



THE GOD WHO SMOKES

Scandalous Meditations
on Faith

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CONTENTS

Prologue: So What's with the Weird Title?	11
1. King of Fools	17
2. Velvet Rembrandts	35
3. A God Who Lets You Drop	53
4. God Is an Earthquake	73
5. The God Who Smokes	89
6. Jesus Is in the Way	105
7. You've Got to Love Somebody	123
8. Warrior for Justice and Righteousness	143
9. Servants of the Glory, Part One	161
10. Servants of the Glory, Part Two	177
11. Dancing in the Dark	189
12. Good Sex and Bad Sex	207
13. David's Dance	221
14. Waiting till Father Returns	239
15. Longing for Home	257
Epilogue: Shall We Dance?	275
Notes	277
About the Author	315

PROLOGUE

SO WHAT'S WITH THE WEIRD TITLE?

To give you a clue, I will have to back up just a little. It goes back to something I read several years ago. I didn't like it that well at the time, and, to tell the truth, I can't say I like it any better now. It will probably bother you, too. But it is the one thing that really helps make sense of this book. After all, what *is* one to expect from a book with such an incongruous title written by a guy whose last name evokes images of joints and bongos and beer?

My favorite Catholic author, Peter Kreeft, teaches philosophy at BCU, “Barely Catholic University” (sometimes known as Boston College University). He wrote this little powerhouse of a book: *Three Philosophies of Life*. It addresses three books of the Bible: Ecclesiastes—life as vanity; Job—life as suffering; and Song of Songs—life as love.¹

In the middle of a brilliant excursion on Job's trials, Kreeft tells us that the meaning of life is about getting a face, about becoming

real, about becoming yourself.² This sounds like pop psychology, but trust me, it's the furthest thing from it. He is alluding to *Till We Have Faces*, which is where C. S. Lewis sketches this out in a haunting myth so beautiful it burns. Becoming real is gaining substance, becoming who we were meant to be: Lords of Narnia, regal splendors, who as Lewis says, will one day shine like the stars, such that if I could see now what you will be then, I would be tempted to bow and worship.³

The problem, Kreeft tells us, is that it takes a bit of doing to turn a cretin like me and like you into a little Christ. "It is not easy getting a face," he says. "It is done by suffering not sinning, by saying No as well as saying Yes: by climbing against the gravity of the selfish self, not by the direct paths of self-realization and self-actualization."⁴

And then he drops the little bomb. "The meaning of life is war."⁵

This is so counterintuitive. This runs so contrary to the accepted wisdom. This is so brutally hard to hear. And it's the last thing you want to be told when you are kicking back, holding a frosty glass, watching the surf come in through your brand-new sunglasses that would do Bono proud. Who wants to hear that? So I shoved it aside until I began my private quest through the Gospels these past two years.

I was reading them like a Navajo tracker studying a week-old trail. I was taking my time. I was picking up and smelling the droppings, fingering the bent twigs, and putting my ear right to the ground. And I heard these drumbeats. I could make out the sound of swords clashing, feet stomping, mothers crying, and babies screaming. Rachel was weeping for her slaughtered infants (Matthew 2:18), and I knew Kreeft (and a lot of others) was right.⁶

Like any decent piece of literature, the Gospels use foreshadowing. We hear it in the Magnificat and in Simeon's prophecy of the sword that will pierce Mother Mary's heart (Luke 1:51-52; 2:34-35). Then Jesus tells it to us straight up. He comes to rip and tear families apart because He is bringing not peace but a sword, not unity but division (Matthew 10:35; Luke 12:49,52). He was not on vacation in Palestine but on a mission of violence that would end violently.

I don't much like it, but there it is.

It does make sense, however, of the bloody battles that soak the pages of the Old Testament. It does give a perspective to those war cries we call the Psalms. And it helps explain the ongoing suffering of thousands of sister and brother martyrs who right now are giving their lives, as Jesus did, for the life of the world. And I tend to think it places the final, cataclysmic battles in Revelation in an understandable context.

But my real dilemma was how does one write about this?

I got my answer at a sushi restaurant.

