

# critique



A Ransom Fellowship Publication 2020 Issue 3

DIALOGUE, POETRY, MUSIC,  
THINGS SEEN AND UNSEEN, AND

# FINDING HOPE IN A PANDEMIC

## CRITIQUE



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Except where noted, all articles are by Denis Haack.

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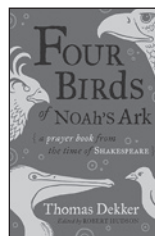
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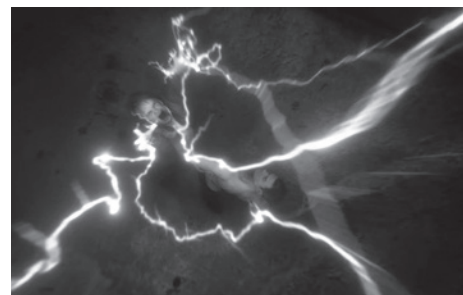


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# The Limits of Contentment



We can know some things about ourselves only when we are tested.

Margie and I have taken “The Defensive Driving Course” that’s offered to drivers over 55 years of age. Completing the 8-hour course and 4-hour refresher every three years makes us eligible for a 10 percent discount on our insurance. Online this year because of the pandemic, there are occasional tests. No score is kept, but when I chose a wrong answer the image of a frowning cop appeared on the screen with the word INCORRECT! I was disgusted with myself for missing a few.

Times of stress, uncertainty, and sudden change act as tests of character, revealing what we are really like rather than how we think of ourselves. I may believe I have mastered patience until I find myself caught behind someone in a drive-up coffee lane that is ordering exotic drinks and then paying with coins dug out of the car’s cup holders and glovebox. Tests may appear as brief occurrences, quick events in a busy day, or in a prolonged period like the coronavirus, but they are always revealing. The quick ones go by so quickly we may gain little, but perhaps one of the hidden graces of the pandemic is that its test of our character is too sustained to be easily ignored.

And we would be wise not to ignore it—what’s the point of living through the pandemic if we don’t grow through it as persons and followers of our Lord? Our calling is not to endure or survive but to mature, not to be satisfied with the status quo but to become more like Christ.

Each of us may find ourselves being tested in different areas. The fruit of God’s Holy Spirit covers a range of character: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Galatians 5:22–23). Your area of neediness is not necessarily mine (for which I am very thankful) and mine is not yours (believe me, be very thankful).

We might be struggling with loving Christians who hold different views on opening society, especially those who join protests with neo-Nazis carrying Confederate flags. Or we might find ourselves angry at the interruption the pandemic represents, outraged that our peace has suddenly been shredded. We may be so overwhelmed by the news, the data, the updates, the boredom and loneliness that joy has slowly leached out of our lives. Perhaps we are weary of trying to find ways to be kind, resisting exploring creative ways to minister to neighbors during the social distancing. Or maybe we’ve found ourselves slipping in self-control, allowing our need for rest to descend into a too-easy embrace of distraction and addiction.

Perhaps what we all share during this pandemic is the need for contentment. St. Paul claims “there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment” (1 Timothy 6:6). This was not merely theoretical to him—Paul’s life had periods of real hardship. “I have learned to be content,” he says, “with whatever I have” (Philippians 4:11).

That’s far easier said than done, far easier calligraphed onto a wall hanging than practiced. And we aren’t helped by the fact that, in our polarized society, discontent—in the forms of outrage, grievance, and dissatisfaction—is actively encouraged.

The person with the most to say about Christian contentment is Jeremiah Burroughs (1599–1646), who wrote a book on the topic. A Puritan preacher who ministered in Rotterdam and London, the motto posted on the door to his office was, “Difference of belief and unity of believers are not inconsistent.” He knew the reality of pandemics: the Black Plague exploded in London during his life, killing, for example, 30,000 in 1603, 35,000 in 1625, and 10,000 in 1636.

Here is Jeremiah Burroughs’ definition: “Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit which freely submits to and delights in God’s wise and fatherly disposal in every condition.” Utterly realistic in facing the brokenness and tragedy of our fallen world, Burroughs nevertheless insisted that contentment is to be—and by God’s grace can be—a mark of the believer’s character.

I have no idea why God is calling us to live through the coronavirus pandemic, but if I gain in contentment from the experience, I will be glad. ■

**Source:** The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment (Carlisle, Pa.: *The Banner of Truth Trust*; 1648; 1987) p. 19.





To the editor:  
Dear Denis,

Warmest congratulations on the [2019:6] edition of *Critique*. I appreciated your opening article, “Not retirement, but faithfulness.” Having just entered this glorious state last February, I was appropriately challenged.

I read “The Embarrassing Church” with great interest. I’ve heard these comments many times in the past four years in books, articles, and conversations. My two brothers feel especially strongly about this. As a result, one now refuses to call himself an evangelical, feeling the term is so negative. However, my thoughts were turned upside down by a recent experience that Gretchen and I had, and I thought it might be of interest to you.

As a recently retired minister, it was unwise to continue to worship in our church, so we decided to take the spiritual temperature of the other churches in our city. We wanted to discover if things were as bad as the pundits claim. There are over 60 Christian churches in Rochester, Minn., and we made it our goal to visit them all. About half are evangelical. We defined a Christian church as one that can affirm the Apostles and Nicene creeds. This covers Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox churches.

In light of the comments about the embarrassing church, we expected a good number of them to be Trump

supporting and immigrant hating. So far, we have been to over 30 churches. They have ranged in size from 18 to 1500. As I’ve been in the community for 30 years, I know many of the pastors and people. We always explain what we are doing and engage them in conversation about their fellowship. Some we return to more than once.

It has been an eye-opening experience. At no church have we heard the president’s name mentioned. In one, the congregation was encouraged to support the gay agenda. In another the lady minister spoke enthusiastically about the rights of Native Americans. These were hardly right-wing comments and were brief parts of the service. Many of the churches are deeply concerned about homelessness in our community. One small church had gone to the lengths of somehow purchasing a former Christian college and is using it for low-cost housing. Others are involved in prison ministry and help for addicts. Many are supporting the local food bank. Several taught the biblical command to welcome immigrants. Their bulletins urge people to sign up for service opportunities that often are for people outside the church.

There was nothing to be ashamed of. All the people we spoke to were proud of their church and wanted their fellowship to do more. There was a similarity about the mission statements, irrespective of the denomination. They mostly boiled down to “love God and love people,” although they expressed this in various ways. There was not a single mission statement that an evangelical, like me, could object to.

The churches seemed largely unconcerned with what is going on in

Washington or the statements of a few Christians who portray Christ poorly. Frankly they were too busy with the Lord’s work. At nearly all the churches we received a very warm welcome and an invitation to return.

