1
Matthew’s Gospel

Galilean Tenderness Under a Warming Sky

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In Memory of My Parents

Tugging at the Knot

The last five chapters of Matthew’s Gospel form a knot I can’t untie.

Upon being asked to respond to Matthew within this collection of personal essays on the Passion Narratives, I soon came to realize that I had always veered away from certain disturbing aspects of this Gospel. Although ours was a Bible-reading family, we didn’t bear down, as scholars would, on one whole book at a time. We either returned again and again to certain inspiring passages or, conversely, contemplated the broad sweep of history, prophecy, and poetry to which individual books contributed. This meant that, as a child, I experienced the Synoptic Gospels as filling out a shared story in complementary ways, rather than
as challenging each other with their own distinctive and characteristic versions. Focusing now on Matthew’s Passion Narrative, I am thus confronted by disturbing elements I was not forced to grapple with in our family’s readings around the kitchen table.

Early in life I took the story of Jesus to heart. I remember clearly how downcast his abandonment by his closest friends made me feel as a child. Even after Jesus says to Peter and the other disciples, “So, could you not stay awake with me one hour?” (26:40), he returns twice from anguished prayer to find they have all fallen asleep again. In 26:45, right before his arrest, he resigns himself to this state of affairs, saying, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.” It is evident as I read it this morning that Matthew’s extraordinarily dramatic account of the Passion gains much of its power from the prolonged, excruciating story of loneliness that both anticipates and defers the public agony of crucifixion: the ache precedes the wound. The isolation Jesus feels in the garden after his disciples have drifted away from him into sleep distresses him more than the torch-lit arrival of “a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people” (v. 47) led to him by Judas.

From that moment and on through his responses to Pilate and his other questioners, Jesus holds himself strikingly remote from the whirl of false testimony, cross-examination, hypocrisy, self-justification, and condemnation. In 27:11 he responds to Pilate’s question only with “You say so.” Verse 12 has him foregoing any answer to accusations by the chief priests and elders, and in verse 14, when Pilate asks if he has heard what they had said about him, Jesus “did not answer.” In Matthew (and even more clearly in the Gospel of John) his attention is already focused inward, on the
coming, galvanic events, which he alone fully foresees and understands. When the cock crows at dawn and Peter realizes that he has betrayed his master three times since Gethsemane, just as prophesied, my sympathy for this disciple’s failure of steadiness always made me feel implicated in his shame. These are, of course, an adult’s words for a boy’s experience. They intellectualize, and in that way falsify, my earlier confusion—caught up in a story that was at once beyond my comprehension and inescapable. Now, if in a different way, I’m entangled in it still.

My current reading of Matthew’s Passion Narrative, well over half a century after my first introduction to it, registers other distressing aspects of the narrative as well as the ones that struck me earlier. So much of modern history, including the jumbled details of the morning’s online news, reverberates with that old account of cruelty and dread. The Good Shepherd, the kindly teacher and healer, is caught up in the remorseless gears of political and military authority. An armed tribunal takes him prisoner and passes sentence upon him. Righteous and triumphant torturers take over from there.

Matthew’s personal rage at Christ’s humiliation and execution introduces yet another harrowing element into his passion for me, now. The writer’s mortification at being ostracized by his own Jewish community because of his belief in Jesus as the Messiah instills a rancorous quality into his depiction of the priests and Pharisees that is far more vitriolic than anything found in the other Gospels. The consequences of such fury become most disastrous in the narrative when Pilate, convinced that Jesus is innocent of the claims of sacrilege lodged against him, offers to release him to the people. Incited by the priests and Pharisees, though, the crowd calls for the release of the murderer Barabbas
instead. As for Jesus, they cry out, “Let him be crucified” (27:23). And they insist in 27:25, “His blood be on us, and on our children.” These lines have been seized upon by anti-Semites over the centuries and have without a doubt encouraged pogroms as well as the Holocaust itself.

Recent years have brought serious attempts by Christian leaders to address this deep stain in the fabric of our tradition. But reconciliation is hard to find within the knotted fury of Matthew’s Passion. Speaking for myself, I possess neither the steady faith nor the keen theological insight that might allow me to slice through this conundrum. All I can do is carry the knot, in my stomach, as a sort of koan. I am involved in this Passion through a love of Jesus that is inseparable from the early guidance of my parents, which I retain even after turning away from the stern certainties that many have derived from texts like Matthew 25—28.

Matthew 25, alone among the Gospels, frames the Passion with a vivid picture of the Last Judgment. Humanity will ultimately be divided into the sheep and the goats, with the former gathered into heavenly joy and the latter condemned to everlasting pain. Chapter 28, after the intervening account of Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection, depicts a transfigured Lord, who delivers his Great Commission to evangelize the whole world as a prologue to such winnowing of the saved from the damned. The Passion itself thus represents a crucible in which Jesus of Nazareth is turned into the Christ, in which the condemned sufferer becomes the supreme magistrate. Overwhelming power remains the central truth, though its locus shifts. Alfred North Whitehead wrote in Process and Reality that when the Roman Empire adopted Christianity as the state religion, “Caesar
conquered; and the received text of Western theology was edited by his lawyers.” Matthew’s Passion contributed to this process of imperial appropriation.

