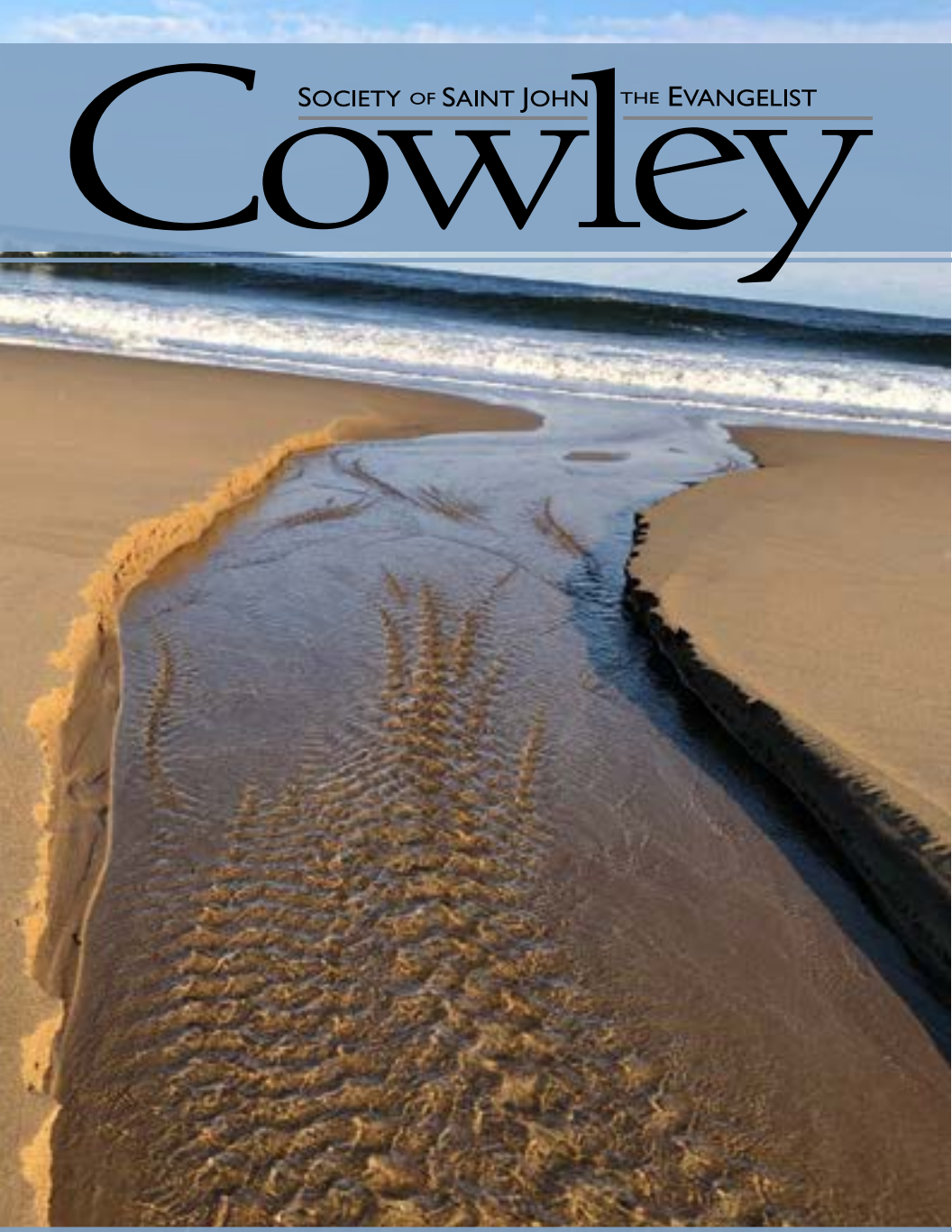
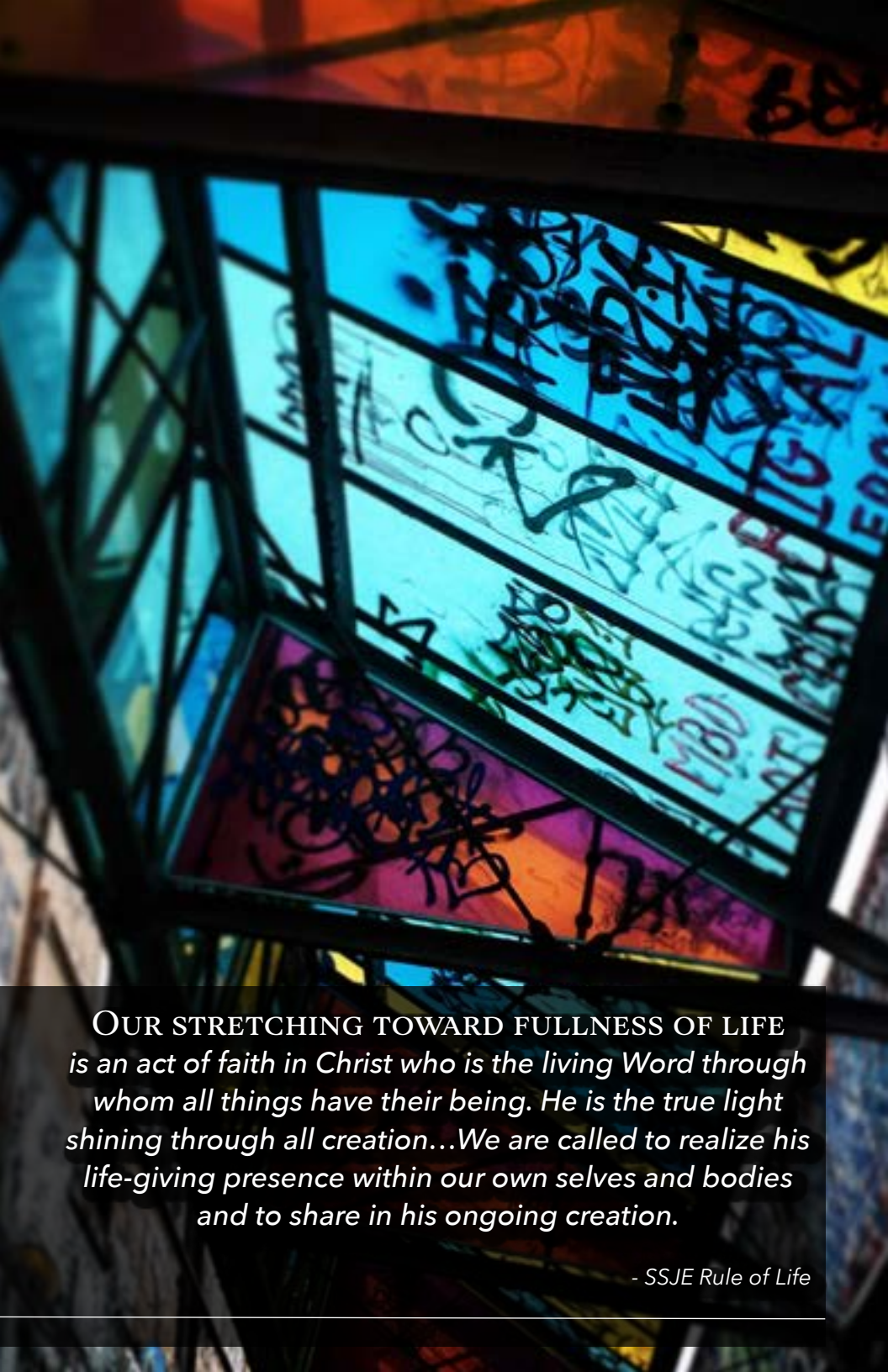
Society of Saint John the Evangelist
Cowley



Challenge

*How does God **engage** with us?*



Our stretching toward fullness of life *is an act of faith in Christ who is the living Word through whom all things have their being. He is the true light shining through all creation…We are called to realize his life-giving presence within our own selves and bodies and to share in his ongoing creation.*

- SSJE Rule of Life

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SSJE.org/cowley

about us

Traditional vows in a non-traditional setting: Rooted in the ancient monastic traditions of prayer and community life, we are committed to standing in the full flow of the modern world, inviting all people to stop, to be still, to reflect, and to receive the love of God. **Read more: SSJE.org/whoweare**

cover

Photograph of Plum Island, near Emery House, by Luke Ditewig, SSJE (November 29, 2021). *"I love to walk along rivers and oceans all year long. I pray with cold, heat, and the seasons in between as water flowing, pouring, or freezing alters my perspective and path. God keeps inviting me out and through to engage."*

My dear friends,

These past months have been ones of particular challenge for all of us, as we have learned to manage, and now live with, the COVID pandemic. This is especially true for us in the Community. In January, eleven of us either tested positive or manifested symptoms of the virus over the course of several days. It seems that, multiple times a day, decisions were made and remade as first one, and then another Brother, went into isolation.

Out of the background of that particular challenge comes this issue of *Cowley*, in which Brothers reflect on personal and global challenges. Whether the challenges are *personal*, such as dealing with sickness, stuttering, or discerning God's voice, or *global*, such as the climate emergency, it is my experience that challenges bring with them invitations.

As Brothers became sick, the invitation was to allow others to look after us. Even as one of three Brothers who did *not* become sick, I discovered in this crisis the grace and companionship of God. The face of God was revealed to me in members of the Sunday congregation who provided medical advice and support; or who brought us meals. So too did I find the hundreds of emails assuring us of your prayers to be a source of strength and comfort. In those exhausting and challenging days, I discovered an invitation to allow the face of Jesus to be revealed to me in the form of all of you, who support and love us. Knowing you were supporting us with your prayers and concern during those days caused me to shed tears of relief.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, the challenges we have faced as a Community over the last two years, I have also become aware of our resilience. Since January we have received Lain Wilson as a postulant, clothed Br. Michael Hardgrove as a novice, and received the initial profession of Br. Todd Blackham. We have also developed a new and exciting partnership with Try Tank (www.trytank.org) and provided prerecorded sermons during Advent and Lent to small congregations with an average Sunday attendance of fewer than twenty-nine people, across the United States, Canada, and throughout the Anglican Communion. These sermons have

A Letter from the Superior

been used on Sunday mornings, as small-group discussion starters, as aids for personal devotion, or as meditations for midweek services of Compline. Three years ago, when this project was first suggested, my response was "over my dead body." Today I cannot imagine saying no to such a creative request – one that challenged our understanding of embodied, incarnate ministry and invited us to discover new and resilient forms of ministry which addressed immediate needs in the Church.

Over a century ago, Father Benson invited us to be men of the moment. In one of his most profound teachings, he says that readiness "makes the religious to be specially a man – not simply of the day, but a man of the moment, a man precisely up to the mark of the times. This makes the religious – so far from being the traditional imitator of bygone times – most especially a man of the present moment and its life. His duties entirely throw him into the interests of the present moment. Eternity is in that moment, and all the energies which are given to eternity are given through that moment. The religious therefore reviews calmly, dispassionately, dutifully all the phenomena of the age in which he lives. He does not review them as things to deplore, but as things to rejoice in, and as things to be acted upon…"

These have indeed been challenging times for *all* of us, but when we review those challenges calmly, dispassionately, dutifully, as Father Benson suggests, we may discover that God's invitation lies within. We may find the challenges not something to deplore, but to rejoice in and act upon. We may in fact discover eternity in that moment of challenge.