Frankly this was very different from what I expected. As a result, I have spent some time trying to figure out why. I realized that none of the many churches I know in the United States and the United Kingdom are like the accusations I have heard, and that you express so well in your article. Many of the embarrassing comments I’ve heard have not come from pastors or ordinary Christians but from self appointed parachurch leaders like Franklin Graham and Jerry Falwell Junior. I have heard of people, mostly young, leaving the church because of its embarrassing drift. But few of them had been part of their church’s hunger or homeless team. Had they been actively involved in the life of their fellowship, they might have seen that, although Christians are sinners and sometimes say and do really silly things, the vast majority of them are seeking to follow Christ to the best of their ability.

We intend to visit the remaining churches in Rochester and it’s possible we could make different discoveries, but so far, our experience of all denominations has been encouraging and hope giving. While some of the churches are declining, others are adding additional services. In the past six months two new churches have been planted in our city. On the first Sunday one had an attendance of 700, the other had 800. This hardly sounds like the church is falling apart, especially as the majority of these two congregations are millennials. Indeed, one of

the local radio stations, on hearing what we were up to, asked me to give a report about our discoveries. There are clearly many differences among churches but, so far, we have not found evidence of the embarrassing comments of the local church that I heard for so long as a pastor.

**Keep up the good work. I always look forward to each issue of *Critique***  
**Blessings on you and Margie,**  
**John Steer**  
**Rochester, Minnesota**

Denis Haack and John Seel respond:

**DH:** Thank you so much for writing, John. And congratulations on your retirement from Autumn Ridge.

Your experience in visiting all the churches in your community may be helpful in all sorts of ways, but it doesn't speak to the issue I am addressing in "The Embarrassing Church." Those who are walking away from church and faith express discontent not with their local church but with evangelicalism. It is a perception issue—how evangelicalism is perceived, how they are perceived if identified as evangelical, and the unspoken but real expectations on them if they are part of the movement. This is a problem even if the reality of their complaint is not reflected in what is happening in specific churches.

You mention visiting churches active in seeking solutions to homelessness. Wonderful. I wonder, however, how many non-Christian young adults in Rochester, upon learning you are an evangelical, would respond, "Oh. You are one of those people working to end homelessness! Tell me more." This is simply not the perception of what it means to be evangelical, and perceptions matter. Tara Isabella Burton argues in *The New York Times* (5/8/2020) that many young believers are rejecting "the fusion of

ethnonationalism, unfettered capitalism, and Republican Party politics that has come to define the modern white evangelical movement." I have no research data on this but suspect that even if the young adults walking away from faith had been involved in the homeless team in their church, they would still have walked away. Being willing to hear and address these concerns is, it seems to me, a crucial pastoral concern.

Growth towards maturity and greater faithfulness by the church in a fallen world requires honest review, evaluation, and careful adjustment. The evangelical movement has the chance to reassess its spiritual health if it is willing to listen carefully to those who believe in Jesus but find evangelicalism infected with a mindset that they find too embarrassing to endure. This is a challenging moment but not a problem—it is an opportunity. Sadly, I see little evidence this is occurring and, instead, a willingness to identify those walking away as the problem.

**JS:** It has long been recognized that much of the public perception of the church is driven by the words and actions of a small number of high-profile evangelical leaders in the media. This fact distorts the actual reality on the ground, but also creates a perceived reality in society. It is this perceived reality that becomes the assumed reality for most people. For as sociologist James Hunter acknowledges, "The power of culture is not measured by the size of a cultural organization or by the quantity of its output, but by the extent to which a definition of reality is realized in the social world—taken seriously and acted upon by storytelling cultural creatives in the social world." So, the local reality will not change the wider cultural dynamics unless we can change the perceived story among the cultural elites.

Real presence will come at a cost. When churches use the term "outreach," it is code for the acknowledgement that they are not

actually "in there." Faithful presence, in contrast, demands a long-term commitment that establishes relationships within pagan institutions, builds trust, and uniquely works for the success of the pagan institutions (Jeremiah 29:1-7).

A new disposition may be now emerging as reassessment—a desire to rethink, reframe, or distance oneself from the evangelical past dispositions. Denis' article on "embarrassment" falls into this new habitus as does those in the "evolving faith" movement. These are the dispositions, or more accurately, the "habitus" that Trump aligned himself to in his campaign that created the 81 percent evangelical support.

Before there is a tsunami of ex-evangelicals, we need to establish a firm footing for post-evangelicals. Dallas Willard clarifies, "Post-evangelicalism is by no means ex-evangelicalism. Post-evangelicals have been driven to the margins by some aspect of evangelical church culture with which they cannot honestly identify." This is the case for an increasing number of young believers and more cosmopolitan educated urban believers. An increasing number of believers no longer identify with the attitudes of the historic evangelical habitus. The spirit of reassessment within the church has created an unsettling of old paradigms and an exciting opportunity for new approaches to emerge. This is an exciting potential turning point for the church in which *Critique* magazine is a leading voice.

For me, a post-evangelical is committed to thinking and living out of the historic orthodox tradition of faith that encourages the current relevance of ancient expressions of belief, holds these convictions with a humble open hand, acknowledges our dependency on community and reliance on the resources of the kingdom of heaven. In this regard, it eschews expressive individualism, Nietzschean autonomy, and Enlightenment epistemological certainty. ■

# A Promising Stone

I cannot afford you flawless.  
To boast this stone so seeming smooth  
Glitters in grace through cracks and cuts  
And faults along each face reflect  
The careful jeweler's joy  
In seeing splendor through the rough  
And risking ruined dust to craft  
Divine geometries.  
So take this ring and be my bride  
If you'll forgive—this hard and lasting gem,  
And soon together we will say  
The stone was surely priceless. ■



# Midnight Sledding

A last December sled down Grandpa's hill,  
Surprised to see beneath a bright blue moon,  
A seldom second light at end of year,  
Bouncing, we laugh then slide through half-dark air.  
Too soon too fast to steer we skip and tilt  
Now spinning back to see our shrinking start.  
We know we'll find a bump at the bottom  
Where the frozen pond levels all our runs.  
Still, there's a kind of thrill not knowing when,  
Or if at this run's end we'll pass the mark,  
Or just wipe out, a shock of snow on skin.  
As after moon its fullest witness bears,  
If, so surprised at first to find this fun,  
Then why not dare to trust another run? ■



*Sam comments: I recently finished this sonnet (although I started it long ago). I wrote it after reading a number of Emily Dickinson's poems wrestling with the possibility of a life after this one (see, e.g., "This World is not Conclusion").*

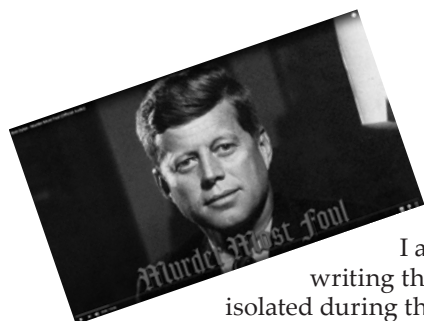
*Both poems copyright © 2020 Samuel Hamer*



**Samuel Hamer** is a practicing attorney in Minnesota. He earned degrees in physics from Wheaton College and in law from Harvard Law School. His occasional poetry considers themes of faith, doubt, and family. Sam lives with his wife, Naomi, and three boys near Minneapolis.



