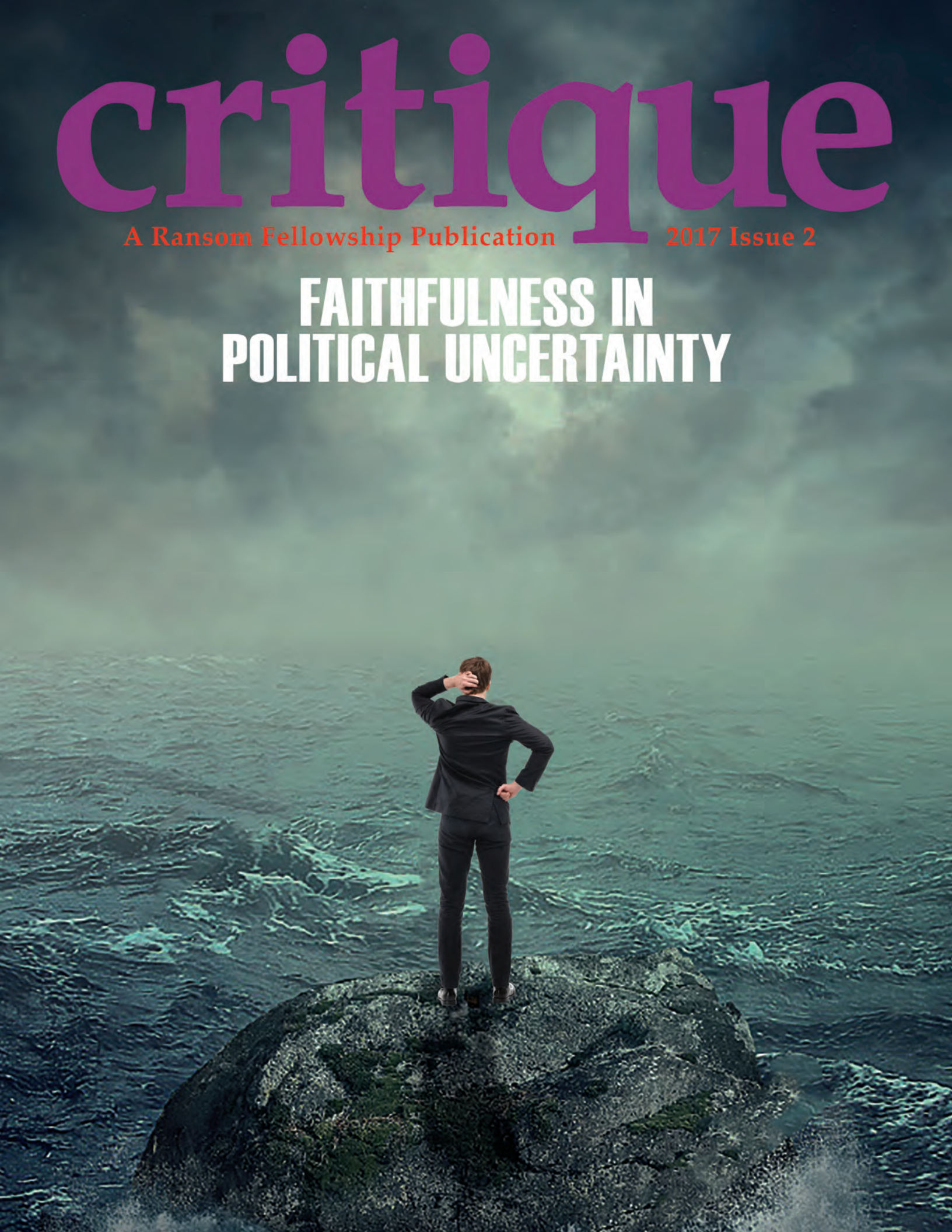


critique

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FAITHFULNESS IN POLITICAL UNCERTAINTY



CRITIQUE



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Except where noted, all articles are by Denis Haack.

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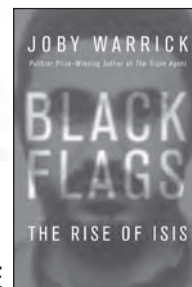
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Polarization, Reaction, and Faithfulness



I like to think that my beliefs are pure, held only because they are demonstrably true, and maintained in a form untouched by the vagaries and cross currents of disbelief swirling around me in a pluralistic world. A pleasant fantasy, one that owes its plausibility to the Enlightenment, that mistaken upheaval of thought that imagined truth to be reducible to logical, impersonal, abstract ideas. But it is a fantasy nevertheless, as Jesus insisted (John 14:6), and one that leads to legalism and a deadly blindness to the folly of my deceitful heart.

Each week my pastor leads us in confessing our faith by reciting together the Nicene Creed. To any that says this is an empty ritual, I reply: I need the repetition, and weekly may not be sufficient. I want to be shaped only by the Scriptures and creed, but know I am also shaped by my world.

In his magisterial study of the Protestant and Catholic reformations of the early modern world, Yale professor Carlos Eire notes an important dynamic. In a cultural setting where there are opposing camps in terms of beliefs, practices, and values, people adopt positions that are true to their side *and* in opposition to their rivals. "Polarization always sets in motion a certain dialectic between opposing sides," Eire says, "as

they sharpen their identities in contradistinction to one another. In other words, each side seeks to be unlike the other."

As Western Christians in the early decades of the twenty-first century, we live in a social setting where the majority culture is post-Christian and pluralistic, and where much of the church has lost its way. Thus, even though we may not be fully conscious of it, our notions of faithfulness will be at least partially shaped by a reaction against two opposing camps. As we seek to live and think biblically, we react against Christians whose positions we dislike *and* against a world hostile towards our faith.

The solution is not to think we must achieve some level of objective perfection so we will be blithely unaffected by wayward believers and a hostile culture, because we can't. The issue rather is to be aware of this reality and to find creative ways to thoughtfully offset it.

One idea is that we can list what we dislike. After all, what I dislike, and disapprove of, or find distasteful is what I will tend to react against. I don't mind non-Christians knowing I am a Christian, as long as they don't think I'm *that* kind of Christian. *They* are politicized, narrow, judgmental, and shallow while *my* type is not. And so I live and talk in a way that distinguishes me from these others, whoever they may be.

We need to believe the truth about ourselves. We yearn to be purely biblical and orthodox but in truth know only in part, are still learning, and have hearts that deceive us even about the things that we hold most dear. The wonder of it all is that God still uses us and does not abandon us. The work we do in the pursuit of our vocation is kingdom work,

and even our unconscious reactions can be tempered over time by the gently sanctifying grace of the Holy Spirit.