Please know how much we value your friendship. May we all know the grace of eternity as we rejoice in, and act upon, the challenges of our lives.

Faithfully in Christ,

James SSJE

James Koester, SSJE
Superior

A decade ago, my family experienced a cataclysmic event, which forever delineated a "before" and "after" in both our individual lives and in our life as a family. In a few words, a family friend betrayed us and betrayed our trust, causing a cascade of hurt which shattered our family to the core. As if we were living out a reverse fairy tale, our once happy family plunged into darkness. Facing this brokenness, I have felt despair, hopelessness, and fear. But with God's help, I am journeying toward hope and love.

As I try to piece together the broken pieces, reading the Psalms and writing poetry offer help. The Psalms, for example, invite me to make sense of "the valley of the shadow of death." Likewise, writing poetry helps me to engage with the challenge of finding purpose and joy in a fallen world.

In writing poetry, my intention is not to write about betrayal or its aftermath. I tried that once, but in the words of a friend, the poems were "beautiful, but too terrible to read." Instead, I want to take the brokenness of my life and stitch it back to reunite it with the light.

Brokenness teaches me that God is in all and works through all to bring healing and hope. Jesus' scars do not prevent suffering but infuse suffering with compassion. Jesus' scars reveal that Jesus is not primarily a philosopher or teacher but that he is human, like us. Even when the meaning of our suffering eludes us, we can offer it back to God.

In my work as a teacher, my scars help me to connect with my students. My students will face many challenges in the years ahead. Even as first graders, many have experienced the suffering that often accompanies poverty. McKinley County, New Mexico, where I live, borders the Navajo Nation, which was devastated by the pandemic. Despite the wounds of the pandemic, parents, grandparents, and guardians entrust me with their children's education. It is my fervent prayer that my students will return their family's love while acquiring the skills they need to live their lives to the full. Here, at the intersection of pain and hope, we find the place from which we all, like flowers, can turn toward the light.

My husband and I recently moved the dial on our "before" and "after" back to the year of our wedding. In doing so, we see the betrayal that shattered our family as a temporary, albeit very real, setback. In our journey toward Love, our sacrament of marriage mirrors the marriage of heaven and earth, the great longing of our soul for its eternal home in Christ. In that spirit, I share my poetry.

A Letter from the Fellowship

Taste and See

Turn your sorrow
into something beautiful.
Accept your loss
and multiply what's left.
Take a lesson from the gardener:
Examine the broken branch
and graft onto it
a living branch.
Then wait for the strange,
new fruit.

All My Life

All my life I wanted to tend roses
But the wind ahead of the storm
sent their petals flailing.

All my life I wanted to create light
But the wind on the heels of the
sunset extinguished it.

All my life I wanted to create beauty
But ugliness raised its fist as
stealthily as the undertow
And crushed everything my hand
had touched.

All my life I wanted to share beauty
with you
But now all I have left to give you is
All my life.

If Not

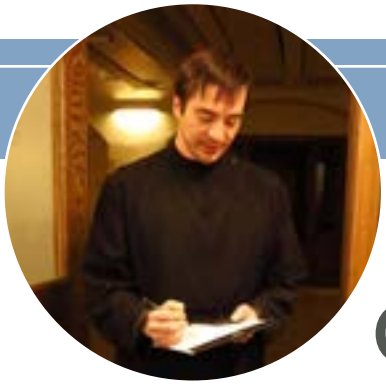
What is prayer if not
the tree in winter
before the budding,
the frozen river
before the crack of the thaw,
the egg in the incubator,
the child – nose pressed against
the window – waiting…
the still red coal awaiting
the poker's stir,
the icicle longing
to melt and flow into the river,
the monk in his cell.

What is prayer if not
the horizon
before the rosy finger of dawn,
the still cold air on the banks of
the Rio Grande
before the winging snow geese
lift off,
that heaviness of breath
before the monsoon,
the hunger in the belly,
the dissonant chord –
unresolved,
oh, the ache of it all,
the water not yet wine.

Tammy Iralu *teaches first grade at Hózhó Academy in Gallup, New Mexico, and writes poetry for her blog:* **www.terimuso.com.**

you are beautiful
CROSS WITH CAUTION
FLASHING
DO NOT START
CONTINUE IF IN CROSSWALK
STEADY
DO NOT CROSS

"But I am slow of speech and slow of tongue"



Jack Crowley, SSJE

engaging with God in CHALLENGE

Most people who meet me today do not realize that I stutter. The truth is that I have stuttered since I was a child and have worked every day of my life to speak as fluently as I do today. God has been engaging with me in my stutter in every syllable I speak, fluently or not. This is just as true now as an adult as it was when I was a child.

My journey with stuttering started in kindergarten when I began getting the feeling that whenever I spoke, words were getting stuck in my throat. I later learned that in the world of stuttering, this is called a block, when you are trying to speak but no sounds or air come out of you. It is an uncomfortable and anxiety-provoking feeling, and I remember being horrified of it as a child.

This was around the same time of my life that I began to pray. Growing up in an Irish Catholic family in a Boston suburb, I was exposed to prayer at a young age. When we would go to Mass on Sundays, I would always pray about my stutter. I would listen to the priest giving his sermon and be amazed that someone could speak so slowly, deliberately, and fluently in front of a church full of people. I used to pray that God would let me speak like that.

Stuttering in front of the class was always the worst. There was no avoiding it, no matter how hard I tried. I was starting to get really nervous on

a daily basis about being called on or someone new trying to talk to me. I used to hide in the school bathroom and take deep breaths. I'd try to pray to calm down. Sometimes I would stand in front of the bathroom mirror, talking to myself with my hands on my throat, trying to feel where the words were getting stuck and praying to God to help me.

I remember once in third grade, I was in math class and we were going around the room saying answers to a worksheet of addition and subtraction problems. I was sitting in the middle of the room and I counted the number of students who would give their answers before me. I figured out what number I was going to have to say. I still remember to this day that the number was eleven. I knew I had about a minute before it was going to be my turn and I must have practiced saying the number eleven in my head a hundred times.

Finally it got to me. I remember the dead silence as I blocked and it felt like the whole room turned around to look at me. I could not get a single sound out. I felt hot like I had a fever, and my body was tensing up in a way I had never felt before. The teacher put her paper down and looked at me. I stood up and walked to her and showed her my answer. "Eleven," she said with such ease. I turned around and sat back down. Some students were laughing, but mostly they all looked at me with confusion, wondering what was wrong with me.

Not long after that, I started to keep a cross in my pocket. In between classes at school, I used to walk in the hallway with one hand in my pocket, gripping my cross. I would pray over and over again for God to help me get through the day. My cross would leave little indentations in my palm from squeezing it so hard. On days when my anxiety was worse, the indentations would be deeper.

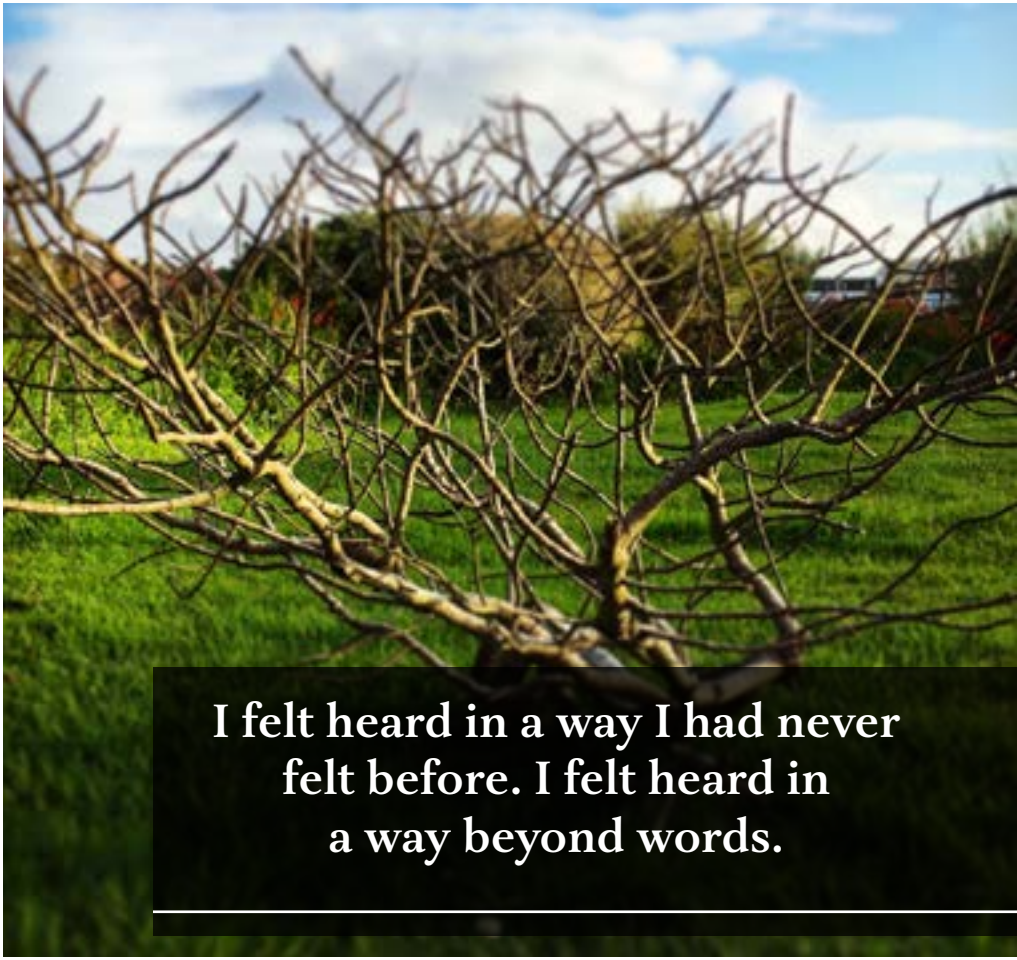
During the school year, I would often go to speech therapy. My speech therapists did their best to try to calm me down and let the words ooze out of my throat instead being forced out. My favorite therapist used to tell me to imagine my throat as a block of ice, and my job was to melt the ice enough so that the words could just glide out of me. At night before I went to sleep, I used to imagine God swirling around my throat melting the hard block of ice that was in there. I would take deep breaths, trying to inhale God's presence. There were many nights I fell asleep doing that.

During the summer when I did not have speech therapy, I used to read the Bible out loud. I have always had an attraction to the Bible since I was a child. I felt safer and more relaxed just holding it in my hand. I used to open to a random page and just start reading out loud from there. Sometimes I would pretend I was reading to Jesus. I would imagine Jesus as a grown man sitting in front of me, looking at me and listening intently.

One particularly hot summer night, I opened up to Exodus. My

neighborhood street was so quiet. Yet even though I was sitting alone on my deck, I felt like I was not by myself. I started to read out loud and got into a good rhythm. I imagined myself reading to Jesus seated before me, the Holy Spirit saturated in the humid air all around me, and God in the starry night sky above me. I could feel my lungs sucking in the hot air and my body moving with the words as my vocal chords got looser and looser.