# Murder Most Foul



I am writing this isolated during the coronavirus pandemic. Writing is a solitary vocation, but this is different. Isolation sucks delight from life, replacing gladness with uncertainty. Jamie Kaihoi, a friend and member of our church, recently reminded us to “Choose Joy,” suggesting we should, among other things, choose to listen to music. We always need music, especially during a pandemic. It’s something we can be grateful our technology provides.

Three months into the pandemic on March 27, 2020, Bob Dylan released a new song, “Murder Most Foul.” Accompanying the release was a simple statement: *Greetings to my fans and followers with gratitude for all your support and loyalty over the years. This is an unreleased song we recorded a while back that you might find interesting. Stay safe, stay observant, and may God be with you. Bob Dylan.*

Dylan has long been gripped (some commentators say obsessed) with President John F. Kennedy’s assassination, and that is on view here. This is a not a song designed to gain new fans, and at 17 minutes long, with sparse instrumentation and allusive lyrics, it is unlikely to be a radio hit. The performance is simple: piano, a single violin, quiet percussion, Dylan’s voice. Intimate, as if we have stumbled into the troubadour’s quiet space where we can listen to what at first seems to be the rambling musing of a troubled soul and soon is revealed to be a sustained

reflection on life and death illuminated by metaphor and human creativity in a broken world. On *Salon* online, author and music critic David Masciotra says:

*With the release of “Murder Most Foul” in a time of extreme American pain and need, Dylan has embraced his unique cultural and artistic authority to present a prophetic examination of American decline, taking a musical magnifying glass to the erosion of America’s historical promise and the “slow decay,” to use his words, of the American soul.*

At first “Murder Most Foul” is about the 1963 assassination of President Kennedy in Dallas, seen not merely as an event in history but as a window of insight into fallen reality. The tragic assassination, yes, taken with ferocious seriousness, so seriously that as we listen, we soon find ourselves reflecting on the death not just of a man but of all we hold dear.

*The day that they killed him, someone said to me, “Son  
The age of the Antichrist has only begun.”  
Air Force One coming in through the gate  
Johnson sworn in at 2:38  
Let me know when you decide to throw  
in the towel  
It is what it is, and its murder most foul  
What’s new, pussycat? What’d I say?  
I said the soul of a nation been torn away  
And it’s beginning to go into a slow decay  
And that it’s 36 hours past Judgment Day*

Then Dylan meanders through popular culture, weaving a network of musicians and songs, events and memories, inviting us to take seriously what we often use as an escape. In the face of death—whether assassination or pandemic—we need more than escape, and in art we have hints that there is something more.

Dylan’s lyrics pile allusion upon allusion, some I catch, many beyond me, and knowing Dylan, I suspect some are included simply to play with us.

*Play “Misty” for me and “That Old Devil Moon”  
Play “Anything Goes” and “Memphis in June”  
Play “Lonely At the Top” and “Lonely Are the Brave”  
Play it for Houdini spinning around his grave  
Play Jelly Roll Morton  
Play “Lucille”  
Play “Deep In a Dream”  
And play “Driving Wheel”  
Play “Moonlight Sonata” in F-sharp  
And “A Key to the Highway” for the king on the harp  
Play “Marching Through Georgia” and “Dumbaroton’s Drums”  
Play darkness and death will come when it comes  
Play “Love Me Or Leave Me” by the great Bud Powell  
Play “The Blood-stained Banner”  
Play “Murder Most Foul”*

The song’s “themes of doom—and possible redemption,” writes Brian Hyatt in *Rolling Stone*, “feel alarmingly in tune with our current moment, which may have prompted Dylan to choose it for release.” Perhaps this is the final irony: The song that can help us see with greater clarity during the pandemic never mentions the pandemic. Such is the mystery that is poetry. ■

**Sources:** Jamie Kaihoi video “Choose Joy” online ([www.ofthecross.org/reflections](http://www.ofthecross.org/reflections)). Bob Dylan statement online ([www.bobdylan.com](http://www.bobdylan.com)). *Salon* online, April 4, 2020 ([www.salon.com/2020/04/04/murder-most-foul-unpacking-bob-dylans-new-epic-from-dallas-1963-to-the-pandemic-of-2020](http://www.salon.com/2020/04/04/murder-most-foul-unpacking-bob-dylans-new-epic-from-dallas-1963-to-the-pandemic-of-2020)).



# Unforeseen Contingencies

by Scott Schuleit

It was early during the evening hours. Night had not yet descended; it was that time of the year when daylight lingered longer than usual. My wife and I were driving on the highway to perform some necessary, but tedious, shopping duties. Traffic was not that bad at all. It was nearing summer in South Florida and most of its winter residents had already vacated the growing heat for cooler climes. In some respects, this is an occasion for rejoicing. Lanes are clearer and stores less crowded. In general, I'm a safe and slow driver (though not always) and could be found cruising that evening at around the 65-mph speed limit in my reliable yet aging vehicle. We were on the right lane of the highway, the very place relished by slowpokes and gazers. The emergency lane to the far right was, as usual, littered here and there with its typical debris: shredded tire pieces, some of the large ones looking like dark carcasses; the dull shine of shattered pieces of glass, and the occasional stray plastic bag that gets whipped about by the wind-trails of cars. I wonder if these bags have produced a little bit of consternation among the more sensitive driving types. The fear involves a floating, drifting bag suddenly plastering itself against the windshield, obstructing vision to the scream of rubber, crash of glass, and crumpling boom of metal.