And so it is called a walk of faith, a path of slow growth and yearning for God. Someday we'll see clearly, but that is yet to come. We'll still be learning and yearning, since we will remain finite, but the trouble with reacting will be past. We won't dislike the Christians we are with and the world will be the kingdom of grace. Can't even imagine what that will be like, but there it is.

Until then, we can be aware. ■

Source: Carlos Eire in Reformation: The Early Modern World, 1450-1650 (New Haven, CT; Yale University Press; 2016) p. 371

Pushed into a Hostile World

Historical consistency is certainly one of the unique marks of Christianity. Christians proclaim the exclusive claims of Jesus as we respond to Jesus' own words: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 4:6). I used to wrestle with this statement and with the forceful ways that the church asserted its assumed dominance on culture and its exclusive claims over other religions. But over time I came to realize that this exclusivity came out of the mouth of Jesus first and in the character of Jesus quite consistently. Thus, apart from the church's institutional need to preserve itself, this idea of establishing a personal relationship with Jesus is highlighted uniquely by the historic reality of Jesus. Religions come to us with sets of rules we must follow to please God; Jesus comes to us to dwell within our lives not only to show us the way, but so we will experience, perhaps for the first time, unconditional love and grace. Religions call us to join and support the institution; Jesus calls us to a liberation of hearts and minds, and invites us into a community of radical generosity, inclusion, and faithfulness. The Ten Commandments and the law of God are the result of what happens when we have Jesus live through us. Even King David, Moses, and Abraham of the Jewish heritage looked to a future when these righteous paths would be fulfilled perfectly in a person. St. Paul, a religious Pharisee who had tried to live perfectly within the law, tells us repeatedly in the epistle to the Romans that our efforts to obey the law turn into an enslavement and create a wretched condition of pride, especially if we think we are successful in pleasing God.

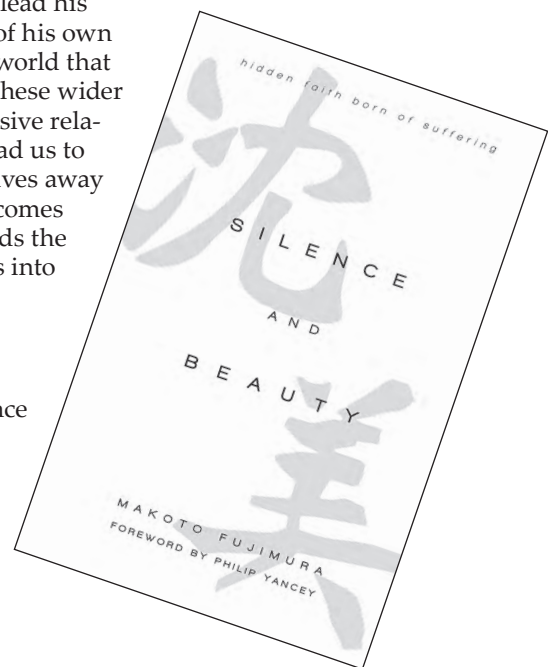
Culture is a complex ecosystem of often-conflicting and competing

elements. God, in wisdom, provided complexity and diversity in Eden, then preserved it in the fallen world. Christianity claims that, in order for the entire diversity of confluences to bring all to thrive, we need a center that holds all things together. St. Paul, in the letter to the Colossians, states of Christ, "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:17). Christ is that center.

In the hidden nature of the post-lapsarian (fallen) world, that center may remain invisible. It requires faith to trust in the invisible rather than the visible. The true church may remain invisible to the eye or exist beyond any institutional structures. Therefore, no matter how perfect our churches may be, no institution can claim to have all the answers. This is the paradoxical nature of Christ's exclusivity; Christ is "the way and the truth and the life," but he, as a good shepherd, may lead his sheep to the wider pastures of his own design to push us out into a world that may be hostile to our faith. These wider pastures demand a nonexclusive relativism. Christ may indeed lead us to mystery and humility that gives away power; thus this exclusivity comes with quite a price. Christ holds the center still, and yet guides us into the storms of life. ■

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This excerpt is taken from Silence and Beauty: Hidden Faith Born of Suffering by Makoto Fujimura (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2016) pages 76–77.



Odd Kid

the odd kid at the bus stop
drops his backpack in the grass,
sorta with defiance,
but not really, not actually.
do you know him?
he gets quite near my space.
odd comments, odd questions.
where is his mother?
I'm on his side,
but I feel awkward
pretending it's not awkward
(though I try).
home
we
go,
me and my kid,
and the odd kid
circles the bus stop awhile longer.
friday (or was it monday?),
we saw him on the corner
as we drove by in our car.
he smiled and waved,
sunny like, funny like,
as if we were his people
and he was ours.
or maybe he didn't, not actually,
but I saw him that way
that day
he being he, not odd at all,
and me
not awkward. ■



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Emily Awes Anderson is a poet, wife, and mom from Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Her love of writing is lifelong, and she hopes this given gladness can serve

God's goodness and glory. She enjoys her crazy kids, her heroic husband, not cleaning, getting haircuts, and going on vacation (of course). Her poetry and other writings on scripture, God's blessings, his timing, and the day by day of this beautiful, difficult, funny, imperfect life can be found on her blog, Silver Pennies: Brief Writings on Riches at emilyawesanderson.com.

When Progress Breeds Problems

Usually we are simply swept along by progress and hardly notice how the advances in technology and the marketplace actually work themselves out in our lives. We've become used to incremental change, as long as it stays incremental. Occasionally we do notice, of course, when the change is too big to slip by us, or when things fail to work as they should or freeze when they are needed or when we are surprised that some latest advance takes away even as it gives. Several years ago I updated my laptop and was astounded to discover the new version did not have a slot for DVDs. What were they thinking? (Actually I know what they were thinking, but their thinking excluded my needs so I had to purchase an external drive.)

Most people don't usually think of progress taking away even as it gives, but we should because that is what happens. A remote allows you to watch television from the comfort of your couch, yet you must juggle three in the right order to watch an episode of *American Gods* on Starz. Central heating keeps my family warm through the cold Minnesota winters, yet removed the necessity of my son doing the healthy chores of chopping, stacking, and feeding wood into the boiler. Everything is electronic and automatic in my car, yet when anything breaks only a trained mechanic with computerized diagnostics can fix it. My cellphone is sleek enough to be with me constantly, yet now I can be interrupted anytime, everywhere I go. All represent advances, all are seen as progress, all are good things for which I am grateful, and yet every one of them takes as well as gives.

