

Everyone Hits the Ground

I remember contemplating "God" for the first time. I was probably eight. I was noticing the similarities between the faces of furry animals that, like most kids, I loved. A squirrel, a rabbit, a dog. They all had in common the eyes, fur, whiskers of a perfect thing that to me was so clearly designed with affection. I remember exclaiming to myself "I know God made this." As an adult, when I got a dog of my own, Samson, I had no doubt some divine being had given him to me. This and an inexplicable desire to pray before bed stayed with me.

I grew up without religion. I was taught an appreciation for my Jewish heritage, but not spirituality. Yet, for some undefined reason I could not bring myself to deny the existence of a higher power. It just wouldn't have a name.

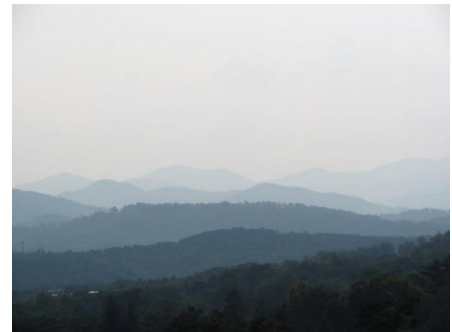
As I worked through adolescence, religion was to my thinking the single worst thing that ever happened to people, responsible for holy wars and inquisitions. Neither spirituality nor religion played much of a role in my day-to-day goings on. Instead, I believed strongly that everything in life came down to the choice to be successful or to fail: the choice to be strong or weak. It seems like every child is told that they he can accomplish anything he sets his mind to. To my understanding, this extended to creating my successful outcome against all of life's obstacles. I believed this right up until I was brought to my knees.

It doesn't really matter what it is that brought me to the ground to pray. Everyone gets there. No one traverses life ignorant of suffering and so we all end up on the ground. I realized two things: 1) the only one down there with me was God and 2) some things were far beyond my power to choose. I would have to rely on God.

First, I would first need to learn more about Him. I had a sense that solitary prayer wouldn't get me there, so I sought out to find a church of some kind. Exploring websites of churches in my area of California, I found obstacles I just couldn't bring myself to ignore. One church seemed promising until I found they listed the need for "traditional marriage" prominently. Though this wasn't directed at me, I just couldn't sign on for a community that began by excluding whole groups of people outright. Then I remembered finding the Episcopal Church on a hill somewhere my cellphone didn't work.

The Good Shepherd

Six years earlier, I found myself in South Georgia for an extended work assignment. For the first two months, my primary form of recreation was complaining about my surroundings: an industrial area that smelled from the factories that defined it. For extra fun, I would expand the scope of my complaints to encompass the whole state of Georgia. My audience for these rants was my friend Sean who was born and raised in Georgia. Finally, Sean replied to one of my tirades by saying that if all I experienced of Georgia was this small area, I was doing myself and the whole state a gross disservice. He suggested I drive to the rural region where he grew up and spend New Year's with his mother, whom I had never met.



When Ms. Mary saw me walk up her driveway on a steep hill at the base of the Blue Ridge Mountains, she welcomed me warmly. Meeting her and her sons, seeing hills like oceans, brought me a Georgia

that I see as the most beautiful place in the world. I spent the days talking with her. Because she was a dedicated parishioner and a full time employee of her Episcopal Church—the Good Shepherd—we spoke about her parish. For hours we sat at her dining room table while I broached every question and misconception about the church I could imagine. She patiently and thoughtfully answered them all: Yes, a black family would be welcome in her church (which was in a largely white area); No, she doesn't believe that little children who parish in parts of the world that don't practice Christianity are going to hell because they don't worship Jesus; God is love; He is the path to her salvation. Hearing Sean's mother speak of her church home invoked an inclusive, loving faith. To see the power of the church, I only had to see this woman in front of me, who spoke with compassion and conviction about her family and faith, how love of both guided her. She spoke about teaching her sons they should always love and support their brothers. I saw the quote on her fridge from Mother Theresa about living a life of love and service regardless of the world's judgment because it's "between you and God" anyway. She understood something rich and unchanging. My views of a hard-hearted faith that excluded and judged others just didn't match this precious person's spiritual home. When I left I was not a Christian, but I was on my way to becoming a vehement Georgia Bulldog fan.