I had never before tried those pinwheel delicacies. My sons Ben and Aaron had graciously invited me to take them to a nearby all-you-can-eat buffet. I was not fond of every variety but found one I liked a lot. It was the house specialty. It was fried and, when a thin slice of salmon was draped over the top, could make your taste buds shout the Hallelujah Chorus. While savoring the exotic flavors, my sons and I were talking about my idea for a book about Jesus. They were commenting on the essay I had given them, summarizing my research. Both sons very kindly proposed that I select another writing style entirely, lest the reader fall over in a fit of exhaustion halfway through the first page.

Ben asked why I didn't just tell stories.

So I began reminiscing about growing up as a fundamentalist

missionary kid on four continents. By the time we had our fill of raw fish, I had decided to follow my sons' advice. I would ditch the essay and get autobiographical.

These stories are signs pointing to a Bigger Story that is really better called a Great Epic in which we get questions *and* answers.⁷ We get hope and we get joy. We get death that bursts up into life; and it is now, and it is then, and it lasts forever, and it makes sense of all the crap and the hurt and the sometimes unrelenting tragedy of life. For it whispers and shouts and sings that it all ends up in a wedding dance where we all get drunk on joy, and it will never, ever end.

And the point of the book is not so much war—that is backdrop. What I want to say is pretty simple: despite what post-modernity (whatever you may conceive it to be) says, there is truth that can be known; there is a center that holds reality together; there is meaning and purpose; there is destiny and a calling of epic proportions (though you may never be famous).

The stories let you in on a wonderful secret: We are not only invited guests but the blushing Bride. And our Groom is a heroic King, a mighty warrior who is good and just and stunning in His beauty. He is so full of passion and blazing emotion that He burns—and yes, smokes in the ferocity of His infinite, holy love that compelled Him to give it all away for His Bride. And He who gave it all for us is worth giving ourselves completely to. We exist not to believe, and not even so much to follow, but to love. And as Luther says somewhere, love God with all your heart and do what you will.

But is the meaning of life *really* war? The final answer may surprise you. What I can say is that, according to the Creator of the world, there is an oppositional defiance disorder in the cosmos, and we are smack in the center of it. Darkness and Light

are in mortal conflict. The Seed of the Woman and the Seed of the Serpent are not friendly to each other. And the very epicenter of the hostilities runs right through our own hearts. The battle rages within and it rages without. We are called to love the world and hate it. We are to lay down our lives for its blessing but cry out for God's vengeance. We are to be *in* the world and *for* the world but not *of* the world. After all, the captain of the heavenly hosts is both a Lamb who was slain and a Lion laying claim to the whole jungle. There *is* a war, but there is so much more.

For our God is a God who smiles and sings.

But He is also a God who smokes.

I

KING OF FOOLS

I think I love Jesus because I was a stutterer. The childhood pain of being mocked for an unflattering appearance has been compared to the shock of a drive-by shooting—I would say that the stutterer’s suffering is more like slow roasting on the Inquisitor’s rack. Whereas a bullet brings a sudden startling pain and then oblivion, fire in the hands of an expert can be protracted, exquisite torture.

Stuttering is like a vicious ghoul—with talons as long and sharp as needles—it eases up on you, luring you into irrational security, then gleefully drives its hooks into your tongue. And there you are, incoherently flailing and fumbling in a waking nightmare.

It is a constant dread and a recurring reality.

You become unusually sensitive to the conversational spotlight. Like Mexicans in the old westerns, you prefer those really big sombreros—they shield your head and face and cast a shadow over your entire body.

But I wasn't really wired to hide out under broad brims or be a complete wallflower. I had things I wanted to say. Quite a few, apparently. So time and again, I would be driven—almost insanely—to take that terrible plunge into the dangerous cata-racts where the stakes were very high and the water shallow. The crazy thing was that I would crash and burn, or come awfully close, almost every time.

Stuttering may be a more cruel disability than most. While others are obvious and readily apparent, this one is not. You look, act, and at times even talk normally, so people interact with you as though you have no speech defect. Their defenses are down—until the goblin grabs your tongue and your eyes fill up with fear and you begin to stammer incomprehensibly. It is then that reality hits: They are dealing with a person with a handicap. They have been caught unaware, plunged into a situation they never invited or expected.

