewitnesses with whom he shares the Divine Spirit, now poured out by The Sender on us. This is the event that has just happened, which you now have witnessed.

“Remember what I just said: David is dead, and we can see his tomb over there. Yet David wrote,

The Sovereign spoke to my Sovereign,
‘Come sit next to me until
all authority in heaven and on earth
belong to you and only you.’³³

“Be assured of this, my beloved Israel: The Sender enacted Their set determination through Jesus, revealing him to be the Anointed One. Jesus, whom you pierced, is the one whom The Sender raised up to be sovereign above Caesar.”

When the people heard Peter’s words, their hearts were pierced.³⁴ They said to Peter and the other sent ones, “What shall we do?”

³⁴ There is a bit of word play in the Greek, which translates as “whom you impaled...their hearts were pierced.” I have chosen to make the word play more specific but less extravagant by bookending “pierced...pierced.”

Peter replied, “Turn your hearts toward The Sender to be restored. Submit yourselves to divine cleansing and renewal through baptism, which is not just for Gentiles but for all who would live the God-life.³⁵ Open yourselves to right relationships through Jesus, who frees you to become whole and complete. Receive the gift of the Divine Spirit who will teach you to dance the God-rhythms. The promise of being new creation is for you and your children and for all who live distant from The Sender, whose call lures you into right relationship, makes you your true selves, and cannot be denied.”

*Purpose
set resolve
choices confirming intent
Living into deepest determination
Jesus*

God, it's me. May I live for you, with you, and through you (and you through me). May I submit myself to you, open myself to you, and receive from you the gift you give: the Spirit of life coursing through my being. O Sender, I'm eager to dance your God-rhythms. I long to become a new creation as the image of Jesus grows clearer within me. It is true: Your call cannot be denied by the likes of me!

Acts 2:40-47

Peter continued speaking, part desperate plea and part winsome invitation for his fellow Israelites to embrace the Jesus' Story and begin to dance the God-rhythms. “Become whole and complete,” Peter told the crowd, “your true selves! Decay and death are no dance partners for those who desire to live and move and have their being in The Sender!” Those who embraced the Jesus Story and the offer of life anew, life abundant, and life eternal received the gift of baptism—a new identity in Jesus to match the new creation they were becoming in him. About three thousand became followers of Jesus that day.

³⁵ This phrase is not in the text but added to give perspective to how Peter's call to be baptized would have been heard by 1st century Jews, as virtually all rabbis only baptized Gentiles. Baptism for Israelites, first initiated by John, was not the norm.

The sent ones and all the gathered followers of Jesus began to learn the rhythms of the God-life; each day they disciplined themselves to learning to dance together as one. They all committed themselves to learning the Jesus Story and to sharing their souls. They practiced the holy habits of worship and prayer. Awe and wonder spread like a wildfire that could not be extinguished as people witnessed The Sender's *dunamis* enacted through the Jesus Story.

Everyone shared a common life, with those who were rich even selling property and goods to care for those in need. In public and in private they shared *koinonia*.³⁶ Social barriers tumbled down as joy erupted from within their hearts and expressed itself through generosity and genuineness. Their very lives were a form of continual praise to The Sender. And people noticed; how could they not? People wanted to be a part of the gathering, and The Sender added more and more and more, each day more, all being made whole and complete, their true selves.

*Holy habits
shape and form
becoming the pattern of*

*Jesus' life,
generous and genuine,
public and private*

*Social barriers breaking down—
“Tear down that Wall!”—
until only*

*Love embracing
joy erupting
our true selves becoming.*

What habits shape and form you?

God, it's me. Lived out, beliefs become practices. May I learn to practice what Christian faith teaches.

³⁶ The Greek word *koinonia* translates as “fellowship” and also conveys a deep sense of spiritual and social kinship. *Koinonia* was a hallmark of early Christian communities and a cause for Roman suspicion of their motives—the Romans assuming something political must be the source of the Christian community.

Practices lived out become habits. May I welcome your Spirit to ingrain within me habits that lead to life. Habits lived out form the image of Jesus within. May I embrace the One who embraces me. May the image of Jesus within me, not yet fully formed, become clearer from day-to-day and year-to-year. O Sender, in your mercy, may I continue this journey.

Acts 3:1-10

One day at 3:00 p.m., Peter and John walked up to the Temple for afternoon prayer. A man who from birth could not walk was being carried by friends to the Temple gate known as “the Beautiful Gate” (though some called it “the Ripe Gate”³⁷). The man sat by the gate every day to beg from people going to afternoon prayer. The man noticed Peter and John and started his spiel, asking for money. Peter and John paid attention. Peter then commanded the man, “Look at us.” The man paid attention—anticipation and expectation grew within him.

Peter spoke to the man, “I have no silver or gold, but what I have I share with you. Walk now in the name of Jesus the Anointed, who is from Nazareth.” Peter grasped the man’s hand and helped him to his feet. As the man rose, his body was strengthened—first his feet and ankles, then his legs. The time was ripe for the man to enter into The Sender’s presence rather than stay outside the Temple. Passing into the Temple through the Beautiful Gate, the man walked and jumped; he danced and praised the name of The Sender.

Those who witnessed the man leaping, dancing and praising The Sender wondered, “Isn’t this the same guy we see every day begging by the Beautiful Gate?” Wonder and ecstasy filled them.

Is the time ripe for revenge or right relationships?

Is the time ripe for castigating or caring?

Is the time ripe for Jesus, justice, and joy?

Beautiful the time when we are called to prayer.

Beautiful the time when compassion fulfills prayer

Beautiful the time when healing touch leads to praise.

God, it’s me. Fill me with wonder, increase my ecstasy! Show me your healing touch at work in the world: orphans fed, children educated, compassion unleashed as the longing of the human heart. O Sender may my heart be filled with the ecstasy that comes when I notice and pay attention to the work you are doing in the world.

Acts 3:11-26

The formerly lame man clutched Peter and John and would not let go of them. A crowd quickly surrounded the three men, as people came out from Solomon’s Colonnade (on the eastern side of the Temple court) to get a closer look at the action. All were filled with wonder and ecstasy.

When Peter saw the crowd gathering, he said to them, “Beloved of Israel, my beloved family, listen! But don’t act surprised. You look at us as if we possess some magical powers—we don’t! The Sender made this man able to walk. The Sender, who spoke to Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah and Rachel, spoke through their servant Jesus. Our own people surrendered Jesus to the Romans, though Pilate thought him innocent, and rejected Jesus in favor of releasing a murderer! Our own people chose a murderer instead of The Sender’s own Anointed—the promised one and creator of right relationships. Yes, it looks bad, doesn’t it? But by The Sender’s set determination, he whom our own people killed was raised from death to life, for, in truth, Jesus is the author of all life. We are eyewitnesses of Jesus’ *dunamis*. Through trust, Jesus made this man whole and complete, in body and in soul.

“Beloved of Israel, my beloved family, listen! I don’t blame you personally for what was done to Jesus, nor do I blame our leaders. You both acted without comprehending The Sender’s set determination. What is more, you did not perceive the wisdom of The Sender’s plan that was enacted through suffering. Though truth-tellers from age to age foretold that the Anointed would suffer, you did not comprehend the power of emptying oneself for the sake of another. You failed to grasp that

³⁷ There are a minority of Greek scholars who argue for this alternative definition of the word *boraios*. If such a translation is accurate (a big if, IMHO), there is a sense of more word play in

Acts—i.e. “the time is ripe for the harvest of compassion and healing.”

dunamis comes through letting go of our own strength, that embracing hurt is the path toward healing. Turn your hearts toward The Sender to be restored. Open yourselves to right relationships through Jesus, who frees you to become whole and complete, your true selves.

“You do not see Jesus now but not because he is dead. Rather, you do not see him because he has gone to abide in heaven for a time. But Jesus will return to make all things new, even the creation itself, as the truth-tellers proclaim. It’s like Moses said,

I am not the last to speak the truth to Israel,
nor will I be the last to lead Israel to The Sender.

The Sender will raise up One like me,
speaking truth; you must listen
to everything the One tells you.

Ignoring the One’s words
is like reviling The Sender;
near to The Sender is where you want to be.³⁸

“The Story we proclaim is nothing new. Samuel told it. Isaiah told it. Daniel told it. Indeed, all the truth-tellers pointed to Jesus’ Story of redemptive suffering, of loss that leads to life, of discovering our blessedness through the Anointed’s woundedness. All of you, all of us are the family entrusted with this Story. We are the ones to remember and honor the sacred promise The Sender made to Abraham:

Through your child, all nations on the earth will be blessed with sacred openness. Through your child, the nations will learn their true name is beloved.³⁹

When The Sender raised Jesus, Their servant, They sent him first to this family, to us, that we might be the first to receive the gift of this sacred openness to the God-life. So turn away from a culture of abuse, betrayal, and corruption; turn toward The Sender, who alone can make you whole and complete, your true selves.”

Let go to receive
Release to embrace
Renounce to claim

Descent is ascent
Humility is glory
Weakness is power

Suffering and majesty intertwined as lovers,
opening to perceive the mystery
of Jesus’ cruciform Way.

God, it’s me. The mystery of Jesus’ Cross continues to astound, amaze, and invite me to awe. I affirm that my transformation comes through his weakness, yet I resist experiencing this. I prefer Jesus as mighty in word and in deed rather than battered and bloody. I relish Jesus’ scolding the Pharisees rather than submitting to Pilate. I am a product of my culture, whose idols are never meek nor mild. Renew within me, O Sender, the curiosity and wonder required to embrace Jesus, even when he hangs on a cross.

Acts 4:1-22

As Peter and John taught the crowd in the Temple courts (the open-air part of the grounds outside the Temple building itself), the captain of the Temple police approached along with a group of the Elite (known as Sadducees, a group who did not believe in the resurrection). The captain and the Elite were worried about what Peter and John were teaching the people. They believed Jesus could not have been resurrected (for there was no such thing according to their theology). On the orders of the Elite, the captain of the Temple police arrested Peter, John and the healed man,⁴⁰ and threw them into prison. But the Story had been told, and those who heard it could not be made to forget it. Many in the crowd entrusted themselves to Jesus and The Sender added to the number of those who were part of the gathering, as many as 5,000 men plus wives, sisters and children.

John the next day at their trial. It could be the healed man was sent home and then summoned to return.

³⁸ c.f. Deuteronomy 18:15,18, 19.

³⁹ c.f. Genesis 22:18 and 26:4.

⁴⁰ The text does not indicate if the healed man was also arrested. However, see 4:10, where the healed man stands with Peter and

The Elite convened a meeting the next day of rulers, scholars, and the influential within Jerusalem, including the current and former high priest and members of their family.⁴¹ Each person in attendance had a vested interest in protecting the Temple rituals of sacrifice, and so they had a vested interest in limiting Peter and John's teaching about Jesus' resurrection, which they perceived as a threat. The Elite had the Temple police officers drag Peter and John into their presence to question them: "By what power⁴² did you heal this man? Whose name holds such power that it can do something like this?"

Peter, infused with *dunamis* from the Divine Spirit, answered, "Elite of Israel and Influencers of Jerusalem, are kindness and compassion now against the law? Is restoring wholeness to one born unable to walk now contrary to The Sender's will? I think not. You ask in whose name we acted. It is in the name of Jesus the Anointed, from Nazareth, that we acted. The One you crucified is he whom The Sender raised up. This man stands before you through Jesus' *dunamis*, even though Jesus is,

the stone the expert mason rejected,
has become the cornerstone of the foundation—
the dwelling place of The Sender.⁴³

Only Jesus can make you whole and complete. In all the Cosmos, his name is the name by which people come to know their true name is beloved."

When the Elite heard Peter's blunt speech, they were taken aback, for they considered Peter and John illiterate idiots⁴⁴—the Elite were amazed they had such moxie and could speak with such persuasive force. Recognizing that Peter and John were followers of Jesus, and seeing the man standing directly before them healthy and whole, what could they do?

The Elite ordered the three men to leave their presence so they could plot and plan their response.

"What are we to do?" the Elite asked each other. "The people know what has happened. We can't hide nor deny it. Somehow, we have to stamp out this message while it can still be controlled. If their message about resurrection takes root, the people may look away from the Temple as their source of healing and hope. We have no basis in the law to arrest them, so a threat will have to suffice."

The Elite then called Peter and John to stand before them to hear the verdict against them. They ordered Peter and John to keep their mouths shut and stop teaching in the name of Jesus. Peter and John stood their ground, saying, "We cannot submit to this council, nor will we retract anything; for it is neither safe nor honest to speak against conscience. Here we stand. We can do no other. O Sender, help us."⁴⁵

The Elite were unimpressed. After making further threats, they released Peter and John. Though the Elite perceived them as impudent and wanted to punish them for it, the people were praising The Sender because the healed man had been unable to walk for his entire life, so this was a big deal and opened for him the privilege to worship The Sender according to Moses' command.⁴⁶ The Elite feared the people and lacked the stomach to go against them.

Conviction
versus fear—
conviction always wins,
strength flowing from within
Courage

Conscience
versus intimidation—
conscience endures, sustains,
overcoming slings and arrows
Trust

⁴¹ The text cites "Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, Alexander and others of the high priest's family."

⁴² I use the English word power rather than the Greek *dunamis* here because it seems to me the Elite are not inquiring about the influence and transformational impact of the Divine Spirit but rather are concerned about raw, political and social power in the conventional sense.

⁴³ c.f. Psalm 118:22.

⁴⁴ This phrase seems harsh, but note the Greek words used are *agrammatoi* (meaning, literally, without grammar) and *idiotai*.

⁴⁵ This quotation is the essence of Peter and John's speech and also the words spoken by Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms when he stood before King Charles V. Luther's quote is not a precise translation of the Greek text but serves as a "sense of the meeting" of what is happening.

⁴⁶ c.f. Leviticus 21:17-19.

God, it's me. When I focus on you, fear, like the tide, ebbs. But like tides everywhere, fear returns, flowing strong, threatening to submerge all in its path in deep waters of terror. May your Spirit help me keep my focus steadfastly on you, O Sender, through both ebbing and flowing of the tides. Through political outrage and economic turmoil, let me focus on you. Through health crisis and emotional strain, let me focus on you. Through every Dark Night of the Soul, may your light bring the dawn that helps me to stand unafraid in this moment.

Acts 4:23-31

Upon their release, Peter and John returned to where they were abiding with many from the gathering. They told of what they had seen and heard while in the clutches of the Elite and the Influencers. When the gathering heard their story, they praised The Sender and as one lifted their voices in prayer, "O Sender, you are sovereign above the Cosmos, for you are Creator of earth and sky and sea and all that is within them. You spoke through David in the Psalms when he wrote,

Nations rage! The peoples plot!
Rulers and elite storm the Holy One's fortress!
Together they attack the Anointed One.⁴⁷

And so it was with Jesus. Herod, the Jewish puppet-king, and Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, conspired together; the Gentile oppressors and Israelite oppressed schemed as one against your servant Jesus the Anointed. They constructed what you designed: What your *dumansis* and set determination had declared from before the beginning of time was enacted.

"Now, O Sender, these same scoundrels threaten us, your servants. Infuse us with your Divine Spirit that we will be able to speak both bluntly and boldly. Place your hand upon us and we will be made whole and complete, our true selves, for we desire only to dance the God-rhythms and live the God-life in ways that point to your presence among us, stirring up wonder among those who witness our love in Jesus' name."

As the gathering prayed, their abode was infused with the Divine Spirit, and they were shaken to their core. Being filled with the Spirit, they spoke The Sender's Word boldly, bluntly and without fear.

*Shaken to the core:
spark of love
birth of a child.*

*Shaken to the core:
saying yes to Jesus
a conviction and calling that will not let me go.*

*How long has it been
since I last was shaken
to the core?*

*Perhaps my spirit has become jaded,
distracted by political theater or the
deafening noise of culture's Siren.*

*Perhaps my soul is wiser now,
no longer needing outward amplification
to rest ever deeper in the assurance of my belovedness.*

God, it's me. I cannot remember the last time I was shaken to my core. I know it has happened: the spark of love, the birth of my children, my conversion to trust in Jesus. But it has not happened lately, or perhaps my soul no longer needs to be stirred up by outward things to rest in the assurance of my belovedness. Rather than shaken to my core, I am open to receiving whatever your Spirit deems necessary for this moment, this day, this season in my life. Come, Holy Spirit, fill your servant with light, life, and peace!

Acts 4:32-37

A crowd of Jesus' followers continued to gather. They lived together with a common purpose—sharing a heart and soul unity so strong that they did not lay claim to what was in their hands or households but shared with all who had a need. The sent ones, as eyewitnesses to the

⁴⁷ c.f. Psalm 2:1–2.

resurrection, told the Jesus Story to the gathering. The wide and generous lovingkindness of The Sender shaped, formed, and transformed all who heard them. From time to time, those with more possessions sold a portion of what belonged to them (in human terms), brought the money from the sales, and entrusted it to the sent ones to distribute as others had a need. Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, was someone who sold some of his property and entrusted the proceeds to the sent ones. People called Joseph from Cyprus by the nickname Barnabas, which means Son of Encouragement.

*Foreign to the so-called “weird” mind:
Western, educated, individual, rational, democratic.*

*Strange to the ears raised on
capitalism, consumerism, and consumption.*

*Less foreign, more common to communities at risk—
need opening understanding to the struggle.*

*Native people not possessing,
true stewards of Mother Earth.*

*Unity and common purpose: the heart.
Sharing with others: the soul.*

*A wide and generous lovingkindness:
The Sender shaping, forming, and transforming.*

God, it’s me. I’m not quite there yet. And by “not quite there,” I really mean “nowhere close” to this kind of generosity. I live and move and have my being in a culture of 401k accounts and bank statements. I can tell you my net worth down to the penny. O Sender, teach me to trust more and clutch less. Forgive me all the ways I love possessions and use people. Teach me, instead, to love people and use possessions. Even

better, teach me how to love people and share possessions, for they all belong to you.

Acts 5:1-16

Ananias and Sapphira conspired to trick the sent ones and the gathering into believing they were fully committed to Jesus when they really only liked the notion of Jesus. They sold a piece of their property, as Barnabas had also done, but unlike Barnabas they held back a portion of the profits, as was their right to do. However, Ananias came and laid a sum of money at the sent ones’ feet as if it was the full price for the land.

Peter said, “What have you done? The Accuser has filled your heart with deceit! You have lied to the Divine Spirit and yourselves. The property belonged to you to do with as you please. The money from the sale belonged to you to do with as you please. But the truth belongs to The Sender, who is not fooled by trickery and manipulation.”

When Ananias heard Peter’s words, his heart gave out, he fell, and died. Treating Ananias’ body with the respect due to the dead, young men wrapped him in a cloth and carried him out to be buried. Three hours later, Sapphira came in, unaware of what had happened to Ananias. Peter asked her, “Is this the full price you and Ananias received for the land when you sold it?”

“Yes,” she replied, “that was the full price.”

Peter said, “Your lies speak in harmony with Ananias—a symphony⁴⁸ of deceit to tempt the Divine Spirit. Listen! The feet of those who buried Ananias are at the door. You shall bear your own guilt, and they will bear you to your grave.” At that moment, Sapphira, like her husband, was seized and fell to the floor. The men carried her out and buried her with Ananias. Fear rippled through the gathering as everyone heard about what happened.

The sent ones did many wonder-full works: compassion and *agape*⁴⁹ the hallmarks of their life together. They continued to gather in the Temple’s courts, under

⁴⁸ The Greek word *symphaneo* is usually translated as agree, but I am playing with the musical notion of a symphony in the interpretation.

⁴⁹ *Agape* is one of several Greek words for love and connotes a perfect, selfless outpouring of benevolence toward others. The New Testament has different words for different kinds of love,

including: *agape*, *eros*, which is sexual love; *phelos*, which is deep friendship or brotherly/sisterly love (thus the reason Philadelphia is the City of Brotherly Love); and *storge*, which is empathy or a close bond. There are seven Greek words for love, of which the New Testament uses four.

Solomon's Colonnade, but no one had the courage to join the gathering after what happened to Ananias and Sapphira (even though the people liked and respected the sent ones). Still, many more trusted in The Sender. To these people, Jesus was more than a notion. He was an opportunity to have friends and family rescued—their bodies cured as Peter's shadow passed by and touched the hem of one's garment. News of the Jesus Story spread to other towns because of what the sent ones were doing. Jesus was no longer a notion, nor even an opportunity, but a spectacle.

*I like the notion of Jesus:
big brother, sage, and friend.
I'd love to pound a few brews with that guy!*

*But we are called beyond a notion,
even beyond spectacle
to a man,
anointed and anointing.*

*Called to embrace Jesus:
Rescuer and Sovereign,
gift and giver who yet demands all.*

God, it's me. Fear ripples through my heart as I recognize how much of Ananias and Sapphira live in me. Fear whispers to my soul as I acknowledge how often I treat Jesus as a notion rather than as my Sovereign. And it's not the good kind of fear: awe and reverence before you. It's the bad kind of fear: the kind felt by Adam and Eve as they searched the garden for fig leaves. O Sender, I know that honesty before you is the antidote to fear—honesty about who I am and am not; honesty about my convictions, commitments, and compassion (or lack thereof). I trust you (help my lack of trust)!

Acts 5:17-26

The high priest and his cronies had seen enough. As members of the Elite (called Sadducees) who denied the resurrection, they considered it their sacred duty to preserve and protect the primacy of the Temple's rituals. Malice resurrected⁵⁰ within them. The Elite arrested the sent ones and threw them in jail. The Sender sent a celestial messenger to break them out. When the messenger opened the jail doors, he told the sent ones, "Return to the Temple courts. Tell the Story of how people can dance the God-rhythms through Jesus. Tell them the God-life is found in him." And so that is what they did. At dawn, as the sun rose, they proclaimed the risen Son.

When the high priest and his cronies arrived to work that day, they called the full court of the Elite together (what is known as the Sanhedrin and consists of 70 leaders). But the jail was empty, even though the doors were locked and soldiers still guarded them. The Elite were clueless as to what happened and worried about what could happen next. Then someone saw what was happening in the Temple courts. "Look!" they exclaimed, "the men you had arrested are teaching the people in the Temple courts." The high priest and his cronies were furious—this could not be allowed! Yet fear, like bile, rose in their throats, for they knew the people were enamored of the sent ones. The Elite feared using force and triggering a riot.

*Corralling a crowd
incitement of a riot
dangerous territory to tread.*

*Flames of hatred,
once ignited,
burn all who are touched.*

God, it's me. Power corrupts the human heart, as I know too well. Power, coveted yet corrupting, is a dangerous friend. O Sender, teach me the cruciform way of Jesus that releases malice from my heart and does not grasp power with my hands. Form the image of Jesus within me, that my ways will conform to his

which is a more accurate translation in this context; however, there is an obvious play on words that is missed.

⁵⁰ The Greek word used is *anistemi* which Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 15 when he speaks of the resurrection. The English Study Bible translates this as jealousy "rose up" within them,

way, and I will learn to dance your God-rhythms and live your God-life.

Acts 5:27-42

Finally, the sent ones were hauled in to be questioned by the Elite—all 70 of them. The high priest badgered them, saying, “We forbade you from teaching in the name of Jesus, yet you insist on spreading your lies. You even seem intent on making us responsible for his blood.”

Peter and the other sent ones replied, “We cannot submit to this council, nor will we retract anything, for it cannot be either safe or honest to speak against conscience. Here we stand. We can do no other. He whom you had killed, The Sender raised from death to life. He whom you had raised to a cross, The Sender raised to Their own right hand as Sovereign and Savior. He whom you considered a threat to the national peace is the One who calls the nation to turn away from Rome and turn toward The Sender—turn your hearts inside out and be restored to your rightful place as Their beloved. We are eyewitnesses of these things, as the Divine Spirit leads and guides us to speak. It is the same Spirit that The Sender gave to each of us personally and all of us corporately to follow as the Spirit leads.”

What Peter said infuriated the Elite, and many called for his death and the deaths of those with him. But one of the Scrupulous (also known as the Pharisees) named Gamaliel rose to speak. Gamaliel was honored by the people, for he had disciplined followers himself to the study of The Sender’s Word. After Gamaliel directed the guards to escort the sent ones out of the meeting, he turned to his colleagues and said, “My friends, brothers of Israel all, let me remind you of our recent history, which has been filled with rebels and revolutionaries claiming to be sent from The Sender’s hand.⁵¹ There was Theudas who rallied

400 men to his side and then was defeated by the Romans. There was Judas the Galilean who established the so-called “fourth sect” and taught that no taxes should be paid to Caesar. He, too, was defeated by the Romans, and 2,000 of his followers were crucified. The litany of failed rebellions is long and disturbing, yet we all long for the day when The Sender’s Anointed will restore us to glory by freeing us from the oppression of the Nations. One of these days, one of these so-called Anointed Ones will actually be sent from The Sender. What if Jesus is the one? If so, we act against The Sender. If not, he and his followers will walk the way of Theudas and Judas and others who have attempted the folly of standing against Rome’s legions. Let’s let things play out, for we do not want to oppose The Sender’s will.”

Gamaliel’s speech persuaded the Elite. They had the sent ones roughed up, ordered them to shut up, and then let them go. The sent ones left the Elite joyful, for they considered it an honor to be insulted by such rogues as the Elite because they stood with conviction and spoke with persuasion about the Jesus Story. Indeed, day after day, the sent ones spoke about Jesus in the Temple courts—never stopping, always sharing the good news that Jesus is the Anointed.

Looking for a Savior?

Meet me on the street corner.

I’ve got something that can save you.

Looking for a Savior?

Vote for me!

All your troubles will magically disappear.

Looking for a Savior?

*Look within: name it and claim it,
and you’ll become it.*

⁵¹ Gamaliel cites two examples, Theudas and Judas the Galilean. Judas’ revolt was in 6 C.E., while there is historical uncertainty about the dating of Theudas’ revolt. What is clear, however, is that the first 135 years of the common era in Israel is accurately depicted as a time of militarism, nationalism, and messianism. The two most momentous uprisings occurred after Gamaliel’s day and led to the destruction of the Temple (70 C.E.) and the destruction of all Jerusalem and diaspora of its people (135 C.E.). The cultural milieu was combustible.

The three “isms” listed above intertwined with one another to create a politically volatile and militarily engaged society seeking a single, charismatic leader to ignite the spark of revolution. These few verses in Acts 5 present good insight into the cultural milieu for Jesus’ ministry and the early church. This milieu suggests why Jesus was an attractive figure to the masses yet ultimately did not fit their expectations of what a messiah (Anointed One) should do.

Looking for a Savior?²

Deny yourself, take up your cross, follow.

Lose your life to find it.⁵²

God, it's me. In a world that promises the quick fix, let me play the long game. In a culture that demands what's easy, let me be willing to attempt the hard. In a world where celebrities and politicians and internet influencers share their new revelations for success, let me listen more—more often and more deeply and more passionately—to the old, old Story of Jesus and his love. O Sender, I do not need a Savior from below, for I already follow One from above—Jesus. Praise be to you and to him in the power of the Spirit—One God, blessed Trinity forever.

Acts 6:1-7

From dawn to dusk the sent ones continued their work, and from sunrise to sunset The Sender increased their number, especially among those from the Diaspora who lived outside of Israel (also known as Hellenistic Jews). Those from beyond Israel were increasing so rapidly that their needs were not being met, and a rivalry erupted between the Hellenistic Jews and the so-called Hebraic Jews, with the Hellenistic Jews murmuring and grumbling that their widows were being neglected when food was distributed each day.

The twelve sent ones invited everyone to a gathering and said to them, “Caring for the needs of orphans, widows, and the stranger in our midst is The Sender’s command to us.⁵³ Yet even more urgent is telling the Jesus Story. For this purpose we were made eyewitnesses of his life, teaching, death, resurrection, and ascension. Choose seven from among you whose character and wisdom bear witness to being shaped and formed by the Divine Spirit. We will entrust the responsibility of care into their capable hands while we persist in prayer and persevere in our service to the Word.”

The sent ones’ idea delighted everyone, and the gathering chose Stephen, one whose trust was deep and whose life was guided by the Divine Spirit; also Philip, Procurus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and even Nicolas

from Antioch (who was a Gentile and had converted to Judaism). The gathering presented these men and called them deacons (after the word for service: *diakonia*.) The sent ones laid their hands on the deacons as a sign of blessing and empowerment and prayed for them and their work.

The Jesus Story continued to spread, and the number of those who became disciplined followers of Jesus the Anointed increased. Even many priests began to dance the God-rhythms and live the God-life found in Jesus!

*Orphans, widows, and poor—
without agency in ancient times,
unable, even if willing, to care for their own needs.*

Who is the orphan?²

Who is the widow?²

Who are the poor?²

*Today our list would be different—
but the same compassion would call,
the same command guide.*

Who is the person with mental illness?²

Who is the person without an address?²

Who are the least of these to whom Jesus calls?²

God, it's me. I thank you for the service of the deacons I have known—women and men of compassion whose service cares for the hurting and those in need of your healing touch. For prayer chains faithfully kept—I praise you. For funeral receptions handled with sensitivity and kindness—I thank you. For flowers delivered to the bereaved and food delivered to the sick—I rejoice. For the ways you are in their midst, at work through their care, I am in awe.