Eventually that night, I got to the part of Exodus when Moses says to the Lord, "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." I had to stop reading, as I started crying. I remember the tears welling up in my eyes then rolling down my cheeks. I felt called by God in that moment, I did not know what for or why, but I felt called. I also felt heard. I felt heard in a way I had never felt before. I felt heard in a way beyond words.



This is the path to God.

I have followed that call my entire life. Now here I am, thirty-three years old and an initially-professed monk at SSJE. It may sound crazy to say that I am grateful to God for my stutter, but it is true. Looking back at my life, I can see how God has engaged with me through the challenges I faced. I would not have the relationship I have with God if it were not for that challenge.

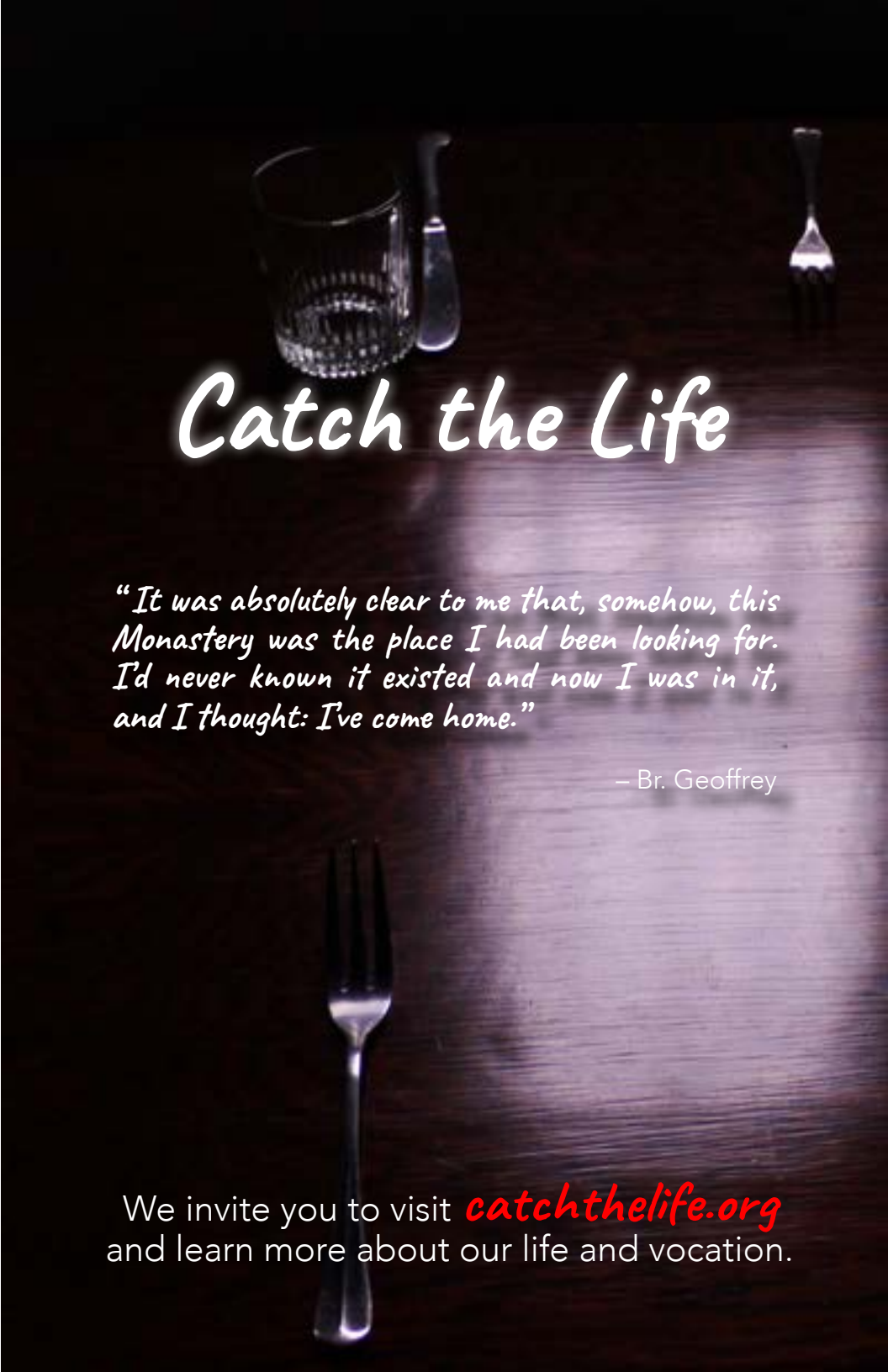
There have certainly been times in my journey with stuttering when I have felt abandoned by God. I have felt hopeless and overwhelmed. Everyone goes through these fights in their engagement with God. These fights are not a sign of failure, they are opportunities to fully engage with God.

Fully engaging with God means going all in. You are either engaged or you are not; there is no in-between. Times of trial make this clear. It is no secret that everyone struggles with something. We are all fighting battles in our head. One thing I have learned in my journey with stuttering is that it is essential to invite and fully engage with God in these battles. It is dangerous to fight alone.

Try fully engaging with God in a conversation about what you are struggling with right now. Go someplace you feel comfortable speaking both out loud and in your head to God. Tell God everything you are thinking and feeling, good and bad. Be as thorough as you can be; God is not going anywhere.

Make sure to express your anger and frustration with God too. Just like any other relationship, anger is going to happen when you engage with God, but it is what you do with that anger that matters. Consider what would happen in a relationship if you never fully expressed how you felt. You would never be totally engaged in that relationship. Our relationship with God is no different.

Do not look back on your life wishing you had engaged with God more. You have the opportunity to prevent that from happening right now. Embrace your struggles, fully engage them with God, and pour everything you've got into living through them. This is the path to God.


Catch the Life
"It was absolutely clear to me that, somehow, this Monastery was the place I had been looking for. I'd never known it existed and now I was in it, and I thought: I've come home."
– Br. Geoffrey
We invite you to visit catchthelife.org
and learn more about our life and vocation.

Sufficient Grace

praying with the calling of sickness

An invitation to see sickness as a call from God.

Sean Glenn, SSJE

"Even sickness can be transfigured and become the means by which we experience personally the reality of the Lord's assurance, 'My grace is sufficient for you.'"

"We should trust that the offering of sickness and weakness contributes powerfully to our total life in Christ."

– "The Challenges of Sickness," *SSJE Rule of Life*

A Peculiar Call

Sickness is, to use the language of our Rule of Life, a mark of the "fragility of human life," a fragility that "makes sickness inevitable." Unless we have been lucky, we have all run into the shadow of sickness over the course of our lives:

> For some of us, sickness only asks us its hard questions on those rare occasions when we come down with a cold or flu.
>
> For some of us, sickness only occupies our thoughts because we know or love someone who is sick.
>
> Some of us may have grown up chronically sick, in and out of hospitals or regularly out from school.
>
> Some of us may not remember a time when we were not sick, or when sickness didn't make so many demands of our conscious energies.
>
> Some of us may have had an otherwise stable experience of health for years, only to now greet sickness as a life-long, incurable companion.

Whether we find ourselves bearing the marks of sickness or not, historically or now in this moment, our culture routinely teaches us certain ways of viewing sickness and health – some of which can cause even more distress than illness itself. Consider how you have reacted to your own times of sickness. Think about how the world around you often responds to the reality of sickness. These reactions reveal our fundamental assumptions about health and sickness.

They also reveal the way the world generally makes moral pronouncements or value judgments about *people* who experience illness or health, judgments which can limit the ways we understand how we relate to God. Indeed, they can limit the ways we experience the fullness of God's reality. Scripture witnesses to this tendency. Consider this passage from the apocryphal book of Sirach (also called "Ecclesiasticus"):

> Health and fitness are better than any gold,
> and a robust body than countless riches.
>
> There is no wealth better than health of body,
> and no gladness above joy of heart.
>
> Death is better than a life of misery,
> and eternal sleep than chronic sickness. (Sirach 30:15-17)

For the author of Sirach, health is very clearly valued as a kind of wealth, while sickness, by contrast, implies a kind of poverty. Unfortunately, these assumptions about health and illness – whether intentional or not – can often work to reinforce the idea that health is somehow a sign of God's favor; illness, therefore, a sign of God's rejection or anger.

Scripture also attests this. In its iconic meditation on human suffering, the book of Job presents this viewpoint rather starkly. Three characters insist that God does not cause wicked things to happen to innocent people, while Job objects, maintaining that he has done nothing to warrant the "punishment" he now endures, of which sickness is but one part. Job's friend, Eliphaz, speaks a paradigmatic admonition:

> "You are doing away with the fear of God,
> and hindering meditation before God.
>
> For your iniquity teaches your mouth,
> and you choose the tongue of the crafty.
>
> Your own mouth condemns you." (Job 15:4-6a)

To Eliphaz's cultural and religious formation, Job must be guilty of some sin. Otherwise, he reasons, Job would not be experiencing the suffering into which he has been plunged.

But God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ tells us this black-and-white way of conceiving health and sickness is too simple. Our experiences of the pain, weakness, or deferred desire that arise from sickness can often challenge some of our deepest moral certainties, rupture the fabric of our faith, or set our own sense of justice and righteousness ablaze at what God has permitted.

Sickness need not come to us with the moralizing baggage of figures like Eliphaz. Indeed, sickness may even come as a form of rescue for

some, or a source of deep inner healing for others. For others still, it can even breathe a renewed intimacy with God into a stagnant life of prayer.

It may be difficult to imagine the idea that sickness could be a call from a *God of love*. At the very beginning of this exploration, it is important to acknowledge that the concept of "redemptive suffering" can easily be corrupted to cruel, abusive, even demonic ends. And still, my own experience of chronic illness tells me that an "either/or" approach to this topic simply will not hold the kind of water – existential, theological, psychological, experiential – for which we come to the well of faith. Life just isn't that cut and dried.

If we hold these phenomena in trust of God's absolute and irrevocable love for us, I believe the Spirit can invite us away from the cruder, crueler readings of sickness as "affliction," "punishment," or an indication of God's "withdrawal" and "disdain." It is worth opening ourselves to an unexpected possibility. Could it be the fact that, in the end, God permits the suffering of sickness to mark our creaturely lives not a sign of any ill-favor or rejection; but rather as a sign – as are all things – of God's great mercy and charity? Consider how you have reacted to your own times of sickness. Has your walk with sickness ever come with a sense of providence – dare I say, even "call"?

A Call to Pray What Is

The deep and distressing challenges that sickness can bring on should not be underestimated. My goal is not to paper over our experiences of sickness and pain with platitudes. These experiences are real. Rather, with faithful trust in God, my hope is to encourage you to let the reality of these experiences be truly felt, named, and known, and to consider how God might be calling to you through the very challenges you experience.

The things we might have to give up, the mobility we may have to live without, and the companionship of pain we may have to reconcile ourselves to, all of these *can* cause crises of meaning, crises of faith. It is worth remembering that most crises *can* also bring with them the seeds of a fresh intimacy with God. A crisis of faith does not have to be the enemy of faith; rather, it can serve as a prelude to deeper awareness of God's loving action in our lives and in the lives of others.

