

Palimpsest

A Creative Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Margaret Dimoplou", written over a horizontal line.

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Palimpsest (pal'imp sest), n. a parchment or the like from which writing has been partially erased to make room for another text

This creative piece is definitely a work in progress that will continue to be added to and polished for many years to come. I believe this is a much larger work that will become more detailed and focused, and it might be a piece that I add to throughout my lifetime. This thesis of seeking to discover more about the identity and character of Jesus Christ has been a goal of mine for many years. As I grow in maturity, both mentally and spiritually, I see how the life of Jesus Christ has dramatically impacted my actions, my thinking and my perception of my existence. I seek to find a deeper connection to the relationship of who Jesus Christ is and my purpose for living. Writing and compiling this creative composition has assisted me in drawing together physical and spiritual parallels so that I can better understand who Christ is and who I want to become.

Some of the essays, stories and poems have arisen from class work and others I have written specifically for this piece. The two non-creative pieces on Arianism and the life of Polycarp were written for a theology class, but because of their pertinence to the subject matter I found it reasonable to include them. Writing my honors thesis has fulfilled just as much of a personal purpose as an academic purpose, but I think that this is how it should be.

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INTRODUCTION

Maybe these pieces won't touch another reader who may read some of this and put it aside and possibly think it is too deep, serious or difficult to relate to. This isn't just a series of stories, poems and essays, though. It is so much more meaningful to me than that; it is the most meaningful work that I've ever created because it is so close to who I am and what I want to be and know. I wrote this thesis from deep within me and the material it contains is the substance of my heart. What I am writing is who I hope to become—to model the character of a Man who many do not recognize as great, but who all will recognize someday. I want to have a greater understanding of this Man, Jesus Christ, so I may better recognize him and realize who he is.

I've heard stories of Jesus all my life, but who is he really? Who is this individual, that changed mankind forever? Many of my friends have asked me about my faith over the course of my college career, wondering how and why my life seems different. I hope that by reading this, some questions will be answered about Jesus Christ, so that even a small glimpse of who he is and what he can do in someone's life can be known. He is so much more than a historical figure. He is God, he is Creator, he is a Promise, a Sacrifice, a King, a Hope. Not only have I written this thesis for my friends and anyone else who is questioning Jesus Christ, but I have also written it for my own spiritual growth. My wish is that by writing this, I can find out more about what was so extraordinary about this Man, who he claimed to be and what difference he can make in our world.

The Planner

"Through him, all things were made . . ." John 1:3

Filial Gratitude

Jesus, you made me—
Planned me from the very beginning.
You molded me with curved fingers,
Shaping me from nothing into woven perfection
In hidden, secret places where all is black and quiet,
Sinews of visceral threads woven into epithelial tapestries,
Rushing impulses, waves of programmed stimuli
Transmitted through watery medium to activate my mind
To think of you, to conceive of you,
To understand I was made by you.

Braided vessels, pumping rhythmically,
(Beating to the song of my own image in your eye)
You twist them around, wind them behind my inner organs, warm and safe,
Cradled by casings of bone and cartilage.
Synaptic nodes sent fiery messages to awaken crimson tendons and limber joints
Made to run races and pause at your wonder,
To fall down in humble fear of who my Maker is.
Strings of dendrites, budding axions, myelin sheaths forming in my head—
Ready to be filled with pictures, formulas, postulations and ponderings.

To hands and toes you give nails of keratin,
Eyelashes, earlobes, knuckles, elbows
At the correct and precise coordinates
You attach them to me, now made ready to live
Yet already so alive.

You breathe inside me with your warmed breath
My soul, myself, that you've known so closely,
So infinitely, so intimately ever since—You Are.
You watch me grow, hovering your Spirit over me,
Graciously supervising your handiwork,
Smiling with delight at the wonder
Of your own organic chemistry.

But how much more were they, the chosen ones of Eden
Perfect, so much more flawlessly designed than I,
Made from your own pattern pieces—
A likeness of you.

Formed from the dust of paradise and rib of paragon;
To think that two beings were made in your image,
The quintessence of God,
Pleasing you in fullness, communing with you
In the cool of the day with liberty to question
With thoughtful musings of their effortless origin.

What muscles to climb mountains
And sinews to run races!
Frames of stalwart build, but graceful in stride—
To look at their hands, feet, faces and hands
And understand that this was how humanity was meant to be—
The closest it would ever be to you,
The founder, the author of what it means to be alive, to breathe.

II

Do you miss those days,
Longing to touch again the hand of a rebellious creation?
To place a divine palm below the factious chin
And turn it back to you—
To look in the eyes of your two creatures
Not pets or toys but kinship
To dislodge the flesh of the forbidden fruit
From untrusting throats that doubted your goodness
And make them who they were?

But you wait and watch the world you've made
And this people you call your Adam
For the time that is unknown to us
When we will be as you are now
And watch you crush the enemy
Under the weight of your heel.

"Can Arianism and Christianity be Compatible?"

an essay written for Early Church History class during Hilary term, Harris Manchester College, Oxford England, 1998

One of the earliest heresies of the early church was the doctrine of Arianism, originating from the mind of Arius, a priest in Alexandria. Arius was a pupil of Origen, one of the great Christian thinkers. Origen taught two separate doctrines of Christology, resulting in both orthodox and heretical thinkers claiming him as their authority. Origen taught from the orthodox point of view that Jesus was and is coeternal with God the Father, that he existed before the foundation of the world, and that the Son has always been because the Father has always been. However, Origen also taught that since the Son is the image of God the Father, he must be dependent on God the Father and therefore in subordination to him (Christie-Murray 45).

Arius followed the second teaching of his mentor, asserting that although the Son was the "eldest and highest of creatures, [and he] had a beginning, whereas God did not" (Christie-Murray 45). Arius stated that the Father alone is true God and that his purpose for creating the Son was so that he would have a companion and intermediary in creation. The Son was willed into existence to become the Logos (the Word) of God, so there was a time that the Logos did not exist. This, Arius is thought to have said, conveys the "unique existence of God" (Christie-Murray 46). Christ was created before time began, and was a perfect and divine creature. Therefore, said Arius, Christ is God because the Father allowed him to be God, but he was not God in his very essence or nature. God the Father is the true *arkhe*, or principle of all beings, and the Son, if he is a true son, was created by the Father. Arius also presented that the Son could have been capable of sin (Belloc 31-33).

Arianism asserts that Christ is God, but not in essence. Arius claimed that the Logos was as divine as possible for a creature, but still was a created being. He was made God, but was not the Preexisting One. He was not and is not omnipotent or infinite, so therefore his full deity cannot be granted to him. Arius fully believed these principles, and even spread them by means of popular music such as songs and hymns sung by sailors and journeymen (Christie-Murray 46).

Arius was consequently excommunicated from the church because of his beliefs concerning the deity and origin of God the Son, but was rehabilitated later by a local synod of bishops in Palestine and Bithynia. However, the controversy between the cities and citizens continued, from Jerusalem to Phoenicia to Rome (Christie-Murray 46-47).

The doctrine of Arianism can even be found in the creeds of the church. When comparing the Nicæan and Caesaraen creeds, there are dramatic differences in their doctrine.

Where the Nicæan creed states:

“one Lord Jesus Christ,
the *Son of God*
the only begotten of the Father,
that is, of the substance of the Father,
. . . true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one substance with the Father
through whom all things were made”

the Caesaraen creed states:

“one Lord Jesus Christ,
The Word [Logos] of God,
life from life,
the only begotten Son,
firstborn of all creatures,
begotten of the Father before all ages,
by whom all things were made”

Clearly, the Nicæan creed expresses orthodox doctrine and the Caesaraen creed expresses Arian doctrine. The word *homoousious* was used by the Nicæan creed for the phrase, “of one substance,” but individuals like Eusebius of Caesarea preferred the word “*homoiousious*,” meaning “of like substance” (Christie-Murray 47-48). These two Greek words are pivotal because they give these two creeds entirely different meanings. The first being the Logos is the same as the Father, and the second being that he is only like the Father and has been made by the Father.

The question as to the nature and origin of God the Son is essential to answer because Jesus Christ claimed to be God when he came to earth. An answer must be found to this question because if the Son is not equal in nature and substance to God the

Father, then Jesus Christ is a liar and salvation in him is meaningless. To find the answer to the question of whether or not Arianism is a heresy, we must go to the Bible and see what it says about Christ, and what Christ says about himself.

One of the most well-known and obvious passages regarding the divinity and humanity of the Son is the first chapter of the gospel of John:

In the beginning was the Word [Logos], and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.” John 1:1-3. This passage clearly states that God the Son is and was equal to God from the very beginning. He is not of like substance with God, but is of the same substance as God the Father (*homoousious*). John begins his eyewitness account of the life of Jesus Christ by prefacing that God the Son is equal to the Father and coeternal with the Father so that there would be no mistake in his identity.

John 1 also shows the role that God the Son played in creation. He was the Creator of all things, and without him, “nothing was made that has been made.” God the Son was not created to be a creator but he himself and in his own power created the world and its creatures. God the Son, the Preexisting One, did not need power allocated to him by God the Father because he was of the same substance as the Father with therefore the same capabilities as the Father.

But what happened when God the Son received his human nature? Was his deity relinquished? The answer can be found in Philippians 2:6-8:

“[Christ Jesus], Who, being in the very nature of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!”

The apostle Paul, another eyewitness of Jesus Christ, makes the divine and human nature of God the Son more understandable. First of all, Paul tells us that God the Son did not consider equality with God something to be grasped. Why would he not grasp equality with God the Father? Because he already possessed complete equality with the Father in his own nature. God the son was equal to God and existed with God the Father in the

beginning. He was not a divine creature, but possessed in himself the fullness of God the Father.