Acts 6:8—7:1

Stephen was a man filled with The Sender’s lovingkindness and Their *dunamis* worked through him to provoke awe and wonder among the people. However, not everyone was happy with Stephen. Men from the

⁵² c.f. Mark 8:34-36.

⁵³ c.f. Isaiah 1:17 and Jeremiah 22:3 among many verses.

Gathering⁵⁴ of Freed Jews⁵⁵ (those who had been taken into slavery by the Romans and then set free) argued with him. These men were from northern Africa and Turkey⁵⁶ and fiercely loyal to the ways of Torah observance and the traditions, having suffered at the hands of the Gentiles. Yet they were no match for the Spirit of wisdom that spoke through Stephen.

The Freed Jews were incensed and remained hostile to Stephen. They recruited some men to level false accusations against Stephen: “We heard him slur Moses and hurl insults even at The Sender!” These lies ignited a frenzy in the crowd. Led by the Scrupulous, the mob grabbed Stephen and hauled him before the Elite. Lies were told: “This guy hates the Temple and is hostile to Law and Order!” And, “He wants to destroy our institutions in the name of his god.” And also, “He says his teacher is Jesus of Nazareth, a known rogue and rebel with whom we have already dealt. He wants us to replace Moses with this Jesus.”

Throughout this mockery of a trial, Stephen stayed calm and serene. Those who saw him said he looked as if he was resting in the loving embrace of The Sender’s celestial messengers. Finally, the high priest asked Stephen, “How do you respond to these accusations? What do you say?”

*We know about mobs:
in Ferguson and Portland,
in Charlottesville and on the steps of the Capitol.*

*We know about anger:
inciting violence,
blinding reason.*

*Do we know about lovingkindness—
making serenity a sacred act and
resting in The Sender’s embrace the ultimate rebellion?*

God, it’s me. In my life, let not anger beget anger. In my words, let not vitriol be spoken. In my actions, let not hostility seize the day. Rather, may my actions express your compassion. May my words express your truth. May my life reflect your lovingkindness in all that I do and in how I do it, in all that I am and all I am becoming.

Acts 7:2-8a

Having been falsely accused of blasphemy by an angry mob, Stephen replied, “Beloved of Israel, my beloved, listen as I recount the mighty acts The Sender has performed on our behalf and the marvelous ways by which They have made us Their beloved. The Sender revealed Themself to our father Abraham and our mother Sarah when our ancestors still lived amidst a people immersed in idolatry, in the fertile crescent of Iraq (before Abraham and Sarah immigrated to Haran in southeastern Turkey). The Sender said to Abraham and Sarah, ‘Leave your family and become a wanderer. Go to a land you have never seen, cannot yet imagine, but which I will show you.’⁵⁷

“And, amazingly, based on this one command, Abraham and Sarah left their home in southern Iraq, left a great people known as the Chaldeans, who were astronomers and astrologers and had a fierce army of conquerors. Abraham and Sarah left the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. Upon the passing of Abraham’s father, they then wandered here, to the land beneath our feet today.

“Abraham and Sarah were not given wealth but wonder, not abundance but enough. Yet The Sender also gave them a magnificent gift: a promise. Even though Abraham and Sarah were childless, The Sender promised them that their children would live in the land—but not without some heartache! They were also told, ‘For four hundred years, your children and your children’s children and many generations of your offspring will live in a foreign

⁵⁴ The Greek word is *synagoges* or synagogue, which means a gathering or assembly (like a church). Because the assembly arose in opposition, and to avoid perpetuating centuries of antisemitic hostility, I use the same respectful term for this gathering of Jewish adherents as I use for the gathering of Jesus’ followers.

⁵⁵ Scholars debate what kind of group this was. The Roman general Pompeii defeated Jerusalem in 63 B.C.E., taking many into

slavery. These Jewish slaves were freed by Rome in 19 C.E. It is possible that these freed slaves and their descendants are the gathering to whom Luke refers.

⁵⁶ The Greek text cites Cyrene (modern Libya) and Alexandria (modern Egypt), Cilicia (southern coast of Turkey) and Asia (Turkey).

⁵⁷ c.f. Genesis 12:1.

land as strangers. Because they are different, your children will be reviled, mistreated and even enslaved. But I will choose them. I will guard and protect them. I will call them out of oppression. I will lead and guide them. They will be delivered to the land of promise that they may worship me.⁵⁸ Then The Sender inflicted upon Abraham circumcision, as a symbol to memory and hope.”

*Strangers in a strange land,
immigrants and foreigners,
loathed for differences,
feared as outsiders.*

So were our forebearers.

*And now we welcome strangers to this land, saying,
“Come, immigrants and foreigners!”
Celebrated for differences,
welcomed as new friends.*

How can we do otherwise?²

God, it's me. I thank you that my father and mother were wandering Arameans, that my spiritual heritage is sojourn and pilgrimage, and that I was shaped by a tradition famous for welcoming the stranger. What happened to turn this heritage inward, looking to one's own abundance rather than others' enough? How did the traditions of welcome and hospitality, of *bienvenidos* and *welkommen*, become NIMBY⁵⁹? O Sender, forgive me and forgive us! Free me to live in memory and hope. Help me to live as a citizen of your kin-dom.

Acts 7:8b-16

Stephen continued recounting the story of The Sender's salvation history, saying, “Abraham and Sarah were parents of Isaac and inflicted circumcision upon him on the eighth day, a sign of their trust in the promise. Isaac married Rebekah and they were parents of Jacob, who together with Rachel and Leah became the parents of the twelve forefathers of our twelve tribes.

“But all was not well between the twelve brothers! The brothers were jealous of Joseph, who was Jacob's favorite son. The brothers conspired against Joseph to sell him into slavery to a band of merchants traveling to Egypt. But what the brothers designed for evil The Sender turned to good. The Sender accompanied Joseph in his troubles, strengthened him with gifts of wisdom, and opened Pharaoh's heart—yes, even the king of Egypt! Pharaoh entrusted Egypt's wealth into Joseph's stewardship.

“Famine struck the region, and of all nations only Egypt was prepared, for Joseph's stewardship was wise and faithful, for he was led by The Sender. When Jacob heard that hope resided in Egypt, he sent Joseph's brothers a first time to seek help and then a second time. On the second visit, Joseph revealed himself to his brothers. They wept together in joy that what the brothers had intended for evil The Sender had designed for good. Even Pharaoh was informed about Joseph's family, and Joseph was allowed to send for them. And so Jacob and his entire family—75 in all—migrated to Egypt, the Breadbasket of the World, where they would live throughout the famine. Eventually, Egypt would be the place where they would die, but their bones would be returned to Shechem, to the tomb that father Abraham had purchased from Hamor's sons.”

Beware the temptation!

*Always Cinderella, never the stepsisters.
Always Joseph, never the brothers (nor Pharaoh).*

*Whose Story is being told?
Perspective shapes what is heard.*

*What Story is being told?
Narrative frame sets expectation.*

Who are we in the Story?²

God, it's me. Great is your faithfulness, O Sender. Great is your wisdom upon Joseph. Great is your abundance through Egypt. Great is the Story that unfolds from such humble beginnings. In gratitude, I seek to be a part of your Story. With thanksgiving, I will play my role as well as I can. I need not be the

⁵⁸ c.f. Genesis 15:13-14.

⁵⁹ NIMBY is an acronym for “Not In My Back Yard.”

hero—neither Joseph, nor Moses, nor David for me. I just want to be in the room where it happens, to see your love unfold in the story of my life and the stories of others' lives, becoming a part of your Story of faithfulness from generation to generation.⁶⁰

Acts 7:17-29

Stephen continued recounting the story of The Sender's salvation history, saying, "As the river of history flowed ever forward, the *kairos* had come for The Sender's promise to be fulfilled. Our ancestors had grown numerous in Egypt, which had suffered regime change—a new line of Pharaoh's had come to power. The new regime did not know Joseph but only saw the great number of his family. Pharaoh felt threatened.

"So Pharaoh conspired with his lieutenants and with his entire nation to ostracize, exploit, and persecute the Hebrew people. He painted them in the colors of fear and enmity. He passed laws that forced the systematic murder of their male babies. He granted immunity from prosecution to anyone committing such an atrocity.

"When the *kairos* finally arrived, Moses was born. Moses' family was courageous. They ignored Pharaoh's unjust laws; their civil disobedience saved their son, Moses. For three months they nurtured him in hiding, until they could hide him no longer. They placed Moses in the reeds along the edge of the Nile river, where he could be discovered. And discovered he was, by Pharaoh's own daughter, who took baby Moses into her home, made him her son, and raised him with all the privileges of an upbringing in a royal family: education, wisdom, and training in speech and action. Moses was raised to be both "in" and "of" the House of Pharaoh.

"Yet Moses never forgot that he belonged to The Sender, nor that his ancestors were wandering Arameans. One day when Moses had grown into young adulthood,⁶¹

Moses visited his people, the Hebrews. He witnessed one of the Hebrews suffering an injustice at the hands of an Egyptian, so Moses intervened and ended up striking the Egyptian, who died. Moses was proud of himself, thinking, 'My people will realize I stood in the gap for them. They will know that I saved them.'

"Yet the next day, when Moses saw two Hebrew men fighting and asked them why. One of the men (like the Egyptian from the day before was committing an injustice upon his fellow Hebrew) replied, 'Are you going to kill me like you killed that Egyptian yesterday? Who made you the boss of us? Who appointed you as our Messiah, our Savior?' Upon hearing this, Moses fled into the desert, to Midian, where he settled, became a shepherd, married, and had two sons. Raised to be in and of the House of Pharaoh, Moses learned the ways of the desert."

*Growing up, I wanted to be a professional athlete—
my body didn't cooperate.*

*I later envisioned a career as an attorney—
then I learned in college what being a lawyer was like.*

*I never saw myself living anywhere else but the beach—
The Sender had other plans.*

*I am both "in" this culture and "of" this culture—
discovering I am called to be new creation.*

*Born in the House of Washington and Jefferson—
I abide in the desert,⁶²
learning the rhythms of the God-life.*

God, it's me. The older I get, the deeper my gratitude for the ways your hand leads and guides. Through Word and Spirit you guide. Through worship and work you

⁶⁰ Personal note: I write this prayer from a hotel room in Overland Park, Kansas, the day of a family wedding. Such events inspire a wider vision, I think, of how The Sender seeks and is always seeking to guide us into Their embrace. May it be so for Krista and Jesse, whose journey together begins today.

⁶¹ The Greek word used is *tessarakonta*, which means "forty." The text says Moses was forty years old, and verse 7:30 will add another forty years to Moses' life. I am comfortable with translations that describe an 80-year-old Moses as seeing the

burning bush. However, I note that "forty years" was a colloquial expression for a generation. Therefore, I adjust the timeline of Moses' life to indicate young adulthood and middle-age adulthood as his age at these key points in his life.

⁶² Readers who know me personally will recognize that I actually do live in the Sonoran Desert of Arizona. However, I refer here to the spiritual desert of contemplative Christianity rather than my physical home.

whisper. In the midst of life's joys and sorrows you have prepared me for the task in this moment. May whatever comes today and into all tomorrows continue to prepare me for the work of being your kin-dom's servant.

Acts 7:30–42a

Stephen continued recounting the story of The Sender's salvation history, saying, "A generation had passed with Moses learning the rhythms of the desert when a celestial messenger appeared to him in a burning bush. Moses was near Mount Sinai when he spotted the bush. Wonder filled his heart! As he drew near, Moses heard The Sender's voice: 'I am the One who is, has always been, and always will be. I am the One worshipped by Abraham and Sarah, by Isaac and Rebekah, by Jacob, Leah, and Rachel.' Dread filled Moses' heart—the kind of dread that gives life by evoking awe and reverence, that focuses the mind and sharpens the senses. Moses' eyes refused to look toward the bush.

"The Sender said to Moses, 'Take off your shoes, ground yourself with mother earth. The earth beneath your feet is sacred. I have discerned the oppression of my beloved who labor in Egypt. I have heard their cries, as if the pain of childbirth pressed down upon them.⁶³ I have come to deliver them from their pain and bring new life. Go where I send you: back to Egypt, the land you fear.'

"The Sender sent Moses to those who had rejected him, to those who had mockingly asked, 'Who made you the boss of us?' The Sender sent Moses to rescue Their people from slavery, oppression, and injustice. Moses was midwife for The Sender's deliverance of the beloved, expressing the *dunamis* found by dancing the God-rhythms, even in a land of oppression, even amidst the tumult of roiling seas, throughout an entire generation of wandering the wilderness.

"Yet as great an instrument of blessing as Moses was, he also knew there would be other leaders, other truth-tellers, others chosen and sent to lead The Sender's beloved deeper into the God-life. Moses himself told the

people, 'The Sender will raise up a truth-teller like me from among the people.'⁶⁴ These words, spoken by Moses in the midst of the desert, are like the rains that bring life and cause the desert to blossom.

"And how did our ancestors behave? How did The Sender's own beloved respond to Moses' leadership? They rejected Moses and refused to obey. With their words and actions the people turned away from Moses, for their hearts turned inward in fear. They feared Moses was too long on the mountain—feared he would never return. They desired the known oppressor rather than an unknown freedom. They demanded of Aaron, Moses' brother, that he restore them to their idols⁶⁵ of silver and gold. They pleaded with Aaron to replace The Sender's daily provision with the suckling tit of a golden calf which could never produce nor provide for the people. They reveled in celebrating its barren, sterile void. The Sender released them to themselves, and the people gave themselves over to that which cannot bring new creation."

Miracle to misery.

Midwife to a stillborn.

Mystic visions even as the end draws near.

*Drawing near, Moses received
promise and purpose and
people.*

*Who were not the ideal congregation
yet beloved in spite of their brokenness
and perhaps because of it.*

Ah, what's a leader to do?

God, it's me. If the greatness of Moses is not enough to lead and guide people toward the God-life, what hope do I have? I'm no Moses! Yet, I trust, I don't have to be. I merely need to be me—in all my belovedness and brokenness, seeking miracles yet enduring misery, drawing near to you. There, in your presence, I am grounded and discover sacred ground

⁶³ The Greek word used is a variation of *stenazo*, which refers to the pressure felt during childbirth; often translated as "groaning."

⁶⁴ c.f. Deuteronomy 18:15.

⁶⁵ Interesting interpretive debate in my writers' group: should this read, "restore to them their idols," or, "restore them to their idols"? How would you have paraphrased this section, O Gentle Reader?

upon which I can stand. At least for today, being near you is enough, and standing is a victory.

Acts 7:42b–8:3

Stephen continued recounting the story of The Sender’s salvation history, saying, “Moses’ experience with the Israelites continued from age to age, as the truth-tellers throughout history attest. The truth-teller Amos declared:

Were you people of integrity in the desert?
Did your worship and work cohere, my beloved?

You dwell in the place
where you sacrifice your children.⁶⁶

You search the stars
for gods who do not exist.

To a foreign land you will be sent;
to Babylon I will send you.

“The Sender dwelled in the Tent of Meeting, built to The Sender’s specifications to express Their radiance. The Sender spoke through covenant and commandments to our ancestors while they wandered the desert, led by Moses. Then Joshua brought the Tent of Meeting with him and the people into the promised land where they settled amidst the Nations yet in the place entrusted to Abraham and Sarah. The Sender dwelled within this same Tent of Meeting throughout our history, including the days of King David, who desired to build a permanent place in which the Most High could dwell. It was not David but his son, Solomon, who finally built The Sender’s dwelling place, the Temple in Jerusalem. Yet, does The Sender really dwell in one place only? Isaiah the truth-teller declared wisdom from above when he said,

I abide in all the Cosmos;
all creation is my dwelling place.

⁶⁶ c.f. Amos 5:25-27 for this quote. The Greek text references Molek, whose adherents practiced child sacrifice, and Rephan, which is an allusion to a “wandering star,” probably Saturn, whom the Babylonians worshipped.

⁶⁷ c.f. Isaiah 66:1-2.

The glory of gold is but rubbish;
marble endures for a time but I for all eternity.

All that is seen comes from me;
the unseen, too, is the work of my hands.⁶⁷

“As it was in the days of Moses, so it is today. As declared by truth-tellers from age to age, so I proclaim to you have neither eyes to see nor ears to hear the wonders that are so evident! Like our ancestors, your hearts are hard and spirits dead! Like our ancestors, you neither sense the Spirit’s nudge nor would know what to do if you did! Was there ever anyone dancing the God-rhythms whom our ancestors didn’t try to trip? Was there ever a truth-teller they didn’t harass for envisioning the day when The Sender’s Anointed One would be sent? And now you are the Anointed One’s betrayers and murderers! You were blessed with Torah and dumped it on the trash heap.”

When the Elite heard Stephen’s words, their fury flared, and rage edged toward violence. Stephen, overshadowed by the Divine Spirit, lifted his eyes into heaven, where the veil between earthly and divine had parted. He saw The Sender’s radiance and Jesus at Their right hand. “Look,” he said, “it’s the Son of Humanity standing next to The Sender!”

The Elite’s fury erupted into violence. They did not look, and they closed their ears to Stephen’s words. They only acted: an orgy of violence. The Elite pounced upon Stephen and dragged him out of the holy city so they could stone him. Not wanting to sully their outer garments (for getting blood on their tunics would make the garments unclean), the Elite laid their tunics at the feet of a young⁶⁸ man named Saul, who was in training to become Elite in position and temperament, but they inflicted this violence with decorum.

Stephen prayed as stones hailed down upon him, saying, “Jesus, receive me! Jesus, embrace me!” Falling to his knees, Stephen cried out, “Jesus, my sovereign, do not place this act on their heads.” And Stephen breathed his last earthly breath.

⁶⁸ The Greek word *neanion* refers to anyone between 20-45, proving Luke was a Presbyterian by calling someone in his forties a young man. 😊

Saul witnessed all the violence—every last stone that was thrown, every drop of Stephen’s blood—and approved. Stephen’s murder ignited a storm of persecution. Targeted, the gathering scattered throughout the area surrounding Jerusalem and to its north. Men who loved The Sender buried Stephen, and all the gathering mourned him. Saul was not one of the mourners. Rather, his passion for persecution was provoked, and he rampaged from house to house seeking those who belonged to Jesus, to toss them into prison.

*How quickly
comes
rage*

*How swift
violence*

How

God, it’s me. I am fascinated at how quickly Stephen’s kindly recounting of Israel’s “salvation history” turned toward accusation—such hostility! I am appalled at how quickly our own history has turned into something hostile, even violent. How is it that good people like the Elite are so easily lured into becoming instruments of violence? How is it that rage has become our voice and fury our anthem? O Sender, protect me from my own rage; guard me against my own temptation to allow fury to edge toward violence—in thought, in speech, or in action. I lift my eyes to you. Jesus, receive me! Jesus, embrace me!

Acts 8:4-8

The scattered still gathered around the Word, proclaiming it through words and deeds wherever they went as they fled persecution. The Sender used this persecution to disperse the sent ones and other Jesus followers, thereby enacting the promise that they would be eyewitnesses to Judea and Samaria.

Philip, one of the original sent ones, went to a Samaritan city,⁶⁹ where Israelites ordinarily do not go, for the Samaritans and Israelites have been enemies for centuries. In the days of the divided kingdom, Israel, also known at the time as “the northern kingdom,” was conquered by the Assyrian army. The Assyrians either killed, tortured, or enslaved the Israelite men, taking them back to Assyria. The Israelite women were forced to marry Assyrians, who settled in the land they had conquered, creating what Jews considered a half-blooded people and impure regime, whose religious practices mixed Jewish and Assyrian beliefs and rituals. It was to these people that Philip proclaimed the Jesus Story.

When the Samaritans heard Philip and saw how he lived and how the Spirit’s *dunamis* lived within him, they took notice. They listened. The Divine Spirit worked through Philip to bring healing and wholeness of mind and body. The brokenness within people fled; The Sender’s light began to shine. The people rejoiced.

To whom would I not go?

*Not because I am afraid
not because I can’t afford to travel but*

*because prejudice is difficult to release
because of hatred and revulsion*

I miss being sent.

God, it’s me. The dispersal was not just of Jesus’ followers but of the poison of prejudice. This poison formed over time as waters carve out a canyon and as anger feeds a starving soul. O Sender, purify my mind and heart that I would no longer be infected with such poison. Give me the courage to cooperate with your work of helping me release my anger that leads to hatred and my prejudice that blossoms into revulsion. None of these things are the Way of Jesus—neither will they help me tell the Jesus Story nor live the God-life.

⁶⁹ What follows in the rest of this paragraph is not in the Greek text but gives historical and theological context to what Philip did.

In English translations, “Philip preached in a Samaritan city” sounds innocuous when it was actually scandalous.

Acts 8:9-25

In the same part of Samaria was a magician named Simon who had for a long time astounded and befuddled people with trickery and enchantment. He bragged about his greatness, and everyone agreed with him. People said about Simon, “Look how wonderful he is! He must be God’s right-hand man.” Simon had quite the following.

But then the people trusted that what Philip said about the Jesus Story was good news. Even more, they entrusted themselves to the Sender through Jesus and were baptized into the kin-dom, both men and women, rich and poor. Even Simon trusted Jesus and submitted to baptism. Simon, who had quite the following, began to follow. Everywhere Philip went Simon tagged along, astounded by the *dunamis* at work through Philip.

When the sent ones still in Jerusalem heard the Samaritans had entrusted themselves to Jesus, they sent Peter and John to Samaria to help Philip with the work. Upon arriving in Samaria, Peter and John noticed the Samaritans had been baptized but had not yet welcomed the Divine Spirit. So Peter and John extended their hands and touched the people, connecting themselves to the people and the people to each other. In this moment of holy community, the people received the Divine Spirit. Simon was intrigued by what he saw.

Imagining the ways such a ritual act could be exploited for profit, Simon approached Peter and John to offer them money, saying, “Hey, can I get in on this action? What’s it going to take to have this power?”

Peter replied, “That’s not how this works, Simon. The Sender’s gifts are not given for our profit but for others’ wholeness. We’re meant to use the portion assigned to us to serve others. Shame on you, Simon, for thinking you could buy what must be welcomed as a gift. Let your money perish in your pocket. You haven’t been assigned this gift because you still think with your wallet rather than with The Sender’s heart. You value things and use people. Turn away from such thinking by learning to value people and use things. Devote yourself to prayer in the hope that your own heart will be healed—forgiven and freed from the bitterness and greed that holds it captive.”

Simon answered, “Pray for me that the Divine Spirit may accomplish in me what you have said. I long to be forgiven and freed from my false and broken self.”

Peter and John remained in Samaria for a time to tell the Jesus Story and share their eyewitness accounts of what The Sender had done through Jesus. Then they returned to Jerusalem.

*Commodity
product sold
article for trade
selling the sacred for
profit*

God, it’s me. As a religious professional, I get paid a salary. I make money off the Gospel. How like Simon am I? Oh, I know St. Paul says a worker is worth their wage. And I don’t think I seek applause like Simon. Yet, these kinds of passages give me pause. They invite me to examine my heart for the roots of spiritual disease and to confess any bitterness or greed I find within me. O Sender, give me the courage to do a thorough and courageous self-examination, that, like Simon, I may be forgiven, healed, and freed from my false self.

Acts 8:26-40

A celestial messenger whispered to Philip, “Go south of Jerusalem to the desert road that leads to Gaza.” Philip obeyed the whisper. Along the way Philip encountered an Ethiopian official of high standing, a eunuch, who was a servant of Queen Candace herself. The official oversaw the Queen’s treasury yet also revered The Sender and so had been in Jerusalem to worship. The official was on his way home from his pilgrimage and had stopped to rest. He was sitting in his chariot (a sign that he was a man of elevated status) reading the Book of Isaiah (that he had a Torah scroll with him was a sign of his wealth). The Divine Spirit nudged Philip, “Go over to that chariot and hang out a bit.”

When Philip drew near to the chariot, he heard the official reading Isaiah. Philip asked him, “What do you think Isaiah means? How do you understand him?”

The official responded, “I have no idea unless someone explains it to me. You’re a Jew; do you understand what Isaiah is saying? If so, you’re welcome to join me.”

Philip climbed into the chariot and said, “Show me what you are reading.” And the official showed Philip this passage from the Book of Isaiah:⁷⁰

Like a sheep led to slaughter, he did not protest.
Like a lamb being sheared, he remained silent.

Justice was removed from his shoulders,
children removed from his future.

Who will speak for his stolen generations?
Who can speak for the progeny taken away?

The official asked Philip, “Please, please tell me of whom the truth-teller is speaking? About himself or another?” Beginning with this passage from Isaiah, Philip told him the Jesus Story.⁷¹ Philip wove together the threads about redemptive suffering found in the Scriptures and showed him how Jesus’ suffering fulfilled Israel’s calling. He explained how The Sender had blessed Abraham and Sarah’s offspring, of which Israel was considered the eldest child, so that the offspring could bless the entire world. He demonstrated through the Scriptures the *dunamis* of innocent suffering to heal and redeem. He revealed how Jesus was the culmination of The Sender’s set determination to heal and redeem the nations.

By this time, the official had resumed his journey, with Philip accompanying him. As they journeyed together along the Way, they came upon an oasis. Seeing the water, the official said, “Look! There is water. Is there any reason why I cannot be baptized? Stop the chariot!” Both Philip and the official climbed down from the chariot and walked into the water, where Philip baptized him.

When they arose from the water, the Divine Spirit nudged Philip, “It’s time to go.” Philip obeyed the nudge. The official never again saw Philip but returned to his home with the Jesus Story in his mind and the Divine Spirit in his heart. He left that place rejoicing. As for Philip, he left to go tell the Jesus Story in Azotus (also known as Ashdod), a city of Israel’s ancient enemies, the Philistines.

He told the Jesus Story in all the towns up to Caesarea, the seat of government of Israel’s oppressors, the Romans.

Beyond one’s own to others
Beyond friends to strangers
Beyond my country to all nations

Servant to the powerful
Submission before the broken
Suffering for all

Now we are invited into the Way
Now we walk
Now we serve

God, it’s me. I rejoice that when your Good News moved beyond Israel it traveled first to an African nation. I marvel that it went to a people whose love for you predated Jesus by centuries, whose queen once journeyed for miles to test Solomon’s wisdom and left with Solomon’s wealth.⁷² I wonder at your providence that a different queen would hear of your wisdom from a servant whom she had maimed. What are the odds? Though broken, we are blessed. Though servants of others, we are instruments of your Good News. May the Good News that traveled first to Ethiopia travel also, ever deeper and more securely, into my heart.

Acts 9:1-9

While Philip was preaching in Samaria and Gaza, Saul relished the stoning of Stephen and ignited the rampage against the gathering. He continued to inhale violence that he might exhale murder against all who followed Jesus. Saul went before the high priest to request letters of introduction to the synagogue leaders in Damascus giving him permission to hunt down everyone who followed the Way of Jesus, both men and women. Saul desired to bring them back to Jerusalem in chains.

⁷⁰ c.f. Isaiah 53:7-8.

⁷¹ What follows in the rest of the paragraph is interpretive and not found in the Greek text. It presumes one possibility of the kind of teaching Philip may have shared with the official based on the

Isaiah passage known as the “Suffering Servant” with its theme of redemptive suffering.

⁷² c.f. 1 Kings 10.

As Saul was approaching Damascus, a bolt of lightning struck near him. Saul was propelled to the ground, his face in mother earth. As Moses before him had heard a voice address him, so Saul heard a voice cry, "Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?"

Saul responded, "Who are you, master? What is your name?"

Jesus answered, "I am Jesus. When you persecute my followers, you persecute me, for they and I are one. Now get up, dust yourself off, and enter Damascus. You will be instructed what to do."

Now the men who traveled with Saul were befuddled because they heard the voice but did not see Jesus. Saul arose from the ground, as he had been commanded to do. Saul was blind, though his eyes were open. His fellow travelers escorted Saul by the hand into Damascus where for three days he fasted, remaining blind, as if in a tomb.

*Amazing grace,
how sweet the sound,
that saved a murderer like Saul,
he once was lost,
then heard a cry,
was blind...
and stayed that way?*

O Sender, this is not the way the song goes!

*When we've been there (in Damascus)
three long days,
waiting and fasting strong,
still many days,
before singing your praise,
oh, when will the new day dawn?*

God, it's me. As Stephen is the archetype for martyrdom, so Saul is the archetype for conversion: from hatred to love, from silencing the way to proclaiming it, from blindness to sight (eventually). I thank you for my own conversion story—not as theatrical but just as meaningful as Saul's. I thank you, also, for those whom you nurture into the kin-dom through mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers, whose legacy of trusting you passes

from generation to generation. Thank you for embracing both "convert" Christians and "cradle" Christians and calling us all to serve in your kin-dom.

Acts 9:10-19

There lived in Damascus at that time a follower of Jesus named Ananias. Jesus spoke to Ananias in a vision, saying, "Ananias!"

Ananias responded with words he had learned from reading the Scriptures, as he was expected to respond: "Here I am!"