The Christian perspective provides a lively metaphor for understanding life at this point. It recognizes that in

a finite, broken world there is always a dialectic in play, so our experience of things is—and here is the metaphor that is so richly informative—for blessing and for curse.

The concept is an ancient one. When Israel was being formed into a nation by being brought into solemn covenant with God and receiving his law, the contrast was placed before them. "See," Moses told them, "I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you today, and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn aside from the way that I am commanding you today, to go after other gods that you have not known" (Deuteronomy 11:26–28).

This was not an artificial dichotomy made up at the moment for religious effect, but an accurate reflection of what life is like in a fallen world. At each point, we find there is a way leading towards life and a way leading towards death. Things can be used for God's glory or misused for our own glory or in the service of some tawdry golden calf. It may not always reveal itself in such stark terms, of course, but we sense the reality of the choice. The new job may be better financially and more satisfying, but it may also require us to spend less time with our family or to move to a city where none of the churches will nourish us spiritually. Receiving news alerts throughout the day may make me more informed while also increasing my cynicism or despair.

The brokenness of the world has worked its way down into every aspect of created reality. Dig down into anything and never will you come across a section of reality untouched by

the fall. We ourselves are glorious ruins, bearers of God's image and yet sinners. A new friendship may be the best thing that's happened to us all year, but it will take time and energy that is already in short supply. As the old saying goes, never say Yes to anything without knowing what you will first say No to in order to make the commitment possible.

This is the nature of things as we actually experience it. Seeing life in such terms is thus simply realistic. It prompts us to be grateful for the good that comes while reminding us to be cautious about jumping on every bandwagon that accompanies it. And it provides us a reason to be alert to discover the hidden costs of things that are good, but that take as well as give.

This suggests a need for discernment. To see the good and be thankful, while spotting the hidden costs in order to make allowances. Examples worth discussing are everywhere we look, if we have eyes to see.

Market competition spawns impatience

In a superb sermon on patience, the Reverend Timothy Keller points out that the growing efficiency of the marketplace tends to reinforce impatience. He says he loves one-click shopping, yet the competition of modern marketing makes him impatient with having to wait to receive what he has ordered. I'm the same way. If one company will deliver the product more quickly to my front door, that's the company I will use. I've come to believe that I deserve to receive things quickly, and I'm impatient when that doesn't occur.

Last week I ordered some briefs, and was sent a tracking number with my receipt. My package has been at a "shipping partner center"—what is that, for

goodness sake—for three days—three days, for goodness sake—and I’ve actually considered cancelling and ordering from someone else. A first world problem, I know, but still, there it is.

It used to be that the normal operation of the marketplace helped consumers to develop patience. Each step in the process took time, and we accepted that. I can remember waiting for something to arrive that we had ordered by mail from a catalogue. “Be patient,” my mom would say. “It’ll come.” And it did, and in that process I learned to wait. Just today I checked—twice—the tracking number on the package I just mentioned. Twice. As things get faster, I seem to be less comfortable with things that move slowly, even if that speed is actually the normal pace of life in that instance.

As with so many things in culture, the speed of the marketplace comes with both blessing and curse. Blessing us in its efficiency and speed, and cursing us in breeding impatience and a sense of entitlement.

Cell phones are addictive

This is old news, I know, but it’s interesting nevertheless, and it’s doubtful cell phones are going to disappear anytime soon.

A fascinating article in the *New York Times* reports on “a curious bright spot” that “has emerged in the

youth drug culture: American teenagers are growing less likely to try or regularly use drugs, including alcohol.” The numbers are down, and of course the question that needs to be asked is, why? What has changed?

Various theories have been proposed and research has begun. “But researchers are starting to ponder an intriguing question: Are teenagers using drugs less in part because they are constantly stimulated and entertained by their computers and phones? The possibility is worth exploring, they say, because use of smartphones and tablets has exploded over the same period that drug use has declined. This correlation does not mean that one phenomenon is causing the other, but scientists say interactive media appears to play to similar impulses as drug experimentation,

including sensation-seeking and the desire for independence.”

This is not a reason to throw out our cell phones, nor is it a reason to hide our children away in a gated—literally or metaphorically—community with old-fashioned dial phones. We need not be afraid or just react, but we should be wise. Besides, the research has just begun—though our faith already suggests that moderation in things is always prudent. The question is, what is moderation in this case, and how do we instill it in our children.

A fast paced life

This too is old news, but even those of us who try to keep from being sucked into the fast pace of modern life still



feel the pull. It's like swimming in a river while trying to keep away from the current. Even as we quietly float in the shallows we can sense the pull of the current trying to take us downstream.

Yet fast and slow are not merely matters of time and pace. They also correspond to ways of thinking and life, as we should expect if we think about it.

Carl Honoré in his *In Praise of Slowness* says: "Fast is busy, controlling, aggressive, hurried, analytical, stressed, superficial, impatient, active, quantity-over-quality. Slow is the opposite: calm, careful, receptive, still, intuitive, unhurried, patient, reflective, quality-over-quantity. It is about making real and meaningful connections—with people, culture, work, food, everything."

The fast pace of life has increased productivity, allowed more people to do more good things in more places, provided activities for children that previous generations had no chance to experience, and permitted me access to the goods and services I want and need when I want and need them. Are those not reasons to be grateful? And the loss of the slow—well, listing what we have lost is a worthy task to fully understand what is at stake.

Being informed leads to unhappiness

Compared to previous generations, we have more news and information at our fingertips than the most informed would have imagined possible. We can be updated frequently since our sources are updated constantly, and we have immediate access to them 24/7.

Arthur Brooks, who studies and writes about patterns of happiness, has made an observation worth noting. "Even after controlling for income, education, age, gender, race, marital

status, and political views," he reports, "being 'very interested in politics' drove up the likelihood of reporting being 'not too happy' about life by about eight percentage points." His article is worth reading for the details he uncovers and the suggestions he makes—I recommend it to you.

"Many of us consume political news and commentary in a compulsive, concupiscent sort of way," Brooks says, "voluntarily subjecting ourselves to gratuitous information and stimuli, particularly on social media. The unhappiness results speak for themselves. A friend of mine—a well-known journalist with a large social media following—once confided in me that there is little that brings him more anxiety than checking his Twitter feed. As he clicks on his notifications, he can feel his chest tighten. Maybe you can relate to this."