Furthermore, the Son did not relinquish any of his divine nature when he humbled himself and took on a human likeness, but added to his divine nature a human nature—one that was submissive to God the Father. This made him submissive to the Father on earth, but before his human nature was added he was in all fullness equal to the Father. However, the Son was not obligated to submit to the Father because he was still his equal. Rather, he humbled himself from the place of highest position to a place of lower position. This comes from the Greek word *kenoo*, “the emptying of oneself.” The son never lost his divinity by coming to earth, but he emptied himself of the position of authority he had with the Father before he was incarnated. Never at any point was the Son any less God than God the Father.

But what about the phrase, “in the very nature of God”? Does this mean that he was only similar to the Father? No, this phrase means, “the essential form of an entity which never alters,” meaning the Son cannot be of any substance different than that of the Father because he is in essential nature of the same substance as God the Father. Since Jesus Christ was very God of very God, he could not humble himself in his divine nature. God could not humble himself to God, so there was the requirement of the addition of a human nature so that God the Son could humble himself to God the Father.

The hypostatic union was necessary between the Father and Son so the Son could reconcile the fallen human race to God—to his own self. He willingly submitted to the Father because he took on a human nature, but he was in all ways completely equal to the Father. Logically, this is the only way that the Son could bring about God’s salvation for mankind. He had to be God because a perfect sacrifice was needed and only God is perfect. He also needed to be man since it was already established that God cannot submit to himself, let alone die to become his own sacrifice.

What is even more important than what is said about the nature of god the Son is what he said about himself. Jesus Christ told the Pharisees, “. . . If you knew me, you would know my Father also.” (John 8:19). Even more clearly, he says to the Jews,

“ . . . Before Abraham was born, I AM!” (John 8:58). This almost resulted in Christ’s stoning because of the strength of this claim to be the Preexisting One. No one had ever identified himself as I AM since God appeared to Moses in the burning bush. Just two chapters later, Jesus tells the Jews, “I and the Father are one,” another statement that cannot be interpreted differently than Jesus Christ saying that he is equal to the Father.

We must also look at these claims of the Son in the light of his purpose for coming to earth. Christ told Nicodemus, “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:17). The Son is claiming to be the one that God has sent to save the world from sin, saying “no man comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). He also claims that he is equal to and of one substance with the Father. If he is not God, who he claims to be, we cannot believe in him because he is a liar, and we therefore could not depend on him for salvation. If Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is capable of lying (as Arius said he could possibly be), it is foolish to place total trust in him to save us from eternal punishment.

We are left with only two options:

1. God the Son is coeternal with and equal to the Father as he said he is and capable of being our Savior because of his perfect and blameless sacrifice.
2. God the Son is neither coeternal with nor equal to the Father and is therefore a liar and incapable of being our Savior because he is a sinner.

In conclusion, Arianism is indeed a heresy. To believe that God the Son was created by God the Father is to say that Jesus Christ is a liar. He claimed that he and the Father are equal in all points, and his subordination resulted from the necessity of adding a human nature to his divine nature so that he could become the perfect sacrifice for our salvation. The Son was not simply an intermediary in creation, rather he was the Creator by whom all things are made. He did not need the assistance or the plan from the Father to create the world and its creatures. He designed and created the world in his own power and authority.

If we are to trust Jesus Christ for our salvation, Arianism must be considered a heresy or God the Son is a liar and a sinner and therefore no more worthy of being the propitiation for our sins than we are. God the Father would not accept an imperfect

sacrifice for sin, so our salvation hinges on this single belief of whether the Son is equal to the Father. Followers of Arianism still believed in the Son to grant them eternal life, but it is illogical to accept salvation from an imperfect sacrifice. Only if God the Son is deemed fully God and of the same substance as the Father can he be who he said he was and be the Savior of the human race.

Where did we come from and why are we here? That is probably the oldest and most asked question. There is a longing and desperation in all of us to know who we are and what our purpose is in life. We are all on a journey to find ourselves. We go to school to learn and gain knowledge, we work to earn money to support ourselves and our families, we have children so something will be left behind when we die. But is this all there is—to live and die? There must be some higher purpose for our being, our living, our existing. Ever since we were small children, we have pondered the same questions: who made me and who put me here and what am I supposed to do while I'm alive?

Just like you, I've searched for purpose in my humanity, and tried to find answers to these questions. Grade school taught me that we all came from a big explosion in the universe. High school clarified that and said that humans evolved from a one-celled paramecium and that we are becoming more civilized and complex as centuries pass. But is this what I want to believe about who I am and where I'm going? What happens when I die and what will happen to the real me? All answers aren't found in textbooks and chemical formulas. Some are just plain common sense. After 21 years of life, I still believe that I was created, designed and made by Someone who wants to have a part of my life.

Creation—an unfathomable concept but the only solution that makes sense to me. Something coming from nothing is difficult to grasp, but I know it is real. It is much easier for me to believe that I was created out of nothing by Someone, than that I was created by nothing out of nothing and have no purpose as a byproduct of cosmological combustion. I was planned by a loving Creator, and I'll go back to that same Creator when I die. He made me in his image, in his likeness. My blueprint was drawn by the God of the universe and is a model of himself.

I believe that the Bible is the truth, the word of the God who made me. In John 1:1-3, it says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him, nothing was made that has been made." This passage is saying that all things were made by the Word, Jesus Christ, and nothing in creation exists that he didn't create. I've always skipped over this part of the passage, never really understanding

what it is talking about. I've believed in creation, but I never understood that it is actually Jesus Christ who made the world and made me. Jesus, the man who was also God and came to earth, is my Creator. He possessed his own body that he created and created mine as well.

We all complain about our bodies that they are not the right shape or too pale, our noses are too big or we're too short. But how often do we stop and appreciate what a wonderful mechanism we live in? How can anyone explain the wonder of our bodies? Do any of us know and understand the complex process of digestion? Can we even begin to comprehend the transmission of electronic messages in our brain that creates our memory? What about the amazing manner in which light reflects off of images and bounces back into our retinas so we can see? When I think of how beautiful the human body is in how it functions, I feel ashamed to think of how many times I have rejected the precious gift I've been given. Jesus Christ lived in a body that was made according to the same design as mine. God lived in a body like mine, so how can I loathe my body like I do sometimes? I should be so much more thankful. Just the fact that all the processes in our bodies continue to function continuously, sometimes for over one hundred years, is miraculous. What machine can compare to the human body in its precision and consistency?

As amazing as my body is, though, there were two people who did have the perfect body. They had the perfect blueprint of God's design and were created flawlessly. I sometimes wonder how it would be to have a truly perfect body that never got old, never got tired and never was sick. Adam and Eve were truly given the fountain of youth, bodies that would never age and never die. Could they comprehend that they were made by God's hand and given life by His breath? I wish I could just see a human body in the form that God intended. Still, I am amazed by the body God has provided me with and that I am still a product of his design—a model of himself.

The Prosecutor

" . . . the law was not made for the righteous men but for lawbreakers . . ." I Timothy 1:9

EZEKIEL

To obstinate children I've been sent
With orders to administer a providential spanking.
My flint forehead, like gritty emery boards
Proves that I'm the perfect paternal figure.

Behind me is a rumbling sound
Of wings and wheels rubbing together,
Going as the Spirit moves them
To the 4 corners of the earth.

Honey flavored scrolls taste pleasant on my tongue
But give a belly ache in the morning;
Filling my mouth with unknown words
That make me detestably unpopular.
I think I lost my self-pride long ago,
For I am an experimental model of
The cruel effects of a sinful nature.

Drawing crude road maps on stone is hardly my expertise,
And don't you think they laugh at me when I play with tinker toys?
Lying on gravel for 390 days gives acute side cramps,
But I endure for an all-important object lesson.

How many bones are in the human body?
(the last time I checked, there were 209)
Pardon my inexperience,
But I'm an amateur in anatomy,
And I believe I'm the only civilian
To be appointed a five-star general.

I wade in water up to my ankles, my knees, my waist
To show you I mean business.
I hardly know what to make of visions of abandoned babies,
And I think I'm the only man who has been denied
Admittance to cry at the loss of his love.

Understand that I mean to offend you;
I do as I've been told
Because someone has to listen when the Maker
Decides to make his presence known.

Judgment is a word we don't like to think about often. It isn't comfortable to think about being punished for something we have done that is wrong. Since the beginning, man has tried to erase the line between right and wrong so that each person can create his own individual code of morality. More and more, it is difficult to discern between right and wrong and many people have stopped trying altogether. But there is still a standard of correct conduct. No matter how hard we try, we can't escape knowing that, deep inside, there is such a thing as wrong and there will be consequences to our behavior.

Ever since the beginning, man has thought that he was good enough. God gave Moses the Ten Commandments not to show man how to live, but to reveal and magnify his inability to be perfect. If every one of us could keep the Ten Commandments every day, we would be without sin. Unfortunately, none of us can say that we have never lied, coveted, stolen or put anything else before God. If we are honest with ourselves, we would say we have committed at least all of these four sins and maybe any number or all of the other six. Galatians 2:15-16 says, "We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law, no man will be justified."

Even if we keep the law, we cannot achieve godliness. Paul goes on later in Galatians 3:19, 21-25 to tell about the purpose of the law: "What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by that law. But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe. Before this faith came, we were held prisoners of the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith." Here, it says that the whole world is a captive under sin. We have become slaves to our sin. It controls us. We think that God means bondage but being independent means freedom. Actually, it's the other way

around. Doing wrong is fun, but it begins to control our actions. I've found that sin is addictive. The more I gossip, the easier it comes to me. If I get in a habit of lying, I have to lie to cover up previous lies and I end up trapping myself in a false reality. People become enslaved by extramarital affairs, telling lies, cheating, gossiping and pornography, and realize only afterwards how difficult and even impossible to free themselves. The choices we make have the potential to destroy lives. We all fall short of God's standard, and that is where the law comes in. It shows us where we have messed up. There is no way that we can ever be good enough to approach God, but humans have kept trying and failing for hundreds of years.

God needed to get our attention, so he used the law. He also sent prophets like Ezekiel to show the Israelites how sinful they were. "I will make you as unyielding and hardened as they are. I will make your forehead like the hardest stone, harder than flint. Do not be afraid of them or terrified by them, though they are a rebellious house."