This takes some work on our part, to be sure; a kind of work that has the potential to draw us out of hiding. God wants to hear from us — but not as groveling servants. God would have us engage with our Creator as we are, not as we think *we ought to be*. As we make this journey of self-disclosure and awareness, we might have to be willing to let God see some things in our reaction to sickness that we would rather God not see. This is what the character Job does in the book bearing his name.

While Job endures many incredible sufferings (the sudden loss of his children, his wife, his land, and his slaves), his *good health* is among the kinds of wealth lost to him. Radically impoverished in every way, Job comes quite close to cursing God. Despairing of his own life, he speaks a litany of remorse and dejection. It is a hymn of uncreation. "God damn the day I was born and the night that forced me from the womb."[1]

Have you ever felt this cry in your heart when particularly struck by pain or weakness? I know I have. Often. Yet just as often, I've brushed it over with a little fake piety and tainted humility. It can end up

1 This evocative translation of Job 3:3 comes to us from Stephen Mitchell, *The Book of Job* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1979) 13.

Consider how God might be calling to you through the very challenges you experience.

sounding quite nice, respectable, and churchy. But my covering-over of the actual roughness of my lived experience fails me in two ways: first, by denying my poverty, and second, by keeping God's love at arm's length. By refusing to deny the suffering with which his condition has burdened him, Job leaves nothing hidden as he gives up his predicament to God.

When we are moved to pray with the calling of sickness, *all of our experience* should be offered to God – not simply our stoic resolve and self-assurances of confidence and faith (when we have those moments), but our dark and awful doubts, dreads, all the agonies of unknowing prompted by pain and weakness. Even our anger at God for permitting such calamity can be offered as the stuff of our prayer.

We are not to hide any of this from God. God can handle it – in fact, *only God* can handle it. Only God can handle these parts of ourselves in any kind of salutary way. When sickness of whatever sort thrusts us down into a place of alienation, we do well to remember the faithfulness of Jesus, who in his humanity prayed in Gethsemane that this cup of suffering would pass. The humanity that cried out from the cross, in the depths of a pain he could not pass over, "*eli, eli, lama sabachtani?*" "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1).

With some courage, we can join Job and Jesus in trusting God enough to pray the true condition of our hearts *as they are in this moment*. If we find such courage lacking, then we shall neither despair nor hide our fear. For, if that is the true condition of our heart, that is what we share with God. Pray as you can, not as you can't. "For," in the words of Carl P. Daw, Jr.'s paraphrase of Psalm 84, "[God] shall bless all those who live the words they pray."[2] We can live the words we pray when we begin to pray with words true to our living.

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2 Carl P. Daw, Jr., para. Psalm 84, from *The Hymnal 1982*, #517.

Jesus, Salvator Mundi

Adjacent to the bombed-out ruins of Coventry Cathedral's fourteenth-century footprint stands the twentieth-century Cathedral, consecrated in 1969. The previous building met its end during the Second World War, as the Nazi war machine littered England with bombs. As a part of Bishop Walter Hussey's aim to renew the arts in the Church of England, the new nave features exquisitely colored abstract stained-glass windows. Yet as one enters the new Cathedral, this glorious sea of color is not immediately apparent. Indeed, if one simply stands at the west, facing the high altar, but advances no further, there is almost no indication that the building has any stained glass in the nave at all.

We have to move our perspective in order to detect this particular beauty. If we make the journey to the high altar and turn around, only then does the building seem to fall into place – for this beatific vision in glass is only visible from the east end, looking west. I think this same principle is at work in the process of healing that the church calls "salvation."

About Jesus Christ, we say he comes to bring God's salvation, for the church names him our Savior.

Salvation, savior, save: these words all derive their meaning from a Latin root: *salve*, or, to heal.

This semantic lineage is not limited to the word *salvation*. "Healing" carries a similar lineage, coming as it does from the Old English *haelen*, to restore to sound health. *Haelen* is related to a German word, *heilen*,

which means to make whole or to heal. It is where the Germans get their word for what Jesus is: *Heiland* – or, savior, healer, the one who makes us whole. That the church uses this kind of language is significant. For before anything else, we confess a Lord who is *Savior*. When we say Christ has come to save us, we are (whether we realize it or not) principally saying that he has come to salve or heal us; to make the fractured human whole.

Why is this important? How is this more than a simple diversion into semantics? I believe that it is of great significance, particularly if we pray with the reality of sickness or chronic illness in our lives. *Most especially* if we find our life or vocation marked by incurable sickness. I used to think salvation principally meant *rescue from something*. It was a concept that only existed in the negative. As my own life became marked by the vocational texture of incurable disease, I found that this negative rescue did little to help me through the personal and social aspects of such textures. Personal, because there was no amount of prayer I could undertake that would cure me of my autoimmune condition. Social, because I could not bear the ways society interpreted my life in light of that condition. If God was not going to "intervene" and "cure" me, then why had I let Jesus into my life at all?

Salvation cannot merely mean, in the end, a kind of rescue or protection *from* pain or suffering. Yet, salvation as a more positive concept – that is, an enabling *for* something – came to me as a way of deepening my intimacy with God as rescue never could. This meant reorienting my understanding of healing altogether. The healing my Creator seeks in me is less about my body and its poverty, and more about my soul and its response to such poverty – a response that must be open to the outpouring of God's love even in (or *especially* in) the midst of what might feel unbearable or deadly.

In order to receive such healing rightly, I need to shift my perspective about some of the very basic terms of life. "He will transform the body of our humiliation," writes St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians, "that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself" (Philippians 3:21 NRSV). To have a share of Christ's glory – of the salutary renewal of life, of resurrection itself – I had to come to see my humble body (in all its poverty) as the very seed from which God would accomplish his healing in me. In the end, I believe our bodily wealth (our good health or strength) will not be what conforms us to the body of Christ's glory. Rather, it will be all the ways our bodies seem to fail us. In Christ, all those things I label in my embodiment as liabilities – scandals even – are now the sites where God will perfect his power – a power made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9 NRSV). But first, I had to change my perspective. I had to turn. I had to turn and look at the Risen Lord Jesus, who says to each of us, "if you have seen me, you have seen the Father."

I had seen him all right. I had seen him *reigning from a Cross*.

The Poverty of Jesus: Salve of Our Souls

God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ discloses a Love that simply asks us to call upon divinity with, as the psalmist puts it, "the sacrifice of thanksgiving."

> Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving,
> and make good your vows to the Most High.
>
> Call upon me in the day of trouble,
> I will deliver you, and you shall honor me. (Psalm 50:14, 15)

It is almost as if the act of delivering us from our troubles ends up being what ultimately honors God. Here is a God who delights in showing mercy and pity. The Creator said, first through the pen of the prophet Hosea, and then again on the lips of the Incarnate Son, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (Hosea 6:6; Matthew 9:13). Yet what are we to make of it when our prayers for healing go, it seems, unanswered? What could it mean that God would deny us such an understandable request? Why withhold the gift of sound health, if not to demonstrate divine disfavor?

Having turned from our habitual perspective, it is possible to move from experiencing our suffering as a sign of God's dissatisfaction or our failure. God shows us in Jesus Christ his Son the truest reality of our experiences of sickness and illness as beloved children made in his image. Here more than ever, Jesus must become the key to understanding who God is and how God uses God's power. This power confounds so many of the ways we collectively understand power. This is what St. Paul learned through his own journey of suffering with Jesus. "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me" (2 Corinthians 12:9 NRSV).

In Jesus Christ, God elects to reveal himself concretely in the poverty of human life. Jesus sought out the sick and chronically ill, refusing to reject or erase their bodies, their experiences, or their inheritance as God's beloved children. In this, Jesus discloses the priorities at stake in the heart of God. We should not be surprised if these priorities contradict conventional wisdom or confound our capacity to reason. They have confounded many of the saints.

Our lives bear the marks of this particular suffering because, if we turn and change our perspective, these marks promise a closeness and intimacy with our Creator and our Redeemer which we could have never imagined if we had gone on seeing illness as yet another obstacle to wholeness. "We must be careful to think of man's salvation," writes Fr. Benson, "as being not an act of mere pity on God's part, but as *being for the manifestation of God's glory*."

When God self-emptied to dwell among us, God necessarily filled the

The healing my Creator seeks in me is less about my body and more about my soul.

poverty of our humanity with the dignity of God's divinity. In showing our creaturely poverty to be the object of God's love and self-identification, God hallowed for redemption the ill health that occupies all of human life. Not just the kind of sickness that shows itself in the bodies of individual creatures, but the very poverty and weakness of humanity in total. Through this poverty, God becomes our intimate friend and lover.

The poverty that God took on in becoming human, God recognized and refigured in those humans among whom he lived as Jesus Christ. Before Jesus heals a blind man in chapter 9 of John's gospel, his disciples ask him about the source of the man's blindness. "As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'" (John 9:1-2). But Jesus resists a pattern of thought that would vilify the ill or blame their condition on a particular sin or moral failure. The blind man about whom they make presumptuous speculation is not in fact blind because somebody sinned.

Jesus breaks open the content of such creaturely poverty by insisting something else – something that might bring each of us hope if we begin to offer these experiences to God in a serious way. "Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him'" (John 9:3-4). Theologian Martin Smith identifies a similar counter-cultural direction in the teaching of our Society's founder, Richard Meux Benson:

> The Fall then consisted in yielding to the persuasion of Satan "to seize upon these higher gifts at once" by man's own initiative and strength, rebelling against the necessity of receiving them as the progressive gift of God.[3]

Fr. Benson's insight means that we have to step back from our experience of suffering and sickness. We, like our first parents, will likely

3 Martin L. Smith, "The Theological Vision of Richard Meux Benson," in *Benson of Cowley*, 35.

not understand how to bear it if we limit our interpretation to our own strengths or desires. God will heal us, we might infer from Fr. Benson, but we need to realize it *as a gift*. Our own initiative refuses to receive this gift – and that is why we are so often tempted to pity or judge ourselves or others who walk with the companion of chronic or incurable sickness. Even St. Paul affirms this shift in our relationship to the suffering we endure. "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own" (Philippians 3:10-14) .

The poverty of Jesus upends and inverts everything we think we know about what it is to be alive, what it is to be human – or what it means to be close to God. "We cannot know what salvation means except in so far as we know what it is to be thus one with Christ," writes Fr. Benson. This oneness with Christ can only be sought as a gift, and it is a gift that I believe has the power to transform and transfigure the suffering of our lives. "There will always be many who love Christ's heavenly kingdom," writes Thomas à Kempis, "but few who will bear his cross. Jesus has many who desire consolation, but few who care for adversity. He finds many to share his table, but few who will join him in fasting. Many eager to be happy with him; few wish to suffer anything for him. Many will follow him as far as the breaking of bread, but few will remain to drink from his passion. Many are awed by his miracles, few accept the shame of his cross."