How well I remember the terrible coolness falling like lead. The tightening along the sides of the mouth as the warm smile turned to glass, the eyes growing wide as though staring at a car wreck, and the body inching back at an obtuse angle.

They are trapped as you are trapped.

They can't walk away. To do so would be a grievous breach of etiquette. Had they known what you were, they would most likely have avoided you. But avoidance is impossible now. They must wait nervously, embarrassed for you and for themselves, as you grit your teeth and somehow manage to pull your tongue free of the demonic tormentor. For them it is an uninvited assault, an intrusion into their calm and safe and predictable normalcy. It is as unwanted as being forced to watch an epileptic seizure when all you came for was a pair of pants at the mall.

To survive, I had to become a master of verbal whitewater

rafting. I could spin on a dime as I saw the jagged rocks up ahead. Conversation was an exhausting venture in skimming and scraping past words that could, if not kill you, destroy your boat and ruin your day. A thorough command of the *words-that-must-never-be-uttered* was required. These tend to be the ones that begin in hard consonants like B, P, or T (as in my first name—having to introduce myself on the first day of school was death by paper cuts), or with the sound of K as in *kiss* or L as in *love*.

And that puts a real drag on romantic dialogue.

When it is with Kathy, the blonde in eighth grade, the pain of it can feel like a belly full of battery acid. But when it is with Sharon, the dark-haired female lead in the high school play, when the interested look softens to pity, the acid can start to bore a hole through your stomach.

Sharon was an upperclassman, who won the lead in all the plays. She was a free spirit and, being a bit of a hippie, was also remarkably kind. We were talking over the kissing scene in *Anne Frank*. It was my first play, and I had somehow been chosen to play the part of Peter Van Dam, Anna's romantic interest. I, a ninth-grader, was *very* interested. During that tentative conversation on a subject I was no expert in, with a lady who was, I began to do the tango on the hard consonant in the word *kiss*. As the blood rushed up my face and fire blazed through me, she smiled, pretended not to notice and finished the sentence for me. I cursed myself for an idiot and vowed never to risk such a verbal gambit again. I don't recall ever having another conversation with her—that is, until the next year when I was chosen to be her romantic lead in *Tevya's Seven Daughters*.

That time I chose my words more carefully.

Glib, I was not. Funny, I could not be. So, robbed of control over that part of the body that James tells us “makes great boasts”

(James 3:5, NIV), I was forced to opt for the monastic's best friend: silence. I lived in a state of mute panic that I would be drawn into a conversation requiring multi-syllabic responses. Shame and fear followed me like bad perfume, even as I tried to melt into anonymity hiding on the fringes.

And this brings me to my love for Jesus. I get His stories. I can relate to the people He interacted with. The woman with that humiliating bleeding problem that forced her to the periphery, dragging behind her the whispers, the finger-pointing, the label "unclean." I know her. She hung out with me there at the edges. She spent twelve years on the outside looking in. Not that we were friends exactly. When you've been deeply shamed you hover alone on the outskirts—bleak, silent, and independent islands. You protect your space.

I understand the lepers, too. They hung out in the back with us. But they at least hung together. They'd somehow learned the value of being a part of a community of sufferers.

The shame-filled who teem on the fringes are like magicians who've mastered the art of becoming invisible. There is blessed safety in anonymity. Of course, it comes at the cost of slowly leaking away into a twilight zone of nonexistence.

You're there but not really there.

The woman with the blood disorder (probably some kind of hemorrhage) lived essentially as an outcast. According to the Law of Moses, she was ritually, and thus socially, unclean. She was an untouchable. Like Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, she also had a large letter stitched onto her chest, except it wasn't an *A* but a *Z*. *Zabab*. It was a designation imposed by the Torah: "unclean." The Law made it abundantly clear that not only was she dirty, but anyone who touched her, even inadvertently, would also be made unclean (Leviticus 15:25-33).