Ezekiel 3:8-9

In the Book of Ezekiel, God asks Ezekiel to do strange things to represent the rebellion of His people. He tells Ezekiel to eat a scroll, representing God's Word, and to be a prophet to the Israelites. Ezekiel has to lie on the ground for 390 days and be tied with ropes, representing the sin of the Israelites when Jerusalem was besieged (Ezekiel 4:1-8). He then has to pretend that he is in exile by packing all his belongings and making the people watch him. God tells Ezekiel a symbolic story about Israel being like an abandoned baby on the side of the road. God picks her up and washes her, clothes her and makes her his daughter. However, she trusts in her own beauty when she grows up instead of her guardian's kindness and becomes a prostitute. God asks how she can take the gold, jewelry, clothes and food He gave her and rebel against him.

This is how God still feels about us. His children take His gifts and don't acknowledge Him, but go their own ways and make their own rules. He used prophets like Ezekiel, but man needed more than a prophet to be restored. We needed Christ, our Creator, to come down himself and be a part of the world he made. Ezekiel symbolized the rebellion of the human race, not only the Israelites. Man still has the same problem over 2,000 years later--thinking he is in charge. We continue to be rebellious, and the

law points out our sin. Christ was promised so we wouldn't have to pay, but first we need to realize how far we fall short of who God is (Romans 3:23). No matter how hard we try to do right, we still are not good enough. How can we ever measure up to God?

One of my friends gave a good analogy of this point. He compared humans trying to be good enough for God to trying to do the long jump across the Grand Canyon. It doesn't matter if we are an average Joe who has never practiced the long jump or if we are as trained as Carl Lewis who has set Olympic records. None of us will make it across the Grand Canyon, regardless of the amount of practice we have engaged in. We have to accept the fact that we have chosen to rebel against the God who made us. We are stubborn people, just like the people in Ezekiel's time. We have tried to jump across the Grand Canyon, but we've failed. Now we are at the bottom with a bruised ego and broken bones. We need a way out.

The Promise

"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit." Isaiah 11:1

Expectation

Little Jacob comes to see the stump every day;
Dead trees are forgotten like tarnished coffee spoons,
Darkened by tanins and steam to await being
Wrapped with rubber bands and laid in cabinets.
But he loves this old stump—
Rotten, dry, full of splinters
It will come to life, he says, if we just wait long enough.
They retort, When has a dead stump ever come to life?
In perfectly civil consternation they walk by,
To scuff their dust on his filial hopes,
But he peers, peeps, crouches
Over the ringed wood, whispering inaudible coaxings
And impatient pleadings,
Lofting above their reproachful glances—
Please grow and make them see that you're alive
Because a promise is a promise.

How much water does a tree stump drink?
About as much as a dead man.
Yet every morning he bears his watering can,
Rusted from years of iron oxidation,
His tennis shoes soggy from the sloshing water—
He's done this same routine for as long as he can remember.
Bending low he pours in sprinkling streams
The precious commodity (for it is August)
And sees a tiny sprout of green
Pushing out of the grainy sand.
With wild delight he squeals,
Clapping his small chubby hands together,
He skips around the splintered stump:
See it grows! It's coming!
And gently feels the tender shoot.
Others would assume ignore this happening,
Taking little notice of this small specimen of evidence.
Passing by they kick the wood and scorn,
What good could come from this old thing?

But Jacob smiles and tips the can
To water the leafy sprout:
It's growing, he whispers.
You're coming
I'm waiting for you.

Now Jacob comes twice a day,
Skipping gleefully every morning after breakfast
Of toast and hot milk.
His tree has grown now,
With branches laden with leaves and fruit,
Giving shade to Jacob under its thickening foliage.
Reaching to sky and bowing to earth
It grows taller, fuller—
Sending roots down to the water below
To give strength to its broadening trunk.
With a satisfied sigh, he rests against the rugged bark
I knew you'd be here if I just waited long enough.

Promises are so tantalizing. I can remember when my parents would promise us that we would go to Florida over Christmas break and I would anxiously await the day after Christmas when we would wake up at 3a.m. and begin our 24 hour car trip to a sunny beach. The anticipation of the warmth, the sticky saltiness of the ocean water and the smell of grilled burgers was almost too exciting and I would count the days until we would leave. I packed my small blue suitcase with my bluejean shorts and Detroit Tigers t-shirt, my sunglasses, Sony walkman and my purple swimsuit right on top. I was ready to go days before the actual trip, and the waiting always seemed so long and I wondered if the days could go any slower.

I can relate to little Jacob in "The Promise" in a more similar way. My mom and my sisters and I liked to have a garden in our back yard and every year my dad would till a huge square of ground and get it ready for the seeds to be planted. We'd keep seeds from the previous crop of last year's vegetables in little bags, and when spring came my sister and I would accompany my mother out to the square of moist brown earth, with trowels in hand, to plant the seeds. I would dig with the trowel to break up the soft chunks of soil and crumble them between my fingers, getting brown dirt embedded under my fingernails. Carefully, I'd trace a line in the soil and place the seeds in their bed, one by one, with equal distance between each. I liked covering them the best, putting them to sleep and wishfully bidding them strength to grow and not disappoint my anticipation.

Waiting for them to grow was the most anxious part of planting the garden. After a week, I would closely watch my rows to see any green appearing, and as little shoots popped above the ground, I'd calculate their progress every day. I'd set out to sprinkler to water the garden every day and let the cool water trickle over me as I walked along the rows. Stems and leaves would appear, and buds that turned into flowers would become plump cucumbers, juicy tomatoes and prickly zucchini. The waiting was worth it. The promise of harvest was my reward for the time that I waited. What I liked best was that I knew what to look for. I knew that the spinach was in the first row because it was marked by a stick and a card that was enclosed in the seed package. The next row was green beans, and each subsequent row was marked carefully. I knew exactly what was coming, but I didn't know when it would appear.

Another promise was given that was as old as time. It took almost two thousand years to be fulfilled, but it was worth waiting for. Like waiting for the growth of a garden or a stump, it was a long process. Just like Jacob waiting for a dead stump to grow, Jesus didn't come from the most desirable of backgrounds from the world's perspective. The Jews asked how anything good could come out of Nazareth, Jesus' hometown, and they doubted his authenticity, origin and purpose. The Promise of hope came in a different package than everyone expected. But after all the waiting, it was worth it.

The Proposal

"You did not choose me, but I chose you." John 15:16

I wear Mark's ring on my left hand. The stone is a shape of a tear drop, and it glimmers brightly when the sun shines down on it. There is a long, thin baggette on each side of the stone, and it fits my finger perfectly. I've waited for this ring, sometimes patiently and other times impatiently. There were days when I would verbalize my anticipation, hinting at it with deliberated, choice words, yet other times I would silently wonder how long it would be until I finally possessed not only the ring, but the promise. It wasn't the ring so much that I longed for and waited to see, but I was waiting to obtain something greater. The ring was only a symbol of his love and his vow that he wanted me. His word was what I was waiting for.

I had dated Mark for almost two and a half years when he proposed. It was a warm, sunny day in October and we were going to Brown County State Park. This was a place that was special to both of us—it was a tradition that we'd go every year during the fall to see the changing of the leaves, to eat at our favorite restaurant and experience the sight and smells of the quaint town of Nashville. My mind was consumed with trying to imagine the shades of color on the trees, the warmth of the sun and just being away for the day with my favorite person.

It happened in a different time and place than I expected. We had talked of marriage so often that I was anticipating the proposal at any time. I was ready. I knew that I would marry him since the day we met in Surfside Beach, South Carolina. We walked on the beach one night and started to make something in the sand as we talked. At first, we didn't know what it was, but it began to look like a man with long hair and since we were talking about music, he began to resemble Beethoven. As we molded the damp sand with our fingers and formed the contours of the head, I stole a glance at his face as he continued resolutely on our sculpture. It was while he was shaping the left leg and I was forming the right arm he told me, without looking up, that he thought he would never marry—a strange thing to tell someone that he had just met. I stared at him, his head bent down to concentrate on his work, wondering why he would tell me such a thing

and why I could meet someone so wonderful who felt he would be single. But at that moment, I knew we would be together. I don't know why.

And it happened. On a Saturday afternoon of October 4, 1997, among half-eaten sandwiches and fried chicken, he asked me to marry him. After such a long period of dating, I'd become so confident that I was right for him, that I was what he needed. But on this day, I felt so small next to him, so inadequate, so unworthy to make that promise to belong to him. It was the way he asked me that got my attention, because I never expected him to approach me in this way.

When I planned it in my mind, I sometimes saw him presenting my ring in a public place for everyone to see, and he'd ask me with a crowd of people around to be his wife—I'd gleefully shout, "Yes!" and obtain my sparkling souvenir. I saw him constructing a speech of how wonderful our relationship was and how much he admired my character. The selfish side of me envisioned how pleased I'd feel that I was such a perfect match for him and how fortunate he'd be to get me.

But my daydreams made the reality of the situation even more impacting. In the quietness of the afternoon, with no one else watching, he presented me with a card. Although his written words made me cry, I still didn't recognize this as the moment I had anticipated for so long. The card told of his love for me, but it also indicated some of his frustrations about various aspects of my personality that were carefully and humorously phrased. He didn't see me as perfect. In fact, he found me far from perfect, but he loved me enough to whisper a question that would have brought me to my knees if I had been standing. In a shy, sincere tone, he reached into his pocket and asked, "Would you let me serve you for the rest of your life as your husband?"

What? Serve me? All of a sudden, the realization of my pride had struck me down. I soon saw clearly what I had misunderstood in the whole construing of this event in my imagination. Marriage was about serving and not being served, and I had to be reminded at such a timely moment. I was immediately reminded of all the times he had already served me and sacrificed for me--how he deferred his admission to law school for a year so that we would not have to be separated, his encouragement for me to go to

England for two months of study, and the demands I had placed on his time ever since we met.

