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— Dr. Eileen C. Burke-Sullivan
Vice President for Mission and Ministry
Heaney Chair in Pastoral, Liturgical Theology
Creighton University

Gerhard Lohfink

Between Heaven and Earth

New Explorations of Great Biblical Texts

Translated by

Linda M. Maloney



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For Linda Maloney
in gratitude

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Foreword

Believers stand before an infinite horizon. They look up to heaven and yet they are firmly fixed on earth. They wonder at the immeasurability of the universe and stare in amazement at a tiny flower. They know the depths of the human heart and they are consoled by an infant's smile.

They focus on individuals and yet they have understood that God needs a people in the world. They have recognized that they have to do everything themselves and they constantly realize that all is grace. They live wholly in the moment and yet they reach out toward "the one who is to come." They know they are dust and at the same time are infinitely beloved of their Creator. They believe in judgment but equally in the endless depths of God's mercy. They have countless mothers and fathers in faith—but what is decisive is their life in Christ.

Everything experienced since Abraham in the unceasing experiment of faith stands in the one, unique Book—and yet their faith is not a religion of the book; it is rejoicing in the Holy Spirit. Again and again they are fascinated by the way the church's faith is profoundly rational and they are happy that, at the same time, this faith transcends all reason in the mystery of the triune God.

Those who believe in Jesus Christ are earth-rooted but not earth-bound: they are also stretching toward heaven. Even children and youth can sense the wingspan of faith, but they cannot measure it yet. For that we need a whole life. We need sisters and brothers who join us in the journey toward God, and we need a living relationship with Sacred Scripture so that we can understand it better and better and dare to live it.

Accordingly, the following texts are addressed not only to those far off who are interested in getting a better idea of Jesus Christ and

his message. They are directed equally, and even more, to Christians who long to understand the Bible better and more deeply. I wish my readers much excitement and joy as they make their journey through Scripture on the paths traveled in this book.

I dedicate the book in gratitude to my former student in Tübingen, the Reverend Doctor Linda Maloney. She has been back in the United States for a long time and is a tireless worker like those named in Romans 16:12. Alongside all her professional duties she eloquently and skillfully translates my books into English.

6 January 2021

Gerhard Lohfink

Part I

Basics



Meaningless Existence in the Universe?

The well-known British author Ian McEwan, in a novel simply entitled *Saturday*, describes a single day—a dramatic Saturday in the life of the neurosurgeon Henry Perowne. It is part of his job to open skulls and probe deeply into the greyish-white substance of the brain; he does this routinely. Perowne considers himself a materialist. In the very first pages of the novel he begins to reflect on people who believe in God, but he does not call them “believers in God.” His expression is “the supernaturally inclined.” He tries to locate them in psychiatric terms, thus:

All these “supernaturally inclined” people (in the context the reader can only picture Muslims and Christians) suffer from an “excess of the subjective,” ordering the world “in line with [their] needs.” They are sick, and their sickness consists in a refusal to contemplate their own “unimportance.” So they create a bombastic system of relationships involving such things as God, creation, ascension, eternal life.

This system of relationships, which is really a delusion, enables them to regard themselves as infinitely important and meaningful. In reality the human being is an utterly insignificant speck of dust in a cold and empty universe, but the “supernaturally inclined” refuse to accept that. Hence the insane system they have created, which is supposed to comfort them! Hence the striving to create metaphysical mountains out of humanity’s absolute insignificance—carried to the point that it becomes a sickness! At the extreme end of their system, and of all religious systems, “rearing like an abandoned temple, lies psychosis.”¹

¹ Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (New York: Random House, 2005), 16–17.

Certainly our brain surgeon does not formulate his thoughts with such sharp definition. He is not an aggressive atheist but a genteel and sympathetic scientist. Still, there can be no doubt of his profound skepticism. Our future is not determined by “an all-knowing supernatural force.” There is no “kindly childloving God,” and “appetites” are “sated in this world, not the next.” Therefore: “Rather shop than pray.”²

All these associations run through Henry Perowne’s mind in the very first hours of that Saturday on which the novel takes place. The day will then develop dramatically.

A Delusion?

If we were thrown together with that neurosurgeon, how could we engage him in conversation? Should we tell him that it is not believers in God who live in a world of delusion but possibly he himself? Could it be that precisely those who deny God are suffering from a short-sightedness that prevents clear thinking? To take just one example: Don’t determined atheists avoid the question of why the universe, or the world, exists at all?—why there is something and not nothing? Christians have a reasonable answer to this fundamental question. Atheists have to constantly repress it or give inane answers such as: the universe has simply existed forever, or: it came about accidentally, all by itself.

Could it be that there are people who deny God only because they cannot bear not to be God themselves? To put it a little differently: They themselves want to be in charge, to have power, to be their own law. That in itself means living a delusion. When Raymond Kurzweil, Director of Engineering at Google, was once asked whether there is a God, he responded: “Not yet!” His answer reveals humans’ burning desire to play God and to make everything—really everything—that is technologically possible, no matter the consequences.

There does not seem to be much sense to such arguments. We would only be throwing back the stone tossed at us, and we could argue forever about which side is really living in an unreal paradigm that refuses to recognize the reality of the world or even perverts it.

² McEwan, *Saturday*, 32, 73, 127.

The Power of Jesus

When I have to deal with such questions I ultimately turn to a relatively simple procedure: I consider, one by one, the great figures in world history—those the philosopher Karl Jaspers called the “paradigmatic individuals.” At the end I have nobody left but Jesus, the one who says of himself in the last chapter of Matthew’s gospel: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matt 28:18). What is this hidden power by which Jesus has continually been at work in history for nearly two thousand years?

It is not political power. It is not the power of armaments, atomic weapons, or swifter research. It is most certainly not the power of capital, nor is it that of the masses who protest in the great city squares. It is definitely not the power of propaganda and potent words, skillful indoctrination and seduction.

Jesus’ power is of a different kind. It is simply that he is the “truth” (John 14:6). Jesus is the truth in the sense that he alone has the solution to human suffering and the dire distress of society. His solution lies in communities in which people freely join their lives with those of others and live according to the Sermon on the Mount. There is no other solution for the world’s misery. Everything else has long since been tried: egoism that makes the self the center of the world and only asks: “What is good *for me?*”; hedonism that seeks human happiness in momentary thrills, in acquisition and consumption; individualism that says “Everyone for him- or herself! Don’t trust anybody!”; communism and fascism, which turn people into a collective and try to force them to enjoy it.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries were a chain of unending experiments in what is best for humanity—and all of them had dreadful consequences: the death or anonymous suffering of many millions. The only way for people to be able to live together in peace and freedom is Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, lived out in communities that follow his path. Jesus really brought the solution: that is his “power.”

Free from Oneself

On a deeper level Jesus’ power consists in his wanting nothing for himself. All and everything he wanted was for God’s plan to succeed:

he lived entirely for the gathering and renewal of the people of God in which every individual as such is precious and irreplaceable—and still is truly a people. Because Jesus was free *from* himself, he was free *for* God, and so God was able to act through him and in him to become Presence for the world.

This is a gentle, even meek power that lifts human beings into their own freedom—quite the opposite of the power wielded by the authorities of this world. This kind of “power” cannot be seized, cannot be achieved by conquest, cannot be finagled. It can only be “given.” That is why, in that powerful scene at the end of Matthew’s gospel, speaking as the Crucified One whom God has raised up to heaven, Jesus can say: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”

When I let the paradigmatic individuals of this world pass before my eyes I behold admirable men and women from whom I can learn, but none who has such power, such truth, such clarity, such knowledge of human beings and the world—and at the same time exudes such a fascination, one that does not seduce but bestows ultimate freedom.

The Christian Paradigm

Thus faith in the God of Jesus Christ is not some paradigm that we Christians thought up in order to be able to see ourselves as important within the infinity of the universe. Our paradigm is uniquely Jesus of Nazareth—and those who came before him, since Abraham. We are following not a projection but, rather, an experience that has been a thousand times tested, proved, suffered through in the world and its history, and has found its summit and goal in this Jesus.

What, then, of the accusation that we refuse to accept the insignificance of humanity within the universe? That charge reveals the absence of any notion of what the biblical tradition really says. We Christians admit with the utmost seriousness that we really are altogether meaningless. We are leaves on the breeze, dust in the cosmos, ultimately nothing but a handful of earth. On Ash Wednesday we receive a cross of ashes drawn on our foreheads and hear

“Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

Yet at the same time we believe that we are beloved of God and, with Christ, are already “seated with him in the heavenly places” (Eph 2:6). That is precisely what we celebrate on the feast of the Ascension. This book will be about recognizing and appreciating this state of being unbound between heaven and earth.

From Adam's Rib

Genesis 2:4-25 tells how God forms the human being out of the soil of the field, breathes the breath of life into its nostrils, and gives it the Garden of Eden as its dwelling. A little later God creates a woman by placing the human creature in a deep sleep, removing one of its ribs, and shaping the woman from it.

When I was ten years old I thought it funny that God would have acted like a surgeon and snipped out Adam's rib. Today I am in awe of the text. I no longer hear it naïvely, and most certainly not in fundamentalist fashion.

Fundamentalists have to read the story in Genesis 2:4-25 as an historical account and imagine God as anesthetist and surgeon, but we have the marvelous freedom to appreciate the story of the creation of the man and the woman at the beginning of the Bible critically and appropriately. That means the images can really remain *pictures* for us, and that is precisely how we can understand their theological intent. This is what gives the images their power and truth.

Sacred Scripture begins with *two* creation narratives that are completely different. That is how they show us that they are meant to be read rightly. The first narrative is in Genesis 1:1–2:4a, the second in Genesis 2:4b–25. Anyone who reads these two texts as documentary reports falls into an irresolvable conflict with the fact of evolution. Supposedly, when the wife of a nineteenth-century Anglican Bishop of Worcester was told about Charles Darwin and his theory of evolution she cried out: "Dear me, let us hope it is not true, but if it is true, let us hope it does not become widely known!"

