



CalmlyPlotting

2014
LENT
DEVOTIONALS



The Stillspeaking Writers' Group is composed of United Church of Christ ministers and authors who collaborate on a variety of resources for people in the church, outside the church, and not so sure about the church. Their motto: "Hearing God where you live (and other surprising places)." Read more about the writers of "Calmly Plotting" on the last page and the inside back cover.

Stillspeaking. It's the shorter form of "God is still speaking," a campaign by the United Church of Christ (UCC) to simply remind us that God still has a lot more to say. Since 2004, Stillspeaking has worked with thousands of UCC churches and individuals across the country to make religion relevant again and to extend an extravagant welcome to all—because no matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you're welcome here. Here at the United Church of Christ.

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About the cover:

New growth out of the old earth is a well-worn theme for Lent. This year, we put a different slant on it with the words "Calmly Plotting" as our title. They come from the phrase, "... calmly plotting the resurrection," which writer E.B. White used to describe his wife Katherine's autumn bulb-planting. Read the full story in the devotional for Ash Wednesday, March 5.

Calmly Plotting

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L E N T
D E V O T I O N A L S

T H E S T I L L S P E A K I N G W R I T E R S ' G R O U P

Hearing God where you live (and other surprising places).

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

“E. B. White, the famous writer of *Charlotte’s Web* and more, found his wife, Katherine, a brilliant editor at the *New Yorker*, in the last year of her life, placing daffodil bulbs gently into the Maine ground in October. She was ‘calmly plotting the resurrection,’ according to White. She knew she was sick, she knew she didn’t have long, but she did have hope. Surely she was afraid. But she wasn’t afraid enough to resist planting.”

In her devotional for Ash Wednesday, Donna Schaper tells the story behind the title of these 2014 Lenten devotionals. The fuller story of Katherine White’s stubbornly optimistic gardening is found in the word “plotting.” Before planting those bulbs, she spent weeks, perhaps months, drawing up her plans. Spring may come all by itself; but a garden, like a life well-spent even in the face of death, requires conscious planning.

Here is E.B. White, from the introduction to the collection of Katherine White’s *New Yorker* gardening essays,* which he collected and edited after her death:

“As the years went by and age overtook her, there was something comical yet touching in her bedraggled appearance on this awesome occasion—the small, hunched-over figure, her studied absorption in the implausible notion that there would be yet another spring, oblivious to the ending of her own days, which she knew perfectly well was near at hand, sitting there with her detailed chart under those dark skies in the dying October, calmly plotting the resurrection.”

May your own Lenten days be filled with the knowledge of yet another spring, yet another Easter when even death is conquered.

The Stillspeaking Writers’ Group

**Onward and Upward in the Garden*. Katherine S. White. Beacon Press, 1979.

A S H
W E D N E S D A Y
M A R C H 5

**“The women ran from
the tomb, afraid but
filled with joy.”**

Matthew 8:28

“Calmly Plotting the Resurrection”

D O N N A S C H A P E R

E. B. White, the famous writer of *Charlotte’s Web* and more, found his wife, Katherine, a brilliant editor at the *New Yorker*, in the last year of her life, placing daffodil bulbs gently into the Maine ground in October. She was “calmly plotting the resurrection,” according to White. She knew she was sick, she knew she didn’t have long, but she did have hope. Surely she was afraid. But she wasn’t afraid enough to resist planting.

She reminds us of those women at first discovery of the empty tomb. They were surely afraid but not afraid enough to preclude their hope or joy. We begin Lent with a destination in mind. We too want to find the tomb

This Lent may we calmly plot the resurrection, one bulb, one congregation and one day at a time. Amen.

empty or at least *some* tomb empty. We are willing to weep as long as joy comes in the morning, or to the next generation of bulbs or people.

Michael Piazza, a new church planter, spends a lot of time asking people to let go of old ways of doing church. Perhaps another time than 11 a.m. on a Sunday, the time the youth we covet like to sleep? Or perhaps, for church meetings, stand up around tables in a café style, so that people can actually talk to each other rather than take minutes? Mediate hard fights that happen without Robert’s rules and perhaps instead use Roberta’s? Mike says, with feeling, “Help me plant a church for your grandchildren.”

