

FRED BAHNSON

The Ecology of Prayer

*Faith and resistance in
the age of climate change*

for David James Duncan

I. The Outer Banks

SOMETHING WAS STIRRING. I waded into the tidal inlet and called to my wife and sons. We had left Ocracoke Island and walked a quarter mile out into Pamlico Sound, wading through shin-deep water to reach a smaller island where we might explore. The day had produced periodic gifts—two hermit crabs, a half-submerged diamondback terrapin—and now this new creature the size of a dinner plate, bobbing up and down in the shallow water: a horseshoe crab. A creature from the dawn of time. When we bent our heads for a closer look, something was wrong. The long spiny tail was missing. Instead of burrowing into the sand or swimming forward, the crab shuffled in place, performing a disjointed hippity hop, like a skeleton on strings. It was a skeleton. I turned over the carapace to find not a live horseshoe crab, but a live and quite livid blue crab, snapping the water. This smaller creature had picked clean the flesh of the shell's original inhabitant; the blue crab's pincers jabbing

upward left and right into the shell had given the horseshoe crab the appearance of life. The boys took turns picking up the shell and extending it toward the blue crab to watch it pinch, each daring the other to stick out a finger, until they tired of this game and we moved on, wading slowly back across the sound. Perhaps it was only the vertigo brought on by all that sand and sea and sky or the fact that we were alone out there on the tidal flats, but it felt then as if we were the last family on Earth, keeping vigil on islands that in the next century or two could all be under water.

WE LEFT FOR THE Outer Banks on Easter Sunday. During a rest stop on the ten-hour drive I pulled our tattered North Carolina road atlas off the minivan dash and thumbed to the map of our destination. The islands appeared like a giant bowstring pulled taut by some unseen watery hand.

It was our sons' spring break. For an entire week we swam in the Atlantic, messed around in tidal inlets, cooked scallops for lunch and bluefish for dinner. My wife and I split a bottle of wine each night. The boys gorged on ice cream. It was glorious and primal and more than a little melancholy, given what I'd been reading about the place.

Several months before our trip I was speaking with a climate scientist, a friend and colleague at my university, who told me about a website called "Surging Seas." Based on peer-reviewed science, the website's interactive tool allows the user to type in a destination and view the projected sea level rise corresponding to the amount of fossil fuels burned. The site presents two scenarios: Scenario A is "unchecked pollution," resulting in a four-degree Celsius temperature increase; Scenario B is "extreme carbon cuts," resulting in a two-degree increase. As for when the seas will rise, the soonest could be "less than 200 years from now." I opened the website and typed in *Ocracoke Island, NC*. In both scenarios, Ocracoke and the entire chain of Outer Banks all but disappeared. Under "extreme carbon cuts," a few sand dunes poked up here and there, but everything else—roads, towns, and estuaries—had joined the Atlantic.

Climate science has given us thousands of similar projections and when you hold them up in your mind it becomes difficult not to see a pointillist image of a planet in travail.

I suddenly felt a strong desire to see this place. Instead of sitting in a church building on Easter Sunday, I needed to celebrate Jesus's resurrection in a place where it would feel like the wild gamble on hope that it was.

We would go as witnesses to this Easter island, to watch and absorb and partake in its beauty before it was gone. Beholders of a passing glory.

II. Good Friday

BEFORE WE LEFT for the coast, I attended church on Good Friday.

Good Friday is the one day in the Christian year when death is given its due. Most Christians avoid it, politely stepping around all that messy crucifixion business and going straight for the Easter party. Some years I avoided it, too. But this year more than ever I needed to cast my lot with the dying, for it felt like we would be living with death for a long time to come.