We need not have such naïve anxiety. If we let the images in the creation stories remain *images* we will have no difficulty with evolution, and what is much more important, we will really grasp something about the human mystery.

Humans and Animals

Let us consider one of the magnificent images in Genesis 2: God forms “every animal of the field and every bird of the air” out of the ground in order to create a “helper” for the human being—a helper as “partner,” or “counterpart,” one who is its “equal” and will put an end to its loneliness. Then God presents all the beasts to the human creature, one by one. But the attempt fails; it does not achieve its goal. It is true that the human gives each animal a name, that is, puts the world in order around it and by naming that world creates it anew. The human being “conceives” the world, orders it in terms of concepts, and so understands it. But there is no being to be found that corresponds to the human.

What an image—so long as we understand it as an *image*! The all-knowing and all-powerful God makes an effort, experiments, and attempts solutions that fail. Here the text is very close to the phenomenon of evolution, which aims toward a goal but makes its way by means of “trial and error.”

Certainly the image reveals something more: if the human creature cannot find the deeply desired partner in any animal, the chief aim of the text is to say that the human being is different, is more than all the animals. Geneticists are right to say that 98 percent of our genetic material is the same as that of chimpanzees, but natural scientists are not talking about the Spirit of God, who encompassed the yet-unformed world from the beginning and whom God the creator (again in pictorial terms) breathed into the human as “the breath of life.” Natural scientists do not talk about that Spirit, and they cannot because of the limitations of their methods. That is: as soon as they assert that the “whole of reality” can be described and explained in every detail by the methods of natural science they are making a basic choice that remains nothing more than a postulate.

But our text continues: what God intended with the animals—a being “equal” to the human—was not achieved. In terms of our current way of viewing the world it means that the human being is not yet a social creature. Socio-biologically speaking it already lives in herds, howls with the pack, hunts with the pride, hurls itself at the beast that has been slain and shares the spoils—but what constitutes personal communion is not yet reality, or is so only in its rudimentary beginnings.

“Male and Female”

So God takes a rib from the human being and builds it into a woman and brings her to the *ādām*, the man, who breaks into a jubilant cry. His prosaic words are shaped in Hebrew into a poetic text. The man cries:

*This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh! (Gen 2:23)*

Feminists of both genders are deeply unsatisfied with this picture. They scent male lust for domination and the worst kind of patriarchal pretensions. To say that the man was there first and the woman was created from the man’s rib appears to reveal the arrogant sense of male superiority that clings to such texts.

But we can understand the text differently by reading it within the whole of the Bible. Previously, in Genesis 1:1–2:4, there was a first, comprehensive story of creation that envisioned no kind of male priority; instead, it simply says:

*So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them. (Gen 1:27)*

Besides: do we have to instantly imagine a battle of the sexes when it is said that the woman was taken from the man’s side? A Jewish commentary comes much closer to the point:

God did not create the woman from the man’s head, so that she would rule over him, and not from his feet, so that she would be his slave, but from his side, so that she would be close to his heart.

Moreover, later in the second creation account it does not say “therefore a woman shall leave her father and mother and cling to her husband,” but instead, and completely contrary to the institutions and social structures of the time:

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. (Gen 2:24)

Because at that time it was the *woman* who had to leave father and mother, not the *man*, this is a revolutionary text. Contrary to the social

conventions of the ancient Near East, it proposes a contrast-world that rests entirely on the elementary power of love between man and woman.

Indeed, it is not only this conclusion to the second creation account but the whole narrative that possesses an inexhaustible depth. How unfathomable the very beginning:

The LORD God formed the human being from the dust of the ground, and breathed into its nostrils the breath of life; and the human became a living being. (Gen 2:7)

Today we can use more abstract and sophisticated terms and still we cannot attain the power of the ancient images. We can say that God gave such power to matter that it was able to develop to the stature of a human being, even though that took an unimaginably long time. It was God's intention that it should do so on its own. God allowed matter all the time it needed so that ultimately, in the human being, it might become conscious of itself.

The Human Needs Help

But let us return to our text. It says not only that God made the human a living being (Gen 2:7). It says: the human is more than merely a living being. Otherwise the animals would have sufficed as partners. The human is a being that comes fully to itself only in community with another "thou." That is depicted in the creation of the woman from the human's side and God's presentation of the woman to the man. It is also heard in the man's exclamation, which is not the roaring of a ruler but a cry of joy. These images are meant to tell us that being human is being-with—being together in trust and in the joy of mutual help.

That all sounds lovely. But when we look at the world we have to acknowledge that life is *not* a "being together in trust." The bird searching the meadow for worms repeatedly lifts its little head and looks around, for safety's sake. That unceasing watchfulness is an image of pure mistrust. Indeed, trust is not a natural condition; it has to be created. Trust has to be achieved in pain and sacrifice.

Thus it is clear that the two creation stories at the beginning of the Bible were by no means intended, in the first place, to tell about a past primal beginning. Instead, they tell us how God envisioned

human beings and for what purpose. It took a very long time for human beings to become human, and that process only reached its goal in liberation and redemption through Jesus Christ.

Hence the Bible pushes us to read the text about the creation of the woman also in terms of God's new creation, namely, the church. Then, in its more profound, overall biblical sense, this text depicts how the church, as the "new Eve," came forth from the side of Christ, the "new Adam." The theologians of the early church located that procession of the church from Christ's side in the event of the Cross. That is how much it cost to create genuine community. It is only in an expanded view reaching to the cross of Christ that the terrible truth of Genesis 2 becomes visible: the human being is created toward and for a "thou," certainly, but for that relationship with the Other to succeed is something impossible in terms of pure nature, of simple biology.

Certainly there are rare cases of marriages that succeed because of a lucky constellation or an almost natural gift, but the church cannot count on that. It is very realistic. It knows that human beings need help, and that help is the church itself, coming from the crucified body of Christ. That help is the bondedness of the Christian community.

In such a community it is possible for the unmarried also to live a fulfilled life. In it marriages can succeed. In it married couples can rediscover one another. In it there is even the possibility that married people can separate and yet not be alone. In it there are marriages for the sake of the reign of God and unmarried people who live for the sake of the reign of God—because there is a "new family," namely, the church.

The Vitality of Christianity

None of that is because the church is an assembly of heroes and heroines. The British-German journalist Alan Posener wrote in 2002:

The enormous power of Christianity rests not least on the fact that it makes its protagonists so weak. There are no "action heroes" at work here. Betrayal and denial, venality and the fear of death exist even in the innermost circle. No other world religion has comparable courage. No other world religion looks people so fixedly and unflinchingly in the eye. All that, indeed, is a heritage from Judaism No people has so implacably criticized itself in its holy

*books, so consistently demeaned its kings, showed its heroes so humanly fallible as the chosen one It is a history in which even perfidy and betrayal become instruments of salvation.*¹

“Becoming instruments of salvation.” May we not apply this text from Alan Posener even to the married and the unmarried in our congregations? There is so much brokenness, so much weakness. There are so many failures and so many lovely dreams that were not fulfilled! Yet all that can become a tool for the one thing that is so much greater than our dreams—namely, for the one thing that God always regards as the goal: a world transformed by the living witness of the people of God. As soon as Christians turn to that goal with their whole strength, the goal that the Bible calls the “reign of God” or the “kingdom of God,” something astonishing happens: marriages are healed. Partners who had become estranged find one another anew. Children’s hearts turn back to their parents. At the very least the lonely are consoled, letting their separation become an “easy yoke and a light burden” (Matt 11:30) so that the dignity of husband and wife is restored.

I sometimes think that what Genesis 1–2 describes is still not finished: God is still working on the rib—that is, the relationship between husband and wife—and on the new family of the church that comes forth from the crucified body of Christ. The church is still on the road. Through it God is still working on the world, undeterred. And God invites us to be coworkers.

¹ From the author’s private notes.

COVID-19

Plagues, epidemics, and pandemics have long marked the history of humankind. I think of the time of the Black Death, when whole districts in Europe were depopulated. Scholars estimate that in the years 1331–1353 the plague took some 140 million lives. But the Black Death is no longer a living memory for us. Much closer in time is the “Spanish Flu” that raged in 1918–1920. It cost some 25 to 50 million human lives worldwide. But that, too, is in the distant past.

Despite the breathtaking numbers of victims of those “historic plagues,” we can say that no pandemic has yet struck the world population with such fury as COVID-19 (= coronavirus disease 2019), and none has previously led to a comparable worldwide destruction in all parts of society. The reason is, of course, the reality of the twenty-first century with its social mobility and vacation travel, its thick traffic, and an economic interwovenness never known before.

COVID-19 is experienced nearly everywhere in the world as a profound rupture because the virus rules our lives. It affects everyone in one way or another, and no one can escape the new situation—not even those who act as if they can ignore the pandemic or even deny it. This plague will change the society in which we live. Obviously it likewise presents probing questions to theology and the church.

What does it mean that the church, which by its very nature is “assembly,” suddenly can no longer gather together in person—or can only do so if all participants wear masks, follow peculiar guidelines fixed to the floors of their churches, then sit far apart, no longer singing together, not offering each other the peace-greeting, and practically not speaking to one another after the service? Don’t get me wrong! I am very much in favor of following public regulations for church gatherings—if, that is, we are talking about a government of laws. But what would it mean if a crisis of this kind, with corresponding restrictions, should last for years?

Besides, what does COVID-19 mean for “theodicy,” the question of God’s omnipotence and the purpose of creation? Can Christian faith still speak of an omnipotent and benevolent God when, because of the mercilessness of this pandemic, countless old and sick people are snatched away, the economy is on its last legs, the poor in Brazil, India, and elsewhere have nothing to eat, and social interaction is profoundly destroyed?