T H U R S D A Y
M A R C H 6

**“For I know my
transgressions, and my
sin is ever before me.”**

Psalm 51:3

Our Sin

D E B B I E B L U E

How can we live with our sin ever before us and remain calm? I have spent hours frantically regretting some sentence I spoke or (more generally) my failure as a human being. But I have spent even more time, I’m guessing, rehashing my neighbor’s or spouse’s or the Koch brothers’ sin. Perhaps because we are born into a world filled with rivalry or because we are afraid of not getting enough love, we learn very early to fight to protect ourselves. This self-protection often involves honing our ability to critique others—as if it will help our situation to sort out how we are more righteous. We scapegoat others, believing somehow this will redeem us. This, I believe, is the heart of our sin. Our *sin ever before us* doesn’t look like loathing ourselves because we forgot to bring

our reusable bags to the store. It’s not loathing our God-given humanness or our personal failings. It’s recognizing how we do violence to others trying to protect ourselves. David had the husband of his lover killed to preserve his reputation. Psalm 51 is his lament for his sin.

There is a freedom that comes from recognizing ourselves as sinners. Instead of participating in some evaluative frenzy, we can stop being so critical, calm down, love.

The Psalm says that the sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken heart. This isn’t because God desires to punish us, but because our hearts—hardened by self-protection and competition—need to be broken open and re-made by God’s merciful generosity.

God, help me to know my need for mercy, that I might be merciful, kind, and compassionate. Amen.

FRIDAY
MARCH 7

The Temptation to Judge

L I L L I A N D A N I E L

“Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself.”

Romans 2:1-11

In our family we have a rule: Nobody can tell anybody else what they should give up for Lent.

You can imagine how we came up with such a rule. “So let’s all go around the table and talk about what we’re thinking about doing for Lent,” quickly turned into, “I’ll tell you what Dad should give up for Lent!”

Everyone’s an expert about other people’s spiritual welfare.

“Cursing doesn’t hurt anybody. What about global warming?”

“If you give up shopping and spending, it hurts the economy.”

“You said you were giving up sweets, but I saw you eating ice cream straight

out of the container after you thought we were all asleep!”

By now we are well into Lent and the things you gave up may be tempting you. Perhaps they already have. The good things you decided to do and add to your life may have proven harder to fit in than you thought.

But remember, whenever we try to get closer to God, it’s only natural for the competition to show up. If Jesus had to fight off the devil’s temptation in the desert, you know you’ll have to as well.

Don’t let other people’s comments or judgments slow you down or discourage you. You know what you need to do for Lent, and God is still eager to help you do it.

Jesus, give me strength when the devil tempts me with ridicule and criticism. I’m trying to follow you instead. Amen.

SATURDAY
MARCH 8

Broken Stuff

A N T H O N Y B . R O B I N S O N

“The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

Psalm 51:17

The Bible’s prophets frequently rail against those who present sub-standard offerings to God—broken or blemished stuff like crippled sheep or sick pigeons. Not the first fruits but the last ones, the dregs.

There’s a modern version of this. People offer up out-of-date canned food or busted boxes of mac and cheese for the local food bank. Or a scratched toy for the toy drive or stained clothing for the clothing bank. Not cool.

There is, however, one broken thing that God is glad to receive . . . a broken heart.

“A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

Why does God especially welcome the broken and contrite heart? Because when we bring this to God we aren’t

any longer pretending. We aren’t pretending to have it all together. We are telling the truth. We need God and we know it.

The truth is, our lives are broken in ways too numerous to name. We need help. We need God. We need the company of other people who are also contrite, humbled by personal failure and shortcoming, and seeking God’s help and healing.

When we bring these things to God—our brokenness, our true sorrow for hurt we’ve caused, our contrition for our shortcomings and self-deceptions, God doesn’t ever reject these broken offerings.

