

"In *Beauty's Vineyard*, Kimberly Vrudny has woven together profound insights from her reading of Scripture and her own rich experience that help us to see both the harsh reality of suffering and the imperative of hope in fresh and connected ways. This is a significant contribution to theological aesthetics, especially as it relates to and informs the struggle for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation."

—John W. de Gruchy
Emeritus Professor
University of Cape Town

"Like the stunning contemporary paintings that embody the themes explored, Kimberly Vrudny's book combines many distinct elements into a satisfyingly coherent whole. At once biblically centered and reverently interreligious, robustly Catholic and expansively ecumenical, grounded in a materially anguished creation and radically open to mystery, this unique approach to key themes of systematic theology significantly advances the field of theological aesthetics. This movingly personal and richly sourced work deftly demonstrates the unity of the aesthetic and the ethical. Here Beauty is the efficient marker for the indwelling of Goodness and Truth, calling us ever and lovingly to itself."

—Cecilia González-Andrieu
Associate Professor of Theology, Loyola Marymount University
Author of *Bridge to Wonder: Art as a Gospel of Beauty*

"This book is a major contribution to the work of theological aesthetics. Beautifully written, it locates beauty as the 'vineyard' of the just and loving community and integrates the idea of beauty and the role of art as crucial to the work of theology. Constructive and systematic theologians as well as theologians of art will welcome this splendidly written book."

—Wilson Yates
Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Religion, Society and the Arts
United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities

"Kimberly Vrudny's *Beauty's Vineyard* provides a much-needed theological aesthetic that is at once lucid, wide-ranging, scripturally probing, and ethically engaged. Informed in part by liberation and feminist theology, this is a passionate and compassionate work of theology that is exceptional in combining a prophetic tone with a core concern for beauty and for artistic expression. Rooted in the North American context, Vrudny's outlook is also international in perspective, profoundly shaped by her experiences and work in South Africa in particular."

—Frank Burch Brown
Frederick Doyle Kershner Professor Emeritus of Religion and the Arts
Christian Theological Seminary

Beauty's Vineyard

*A Theological Aesthetic
of Anguish and Anticipation*

Kimberly Vrudny



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*for Richard,
my South African friend,
whose gentle questions
guided me in these directions*

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Preface

Beauty's Anguish On Tenants

*Let me sing for my beloved
my love-song concerning his vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard
on a very fertile hill
He dug it and cleared it of stones,
and planted it with choice vines;
he built a watchtower in the midst of it,
and hewed out a wine vat in it;
he expected it to yield grapes,
but it yielded wild grapes. . . .*

*For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts
is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are his pleasant planting;
he expected justice,
but saw bloodshed;
righteousness,
but heard a cry! . . .
[T]he LORD of hosts is exalted by justice,
and the Holy God shows himself holy by righteousness. . . .*

*Ah, you who call evil good
and good evil,
who put darkness for light
and light for darkness,
who put bitter for sweet
and sweet for bitter!*

*Ah, you who are wise in your own eyes,
and shrewd in your own sight.
Ah, you who are heroes in drinking wine
and valiant in mixing drink,
who acquit the guilty for a bribe,
and deprive the innocent of their rights!
Therefore, as the tongue of fire devours the stubble,
and as dry grass sinks down in the flame,
so their root will become rotten,
and their blossom go up like dust;
for they have rejected the instruction of the LORD of hosts,
and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.*
(Isa 5:1-2, 7, 16, 20-24)

The prophet Isaiah drew on vineyard imagery to describe the people of Judah. God's holy nation—a people meant to look unlike other nations by producing the good fruit of justice and the choice wine of righteousness in the vineyard they had been granted—traded the former for bloodshed, according to the prophet, and the latter for a bribe. The prophet lamented his people's fate, interpreting that they were experiencing the consequences of their injustice in the stripping of their land and the nation that had been their inheritance. Their sanctuary, their vineyard, the land that had been promised to their ancestors, was now in flames because of their transgression against the stranger, the poor, the widow, the orphan. Because they called evil good and good evil, because they put darkness for light and light for darkness, because they called bitter sweet and sweet bitter, their vineyard went up in flames. Its vegetation was reduced to ash. Its inhabitants went into diaspora. The author of Isaiah 5 understood war to come to Israel with divine sanction, for the nation had failed to live as it was intended to live—with care and concern for the immigrant, the prostitute, the destitute, and the sick.

When Jesus speaks of the vineyard, he is intentionally drawing on a tradition of thought sacred within his own Jewish culture. The author of the Gospel of Matthew recounts two parables of Jesus set in a vineyard ("The Parable of the Sons" in Matt 21:28-32 and "The Parable of the Tenants" in Matt 21:33-46). Jesus shares these stories, according to Matthew, in the temple, with chief priests and elders in attendance among others who are also following him. After overturning the table of the money changers and cursing a fig tree, religious leaders ask Jesus to disclose the source of his authority. In addressing their inquiry, Jesus

asks which of two sons better pleased their father who had instructed his sons to work in the vineyard—the first, who initially refused to work in the vineyard but later changed his mind and went, or the second, who promised initially to go but never did? When those assembled around Jesus answer that the first son did the will of his father, Jesus endorses their reply by pointing out that the ones in their community who are despised, like tax collectors and prostitutes—those like the disobedient first son—are entering the kingdom of God ahead of the religious leaders who had promised to participate in the kingdom of God but are not. According to Matthew’s Gospel, they were insufficiently producing fruit for the kingdom in the form of justice and righteousness. Those whom they considered to be sinners, Jesus disclosed to them, were surpassing them in righteousness.

Jesus was situating his comments squarely within his Jewish community’s prophetic tradition. He expressed how working in the vineyard had to do with living one’s life according to the will of the Father—that is, living in relation to the good and gracious will of God as revealed by the prophets. This entailed commitment to performing works of justice and righteousness, such as securing care for the immigrant, the orphan, the widow, the leper, the poor—the ones marginalized by the social structures operating in Judah during Jesus’ day, a situation made only more complex by the reality of Roman occupation. Within such a vineyard, where allegiance to the will of God was normative, was the potential for a great yield—with grapes in plenty growing on a multitude of twisted vines, transformed over time into choice wine. The fruit of this vineyard that Jesus describes, in line with the prophets, is a community of attention to those who are most vulnerable. The fruit—the yield of the vineyard for which God, the landowner, is asking—is a community of *hesed*, of loving-kindness, a community living in right relation to God and to neighbor as outlined in the books of the Law, upheld as sacred by Jesus’ own Jewish brothers and sisters. Writing decades after Jesus’ ministry, the author of the Gospel of Matthew characterizes Jesus as insinuating that the religious leaders were like the second son, the one who promised his father he would participate in the harvest but who never followed through. Tax collectors and prostitutes, however—representing a group of people despised by the religious elites for their moral laxity—were being transformed in Jesus’ sight. Initially unrepentant, they were turning and, like the first son, were among those serving first in the vineyard, enjoying the dawning kingdom of God present among them. By living righteously through their care for one another, and by living justly by resisting harmful socioeconomic systems in place in the first century, they were entering what I am calling Beauty’s vineyard.

The early Christian community called Jesus their “Messiah” in part because he was able to imagine the possibilities of a just and righteous community, this vineyard, this kingdom of God, coming into being in the midst of them. Within the Jewish tradition, the messiah, literally an “anointed one,” was usually a royal figure, one who could make God’s vision for such a potential community visible, as such a vision is easily trampled over in our world: dismissed as hopelessly naïve, easily corrupted from the inside, impossible to sustain. Through him, Jesus’ followers also perceived this community. He was making God’s will known to them. Indeed, it was incarnate among them.

In order to comprehend what was meant by the use of the word “messiah” within the first-century Jewish community, we might consider the teachings of the rabbis. Rachel Farbiarz, a 2008 writing fellow of the American Jewish World Service, an organization dedicated to alleviating hunger, poverty, and disease among people living in the developing world, helps to enliven the contemporary imagination to the ancient Jewish understanding by drawing from a Talmudic exchange imagined between the wise third-century Rabbi Joshua ben Levi and the prophet Elijah:

Rabbi Levi beseeched the prophet to divulge when the Messiah would come. Not one to gratuitously expend his prophetic prowess, Elijah directed Rabbi Levi to inquire of the Messiah for himself. “Where is the Messiah to be found?” Rabbi Levi persisted. “At the gates of the City,” Elijah replied. “And by what sign shall I recognize him?” Rabbi Levi asked. “He is sitting among the lepers,” Elijah explained, “untying and changing their bandages one at a time: He is the one who tends to the lepers sore by sore.”

Rabbi Levi went to the city’s gates and there found a man who tenderly cleaned and wrapped the lepers’ fetid wounds. “When will you redeem us as the Messiah?” Rabbi Levi asked. “Today,” the apparent Messiah answered.

Rabbi Levi returned to Elijah informing him that the Messiah had spoken untruthfully—since he had not yet come. “What did he say to you?” Elijah pressed. “He said he would come ‘today.’” “You misunderstood,” Elijah rejoined. “He did not say that he would come ‘today.’ He instead quoted for you the verse from Psalms that instructs: The Messiah will come ‘today—if only you will listen to God’s voice.’”¹

Farbiarz interprets the “weighty implications of this story.”