The theodicy question arose acutely in Europe for the first time when an earthquake destroyed nearly the whole city of Lisbon on All Saints’ Day in 1755. People who survived the raging fires by escaping to the sea were drowned by a gigantic tsunami. Nearly every church in Lisbon was a heap of ruins. Nothing remained intact but the red-light district. After the news of this catastrophe many European intellectuals hesitated to believe any longer in the providence and parental kindness of God.

Since then the theodicy problem has raged again and again, especially in light of the murder of millions of Europe’s Jews by the Nazi regime. Now the whole question arises anew, for many, in the context of the coronavirus pandemic.

Some theologians attempt to resolve the problem of theodicy by reducing God’s creative power, or they go still further and say that, in light of the global misery, God can never again be called “almighty.” We can no longer consider God the “lord of history,” they say. God seems helpless in face of the endless suffering; in fact, God in Christ submitted to that same suffering in order to be in solidarity with the world.

The idea of God’s suffering with the world is correct. But can God’s omnipotence be curtailed? The notion of a helpless, powerless God is a self-contradiction, but still weightier is the fact that it is absolutely unbiblical. Not even the book of Job reduces God’s omnipotence and creative wisdom one iota. Quite the contrary! The great divine speeches in Job 38–41 are designed precisely to demonstrate God’s sovereignty. Still, they also emphasize the inaccessibility of God and the mystery of divine creative wisdom.

Thus the problem of theodicy cannot be resolved by theology’s questioning God’s omnipotence. It has to be approached differently—namely, first of all with the aid of a rational theology of creation that takes seriously what the whole of evolution really means.

I have said quite deliberately “. . . *first of all with the aid of a rational theology of creation,*” which means that creation theology by no means

has the last word in the question of theodicy. The last word belongs to the death of Jesus and the raising of Jesus from the dead—and that “last word” (in this chapter, at least) can remain unspoken. No one can speak “last words” all the time. We are dealing here with “next-to-last words.” They are what is at issue here, because unless we have understood what “creation” is, we cannot understand what “resurrection” means as the goal of creation.

A Snippet of Creation Theology

Let me begin with the phenomenon of human love—in particular, a love that has been purified in common life and is capable of genuine dedication. Obviously one of the foundations of the love between man and woman is the sexual realm, something we have in common with our animal ancestors: attraction, longing, desire, and the fulfillment of desire are simply animal in nature. Certainly they can be such if the human being behaves like an animal or is more animalistic than any beast. But longing and desire can also be *humanly* shaped; indeed, they must be. Love achieves its specifically human ripeness only at the moment in which it no longer seeks merely its own pleasure but, above all, the happiness of the other—when it says “thou” in the fullest sense: “You, with all that you are,” “Only you,” “You always,” “Being with you for the sake of others.” It is precisely in that moment that love presumes freedom.

True human love cannot attempt to instrumentalize the other for one’s own pleasure or to shape and model the other according to one’s own image. True love cannot mean, either, that one is surrendered to another; then it would be the worst kind of prison. Real love has chosen the other in freedom and it presumes that in return it will be granted the dignity proper to every human being. Genuine love is therefore inseparably bound up with freedom. Love that is not mutually given in full assent remains fragmentary. The greatest, most beautiful, and most human thing in the world thus presumes freedom—free, total acceptance of the other.

And let us go a step further! Freedom, too, has its preconditions: namely, it presumes history. That should be obvious, because freedom did not fall from heaven one day and simply exist thereafter. It needed a long “history of freedom” in order, little by little, to become what it can be. Freedom had to be desired, achieved, and often bitterly

fought for. It was not a matter of course. We all live in the spaces of freedom that others have opened for us in the course of history. At some point, in the dawn of humanity, there must have been individuals who did not simply follow their instincts like the animals but who instead *chose* something they thought was good and proper—or better and more proper than something else. That was the beginning of the history of human freedom. It is more than “natural history.” It began to grow slowly, like a plant that is still very tender and constantly in danger.

The mighty field of history in which historians labor is a constantly confused but ultimately unstoppable story of enlightenment, emancipation, and the quest for freedom. Each individual’s story of freedom is rooted in and lives out of this larger history and gives its own new impulses to it, again and again.

The history of emancipation and freedom thus extends far beyond mere natural history; it transcends and transforms it. *But obviously it presupposes it.* The history of human freedom is based on and embedded in the history of Nature, of the universe, of evolution. My central point here is that we must acknowledge this. We can clarify this crucial fact in terms of the phenomenon of “successive generations.”

The history of freedom develops in epochs. To take one example, there was the epoch of the European Enlightenment, with all its one-sidedness but also with all its insights. It is true that the First World War and all its consequences finally destroyed the naïve optimism about “progress” that reigned in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but it by no means wrecked the fundamental insights of the Enlightenment. Something similar happened long ago in Greece, and in Israel. A genuine history of freedom presumes the succession of generations and requires newer and newer generations that build on the insights of their predecessors while modifying, improving, or even revolutionizing them. Precisely because the human history of freedom and enlightenment is unthinkable without the succession and dialogue of many generations it also presumes the end and demise of those who have preceded and fought the battles before them.

That puts us right in the middle of the immense event of evolution, which lives precisely from ending, disruption, and death—simply because space is required for the testing of new things and advancing those that are successful. Evolution presupposes constant mutation, the continued life of successful mutants, but also the collapse and end of obsolete forms.

At precisely this point it is good to look into a book published in 1895. Its author was Herbert George Wells and its title is *The Time Machine*. It was the precursor and pathbreaker for famous dystopian novels such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *1984* (1949). The "time traveler" who is the principal figure in Wells's book has invented a time machine that takes him into the Fourth Dimension, so that he can speed through millennia. On his first journey the machine brings him to the year 802,702. As he exits the machine he finds himself at the place where his house used to be, but in a new, radically changed world. When at last, after terrible experiences, he returns to the day of his departure he tries to describe to his friends the altered world that had confronted him. They listen very skeptically. This is how it goes:

Some day [the whole world] will be intelligent, educated, and cooperating; things will move faster and faster toward the subjugation of Nature. In the end, wisely and carefully we shall readjust the balance of animal and vegetable life to suit our human needs.

This adjustment, I say, must have been done, and done well: done indeed for all time, in the space of Time across which my machine had leaped. The air was free from gnats, the earth from weeds or fungi; everywhere were fruits and sweet and delightful flowers; brilliant butterflies flew hither and thither. The ideal of preventive medicine was attained. Diseases had been stamped out. I saw no evidence of any contagious diseases during all my stay. And I shall have to tell you later that even the processes of putrefaction and decay had been profoundly affected by these changes.¹

In this part of his story the time traveler presents a utopian human dream: that of a world in which there are no more weeds but only cultivated plants; no more annoying gnats or mosquitoes but only beautiful butterflies; no dangerous microbes, no illnesses, and nothing of a threatening nature. The earth has been altered, down to the microscopic world, by an international science.

It speaks for the intelligence of H. G. Wells, of course, that the time traveler's interpretation just quoted proves in the course of the book to be an extremely dangerous deception. The apparently redemptive alteration of the world had been accompanied by the rise of a beastly and abysmal anti-world producing constant fear, horrors, and death.

¹ H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine: An Invention* (New York: Henry Holt, 1895), 71–72.

For the moment, though, let us consider the quoted section! No more weeds, no mosquitoes, no microbes, no decay? Bitter experience has shown us in the meantime how to correct such mistakes. We no longer speak of “weeds” but of “wild plants.” We deliberately let “weeds” grow on the edges of fields and roads because, little by little, even the slowest among us begin to grasp that otherwise there will soon be no insects left, and without insects any number of birds will vanish—and, because our world is so interconnected, unimaginably more will cease to exist.

We also know that without microbes and decay our planet would very rapidly become a gigantic garbage heap. After all, microbes are Nature’s cleanup crews, and decay steadily cleanses our planet. All the same, we continue to pursue the illusion of a world without illnesses, and that is because we fail to recognize that sicknesses have something to do with evolution, and that a completely sterile and eternally restyled world cannot exist—and must not.

Therefore we must keep in view the whole vastness and utterly radical nature of the phenomenon of evolution: from the rise of the initial organic compounds through the development of macromolecules and the first one-celled animals to the rise of *homo sapiens sapiens*—and throughout it all, the appearance and disappearance of countless biological forms and beings. We cannot escape the insight that the birth and death of the individual and, clearly, deformation and illness as well, are all essential parts of evolution.

Yes, obviously illnesses too! Life on our planet would be unthinkable without microbes, without mutating bacteria and viruses. For example, viruses create many highly dangerous sicknesses in plants, animals, and humans. But as they repeatedly creep into cells they bring new DNA material into the inherited substance, and in this way they have driven and accelerated evolution to an extraordinary degree.

To take another example: without the multitudes of bacterial (and viral!) flora in our gut we would die very quickly. The human being is a highly complicated ecosystem in which bacteria play a vital role. However, a disturbance of the intestinal flora can make one sick, and cells can mutate, causing cancer. Of course, if they could not mutate there would have been no evolution, no mammals, and never any human beings.

Let me summarize: real love presupposes freedom, and freedom can only develop within a history of freedom. But a genuine history

of freedom presupposes the succession of generations in natural history and evolution—and evolution is unimaginable without constant change: not without catastrophes, not without sicknesses, and not without death. I can envision no possibility of interrupting this chain of causation at any point and thus conceiving creation in another way.

However, if love is the goal of all creation, and if love requires evolution, with all its shadows of innovation and decay, as the condition of its freedom, then creation is good. That brings us, finally, to Sacred Scripture, for it, too, says clearly, unmistakably, and with the utmost emphasis: everything God has created is good. Creation lives out of God's eternal caring and reflects it as well.

The Play of Creation Wisdom

Israel's wisdom literature speaks especially, and repeatedly, of the beauty, order, and appropriateness of creation. A particularly important figure in this context is "Wisdom," a *personification* of God's creative wisdom. In the eighth chapter of Proverbs, "Wisdom" seems to appear in the figure of a "child at play." I say "seems to" because the interpretation of the corresponding Hebrew words in Proverbs 8:30 allows for other possibilities, namely "master worker" or simply "constant."