I then thought of the many harsh words I had said to him lately, my impatience with him and my bad attitudes even during the past week. All of my selfish actions came clear to me in this moment. I was shocked, overjoyed and humbled. I thought of all the qualities I wanted in a husband, even down to the smallest detail of wanting a man who could sing, and I knew that I had been given even more than I had hoped for. I felt completely humbled in his presence. I realized that I didn't deserve this man, the proposal or the gift he was giving me, but he was offering me his life and his name. I thought that this proposal would mean me giving my self over to him, but he was offering himself to me.

I felt ashamed that I had internally boasted of how worthy I was and how fortunate he'd be when I accepted. Instead of shrieking for joy, I wept out of humbleness and remorse, but overpowering gratefulness of knowing that he had chosen me, in spite of who I was, and who I still am. I didn't deserve him, but he never asked me to. I just had to accept, and it was the most difficult but remarkable moment in my life.

But this day reminded me of another day, which I cannot remember so vividly in my mind, when someone else popped the question. I was no more worthy to accept this proposal than the one in October—much less worthy, I'd say. But nevertheless, I was approached on one knee to receive a new name and a membership into a new family. The God of the universe hung His head in lowest humility, in anticipation of my acceptance. In the form of a man, the greatest marriage proposal was given for all humanity. Jesus Christ, the Creator, came to his own creation to be a servant and asked if he could wait upon us.

Bending low, he whispers quietly, "My I have you, please?" in hopes that we will say "Yes" to him. What painful and joyful irony. We often think we are so adequate in our character, that we're "a good person." It's so easy for me to congratulate myself for small deeds I do for others and think I'm good enough. But when I am faced with the humility of one who possesses true perfection, I am horrified of the pride I feel for the

insignificance of my goodness. Anything that I do that is good in my estimation is like filthy rags in his presence (Isaiah 64:6), so how could I ever be worthy of his proposal?

That's just the thing, though. I will never be worthy of Jesus' grace in my own effort, no matter how hard I try, but somehow I'm loved. I didn't choose Jesus, the Bible says, but he chose me. How could I ever reach out and find God in my simple, arrogant mind and intellect? He had to find me and ask me a question that would change my life forever.

Just like my unexpected marriage proposal, Jesus didn't come in the way we expected him to. His proposal didn't come with gold ribbons, but was initiated in a feeding trough for cattle and ended on a splintered wooden structure. It wasn't glamorous, but that very fact gave it the lasting impact. When I think of how Jesus decided to propose to me, I marvel at my ingratitude, his humility and my ignorance. He didn't approach me as I expected, but the proposal has changed how I look at life.

Mark and I are getting married in less than four months. Sometimes it seems so long from now. The days drag when I am most excited, but I know the day will come. I have my dress, the cake is ordered, and I have almost everything prepared. But am I ready for the marriage or just the wedding? I have thought about another marriage—the completion of the other proposal in my life. Will I be ready for that wedding too? There are so many deeper parallels to this event, and I hope my marriage with Mark will prepare me for the real wedding someday.

The People Person

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” John 1:4

Who was this man who was born in a stable, promised for thousands of years, sought by shepherds, followed for two years by rich kings and threatened the power of great rulers with his presence? This is an extraordinary birth. Probably no child was ever sought as diligently as Jesus. The place and origin of his birth was known so he could be found, and people came. Sometimes I wonder what the star of Bethlehem was like. When I think about it, I realize it had to be in the sky for the years that the wise men were following it to find Jesus. What did the world think of this new, flaming stellar fixture that suddenly appeared in the sky? Ever since his birth, this man was a people person. He could never be alone without being followed.

He lived an unmatched life. He wasn't afraid to tell people what he thought. Jesus told religious leaders that they were hypocrites, he put his hands on people with contagious, terminal diseases, he went for forty days without food and he told all kinds of stories that people had a hard time understanding. Imagine being in a boat with him and watching him calm a storm with words. The miracles he did astound me—feeding 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish. Simple math says that is one loaf for every thousand people, and one fish going 2,500 ways. I wonder what it would be like to be blind from birth and finally be able to see after being touched by Jesus, or being lowered into a house from the roof and then able to walk out instead of being carried. Or imagine the exposure of the Samaritan woman felt at the well, realizing, horrified, that Jesus could see through her to her heart and know all about her yet accept her at the same time.

I think that most of all I would like to know what it was like to be the woman who was about to be stoned for adultery and see Jesus writing something on the ground while all her accusers fled. She must have felt like her life was ending one second and beginning the next. This woman knew what it was like to be at the edge of death, and know the true meaning of rescue, forgiveness and restoration. What would it feel like to be touched by healing hands, rebuked by kind words and be changed?

No one left Jesus without being impacted. The rich young ruler left heartbroken because Jesus told him to sell his riches. The Samaritan woman left joyfully because

although her sin was exposed, she had the hope of forgiveness. Zaccheus left repentant and repaid what he had cheated citizens in tax collecting. Peter began as an outspoken coward but left one of the primary evangelists in the early church.

Whether Jesus is believed as the truth or a myth, it is impossible to deny that he was the most influential historical figure in history, a person who dramatically changed people. His life was extraordinary, his words were unforgettable and his effect was permanently remembered.

The Price

“ . . . the punishment that brought us peace was upon him . . . ” Isaiah 53:5

Pieta

Again, I hold you, my son
Again you lay in the arms that held you—
These arms that intended to protect you from all harm.
But alas, I could not cover you from the evil that was wrought this day.
You, the incarnation,
The intersection of flesh and God—
My tender touch of maternal sadness
Has lost its power to soothe you as it did on that first night,
With the smell of hay and angels' wings—
Do you remember?
You look so small today as you did then,
So in need of me.
Your pallid visage is worn by centuries of pain,
And who is here to wipe the blood from your forsaken brow
But I alone?
Look how it flows from your head, hands, feet and side—
The joy that once was yours is hidden.
Let me remove this thorn that pierces
To relieve you from your agony,
Your humiliation, your disgrace.
How your strength escapes you!
Rest heavy on me, my helpless babe.
I bore you once, and yet again I will in your hour of weakness
May my tears mix with yours
So that I might understand why this day was made by you—
Why the sun rose this dawn
To steal my once bright star.
How the sky darkens with your departure.
Let me partake in your grief,
Share in your sorrow
Take a breath of your pain
And quiet your heaving cries.
Forgive me for my helplessness.

Who can give a verbal response to the exquisiteness of Michelangelo's Pieta? This sculpted wonder has captured my imagination, curiosity and admiration since I was a little girl. My great aunt bought my sister and me a set of WorldBook encyclopedias when I was about eight years old, and the entries on the painters were my favorites. I come from a family of artists. I've loved drawing and painting as long as I can remember. Some of this is hereditary, but my love for art has also come from flipping through my encyclopedias, especially the M volume, and studying the photographs of Michelangelo's work. The Pieta is the only piece of art that has ever inspired a poem from me. I wrote this poem two years ago, after seeing a small picture of the Pieta in an ad in *Smithsonian* magazine. Something touches me every time I see a picture of it, so I wanted to find out what was behind the work that I most admire.

It is incredible to me that Michelangelo completed the Pieta when he was so young. I always thought that this was one of his later works because of its flawless perfection. It seems like it should be the pinnacle of an artist's creativity--the single masterpiece of an entire life of planning and preparing for its birth. However, the Pieta was actually Michelangelo's most significant work in his youth. He began sculpting it in 1498 when he was 23 years old and completed it the following year. Michelangelo was commissioned by a French cardinal to sculpt the Pieta, but unfortunately, the cardinal never saw it finished. The contract commanded that this sculpture would be the most beautiful work in marble that would exist in the city of Rome.

The sculpture was well received when it was first revealed to the crowds at St. Peter's. According to the historian Varasi, the people had a difficult time accepting the fact that Michelangelo created the Pieta, and Michelangelo stole into the church at night to carve his signature across Mary's breast. This is the only sculpture that bears his name, although it wasn't originally intended to be signed.

The detail of the Pieta was carefully constructed by the artist. The curls of Christ's beard and mustache are incised into the marble, making the hairs look as if they are ingrown. Muscles in Christ's torso and the joints of his knees and fingers are clearly defined, making his limp body appear completely relaxed. Nail holes are carved into his hands and feet, especially visible on his right hand that falls over his mother's lap and

over the intricate folds of her robe. What makes the Pieta so distinct from other alterpieces that were completed at the same time was that Michelangelo's Pieta has Mary displaying the dead Christ to the onlooker instead of showing Mary mourning over Christ. She extends her left hand as an invitation for all to come and see what has taken place. It is as if she is asking others to come to mourn with her over her son.

Mary has an intriguing appearance. If her age is calculated by speculating that she was 18 at the birth of Christ, she would be 51 at the time of his death. However, Michelangelo gives Mary a much more youthful appearance, stating that a pure virgin would keep her youth more than a married woman. At the most, Mary looks about 30 years old, but this was an intentional allowance by the artist. I sometimes wonder if he kept her youth to show a symbolic reflection on the times when she held Christ as an infant, representing a sentimental and sorrowful reminiscence of an earlier time when he depended on her assistance.

I sometimes wonder what it would be like to be Mary at that moment, to watch my son die and hold him one last time. In the poem, there is a pensive, mournful and almost questioning Mary. I don't know what she thought as she watched the life seep out of her firstborn son, the promise of hope. I want to know what she thought, though. What would Christ's mother be thinking as she watched the incarnation of the Creator yield up the life, breath and body he had given himself?

In those last intimate moments, I suppose she would have recalled in the span of a few seconds every event they had shared together. They say when someone is close to death, their life flashes before them and I wonder if Christ's life flashed before Mary. She probably recalled the night of his miraculous birth and the first time she held him remembering the tiny hands and feet and comparing them to the pierced, bleeding ones now. She wonders how she could feel the most intense joy and sadness in such a brief amount of time. Maybe she gets lost in her sorrow in these moments, but then she sees other things in her mind's eye--her son teaching grown men about God when he was only twelve, the wedding where she told him there was no more to drink and he made water into wine, and the times he reminded her of why he came. There was a reason for this day. This wasn't the end. There is hope.