I am glad to live in the modern era, after the inventions of the printing press, the Internet, and inexpensive devices that I can use to keep up to date with the events, news, and people of my world. These are things for which I am grateful. But I can identify with what Brooks writes about here and admit that my mood is affected by the news I consume.

We love to vacation at a lovely cabin that is nestled in the woods at the edge of a lake in northern Wisconsin. This is not roughing it—the cabin is generously equipped with all the accessories and devices of modern first-world life. All, that is, except the Internet, so for two glorious weeks we are gloriously out of touch with what is happening. And when we emerge we always find the world has gone blithely on and not noticed our absence.

Brooks suggests we "pay less

attention to politics as entertainment. Read the news once a day, as opposed to hitting your Twitter feed 50 times a day like a chimp in a 1950s experiment on the self-administration of cocaine. Will you get the very latest goings on in Washington in real time? No. Will that make you a more boring person? No. Trust me here—you will be less boring to others. But more important, you will become happier."

Part of the difficulty here is that no one wants to appear "uninformed," and so we assume the problem is not in the situation but in our weakness. Both turn out to be mistaken ideas. ■

Sources: Sermon by Timothy Keller, "Patience" on James 5:7–12 (RS 368–09, 8/28/16) available at www.redeemer.com; Cell phone from "Are Teenagers Replacing Drugs With Smartphones?" by Matt Richtel in the New York Times (March 13, 2017); Carl Honoré, *In Praise of Slowness* quoted in *Reading for the Common Good* (p. 25); "Depressed by Politics? Just Let Go" by Arthur C. Brooks in the New York Times (March 17, 2017).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What is your first impression(s) of the examples of blessing and curse listed above? Why do you think you reacted as you did? With which of these, if any, do you find yourself struggling?
2. What other examples come to your mind as possibly worth consideration? Discuss each one, exploring the dynamics involved and identifying the difficulty we have in dealing realistically with them.
3. Some would argue that technology and market efficiency are neutral, and so it is a mistake to think about them in terms of blessing and curse. How would you respond?
4. In Psalm 1, the ancient Hebrew poet used plant metaphors to get at the notion that life either tends towards blessing (shalom, or a full flourishing as intended by God) or towards something far less that eventually leads to death. The contrast the poet uses is between a tree, unmovable and fruitful, on the one hand or on the other, a pile of chaff blown about by the wind. Read the psalm and reflect in its meaning as a poem.

*Blessed is the man
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
but his delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law he meditates day and night.*

*He is like a tree
planted by streams of water
that yields its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither.*

In all that he does, he prospers.

*The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
for the Lord knows the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.*

What does Psalm 1, in all its lovely simplicity, tell us about life? What sort of things have you grasped, only to find them blowing away from your hand like dry chaff?



FAITHFULNESS IN POL

Great forces have been unleashed politically, and the ripples set in motion are washing over our world. The 2016 United States presidential election revealed that our media and political elite were not listening to their fellow citizens, or they would have noticed as the ripples turned into a wave that took them by surprise. This will push the metaphor to absurd lengths, but the church seems to have been surprised too, with some Christians eagerly riding the wave while others, in appalled disbelief, were bowled over by it.

So, what do we do now?

The path that brought us to this point is easy to see in retrospect. Over a period of years, economic uncertainty has increased as contrasting statistics are used to argue for contrary policies, while opportunity and jobs seem in flux on a global scale. Dreams have been shattered, communities decimated, and a divide between rural and urban centers has grown. Beyond our borders vast migrations are on the move, with people fleeing war, famine, and oppression, warehoused in sprawling camps, disrupting the societies they enter and calling into the question the ideals and



ITICAL UNCERTAINTY

priorities that inform American policy. Wars drag on with no apparent end in sight, tension erupts between nations, and shadowy networks promoting brutality flourish, spawning fear that conflicts that seem to have nothing to do with us can and will suddenly sponsor attacks in the homeland. People are not talking to one another, and leaders are not serving the common good.

Such things do not sit lightly on the edge of our consciousness as a society, but instead worm their way into our social imaginary—into how we imagine life and reality before we begin to think it through. They poison our sense of confidence, decrease our sense

of security, and increase our feeling of unrest.

Periods of uncertainty tend to produce visions of apocalypse, dystopia, and disorder, and the storytelling arts of our modern world are crowded with them. *The Walking Dead* is not merely entertainment that panders to a taste for violence; it is rather an exploration of what it means to be human in a world where certainties have disappeared.

Periods of uncertainty cause a fearful citizenry to circle the wagons, to use an image from a different era. Authoritarian measures, calls for law and order, and a tendency to see others different from oneself as the problem

proliferate and grow more insistent. The desire for safety and security and a restoration of certainty makes people willing to give up hard-won freedoms that otherwise are seen as sacrosanct, fragile, and worth preserving.

The ancient psalmist's call can seem a bit sentimental in a time like ours.

*Shout for joy in the Lord, O you righteous!
Praise befits the upright.*

*Give thanks to the Lord with the lyre;
make melody to him with the harp
of ten strings!*

*Sing to him a new song;
play skillfully on the strings, with
loud shouts. (Psalm 33:1–3)*

Those whose candidates won feel merely optimistic, while those who lost don't respond well to being told they should shout for joy.

It's natural to wonder how we should live as Christians in such a setting. There are a myriad answers being proposed in books and articles, over coffee, and in discussion groups. From what I've heard, they often contradict one another, some have proof texts attached, and in the end most of them leave me unimpressed. That doesn't signify much, except that it suggests the church is unprepared for this moment of history, which should not be the case.

There is no single, definitive answer or formula of faithfulness in a time of political uncertainty that we can derive from scripture. What we are given instead are foundational truths, convictions rooted in God's revelation, that we believe are reliable because they speak to the nature of life and reality as we truly find it in a broken world. So, we can reflect prayerfully and creatively on those ideas and values, seeking to find imaginative ways to flesh them out in the ordinary and routine of daily life.

The best summary I can think of for the people of God living as a minority in a pluralistic, hostile culture is found in the prophet Jeremiah's letter to the Jewish exiles living in Babylon (Jeremiah 29:4–11). It involves five straightforward yet penetrating proposals for living:

- We are called to be here, now (29:4).
- Our focus is to be faithful in ordinary things (29:5–6).
- Our goal is to help our city/culture flourish (29:7).
- We will need to be discerning (29:8–9).
- God's people are people of hope (29:10–11).