*The LORD created me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of long ago.
Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.
Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth—
when he had not yet made earth and fields,
or the world's first bits of soil.
When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,
when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,*

*when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
 then I was beside him, like a beloved child;²
 and I was daily his delight,
 rejoicing before him always,
 rejoicing in his inhabited world
 and delighting in the human race. (Prov 8:22-31)*

In this glorious poem, then, “Wisdom” is God’s companion in creation. She herself was created, certainly—but then she was present in a mysterious way through the whole process of creation. That process is described in images drawn from ancient Near Eastern knowledge of the world. What is crucial is that God, the Creator, works sovereignly, thoughtfully, and planfully, step by step, masterfully and meaningfully. Evidently God has a plan in mind for creation, and there is a suggestion that “Wisdom” herself is that architectural plan. That is precisely why it is so firmly emphasized that she is there *from the beginning*. But even if she is not depicted here as a kind of architectural plan, her unceasing presence in any case reveals to her the planned nature of Creation and thus its wisdom. And because she was there from the beginning she can also convey the order of the universe to human beings.

If the translation of Proverbs 8:30 quoted here is correct, it could be an especially touching feature of the poem that Wisdom plays on the globe like a child. But she plays not only on the whole earth; in the same moment she plays *before God*. She is God’s joy, God’s “beloved child,” and she herself has joy and pleasure in what God creates.

The lightness, the playfulness, the beauty, and the utter perfection of creation could scarcely be better expressed than in the image of joyful, unbounded play. Naturally, the metaphor of “creative wisdom’s play” is also used to say that *God* rejoices in creation. It was not a painful birth, most certainly not a miscarriage, but an easy and glorious game—and it could remain so forever if people would pay attention to creation’s wisdom and play along with it. Thus personified Wisdom also has to say, immediately after this poem:

² NRSV “master worker.”

*And now, my children, listen to me:
 happy are those who keep my ways.
 Hear instruction and be wise,
 and do not neglect it.
 Happy is the one who listens to me,
 watching daily at my gates,
 waiting beside my doors.
 For whoever finds me finds life
 and obtains favor from the LORD;
 but those who miss me injure themselves;
 all who hate me love death. (Prov 8:32-36)*

In other words: those who do not respect the structures of creation, those who distort Nature's blueprint and thus God's creation do themselves the utmost damage. It is not God who "punishes" them; they punish, fall short of, and even destroy themselves. And it is not only individuals who destroy themselves. Today we may add: world society could destroy itself. The nuclear weapons on alert today would be sufficient to destroy all humanity many times over.

A Growing History of Evil

The creation account of the so-called "Priestly document" in Genesis 1:1–2:4a ultimately says the same as the quoted text from the book of Proverbs, though in a completely different form. At the beginning of Genesis we also have a description of the world's creation; in part it uses the same inventory of the created world as is found in Proverbs 8:22-31. But above all, the direction and goal are identical: the creation account in Genesis means to say that God's creation was good. The text emphasizes it, like a refrain, no fewer than six times: "God saw that it was good" (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). Finally, on the sixth day, the formula is expanded:

*God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.
 (Gen 1:31)*

With those words this text also shows what is at stake when it speaks of creation: it is successful, it is good, it is in fact "very good." God's creation is something God can survey with pleasure.

However: when we read the subsequent chapters in Genesis we quickly see that we are only told, and must be told, about God's *good*

creation because a terrifying history of evil begins right away: The very first human beings let themselves be tempted, distrust God, and violate God's commandment (Gen 3:1-24).

The results of their sin appear almost immediately, in the next generation. There is rivalry between two brothers: in the end, out of pure jealousy, Cain kills his brother Abel (Gen 4:1-16). Obviously this is not an historical account of an incident at the beginning of human history. Rather, what is told here is first and above all what happens over and over again in history after Evil has broken into the world: rivalry between brothers such that one wants to kill the other.

Then, in the generations after Cain, there emerges a man named Lamech. He does not hold to the law of blood-vengeance, intended to control major incidents of violence: he boasts to his wives that he will revenge himself not seven times but seventy times seven (Gen 4:15, 23-24). That, too, happens over and over in history: individuals' lust for domination, their pride, and their thirst for power create unspeakable misery and plunge the world into chaos.

As the number of people on earth increases more and more, the Bible goes on to say, evil grows along with them. The narrator asserts: "The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually" (Gen 6:5). As the story goes on, this evil inclination is described more precisely as a lust for slaughter: "the earth is filled with violence" (Gen 6:13).

Thus the creation account in Genesis 1:1–2:4a intends to show that the world was initially good when it was created by God, but sin breaks into that good creation and a history of evil begins, a history that consists primarily of an ever-more-rampant violence. Thus the narrative in the first chapters of Genesis makes a clear distinction between *creation* and *history*. Evil does not lurk in God's creation; it develops in history, which rapidly becomes a history of evil. Still, God does not leave it that way: in Genesis 12 God begins a "counter-history" by calling Abraham. The whole Bible tells the story of that counter-history.

Certainly one could object that if the first humans sinned right away, if criminal violence in the form of fratricide existed at the very beginning of human history, if "the thoughts of human hearts were only evil continually" so that God had to set a "counter-history" in motion—doesn't that all go to prove that God's creation was not at all good? Isn't it true that what God made was a fundamental failure?

But here again we have to think of creation as evolution. The human being comes from the animal world, and that world includes violence, eating and being eaten, the intricate and interwoven networks of nourishment. But not only those! It is by no means so that animals favor their own kind. Woe to the rat that wanders by accident into the nest of another tribe of rats. The minute the “native” rats scent the alien rat its fate is sealed: it will be torn to pieces.

Clearly such structures of aggression persisted within the human species for a long time. Our tribe against their tribe! Our clan against that other clan! Whoever doesn’t smell like us is our enemy! Whoever’s skin is a different color from ours is inferior! It is no exaggeration to say that behavioral patterns of that kind still lurk within us.

But at some point in the long history of human becoming, for the first time the possibility of freedom and reason appeared. From then on people, if they followed these new possibilities, no longer engaged in brutal violence against their fellow humans. Since then it is no longer necessary to give free rein to group-egoism. But those who rejected that newly opening possibility became “more beastly than any beast,” because they now had infinitely more opportunities, thanks to their intelligence, to destroy the members of their own species.

Thus the unbroken chain of violence that Genesis relates also presumes—to use a modern term—deliberate refusal in the face of new opportunities that have been achieved in the course of a long history of culture and freedom. It was only this *deliberate refusal in light of new possibilities for human sympathy and community* that created evil. And because evil (just as much as good) is imitated and so begets more evil, a history of self-perpetuating evil began. Potentials for evil arose into which humans were born without any personal fault, and what happened was precisely what church dogmatics speaks of—using a concept that is regrettably easy to misunderstand—as “original sin.”

The consequences of this chain of evil, this self-accumulating potential for iniquity, were and are enormous. The new possibilities for freedom and goodness that entered human life could have sharpened the sense of the meaningfulness of creation. But where iniquity spread, there the view was obscured, goodness became unrecognizable, and meaningful structures were perceived as futility.

For example: The beginning of a serious illness must not necessarily produce profound fear, naked misery, feelings of isolation and loneliness. Sickness could also be an experience of human care and

concern, even a sense, drawn from faith, of being sheltered in God. The same is true for death. It can be a breaking-off and nevertheless a surrender and a hope-filled trust in God. Experience of the world could have been an increasing sense of meaning. But it turned out differently. A gigantic potential for self-created misery clouds our view of the meaningful structures of creation.

It must be clear by now that those who continually complain that God created mosquitoes, decay, mutating viruses, dangerous bacteria, and faulty cells and, besides, allowed evil to enter history have not understood what evolution is. Ultimately they want a complete, sterile, glass house of a world, a lotusland in which happiness is prefabricated and honey drips into people's mouths.

In such a world there would be no freedom and therefore no real love. In such a world we would be mere marionettes: infantile, contented bio-machines programmed to feel happy, as Aldous Huxley so masterfully caricatured them in *Brave New World*. In the sterile, artificially propagated society conditioned to unceasing pleasure that Huxley describes there is no failure, no sickness, and no sort of misery any more. There is death, of course, at some point, but it happens in a drugged half-sleep and zombie-like bliss in a death center erected for the purpose.

God wanted a different world—a world in which there is love, which comes from freedom; in which there is suffering that allows people to mature; in which there is misfortune that tests them. Still more: God wanted a world that is not yet finished, a world where humans can join in, full of longing to heal the wounds of history and to become human in the fullest sense—rooted in earth, reaching toward heaven.

How a History of Sin and Guilt Happens Today

All this we can now apply to COVID-19. As we have seen, the world in which we live is not God's pure creation. It already has a long history behind it; in fact, it *is* history by its very nature. But that history can be clouded and darkened by the accumulation of human guilt; it can even be ruined. Then it becomes a history of disaster.

Let us simply assume that the new virus SARS-CoV-2 (= severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2) did not happen through human planning, as in a laboratory commissioned by a government

to create biological weapons. Had that been the case, the action itself would have been profoundly criminal.

However, the virologists tell us that in this case SARS-CoV-2 was constructed differently. The virus is not of human making, but in all probability arose through an accidental transfer from animal to human—possibly by way of the gigantic market for wild animals in the Chinese metropolis of Wuhan, where one may find not only meat from domesticated animals for sale but also that of snakes, rats, salamanders, frogs, and a variety of birds as well as ground bones and the dried dung of bats—probably not as a delicacy but for medicinal purposes. Certainly one may ask whether in the twenty-first century that kind of pseudo-medical magic is not an evil in itself.