So this woman, for a dozen aching long years, has been shunned by her own community, suffering alone. There has been no one to embrace her, no one to express comfort and grace. She has been shut out of the social fabric, the warm, inviting circle of belonging. Neither family nor friends have been able to physically communicate love or affection.

Her sickness has stolen her place and expelled her into the shadowed existence of a foreigner, a social and religious defective. Like Oliver Twist gazing wistfully through bright windows at families celebrating happy, plentiful Christmases, she could look but not touch. She might try to warm herself at a hundred vicarious fires, but these provide no cheer or relief to her lonely distress. It is cold comfort indeed to watch others laugh, holding easy hands as they dance, knowing you can never join up.

So she stands year after year, looking in from a distance until her heart grows cold and hard like a burnt gray cinder. She shrinks back and withdraws, permanently . . . until she hears that Jesus is in town.

Flinging caution to the wind, she inches her way through the crowd, trying hard to avoid notice. Her goal is just to touch, not a person, but a bit of a robe. It is the fringe of the prayer shawl. *If He is the Messiah*, she tells herself, *the Torah guarantees healing beneath those “wings.”* If she is wrong, she knows she will be humiliated for befouling a nationally respected rabbi. Yet she pushes through, eventually putting the anonymous tips of her guilty fingers to the fringe of His shawl. She has shuffled her way invisibly from the fringes to the fringe. She risks it all, and she is rewarded abundantly.

From my perspective, the real miracle of these Jesus miracle stories is that fringe dwellers—these indistinct, bare smudges of existence—stood up, cried out, or stretched forward to make

contact with the Real. Taking their courage in their hands, these insubstantials pressed through the veil of shame that had rendered them nonpersons, crashed through the barrier of separation that expelled them to the periphery, and connected with the only one who is truly substantial.

They crashed the party and found themselves not only accepted, but favored and blessed as well.

They got the seats of honor.

Of these Jesus would say, “Since John the Baptist came, up to this present time, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence and the violent are taking it by force” (Matthew 11:12).

Blessed are the violent.

Blessed are the wild eyed, the inarticulate, the social misfits, the desperate—those who throw all caution and reputation aside so they can just get close.

Blessed are the gate-crashers who push over every restraint in their mad dash to grab hold of life and hope to find in their delirious hands joy.

Blessed are those who trample their pride to death as they cry out their longing and pain and, in falling on their faces, get not only a new face but a new name. Where once they were unloved and overlooked, they grow drunk on the sparkling wine of acceptance and welcome and home.

I also get the delicious intoxication of the first-name-basis: “Matthew, follow me” (Matthew 9:9), or “Zacchaeus, can I hang out at your place tonight?” (Luke 19:2).

Zacchaeus was short even by Jewish standards. He was the weakling who could not escape the scorching tongues and cruel fists of the village bullies. In the wolf-pack hierarchy, he was the disregarded runt of the litter—the last and least. But when he grew older, he figured out a way to power.

Both he and Matthew, despite their money, were forced by their professions to the margins. They were despised as traitors. They represented the interests of the Roman establishment. They were the FBI agents shaking down the poor blacks in Selma, Mississippi. They were the quislings, the French collaborators who sided with the Nazis. They were the representatives of big business who busted up the union and enforced sub-minimum wages on the working poor. They stood erect for law and order and profited handsomely for it.

Their consciences were rubbed down to a nub. But when they were given a chance to break free from the yoke of greed, they made a run for it. When they were given their names back—no longer “Traitor” but “Zacchaeus” or “Matt”—they were released and rushed into an embrace they never expected and knew they never deserved.

I also get the tangy sweetness of the words: “I’ve come to find and to save the rejects, the misfits, the overlooked and undervalued. I came on purpose to choose you, as Rob Bell writes, ‘the not-good-enoughs.’”¹

Though Jesus was not a true insubstantial, He may have grown up feeling like a third-culture kid—not at home in this country and no longer at home in the one He was born in. He was from another planet after all, but He’d changed dramatically.

He didn’t look the same.

He wasn’t the same.

How does a God-man fit back into the heady sweetness of the infinitely loving, interrelationship of infinite Persons?

