

## Rumors of Glory

Another year begins at faculty retreat. Faculty retreat begins with worship. Where should worship begin? What exactly do Christian academics need before launching into another year of teaching and study? What sort of worship fare should I serve up to Christian scholars who are often strong on head and weak on heart; passionate about their thoughts but not always thoughtful about their passions. What might I offer to esteemed colleagues who find themselves wandering in a spiritual wasteland?

Maybe that desert is loneliness. You recall fondly a youth group or home Bible study of long ago—an innocent faith-community where the scandal of Christianity made perfect sense because it was *lived out in community*. But somewhere along the way you replaced the *experience* of community with the *memory* of community. Or maybe your dryness comes from busyness, living lives without margin—fragmented, compartmentalized, frantic and joyless—not at all the abundant life Jesus promised.

Or maybe the desert we wander is called weariness. Life's intense demands have distracted us from the pursuit of God, from the study of theology, the quest for renewal. And weariness leads to compromise; we've settling for a clichéd, domesticated version of Christianity that bears little resemblance to the dangerous faith Jesus demands.

Perhaps your personal desert is intellectual. You inhabit the *No Man's Land* between fervent, unbridled piety and cool, academic respectability. You've read your way out of fundamentalism, but you wonder if what's left can nourish you over the long haul. By trade, training and disposition, you question what you've been told. But now you live with unresolved doubts. But agnosticism brings no renewal. Cynicism quenches no thirst. Sometimes that desert is simply a prolonged, unexplained sense of divine absence, when the voice of God falls silent.

But even nomads in the desert sometimes catch the scent of an ocean breeze. Even academics can catch a fleeting glimpse, can hear rumors of God's glory. I don't know what summons you out of the desert, what re-ignites your capacity to worship. Perhaps you find delight in a crafted sermon or ancient liturgy. Perhaps you find the well during private meditation. Maybe your soul is refreshed by a well wrought story, a cherished scripture, a poignant poem, a kind gesture. Maybe you've glimpsed God's glory at the end of a mountain trail, or in the elegance of a mathematical proof. What I have to offer today, very hesitantly, are four images, four unremarkable episodes in my life, four moments when I was summoned back to worship. Especially if things are dry for you right now, perhaps you might consider with me these moments when I caught wind of God, when I heard rumors of glory, and be encouraged.

### 1. The Sacrament of Sunset

*"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down"* Isaiah 64:1

It was early December, 2002. I was tired, suffering from burnout, at the end of a 15-week quest to be teacher, guide, mentor, father, husband, trouble-shooter, role-model, negotiator, planner, authority, expert, on my first ever Europe Semester. We had planned to spend our final day on an island off the Greek coast, but the weather was iffy; storms had moved in and we could not afford to be stranded offshore over night or we would miss our early flight the next day. We hesitated, waiting for the weather to stabilize, but without a viable Plan B, we took the plunge, or rather, the ferry, across to the island of Aegina where we spent the day wandering a small harbor town, peddling down the coast on rented bicycles and climbing rocks along the shore. Soon enough it was time to return to Athens.

The sun was setting as the ferry pulled out. The sky was wild, but recovering for the night. Our ship's course took us due east, with the sun directly behind us. Some of us made our way aft to the stern deck where we found ourselves, almost immediately, engulfed in an impossibly beautiful sunset. The clouds were still agitated. Storms dotted the horizon. Gulls gave chase, criss-crossing before the sun as it conceded defeat. It hit me, suddenly, that our journey

away from home was over. Tomorrow we would turn back westward and chase the sun on an endless flight to Los Angeles. My job was almost done. There had been no mutiny. No one was pregnant. No one had died. God's grace had been sufficient.

Maybe it was the weariness at the end of a journey. Maybe it was the glorious intrusion of light through the darkened clouds. Or the rolling waves adding salt to the evening breeze. I began to cry, which is why it's always good to wear sunglasses, even at sunset.