In any case, afterward human evil immediately and in a positively terrifying way joined hands with the story of the new virus: the existence of the highly dangerous corona variant was kept in the dark within the People's Republic of China for a brief period—a time, however, that was enormously important for the spread of the virus; such are the ancient silent tactics of dictatorships. Along the same lines, a number of Western politicians at first minimized, downplayed, and instrumentalized the virus for their own ends in the game of power politics, as has become fairly obvious. Some of them are still doing it.

The corona crisis not only uncovered the irresponsibility of certain politicians and revealed their true faces, however. Sadly, it also showed that research into the possibility of corona mutants was not sufficiently advanced, even though the severe effects of the respiratory syndrome caused by SARS-CoV (since 2002) and MERS-CoV (since 2012) should have sent a warning signal. Precisely here it was fairly clear that the so-called coronaviruses came from a reservoir of animal pathogens.

In many countries emergency services were even less prepared. The crisis revealed with brutal clarity the deficient healthcare systems, the lack of breathing apparatus and intensive-care beds, the shortage of expert personnel, and the inability of public procurers to maintain a supply of breathing masks for catastrophic situations.

It was not only politicians and power-brokers who failed. As the first wave of the pandemic was fading and some relaxation of lockdowns began, it was precisely in the free Western countries that more and more people refused to listen to reason and protested against the

regulations set by their governments in regard to corona. They came from all cracks and crannies, pouring into the streets: mask-refusers, immunization skeptics and rejecters, corona minimizers, pandemic deniers, conspiracy theorists, esoterics, and contrarians. They wanted to demonstrate their contempt for government restrictions such as social distancing, wearing masks, and restricting contacts. Care for others, especially the old and sick, was of no concern to them. Police supervision and even the exercise of force is hard put to cope with such ignorance and even recklessness.

But the real problem—at least in the free societies of the European type—was not these social-critical demonstrations. The true problem was the many who simply could not understand that the highly dangerous pandemic of COVID-19 can only be encountered with focused attention and the most extreme discipline. In the stores and where it was required, they dutifully wore their masks, but as soon as they were outside—and this is something that could be observed in every street and on every corner—it did not enter their heads to keep their distance. It was no different at home. Many people never even considered doing without the usual visits and gatherings. That kind of undisciplined behavior was the real cause of the so-called second wave of the pandemic in the late fall and winter of 2020 (and the surge in mid-2021 due to the Delta variant).

There was no malice behind that lack of insight; rather, it was due to the complete inability to grasp a wholly new situation, to see the broader connections (such as the threatened collapse of the healthcare system), and to change one's own way of life—at least for a little while. In the face of such inability to empathize, to begin to feel comfortable in such an unaccustomed social situation, a free state is helpless. Here it has reached its limits. It can only warn, admonish, appeal, plead—but it cannot compel understanding.

So it was not malice that underlay the inability of many as we have described it, and yet the question arises: must we not speak of guilt here also? I am talking about the guilt, the fault that consists of an acquired or self-created inability to abandon one's own habits, rituals, and convenience, to leave one's comfort zone, and even to think about other people and about larger contexts at all. Such an individual and likewise collective torpor can certainly involve guilt.

This whole list could easily be expanded and deepened. It shows us that an event that at first is purely biological in nature but then

sets profound social processes in motion can, because of human failure, inertia, ignorance, attitudes of “I know better,” arrogance, and criminal manipulation intertwined with evil, set in motion a history of guilt and malice and thus create genuine misery.

Signs of a Counter-History

Everyone who has endured the pandemic with open eyes, and is still doing so, certainly has very different things to report. Such reports come from numerous research institutions that work day and night analyzing the virus, the way it is spread, and the ways to counter it: we learn of the admirable dedication of physicians, hospital workers, and many others who assist them—of countless people who offer themselves spontaneously to help older people—of teachers who have given profound attention to preparing digital lessons—in short, of a wave of willingness to help, of solidarity, and of community effort. Here we should also mention worldwide cooperative medical projects that have arisen in response to the COVID-crisis. The history of this great, immediate human effort has yet to be written.

Certainly this raises another theological question that to me seems as if it may be the most important: What is the relationship of this positive aspect of the history of the virus’s effects, this wave of solidarity and human cooperation, to the idea of the “reign of God”? Jesus himself, after all, worked against sickness, need, the isolation of individuals—against human suffering in every form—and he saw that campaign as signaling the arrival of God’s reign (Luke 11:20). May we place the unbelievable devotion of so many helpers in the time of the coronavirus in this context and associate it with the coming of the reign of God? I would have no difficulty in doing so.

I say this because the reign of God that Jesus proclaims reveals itself not only in Jesus’ actions and those of his disciples and is not located only in Israel; its desire is to encompass the whole world through Jesus and his disciples. It calls for as many sympathizers as possible, and it even needs people who are totally unaware that they are acting as Jesus did and yet do so—often, in fact, shaming Christians who not only do not do their duty but have even forgotten it altogether.

Therefore I dare to say that the selfless devotion of many women and men in the time of this pandemic certainly has something to do

with the coming of the reign of God. The battle against the illness and the coming of the reign of God cannot be separated. They belong together.

Obviously all I have just said is not yet the “last word” about the reign of God. The last word on the coming of the reign of God is Jesus’ surrender of his life, his representative death, his resurrection from the dead. But the reign of God also has its “next-to-last words,” its “forecourt,” a broad field in which the obstacles to the coming of the reign of God need to be eliminated.

Outlook

In all probability the COVID crisis will keep us on our toes for a long time. At the moment the whole world is counting on the new vaccines—and rightly so! Yet coronaviruses mutate, just as do all viruses and bacteria. Some virologists say that, like the flu, this illness will recur repeatedly in new waves. COVID-19 could become an enduring crisis that weakens only very slowly. If that should happen, what would such an ongoing crisis do? Will it deepen the already-simmering conflicts throughout the world and bring forth new power struggles? Will it dig the existing trenches in society even deeper? Will the chaos that SARS-CoV-2 sets loose in the human immune system develop into a chaos that encompasses the whole of world society?

Or will the profound interruption of our stupid habits by the virus become the occasion for strengthened *meaningful* medical research, something that cannot occur except through international cooperation? And will that interruption give the impulse, at last, to the insight that in our world national egoisms and power games are not only highly dangerous but have become positively childish and laughable—because the world has become so networked and the balance of our blue planet so endangered that only a profound reversal can save us?

So will the global corona crisis ultimately become another part of the history of evil, or will it instead become something like salvation history or at least a distancing from things that stand in the way of the coming of the reign of God? The virus SARS-CoV-2 allows for both. Everything depends on us—on what we do with this biological phenomenon. The virus, viewed through the electron microscope,

looks temptingly beautiful, almost like a flower—and yet its shape is also reminiscent of the highly explosive naval mines in both world wars. It could be a sign of destruction, or it could be a sign of our repentance.

Part II

Festivals and Feasts



Advent Eschatology

Advent means “arrival.” That does not refer only to the birth of Jesus; it is also about the coming of the reign of God as well as the coming of Jesus Christ on the Last Day, when our time flows into its eternal fulfillment. So the weeks before Christmas not only look forward with joyful expectation to the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem; they look far beyond. That is why, for example, we hear in the Gospel for the First Sunday of Advent how Jesus Christ appears on the clouds of heaven—with great power and glory (Matt 24:30; Mark 13:26; Luke 21:27).

Imminent Expectation

“He will return in glory.” That statement in the Nicene Creed summarizes the fundamental hope of the very earliest Christian communities, and it was combined with a burning expectation. We encounter this expectation of the imminent return of Christ and with it, naturally, the end of the world, at many points in the New Testament: in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, in the authentic Pauline letters, in the book of Revelation. The question for us, of course, is: What shall we do with this excited anticipation that marked the first decades of the church’s existence? But first we should ask: how did Christians deal with it in the further course of church history?

A number of sects, from the Montanists to the Adventists, have pursued a completely delusive resolution by repeatedly stoking that early Christian expectation in new ways. They have proclaimed the “thousand-year reign” or the end of the world with Christ’s re-appearing as imminent—despite the biblical “about that day and hour no one knows” (Matt 24:36), often giving a precise date. Then, when at last the promised day arrived and the clock struck the

longed-for hour, they all stood waiting—but in vain. Still, that momentary disappointment was never the end for those sects because their leading prophets were always able to give reasons for the delay of Christ’s appearance: specific obstacles that supposedly prevented the return from happening as they had calculated.

The larger church took another direction from a fairly early date: as more and more generations of Christians were born and the return of Christ had still not come about, the phenomenon of “imminent expectation” dimmed, and with it the power of the corresponding New Testament texts faded from the forefront of believers’ minds. At some point apocalyptic expectation ceased to be discussed, and the texts referring to it were suppressed—at least, that was the case for the mass of churchgoers.

The Revival of Imminent Expectation

It was only in the nineteenth century that biblical scholars discovered how deeply Jesus’ preaching of the reign of God was *eschatologically* shaped and filled with urgent expectation—and so also the expectation of the early communities. Since that time theologians have been trying to deal with eschatological expectation, and some quickly found an elegant solution: they reduced the expectation of the imminent coming of the reign of God in Jesus’ preaching to a timeless *ethos*.

One example we might mention is the German Lutheran New Testament scholar Herbert Braun. In his book on Jesus he wrote: “The essential intention of Jesus’ preaching about the end is not entertaining advice about events in the near future but an unprecedented sharpening of accountability.”¹ The assertion here, then, is that when Jesus said “the reign of God is at hand” his aim was ultimately to establish a new ethical position: the reference to the reign of God is not *temporal*. What was meant, instead, was a very particular quality of our ethical behavior. A Christian’s whole thinking and doing should be directed by the sense of an ultimate responsibility for the world.

¹ Herbert Braun, *Jesus of Nazareth: The Man and His Time*, trans. Everett R. Kalin (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 41.

What should we say about that? Obviously, Christians are responsible for the world, but Herbert Braun's position simply ditches a crucial element of Jesus' proclamation of the reign of God. It makes Jesus' preaching and that of the early church *a-historical*. Living hope is turned into sharpened "accountability." There is no salvation that comes to us from the future, the promised future already in the process of fulfillment. We could also say: there is no more Advent.