My lifelong vocation has been as a teacher of literature, and the power of vivid scenes has always trumped more systematic or theoretical approaches to reading for me. One scene from fiction and one indelible experience in my own life are especially helpful to me now as models for the way in which loving scenes may live on beyond their stories’ daunting conclusions. Both reveal that sometimes the last word can come in the middle of a tale. The first scene I’m thinking of comes in one of the most violent and chaotic chapters of Moby-Dick, “The Grand Armada.” A boat is launched from the Pequod to pursue a congregation of migrating sperm whales. After Queequeg manages to harpoon one whale, Ishmael and the rest of the crew are pulled wildly through the sea by the stricken creature. When the whale finally dives and dislodges the harpoon, they veer suddenly into a calm circle amid the tumult of flight and pursuit, “as if from some mountain torrents we had slid into a serene valley lake.”

Looking down, they could see mother whales gliding around their nursing calves, “the women and children of this routed host.” The young whales came up to rub the gunwales, while “Queequeg patted their foreheads” and “Starbuck scratched their backs with his lance.”

And thus, though surrounded by circle upon circle of consternations and affrights, did these inscrutable creatures at the centre freely and fearlessly indulge in all peaceful concerns; yea, serenely reveled in dalliance and delight. But even so, amid the tornadoed Atlantic of my being, do
I myself still for ever centrally disport in mute calm; and while ponderous planets of unwaning woe revolve round me, deep down and deep inland there I still bathe me in eternal mildness of joy.

Ishmael’s capacity to resist the fury of Captain Ahab, who is so fiercely determined to separate white from black, righteousness from evil, is reinforced by this vision of nurturing communion. In the quiet interior of the sea something is glimpsed that lies below and beyond the harpooned and exhausted whales spouting blood, the blubber distilled into kegs of wealth, and the scraps from the try-works thrown overboard to roiling sharks. When Ishmael finally floats alone in the sea, after the great ship has gone down, he does so without fear; remembering the vision of a world beyond conflict, he is borne up in faith that he will find a way to tell his story. In trying to engage with Matthew’s Passion while at the same time holding out against its punitive and judgmental tone, I too am buoyed up by remembering the nurturing, beautiful home life in which my parents enacted their own deep Christian faith.

Affirmation can arise in the midst of a story whose ending might seem to allow no possibilities other than apocalypse or nihilism. My most direct experience of this truth derives from my father’s final illness. He was an exemplary man, serene and kindly, deeply read but never dogmatic, a devout Christian with no sense of narrow sectarianism but with a strong, sympathetic interest both in other religions and in science, a man whose days were filled with mirth and music. Dad’s favorite word in the Greek New Testament was agapé—a tender concern for others.
And then he developed Alzheimer’s. Shortly before his death, when the family assembled at the nursing home for his seventy-sixth birthday, we wheeled him into a room with a cake on the table and balloons hanging from strings taped to the acoustical tile on the ceiling. But when we began to sing “Happy Birthday,” his face crumpled in fear. He didn’t know where he was or what we were doing. Perhaps even who we were. Realizing that we had made a grievous mistake, we all quickly stopped singing and helped him back to his quiet room, where he would have less reason to be alarmed.

We may have fallen into this error because of our inability to believe Dad could ever lose the resilient, nonassertive pleasure in life that had made him seem to me like the I Ching’s “superior man,” the one who flows like water rather than contending for eminence. He had lived such a life of flow, from an impoverished boyhood on through horrible experiences in World War II. His heart had never succumbed to strife, and his impulse was always to encourage others in their own quests for balance and peace. In the midst of his religious vocation, and of the family life in which my mother and he gently fostered my older brother, Lyn, and me, he sought moments of connection in which the ponderous circumstances of life might be lifted up. One of the last sentences I heard him utter as I was sitting by his bedside, just before he lost the power to speak, was “Things change.” Even after that, though, he would join in the hymns sung by members of Tiburon Baptist Church who came to visit. His strong baritone was husky now, but he knew all the verses and still liked to switch back and forth between the bass and tenor harmonics.

My father was a Southern Baptist minister and seminary professor who also loved the philosophy of Whitehead. It excited
him because of its bold attempt to reconcile faith and science into a non-monolithic but unified and dynamic system. While I was at college, Dad sent me copies of Whitehead’s *Process and Reality* and *Science and the Modern World*, as well as John Cobb’s *Process Theology*. In returning to the heat of the Passion now, while also trying to affirm the loving center of my own biblical experience, rather than reside at an apocalyptic edge, I take courage from a late chapter in *Process and Reality* called “God and the World.”

After having discussed the dominant visions of the divine order modeled on the power of the divine Caesars, the moral absolutes of the Hebrew prophets, and the logical hierarchies of Aristotle, Whitehead writes:

> There is, however, in the Galilean origin of Christianity yet another suggestion which does not fit very well with any of the three main strands of thought. It does not emphasize the ruling Caesar, or the ruthless moralist, or the unmoved mover. It dwells upon the tender elements in the world, which slowly and in quietness operate by love; and it finds purpose in the present immediacy of a kingdom not of this world. Love neither rules, nor is it unmoved; also it is a little oblivious as to morals. It does not look to the future; for it finds its own reward in the immediate present.