So I'll base my reflections on what Christian faithfulness looks like in a time of social, political, and economic uncertainty on these five concepts. Consider my reflections not as an attempt to produce a final, exhaustive answer but as a pointer, an attempt to stimulate discussion and exploration by a fellow pilgrim along the path we take together as we follow our Lord into the world.

We are called to be here, now.

This is very reassuring. Our neighbors may be anxious and fearful, but we need not be. We aren't here by chance, but by God's call, and the very safest place to be is where God wants us. Things have not spiraled out of control, even though we may have no idea why the God of history would allow events to unfold as they are. Even the fact we aren't sure how to be faithful is not a disaster, but an opportunity to walk by faith. We can trust that God will direct us because he has promised never to abandon us. We can maintain a sense of humor as we stumble along in grace, confident that if God could use Balaam's ass (see Numbers 22) he can probably use the likes of us.

And since we are called to live here, now, we can use a bit of common sense. Here's one example: Ours is not just a time of political uncertainty but of wars, terrorism, refugees, hunger, and unrest. And it is a time when news, images, and updates of all the brokenness of

the world echoes around us relentlessly, streaming continuously into our devices and into our awareness. Only God is capable of comprehending the full brokenness of the world without sliding into cynicism or despair. We finite creatures are unable to bear the weight of sin's destructiveness without ill effect. We feel the pressure to stay informed, but the sheer weight and horror of the information becomes corrosive to our souls. Since I can do nothing about the vast majority of the news, do I really need to take on such an unnecessary burden?

Our focus is to be faithful in ordinary things.

It matters to me who occupies the White House. It matters to me how America treats refugees, how we resolve the issues of immigration and

health care, how we balance the need for security with the need to maintain freedom, and whether we will take meaningful steps to bring reconciliation to the racial tension that tears at the fabric of our society. These things matter to

me. But truth be told, my ordinary was pretty much the same the day after the election as it was the day before.

It's true that when political change occurs that is as sweeping as that represented by the 2016 election, it's a good time to pause and consider whether my political stewardship should be adjusted. Perhaps I will need to write my representatives on certain issues, or

ONLY GOD IS CAPABLE OF COMPREHENDING THE FULL BROKENNESS OF THE WORLD WITHOUT SLIDING INTO CYNICISM OR DESPAIR.

give some funds to some cause, or alter my level of involvement in the political sphere. Perhaps.

But wait, someone might say, won't we be held responsible for the choices we make in a democratic society? Isn't this a major difference between our situation and that of Daniel and his friends in Babylon? The answers are obvious: Yes and Yes—yes we are accountable to our Lord for our political stewardship, and yes we live in a democracy and the Jewish exiles living under King Nebuchadnezzar did not.

The correct answers are obvious, that is, except that these questions usually come with unspoken assumptions attached. If you mean that my involvement in the political sphere of life is a matter of obedience to Christ's lordship, I agree. If you mean that my political involvement must reach a certain level of activism you deem acceptable, I disagree. I think it is wonderful that some believers are called to be active in the political sphere of life. I bless them for their involvement, pray they might be wise and prudent, and hope that God's glory and the common good might increase as a result. The problem with activists, however, is that they want all of us to be more involved in their cause. I get it—they are passionate, their cause is good and righteous, and if more of us did more, then much more would get done. That is all true, but also rather irrelevant. In my ordinary, politics makes up a very small slice of life. I want to be faithful in it and am happy to learn from you how to be more effective, but it is not central to my calling, and it would be disobedience on my part to make it so.

Bono put it well: "I'm a musician. I write songs. I just hope when the day is done I've been able to tear a little corner off of the darkness." I'm a writer. So, my

ordinary consists of ordering my life so I have uninterrupted time to write; to do research, read, and study; and to have extended periods of quiet because my imagination shrivels without it. My ordinary doesn't seem like much and certainly doesn't seem to be a formula for transforming the world. But it is my ordinary, and I am content to be faithful in it, believing that as you are faithful in yours, our faithfulness might add up in our Lord's gracious economy to be more than the sum of the parts.

I cannot change the world; I cannot even cause my neighbor to vote correctly or to be less fearful. I can only be faithful and trust that God will use it. I believe we are called to nothing else. So let's do it with contentment and do it well.

Our goal is to help our city/culture flourish.

Even if I don't like what my nation is like, I am called to serve my neighbor for the common good. Daniel and the other Jewish exiles were not to withdraw into a ghetto in Babylon but to be involved in Babylon's culture and to seek its good. So we should try to figure out, given who and where we are, how we might do the same for our city, culture, and world.

Getting together with trusted friends to brainstorm the possibilities can be good. And occasionally, people make suggestions that we can reflect on to see if anything might apply to us.

Here's an example: After losing the election to Donald Trump, independent conservative candidate Evan McMullin tweeted ten things Americans should do "if Trump governs as an authoritarian like he has promised." Here is McMullin's list:

1. Read and learn the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. Know that our basic rights are inalienable.

2. Identify and follow many credible sources of news. Be very well informed and learn to discern truth from untruth.

3. Watch every word, decision, and action of Trump and his administration extremely closely, like we have never done before in America.

4. Be very vocal in every forum available to us when we observe Trump's violations of our rights and our democracy. Write, speak, act.

5. Support journalists, artists, academics, clergy, and others who speak truth and who inform, inspire, and unite us.

6. Build bridges with Americans from the other side of the traditional political spectrum and with members of diverse American communities.

7. Defend others who may be threatened by Trump even if they don't look, think, or believe like us. An attack on one is an attack on all.

8. Organize online and in person with other Americans who understand the danger Trump poses and who are also willing to speak up.

9. Hold members of Congress accountable for protecting our rights and democracy through elections and by making public demands of them now.

10. And finally, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, have "malice toward none, with charity for all" and never ever lose hope!

Depending on your political and theological convictions, you will doubtless agree with some of McMullin's suggestions and disagree with others. That's fine, and central to the process

of being discerning. Still, begin with this list—and find others—and figure out what it might look like for you to intentionally seek the good of the city, culture, and world in which you are called by God to live. And of course this list is primarily about political stewardship under President Trump—while our concern must touch on all of life and culture within our ordinary.

We will need to be discerning.

Being discerning isn't merely a task we perform occasionally but a way of life, of interacting with others. We can be safe places of warm hospitality with people across various political, religious, and ethnic divides to whom we can give the gift of listening and asking questions. Unhurried conversation is a precious thing and too rarely experienced.

And if we are convinced that our political leaders are unqualified and promoting wrong policies, we will need to be discerning in how we speak and act in response. For one thing, we will need to be civil even when those around us fail to speak and act with civility. For another, the scriptures instruct God's people to speak of their leaders with care.