This is what this sculpture means to me. Mary shows Christ to the world, possibly asking for us to mourn with her but there is peace in this face. She realizes there is more than Calvary and suffering. Yes, I am sure she did feel helpless, but the more I look at this marble statue I see submission to her Master who has gone before her. She knows he is the sacrifice and shows him as the payment so we can see that it is finished. Our lives of hopelessness can cease and become meaningful through the sorrowful event that pierces her heart.

The Provider

"For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive." I Corinthians 15:22

Jamie's Secret

I sat alone on the bench, even though there were people all around me. Everyone seemed so far away and although I probably appeared to be having fun, I really just wanted to be by myself. Being here at Woodmont Camp brought back a kaleidoscope of unpleasant memories, dominated by a sick, hollow feeling in my stomach that I recognized as the same sensation I annually experienced during the first days of summer camp in my childhood. The anxiety of unfamiliar territory and company always caused me to be detached, observant and reflective, and the fact that these emotions still presided over me was almost humiliating. I thought that college had immunized me from such recurrent happenings, but I felt myself helplessly descending into a somber stupor. Loneliness filled me, but I also knew that I was experiencing self-pity to the degree that I was past the point of enjoying it and was instead embarrassed because of my inability to control my feelings. Hunching over on my bench, I desperately wanted to disappear into the dark wood paneling of the walls and be invisible to everyone who had come on this retreat with me.

The fall had been unseasonably cold, and my multiple layers of clothing had kept my body warm except for my feet. Untying the laces of my brown hiking boots, I discovered a small hole in the left heel. Due to the darkness of the hour, I was unable to avoid stepping in the intermittent puddles in the ratty trail from my cabin to the lodge, and my foot was thoroughly saturated. The sun had gone down only half an hour earlier, but as I peered out the nearest window, I saw that it was completely dark. The floodlight above the window shone out towards the lake, attracting gray moths that slowly crept closer to the source of the glaring beam. I tapped several times on the window, causing the insects to disperse, but they quickly returned to their destination again.

Seeking to dry my soggy appendage, I abandoned my bench for an old rocking chair. It had a yellow cushion and looked much more comfortable than my wooden

bench, despite its decrepit appearance, so I positioned it directly in front of the gray, stone fireplace. Staring into the fire, I could see the shadow of myself, all long, thin and wavy, slowly fading in and out as the flames popped and gradually grew dimmer. I felt the heat from the fire move up my neck to my cheeks and forehead, making them pink and flushed and I began to feel dizzy and sleepy. My eyes focused on my shadow, moving up and down in slight syncopation with my rocking chair, and their clam, steady rhythm made me feel as though I was both dreaming and awake at the same time.

Across, the room, I saw Jamie. He had always intimidated me, probably because of his massive size. Jamie stood about six and a half feet tall and towered over everyone. the first time I saw him I thought he looked like Paul Bunyan, with his heavy, brown flannel shirt untucked over tan corduroy pants, but his pale, blue eyes were the gentle and trusting eyes of a child. Sitting in the corner, he played a hand-carved flute and attracted spectators like a snake charmer would lure slithering serpents. The audience slightly swayed back and forth in a slow rhythm, mesmerized by his monotonous, sing-songy tune. My head felt heavy as I listened, and I stared into the dancing flames in the stone fireplace. I watched the flames cast their spirit-filled shadows in his face, almost as if he had enticed them too. "Come along and play," the song rang out in my ears. "Come along and play with us." But I didn't want to play.

Missy never played baseball with us after school. Every day, the kids in my neighborhood begged her to play catcher because we were always short one person, but she would just shake her head, "no." We never understood why she was so quiet. Was it because she had nothing to say or was it that she was afraid of people? Other kids would make fun of her and say, "Cat got your tongue? Come on Missy, you sissy, what's wrong with you? Didn't your momma teach you how to talk?" I always liked her because she kept her dress clean and she had long black hair that was braided. I think I wanted to be like her, but I had too much fun getting dirty and playing baseball. We asked her to play with us every day that fall, but after a while we stopped asking. Missy and her family moved to Kansas when we were in sixth grade, and still no one had heard her speak one word out of school. We never saw her again.

Before I had even noticed that the song was finished, Jamie was standing by the edge of the bench where I used to be sitting. Just having him stand so close to me made

me feel squeamish, and I wanted to push him away and say, "Please go--can't you see that I don't want you here?" With one colossal step, he put his black boot on the bench beside me and bent down so that we were almost at eye level. I wouldn't look at him but I knew he was staring directly at me when he said, "Would you like to see something neat?" Maybe he could sense how miserable I was, and somehow I knew that he could help me, but I wasn't sure if I would let him.

"It's kind of like--a buried treasure," he almost whispered. He said he had found it that morning and he wanted to show it to someone. In a soft voice he said, "Did you know that everything praises God? I was reading in Psalms today how the heavens declare God's glory and the earth shows the works of his hands. I think I found something to prove that." Looking down at me, he asked, "So do you want to see it?" Although my queasy stomach made me want to stay where I was, my limp rag doll head nodded "yes" in agreement. I knew that I didn't really want to go with him, but I went because I was hoping to find something worthwhile, something to fill the hurting hollowness I felt inside.

The night was crisp and black, and the wind chilled my face. The sky was like a huge, upside-down basket where handfuls of stars were suspended. Rain had fallen that morning, making the ground spongy, and my left boot began to leak again. I tried to lean heavier on my right foot so I wouldn't have wet feet all night, but the cold soon made both feet numb and I could hardly tell the difference. It was so dark that I could hardly see Jamie in front of me, but I relied on the faint beam of his flashlight to make sure I was going the right way.

One of the first times I remember being scared was on a stormy night when I was four years old. I was walking in the dark hallway of my house in the middle of the night when everyone else was asleep. The green night light had new batteries, so the light was clear and bright and it illuminated the entire hallway. As I slowly walked up the five stairs to my room, I watched my shadow become taller and more defined as I climbed each step. When I reached the top step, my shadow's head was on the ceiling, bent backwards, and looked as if it were about to topple off. The closer I got to my bedroom, the more I feared that my own head would fall as my shadow's head did. It frightened me to see such a hideous

distortion, and to know that I had the capability to cast such an image--that it was a representation of me. All I wanted to do was jump into my bed and pull the covers over my head so that my shadow wouldn't follow me.

The wind seemed indecisive that night, not sure whether to be calm or angry. It howled and swirled through the trees like an invisible cracking whip, breaking off little twigs from the tops of the trees. As the chilling breeze blew through my thin jacket, I could feel it slip through my shirt, making me shudder when it gusted. Then, it became quiet, almost as if someone had snatched it up and put it to sleep in a gigantic pocket. The moon cast a dim halo of light around itself as long strips of clouds matted the blackness of the sky.

The spiny naked trees formed a canopy with their long branches, making a tunnel from the campground into the dark woods. It was like stepping out of one dream and into another, a nebulous journey where I felt like I was floating. I wanted to believe that in this new place, everything was the opposite of what it was before. I was now in a world where people were trees and trees were people. It was so dark that I could see everything, and I felt so alone that I was completely peaceful.

"What is it that you're gonna show me?" I asked.

Jamie didn't answer. Instead, he spanned the area with his flashlight, sending beams of yellow light everywhere so that my eyes caught only glimpses of hundreds of objects. I saw tangled thorn bushes, fallen tree limbs and twigs randomly strewn during the storm the previous night. Taking off my gloves, I pulled a fork-shaped stick from a thick branch and it broke in half in my hands because it was wet and rotted. The wind began to blow again, and it sounded like a song, a dirge, much like the one that Jamie had played on his flute. It hovered overhead for a second before slipping back into a deep slumber.

I quietly surveyed my surroundings. The earth looked dead, bleak and sterile. What could Jamie show me that would prove that nature bore God's signature? I began to doubt his purpose for bringing me here, but I didn't lose faith in him completely because I wanted to be proven wrong. I wanted to find some kind of hope for the earth, and also for myself.

Playing hide and seek with Kevin was always my favorite game. We liked to play out in Mr. Berdaky's field at night, and we could hide behind the huge bales of freshly mown hay. Playing in teams was best because Kevin said there was less chance of getting lost and being eaten by the black hairy werewolf that stalked to woods after the sun went down. With a flashlight in his hand, Kevin would lead me to our own secret hiding place where no one had ever found us, no matter how hard they tried or how long they were "It." We took the light to keep us from falling into ruts or tripping on stones in the field. He always held the light behind him so I wouldn't trip. I trusted him because he was older than I was and he knew the way.

"We're almost there," Jamie said confidently. The trail became more difficult to walk as the incline grew steeper. My legs were getting tired, but I couldn't stop to catch my breath because I would get left behind. As I climbed, I grabbed on to branches sticks and roots sticking out of the ground, anything that would keep me from falling. The mud was slippery and I had to dig my boots into the ground to steady myself as I struggled to keep my balance. When I got to the top, I was surprised to find that the ground was completely flat again, like a plateau. My muscles felt weak, but I kept the same pace as before because I knew we weren't far.

The water seeped through my leather boots with every squishing step I took, and I could see tiny bubbles form around the soles whenever Jamie shone the light on the ground. Looking behind me, I studied the path of my footprints, little indentations in the mud. Something made me want to throw off my shoes and plunge into the thick mud to smear it over me and let it dry hard so I would look like one of the trees.

I have heard that the ancient literaries believed that trees were silent watchers, holding spirits of the past. In Dante's *Inferno*, those souls who had committed suicide were doomed to confinement in a hollow tree, never to escape. I always thought this was a gracious punishment, compared to other more gruesome fates. But what would it be like to spend eternity enclosed in a lifeless deciduous casing? It seemed ironic that those who sought to free themselves from their earthly life would be condemned to be eternally trapped. What if each of these trees had a human soul? And what if I recognized them? This gnarled oak tree right here--could this be Ernest Hemingway? What was it that lured you to the revolver in the upstairs closet? Was it the voice of your father, or his father that made you

pull the trigger? And this spindly maple--Virginia Woolf? How many stones did it take in each pocket of your cloak to be heavy enough to sink to the bottom of that lake? Did you purposely leave before the dawn so you wouldn't be seen by the fishermen, or did your night of insomnia last too long to wait until morning? They all seemed to be reaching out for help with their long bare branches extended.