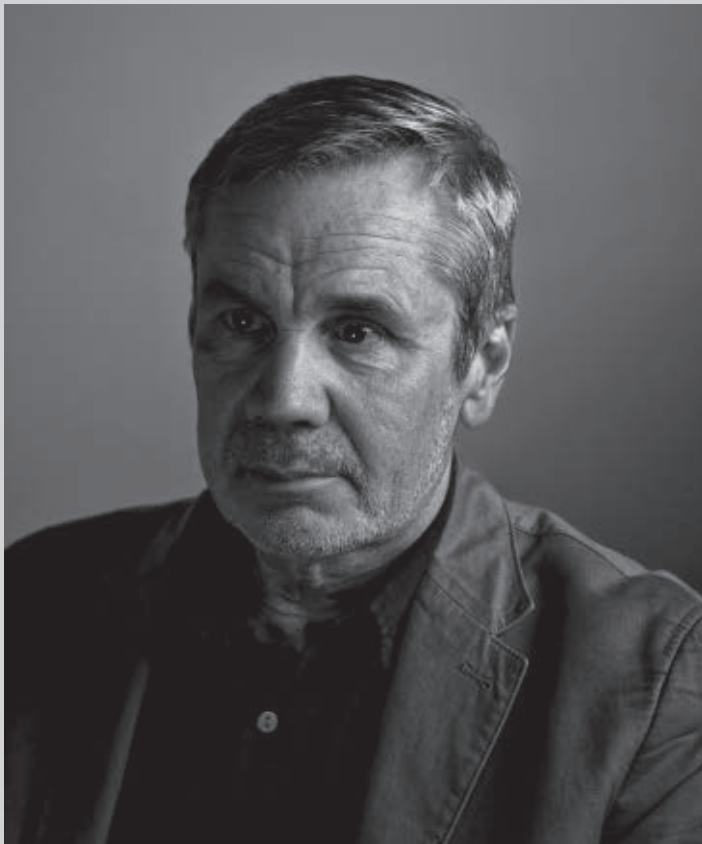
I had been in a dark place for months. It probably didn't help that for my Lenten reading I chose Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. In that disturbing, apocalyptic novel a father and son push a shopping cart through a nearly uninhabitable world, hanging onto nothing more than the love between them. I had also been listening to Leonard Cohen's final album *You Want*



Facing Change

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
NICK BOWERS

THE PHOTOGRAPHS that accompany this article are from *Scared Scientists*, a series created by Nick Bowers and commissioned by Climate Council, an Australian environmental organization. Bowers interviewed scientists in a variety of fields and photographed them as they discussed their findings with him, particularly their fears about the effects of climate change.



TOP FAR LEFT

PETER MACREADIE

Marine ecologist

Fear: global catastrophe

TOP NEAR LEFT

SHAUNA MURRAY

Biological scientist

Fear: reaching four degrees
of warming

BOTTOM FAR LEFT

WILL STEFFEN

Earth system scientist

Fear: loss of control of the
climate system

BOTTOM FAR LEFT

SARAH PERKINS-KIRKPATRICK

Extreme weather researcher

Fear: increase in extreme
weather events

It Darker. The title track lyrics evoke the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead.

Magnified, sanctified, be thy holy name

Vilified, crucified, in the human frame

A million candles burning for the help that never came

You want it darker, we kill the flame.

If I could give a name to the anxiety I experienced then it would be the fear that we are killing the flame. That the world we have always known and mostly taken for granted is breaking free of its moorings—not just in the future, but in real time, like the Larsen C ice shelf in Antarctica, which, as I write, is expected to calve any day now into the Weddell Sea. *Things fall apart; the center cannot hold.*

The utter inability of our political institutions to prevent or even slow the catastrophe of climate change is now on full display. I'm no apocalypticist. Entropy is inherent to our universe; stars and solar systems and planets disassemble and assume new forms. It is the speed of the destruction, and the human agency behind it, that nearly overwhelms me with grief.

"One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds," wrote Aldo Leopold. "Much of the damage inflicted on land is quite invisible to laymen. An ecologist must either harden his shell and make believe that the consequences of science are none of his business, or he must be the doctor who sees the marks of death in a community that believes itself well and does not want to be told otherwise." All winter and spring I had begun to see those marks of death and feel those wounds as never before. As I sat in that Good Friday service I wondered: what effect is climate change having on our inner landscapes? Leopold was right: a keen ecological perception makes us see a world of wounds. He was also right that the pain brought on by that vision is borne internally. We may gather in crowds online or in person to vent or protest climate change, but existentially we each confront our fears alone. That's how it feels to live in the Anthropocene, the era in which humans are changing the geological and biological foundations of life.

