

# WAITING ON GOD

A STORY ABOUT FALLING IN LOVE WITH JESUS ALL OVER AGAIN

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WHEN I FIRST started attending the Church of the Apostles in Fairfax, Va., we had no church building and met in the cafeteria of an elementary school. There were about 50 of us and a brand new priest, Rev. H. Lawrence Scott (“Call me Renny”). It was an Episcopal church in Fairfax County in the 1970s. Really, how much trouble could I get into?

What I didn’t know was that it was a charismatic, Bible-believing, tongues-speaking church. The praise band led us in worship. We sang and raised our hands. There was speaking in tongues and interpretation.

When I committed my life to Jesus in October 1977, I was sitting in the living room with Renny and his wife, Margaret. We had lunch. We talked. I disagreed with them about this Jesus stuff. We talked some more, and I was shocked to find myself saying “yes” when Renny asked if I was ready to commit my life to Jesus. I just said sure—then Renny made me pray. I remember walking to the car and having a brief conversation with God, the culmination of which was that I said I would never be a missionary to Africa. It’s funny what I thought were the key questions then.

Because I am an all-or-nothing person, I threw myself entirely into this new life. Within a few weeks I was baptized in the Spirit. I went to a Bible study every week. When I heard you were supposed to have a quiet time, I did that religiously. Every morning I sat and waited on God: Bible reading and prayer, other spiritual reading, and index cards to help me remember. Every morning for years I got up very early and met with Jesus in the quiet before dawn. Between my study and the praise songs we sang at church, I learned hundreds of scriptures by heart.

For 20 years I sat in the quiet and waited on God.

My readings changed. *My Utmost for His Highest* was replaced by Richard Foster. Jim and Elisabeth Elliot gave way to John Boswell. The inerrancy of scripture changed to a reverence and delight in God’s word without being quite so rigid, a journey much helped by Rev. Reginald Fuller. My early conviction that a woman could not be ordained crumbled after a year at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. And through it all, I got up early and waited in the quiet, perhaps for a word from God.

My favorite song then was based on Zephaniah 3:17: “The Lord your God is in your midst / the Lord of Lords who saves / [God] will exalt over you with ... shouts of joy.” Over the years I have come to think of God “exalting over us” as dancing over us with love. God dances over us as on a day of festival. The first sermon I preached was about God dancing over us with joy. Truly this is really my only sermon: God loves us and dances over us with joy. I have preached it a thousand times and will keep on preaching it as long as I have breath.

I DON’T REALLY remember when I stopped having regular quiet time. Not that I stopped believing in or expecting to connect with God; I just stopped getting up early. I continued to preach and celebrate. I continued to hear that people liked my sermons. I just let the relationship slide a little. I took things for granted and only

sat in quiet when I needed a word to preach, or had an occasional down time. Oh, and my reading changed also. Somehow over the years I got hooked on detective novels, particularly the works of Elizabeth George, and I loved the Jack Reacher thrillers. The depths of scripture and quiet reflection gave way to murder and mayhem, violence and sex. I was addicted to thrillers.

During this time I did a pretty good job, outside of church, of keeping my faith to myself. In church I preached Jesus; I told of the miracles I saw and experienced. But no one would ever have considered me an evangelist. At best, I was reluctant to share my faith. That was probably the nicest thing you could say about my lack of evangelism.

Two years ago something shifted. During summer 2011, I spent a couple of days with my friends Paul and Mariann Budde in Minneapolis. Mariann and I had gone to Virginia Theological Seminary in the 1980s and had kept up sporadically over the years. While I was there I was surprised to realize that Mariann was still having her quiet time. She was reading, praying, and working out every morning. I felt a little bad at what a slacker I had become, but not bad enough to change.

That summer something else amazing happened: Mariann was elected bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington, D.C., and she asked me to preach. Uh oh, I thought, I had better get back to a serious relationship with God. No more coasting. This was time for a big push.

That autumn, as I struggled to find the words to preach for the ordination of a bishop, I fell in love with God all over again. I prayed and listened and sat. I read and waited and prayed some more. I retreated to a stone cottage, which became my hermitage. It was the quiet place that helped me give birth to a new relationship with God and, of course, a sermon, which I preached in the Washington National Cathedral. This time I was found anew by God in the waiting.