We stopped. Jamie directed his flashlight to a pile of brush and brittle twigs. Behind the pile was a stump covered with white and rust colored fungus. It seemed ostracized from the rest of the forest, fearing its disease might spread to them. I bent down to pick up a lifeless stone, the most static object I could find. This will never die, I thought. It can never miss what it didn't experience. The whole forest was like a graveyard, and I was walking among the hollow corpses wondering if the leaf that landed on my boot was from the birch of Antigone or if the pile of brush would tangle me in its tentacles and keep me forever. How could Jamie show me anything from God in a place like this?

Momma took me berry picking every summer when the sun was hot and the sweat made our faces sticky. I always picked the berries that were on the tops of the bushes because they were the easiest to find, and I could fill my basket quicker. Momma always took longer because she searched for the berries underneath the bush, and her berries were always bigger and redder than mine. "The ones that are best are hidden from us. They grow the best when they're shaded from the sun," she said. "You have to look to find them, but they sure are good!" She popped a red juicy berry into her mouth as she tossed another into her basket.

"Here it is."

He stepped forward and pulled a few twigs away from the heap of brush, and backed away to widen the beam of light that shone on the pile. My eyes searched every part of the lit space, but I saw nothing out of the ordinary. I focused again on the illuminated area, examining every place that the light touched. Inching forward, I lifted my head to peer over the tops of the sticks.

Then, I saw it.

It was so small that I would never have noticed it in passing. To have seen this, someone would have had to have been anticipating to find something special. Jamie must have been expecting to find something here and patiently searched to discover it. I knew I never would have had the patience to do this, but Jamie had a careful eye and that's why he found treasures like this one.

It was a tiny tree, a seedling, springing up from the frigid soil. Standing no more than four feet tall, its thin white trunk was frail but straight. Its existence amazed me, and all I could do was gaze at in silence. Autumn was the time when the earth was supposed to experience death, but Jamie had found something that went against the laws of nature. Could this be anything but God speaking? In the midst of all that was dead, the little tree was alive, vibrant and possessed strength even in its smallness.

My eyes moved up its small body and it became even more amazing to me. This white sapling had a branch emerging from each side of the trunk so that it was growing in the perfect shape of a cross. No artisan could've fashioned it more flawlessly if he had sculpted it with his own hands. It captivated me with its delicate beauty, a natural wonder. Cascading over the top of the cross branch, like falling rain, were green, tear-shaped leaves connected by tiny vines that wound around the branches several times. The leaves seemed to cling to the tree, proclaiming that it was alive and would grow out of defiance against all the death that surrounded it.

Grandpa said that a certain tribe in West Africa used to burn their land before planting new crops. They said that it made the soil rich and fertile so that more yams could grow. At the end of the dry season, they would burn all the land and wait until the first rain of the rainy season to plant the yams. One year, the chief of the Tangali village said that there would be no more burning of the land because it had been such a plentiful harvest that season. He said they would plant the yams on the unburned soil so they would have another year of good harvest. No one burned the land that year, and the yams were small, hard and knotty. The villagers were hungry but there was no more time to burn the land and plant more yams before the coming of the dry season. They had no yams to eat or to take to market to trade, and many people died. All the soil had to be burned every year so that new yams could grow.

I touched the tender white bark and the tiny, pliable trunk. The soft green leaves had dark veins that pulsed with living fluid. I got even closer and intertwined one of the vines around my index finger and put it back on the cross branch. Jamie slightly smiled as he turned his light toward the camp. "Live, little tree," I whispered.

Resurrection is exciting to witness. Every spring I love to see the resurrection of nature as tiny buds appear on the trees and crocuses pop their heads out of the frosted ground. It is really a miracle to see life come from deadness. When I was studying at Harris Manchester College in Oxford, I took a walk every day in University Parks from the middle of January to the middle of March. My first walks required a sweatshirt, sweatpants and thick socks, and I shivered as I made my way around the grounds, watching my breath come out of my mouth in large, white puffs. The trees were bare, and the trails were hardened from the frost in the mornings. I made it a goal to go to the park every day and see nature revive from its sleep.

At first, there seemed to be no progress. Every day was the same, and there was almost no change for weeks. In late February, though, I began to see the yellow, white and purple blossoms of crocuses appear on each side of the trail, and every day there were more until the entire field was filled with blossoms. Fuzzy pussywillows emerged from twigs, followed by tiny green leaves. The changes became more significant, and then I began to watch even closer. It became my favorite pass time as a break from my studying to be outdoors and mentally documenting the transformation of nature. How could something so beautiful come from deadness?

Watching the park change took on a different meaning to me as I compared it to what was happening inside of me. Being away from everything I knew and understood was uncomfortable for me. It was like breaking out of a long sleep and awaking to the reality that change was happening to me. I had never been so alone before, and it hurt. I was away from a culture that was familiar to me and everyone who understood me. I often would have so much studying to do that I would stay in my room all day, and I had hours of time to look at myself and thoughtfully observe my habits, thoughts and attitudes.

As I examined my life, I began to see so many areas of my life that I hoped that other people didn't notice about me. I saw what control material possessions had on me, and how much focus I placed on objects even more than people. I became much more conscious of my thoughts and how often I would become angry at people if they didn't see situations from my point of view. It seemed that I would think negatively as a natural

tendency, and I knew that it must have been arising from some flaw in myself instead of other people. Being alone caused me to realize how much I do and say things for my own personal gain, my desire to manipulate situations and people and my immediate thoughts of my own comfort and interests. I wanted to try to control my actions and I tried fasting from things that were important to me, even something as small as ice cream. I became discouraged as I found that I couldn't even succeed at a small sacrifice!

C.S. Lewis' *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* in his *Chronicles of Narnia* series provides a great example of resurrection. Eustace Clarence Scrubb, the cousin of the Pevensie children, steals a gold bracelet from a dragon's lair which turns him into a dragon himself. Eustace had been rebellious and taken his own course, leaving his cousins and setting out on his own. After being a dragon, Eustace despises his appearance and hates what he has become. Lewis says of the rebellious boy, "He shuddered whenever he got sight of his own reflection as he flew over a mountain lake. He hated his huge, bat-like wings, the saw-edge ridge on his back and the cruel, curved claws. He was almost afraid to be alone with himself and yet was ashamed to be with others" (Lewis 84).

I can relate to this feeling of seeing myself as so despicable when I think about or look on myself, being so afraid to be alone but being ashamed to be around others. I have to come to the realization that, compared to God's standard, I am a horrible person. It is an unforgettable moment when I understood how helpless I am by myself. I remember sitting in my tiny room on the brown carpet floor, being faced with the reality that I was not the person that I was portraying to other people. Outwardly, I could speak kind and pleasant words to people, but I was angry at them inside. I could pretend to be modest when given a compliment, but I would be thinking the whole time that I knew I was the best. I could pretend to be hanging on every word of someone's heartfelt story of excitement or sadness but never really hear a word. I pretended to be someone who I wasn't, and the pride in me told me I could get away with it. The truth was, I probably could get away with a lifetime of hypocrisy, but what would that make me? Did I want to be that kind of person?

Eustace detests himself when his body manifests what is in his heart. He needs help, and only Aslan can offer assistance. He describes this resurrection and restoration to Lucy and Edmond later. He tells his cousins that he was approached by a lion who beckons Eustace to follow it to a well. The gold bracelet is cutting into the flesh of Eustace's arm, and he wishes to dip into the pool to relieve the pain, but Aslan tells him he must undress first. Realizing Aslan must mean his scales, Eustace begins to scratch off the first layer of his scales, but becomes frustrated that he is not making any progress. As soon as he peels off one layer, another appears. Finally, Aslan says that he must undress Eustace because he can't do it alone. He describes laying down on his back to let Aslan tear off his dragon skin and says, "The first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off." He then describes his new body: "And there I was as smooth and soft as a peeled switch and smaller than I had been. Then he caught hold of me--I didn't like that much for I was very tender underneath now that I'd no skin on--and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious and as soon as I started swimming and splashing I found that all the pain had gone from my arm" (Lewis 90-91).

I feel like Lewis was writing about me. That winter in Oxford was the time when I was so horrified by who I was inside that I actually hated myself. Instead of seeing myself as "good enough," I saw my character as weak, undesirable and flawed, and at first I was determined to fix it. I made resolutions that I would make more effort to be kind to people, that I would not let anger or resentment control any of my actions, that I would completely forgive someone if they wronged me and I would be generous and not greedy with my possessions and time. However, the more I tried to fix these deficiencies, the more I was discouraged. As soon as I would focus on one area of my life and get that under control, it seemed that another area was neglected and I felt like I was getting worse instead of better.

I didn't want to admit that I proud, arrogant, self-serving and unsympathetic, but I slowly saw the scales appearing on me. Like Eustace, I tried to scratch them off and

cover them up with clothing of modesty and kindness, but they kept coming back. Being faced with the reality of my true habits and attitudes, I knew I couldn't transform myself or if I did it would only be for a short period of time. I had to claim a previous resurrection to obtain the resurrection that I needed. The deadness inside of me was repulsing--the selfishness, anger, pride and resentment disgusted me. I didn't want to be fake anymore.

Like Eustace says, change is painful. There is no time for recovery, but the pain goes away eventually. We have new, smooth bodies from the author of resurrection. We are meant to feel alone, ashamed and despising ourselves. I had to realize that I wasn't good enough on my own, both while I was in England and the night I saw the little tree. I didn't like who I was, but Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life. He continues to raise me up from my internal deadness to become a new person. It hurts, but it brings the change that my heart needs. Deadness can come alive, but it's not by my power. The same One allows me to see leaves appear on the trees every year and the crocuses bloom is the one who brings spring to the hearts of men when they cry out from a spiritual hibernation of winter.