I'm a Christian educator; I teach at a university divinity school that trains pastors, nonprofit leaders, and chaplains. What I'm mostly trying to do in my teaching is bring Christianity back down to Earth. We've let it float around too long up in the Neoplatonic ether. I try to help my students reclaim Christianity as the earthy, visceral, this-world-focused faith of Jesus. But as we discuss the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's report or books like Naomi Klein's *This Changes Everything* or Jedediah Purdy's *After Nature*, I sense my students' frustration. They are overwhelmed by the immensity of climate change, doubtful that any of our current approaches—be they policy or

grassroots—are up to the challenge. I teach about the unique gifts the Christian narrative offers, but I often feel a deep frustration that our tradition’s response to our pressing ecological crisis has been either a small and strident and mostly ineffectual kind of activism, or for the majority, a willful silence.

Good Friday is a day when Christians reflect on our own sin and complicity. But that word “sin” carries a strong whiff of judgment. British novelist Francis Spufford suggests a better name for this condition: “The Human Propensity to Fuck Things Up.” The HPtFTU is a great equalizer. It cuts across religious, socioeconomic, and cultural boundaries. And it’s not just individual faults that are the problem; we fuck *things* up: species and ecosystems, ice sheets and atmospheres.

Given our innate HPtFTU, it often feels as if we can never do enough to stop the hemorrhaging of life. I wonder how much of climate activism comes from deep feelings of guilt and fear and grief over our individual and collective HPtFTU. Those of us with half a conscience are hounded by the voice in our head telling us there is always more we can do, and so we fling ourselves headlong into further actions and denunciations, hoping it will all add up to something effective while we ignore the mounting guilt. We then grow apathetic, because such a cycle is ultimately exhausting. Surely there is another way to live. Perhaps we begin by grieving

We need a deeper form of political engagement, one that leads us to confront the darkness of the human heart.

the losses—the loss of species, the loss of the Outer Banks, the end of innocence that comes when we realize we aren’t getting any better as a species. Such were my thoughts as I entered the church on Good Friday.

I came seeking liturgical shelter. Here in the small Episcopal church in western North Carolina where I had worshipped for a number of years I intended to walk through the fourteen Stations of the Cross, hear the Passion narrative read aloud, and watch the lights go out one by one until the final candle, the Christ light, was extinguished and the nave grew dark, the first hints of anguish scuttling lightly up my spine. I needed to give voice to my anger, lament, and grief for a world that is passing. If there is one service in the Christian year when one can contemplate our role in Earth’s Great Diminishment, the ecological crucifixion well underway, surely it is Good Friday.

As the service began, however, it appeared that our interim

priest had something else in mind. After a few perfunctory readings from the Passion narrative we moved straight to the hopeful stuff—a celebration of the Eucharist, the great symbol of resurrected life—and the reality of death was elided. Midway through the service I walked out.

I left while Jesus was still on the cross.

III. The Phenomenology of Protest

IF I COULD PLACE the beginning of my unease, it would be Thursday, September 24, 2015, the day I attended two climate rallies in Washington DC set to coincide with Pope Francis’s visit to Congress.

That morning on the National Mall a faith-based coalition of climate activists had convened the Moral Action on Climate Justice. According to the press release the purpose of this rally was to “demand that our leaders #FollowFrancis and take bold action for climate justice.” The “tens of thousands” predicted on their website had failed to materialize. I counted six or seven hundred on the National Mall that day, tops. Every third person, it seemed, wore a press badge.

I arrived midway through Moby’s set, before Pope Francis would appear on the Jumbotrons. Moby’s white t-shirt, emblazoned with bold black letters, read #VEGAN. While Moby sang I wandered and took in the scene. A few watched the stage, but most people were watching newsfeeds on their smartphones, while still others held homemade signs and struck poses for the selfie camera. One group of selfie photographers had gathered around a man and a woman dressed as nuns. The fake nuns carried placards that read EATING MEAT

IS A BAD HABIT—PETA.

I walked past several ashen-faced women in their sixties sprawled on a blanket. One of them arose with great effort and beckoned gravely, like an oracle. She was a member of a group called Beyond Extreme Energy. She told me that the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission had been rubber-stamping fracking permits left and right, and how despite her group’s concerted petitions the FERC had failed to cease and desist its catastrophic actions and therefore she and eleven other BXE members had undertaken an eighteen-day water fast, which they would conclude at FERC’s offices that very day at noon, and would I like to join them and *deliver the message*, but I couldn’t hear the rest because Moby was at that moment belting out a peace anthem on stage.

Pope Francis’s speech was delayed. Moby took that as his opportunity to preach about the virtues of veganism, a long rambling sermon that ended with a series of passionate exhortations.