"You shall not revile God," Israel was told in Exodus 22:28, "nor curse a ruler of your people." Eugene Peterson in *The Message* translates it this way: "Don't curse God; and don't damn your leaders." In the New Testament, St. Paul refers to this text when he appears before the Jewish Council. Paul is speaking as Ananias disapproves of what he says and commands a guard to slap Paul in the face. "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall!" Paul retorts. "Are you sitting to judge me according to the law and yet, contrary

to the law, you order me to be struck?" (Acts 23:3–4). When Paul is told he has just addressed the high priest, he immediately apologizes and quotes the Exodus text as the reason. And in case we wonder if the command applies only in a theocratic setting, St. Paul extends the principle to Christians living under the rule of the Roman Empire (Romans 13:1–7). And St. Peter, writing specifically to believers living in a society that is hostile to their faith, tells them: "Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor." (1 Peter 2:17)

Does this apply to unjust rulers? Absolutely: consider the emperor who was in power when Peter wrote his epistle. Some texts of scripture are notoriously difficult to interpret but this one doesn't fall in that category.

We need not demean an official to stand for and to speak out for what is right. In this we can learn from the dissidents that resisted Communist tyranny. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in the Soviet Union and Václav Havel in Czechoslovakia both were trenchant critics of their Marxist governments without needing to speak dismissively of specific rulers. I am not claiming they never did so since I am not a scholar of their work. But I read both extensively during the sixties and seventies, and what I remember is not the sarcastic denigration of specific officials but forceful arguments for the rule of law and freedom rooted in the permanent principles of human dignity, responsibility, and justice. Such arguments essentially diminished unjust rulers not by calling them names or by appending negative adjectives, but by appealing to truths so great that any who ignored or repressed them were petty in comparison.

God's people are people of hope.

The Hebrew poet who calls us to joy and gratitude is not being sentimental, purposely ignoring the brokenness of things in order to be happy. Rather, the brokenness can be endured because it is not the final word in the story. The Creator has not stepped away from his creation nor abandoned it, and to realize who he is brings overwhelming awe at his greatness, power, and glory (Psalm 33:8–9). This means that current events, with all the ups and downs, need not define our response or shape the music of our hearts. There is something far greater than all this and, when our souls are centered on it, the fluctuations of current events remain meaningful without taking center stage.

The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples.

The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations...

The king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength.

The war horse is a false hope for salvation, and by its great might it cannot rescue. (Psalm 33:10–11, 16–17)

Is the correct person in the Oval Office? Remember that no president can save us from the brokenness and that the Lord still reigns. Is the wrong person there? Remember that God can frustrate foolishness and that the Lord still reigns.

Sometimes a friend asks whether I am optimistic or pessimistic about America's future. I don't see how a Christian can be either. I can see things that could make me feel optimistic and other things that could make me feel pessimistic, but those are just passing



BE OF GOOD COURAGE.

fancies based on what are ultimately fleeting events. I need something secure and stable at the root of things—and even then my emotions can be more unruly than I prefer. Besides, our optimism is often frustrated and our pessimism is often proved wrong. The primary metaphor underlying our social imaginary, the essential foundation on which our heart rests, is something we can nurture consciously. Is the reality of God's promise like a shadow or a rock to me, a mist or a fortress?

*Our soul waits for the Lord;
he is our help and our shield.
For our heart is glad in him,
because we trust in his holy name.
Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be
upon us,
even as we hope in you.
(Psalm 33:20–22)*

What I meditate on and steep my consciousness in can transform my doing, thinking, and being, and the promise of the gospel is that God has not withdrawn from me.

It might be wise to resurrect a biblical greeting that was used when God's people faced uncertain times—"Be of good courage." The story goes like this:

For three generations the people of Israel had been a nomadic tribe freely wandering the hills and land of ancient Palestine. Abraham had been the first, the patriarch who was followed by his son, Isaac, and in turn by his son, Jacob, and his family of twelve sons. Then famine swept through the land, as sometimes happens in a dry place dependent on seasonal rains. Harvests failed, and the sprawling pasture the

Israelites depended on for their flocks dried up. Word was that there was food in Egypt, so Jacob sent his

sons there to purchase supplies and, in a series of events that need to be read to be believed, the Israelites ended up moving to Egypt as refugees fleeing famine. At first, things went relatively smoothly but then political change in Egypt transformed attitudes. The Egyptians feared there were too many Israelites in their land and that, in time of crisis, they could not be counted on to remain loyal. So they changed the marketplace and enslaved the Israelites in a system from which there was no escape. The Israelites prayed, but God was silent.

The Israelite commander told his officers of his plan for the battle and, recognizing the danger they face, said to his men, "Be of good courage" (2 Samuel 10:12). Centuries later the exilic prophet Daniel is visited by a spiritual being so grand that he falls to the ground, trembling before such overwhelming glory. "'O man greatly loved,' Daniel was told, 'fear not, peace be with you; be strong and of good courage. And as he spoke to me, I was strengthened and said, 'Let my lord speak, for you have strengthened me'" (Daniel 10:19–20). And the phrase appears again, repeated twice in a letter written by St. Paul. He was talking about the transience of life, the frailty of our bodies so broken in this fallen world, and the yearning we feel for something more permanent and settled and certain. "So we are always of good courage," the apostle said. Right now we walk by faith, not seeing the One we serve, and looking forward to the day when our Lord's kingdom

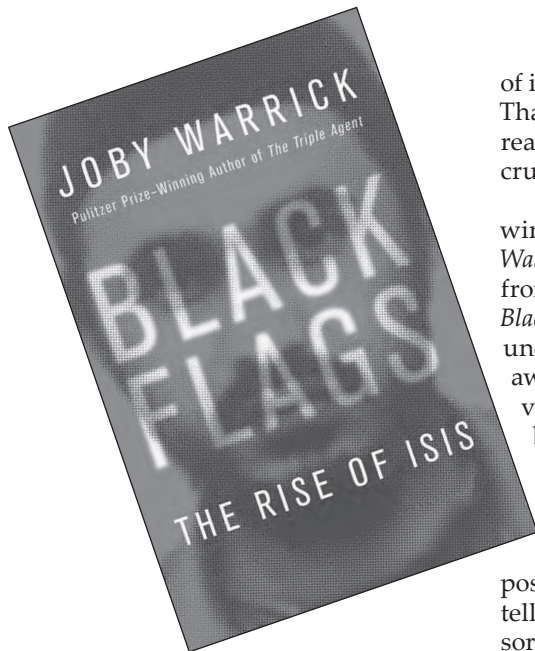
is fully consummated. "Yes, we are of good courage," Paul said, and in this in-between time when Christ's kingdom is established but not yet fulfilled "we make it our aim to please him" (2 Corinthians 5:6–9).