The Palimpsest

"I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand." II Timothy 4:7

"The Impact of Polycarp on the Early Church"

an essay written for Early Church History during Hilary term, Harris Manchester College, Oxford England, 1998

What made the martyrdom of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna so impacting on the Early Church? What was it that this frail, elderly man accomplished in the last moments of his life that has preserved his memory for centuries? Possibly the greatest reason that the martyrdom of Polycarp is remembered is because it so closely paralleled the death of Christ.

After examining the Letter of the Church of Smyrna about the martyrdom of Polycarp, there are several similarities between the events that led up to the death of Polycarp and the events that led up to Christ's crucifixion. This could very well be what was so meaningful about Polycarp's death. Polycarp was betrayed like Christ. The letter says, "For he waited that he might be betrayed, just as was the Lord, that we too may become imitators of Him, regarding not only what concerns ourselves but also what concerns our neighbors. Polycarp had left his farm to go to avoid being pursued, but a slave boy betrayed his whereabouts to the Chief Constable under torture. With the slave boy accompanying him, the Constable set out to find Polycarp, and the letter continues that the Constable "made haste to bring Polycarp into the stadium, that he might be made a partner of Christ, and so fulfil his own appointed lot, and that his betrayers might undergo the punishment of Judas himself." Jesus was betrayed by Judas, one of his own followers, who sold him for thirty pieces of silver. He betrayed Jesus to the Pharisees who hated him, knowing he would be killed.

Polycarp treated his executioners with kindness. He invited them to eat and drink as much as they wanted at his table before taking him away, and he asked for time to pray. The letter says, "On their granting him this he stood up and prayed, being so full of the grace of God, that for the space for two hours he could not hold his peace, and the hearers were astonished, and many were sorry that they had come after so venerable an

old man” (Stevenson 20). Jesus also had a meal prepared, knowing that Judas would eat at his table and soon betray him. He tells the disciples that the one who betrays him will be the one that receives the bread that he has dipped into the sop, and he tells Judas to go from the table so he can betray him. Of course, Jesus also prayed before his betrayal. In the garden of Gethsemane, he prayed that God’s will would be done, and he prayed for the unity of the church—the people who would be saved by his death.

What is astonishing is what the letter says about Polycarp’s reaction to his betrayal. He could have escaped from his cottage, but he stayed saying, “God’s will be done.” He remained in his house and refused to escape. Similarly in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus could have escaped from Judas and the men who had come to arrest him, but he allowed himself to be taken. Even when Peter cuts off Malchus’ ear in an attempt to prevent Jesus from being taken Jesus says to him, “Do you think that I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen this way?” Both Polycarp and Jesus willingly put aside his power to save himself and allowed his life to be taken.

Also the fact that Polycarp predicted what type of death he would die made him similar to Christ. Polycarp was said to have a vision of his pillow burning while he was at prayer, and he said, “I must needs to be burned alive.” He was unafraid of his impending death as the Proconsul threatened him with wild beasts and fire. He told him, “You threaten the fire that burns for an hour, and after a little while is quenched; for you are ignorant of the fire and judgement to come, and of everlasting punishment reserved for the ungodly. But why delay? Do what you wish” (Stevenson 21). Jesus tells the Jews what kind of death he will die in John 12:32-33. He tells them, “But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.” John then says, “He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.”

Both Polycarp and Christ were exhorted to recant by their judges so they could live. The Proconsul told Polycarp, “Have respect to your old age” and “Swear by the genius of Caesar; change your mind; say ‘Away with the Atheists!’” He was willing to let Polycarp go if he would simply recant his faith and curse Christ. Polycarp responded,

“Eighty-six years have I served Him, and he has done me no wrong: how can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” Pilate also told Christ the power that he had over him to release him. He says he has no charge against Jesus and says to him, “Where do you come from? Do you refuse to speak to me? Don’t you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?” Jesus answers him, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.” Christ refused to say he was not the Son of God like he had professed he was, in spite of Pilate’s offer to free him.

Polycarp’s martyrdom was impacting because he had the attitude of Christ. Philippians 2:5 says, “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.” Polycarp had the same mind as Christ as he was sentenced to death. He was kind to his executioners, he prayed that his death would draw men to God, he wouldn’t recant his faith and he went willingly to death. Not only did Christ go willingly to death, but he went joyfully, according to Hebrews 12:2-3 which says, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

The example that Polycarp set for the church was amazing—that an elderly man would not go back on his claim to be a Christian, even when it meant being tortured and humiliated before thousands of men. Fueled by an angry mob that insisted on his death (which also parallels the death of Christ) Polycarp was seized to be prepared for burning. He asked that he not be nailed to the post but said, “Let me be as I am: He that gives me power to abide the fire will grant me too without your making me fast with nails to stay at the pyre unflinching.” He blessed God as he was preparing to die, and thanked him that he counted him worthy to die a martyr’s death.

The fact that Polycarp’s body was not consumed by flames is miraculous. The letter of the church in Smyra said, “The fire made the appearance of a vaulted roof, like a ship’s sail filling out with the wind, and it walled about the body of the martyr in a ring. There was it in the midst, not like flesh burning, but like a loaf baking, or like gold and silver being refined in a furnace. Moreover we caught a fragrance as of the breath of

frankincense or some other precious spice” (Stevenson 23). Perhaps God allowed the miracle to happen to answer Polycarp’s prayer that people might believe. The letter ends by saying, “Through his patience he overcame the unrighteous ruler, and thus received the crown of incorruption. Rejoicing with Apostles and all just men, he glorifies our Almighty God and Father, and blesses our Lord Jesus Christ, Saviour of our souls, and Helmsman of our bodies, and Shepherd of the Catholic Church throughout the world” (Stevenson 24). This miracle obviously impacted not only the church but the unbelievers that were present to show the power of God in Polycarp’s faith. Undoubtedly, this miracle would remind the church of the miracle of the resurrection of Christ, and surely this would remind them that Polycarp’s spirit did not cease after death but was united with God—as was the same with Christ.

The martyrdom of Polycarp stood as an example to all believers especially since his death was so close to the time of Christ’s crucifixion. The parallels of meekness prayer, humility and steadfast faith mark the virtues that the early church should possess. Polycarp, as Christ, gave himself freely and looked forward to sacrificing himself for God. He is an example to all believers in the literal meaning of Romans 12:1-2 which says, “I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God which is your reasonable service.”

We all think we sacrifice. We give a few meager dollars to charity when prodded and it always makes us feel better about ourselves. The tinkling of the Salvation Army bell convicts me at Christmas to plunk two quarters into the small, red can. I sometimes spare some loose change for Habitat for Humanity, proudly thinking to myself that I just provided a light bulb or a curtain rod for a new house for a needy family. We give up our time to volunteer at an after-school program for children, congratulating ourselves for an hour of service per week, thinking we're making such a difference. But are we? Do we do what we do for others or do we do it for ourselves?

Paul tells the Corinthians that he does all things for their sake. In II Corinthians 12, Paul says, "Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? We have been speaking in the sight of God as those in Christ; and everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening." What would my life be if I lived it for others and not for myself? I really can't relate to what Paul is talking about--to say that everything I do is for other people. This makes me realize how much I think of myself all the time, whether it is my physical needs of wanting new clothes or wondering what I'll eat for dinner, or emotional needs of wanting attention, love and recognition from people around me. I struggle so much with focusing on my own needs, but it just makes me feel empty.

It is when we empty ourselves of selfishness that we can become truly effective people. Paul tells Timothy right before his death, "I am being poured out like a drink offering" (II Timothy 4:6). Poured out like a drink offering . . . what does that mean? It seems ironic to me that the more and more we try to fill ourselves up, the more empty we feel. But when we can pour ourselves out for someone else, we change people, circumstances and ourselves. Sometimes I pour myself out and other times I keep everything inside me, thinking I will need my resources such as time, money or kindness for myself if I get in a bind.

I admit that I am a selfish person, but there are times when I feel as though God helps me break through my selfishness to see what can happen when I let go of the things of this world. Three years ago I worked as a waitress in Surfside Beach, South Carolina. I worked breakfast and lunch every day, and I got to meet people from all around the

world. Often I would get into conversations with customers, and that was the most rewarding part of the job. Sometimes people weren't as talkative and there would be minimal words exchanged. On a certain day in mid-June, I was about to finish my shift. That day I had been praying that God would use me to do something nice for someone that day, but so far nothing had happened and I had kind of forgotten all about it. I had found this verse that said, "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it." (Malachi 3:10) This verse was intriguing to me. I wanted to try it to see what would happen. I was about finished cleaning all my tables when a couple came in and sat in my section. They looked in their middle thirties and I could tell that they had been riding on a motorcycle. They were plain in appearance and a little windblown from traveling, but they were pleasant and weren't demanding of me as I prepared to leave.

After bringing them their food, refilling their drinks, I had hardly spoken to them at all and was most concerned with getting home and going to the beach. I brought them their bill, and the man looked at it and jokingly said to me, "How about if you just keep the check and pay for our lunch?" We both laughed and agreed that his remark was funny, and I went back to cleaning my tables. But something inside me told me that I was supposed to do just what he asked me to do, even though he said it in jest. I had never felt something so strongly as at that moment when I felt like I was supposed to pay for their lunch.

Almost inevitably, when we are about to do something for someone, we think of the cost. I knew business wasn't great that day. Paying for their lunch would mean over one fifth of my earnings would be lost, so I suddenly felt the instinct to clutch my money in my fist. I kept covering up my selfishness by thinking they would think I was strange if I offered to pay for their lunch or maybe they would be offended. But I knew that this was what I was supposed to do. I couldn't get it out of my head, so I prayed that if I was supposed to pay for their lunch, they would speak to me once more. Nothing happened for a few minutes, but as I was leaving to clock out, the man said to me, "Could I have

some more ice tea?” I froze for a second as I contemplated what had just happened. I expected that if he would say anything, he would joke about me paying for the meal again--but all I asked for was any kind of verbal communication.