Several pages later Whitehead elaborates further on this vision:

> The image—and it is but an image—the image under which this operative growth of God’s nature is best conceived, is that of a tender care that nothing be lost. . . . It is the judgment of a tenderness which loses nothing that can be saved. It is also the judgment of a wisdom which uses what in the temporal world is mere wreckage.
While such gentleness is not evident within the heat of Matthew’s Passion, it is essential to the larger career of Jesus. As captured in the image of a tiny seed growing into a mighty tree, or of leaven folded into the dough for bread that will feed a family, his life was a ministry of hope, not admonishment. While reading chapters 25 through 28 of this Gospel, it is important not to forget 5:44–45: “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”

The instances of “tender care” that Whitehead contrasts to “the kingdom . . . of this world” are not by that token separate from history. Rather, it is because they are so vital, modest, central, and immediate that they can escape notice by an eye obsessed with ideology and power. Nonetheless, in offering the possibility of “a judgment of a tenderness” they help to heal a world rent by the furious judgments of division and vindication. They bring redemption to a world of wreckage. Just as moments of grace can live on in the heart amid climactic violence and loss, so, too, does a promise of tenderness endure within the DNA of Christianity. This remains true today, even after decades in which judgmentalism and self-righteousness have loudly claimed the tradition as their own. If the potential of Galilean tenderness is now to be more fully realized, however, it must be through vigorous engagement with the ecological and political challenges of our day. It must reclaim a suitable, non-punitive expression of its own passionate intensity. Such a hope also requires me, on a personal level, to explore my own history as a reader of the Bible. I need to understand how my current environmentalist values are rooted in early religious experiences if I am to respond more constructively to the ecological crisis of our time.
Beginning at the Kitchen Table

Our family read the Bible every day. We studied passages from the Old and New Testaments for Sunday School and Training Union, the classes coordinated with morning and evening services on the Sabbath. These selections were designed to take us through the entire Bible over a several-year cycle. On Wednesday evenings we gathered with a smaller group from the congregation for Prayer Meeting. This midweek service was less formal, with lots of hymn singing in the four-part harmony that is the glory of Southern Baptist worship. There was Bible reading and prayer in that setting, too, though with passages chosen more spontaneously than in the Sunday curriculum. The context for all these services and classes was our nightly experience of reading the scriptures together, as my mother and father, my older brother, Lyn, and I gathered around the kitchen table for supper. These were my favorite exposures to the Bible, both because of the pleasure I felt in reading and conversation with my parents and because we generally focused on the stories and poetry rather than on the historical and theological content of Sunday’s more systematic study.

Just as we didn’t spend much time around the family table on Pauline Christology, we rarely dwelled on the priestly prohibitions and apocalyptic fantasies so exciting to the wowsers of today’s so-called Religious Right. What the four of us loved were the dramas of Genesis and Exodus, Joshua, First and Second Kings, Jonah, and Ruth, the poetry of the Psalms and Job, and the Gospels. I can still remember how flavorful these books felt to me as a ten year old. The shadowed grandeur of Moses and David and the eloquence of Job were so much more bracing than the tepid
fare we generally read in school. When our readings turned to
the Gospels, we lingered over events like Jesus’ healing of the
crippled and the blind. We also focused on the parables, where I
cought my first intoxicating glimpse of a landscape where spiri-
tual truth and natural fact may embrace. By the time I entered
junior high, our family’s Bible study had stopped, in part because
my brother’s teenage activities made it harder to schedule regular
sessions together around the kitchen table. But my path was al-
ready set. My love of literature and my vocation as a teacher and
writer grew directly from the experience of reading the majestic
language of the King James translation aloud in our family.

I wonder whether the positive and inviting tone of our early
Bible reading may have been set especially by my mother, whose
sweet nature seems to have borne her along equably from girl-
hood on a red-dirt farm in northern Louisiana to her meeting
with my father in the Baptist Student Union at LSU to her return
to the farm as she waited out his service as a paratrooper during
World War II and finally to my parents’ move to California when
he started teaching at a Baptist seminary there. Though she didn’t
read the scriptures in Greek and Hebrew as my father did, she
studied the Bible assiduously throughout her life.

Dad, Lyn, and I all owned beautiful copies of the Bible,
printed by Cambridge University Press on India paper and
bound in black Morocco leather. My two most glamorous pos-
sessions as a boy were this stately volume and my supple Richie
Ashburn—model fielder’s mitt. Mom had a lovely leather binding
on her bible, too, but chose to order it in her favorite color of
sky blue. I’ve never seen another bible of just that color. Its stron-
gest associations for me (beyond the fact that it matched both my
mother’s eyes and the woodwork in our Mill Valley kitchen) are
with the tender blues and greens of a vernal landscape photograph
that hung on the wall beside my bed when I was a child. Superimposed on this image were the kindly countenance of Jesus and the text of Psalm 23.

This psalm was the first poem I ever memorized, learning it line by line from my mother before I could read. The comforting cadences of the shepherd David, like the goodness and mercy of my parents, have followed me all the days of my life. Just as, from the time of Plato, lovers of music have identified certain intervals and keys with particular colors, the language of Psalm 23 remains inseparable for me from the green of its pastures and the blue of its still waters. Another personal association with this poem is with my mother’s cool hand (fragrant with the almond scent of Jergens Lotion), resting on my forehead as she tried to help one young dervish stop spinning at the end of the day.

My mother’s hand also figures in my memory of a memorable revival we attended in Bastrop, Louisiana, one summer when I was a boy. The billowing beige tent was set up across Mer Rouge Road from the dairy farm where my mother had grown up, on a field donated for that purpose by my beloved namesake Uncle John. The service opened with a few announcements and jokes, then moved straight into the hymn singing. We began serenely with hymns of faith:

Jesus is the friend you need
(the friend you need),
such a friend is He indeed
(is He indeed).

Over the course of the next half hour the key modulated to longing. We sang “Tell Me the Old, Old Story” and “Softly and Tenderly,” with its organ-tone refrain “Come home (come home),
Come home (come home), Ye who are weary come home." Then it was time for the sermon.