However: besides theologians who reduce Jesus' expectation to mere ethics there are others who interpret it *existentially*—in terms of human existence. A particularly impressive example is that of the New Testament scholar Hans Conzelmann. In his *Interpreting the New Testament* he wrote:

Jesus is not interested in the question of the interval of time in itself. If the expectation of the kingdom is understood radically, then "enggiken" [the kingdom "has come near"] does not represent a primarily neutral statement about the length or brevity of an interval of time, but a fact that determines human existence: man has no more time left for himself. He must respond to the kingdom in the present moment. It is still not there; otherwise the opportunity for this response, for repentance, would be past. The kingdom would no longer be preached. But it is so near that a man can no longer ask: "For how long can I postpone repentance?" There is no more time. Now is the last moment for those who are addressed.²

That is exceptionally well stated. An existential theology of this kind does, in fact, reveal important elements in Jesus' preaching and practice. Above all, it makes it plausible that the delay of the imminent end did not represent too much of a problem for the early church: in its repentance, in its ever-renewed expectation of the Holy Spirit, and above all, in its sacramental life it experienced that "last moment" again and again.

On the other hand, though, the existential view has a deficiency: it considers imminent expectation from the point of view of the individual, and therefore history falls out of the picture. We need a better explanation for Jesus' imminent expectation and that of the early communities.

² Hans Conzelmann, *An Outline of the Theology of the New Testament*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 111.

The God Who Is Continually Coming

Since the creation of the world—to speak for the moment in the categories of time, although God is beyond all time—there has been no “moment” in which God does not contain and sustain the world with anticipatory action, with providence, with love, with constant coming. God is always coming. But in Jesus of Nazareth that grace and care that are and always have been coming to the world attained their goal.

Prepared by Israel’s history since Abraham, God found in Jesus the “place” to which God could ultimately and finally come. With that, the end-time has come. With that, the reign of God breaks in. Even if, all the same, it is not yet whole and without diminutions, often scarcely visible at all, that is not because God is still withholding it but because we have not yet grasped it. Blindness and unbelief predominate everywhere in the people of God and in the world. The reign of God cannot yet be full reality. What in principle is already present in Christ since his coming has not yet made its home everywhere; indeed, it often meets bitter resistance. But that is not God’s fault. It is ours, because of our lack of repentance. From God’s side everything is already present, everything is offered.

At this point, then, the existential interpretation given by Hans Conzelmann also makes sense. Its only deficiency is that it does not take into account the *historical* dimension of this salvation that is already available to us. After all, the world is not made up of individuals who repent or do not. Rather, the decisions of each individual are sustained and limited by the choices of many others to whom the individual is tied or in whose steps she or he follows—and the decisions of every individual likewise create a history, opening or closing doors to others. To put it another way: we are located within a history of salvation and anti-salvation, and it is essentially determined by whether we, as church, live as a believing community or not. In the church, in its liturgy and life, the end-time salvation of God is constantly coming to us, desiring to transform the world. Here, then, we live in eschatological expectation—in a space where God’s promises are, or can be, unceasingly fulfilled. But if we do not believe God’s promises they are not fulfilled and the ultimate arrival of the reign of God is delayed.

It Happens Every Moment

We must locate the New Testament texts of imminent expectation within this field of tension: of salvation already being fulfilled and also repeatedly delayed. Imminent expectation must then mean reckoning, in every hour, that God wants to show us new ways; expecting in every hour that God will open new doors for us; believing in every hour that God is transforming evil into good, damnation into salvation; awaiting in every hour that the impossible will be made possible. Imminent expectation means that we never say: "Later!" but always "Now!" We always have only this hour, and this hour is already the hour of Christ's coming.

One day, then, the time will come when the many hours in which Christ has already come will be gathered together into the single moment in which all the hours of our life will be collected and brought together. Then Jesus will finally come for us. That is the hour of our death. It is close to all of us. When, in death, we leave earthly time behind us, all earthly time and history will also have reached their end. Then our own hours and those of the whole sweep of world history will be gathered before Christ, the judge of the world. All that is very close to us—much closer than we think.

Thus the texts of imminent eschatological expectation in the New Testament are not something embarrassing that we should be ashamed of, nor are they something time-conditioned that we can leave behind us. No, these texts are at the center of what is Christian, and that is why they are placed at the very beginning of the new church year. They show the kind of time in which we live: the end-time that has dawned with Jesus Christ, the time when we can no longer ask: "how long can I delay my repentance?" Not a minute longer! The last hour is always here. It is especially Advent, the beginning of the church year, that aims to open our eyes to it.

How the Son of Man¹ Comes

The Advent liturgy makes no pretenses. It is hard and clear. It does not try to enchant us with soft, sweet “pre-Christmas” images. The gospels with which Advent begins in the several cycles speak of a catastrophe—the catastrophe. They talk of the darkening of the sun, the fading of the moon, the tossing of the sea. They say that the stars will fall from heaven and all the powers that hold the universe together will fail. They speak of the end of the world (Matt 24:3-31; Mark 13:3-27; Luke 21:7-28).

End of the World?

There are various ways of dealing with such texts. Some see in the images real disasters that are approaching humanity: climate catastrophes, environmental catastrophes, nuclear catastrophes, pandemics. Others say that these biblical horror scenes of the end of the world, these threatening scenarios, are part of apocalyptic, which arises out of a worldview that nearly always emerges in times of crisis. But we are not tied to a concept of the world born altogether from the experience of disaster. Still others limit the catastrophic images in these texts to internal events in the human soul.

All those positions fall short. We may not locate the Bible’s images of horror simply in the fear-induced disaster scenarios of our contemporaries, nor may we make light of them. All these images are

¹ The Aramaic words traditionally translated “Son of Man” simply mean “a human being”; see NRSV at Daniel 7:13, “one like a human being.” In the time of Second Temple Judaism it could be used in ordinary speech to mean “a person” or even “I,” but the gospel writers often understood Jesus to be referencing Daniel 7:13 when he called himself “the Son of Man” and thus to be claiming the status there described.—Tr.

very old, originating long before so-called “apocalypticism.” We must consider what they really mean to tell us.

The Fundamental World Catastrophe

These images are not about *some* disaster or other; they concern the fundamental catastrophe of the world: unbelief. From its first page to its last, the Bible tells us that unbelief is never something that happens only in the interior of the human being. It arises, certainly, in heads and hearts, but it does not stay there. It pushes outward. It makes itself at home in the world, replacing a part of it. The mistrust that is unbelief destroys the world that could be Paradise.

The immense pride of which human beings are capable, the pride and avarice that blind them and cause them to forget all fear of God: these create world catastrophes. We can almost count on it that these catastrophes will grow increasingly intense as more and more technical and digital possibilities are made available to people in the future.

That, then, is the first thing the horrific apocalyptic images in the Bible want to tell us: unbelief is the fundamental world catastrophe. It does not stay in hearts; it causes evil on earth, and when it is the unbelief of many it will become a comprehensive, global context of blindness.

The Coming of the Son of Man

All that is, of course, more the presumption than the proper statement of the gospels for the first Sunday of Advent, for their center is the coming of the Son of Man in power and glory. It then appears that the world is being shattered not only by unbelief but ultimately by the coming of the Human One, the “Son of Man” himself. What really causes the world to totter is the confrontation between unbelief and the returning Christ.

Jesus Christ, indeed, is the absolute reality, God’s own reality. When he appears, the true condition of society is uncovered. The old world, with its pride and arrogance, falls to pieces before him. It cannot stand before the truth that appears in him. It collapses, and a new world is in the making. But when will all that happen?

We may and must say: since the appearance of Jesus this new world of God has been on the way. It can already be seen with the eyes of faith, even in the midst of our old situations. Again and again the truth of the gospel shows itself, the miracle of faith happens, people allow themselves to be called into discipleship, following Jesus, and the church takes the path of repentance. And again and again the miracle of reconciliation happens.

Of course, this inbreaking of God's new world into the old one is not without peril. The coming of the reign of God has consequences. Therefore the gospel is right when it describes that coming as a shattering of the world, a cosmic drama. Letting Jesus into our world threatens uproar—not only in our insides but far beyond. After all, we don't want the upheaval by which Jesus becomes master of our lives—and the society around us most certainly does not desire such a thing. Society's models and its self-made gods are so powerful that their overthrow is like a complete collapse. Then "stars" indeed fall from heaven, and people experience profound fear.

Thus Jesus is already coming, today, in this life. Like a thief in the night, he is suddenly there. We do not know in advance when that will be. It can happen in very many ways, differently for each individual. It can be an event that shakes us, an accident, an illness, a fatality—but for the most part God speaks to us through human messengers. The "end of the world" begins for us—to speak in theological terms—at the moment when we suddenly know: I can no longer escape. Now, for me, it is no longer about this or that; it is about God's very own cause, God's reign, God's rule.

Such a moment can take one's breath away. We are profoundly shocked—which is why angels in the Bible always say "Fear not!" In precisely such a moment, when in the midst of our life we grasp that it is now about a change of ruler, we are confronted with the end of the world: namely, the *end of our old world* and the beginning of the new world that lies before us.

Fundamentally, this is good news: we can put the old, used-up thing aside and enter into God's new world, the world Jesus Christ spreads before us. That is the merciful kindness of our God: that year after year, in Advent, the door to repentance, to new beginning, to the coming of Jesus is opened anew. We only have to enter it. Those who dare to do so will realize that the church's penitential time before Christmas bestows a blessed stillness on us, something altogether

different from the supposed blessings of the Christmas frenzy that is building up around us.

Threefold Advent

Advent celebrates the “coming” of Jesus. After everything I have said, we have to understand that coming in a threefold sense. Advent reaches out to the coming of the Son of Man as judge of the world at the end of time. The gospels for the first Sunday of Advent speak about that.