There is an unexpected invitation in our sufferings. This invitation is to know ourselves as participants in Christ's life and love; to know in the midst of pain that God has not withdrawn from us, but has perhaps instead come closer than we could ever imagine. My own life with chronic illness is frequently illuminated by the brightness of this invitation. For its light banishes the cultural voices that would plunge me into darkness, lifting me instead to a place where Jesus invites me to the supreme honor of being like him in his suffering, a place where I discern an intimacy with him so tender that it scandalizes my sense of self-reliance. It is within this tender intimacy with him – this oneness with Christ – that we begin to consider how we are called to consecrate even sickness and pain to our total life in Christ.

"Interference"

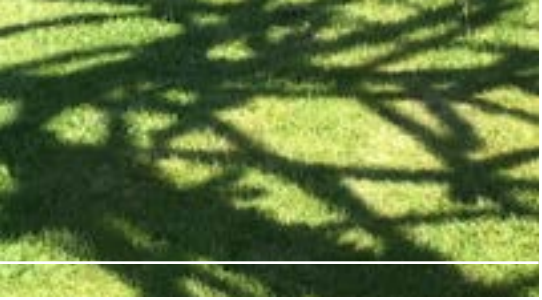
watercolor (2022) - **Luke Ditewig, SSJE**

In January of 2021, Luke Day was named as the new strength coach for the University of South Carolina football team. At a press conference which introduced Coach Day to the wider public, he was asked about the inspiration for his mantra "Struggle Well!" Coach Day remarked that the mantra came from some personal "big-time life setbacks." Both his charisma and brutal honesty had me hanging off his words as he went on to aver the inevitability of struggle in life. Certainly, my own experience of struggle has been arduous, life-long, and at times traumatic.

As Coach Day began to speak, his words sounded like wisdom from the monastery 'playbook.' He explained that we live in a culture that looks for the fastest, easiest, and most convenient way to solve problems, striving for the least effort possible. We tend to de-value the experience and process of struggle because if we're honest, struggle isn't always fun. Yet it is in such struggle that we build the stamina to obtain our goals. Struggle in a sense makes the goal valuable. Coming from a strength coach, this message about the value of struggle makes sense. But I also see many similarities to my life in this Monastery. I am reminded of the story where a man asks a monk, "What do you do inside the monastery all day?" The monk replied, "We fall down, and we get up. We fall down, and we get up!" In many ways, the monastic life and the wider Christian life require a sober engagement with struggle.

Struggle is a place where God readily engages us. Scripture is filled with examples of God in our midst, encouraging, sharpening, and yes, even challenging us. One of the most explicit examples of this comes from the Old Testament in Jacob's encounter with a divine being (Genesis 32:22-31). While Jacob is traveling, he encounters a man who engages him in a struggle. The two spend the long hours of the night wrestling, and eventually Jacob overpowers the man. Before conceding defeat the man dislocates Jacob's thigh and exclaims, "Let me go, for day is breaking."

But Jacob perceives something about this man. Aware that this is no ordinary encounter, Jacob asks his holy opponent for a blessing. The man declares that he will no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, "for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." The name Israel means "a man seeing God." The story continues: "And there he blessed him. So, Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.' The sun



a letter from the Editor

Jim Woodrum, SSJE

rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip." The struggle has been a place of divine encounter.

Our founder, Richard Meux Benson, reminds us of the divine purpose of struggle: "The soul that listens to the voice of God finds God calling it to actions which seem to be impossible. It would be of no use for God to call unless the actions were impossible. God calls us on to something more than we are." While our struggles are never simple (or they wouldn't be true *struggles*), God is in the midst of them, with the desire to bless us by giving provision, encouragement, and even rest – taking on all that which is too much for us to bear. While none of us gets out of this life alive, we are given the hope of glory in which our labor and struggle in this life will be transfigured. As we struggle, we shall become more and more the person God created us to be. Like Jacob, we will sometimes bear the scars of our struggle – certainly I do – but we also will limp away a new person, one who has seen God in the fray.

The past two years have been a time of great struggle for all of us, not only individually, but corporately. A global pandemic which has claimed the lives of millions, the brutal scourge of racism and the senseless death of our Black brothers and sisters, the climate crisis, the war in Ukraine, and many more tragedies accompany the unseen and unfathomable difficulties that many of us bear in our personal lives. Sometimes it is hard to see how we will come out of all this struggle. Surely, the struggle will test our resolve.

Yet, it is my prayer that in these struggles, God will give blessing and provision – making us stronger, more resilient, and transfiguring our discouragement and complacency, to make us more like Jesus. In his struggle, Jesus bore his cross and gave himself as a sacrifice for a hurting world. Through his resurrection and ascension, he paved the way for us all to transcend *through* the struggle, discovering on the other side (wounds and all) the Life that awaits.

I give the final word to the inspiring Coach Day: "Struggle in life is inevitable, and engaging in struggle is essential to making life experience great. So, struggle well!"

God is speaking in our hearts, engaging us in the many decisions we make as we move through the world; we have only to tune our ear to recognize that voice.

between good and evil

David Vryhof, SSJE

the practice of Spiritual Discernment

In this issue of *Cowley* we are asking the question, *How does God engage with us*? Throughout the scriptures, the metaphor of a shepherd and his sheep is used to describe the relationship of love and care God desires to have with us. The psalmist describes this relationship with these familiar words: "The Lord is my shepherd; he makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters" (Psalm 23:1,2). As a shepherd would, God engages with us as our protector and provider, our companion and guide.

The Gospel of John applies this same image to the relationship between Jesus and his followers. Jesus identifies himself as "the good shepherd" who "calls his own sheep by name and leads them out" (John 10:3). "The sheep follow him because they know his voice. They do not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers" (John 10:4,5).

The metaphor implies that we who follow Jesus are like "sheep." He calls each of us by name, and we learn to recognize and trust his voice, and to follow where it leads us. It further implies that there are other voices – the voices of strangers, thieves or bandits, or hired hands – which we should *not* trust. So it seems that in our own response to God's engagement, we must learn to distinguish between these diverse voices, so that we may be guided aright.

Monastic tradition has always practiced and taught this skill of "spiritual discernment," the art of distinguishing the voice of God (or of "good spirits") which leads us to that which is good and life-giving, from the voice of the enemy (or of "evil spirits") which tries to deceive us and lead us away from God to evil and destruction. If the language of "good spirits" and "evil spirits" seems foreign to you, imagine a person with an angel perched on one shoulder and the devil perched on the other. That image is universally understood because we all experience thoughts that lead us toward what is good, and thoughts that lead us toward what is evil. Spiritual discernment is about distinguishing between them. The spiritual skill of discernment enables us not only to resist the lure of those voices that would distract and distance us from God, but also to perceive directly God's engagement with us in the circumstances of our lives as we navigate the many decisions that crop up along our way.

Discernment in the Desert

Teachings on the practice of discernment come to us from the very origins of the monastic tradition. The early desert fathers and mothers left their homes and deliberately went into the desert to find silence and solitude. They freed themselves of the obligations of family and work to seek God above all else. But the ancients also considered the desert to be the dwelling place of demons, and so part of their intention in going there was to fight the forces of evil 'on their own turf.'

The fight against temptation was part and parcel of their lives. Battling their inner demons forced the monks to root themselves in God's love and grace, and to put their whole trust in God's strength. They recognized that the raging conflict in their

> The raging conflict between good and evil, light and darkness, love and hatred, trust and fear, could not be escaped, but had to be faced head-on.

hearts between good and evil, light and darkness, love and hatred, trust and fear, could not be escaped, but had to be faced head-on. Engaging in this struggle was the way to encounter the truth about themselves and thereby draw closer to God.

Abba Antony (251-356 CE) said: "Whoever has not experienced temptation cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven." He even added, "Without temptations no one can be saved."[1]

Experience taught them to discern between the voice of God (and "good spirits") and the voice of the enemy (or "evil spirits"). Evagrius of Ponticus (c.345-399) compiled detailed descriptions of the types of temptations that plague us, identifying nine "passions" which, if not handled with moderation, could be areas of temptation for us: gluttony (the misuse of food and drink), lust (the misuse of our sexuality), greed (the misuse of money and possessions), sadness (a self-pity that arises when our wishes are not fulfilled), anger (an active response to not getting what we want), acedia (boredom, a hatred of what is, an inability to enjoy the present moment), vain glory (the thirst for recognition and approval), envy (the continuous comparison of oneself with others), and pride (exalting ourselves, seeing ourselves as special in comparison with others).[2]

Evagrius encourages us to constantly examine our *thoughts* and *feelings*, observing carefully whether they lead us to good or to evil, to life or to death. We are to reject those thoughts that are destructive (for example, an obsession with someone who has hurt us) and to embrace the

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1 *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection.* Translated by Benedicta Ward, SLG. (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975) 4.

2 Gruen, Anselm, OSB. *Heaven Begins With You: Wisdom from the Desert Fathers.* (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1999) 60-75.

thoughts that lead to life and freedom. Jesus said, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have *life*, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). God's voice is the voice that is calling us to that which is good and life-giving.

Ignatian Discernment

Perhaps the most well-known teacher on discernment in our tradition is the sixteenth-century Spanish saint, Ignatius of Loyola. He offers further helpful advice on distinguishing between "good" and "evil spirits." He encourages us to notice feelings of *consolation* and *desolation* that result from the circumstances of our lives, and from our thoughts and feelings in response to them. "Spiritual Consolation," he says, is characterized by inner movements "through which the soul becomes inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord."[3] They lead to an increase of "hope, faith, and charity, and all interior joy that calls and attracts to heavenly things and to the salvation of one's soul, quieting it and giving it peace in its Creator and Lord." We recognize by these inner movements that our lives are aligned with God, and we experience the peace and love and joy which God intends for us.

In contrast, "Spiritual Desolation" is characterized by "darkness of soul, disturbance in it, movement to low and earthly things, disquiet from various agitations and temptations… (it is to be) without hope, without love, finding oneself totally slothful, tepid, sad, and as if separated from one's Creator and Lord" [250]. When we experience such desolation, we realize we are in conflict with God's intentions for us and may have lost our way.

All of us, including the greatest of saints, pass through times of consolation and desolation. At times we feel God's presence so clearly and powerfully. Our hearts are moved by God's words of love and hope, and we find ourselves filled with peace and joy. At other times, God may seem absent from us. Our prayer may seem barren and dry, and we may wonder why God feels so far from us. We may be tested in these times, tempted to abandon our faith or to turn away from God. But even in these times of desolation, God is present to us and at work within us, and if we continue to put our trust in God's goodness and love, we can find ourselves strengthened by these times of trial.

I met once with a young mother who found herself in a time of desolation. Prayer had become routine and unfulfilling, and God seemed to be absent from her daily experience. In the course of our meeting, she related to me something that was going on in her home. Her young daughter was having difficulty going to sleep on her own. Each night she

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3 Fleming, David L., S.J. *Draw Me Into Your Friendship: The Spiritual Exercises, a Literal Translation and A Contemporary Reading*; (St Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Studies, 1996) [248].

insisted that one of her parents stay with her until she had fallen asleep. She protested vehemently, sometimes with tears, if they tried to leave her side. Despite the parents' assurances that they were nearby and that she was safe, she could not abide their absence. It then dawned on the young mother that the child's reluctance to be separated from her parents was not unlike her reluctance to be separated from the felt sense of God's presence. She saw that loving God even when she was *feeling* distant from God was a necessary step toward spiritual maturity, as necessary as the step her daughter needed to take in trusting her parents enough to risk being alone in the night.