1. Rachel Farbiarz, “The Jewish Response to HIV/AIDS,” in an unpublished piece she wrote for the American Jewish World Service.

The most holy work resides in the tender care for those whose affliction renders them cast out, at the margins of society, sitting at the city's gate. And the mark of the most holy man is that he changes the reviled lepers' bandages one by one, sore by sore. In doing so, he validates the shared humanity between them. He wordlessly communicates his esteem for the bandaged individual, who—like the Messiah himself—is simply and miraculously flesh created from dust, formed in God's image. Unless and until each person thusly heeds "God's voice," implies the Messiah's terse response to Rabbi Levi, the Redemption will surely remain beyond our collective reach.²

Farbiarz's reflection helps contemporary Christian readers understand the kind of community about which Jesus spoke by reference to the vineyard. Because salvation in the ancient Jewish tradition had primarily to do with the healing of the community in the here and now, even as there was development of thought in some Jewish circles by Jesus' day that included belief in a heavenly afterlife, Jesus was critical of those who claimed to have some association with God without doing that which God required—the redeeming work of God's beloved community. The ones despised for their lifestyles in the first century, tax collectors and prostitutes, among others, were producing the fruit of the vineyard so desired by its owner. They were unlike those Jesus reprimanded by use of the parable, those who claimed to work in the vineyard but had never set foot in the rows of vines producing sweet grapes. They had not set foot in the gate of the city to change bandages sore by sore, or to feed the hungry, or to care for the ones who had fallen ill. Indeed, they hid behind religious rules to defend their right to neglect those in need. It is important to emphasize that Jesus was not offering a critique of Judaism in preference for Christianity. Jesus was born a Jew, lived the life of a Jew, and died a Jew. According to the author of Matthew, however, he challenged religious leaders who were engaged in a well-intentioned attempt to pass the tradition to the next generation to abide by the spirit and not simply the letter of the law (Jer 31:31-32; Rom 2:29).

As the Gospel of Matthew unfolds, another story (also set in a vineyard) follows immediately on the heels of the "Parable of the Two Sons." In his "Parable of the Tenants," Jesus tells about how a landowner leased his vineyard to tenants and went away to live in another country. First-century landowners, especially those who could plant vineyards complete with fences, wine presses, and watchtowers, were wealthy. Clearly,

2. Ibid.

the landowner was privileged, a reality that would not have been lost on Jesus' audience. In fact, so privileged was he that he was able to send slaves to collect the produce when harvest time had come. The tenants beat, killed, and stoned the slaves who did their master's bidding. When the landowner sent more slaves, they were treated in the same way. The landowner thought that if he sent his son, they would respect him—but the tenants killed him as well, hoping nevertheless to receive the son's inheritance. Jesus asked the people assembled before him, "When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" (Matt 21:40). Those in attendance answered that the landowner would kill the tenants and lease the vineyard to others who would hand over the produce as requested at harvest time. Jesus replied, "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom" (Matt 21:43).

Interpretation of this parable requires caution. The author of the Gospel of Matthew, writing about fifty years after the crucifixion of Jesus, is representing the tension within his own Jewish community. Judaism in the first century, which was not a single entity but many different sects (among them Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, Covenanters, Essenes, and more), became further divided over the question of whether Jesus was, indeed, the long-awaited Messiah. For the author of Matthew, the Pharisees, chief priests, and elders came to represent the opponents of Jesus for their refusal to see in him the identity of the Messiah. The text is certainly functioning rhetorically here to shame the ones the author of Matthew had come to see as Jesus' opponents. The passage reflects the growing tensions that, by the author's day, were developing within the community between Jews who were followers of the ancient traditions and Jews who were followers of Jesus' interpretations of the same. It is unlikely, however, that the situation was this volatile in Jesus' own day. Rather, the text reflects the author's situation a half century later.

In the decades after Jesus' death, allegiances were being drawn in the Jewish community either to follow an interpretation of the law as proclaimed by Jesus or to follow the more ancient tradition as communicated by the high priests. Both were Jewish options until probably around the turn of the century, when definitions tightened after the destruction of the Temple, and the way of Jesus, the way of the Christ, was understood as clearly distinct from Judaism. Given the decades between the episode recounted in the text and the writing of the text itself, scholars cannot know with certainty the degree of the conflict between the religious leaders and Jesus in his own day, and whether

or not in fact Jesus shamed the leaders publicly in the way the author describes. My own experience in varying religious communities informs the opinion that Jesus' posture in solidarity with the marginalized would not have been received enthusiastically by the powerful, those whose professional lives were bound up in protecting the tradition as they had received it and handing it down to the next generation. But whatever authentic historical tensions there were between Jesus and the religious leaders within Jesus' own community, these were most likely much more pointed by the time the author put quill to papyrus. And this historical development is reflected in the text, as the author of Matthew in some places characterizes the Pharisees as opponents of and adversarial to the newly emerging community allegiant to Jesus, even as they are described in other places as inviting him in for conversation, seeming quite genuinely curious about what he is saying.³

Given the additional centuries that separate the writing of the Gospel of Matthew from a reading of it in our own day, a second cautionary word is in order. During the Christian Middle Ages, interpreters used these gospel texts to rationalize acts of brutality against Jews. When medieval exegetes read in Matthew's Gospel that the kingdom of God would be taken away from one people and given to another, they understood Jesus to be disclosing through a sacred text that God was ripping the kingdom from those who worshiped in synagogues and was handing it over to people who would worship in churches. By then, because Christians understood the kingdom as predominantly manifest in the life of the church, many Christians threatened Jews with death unless they converted to belief in Christ as their Redeemer and Lord. Medieval commentaries, as well as art decorating medieval cathedrals, show the synagogue blindfolded and the church triumphant over it. In some images, the church holds the synagogue at sword point. For many throughout medieval Europe, the Christian life was the normative standard, the only kind of life worth living, and certainly the only lifestyle they believed could be rewarded in the much-anticipated afterlife. On the basis of passages such as the parable of the tenants, Christians rationalized the idea that God was ripping the covenant from the Jews and delivering it into the hands of the Christians; Jews were not to be inheritors of the kingdom alongside Christians. As a result (at least in

3. Marilyn J. Salmon, *Preaching without Contempt: Overcoming Unintended Anti-Judaism* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009).

part) of such readings, Christians participated in the persecution of Jewish people—killing them, they reasoned, with God's endorsement.⁴

Suffice it to say that many Christians believed that this text revealed God's displeasure with the alleged unfaithfulness of the entire Jewish people. For Jews, this chapter in Matthew is a text of terror, and rightfully so—as should it be for Christians as well who carry the burden of guilt. No degree of contextualization can undo what has been done in the name of Scripture held sacred by Christians—a reality with which Christians must live, repenting again and again for the atrocities committed in the name of Christianity, and committing generation after generation to the principle: *never again*.

Despite the minefields surrounding interpretation of these passages, given centuries of poor exegesis that have contributed to the current state of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism in a world still standing condemned in light of the Shoah, there is in the parable of the vineyard a jewel worth extracting. The vineyard about which Jesus teaches is grounded in the prophetic tradition of Isaiah. It remains occupied in some measure by those who sing psalms in synagogues and churches and by singers of songs in temples other than these. But for Jesus, even more than either synagogue or church, the vineyard signifies a place of justice and righteousness, a community of peace and nonviolence, a sanctuary of hope and promise. Jesus conveys through his parable that God is taking it away from those whose wickedness had caused the grapes to wither on the vines and sour and is giving it to those who will see that life in the vineyard is restored. It is not being given to a people on the basis of their ethnicity, nor is it being given to anyone for offering consent to a number of dogmas. It is not being given to a people on the basis of a birthright, nor on the basis of a religious conversion. Rather, all people are invited to enter the vineyard by laboring for the common good in the world so that suffering can be minimized. They are asked to labor for a world where the needs of all are tended; to labor for a world where fewer make choices out of desperation; to labor for a world where more are able to contribute to the endeavors of the community, thereby liberating the liberators as well. These are the grapes that mature on the vine, the fruit of their collective labor. Their works benefit the entire community.

4. The history of Christian anti-Semitism is obviously long and complex, and this is an oversimplification for the sake of brevity. For a good starting place, see James Carroll, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews; A History* (New York: Mariner Books, 2002).