But Advent also means the coming of the reign of God that has already arrived in Jesus. Jesus has already broken into our world like a thief in the night. He has broken into our society, which tries to close itself to him and yet cannot. He comes toward us, unceasingly: in the Gospel we hear, in the sacraments we receive, in the great saints given to the church again and again, and in the upheavals through which God renews the church that is God’s.

Also, the days of Advent want to prepare us for the child lying in the manger. That was the beginning of all the advents of the Son of Man, the Human One. We want to kneel before this child, forget ourselves, and give him our hearts. Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus!

Part III

In the Joy of Faith



Zacchaeus's Joy

I still remember my first trip to Israel very well. At the time I was deeply impressed by all the places whose names were already known to me from the Old Testament or from the narratives in the gospels and Acts. But now I was *there*, and that was altogether different.

At some point our little tour group arrived in Jericho. Naturally, we all had the story of Zacchaeus in mind and were picturing the scene in which he climbs a sycamore tree in order better to see Jesus, because he is short and can't see over the crowd (Luke 19:1-4). So we asked our Israeli guide to show us some sycamore trees and peppered him with questions: "What does a sycamore look like?" "Do they still grow here?" "Is it possible to climb them?" It was not just a thirst for knowledge. If I am honest, I have to say that we also wanted to test the historical reliability of the Zacchaeus story a little.

When we then found ourselves standing beneath a mighty sycamore we had our answer: when these trees are old and well developed they are extraordinarily well suited for climbing. Even close to the ground they have thick branches that one can step up on without any difficulty. I felt a little ashamed. Once again the gospel text had proved to be very precise and accurate. (I am writing this in the hope that the sycamore trees in Jericho have not been trimmed up for the sake of Holy Land tourists.)

The Little Man on the Thick Branch

Obviously, then, sitting in the shade of a sycamore tree, we read the Zacchaeus story out loud. At first glance this narrative of the chief tax collector Zacchaeus offers no difficulties. It is smooth as a well-mixed cocktail. At last, a happy, satisfying story! The little man on the thick branch—Jesus down below in the passing crowd—the way Jesus invites himself to dinner and an overnight stay—the wealthy

chief tax collector is all in with the idea—finally a religious happy ending; now, that is a *story* you could even tell in kindergarten.

Add to this that the story seems to be a superb match for the contemporary religious mind: a soft Christianity that does not like to give offense to anyone. We can describe this mentality, which massages the gospel to the point that it doesn't annoy anyone, in three principles: (1) Don't exclude anyone; everyone belongs! (2) I'm okay; you're okay; and God loves us just as we are! (3) If all of us treat one another with love and without fear, all the world's problems can be solved!

I don't want to say that those three statements are simply false. Christian truth is so strong that it shines through even such sayings. Obviously we must not exclude anyone, and it is also true that God loves us. And it is a fact that love—as the Bible describes it—is the only solution to the problems of our world. Only: how does that love come into the world, and which of us can say we have such love? And what happens to that love when it really enters the world?

We must not forget that in our story Jesus is already on his way to the capital city. From Jericho it is only *one* day's journey up to Jerusalem. And in Jerusalem Jesus, because of the way he lives the love of God, will be killed. So the story of Zacchaeus is not quite as harmless as it looks at first glance. What takes place between Jesus and the tax collector is not really a kindergarten story; it is an event played out against a dark background.

A Hated Man

After all, at that time toll collectors and tax-gatherers were instruments in the hand of the Roman occupying power and the lesser nobility dependent on Rome. At the beginning of every year they paid a considerable sum to the current governor; after that they were entitled to collect the money for themselves—under government protection, and with an added profit. They were exploiters. They shared in the guilt for the fact that many of the people suffered grinding poverty.

There is no excuse for such behavior. We can easily understand why the tax-gatherers lived in social isolation—that they were regarded as unclean because of their constant dealings with Gentiles—that nobody wanted to have anything to do with them—and that they were classed with criminals.

When Jesus speaks to such a man and says, “Zacchaeus, I must stay at your house today” (Luke 19:5), that was breaking all the rules. It was simply scandalous.

But this was not only about rules that get engrained in society. It was about God’s social order, about the life of the people of God. Didn’t Psalm 1 say that one should avoid the godless, not follow the path of sinners, and not sit in their company? With those warnings Psalm 1 gives the tone for the whole Psalter. It formulates a kind of motto for everything that is to follow: there are those among the people of God who hold fast to the Torah, the law of God, and base their whole lives on it. They keep clear of the godless. Those pious people will survive the judgment; their lives will be successful—unlike the lives of the godless, who are like straw that the wind blows away. They are like a trail that loses itself in the pathless waste. One must keep distant from them.

So how could Jesus invite himself to the home of a man like Zacchaeus, who did not live according to Torah, who trod the social justice of the people of God underfoot, who thus belonged among the sinners and the godless—how could Jesus possibly go to the home of such a man, sit at the same table with someone who behaved so indecently toward Israel?

The people of Jericho who were pressing around Jesus must have sensed the whole drama as a provocation. They could not allow it—for reasons of faith. Ultimately it was his association with sinners that cost Jesus his life. He was condemned to death by the highest court in Jerusalem as someone who led the people astray.

A Man Who Changed His Life

But there is nothing naïve about Zacchaeus’s reaction either. It is incomprehensible to him that Jesus wants to spend the night in the home of one who is socially isolated, despised, and avoided. Jesus restores his lost honor to him by taking up quarters in his house and breaking bread with him and his family.

That overwhelms Zacchaeus. It releases unbelievable strengths in him. What none of the reproaches and hatred of his fellow citizens had achieved, Jesus’ attention brings about. In Jesus, Zacchaeus encounters the reign of God and the new attitude that is part of it: the acceptance of one another and permission to sit together at one table

because God wants to bring together all the children of Abraham—the righteous and the sinners, the strong and the weak.

Zacchaeus had gone all out in exploiting his fellow citizens. Now, in his repentance, he is equally extravagant. Arriving at home, he confesses his sin to Jesus and promises to make restitution: he will give half of his possessions to the poor and will repay fourfold the excess sums he has demanded in the past. Here again we see that this story is no idyll. Nothing remains the same. A whole life has reversed its course. For Zacchaeus it will all be extremely expensive.

It is just here that we strike our own sore point. We are all for God. We are all for Jesus. And we are also for the church. But we do not want any of that to change any part of our lives. We want both: God's cause and our own security. God's cause should succeed—and everything in our lives should remain as it is.

But that simply will not do. No one can have both: God and bourgeois contentment. The great Bernard of Clairvaux once wrote: "Whoever believes in the reign of God must be restless." Zacchaeus has met Jesus, and in Jesus the living history of God with God's people—and he has allowed himself to be disturbed by that encounter. He has set himself in motion.

At first the movement only signifies that he climbs a tree. He wants a better view. He wants to know what is going on. But then his life changes. We sense what that means: exposing his life to the new thing, transforming it for the sake of God's cause.

Now comes the decisive point: our lives are sluggish; the inertia in them is astounding. How will God manage to move the heavy weight of our lives, to set the sluggish mass of our habits in motion? The secret to God's success in doing that is joy in the story God is bringing to reality in the midst of God's people. Zacchaeus is "happy" to receive Jesus (Luke 19:6). It is not difficult for him to change his life, to be ready to turn his whole existence on its head; it is no trouble. Joy grows out of the new experience Zacchaeus encounters in Jesus, and that joy is the real driving force of his repentance.

Why Christians Are Carefree

The “Sermon on the Mount” contains the following text:

. . . do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?

Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?

And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?

Therefore do not worry, saying “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.

But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.
(Matt 6:25-34)

An Anti-Stress Program?

Such talk could initially sound as if Jesus were a wellness advisor. Why be constantly worried about oneself? Why live a life that doesn’t let us sleep at night because we have a thousand worries? Why let oneself be tortured by everything that has to be done and what is still unfinished? Just don’t think about it! Or better: always do only what is important at this moment! Don’t let tomorrow’s worries weigh you down!

Besides, doesn't the *language* of this program speak to us? How precisely Jesus observed nature: the birds who collect their food, the spring flowers that bloom almost overnight on the Galilean hills after the winter rains and light up the slopes, and even the beauty and usefulness of the grass!

We are pleasantly moved and do not even notice all the problems hidden in this seemingly comforting text, but when we start to think about it those difficulties swarm out at us.

For example: Doesn't the text recommend that we live for the day and not work? Doesn't it tell us to lie down and be lazy? No, our reason tells us: that can't be what it means. After all, one of the Pauline letters says, "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat" (2 Thess 3:10). Stop working, lay your hands in your lap: that can't be what this is about!

After all, if that were the case the images Jesus uses would not fit. The birds, for example: they work all day long. How busy they are when they are building a nest! And when the chicks are crowded in that nest—how the parents fly constantly back and forth seeking worms and insects and stuffing them into the gaping beaks of their young! You don't call that work? Even the flowers, which draw their nourishment from the soil—water, nitrogen, phosphorus, minerals—their osmosis is constantly at work.

No Forethought?

So the text cannot mean that we should be lazy. Instead, what it says is that we should not worry—about food or clothing or our lives. God cares for us, just as God cares for the birds of the air and the flowers of the field. But if the text is not talking about laziness, does it mean to say that we should not think ahead and make plans? After all, at the end we read: "do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own." Does that mean we shouldn't think and plan ahead?

That would mean: nothing in the refrigerator! No buying three sensible shirts at once when they are on sale! No money in the bank accumulating interest! No provision for old age and no insurance! No annual checkups from the doctor! For pastors, maybe no preparing sermons ahead of time! Let them just speak as the Spirit moves them!

But what would the consequences be? A lot of bad sermons! No concern about a good school for the children that will prepare them for their future calling! No economic system, no industry, no science! After all, entrepreneurial initiatives, scientific projects, and political activity all require planning and careful preparation, often over many years. Then the Christians would have to leave all that to the Gentiles, as we read: “it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things” (Matt 6:32).