If we continue to put our trust in God's goodness and love, we can find ourselves strengthened by times of trial.

Consolation is the gift of God; it is not generated by our efforts. Desolation comes from the evil one, but even still, God may use the periods of desolation we sometimes experience to encourage us to deepen our trust in God, to strengthen us and to shore up our faith. The best response in desolation, therefore, is to be patient (not immediately changing course or giving up on our original resolve to do good). In these times, we can deepen our trust through acts of faith and devotion, resolving to see it through, knowing that all the saints have encountered similar times of difficulty and testing [252, 254].

All true consolation comes from God, but the tradition also teaches that the evil one may give us a sense of *false* consolation: when something seems good and right to us on the surface, but further examination reveals that it originates in evil or leads to evil. False consolations are like wolves in sheep's clothing and can easily lead us astray unless we are vigilant. To give an example: a priest once told me that he had fallen deeply in love. He was filled with "consolation" that, after so many years, he had finally met his "soulmate." He was incredibly happy. But as we spoke further about it, he revealed that the object of his affection was

a member of his own congregation, and that she was already married. The consolation he was *feeling* ("how could it be wrong when it feels so right!") was a *false* consolation; the enemy had disguised himself in sheep's clothing. The path this priest was being led down was a path to destruction, rather than a path to life.

Recognizing the movements of good spirits and evil spirits in our inner selves – and distinguishing between the consolation that comes from God and the desolation that characterizes separation from God – are skills to be developed over time and with experience.

The Tactics of the "Enemy"

Ignatius gives us further practical advice by teaching us to recognize the ways in which the enemy or the "evil one" is likely to tempt us. He suggests these three ways:

- **The enemy is like a bully or a coward,** depending on how we respond to his suggestions ([256], *language changed to be more inclusive*). The evil one will implant dangerous thoughts in our minds, Ignatius says; and if we listen to those suggestions and take them to heart, they will lead to evil and to greater separation from God. In this way, the enemy is like a bully: when we give in to his suggestions, he is emboldened and continues to torment us. But if we reject those thoughts, he becomes like a coward and quickly runs away.

  Imagine, for example, the voice of the enemy whispering these words to you: "You are not as good as others are (or not as smart or as beautiful or as successful or as popular…)." If we listen to this suggestion and believe it, it gradually distorts our identity and eats away at our self-esteem. But if we challenge and confront the thought (responding, for example, by saying, "My worth as a person does not depend on my intellect, my looks, or my accomplishments. I am a beloved child of God, just as I am, and I bear the image of God"), we will find the temptation is withdrawn, and the enemy flees.

- **The enemy is like a seducer** [257]. When someone sets out to seduce another, he or she suggests some illicit behavior, but insists on *secrecy*. (For example, a person might tempt a married co-worker by saying, "We can meet privately for a drink after work; no one needs to know.") Seduction depends on secrecy; we do not want our words and actions to come into the light. Similarly, the enemy makes his suggestions in the context of secrecy ("You can do this [evil thing]. You won't hurt anyone. No one needs to know.") When a temptation is cloaked in secrecy and we fear others finding out, we can be sure we have fallen prey to the suggestions of the evil one.

- **The enemy is like a military commander** [258]. A military commander studies the defenses of his opponent, searching for the

weakest point, which he will then try to attack and exploit. Similarly the evil one knows which temptations we are particularly susceptible to, and will attack us in those very places. (For instance, I may not be tempted by alcohol or drugs, but I may have a weakness for gambling or pornography.) The enemy studies us and knows us, so we need to be especially prepared to combat him in those areas that we recognize as our weakest. We can do this by avoiding certain people, places, or activities that we know are dangerous for us, and by shoring up our inner resources so that we can respond firmly when temptations are whispered in our ears.

Just as we learn to recognize the enemy's voice, it is also incumbent that we learn to recognize the voice of the Shepherd, so that we may follow where he leads. All of this requires careful attentiveness and determined vigilance.

God is speaking in our hearts, engaging us in the many decisions we make as we move through the world; we have only to tune our ear to recognize that voice. Many of us need help learning to hear the voice of God or to recognize the temptations of the enemy. Reading the scriptures and opening our hearts in prayer can be two ways that we learn to recognize God's voice. A spiritual friend or a more experienced Christian may also be able to help us test the voices we've heard, to distinguish between them, and to see where they are leading us. To be sure, we need the wisdom and protection the Good Shepherd offers us. Trust him to show you the way.

spotlight on

Br. Todd's Profession

On March 12, 2022, the community was delighted to celebrate the Profession in Initial Vows of our Brother Todd Blackham. As Br. James noted in his sermon, Todd surely has experienced one of the stranger novitiates in the Community's history:

Your novitiate Todd, will, I think, go down as one of the longest in the history of the Society. Sure, Father Arthur Hall spent eight years as a novice, but I am pretty sure yours was longer. At least it felt that way. Father Edwyn Gardner was a novice for fifteen years. But I think yours was longer. At least it felt that way. Brother William Buckingham spent twenty-three years as a novice, but yours was definitely longer than that! At least it felt that way.

When you arrived in September 2019, no one foresaw what the future held in terms of pandemic, lockdown, and the closing of the Guesthouse and Chapel. We had never heard of COVID-19, worn masks (except perhaps at Hallowe'en), or imagined that millions of people around the world, including people we knew and loved, would become sick, and die in a matter of months. No one dreamed that in the matter of just a couple of days, eleven of us would test positive for the virus, and I would spend several sleepless nights wondering if this in fact was the way the Society would end. None of us, least of all the Luddite that I am, could have fathomed that cameras or livestreaming would become a welcome fact of life here in the Chapel.

No, none of that was foreseen, imagined, dreamt, or fathomed. But except for a few glorious weeks this summer when we were able to reopen the Chapel, all of that has been a fact of life for us, and especially for you, and it has shaped and marked your time as a novice. No wonder then your novitiate has lasted an eternity! Brother William and Father Gardner or Father Hall have nothing on you!

But through all of that Todd, you have stuck it out. There were many days when I wondered if you could (or I admit, even should), but you did, and here we are.

…

In coming here, you have found that place where you can share not only in the sufferings of Christ, and become like him in his death, but know him in the power of his resurrection.

In coming here, you have found a place to be steadfast, and to endure, so that you may abide, until it is finished.

Br. Todd's perseverance through the pandemic, to arrive at this milestone, is an inspiration and joy to us all. Please join with us in praying for Br. Todd and the continued unfolding of his vocation.

Worship with us

Online

SSJE.org/chapel

In-Person

The Chapel is now open!

Tu – Sat | 6AM-9PM
Sun | 6:30AM-4:45PM

SSJE

“exchanges unseen (in the space between)”

colored pencil (2017) - **Keith Nelson, SSJE**

Keith Nelson, SSJE

God-with-us in the midst of
Climate Grief

Last year I sat in a webinar on climate emergency organized by Episcopal clergy and lay leaders in our diocese. I listened to Dr. Bette Hecox-Lea, an Episcopalian and marine biologist, speak words of unvarnished truth about how biosphere degradation has activated tipping points that, if left on course, will result in a massive extinction event. On behalf of the scientific community, she said plainly, "We do not know what will come after these points have tipped permanently, other than that the earth will become uninhabitable." I wept tears of shocked but sober recognition as I absorbed this information. I had heard it before, but this time, I truly listened.

A few months earlier I had brought my weight of grief and hope for the world to the silent winter woods at Emery House. I had left screens and books and words and even food behind me for a time. I found a lone hemlock tree and dug a clearing in the snow beneath it until I could see and touch the body of the earth. I nestled my weary body against the cold, dark soil and gazed up at the green branches sheltering me. I prayed as though my life and all life depended upon it. Time seemed to stop as I lay there, and as the drops of snow-melt mingled with my tears of gratitude, something happened. My flesh knew the earth from which it had come, and to which it would return; my bones knew that death would be only a door into the Creator's heart; and my heart knew that while I am alive I am bound by Christ to love him in and through this Creation, from which we are not separate.

In very different voices, a marine biologist and a hemlock tree spoke to me the truth in love – and helped me lay claim to a grief like no other.

Our Pain for the Earth is Pain for Us All

Grief is a natural human response to losing what we love. What we grieve most often helps us to see what we have loved most. At times, this can help us sift our ultimate priorities. For instance, the material loss of a stolen family heirloom, or an entire home destroyed by a natural disaster, is a tragedy. But we know intuitively that the grief we feel at material loss, however great, is of different order than the grief when a spouse, a child, or a sibling dies. We grieve over lost things in a way that is different than how we grieve over a death.

In contrast to these highly legible experiences, we may also undergo what is called "disenfranchised" grief. When what we grieve is honored as worthy by those around us, our capacity to move through it is strengthened. But some kinds of grief are not commonly understood or accepted. We may be embarrassed, for instance, to speak of how devastated we are by the loss of a beloved pet, an animal friend with whom we shared years of loving companionship. Women I know routinely describe how alienated and alone they have felt in the solitary grief of a miscarriage. The grief of touch starvation, as ubiquitous as it has become during these years of COVID, can feel trivial when we speak it aloud – but it can envelop us in long, pained hours of loneliness.

Grief in response to the disastrous loss, death, and change caused by climate emergency has, for too long, been disenfranchised grief in a culture that prizes business as usual.

But this is changing. More and more people – many of them college-aged and younger – experience genuine existential despair about the effect that human-caused climate change will have upon their futures, and is already having upon their present. This is not because they are naïve or ill-equipped for life's harsh realities; rather, it is because they want and deserve the life that generations have taken for granted. The struggles of Black, brown, and indigenous peoples, whose neighborhoods and ancestral lands have been consistently treated as "sacrifice zones" to the

If we bravely consent to let the grief in just a little, there are a thousand reasons to wonder, "Where is God in this?"

interests of colonization, then nation-building, then energy infrastructure and corporate expansion, are claiming the attention and allies they have long deserved. There is a collective awakening to the bare reality of climate emergency – not simply that it is real, but that in many ways it is worse than we have been led to believe. The emotional response to such awakening is diverse, but its pain has been evoked in names like pre-traumatic stress, climate anxiety, or climate and ecological grief.

Hannah Malcolm, one of the foremost emerging voices on climate grief and Christian faith, notes three aspects that make ecological grief distinctive. First, she reminds us that it has its own integrity apart from comparison with better known forms of grief. Our relationship with the whole of the created order is unlike any other relationship. Second, she notes that when honored through the lens of faith and in dialogue with reason, it has enormous power for moral good – our own, and that of the world. We are not merely grieving our known human neighbors, but extending our felt sense of mourning to humans thousands of miles away. We are even expanding our definition of "neighbor" to the more-than-human forms of sentient life to whom we are connected, perhaps even to earth's non-sentient beings. Thirdly, this grief is distinctive because we are mourning processes and systems of harm in which we ourselves are contributors, simply by living in an industrialized society. In this, we mourn the profound injustice we ourselves have perpetrated, however indirectly.

