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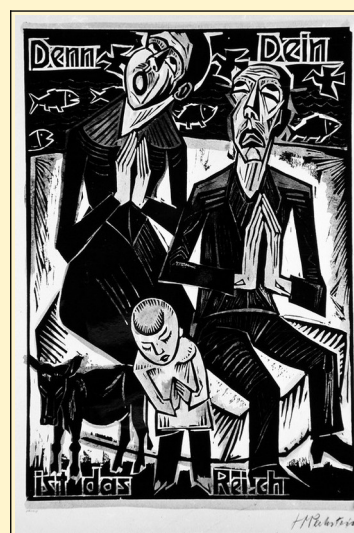
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I write today from home #1. This whole “play monk in three locations” thing is starting to feel familiar. Sometimes I despair and wonder why I play at all. But then I read the quote I put at the top of my 2020 revised Rule of Life, “for if you can bear the whole yoke of the Lord, you will be perfect, but if you can not, do what you can” (*The Didache* [second century Christian writing] VI.2). Four years after writing this, I still wonder at that word “perfect,” but I wholeheartedly embrace the call to do what I can. A few weeks back I calculated my “three locations” from May 13 to June 9: I lived seven days at the ranch, nine days here at home #1, and spent eleven days in travel, either ministry or van trips. It has been about the same in June. Making appropriate space—and sometimes it is a matter of literally making space—

for prayer, for manual labor or exercise, for study, and for ministry is an adventure, but if I welcome the adventure instead of giving up, I find God’s Spirit in the midst of it all. Oddly enough, some of my best study times have been on our van trips. Go figure.

So let me review the highlights of what Spirituality Shoppe has been doing since the last NewesLetter in February (skipping the details of ranch work and such).



As I mentioned in the previous NewsLetter, I am preparing for a big *ecumenical theology of consecrated life* project. A one-volume project rather than three. So, I have decided to publish the remainder of my historical studies in various locations and focus the big volume on the constructive theological work, referring to the historical material scattered hither and yon (yet gathering all of it on my website). I had felt like there were three historical topics I wanted to address, and I have finished two of them and started the third. In January I wrote and submitted “Communities at a Distance: Does it Work?” to the *Teleios Journal*. Printing delays have kept it back but they hope it will arrive in July. I created a YouTube version of the article and uploaded it in February. Those pieces explore what it means to nourish community when we live in a Zoom society, drawing upon the wisdom of the sixteenth-century Jesuit order and others. I was invited to respond to a talk by author Lauren Winner on resurrection and what she calls “relocated exegesis.” I did a bit of relocated Bible-reading myself, reading about resurrection at the grave of a friend who died that month. My response is titled, “Resurrection, Prayer, and Relocated Exegesis: A Response to Lauren Winner” to be published in *Resurrection in An Age of Uncertainty* (Paulist Press).

The second topic I wanted to explore was the history of folks who *as a family* consecrate lives of devotion to Christ. I published “Consecrated Families in Western Christian History: Their Presence in and Significance for



Christian Spirituality” on academia.edu in March. My article “The Home, a Monastery? Reexamining the Potential of Family Life.” was submitted to *Plough* magazine early May and is expected to appear in the July 15 online edition. The third topic that I am just starting to work on now is an examination of what “new monastics,” or Protestant folk interested in community and such, can learn from the lives of

American Catholic nuns and sisters, since the birth of the colonies, but particularly in the last seventy years. We will see where this work ends up being published.

People here in town asked me this winter to “read with them” this or that book and it ended up that many were about “church.” I summarized what I learned in a presentation to a home group on “What is Church About?” Just after Memorial day, I traveled to Abilene, Texas for a week to attend and to offer some reflections concerning the Eden Center’s “Foundations of Regenerative Culture” workshop. As I mentioned in my feedback, I think this community really has a genuine contribution for the Body of Christ. In mid-June I led a zoom gathering of instructors (from the ranch!) for the Canadian Emmaus Formation Centre instructors on fostering learning and learning communities in online education. I talked about paying attention to our topic, ourself, our students, our teaching resources, and to the presence of God.