This kind of beloved community, marked by just and right relations, is what the parable discloses as desired by the God revealed in these texts, rooted in a tradition sacred to both Jews and to Christians. Christians believe that, in Christ, the covenant to the Jews was opened in such a way that all of humankind could participate. God's covenantal promises, first granted to the Jews, was broken open in Christ, no longer restricted to a few chosen ones but now extended to all. Membership was no longer on the basis of a bloodline but by faith in what Jesus was teaching—that our collective salvation is received by surrendering our wills to the will of God, a surrender only possible by grace and by following in the footsteps of those who walked this way before: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, and now Jesus. Through his simple, peaceful, and joyful existence in service to humankind and its well-being, ultimately laying down his life instead of bringing harm to another of God's beloved creatures, Christ invites us to follow him. For Christians, involvement in the creation of such a society is participation in the mystical Body of Christ. Such a society is Beauty's vineyard, as is testified in John:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. (John 15:1-8)

In a similar vein, the apostle Paul did not understand Jesus' teachings to represent God's rejection of Israel. To the contrary, Israel and its covenant with God was the root that supported additional branches. Gentiles were, through Christ, grafted onto the Jewish vine, the Jewish covenant, the Jewish community. Both Paul and Jesus, however, condemn those branches that are not bearing good fruit. Insofar as faith in God is evident in lives of *hesed*, of loving-kindness, and insofar as unbelief is evident in lives that persist in the perpetuation of injustice, Paul instructs the Gentile believers in Rome:

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, do not vaunt yourselves over the branches. If you do vaunt yourselves, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. You will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you. Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity towards those who have fallen, but God's kindness towards you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. And even those of Israel, if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree. (Rom 11:17-24)

Paul's vision is that Jews who had failed to live out their obligation to live justly, and who nevertheless renounce their faithlessness to the covenant by returning to God as demonstrated by their commitment to righteousness and to justice, are grafted back onto the vine more naturally than are Gentiles, who nonetheless are now able to become part of the vine as well.⁵ The branches bearing good fruit make the vineyard thrive and flower, producing plump grapes that are pressed into choice wine. This becomes visible when humankind functions as a community living as God intends: embracing one another, assisting one another, listening to one another, enjoying one another's company—not only in our little tribes, but as an entire human race, holistically appreciating the diversity of the human story and learning from the wisdom in one another's stories. Jesus did not specify that only people who shared his ritual practice could enter; indeed, anyone who encountered someone in need with compassion rather than contempt and scorn had already entered. Today, this means that when we look to the teachings of the Buddha, whose own spiritual journey was begun by introduction to the aged, the disabled, and the poor, we see that he too is interested in fostering this kind of being in the world. To the extent that all sacred traditions guide their faithful to this same essence that is Good, Beautiful, and True—and to works of loving-kindness that such just, compassionate, and wise teachings counsel, whether the ideals are expressed in the beauty of the *Bhagavad*

5. See also chapter 4, "Beauty's Veiling: On Sin," where I return to Paul's explication in his letter to the Romans of the redemption of both Jew and Gentile.

Gita and other texts sacred within Hindu traditions, or in the whispers of those spirits Aboriginal peoples hear as they recognize human interconnectedness too with the land—Catholic teaching affirms that all human beings are related, and in our encounter with others sharing a common humanitarian purpose, glimpses of the vineyard come into being.⁶ The vineyard represents our meeting place as a people of commitment to creation rather than to destruction, where we acknowledge and celebrate the existence of our distinct rituals, creeds, and codes that distinguish us as people of diverse religious traditions without losing sight of our common humanity, our common dignity—including first and foremost the humanity and dignity of our brothers and sisters who are struggling for survival, and of the earth on which our common existence depends. Certainly not all theological constructions are equally accurate in describing the reality to which they point, and surely all fall short of their ultimate aim, which is, finally, beyond the capacity of finite language to describe. But, regardless, the fruit of the vineyard—these works of loving-kindness that extend care and attention to the vulnerable ones in our midst—produces the peaceable kingdom no matter the faith orientation of the one participating. In this kingdom, all of creation is celebrated as abundant enough to quench our thirst in senses both physical and spiritual.⁷

The wisdom of the parable lies buried beneath the branches of a vineyard often largely neglected and all but abandoned centuries ago. Raking back the dead foliage, however, we can see signs of new life. Reminded that these passages in Matthew intentionally evoke the tradition of the prophet Isaiah who wrote a love song about God’s vineyard, the people of Judah—a people in whom God delighted and with whom God entered into covenant by the establishment of a just social order marked by justice for the poor and marginalized—the Jesus of Matthew’s Gospel is revealing that this covenant was being extended to all humankind. The blessing promised to the people of Abraham, that the chosen ones would make God known to the nations, was continuing to be fulfilled. The author of Matthew relies on the knowledge of a Jewish audience to make the connection between Isaiah’s love song and the parable of the tenants,

6. “Those who have not yet accepted the Gospel are related to the people of God in various ways.” Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), par. 16. English translations from the Second Vatican Council are taken from *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014).

7. *Ibid.* “Whatever of good or truth is found amongst them is considered by the church to be a preparation for the Gospel and given by him who enlightens all men and women that they may at length have life.”

set in the very same vineyard. In Jesus' words, they would understand the tenants to represent the people of Judah, the precious ones most beloved of God who were first invited to live in the vineyard and to live by God's ways within it. In his words, they would understand the slaves to represent those prophets who called the people to repentance when they had failed to live according to the covenants they had entered with God to enact justice for the widow, the orphan, the immigrant, the poor, the hungry, and the sick. In his words they would hear an indictment tied to a failure to live justly—by a failure to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, tend the sick, and visit the prisoner. And after still more slave-prophets were killed, as was the landowner's son, in whom is the author's memory of Christ's crucifixion, Jesus informs his listeners in a manner like the prophetic tradition before him that "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom" (Matt 21:43). Jesus' critique is against those who claim to follow God without recognizing that YHWH desires works of justice more than songs of praise. It isn't about ripping the vineyard, as it were, away from one religious group and giving it to another. It is about how those who fail to bring forward its bounty have abandoned the vineyard and how God will welcome in still others to make it flower again. The parable is about welcoming humanity into the vineyard, the kingdom of God—a kingdom once Jewish, always Jewish, and yet now also more than Jewish. In this vineyard, all of humanity is welcome, so long as humanity is compassionately engaged in the care of God's creation. It is *this* that God desires, according to the parable: a community committed to the well-being of the hungry, the weak, the downtrodden—not festivals of worship, a point too that has resonance with the prophetic tradition before Matthew, before Jesus, and even before Isaiah:

I hate, I despise your festivals,
 and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
 I will not accept them;
 And the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
 I will not look upon.
 Take away from me the noise of your songs;
 I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
 But let justice roll down like waters,
 and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:21-24)

If the Matthean recounting is accurately reflective of a historical episode, Jesus was leveling a critique that could equally be directed

against many Christians today who fill churches with songs of praise without attempting to imitate the one who inspired these songs and for whom they must ring hollow. The followers of Jesus have demonstrated throughout history an ability to become oppressors as well, failing to live according to the ways demanded by their God and Lord and enabling the vineyard once again to spoil, turning its grapes sour and mangling its vines, leaving them withered, dried into dust upon the ground. Each generation receives the invitation over again, regardless of religious creed or ethnic identification. Each person is free, ultimately, to contribute to the vineyard's harvest or to speed along its demise. But, according to Matthew, there are consequences. And, of course, we all experience the consequences of a humanity failing to abide by the ways of this vineyard God imagines. We all taste its sour fruit and drink its fermented vinegar in a world brewing fear, hatred, violence, and despair. This is the cause of our collective anguish.

The fence around the vineyard delineates a clear line between those who live within the vineyard and those who exist outside of it. Perhaps this is the meaning of Jesus' words that he comes not to unite but to divide (Matt 10:34). The fence divides the just from the unjust, the righteous from the unrighteous. Too often in Christian churches, the spiritual dimension of this fence has been emphasized to the neglect of the material, such that the fence is seen primarily to exclude those thought not to be righteous (i.e., non-Christians). But given the prophetic passages that the parable references, there are worldly economic and political dimensions to the parable as well. Inside the vineyard, there is an awareness of structural systems like sexism, classism, racism, anti-Semitism, heterosexism, and militarism, to name just a few. These systems harm everyone they touch. Yet inside the vineyard, there is a commitment to bring about just and charitable relief to those harmed by the systems, including a commitment to the transformation of the ones privileged by the systems as they stand as well as a transformation of the systems themselves. Outside of the vineyard are those who do not live in such a way—who profit off the backs of those who labor for mere pennies, if that, and who function within the myth that the systems do not need repair. Such a myth perpetuates the idea that folks need simply to work harder to become part of the consuming classes without recognizing the systems that entrap us all. Yet Jesus offers a counter word to such deception. He extends grace to all and promises that upon entrance to the vineyard, even just a little contribution is appreciated. The community contributing to the good of all humankind creates this vineyard and keeps it thriving—from the widow who contributes a mite (Mark 13:1-2) to the rich man who is expected

to give everything he has (Matt 19:21). It is not about the value of what we give but *that* we give. Every contribution is valued equally, for in the contribution itself we find our common redemption. To reference another parable, we reap what we sow (Gal 6:8).

Despite the wide expanse of those who participate in the vineyard, whether they give only a little or a lot, Jesus' grace is not a cheap grace behind which we can hide injustices that dehumanize and humiliate those whose image also bears God's own.⁸ Judgment is promised several chapters after this parable in Matthew, on the basis of whether one feeds the hungry, welcomes the stranger, clothes the naked, tends to the sick, or visits the prisoner:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. (Matt 25:31-46)

8. For a treatment of "cheap grace," see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 4 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003).