No, that can’t be right! Such an interpretation would be absurd. It can’t be right, given the hunger in the world, in view of the many catastrophes caused, at least in part, by lack of planning—for example, when a school collapses on the heads of a hundred children because it was not built to withstand an earthquake, or a condominium in Florida snuffs out a hundred lives because of faulty maintenance. It can’t be true in light of the many illnesses and epidemics that urgently call for medical planning and preparation!

If Jesus had meant anything like that, we Christians would have to fold our hands in our laps, stay clear of everything, and tell the sick, the poor, and the despairing: “Do not worry, saying ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ God knows that you need all these things.” That would be nothing but a shocking cynicism. The gospel words about unconcern simply cannot mean anything like that. But what *does* the text mean? What does Jesus mean to say?

Worry Calmly?

Not long ago I read the following interpretation of our text in a church bulletin:

There is a right and a wrong way to care for ourselves. We Christians live under God’s paternal kindness, and for that reason our concern has acquired a different character. Of course Jesus knows that care and planning are necessary for human existence, but the care of those who believe in the reign of God has a different character from the planning and concern of the Gentiles. For those who do not believe in God every misfortune is a catastrophe, as is every illness and, in the end, death itself. Therefore people without faith must constantly be anxious and concerned, must unceasingly try to avoid the great and small catastrophes of the world—and yet they cannot escape them. It is different for Christians. They also have concerns, but they are unperturbed

by them; they are not anxious. They can approach everything with great calm and profound trust because they know they are sustained by the care and fatherly love of God.

Would that not, at last, be a serious, reasonable suggestion for resolving the problems we have with this gospel text? A Christian also has cares, but she cares calmly, without worry, unfazed, enlightened, and without fear. Still, I find that interpretation inadequate. It is not simply false, but it ignores the crucial factor. It seems to lack any experience of what Christian community is, and therefore it cannot approach the really decisive truth.

Why Christians Are Carefree

If we want to interpret the gospel of unconcern rightly we have to notice the audience to whom these words of Jesus were first spoken. Who were they? Then it becomes entirely clear: the addressees were not just some group of Gentiles, but they were also not simply Jewish listeners, the crowd that repeatedly pressed around Jesus. No, the text in question was addressed to the little group of disciples who were on the road with Jesus, wandering without rest through Israel (see the description of the addressees in Luke 12:22). This is about the situation of disciples.

Look more closely at their way of life! They have left everything: their own houses, families, work. Jesus moves with them throughout Israel, living a restless life. They are on the road with Jesus so that the coming of the reign of God may be proclaimed throughout the land. Usually Jesus and his disciples did not know in the morning where they would lodge at the end of the day (see Luke 10:5-12). Would they find people who would receive them into their homes that evening?

Still, it was not just the disciples. There were many others who did not travel with Jesus but who heard and accepted his message about the reign of God and then returned to their homes: *localized* followers of Jesus, sympathizers, friends, those who had been healed, helpers, supporters. We may think, for example, of the man who made a well-furnished upper room available to Jesus for the celebration of his last meal (Mark 14:12-16), or of people like Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42).

So Jesus and his disciples are not alone. They can rely on a network of friends and sympathizers throughout the land. This is precisely where we should locate the lack of concern that Jesus demands of his disciples. They can be carefree because there will always be people who will take them into their homes at evening. Then there is a mutual giving and receiving: Jesus and his disciples need people who provide them with food in the evening and shelter for the night. These localized followers, in turn, need living contact with Jesus and his disciples so that their family can enter into the new thing: the quiet revolution of the reign of God.

There is thus a give and take between the two groups: the disciples no longer live for themselves and their private interests but for the people of God—and the resident followers no longer live only for themselves and their children. Thus everywhere in Israel where Jesus comes, and people receive him and his disciples, something new occurs: a new togetherness of people, a new family extending beyond the natural one.

This makes it clear that the trust of which this gospel speaks is not a magical one that says “God will make it happen.” It is by no means a romantic living-for-the-day. The carefree attitude to which Jesus refers has a very real basis: the houses of Jesus-followers throughout the land where Jesus and his disciples are received. Then round about these houses, after Jesus’ death and resurrection, the first communities arose. It was in those houses that people gathered after Easter—to pray and celebrate the Eucharist.

Genuinely Christian Communities

But what does all that mean for us? What could this text tell *us*? We had to work through the theme of freedom from care to get at what Jesus is really aiming at. As we saw, the disciples could be free from care because they were not alone; they were part of a network of Jesus-followers, of people who, together with them, were expecting the coming of the reign of God. On the other hand, the people who in the evening received the disciples into their houses learned to think with Jesus and the disciples: to place the reign of God and its needs above all else. Their first concern was now “the kingdom of God and its righteousness” (Matt 6:33).

So there arose within Israel a form of society in which many engaged in mutual aid. The goal of that community, of that supporting-one-another, was to make apostolic work possible: the messengers of the Gospel were to have the time and the strength to be able to proclaim the Gospel. They were to be put in a position to devote themselves to their task of preaching. They were to be able to live entirely for the sake of the reign of God. But those touched by the Gospel likewise placed concern for the reign of God above everything else by helping the preachers—and thereby God cared for them also. God gave them the peace promised to them by Jesus' messengers (Luke 10:5).

At precisely this point we are all affected by this Gospel. Do we want community in this sense?—as a coming-together of many who live in solidarity, as a communion of sisters and brothers who are there for each other so that commitment to the Gospel can be made possible? Do we want that? Do we want to help change our parishes in that direction, so that they become communities in which there is mutual aid, mutual encouragement, mutual consolation, ongoing common repentance—and thereby the absence of worry?

I am convinced that precisely that is the background of this Gospel of freedom from care. Without that background it would not only be incomprehensible; it would also be reckless and without conscience. But read against the background of “living communities,” in which many join their lives together and are there for one another, it is Good News.

The Reality of Persecuted Christians

I admit that for many Christians in the West all that is hard to grasp because our communities are for the most part far from such “togetherness.” We live in a security network of insurance programs—health, life, auto, and so forth—social institutions and a great variety of organizations that aid people in need. We expect effective aid especially from the state.

But what about those for whom there is no such helpful state?—or for whom there is one, but at some point, in face of a profound catastrophe, the state itself is helpless? Or what about all the Christians who do not live in a supportive state at all but in one that exploits or even persecutes them?

Are we really aware of the fact that only a small portion of all Christians live in democratic countries that uphold religious freedom and public social programs? In many, shockingly many, of the countries on earth Christians live in the most bitter misery, are excluded, robbed of their rights, persecuted, or simply eliminated. They are literally compelled to hold together, to meet secretly in houses, and to beg us who live in secure situations to help them. We never dare forget that the words of Jesus are not only for us but, ever since his resurrection, for all his followers throughout the world. Yes, Jesus really spoke about freedom from care, but that freedom presupposes the solidarity of his sympathizers and followers.

Locating the Individual Chapters in the Church Year

Most of the chapters in this book explore texts that occur in the lectionary for Sundays and feast days. The following list should be an aid to locating them within the church year, or at least in the Roman Catholic lectionary. The letters A, B, and C represent the three years in the lectionary cycle.

Year(s)	Sunday or Feast Day	Title	Page
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A–C	First Sunday in Advent	How the Son of Man Comes	102
A–C	Christmas; Christmas Eve	Christmas without a Manger or Shepherds	106
A–C	Christmas; Christmas Eve	A Longed-for Child	111
A–C	St. Stephen (December 26)	The Treasure of “Now”	71
A–C	Epiphany (January 6)	The Astrologers from the East	120
A–C	Baptism of the Lord	Why Did Jesus Let Himself Be Baptized?	124
A–C	Ash Wednesday	The Problem with Resolving to Fast	133
A–C	Good Friday	The Laments of the Crucified	141
A–C	Easter Sunday	The Easter Alleluia	144
A–C	Easter Monday	Learning from the Disciples at Emmaus	149
A–C	Christ’s Ascension	A Caricature of Christ’s Ascension	160
A–C	Pentecost Sunday	A Saga of Resistance	165
A–C	Pentecost Sunday	Who Is the Holy Spirit?	169
A–C	Pentecost Sunday	Can Anyone Experience the Spirit of God?	172
A–C	Trinity Sunday	The Triune God in the Eucharistic Prayer	181
A–C	Eve of the Assumption	Compliment and Return Compliment	49
A–C	All Saints (November 1)	There Have Never Been So Many Martyrs!	191
A–C	All Souls (November 2)	Our Service to the Dead	195
A–C	Christ the King Sunday	The “Now-ness” of the Feast of Christ the King	204

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A	Fourth Sunday of Easter	The Voice of the True Shepherd	157
A	Fifth Sunday of Easter	How the Church Grows	326
A	Ascension Day	Meaningless Existence in the Universe?	3
A	Second Sunday in Ordinary Time	The Burden and the Joy of Being Chosen	227
A	Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time [Matthew 5:1-12]	Where Is the Land?	59
A	Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time	The "Poor" in the Sermon on the Mount	64
A	Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time	How God Consoles	222
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A	Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time	Why Christians Are Carefree	215
A	Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time	Baptism as Death and Resurrection	335
A	Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time	Does Faith Produce Violence?	252
A	Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time	Aloof and Immovable?	331
A	Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time	Walking on Water	45
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B	Third Sunday in Advent	Unceasing Prayer	316
B	Fifth Sunday in Lent	Apparently Contrary to All Reason	54
B	Palm Sunday	Jesus' Fear of Death	138
B	Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time	The Leper's Plea	280
B	Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time	Sickness and Guilt	285
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B	Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time	Overflowing Riches	237
B	Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time	Elijah Wants to Die	268
B	Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time	How the Reign of God Happens	298
B	Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time	From Adam's Rib	8
B	Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time [Mark 10:29]	Where Is the Land?	59
B	Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time	The Heart of Torah	294
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C	Third Sunday of Easter	The Longest Easter Story	153
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C	Trinity Sunday	The Self-Giving God	177
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