Our redheaded traveling revivelist’s approach contrasted starkly to the witty, reflective preaching I was used to hearing from my father at our family’s church in New Orleans. With little by way of prologue the revivelist was shouting, haranguing, and, yes, pounding the pulpit. I had never heard, or imagined, a voice of such fury and passion. All of us gathered in that gusty canvas enclosure had been condemned to hellfire by a just God. Yet we were, amazingly, offered salvation if we could open ourselves up to the present moment of grace through our wholehearted repentance. This masterful sermon had one keenly honed intent—getting members of the congregation to stumble forward at the altar call. As the revivelist exhorted listeners with his emotion-saturated voice, and as we all sang “Just as I am,” over and over and over again, a current of those who wanted to rededicate their lives pulsed up the central aisle. Twenty, thirty, fifty people from the several hundred in that congregation walked up to receive the minister’s hand of blessing on their heads. After doing so, they sat dazed and sobbing in a pew at the front, where they would be embraced by their friends and family after the service ended. I can still remember how oppressive this sustained and mysterious intensity felt to me as a child.

Such a spectacle of unmediated adult emotion was hard to make sense of. I felt frightened by the anguish and jubilation voiced by people in the surrounding benches. I was also troubled, as I have remained ever since, by a conflict between the image of a loving God and his gentle Son Jesus and the sentence of eternal suffering for all who were not reprieved by grace. It wasn’t that I imagined that everyone around me was perfect.
But the main thing my parents had shown me every day of my life was kindness and encouragement, and I couldn’t imagine a more generous uncle than the one who sat on the other side of me. I was aware of various sneaky stratagems through which I sometimes managed to get my own way, but none of them felt like hanging crimes. Even my older brother, Lyn, who liked to knuckle me hard in the upper arm when Mom wasn’t looking, didn’t seem to deserve eternal fire—though I thought he might well be improved by a couple of solid parental whacks.

The revivalist kept pleading with us. He seemed to be on the verge of weeping himself now but knew that there were still people in the congregation who could hear Jesus calling them. Several more would go up, then there would be another long, painful delay as the music swelled and the preacher shouted. I began to wonder whether if I went up that might finally allow the evening to end. But then I could feel my mother’s cool hand on my arm. Not exactly holding on. She was simply reassuring me that I was fine beside her, just as I was.

Over the intervening years I’ve continued to ponder this seeming disconnect between the harshness and the gentleness within my religious heritage. I have never been able to believe in the stark tale of damnation versus redemption that many find essential to Christian faith. Nor do I now ascribe a unique or exclusive value to Protestant Christianity among the world’s spiritual traditions. From my wife, Rita’s, Catholic practice and from my personal contacts with Judaism, Buddhism, and Native American beliefs, I have received inspiration both akin to and complementary to the best of my Southern Baptist training. Like many Americans I know that I must also find a way to glimpse the heart of Islam now, and the way in which it sustains all those millions of the faithful whose lives never register in our explosive
headlines. But in the midst of all these valuable influences I continue to pray as I was taught and to love Jesus. In trying to sort this all out, and to help activate the constructive power of my own tradition in a time marred by consumerism, violence, and environmental damage, I’ve turned back to the Bible as a resource. What I’ve found there has been the same conflict that I felt in that long-ago revival. In compressed form, my struggle is somehow to reconcile the spiritually charged and flowering world of the psalms and parables with the apocalyptic heat of Matthew’s Passion.

By 1961, as I entered Tamalpais Union High School in Mill Valley, California, I had begun to identify passionately with the wilderness movement. It seems clear in retrospect that this new sense of affiliation grew pretty directly from my early exposure to the psalms and parables, with their celebration of earth’s sacred fund of truth. A couple of years later my friends and I got our driver’s licenses and began to take excursions to the high Sierra, Yosemite Valley, and Tuolumne Meadows. Such landscapes, much as our family’s Bible reading had done, loomed over and enhanced both my personal relationships and my private reflections. The gorgeous, large-format Sierra Club books in the Mill Valley Library reinforced this sense of a parallel. Ansel Adams’s sublime monochrome prints of Yosemite were awesome in ways that reverberated with Genesis and Job, while Eliot Porter’s images of trees, wildflowers, and lichen-speckled boulders were reminiscent of Jesus’ parables of the kingdom. The tender blues and greens of Richard Kaufmann’s photographs, in a Sierra Club edition of John Muir’s writings entitled Gentle Wilderness, felt strikingly close to the palette of the Twenty-third Psalm.

Like other children I both grew into and away from my family with the passing years. Just as reading the Bible had pointed me
toward the Sierra, it encouraged me to become a devout reader of other books, too. One of my reasons for choosing to attend Pomona College was to stay on the West Coast and be able to hitchhike up to Mill Valley from Claremont every month or so and see my parents. Another was the excellent reputation of its faculty in philosophy, the field in which I thought I wanted to major. Though I could sense the intellectual power of Leibniz, Locke, and Hobbes, however, my freshman-year class on modern philosophy felt like pretty arid terrain. If there was poetry or drama in those cheaply printed little paperbacks, I was unable to find them. Studying sonnets in an introductory course on poetry with Darcy O'Brien opened up the possibility of a more embodied mode of reading. I became an English major so that I could get my college degree while reading books that astonished and delighted me, and whose language had a meaning beyond the denotative. I noted with interest that quite a few of my fellow students of English had their own strong backgrounds in various traditions of the Book; for them, as for me, vast meanings swam through and around these vital new voices. Like that Sunday School boy D. H. Lawrence, we turned to literature as the “Bright Book of Life.”