“You can’t be for climate change and not be a vegan, people!”

My impatience, not to mention my innate crowd anxiety, was mounting. I needed to get the hell out of there.

Amid such a confusing jumble of images and slogans and hashtags it was difficult to understand just what was being demanded here on the National Mall. I knew the event was about faith and the morality of climate change. It was about #BanFracking and #ClimateJustice and #Divest and #BeyondExtremeEnergy. But it was also about #FollowFrancis and #BlackLivesMatter. It was about #PETA. It was about #Vegan. Maybe that was the take-home message, that climate change connects to every other message, that all voices are important. Maybe the organizers had taken the stone soup approach to climate protesting: everybody bring an issue, throw it in the pot, and hope the feast is tastier than the sum of its ingredients. But at a certain point the chummy communitarian ethos failed to cohere. Throughout the morning people seemed less and less engaged by what was happening on stage, turning to their screens instead. Digital distraction is not limited to protests, of course. But because this event was supposed to be a time of moral focus on the fate of our world, I found it troubling that people kept escaping into virtual rapture. The protester’s bodies were here, but their minds were elsewhere, entrapped in the sticky strands of the Interwebs.

This wasn’t my first protest. Nearly twenty years ago I was arrested at Fort Benning, Georgia, for protesting the US Army School of the Americas. I had marched with 400,000 others at the People’s Climate March in New York the previous September. That morning on the Washington Mall I recognized a feeling I’d felt at those previous events, something universal to all protests: a heightened expectation that at any moment something truly momentous was going to happen, except that it never did. There would be no end to the climate fight, I realized, no clear victory. Could we live the rest of our lives on high alert? Could we really organize our way out of the Anthropocene?

Later that evening I attended a similar rally at the National Cathedral. A group of prominent national faith leaders had convened under the unwieldy banner of “Coming Together in Faith on Climate: Supporting the Pope’s Call to Climate Action.” Is there an algorithm somewhere that churns out these names, I wondered? Ten different religious leaders spoke from the three Abrahamic traditions. The speakers called for five action steps: Engage, Energize, Divest/Invest, Vote, and Educate. The then-presiding bishop of my own denomination spoke last. She had a PhD in oceanography and was the spiritual leader of millions of Episcopalians in sixteen countries, which surely qualified her to speak about faith and climate change. After the event I approached her to ask what the church was doing about global warming. She referred to a recent General Convention in Salt Lake City. “The significant thing we

did at this General Convention was to ask all of our component bodies, the dioceses and congregations, to examine their investments and to use their monetary resources in creative ways. We’re not a tradition that says you must do this, you can’t do that.”

That’s it? I thought. Examine your investments? Use them in creative ways? What if Episcopal churches examine their Exxon stocks and realize they are quite happy with them? What if they decide to creatively invest in fracking? Here were our country’s leading religious voices in the same room talking about a problem as momentous as climate change and their main recommendations were how to shuffle stock portfolios and get out the vote.

Over the past few decades we Christian environmentalists have worked hard. We’ve formed “creation care” committees, planted symbolic trees on Earth Day, bought Priuses, put up solar panels, planted gardens. At the 2014 People’s Climate March we packed the block on 58th Street. Consortiums of seminaries and divinity schools like my own teach courses in ecotheology and sustainable agriculture. All of these things are noteworthy and laudatory and yet when taken all together add up to nothing anywhere close to the kind of response needed to confront the challenges posed by the Anthropocene.

That day in Washington DC I began to wonder if events like this weren’t missing the point, weren’t in fact distractions that stopped far short of addressing the root cause of all this: ourselves. Should churches divest from fossil fuels? Yes, of course. But if the main thing we religious folk have to say in this moment of pending planetary doom is how to shift our investments from a more rapacious form of capitalism (fossil fuels) to a less rapacious form (Google and GM, or even wind and solar) all of which presume a world of continuous economic growth, while we pump ourselves up with democratic platitudes—*Energize! Educate! Vote!*—then we’ve already lost. If the underlying message is that we just need to green up our lifestyles without any real sacrifice, what’s the point? But no, I fear that the crisis before us will ask far more of us than we realize. Climate change can’t be just another bullet point on the church mission statement. We need a deeper form of political engagement, one that leads us to confront the darkness of the human heart.