Jesus then commanded Ananias, "Arise and go to the house of a man named Judas, who lives on Straight Street, and ask for a man named Saul, who is from Tarsus. At this very moment Saul is praying, and I have given him a vision that you will lay hands on him and his sight will be restored."

Ananias then responded with his fear rather than what he had learned from the Scriptures, saying, "Are you nuts?! I've heard about this Saul. He is a bad, bad man who has menaced the gathering in Jerusalem. What's more he has authority from the chief priest to imprison anyone who invokes your name."

Jesus responded, "Ananias, my authority trumps the chief priest's authority. Do what I command, for I have chosen this Saul to be an instrument of my *shalom*. He will proclaim my Story to the nations and even kings. He will share my Good News with my people Israel. You worry he will imprison you when it is I who will liberate him. I will personally tutor him to suffer through his service, submit to the cross, and live as one who bears my name."

Ananias went to the house, entered it, and placed his hands upon Saul, saying, "Saul, my brother, Jesus, my Sovereign, who revealed himself to you on the road as you journeyed here, has sent me. You are to see again—see anew and see from above, for you will be filled with the Divine Spirit." In that very moment, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes. He who was blind could now see. Saul got up and was baptized to be strengthened spiritually. Only after submitting to baptism did Saul eat food to be strengthened physically.

*Fear
so noisy
voices in my head I cannot mute.*

*Dread
stronger at night
like clothes in my closet that looked⁷³ like monsters.*

*Grace
distant hope
arriving before seen on the horizon.*

God, it's me. As the command is given, so is the grace that makes obedience possible. As the vision appears on the horizon, so grace arrives at our front door to bless us and keep us and make us strong (or at least able) to serve. O Sender, I love that Ananias started so faithful—"Here I am!"—yet struggled when fear gripped his heart—"I have heard about this Saul." I can be like Ananias, so his example gives me hope that as you worked through him so you can work through me (and even in spite of me). Teach my heart the ways of trusting in your enduring goodness and strength, even when my heart fears.

Acts 9:20-31

Saul was with the gathering in Damascus for several days and soon began telling others the Jesus Story, even teaching in the synagogue that Jesus was The Sender's Son. This astonished those who heard him, who were perplexed because Saul had ignited the persecution against Jesus' followers in Jerusalem. They knew Saul's purpose in coming to Damascus was to hunt down the gathering and imprison its people, and that even the chief priest had authorized him! Those in the synagogue openly wondered about Saul, "What the heck is going on with this guy?"

Saul's teaching that Jesus is the Anointed One grew in clarity and became so compelling that some in the Damascus synagogue schemed together how they might kill him. Saul learned of their conspiracy against him. He knew that his enemies were watching the city gates day and night for an opportunity to enact their plot. Knowing their plan, however, the gathering lowered Saul down the city wall in a bucket to allow Saul to escape and return to Jerusalem.

The gathering in Jerusalem reacted to Saul in the same way as the Damascus gathering—with fear and suspicion. Yet there was one among them named Barnabas who had the gift of encouragement. Barnabas went to Saul and brought him to the sent ones. Then Barnabas vouched for Saul, telling the story of how the resurrected Jesus had spoken to Saul on the road to Damascus. Further, Barnabas testified that in Damascus Saul had taught about Jesus with clarity, courage, and conviction.

Having heard Barnabas' testimony, the gathering in Jerusalem welcomed Saul, who went in and out from among them and taught with the same clarity, courage, and conviction to those in Jerusalem. Saul even engaged in debates with the Hellenistic Jews (those from the Gentile nations beyond Israel), who were so incensed by Saul that they too plotted how they might kill him. When the gathering in Jerusalem learned of the Hellenists' scheming, they smuggled Saul to the sea, to Caesarea, where they put him on a boat bound for his hometown of Tarsus.

During this time, when Saul was stirring up emotions and hostility in Jerusalem, the gatherings outside of the holy city lived in peace. In Judea, Samaria, and Galilee, the gatherings increased in number and spiritual strength as they lived in holy awe and reverence before The Sender.

*Some people
evoke
heartburn
in others.*

*Some people
doubt
what they have not seen
from others.*

*Some people
encourage
welcome and hospitality
of others.*

⁷³ I made this verb past tense for a reason: to be clear, this was a problem in childhood but is no longer a fear I possess (nor that possesses me). 😊

God, it's me. Thank you for Barnabas, for Saul would have been lost without him. Oh, I know, they had a falling out later. But in the beginning, there was encouragement—Barnabas opening doors (and hearts), smoothing the path that would one day lead to missionary journeys. Thank you for those people who smooth my rough edges, too, who do for me what Barnabas did for Saul: believe, befriend, and become partners in Good News. I thank you for their friendship through the years.

Acts 9:32-43

While Saul was beginning his ministry, Peter remained active in his work among all the beloved. One day Peter traveled from Jerusalem to Lydda, southeast of Tel Aviv,⁷⁴ to visit the gathering. In Lydda was a man named Aeneas who was paralyzed and had been bedridden for eight years. Peter said to Aeneas, “Aeneas, Jesus the Anointed makes you whole. Arise! Arise and walk! But first make your bed.” At once Aeneas arose, and all the residents of Lydda and nearby Sharon, who were eyewitnesses of this marvel, turned toward Jesus.

In Tel Aviv, in the Joppa neighborhood, lived a follower of Jesus named Tabitha (whose name means gazelle and who, in Greek, was called Dorcas).⁷⁵ Dorcas danced the God-rhythms through good works and *agape*, yet she became ill and died. Her family and neighbors washed her body and laid her in a room upstairs. Because Lydda and Joppa were near one another (about eleven miles apart), the gathering in Joppa sent for Peter, for they heard he was in Lydda. “Please come. Hurry!” said the two men who were sent. Peter arose and accompanied the two men.

When Peter arrived at the house in Joppa, the residents led him to the room upstairs where Dorcas' body lay in repose. The widows who surrounded the bed wailed

in grief, and they showed Peter the beautiful clothes and cloaks Dorcas had made while she was alive. Peter asked the widows to leave so that he could pray with the body. Once the widows had left, Peter kneeled and prayed, “Tabitha, arise.” And Tabitha opened her eyes anew, looked at Peter, and sat up. Peter gave her his hand so that she could rise to her feet. Calling to the widows and the beloved, Peter stood beside her. News of Tabitha's rising could not be hidden but spread like wildfire. Many in Joppa entrusted themselves to Jesus. Meanwhile, Peter remained in Joppa for a while, in the house of Simon the Tanner.

*Grief and mourning a tapestry of sorrow and joy.
Hope in the morning as agape invites joy.*

*The gazelle leaps, bringing pleasure.
The spring in its step incites joy.*

*Escaping, the gazelle twists and turns, like life itself,
as fabric, woven beauty, delights joy.*

*Horizon seen upon the dawn,
Tabitha leaping amidst the light's joy.⁷⁶*

God, it's me. My heart jumps with joy at the sound of your Good News entering a home and a life, as it did for Tabitha. Praise leaps from my lips when your healing touch alights upon one in need of your care. I spring forward in hope, searching for the place of your perfect will that makes me whole and complete, my true self. Guard my heart from the lion's pride. Make me swift to flee the cheetah of culture, for the temptation to do injustice, desire vengeance, and speak with arrogance stalks its prey. I am the prey.

⁷⁴ The text refers to Joppa, which is a suburb of modern Tel Aviv.

⁷⁵ Studies of cemeteries from the 1st century demonstrate that it was common to have multiple names—in Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek, and/or Latin. For example, *Yeshua* (Hebrew) and *Jesus* (Greek) both refer to Jesus, as *Saulos* (Hebrew) and *Paulos* (Greek) refer to Paul. Random note: My wife thinks I am a nerd for knowing that studies of 1st century cemeteries exist. She's not wrong.

⁷⁶ This poem seeks to honor Tabitha's name, which means gazelle, by using a Persian form of poetry known as the *ghazal* (Arabic for gazelle). The *radif* is used twice in the first couplet and at the end of each successive couplet. The *qafia*, or rhyming word, is used before the *radif* in each couplet. Finally, the last couplet includes a proper name. In this poem, the *radif* is joy and the *qafia* is invites.

Acts 10:1-8

North of where Peter was staying in the Joppa neighborhood of Tel Aviv was the seaside town of Caesarea, the seat of the Roman government in the region. There lived a man named Cornelius, a professional soldier from among the ranks of the Italians. He commanded 100 men and so was called a “centurion.” Though a Roman, and therefore one of Israel’s oppressors, Cornelius was a good man who revered The Sender and respected all people. He sought to dance the God-rhythms through kindness, generosity, and prayer.

At 3:00 one afternoon, while Cornelius was praying the hours,⁷⁷ he perceived the presence of a celestial messenger, “Cornelius!”

Cornelius froze in terror, for to encounter the Roman gods was considered a bad omen and quite dangerous. He did not yet understand what was happening. As he stared at the messenger, Cornelius responded, “Yes sir?”

The messenger reassured Cornelius that all was well: “The Sender has seen and heard your kindness, generosity, and prayers and is well-pleased with you. The Sender commands that you send men to Joppa, to the home of Simon the Tanner. A man staying there is also named Simon, though he goes by Peter.” Then the messenger left.

Cornelius obeyed the command and sent for one of his soldiers who was known to revere The Sender. He told the soldier everything the messenger had said and sent him to Joppa along with two servants from Cornelius’ household.

Kindness
simple yet beautiful

Generosity
joyful sharing of community

Prayer
inspiration through connection

God, it’s me. How beautiful to be known as a person of kindness, generosity, and prayer. May I be so known! And yet I confess how often I withhold kindness, keep generosity in my pocket, and silence my prayers. Forgive me, O Sender, and teach me anew that the path of kindness, generosity, and prayer form a path for me to walk—pleasing for me and pleasing to you when I walk it.

Acts 10:9-16

The next day at noon Peter went to the roof to pray the hours and became hungry. While a meal was prepared for him, Peter experienced a mystical vision in which a feast was lowered to him from heaven itself. The feast stretched across the four corners of a picnic blanket, as if to symbolize the four corners of the earth. The blanket was covered with every variety of beast from earth and sky, those considered clean and unclean, those deemed pure and impure. A voice spoke: “Take and eat, Peter. All of it is sacred.”

Peter rebelled against the voice, “Never! My lips have never been soiled by such vile impurity.”

The voice rebuked him, “What The Sender calls sacred you must not call impure.” Again and again the voice rebuked Peter; three times the voice rebuked him. And as suddenly as the vision had overshadowed Peter, it disappeared.

*If I keep my eyes closed,
my ears shut, and
my lips locked,*

I never have to agree to anything new.

*“God said it.”
“I believe it.”
“That settles it.”*

Until God changes what is said.

⁷⁷ Jewish religion in the 1st century, like Catholic monastics and Muslims, had prescribed hours when believers were called to pray.

God, it's me. For 1,500 years, Peter's people had lived a certain way, and then you showed them the way. For his entire life, Peter had practiced a way before being shown the way. Then, in an instant, you gave him a new vision, a new calling, a transformed way. No wonder church folks don't like the new hymnal! No surprise that they freak out when a band replaces an organ (or a preacher introduces new gender pronouns). O Sender, I'm so glad I'm not entrenched like that. Just don't change anything I like, and I'll continue to be flexible and open to things.

Acts 10:17-33

Peter's vision perplexed him, and he wandered about in his mind wondering what the vision could possibly mean. While Peter stewed over the vision, Cornelius' men arrived at Simon's house and called out, asking for Peter. Peter, still lost in his thoughts, was interrupted by the Divine Spirit, who whispered to him, "Hey! Focus! Three men who seek The Sender require⁷⁸ your help. Arise! Get up and journey with them. Don't wait. Don't waver. Just do it, for I have sent them."

Peter uncoiled his legs, stood, and walked down the stairs to greet the men, saying, "I am the one to whom you were sent. How can I help you?"

They introduced themselves to Peter, saying, "We were sent by Cornelius, a soldier of Rome yet one who reveres The Sender and seeks right relationships with all people. Even your brothers and sisters from among the Jewish people speak well of our master. A celestial messenger instructed him to send for you and to invite you to come to his home. We know that such table fellowship is uncommon for your people, for it conveys a message of unity and peace with those your people call impure. Yet our master invites you to cross his threshold and enter his home. He welcomes you to his home."

Peter responded, "And I welcome you to this home." The men entered and stayed the night.

The next day, Peter journeyed with the men, along with six of the beloved, to Caesarea, the seat of Roman government. Cornelius was expecting them and had called

together his family and several of his close friends to listen to Peter. Upon seeing Peter, Cornelius fell to his knees and worshipped Peter. Peter rejected such nonsense, saying, "Stand up! I am just a man."

When Peter crossed the threshold into Cornelius' home, he saw that many had gathered to hear him tell the Jesus Story. He said to them, "You know that it is our tradition to remain separate from those we consider impure and whom we call unclean. But The Sender has revealed to me a new step with which to dance the God-rhythms: unity and peace with those who are different, whom I formerly called my enemy. The Sender instructed me not to call impure what They have called sacred, which is why I came here without murmur nor grumbling nor complaint. So, why have you sent for me?"

Cornelius answered, "Four days ago I was praying the hours when a celestial messenger appeared to me. He said that The Sender had seen and heard my kindness, generosity, and prayers. They commanded me to send for you at the house of Simon the Tanner in Joppa by the sea. Therefore, I sent for you immediately, and by your kindness you have entered my home. Now we are gathered here to hear you, to listen to everything The Sender has commanded you to tell us."

Crossing the threshold

no turning back

never the same again

new vista

bridge to new hope

conscientious

calling for new creation

Cross to hold

God, it's me. I wonder what the four young black men were thinking as they approached the Woolworth's

⁷⁸ The Greek text uses the verb *zeteo*, which can mean "to seek, search, or require." Peter is the object of the men's search, but

there is a large sense in which their search is bigger than Peter, who is the instrument of their finding The Sender.

lunch counter in 1960.⁷⁹ Were they apprehensive and afraid or filled with excitement and adrenaline? Did they see themselves as Peter entering Cornelius' home? I wonder, too, if I could ever be so bold? I wonder now what "dividing walls of hostility"⁸⁰ need to be torn down and what bridges of peace need to be built. O Sender, make me an instrument of hospitality and welcome that seeks unity and plants seeds of new creation.

Acts 10:34-48

Peter addressed the mixed gathering of Jews and Romans sharing table fellowship in Cornelius' home: "I am seized⁸¹ by this truth that holds my heart captive: The Sender rejects all prejudice and welcomes all who practice reverence and right relationships. You have heard rumors about the Jesus Story, but now I tell it to you plainly. It is a story of The Sender's *shalom* told in the words and deeds of Jesus the Anointed—who is Sovereign above Caesar.

"This story of *shalom* began in Galilee and spread throughout Judea. It began with John's baptism of Jews, a ritual that formerly had been reserved only for Gentiles. John's baptism invited national repentance and personal commitment to the Way of *shalom*. John prepared the Way for Jesus of Nazareth, whom The Sender anointed with the Divine Spirit and the *dunamis* that comes through the Spirit. With this *dunamis*, Jesus ushered in wholeness of body, mind, and spirit to those afflicted by the Accuser and oppressed by the Accuser's systems of injustice.

"We are eyewitnesses of what Jesus endured in Judea and Jerusalem. You Romans crucified him for sedition after we Jews had falsely accused him of blasphemy. Yet The Sender raised him from death after three days and granted us the honor of eating and drinking with him in his resurrection, for we are chosen as eyewitnesses to tell the Jesus Story. And so we tell it—tell it to all. We bear witness that Jesus is the Sovereign over the living and the dead, the one who will divide the just from the unjust. All the truth-tellers from ages past have pointed

to Jesus, and everyone who trusts in him opens themselves to his healing and wholeness. Through Jesus' forgiveness all can be seized and have their hearts held captive in him."

Peter's sermon was interrupted by the Divine Spirit that descended upon all who heard Peter's words. The Jews who had accompanied Peter were amazed when they saw the Romans given the gift of the Spirit and astounded when they heard them speak in foreign languages and offer praise and thanksgiving to The Sender.

Peter exclaimed, "These Romans are like us and have received the Divine Spirit! Who dares to argue that they are not our family? We will offer them up to The Sender in ritual and prayer through the waters of baptism, just as we have been so offered." Peter commanded the Romans be baptized in the name of Jesus the Anointed, and all of Cornelius' household invited Peter and the other Jews to stay and share with them in table fellowship to mark their unity.

*Carpe diem—
not our act
but The Sender's initiative.*

*Captive to a truth
that will not let us go
but instructs and sends.*

*Caught in Spirit's web—
creating community we did not expect
but welcome as a gift.*

God, it's me. Who dares to argue? Not me! I accept my family is born of other clans and different cultures; it is borne by different times and many tribes. I acknowledge "my" family is really your family, that I am allowed to share. Praise and thanksgiving to you, O Sender, for your wide and generous love that seizes my mind and holds captive my heart.

⁷⁹ The four men who initiated the lunch counter sit-ins during the civil rights movement are Joseph McNeil, Franklin McCain, David Richmond, and Jibreel Khazan. They entered the Woolworth's in Greensboro, North Carolina on February 1, 1960.

⁸⁰ c.f. Ephesians 2:14.

⁸¹ The Greek word used is *katalambanomai*, which can mean "seize or capture" as well as "understand or comprehend." The prefix *kata* intensifies the verb *lambano* to give the sense of "take hold in a decisive manner."

Acts 11:1-18

Now the sent ones and beloved gathered in Judea heard the Romans had welcomed the Jesus Story. When Peter returned to Jerusalem, some of the beloved who were Jewish criticized him because he had transgressed centuries of religious tradition by calling as family those not of the genetic lineage of Abraham and Sarah. By sharing table fellowship with Gentiles, Peter bypassed religious statute for relational union, and his critics were having none of it. “Why did you enter a home of men who had never been circumcised? Our father Abraham received the ritual of circumcision as a sign of the covenant with The Sender. The ritual was The Sender’s idea! Peter, how dare you betray what comes directly from The Sender?”

Peter broke it down for them step by step. “While I was in Joppa praying the hours, I experienced a mystical vision. A feast from heaven itself was lowered down to me. The feast stretched across the four corners of a picnic blanket, as if to symbolize the four corners of the earth. The blanket was covered with every kind and variety of beast from earth and sky, those considered clean and unclean, those deemed pure and impure. The voice spoke to me, ‘Take and eat, Peter. All of it is sacred.’ I rebelled against the voice, ‘Never! My lips have never been soiled by such vile impurity.’ But the voice rebuked me, ‘What The Sender calls sacred you must not call impure.’ Again and again the voice rebuked me; three times the voice rebuked me. And as suddenly as the vision had overshadowed me, it disappeared.

“As soon as the vision disappeared, three men arrived at Simon’s house where I was staying. The Divine Spirit whispered to me, ‘Go! I am sending you with them. Accept no prejudice that divides people one from another.’ Six of our brothers accompanied me, and we all crossed the threshold of Cornelius’ home and can bear witness to what we saw and heard. Cornelius told us that he, too, had received a mystical vision from The Sender. He said, ‘A celestial messenger commanded that I send for you, Peter, to hear the Story that will bring wholeness to me and my entire household.’ As I told the Jesus Story to Cornelius’

household, the Divine Spirit interrupted me by pouring out upon them just as it did upon us on the day of Pentecost.

“In that moment, the Spirit brought to my memory the words of Jesus, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Divine Spirit.’ You asked me, ‘How dare I betray what comes directly from The Sender?’ I answer you, ‘I cannot!’ The Sender gave to the Gentiles the same gift that was given to us when we trusted in Jesus the Anointed. Who am I to forbid The Sender from welcoming others into the kin-dom?”

And when Peter’s critics heard his eyewitness account, their hearts were still⁸² and they rejoiced in The Sender’s loving-kindness, saying, “The Sender has turned Gentile hearts away from the corruption of this culture and turned them toward the God-life!”

*Who am I
to hinder loving-kindness
to prevent community
to forbid The Sender from being Sovereign?*

*Who are you
by allowing welcome
by building bridges to the future
by freeing people to dance the God-rhythms?*

God, it’s me. It takes a while for you to breakthrough my defenses sometimes. Forgive me when I refuse to notice your Spirit at work, to acknowledge Their nudge, or to listen to Their whisper. Forgive me when I hold up the walls of hostility rather than allow them to fall. Forgive me when I do not cross the bridges of peace others have built because of your word to them. Forgive me and free me to dance to your God-rhythms, even if I am hearing them for the first time.

Acts 11:19-30

When persecution of the gathering erupted, the beloved scattered to Lebanon, Syria, and Cyprus and spoke the Jesus Story to those of Jewish lineage. Some folks also came to the Syrian city of Antioch from Libya and

⁸² The Greek word used here is *hesychasan*, which is sometimes translated as “silenced” to refer to the critic’s objections. In my humble opinion, such translations miss the spirit of this verse and

the use of *hesychasan* in it. *Hesychasan*’s dominant meaning is “still or stillness,” with biblical connections to Psalm 23:2 and Psalm 46:10 and the contemplative spirit.

Cyprus and told the Jesus Story to Greeks. The Sender empowered their speech and many who heard them entrusted themselves to Jesus.

News about what happened in Antioch reached the ears of the gathering in Jerusalem, who commissioned Barnabas and sent him to Antioch. When Barnabas witnessed the ways The Sender's loving-kindness was at work amidst the gathering of Greeks, he encouraged them to persevere in their devotion and remain unwavering in dancing the God-rhythms. Barnabas was a man full of kindness, trust, and the Divine Spirit. He noticed how The Sender was swelling the gathering by teaching these Greeks to dance the God-rhythms. Sensing the Spirit's nudge, he traveled to Tarsus to look for Saul, to bring him to Antioch that together they could tell the Jesus Story. For an entire year they worked together tirelessly to train the gathering of these new disciplined followers of Jesus. It was in Antioch that they were first called "Christ-ones."

About that time some mystics traveled north from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of the mystics, Agabus, influenced by the Spirit, predicted a severe famine throughout the area. (This is the famine that happened under Emperor Claudius around 41 or 42 C.E.) Jesus' disciplined followers set guidelines for all to follow: Each one would give according to their ability to support the beloved throughout Judea. All that was collected would be sent with Barnabas and Saul to give to the elders for distribution to the people.

*I once lived in a community that inquired,
"Who are you from home?"
The question would be spit
like venom.*

*The questioner never guessed—
and would be shocked, shocked I tell you!—
to learn the question
landed like the viper's strike.*

*"Who is your grandmother? Do I know her?"
the question is wondered innocently, harmlessly,
to divide
me from thee and we from them.*

*The "correct" answer,
for those from other places,
for those whose kith and kin were unknown,
"I am no one from home."*

*And The Sender sends
you and me until
there is only we
unity in love.*

*God, it's me. In ever-expanding circles, you swell the
love in my heart. You first gave me my love for you, and
then showed me how to love those around me. You
continue to swell my heart that I might love those
both near and far, those from my own clan and culture
as well as those whom I encounter who seem foreign
and distant. It matters not who we are or where we
are from, for we all belong to you.*

Acts 12:1-11

During the season of famine, King Herod searched for a scapegoat to blame, and his violent intent shifted toward the gathering. Herod had James, one of the brothers Zebedee, executed by the sword. This execution pleased the religious leadership Herod needed to co-opt in order to ensure his power and influence continued, so he arrested Peter, too. (This happened during the politically charged and religiously significant time of the Passover, also known as the Festival of Unleavened Bread.) Herod had Peter tossed into prison and ordered four platoons of four soldiers each to guard him around the clock—Peter was going nowhere.

Herod intended to parade Peter around after the Passover to appease the religious leaders and, hopefully, to the applause of the masses. Yet, while Peter was in prison, the gathering prayed earnestly and strenuously. The night before Herod was going to parade Peter around, he bound him in chains, even while he was sleeping. Each of Peter's wrists were chained to one of the soldiers, while the other two soldiers guarded the prison doors—Peter was going nowhere.

Then Peter left the prison.

A celestial messenger showed up, his radiance evident in the cell. He tapped Peter on the shoulder and

whispered in his ear, “Shhhh, wake up! Get up!” Peter’s chains dropped off, and the messenger told him, “Get dressed. Take everything. You’re not coming back.” Peter was going somewhere.

Now, Peter thought he was having a vision or perhaps was dreaming, yet he followed the messenger anyway. Past the first guard they crept. Beyond the second guard they inched. All the way to the heavy iron gate to the city they ambled. Peter wondered how they would open the gate when it opened to them automatically.⁸³ Peter and the messenger walked into the night side-by-side, and the messenger left. Peter now recognized this was reality and not a vision he was having, and he said to himself, “Wow! The Sender sends! The Sender sent that messenger to rescue me from Herod’s violent intent and from the vindictive expectations of the religious leaders.”

*Past is prologue:
looking back
horizon is seen...right?*

*James arrested,
dead.
Peter arrested...*

*Not so fast!
Looking forward,
praying forward....*

*What hope comes
when expectations die
and all we are left with is you?*

God, it’s me. I cannot imagine how Peter felt. His good friend James, fellow fisherman, fellow follower, was dead. Amidst his grieving and now himself arrested, Peter must have known his fate was sealed—and by the king’s signet. What would my prayers have been? Would I have lost hope? I cannot imagine, yet I acknowledge that even now, many of your beloved around the world experience a similar fate. In your mercy, hear my prayers for their safety. By your mercy,

grant them strength and courage. Through your mercy, overshadow them with your presence and peace.

Acts 12:12–25

As Peter awakened to the reality of his rescue, he went to John Mark’s house, where the gathering was earnestly and strenuously praying for him. Peter knocked on the outer gate, which was answered by a servant named Rhoda. Rhoda recognized Peter’s voice, and a jolt of joy surged through her. Forgetting to open the gate (and leaving Peter standing in the street), Rhoda rushed in to where the gathering was praying and exclaimed, “Peter is outside!” The gathering dismissed Rhoda’s witness and attempted to silence her voice by telling her she was crazy. Rhoda persisted—she knew what she knew and would not be dissuaded from speaking her truth. “Perhaps it was one of The Sender’s messengers you heard,” they suggested.

While this inane conversation occurred, Peter stood in the street, alone, knocking and knocking and knocking. Finally, someone opened the gate, and the gathering saw Peter and were astonished, even though they had been praying for him. They badgered Peter with a flurry of questions about what had happened and how he came to be rescued. Peter raised his hands and motioned for them to listen. As an eyewitness, he described to them all that The Sender had done to bring about his rescue from prison. Peter concluded, “Tell what I have told you to James⁸⁴ and the rest of the beloved.” And then Peter went into hiding, for it was not safe for him or for anyone else that he remain there, for the authorities would be searching for him.

Chaos erupted at dawn when the guards’ shift change occurred. Herod himself organized and directed the search for Peter, for Herod was incensed! He personally grilled each one of the four soldiers tasked with guarding Peter. Per Roman law, soldiers were personally responsible for the prisoners entrusted to them. Because these soldiers had lost Peter, Herod had them executed.

⁸³ The Greek word used is *automatos*.

⁸⁴ Peter appears to warn the gathering a storm is coming because of his escape and bring a measure of comfort to his friends, as if to say, “They didn’t kill me also.”

Herod, clearly in a foul mood, needed a spa day, so he left Jerusalem to go to the beach.⁸⁵

Herod's foul mood continued, and he took it out on the people of Tyre and Sidon in southern Lebanon. Leaders from Tyre and Sidon came to Herod's court to schmooze with the king, for they depended on Herod's abundant agricultural production for their food supply. Finding Herod's lackey, Blastus, they sweet talked their way into an audience before the king. The day their meeting was scheduled, Herod dressed in his full pomp and circumstance and sat upon an elevated platform. Looking down upon the people from Tyre and Sidon, Herod addressed them. The people fawned over Herod, shouting such things as, "He speaks like a god!" and, "This is no mortal!" But Herod was struck down,⁸⁶ for though he was half Jewish, he refused to honor The Sender and accepted the heretical accolades from the crowd. Herod's stomach was filled with worms, and he died.

Yet The Sender's Word continued to advance, seizing minds and capturing hearts as many entrusted themselves to Jesus. After finishing their work, Barnabas and Saul returned to Jerusalem and brought John Mark with them.

*Do we believe what we are told
by those without status or star power?*

*Do we trust the message
of those rescued from varieties of imprisonment?*

*Do we listen
as those rescued recount stories of loving-kindness?*

*Or, like Herod, do we fume—
pissed off that we didn't get our way?*

God, it's me. Forgive me when I am surprised that you heard my prayers and responded in love. Forgive me that when I pray, it seems as if I assume, "Of course you hear me, but I'm sure you are way too busy for the

likes of me." Give me voice to trust you enough to pour out my longings and my needs, my heart and my soul, to your merciful care. I don't understand why Simon Peter was rescued but James Bar Zebedee was not, so help me pray and pray and keep praying until I find the serenity, courage, and wisdom you give as a gift. May I pray until my surprise is transformed into acceptance, release, and joy.