When I decided, after Pomona, to attend graduate school at Yale, my experience of literary study became a more complicated one. The most valuable part of it was the regimen of reading from early in the morning to late at night. In a single, nourishing class with David Thorburn we read practically all the novels of Eliot, Hardy, Conrad, and Woolf. In other seminars we read the collected works of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Whitman, Dickens, and Frost. Bart Giamatti’s course on Spenser rooted our reading of *The Fairie Queen* in the enchanting worlds of Ariosto and Tasso. I can vividly remember the class in which he related the anxiety
at the heart of Renaissance humanism to the Italian words *frenare* and *sfrenare*. The first expressed a determination to rein in and control our impulses, the second an ever-present possibility of losing control and galloping toward social and individual destruction. Submerging in such seas of imagination and poetry was intoxicating.

I was less attracted by certain professionalistic and technical aspects of literary criticism at this level. I arrived at Yale in 1969, soon after the champions of high theory had seized the ramparts. In the course of one panel discussion at the graduate school a tenured enthusiast proclaimed that he would as soon read the Manhattan telephone directory as *Bleak House*; in each case there was an intricate system of language available to decipher and deconstruct. But just as I had held an inward reservation about hellfire as a child in Louisiana, so too I resisted the incineration of compelling plots and characters as a grad student in the suave pastures of Connecticut.

The requirements for coursework were not extensive: just three semesters of classes before beginning to formulate a thesis. When I discovered that it was possible to include courses outside of English in fulfilling this requirement, I signed up for one on New Testament theology taught at the Divinity School by an amiable Dutch professor named Frederik Wisse. This was where I discovered the New Hermeneutics, an unanticipated bridge between the New Critical close readings, which were prevalent in my college courses and current theoretical approaches down the hill at the Hall of Graduate Studies. I was also fascinated by a volume we read called *Gospel Parallels*, in which the Synoptic Gospels were arrayed side by side in columns that showed where the narratives intertwined or diverged. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke elaborated on Mark’s earlier version in ways that brought
out the writers’ differing attitudes toward both Christianity’s Jewish heritage and the divinity of Jesus. Matthew’s parables of the kingdom were of special interest to me, and I enjoyed reading scholars like C. H. Dodd, who delved as deeply into them as one would into a sonnet by Shakespeare or Wordsworth.

That course with Professor Wisse turned out to be the total of my formal training in biblical studies. Nor have I ended up building my life around a church, as my parents did. The Quakers, with their steady witness against the Vietnam War, were an inspiring community for me to encounter during graduate school and again at the beginning of my career at Middlebury College. Following that chapter, a vital new Zen Center in Shelburne, Vermont, was also of great value to me, with its training based on koans that were strikingly reminiscent of certain parables of Jesus. As familial and professional challenges continued to ratchet up, though, weekend outings into the Green Mountains refreshed me more than anything else as I tried to prepare myself for the coming week. Each season—from the yellow of early foliage season to its russet aftermath, from blue-shadowed snow on midwinter afternoons to the Dutchman’s breeches and trillium of early spring, and on to July, with splashing forays along the pools and boulders of the New Haven River—offered its own collection of parables. Occasionally, too, I would drive down to Woodstock for services at Weston Priory with Rita, whose Catholic faith is as steadfast as my parents’ Baptist belief was. The chance to read the Bible and sing hymns in that congregation felt nourishing and also harmonious with the simplicity of its monastic community and the grandeur of the surrounding woods. Though theologically diffuse and without the solid sense of a religious community I would have hoped for, I could
nevertheless still identify with Wendell Berry’s self-description as “a forest Christian.”

A couple of years ago I was challenged to look harder for a shape within this personal jumble of experiences and affinities. Bill McKibben asked me to help out with planning an environmentally oriented worship service in the Methodist Church of Ripton, Vermont, where he lives with his wife, Sue Halpern, and their daughter, Sophie. This white clapboard structure just up Route 125 from the general store used to enlist Rabbi Victor Reichert as its seasonal minister. Rabbi Reichert and his wife, Louise, traveled to Ripton every summer from their home in Cincinnati, where he taught in a seminary associated with the Conservative branch of American Judaism. Robert Frost and he became close friends, and the two of them frequently enjoyed discussing the Bible together. The local Methodists had relished the annual adventure of having a rabbi as their pastor. So this beautiful little church felt like an especially promising place for an experiment into whether the scriptures, which Jewish and Christian traditions claim as holy ground, could be reclaimed as a resource by activists concerned about climate change and the disruption of natural systems. Prayer and the Bible, like the American flag, were too powerful simply to cede to George W. Bush’s sanctimonious and anti-environmental supporters.

Several dozen people gathered in the Ripton Meeting House on an overcast but pleasant summer evening. To the accompaniment of the wheezy old pump-organ we began by singing a few hymns like “For the Beauty of the Earth.” After I read Psalm 100, “The heavens declare the glory of God,” along with an evocation of the earth’s sublime wildness from the Book of Job, Rita’s and my son Caleb played an improvised meditation on the viola.
Then Bill offered a compact, provocative sermon based on Job’s celebration of wilderness in chapters 38 through 40. He paused over sublime lines like God’s challenge to Job’s know-it-all “comforters”—“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?”—and he dwelled especially on the loving evocation of undomesticated animals, with no discernible use to humans, for whom God had nevertheless created wilderness as a “house,” and “barren lands” as their “dwellings.” Such descriptions, Bill suggested, should chasten our sense of human prerogatives. After a couple more hymns and a prayer the service concluded with a chance for members of our little impromptu congregation to chat about what we had just experienced together. Several comments mirrored my own feelings of both pleasure and relief in beginning to draw together our environmental ethic with our religious backgrounds.