The reality is that just as there is a dimension of the kingdom present in the here and now, perceptible where people are creating this kind of community as, for example, in the Catholic Worker houses and in the St. Vincent de Paul programs in many Catholic parishes, or in many organizations caring for the created world outside of the institutions of our churches, so too is judgment recognizable already.⁹ Where this kind of community is not being created, all people are suffering to a greater degree. We are all tormented by the dysfunction of a society whose ill are not cared for properly, whose wealthy are disconnected from the world because they live in gated communities both isolating and despair inducing, whose hungry beg for food on the street. In our society, the desperate readily access drugs, alcohol, and guns, extremists unleash violence, and the masses spiritualize the teachings of ancient philosophers, exclusively postponing liberation until the afterlife, thus underscoring our powerlessness to change anything for the better and thereby assuring that nothing will change. All of this creates a living hell, putting all of us into greater jeopardy, making all of us less safe. It creates the anguish to which the subtitle of this book refers.

All of this is rectified in Beauty's vineyard, the reality to which Jesus' parable points, the reality to which we all, as human beings created in the *imago Dei*, are oriented, and the reality in which our hope lies. Beauty's vineyard, then, ought to become a spiritual anchor for Christians struggling to discern how best to live, given this context of anguish that I have described. And so this book, bearing *Beauty's Vineyard* as its title, will outline such a system as informed by theological aesthetics, a theology anchored in an understanding of beauty, with theological, christological, soteriological, pneumatological, and ecclesiological implications. Taking seriously the understanding of "beauty" as a transcendental aspect of all beings which becomes manifest in the person of Jesus the Christ, and in whose compassion, justice, and wisdom his disciples can participate through the power of grace, each chapter will sketch what Beauty's vineyard might look like by reflecting on a theological theme in conversation with a painting by a contemporary social realist. The paintings, for the most part, are filled with anguish. They will draw us onto religious ground, raising the theological questions that each chapter considers. Chapters follow the outline of a classical theological system, treating in turn such topics as theology (on the Trinity), anthropology (on *imago Dei* and sin), Christology (here emphasizing

9. Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of the Legendary Catholic Social Activist* (New York: HarperOne, 1996).

his humanity not to the exclusion of his divinity, with a focus on his parables), soteriology (on forgiveness and offering a nonviolent theory of atonement), and, after a chapter on suffering, the final word is given to pneumatology and its concomitant hope.

In chapter 1, "Beauty's Allure: On Conversion," and in conversation with a painting by Jerome Witkin, I speak of my own journey of anguish as the glass box of fundamentalism into which I had been born and raised was cracked by learning to read the Bible in a scholarly way and then ultimately shattered by traveling to Israel where I lived, for the first time, among people who did not share the same assumptions I held about the world and our role in it. Learning also from communities where oppression had been evident, first by travel to Palestine, then to South Africa, next to Thailand, and finally to Mexico, I discovered how Beauty's vineyard was coming into being in peaceful, nonviolent, and faithful expressions of resistance to structures of violence and in creative, hopeful, and imaginative communities living out a different understanding of what it means to be authentically human in our increasingly globalized, interconnected, and interdependent world. The ideas for this book took root beside the Atlantic Ocean in South Africa, where my family and I spent a sabbatical during 2009 to 2010, a period of time where I learned better how to be human by attending an Anglican church where we worshiped, in a Presbyterian community center where we tutored pastors and children, and in a Catholic house run by the Scalabrini Brothers where we prepared meals for abandoned refugee children and served meals in a soup kitchen. In all of these places, I entered more deeply into an understanding of how Christ can be found among those living in poverty. Without wanting to romanticize the situations of suffering we encountered among people who are struggling for survival in the midst of abject poverty and devastating illness, I must acknowledge that we did, without question, experience holiness in these places. Each community we encountered is participating in Beauty's vineyard, as I imagine it, each modeling in different ways what it is to be a disciple of Christ. Early drafts of all of these chapters were conceived in Africa.

In chapter 2, "Beauty's Companions: On the Good and the True," and in conversation with a painting by Mark Rothko, I propose a Trinitarian theology that navigates an understanding of reality grounded in an awareness of God's creative presence. After treating prolegomena of how we use language theologically and after examining what is at stake in committing to various theological systems, I sketch a theological aesthetic that informs each remaining chapter. While celebrating endeavors in our wisdom traditions to forward humanity's understanding

and embodiment of holiness, it is in this chapter that I retrieve Thomas Aquinas's participation metaphysics. Thomas believed that transcendental categories of being, like the good and the true, are names for God. Beauty sometimes appears in his lists of transcendental categories of being; sometimes it is absent, though I follow Umberto Eco in believing that Thomas did think of beauty as a transcendental. In something of a thought experiment, I imagine Goodness as a name for the Father, the Just Creator; Beauty as a name for the Son, the Compassionate Redeemer; and Truth as a name for the Spirit, the Wise Sustainer. Just as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are One by a divine and eternal *perichoresis*, or indwelling, of the Good, Beautiful, and True, so are these persons nevertheless distinct. The distinct but not separate Good, Beautiful, and True Persons are One in Love, and we are invited to participate in their celestial dance, even in the here and now. Love, then, sustains them in their Unity through all eternity, and through which we too become One with them. It is this Love that overflows into the creation of material existence, breaking into time and space, the superabundant expression of all of the transcendentals together. Thus, Being brings being into being out of Being, creating the universe in which we are in the process of becoming that which God intends for us to be. Beauty becomes visible in the person of Christ, hinting at what is truly beautiful: a life so devoted to principles of peace and nonviolence that one's own life might end in its refusal to harm another. In refusing to harm another, however, life and salvation might paradoxically be found, not only for the individual who hopes for an afterlife but also, more fully understood, within the context of a human community that thrives peacefully. Without denying the existence of an afterlife, I suggest that the implications for this world are paramount.

Having arrived at the creation of human beings, I will move into a treatment of theological anthropology, the study of the human person in relation to God. Issues of human dignity and human corruption, or sin, are considered in chapter 3, "Beauty's Trace: On *Imago Dei*." In this chapter, I enter into varying theological "imaginings," a term employed to refer to ways of thinking about a subject. Here, and in conversation with a painting by Samuel Bak, I trace the problematic association between human dignity, *imago Dei*, and human nature, alternatively thought to be damaged (in the Catholic imagination) or destroyed (in the Lutheran and Calvinist imaginings) by original sin. In the first part of this chapter, I treat the issue of human dignity and propose that Christians believe that all human beings are beloved creations of God and thereby possess an inviolable dignity that is not increased by the degree to which one is

sanctified, whether through baptism alone (as in the Lutheran imagination) or by cooperation with God in performance of good works (as in the Catholic imagination). Distinguishing the sanctity of one's soul from one's dignity protects those who have struggled and fallen down through life, ensuring that all, saints and sinners alike, are recognized to be beloved children of God, worthy of care by the very nature of their existence, by their very being, created as they were by a Creator who willed them into existence. Dignity therefore is grounded in one's *imago Dei*, which is the image God has in mind regarding each one of us. As "God's projects," Catholics believe we incrementally live into the image that God has in mind for us with greater and greater integrity. Through a process of sanctification, veils of participation in individual, relational, and structural sin are lifted, enabling us to participate in the perfect image that is granted to us as a gift and birthright. This image itself was never compromised by sin nor made holier by sanctification. It is, indeed, inviolable. Nevertheless, incrementally and by a sanctifying process, we increasingly embody the goodness, beauty, and truth that God has in mind for each one of us as we become who we are meant to be, and as we find deeper and deeper integrity in our being by living into God's imagination of who we really are and, in a real way, always have been.

Sin measures the distance between who we are and who we are meant to be. So in chapter 4, "Beauty's Veiling: On Sin," and in conversation with a painting by Kehinde Wiley, I outline how humankind's relationship with the Good, Beautiful, and True is damaged by individual, relational, and structural sinfulness which, collectively, most adequately accounts for the personal behaviors, broken relationships, and oppressive structures that we experience in the modern world. The chapter includes discussion of systems of jeopardy that apply to most of the social issues plaguing the world in its contemporary context, creating much of the anguish we experience as creatures who share this planet for a time.

Next, I turn to the healing of the world in a chapter on the person and mission of Jesus Christ. In chapter 5, "Beauty's Story: On Parables," and in conversation with a painting by Sefedin Stafa, I reflect theologically on the power of telling stories within the wider context of Jesus' own fondness for teaching through the sharing of parables. By treating his stories about a good Samaritan, a great feast, and a persistent widow, and by eliciting their subversive meaning in Jesus' own social context, the chapter points to the core of Jesus' mission as one of creating a holy community. This community stands in stark contrast to the ways of this

world. Jesus was not primarily concerned about our attainment of an afterlife, though he was mindful of that as well. Rather, Jesus was focused on the creation of a community dedicated to greater intentionality and justice in the here and now—and this was tied to a consummation of the kingdom “on earth, as it is in heaven” (Matt 6:10).