Acts 13:1-12

The gathering in Antioch was served by truth-tellers and teachers: not just Barnabas and Saul but also Simeon, Lucius, and Manaen, a childhood friend of Herod and a member of his court. While the gathering worshiped The Sender and fasted, the Divine Spirit whispered, "Set apart Barnabas and Saul for a special work, for I have chosen them." After more fasting and prayer, the gathering laid hands on Barnabas and Saul, a sign of being empowered for the work, and sent them to live according to the Spirit's call.

Being sent by the Spirit, Barnabas and Saul went first to Seleucia in southeastern Turkey and from there sailed to Cyprus. Upon docking in Salamis, on the eastern side of the island, they went to the Jewish synagogue to teach The Sender's Word and brought John Mark along with them to help. They taught throughout the entire island.

When they got to Paphos on the southwestern side of the island, Barnabas, Saul, and John Mark encountered a man named Bar-Jesus, allegedly a wise man but actually a liar and trickster. Bar-Jesus was schmoozing with Sergius Paulus, the Roman governor of Cyprus. Now Sergius was intelligent and inquisitive, so he summoned Barnabas and Saul so he could hear what they had to say about The Sender's Word. Bar-Jesus, also called Elymas,⁸⁷ was irritated by their presence and jealous of the attention the governor was giving them. Elymas tried to distract the governor and turn his attention away from The Sender's Word.

days. The difference in timelines is literary and cosmetic more than a substantive difference.

⁸⁷ It was common for people to have different names in Aramaic, Greek, and Latin (e.g. Cephas/Peter, Saul/Paul).

⁸⁵ The Greek text merely notes that Herod traveled from "Judea to Caesarea." His motivation is interpretive and not in the text (but I bet I'm right about Herod).

⁸⁶ Luke has Herod die immediately, while the ancient historian Josephus recounts Herod dying from a stomach ailment after five

Saul, also called Paul, inspired by the Spirit, looked at Elymas and called him out: “Stop it! You are a child of the Accuser and enemy of right relationships. You are full of deceit and manipulation and make The Sender’s straight paths crooked with your scheming. Listen up! Because of this you will be blind for a while—not forever, but for a time—a visual symbol of the darkness you inhabit.” In that moment, darkness descended upon Elymas like a mist, and he stumbled and fumbled about. Someone had to lead him about by the hand. Meanwhile, the governor was an eyewitness to what happened! He entrusted himself to Jesus, though not because of what happened to Elymas but because he was overwhelmed by the teaching about The Sender.

*Haters gonna hate!
Narcissists gonna wag the dog!
“Can’t be talkin’ ‘bout somebody else!”*

*Darkness descends like a mist...
...that forms into concrete!
Tough to see with concrete goggles!*

*Light dawns in the morning,
illuminating and enlightening
all upon whom the Spirit rests.*

God, it’s me. Give me insight with which to notice that I am in the presence of a narcissist. Help me resist the temptation to try to please, persuade, or impress them, convince, coax, or cajole them, get them to see reason or care about others’ feelings. O Sender, save me from such folly!!! Give me the courage to notice in the moment the trap set for me. Give me the wisdom to know that the only loving response is to set a boundary, for the protection of myself and others.

Acts 13:13-23

Paul, Barnabas, and their colleagues sailed from Paphos on the Island of Cyprus across the Mediterranean to Perga on the southwestern coast of Turkey. John Mark

left them to return to Jerusalem, while Paul and Barnabas continued north to Antioch in central Turkey (not to be confused with Antioch in Syria).

On the Sabbath, Paul and Barnabas went to the synagogue and sat down, assuming the role of teachers. The elders noticed, and after readings from the Torah and truth-tellers, they beckoned to Paul and Barnabas, saying, “Brothers, if you have a word of comfort or courage about these readings, speak!”

Paul stood, waved his hand to silence the murmuring of the crowd, and began to recount The Sender’s salvation history. “Beloved of Israel, my family, listen! Listen also you who are from the Nations yet who revere The Sender. The Sender chose our forebearers and increased their number while in Egypt. With a strong arm and mighty hand, The Sender led our people away from oppression in the greatest nation of that time and into freedom in the desert. And then for an entire generation he endured their bad habits, twisted thinking, and fractured ways.⁸⁸

“After defeating the clans of Canaan, The Sender allowed our ancestors to live in the land as Their children. For 450 years, our ancestors resided in the land and abided in The Sender, who sent judges to guide the people and help them live the God-life. During the days of Samuel, the last judge and the first truth-teller, the people asked for a king, for they wanted to mirror the nations. The people no longer wanted their culture and customs to be different from the neighboring clans and tribes and peoples.

“The Sender sent them Saul bar Kish from the tribe of Benjamin. Saul was king for a generation before The Sender removed him from the throne and chose David to be king. The Sender testified to David’s character, calling David a man who understood Their desires and claimed David to enact Their set determination. Through the lineage of David, son of Jesse, The Sender delivered to us Jesus the Anointed, to rescue and restore us as They promised to Abraham, David, and truth-tellers from ages-to-ages past.”

⁸⁸ The Greek word used is a compound word from *tropos* and *phoreo*. *Tropos* has the connotation of “habit” or “enduring character.”

*Down through the centuries they march—
a gallery of rogues,
a cathedral of saints,
Jesus' family.*

*Chosen from before the beginning of time—
real and earthy,
neither particularly pious nor sentimental,
Jesus' family.*

*From generation to generation—
spoken into existence by a promise,
until invitation is extended also to us: to become
Jesus' family.*

God, it's me. This is now the third retelling of your salvation history (by Peter, then Stephen, and now Paul). This makes me wonder: What would I say? How would I tell your Story? O Sender, give me the words I need to recount your mighty acts of bending the moral arc of history toward justice. Help me internalize the narrative of your reaching into human hearts to curve them outward in love. Give me words adequate to point toward your new creation. Teach me what to say when asked to give an account of the hope that is within me.⁸⁹

Acts 13:24-43

Paul continued to recount The Sender's salvation history. "Before Jesus the Anointed arrived, John the Baptizer had announced a season of national repentance, to be observed through the ritual of baptism of everyone in Israel. John's ministry was in the eastern desert, the same place from which our ancestors crossed over from the Wilderness to the Promised Land. As our ancestors' freedom from slavery to the Egyptians culminated with their crossing the Jordan River, so John invited all Israel to claim a renewed freedom from our national brokenness through baptism in the Jordan. And when John was finished with his work, he made it clear to all who had ears to hear, saying, 'Who do you think I am? I am not the

Anointed! The Anointed comes next, and I am unworthy even to serve as a slave to him.

"Beloved of Israel who descend from Abraham and Sarah, and all who revere The Sender from among the Nations, my family all: Listen! The Sender's Story has been entrusted to us because our leaders failed to recognize the signs of the Anointed's arrival. They looked for strength, not service; for hubris, not humility; for one who called for war and not one who walked the Way of peace. Our leaders misunderstood the truth-tellers from ages past with their call to live lives of justice and joy, to feed the hungry and welcome the stranger. Our leaders fulfilled the truth-tellers' expectations that some would seek power above all else. Indeed, they condemned to death The Sender's Anointed, even though they knew him to be innocent. As subjugated people, we cannot enforce capital punishment, so they asked Pilate, the Roman governor, to enforce the sentence. And so Jesus was crucified and laid in a tomb.

"But The Sender was not finished with Jesus, for They raised him from the dead. For fifty days Jesus appeared to his disciplined followers who had abided with him throughout his years in Galilee. These men and women are eyewitnesses to what The Sender has done! And we, too, tell the Jesus Story and share the news that what The Sender promised to Abraham and Sarah has been fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus is Abraham's seed and the one through whom all the world shall be made whole and complete. Jesus' resurrection is the sign of hope that new creation has come and will come through him. This good news is for us and our children.

"The psalms and truth-tellers proclaim this wonder. We read in the second psalm,

'Son! Son!

Today I reveal you and bring you forth!⁹⁰

"And Isaiah says this about The Sender raising Jesus, never to experience the decay of death,

'What I promised David—

it's yours, all yours; it all belongs to you!⁹¹

"Again, in the psalms, The Sender declares,

⁸⁹ c.f. 1 Peter 3:15.

⁹⁰ c.f. Psalm 2:7.

⁹¹ c.f. Isaiah 55:3.

‘My Anointed shall never experience decay!’⁹²

“Now, my beloved, these passages cannot refer to David. David served The Sender during his lifetime and was laid to rest. We can see David’s tomb in Jerusalem, where his corpse experiences corruption and decay. But the one whom The Sender raised experiences neither corruption nor decay. I tell you the truth, my beloved, and this truth you must experience: Being made whole and complete happens through Jesus; freedom from the past and good hope for the future happen through him. Indeed, all who entrust themselves to Jesus are set free—both from the guilt and then the powers that prevent people from becoming their true selves. What the written law could only point to is what Jesus provides.

“Be careful, my beloved, that you avoid falling into the trap about which the truth-tellers warned:

‘Look around, you who despise the God-life!
Wonder about what you see!
Let perish your doubts that lead you to distrust
what others have seen and testify to you.’⁹³

As Paul and Barnabas left the synagogue, many asked them to return the next Sabbath and continue teaching. Many others did not wait until the next Sabbath but followed them from the synagogue so Paul and Barnabas could continue to teach them about The Sender’s loving-kindness and encourage them to live the God-life. Both Jews and Gentile converts to Judaism were among those who listened as Paul and Barnabas taught.

Look! Notice! Wonder!

*Look upon the creation.
Notice the Spirit at work.
Wonder how God-life happens.*

*Look into a child’s eyes.
Notice a mother’s concerns.
Wonder about the pressures opposing this family.*

*Look for justice and joy.
Notice invitations to participate in shalom.
Wonder is the prerequisite for awe.*

*Do not despise what you see.
Let not doubts lead you to distrust.
Scorn and ridicule cannot dance the God-rhythms.*

Look! Notice! Wonder!

God, it’s me. Paul cites Habakkuk’s warning against being a scoffer or despiser of the God-life. Speaking to people in his day, Paul warns against doubting Jesus’ resurrection. I accept the mystery of resurrection as both realized event in Jesus and promised hope for me. What warning do I need to heed today? Show me, O Spirit, where I scoff and what I despise. Help me to notice where I stumble while dancing the God-rhythms. Keep me open to wonder at the many ways you continue to work in our world.

Acts 13:44–52

The next Sabbath saw a surge of people wanting to hear Paul and Barnabas; it seemed like the whole city was there. The religious leaders were as mad as hornets about Paul and Barnabas’ popularity, for some of them were from the group known as the Elite, who opposed teaching the resurrection. They argued against Paul and Barnabas. Paul confronted the Elite, “We tell the Jesus Story first to Israel, for we are heirs of the covenant entrusted to our forebearers. But if you are apathetic toward the God-life that will be in the age to come, we must turn to the Nations. The Sender commanded Israel, saying,

‘Beloved Israel, my heart and my love:
You are a light to the Nations!
From you, the Nations learn
to dance God-rhythms.
My wholeness is spoken through you
and the God-life learned from you.’⁹⁴

⁹² c.f. Psalm 16:10.

⁹³ c.f. Habakkuk 1:5.

⁹⁴ c.f. Isaiah 49:6.

When the Gentiles heard Paul's words, they rejoiced and praised The Sender's loving-kindness. Those set apart for the God-life to come entrusted themselves to Jesus. In this way the Jesus Story spread throughout the area.

However, the Elite, incensed by what was happening, manipulated women from the city's upper echelon to incite opposition to Paul and Barnabas. A persecution erupted against them, and Paul and Barnabas were driven beyond the city and into the wilderness. As a sign of rebuke and repudiation, Paul and Barnabas shook the dust from Antioch from their feet so that not a speck would accompany them as they journeyed to Iconium, southeast of town. The disciplined followers of Jesus rejoiced, and the Divine Spirit accompanied them all as they walked the Way toward Iconium.

*The open closet at night,
clothes looking like strangers,
scary monster under my bed.*

*Who will shine a light for me?
Who will take away my fear?*

*Alone in a parking lot,
past the midnight hour,
hoping I encounter no one.*

*Who will show me all is well?
Who will brighten my way?*

*Light dawns as sun rises,
light dawns as Son rises,
and with the light: love to enlighten the Way.*

God, it's me. As a Gentile, I thank you for my Jewish siblings who have protected and proclaimed the Torah throughout millennia. I thank you for their example of morality and tenacity in the face of withering persecution, and for their steadfast character in the face of holocaust. Because they are, I am. O Sender, may I never forget the debt I owe them, which I can never repay. May I embrace the covenant that began

with them, the law that was first taught to them, and the Savior who came from them.

Acts 14:1-7

In Iconium, in central Turkey, Paul and Barnabas went about their ministry according to the routine they had established in other cities. They went first to the Jewish synagogue to teach and tell the Jesus Story. A great number entrusted themselves to Jesus—both Jews and Greeks.

But some of the other Jews objected to their teaching and refused to believe that Jesus was The Sender's Anointed (whom they called Messiah). These others poisoned minds and planted seeds of bitterness that sprouted into anger against Paul and Barnabas. Still, Paul and Barnabas were not dissuaded from teaching but continued to tell the good news of the Jesus Story. The Sender affirmed their words with *dunamis*—awe and wonder erupted in many, and loving-kindness was expressed among all who entrusted themselves to Jesus.

The people in the city took sides. Some agreed with Paul and Barnabas and saw them as ones sent by The Sender to bring wholeness and *shalom* to the people. Others objected to the newness of their message and argued it did not conform to ancient expectations about The Sender's ways.⁹⁵ How could The Sender love the Greeks if the Jews were Their chosen people? Was it really The Sender's plan to resurrect only one man rather than establish the eternal kingdom by resurrecting all the Jewish dead all at once? And why was Jesus resurrected physically, continuing in the corrupted state of the material world?

A plot emerged against Paul and Barnabas among both Greeks and Jews, who schemed how to abuse, mistreat, and even murder them with the ancient ritual of a mob throwing rocks at them. The beloved learned of the plot in the gathering, however, so Paul, Barnabas, and their companions fled to the southeast, to the towns of Lystra and Derbe. There they continued teaching, always teaching, telling the good news of the Jesus Story.

objections to the Jesus Story, while the third question asks a question that would have been raised by a Greek.

⁹⁵ The next three questions are not in the Greek text but are interpretive. The first two questions mirror ancient Jewish

Resistance
opposition, challenge
refusal to accept
new creation being invited:
stuck

God, it's me. The older I grow, the less flexible I become—and it's not just my back! I find I like familiar routines: eating at certain times, praying in certain ways. I find that the familiar brings assurance—deceiving me into believing that if nothing changes all will be well. And then you interrupt me with your thoughts and your ways. You challenge me to a wider embrace and deeper love. You break my comfortable life to bring your life of care for those who do not yet know the height and depth and breadth of your love. O Sender, break me, break me, break me until I am whole.

Acts 14:8-21

While Paul was still in central Turkey, in Lystra, there was a man unable to walk from birth—not a step in his life. This man listened as Paul told the Jesus Story. Paul noticed the man and saw in him a deep trust in The Sender's goodness (in spite of his physical challenge). Paul made eye contact with the man and said, "Stand! Come on now: on your feet!" Immediately the man stood, walked, and leapt with joy.

When the crowd witnessed The Sender's *dunamis* at work, they praised Paul and Barnabas, calling them gods and believing they were Zeus and Hermes in human form. They assumed Barnabas was Zeus because he let Paul do the talking and so thought Paul was Hermes. The pastor from First Zeus Temple just outside the city brought to the city gates bulls for sacrifice and honorific headwear for Paul and Barnabas. He and his church intended to honor them with a grand celebration!

Paul and Barnabas were horrified! "Stop!" they cried out. "Friends, listen to us; our friends, hear us. We are human, as you are. We are servants of the Most High, whom we call The Sender. It is The Sender's *dunamis* that you see at work through us. We proclaim the Jesus Story so that all people may turn away from that which is

unproductive, which cannot transform, which does not lead to one's true self. We seek to point all people toward the God-life found in The Sender, who made heaven and earth, all that is seen and unseen, every atom and quark.

"The Sender was not known to you in previous generations, but They have left clues that point toward Them—hidden signs of Their majesty, mystery, and might. Through The Sender's loving-kindness, the rain waters the earth and brings bounty. From The Sender comes a well-spring of joy in your hearts."

Though Paul and Barnabas pointed away from themselves and toward The Sender, the throng from First Zeus Church insisted on celebrating them. This horrified some folks from Israel who witnessed this explosion of idolatry, for to worship Paul and Barnabas violated the first commandment.⁹⁶ These Israelites convinced the mob that Paul deceived them with his words and persuaded the mob to practice the requirement prescribed by Leviticus for those who spoke falsely about The Sender: death by stoning.⁹⁷ Presuming he was dead, the crowd dragged Paul's body outside the city gates to let him rot. Once the crowd dispersed, the gathering encircled Paul, who stood, walked, and leapt for joy back into the city.

The following day, Paul and Barnabas left for the nearby village of Derbe. Paul and Barnabas told the Jesus Story in Derbe and were the instruments through whom the Divine Spirit persuaded many to entrust themselves to Jesus and become his disciplined followers.

Religion that's
always looking for an angle,
easy money,
sure thing,
the next big thing.

Faith that's
easily preoccupied,
loud, Loud, LOUD!
Constantly distracted,
Tik-Tok replacing holy writ.

⁹⁶ c.f. Exodus 20:3.

⁹⁷ c.f. Leviticus 24:14.

*Becomes
unable to see human pain,
unwilling to hear lament,
impotent for justice,
incapable of joy.*

God, it's me. How easily am I distracted? While I scoff at the pastor from First Zeus Temple wanting to celebrate Paul and Barnabas, I have a fascination with news about Prince Harry and Princess Meghan. I can't believe these people thought of your servants as gods, even as I celebrate the exploits of Tom Brady and LeBron James (as well as Meryl Streep and Dolly Parton)! O Sender, help me not to ignore the heart of this passage: Someone in pain and loss was healed. Someone who had been invisible for his entire life was seen. And you are the source of our seeing; you the One who empowers our vision. O Sender, help me to look. Help me to see. Make me to notice those upon whom you shine your light.

Acts 14:22-28

From Derbe, Paul and Barnabas returned to the nearby towns in central Turkey of Lystra, Iconium, and Turkish Antioch. Their purpose was to build up and support those who had become Jesus followers, inviting them to make their home in Jesus and open themselves that Jesus could abide within them. "Anguish often accompanies the God-life," they taught, "and through adversity the Spirit midwives us into the kin-dom. This is a divine necessity. We do not seek adversity, yet it comes. We do not ignore anguish but strengthen each other while it is experienced. We live the God-life together. We are stronger together."

Having taught the divine necessity of strengthening, supporting, and encouraging one another to dance the God-rhythms together, Paul and Barnabas appointed team leaders, whom they called "elders." Through prayer and fasting, Paul and Barnabas entrusted these leaders into The Sender's secure hands, for in The Sender the leaders had placed their trust.

Having fulfilled The Sender's work for them, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch in Syria by way of Pisidia, Pamphylia, Perga, and Attalia, on the coast. From

Attalia, they sailed to Syrian Antioch, where they had first been commissioned through loving-kindness to tell the Jesus Story.

Upon arriving in Syrian Antioch, Paul and Barnabas called the gathering together to share what they had experienced and to celebrate The Sender's *dunamis* that had been at work through them. They recounted how the Divine Spirit opened the hearts of the Gentiles and lured them into The Sender's embrace. For a long time, Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch with Jesus' disciplined followers and recounted The Sender's many wonders among those who had previously lived ignorant of Their loving-kindness.

*The sky darkens in the distance
while we picnic beneath the buckeye—
it's sparse shade still respite as summer looms.*

*We notice not the clouds beginning to
roil and rage,
promising to spoil our gathering.*

*The first drop lands on my forehead
And I'm uncertain if I felt something
but soon follows a second,
a third, and the skies unleash their cleansing.*

*Bundling our belongings into a heap,
laughing, scrambling, dumping baskets into trunks,
wistful our sharing will remain incomplete.*

*Departing separate ways, yet common heart remains,
that no mere storm can divide,
for the buckeye still stands,
its shade inviting to another day.*

God, it's me. In a world of shouting at enemies, you invite us to support friends. In a culture of blaming, you would have us build up. I thank you for those in my life who build up and support; may I be one such person to others. In this era of division, you call us to unity. In a time of hatred, you claim us for love. I thank you, O Sender, that you are the foundation of our unity; may we build upon it through love borne upon the wings of your Spirit.

Acts 15:1-6

Some men came from Judea to Syrian Antioch and were teaching the gathering: "Tradition is the only path to wholeness. Without the outward and tangible cutting commanded by Moses, The Sender is powerless to make you whole and complete." This teaching provoked Paul and Barnabas to incite a riot of controversy.⁹⁸ After the ruckus calmed a bit, Paul and Barnabas were chosen to journey to Jerusalem with others from the gathering in Antioch. Their commission was to seek the counsel of the sent ones and old ones from among the Jerusalem gathering.

As Paul and Barnabas traveled through Lebanon and northern Israel, they shared what The Sender had been doing among the Gentiles: turning hearts away from the broken culture of Greece and Rome and toward the God-life. Those who belonged to Jesus who heard this news welcomed it with joy. When they arrived in Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas were welcomed by the sent ones, leaders, and the entire gathering, to whom they shared what The Sender had done and was doing through the Jesus Story.

Not everyone was happy though. Some who belonged to the Intense stood and proclaimed their view: "Cut the Gentiles' foreskins! It's the only way to wholeness, as commanded by Moses long, long ago!" The sent ones and leaders of the gathering in Jerusalem met to discern what to do.

*Rich in tradition, my people:
Christians, Presbyterians, Americans.*

*Finding my dad's words coming from my mouth:
Wisdom passing unconsciously to the next generation.*

*And then my Millennial children create
new pronouns that invite equity and inclusion.*

*"I am a good person," I tell them.
They chuckle and roll their eyes.*

*Luring me, challenging me, guiding me toward
adventure I accept begrudgingly, with trepidation.*

*What is this new world becoming:
a kin-dom in which valleys are made level?*

*Can mountains of privilege truly be made low,
dividing walls of hostility be torn down?*

God, it's me. I don't blame those called "the circumcizers," for 2,000 years of religious tradition is hard to reform. That much religion creates its own gravity; the force of its pull lures powerfully, even if it pulls toward exclusion. I once found myself caught in its grasp, convinced by the centuries that you could not do a new thing. And then you did. Like Paul, scales dropped from my eyes, and I saw as you see: eternity the lens through which you look upon creation, agape bringing all things into proper focus. I cannot judge those who seek to hold true to what has been, yet neither will I remain silent while they disparage, discourage, and disregard others' humanity. I choose not to judge, for I have better tools: winsome words and a prophet's passion, laughter and love with friends over dinner, seeing in all your imago dei. Rather than judge, I will whisper the new song your Spirit has taught me to sing, rejoicing always when others join the chorus.

Acts 15:7-21

The debate was robust. Peter stood and declared, "Beloved, you remember how The Sender, persuaded by Their own intention and integrity, spoke to the Gentiles from my own lips! The Gentiles listened as I told them the Jesus Story, and they entrusted themselves to him. If you doubt this, remember The Sender appreciates not a person's outside but a person's heart. The Sender sent the same Divine Spirit to the Gentiles that lives within us. The Sender did not distinguish between us and them, nor did They discriminate against them but cleansed their hearts by infusing them with trust. If The Sender did not discriminate, neither should we! Let us not weigh our

toward a provocative connotation that seems missing in most translations.

⁹⁸ The Greek verbs in this sentence are *staseos* and *zeteseos*, which can be translated as insurrection and debate. Both verbs lean

Gentile friends down through ritual rigidity that we ourselves could not bear. Never! Just as we trust that it is the loving-kindness of Jesus the Anointed that makes us whole and complete, so we should entrust the Gentiles to the same loving-kindness.”

The entire gathering was enthralled as they listened to Paul and Barnabas tell about all The Sender had done among the Gentiles—how the power of Rome’s distorted culture had been broken, no longer holding them in bondage to seek after abuse, betrayal, and corruption. The gathering reveled as they heard Paul and Barnabas recount how the Divine Spirit began to lead the Gentiles into dancing the God-rhythms of the God-life.

When Paul and Barnabas had finished sharing the stories of The Sender’s work among the Gentiles, James the brother of Jesus stood, saying, “Beloved, listen! My beloved, hear me! Simon Peter reminded us of what we must remember: The Sender acted upon the Gentiles without their foreknowledge; before the Gentiles could earn anything, The Sender chose them as Their very own to receive the gift of Their *agape*. This is also what the truth-tellers have said from ages to ages:

Justice comes and only then the new dawn.
The Sender’s justice reverses the curse.
Right relationships revive David’s name.
‘I can ruin and can renew,’ declares The Sender.
‘I have ruptured the Nations yet will restore.
All humankind will see it; all humanity will seek it.
‘Even the Gentiles will bear my name;
they will I embrace to my bosom,
from ages to ages past I Am and I Will Be.
‘I, the Eternal One, cause peace to burst forth.’

“Therefore,” continued James, “I consider it foolish to make it difficult for the Gentiles to dance the God-rhythms or live the God-life. Instead of worrying about who they once were, we should rejoice in who they now are becoming. Rather than seeking to block them from going back to their old ways, we should open the path that leads them (and us) forward in the Way of Jesus.

“Let us write the Gentiles a letter they will receive as a gift, a letter that teaches them to dance the God-rhythms: ‘Stay away from both idolatry and immorality. Be outwardly kind and inwardly clean. Integrity should be your constant companion and the Spirit’s wisdom your best

friend forever. Immerse deep into The Sender’s Word; read the Word that it may read you.”

*I no longer wear ties four inches thick.
My sideburns don’t drop to my jaw line.
I burned my polyester suit decades ago.*

*I no longer can own another human being.
My ancestors would not recognize my marriage.
I stopped using leeches to heal a fever.*

*O Sender, have you a new song to sing?
Might fresh wisdom have been waiting
for such a time as this?*

*They bring their baby over for a visit—six weeks old!
Two moms with so much love to share.
O that we all could be so loved.*

*I watch the fastidious care with which the moms work:
so concerned to do everything right!
(Baby #2’s parents will be much more chill.)*

*O Sender, have you a new song to sing?
Might fresh wisdom have been waiting
for such a time as this?*

*Spirit whispers, nudging me toward discomfort.
I feel like an old dog—not ready to learn a new trick.
Yet the siren’s call in my heart cannot be denied.*

*Morning renews,
roots deep, I’m ready to soar;
panoply of stars, I’m ready to embrace.*

*O Sender, have you a new song to sing?
Might fresh wisdom have been waiting
for such a time as this?*

God, it’s me. Comfort me in the assurance that I am not as I once was, nor am I yet as I will become. Grant me the grace to admit who I am in this moment: flawed yet seeking to learn, to grow, to give as much grace to others as has been given to me. As I have received, so let me give. As I am learning to love more

deeply and authentically, so let me be patient with others whose journey differs from my own.

Acts 15:22–30

Following robust debate and after seeking to discern the Spirit’s wisdom, the sent ones and other leaders in Jerusalem chose to send Paul and Barnabas to Syrian Antioch. Judas (who was known as “Abba’s Boy”) and Silas were chosen to accompany Paul and Barnabas because they were leaders of the gathering. These four were to carry the following letter to be read to the gatherings of Jesus’ disciplined followers who were Gentiles:

The sent ones and leaders in Jerusalem, your beloved in Jesus, to the Gentile followers of Jesus in Antioch and the surrounding country: Greetings.

We heard how some from Jerusalem went to you and sought to prohibit you from practicing the Way of Jesus according to The Sender’s freely shared gift. This prohibition naturally troubled you and caused confusion, for it differed from what you had learned from Paul and Barnabas, who are our beloved and respected for their courage as they risk their lives for the sake of the Jesus Story. Therefore, we chose some of our own leaders, Judas and Silas, to accompany Paul and Barnabas to clarify our message to you. Judas and Silas can confirm verbally what we write to you.

We listened to the Divine Spirit, our hearts and minds singing in harmony with The Sender, and our wisdom is this: It is good that we avoid weighing you down with burdens. It is right for you to dance the God-rhythms by avoiding idolatry and immorality. Live the God-life with integrity of mind and heart, body and spirit. Do this and all will be well with your soul. Farewell!

The group chosen by the sent ones and leaders in Jerusalem were sent to Antioch, where they called the gathering together to read the letter. When the people heard the letter, their hearts leapt with joy at its

encouragement. Judas and Silas, both of whom were truth-tellers, encouraged and fortified the gathering with sound teaching about the Way of Jesus. After a time, the gathering collected provisions and sent Judas and Silas on their way with sacred joy and The Sender’s *shalom* as they returned to Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas, however, remained in Antioch to tell the Jesus Story and teach the people the meaning of its message—its comfort, and counsel, and commandments.