Even on those really, really bad days when we may despise ourselves, God does not. “A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

Grant us, O God, that choicest of gifts—a sense of sin. Amen.

The Tempter

QUINN G. CALDWELL

“Then the Lord God said to the woman, ‘What is this that you have done?’ The woman said, ‘The serpent seduced me, and I ate.’ The Lord God said to the serpent, ‘Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals.’”

Genesis 3:13-14

Among the best features of our house is the laundry chute. It opens via a pedal that makes the top pop up. It goes from the second floor to the basement, and if the light’s on at the bottom, you can watch stuff tumble all the way down. We knew we would be lost—along with the cat and a great many other things—if our then-two-year-old discovered it. The temptation would just be too much.

So we pretended it wasn’t there. We banked plants in front of it. We made sure never to use it when he was around. This worked for over a year—then his ten-year-old cousin came for a sleepover. And that was the night our son discovered the delights of throwing glow sticks down the chute.

Next morning, defeated, we let our son dump a heavy load of wet towels down, followed by a sheet that had come off the bed in the middle of the night after somebody’s copious accident. Then we heard a distant “Aaaaargh! Heeeeelp!” We ran to the basement to discover our nephew in the laundry basket. It seems he had looked up the chute just as the towels came out. They had knocked him into the basket, the pee sheet had come out right on his face, and he’d gotten himself all tangled up trying to get free. Not able to decide if he should laugh or be grossed out, he was doing both. I just laughed.

Some sins carry their own punishments.



**God, lead me not into temptation.
And don’t let me lead anybody else there, either.
Amen.**

MONDAY
MARCH 10

Out of Hiding

MARY LUTI

**“While I kept silence,
my body wasted
away, my strength
was dried up as by the
heat of summer. Then I
acknowledged my sin
to you; I did not hide
my iniquity.”**

Psalm 32:3-4

Someone I love is in rehab, his second try. He’s starting over after pretending for years to be sober when he wasn’t. I can’t begin to describe the mess he’s made, the grief he’s caused, the emptiness in his voice when he finally emerged from deep cover and confessed his lie.

Unlike last time, he’s “working the program” honestly now. It’s hard and it’s painful, but not as painful as when he was going it alone, when it was just the bottle talking, telling him, “You’re fine.”

Now he’s in better company—a fellowship of the nearly-dead who really want to live. They tell their own stories and listen to each others’ truth. They know they’re not fine, and they tell it like it is. They need each other to make it.

Light of lights, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, no secrets hidden. Make us mirrors of mercy for each other so that church may be a company of grace where truth can set us free. Amen.

I called him the other day. He sounded different. He sounded overjoyed. In such a fellowship, he told me, you can strip naked and not die of exposure. Even the worst thing is redeemable.

When I heard his voice I wondered, if the payoff is joy like that, why wouldn’t we all want uncompromising light to shine on our deceitful hearts?

Maybe we don’t think we need it. We’re not that far gone. And maybe that’s lie number one. But maybe we’d be willing to come out of hiding if we had some company, a fellowship in which there are no reprisals for truth-telling. No shock, no shaming. Only healing, only the gift of life. For who can bear to see themselves truly except in the mirror of grace?

Maybe we could all emerge from deep cover in the fellowship of church, if church were such a fellowship.

TUESDAY
MARCH 11

The One Who Stands by Our Side

MARTIN B. COPENHAVER

**“I will give you
another Advocate, to
be with you forever...
I will not leave you
orphaned.”**

John 14:16,18

According to John, after Jesus concludes his public ministry, he spends a considerable amount of time with his disciples preparing them for what lies ahead. As Jesus speaks of his death and resurrection, his disciples have a multitude of questions. They sound like the questions of children just before their parents go out the door: Where are you going? Do you have to go? Can’t we go with you? When will you be back? Who will stay with us while you are away? They are plaintive questions, pressing and immediate.