And then it happened, a jarring phenomenon that has, on occasion, happened before. As a matter of fact, the experience appears to be occurring more frequently in our culture. There it is, a threatening sound in the background, gathering in strength. A high whining and whirring; an accelerating intensity of sound. An approach at a formidable rate of speed. It makes me

nervous. I cling to the steering wheel, my mind imagining collisions from behind. An immense swarm of hornets buzz wildly behind me. Incredibly, the noise grows louder. A motorcycle shoots past at a remarkable velocity, probably around a hundred or more. The fluttering of a heart. The rattling of nerves. The slight buffeting of our car. The hornets die down. It was the crack of a whip; a flash of lightning. Please remember that I was already driving at a fair pace. Its passing made us feel at a crawl. It wove through cars with great ease and grace, shrinking before our very eyes as if by the wave of a wand, the magic of sheer speed. The clamor of hornets raised their voices again, and then another motorcycle shot by as if a bullet fired from a high-powered rifle. The hornets sounded their wrath yet again and a third one rocketed down the emergency lane to our right, leaping with dexterity into our lane, moving, dancing about a couple of cars, weaving with beautiful agility, disappearing, gone.

The three of them were obviously friends, striving to keep up and surpass each other, perhaps playing some kind of a game. With a shuddering in my soul, I considered the outcome of a slight miscalculation: the clench of brakes, screech of tire, snapping of bones, release of blood, chaos. Possibilities for disaster were many, such as a sudden malfunction, a glitch in the motorcycles carefully engineered machinery, throwing off the fine balance of its missile-like trajectory. Or what about fallen, unpredictable humanity? It was not too difficult to imagine one of the cars on the highway, unaware of the swiftness of a motorcycle's approach, turning into its lane, causing the white flicker of a fearful eye,

crunch and sickening flight, a strange moment of flying, the world, highway, and sky twisting around, a moment of dreamlike beauty before the ripping of gear, rupturing of organs, and crack of vertebrae.

At this point, I suppose I'm expected to render insights and criticisms concerning our adrenaline-obsessed, youth-oriented culture, but instead I hunch a little towards my steering wheel as if such a posture can shield my wife and me from unforeseen contingencies, protect us from the intrusion of tragedy. ■

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*Scott Schuleit is the associate pastor at Taft Street Baptist Church. He enjoys preaching, the arts, theology, good conversation, and spending time with his dear wife Christina.*

# FINDING HOPE IN A PA

The coronavirus is a terrible scourge, leaving a devastating trail of illness, death, strained relationships, loneliness, economic hardship, and business loss in wide swathes across the globe. In this it is similar to the numerous sinister plagues that have ravaged the world throughout history—Black Death, yellow fever, influenza, cholera, and more.

What we are enduring in the coronavirus pandemic seems so novel to most of us that it's worth remembering that living through a pandemic is not really new. Of course, this fact does not make COVID-19 more bearable; it merely reminds us of the brokenness of our world and that, for all our heroic efforts, remarkable science, medical advances, and technological expertise, we are still unable to save ourselves. The speed and spread of infection, scientists tell us, is not surprising given the nature of the disease, but it was shocking how quickly it upended our lives and perspectives.

Margie and I are sheltering in place, as ordered by Minnesota Governor Tim Walz when he wisely told us all to stay home. We are writers, a solitary vocation, but this isolation feels different. Our home backs up to the edge of Hidden Valley Park (appropriately named for a time of quarantine), thickly wooded with steep ravines leading down to the Credit River (appropriately named during a time of economic downturn). When we moved in, we named our home, The House Between, where we are in the years between the main period of our lives and ministry, and our deaths (also, as it turns out, appropriately named).

"We face a doleful future," Harvey Fineberg, former president of the National Academy of Medicine, says.

He sees "an unhappy population trapped indoors for months, with the most vulnerable possibly quarantined for far longer." Margie and I are in that category, both by age and with underlying health issues. "If we scrupulously protect ourselves and our loved ones," Donald McNeil reports in *The New York Times*, "more of us will live. If we underestimate the virus, it will find us."

*It will find us.* Uncomfortable words. Today, under the spell of medical science, we see death as a physical phenomenon, an impersonal event explainable by natural causes. And so, it is. But when it comes close, or snatches someone we love, or hovers unnervingly around us, this left-brain explanation by itself seems somehow insufficient. Death reminds us of greater realities, principalities, and powers that are at work beyond the reach of science to observe, measure, and replicate. To see properly here, a right-brain vision is also necessary, so that art complements science to align our perspective more closely with the nature of reality. And so, we turn to the artist for help, allowing our imagination to join our mind in grasping the horror of pandemic.

In 1850 a German artist, Alfred Rethel (1816–59) created a woodcut (approximately 12 inches square) titled, "Dance of Death: Death the Strangler." Here death is personified as a skeletal phantom dancing to its own music, played not with a violin bow but a bone. Bodies lie about in the street, abandoned corpses, and villagers flee fearing infection. Those that flee also carry musical instruments—cello, violin, oboe—but their music is stilled, in fear perhaps or anguish or in the rush to escape. The only music is that played by Death and it is the music of despair. In the background a gruesome creature,

Illness or Infection, rests, holding a cruel scourge with sharp metal studs on multiple flails. It pauses in inflicting its pain, in no hurry because the pandemic will not quickly flee or fade. One person covers their face, hoping to avoid the illness and the scent of decay, but neither of the phantoms are concerned anyone will escape. Perhaps not today, or even tomorrow, but in the end Death will not be avoided.

Rethel's woodcut is art, a metaphor, a creative depiction of reality. It is imaginative and allusive; not definitive, right-brain not left. In contrast, Merriam Webster defines coronavirus as, "any of a family (*Coronaviridae*) of large single-stranded RNA viruses that have a lipid envelope studded with club-shaped spike proteins, infect birds and many mammals including humans, and include the causative agents of MERS, SARS, and COVID-19." We need both depictions to see properly and are mistaken to place them in opposition.

The media and various officials from a variety of institutions provide daily pandemic updates. We want to remain informed without being overwhelmed, which takes intentionality and thoughtful care—in a word, discernment. Complicating this is the need to wade through the endless political posturing, the ideological debates, dangerous distrust, the myths and reckless suggestions for cures, the obviously incorrect claims, the appalling lack of leadership, and polarizing protests that seek not to persuade but to bully. Even setting aside all of that, the flood of helpful, legitimate data and information is continuous and feels at times like a tsunami: How many have fallen ill, how many have been hospitalized, how many of the hospitalized are in the ICU, how many ventilators are available,



# NDEMIC



US DEN VORZUGSDRUCKEN, HERAUSGEGEBEN VOM KUNSTWART.

ALFRED RETHEL, DER TOD ALS WÜRGER.

whether the supply of personal protective equipment is sufficient, how many are tested, how many more test kits and reagents are needed, how many have died, how many have recovered.

We must realize that all this updating and commentary is not merely neutral data or information. Together it works to shape our perspective, our view of where and who we are, of how we see ourselves, our world, the pandemic and our future. Perspective matters. It slowly becomes the story that shapes how we interpret what is happening around us, how we should live, and what we should expect.