About the same time, I started praying for my work colleagues in the 100,000 Homes Campaign, which aims to house the most vulnerable homeless in the U.S. I prayed for each of them by name, along with their families. After a year of praying for them, something strange started to happen: I found that I was talking more about my faith and sharing what I was learning. Somewhere along the way, my colleague Leslie asked me about a book to read that would tell her about Christianity. I asked a friend what she might recommend. She suggested *The Heart of Christianity*, by Marcus Borg. I thought I'd better read it myself before I gave it away, so I started zipping through it. Even though I thought of myself as a pretty mature Christian—one not badly educated about things spiritual—this book blew me away.

During Lent, I read another book by Borg, *Speaking Christian*. He underscores the essence of what I learned in *The Heart of Christianity*: I am not called to believe with my head the works of God before and through Jesus; I am invited to give my heart to God. Instead of saying “I believe in God,” I have begun to say “I give my heart to God.” “I give my heart to Jesus.” “I give my heart to forgiveness of sins.” And my life has changed.

Social media has also profoundly changed the way I do evangelism. On Facebook, I live on the cusp of my personal, spiritual, and work lives. Folks from all aspects of my life, past and present, come together in this virtual arena. So folks from my work to end homelessness hear about my decision to walk the Stations of the Cross to end gun violence, and they ask about it. I get a chance to talk about my life in Jesus. Pictures I took at the Easter service at my Episcopal church, St. Stephen and the Incarnation, spur more online conversation.

When I visited Lafayette, La., this spring in my homelessness advocate role, I saw the Lord's Prayer posted in the dining room of a soup kitchen. I referred to it as the Jesus Manifesto. Someone picked up on it on Facebook, and we discussed the call of Jesus to distributive justice—another chance to share my faith.

Mostly, though, I try to pay attention to the promptings of the Spirit as I pray in the mornings. When I was praying for a colleague in Washington, D.C., I realized that I wanted to call him to see how things were going.

When I called later that morning and asked the simple question about his vacation, he told me about his recent trip—and his cancer treatment. I have ramped up my prayers for him and periodically ask for updates.

I am neither facile nor graceful in this activity. When another colleague's mother died, I just went in and sat in his office. We talked about his mother. It felt awkward, but oh, well. I followed up with a sympathy card and simple note. I don't have any idea whether this helped. But I do try my best to pay attention to the simple promptings, the fleeting thoughts of "I should call x" or "I wonder what is going on with y."

One morning on a walk, I thought, "I should call Gail." And then I thought, "It's 6 in the morning." I called anyway. She started crying. I found that she had been told devastating medical information the night before.

Following those kinds of prompts might seem foolish if we are not right—but we'd be really dumb if we didn't follow them and God was doing the prompting. I have decided that I would rather look foolish than miss an opportunity to be present in a time of need. And, hey, how foolish is it to say that I was praying for you and felt the need to be in touch?

So where does this leave me? By praying for my colleagues, family, friends, and fellow parishioners for days on end, I am filled with a love for them that spills over. By praying for the work I do (ending homelessness nationwide), I am a zealot for sharing that also. Let's just say that I'm the person who cranks up my laptop in a coffee shop in the Atlanta airport to show my campaign's video to some poor, unsuspecting Starbucks worker who expressed a little interest. I have come to realize that my work is just part of the Jesus Manifesto.

My renewed love for Jesus is sloshing over onto my colleagues, my friends, and my work. Sometimes I am winsome and compelling, with offers of love and faith and joy. Other times I just blurt out, "I think I need to pray for you. I brought my oil. Can we pray?" And they love me no matter how awkward my attempts. Sometimes they even seek me out. And I pray for each of them and their families every morning. The odd thing is that all of this has made me bolder with all the people I meet doing my work. I share with folks how my love for God impels me to do this work. I have no idea whether this offends or invites, whether it is winsome or off-putting, but I do know this: My heart is full and I slosh love in lots of directions.

The song of my life has changed over the decades, but the content of my intention has not: God delights over us and dances over us with joy.

Over the years I often use this blessing at the end of services. Janet Morley, part of the movement for women's ordination in England, wrote it years ago. It sums up my call and joy, and my understanding of why we are called to do this work: "May the God who dances in creation / and embraces us with human love / who shakes our lives like thunder / bless us and drive us out with power / to fill the world with her justice. Amen."