Jesus responds that God “will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever... I will not leave you orphaned” (John 14:16,18). He is promising them

Wonderful Counselor, beloved Comforter, I thank you that, even as I call you to my side today, you are already there, granting me the continued presence of Jesus Christ. Amen.

the presence of the Holy Spirit. The word translated “Advocate” (sometimes translated, “Counselor,” or “Comforter”) means, literally, “someone who is called to one’s side.” The Holy Spirit is the one who stands by the disciples even after Jesus departs. And the Spirit is a constant and comforting presence for all those who follow Jesus, an advocate in times of trial, a counselor in perplexity. The presence of the Holy Spirit, so wonderfully manifest in Jesus, continues to stand by and work through those who continue to follow him after his death and resurrection. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit we have Jesus’ continued presence at our side always.

W E D N E S D A Y
M A R C H 1 2

“For it is clear that Jesus did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham.”

Hebrews 2:10-18

We're No Angels

L I L L I A N D A N I E L

Some people act like Jesus did come just for the angels. They act all prim and proper, and all but wear haloes to church. They act like they already have all divine knowledge (“The Bible says it, that’s good enough for me”) and like they’re already so good they could float to heaven on a cloud any day now. And heaven forbid you don’t live up to their standards and beliefs.

Of course, if you were to scratch beneath that surface, as pastors often have the opportunity to do, you would know there are very few angels walking around the earth, clergy included.

We’ll meet angels down the road. But beware of the person who pretends to be one here on earth.

God, let my spiritual role models inspire me without deflating me. Let their goodness seem attainable. Remind me of all you can do with a little imperfection. Amen.

You may think, “But I’ve met an angel!” We use the term to describe people who make a huge difference in our lives, who are blessings to the world. But I’ve never met one of those people who actually claimed the title for himself. Angelic people are the first to tell you, “I’m no angel.” They’re humble like that, and clear.

Jesus came for the descendants of Abraham. When Paul wrote that to the early church, he meant Jesus came for all of us.

Apparently, angels don’t need saving. But we do.

So throw me in with the non-angelic crowd. Besides, they always look like they’re having more fun anyway.

T H U R S D A Y
M A R C H 1 3

“I want to remind you to stir into flame the strength and boldness that is in you...”

Timothy 1:6 (Living Bible)

Stirring Things Up!

K E N N E T H L . S A M U E L

Worship in many African American contexts is known to be a bit loud. The drums, cymbals, bass guitar, tambourines, Hammond organ and syncopated clapping of the Gospel choir combined with the impassioned proclamations of the preacher can certainly raise a few acoustic decibels.

After church one Sunday a five-year-old girl came up to me and said softly: “Pastor, you forgot to use your inside voice.” I responded: “You’re right baby. I was just trying to stir up the people, so they wouldn’t fall asleep.”

Lent requires that something in us be stirred up. The orthodox presumptions of our Judeo-Christian doctrine must be re-examined. The assumed affirmations of our hope beyond the grave must be re-awakened. The Christ who refused to be confined to established religion in life and who refused to be confined to finite terminations in death must be re-encountered. The stationary order of our worship and the sedate posture of our devotions must be re-engaged.