Accepting ecological grief in its fullness is helping many of us open our eyes, minds, bodies, and hearts to the truth that "pain for the earth" is in reality *pain for us all*. All of us call this created order our home, and all are threatened by the undeniable consequences of human-caused global warming. Letting ourselves hear this *and rest for long enough in the weight of its truth* is the first step to another way forward.

There are a thousand reasons to say: "I'm not up for that. I can barely keep my little corner of the world functioning. This grief isn't my responsibility." At the opposite end of the spectrum, there are a thousand reasons to pole-vault over it, into impassioned activism or environmental advocacy, only to discover that the underlying grief has been compounded by burn-out. If we bravely consent to let the grief in *just a little*, there are a thousand reasons to wonder, "Where is God in this?"

It may help to recall a moment when God was undoubtedly present to us – and in response, we felt a holy discomfort. If we understand God to be the source, or the instigator, of certain kinds of grief, our perspective shifts. What if the awakening of our conscience to profound new layers of the world's pain is a sign – not of God's absence, but of the Spirit of God excavating strata of our personhood and our collective attention that we are now called to engage? And what if the path of grief thus sensed could become a sober and conscious choice – claimed and lived, come what may, as the cost of our full becoming? What if, in the words of Bill McKibben, this is the moment the church was made for?

A Man of Sorrows, and Acquainted with Grief

Having made a personal beginning at living it through, I believe that climate and ecological grief is one way that God engages with us, reaching out and through to the heart of our present moment. In that grief, God stands not over or outside us in the ways we have done for too long with non-human life, but alongside us. As Malcolm reminds us, the God-among-us in Jesus is "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3).

It is important to acknowledge privilege in accepting an invitation to grieve. Citizens of the global south live in countries whose peoples have contributed the least to human-caused global warming, yet are suffering first and worst. This suffering is of a different order because it is not chosen. Grief cannot be ignored or denied when your family starves due to soil erosion or your house is washed away by rising tides.

But in the global north, or in any place where we are on high enough ground with enough wealth to pretend the situation isn't that bad, entering into grief may be our primary spiritual work. Without facing, accepting, and feeling our grief with and for the planet, we cannot honestly lay claim to Christian hope. This is as true of our relationship with the climate emergency as it is with any facet of discipleship. There is a direct parallel here to the work of the cross: without it, there is no risen Life.

"Blessed are those who mourn," said our Teacher, "for they shall be comforted" (Matt. 5:4).

Godly Grief: Compunction, Contrition, & Conscience

How exactly is mourning a blessing for followers of Jesus? In his second letter to the Christians at Corinth, St. Paul writes, "Now I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because your grief led to repentance; for you felt a godly grief, so that you were not harmed in any way by us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death" (2 Cor. 7:9-10).

Godly grief is a response to seeing our sins as they are, and a response

to seeing *ourselves* as we are: broken, fallible, and imperfect. In relation to a changing earth, godly grief gives rise to profound humility, as we awaken to just how complicit we all are, both in what we do and what we fail to do, in weaving the web of structural violence that harms other life. Our sins of action and inaction in the so-called developed world especially harm the most vulnerable communities on the planet and the vast number of non-human creatures upon whom we all depend. On these verses, St. Augustine comments, "Sorrow because of one's own iniquity produces justice."

For these reasons, climate and ecological grief is potentially a godly grief for two kinds of Christian: both the one who has been ignoring or denying these feelings for far too long *and* for the one who attempts a strident moral purity in relation to climate change. While the first may do harm through inaction, the second may unwittingly shame and blame others for their high carbon footprint, while never feeling "green" enough themself. The Spirit brings the gift of humility to both: humility to grieve blindness and resistance to seeing the truth in the first case, and in the second, humility to repent of the arrogance that presumes to save ourselves and everyone else. God, the only Savior, both pierces through to the first and crushes open the second, with the gift of godly grief.

Those words "pierce" and "crush" may feel violent, but they are root meanings of two common words in our Christian lexicon: *compunction* and *contrition*.

Compunction comes from the Latin *compunctio*, "to puncture." When we realize that something is not quite right between our inmost self and our God, or self and neighbor (God's image), a feeling of appropriate judgment pierces through our former oblivion. Similarly, contrition comes from the Latin *contritus*, meaning "to crush or bruise." The classic image used was of incense grains: they could only release their fragrance by being crushed. With grief, there is something in us that can only be released through breaking open. So in Psalm 51, the psalm of penitents, we read, "The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." God witnesses and receives this inner movement as an offering.

The sensitization of our conscience in compunction and contrition is a painful process. So much more of the world's pain can be seen, heard,

and felt in this agonizing new place. There is new potential for overwhelm, a sense of helplessness – even despair. But the very fact that we feel the pain, rather than carrying on with life oblivious to it, may be proof that God is breaking in and breaking through to touch us. The prophet Ezekiel called this being given a heart of flesh to replace a heart of stone. Through Ezekiel, God says, "I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh… Then you shall remember your evil ways, and your dealings that were not good; and you shall loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominable deeds" (Ezek. 36:24-26; 31). Though self-loathing is pretty pungent language, this is no self-centered brooding. Rather, it is a liberating turn away from the impotence of self toward a savior: the God of saving justice.

St. Paul sees the alternative – refusal to be pierced by compunction, crushed by contrition, or moved in response to the promptings of conscience – as a crippling *regret*. Therein we feel the weight of our fear, sadness, or anger, but we stand inert and paralyzed. If we remain there, the apostle writes, *it produces death*. There is a foreclosure of possibility and meaning, one of the darkest places to which the heart can descend.

At this cultural moment, there are many who find themselves in just such a place in relation to climate emergency. According to the Yale program on Climate Change Communication, a large proportion of Americans report feeling "alarmed" by the dire nature of the changes unfolding on

the planet. But more than half of this group report that they are not yet engaged in any form of constructive action on the issue.

This reluctance is cause for curiosity, compassion, and conversation with each other, because acknowledging and working through the enormity of our grief may be the missing link. What if we let our repentance of ecological sin be the first constructive action taken – a true action of the heart? What if we led by finding, feeling, and confessing our grief about these changes to one another? This kind of public, collective lament has power to express anew the paradox at the heart of the church: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies" (2 Cor. 4:8-10).

The Gift of Tears

The cultivation of godly grief flowered in the deserts of Egypt and Syria in the fourth-century monastic movement. I find meaning in a saying attributed to one of these early monks: "Tears are both the mother and the child of prayer." To me, this phrase expresses something profound about the spiral movement of both godly grief and ecological grief. With each, layer upon layer are uncovered, and the work is never done, because what we are grieving is so much larger than our finite creaturehood. Yet somehow, each spiral turn weaves us deeper into that largeness: our care begins to mirror the largeness and the tenderness of God's care for every living thing, "not one [of whom] will fall to the ground apart from your Father" (Matt. 10:29).

The experience of tears, whatever the source, often opens us to our need. Stretched beyond our capacity, we call out in prayer to the One we need most. Or, marveling at the fulfillment of a need, our tears of relief prompt prayers of gratitude. Or the beauty of life itself brushes against our depths and tears flow, in wordless wonder at the divine mystery of it all.

At other times, we are not conscious of any particular response until we begin to pray. Something inside shifts, gets knocked loose, and a gurgling spring wells up in our eyes. You may recall how *good* it can feel when you have let those tears cleanse you from the rust of apathy, the mildew of complacency, or the hard-packed crust of denial. When prayer gives birth to tears, we feel alive again. Touched by a loving hand, we are returned to the land of the living – even if it is a place of pain. Our pain is placed in God-given perspective; it is the pain of the living, in solidarity with all life.

What upheld the desert monastics on the path of godly sorrow was community and a strong sense of place. They were grieving together, not as isolated individuals. They were grieving as those who did not belong

to the world, but had nonetheless settled in the barren and clarifying wilderness. Its particular animals and landscape features infused their imagery and sayings. The desert and its harsh lessons of survival, its burning heat and frigid nights, the monastics' dependence on the generosity of travelers, the asceticism of subsistence gardening: all of these elements were essential to their particular path of conversion. They lived closely and lightly upon the earth – and, through their tears, came to cherish God's radiance in the created order around them as a foretaste of heaven.

The Bridge of Grief and Hope

Alongside my encounter with God in the monastery, I am meeting the crucified-and-risen Jesus afresh in a place outside its walls: in a climate grief circle. The circles are a routine offering by Extinction Rebellion, a nonviolent resistance movement which aims to convince governments to act on climate and ecological emergency. In these gatherings, tears flow freely and without fear of judgment, as courageous people bring their whole selves to their fight for a livable world. For ninety minutes, we consent to look with a steady gaze at hard truths around and inside ourselves, and don't turn away. At times, hope and despair wrestle visibly. But by the concluding moments, something miraculous happens. Without any group engineering or artificial optimism, the web of Life restores the sanity, the conviction, and the deep love we need to act together on Life's behalf. It all happens – in Christian terms – by remaining steadfast together at the foot of the cross. It is not the cross any of us would have chosen, but the cross our planetary moment has given us.

What's on the other side of this cross? To put it another way, what's the relationship between climate grief and climate hope? Reflecting on competing definitions of "hope" in climate discourse, climate grief psychologist Jennifer Atkinson asks, "What if hope is not an end game, but a bridge that allows us to cross over that gulf between the beliefs and actions of today and the possibilities and outcomes for tomorrow?" As a follower of Jesus, I resonate with this question, and latch on to the word "bridge." A bridge is an in-between place. Perhaps people of hope are inherently bridge people. Astride a river of uncertainty and pain, we are called to live in two worlds. The death and resurrection of Jesus – the foundation of Christian hope – is our bridge. At times, we may be closer to one shore or another, but our eyes are trained on that place where "mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away" (Rev. 21:4). In this way, godly grief is also a bridge. It fulfills a sacred purpose by forming us on the journey; taking up our cross we follow the Crucified. But having fulfilled its purpose, it too will pass away.

In the meantime, let us respond – unabashedly, and as one Body – to this precious gift of our climate grief. This grief is a function of our love, and our capacity to love is the surest sign of our creation in the image and

likeness of the God who is love. This grief is also our surest antidote to the worldly grief of climate despair, a final door that is locked and sealed forever. The crucified-and-risen Christ has wrenched that door from its hinges, so that we may pass through it, as he did, into the heart of God. His resurrection is, in the words of Rowan Williams, "the open door at the heart of every situation."

Even as we grieve, this open door is cause for the ultimate rejoicing, and our surest motive to act – in love – in the time we have been given.

"forest words"

black walnut ink (2022) – **Keith Nelson, SSJE**

Laudate Dominum

There is probably no clearer evidence of the engagement between God and humankind than through the arts. Tactile expressions of this relationship can be experienced through poetry and music (such as the Psalms in scripture), painting, and architecture, to name a few. SSJE has had its share of artists throughout its history, but none as substantial as Br. Maynard (William Maynard Shaw), SSJE. Trained in the discipline of architecture, Br. Maynard came to our Community at the Mission House in Oxford around 1880. He had previously worked for the distinguished architect George Frederick Bodley who, assisted by Br. Maynard, would later design and build the Mission House of the Society on Marston Street near the Iffley Road in Oxford.