God met me there. Water rose to my eyes, breathing stuttered, I suppressed a sob. I felt overcome with something. Was it thankfulness? Relief? Grace? Glory? For a moment, at least, I understood Gerard Manley Hopkins. "The world is charged with the grandeur of God" Hopkins writes. And: "the Holy Ghost over the bent world broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings." [from *God's Grandeur*]

In Isaiah 64:1-3, the prophet cries out for God to appear in power, to "tear open the heavens and come down," to do again for a disheartened Israel *after* the exile what God did long *before* in the glory days of the exodus.

Centuries later, Mark offers an account of Jesus' baptism: "And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him." Can you hear echoes of Isaiah 64? I think Mark is proclaiming that Isaiah's dream has come true. That God's glory *has* torn through the heavens and descended once again, now coming to rest on God's Son, Jesus.

The same verb appears once more in Mark's Gospel. When Jesus gave a loud cry on the cross and breathed his last, the curtain of the temple *was torn* in two, from top to bottom. The barrier between heaven and earth, between God's world and ours, was ripped apart. Christ could ascend, so that he might descend once more. For us who yearn like Isaiah for one more chance to see the heavens torn open—for one more intrusion of divine glory, for a second coming of God's Son, is there not something gloriously sacramental about a wild sky at the end of the day? For me, last December, off the coast of Greece, I caught a glimpse of descending glory, a reminder of what happened before, and a promise of what will happen again.

## 2. The Recollection of Rescue

*"He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son."* Colossians 1:13

My second image, a second rumor of glory, comes from the sea. Scripture is full of images from the sea, mostly negative and unwelcome. From the surface of the deep in Genesis 1 to the swollen floodwaters of Genesis 7 to the drownings of the Exodus (Ex 14), the sea is a symbol of powers we can't control, of forces that bring judgment, of mysteries we cannot discern. It is the home of dragons and monsters in Isaiah (27:1; 51:9-10), Job (26:12), and Revelation (13:1). In Job 38 (v.10-11) God has to restrain the sea, saying "thus far shall you come, and no farther." And *from* the sea in Daniel 7, we see four predatory beasts, four evil kingdoms, emerge. So much is the sea a symbol of chaos and danger that when John pictures a restored, pristine earth in Rev 21:1, there is no longer any sea whatsoever.

I have a song I want to play for you now that turns all of this on its head. In *this* song, to be lost is to be landlocked, run aground in some harbor town; to be rescued is to be carried once again out to sea. Not all sea imagery in scripture points toward darkness or danger. Perhaps we should think of Paul shipwrecked and landlocked on the island of Malta, having to wait out the winter before resuming his sea voyage to Rome. Isaiah 40 (v.12) pictures God measuring the waters in the hollow of his hand. And Psalm 95 reminds us that "the sea is his, for he made it."

I'm particularly fascinated by Job 9:8 which tells us it is God "who alone . . . trampled the waves of the sea." In the old Greek translation, the text differs slightly: God "alone . . . *walks upon the sea as upon dry ground.*" I love the picture of God *walking* on the sea, conquering it and taming it. It's hard not to think of Jesus who also walked on the sea as we read in Mark 6:48. The sea is the place where we see God's Son revealed in power, rescuing those he loves from the storm.

I have lived with this song for a long time; it is a song of rescue not *from* the sea but *to* it. It's by a fellow-Canadian, Bruce Cockburn who composed it back in 1974; it's his account of his conversion to Christianity, his recollection of rescue. According to Cockburn in a concert:

"This is a song I wrote the day after I actually took a look at myself and realized that I was a Christian in fact – which I guess, is a kind of conversion. It was a very long term, slow one, not the light and voice from heaven like St. Paul. But when it finally was over, I had to look at my life and either commit myself to it or pass."

Attributed to Cockburn in Aug. 30/31, 1979. From:

<http://cockburnproject.net/songs&music/atd.html> (accessed June 25, 2003)

*All the Diamonds* by Bruce Cockburn (*Salt, Sun and Time* © 1974)

All the diamonds in this world That mean anything to me  
Are conjured up by wind and sunlight Sparkling on the sea  
I ran aground in a harbour town Lost the taste for being free  
Thank God He sent some gull-chased ship To carry me to sea

Two thousand years and half a world away  
Dying trees still grow greener when you pray

Silver scales flash bright and fade In reeds along the shore  
Like a pearl in sea of liquid jade His ship comes shining  
Like a crystal swan in a sky of suns His ship comes shining.