But one remark, offered near the end of that gathering by a lifelong member of that Methodist Church, also struck a troubling chord in my heart. With a friendly smile this gentleman rose from the venerable pew where he’d been sitting—with its white-painted back and seat and its brown, varnished arms. He wanted to remind us all to proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord. This summed up my conundrum. To what extent is it possible for an individual like myself to claim the religious heritage and language of Christianity if not also declaring its unique value? Could there be validity in an approach that valued some aspects of Christian practice and belief while also appreciating the spiritual insights of Buddhism, for instance? I remembered sitting beside an American Jesuit, posted to the Vatican, during dinner at a UN-sponsored conference on environmental stewardship. He assured me that such a “smorgasbord” approach to religion was simply a manifestation of New Age longings for spirituality
without rigor or responsibility. In resisting such claims for the exclusive validity of traditional systems of belief and practice, though, I feel obliged to attempt a more forceful connection between those aspects of the biblical tradition with special value for me and the daunting ecological and ethical issues of our time. I am strengthened in this impulse by Karen Armstrong’s statement, in The Bible: A Biography, that “Midrash and exegesis were always supposed to relate directly to the burning issues of the day, and the fundamentalists should not be the only people who attempt this.”

Facing the Heat

One reason, beyond its connection with my parents’ faith, that I find myself knotted up in Matthew’s Passion now is its association with the nature-based spirituality that emerged from and expresses my Christian background. The parables in that Gospel tilted gradually toward apocalypse and judgment. But so too has my love of the verdant beauty around my boyhood home in California and our own family’s Vermont home been increasingly shadowed by the global crises of our day. David Brower, arguably the most influential conservationist of the twentieth century, used to deliver a speech he called “The Sermon.” In it he detailed the destruction already visited upon wild beauty and natural systems by toxic chemicals, nuclear waste, industrial and transportation systems based on fossil fuels, and an exploding human population. And he evoked the prospect of a much more drastic ecological collapse if we in the West do not mend our ways. Dave Foreman, a founder of Earth First! and subsequently of the Wildlands Project, was, like Brower (and like me), a product of a
fundamentalist home. He steadily carried on this oratory of peril, with its altar call for national and personal conversion. It’s appropriate, then, for environmentalists to recognize the Calvinist heritage within such rhetoric, and the direct line that stretches back from it to the last four chapters of Matthew.

On the one hand, such a link should make us more careful about our own tendencies toward judgmentalism and righteousness—a division of the environmental sheep from the goats, and an impulse to order SUV drivers to climb out of their vehicles with their hands where we can see them. On the other, it reveals a powerful element of Matthew’s Passion that I might have been in danger of missing for temperamental reasons: the inseparability of the nurturing loveliness of nature and our intimate relationships from the recurrence of fiery moments of decision. If the importance of either mode is unrecognized, both the web of life and our bonds to one another may be endangered. It has always been easier for me to perceive the danger to tenderness and empathy within the furor of judgment. Equally important, though, is the ability to stand up at moments of decision and engage in the larger struggles of our world. From Jonathan Edwards’s painstaking attempts to awaken his congregation to their peril in ways that were visceral, not simply intellectual, to Brower’s sermon, the passionate call for judgment and choice is an attempt to catalyze diffuse energies, to brush up the current from which a spark might leap. Today, facing an ecological crisis that is reflective of a profoundly isolated and selfish aspect of our culture, we need to acknowledge the error of our ways and take a new direction.

The sermons that speak most powerfully to me now have to do with climate change. They come from people like James Hansen, chief climate scientist at NASA, and Bill McKibben. Both
of them call attention to the fact that, while global warming and climate destabilization are inevitable, the changes will shift from a serious scale to an utterly cataclysmic one if we can’t soon bring the proportion of carbon in the atmosphere back down below 350 parts per million. The facts are so sobering as to require little polemic or metaphorical amplification: the melting of the Arctic ice, a rise of the oceans that endangers impoverished coastal communities around the world, an increase in the frequency and severity of hurricanes, and the desertification of continental interiors. Unless we can turn away from practices that continue to pour carbon into the sky we will turn our still waters and green pastures into a parched and inhospitable wasteland. If we don’t change our lives there will be hell to pay. Since the present concentration of carbon in the atmosphere already hovers around 387 parts per million, this will require us to make immediate and significant changes to our personal and collective practices. Both conservation and the development of renewable sources of energy will be important parts of this change. But, most fundamental, it will require a willingness to restrain our appetites.

Ecologists use the term *ecotone* to describe the biologically rich habitats that contain species from each constituent habitat as well as species unique to that zone. *Edge effect*, in this scientific vocabulary, describes a proliferation of biotic energy and mass that arises within such dynamic, precarious, ambiguous environments. The richness of my own religious experience has been enhanced by the encounter between my Southern Baptist upbringing and the Zen Buddhist influences of my high school and college years in California, just as my religious heritage has become fruitfully entangled with the environmentalist movement’s values. But there are also edges within edges. My sense of an affinity between the parables of the kingdom and the sacred
beauty of Yosemite Valley torques into a dynamic tension with the sternness of the Last Judgment and the furor of the Passion, on
the one hand, and with the urgent dangers of climate change, on the other.