Jesus’ stories had political consequences, however. Religious authorities in his own community, as well as political authorities occupying his nation under the auspices of Rome, took notice of him and ultimately conspired to kill him. In chapter 6, “Beauty’s Incarnation: On Forgiveness,” and in conversation with a painting by Kukuli Velarde, I examine the salvific meaning of Jesus’ incarnation. I propose a restorative model of atonement that counters the violence implicit in classical theories of atonement. In contrast to these, I construct a model that properly situates the cross as the instrument of torture it was and, as such, an implement used by Rome that represents everything that is in opposition to the faithful, peaceful, and hopeful way Jesus lived his life, a way that is ennobled in his community of followers by the coming of the Holy Spirit. By emphasizing reconciliation between humans and God, and by thinking about forgiveness as the first step toward a restored relationship after a violation has occurred, the chapter will reimagine atonement in a way that does not implicate God the Father in the use of redemptive violence.

In chapter 7, “Beauty’s Lament: On Suffering,” and in conversation with a painting by Geoffrey Laurence, I will pause to think through implications of understanding God as Good, Beautiful, and True on classical dilemmas presented by the question of theodicy. How can the monotheistic religions defend an all-Knowing, Good, and Powerful God, given the reality of human experiences of evil and suffering? This book, in large measure, is about the anguish produced by atrocious acts of evil committed by human beings against human beings—not only those committed directly but also those committed by complicity in systems that do great harm. Since an all-Good God would want to create only an all-good creation, and since an all-Powerful God should be able to do so, how can we worship God, given the depths of suffering and evil we experience on earth? If God did not will an all-good creation, God’s perfection of Goodness is collapsed, and God must be characterized as evil to some degree. If God could not create an all-good creation, God’s perfection of Power is collapsed, and God must be characterized as impotent to some degree. If God did not know it would go badly, God’s omniscience is collapsed, and God must be characterized as incompetent to some degree. What alternatives are there?

By differentiating God's foreknowledge from terms such as predestination and predetermination, by retrieving an Augustinian reading of evil as the profound lacking of goodness, and by rethinking the meaning of omnipotence and the proper exercise of power, I propose a way for Christians to navigate through questions of theodicy. My proposal leaves intact a monotheistic worldview that acknowledges, on the one hand, truly brutal experiences we have in a world where a profound lack of goodness creates suffering and anguish. It also affirms the existence of a perfectly Good, Beautiful, and True God, on the other hand, who wields power strategically even if subversively and, yes, perfectly, opening the way to a joyful anticipation of a new world coming into being, opening the way for Beauty's vineyard, having taken root, to flourish even into its ultimate and beautiful consummation.

Recognizing that we live not only in an age of anguish but also in an age of anticipation, where we are expectant and hopeful not only for a heavenly afterlife but also for a new way of being coming into being in the here and now—in a community of peace and loving-kindness I have been calling Beauty's vineyard—in the last chapter of the book, I ponder the work of the Holy Spirit among us. In "Beauty's Imagination: On Hope," and in conversation with a drawing by Ricardo Cinalli, I pick up a theme from the previous chapters about Beauty—understood as Jesus present among us, as the one who compassionately "suffers with" us. When he was among his first followers, he promised to send an Advocate, One who would be the Spirit of Truth in the community—the One who would be with us, to help us navigate our way to this paradise of peace and loving-kindness present in the here and now, culminating finally in a holistic vision in the presence of God, a union of heaven and earth. I speak of the hope inherent in the task of creating this community of peace and loving-kindness—even when there are no reasons to believe it can come into being, even when all evidence points to the contrary, even when there is no optimism whatsoever that it can be achieved. Hope lies in the imagination that there can be a different way, and in the vision that, within such an imagination itself, the new community emerges.

The book concludes with a short epilogue, a reflection called "Beauty's Anticipation: On Workers," about another of Jesus' parables, also set in a vineyard. It is in this chapter, along with the chapter on hope, that the "anticipation" of the subtitle of *Beauty's Vineyard* finds articulation. The workers in the vineyard are those who contribute to the community of *shalom* and *hesed*, of peace and loving-kindness, whether by giving every ounce of energy they have to the community or by laboring in it

only lightly. These reflections are borne of an understanding of *ubuntu*—that our humanity is bound up in one another’s, such that what affects one affects all, and what harms one harms all. What contributes to one’s well-being contributes to the well-being of all. Again, we reap what we sow: if we focus on building a healthy community, we will all benefit; if we greedily exploit one another’s labor, we will all live in fear. Within the concept of *ubuntu* lies the promise of a new world coming into being, breathed into existence by a God who wants us to live abundantly, enjoying lives committed to integrity and to simplicity—to the way of justice and righteousness, and by a God who embraces us when the long, hard day is done.

So I begin this book with the parable of the tenants, fittingly, it seems, because it introduces the ideas disclosed throughout the book. *Beauty’s Vineyard* is written with the awareness of a conflict between varying theological imaginations at work in relation to the kingdom of God, as well as differing theological languages at work utilizing analogies and metaphors that speak to these varying realities. But explicit is one biblically and philosophically rooted imagination of the being of God as Love, a Trinity who is the essence of Goodness, Beauty, and Truth, persons distinct but not separate within the Godhead. Within this Being a material world is gestating, as it were, in God’s womb, developing through evolutionary processes its material goodness, beauty, and truth expressive of the One from whom the creation comes and to whom the creation is oriented. Within this Being, Love is actively producing, degree by degree, faithfulness and peacefulness, kindness and gentleness, hopefulness and joyfulness. Within the world, Love is producing, in other words, a blessed community of God’s beloved ones, all of humankind, who tend to Beauty’s vineyard in the many and varying ways, large and small, they are uniquely qualified as they go about living their lives. One day, Beauty’s vineyard will be fully developed, finding its union in the mind of God, where all tears will be wiped from our eyes, and in which our long journey of anguish is ended—our anticipation ultimately fulfilled. At long last, and in community, we will see Love. We will see God, face-to-face.

Throughout the years, many people have become my teachers. What I have gleaned from them is written in these pages, with a request for the reader’s patience as I continue to learn and an appeal for generosity of spirit as readers encounter ideas new to them. Sue Myers should be named first and foremost among those who read these pages carefully and provided feedback at critical stages, as should my colleagues Gerald Schlabach, Philip Rolnick, and Paul Gavrilyuk. I am grateful for their

biblical insights, sensitive eyes, and mature spiritual orientation, even while I accept responsibility for any errors that remain. Further afield, Frank Burch Brown, Rod Pattenden, Peter Kjeseth, John de Gruchy, and Bob Albers also read the manuscript and shared their thoughts. I am mindful, too, of my Basilica family, especially Leo and Paul, who in many ways official and unofficial sponsored our family, including our children, as we found our way to Catholicism. Thank you for living out the Catholic faith in joyful ways that drew us more deeply into the Body of Christ. The Center for Faculty Development at the University of St. Thomas provided me with release time from teaching to write the first draft of the book. I am grateful, too, for grants that made publication of this book possible, including support from the College of Arts and Sciences, the Theology Department, and the LuAnn Dummer Center for Women at the University of St. Thomas. I am always grateful to my husband, Joe, and my sons, Abe and Andy, for their love and support and, of course, for the gift of time to devote to research and writing. I am blessed by their encouragement. Finally, I want to name Fr. Richard Cogill, a South African priest and college friend, who has demonstrated so well the way of being human that is described in this book. My friend, I am sorry for those things that I still do not understand. I know you have many spiritual counselors; I hope very much they are for you what you have been for me. I am dedicating this book to you.



Chapter 1

Beauty's Allure On Conversion

The shards of glass and the artistry with which he had captured them flying through the air captured my eye when I first stood in an art gallery exhibiting Jerome Witkin's five-painting series, *A Jesus for Our Time*. Jimmy, the preacher in the series who, in the preceding panel, was preaching confidently in Beirut, is now, in this third panel titled "The Explosion of the Car Bomb," sheltering his face from the fragments of glass propelled by the force of a blast, its heat melting the cross before which he cowers. Looking from the previous panel, "Jimmy's Mission to Beirut (Late Afternoon)," and back again to the explosion before me, it took me some time to notice the artist's double entendre. The shards of glass may very well be the broken bits of windshield and windows from the exploding car. But more likely, they are shards from the glass box in which Jimmy had been encased as he preached, naïvely believing that his message of God's wrathful judgment and conversion to faith in Jesus Christ, the Lord and Savior, would bring peace to the Middle East. Having only months previously returned from a semester of study in Haifa, Israel, from which students were evacuated because of Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait and the determination of the United States to oust him, I too experienced the shattering of a glass box of sorts in the Middle East, just miles from Beirut. And so for reasons I could scarcely have named at the time, I resonated with the image on a profound level. This book, in some ways, is the story of my journey to

The Explosion of the Car Bomb, A Jesus for Our Time (1986–1987) by Jerome Witkin. Oil on canvas; panel 3 of 5; 88 x 79 inches. Courtesy of Jack Rutberg Fine Arts, Los Angeles.

2 *Beauty's Vineyard*

piece together again a faith system after that life-changing semester in Israel, where I first encountered, in the sense of war, at least, the anguish of the world.¹ It took me a long time, and a great deal of study, before I had erected enough of a faith system to sing genuinely, once again, songs of praise to God.