I don't know about *your* conversion—whether it was sudden and dramatic or glacial and incremental. Mine was naïve and superficial. In some ways, frankly, I'm *still* undergoing conversion—still deciding to follow Jesus. And it seems I'm regularly washing ashore and regularly needing a gull-chased ship to carry me to sea.

When I inhabit the imagery of this song, it helps me stay grateful . . . for the rescue, for the open sea where we hoist our sails. Let me invite you to recollect your own rescue as the fall term descends once again. Perhaps your conversion along with mine can be more than a faint echo from a distant place and time. Baptize it in fresh metaphors, put it to music, retell your story. Let it become again for you a source of inspiration, a rumor of glory.

### 3. An Ancient Tower of Refuge

"My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it." Isaiah 5:1-2

"There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower." Matthew 21:33

At the *front* end of our "European Vacation" last fall, on our first full day in Ireland, we journeyed by bus to Glendalough, the ruins of an early Celtic monastery. Glendalough is a holy and mystical place, and it stands today in testimony to the rich, ancient tradition of Celtic Christianity that reached the height of its influence in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Around that time was built a round tower, one of 65 round towers surviving, in whole or in part, throughout Ireland.

Apparently these towers once served as bell towers, and storehouses, and as places of refuge when attacks came, which probably explains why the only door of this tower was some 4 meters off the ground. At the top, its four windows face the four directions, so it would have served well as a lookout tower, and would surely have been a welcome sight for weary pilgrims in need of shelter and rest—its long shadow reaching out as a tangible, caring extension of that monastic community, the people of God in that place.

We spent the day wandering the ruins of Glendalough, all of us so fresh and naïve and ignorant of what lay before us during the next 15 weeks. But whatever would happen, we had begun our journey with a tower—a symbol of God's protection and strength and refuge, and a reminder that God often extends his care and protection through his people, the church.

I can't look at this Irish tower without thinking of an Irish hymn, *Be Thou My Vision*, which has a wonderfully medieval feel to it, especially in the third verse where we read:

Thou my soul shelter, and Thou my high tower  
Raise Thou me heavenwards, oh power of my power.

Unfortunately, this verse is often excluded from hymnbooks because, of course, true hymns can only have four verses, not five.

Van Morrison, my favorite Irish troubadour, offers a wonderful version of *Be Thou My Vision*, including the prodigal verse about the tower. I brought it along today. As you listen, allow your mind to travel back to the days when daily survival was tenuous, when travel was risky, when things like *swords* and *shelter* were anything but quaint metaphors, back when they were crucial inventory for any pilgrim whose travels drew him far from home.

*Be Thou My Vision* sung by Van Morrison (Hymns to the Silence © 1991)

Be Thou my vision, oh Lord of my heart  
Nought be all else to me, save that Thou art  
Thou my best thought in the day and the night  
Waking or sleeping, Thou presence my light

Be Thou my wisdom, be Thou my true word  
I ever with Thee and Thou with me Lord  
Thou my great Father and I Thy true son  
Thou in me dwelling and I with Thee one

Be Thou my breastplate, my sword for the fight  
Be Thou my armour and be Thou my might  
Thou my soul shelter, and Thy my high tower  
Raise Thou me heavenwards, oh power of my power

Riches I need not, nor man's empty praise  
Thou mine inheritance through all of my days  
Thou and Thou only though first in my heart  
High king of heaven my treasure Thou art

Oh high king of heaven, when battle is done  
Grant heaven's joy to me, bright heaven sun  
Christ of my own heart, whatever befall  
Still be my vision, though ruler of all

We modern academics tend toward a different sort of vision. Our *sword* is the pen, our *breastplate* the well-crafted argument, our *shelter* the guild, our *tower* is of ivory, whither we retreat to avoid confronting the dangers of the real world down below. Sometimes I think one of my greatest obstacles to unfettered worship is my undeveloped, stagnant imagination, my inability to travel back through time to stand alongside saints who have gone before. If that is too romantic for you, I challenge you to find your own tower, your own place of refuge, not in your library cubicle, but among God's people.