I think about this edge while walking the cool slopes of our Vermont sugarbush with our dog Shadow, tightening saplines and
tapping trees in preparation for the new sugaring season. This is a green and beautiful world in spring and summer, when I do
such work. It is also the scene of shared projects that bind Rita
and me together with our grown children and their own families,
and connect us with the cycle of the year in our home landscape.
But the combination of a gradual warming trend and a blurring
of the transitions between seasons has already damaged the re-
generation of our maple forests. The disruption of our familiar
patterns alarms and disturbs me, as the torch-lit cruelty of the
Passion did when I was a boy reading the Bible. Just as the Gospel
writer turned to natural images like sheep and goats, wheat and
tares to convey spiritual truths, so too, in the destabilization of
the earth’s climate we can discover a sharply focused image of
today’s drastic cultural crisis. The painfulness of the crucifixion is
much more intense for a reader in love with Jesus, a love nour-
ished by the beautifully natural context of his parables and other
teachings. Dread of climate change and the impulse to work for
new practices at the levels of policy, community, and family life
are both more intense because of the love we bear for particular
landscapes and the concern we feel for coming generations. Be-
cause of love there comes a time when we must turn to face the
heat. But my own ethical center is neither in the Passion nor in
the world of activism; it is in the zone between those fiery realities
and my own daily, local experience of loving affiliation.
Unlike me, my parents remained devout Southern Baptists to the end of their lives. But as I return again in memory to their lives, I can glimpse the edge at which they found their own energetic sense of purpose. Much of the joy they found in their church, as members of the Southern diaspora to California in the mid-twentieth century, came from the experience of old-fashioned fellowship in a new setting that was at once exhilarating and intimidating. Frequent after-worship socials on the church grounds featured the fried chicken, fresh rolls, potato salad, three-bean salad, lemonade, and ice cream that were their childhood’s taste of Sunday. I can remember the adults strolling amid picnic cloths spread on the grass, greeting each other as “Brother” and “Sister.” There was always a joke to share and laughter was in the air. We had moved to California from Louisiana when I was eight, and I also remember noticing, from about the age of ten, that while the adults mostly retained their pronounced southern accents, my brother and I had already begun to speak in the more neutral tones of the Bay Area. This transplanted church culture was my heritage but not my culture.

Ours was a home in which voices were never raised in anger. Never. This didn’t feel like repression then, and it still doesn’t. The two loudest sounds were music and laughter. My father played piano, guitar, and French horn, the last of those being the instrument I also chose to take up in school. My brother chose the flute and the guitar. The three of us also liked playing recorders together. My mother hadn’t ever taken up an instrument, and it was typical of her modest ways to deprecate her musical abilities in comparison with those of her husband and sons. In truth, she had a lovely soprano voice that made me want to stand beside her whenever we sang hymns at church and at
home. And the mirth that still echoes to me across the years was especially infectious at our Sunday dinners. These usually took place around two or three in the afternoon, after we’d changed our clothes from church and fallen in to help my mother with what was always a pretty big production.

Just as the food at our socials hearkened back to similar church events in the South, the heart of my mother’s cooking at home was the food she remembered from her own home at the farm in northern Louisiana. Chicken and dumplings, turnip greens, corn bread, rolls and jam from the plum trees in our front yard, deep-dish peach cobbler in season, all washed down with iced tea from the condensation-beaded pitchers stationed on either side of our mahogany dining room table. When guests joined us and a table leaf was swung up to increase the seating space, there was barely room to move around in the small dining area of our Mill Valley home.

As we settled more deeply into the meal, lingering sedately over seconds (no reason not to take another dumpling or two), my father would begin to tell jokes from his endless supply. The talking dog and the skeptical bartender, the tramp tumbling into the freshly dug grave into which another benighted soul had already fallen, the backwoods fellow from Alabama who takes his bride into a hardware store and tries to order lunch, the inherited parrot with the salty vocabulary. They were silly to the point of being ridiculous, but again and again they got us laughing so hard we couldn’t stop until we slid out of our chairs and were sitting against the wall beneath the big double window. Which of course just kept the whole group laughing.

Although my father was a more gregarious, performative personality than my more placid and retiring mother, he was like her in never showing a forbidding or angry face to my brother
and me as we grew up. I didn't feel the slightest falseness about his self-presentation and was always proud of his charming and entertaining ways. But I did notice occasions when his positive affect was, while still pleasant, kind of odd. He was, in the ways of his Scotch Irish ancestry, remarkably frugal. When we drove across country each summer to visit our relatives in Louisiana and Mississippi, we stayed in some pretty sketchy motels. Lunch was sandwiches packed in a shoebox; supper was hash and potatoes cooked by my mother on a Coleman stove set up on the tailgate of our Pontiac station wagon. Though these were not deluxe tours, I was always struck by my father's exuberant pleasure in simple things. We would check into our $5–a-night room, and Dad would sit down on the mattress of one of our beds and, more often than not, pat it and say: "Feel that mattress. That's what I would call a good, firm one." Or we'd indulge ourselves in ice-cream cones and he'd say: "Taste that ice-cream! So sweet and so cold!" These were not jokes, and nobody laughed. They felt to me as a child like good things to say, even if not exactly necessary.