Certainly, the perfect Son of God, the Creator of the world, found Himself not at home in the fragmented darkness and bleakness of His fallen creation. As His feet raised dust clouds on the mountain trails of Israel, was He afflicted with the pain of

displacement, the ache of homesickness, the disquieting longing for His true home and His perfect Father?

I think He was.

Did He miss glory?

I think He did.

Judging by how the Pharisees threw back in His face the implicit accusation of illegitimacy, I think that there was a black cloud that hung over His head His entire life (John 8:31; Matthew 12:24; John 1:46). Did the moral minority exclude and shove Him to the periphery populated by the “unclean”: the traitors, the morally and physically foul, the corrupted and corrupting, who bore the perpetual acne marks of unworthiness?

I think they did.

That was part and parcel of bearing our sufferings and shouldering our pains. And of carrying our humiliation and shame. Which is why I think there was a bit of intoxication for Jesus also when He drank in those sweet words: “You are my Son, the Beloved, my favor rests on you” (Luke 3:22). He needed to know He was inside too.

We all do.

That’s why it’s the poor, the weak, the needy, the bottom-feeders and cave dwellers, the expelled and repelled, the shame filled and shamefaced who run when they hear His voice. They can hear their names being called from miles away, and they can’t help themselves. They lose their heads and come running from the dim fringes into the light of day and find themselves, finally, against all hope, inside.

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There is a scene that sticks with me from the black-and-white version of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. It is Paris during the

New Year's celebration known as the Festival of Fools. In France, as in the majority of other European countries, the celebration was kicked off with the election of a Lord of Misrule or King of Fools. Historians tell us that this harlequin king went by many names: the King of the Bean in England, the Abbot of Unreason in Scotland, the *Abbe de la Malgouveme* in France. This mock ruler had the power to call people to disorder. This could include cross-dressing, bawdy songs, drinking to excess, and gambling on the church altar.

In some places the Festival of the Ass was commemorated. A young girl with babe in arms would enter a church riding a donkey. During the mock services, prayer responses that would have normally elicited an *amen* were concluded by a hearty (but hardly respectful) *hee-haw* instead.

Apparently, Parisians had a particularly infamous reputation. Such was their debauchery and disgraceful behavior that by the fifteenth century an embarrassed Catholic Church was compelled to finally clamp down on these “monstrous” celebrations.

Quasimodo is a fringe dweller. He is the impossibly ugly, deformed hunchback who lives and works at the Cathedral of Notre Dame. He has been irresistibly drawn in by the gleeful sounds, the guttering torches and shouts of delight from the crowd. He is on the outskirts spying on the revelries. When the time comes to crown the ugliest member the King of Fools, the pathetic, mentally challenged bell-ringer readily wins.

The hunchback is thrown up on their shoulders and bounces down the cobbled streets of Paris, held up by the cheering riff-raff—the inebriated, filthy backstreet dwellers. Poor Quasimodo feels thrilled and embarrassed and honored. He has never been chosen for anything before. Now, not only has he been hand selected to be inside but to be the top dog as well. He doesn't

understand that the celebration is a mockery. He does not know he is being made sport of. He is the King of Fools in more ways than one.

It's the look of surprised joy and timid, hopeful delight mixed with the tiniest little question that gets to me. It's too good to be true, Quasimodo is thinking, but the shouts of approval seem so genuine.

Quasimodo cannot tell that the cheers are really jeers.

When you live on the margins, you never really know for sure. There is this needling suspicion, this carnivorous worry: Are these prestige brokers patronizing or, behind sidelong glances, quietly mocking?

When it dawned on me that Jesus came to the outcasts like me who choke on the smog of a rejection that is both real and imagined, I began to be won over. When you've given up all hope of being picked for the team, much less of hearing your name get top billing, this is heady stuff.

No wonder an avaricious, cold-blooded thief named Zacchaeus lost his grip on sanity and promised to give back four times what he'd defrauded. No wonder the lepers forgot to say thank you. They were simply too stunned at their unbelievable good fortune. Their heads reeled from the delirious thrill of being clean, being cool, being invited in by the only one who really matters.