We can’t leap straight to Easter without first passing through Good Friday. Perhaps what we needed that night at the National Cathedral was not more can-do American solutions, I thought, but more sackcloth and ashes.

IV. The Caress of God

BACK AT THE MORNING climate rally, Moby had finished his vegan sermon and had finally left the stage. All eyes turned to

the Jumbotron. Or rather, half the eyes turned there and the other half turned to their smartphones, for at that moment, ascending the podium to address the United States Congress, was Pope Francis. What I remember most about his speech was the tone: quiet, unhurried, the amiable assumption that we share a common Creator and a common fate, that we are more than our political squabbles.

Earlier that summer Pope Francis had published his papal encyclical *Laudato Si*, a long essay that might be described as the marriage between the religious and ecological imaginations. Certainly no public document in my lifetime has achieved such a union. I read *Laudato Si* not simply as a stirring call to action on climate change or a critique of capitalism (which Pope Francis calls “a power which has no future”) or a defense of social equity. It is all those things. But at its heart, *Laudato Si* is a mystical treatise. Prior to his call to action is a call to relationship. “Soil, water, mountains: everything is . . . a caress of God.” A caress? That’s not vague religious boilerplate about examining one’s investments. It is the language of Eros: the Divine lover reaching for the beloved. Such language appears again and again, like a string of barrier islands, throughout the entire encyclical.

Pope Francis is out to champion “the mysterious network of relations between things.” He sings the praises of “fungi, algae, worms, insects, reptiles, and an innumerable variety of microorganisms.” He uses nonmechanistic metaphors, describing the Amazon and Congo as the “lungs of the planet” and coral reefs as “underwater forests.” Awe and wonder, the results of a mystical union with creation: these are the things *Laudato Si* would have us notice. “Nature as a whole not only manifests God but is also a locus of his presence. The Spirit of life dwells in every living creature and calls us to enter into relationship with him. Discovering this presence leads us to cultivate the ‘ecological virtues.’” Riffing on the Sufi mystic Ali al-Khawas, Pope Francis writes, “the universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person’s face.”

God is in everything. Toward the end of the encyclical, Pope Francis enlists the help of Saint John of the Cross to underscore this point. The goodness of created things, Saint John of the Cross says, “is present in God eminently and infinitely, or more properly, in each of these sublime realities is God.” Perhaps worrying that the Spaniard’s words might be misread as pantheistic, Pope Francis qualifies: “This is not because the finite things of this world are really divine, but because the mystic experiences the intimate connection between God and all beings, and thus feels that ‘all things are God.’ Standing awestruck before a mountain, he or she cannot separate this experience from God, and

