

For the

LIFE of the WORLD

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PUBLISHER
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By the Rev. Dr. Harold L. Senkbeil, Associate Professor of Pastoral Ministry and Missions at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana

What can you do when life crashes in? How do you keep going when everything you hold near and dear is taken from you? What happens when health is jeopardized, when you lose your job, when someone you love dies, when you face intractable physical or emotional pain? What if you feel like God is out to get you? What then?

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By the Rev. Dr. Dean Nadasdy, Senior Pastor at Woodbury Lutheran Church, Woodbury, Minnesota, and Third Vice President of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

Whether it's Christ in death or Christ in life, let Christ be real. Borne by confirmands and children, pastors and poets, musicians and artists, and all the company of faith, the Christ of the Gospels endures. In death and in life, He is "Son of God and Son of Man." He is the beginning and end of history.

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By the Rev. Lance A. O'Donnell, Pastor of Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Van Wert, Ohio

And somewhere in all of this, amidst the tears of agony and sorrow, I realized that I was in the midst of an epiphany about grace. You see, with each little heartbeat I loved that boy more . . . And our family verse, whose reference is etched on my wedding ring, the verse I repeat each morning, kept ringing in my ears: "Fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the *joy* set before Him endured the cross . . ."

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Christ in Death

Christ in Life

By the Rev. Dr. Dean W. Nadasdy

Stephanie is 15, a ninth-grader completing her final year of confirmation instruction. I had asked each student to write about the difference Jesus makes in his or her life. Stephanie stood to read her story of faith. Without a flinch she shared how her father had died just a year earlier of heart disease. She went through her emotions before and after the funeral—her anger and loneliness and how she kept thinking he would still come home from work one day.



There was no dancing around death here, no painting of loss in warm, cuddly pastels. She showed no false bravado that focused on her own courage or denied it all with flippant humor. Stephanie wanted us to know how deep her pain had been. Stephanie brought us into her loss now a year old, long enough for her to stand beside her story and tell it truthfully.

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The students listened. My, did they listen. It wasn't just that she got it all right—all the theology we want our children to believe and articulate; she made it real, as real as watching a casket lowered into the ground.

Then the turn came in her story. She said, "I grew as a Christian when my father died." Her growing, it turns out, came in seeing the stark realities of cross

Then the turn came in her story. She said, "I grew as a Christian when my father died." Her growing, it turns out, came in seeing the stark realities of cross and resurrection applied to the stark realities of death and life. She said she can't look at a cross without thinking of her father. She said that because her dad believed that Jesus died and rose again for him, she knows he is with Jesus. She said that just as Jesus' body was raised from death, she knows her father's body will be raised, too, when Jesus comes again. "I hope you remember my words today," she said, "because they're true."

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Stephanie's growth in loss reflects the power of the cross and resurrection to bring hope. What's more, it confirms the need for a real, historical, physical resurrection. As she told her story, it all hinged on the reality of Jesus' story. Make His death and resurrection some kind of symbol or

metaphor, turn His story into a morality tale about good winning over evil, and Stephanie's hope would be dashed.

Some 45 years ago, John Updike entered a poem in a contest at a Lutheran church. Today his *Seven Stanzas for Easter* is often quoted by pastors and others. It witnesses in stark language to the utter necessity for the death and resurrection of Christ to be real, in-the-body history and science. The seven stanzas are like reading 1 Corinthians 15 in verse. For Updike, "if the cells' dissolution (in Jesus' body) did not reverse, the molecules reknit, the amino acids rekindle, the Church will fall."¹ Here is the fourth of the seven verses:

Let us not mock God with metaphor,
analogy, sidestepping, transcendence;
making of the event a parable,
a sign painted in the
faded credulity of earlier ages:
let us walk through the door.²

For millennia Christians have tended toward an unhealthy mysticism, a subtle turning of holy history into metaphor, body into spirit, truth into tradition. The smell of sweat and blood is translated centuries later into jeweled crosses, each, as one secular mystic put it, "with this little man on it." Realities become words from a creed, cherished yet so often recited, not confessed. The vivid, risen Jesus of the Bible, inviting Thomas to touch Him and His disciples to eat with Him, appears in our minds as hazy, other-worldly, and iconic. The centuries, if we are not careful, can blur our vision of the real.

In his poem entitled, *Nothing Gold Can Stay*, another poet, Robert Frost, caught how temporary all things are. By 1923, when this poem first appeared, Frost had lost two children and a dear friend. Middle age brought to Frost the realization of how fragile and short-lived the gold of life can be.

Nature's first green is gold
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.³

"So dawn goes down to day." The same could be said of Easter. Now, in the daytime, after that first and distant dawning, the gold can turn to green. In the green of busy lives, dying and rising escape our contemplation. The gold of Easter may seem tarnished long ago—its hour long passed.

Then someone dies. Then the Gospel of a crucified and risen Lord seems brand new again, golden once more—in all its brutal and beautiful physicality. A 15-year-old stands up with confidence and presents what comes as news—Jesus Christ is real. She clings to the hope that His death and resurrection have everything to do with her father's death and resurrection. And hope, as golden as the cross around her neck, springs eternal.

I am haunted by a painting that hangs in the Smithsonian Art Museum. It is a visual testimony to the power of Christ-centered hope. The artist is John Biggers. The painting is *Shotgun Ward # 1* (1966). In Houston, Texas, many African-Americans grew up in these homes. They are called “shotgun” homes because they have a long center hallway with rooms on both sides so a shotgun blast from the front porch will go right through the back door. In the painting Biggers shows a Christian church on fire. Many children and adults have gathered to watch their church burn down. Most have their backs to us as we view the painting. In the foreground, though, an older man faces us. He holds a lamp and faces away from the burning church, away from the ashes, to the future. He is the pastor of that church, a valued community leader, who offers hope in the face of tragic loss. The light he bears is the light of the Gospel, an enduring reality that simply will not succumb to fire and ashes.

In the church I serve a 21-foot Christ figure hovers in relief over the back doors of our sanctuary. We call the figure “The Sending Christ.” The contemporary figure’s hands are stylized enough for one of our young children to have commented, “Look at that! Jesus is wearing mittens!” Since then, a few of us have begun calling the figure “The Minnesota Jesus,” because of the mitten-like hands. There is something beautiful about a child’s ability even to imagine Jesus as real enough, physical enough, to wear mittens in Minnesota.

Whether it’s Christ in death or Christ in life, let Christ be real. Borne by confirmands and children, pastors and poets, musicians and artists, and all the company of faith, the Christ of the Gospels endures. In death and in life, He is “Son of God and Son of Man.” He is the beginning and end of history. In, of all places, a confirmation class (where pastors sometimes fear to tread), I heard Him intersect with the tragedy of a 15-year-old Christian. As she spoke, He was real for me again, trumping death with life and a Gospel all golden like the dawn.

The Rev. Dr. Dean Nadasdy is Senior Pastor at Woodbury Lutheran Church, Woodbury, Minnesota.



1 *Telephone Poles and Other Poems* © 1961 by John Updike. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House Inc.
2 Ibid.
3 *The Poetry of Robert Frost*. Edward Connery Lathem, ed. New York: Henry Holt, 1979.