During the course of his life and vocation with SSJE, Br. Maynard expressed his own engagement with God through his artistic talents. His intricate stenciling of the ceiling of the Mission House Church (which now belongs to St. Stephen's House, an Anglican theological foundation and permanent Private Hall of the University of Oxford) can still be seen. The pictures here show the ceiling of the choir and nave of the church with extracts from Psalm 148 (Laudate Dominum). His stenciling also decorates both the Church of St. John the Evangelist (Tannersville, NY) as well as St. Clement's Church (Philadelphia), where the Society had charge of the parish in the 1880s. While there, Br. Maynard also built confessional booths, one of which is still in use at St. Clement's today.

In his history of the Cowley Fathers in England, Dr. Serenhedd James wrote that at the time of Br. Maynard's death in 1918: "The fruits of his skills as an architect, draughtsman, and artist, had been almost everywhere the Society looked," from Oxford, to Philadelphia, to South Africa.

Jim Woodrum, SSJE

The Legacy Society *of* SSJE

James Koester, SSJE

One of my favorite activities is to wander around old cemeteries looking for the gravestones of my ancestors. Often a crumbling stone is the only legacy left of a life. The wrought iron cross in the Guesthouse garden is another such legacy. Given by an anonymous donor, it stands as a silent memorial to their life. A number of years ago it was restored: the rust removed, the wrought iron painted, and the rays emanating from the center gilded. That too was accomplished through the generosity of a memorial gift. Like those crumbling gravestones, the wrought iron cross stands as a silent witness of lives well lived.

Your gifts to SSJE's Legacy Society allow us to maintain our facilities, ensure our ministries, and support our life. Like that cross, this Monastery – and the life and ministries which it supports – is a witness and memorial to countless lives well lived.

For over 150 years, this monastic community has been supported by the generosity of many, enabling us to be a beacon of hope to all whom we encounter. Please consider including SSJE in your estate planning, and help us continue to be a beacon of hope, and a memorial to countless lives well lived.

For more information please contact legacy@ssje.org

SSJE Friends

SSJE Annual Fund Update

a message from the co-chairs

Whenever we renew our Baptismal Covenant, we renew our commitment to God and one another. We embody that commitment by our prayers for one another and by sharing our resources as we can. Years ago at a workshop on prayer, the Brothers focused on God as the initiator. When a thought comes to us of another person, organization, or situation, it is a gift from God. It is God knocking on the door of our heart, providing us the opportunity to respond. God takes our response and weaves it into what God is already doing. Our gifts to SSJE expand our sphere and engage us in the wider work of God.

– Madelyn Sorensen

Of all the gifts God has given us, the greatest, to me, is the ability to give. The return in joy is beyond telling. Just as in the words of Psalm 36, "In your light we see light," so for me, in our *giving* we are *given*. To give to the Brothers is to join in a great work of love that reaches around the globe. May you feel God's deep joy in your generosity.

– Mary Chatfield

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In January, **Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas** led us in a discussion on a faith-based response to the **climate emergency**. We talked about some decisions we could make in terms of advocacy and direct action to address this issue.

We continue to have conversations with the **Fellowship of Saint John** with reflection, questions, and prayer. Our most recent conversation was on the topic of "Keeping the Fast of Lent."

During Lent, Brothers preached in parishes across the country through the **Virtual Preaching Monks** program offered in collaboration with Virginia Theological Seminary and TryTank.

Br. Nicholas led a virtual retreat at Emery House called "Deeper into Silence."

We survived our own **COVID crisis** and have since updated our community-wide COVID protocols.

Br. Keith continues his journey as a postulant for ordination in a field education placement at Church of the Woods in Canterbury, New Hampshire. He is seen here looking for "elf scout" tracks in the woods with two parishioners, Luke and Grace.

On March 4, we welcomed **Amanda Millay Hughes**, Director of Development and Strategies at Duke Chapel (Durham, NC) to lead a day of study and reflection on the Psalms. Amanda is a long-time friend of the community and is overseeing the "Psalms in Dialogue" project at Duke Chapel, which brings together theologians, artists, musicians, singers, and dancers to explore the **meaning of the psalms for today.**

In February, **Br. Michael was clothed as a novice** and **Br. Todd initially professed his vows** in March. We also received Lain as a postulant. If you or someone you know might be considering the monastic life visit **catchthelife.org**.

March 17-20, **St. Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church, Dallas** hosted **Brs. Curtis and Jack,** where they led a workshop called "Loving Listening," as well as a daytime retreat, "Forgiving and Being Forgiven." They met with a number of individuals for spiritual direction and shared a

delightful evening with Dallas-area members of the Fellowship of Saint John. Br. Curtis preached at two liturgies and both Brothers spoke at the Adult Forum. They received such warm hospitality, thoroughly enjoyed a reunion with many friends of SSJE, and had the pleasure of making new acquaintances.

After two pandemic Holy Weeks, we were delighted to be able to open our doors again this year to share the powerful liturgies of **Holy Week and Easter** with retreatants and our local congregation.

Brs. James, Lucas, Jack, and Todd anticipate going to Baltimore for **General Convention** in July. This year, the Brothers will be offering an immersive virtual retreat for participants. The week following Easter, the Community held several **recording sessions** with professional sound engineers, to help us capture the audio that will be used in this

offering to the Church. We look forward to sharing it with you all.

In April, we upheld our annual tradition of celebrating a memorial mass on the birthday of our historic benefactress, **Isabella Stewart Gardner,** who donated the land on which the Monastery was built, as well as much of the original funding for its construction.

We have welcomed **local students** to join us for Evensong, supper, conversation, and Compline on Tuesday nights over the past few months. As this program wraps up with the end of the school year, we are excited to continue supporting students again in the fall.

Br. James has been busy preparing the **Emery House gardens** for planting.

Formation *in practice*

This issue takes up the question of how God engages with us – and how we engage with God – especially through ***challenge****. We hope these questions will help you to dig deeper into your own experience, either in prayer, journaling, or in conversation with others.*

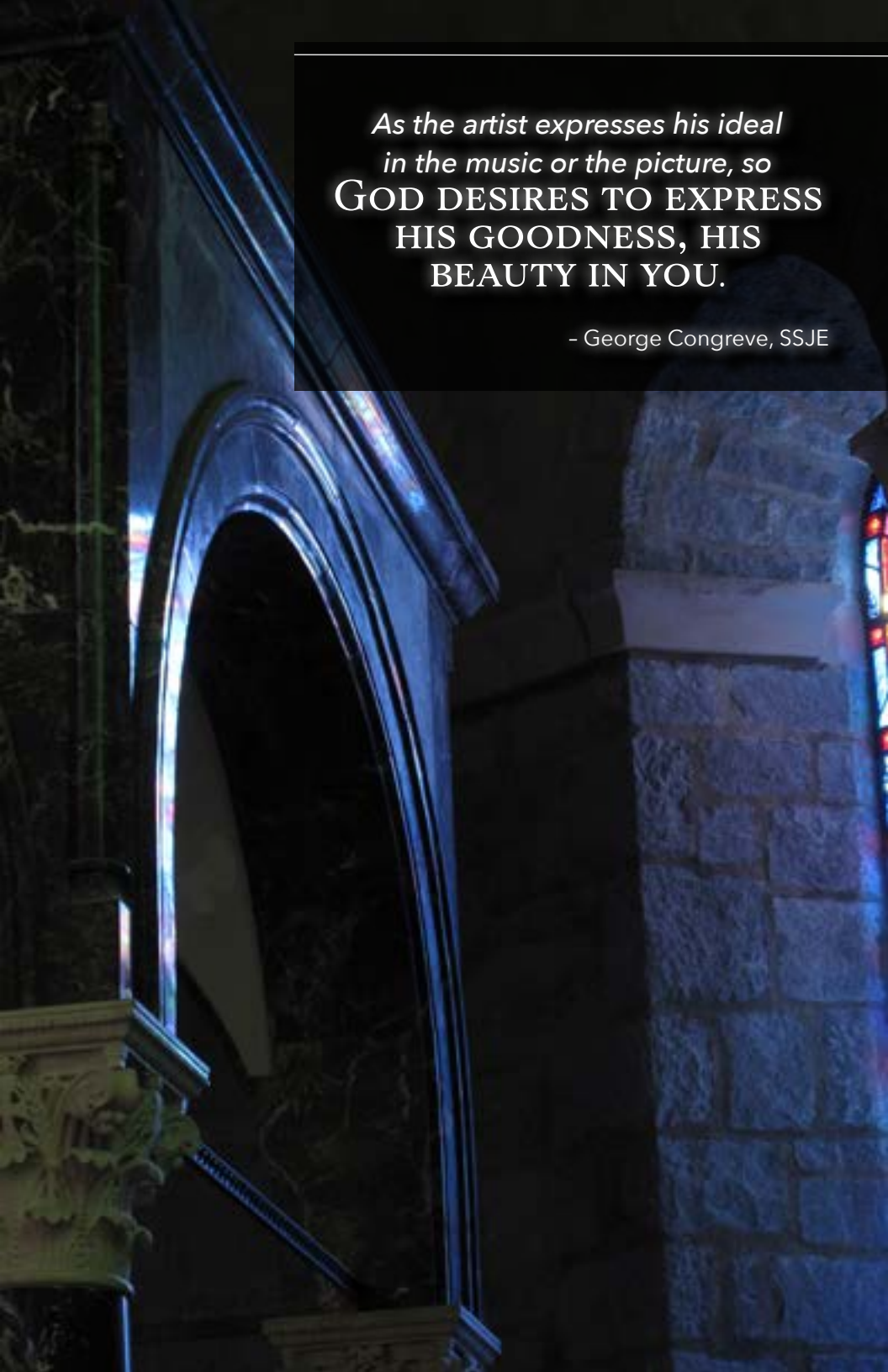
Engaging with God

- How have you experienced God's engagement in your life? Recall a place, a person, a moment, in which you knew that God was engaging with you.
- Are you open and honest with God about all your feelings and experiences, good and bad? Have you ever felt unable or even afraid to be honest with God?
- How might *you* engage God more fully?
- Where do you hear God's voice? What messages might come from other sources, as they seek to lead you *away* from life?

Challenges

- How do you tend to react to experiences of struggle, pain, weakness, or sickness? What underlying assumptions do your own reactions reveal?
- When have you experienced or witnessed the transformation of something devastating into a path for reconciliation, healing, or transformation?
- Think about the struggles that you are facing right now. How might you embrace them as the place of God's engagement with you? How is God calling to you through them?

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." (Psalm 46:1)



As the artist expresses his ideal in the music or the picture, so

GOD DESIRES TO EXPRESS HIS GOODNESS, HIS BEAUTY IN YOU.

– George Congreve, SSJE

SSJE

SOCIETY OF SAINT JOHN THE EVANGELIST

For more about the Brothers | **SSJE.org**
Curious about our life? | **catchthelife.org**
To share these resources | **SSJE.org/cowley**

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