TOP NEAR RIGHT

TIM FLANNERY

Mammalogist, Paleontologist

Fear: disruption of global civilization

TOP FAR RIGHT

PENELOPE AJANI

Biological scientist

Fear: unknown repercussions of climate change

BOTTOM NEAR RIGHT

LESLEY HUGHES

Ecologist

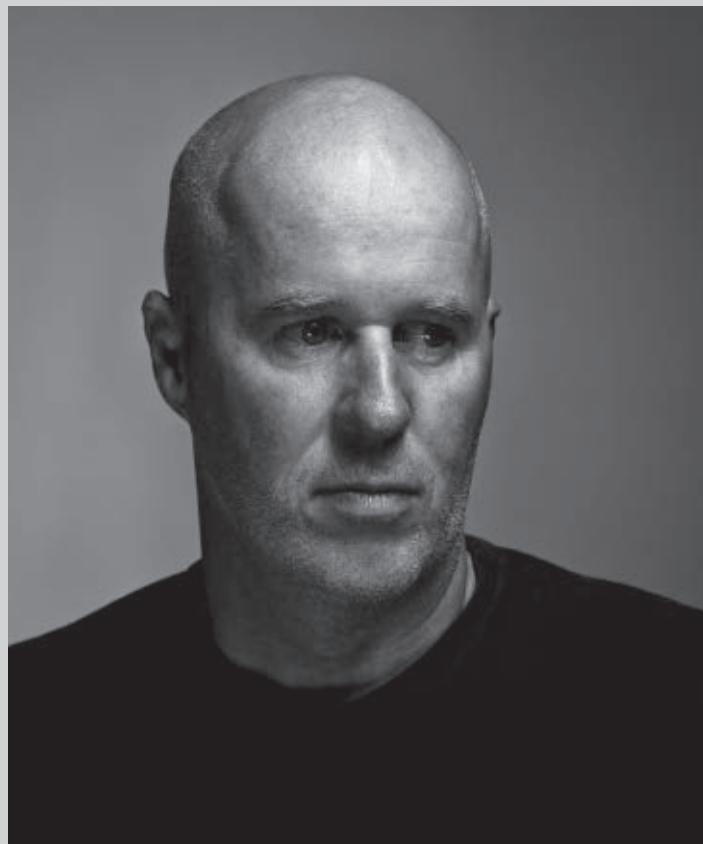
Fear: species extinction

BOTTOM FAR RIGHT

MATTHEW ENGLAND

Oceanographer, Climate scientist

Fear: climate-induced global conflict



perceives that the interior awe being lived has to be entrusted to the Lord.” To say that God is in everything does not mean that a horseshoe crab is God. It means that God fills and animates that creature—or the smaller one chewing on its innards—while remaining distinct.

The shout-from-the-rooftop message I hear in *Laudato Si* is this: Christianity must become an earthier faith. That should be a truism, but we Christians mostly live as if it weren’t. In the Jewish and Christian traditions, we’re quick to point out that we were created *Imago Dei*, in the Image of God, but we neglect that part of the story that says we were also created from soil. *Adam* from *adamah*, as the Genesis story reads: human from humus. We are soil people. If nothing else the Anthropocene is forcing us to remember that we are not disembodied souls waiting to ride the Big Elevator into the sky. We are en-souled creatures, yes, but earthbound first. In Augustine’s memorable phrase we are *terra animata*—animated earth.

Pope Francis also calls for a more mystical faith. “The ecological crisis is a summons to profound interior conversion,” he writes. *Ecological conversion* is the phrase he uses elsewhere. That’s strong language, even for a pope. A conversion by nature is not simply an intellectual assent to a new idea. Conversion, in New Testament parlance, comes from the Greek *metanoia*: a change of heart. A complete reorientation of one’s life.

V. No Man Is an Island

IN HIS ADDRESS to Congress that day in Washington DC, Pope Francis named four “representative Americans” who worked for the common good. Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. were obvious choices, as was Dorothy Day, and much as I admired all three, it was when Pope Francis spoke the name of Thomas Merton, whose writings first led me to the Christian contemplative tradition, that I found myself moved to tears.

Yes, I thought. Merton sought *metanoia*—his own and the world’s—his entire life. How we needed someone like him now. Yet how remote that possibility seemed here at the Climate Action Rally for something-or-other.

Thomas Merton. A man who had lived the bohemian life of an aspiring poet in New York City before leaving at age twenty-seven to become a Trappist monk at Kentucky’s Gethsemane monastery; a man who believed that his greatest contribution to society came from removing himself from it. And yet his writings on contemplation and prayer and the social issues of his day (Vietnam, racism, nuclear war) created numerous openings in the social fabric that would never have occurred had he remained Tom Merton, another Beat poet with a degree from Columbia.

Those openings are with us still, fifty years after his death. Withdrawal into contemplation heightened, not lessened, Merton’s political impact.

It was jarring to hear Merton’s name there on the National Mall amid this throng of protestors. Merton had deep misgivings about activism. “We must be detached from the results of our work, in order to deliver ourselves from the anxiety that makes us plunge into action without restraint,” he wrote in *No Man Is an Island*. Causes and ideals nauseated him, even causes as worthy as protesting the Vietnam War. In his famous “Letter to a Young Activist,” Merton wrote, “It is so easy to get engrossed with ideas and slogans and myths that in the end one is left holding the bag, empty, with no trace of meaning left in it. And then the temptation is to yell louder than ever in order to make the meaning be there again by magic . . . the big results are not in your hands or mine.” Merton’s withdrawal from the world, first to a monastery and later to a hermitage in the woods, made him less of a “representative American” and more of a representative fourth-century Desert Father. It was he who led me to the Desert Fathers and Mothers—early Christian hermits—and their spiritual descendants who walked the contemplative path.