When the Psalmist sings, trusting in the presence of a God who will, ultimately, bring an end to war and to human suffering, he writes using language that evokes memories of deliverance from Egypt and of the revelation of God's name from the burning bush (Exod 3:14). "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps 46:10). The Psalmist sings, assuring hearers of God's existence—a consolation found not in frantic searching but in a quiet mindfulness. Likewise, there is in Hebrew Scripture an account of Elijah's experience of God:

And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. (1 Kgs 19:11-12, RSV)

Just as in Exodus, in which the name of God was revealed to Moses as Yahweh, the one Who Is, the great and wonderful "I Am," the Psalmist returns to the theme of existence, promising that, when we are silent, when we are intentional about quieting our innermost selves, we too will know the presence of God. We will find assurance that God *is*, and that God whispers to us still. These verses suggest that the God of glory and majesty situated in heavenly grandeur is also a God of intimacy, perceptible in simplicity, present in stillness, perceivable in silence. The belief that God expresses something of God's Being to humanity in a barely audible, still, small voice is an insight shared by wisdom traditions throughout the world. If it is truly the voice of God we hear in our contemplative posture, a way that is so necessary to replenish the wells that dry up quickly in our noisy and busy world, the biblical witness assures us that we can anticipate that the Word will prod God's people

1. Among the first articles I published as I was embarking on a career in academia was an essay about this artist and this series in particular. See Kimberly Vrudny, "Indictment of Human Cruelty: Jerome Witkin's Image of *A Jesus for Our Time*," in *ARTS: The Arts in Religious and Theological Studies* 6, no. 3 (1994): 14–19. The best book-length treatment of the artist remains Sherry Chayat, *Life Lessons: The Art of Jerome Witkin* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1994).

into engagement with the world—God’s beloved creation—and particularly with God’s beloved ones, those who are neglected and vulnerable.

An experience opened up one meaning of these passages to me in 2002. I had become pregnant for the second time and, after carrying my first child to term and giving birth naturally, I hoped and expected that all would go smoothly this round as well. I went through the first trimester with moments of nausea and overall exhaustion, and the second with its attendant joys in feeling the baby kick along with the requisite impulse to prepare the nest for our baby’s impending arrival. We were looking forward to presenting our firstborn son, Abraham, with a baby brother or sister during the summer.

One night after a prenatal care appointment early in the third trimester, however, I had a terrible dream. In my nightmare, the nurse inserted a needle into my arm to take a blood sample. When she withdrew the needle, a tornado of blood rushed from the needle’s point of entry and swirled fast and furiously around me. I could hear babies screaming over gusts of wind, babies whose images pressed into the wall of the tornado from either side, leaving behind deformed imprints in the dense, red, rubbery wall of the tornado spinning wildly around me. The imprints were visible from where I lay, still on the table in the clinic, cowering under the storm circling around me. I shook myself awake, promising that I would schedule an appointment and insist on an ultrasound which, for cost-saving purposes, were not being given regularly to patients in my clinic. When I followed through, the doctor appeased me and ordered an ultrasound, rationalizing the expense on the medical and insurance forms as necessary for reasons of “maternal anxiety.”

During the ultrasound, I could tell something was wrong as soon as the images appeared on the screen. Within moments, the technician excused herself from the room, returning some minutes later with an order for a level-three ultrasound at the perinatal center at the hospital. “Why?” my husband and I asked, alarmed in part because she would not step back over the threshold into our room. “Is there something wrong?” She disclosed that there was fluid around the baby’s heart, and apologetically explained that we would have to wait until the next day to learn more, as she was not qualified to interpret what she had seen on the screen. The next morning, after a thirty-minute ultrasound that was broadcast to a national panel of experts to diagnose the condition of the baby, we waited in the office for an opportunity to meet with the doctor. When he finally arrived, he revealed that the baby was in advanced stages of heart failure. Fluid encircled her heart and was beginning to surround her brain as well. He told us that the baby’s

condition was most definitely fatal. There was risk to my life as well, for if I attempted to carry her to term, my body would likely begin to mirror what was going on in hers, and so I too could go into heart failure. Second opinions confirmed the doctor's prognosis, and they advised us to induce labor as soon as possible. Because I was entering the third trimester, there was a chance she could survive outside of my womb, though not for long in her condition. But the action would certainly protect my life. Not wanting my husband to have to raise our firstborn son without me, we scheduled the induction.

Our daughter was stillborn eighteen hours after the induction began. I know precisely the moment she died; I felt her last shudder during labor. We named our baby Dora, a name that means "gift." We would have to wait six months for autopsy results to learn that she had Adams-Oliver Syndrome, an inherited but rare congenital disorder. Back in the hospital, however, when I closed my eyes, I saw a net being woven together, I believed, by prayers being spoken by our friends and loved ones—a net to catch us as we were falling. It was in those hours deep in the night, rocking in a chair with my tiny, warm, but dead baby bundled in blankets, that I heard the voice of God in the silence of our room and in the stillness of her half-pound mass in my arms—a baby both beautiful and precious, even if deformed and no longer breathing. In the silence, I heard a gentle voice grieving alongside me, singing a lullaby as I transferred and entrusted her care to the motherly ones who would hold her for me now in the next world, until she could be placed in my arms again, restored, I continue to hope, at the end of time.

Through it all, I most dreaded the questions of our son, Abraham. He would ask what happened, of course, which I was prepared to answer. But I knew he would wonder too *why* this happened. I didn't know what I would tell him. Our pastor visited, as did hospital chaplains. Grief counselors stopped by the room as well, dropping pamphlets about how to cope with this kind of tragedy. But there were no suggestions about how to communicate something of the depth of this loss to an inquisitive three-year-old child, now sibling to a dead baby. When I was discharged from the hospital, I asked my husband what I should say to Abe—and what he had said already. He too could offer no suggestion. When we returned home, he went into the house to greet his parents, who were watching Abraham for us. Before going into the house, I peeked around back and found him playing in his sandbox. I joined him, hugging him and holding him very, very closely for a bit. Before too long, as we rummaged through the sand, dragging dump trucks to imaginary building sites and back again, he asked the question I feared

most. Words not mine found voice: "Baby Dora was so fragile. . . . Only God was tender enough to hold her."

As a theologian, long fascinated by questions about how God's Goodness, Beauty, and Truth could be reconciled with a world where goodness, beauty, and truth are perceptible to some degree, and even profoundly so, but aware too of a world in which evil and suffering are real, I recognized that the paradoxical reality of these terms were manifest in our Baby Dora—the tiny gift who graced our lives so briefly, both beautiful and deformed, and in whom we experienced something so good yet so unjust, something precious even if absolutely still. In Dora, the gentleness of God revealed itself to me as well—an image that was not among those shared with me when I was growing up, baptized, and confirmed in the more fundamentalist-leaning denomination of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS). Being raised within this denomination, I gathered that God was a stern judge, one who saw my every misdeed, and whose righteous wrath was taken out on his Son, Jesus Christ, who was crucified, bearing in his body the beating that I was told I so very much deserved, so despicable was humankind to the core. He died for my sin so that I could have everlasting life. Having received such a gift, the greatest thanksgiving I could offer, I was taught, was to share this story with others so that more could believe in Jesus Christ, in order that they too could be spared eternal damnation. When they confessed Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, the cross would be effective for their salvation as well, I was told. Discriminating minds will recognize that there is little here of a truly grace-filled, Lutheran theology—but this is the message that I took away, nonetheless, from my first eighteen years in the LCMS church in the small town where I was raised in central Minnesota.

The next eighteen years and more were spent studying and then teaching at colleges, universities, and seminaries decidedly *not* the same in theological orientation or denomination—and with professors who opened new worlds to me, and to whom I will be forever grateful. They introduced me to conceptions of God I would embrace over time—a loving God, good, beautiful, and true; just, compassionate, and wise; creatively active and intentionally present in the world. They offered me a more complex approach to theology that ultimately transformed the infancy of my childhood faith into a more mature and nuanced system of belief, into a way of living courageously into the hope that there is more, and that in this something more is the existence of a transcendent, personified Love made immanent through the incarnation and activity of the Holy Spirit among us. They helped me to see that

what we believe informs profoundly how we live, often in ways that go unrecognized—and so it matters what we believe. Theological imagination influences how we interact with the world, with ramifications both profound and persistent.

While the fundamentalism of my upbringing was shattered in essentially two strokes, the faith that emerged in its place took years to take root and to flourish. These discoveries, constituting a conversion, of sorts, to a new way of being in the world, took place gradually, over many years of careful study. They were marked at times by sporadic breakthroughs in understanding, sometimes dramatic during encounters with people very much unlike me. Sometimes, the breakthroughs were quite unremarkable, detectable only in a speechlessness that overcame me when reading silently in my study a line from a theologian or philosopher whose insight touched me in a deep and transforming way. It was not a conversion of unbelief to faith, or a conversion from one denomination to another, although at varying moments it entailed these as well—but rather a conversion to a deeper commitment to God and to God's creation that meant a deeper acceptance and embrace of humanity in all its wonder, all its diversity, and all its brokenness.