Only toward the very end of my father's life did I get a feeling for where such determined affirmation of simple pleasures might have come from. It wasn't, I concluded, from his hardscrabble upbringing by a harsh mother in Gulf Coast Mississippi. Rather, his outlook and affect were inseparable from the nightmare of World War II. After graduating from the Baptist Seminary in Louisville, he had joined the 82nd Airborne Division as the first paratrooper chaplain in the army. As a small child in New Orleans in the early 1950s I would ask him about the war, since stories of soldiers' experiences were so prominent in magazines like Reader's Digest and Saturday Evening Post. But that was the one place in my relationship with Dad where I found a firmly closed door. Shortly before his illness and death in 1994 he gave
a long interview to an oral history project and I learned that he was at Omaha Beach on D-Day, that he had broken his leg in a training jump at night in England and thus arrived not by air but in an amphibious landing craft, as in Saving Private Ryan, that the Catholic chaplain and graves’ registration officer were both killed in the assault, and that his role in the days and weeks following the invasion was to walk the beach and identify the remains of his fallen comrades. I also learned that he had a breakdown after this experience, was shipped to an army facility in France for a couple of weeks, and then was back in his unit for the Battle of the Bulge, when he took a piece of shrapnel through his side and out his back. That explained the wide, livid scars I’d inspected quietly on family trips to go swimming at Lake Ponchartrain. Throughout much of his time in France, too, he was the surgeon’s assistant for amputations and other battlefield operations.

It was a bloody immersion for a gentle Sunday School boy who liked to sing, and like many a combat veteran he turned the page when he came home to my mother and Lyn, the almost three-year-old son he’d never met. What could he have said, and who would have understood? For him, I now believe, the choice was a stark one between living in the darkness and turning away from it. Hence his stylized but engaging and interesting exclamations while patting the mattress and tasting the ice cream. He chose to live. I’m also certain Dad’s combination of devoutness and religious open-mindedness, along with his highly sympathetic responses to such a wide variety of people, was strengthened by the cataclysm of his early manhood. In a world of such horrible suffering, kindness and forbearance made the most sense to him.

Northern California felt to both of my parents like a refreshing opening, and their attitude briskly ushered Lyn and me, too, into a new world. In Louisiana I had gone to segregated public
Matthew’s Gospel

schools and had little significant contact with African Americans. In California I stepped into a world that was more pluralistic and dynamic. I remember coming home from third grade in Albany, California, with the “N word” on my lips and having both my parents sit me down immediately to explain that our family never used such language under any circumstances. Their own unusual degree of seriousness made this a sobering moment for me, and I have always been grateful to my parents for not letting the occasion slide. Later in that same year a Sunday School teacher had taken special pains to impress us all with our duty to bring others to Christ, in fulfillment of the Great Commission. So I set off to school one Monday determined to evangelize Hal, my Jewish best friend. My mother headed me off at the door when she saw the bible under my arm and told me to leave it at home; Hal had his own religion, and what I had been led to view as a loving action toward him would simply destroy our friendship.

Though such moments of guidance within the family were invisible to a rising group of would-be censors, other aspects of my parents’ aerated religious lives were less under wraps. My father’s teaching at the seminary, with its warm appreciation of the broader world of process-thought, came to the attention of certain denominational politicians. One statewide publication accused him of “not having a personal devil.” I remember Dad laughing about this, which suggested to me that the accusation may have been true. My mild-mannered mother even came in for criticism by the same types after she was ordained as a deacon at the Tiburon Baptist Church. With the apron she always wore around the house and her devotion to the world of kitchen and garden, she was an unlikely champion for feminism. But she calmly pointed out the biblical warrant for women deacons, in such early Christian figures as Dorcas. Though after heading off to
Pomona College I’d begun to drift away from my own affiliation with the Baptists, I felt angry about having people of my parents’ character come in for criticism by such hypocrites and boobs. For their part, though, Mom and Dad never spoke harshly about those who impugned their motives. With friends from their early days at LSU and Louisville, they quietly established an escrow fund so that their lifelong double tithing could continue to go toward socially progressive initiatives within the Southern Baptist Convention. And they continued to delight in their own church and in their deep experience of a Bible-based faith.

What has been borne in on me through moving back and forth between Matthew’s Passion and the lives of my parents is the perpetual need for dialogue between tenderness and resolve. This is true both in reading the Bible and in trying to participate in the major crises of one’s time on earth. I believe that climate destabilization caused by overly consumptive and wasteful societies like our own is in fact the crucial religious challenge facing the world now. It imposes the gravest suffering on the most vulnerable human populations; it disrupts natural systems on which so many species beyond our own depend for their existence; it blights the beauty of our blue-green world. But for all of us who live in the economically developed world there is no way to shunt the blame onto oil-company executives or conservative politicians. With relation to climate change, middle-class citizens of the West, as of the industrialized nations of East Asia, are all goats. Our most appropriate and constructive response will be a combination of repentance and determination—both to bend our nations’ policies in the direction of renewable energy and fairness and to transform our own household practices toward mindfulness and restraint.
When Peter realized, at the end of Matthew 26, that he had betrayed Jesus for the third time, “he went out and wept bitterly.” Repentance and renewal are similarly called for now by people like myself whose way of life reflects the assumptions of our greedy and consumptive society. But, as was true for Peter, such transformation will only become real when enacted, both in our roles as citizens and in our personal practice. Such an urgent call for change is at the core of Matthew’s depiction of the Passion as it was for that long-ago revival in Bastrop. Because of my parents’ examples, though, I believe that we can pursue fundamental change without falling into the divisiveness and anger expressed by Matthew or the manipulation and hysteria of that tent meeting. In addition to *agapé*, another word from the Greek New Testament that my father liked to reflect on was *hamartía*. This term, which is translated as “sin,” is generally taken to refer to a shameful moral infraction. But Dad liked to point to its original connection with an archery target, so that a more accurate meaning would therefore be “missing the mark.” A moment of crisis such as the present one requires us, collectively and individually, to aim in a different direction. We may do so more effectively, however, if instead of squandering too much of our energy berating others or ourselves we advance together in mutual affection and encouragement.