Wisdom suggests we must find a way to check our perspective. If our view of things is simply fed by the daily updates, political agendas, and pundits' commentary we are likely to be swept off in all sorts of directions. Better to be discerning: Am I seeing things correctly? Is the story I am telling really reflective of life and reality or does it merely reflect how conformed I am to a fallen world? And does my story take into account the bigger story to which, in my hearts of hearts, I have pledged my allegiance?

I would suggest that there are at least three touchstones by which we as Christians can check our perspective during a pandemic:

1. Remember fallen reality
2. See the coronavirus Christianly
3. Reexamine our basis for hope



## REMEMBER FALLEN REALITY

As a society we have gone to great effort and expense to keep death at arm's length. Not too long ago the average American child would help their grandmother with butchering a hen for Sunday lunch. Along with advances in medical science, there has arisen a funeral industry that has made obsolete the necessity of caring for and sitting with the body of a deceased loved one. The family physician, who used to include in their calling the task of informing the family when death is near, now uses technology and extreme measures to keep death at bay. There is nothing inherently wrong with any of that, except if it causes us to somehow be disconnected with the reality of the fall, including the fact that each of us, without exception, will die.

"We are alienated from ourselves: that is, within each of us we find the disintegrating power of sin," Jerram Barrs says.

*This separation within our own persons is also expressed in our bodies. Pain, sickness, and the debility that comes with advancing age demonstrate this physical corruption. Death, our final enemy, manifests this reality most fully as it tears apart body and spirit and brings our bodies down to the grave.*

Truly believing in the reality of the fall should help us maintain perspective during the pandemic. All the coronavirus has done is remind us of this fallen reality. In that sense, nothing much has really changed.

In 1948, C. S. Lewis published a magazine article, "On Living in an Atomic Age." At the time, nuclear weapons were new and horrifying, especially to the people of Great Britain

who had suffered horribly through the Blitz in World War II. Scientists and politicians warned that humankind now had the capability to wipe life from the earth. The terrible images, death toll, and massive destruction inflicted on Hiroshima and Nagasaki caused people to pause and wonder whether dropping them was just, and to feel fearful. Their perspective on life had been altered.

But Lewis challenged the new story they were telling themselves and each other. In his essay he argued we must take the nature of fallen reality seriously. He begins this way:

*In one way we think a great deal too much of the atomic bomb.*

*"How are we to live in an atomic age?" I am tempted to reply:*

*"Why, as you would have lived in the sixteenth century when the plague visited London almost every year, or as you would have lived in a Viking age when raiders from Scandinavia might land and cut your throat any night; or indeed, as you are already living in an age of cancer, an age of syphilis, an age of paralysis, an age of air raids, an age of railroad accidents, and age of motor accidents."*

*In other words, do not let us begin by exaggerating the novelty of our situation. Believe me, dear sir or madam, you and all whom you love were already sentenced to death before the atomic bomb was invented: and quite a high percentage of us were going to die in unpleasant ways. We had, indeed, one very great advantage over our ancestors—anaesthetics [sic]; but we have that still. It is perfectly ridiculous to go about whimpering and drawing long faces because the scientists have added one more chance of painful and premature*

*death to a world which already bristled with such chances and in which death itself was not a chance at all, but a certainty.*

*This is the first point to be made: and the first action to be taken is to pull ourselves together. If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb when it comes find us doing sensible and human things—praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts—not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about bombs.*

Whatever threat we face, whether atomic weapons in 1948 or the Black Plague in London in 1665 or the COVID-19 pandemic in America in 2020, our perspective needs to be grounded in reality—and reality is that life is fallen, the world is broken, and death awaits us all. This is not pessimism but realism. The fact that something is deathly wrong is one of the few, perhaps the only, point on which all religious and philosophical worldviews agree. Everyone must account for death and suffering and live accordingly. We may choose to ignore it, believe it is an illusion, escape into drugs or busyness or some other distraction, but eventually death finds us.

This was true before the pandemic and will remain true after it is past. It is not what God intended to be normal in the world he created, but it is our normal in this abnormal world. This provides a helpful check on our perspective, namely, that things haven't changed as much as we might imagine. The coronavirus is new, but reality remains. For the Christian this means that, whether we feel threatened or



not, our calling remains constant, to be faithful in the ordinary and routine of life. It was so before the pandemic and will be so once it is past. Our ordinary and routine is different, of course, but that isn't entirely unprecedented either.

### SEE THE CORONAVIRUS CHRISTIANLY

My natural tendency is to see Margie and myself sheltering at home dangerously surrounded by the pandemic, praying that God, who is out there, will keep us safe. But I would argue that a holy spirited perspective is to see us sheltered safely in Christ, with the pandemic out there safely under the sovereign providence of God.

Remember what St. Paul writes in Colossians when he speaks of a great mystery of the faith. He claims our redemption in Christ means that we are actually not out on our own, but in him, or as the apostle puts it in Colossians 3:3: our life "is hidden with Christ in God."

Now compare this to what the Hebrew poet says in Psalm 46—it's repeated twice like a refrain. "The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold." The first line reminds us that, no matter how dark our days, we have not been abandoned. And the Lord who is with us has suffered his own darkness and separation, and feared abandonment. The second line reminds us of where we have been placed by God's grace. A stronghold is a place we shelter during danger, a place of safety where the enemy is kept at bay.

This means I can be realistic without panic, I can plan without hoarding, and I can be content to serve in love because I am in the shelter and refuge who is the God who loves me, and his world and has not abandoned it. A distinctly Christian or biblical perspective reveals that Margie and I are not

in a vulnerable spot, the coronavirus is. We're ensconced in the safest place there is.

This should be reflected in our choices, our attitude, our gratitude, and our hopefulness.

### REEXAMINE OUR BASIS FOR HOPE

Besides remembering the nature of fallen reality and being certain to view the pandemic through the lens of Holy Scripture, it also helps to reflect again on the meaning of life and the possibility of hope.

For Lewis in his essay on atomic weapons, this meant thinking about Naturalism, the popular explanation for things in his day. So, he took Naturalism to its logical conclusion:

*If Nature is all that exists—in other words, if there is no God and no life of some quite different sort outside Nature—then all stories will end in the same way: in a universe from which all life is banished without possibility of return. It will have been an accidental flicker, and there will be no one even to remember it.*

And in writing this, he sounds very much like some of the voices of our own day, 72 years later in 2020 during the coronavirus pandemic.