*News from afar:
soldier’s scribbled letter,
Juneteenth Emancipation,
late night text: “I made it home.”*

*Glad the heart
to hear of another’s belovedness;
challenge accepted
to live into its truth.*

God, it’s me. I am by nature a people pleaser, a peacemaker, a bridge builder. I seek by habit to bring people together—looking for connections between disparate opinions so that many might become one. I am hopeful that someday we’ll all just get along. In these days of unrest and uncivil speech, of provocation and agitation, I am tempted to be anxious—always. So, I see in the Body’s early leaders something to which I aspire: the ability to take a stand and speak one’s convictions, even if the opinion is unpopular. O Sender, you know that I am a sequentialist; I appreciate change best when it happens little-by-little and step-by-step. I aspire to be one who can “plant the flag” and say, “Here I stand!” O Sender, help me to choose wisely the times and places and ways to plant the flag of your justice that seeks *shalom* for all.

Acts 15:36–41

A while later, Paul and Barnabas had a falling out. It was the kind of dispute⁹⁹ where sharp words are

⁹⁹ The Greek word used in 15:39 is *paroxymos* which means angry dispute or “a provocation which literally jabs (cuts) someone so they ‘must’ respond.” (HELPS Word Studies: 3948)

exchanged and flashes of anger erupt, even between friends. Paul said to Barnabas, “Let’s revisit those places where we have been, to encourage and strengthen the gathering in dancing the God-rhythms and living the God-life.” Barnabas agreed but wanted to take one of their apprentices named John Mark. Paul thought taking John Mark was unwise because John Mark had abandoned them in Pamphylia when the work had become difficult. The difference of opinion was a disagreement that led to dispute that became division. Barnabas took Mark and continued the work in Cyprus. Paul chose Silas to accompany him and traveled through northern Syria and Cilicia, a region in southeastern Turkey. Both Barnabas and Paul were offered up by the beloved to The Sender’s heart as each left to encourage and strengthen the gatherings to which they journeyed.

Whither Barnabas?

We know about Paul:

Storms and shipwrecks.

Fierce beasts and angry crowds.

Defender of the Faith!

Paul’s story is “the” story, “our” story:

Eloquence that has moved us to tears.

Theology that has launched 1,000 seminaries.

One-third of the New Testament!

Barnabas seems to have disappeared:

Embracing the outcast.

Befriending the one who betrayed the team.

Son of Encouragement to the end.

Barnabas’ story is our story:

The pastor holding the hand of a widow.

The deacon handing groceries to parents.

Anonymous are most of us—and so will remain evermore.

Whither Barnabas?

He is found in you.

He is found in me.

We are Barnabas.

God, it’s me. It has been said of Presbyterians that we are like a good hickory stick: useful but easy to

break in two. (I imagine the same can be said of other denominations.) O Sender, save us from disputes that lead to division. May our disagreements be the path for wider understanding and deeper appreciation of one another rather than cause for schism. May acknowledgement of a “good faith” dispute lead us to practice good faith that listens with love and speaks with both clarity and charity. O Sender, I imagine your heart breaks whenever the Body breaks, even if, according to your grace, mercy, and peace, it is never broken beyond your repair.

Acts 16:1-5

Paul journeyed to the towns in southern Turkey where he had previously told the Jesus Story. In Lystra, Paul met a follower of Jesus named Timothy whose mother was Jewish and father was Greek. The beloved in Lystra all spoke well of Timothy, and Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him as they went from town to town sharing the Jesus Story among those who had never heard it, while also encouraging those who had already entrusted themselves to Jesus. Because it was well-known that Timothy’s father was Greek, Paul inflicted the ritual of circumcision upon Timothy, who accepted the obligation willingly for he did not want to impede the Story in any way. Timothy understood the sent ones and leaders did not require circumcision, yet, for the sake of the Story, he would endure it.

As Paul and Timothy journeyed from town to town, they encouraged the beloved with the wisdom from the sent ones and leaders in Jerusalem. They read aloud the letter about avoiding idolatry and immorality. All who gathered and heard the letter rejoiced—their ability to dance the God-rhythms strengthened. The Sender continued to bring more and more people into the circle of their beloved communities.

I am of an age when

*“passing the baton” has become not
future event but present concern.*

What happens next is about

*correct policies and clear procedures—and also
values and vision.*

*Paul, meet Timothy.
Timothy, meet Paul.
Two hearts, one mission.*

God, it's me. I thank you for those who were my "Paul" when I was younger. I thank you for those who are my "Timothy" as I grow older. Together, we share a heart made one by Jesus. Together, we serve the common vision of bringing the Jesus Story to new ears while encouraging those you embraced with loving-kindness from the moment of their birth. Today and into all tomorrows, we give you thanks and praise.

Acts 16:6–16

Paul's team journeyed throughout central Turkey, in the regions of Phrygia and Galatia, but the Divine Spirit locked them out of Asia. Though they had a notion to tell the Jesus Story there, the Spirit inflamed their hearts with the conviction that they were not to go to the region of Asia. Though they sought the Spirit's permission to journey there, they were continually thwarted: only unrest, not peace, was found within them. When they approached the border between Mysia and Bithynia in northwest Turkey, the same conviction overwhelmed them there also—they were to go somewhere else and not Bithynia. Paul and his team decided to go to Troas on the western coast.

That night, Paul had a dream. A man from the Macedonian region in northern Greece stood, pleading with Paul, "Come to Macedonia and help us!" The next morning,¹⁰⁰ we left for Macedonia with the conviction that The Sender was calling us to tell the Jesus Story to the people there.

We set out from the port of Troas and sailed for the small island of Samothrace between western Turkey and northern Greece. From there, we sailed to the port city of Neapolis and then traveled by land to Philippi, a Roman colony (and therefore politically important) and economic hub of the region (it lay along the road to Rome). We made our home in Philippi for several days.

On the Sabbath, we wandered beyond the walls of the city looking for a place to pray. We imagined the river would be such a place but found a group of women gathered by the river. As men do not ordinarily socialize with women in public, the setting was awkward, yet the Spirit overwhelmed us with the conviction to tell the Jesus Story to these women.

One of the women was named Lydia and was from Thyatira. Lydia was affluent, a dealer in expensive purple cloth. (Purple dye was made from thousands of snails and required an artisan to create.) Lydia was also a Greek who worshipped The Sender. Though she could not be Jewish, for she was not born a Jew, yet she practiced the rituals, observed the festivals, and obeyed the commandments as she was able.

The Sender opened Lydia's heart to the Jesus Story. She entrusted herself and her whole household to Jesus, asking Paul if the members of her household could be baptized. She implored Paul, "If you believe that I have entrusted myself to Jesus and committed myself and my household to following the Way, abide with me. While you are here in Philippi, may my home be your home, even as The Sender's Anointed has become my sovereign." Lydia would not be deterred. She compelled Paul and his friends to abide in her home.

*Hearing noise is hard to do when sound assaults at
every turn,
everyday,
everywhere, for
everything, even
every voice we want to shut out.*

*Listening to the heart is difficult work in
crowded cities,
crowded thoughts,
crowded hearts,
crowded lives,
with crowded schedules.*

¹⁰⁰ The author famously shifts from the third person "they" in the previous paragraph to the first-person "we" in this paragraph. Scholars posit that Luke spent some time away from Paul and the work and then returned. This reality points both to the notion that

Luke is recounting Acts as an eyewitness (and clarifying when he has heard stories from others) as well as the dynamic living intrinsic to Luke's account—from past to present to future, never assured what they / we will be doing next.

*Discerning is life-giving for
those who hunger,
those who thirst,
those who pause,
those who pray,
those who attend the Spirit whispers.*

God, it's me. Teach me the difference between my opinion and the Spirit's conviction. Show me where I end and you transcend. Teach me the art of listening, that I might not go where you have not called me. Teach me the path of discernment, that I may reach the people to whom you send me.

Acts 16:16-24

While still in Philippi, we were walking to the place of prayer and met a woman enslaved by businessmen and exploited for her spiritual abilities. The woman could predict people's future and made the businessmen wealthy through her service to them. Being sensitive to the ebb and flow of the divine, she recognized the *dunamis* that accompanied Paul and his team. She followed us, continually shouting, "These men serve The Sender Most High, and their words point to the Way that makes one whole and complete, one's true self." Hour after hour and day after day, the woman followed us around saying this. Paul finally snapped and shouted at the spirit living within the woman, "Silence! In the name of Jesus the Anointed, I command you: Leave this woman!" The spirit within the woman had no choice but to obey Paul's command and departed.

The businessmen who enslaved the woman were incensed because she lost her ability to predict people's future and, therefore, deprived the businessmen of their money-maker. The men assaulted Paul and his team and dragged them through the streets to the marketplace, where the town's authorities met to discuss civic matters. The men, though angry that Paul and his team had cost

them serious coin, accused them based on religious prejudice: "These Jews create chaos in our streets! They teach rituals foreign to us! They practice customs we Romans revile: atheism, cannibalism, and the destruction of social order!"¹⁰¹

The crowd turned malicious and joined the men berating Paul and his team. The authorities, fearing a riot, had Paul and his team beaten and abused, stripped and humiliated, then dragged to prison, where they were tossed in a windowless cell. The Roman soldier who served as the guard was ordered to ensure they did not flee and threatened with death if they escaped.¹⁰² The soldier tossed them into the inner cell and locked their feet in stocks made from the trunk of a tree.

*Religion and business make bad lovers.
The antiquated phrase "unequally yoked,"
describes the invitation
to abuse the good,
by distorting what is intended as gift.*

*Religion and ignorance make worse lovers.
Compassion devolves into commerce.
The search for tranquility
degenerates into a quest for control
when worship serves avarice.*

God, it's me. Too often, I don't trust what I cannot understand. Too easily, I suspect others' motives are tainted with greed while assuming my own are pure. Too often, I am tempted to "use people and love things" rather than love people and use things. Too easily, I fall to such temptations. Praying "too often" and "too easily" are, at times, the most consistent routine of my spiritual practice. O Sender, may I learn anew your way of justice and joy; may I journey ever forward, deeper into your salvation and shalom.

¹⁰¹ Jewish religion was widely mistrusted (and misunderstood) because it did not acknowledge or honor the Greco-Roman pantheon of the gods, thus the accusation of atheism. Further, followers of Jesus were furthered mistrusted and reviled for the rumors Roman citizens heard about "eating the body" and "drinking the blood" in the sacrament, thus the accusation of

cannibalism. Finally, the social egalitarians between "Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free" (c.f. Galatians 3:26) among Christian gatherings violated Roman culture's strict and rigid social hierarchies.

¹⁰² This phrase is not in the Greek text but was the Roman custom and helps explain the guard's response in 16:27.

Acts 16:24-40

Around midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and praising The Sender. Other prisoners were listening as they sang their trust, thanks, and assurance of The Sender's love. Suddenly, a violent quake shook the prison's foundations, and all the prison doors opened and chains fell away. The Roman soldier guarding the prisoners saw the open doors and assumed everyone had escaped. Drawing his sword from its sheath, the soldier prepared to die with honor by killing himself for his failure. But Paul shouted, "Stop! Bring yourself no harm! We are all here."

In the pandemonium that ensued, the soldier shouted to one of his colleagues for torches to be brought. He ran into Paul and Silas' cell and collapsed at their feet. After he stood and composed himself, the soldier escorted Paul and Silas from their cell and into a courtyard. "Gentlemen," he asked, "what must I do to be made like you—whole and complete, my true self?"

Paul and Silas answered, "Wholeness comes through trusting in Jesus the Anointed. This promise is not just for you but for your entire household." Paul and Silas then began to tell the Jesus Story to the soldier and teach him the Way. In response, the soldier escorted Paul and Silas to his home so that everyone within his house could hear what they had to say. The soldier treated them tenderly, washing their wounds from when they had been beaten, abused, and dragged through the streets earlier in the day. Then, everyone in the house was sprinkled¹⁰³ with water as a sign of ritual cleansing and mystical union with Jesus. The guard himself set a meal before Paul and Silas. He was overwhelmed with joy, for he had entered into right relationship with The Sender Most High—he and his entire household.

At dawn, the authorities sent officers to the prison with the order to release Paul and Silas quietly, discreetly. The guard informed Paul and Silas of this happy news, saying, "The authorities have said you are to be freed! Go in peace."

But Paul responded, "Not so fast! The authorities beat us publicly without a trial. They abused us even though we had done nothing wrong. They humiliated us

before our fellow Roman citizens! We deserve better than a discreet dismissal. Let the authorities come here themselves to escort us from prison."

When the officers told the authorities that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, the authorities were terrified. Dread draped itself across their shoulders, for Roman citizens had rights that had not been afforded Paul and Silas. The authorities approached Paul and Silas with chagrin and regret—humility had replaced dread as their shawl. They escorted Paul and Silas away from the prison publicly, though privately they pleaded with them to please leave Philippi. Paul and Silas walked to Lydia's home, where they encouraged the beloved before continuing their journey.

*Injustices mount,
scurrying about like ants whose
hill has been kicked by seven-year-old boys.*

*Not fair
for boys to destroy
someone's home.*

*Response of the chosen:
to bite the foot, protect the queen,
or be about the work of rebuilding the home?*

God, it's me. I am fairly confident I would have reacted differently—tried to run, to escape, anything to avoid another beating at the hands of armed guards. I am confident I would have been praying but doubt I would have been praising you. And when confronted by soldiers tasked with enforcing my unjust imprisonment, I suspect anger, not mercy, would have spilled from my lips. O Sender, infuse me with your Spirit, that loving-kindness might become my instinctive response even when others abuse their authority—my first word and last act to those who have done me wrong whether in the name of the church or the state.

¹⁰³ The baptism appears to have occurred either in the guard's house or somewhere between the jail and the house, making the act of sprinkling the likely form of the baptismal rite.

Acts 17:1–10

Paul and his team continued their journey across northern Greece, through the cities of Amphipolis and Apollonia to Thessalonica, which had a Jewish house of worship (known as a synagogue). Paul's holy habit was to worship in the synagogue each Sabbath, and so he participated in the Thessalonian synagogue's worship for three consecutive Sabbath days.

It is the custom in the synagogue for leading teachers to discuss Torah and the Truth-tellers—the Jewish scriptures—and even debate the meaning of what is read. Paul engaged in robust debate¹⁰⁴ regarding The Sender's Anointed, whom many Jews call Messiah. Paul sought to open the minds of those who heard his words. He served them all a sumptuous feast of scriptural reasoning to prove The Sender's purpose: to show that The Sender's set determination and intention was for the Anointed to enter fully into the human experience and then transcend it. Paul pointed to the passages that promised the Anointed would suffer and rise from the dead. "Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Jewish Messiah," Paul told them.

Some of the Jews who heard Paul were convinced by his words—their hearts strangely warmed and their minds opened as if by an act of The Sender's set determination.¹⁰⁵ Many Greeks who revered and obeyed The Sender also entrusted themselves to Jesus because of Paul's words.

Other Jews, however, took offense from Paul's teaching, believing it a threat to their core values and beliefs. These others acted with malice toward Paul and his team, recruiting hooligans to oppose Paul. Together, they constituted a mob and initiated a riot in the city.

The mob descended upon Jason's home, where Paul and Silas had been abiding. The mob demanded that Jason bring out Paul and Silas from the house. Upon discovering Paul and Silas were not there, the mob dragged Jason through the streets, along with several others from among the gathering. Jason and the others were brought to

city authorities, where the mob accused them of creating chaos. "These men are infamous troublemakers. They go from town to town, inflaming people's passion and misleading the masses! And this man welcomed them into his home—offered them table fellowship, an open hand and open heart. Yet these men deny Caesar is king; they follow another king named Jesus."¹⁰⁶

The mob's accusation against Jason and the other followers of Jesus troubled¹⁰⁷ the city authorities, for Thessalonica was a Roman colony. The authorities could not afford rumors that they had dismissed a complaint against those who defied Caesar. The authorities forced Jason and the others to post a bond before letting them go.

We know about fake news.

We see disinformation daily.

What role has robust debate?

"Let us reason together"—

invitation to adventure and exploration.

Riots erupt from whispered rumor.

Rumors become fact become truth become holy writ.

Community is hard-earned (and messy).

True community guides hearts and minds

forming justice and transforming joy.

God, it's me. Save me from the will of the mob: hearts inflamed by rumor and rigidity, accusations spun like a spider's web. Save me from being a part of the mob: unaware of my own confirmation bias, unwilling to leave the comforts of my echo chamber. Save us, O Sender! Save us from ourselves.

¹⁰⁴ The Greek word used is *dialegomai*, which can be translated as "one-way communication" (e.g., lecture, preach, or address) or "two-way communication" (e.g., converse, dialogue, argue). The interpretation chooses the latter connotation.

¹⁰⁵ With a nod first to my Methodist siblings and then my Reformed roots, I seek to convey John Wesley's and John Calvin's descriptions of the experience of "salvation."

¹⁰⁶ The foundational confession among the first Christians was "Jesus is Lord," which explicitly contradicted Roman law, culture, and even coinage, which proclaimed "Caesar is Lord."

¹⁰⁷ The Greek word used is *etaraxan*, which can mean "disturb, agitate, stir up, or trouble." Ironically, the mob committed the same sin that they accused Paul and Silas of committing. Psychologists call this projection.

Acts 17:11–15

When night fell, the beloved sent Paul and Silas west from Thessalonica to Berea in southwestern Macedonia. When they arrived, as was their practice, Paul and Silas began with worship. As Paul was a visiting rabbi, he was once again afforded the privilege of speaking to those gathered in the synagogue, according to the customs of the Jewish faith. Now, the Berean Jews were considered to be from a more noble class of people than those in Thessalonica. The Berean Jews were inclined to welcome Paul's message and responded by diving deep into the Hebrew scriptures to investigate and examine if what he was teaching was true. As a result, many entrusted themselves to Jesus, as did several of the affluent Greeks—both men and women trusted Jesus.

When the Thessalonian Jews heard that Paul had popped up in Berea, some took it upon themselves to go to Berea to cause Paul trouble. Those who had incited a riot in Thessalonica invited one in Berea! The beloved did not hesitate: They sent Paul to the coast, though Silas and Timothy remained in Berea. Those escorting Paul journeyed with him to Athens and left with instructions to tell Silas and Timothy to join Paul there as soon as possible.

*Safety sometimes travels by night,
creeping through alleys, along backstreets.*

*Outmaneuvering trouble can be
the way of the Way. We are*

*never alone beneath the moonlight, as we
navigate the provinces of love,*

*frustrating mobs, always willing to
walk alongside good trouble.*

God, it's me. I know there are no "island Christians." We live in holy community, seeking lives of holy compassion. I thank you for those who pray for me (and others), who volunteer to teach, to sit beside

beds, to ladle soup. I thank you for those who pay bills, paint walls, and provide hot dogs to the junior high kids on Sunday night. I thank you for those who do not flee when trouble comes looking for me or when good trouble finds me. I thank you that I am a part of "we" and "we" helps define "me"—together one Body, together your beloved.

Acts 17:16–34

Paul waited for Silas and Timothy to join him in Athens. His heart struggled and joy escaped him because of all the idols he saw in the city—statue upon statue giving testimony to Athenian ignorance of the God-life. Paul taught in the synagogue among Jews and Greeks who revered and obeyed The Sender as well as in the Greek marketplace. Daily, he lectured, conversed, and debated with whomever was present—the dialogue was robust!

A group of Greek philosophers engaged Paul in debate. Among them were Epicureans who sought lives of inner tranquility through philosophical discussion rather than food, sex, or drink.¹⁰⁸ Also among those with whom Paul debated were Stoic philosophers who taught that developing wisdom, justice, courage, and moderation were the means to overcome destructive emotions. The philosophers ridiculed Paul as a "babbler" and as "advocating foreign gods" because he told them the Jesus Story, including how The Sender raised Jesus from death to life, which was foolishness to their Greek minds, which believed the material world to be inherently corrupt.

The philosophers invited Paul to address the high council of the Greek philosophers (what is known as the Areopagus), which was the center of Athenian culture and located amidst a sea of idolatrous statues. Philosophers daily addressed one another in the Areopagus, absorbed and obsessed with novel ideas, fads, and the latest thought experiments. Members of the Areopagus asked Paul, "What is the new teaching you are spouting? It seems strange to our ears, and we need you to say more if we are to understand it."

Paul stood in their midst and said, "Athenians! I see you. I see you for who you are. I see that you desire to

¹⁰⁸ This sentence and the next are not in the Greek text but inserted to provide context about the philosophies of those whom Paul was debating.

live the God-life; you seek to know the God-rhythms. As I ambled about your city, I saw many ideas, many ways of worship, a multiplicity of meaning. I even saw an altar with the inscription: TO THE MYSTERY THAT IS BEYOND OUR KNOWING. The One you call Mystery I name as Majesty. This is the One who ‘is never missing but is frequently missed.’¹⁰⁹ I will show this Majesty to you now.

“The One who made the heavens and earth, all that is seen and unseen, every atom and every quark, cannot be contained by brick and mortar. Human hands are incapable of doing justice to the depth and breadth of their Creator. Rather, the Creator is the One who gives life and breath to all. From a common source, all nations upon the earth were crafted and the number of their days set, for history flows both from and to the Creator. In this way, the Majestic One set in our hearts and minds the seed of longing that, when blossoming, leads us to find our home within the Creator’s heart, who is closer than our own breath and knows our needs before we ask for them.

“Even your own philosophers bear witness to this truth when they write, ‘In the Creator we live and move and have our being,’¹¹⁰ and, ‘We are the fountain which springs from the Creator’s wellspring.’¹¹¹ Thus, since we spring from the Creator and return to the Creator and live every moment in the Creator, from first breath to last gasp, human hands crafting an image of the Majestic One is absurd! Silver and gold and stone constructed by human skill cannot reflect Their image.

“In previous generations, the Creator ignored our ignorance but now invites all to turn away from idols that do not and cannot give life. The Creator implores all to turn toward the Anointed in whom light, life, and love are discovered anew. The Creator’s mystery that is sung by the stars is heard through the Anointed. The Creator’s majesty that is seen in the dawn is expressed in him. The Creator has shown us that the Anointed will judge the nations with justice, even he whom the Creator raised from death to life.”

When the members of the Areopagus heard Paul speak of resurrection, some scoffed while others were open to hearing more: “We will listen to you again.” Paul then

left the Areopagus, and some followed him and eventually trusted in Jesus. Among those who trusted were Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, a woman named Damaris, and several others.

Ode to Dionysius and Damaris

Two minds shaped by thought.

What good Greeks to think as taught!

Body’s bad—corrupt, immoral, stained.

Spirit’s winsome—God’s approval gained.

To say goodbye to ought and gain:

Courage outlasting pain.

To embrace in foreign voice

The Story, wisdom, life and choice.

Beyond the mystery and wood,

against their elders, these two stood.

*Proclaiming, “The Mystery you do not know
knows and has known you.*

God, it’s me. I so appreciate Paul’s tone: kind and respectful toward others’ beliefs yet not shy about speaking the truth as he understood it. I want this. I want to be able to speak the truth in love, with humility toward others. I want to speak the truth in love, with the courage of my convictions. Most of all, though, I want to point to the life that is beyond human ignorance—your majesty and your mystery unveiled in Jesus for all to see.

Acts 18:1-11

After speaking in the Areopagus, Paul left Athens and journeyed south to Corinth, where he met a Jewish man named Aquila and his wife Priscilla. Aquila, like Paul, was a tentmaker, though from Pontus in northern Turkey. He and Priscilla had most recently lived in Rome but had

¹⁰⁹ Rachel Srubas, *The Desert of Compassion: Devotions for the Lenten Journey* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2023), page 16.

¹¹⁰ c.f. Stoic philosopher Epimenides.

¹¹¹ c.f. Stoic philosopher Aratus.

left there when Emperor Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave the city. Paul stayed with them as they worked side by side making tents. On every Sabbath, Paul lectured, conversed, and engaged in robust dialogue with those in the synagogue, both Jews and Greeks, urging them to open themselves to the Jesus Story.

When Silas and Timothy caught up with Paul (having spent time in Berea in the region of Macedonia), Paul was released from having to work as a tentmaker each day. He was seized, as if by a compulsion, to tell the Jesus Story,¹¹² committing himself to the sacred act of bearing witness that Jesus is the Anointed. Many who heard Paul resisted his words and attacked him as a blasphemer.¹¹³ In response, Paul took off his cloak and shook off every speck of dust in a symbolic act of protest, as if to say, “Not even your dust shall accompany me as I journey forward.”¹¹⁴ Paul said to them, “You do you, but know that you are accountable for your own actions. I have fulfilled my calling to speak The Sender’s truth about the Anointed. My conscience is clear. From now on, I shall go among the Nations.”

Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the home of Titius Justus, a Greek who revered and obeyed The Sender. Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household, both family and servants, were among those who entrusted themselves to Jesus, as did many of the Corinthians who heard Paul tell the Jesus Story. All of them were baptized.

In the midst of this mixed bag of acceptance and opposition, Paul had a vision. The Sender spoke to Paul, saying, “Be not afraid, my beloved. Keep on keeping on. Speak the truth in love. Speak with both boldness and humility. Speak with clarity and with the courage of your convictions. I am with you—before and behind and beside. You are not alone in this city, for many are they upon whom I can call.” Encouraged and emboldened by this vision, Paul abided in Corinth for a year and a half, continually speaking The Sender’s Word.

*Speaking with an open heart,
ignored by the one closed off,
prevented from being heard,
frustration mounting with every click of the mouse.*

*I try to convey my gentle intent,
which matters not to one who knows better than all,
living within a chamber whose echoes reverberate
to a different frequency from the echoes of my heart.*

*Acceptance and opposition have become the
teeter-totter of our grownup playgrounds.
The grass we run on, laughing together
soils and muddies our feet.*

*Playground games require new rules:
the courage of convictions,
speaking boldly yet with humility,
always pointing forward,
embracing joy, rejecting derision.*

God, it’s me. I have been Paul, like most pastors I know. I have spoken what I learned in seminary with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love, only to have a realtor try to school me in the correct usage of the Greek. I have taught your Word to the best of my ability and been told, “We know you’re right, but we don’t want to change. Our church is dying, and we only care that you’re around to do my funeral.” Yet, in each of these churches, there have been those who believed in you more fervently than I, whose imagination lured me into mission and whose vision compelled me to continue the holy work of making disciples. Opposition and acceptance, acceptance and opposition—the magnetic poles of earthly ministry. O Sender, have mercy upon us!

¹¹² The Greek word used is *sunecho*, which can mean “disciplined followers, urge, or to be seized by an illness.”

¹¹³ The Greek word used is *blasphemouton*. The strength of this word hints that the Jewish opposition to Paul’s message was more than mere opposition but crossed a threshold that fueled the

intensity of Paul’s reaction in the following verses: shaking dust from his cloak and reorienting his ministry exclusively toward the Gentiles; c.f. Matthew 12:31–32.

¹¹⁴ c.f. Luke 9:5 and 10:11.

While Paul was still in Corinth, and Gallio was the Roman Governor of southern Greece (known as Achaia), the Jews in opposition to Paul's message assaulted him. They dragged Paul before Gallio while Gallio sat upon the judgment seat. They accused Paul before Gallio, saying, "This man violates Torah and persuades people to worship The Sender in ways we do not recognize."

Paul began to defend himself and was silenced by a dismissive wave from Gallio, who said, "Bring me a charge I care about, and I will deal with it. Questions about your religious ritual are no concern of mine. You and your laws are tiresome to me. Be gone with you!" And Gallio's guards forced them out. The mob turned on Sosthenes, the synagogue leader, and beat him. Gallio saw it and yawned.

*Bureaucrats and sociopaths:
our passions not shared by them,
our common sense seeming uncommon,
our ways and the Way incomprehensible.*

*Bored into a stupor,
they act;
we applaud.
What's wrong with this picture?*

God, it's me. I forget that not all opposition is active, aggressive, or argumentative—neither is it necessarily emotional, explosive, or violent. Sometimes, opposition is lazy and lethargic, indifferent and even apathetic. I prefer the more explosive opposition rather than the uncaring type. If given a choice, I prefer active resistance to passive avoidance. The one who engages me in robust debate at least agrees with me that there is something worth caring about. The one so bored they dare not hold an opinion only cares about themselves. O Sender, may I nurture my passion for you, for my spiritual journey doesn't get far by merely sleepwalking with Jesus.

¹¹⁵ Both modern and ancient commentators agree the text is unclear regarding the purpose of the vow.

Paul abided in Corinth for many months before leaving the beloved to sail for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Before sailing from Cenchrea, the port just to the east of Corinth, Paul shaved his head as a symbol that he had taken a vow to The Sender.¹¹⁵ Upon arriving in Ephesus, Paul left Priscilla and Aquila and went to the synagogue to lecture, converse, and engage the Jews in robust dialogue, even though he had told the Jews in Corinth that his ministry would be only among the Nations.¹¹⁶ The Jews in Ephesus were more receptive to Paul's message about the Jesus Story than those in Corinth had been, and they asked Paul to remain with them. He declined their invitation but promised that if it was The Sender's intention, he would return. Paul then sailed from Ephesus to Jerusalem. Upon landing in the port city of Caesarea, Paul went to Jerusalem and greeted the beloved before heading to Syrian Antioch, from whence his most recent journey had begun. After spending some time in Antioch, Paul returned to central Turkey, to Galatia and Phrygia, to encourage and empower the beloved who lived the God-life by following the Way of Jesus.