St. Wilfred

When the time came six years later for me to get off the floor and seek out a church, I remembered Sean's mother and her Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd. So I looked for Episcopal churches nearby. On my first visit to St. Wilfred's Episcopal Church in Huntington Beach, California, I filled out the newcomer's card with the small golf pencil provided by the back of the pew in front of me. A few days later, I received an email from the Associate Rector, Alison Rainey English. During our first meeting, I explained to her what brought me to the ground and my doubts about church as an institution. She spoke to me, not with dogmatic answers, but as someone who had considered many ideas and problems and had found a home. She prayed with me and for me. At 30 years old, this was the first time I had ever prayed with someone and the first time I had heard someone pray for me.



When I went to the bookstore soon after to buy a Bible, I sought out a New Revised Standard Version since that's what they had at the pews at St. Wilfred. At night, I laid in bed with my pal Samson the Doberman leaning his back against me, and read the Bible for the first time. I read the bible without knowing the story of Jesus, without knowing what he had to say, without even knowing how it ends. It was a page turner. I was surprised how often Jesus violated conventional wisdom (isn't it unfair to pay folks who work one hour the same as those who worked all day?). I got all fired up when Jesus started turning over tables and kicking entrepreneurs out of church. I learned the origin of expressions I had heard forever (turn the other cheek), I struggled when those expressions didn't mean what I thought they did (you mean the left hand *shouldn't* know what the right hand is doing?). I ruminated over the idea that the way I treat the least of his people is the way I treat Him. I read and understood that it is all about, only about, love. And none of it seemed far-fetched. When I looked at the story of Jesus Christ at face value, it seemed self-evident.

Over the course of the next several weeks, I would meet with Reverend Alison in her office or over coffee or lunch. She spoke in determined sentences about this divine man who died for his friends. She told me about an eccentric living in the woods eating honey and ranting truths at an-out-of-control society. She told me about this wild man baptizing Jesus, the voice of God's approval of his Son with whom he is well pleased.

As I was beginning to wonder whether I could take the major step towards Christian faith, Reverend Alison eliminated debate by just asking me if I wanted to be baptized. On the day of the Pentecost, at age 31, I was baptized. I had always thought the words that were spoken at church services are at worst mere tradition, and at best symbolic. I was wrong. When Reverend Alison poured water on my head and said "I baptize you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," it was no allegory. I immediately felt the literal power of those words. Plus, Reverend Alison blessed Samson on a special day that the church dedicates to blessing the animals. There's even a place in the Episcopal Church for my dog.

Home

Since my baptism, I have visited Episcopal churches everywhere. When I see that classic sign that says "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You," I take it literally. I have worshiped in Kauai, Hawaii; South Gate, Michigan; Annapolis, Maryland; Arlington, and now at Emmanuel. Every place I go, I feel I have a family behind that white sign. When I first visited Emmanuel, I thought I was in the right place and so—for the second time—I filled out a newcomer's pew card with that scratchy golf pencil. A few days later, I shared a meal and this story with Father Chuck.

I knew I was at home when Father Chuck spoke of Heaven with his certainty. It's impossible for me to avoid feeling inspired when faced with the unrestrained excitement in Chuck's sermons. Lately, what brings my knees to the ground in prayer is thinking of all the awful things going on in our world—"things" that could happen in my world, at any moment. If I am honest with myself, I acknowledge that by sharing this with Chuck, I was fishing for him to say something about how God wants me to be happy. Instead, Chuck spoke to me about service. But a strange thing happens when I try to serve others: my mind stops churning on all the things that bother me. Recently, Chuck gave a sermon on the meaning of Good Shepherd, and following Jesus' example to serve as a shepherd. I remembered sitting in Sean's mom's car in her driveway, on our way back from her Good Shepherd, the first Episcopal Church I ever attended. In that driveway, she told me about the small quiet voice of God.