Consider, for example, the voice of Maria Popova, author of the book, *Figuring* (2019) and the popular blog, *Brain Pickings*. In a *Brain Pickings* email titled, "Figuring Forward in an Uncertain Universe," Popova writes: "A couple of days ago, I received a moving note from a woman who had read *Figuring* and found herself revisiting the final page—it was helping her, she said, live through the terror and confusion of these uncertain times. I figured I'd share that page—which comes after 544 others, tracing centuries of human loves and

losses, trials and triumphs, that gave us some of the crowning achievements of our civilization—in case it helps anyone else."

This, then, from the final page of *Figuring* by Popova:

*Meanwhile, someplace in the world, somebody is making love and another a poem. Elsewhere in the universe, a star manyfold the mass of our third-rate sun is living out its final moments in a wild spin before collapsing into a black hole, its exhale bending spacetime itself into a well of nothingness that can swallow every atom that ever touched us and every datum we ever produced, every poem and statue and symphony we've ever known—an entropic spectacle insentient to questions of blame and mercy, devoid of why.*

*In four billion years, our own star will follow its fate, collapsing into a white dwarf. We exist only by chance, after all. The Voyager will still be sailing into the interstellar shorelessness on the wings of the "heavenly breezes" Kepler had once imagined, carrying Beethoven on a golden disc crafted by a symphonic civilization that long ago made love and war and mathematics on a distant blue dot.*

*But until that day comes, nothing once created ever fully leaves us. Seeds are planted and come abloom generations, centuries, civilizations later, migrating across coterries and countries and continents. Meanwhile, people live and people die—in peace as war rages on, in poverty and disrepute as latent fame awaits, with much that never meets its more, in shipwrecked love.*

*I will die.*

*You will die.*

*The atoms that huddled for a cosmic*

*blink around the shadow of a self will return to the seas that made us.*

*What will survive of us are shoreless seeds and stardust.*

Or consider the voice of Brian Greene, professor of physics and mathematics at Columbia University. This from an online conversation:

*When you recognize that we are the product of purposeless, mindless laws of physics playing themselves out on our particles—because we are, all, bags of particles—it changes the way you search for meaning and purpose: You recognize that looking out to the cosmos to find some answer that's sort of floating out there in the void is just facing the wrong direction. At the end of the day, we have to manufacture our own meaning, our own purpose—we have to manufacture coherence... to make sense of existence. And when you manufacture purpose, that doesn't make it artificial—that makes it so much more noble than accepting purpose that is thrust upon you from the outer world.*

And this from Greene in the final pages of *Until the End of Time: Mind Matter, and Our Search for Meaning in an Evolving Universe*:

*We are ephemeral. We are evanescent.*

*Yet our moment is rare and extraordinary, a recognition that allows us to make life's impermanence and the scarcity of self-reflective awareness the basis for value and a foundation for gratitude....*

*We exist because our specific particulate arrangements won the battle against an astounding assortment of other arrangements all vying to be realized. By the grace of random chance, funneled through nature's laws, we are here....*

*As we hurtle toward a cold and barren cosmos, we must accept that there is no grand design. Particles are not endowed with purpose. There is no final answer hovering in the depths of space awaiting discovery.*

*Instead, certain special collections of particles can think and feel and reflect, and within these subjective worlds they can create purpose. And so, in our quest to fathom the human condition, the only direction to look is inward. That is the noble direction to look. It is a direction that forgoes ready-made answers and turns*

*to the highly personal journey of constructing our own meaning. It is a direction that leads to the very heart of creative expression and the source of our most resonant narratives. Science is a powerful, exquisite tool for grasping an external reality. But within that rubric, within that understanding, everything else is the human species contemplating itself, grasping what it needs to carry on, and telling a story that reverberates into the darkness, a story carved of sound and etched into silence, a story that, at its best, stirs the soul.*

I want to be careful here because I am not a secularist. I deeply appreciate Greene's ability to explain the

discoveries of science and mathematics in a way I as a nonscientist could begin to grasp their meaning. And I want to take Greene's and Popova's beliefs seriously. But. If the cosmos is finally an

impersonal space of no meaning or purpose, then any sense of meaning and purpose we project from within ourselves is finally meaningless as well.

Both Popova and Greene are good writers, using well crafted prose to make their point with brilliance. But. It is one thing for good writing to enhance and exposit the substance of an idea, but it is quite another

when good writing is used to hide a lack of substance. As a writer I appreciate good writing and know the delight of working hard to craft prose that delights as well as informs. I have no doubt that secular readers might find solace in what Popova and Greene suggest. We naturally feel a sense of awe when we consider our place in the physical universe within the scale of time and space that overwhelms us. But. On what basis can we assume those feelings have any meaning, or that the meaning we ascribe to them is not meaningless? The appeal of this sort of writing is known to me. In my tribe there is an almost insatiable market for devotional literature, some of which

**STILL, I WOULD INSIST THERE IS A FAR BETTER STORY TO ACCOUNT FOR MEANING AND HOPE IN THE MIDST OF A PANDEMIC. MEANING, PURPOSE, AND HOPE FOUND IN THE PERSONAL INFINITE GOD WHO CREATED ALL THINGS, WHO LOVES WHAT HE MADE AND IS REDEEMING ALL THINGS.**

involves a story that tugs at heartstrings along with a few favorite scripture verses (out of context) woven together with a few well-beloved phrases in the dialect spoken in Sunday school classes. Here sentimental writing does not help believers deepen their faith and life but rather substitutes warm feelings for spiritual growth, mature reflection, and robust worship.

“By the grace of random chance,” Greene writes, “funneled through nature’s laws, we are here.” As a Christian, I must say, No. There is no grace here, nor is there the possibility of grace. Greene is borrowing a Christian term and misapplying it to make his case sound better than it is. Random chance can be described in many ways: impersonal, blind, unfeeling, but one thing it is not is gracious. Grace is not a secular concept but a profoundly Christian one, and the etymology of *grace* has roots in twelfth century Old French meaning “God’s unmerited favor.”

I hope you read Lewis’ essay. And I would agree with him that the secular reductionistic perspective on life is insufficient for real hope in the face of death. Depending on an inner sense of meaning in a meaningless cosmos is the counsel of despair. I do not mean that Popova and Greene are in despair—from their writing they seem positive and optimistic. I use despair here in a more technical or philosophical sense, to define a romantic and irrational conclusion that is unrelated to their insistence that reality can be known only through science. This is blind faith, a leap in the dark, and speaking personally as a Christian I would say that I could never muster that much faith. To argue for meaning to arise from meaningless is to counsel a blind embrace

of meaninglessness while renaming it, against all evidence, meaningful. I find no cause for hope in this.