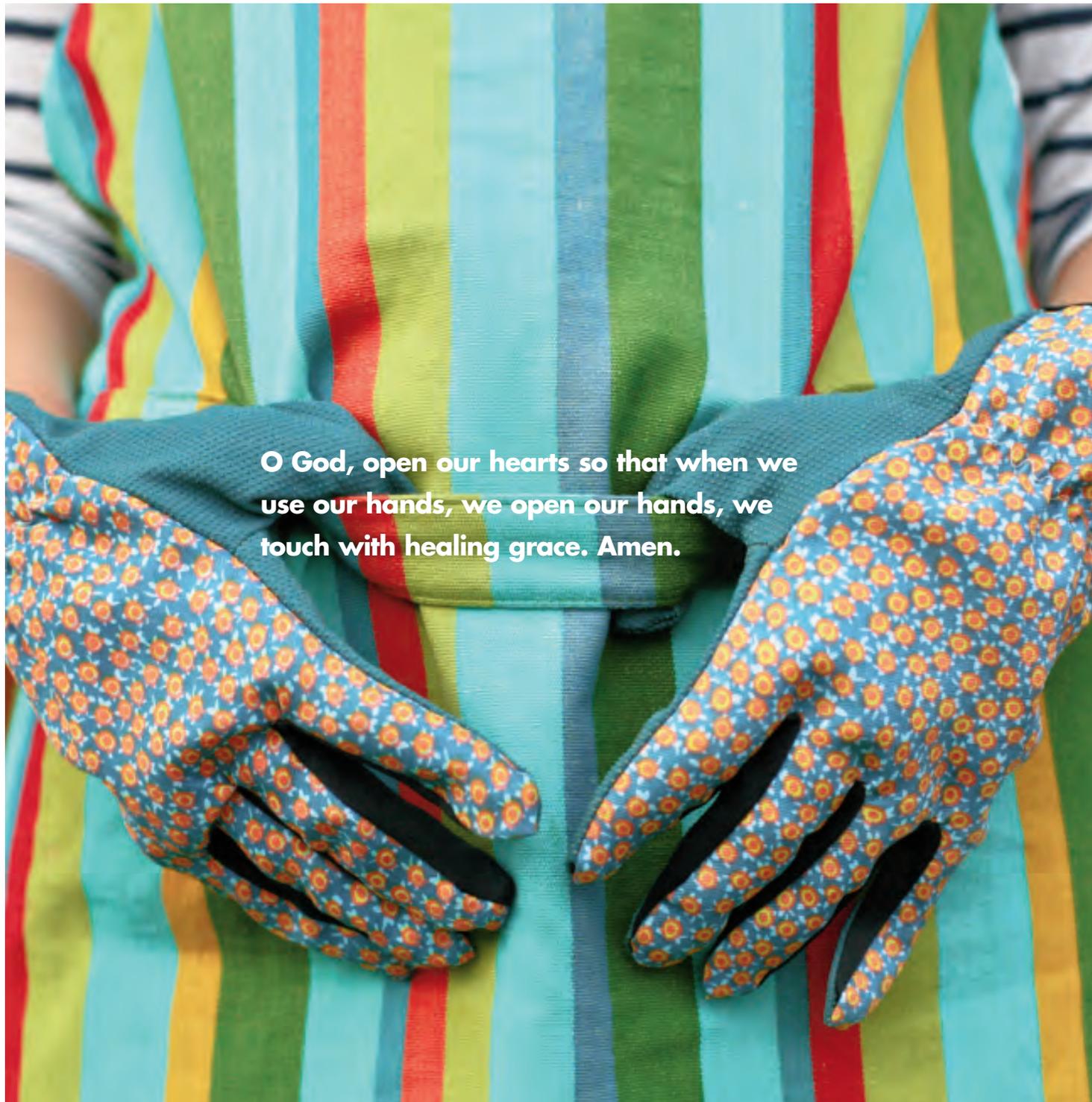
Dear God, there is so much in me that needs to be rekindled. Allow me the time and space this season to stir up everything that I already am. Amen.

This is the time for us to re-connect, re-consider and rekindle everything about faith to which we have given passive assent.

On the label of liquids you may read these instructions: “Shake well before using.” It is presumed that everything you need in the liquid is already in the bottle. But without shaking, the ingredients necessary to make the liquid effective will remain at the bottom, thus rendering the liquid at the top ineffective. Stirring up the ingredients at the bottom makes the entire liquid solution effective.

This is the season to disturb our sedimentary attitudes, prescribed actions and established assumptions. This is the season to re-evaluate the true consistency between our beliefs and our behaviors. This is the season to stir up the gifts of faith that God has placed inside each of us.

This is the season of Lent.



O God, open our hearts so that when we use our hands, we open our hands, we touch with healing grace. Amen.

FRIDAY
MARCH 14

“God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that when the handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were brought to the sick, their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them.”