Most recently I traveled to Ambridge, PA (near Pittsburgh) to give the teaching contribution for a retreat at Trinity Anglican Seminary on “The Call.” The retreat blended times of teaching, private prayer, corporate worship, spiritual direction, and practices to aid people who were exploring their next steps of life, especially those who might be considering a vocation to the ministry. I started preparing for this retreat back in February during our van trips, thinking that this series of sessions would require only a small revision of retreats I had led on discernment. Boy, was I surprised! Preparation for this retreat has served to *deeply* challenge and then reinforce my sense of what Christianity—and my own vocation—is all about. In the end I gave presentations on Genesis 1, the Sermon on the Mount, Acts 2, and Romans 8 as a way of facilitating an exploration of how our vocation as human beings and Christians is formed by God’s own vocation. Let me give you a little taste of where I was going with Genesis 1.



Reflections: What Does God Do for a Living? What Do People Do for a Living?

What does God do for a living? I started wondering about Genesis 1:26–28 as a “call passage”—one of those places in the Bible where God/Jesus calls someone to follow—and I got to thinking about God’s own vocation. God created the world and the animals and humans in days one through six. On day seven God took time off. But what about day eight, and day nine? What does God do for a living, like right now?

Well, yes, God sends judges, instructs prophets, and destroys enemies, but that seems a bit “as-needed.” Yes, God answers prayer, but that seems like “on-call” work. Yes, Jesus is interceding at the right hand of the Father, but is that a “full-time” job? Is that what God does: wait around and respond to our needs?

And then I began noticing some other Scriptures:

- The psalms again and again describe God’s ongoing work: “He covers the sky with clouds; he supplies the earth with rain and makes grass grow on the hills. He provides food for the cattle and for the young ravens when they call” (Psalm 147:8–9). “The lions roar for their prey and seek their food from God.” (Psalm 104:21). “O Lord, you preserve both man and beast” (Psalm 36:6).
- God confronts Job’s complaints by asking him about the divine job description: “Do you hunt the prey for the lioness and satisfy the hunger of the lions when they crouch in their dens or lie in wait in a thicket? Who provides food for the raven when its young cry out to God and wander about for lack of food? Do you know when the mountain goats give birth? Do you watch when the doe bears her fawn? Do you count the months till they bear? Do you know the time they give birth?” (Job 38:39–39:2)
- Similarly Jesus speaks of God’s care for creation in his teachings: “Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. . . . See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these” (Matthew 6:26–29). “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father” (Mt 10:29).
- Paul proclaims the character of God in his speech to the Athenians: “For in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28); and in his letter to the Colossians he speaks of Christ,

saying “For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:16–17).

- And in the end, the tree of life is “bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations” (Revelation 22:2)

In theology, these passages are discussed as part of the doctrine of “divine providence.” God not only created the universe, God also cares for it and nourishes it, sustaining the entire cosmic/global ecosystem on an ongoing basis. *This* is what God does for a living. We tend to avoid talking about divine providence these days, because it opens up those nasty questions of free-will (“Does God really control *everything*?), or the relationship of God and evil in a fallen world (“Might that fawn God watches born become the prey God later provides for the lioness?”). Yet, we shy away from divine providence at great risk. God makes a living of nurturing the life of this planet. It’s not all that God does, but it is important.

A mockingbird has settled near our house this summer, singing constantly. I think it is good for me to celebrate God’s provision for this new neighbor.

And that brings us to our next question. What do people do for a living? Of course, people do a lot of things for a living. Some install audio-visual equipment in homes and businesses. Others maintain alfalfa fields. Still others teach school, or care for young children at home. I know of people in India (and Denver) who ride bicycle taxis for a living. “What do people do for a living?” What an odd question. So let me specify. Our question here, is “What does God’s vocation have to do with ours?”