I am new to the contemplative journey, my own *metanoia* still a distant hope, but even my beginner’s mind leads me to ask: How do we live with the knowledge that we can’t get our old Earth back, that we can perhaps only live with an ever-diminishing world and try to avoid further diminishment? Our main work is not technological; it is theological. How do we live with ourselves given what we now know? And how do we care for what remains of our island home? That work looks less and less like “saving the world” and more like hospice care. Ecological chaplaincy.

What Christianity most has to offer the world now is not moral guidance or activism or yet another social program; it is a mystical connection to the Source of life. Cultivating that divine-human love affair seems to me the only hope left. Not as some kind of opiate-of-the-people escape from our problems, but as a nonlinear path that leads us deeper into them. Christianity has no exclusive claim on this relationship. It does have a two-thousand-year-old history full of reliable matchmakers—the Desert Fathers and Mothers, Isaac of Syria, Teresa of Ávila, Howard Thurman, Simone Weil, Oscar Romero, Thomas Merton . . . the list is long. We can choose our guides. The inner journey into love is taken not for the self, but on behalf of all life. The purpose of the early desert hermits, Merton wrote, was to “withdraw into the healing silence of the wilderness . . . not in order to preach to others but to heal in themselves the wounds of the entire world.”

From seventh-century Ninevah, in what is now Iraq, Saint Isaac of Syria wrote: “An elder was once asked, ‘What is a

compassionate heart?’ He replied: ‘It is a heart on fire for the whole of creation, for humanity, for the birds, for the animals, for demons and for all that exists.’”

Christianity will truly come into its own in the Anthropocene, I believe, when it fully embraces that path to compassion, when it refuses to look away from the ecological Good Friday we are inflicting on the world. Only then will our actions, humbled and chastened, flow from compassion rather than from guilt. This requires a shift in vision, a redirecting of our gaze back to the One who loved the world into being and who sustains its every breath.

VI. Behold

IN HER LOVELY BOOK *Ask the Beasts*, theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson describes the need for “beholders,” people who direct their contemplative practice toward the nonhuman world.

Such a gaze will “look on the natural world with affection rather than with an arrogant, utilitarian stare,” writes Johnson. Such beholding is not the exclusive territory of Christianity or of any other religion, but also the work of artists, poets, and writers. The difference in religious contemplation, Johnson says, is that it “ratchets up what is at stake because it sees the world thus appreciated as God’s handiwork, a place of encounter with the divine. The vivifying, subtly active presence of the Creator flashes out from the simplest natural phenomenon.”

Douglas Christie pursues the contemplative gaze in its relation to the natural world in *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind*. Contemplative practice is “a fierce commitment to paying attention.” The spiritual character of paying attention, Christie learned, could not be separated from its aesthetic and moral character. “To open oneself to seeing in this way was to risk being drawn into an utterly involving engagement with all that one beheld. . . . I began to wonder: what would it mean to behold the living world with the same fierce attention the early monks gave their lives?”

For the monks, the proximate end of all their striving was purity of heart, wrote Merton, “a clear unobstructed vision of the true state of affairs, an intuitive grasp of one’s own inner reality as anchored, or rather lost, in God through Christ.”

This would be the natural point to propose an action plan, a contemplative manifesto, or — God help us — a list of resources. Such imperatives are anathema here, for the contemplative path is always an invitation, never a directive. And we need not adopt a false binary between action and contemplation, as if the choice were either to fling oneself headlong into round-the-clock

protests or leave everything and strike out for Gethsemane. The invitation to become a beholder is offered daily, wherever we find ourselves.

Contemplative practice is “not a technique, but a skill,” writes Martin Laird in *Into the Silent Land*. In the Christian tradition Laird names two skills of fundamental importance: the practice of stillness, which includes meditation and prayer; and watchfulness, a concentrated gaze on one’s inner landscape. This journey is not about “finding” God, Laird says. “The God we seek has from all eternity sought and found us and is shining out our eyes.”

VII. Anachoresis

THE PRACTICE OF beholding necessarily entails a break with society, a disciplined removal of oneself away from daily routines and settled modes of thought, and in the case of the Anthropocene, fleeing the compulsive action that results from thinking we’re going to “fix it.”

The Gospel of Matthew frequently makes use of a Greek verb that’s often translated as “withdraw”: *anachōreō*. As historian Diarmaid MacCulloch writes in *Silence: A Christian History*, the verb *anachōreō* was used in the Classical world to describe withdrawal from public life, “or a personal meditative withdrawal into one’s inner resources.” Three centuries after Matthew’s Gospel, the first Christian monastics would read, somewhat anachronistically, a confirmation of their own impulse to flee for the desert. They became the first *anchorites*, those who withdrew from the

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world. In Merton’s memorable image, they regarded society as a shipwreck from which each person had to swim for her life.