The first blow to the image of God I acquired as a child came during my first-semester Bible class at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota, a college affiliated with the more progressive branch of Lutheranism, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). At Gustavus, I was introduced to historical-critical methods of reading the Bible, which are attentive to the vantage point of the human authors who wrestled with religious questions and ultimate meanings in their experience of the unfolding history of the ancient Near East. Acknowledging that the Scriptures were inspired but not dictated, this treatment of the Bible allowed for “both/and”—that there are divine truths to be gleaned from the wisdom of our ancestors in the faith without requiring that we understand the texts as scientific journals or historical chronicles about the origins of the world and the unfolding of the ages in a time span of ten thousand years or less. This method included analysis of the varying perspectives of the gospel writers and entailed an acceptance that they had differing agendas and audiences in mind (and sometimes a different set of facts and assumptions from which they were working) as they shared the stories of Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection from these unique vantage points. This was a radical departure from how we had understood the Bible in my denomination.

Indeed, as I dug deeper, I learned that the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod had soundly rejected this method of reading the Bible when I

was still a toddler. In 1970, the newly elected and conservative president of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, Jacob Preus, established a fact-finding committee to interview the St. Louis Seminary's faculty. The committee prepared a report regarding faculty allegiance to the inerrancy of Scripture and commitment to orthodox Lutheran doctrine as they defined it. Upon completion, this report was sent to John Tietjen, the president of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, as well as to its Board of Control.² Although the board cleared the faculty of all charges of false doctrine, the synod's convention in 1973 condemned the faculty and elected more conservative members to the Board of Control—members who later suspended Tietjen as president of Concordia Seminary. In 1974, this action led to protests by the seminary's students and faculty. The students organized a moratorium on classes, and forty-five of the fifty professors then employed declared that the charges against their president were *de facto* charges against them. The faculty interpreted this to mean that they too were suspended. The Board of Control responded that the faculty would be in breach of their contracts if they did not return to their classrooms by February 18, 1974, and that their teaching appointments would be terminated. They did not return. On February 19, 259 students voted to study with the terminated faculty at the newly formed Concordia Seminary in Exile (Seminex), in facilities provided by Eden Seminary and St. Louis University, and with accreditation temporarily provided under the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. Under the independent church body formed by these dissidents in 1976, the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC), Seminex operated until 1987, with many of its leaders acting as catalysts for merging the American Lutheran Church (ALC) and

2. To learn more about this episode in the Missouri Synod's history from the most historical distance, see Paul A. Zimmerman, *A Seminary in Crisis: The Inside Story of the Preus Fact Finding Committee* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2007). For accounts appearing in the immediate aftermath, see James E. Adams, *Preus of Missouri and the Great Lutheran Civil War* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977); Frederick W. Danker, *No Room in the Brotherhood: The Preus-Otten Purge of Missouri* (St. Louis, MO: Clayton Publishing House, 1977); and Kurt E. Marquart, *Anatomy of an Explosion: A Theological Analysis of the Missouri Synod Conflict* (Fort Wayne, IN: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1977). Further down the road, John Tietjen published his memoirs in which he treats this episode in large measure. See John Tietjen, *Memoirs in Exile: Confessional Hope and Institutional Conflict* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1990). The fallout for women is recounted in Mary Todd, *Authority Vested: A Story of Identity and Change in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).

the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) into the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). This new denomination within American Lutheranism was formed in 1988 and to this day is the largest Lutheran church body in the United States. Those who retained control of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis and who maintained their support of the synod through this fractured moment in its history, however, influenced the fundamentalist direction that the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod would take, as well as the theological imaginations of the young men who were entering the ministry and who have steered the direction of the church now in the four decades since this episode in its history.

Since I was a preschooler at the time, I only subsequently learned of the drama that had unfolded in St. Louis, preventing me and mine from learning that the Bible is, rather than a document communicated by God directly into the ears of prophets, evangelists, and epistle writers, a composite of writings prepared by many people who, over many centuries, wrestled to discern God's activity in and message to the world. Learning about the historical-critical method came, for me, as a breath of fresh air as I, like many of my classmates, was struggling to understand the claims of Christianity alongside things we were learning in our science classes. Although my denomination feared that reading the Bible in this way would destroy belief in God, it actually saved my faith from collapsing under the weight of the competing and compelling evidence supporting evolution and the emergence of life from an as-yet inexplicable explosion in space billions of years ago. Reading the Bible in this way opened my mind to the possibility of faith and reason existing harmoniously, and it allowed me entry into Christianity in an age of scientific discovery. By semester's end, I no longer shared the faith of my parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents—all of whom were heavily invested in this branch of the Lutheran Church. And there was no going back. It has created a rift that my extended family of both birth and marriage scarcely understands—and about which we have spoken precious little.

The second blow to my fundamentalism came when I studied abroad at the University of Haifa during the fall semester of my junior year. Because we did not have a lot of money when I was a child (neither of my parents attended college; though now retired, my father was a television repairman and my mother was a stay-at-home mom until I was in the fourth grade when she agreed to assist in classrooms at the elementary school nearest our house), and because I believed I would never be able to go overseas again, when my art history professor and mentor suggested strongly that I study internationally, I selected Israel.

I wanted to see the places I had read about in the New Testament, and because the program at Haifa offered courses in both art history and religion, subjects that had become my major fields of study at Gustavus, it seemed like a natural choice. So in September 1990, I was off to Haifa via New York City and Tel Aviv.

Only a handful of Christians were in attendance at the University of Haifa. Most students, including those who had come from Europe to study in the same program into which I had enrolled that semester, were Jewish by descent, even if they were not practitioners of the religion. Unlike me, they were attending the university at a fraught moment in history, as they considered making “aliya,” or “stepping up” to Israeli citizenship. In Israel, I experienced life for the first time as a religious minority and felt the sting of my status as an outsider. My non-Jewish identity was revealed accidentally, and quite publicly so, on the first day of our arrival, when we were asked to take a Hebrew placement exam within hours of deboarding the long, overnight flight from New York. When I held the quarter-inch stack of papers in my hands, unable to decipher a word of the Hebrew, appearing to me as nothing more than illegible scratches on the page, I simply walked up to the proctor and asked to be placed in the elementary class. An elderly woman, she tapped my hand and whispered sweetly, “Just do as much as you are able to, dear.” When I responded that I had done as much as I was able, given that I didn’t know a single letter of the Hebrew alphabet, I communicated unknowingly to everyone in the room that I was not Jewish, since most Jews of some commitment go to Hebrew school as children and learn, at the very least, the basics of the Hebrew language.

Studying in Haifa was an isolating experience. The Jewish Americans in the program, I came to understand over time, were attempting to escape the Christian dominance of their own country in order to experience life in a Jewish one. Classmates confronted me about the symbol of the cross, the brutality of the crusades, and the anti-Semitism in the New Testament. They were legitimate questions, but they were questions I had never considered, and to which I was ill prepared to respond. Later in the semester, the derogatory word “goy” was painted, graffiti style, over a poster announcing a tour of sites sacred to Christians. It was the goy tour—the tour for goys of sites sacred to the goyim. I was a goy who didn’t know Hebrew—someone considered unclean, I learned; someone despised.

I internalized too the tensions experienced by contemporary Israelis. Fearful of attacks at the hands of Palestinians, Israelis lived constantly under a double threat, also wary of invasions from foreign armies

surrounding the small country struggling to exist after the horrors of the Shoah, the destruction, the Holocaust—a catastrophe wrought in some measure by interpretations of teachings sacred to my tradition. At the same time, I witnessed firsthand the oppression of the Palestinians as we visited refugee camps. With the help of our Palestinian classmates and dormitory neighbors, we began to understand their struggle for freedom. We took part in mock UN sessions, attempting one week to play the role of Israelis, and the next the role of Palestinians, finally trying to broker our own peace deal. Ours too failed. On top of all of this, the political situation was tense. Saddam Hussein had invaded Kuwait earlier that year, and President Bush promised to expel him from Kuwait. The American military was readying itself for war in the Persian Gulf throughout the summer of our departure, and ultimately setting a deadline of January 15, 1991, for Iraq's withdrawal. A refusal on Iraq's part to acquiesce to demands of the United States would result in war. We were taught how to inject ourselves with antichemical agents and what to do in case of war. Our semester-long program at Haifa was scheduled through the end of January, but most of the students fled as the deadline approached. The university eventually closed temporarily when the United States launched its missiles and when Iraq retaliated by sending scud missiles into Israel, America's staunchest ally in the region. These missiles were aimed at targets in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and my own Haifa and detonated just days after I had evacuated.