While Paul was journeying to Jerusalem and back to Turkey, an Alexandrian Jew named Apollos came to Ephesus. Being from Alexandria, Apollos was educated in using allegory to harmonize the Hebrew scriptures with Greek philosophy and was, as well, a dynamic communicator. He had received catechesis about Jesus and knew him to be sovereign above Caesar, though he did not know all the details of the Jesus Story, for he knew only the baptism of John but not the baptism of the Divine Spirit. What Apollos knew, he taught with passion and precision. He spoke about Jesus boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard Apollos, they welcomed him into their home and taught him to dance even more of the God-rhythms found in Jesus.

When Apollos journeyed to southern Greece, to the region of Achaia, the beloved in Ephesus encouraged him as he prepared to travel and wrote a letter of introduction to the beloved among the gatherings in Greece. Upon arriving among the gatherings, Apollos often served as an adviser to those who, through loving-kindness,

¹¹⁶ c.f. Acts 18:6: a statement Paul made in the heat of the moment.

had entrusted themselves to Jesus. He was a strong advocate for the beloved, for with his energy, intelligence, imagination, and love, he was a winsome and compelling orator who spoke convincingly from the Word that Jesus was The Sender's Anointed.

*New voice,
same message.*

*New messenger,
same loving-kindness.*

*From generation to generation:
"I must decrease that Jesus may increase."*

God, it's me. I love that Priscilla and Aquila took Apollos aside to instruct him in what he did not know. I love that Apollos received the instruction and grew more effective from it. I love that both young and old dwell within your Body. O Sender, I have been the young voice (though not as dynamic as Apollos). I am now the voice people are long accustomed to hearing (even longer than Paul). O Sender, I pray that churches would respect the old voices while welcoming the new ones. I pray the new voices would be confident and compelling, even while open to learning from the likes of Priscilla and Aquila.

Acts 19:1-11

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul journeyed through central Turkey and arrived at the port city of Ephesus on the western coast. Paul found twelve disciplined followers of Jesus and asked them, "Did you receive the Divine Spirit when you were baptized?"

They answered, "No, we have never heard of such a thing as the Divine Spirit."

"So how was it that you came to be baptized?" Paul asked them. "In whose name were you baptized?"

"In the name of John," they answered.

Paul instructed them about baptism: "John's baptism called people to turn away from the destructive

forces of culture and the practices that support these forces. John knew, though, that One would follow him that would rebuild culture through holy communion with the Creator that formed holy community and that led to practices of holy compassion. This is the baptism of Jesus." Hearing Paul, the twelve submitted to being baptized in the name of Jesus, to welcome and be embraced by the character of Jesus for their true self. Paul touched them with his hands, and the Divine Spirit acted, speaking mystical mysteries through them and enabling them to become truth-tellers for the God-life.

Paul regularly visited the synagogue in Ephesus for three months. He lectured, dialogued, and debated robustly about The Sender's kin-dom: how to dance the God-rhythms and live the God-life. Some who heard Paul had desiccated¹¹⁷ hearts full of anger and violence and reviled the Way of Jesus to all who would listen to them. Paul and the disciplined followers quit going to the synagogue and instead went to the lecture hall of Tyrannus where, for two years, Paul lectured and engaged in dialogue and robust debates. So many heard Paul that it was as if everyone in the region of Asia heard about the Jesus Story.

*Not enough
to leave childish things behind.
Adolescence ushers in
our becoming new persons: an adventure to journey.*

*Not enough
to leave adolescence in the dust.
The adventure of "adulthood" comes, ready or not,
to bear responsibilities, explore opportunities.*

*Not enough
to let go of avarice, betrayal, and corruption,
unholy hierarchies,
weighted systems designed to oppress.*

*Enough
to be embraced by love that will not let us go,
to welcome new creation in oneself, others, all,
seeking the eternal, the eternal, the eternal.*

¹¹⁷ The Greek word *esklerynonto* is usually translated as "but literally means "dried out."

God, it's me. My heart sometimes feels "dry." I never feel "desiccated," but the experience of spiritual dryness happens—sometimes even the dark night of the soul. O Sender, in such moments, give me the trust to be patient—with myself and with you. Help me to trust that the waters of life from which you have quenched my thirst will one day renew. My heart will not remain forever dry, even if recently it has felt that way. And so I trust that as you have given, so will you give. As I have received, so will I receive again. Until then, I wait. I wait. I wait—ready to welcome the renewal of your baptismal waters as they restore me.

Acts 19:11–22

The Sender wasn't just up to the ordinary with Paul. Rather, The Sender displayed *dunamis* through Paul to bring wholeness of mind and body, spirit and soul, even through such ordinary things like someone's handkerchief or an artisan's apron. Through Paul, the ordinary became extraordinary, which caught the attention of the professional religious classes.

Some Jewish healers whose profession it was to travel from place to place, confronting unholy powers, invoked the name of Jesus as the sovereign above the cosmos. Even the seven sons of Sceva, whose daddy had been an important shaman,¹¹⁸ invoked Paul's authority as their own.

It did not go well for them. One day, one of them commanded an unholy spirit who resided within a man, "In the name of Jesus, whom Paul proclaims, whom Paul serves, whom Paul worships as sovereign, I command you to leave this man!"

The unholy spirit answered, "Jesus, I know. Paul, I know. You, I do not." Then the man in whom the unholy spirit abided beat all the sons, thrashing them so badly they ran from the house utterly humiliated—naked and bleeding.

When news of this incident spread to those living in Ephesus and its surrounding areas, a reverence and awe descended upon them, and the name of Jesus, who is

sovereign above Caesar, ascended. Many approached to entrust themselves to Jesus and openly repent of their commitment to the broken culture and having walked crooked paths and engaged in practices that only supported their false selves. The artifacts of their own destruction they abandoned, even those things of great economic value. In this way, Jesus' name was honored, and his Story spread widely.

Following this flurry of spiritual renewal of the God-life in Ephesus, Paul decided to return to Jerusalem (to the east) by way of Macedonia and Achaia (to the north and west, around the curve of the Aegean Sea). "I must visit Rome, too," he told the gathering. Paul sent Timothy and Erastus to Macedonia in northern Greece, where Philippi and Thessalonica are located, to prepare for his arrival, while he abided for a wee bit longer in Ephesus, on the western coast of Turkey.

*Enrolled in language school in Costa Rica
homestaying with a
couple whose parents we could have been.*

*"Somos Presbyteriano? Vamos alla."¹¹⁹
But "mamacita y papacito" did not understand
differences between Presbyterian and Pentecostal.*

*My wife and I later confessed:
We prayed for the gift of tongues.
"God, language school would be so much easier!"*

*Laughing at our folly,
we realized: the easy path is no substitute for
knowing and being known, for loving and being loved.*

God, it's me. As I write this, it has been a fortnight since the "revival" at Asbury University in Kentucky, begun at a chapel service. The revival lasted the full fortnight: two weeks of Spirit-empowered healing. Oh, how I wish I could have been there. Evidently, I am not alone, for 50,000 people descended upon that small campus, overwhelming local resources but not you. I know, O Sender, from my background—having been

whether Sceva was a shaman or from the clan of Zadok (the first priest in the Solomonic Temple), known as the Zadokites.

¹¹⁹ "You are Presbyterian? We will go there."

¹¹⁸ The Greek text calls Sceva a chief priest, though no such priest is recorded as having served in Jerusalem. Scholars debate

converted through a charismatic congregation—that your wonders are full (and mysterious). And now I am Presbyterian—whom others call “the frozen chosen.” I admit: I wonder sometimes if we “quench the Spirit” and prevent your modern miracles. And then I listen to the stories of those cared for by hospital and hospice chaplains, of migrants whose lives have been saved by water left in the desert, of those impacted by just laws enacted through political advocacy, and I wonder if, perhaps, I am a bit too enamored by glamour and glitz. O Sender, in your mercy, forgive and renew.

Acts 19:22-41

While Paul was still in Ephesus, and before leaving for Macedonia, Achaia, and then Jerusalem, trouble arose about the Way of Jesus. Demetrius, a silversmith who constructed silver shrines to the goddess Artemis and thereby helped the local artisans create thriving businesses, called the artisans together and said, “Friends, we make good money, but our businesses are at risk. This guy Paul has sparked spiritual renewal for one known as The Sender and has persuaded many throughout the region to think the God-life cannot be represented through the pantheon of the gods, whose images we craft as we ply our trades. Not only are our businesses at risk, but the great name of Artemis is being disrespected by this Paul. Are we going to allow this Paul to disparage the temple of the great goddess Artemis? Are we going to stand idly by while this Paul spews disdain upon the goddess herself? Will we do nothing while he seeks to destroy her majesty?”

Those in attendance erupted in fury, “NO! Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! GAE! GAE! GAE!” Soon, all Ephesus was rioting.

The rioters seized Gaius and Aristarchus, two of Paul’s traveling companions from northern Greece, and dragged them into the outdoor amphitheater that served as the city’s public meeting space. Paul heard his companions were at risk and wanted to go defend them, but the beloved refused to allow him to go. Even some of Paul’s friends in the local government sent a message telling him to stay away from that place, for it was chaotic and confusing, as riots are.

The Jews in the crowd worried that they too would be targets of the crowd’s fury, for they also did not worship the pantheon of Greco-Roman gods. They thrust Alexander to the front so he could defend them against the accusations that, because they were both Jews, it meant they were with Paul. When the crowd realized Alexander was also Jewish, they were deaf to his words and shouted even louder: “GAE! GAE! GAE!” For two hours, the crowd carried on that way.

Finally, the city clerk calmed the crowd by saying, “My fellow Ephesians, all the world knows that we are the guardians of the great goddess Artemis’ temple! We protect her sacred image that has been gifted to us by the gods! All the world knows this is our inheritance and our obligation. No one can deny us this sacred duty! Therefore, do not be rash.

“You have dragged these men into this public arena, though they have neither robbed the temple nor blasphemed the goddess. If Demetrius and his fellow artisans have a just grievance against them, let them adjudicate it in the Roman courts. The Romans have judges who will hear this case, if one is made. Accusations can be levied against them before those who have jurisdiction in such matters. As it stands now, we are in danger of being charged with rioting. We may even be indicted for conspiracy to incite insurrection for the commotion we have made, since we are rioting without a cause.” Having spoken these words, the clerk sent everyone to their homes.

Fear leading to riot

Fury expressed as revolution

Anarchy making blind and deaf but certainly not mute

Guilt by innuendo

Guilt by association

Guilt before evidence is heard

God, it’s me. I have seen this passage multiple times: in Peru and Venezuela, in Hong Kong and the Arab Spring, in Ferguson and on the steps of the U.S. Capitol. Are our grievances reality or reactivity, based in evidence or on raw, unregulated emotion? I have this mythic conception of the early Apostles and the Founders of the U.S.: Stately discourse uttered in long,

reasoned paragraphs that adjudicate differences based on thoughtful principles—no shouting, no interrupting, just a gathering of conversation. Having traveled the world and listened to Arabic-speaking friends or Italian relatives speak with one another, I know the likelihood is that our ancestors got loud, got emotional, spoke vociferously because their conversations mattered to them. Having sat in meetings with pastors and elders, I have witnessed the same and felt uneasy. O Sender, I wonder if my preference for calm, reasoned debate is a symptom of my own privilege; after all, my white, male, U.S.-born voice has always been heard by others and usually heeded. Would I hold a different preference if I was a migrant and my skin were brown? Would I routinely feel exasperated were I a woman that had just said the same thing for which a male colleague was praised? I don't—I cannot—endorse the chaos of a rioting crowd, but I do—I must—endorse the rights of those whose voices need to be heard as they cry for justice. O Sender, in my own life, may I listen more than I speak and invite more than I demand, as I rejoice with those who rejoice and sorrow with those who sorrow.

Acts 20:1–12

When the riot in Ephesus calmed, Paul sent for the disciplined followers to speak courage to their hearts and say farewell before his journey to Macedonia in Northern Greece. As Paul journeyed throughout the region toward Macedonia, he spoke in each town to pour courage into the hearts and hope into the minds of those who came out to greet him. Finally, Paul arrived in Greece where he made his home for three months.

Paul had intended next to sail directly to Syria, but some of his countrymen from Israel planned ways to impede his journey. Therefore, Paul traveled east by land through Macedonia to the port city of Troas on the west coast of Turkey. A host of the beloved accompanied Paul, including Sopater from Berea, whose name means “of a

safe father,” which seemed appropriate, for The Sender kept Paul safe.¹²⁰ Also accompanying Paul were Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy of course, and Tychicus and Trophimus from central Turkey. The rest of us sailed from Philippi after observing the Passover and met up with these others five days later in Troas, where we abided for seven days.

On the day after the Jewish sabbath, on the first day of the week, we gathered to break bread and listen as Paul instructed us in The Sender's Word. Paul taught at length and well into the night, for he intended to leave the next day. Delivering depth for our understanding and making clear the complexities of the God-rhythms, Paul taught. On and on he examined the Word and expressed the mysteries of the God-life. Until midnight he taught.

The room in which we gathered was on the third floor, and there were many lamps in the room. Each gave a soft glow and provided gentle warmth. A young man named Eutychus was sitting in a windowsill and succumbed to the lateness of the hour, falling into a deep sleep—and then falling from the window.

Eutychus lay dead on the ground below. Paul rushed down and embraced Eutychus, saying, “Fear not! He lives!” Then Paul went back upstairs and celebrated by breaking bread together with the community—giving *eucharisto*¹²¹ for The Sender's loving-kindness in sparing Eutychus. After giving thanks, Paul continued his teaching, and continued and continued, not stopping until dawn. The people were relieved to be able to take Eutychus home.

*When hunger cannot be sated
by a single meal,*

*when thirst is not quenched unless
water is guzzled,*

*when Spirit takes wing
through roots sunk deep, deep, deep into the soil,*

*then trust comes alive in the warmth and glow of
light illuminated by the Word.*

¹²⁰ The Greek does not translate Sopater's name but adds “son of Pyrrhus.”

¹²¹ “*Eucharisto*” is the Greek word for “thanksgiving” and a common name for the breaking of bread (as are “holy communion” and “the Lord's Supper”).

God, it's me. I believe that wanting to know you and be like Jesus is good, but obsession is a curious thing. It can be dangerous or good, depending upon the object of preoccupation. My desire to know you lights my mind and heart on fire. It leads me to live in ways that seem outrageous to others—making strange commitments, being passionate about causes, and viewing all the world through a love-tinged lens. O Sender, send your Spirit to nurture my trust, inflame my love, and increase my commitment to live for you in what I do and in how I do it.

Acts 20:13–38

As Paul was journeying by land to Troas in northwest Turkey, the rest of us sailed from Philippi to Assos, about 20 miles south of Troas, where Paul was going to join us. Once Paul was aboard, we island hopped down the western coast of Turkey from Mitylene to Chios and to Samos before landing in the port city of Miletus, which is south of Ephesus. Paul wanted to avoid Ephesus because he was in a hurry to arrive in Jerusalem before Pentecost and knew landing in Ephesus would require an extended stay. However, he did not want to leave the region without saying goodbye, so he sent for the leaders of the gathering.

When the leaders arrived, Paul gave his farewell: “My beloved, you know me. You know who I am and how I lived among you from the first day I met you until today. I served The Sender in complete dependence upon Their goodness and loving-kindness, without self-exaltation, and even amidst severe resistance from my own kinsmen. You know I have never been ashamed to tell you the Jesus Story nor been shy about teaching you how to dance the God-rhythms. I have taught both publicly and privately, in the Agora and your own homes. I have taught both Jews and Greeks and taught the same message to all: Turn away from the broken culture and turn toward the God-life through entrusting yourselves to Jesus, who is sovereign above Caesar.

“And now the Spirit has bound me in the chains of resolute purpose. I am to go to Jerusalem. I cannot

perceive what will happen to me there, but the Divine Spirit continuously warns me of what awaits me—persecution and prison. What will happen to me is less important than my purpose and that I fulfill it. I am to run the race to the very end, making whole and complete my purpose in serving The Sender. Even at the cost of my life, I will bear witness¹²² to the loving-kindness unveiled, discovered, and experienced through Jesus, who is sovereign above Caesar.

“This is the final time we will see each other. I know this. I know also that I have told all of you the Jesus Story and invited you all to dance the God-rhythms of the God-life. I have shown you the belovedness that awaits you in The Sender’s kin-dom, and I’ve always been bold to point you toward the Way of Jesus for how you live. Therefore, I have fulfilled my purpose. My conscience is clean.

“Notice the rhythms of your own hearts and the preoccupations of your minds. Be aware of what is happening amidst your flock, over which the Divine Spirit has appointed you a shepherd. Be good shepherds of the sheep for whom the Good Shepherd became the Lamb whose sacrifice makes all whole and complete. There will be wolves who seek to distort what is right, just, and good. Rising from your own community, these wolves will seek to drag your sheep away into oppression and perverted desire, into the abuse, betrayal, and corruption of this broken culture. Be wary and aware! Remember how for three years I warned you night and day with tears in my eyes! Be on your guard against the wolves!

“Now, I commend you into The Sender’s care. Their message of loving-kindness makes you whole and complete, your true selves. I never wanted lots of money or a fancy house from you, which is why my own hands worked to provide for my needs and those of my companions, as you know. I lived and worked to demonstrate to you that working hard to help the poor and oppressed among us is a sacred joy. I sought to be an example of Jesus’ words, “Sacred joy is discovered through giving, not receiving.”

When Paul finished his farewell to the Ephesian leaders, he knelt with all of them, and together they prayed. Together they wept. Together they embraced. And the

¹²² The Greek word used is *diamartyrasthai*, which is a cognate of *martyreso*, which means “witness” or “testify” and from which we get the English word “martyr.”

leaders were grieved by Paul's word that this would be the last time they would see him face-to-face. Together they journeyed with him to his ship.

Farewell
Defining purpose
Looking to horizon
End discovering new beginning
Fulfillment

God, it's me. I know the sting of saying farewell. I remember times of loss and hope, sorrow and joy, kindness shared and tenderness offered, faithfulness that both did and did not bear fruit. To have fulfilled my purpose in one community does not mean the gift of them and the gift of us is forgotten. To move forward toward new calling and new purpose is sweet sorrow and requires an honest goodbye. O Sender, may I always say goodbye well, that I may say hello to the calling to which you send me next.

Acts 21:1-16

After we wrenched back¹²³ our hearts from the Ephesian leaders, our beloved all, we put out to sea. Once again, we island hopped south—from Kos to Rhodes and then to the mainland port city of Patara. From there we switched ships for a ship traveling to Phoenicia,¹²⁴ passing south of Cyprus, and on to Syria. We landed at Tyre, where the ship was to unload its cargo. We abided in Tyre for seven days and sought out the gathering of disciplined followers there.

The beloved in Tyre had received a conviction through the Spirit that Paul would encounter troubles in Jerusalem. Therefore, they urged him to remain with them in Tyre. However, Paul, even knowing the uncertain troubles that awaited him, obeyed the Spirit's nudge and continued his journey to Jerusalem. All of the beloved—

¹²³ The Greek word used is *apospao*, which refers to the unsheathing of a sword as a means of escape and is often translated as “wrenched away,” “torn away,” or merely “drawn away.” Paul's imagery in this sentence seems visceral, so I chose to use “wrenched away,” which seemed more emotionally evocative and conveys that Paul and his companionships didn't merely leave the Ephesians.

men, women, and children—escorted us out of Tyre and to the port. We knelt together on the beach to pray. After saying our goodbyes, we boarded the ship and continued our journey.

We sailed south down the coast, landing first in Ptolemais, where we stayed for a day with the gathering, and then to Caesarea, where we stayed with Phillip the Evangelist, one of the Seven who had been chosen by the sent ones to oversee the distribution of food.¹²⁵ Philip has four daughters, all of whom were gifted by the Divine Spirit as truth-tellers.

A few days later, another truth-teller, named Agabus, traveled to Caesarea from the hills of Judea. Moved by the Divine Spirit, Agabus also warned Paul of troubles to come in Jerusalem. Agabus grabbed Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it, and said, “The Divine Spirit has spoken, is speaking, and will continue to speak! Your kinsmen will bind the owner of this belt and surrender their authority over him by giving him to the Romans.”

When we heard Agabus, we begged Paul not to journey to Jerusalem. He refused, “Why do you lament? You crush me! I am ready—ready to be bound, ready to die if The Sender determines that is needful. I will do what I must in Jerusalem, whatever The Sender requires, to live the Way of Jesus, who is sovereign above Caesar.” He would not be detoured from the journey before him.

We journeyed together to Jerusalem. Some of the disciplined followers from Caesarea journeyed with us and introduced us to Mnason, from Cyprus, in whose home we abided. Mnason was an early follower of Jesus.

Spirit speaks
in whispers and nudges,
in words and symbols.

Spirit is speaking
through daughters and friends,
through conviction and clarity.

¹²⁴ Modern Lebanon.

¹²⁵ c.f. Acts 6, where the first “deacons” are elected. Interestingly, though the modern church calls these seven “deacons,” the New Testament does not. The seven function like deacons, certainly, and Philip has taken on the further role of evangelist.

*Spirit will continue to speak
always toward courage and commitment,
always toward fulfillment of The Sender's purpose.*

Speak, O Spirit, your servant is listening!

God, it's me. Tune my heart to hear your Spirit. Open my mind to words that provoke conviction, invite compassion, and inspire courage. Help me to welcome what others tell me yet listen only to what you speak. May all my listening, perceiving, and discerning be in service to discovering, exploring, and practicing your will.

Acts 21:17-26

The beloved greeted us when we arrived in Jerusalem and welcomed us with joy. The next day, all of us went to see James, Jesus' brother, along with all the leaders in the Jerusalem gathering. Paul greeted them and spoke out the Story of all the Divine Spirit had done and was doing among the Gentiles through our service to The Sender. The leaders' hearts rejoiced, and they honored The Sender upon hearing this good report.

However, the leaders also conveyed their concerns to Paul. "Many of our kinsmen entrust themselves to The Sender and seek to live the God-life as they understand it. They are zealous to do what is right, just, and good as they understand Moses' teaching. These, our kinsmen, have been told that you teach others to ignore Moses, to not circumcise our children as The Sender commanded and Moses taught, and to turn away from the holy habits that shape and form us as a community. What shall we do? Our kinsmen will hear that you are in Jerusalem!

"Do what we tell you—take these four men and together make a Nazirite vow.¹²⁶ Publicly devote yourselves to The Sender. Pay for the cost of the animals for purification, both for yourselves and the four others. Make the vow before the priests in the Temple so that all will know you dance the God-rhythms and live in obedience to the God-life. Do this so that all will know you respect the customs of Moses even as you live the Way of Jesus.

"As for our beloved who are Gentiles, we have already written to them that they should 'Stay away from both idolatry and immorality. Be outwardly kind and

inwardly clean. Integrity should be your constant companion and the Spirit's wisdom your best friend forever. Immerse deep into The Sender's Word; read the Word that it may read you."

The next day, Paul took the four men to the Temple and together they publicly made sacred promises to The Sender. They committed themselves to the number of days they would abstain from drink and devote themselves to practicing holy habits intended to draw them deeper into the God-life. Paul, himself, personally promised to pay for each of them the costs of the offerings prescribed by Moses.

*I write this during Lent,
having taken a "Nazirite" vow
of sorts—
abstaining from drink for these forty days.*

*My hair is unshaved,
and you would not know of my vow
had I not confessed it so publicly—
does it no longer count as a vow?¹²⁷*

*I am unconcerned about public notice,
and more focused on interior observations
of how choosing water with friends
changes how I "show up."*

*What vows do you make, O Gentle Reader?
To whom do you make them?
For whom do you make them?
How do you live your holy habits?*

God, it's me. Many are they who define me though they do not really know me—or know me only by reputation—real or imagined. O Sender, help me live with integrity regardless of what others think, believe, say, or do. Help me dance the God-rhythms from the place of call, with an open heart, and always to your honor. May I seek to live in ways that invite others into the joyful dance of being loved by you.

¹²⁶ c.f. Numbers 6.

¹²⁷ c.f. Matthew 6, especially 6:16.

Acts 21:27–36

When the seven days of Passover (also called the Feast of Unleavened Bread) were almost finished, some of the kinsmen from Turkey saw Paul. These men knew of Paul's ministry and opposed his work because they perceived it as being against Moses. The kinsmen agitated the crowd, seized Paul, and began shouting to all present, "Our countrymen, hear us! Our fellow citizens, help us! This man teaches everyone everywhere practices that betray Moses and distort how we dance the God-rhythms. He has even brought a Greek into the Temple, which is illegal to do." (Paul had been seen around Jerusalem with Trophimus the Ephesian, and people assumed Paul had brought him into the Temple.)

A riot broke out, and people came running from all directions. The rioters seized Paul and dragged him out of the Temple and away from the Temple courts. Immediately the Temple gates were shut to prevent the riot from spilling into the Temple area. The rioters beat Paul and were seeking to kill him. The commander of the Roman troops rushed to the scene with some officers and soldiers. (The Romans were always hyper vigilant throughout the seven days of the Passover, watching for social unrest, for it was a time when larger-than-normal crowds gathered in the city to celebrate the people's political liberation from Egypt.)¹²⁸ When the rioters saw the commander and soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.

The commander acted first and then asked questions. He ordered Paul arrested and bound with two chains according to the Roman practice: each chain bound to one of Paul's arms and a Roman soldier. Having secured Paul, the commander then asked who he was and what he had done. The crowd erupted with shouts of denunciation, a cacophony of confused and contradictory accusations. Unable to hear a clear account of the situation, the commander ordered that Paul be taken to the Roman barracks. The crowd was not appeased but followed the

Romans as they escorted Paul away. At one point, the crowd was so dense and their anger so profound that the soldiers had to lift Paul up to carry him through the crowd, who continued to call for Paul's death: "Away with him!"

Claim and counter claim.

Why seek to understand when blame is so easy and seeking unity hardly worth our time?

*Have we become a culture of ruffians—
"heckler's veto" replacing
dialogue, discourse, and discernment?*

*O Sender, in your mercy,
hear our lament and heal our maddening ways!
O Sender, in your mercy,
help us serve our better angels!*

God, it's me. I have accused and been accused. I have been angry and the object of anger. I am weary of it all and am wary about wading into the waters that seek communal discernment. Dialogue has become a rushing river with rocks and shoals, while discourse detours into eddies that lead nowhere. Is there no end to the blame game? Are my only options "defend" and "attack"? O Sender, in your mercy, liberate me from the oppression of vitriol. Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me. May I be the change I seek.

Acts 21:37–22:22¹²⁹

To calm the riot, the commander had arrested Paul. As Paul was being taken to the Roman barracks, he asked the commander, "May I speak?"

¹²⁸ This sentence is not in the Greek text but added to provide context for the Roman commanders' prompt action.

¹²⁹ This passage is a good example of the fickleness of biblical chapters and verses. The story of how chapter and verse became a part of the Bible originates after the invention of the Gutenberg press. An editor, seeking a marketing advantage for his translation of Scripture, decided to add in chapters and verses (and did a decent job with it). He placed marks upon the manuscript as

notations while traveling by carriage from Paris to Rome (where he hoped to secure Papal patronage for his "new" version of the Bible). The joke among scholars is that the editor sometimes placed an errant mark when the carriage hit a pothole, leading to some awkward transitions. This passage is an example of such an awkward transition as the narrative of Paul's post-riot speech begins in chapter 21.

“You speak Greek?” asked the commander. “I thought you were the Egyptian that started a revolt a while back. Didn’t you lead an army of terrorists into the wilderness after having been defeated on the Mount of Olives?”¹³⁰

Paul answered, “I am a Jew! I am from the port city of Tarsus in the southeastern corner of Turkey and a citizen! I ask to speak to my people.”

The commander pondered Paul’s request, for to allow him to speak could reignite the crowd’s violence.¹³¹ Upon receiving the commander’s permission to speak to the crowd, Paul stood on the steps and motioned for the crowd to settle down. When the crowd calmed, he said to them in Aramaic, the common language in Jerusalem: “Beloved of Israel, my beloved. Listen to my defense. Let me give you my bona fides.” Upon hearing Paul speak Aramaic, the crowd became silent.

“I am a Jew born in Tarsus in southeastern Turkey but raised here in Jerusalem. Gamaliel was my tutor who educated my mind to know the precise requirements of Torah and nurtured my heart to fulfill these requirements zealously. I was as passionate to worship and serve The Sender as any of you today. I hunted the followers of Jesus who practiced what is known as the Way. I hounded them and, when I found them, arrest, prison, and death was their destiny—both men and women! Ask the high priest and old ones who rule our people. They will confirm that they gave me letters to present to our kinsmen in Damascus. These letters empowered me to persecute the followers of the Way, imprison them, and return them to Jerusalem for punishment.

“As I approached Damascus while the sun was at its highest point, a light flashed from heaven—brighter than the sun! I was enveloped in light and fell to the ground. I

heard a voice say to me, ‘Saul! Saul! Why do you pursue, persecute, and punish me?’

“I asked the voice, ‘Who are you?’

“The voice answered, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth. What you do to my people you do to me.’