The practice of *anachoresis* is to remove one’s body from a place of duress and confusion to one that offers a renewed clarity of vision. That need not involve a permanent change of address. It can be a daily withdrawal. However short or prolonged the anachoresis, this act, from the outside, can’t help but appear solipsistic. Any talk of withdrawal as we approach the climate’s tipping point might seem silly at best, and at worst a criminal dereliction of duty.

But if the two-thousand-year-old Christian monastic tradition has anything to offer, it is the assurance that what could emerge from our anachoresis in the Anthropocene—our activism and our ability to grieve with honesty in the face of so much loss—is a stronger, more durable self. And yet the point of withdrawal from society for the fourth-century desert monks was always larger than the self. Merton: “They knew that they were helpless to do any good for others as long as they floundered about in the wreckage. But once they got a foothold on solid ground, things were different. Then they had not only the power but even the obligation to pull the whole world to safety after them.”

The choice is not between withdrawal or political engagement; anachoresis and prayer are themselves political acts. They change the beholder. In contemplation and silence, we cease our frenzied activity that makes us deny death. We place our hopes not on our own efficacy, but on God who acts through us. “Prayer is by nature a dialogue and a union with God,” wrote John Climacus in his sixth-century text *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. “Its effect is to hold the world together.”

I am a mere dabbler in this contemplative practice I’ve been espousing. I resist becoming a beholder, I’ve realized, and that resistance is born of fear. To sharpen our gaze is to behold not only the passing beauty of this world, but also its deep suffering, and I’m afraid of the pain and purgation such vision will entail, that it will break my heart open in ways I’ve only begun to fathom. It will lead me deeper into the Good Friday of the world’s wounds


than I care to go. I want to stake my claim on the wild hope of the resurrection, to see the new life clawing its way out of the old carapace, but I need new eyes to see it.

Meanwhile we are crucifying the caress of God: the soil, the mountains, the water. Meanwhile the throng of protestors are collecting signatures on the slopes of Golgotha and somebody is preaching veganism and somebody somewhere is trying to come up with just the right hashtag that will make Rome change its ways, and meanwhile the Outer Banks are drowning. How do you protest that?

VIII. The Inner Banks

WE’RE BACK HOME in the North Carolina mountains, far inland from the sea. One afternoon in June, my three sons and I hike up Daniel’s Creek. We boulder-hop our way upstream, stopping here and there to look for crawdads or dunk in a plunge pool. We hike several miles, mostly in the stream itself, wading shin-deep through bracingly cold mountain water.

Along the banks we look for reishi, a medicinal mushroom that grows on dead hemlock trees. Hemlocks are abundant in western North Carolina. Or they were. With insect pressure, drought, a warming climate—most of them are dying now. Which is a boon for reishi. We round a bend in the creek and my oldest son gives a shout. He points to the far bank, and suddenly we see them: a red cluster barnacled on a mother tree’s underbelly. One by one we pry loose the smooth-skinned polypores from their host. We inhale the fungi’s dank scent of umami. As we wade back across the stream, a shaft of sunlight reveals millions of spores swirling in the warm air.

We have no plans to visit the Outer Banks again anytime soon. There is more than enough beauty and death here on these stream banks. As I watch my sons walk through the water, I hope their minds will be caught in the web of relationships between reishi, hemlock, water, and sunlight. I hope the same imprint of love left on my heart by this place will be left on theirs. Whatever perils they will face, I want them to remember this deep bass note of Divine joy humming just beneath the surface. We don’t speak of these things. They are sacraments of the world’s self-giving. Our role first is to receive, and to behold. 

And if there is a day of resurrection

then on that day may the water in the creek shimmer
green, a music never heard take shape in a hatch
of caddis and coffin flies, the air bluing as the sun’s light
dries insect wings, and the bear skull on the ridge,
the circle of porcupine quills, the mink’s eye sockets
and the coyote’s hinged jaw still clutched around the rabbit’s femur,
may all the bones of the living and the dead rise
with skeletal praise, this ancient world being remade
in their image.

— Todd Davis

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