Acts 19:11

Touch

D O N N A S C H A P E R

Grueling gardening can become joyful gardening, with the arrival of a cool cloth for a hot forehead. Discouragement can turn to encouragement, if the right person at the right time in the right way gives us a pat on the back. Caressing a child’s chin after the tricycle spill can stop the tears and put the kid back on the bike. Hasn’t someone told you many times about the importance of a strong handshake?

Touch is tremendously important to human beings. It can change the cycle and change the momentum. Ask those who are lonely, they know. Ask those who have been touched in a way they should not have been

touched, they also know. Paul apparently had the divine touch. He knew how to fill his aprons and his handkerchiefs with the spirit of God. We can too.

The ordinary moves to the extraordinary when we channel the touch of God with our own hands and clothing. Such holy touch has to be careful not to get conceited or formulaic or fraught with its own power or need. Healing happens from the open heart not the self-aggrandizing one. As long as our touches are small, even domestic, as domestic as the laundry, we too can provide extraordinary miracles.

Outsider Faith

ANTHONY B. ROBINSON

“When Jesus was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, ‘Lord do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof.’”

Luke 7:6

Over and over again Scripture tells us that some of our very best teachers will be people we don’t expect to learn from at all. Some are the least and lost. Others are oddities and outsiders.

In this little story (Luke 7:1-10) it is not the religious leaders (aka Pharisees) who get it, but—surprise—a Roman military officer. The religious leaders appeal to Jesus on the officer’s behalf and—note this—they do so on the basis of merit. “He was a big giver to our synagogue building fund—he deserves your help,” they tell Jesus.

The Roman officer, who sought Jesus’ help for his beloved, ill servant, did not however imagine he *deserved* anything from Jesus. In fact, he said he was totally unworthy. But what he did understand is what it meant to have

authority and to give orders. And he got that Jesus had authority to order the evil spirits to stand down.

In other words, this foreigner and outsider, this representative of the Empire, became a teacher of faith to the faithful church-goers who thought God’s grace was something you had to earn or deserve. Nope, not how it works. “You got the power, speak the word,” said the Roman officer to Jesus. And Jesus said, “Wow, naked faith!” (My paraphrase.)

Some of our best teachers and guides will be unexpected. They may be the very old or the very young. They may be addicts struggling to recover, or people of another faith, or someone we truly cannot stand (which proves that God does have a sense of humor).

Houdini God, forever slipping the knots and bonds we make for you, revealing yourself in unexpected people and events: Thank you. Amen.

Questions

SHAUNDRACUNNINGHAM

“Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’”

John 3:4

“Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he has been doing?”

John 7:51

Asking for Trouble is the title of Donald Woods’ autobiography in which he chronicles his journey as a white South African journalist who used his pen to work against apartheid. Although he and the Prime Minister held staunchly divergent views, they communicated regularly for years. However, one day, Woods asked the Prime Minister a question that changed everything: how do you reconcile your support of apartheid with being a Christian? Immediately, Woods says, he saw a flash of anger on the Prime Minister’s face and from that moment on he knew he was “asking for trouble.”

Now what does trouble look like? For Woods, trouble leads to house arrest and eventually being banned from his own country. For Nicodemus, as a religious authority among a hostile cohort of colleagues, his questions risked identifying him with this “King of

the Jews” and enemy of the state. Nicodemus asked Jesus a question in chapter 3 that lingers with him through chapter 7 and in John’s account it propels him to help prepare Jesus’ body after crucifixion.

I love John’s gospel because he never makes it clear whether a *conversion* happened with Nicodemus; he renders it a moot point. The wondrous and powerful witness that Nicodemus shares with us is of a man who was irrevocably impacted. Each of us, like Nicodemus, has had encounters, and as James Baldwin declares, “Whether we sing, shout, cry, dance, or keep it to ourselves—know from whence you’ve come.” Remember the questions and encounters that shaped you along with the questions that you have yet to ask. Some will get you in trouble, others may lead to ridicule and suspicion but, ultimately, they hold the key that sets you free.

Perplexing God, may we recall the tip-toe, egg-shell questions we’ve asked along with the disturbing responses that rattle our core. Help us to live in these tensions with courage, grace, and humility. Amen.