“Now, my companions saw the light but were prevented from understanding the voice.

“I asked Jesus, ‘What shall I do?’

“He answered, ‘Live into resurrection!’¹³² Go to Damascus. You will be instructed on what I have prepared for you to do.’

“My companions then led me by the hand into Damascus because the light had blinded me.

“A man named Ananias came to me. He was obedient to Torah and respected by all our kinsmen living in Damascus. Ananias came along beside me and said, ‘Brother Saul, see and perceive what The Sender has called you to do!’ And then I could see.

“Ananias was indeed one of The Sender’s truth-tellers, for he spoke to me of The Sender’s purpose for my life. ‘The Sender, who appeared to our ancestors and chose them as Their people, has chosen you for a sacred purpose: You will see the One who creates right relationships and hear the words that come directly from his mouth. You will be a witness to all whom you meet of what you see and hear. Now live into resurrection! Wait no longer! Be baptized into his death that you may be united with him in the newness of life.’¹³³ Be immersed in his love that your sin will be washed away.’

“When I returned to Jerusalem from Damascus, I prayed in the Temple. While in prayer, I was carried away by a mystic vision. It was Jesus speaking to me. ‘Quick!’ he said, ‘Come out from Jerusalem because the people will not delight’¹³⁴ in your message about me.’

¹³⁰ The Jewish historian Josephus referenced an Egyptian terrorist whose revolt was squashed by the Roman governor Felix (*Ant.* xx. 8. 6). The Greek text mentions 4,000 soldiers while Josephus says there were 30,000. Rather than be concerned with trying to reconcile this discrepancy in numbers (e.g., Josephus described the invading force entering Jerusalem while Luke described the number of soldiers after the revolt was defeated, which are both speculative notions), the more significant point is the revolutionary ethos prevalent in 1st century Israel. Revolutionary rhetoric and actions were borne upon the wings of Israel’s nationalism, militarism, and messianism. Rome’s response was oppression, repression, and suppression.

¹³¹ This sentence is not in the Greek text but provides interpretive context for the commander’s decision.

¹³² The Greek word is *anastas*, from *anistemi*, which is a cognate for the word meaning “resurrection.” While the NIV’s translation of “Get up” is appropriate, the NIV misses the theological subtext of using a cognate of *anistemi*.

¹³³ c.f. Romans 6:4.

¹³⁴ The Greek word used is *paradexontai*, which has a range of meaning—from “acknowledge, receive, or accept” to “welcome or delight.” Although it may be that the concern is that the people will not receive Paul’s message, I sense Jesus’ concern is that they

“I replied, ‘O my sovereign, these people know me better than that. They know how I used to pursue, persecute, and punish those who followed your Way. They know that when the martyr Stephen’s blood was spilled, I approved the act and even guarded the clothes of those who stoned him.’

“But the One who is sovereign above Caesar said to me, ‘Go! I will send you to the Nations.’”

The crowd, who had been listening intently as Paul recounted the way Jesus had led him into the Way, turned violent when they heard Paul believed the Gentiles worthy to be invited into the God-life. Raising their voices, the crowd shouted, “Death to him! He is unfit to live!”

*Must life be a zero-sum game?
I lose if you win.
You lose if I win.*

*Must tribalism rule
nation states and
neighborhood associations?*

*If I celebrate your belovedness,
if I rejoice in your blessing,
I am not, therefore, less beloved or less blessed.*

*To widen the circle of love is
sacred purpose, worth
pursuing (or being pursued).*

God, it’s me. I love Paul’s hopeful naivete! He is willing to believe others will delight in the message of their own belovedness and also delight that others are beloved. And why not? What kind of person does not delight that another is beloved? O Sender, if I am honest with myself, sometimes I am that person. I can be greedy in hoarding for myself what you freely offer to all. Forgive me, O Sender. Free me to embrace Jesus’ joy in loving one and all.

When the crowd heard that Paul welcomed the Gentiles to dance their God-rhythms as worthy of the God-life, chaos erupted. People shouted and threw off their cloaks to ready themselves to do violence, and flinging dust in the air as a sign of lament. The commander responded immediately by having Paul dragged back into the Roman barracks, flogged, and interrogated about what had just happened. (As a Roman, the commander was not well-versed in the nuances of Jewish culture and so did not understand the source of the people’s rage.)¹³⁵

As the soldiers stretched Paul preparing to flogging him, he asked the centurion, “Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen on a mere accusation? I have neither been tried nor convicted of an offense!” (Roman citizens were privileged by the Empire and afforded iron-clad rights to a fair trial not offered to Rome’s subjugated peoples.)¹³⁶

When the centurion heard Paul’s question, he reported to the commander. “This man is a Roman citizen. What are your orders?”

The commander confirmed the centurion’s report by asking Paul, “Is this true? Are you a Roman citizen?”

“Yes,” Paul replied.

“It’s quite expensive to purchase Roman citizenship. How could someone as obviously poor as you have afforded it?” asked the commander.

“I was born a citizen,” replied Paul.

The soldiers who surrounded Paul stepped away from him immediately, as they did not want to be complicit in the illegal flogging of a Roman citizen. The commander also was alarmed when he realized he had put a Roman citizen in chains and treated him like one of Rome’s subjugated peoples.

*Justice is blind
unless your skin is black or brown, or
your first breath was taken in Sonora
rather than Arizona.*

cannot (for various reasons) delight in it. This is my theological interpretation rather than a grammatical or linguistic observation.

¹³⁵ The sentence within the parentheses is not in the Greek text but offered to provide interpretive context.

¹³⁶ The sentence within the parentheses is not in the Greek text but offered to provide interpretive context.

*Justice is blind
when white-collar folks steal billions annually,
while blue-collar thieves serve sentences
thrice the length
for a fraction of the cash.*

*Take off your mask, Lady Justice!
Look! Lament! Long
for the day when all are treated as
equals before the law.*

God, it's me. As a follower of Jesus, I have often read this passage and thought, "Gee whiz, that sure seems unfair to Paul, my hero, who, like me, follows Jesus." Rarely have I wondered about the hundreds of thousands who lived under the oppression of Roman rule. As a U.S.-born, white, cis male, I have read this passage and been glad Paul was afforded a measure of legal privilege in Roman society. Almost always, I avoid feeling chagrin that I am afforded that same privilege in my own society while millions of my fellow citizens know no such freedom. O Sender, I am appalled at myself. I lament my insensitivities to the daily injustices experienced by others. Forgive me in Jesus. Renew me in your Spirit. Make me an ally and advocate for those who daily remain oppressed.

Acts 22:30–23:11

The commander needed to cover his backside—do a bit of damage control after having arrested a Roman citizen on mere accusations. Therefore, he released Paul and ordered the entire gathering of Rulers to assemble, all 71 of them. The commander hoped the Rulers would help him understand the rage Paul inspired.

Soldiers brought Paul to stand before the Rulers. Paul gazed upon the Rulers sitting before him and said, "I stand before The Sender with a clear conscience. I have fulfilled all that The Sender has commanded of me." Ananias, the high priest, ordered those near Paul to slap him for his insolence.

Paul responded, "Hypocrite! You dress all spiffy in your fine threads, but your heart is a bundle of used rags. Looking good is not being good. You disobey Torah by

ordering violence against me. As you have struck me, so The Sender will strike you."

Those nearest to Paul screamed in his face, "How dare you insult the high priest!"

Paul, seeking to be obedient to Torah, apologized, "Beloved, I did not realize he was the high priest. I know it is written, 'Speak no evil against the ruler of your people.'"

Then Paul, reading the room, observed the presence of both the Elite and Intense. He knew the two groups differed in their understanding of the resurrection, with the Elite saying there is neither resurrection, nor angels, nor spirits and the Intense teaching all these things. Paul said to the Rulers, "Beloved, I am one of the Intense and come from a long line of the Intense. I stand accused before you because I hope in resurrection!"

Paul's words ignited a storm of controversy, as the Rulers began to bicker among themselves. The dispute became violent, and the Roman commander feared for Paul's safety. The commander ordered his soldiers into the ruckus to protect Paul and bring him back to the barracks.

The following night, Paul had a mystic vision. Jesus appeared to Paul and said, "Courage! Take heart! As you have spoken your convictions here in Jerusalem, so you will speak them in Rome."

*No one wants a fox in the hen house—
then the realization slaps you in the back of the head:
this hen is slyer than the fox.
Savvy is not a sin.*

God, it's me. In today's world, it can seem as if there is a trapdoor beneath my feet in every conversation, a snare hidden where I cannot see it in every circumstance. O Sender, I long for the days when being naïve or gullible were not character flaws. I long for a time when all can speak with conviction without having to feel as if we must defend our clan or win at all costs. Given the rootedness of our polarization, help me not contribute to it but persevere in speaking the truth in love, allowing my "yes" to be yes and my "no" to be no. May I trust that speaking with humility is enough, conveying my convictions with clarity sufficient. Give me the courage to speak the truth with kindness and respect. O Sender, grant me a heart willing to speak for you.

Acts 23:12-35

The next morning, some with twisted motives and inward-turned hearts¹³⁷ conspired against Paul, binding themselves by oath to murder Paul. More than forty were involved in this nefarious plot. This murderous gang slithered into the presence of the Rulers and Elders to declare themselves: “We have bound ourselves by oath to murder and will neither eat nor drink until this Paul is dead.” The large gathering of oath takers bullied the Rulers into asking the Roman commander to bring Paul back for further questioning (under the pretense of gathering more information about the circumstances of his imprisonment). “When the soldiers bring him, we will attack and kill him before he gets to you.”

The mob did not account for the children, though. Paul’s nephew, just a boy, heard of the plot and informed his uncle. Paul, in turn, asked one of the Roman soldiers, “Take this young man to your commander. He has news the commander will want to hear.” The soldier took Paul’s nephew to his commander.

The soldier said to the commander, “This boy has a message from the prisoner Paul.”

The commander placed his hand upon the nephew’s shoulders and said, “What is it, boy?”

The nephew answered, “Some men have bound themselves by oath to murder my uncle. They are going to ask you to bring him to the Rulers under the pretext of gathering more information about his case. Please, sir, don’t let them hurt my uncle.”

The commander dismissed the boy with a command: “Tell no one you have reported this to me.”

The commander then turned to a sergeant with another command: “Prepare 200 soldiers, 70 cavalry, and 200 more special forces. Have them ready to ride at 9:00 p.m. Provide a horse for the prisoner, too. You ride to Caesarea tonight so that this Paul may be taken safely to Governor Felix.”

The commander then penned a letter:

¹³⁷ The Greek words *ystrophēn* and *animathatīsan* are used. *Ystrophēn* means “a twisting together” or “riotous crowd.” *Animathatīsan* means “curse” or “devote to destruction” and is the word from which we get the English “anathema.” Paul paints a picture of a

Claudius Lysias, to the most honorable Governor Felix, greetings.

This prisoner was attacked by a riotous crowd who were about to murder him when I arrived with my troops to rescue him, for I had learned that he was a Roman citizen.

I wanted to understand the cause of the riot, so I brought the prisoner before the local leadership, whom they call the Rulers. I learned the prisoner had done nothing worthy of death or even imprisonment. The accusations against him were merely matters of their local religion.

When I discovered a murderous gang’s conspiracy to ambush him, I sent him to you at once, your Excellency, so you may hear his case. I further ordered his accusers to stand before you to plead their case.

The regiment obeyed the commander and took Paul that night down from Jerusalem, through the Judean hills, and as far as Antipatris but could not make it all the way to the coast. The next day, the soldiers and special forces returned to Jerusalem while the cavalry continued on with Paul to Caesarea. Upon arriving, the commander of the cavalry presented Paul and the letter to Governor Felix.

Governor Felix read the letter and asked Paul what province he was from. Paul answered, “I am from the city of Tarsus in the province of Cilicia in southeast Turkey.” The governor then ordered Paul be kept under house arrest in Herod’s palace.

*The commander had Paul
lashed
and then portrayed himself as Paul’s
liberator.*

*How often, I wonder, do I portray myself as
righteous
when others experience me as a
rascal?*

highly volatile situation that the Rulers participate in and yet are also swept up by. I wonder if the Rulers’ culpability is less about malicious motives and more cowardice, unwilling to stand against a mob.

The commander portrayed himself as the hero of events that happened mostly in his head.

God, it's me. I confess my good is yet tinged with brokenness. I am not perfect, will never be perfect, and am loved anyway on a journey toward my true self. Your gift of mercy heals my brokenness. O Sender, help me notice when I try to portray myself as someone I am not: better (or worse) than I am. In this sacred awareness, help me be who I am, for in you, with you, and through you, I am enough.

Acts 24:1-27

Later that week, the high priest Ananias and some of his lieutenants traveled from Jerusalem down to Caesarea. Ananias also brought a lawyer named Tertullus to bring a formal indictment against Paul. Tertullus was a Hellenistic Jew who understood the political concerns of both the Jewish high priest Ananias and the Roman governor Felix.

When Paul was brought before Governor Felix, Tertullus, a skilled orator of the type common in Roman municipalities, spoke. “Your eminence, we stand before you having enjoyed a long and prosperous period of peace. You have crafted reforms to make our nation great again, most excellent Felix, for which we are profoundly grateful! We seek not to weary you with our problems but beg your indulgence to hear these concerns we have that also affect the peace within your jurisdiction.

“This troublemaker disturbs the peace throughout Caesar’s realm. He provokes riots wherever he goes! He is the ringleader of a sect of Jews called the Nazarenes and introduces new gods into our religion—which, as you know, most honorable Felix, is against Roman law. He even tried to pollute the Temple in Jerusalem, and Caesar allows us to punish such acts. Talk to him yourself, and you will learn that all we say is true.” Those with Tertullus chimed in with their own accusations, a riot of allegations.

Felix waved his hand at Paul, beckoning him to speak. Paul spoke, “I know you have been governor for many years and not new to this. You can see when people are using their words to craft lies and hurling false

allegations to obscure the truth. I gladly make my defense to you, Governor Felix. The facts are easy to confirm. I arrived in Jerusalem a mere twelve days ago. I went there to worship. I was not arguing with anyone nor stirring up a crowd. Inciting a riot? Ridiculous! They have no proof of any of their charges against me.

“The one thing about which these men speak the truth is that as a follower of the Way I worship The Sender as a follower of the Way. These men call the Way a cult, but I call it the culmination of all Torah and the path that guides us to observe every ethical act demanded by the truth-tellers. I am just like them in trusting there will be a reckoning when death gives way to new life: The Sender will unveil the time of resurrection both for the true and the false, for those who live in right relationship and those who pursue brokenness and strife. I strive always to live into this hope that The Sender has planted within me.

“I had been away from Jerusalem for several years. I came to bring my people gifts—to care for the poor and offer sacrifice in the Temple. I was ceremonially pure, as our Jewish customs require, when these men found me in the Temple. There was no crowd. There was no riot. There are some from Turkey who may have charges such as this. Bring them here to stand before you if they want to speak against me! As for these men, ask them to state what crime they found in me when I stood before their Rulers. The only thing I did in their presence was boldly proclaim my trust in The Sender’s hope of resurrection: ‘It is because of the resurrection I stand before you today.’”

Felix, having served as governor of Syria for many years, knew about the Way. He stopped the trial. Turning to Paul, he said, “When commander Lysias comes, I will hear what he has to say and decide your case.” Felix then ordered the sergeant to keep Paul guarded but give him enough freedom that his friends could care for his needs.

Several days later, Felix brought his wife, Drusilla, to speak with Paul, for Drusilla was Jewish. Felix listened as Paul spoke about trusting Jesus the Anointed. Paul talked about right relationships, becoming one’s true self, and the unveiling of justice that is to come. Hearing Paul incited Felix to fear. “Enough for now!” he told Paul. “When I want to hear more, I’ll summon you.” (Felix summoned Paul often, hoping for a bribe from him.)

Because Felix wanted to keep the Jerusalem leaders happy, he kept Paul in prison. Paul lived for two

years under Roman guard and then Felix was replaced as governor by Porcius Festus.

*We have seen this before,
in the corridors of power.*

*Manipulation for any reason
is still manipulation.*

*Power corrupts.
Absolute power corrupts absolutely.*

*How long, O Sender,
until the color of justice is not green?*

God, it's me. Paul speaks the truth of his conscience, character, and conduct without vitriol and without being defensive. He trusts that, ultimately, his words are directed neither to Ananias nor Felix, but to you! O Sender, grant me such grace under pressure. May my audience be you in both my actions and attitude, in what I do and how I do it, in what I say and in how I say it.

Acts 25:1-12

Three days after arriving in the region, Governor Festus traveled from the coastal city of Caesarea to the hill country of Judea, finally arriving in Jerusalem. The chief priests and other religious power players in Jerusalem assaulted the absent Paul with accusations. They even requested that Festus bring Paul to Jerusalem so they could hold a trial there (for they conspired to ambush Paul as he traveled to Jerusalem). They said they would consider it a favor.

Festus, as a Roman governor, was skilled in detecting someone trying to play him. He refused their request and, in turn, “invited” the religious power players to return to Caesarea with him (and his cadre of soldiers). “If this Paul has done anything wrong, you can accuse him in Caesarea.”

A while later, Festus returned to Caesarea with soldiers and those who conspired against Paul. Festus immediately convened a hearing and had Paul brought before him. Those who wanted Paul dead had much to say but could prove nothing—many accusations, yet all without evidence. Finally, Paul was allowed to defend himself: “I am innocent before Temple and Torah and have done nothing to offend Caesar.”

Festus, unwilling to require Paul to stand trial in Jerusalem, which would be against Roman custom, yet fully willing to try to manipulate Paul as a favor to the religious leaders, asked, “Paul, will you go to Jerusalem to stand trial? You may defend yourself before me against these accusations.”

Paul responded, “I am standing before a Roman court now, am I not? This is where I belong. You know quite well, good Festus, that I am innocent of these accusations. If I have done something worthy of death, I am prepared to receive the consequence of my actions. But no one (not even you)¹³⁸ has the right to hand me over to these men. Therefore, as a Roman citizen, I appeal directly to Caesar!”

Festus consulted with his council and then said to Paul, “By Roman law and the will of Caesar, appealing directly to Caesar is your right as a citizen. To Caesar you have appealed. To Caesar you will go.”

*The CEO sat, seething at what he had just heard—
his admin having admitted, unintentionally,
his intent was malign.*

Can ethics be “elastic”?

*If the admin had he just
Kept. His. Mouth. Shut.
no one would have known of his
manipulation and malice.*

*How far can I stretch reality
until the truth breaks?*

¹³⁸ Neither the parenthetical phrase “(not even you)” nor the phrase “as a Roman citizen” are in the Greek text, but they are essential sub-texts of the power dynamics flowing between Festus

and Paul, both of whom understood the limits to Festus’ authority, based on Roman law.

*Now, embarrassed, he opened his mouth,
“We welcome the opportunity to be generous
and look forward to working
together with our community partners.”*

*Is it ethical to resist and reject what’s right
so long as one ends up doing it—begrudgingly?*

Igniting smiles and nods around the table.

God, it’s me. Help me do the right thing, in the right way, at the right time, for the right reason. May the intent of my heart mirror the integrity of your character. May the words of my mouth and actions I take express the love you have for all.

Acts 25:13-21

Several days later, the Jewish King Agrippa and his wife Bernice traveled to Caesarea to show deference to Festus as the Roman Governor. At one point during the many days Agrippa was there, Festus inquired of him about Paul’s case. Festus said, “I have an interesting dilemma about which you may be able to provide insight. I have in my jail a holdover from Felix, named Paul. When I went to Jerusalem, the leadership there accused him of crimes they believed were worthy of death and asked that I condemn him. I told your kinfolk that condemnation without a trial is not the Roman way, that prisoners must be given the right to defend themselves against any accusation.

“I called for a trial immediately, and the next day had the prisoner brought before me. When his accusers spoke, they didn’t accuse him of crimes worthy of death according to Roman law but what sounded to me like obscure theological disputes of Jewish religion centered around a dead man named Jesus, whom the prisoner claimed was alive. All their arguments were about the living and the dead and whether or not their god would one day make the dead alive again. I was perplexed by it all. I asked the prisoner if he would not rather have this matter adjudicated in Jerusalem, for it seemed a matter of local religion rather than Roman governance. However, Paul appealed to Caesar, which tied my hands, for I am now bound by both law and oath to send him to Caesar.”

Agrippa responded, “I would like to hear this man speak with my own ears.”

Festus replied, “And tomorrow you shall.”

*True ethics express one’s very Breath,
character neither diminished nor derailed
by the complexity of a circumstance.*

*Weaving action and intent in intimate embrace,
integrity nurtures the heart and crafts the mind.*

*Knowing the good, doing the good, living the good—
exhalation of one’s inner light.*

God, it’s me. I am uncertain if Festus and Agrippa are actually seeking justice for Paul or more interested in appearing to seek justice for him. I wonder: How do their own self-interests influence them? How do the interpersonal dynamics between these two powerful men sway what they say? How do political alignment and potential coalitions define their willingness to do what is right and good? I confess: I am judgmental toward these men. I mock their flaccid willingness to discuss a man’s freedom so nonchalantly. In my heart, I am tempted to loathe them. And then your Spirit whispers to that same heart: “This is you, beloved. You can be blissfully unaware of your own bias. You can speak blithely about matters of great impact upon others. Not Festus. Not Agrippa. You.” O Sender, in your mercy, redeem this sinner of your choosing! Renew within me a holy empathy toward others. Give me ears to hear my own words. Grant me courage to confront my own conscience.

Acts 25:22 - 26:32

The next day, the Jewish king Agrippa and his wife Bernice paraded into the courtroom with full pomp, a grand spectacle. They sauntered past high-ranking Romans—military, civil, and economic leaders—and took their seats. Festus nodded to his soldiers, and Paul was brought into the courtroom. Festus said, “King Agrippa and all who are present with us: Behold the man! Local leaders in both Jerusalem and Caesarea believe him worthy of death, but I found nothing in Roman law that would allow such a sentence. Further, he, a Roman citizen,

appealed to Caesar, so by Roman law I must send him to Rome. But what shall I say about this man? What shall I write about the charges against him? To write nothing would be absurd!”

Agrippa then said to Paul, “You have permission to speak.”

Paul assumed the pose of an orator, stretching out his hand even though it was chained to a Roman guard. “King Agrippa,” he began, “I am most blessed today to stand before you and be able to build the case¹³⁹ for my innocence, as you are an expert¹⁴⁰ in our customs, culture, and controversies. Listen to me, I plead. Hear me, I pray.

“Our people remember how I have lived since I was a child, from my home in southeastern Turkey and then in Jerusalem. They have known me for decades and can witness, if they choose, that I poured myself into the mold of the Intense, living with passion to dot every ‘i’ and cross every ‘t’ of our laws and their strictest interpretations.

“I have lived among our people, lived for our people, and now stand before you today because of my belief in The Sender’s promise to our people. And not just our people today but from throughout the ages. I have put my trust in The Sender’s promise to our ancestors, even Jacob’s sons! The twelve tribes who entered the Promised Land longed to see what The Sender has done and is doing even now. O King Agrippa, it is for this hope that I stand before you: that The Sender is the One who brings life to the dead! Why is it a surprise to hear that the Creator of all that is seen and unseen is also sovereign over life and death?

“As our people can witness, if they choose, it seemed to me that I should oppose those who followed Jesus of Nazareth. And so I did. Beginning in Jerusalem, I sought permission from our religious leaders to put the Jesus followers in prison. When asked whether to put them to death, I cast my vote for death. From place to place I traveled, throughout Jerusalem and Judea, to hunt them

down. I pursued them and sought to punish and persecute them. My fury against them could not be quenched. I then went beyond Israel, into the Diaspora, to hunt them among the Nations.

“On one such crusade, I was going to Damascus with the full authority of our religious leaders clenched in my fist. As the sun peaked in the afternoon sky, I saw a light brighter than the sun and heard a voice speaking to me in Aramaic, saying, ‘Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me? Why do you shoot yourself in the foot?’¹⁴¹

“I responded, ‘Who are you, master? What is your name?’

“The voice answered, ‘I am Jesus. When you persecute my followers, you persecute me, for they and I are one. Now get up, and dust yourself off. I have unveiled myself to you for a purpose: I have chosen you to serve me as a witness, to testify to what you see and hear from me. I will remove¹⁴² you from your own people and from the Nations. No longer will you follow their path to accomplish their plans. From now on, you will follow the Way to fulfill my will: to give both your own people and the Nations the ears to hear God-melodies and the Spirit’s whispers; to make their bodies able to dance the God-rhythms and feel the Spirit’s nudges; to turn the night that was given over to the Accuser into the dawn that belongs only to The Sender. I have chosen you to be the vessel through whom I will proclaim Good News and bring healing, wholeness, and hope to the Nations, to transform them into their true selves through trust that unites them to me.’

“King Agrippa, how could I disobey this vision, mystic and transcendent, given from above? I could not! So, first to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and Judea, and finally to the Nations I proclaimed the Jesus Story. I invited all people to turn away from the folly of this broken world and turn toward the wisdom of The Sender’s kin-dom. I called for them to express their trust through action, to ‘walk the walk’ and not just ‘talk the talk.’

¹³⁹ The Greek word used is *apologeisthai* and is often translated as “defends.” While technically accurate, the notion of a Greek *apologia* is much more than merely a defense against something but the positive construction for a belief; thus, “build the case.”

¹⁴⁰ The NIV translates “acquainted,” yet the Greek word *gnostes* means “expert.” Whether Agrippa was an expert is open to debate, but Paul is schmoozing Agrippa by calling him one.

¹⁴¹ The translation of the Greek means “kick against the goads,” which was both a Roman and Jewish proverb. The Greek word

kenra means “sting” and refers to the end of a whip used to whip oxen. Sometimes the oxen would kick in response to being whipped, which created havoc for the farmer.

¹⁴² The Greek word used is *exairoumenos*, which can mean either “rescue” or “remove.” In choosing “remove,” I am playing with the notion that Saul/Paul’s allegiance, his clan affiliation, is being transferred from being Jewish or a Roman citizen to being a citizen of the kin-dom.

“My teaching the Jesus Story is why some of your subjects pounced upon me in the Temple courts and pummeled me. Yet The Sender has never left my side, which is why I can stand before you now—indeed, why I can speak to both great and small alike. And all that I say is nothing more, nothing less, and nothing else than what Moses and the truth-tellers taught: The Anointed would suffer and be the first to leave the grave, to be a beacon to his own people and a light to the Nations.”

Festus leapt to his feet, nearly shouting at Paul, “Enough! Paul, you are insane! Your great learning is driving you mad!”

Paul replied, “I am most rational and in my right mind, most honorable Festus. King Agrippa is familiar with what I speak. I speak openly to him, for these things to which I refer were done openly. None of it has escaped his notice. King Agrippa, do you believe the truth-tellers?”

Agrippa replied, “Paul, do you think you can convert me to become a follower of your Jesus in such a short time?”

“Short or long matters not to me,” replied Paul. “Except for these chains, I would have you and all who hear my voice become as I am and entrust themselves to Jesus. For this, I pray to The Sender.”

Agrippa had heard enough. The king rose to his feet and with him Governor Festus, Bernice, and all who sat with them. They left the room and immediately began saying to one another, “This man has done nothing to deserve death or imprisonment.”

Agrippa even said to Festus, “Had Paul not appealed to Caesar, he could be set free.”

Not everyone wants to listen.

Not all will entrust themselves to The Sender.

*Another’s response is my concern
but not in my control.¹⁴³*

What belongs to me, I will speak.

What belongs to The Sender, I will trust.

God, it’s me. In the midst of despair, you are hope. In times of trial, you sustain. When the Storm rises, your calm descends. O Sender, grant to me, like Paul, the serenity, courage, and wisdom to do what must be done and entrust to you everything else. Help me to see the part I play in the Jesus Story and then accept that the part you play is much more central to its grand narrative of healing, wholeness, and hope.

Acts 27:1-12

After a time, it was decided we would sail for Rome, watched over by the prestigious Augustan Regiment whose leader was a captain named Julius. Paul and other prisoners were placed under Julius’ watch. We boarded a ship in Adrymittium, whose journey hinted at majestic death and whose destination was the afterlife.¹⁴⁴ We set sail and Aristarchus, from Macedonia in northern Greece, was with us. The journey was hazardous, and we sailed up the coast toward Sidon in Lebanon. Julius, as a kindness to Paul, allowed him to visit friends, so they could provide for his needs. From Sidon, we sailed around the Mediterranean coastline to Cilicia and Pamphylia in southeastern Turkey. We continued across the Turkish coast, finally landing on the southwestern coast of Turkey, in the port of Myra. In Myra, we switched ships to one bound for Rome. We struggled to sail to Cnidus, the westernmost tip of Turkey, and made our way south to the southern coast of Crete for protection against the winds.