#### 4. The Strong Hand of a Father

"And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them."  
Mark 10:13-16

Last spring when the war in Iraq began, I found myself seeking ways to grasp what was happening, ways to imagine myself in the battle, ways to identify with the fears of the soldiers, the grief of the bereaved, the anguish of so many disrupted lives. In my quest, I turned, as I've often done before, to the still photograph. There's something about those ubiquitous, grainy, endlessly looping video clips that seemed to me voyeuristic, produced, commercial. But the photographs. . . I studied many still images and looked into many pairs of eyes, searching for reasons to hope;

seeking ways to stay mindful of the human costs. I found myself saving pictures off the web and presenting Gulf War slide shows at the beginning of some of my classes.

Two pictures in particular captured my heart. Caught me by surprise. The first is a picture of a newly captured POW seated, behind barbed wire, somewhere in the Iraqi sands. The bag on his head cuts him off from his fellow soldiers, from the chance to conspire, from the world at war around him. It humiliates, yet hides his shame. Beside him on the sand is his son, bare foot, bare faced, weary, scared or maybe (we can hope) sound asleep, resting in his father's strong, loving hands. I can't look at this picture without water rising to my eyes. I want so badly for this little boy to feel that all is well, that daddy will protect him from his fear. And so I pray. I pray that God would be gracious to this little boy and his dad. I pray that their lives are better now. Or will be, soon.

I was drawn as well to this picture of another young boy whose face shows more concern than a boy his age should know. And yet he stands close to someone; his worried face almost rests against another strong hand. His father, I would guess, whose hands look older than their age; gnarled from years of labor and, perhaps, months of battle. And so I pray for this boy too, and for his father. And I'm drawn to think of another Father whose strong hands are sometimes close enough to feel, and sometimes hidden in the shadows.

The "strong hand" of God is a familiar metaphor in scripture, maybe even scripture's favorite way of referring to the Exodus. God promised to deliver Israel "with an outstretched arm" (Ex 6:6) which presumably means God would work a full, public, active, powerful rescue; God's care for Israel would become crystal clear to all the world. Being *left*-handed [cf. Psm 98:1], I must quickly point out that God's "*right* hand" is a metaphor. But it is a vivid metaphor, nonetheless, of a God who is fully, strategically engaged with his people. I love the way Mark tells the story of Jesus and the children:

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them. Mark 10:13-16

Reminds me of the chorus of a song by Mark Heard, a poet and prophet whose life was cut short in 1992 at the age of 40, leaving behind a wife and young daughter—a daughter who must now grow up *without* the touch of her daddy's strong hand. Listen to part of his song called *Strong Hand of Love*.

*Strong Hand of Love* by Mark Heard (*Dry Bones Dance* © 1990)

Down peppers the rain from a clear blue sky  
Down trickles a tear on a youthful face  
Feeling in haste and wondering why  
Up struggles the sun from a wounded night  
Out venture our hearts in their silent shrouds  
Trying to ignite but wondering how

We can laugh and we can cry  
and never see the strong hand of love hidden in the shadows  
We can dance and we can sigh  
and never see the strong hand of love hidden in the shadows

Young dreamers explode like popped balloons  
Some kind of emotional rodeo  
Learning too slow and acting too soon  
Time marches away like a lost platoon  
We gracefully age as we feel the weight of loving too late  
and leaving too soon

We can laugh and we can cry  
and never see the strong hand of love hidden in the shadows  
We can dance and we can sigh  
and never see the strong hand of love hidden in the shadows

Much of our lives are spent laughing and crying, dancing and sighing while the strong hand of love remains just out of sight, hidden in the shadows. That's my challenge—to me and to you—to learn to see the hand I so often overlook. But I don't think it's about squinting and pretending; it's about learning to see differently. Learning to look in the right places. Learning to watch for the signs of that hand at work. Learning to persevere even when we can't.

Four simple, unremarkable images for you to consider.

1. I saw God tear open the heavens in a Greek sunset.
2. I re-imagined my conversion in a sailing song.
3. I witnessed God's protection in an ancient tower.
4. I felt God's hand in a photograph.

May God grant you many moments this year, equally unremarkable yet equally filled with rumors of glory.

NOTE: The title of this address comes directly from a song by Bruce Cockburn.