I realize that, for most today, this is finally an issue of faith, commitment, and belief; not argument, reason, and evidence. It is love, not debate, that matters. Still, I would insist there is a far better story to account for meaning and hope in the midst of a pandemic. Meaning, purpose, and hope found in the personal infinite God who created all things, who loves what he made and is redeeming all things. This God is not acquainted with pain, illness, and death only theoretically, because he entered human history in the person of Christ, suffered, and gave up his life, going through death so that life in him was won, eternally. And the guarantee of the story is not a leap in the dark but a historic fact, in space and time, testified to by a skeptical—and still growing—crowd of witnesses: an empty tomb, a risen Lord.

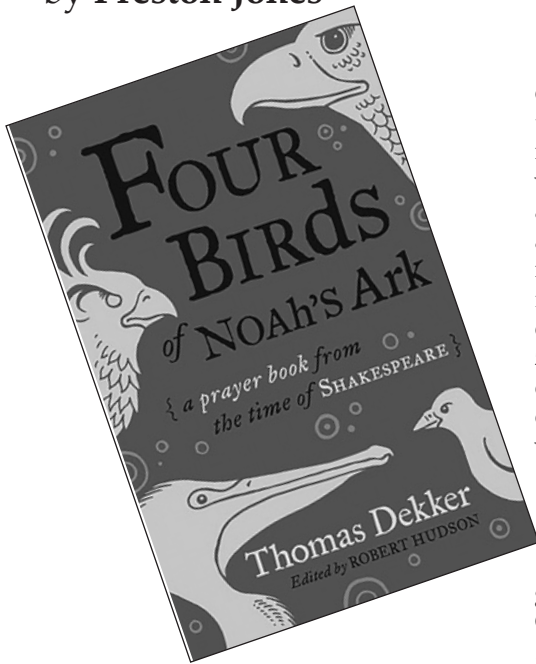
And in this I see sufficient reason for hope. ■

**Source:** Fineberg and McNeil in “The Coronavirus in America: The Year Ahead” by Donald G. McNeil Jr. in *The New York Times* (April 18, 2020). Merriam Webster online ([www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/coronavirus](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/coronavirus)). Jerram Barrs from “Eight Biblical Emphases of the Francis Schaeffer Institute” in *Covenant Magazine* (Covenant Theological Seminary; Issue 32, 2020) p. 39. “On Living in an Atomic Age” in *Present Concerns: Essays by C. S. Lewis* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; 1986) pp. 73-74. Maria Popova online ([www.brainpickings.org](http://www.brainpickings.org)), specifically (<https://mailchi.mp/brainpickings/figuring-last-page-1?e=d72e23397f>), *Figuring* by Maria Popova (New York, NY: Pantheon Books; 2019) page 545. Brian Greene in conversation online ([www.brainpickings.org/2020/04/24/brian-greene-janna-levin-conversation](http://www.brainpickings.org/2020/04/24/brian-greene-janna-levin-conversation)). *Until the End of Time: Mind Matter, and Our Search for Meaning in an Evolving Universe* by Brian Greene (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf; 2020) pp. 322-326.

# FOUND.

# Old Prayers in Modern Vietnam

by Preston Jones



This collection of prayers from the early seventeenth century, edited by the poet Robert Hudson, travelled with me to Vietnam. For a second time, I went hunting ghosts in places linked to a war a half century finished but still alive in so many minds. Separated by more than 300 years, an Englishman's religious petitions and a warrior's experiences in a Southeast Asian battle zone would seem to have nothing in common. But they have humanity in common. So, at breakfast in hotels where mostly French and Australian tourists chat; in a park in central Saigon; at a sidewalk restaurant in the city of Huế; after a day of touring in the sweltering Mekong Delta; after gathering relics on the battlefield of Con Thien—prayers from the days of Shakespeare and thoughts of a more recent story mixed and conversed.

There is a "Thanksgiving after a Woman Delivers her Child." It praises God for giving the mother "double life"—the preservation of her own and the new one in her arms. And the reviewer's mind turned to a combatant who saw comrades die in Huế, and who says that not only was his own life spared on the first day of the Tet Offensive, but he was allowed to have a life post-war. He gives thanks for the preservation of his own double life and yet mourns those, like the medic lying on the sidewalk a few feet away, who did not survive and thus lost two lives: the one in the moment and the one that could have been.

There is a "Prayer for a Farmer" which observes that, like the plants in a garden, the farmer is also made of the physical stuff of the world; and "so that in trimming the earth, I do but dress myself." And veterans speak of the ways the war of bullets and bombs and

traps reflected the hostility also rife in the natural world of their war zone—fire ants, pythons, thorns, and cobras. It also dwelt in the minds of tightly wound young men who would play and speak violently even when out of danger. It's good to pray that the wild garden of the mind would be trimmed as well as an earthly one, for both can host scorpions.

There is a "Prayer for a Soldier Going into Battle," which conveys the ancient confusion between political and divine interests. "Be my captain...this day," the petition reads. May "the weapons that I fight with [be] faith and hope; and the cause for which I fight, the advancement of true religion." But English soldiers in the day of Shakespeare must have known that Frenchmen prayed the same thing, and it is hard to believe that this did not make some of them cynical. What, soldiers in Shakespeare's own *Henry V* asked, was the war *really* about?

And I hear Vietnam veterans say that their war was about stopping the spread of communism, but who also know that most of the enemies they captured and interrogated never knew or cared about communism. Or their war was about the preservation of American prestige as a leading Cold War power, but the war ended in American humiliation. They know the historical facts and listen again, this time on YouTube, to President Johnson making his case. But still they wonder: what was that war *really* about? "[W]hat reason have I to be proud? Am I not dust and ashes?"

There is a "Prayer for One Who Is Sick," which says: "My sins cry out as witness against my soul, and my soul pleads guilty of treason against your majesty." And a veteran tells me that, once after a firefight in Cambodia, he searched the body of a dead enemy soldier, and he found a wallet, and in



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the wallet was a photo of the man with a woman and children. And the veteran said, and says, to himself: *we just killed daddy.*

Another veteran says, *we didn't take prisoners*, meaning captives were killed. Another wonders if he left behind a child, the product of a union with a poor Vietnamese girl who served for pay. "Restore me, O God, by your pardon," they might say, "under that great seal of your promise, to forgive sinners at whatever time they heartily pour out their tears of repentance."

There is a "Prayer for Those Who Work in Dangerous Places, as Coal Pits, Mines, Etc."

*Save my body, O Lord, because, at every turn, Death*

*is at my elbow. Whatever happens to my body,*

*save my soul, which is the divine part of me,*

*so that it may come into your heavenly treasure-house.*

Death is at my elbow: ambushes and counter-ambushes; mines; the Vietnamese fighter by night who was the army base barber by day; the smiling local kid who takes the candy bar you distribute in the name of winning hearts and minds and then tells what he knows to the Vietcong; the Agent Orange that still wreaks havoc. And the sense that *the divine part of me* has been lost. Combat, many veterans say, is a God-free zone, the very definition of hell.