The journey had gone slowly, and the calendar already read October, for it was past the Day of Atonement. Paul warned the soldiers, saying, “Gentlemen, I can see our voyage is likely to fail, with the loss of the ship and cargo as well as life.” Julius, instead of listening to Paul, heeded the concerns of the ship’s owner and the captain, who both had a vested interest in seeing the ship sail quickly to Rome. Because the harbor they were in—Fair Havens, near the town of Lasea on the southern coast of Crete—was not suitable for winter, they chose to sail on. They hoped to reach the port of Phoenix on the western

Adramyttium in Greek means “majestic death” or “destination afterlife.” I suspect the author was merely noting the city. I have chosen to take it metaphorically even though I agree that the more literal translation is likely a more accurate paraphrase.

¹⁴³ I am referencing in this couplet the distinction between “circle of interest” versus “circle of control.” There are many more issues for which I am concerned than that I have the ability to influence.

¹⁴⁴ The Greek actually reads “from (or of) Adramyttium,” which is an actual city in southwestern Turkey. However, the name

tip of Crete. (Phoenix had two harbors, both facing west, which would protect the ship against the Nor'easters—fierce winds that blew from the northeast during winter.)

*I know the rest of the story:
the shipwreck,
boat lost,
goods destroyed.*

*Like a movie I have seen many times,
I want to shout at Julius, the captain, and the owner:
"Listen to Paul!"
"Don't sail on!"*

*I know that this ship is headed toward a
majestic death,
destined for the afterlife,
(even though this ship is not named Adramyttium¹⁴⁵).*

*I take comfort knowing this also:
the ship and property will be lost, but
the people will be safe (and saved).
This...is the rest of the story.*

God, it's me. I have no vested interest in a Roman vessel from 2,000 years ago. I write this five days after one of my presbytery's churches burned to the ground.¹⁴⁶ Some say, "It was just property." All loss is human loss. Yes, some losses are worse than others. Some lost things can be replaced, while others cannot. Still, all loss is loss. Yet there is more to say. It may seem contradictory, but it is not dissonant: I can feel "grielielief": be sad and happy at the same time.¹⁴⁷ So, I grieve with thanksgiving that no one's life was lost in

the shipwreck to come in the next two passages, nor in two church fires in Douglas, Arizona.¹⁴⁸

Acts 27:13–26

When a gentle wind from the south began to blow, the ship's owner and the captain saw an opportunity to set sail. They lifted the anchor and sailed along the shore of Crete. Before long, fierce winds swept down upon us from Crete, the ship to be battered by "wind walls."¹⁴⁹ Unable to point the ship directly into the wind, we were dragged toward the south. As we passed Cauda, an island¹⁵⁰ just south of Crete, we could not secure the lifeboat to the side of the ship and so brought it on deck and secured it. The ship continued to be dragged toward the coast of Libya and the north African coast. The sailors passed ropes under the ship to hold it together. They feared we would run aground on the sandbars off Syrtis. Finally, in a desperate attempt to prevent our being dragged to destruction, they lowered the anchor. Still, the winds battered and drove us along. Still, we were battered violently.

Desperate, the sailors threw cargo overboard the following day. The day after that, the sailors even enlisted us prisoners to help! We threw overboard the furniture and everything else not bolted down, even the ship's tackle. We saw neither sun nor stars for many days—our hope adrift¹⁵¹ with the storm, cast off by our own desperation.

Having gone without food for several days, Paul stood and gave the sailors an "I told you so" message, stating that they should have listened to him. But Paul also spoke courage and hope into their hearts: "I urge you to hold on to courage. No one will be lost, even as the ship is destroyed. Last night, a celestial messenger from the One whom we call The Sender came to me. The messenger said, 'Be not afraid, Paul, be not afraid. It is The Sender's grit and determination¹⁵² that you stand before Caesar, and

¹⁴⁵ c.f. Previous note.

¹⁴⁶ c.f. Arson of First Presbyterian Church and St. Stephen's Episcopal Church of Douglas, Arizona on May 22, 2023.

¹⁴⁷ My brother-in-law, Mike Martone, coined the phrase "grielielief" to describe this dual emotion: to grieve the loss of a loved one who has suffered much for many years.

¹⁴⁸ Regarding the fires that destroyed First Presbyterian Church and St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Douglas, Arizona, the fires were deemed arson, and the arsonist confessed his motive was to protest that the church pastors were "gay" and "a woman."

¹⁴⁹ The Greek words used in this sentence are *typhonikos*, meaning "typhoon," and *eurochlydon*, which is a compound word meaning "broad or wide" and "wall or wave."

¹⁵⁰ Modern Gavdos.

¹⁵¹ The Greek word used is *perieireto*, which the ESV translates as "abandoned." While this is an adequate translation, *perieireto* means "adrift" or "cast off." The author is using nautical terms to convey the sense of their storm-caused loss of hope.

¹⁵² The Greek word used is *dei*, which means "it is necessary" and conveys divine necessity.

They have generously gifted you the lives of all who sail with you.' Have courage! I trust The Sender will cause everything to happen as They have declared it shall be. We will run aground on an island, but all will happen as The Sender has proclaimed."

*Last week, 450 refugees drowned
in the general vicinity of Paul's storm.*

*Last week, five wealthy tourists drowned
in the vicinity of the Titanic wreckage.*

*I imagine the fear was similar:
trauma and terror
in howling wind or impenetrable silence.*

*Only one of these stories
captured the world's imagination.
Care to guess which one?*

*The Sender saw them both.
The Sender sees us all.*

God, it's me. I cannot imagine the fear Paul felt nor the fear that grips the hearts of all those who are lost at sea. O Sender, what I cannot imagine, you have witnessed countless times! I wonder: Why are only some rescued but not all? That Paul was a part of your "grit and determination," a part of your "divine necessity," I trust because I perceive your character as good and just and loving. I do trust, O Sender. Help me, therefore, when my trust falters, for sometimes the news of the day all seems so senseless.

Acts 27:27-44

Two harrowing weeks ensued, with all aboard in mortal danger as the ship was blown south and west. Then, in the dark of night, the sailors sensed something had changed: They were approaching land. The sailors dropped a weighted rope into the water to check the sea's depth: 120 feet. A short time later, they checked again: 90

feet deep. Fear invaded the sailors' hearts, as they imagined the ship being crushed against rocks. The sailors dropped four anchors from the back of the boat and prayed to their gods for dawn to rise.

The sailors conspired to flee the ship by pretending to want to lower the lifeboat to drop anchors from the front of the boat too, though this was a ruse to escape the ship. Paul, sensing the sailors' deception, said to Julius the captain, "If the sailors abandon our community, the soldiers will die with the prisoners. Either we all live together or each perish separately." The soldiers cut the ropes holding the lifeboat and let it drift away.

As dawn rose, Paul urged everyone to eat. "For two weeks, trauma has taken hold of your spirit, affecting your appetite and strength. I urge you to eat—nourish yourselves for the challenge to come. Trust me that what The Sender has told me will come to pass: Not one of you will be lost, not even a single hair on your head."

After Paul spoke this message regarding The Sender's word of hope, he took bread, gave thanks to the Sender, and broke the bread for all to see, as a symbol of their unity amidst the chaos and threat to their lives. Everyone ate; all were encouraged. Altogether, there were 276 souls on board the ship. When they had sated their hunger to the full, they shed the ship's final load by tossing the last of the grain into the sea.

Dawn rose. The sailors did not recognize the land but rejoiced in sighting a bay with a sandy beach. They decided to run the ship aground. The sailors cut loose the anchors (leaving them in the sea), untied the ropes that had bound the rudder, and hoisted the foresail: "Beach, here we come!"

Alas, in their delirium,¹⁵³ the sailors did not consider the sandbar and ran aground while still far from shore. The front of the ship stuck in the sand and the back of the ship was battered by waves. The ship began to splinter.

The soldiers, whose job was to keep the prisoners from escaping, planned to kill them; better to have dead prisoners than live fugitives. But Julius, wanting to spare Paul, forbade the soldiers from killing any of the prisoners. Julius ordered those who could swim to jump overboard and swim to land. Those who could not swim, Julius

¹⁵³ This phrase is not in the Greek text but added as interpretation for context. Seasoned sailors would have recognized a sandbar.

That they did not is a result of the trauma they experienced and/or their fatigue.

ordered to wait until the ship splintered and then grab a plank to float on. One way or another, everyone made it safely to shore, as the celestial messenger had promised.

*Fear
invades, infects,
cascading egoism affecting every cell.*

*Fear
divides, destroys
community necessary for life.*

*What price are we willing to pay
for the right to be afraid,
to clench hold of that which kills?*

*Hope pierces Fear's darkness.
Dawn emerges,
love and life found in the light.*

God, it's me. I imagine this passage as a movie: What harrowing scenes! What heroism! I confess that I never before imagined the penetrating fear the sailors, soldiers, and prisoners must have felt. I am not sure I have ever felt such sustained fear, yet I know those who have: my wife when I lay in a coma for days on end, parents watching over their child in an ICU, refugees running from gunfire. Fear is not my prevailing emotion, yet I see its destructive force. O Sender, may I be ever compassionate toward those upon whom Trauma has descended like a cloud or those for whom Fear is an intimate acquaintance. Like Paul,

may I be a beacon of hope and help others to cling to your light that gives life and leads us to love.

Acts 28:1-16

Safely on shore, we learned the island was called Malta. The Maltese hospitality hit the mark¹⁵⁴—kindness and welcome embraced in their treatment of us. They built a fire to keep us warm and provided food and drink to nurture us.

Paul gathered some branches to stoke the fire, and, as he placed the kindling on the fire, a snake driven from the fire by the heat attached itself to his hand. The Maltese gasped, saying to each other, “Oh, this man must be a vile criminal, perhaps even a murderer. He escaped the sea yet Justitia, the goddess of justice, has exacted her vengeance.” Paul merely shook the snake from his hand back into the fire and felt no side effects. The Maltese assumed Paul would get sick and die; they waited and waited. Seeing nothing bad befall Paul, they changed their opinions of him and proclaimed Paul a god.

A nearby estate belonged to Publius, Malta's governor, and he welcomed some¹⁵⁵ of us to his home, including Paul, Luke and Julius, the Roman captain. For three days, Publius extended his hospitality, according to the ancient custom of opening one's home to strangers, and the welcome was prodigal.¹⁵⁶

Publius' father was sick in bed, suffering from a fever and dysentery. Paul prayed for him, laying hands on the father,¹⁵⁷ and relieved his suffering. When the Maltese heard of Paul's *dunamis*, they brought others who were sick so that Paul could care¹⁵⁸ for them also. The Maltese were profoundly grateful and honored us in a variety of

¹⁵⁴ The Greek word used is *tychousen*, which literally means “hit the mark” or “hit the target” and is the opposite of *hamartian*, usually translated as “sin” but literally meaning “miss the mark.”

¹⁵⁵ The Greek does not indicate the number of those welcomed by Publius. Commentators agree it is unlikely that all 276 survivors were hosted by Publius.

¹⁵⁶ The Greek word used to describe Publius' welcome is *anadechomai*, which is a compound word of *dechomia*, meaning “welcome or hospitality,” and the amplifying prefix *ana*. Therefore, *anadechomai* is hospitality given to the full.

¹⁵⁷ The Greek text does not indicate where Paul lay his hands, whether generally upon the father's person or specifically where

the father was ill. I have resisted the temptation, O Gentle Reader, to incorporate a bit of interpretive mischief and so do not suggest a specific place for Paul's hands.

¹⁵⁸ The ESV translates *etherepueonto* (a derivation of *therapeuo*) as “cure.” However, the word, from which we get the English “therapy,” can mean “care,” “attend to,” or “treat.” I understand the impulse of wanting to proclaim a miracle of healing; however, the Greek text does not require a special healing and allows for the gift of one person caring for another as a legitimate paraphrase.

ways, including by furnishing us with supplies when it was time for us to depart.

After winter had passed, we put out to sea in an Alexandrian ship that had the figurehead of the twin gods Castor and Pollux, sons of Zeus and Leda. The Romans believed that Neptune had given Castor and Pollux power over the winds and waves to provide safe travel for sailors. We sailed first to Syracuse on the eastern tip of Sicily. Three days later, we sailed to Rhegium, a port on the “toe” of Italy’s boot. The day after, a wind came up from the south and we sailed to Puteoli, just north of Pompeii and about 90 miles south of Rome. In Puteoli, we found some of the beloved, who welcomed us and invited us to abide with them for a week before we traveled on to Rome.

Many of the beloved in Rome knew Paul from his many journeys and others from his letter to the gathering in Rome.¹⁵⁹ When the beloved heard Paul was coming, they went out to greet him, traveling as far south as the Forum of Appius, 43 miles south of Rome, and the well-known inn, called the Three Taverns, ten miles nearer to Rome. At the sight of the beloved, Paul gave thanks,¹⁶⁰ for they were an outward and visible sign of The Sender’s inward and tangible gift. When we arrived in Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself under house arrest, with a Roman soldier to guard him.

*When disaster strikes,
hearts open,
wallets, too.*

*Presbyterian Disaster Assistance is a
Public Display of Affection—
truest and most wholistic sense of PDA.*

*To welcome the stranger is sacred ground:
“Who welcomes you welcomes me,”¹⁶¹
said the One from whom we long to receive welcome.*

*As Abraham welcomed angels,¹⁶² and
Egypt welcomed La Sagrada Familia,¹⁶³ so
I choose to welcome “the other.”*

There are no walls around my welcome.

God, it’s me. Thank you for hospitality. To receive it is a blessing and to offer it even more so. Welcomed into families that were not my own and welcoming strangers who became friends has been a sacred path in my life, a path that invites an open heart and evokes humility. Thank you, O Sender, for the Maltese—who welcomed to their shores 276 bedraggled strangers, never once suspecting their actions would be honored by all generations. Thank you also for friends willing to journey with us and welcome us home even though we arrive in that place for the very first time.

Acts 28:17–31

Three days after arriving in Rome, Paul asked for the Jewish leaders to visit him. When they had gathered, Paul explained to them why he was under house arrest: “Beloved of Israel, my beloved, I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans even though I lived the holy habits and observed the sacred practices of our people. The Romans investigated my story and interrogated me, eventually finding I had done nothing deserving my death. Our brothers in Jerusalem objected to this, for their hearts were set against me. Therefore, I appealed my case to Caesar, which provided the protection offered by the Roman courts to me, a Roman citizen, though very much a Jew like all of you.

“I bring no accusation against my people and hold no malice in my heart toward my own beloved. I am in chains because of my great hope¹⁶⁴ for Israel, my yearning

¹⁵⁹ This sentence is not in the Greek text but added to provide context for this moment and the response of the beloved in this paragraph. c.f. Romans 16 for the extensive list of Paul’s friends within the Roman gathering.

¹⁶⁰ The phrase that follows this note is also not in the Greek text, but the word used is a variant of *encabristeo*, from which we get “Eucharist” and “thanksgiving.” In the context of the passage, the sight of the beloved functioned sacramentally for Paul, as hospitality and friendship often does.

¹⁶¹ c.f. Matthew 10:4.

¹⁶² c.f. Genesis 18:2–3.

¹⁶³ c.f. Matthew 2:13–15.

¹⁶⁴ The Greek text only references Paul’s hope but leaves it undefined. The rest of the sentence is an interpretive expansion that summarizes how Paul defined Israel’s hope and imagines this might have been the topic of conversation when Paul expounded on his views for an entire day (c.f. 28:23).

that our suffering and bondage come finally to an end, my trust that The Sender is even now freeing our people from oppression to sin and death and all the powers and principalities. My vision, which I have witnessed with my own eyes and ears, is that The Sender is even now fulfilling Their Promise to restore heaven and earth by bringing new creation through Jesus the Anointed. For this reason, I asked to speak with you.”

The leaders replied, “We haven’t heard anything about you from our people, neither good nor bad, neither by letter nor word of mouth. We have heard about this clique you are a part of. Some say it is a cult. Others argue it fulfills our customs. We will listen to your views and decide for ourselves what we think.” So, they scheduled a day when Paul could share with the leaders his views on how dancing the God-rhythms of the God-life was best done by following the Way of Jesus.

When the day came for Paul to share his views, a huge crowd gathered, for many were intrigued to hear about the Way. Paul taught from dawn to dusk, sharing his great learning of Torah and the truth-tellers, testifying to everything he knew about Jesus from what he had seen with his own eyes and heard with his own ears, weaving Word and Spirit into a divine tapestry, seeking to persuade hearts and convince minds, inviting all to entrust themselves to Jesus as the Anointed One who came from The Sender. Some who listened to Paul were convinced that he spoke the truth about the God-life. Others refused to accept that Jesus was The Sender’s Anointed One.

Robust debate erupted when Paul accused those who refused to accept Jesus of being the ones about whom the truth-teller Isaiah spoke:¹⁶⁵

Go to the people and say,

‘You hear but do not understand;
you see but do not perceive.

‘Hearts harden as ears close;
spirits wither as eyes shut.

‘To look and perceive is the path to wholeness;
to listen and intuit is the way of comprehension.’”

Paul concluded by saying, “And now the Way of becoming whole and complete, our true selves and The Sender’s new creation, has been sent to the Nations! They will hear and understand. They will see and perceive. They will dance the God-rhythms of the God-life.”

For two years Paul abided in that place—free though in prison, imprisoned but unhindered.¹⁶⁶ He welcomed all who visited and taught about the kin-dom and how to dance the God-rhythms. He proclaimed the Way of Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar.

Living amidst constraints.

Living to one’s final breath.

Living to the end for one’s end:

*to live as free regardless of the circumstance,
to live speaking one’s deepest convictions,
to live ever deeper into the Way of new creation.*

Some will applaud.

Some will jeer.

Only one opinion matters.

God, it’s me. My life seems tame compared to Paul’s life. My trust in your gift of love appears timid beside the apostle’s. I feel no shame in not measuring up, for it is not a contest. I do feel inspired though by Paul’s example. I sense an invitation to continue my journey—to walk ever deeper into your love, to immerse myself in your goodness, to reflect in my person the image of Jesus. You know, O Sender, I am not there yet (and may never get to such an exalted place). And I know, O Sender, you will be with me every step of my journey along the way that leads not to a place, but to Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar.

¹⁶⁵ c.f. Isaiah 6:9-10.

¹⁶⁶ We might think of Paul as the first “anchorite” or “ anchoress.” In later monastic tradition, an anchorite or anchoress would voluntarily live in a cell where they would pray and receive food

(and relieve themselves), as well as receive and pray for visitors who came to them for spiritual counsel. Julian of Norwich (1342–c. 1416) is one of the most famous anchoresses.

Appendix A: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 Bible Study

Format

1. *Choose a facilitator.* The person who leads can be the same person each week or rotate among participants. The facilitator's job is not to teach but to create a safe space for everyone to share their perceptions and understanding of the material without being interrupted, talked over, or argued into silence. For all activities, participants may share or pass.

1. *Round 1—NOTICE*

Write¹⁶⁷ and then share five (5) "I notice..." statements about the passages' textual or literary content (e.g., "The word joy is repeated," "The speaker is Moses," "The younger son went to a distant country"). Focus only on the text's content but not meaning or ethics (e.g. Not, "I think this means," or, "What I hear God saying is..."). There will be an opportunity to focus on meaning and action in later steps.

Focus = DATA and DETAILS

2. *Round 2—WONDER*

Write and then share four (4) "I wonder about..." statements or questions. Questions can focus on textual content, theological meaning, or ethical expression (e.g. "I wonder about how this passage relates to Psalm 119?" "I wonder why David was so angry?")

Focus = INQUISITIVENESS

3. *Round 3—THINK*

Write and then share three (3) "I think..." statements about what this passage means. These three statements are the cognitive and intellectual expressions of your engaging Scripture (e.g. "This passage expresses God's mercy," or, "God hates injustice").

Focus = CLARITY AND COHERENCE

4. *Round 4—VALUE*

Write and then share two (2) "I value..." statements that describe the two values to which you are being called by the passage (e.g. "I am called to express humility," or, "God wants me to value corporate unity"). There may be many values implicit in the passage, but only write the two values to which you are most strongly being called today.

Focus = CORE CONVICTIONS

5. *Round 5—COMMIT*

Write and then share one (1) "I commit..." statement that says one action to which you will commit as a response to this passage (e.g. "I will give you my full attention when you speak," or, "I will honor the sabbath this week by...").

Focus = ACTION

6. Close by praying for each other!

¹⁶⁷ Writing can be done either before or during the study.

Appendix B: 3P Bible Study

Format

1. *Choose a facilitator.* The person who leads can be the same person each week or rotate among participants. The facilitator's job is not to teach but to create a safe space for everyone to share their perceptions and understanding of the material without being interrupted, talked over, or argued into silence. For all activities, participants may share or pass.

2. *Round 1—PARAPHRASE*

Have each participant choose one passage of Scripture from the assigned text that stood out for them. It may have stood out because it inspired them or challenged them. It may have stood out because it caused them to wonder or answered a question. Invite each participant to share the passage that, for them, stood out and speak to why they chose the passage they did.

(Alternate I) The facilitator chooses one to three verses or short sections of a passage for the group to discuss. For each verse or section, invite participants to respond with what they notice, appreciate or wonder about. Invite participants to respond also to the core comfort, conviction, or challenge they hear in the verse or section.

(Alternate II) The facilitator chooses one to three verses or short sections from an English Bible. Invite participants to write their own paraphrase. If they choose to do so, participants may share their paraphrase with the group.

3. *Round 2—POETRY*

Have each participant choose one passage of poetry from the assigned text that stood out for them. How did the poem speak to them? What insights into Scripture or life did the poem invite? Invite each participant to share the poem that, for them, spoke to them.

(Alternate I) The facilitator chooses one or two poems for the group to discuss. How does the poem tell the Scripture "slant"? What insights or wonder does it invite? What questions or challenge does it provoke?

(Alternate II) Facilitator chooses one or two verses or short sections from Rhythms. Invite participants to write a poem based on the verse or section. If they choose to do so, participants may share what they write with the group.

4. *Round 3—PRAYER*

Have each participant choose one prayer from the assigned text that stood out for them. What in the prayer spoke? Did the prayer evoke "amen" or "may it never be," or some other kind of response? Invite each participant to share the prayer that, for them, stood out and why they chose the prayer they did.

(Alternate I) The facilitator chooses one or two prayers for the group to discuss. How does the prayer reflect the Scripture? How does it flow from Scripture to life? What insights or wonder does it invite? What questions or challenge does it provoke?

(Alternate II) The facilitator chooses one or two verses or short sections from Rhythms. Invite participants to write a prayer based on the verse or section. If they choose to do so, participants may share what they write with the group.

5. *Round 4—3P FREE-FOR-ALL*

Invite participants to share something they have written from the assigned text. It may be their own paraphrase, a poem, or prayer. Invite each participant to share something they have written.

6. Close by praying for each other!

Appendix C: Writing Exercises

Poetry Writing Exercises

1. (A) Choose a passage of Scripture. (B) Choose a word or phrase from the passage. This word or phrase will be the focus of your attention and the expression of your poem. (C) Write a Haiku that focuses on the word or phrase.

Five syllables

Seven syllables

Five syllables

The Haiku may express wonder, insight, challenge, inquiry, lament, rejoicing or whatever the Spirit leads!

Write!

2. (A) Choose a passage of Scripture. (B) Choose a word or phrase from the passage. This word or phrase will be the focus of your attention and the expression of your poem. (C) Write a Cinquain that focuses on the word or phrase.

One word

Two words

Three words

Four words

One word

The Cinquain may express wonder, insight, challenge, inquiry, lament, rejoicing or whatever the Spirit leads!

Write!

3. (A) Choose a passage of Scripture. (B) Choose a word or phrase from the passage. This word or phrase will be the focus of your attention and the expression of your poem. (C) Write a free verse poem that focuses on the word or phrase. The poem need not rhyme but it may. The poem can have one stanza or several. The point is not to explicate or summarize the word or phrase but to engage the Word. The poem may express wonder, insight, challenge, inquiry, lament, rejoicing or whatever the Spirit leads!

Write!

Prayer Writing Exercise

1. (A) Choose a passage of Scripture. (B) Choose a word or phrase from the passage. This word or phrase will be the focus of your attention and the expression of your prayer. (C) Write a prayer that uses one of the literary themes listed below:

ACTS Prayer	/	Colloquial Alternative (different order from ACTS)
Adoration		Please!
Confession		Thank you!
Thanksgiving		Oops!
Supplication		Wow!

(D) Additional challenge: using the same passage, choose one of the other literary themes above and write another prayer. It's okay to write four prayers that each have a different literary focus!

Write!

Write!

Write!

Paraphrase Exercises

Matthew 5:21-22 (NIV): “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder,⁶¹ and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister⁶¹ will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’⁶¹ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Matthew 5:21-22 (TIP): “From age to age it has been taught, ‘Murder someone and you will be judged.’ But I take it further: even anger is a kind of murder; to degrade another a form of killing. To call your beloved a ‘Fool!’ is to invite the fires of purification, for surely you are missing the grace of offering life to one another. Life shared in friendship is among the greatest gifts we can give.”

Your Paraphrase:

Mark 8:31-32 (NIV): He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

Mark 8:31-32 (TIP): Then Jesus begins to teach them what it means to say he is the Anointed One. “It means suffering,” he tells them. “The Son of Humanity must suffer—he will be rejected by the Elite, the Intense and the Scrupulous. And, working together with the Collaborators, he will be killed. But after three days rise again.” Jesus says this plainly. He doesn’t stutter.

Your Paraphrase:

Luke 1:1-4 (NIV): Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled¹ among us, ²just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. ³With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

Luke 1:1-4 (TIP): The Story has been told many times in many ways: of divine love alive among us, walking beside us, living, breathing, being. This is the Story told by those who were there, of the things they saw with their eyes, things they heard, touched, felt, experienced. These trustworthy eyewitnesses are servants of the Word. This is the Story to which I have disciplined followers my life, O Friend of The Compassion. I share this Story with you so that you too may know it, so that you too may know Them: The Compassion who loved, the Man who lived, whose light shined upon us.

Your Paraphrase:

John 1:1-3 (NIV): In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was with God in the beginning. ³Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

John 1:1-3 (TIP): In the beginning was the Verb, and the Verb was with The I WILL BE, and the Verb was The I WILL BE. The Verb was in the beginning and the source of creation—the WHOOSH! that ignited the cosmos, the generative energy that unleashed everything: every atom and every quark and even the dark matter in between. Neither what is, nor what has ever been, nor what will someday be came about by accident but through divine intention and purpose: spoken into being by the Verb.

Your Paraphrase:

Acts 10:12-14 (NIV): It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. ¹³Then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.” ¹⁴“Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.”

Acts 10:12-14 (TIP): The blanket was covered with every variety of beast from earth and sky, those considered clean and unclean, those deemed pure and impure. A voice spoke: “Take and eat, Peter. All of it is sacred.” Peter rebelled against the voice, “Never! My lips have never been soiled by such vile impurity.”

Your Paraphrase:

Appendix D: Reading Plan for Rhythms of the God Life - Acts

Acts

Week 1:	Introduction and Acts 1-2
Week 2:	Acts 3-4
Week 3:	Acts 5-8
Week 4:	Acts 9-12
Week 5:	Acts 13-15:35
Week 6:	Acts 15:36-18:22
Week 7:	Acts 18:23-21:16
Week 8:	Acts 22:17-23:25
Week 9:	Acts 24-26
Week 10:	Acts 27-28

About Rhythms of the God-Life

“...an interpretive paraphrase rooted in the Greek text that gives wings to God’s Word through paraphrase, poetry, and prayer. By providing cultural insights to help the reader understand the Word’s meaning, *Rhythms* seeks to capture the beat and harmony of the original text yet also convey wisdom, ethics, and hope for today.”

“...a comprehensive study of biblical scripture, and a confronting, immersive read...with an ability to fascinate even the less experienced reader on the subject through an accessible authorial voice and an in-depth analysis of the language....[The author’s] choices of focus allow deeper analysis on the history of the text, and creates a layered approach that can be used in a contemporary setting. It is a compelling and well researched read, showing the author’s deep knowledge and understanding. The assured writing style, attention to detail, and clarity of the research set out in the work make this work one that will intrigue and fascinate.”

A Poem on Acts 15 — The Council of Jerusalem

*Rich in tradition, my people:
Christians, Presbyterians, Americans.*

*Luring me, challenging me, guiding me toward
adventure I accept begrudgingly, with trepidation.*

*Finding my dad’s words coming from my mouth:
Wisdom passing unconsciously to the next generation.*

*What is this new world becoming:
a kin-dom in which valleys are made level?*

*And then my Millennial children create
new pronouns that invite equity and inclusion.*

*Can mountains of privilege truly be made low,
dividing walls of hostility be torn down?*

*“I am a good person,” I tell them.
They chuckle and roll their eyes.*

About the Author

The Rev. Dr. Brad Munroe is Pastor to the Presbytery for the Presbytery of Grand Canyon and the Presbytery de Cristo. He earned his Doctor of Ministry from San Francisco Theological Seminary, receiving the Outstanding Contribution to Ministry award for his dissertation in which he coined the phrase “blended worship.” He is also the author of *Waging Peace: Developing Interpersonal Skills for Conflict Transformation* and numerous devotional works and curriculum that can be downloaded at www.BradMunroe.org.

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“IN THE BEGINNING
WAS THE VERB...”