

Occasionally, Sean will enfold me in his arms while I am in the midst of preparing our evening meal. More often than not, my response in that moment is to pull away and ask, "What? What's happening?" Similarly, if Sean says, "I love you," out of the blue, I usually respond with, "Why are you saying that?"

Sean's gestures and my half-joking responses reveal differences in the culture of our families of origin and differences in personality, to be sure. We've been married long enough that they've become part of wallpaper of our relationship. This dynamic comes to mind as I reflect on the beckoning of the Beloved to rise and come away, to find rest for our souls with One who is gentle and humble of heart. Like the embrace that is offered when I am concentrating on a recipe or madly stirring sauce, the wooing of God is often a surprising interruption within our ordinary routines and carefully constructed lives.

To come away, then, often requires a turning aside. We must relinquish our preoccupations and investment in what has been and risk attending to what is emerging. Like my cooking, who we are and what we are doing is not necessarily "bad" or "wrong." But the Beloved's call does intend to escort us deeper into and more fully along the gracious, liberating way. Several months ago, I experienced a divine interruption that continues to unfold and give shape to my present. Some have heard this story before, at least in part, but I trust it bears repeating here.



It was a Tuesday afternoon. Avril spoke with me about her concern for John♥ who was obviously not travelling well. By his own admission, he had not taken his medication and chose to "self-medicate" with an alcohol binge. When we found John, he was dozing on the steps of the church, covered with a dirty blanket.

Mindful that in a few hours, others would be arriving for Mary's Kitchen, we were hopeful that the police might be able to escort John to a safe place where he could spend the night and receive his needed injection. So, Avril rang the police and explained the situation and our time frame. We wished to avoid an emotional scene in front of the other members of the community and to preserve John's dignity, if possible.

Unfortunately, the police arrived at 5:20. (The community meal begins at 6:00.) Most of those who were gathering seemed intent to ignore the situation as John pleaded for help and one of the officers handcuffed and moved him towards the car further down on Chapel Street. But one of our friends helped the other two officers gather John's things into a plastic bag and tried to comfort John by saying, "It's okay... just go with them... they'll help you."

I found the scene emotional, the whole of it—John's wailing, our friend's kindness and reassurances and the community's response. I felt a pull to be closer to John so I walked down Chapel Street and called out his name. He turned and cried out. In hearing our exchange, I saw what can only be interpreted as anger flit across the face of the officer. Without any justification that I could see, he put his knee into the back of John's legs, bringing him to the ground before the open door. Then, just as quickly, he pulled John up by his handcuffed arms and ushered him into the back of the car.

Shortly after, this same officer returned to the hall to speak with Avril and me. His word of advice to us that night was: You shouldn't befriend "people like him." He left us with no doubt that he sees John and others like him as a perpetual problem for whom there is no hope and, if we insist on befriending them, we will be on our own because "we can't keep coming out here to help you."

♥ Not his real name.

This experience may seem far from the expression of desire in the Song of Songs or the warm invitation to find rest for our weariness in the Gospel. However, through this incident, I clearly heard the voice of Love calling out, asking me to rise from where I was and come away to a new place of being.

To be honest, the officer's warning that night tapped into my own fear of the murky world of mental illness, poverty, drugs and alcohol. In part, I understood where he was coming from because I have held something of his perspective myself in the past. But confronted with the overt view that there is no hope for some people and that my/our response should be to abandon them emboldened and clarified God's love within me. This shattering experience opened my heart and is drawing me into new terrains full of light and air and freedom.



As Bernard of Clairvaux rightly, I think, preached, the Bridegroom / Word enters and "awakens... stirs... soothes... and pierces" our hearts. The Love that comes to embrace us is not the stuff of TV dramas and romance novels. Though warm and non-coercive, God's love intends transformation and conversion. It never leaves us quite the same. In this way, the spiritual experience may be personal, but the fruit is always born in and for community.

Our experiences of God coming near may not be as dramatic as the one I've shared, nor, thankfully, are they always as life-altering. But Love comes to us daily in a myriad of ways and, in our turning aside and conscious reception, we are given an abundance of grace and direction for the living.

The R. S. Thomas poem below was read during a Benedictus Zoom meditation and I chose to incorporate it into our prayer at Church Council that evening. It speaks of the invitation to see the brilliance of love shining in our midst and to turn aside. It seems a fitting poem to contemplate during this time of transition between what was and what will be.

The Bright Field by R. S. Thomas

I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the pearl
of great price, the one field that had
treasure in it. I realise now
that I must give all that I have
to possess it. Life is not hurrying

on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

What have been your experiences of the lit bush recently?

Where do you sense the brilliant shining of love in your midst?

How are these encounters giving shape to your heart for the future?