Let's start by going back to day six (Genesis 1:26–28). Even while fashioning the world, the Creator/Provider recruits partners. “Be fruitful and increase in number,” God proclaims. He had already pronounced this same blessing on the birds and sea creatures (verse 22. God repeats it in Genesis 9). But we read something more: “Fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living thing that moves on the ground.” God provides food for the ravens. Human beings are to rule over the birds of the air. The call is developed even further in the next chapter where God puts Adam in a garden and commands him to “work it and take care of it” (Genesis 2:15). Our vocation as human beings is to cooperate with God in caring for this earth: birds, fish, plants, and ultimately other human beings.

But then in chapter three, things go bad. The ground produces thorns and thistles. “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food” (Genesis 3:19). Now what? Has our vocation as co-caretakers

been revoked as a result of the Fall? Is our job now simply to harvest the earth's natural resources, believe in Jesus, and spread the good news? Let's take a look at a few scriptures:

- Psalm 8 announces, regarding human beings, “You have made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet: all flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild, the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea. . .” (Psalm 8:6–8)
- Again in Psalms: “The highest heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth he has given to humankind.” (Psalm 115:16)
- The epistle to James speaks explicitly about the fact that we continue to “tame animals.” (James 3:7 – but it seems that taming animals is much easier than taming our tongue!)
- Finally (I could go on), we discover in the final chapter of the Bible that at the end of things—the fulfillment of God's plan—human beings are not in heaven playing harps, but rather will, on earth, “reign forever and ever” (Revelation 22:5). Our vocation at the end of time is the same which we were assigned in the beginning. Co-ruling with God.

Of course, this does not eliminate our call to live a new life, to spread the gospel, or to be the church. No indeed! The Sermon on the Mount, the Great Commission, the outpouring of the Spirit, are as much a part of our call as ever. These are the *means* by which God desires to accomplish his

purpose: “to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ” (Ephesians 1:10).



Schafhirt. 15. Jahrhundert. (Holzschnitt [des Hansbuchmeisters?] aus Rodericus

As Douglas Moo and Jonathan Moo declare, “to live in a post-Genesis 3 world is not to accept blithely the fact that the land is cursed. On the one hand, it does require that we

acknowledge that our broken relationship with God has consequences for our relationships with each other and with the earth too, but on the other hand it calls us to face the challenge of participating in the restoration of all these relationships in light of the restored relationship with God that has been made possible in Christ. We are called, in other words, to join in the fight against the powers of chaos and destruction that human sin has unleashed.”

So what do humans do for a living? We could ask what really is a “living” anyway, but I will forego that one. Some of us install audio-visual equipment manufactured with earth-mined materials. Some of us maintain alfalfa fields, either nourishing or harming the soil in the process. We are teachers, homemakers, taxi bikers. In all we do—simply by the way we do it—we exercise our rule over creation. And we will do this in eternity.

God’s vocation is—in part—to provide and preserve. Our vocation is—in part—to cooperate with God in this vocation. My relationship with the soil, plants, animals, and people of this planet are affected by the food I consume, the means of transportation I use, the housing in which I dwell, the clothes on my back and much, much more. One way I am stepping into this vocation is simply to learn the names of the plants and animals at the ranch. Getting to know my neighbors begins with knowing their names. I wonder how I might further fulfill my God-given vocation by the way I live my life each day?

May the love of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be with you all.

By God’s Grace,

Evan B. Howard

Images

1) Denn Dein/ist das Reich

plate 10 from from Das Vater Unser collection; Max Pechstein (Germany, 1921)

2) Three-People reading

3) Annunciation (Francesco Denanto, (artist), Italian, active c. 1532, The Annunciation, woodcut)

4) Sixth day (Woodcut from 'Liber Chronicarum' (aka Nuremberg Chronicle) by Hartmann Schedel (1440-1514),)

5) 15th century, after woodcut, from: Rodericus Zamorensis, "Speculum Vitae Humanae", Augsburg, 1475,