Be of good courage. I suggest this should become a blessing we say to one another as we end conversations. *Be of good courage.* Life may be uncertain, our neighbors may be afraid, and we may be disappointed by all that is unfolding; but these things, though significant, are not the ultimate realities. The tomb remains empty, God's promises remain certain, and Christ remains King. These are the ultimate realities we face; they have not changed nor will they. So, *Be of good courage.* If our imaginations are so pummeled by news and rants of uncertainty and fearfulness that our hearts fail within us, we can choose to spend more time embracing reality than focusing on the transient and trifling affairs of a world gone astray.

A lot more could be said, of course, but remember this is meant to be a pointer to stimulate thinking and discussion, not a final answer. Take it from here. And whatever the details, *Be of good courage.* ■

Source: *Evan McMullin tweets @Evan_McMullin*

The Story of ISIS



If you are like me, a great deal of the conflict that roils the Middle East is rather unclear. Perhaps most unclear is the terrorism that darkens the news day after day. How do we make sense of the Islamic State—ISIS, ISIL, DAESH—and what policies should we support in order to stop it? How did Zarqawi—a name often in the news until his death in 2006—give birth to the movement, what is his legacy, and what is the significance of al-Baghdadi declaring himself caliph in 2014? Who are these brutal people? Why are some young adults living in the West and in modern states in the Middle East drawn to join ISIS even at the cost of their lives? Just what is the attraction?

ISIS is a present reality that is shrouded in mystery. I know the talking points put forward by commentators on the left and the right, and the policies developed by the United States, but they do not probe deeply enough. Keeping up with the news provides snippets

of insight, but is also insufficient. Thankfully there is now an accessible, readable book that helps to fill in some crucial gaps in our understanding.

Joby Warrick is a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist who works for *The Washington Post*. He has followed ISIS from the start as a reporter and, in *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS*, helps us to understand a phenomenon that is far away yet threatens to bring its violence very close to home. Part history, part biography, part current events, *Black Flags* traces the rise of ISIS, the problems and grievances that were the fertile soil in which they grew, and the cast of characters that made it possible. And part of the story Warrick tells is the difficulty diplomats face in sorting out all the details in real time, and how some analysts anticipated that ISIS would eclipse al-Qaeda but whose warnings were ignored.

Black Flags reads like a novel, fast paced and clearly written. Warrick leads us through a thicket of unfamiliar names and places, helping us make sense of something that in almost every way is foreign to the experience and mindset of the average American. The book is factual and carefully researched, but is structured like a mystery as reporters, spooks, and analysts sort through masses of raw data from the Middle East to piece together the story of an amazingly effective and pitiless military force that has spread brutality across the world.

In the past, wars have tended to be relatively neat, if horrible and bloody, affairs. One nation fields an army in uniform against another, and they battle until one surrenders or is destroyed. The twenty-first century has ushered in a new age when the old rules no longer apply and where new strategies

will have to be developed by those who yearn for justice and peace.

As Americans we tend, I think, to see the Middle East as a group of nations. We fail to appreciate how the people spread across those nations do not necessarily identify themselves primarily as citizens of those nations but as members of tribes and language groups with a much more ancient heritage. We fail to understand how the nations themselves are not the natural groupings of the people in the region, but are instead artificial boundaries established by the Western nations who won the first world war and carved up the Ottoman Empire in ways that benefited their dreams of empire. Old grievances and divisions and a deep sense of humiliation cast a dark shadow across the social imaginaries of the people who live in these nations. Catch even a glimpse of this sad reality and it is easy to understand why, even if ISIS is routed militarily, it may not thereby be defeated.

I recommend *Black Flags* to you. Joby Warrick's journalistic gifts are a grace in a world difficult to comprehend. ■

Resource recommended: *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS* by Joby Warrick (New York, NY: Anchor Books; 2015, 2016) 324 pages + notes + index.

RESOURCE

Hearts and Minds bookstore is a well-stocked haven for serious, reflective readers. When ordering resources, mention Ransom Fellowship and they will contribute 10 per cent of the total back to us. ■

Resource: *Hearts and Minds bookstore*, www.heartsandmindsbooks.com

Singing Truth to Privilege



Some protest music rants angrily over wrongs, but the best shines love on injustice and thereby allows us to sense the horror of wickedness deep in our souls. There is something life-giving and transformative when stories and names from the news and history, kept at a distance through long practice, are made alive and real and full of dignity and significance, and brought into our hearts. This is a power that grew out of old spirituals, Americana folk roots music so profoundly human it whispers transcendence and a final reckoning even when the lyrics mention neither.

Rhiannon Giddens embodies this musical tradition beautifully and, on her second solo album, *Freedom Highway*, takes it to new heights.

*Mama, dear mama, look in yonder tree
See that pretty little sparrow, a-lookin'
back at me
She can soar above the clouds, way up in
the sky
She can fly away from here—why, o why,
can't I?*

*Daughter, dear daughter, I'll tell you
something true
Remember Granny Liza? well every
night—she flew—
They tried to keep her down but there*

*was nothing they could do
She could fly, she could fly
She could slip the bonds of earth and rise
so high
She could fly across the river
Her spirit in her hands
Searching, always searching for the
promised land
[from "We Could Fly"]*

When I opened the lyrics booklet that accompanied *Freedom Highway*, the first image took my breath away. An advertisement from a 1797 newspaper is glued on the page. "FOR SALE," the ad reads, "A remarkable smart healthy Negro Wench, about 22 years of age; used to both house work and farming, and sold for no fault but for want of emply. She has a child about 9 months old, which will be at the purchaser's option." The opening song is entitled, "At The Purchaser's Option":

*I have a babe but shall I keep him
'Twill come the day when I'll be weepin'
But how can I love him any less
This little babe upon my breast
You can take my body, you can take
my bones
You can take my blood but not my soul*

Freedom Highway begins in the past, in the heart of the cruel slavery practiced in the early days of an America that supposedly believed that "all men are created equal." Giddens does not leave the story there but, from song to song, leads us across the decades to the present. "The album's beauty and gravitas," Jonathan Bernstein writes in *Pitchfork*, "come from how Giddens collapses the last two centuries of American history, juxtaposing songs about antebellum slave plantations with 1960s Civil Rights anthems and narratives of twenty-first century

state violence."