That was my answer. I brought him his ice tea and then slipped to the register, unwadding my role of bills and clearing their tab from the computer. I didn't see them as they left. I guess the hostess explained to them that their meal had been paid for, and as they left, I cleaned their table so I could go home. One of the waiters that worked with me was helping me clear the dishes and looked at me with a puzzled expression and handed me a piece of paper and some cash from under the plate. On the paper, the woman had written:

Dear Rachel

Thank you for the wonderful lunch. Please take this \$20.00 and do something nice for someone else.

I don't remember their names, even though they signed it. I lost the note somewhere in South Carolina, but the memory stayed with me. The verse was right. If I would give God what I had, He would give me more than I had before. If I would have kept my money that day, I would have robbed myself of a significant happening in my life and a lesson on what it means to give. I still struggle with selfishness all the time, but I remember what I learned that summer at Denny's.

Paul dedicates two whole chapters in II Corinthians to giving. He says, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though he was rich, yet for your sakes, he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.” Paul uses Christ as the one example of true sacrifice, and yet he has known also what it is like to suffer. He tells the Corinthians of his sufferings for Christ--that he was lashed, beaten with rods, shipwrecked, spent a night on the open sea, in constant danger, gone without sleep, been hungry, thirsty, cold and naked, and been betrayed by friends. However, he still looks to Jesus as the ultimate example of suffering and sacrifice. In Romans 12:1-2, Paul says, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living

sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will."

Sometimes I wonder just how much I would be willing to sacrifice for what I believe in. Jesus died for me, so I wonder if I would die for him if I had to. I hope that I could confidently say that I would, but I acknowledge the weakness of my human nature and the strength of my desire to live. But if I was faced with the decision and had to choose, what would be my decision? Many people have had to make that choice. Martyrs were prevalent in the early church when individuals were threatened to recant their faith. They were burned, attacked by animals, impaled, cut in two, beheaded and crucified for their belief in Jesus Christ. Their lives were a sacrifice. I have heard that there are actually more martyrs today than ever before, yet we don't hear about all the people who are losing their lives. Would I also pour out my life as a drink offering? I can be a living sacrifice, I know, but I wonder if I would have the courage and devotion to give my life for Christ.

I love the story of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna. Even as an elderly man, he persevered against the Roman government and stayed true to the faith. They say that the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church, and I think that must be true today as well. I hope that if and when we are faced with opposition, we will hear the same voice that Polycarp heard in the stadium, to "Be strong and play the man." This is a story of true sacrifice. It doesn't compare to that of Jesus, but the palimpsest of the death of Christ has made room for the stories of hundreds of martyrs. The story of Polycarp's martyrdom was written on pages of history and in the minds of men, with the shadow of Christ's martyrdom showing through underneath. These two stories are amazingly compatible, the second mirroring that of the first in hopes to imitate the ultimate sacrifice.

The Perfector

" . . . We ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies." Romans 8:23

For Marty

As I sit and watch him, I often wonder
Who is the keeper of his voice?
How much would I love to know
The world that lives inside his head—
Of green and soft, bright and dark,
Or maybe scratchy sweaters and pill bugs,
Ice cream cones that drip chocolate
And round pebbles that fit perfectly in pockets?
Where is the key to unlock the door
That is holding back his thoughts?
I watch his lips move slowly, slow—
A language cannot explain or tell
What he has kept hidden for so many years.

Are his dreams like mine—
Of tongues of puppy dogs and baseball gloves?
His smile could light the wick of a golden sunset,
But it cannot illuminate his secrets.
He has two worlds, and one I cannot share—
But maybe he is the lucky one
For sometimes I wish for an escape like his
Where he controls the switch
To shut the world out when it is cruel
And embrace it when it is friendly.

One day, Marty, I'll talk to you,
Not as I do now, but differently.
You'll tell me things I never understood,
What I'd never hope to know the meaning of—
Why frosty ice cubes float in water glasses,
How birds know where to fly in winter
And why you think Spam sandwiches are good to eat.
But answer me this question:
How can I look on you with sadness sometimes?
Was the One that made you mistaken
To make you as you are?
I envy you, yes, but I am pricked by my own callousness to you
When I fail to see you for the value you hold.

What is this but a temporary condition,
A mere speck on the timeline of eternity,
A flashback in our memory
That will matter little when you and I are the same?

Marty is one of my favorite people in the world. He'll be my brother in just a few months, but in a way I feel like he already is because of how much I care about him. He's impacted my life in a way that no other person could. The first thing that you notice about Marty when you see him is that he has Downs Syndrome, but that's not the first thing I tell people when I talk about him. I say that he's Mark's younger brother and he's really cool—because he is. I love Marty because he shows me what in my life is really significant. He shows me the importance of a routine and how a simple thing like tearing off a new page on the day calendar can be something to look forward to because it means the beginning of a new day. Marty shows me that I can do anything if I just practice hard enough. When I go to his house, I often see him in the driveway shooting baskets. I know he must practice all the time because he has great form and he can always beat me in a game of PIG.

Another thing Marty has shown me is how to make people feel important. He knows more people than I do, probably, and he makes a point to talk to everyone he knows whether it is at church or at a restaurant or the mall. Most people do this too, but Marty almost always calls them by name. I think it makes a huge difference when you use someone's name rather than just saying hello to them. He uses his memory to remember people's names, phone numbers and even the numbers of the players on almost any pro sports team.

Sometimes I struggle with Jesus' role as Creator—to accept the fact that he was not mean to Marty by making him the way he is. I feel like there is something locked up inside of Marty that I want to see and understand. I want to be able to extract all his thoughts that he can't express in words. But what is it that he should have? I ask myself: Do I really think I could do a better job than the Creator of life when it comes to making people the way they should be? Just like my life is a gift to me, Marty's life is a gift. I came to the conclusion that I shouldn't be sad for Marty because he's not sad for himself. I think he likes being himself, and probably has a healthier self-image than many of us.

Marty has taught me a significant lesson. He takes people at their word, and never questions anything that I or anyone else tells him. He has the most simple kind of

faith—the only kind of faith, really. Faith is believing without questioning. I sometimes have so much trouble taking people at their word and even God. It is easier for me to question a truth than to accept it. To accept it seems so risky. But Marty's simple, trusting faith has made an impact on how I see God and the importance of my faith. The reality of Marty's trust is so apparent and he fully believes that promises to him will be kept. I want to have faith like that.

I don't know what Jesus will do to make all things right, but he says he will. The same God, God the Son, who ordained all things in creation, will restore his wounded creation someday to the perfection it should have been before the fall of man. He's promised to do that—to restore all things to perfection—and I just believe that it will make sense someday. It's such a great realization to know that Jesus will someday restore everything to how it should be. Revelation 21 talks about the restoration of the fallen creation: “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away’ . . . He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new.’” Revelation 21:3-5

If there was no promise of restoration, we would feel so hopeless because it would seem like there was no justice in the world. But above all the Creator's qualities of love and goodness is his justice. Things will be made right in the end. We can't blame the Creator for all that has gone wrong in the world because we've brought it on ourselves. We make the choices that determine consequences, but he has graciously promised that he will correct things in the end. That is my purpose in life—to live for the day when I will see the restoring hand of Jesus Christ touch creation and make it as it should have been before we chose to live life our own way.

Afterward

“There is now stored up for me a crown of righteousness that the Lord, the righteous Judge will give to me in that day—and not to me only, but to all who love his appearing.” II Timothy 4:8

As I read what I have just written, I wonder who will also read this. I wish I could answer any question that someone might ask of me regarding this because it is so important to me that what I say is not misunderstood. The character of Jesus Christ has changed me, and I continue to seek who he is to be like him. But I want to clarify something—that I am not praising the character of a man, but I desire the attributes displayed in the nature of Christ. Character is not gender-specific. I want to show his character, but this does not mean that because Jesus was male in his human body that I am in any way limited by being female. Imitating him does not mean I am looking down upon my identity as a woman, but it gives me even more identity because I am becoming who I was made to be. Galatians 3:28 says, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ.” As I continue in my faith, I see a plan for my life as a woman who seeks the Lord’s will for her life. Paul says in Colossians 2:6, “So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in Him.” I find even more satisfaction in my identity, my personality and my goals when I seek his direction. It’s a paradox, but it’s true.

My life is changing so fast. I’m graduating, getting married and beginning a new career all at once. I remember being only about ten years old and wondering what my life would be like when I am at the age I am now. I recall perfectly the first time I ever saw Mark on a retreat but didn’t even speak with him. If someone told me I would be married to him in four years I’m not sure I would be able to handle the shock. It would be too much revelation for me to grasp. I think that is the same with God. He gives us enough of the future in situations in our lives and in the Bible, but if we had the entire picture we would be overwhelmed. The future is so unknown to me now, but I see how Christ has directed every detail of my life—I see how he has provided for my needs, put me in places and situations where I have met significant people who have changed my life,

protected me from danger and given me hope when I am discouraged. This is all I need to put my faith in him.

I have something to live for. I know that the end of my life is not the end of existence. There is more and I have the assurance of knowing I will return to my Creator when I die. I am so surprised at how few people have an answer to the question of what lies beyond death, but it makes no sense not to find an answer to that question because death is the only certainty in life. My belief in Christ's death and resurrection to save me from God's judgement on sinful man gives me an answer to that question, and it gives me a reason to live.

I see my life as a practice—the pregame for eternity. Jesus came to earth to die for me, and he also came to show me how to live. As I live my life in anticipation of my eternity with God, I seek to imitate the character of my Savior. It makes sense to me. It is not the man I seek, but the character of God in the flesh who sees all people equally. I don't know what the future has for me, but I know my goal. Just like running a race, I have a finish line to look to. I live my life in the light of giving thanks to the God who made me, forgave me for my sins and will receive me in heaven when I die. This, I believe, is the meaning of life.

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