Divided into four parts—the Dove, the Eagle, the Pelican and the Phoenix—the collection of prayers in *Four Birds of Noah's Ark* makes for an interesting period piece but also as a still useful source for reflection. A fifth part comprises Feathers, i.e. short quotations

from Augustine, Jerome, Chrysostom and others. One reads:

*The heart has four duties to fulfill:  
What to love, what to fear,  
What to rejoice in, and for what to be sad.*

—Bernard

It would be compelling to listen to a thoughtful combat veteran reflecting on which is which. ■

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**Preston Jones** teaches at John Brown University. He provides content for the website War and Life: Discussions with Veterans (<https://warandlifediscussions.weebly.com>)

**Book recommended:** *Four Birds of Noah's Ark* edited by Robert Hudson. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017) 167 pages + notes + bibliography.

**An excerpt** from "A Prayer Against Wrath in Four Birds of Noah's Ark (p. 108):

*Wrath is a short madness;  
madness is the murderer of reason,  
so that anger transforms us into  
brute beasts.*

*Give us courage, therefore, O Lord, to  
fight against  
this strong enemy, and not only to  
fight,*

*but to overcome him—for it is harder  
to triumph*

*over our raging affections than to  
subdue a city.*

*All vengeance is yours, O God, and if  
we offer*

*to take it out of your hand, it is  
high treason;*

*for we do as much as if we set about  
to pull*

*you from your throne...*

# Supernatural Realities

Although perspectives shaped by the Enlightenment—within or without the church—will have barely noticed, the world is rife with mystery, principalities, mystical voices, powers, and spiritual realities.

For one thing, as the ancient Hebrew poet saw so clearly, creation simply will not remain silent. It speaks and sings and tells stories.

*The heavens declare the glory of God,  
and the firmament shows his  
handiwork.*

*One day tells its tale to another,  
and one night imparts knowledge  
to another.*

*Although they have no words or language,  
and their voices are not heard.*

*Their sound has gone out into all lands,  
and their message to the ends of  
the earth.*

Living in such a universe makes spiritual realities present, unless we have trained our ears not to listen. Do we hear it?

Not only does creation speak of divinity, but we live moment by moment at the interface between the physical and spiritual realms, between the visible and invisible, between the natural and the supernatural, between the mythical and the logical. Nearby angelic hosts and demonic hordes, beings of unspeakable majesty or horror, exist and actively shed light or cast shadow into human history. It takes a certain kind of blindness not to notice an enemy constantly prowling the world, seeking souls to devour. Do we see reality clearly?

Often it is artists, mystics, and the mentally troubled that hear and see the supernatural with greatest clarity, but such voices are easily explained away as illusionary, delusionary, imaginary, or

the meaningless firing of some network in the brain. The confidence that causes us to refuse to listen to these voices is more akin to arrogance than it is to wisdom. Absent metaphor, the facts are often unintelligible.

With this in mind, I want to call attention to three cinematic stories—television series, actually—that explore aspects of spiritual reality in a broken world. They will not be to everyone's taste, but that is not my concern—getting them is more important than liking them. Watching all three must be a right-brain, not a left-brain cinematic encounter. We need to understand why these expressions of myth and spirituality are attractive. What we as Christians can learn from them. And how we can witness to the Story of our Lord in a way that might be intriguing enough for the conversation to continue.

## ***The Green Frontier* (Netflix)**

A crime thriller set deep in the isolated and lush Amazonian forest, *The Green Frontier* introduces us to the supernatural rituals and beliefs of Colombian indigenous peoples.

Some missionaries have been murdered in the jungle on the border of Columbia and Brazil. Detective Helena Poveda (played by Juana del Rio) is sent from the capital, Bogota, to investigate. As she does, Poveda uncovers strange new ways of seeing and living that upends her perception of reality and ultimately helps her understand her

past. Members of an indigenous tribe in the area who have long resisted contact with the outside world assist her, even as they guard a mystical secret passed on from generation to generation, rooted in ancient shamanistic magic. To them the jungle is not simply their home or an ecosystem; it is a being with which they maintain a fragile, unique, and powerful communion.

## ***Ragnarok* (Netflix)**

*Ragnarok* is a Norwegian fantasy drama in which high schooler Magne

Seiera (played by David Stakston) slowly discovers, to his surprise, that he is Thor, the Norse god. The story unfolds in a remote fictional Norwegian town dominated by an industrial complex ille-

gally and disastrously polluting the surrounding air, water, and land. The wealthy family members that own the business are actually *Jötunn*, in human form, which in Norse mythology are frost giants. They have the town under their control, and Magne's initial, bumbling attempts to intervene backfire spectacularly.

Though I found the series too slow in its pacing and too weirdly brutal in depicting the evil of the villains, there is no doubt the old Norse myths can continue to capture imaginations. *Ragnarok* represents a creative attempt to apply them to a modern setting.

## ***Evil* (CBS)**

I've only watched one episode, so I'll

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**WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND  
WHY THESE EXPRESSIONS  
OF MYTH AND SPIRITUALITY  
ARE ATTRACTIVE.**

let John Seel comment:

"The show is the brainchild of married team Michelle and Robert King. Here they directly explore the question: What is the nature of evil? The outcome is a provocative series that studies through narrative drama the intersection of science and religion.

"The story centers on an open-minded but skeptical lapsed Catholic psychologist Kristen Bouchard who begins working with Roman Catholic priest-in-training David Acosta and blue-collar non-practicing Muslim technology contractor Ben Shakir. The Kings fall on both sides of the debate—Robert believes in the demonic, while Michelle doesn't. What emerges is an honest and balanced debate about the nature of reality. Neither sees reality in black and white categories, making them exemplars of what I have described in my book *The New Copernicans* as an 'open immanent' perspective. Robert states, 'I think it works as both metaphor and fact. Exorcists we've talked to talked about how difficult it is to distinguish between mental illness and what they would call demonic possession. Because demonic possession can be mixed in with mental illness, and the reverse is true too.' Michelle adds, 'Given that we created two characters that have very different ideas, it is important to me that they listened to each other respectfully, and that they feel comfortable expressing those opposing viewpoints. It feels like there's not a lot of listening going on in the world.'" ■

**Sources:** Psalm 19:1-4 from The Book of Common Prayer. John Seel online ([www.nconversations.com/single-post/2019/11/24/CBSs-EVIL-Learning-to-Live-in-the-Midst-of-Tension](http://www.nconversations.com/single-post/2019/11/24/CBSs-EVIL-Learning-to-Live-in-the-Midst-of-Tension))