Giddens' voice is an instrument of rare beauty and finely honed practice, and the accompaniment on this album highlights its power. The final cut, and the title song, is by Pops Staples, "Freedom Highway":

*March down freedom highway
Marching each and every day
March down freedom highway
Marching each and every day
Made up my mind, that I won't
turn around
Made up my mind, that I won't
turn around
There is just one thing
I can't understand, my friend
Why some folks think freedom
Is not designed for all men*

Freedom Highway is an album for our time because the journey is not yet done. I am glad for the soaring reminder Rhiannon Giddens provides in this glorious music, filled with longing and pain and beauty, and a lovely, steadfast refusal to give up hope.

Don't just buy a copy for your music library, but buy copies for all your friends as well. ■

Sources: Jonathan Bernstein in *Pitchfork* online (<http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/22912-freedom-highway>)

Album recommended: *Freedom Highway* by Rhiannon Giddens (Nonesuch Records, 2017)

A Gift from Beyond the Horiz



The plot of this movie is relatively simple: Twelve massive spaceships suddenly appear at various points around the globe, and a linguistics professor is asked to help the world learn to communicate with the aliens that have arrived. Nothing is ever quite that simple, of course, so complications arise. Rumors spread, populations begin to panic, some world leaders suggest caution while others insist we must strike first or risk being obliterated; and soon the various nations in which the ships have appeared are not talking to one another. If scientists are learning anything, the information isn't being shared. Division and suspicion reigns supreme, and no one knows what the aliens intend or want, or even if it is really possible to communicate with them at all. Verbal communication is ruled out as impossible, but then our linguistics prof realizes that written communication holds the key.

Colonel Weber (played with cool

efficiency by Forest Whitaker) shows up at the office of linguistic professor Louise Banks (played by Amy Adams) to tell her the world needs her services. He escorts her to a temporary base established near the site of one of the alien ships where she meets the third member of the team tasked with sorting out what's going on, a theoretical physicist named Ian Donnelly (played by an understated Jeremy Renner).

They establish contact with the aliens, and, well, the movie goes on from there, but if you want to know what happens, see the film. It's well done and, unlike many science fiction stories, invites viewers to not just watch and enjoy, but to think. Besides, the special effects are wonderful, never flashy but subservient to the story, and the ones involved with the aliens' writing are stunning, imaginatively beautiful.

Good science fiction is able to focus our attention on issues and questions that otherwise can seem merely theoretical. After all, a little nuclear devastation and the appearance of zombies tends to concentrate one's mind on the meaning of humanity, the finality of death, and the possibility of hope. Does it not? And that is the genius of the genre.

What is impressive in *Arrival* is that the themes that are explored get to the very heart of what it means to be human. We live in time but dream of transcending it and wonder if, since we can have flash-backs, is it ever possible that some—perhaps poets, seers, or the specially gifted—have flash-forwards? And isn't it strange we are defined by language—the unique quality all humans share—yet find our communication difficult and divisive? The aliens, whose ships seem to dwell in a cloud, claim to bring a gift of unity

to a fractured humanity, but are we even capable of receiving it, and will it be sufficient?

From a Christian perspective, *Arrival* is a clever reversal of the ancient story of Babel (Genesis 11), with its confusion of languages and rupture of human unity. Poet Kathleen Housley captures the moment of divine intervention so well in her poem, "Babel":

*The demolition blast was so intense
it blew away their common tongue.*

*Across the plain of Shinar,
parts of speech shrapneled the ground.*

*Syntax rained down like gobs of tar.
Nouns whirled in vortices of brick dust.*

*Mute, the people stood owl-eyed
in a heavy ash-fall of vowels,*

*shielding themselves from verbs
that ricocheted through the hush...*

(Her complete poem, so worth reading aloud, can be found on Ransom's website.) A case can be made that our modern pursuit of science and technology is animated in part by a deep desire to reverse Babel, and that perhaps mathematics will be the language that can finally unite human beings in truth with which all can agree. And what if a word came from outside the horizons of our world that provided the key to finally tie all language together?

As I watched *Arrival*, I was aware of how deeply I yearn for Babel to be reversed, its curse undone. This film touches on one of the most profound expressions of our brokenness and hope-against-hope for healing and restoration. ■

ons of Time



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What was your initial or immediate reaction to the film? Why do you think you reacted that way?
2. Some people, even many Christians, have difficulty with science fiction as a genre. Why is that? In what ways should science fiction be especially attractive to Christians in a post-Christian world? To be effective, a science fiction story must draw us in so that we suspend disbelief and enter the world that is being imagined. Does *Arrival* succeed in this? Why or why not?
3. In what ways were the techniques of film-making (casting, direction, lighting, script, music, sets, action, cinematography, editing, etc.) used to get the film's message(s) across, or to make the message plausible or compelling? In what ways were they ineffective or misused?
4. What is made attractive in the film as the central themes are explored? How is it made attractive? Note the various special effects that are used in the film—the alien ships, their appearance in mist/clouds, the interior of the alien ships, the aliens' writing, the aliens, the flashbacks/flashforwards in time—and discuss their effectiveness.
5. With whom did you identify in the film? Why? With whom were we meant to identify? Discuss each main character in the film and their significance to the story.
6. How is language so intimately intertwined with human unity, disunity, division and conflict? Is it possible that the deep yearning we have that the divisions of humanity be healed is a signal of transcendence?
7. What insight does Kathleen Housley's poem bring to the discussion?
8. Why might the biblical story of the Tower of Babel hold particular fascination for our Western secularized culture? What is the biblical solution to Babel, and what texts would you use to follow the theme throughout scripture through the narrative of creation, fall, redemption and restoration? How could you talk about this in a way that non-Christians alienated from the church might be intrigued?



Film credits for *Arrival*

Starring:

Amy Adams (Louise Banks)
 Jeremy Renner (Ian Donnelly)
 Forest Whitaker (Colonel Weber)
 Michael Stuhlbarg (Agent Halpern)
 Mark O'Brien (Captain Marks)
 Tzi Ma (General Shang)

Director: Denis Villeneuve

Writers: Eric Heisserer (screenplay), Ted Chiang
 (based on "Story of Your Life")

Producers: Glen Basner, Dan Cohen,
 Eric Heisserer and others

Cinematography: Bradford Young
 USA, 2016; 116 minutes

Rated PG-13 (for brief strong language)