In many ways, the religious delusions of my childhood exploded with those bombs during those weeks of war in the Middle East—and my academic journey to try to find meaning amid the anguish of human life was begun. I began to search for a faith that was meaningful in a world where children are turned into soldiers, many learning hatred based on differences in skin color, nationality, or religious affiliation from birth; where religion becomes another means by which to segregate ourselves, many becoming violent in adherence to their own ideologies; where men, women, and children are trafficked as slaves, many in situations of sexual servitude; where diseases like diabetes, cancer, and AIDS eat away at bodies of beloved ones, many without access to life-prolonging or life-saving medicines; where poverty and hunger deny people of their inherent dignity, many of whom could be fed given the world's abundance. These conditions were no longer merely abstractions in my mind. I had seen those affected by these situations face-to-face. And I could not turn my back on the complexities of what I had witnessed, nor could I wrap my mind around the condition of a world that produced and tolerated these realities.

In terms of my own academic pursuits, I turned ultimately to Christian doctrine upon acquiring still more experience at seminary in reading the Bible critically, struggling to understand the traditional view of God as Beauty alongside bloody atonement theories and histories of crusades against Muslims and pogroms against Jews. Because ultimately I landed a position at a Catholic university after being trained at Protestant seminaries, I was forced more than most, I think, to examine Lutheran and Catholic doctrines side by side. Over time, and in conversation with many a patient colleague, I began to enter more and more deeply into the Catholic imagination and fell in love with its intellectual tradition, its sense of sacramentality, and its social teaching. I officially broke ties with the Missouri Synod in 2010, a move I had desired for twenty years but did not make in order to maintain peace in my family. An opening to do so came after experiencing the JustFaith curriculum with my husband in 2008–2009, and then a sabbatical journey with our family to South Africa during academic year 2009–2010.

Finally, in 2011–2012, my husband and I participated in the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA) through the Basilica of St. Mary, a Catholic parish in Minneapolis near where we live, where we were received into the Catholic Church and became members of this co-Cathedral during the Easter Vigil of 2012, along with our children who were also undergoing sacramental training that year. Obviously, the Catholic Church is no panacea. I entered with eyes wide open but with joy in coming home after a long, long period in the desert. This book outlines how I have come to think about the human person and sin, evil and suffering, Christ and salvation, and community and hope, after twenty years in an exile of sorts—a period in the wilderness, written by a theologian serving the church without having a church to serve, desiring now to contribute to Catholic scholarship in the post-Vatican II era. This book attempts to explain my conversion to a way of thinking profoundly different from the manner the denomination in which I was raised taught about what it means to be a Christian. Informed both by the study of theology and the arts, especially the visual arts, and by meaningful travel to places where traumatic experiences have shaped people to think critically about power and its abuse in a world of great disparity, *Beauty's Vineyard* is my theological aesthetic of anguish and anticipation.

The ideas that take shape in this book are ideas with which I have wrestled since that glass box was shattered in college and then again with Dora's stillbirth. Immediately after her death, I was grateful for my work at the university, but I was restless as well. I looked for an opportunity to do something meaningful in the community with Abraham—a

voluntary commitment that we could do together, without putting Abraham in a toddler room somewhere while I performed a task for a nonprofit organization. I found a placement site online and learned about Open Arms of Minnesota, an organization that prepares meals for and delivers meals to people living with HIV/AIDS in the Twin Cities and thought it would be a perfect fit for us. Abraham could deliver meals with me, and we could get out of the house to do this work together a few times each month.

I fell in love with the organization the minute I walked through its doors. Open Arms, it seemed to me, represented something of an alternative universe, where people were committed to preparing tasty and healthy food so that no one who was sick in the community need also go hungry. Everyone seemed joyful despite the heaviness of the issues to which they were responding. Abraham and I became a part of the place. And I soon incorporated the organization into my work as well, collaborating with administrators at the University of St. Thomas to develop a service-learning partnership with Open Arms, beginning in 2004. Students could learn their discipline-specific coursework by conducting projects for Open Arms of Minnesota and, by their work, learn too about a public health dilemma unfolding in our own backyard. By 2006, I was traveling with Open Arms to South Africa in order to design an international service-learning course, "AIDS, Apartheid, and the Arts of Resistance," in affiliation with a community center with which Open Arms was partnering in the townships outside of Cape Town.

By engaging in this kind of work locally and globally, I was increasingly attentive to the reality that vulnerability to an HIV infection is too often predictable, not only based on the behaviors of individual people to which so much of the global health community was focused, but also on a person's relationship to various systems of jeopardy, among them sexual orientation, race, class, and gender. Wanting to disseminate what I had learned more publicly and beyond the academics more typically my audience, I developed a photography project to conduct on sabbatical and moved with my family to Cape Town during academic year 2009–2010 in order to create *30 Years / 30 Lives*, a photographic documentary project about HIV/AIDS intended to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the virus's known presence in the human community (1981–2011).

The project took me to cities in Thailand and Mexico as well, where I invited people impacted by HIV/AIDS—either directly through an infection or indirectly through the care or loss of a loved one or engagement in humanitarian response—to share their portraits and perspectives with those who would see the exhibit or its website. In addition,

my family and I volunteered at the J. L. Zwane Church and Community Center in Guguletu, tutoring children in the Rainbow After-School Program, as well as at the Scalabrini Center in Cape Town, cooking meals for abandoned refugee children at the Lawrence House. To accompany the exhibit and to place the work in a religious framework, I published theological blogs on the project's website, short reflections which are now thoroughly reworked in the book the reader is now holding.

While in South Africa, I again read Alan Paton's novel *Cry, the Beloved Country* and discovered deep resonance with the character named Arthur Jarvis, with whom readers become familiar only through memories of his father who reads Arthur's letters after his death at the hands of a robber. The letters reveal Arthur's active political resistance to racism and oppression. In one of them, Arthur writes of his desire to follow a compass that will never play false to him—a compass I have found too in a Christian appropriation of the African philosophy of *ubuntu*.

I shall devote myself, my time, my energy, my talents, to the service of [*ubuntu*]. I shall no longer ask myself if this or that is expedient, but only if it is right. I shall do this, not because I am noble or unselfish, but because life slips away, and because I need for the rest of my journey a star that will not play false to me, a compass that will not lie. I shall do this . . . because I cannot find it in me to do anything else. I am lost when I balance this against that, I am lost when I ask if this is safe, I am lost when I ask if men, white men or black men, Englishmen or Afrikaners, Gentiles or Jews, will approve. Therefore I shall try to do what is right, and to speak what is true. I do this not because I am courageous and honest, but because it is the only way to end the conflict of my deepest soul. I do it because I am no longer able to aspire to the highest with one part of myself, and to deny it with another. I do not wish to live like that, I would rather die than live like that. I understand better those who have died for their convictions, and have not thought it was wonderful or brave or noble to die. They died rather than live, that was all. Yet it would not be honest to pretend that it is solely an inverted selfishness that moves me. I am moved by something that is not my own, that moves me to do what is right, at whatever cost it may be.³

Through my work in response to HIV/AIDS both in the United States and in Africa, I have been able to connect my current path with the longer journey I have traveled since my college days. The experience

3. Alan Paton, *Cry, the Beloved Country* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), 170–71.

of witnessing many tragic situations throughout the world—by seeing Palestinian children holding rocks and sling shots, intimidated by Israeli defense forces manipulating machine guns, just as I was intimidated by soldiers who mounted the buildings surrounding Manger Square outside of the Church of the Nativity on Christmas Eve in order to watch us all night, with guns poised, ready to shoot; by sitting with bedridden men wasting away from opportunistic infections associated with AIDS in shacks built due to apartheid segregation and its aftermath in South Africa; by visiting hospitals mobilizing to provide comprehensive medical and legal care to women raped by men, some of whom were carrying a lethal virus; by sitting with and listening to survivors of human trafficking revisit the trauma they had experienced in the hope that a documentary photography project could make an impact; by interviewing leaders of the Zapatista rebellion against the exploitation of Mayan peoples in Mexico; by visiting with community health workers trying to respond to the crisis of a community in Mexico cut off from governmental assistance; by studying the practice of child soldiering in the context of Sierra Leone; by examining the practice of torture in the context of Argentina; by exploring the dynamics of fundamentalism and acts of terrorism in the context of Lebanon and the rise of al Qaeda, al Shabab, and ISIL; by observing the power of people putting feet to pavement in order to demand justice—all of these experiences have shaped my thinking and inform the theology of anguish and anticipation sketched in the pages of *Beauty's Vineyard*.

Invariably, my ideas will change over the years as I am introduced to still more authors and as I experience more of what life has in store. But, for now, this collection of chapters sketches what the broken pieces of faith began to look like once they were assembled again, especially since that eighteenth day of April in 2002, when I was touched gently by grace, by a “still small voice,” by the voice of God singing a lullaby, tugging my heartstrings ever so gently, drawing me to a different way of being in the world, converting me to a way of peace and loving-kindness, to a philosophy of nonviolent resistance to the ways of the world. Beauty continues to invite us in, drawing us all to participate in the creation of such a society, a sisterhood, a brotherhood, a kingdom, a kin-dom,⁴ that will sustain us all—Christian, Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, indigenous, and secular humanists alike—in a community of *shalom*. For such a community is, I believe, Beauty’s vineyard.

4. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, “Solidary: Love of Neighbor in the 1980s,” in *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, ed. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel (San Francisco: Harper, 1990), 31–450, here 303–5.