That's why I love Jesus.

He called me by my first name, put His arm around my shoulder, and as we strolled over the luscious green soccer pitch, He told me I could play fullback on His team. And I could start, if I wanted.

But I have a feeling most of us get all this too.

Our brokenness is such that we walk around with trace levels of radioactivity from exposure to the painful blows of misfortune.

We are a band of miserable brothers and sisters—a motley crew of the shattered and battered, the bruised and broken.

We have come to Jesus, or are thinking of coming, because we have heard that He is kind and gentle and tender, that He is protective and would hold us and heal us. And it is all very true. But I worry that it is all we know. It certainly is mostly all that we read or hear or sing. It is sweet and delicious, and it is repeated and then repeated some more.

Though true, it is only partially so. And as a wise soul pointed out, a half-truth, if taken as the whole truth, is a lie. I do not for a moment want to deny or minimize the attraction of love incarnate. I join all those other fringe dwellers and shout out, “Jesus is good!” But I also want to link arms with another timid introvert, an unassuming little beaver speaking about Aslan, the King of Narnia, and say: “Yes, He is Good, but He’s NOT safe!”

He is a lion, after all.

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There is a Christian bumper sticker on the back of lots of cars in our town that reads: LOVE WINS. I understand the sentiment and even approve, kind of. But like all bumper stickers, its impact suffers from a diffused ambiguity. Whose love wins? Does human love inevitably win? Wins what? Wins the war, the tennis match, the poker game? Anyway, isn’t it now passé to view life preeminently in terms of winning and losing? Isn’t that a carryover from the modern, colonial, black-wing-tip-and-oxford-shirt era?

The big question that looms in my mind is this: If it’s God’s love that wins, then what *kind* of divine love wins? This may seem to be a very odd question. It may seem self-explanatory or moot—God’s love is God’s love, right?

And, as the Bard said, there is the rub.

The divine love we have been trained to think about is the sentimental variety. Brian McLaren astutely takes note of this in *The Last Word and the Word After That*. He calls this distortion “the divine doting auntie in Heaven full of sweetness and smiles, who sees war and corruption and violence and racism and says, ‘Well, boys will be boys. Would you care for another blessing, dearie?’” He surmises that this theological caricature and others like it “probably, in some way, flow from an understandable but unhealthy overreaction against God the eternal torturer.”² Maybe. Maybe not.

The only problem with his critique is that it provides no real alternative. Today, the cultural, philosophical, and religious flow is rushing so strongly in the direction of the Auntie God that you need to be very insistent and clear (one might even suggest a bullhorn) in proposing an alternate perspective. Otherwise, it just gets drowned out in the surge of converging waters and is dragged under. The undertow is so powerful that there is an almost numbing inevitability to its insistence that God’s love is driven by a sugary sentimentality, not something more solid and substantial and dangerous.

When the flow of culture (the Germans called it *zeitgeist*) is rampaging along the same narrow channel, it is the voice of wisdom that insists, “Take a step away from the stream. Take a step away from the stream.” One step sideways is usually all that is needed to catch your breath and clear your head.

If the church has a higher calling than being the world’s chaplain, baptizing its wars, its social and political agendas, as some still believe—if it exists to do more than pronounce approved religious blessings on culture—then stepping outside the prevailing stream is not only wise but essential. This is the only way to

provide the prophetic counterpoint that brings a perspective that is out of this world, which, if you study the example of the biblical prophets, seems to be their exclusive literary point of view.

This voice will frequently, though not always, be at odds with the *zeitgeist* and will incur its hostility. The birth of Jesus was inaugurated with a bloodbath. Herod's slaughter of all male children in Bethlehem two years old and younger is merely its foreshadowing. The Messiah made it explicit: "If you belonged to the world the world would love you as its own; but because you do not belong to the world, because my choice withdrew you from the world, therefore the world hates you" (John 15:19; Matthew 10:22).

What Jesus is saying to His followers is that if they are going to be faithful to their calling to challenge the prevailing assumptions and values—the accepted paradigms of their world—sparks, at least, will fly. There is an inherent, settled antipathy between God's kingdom and the kingdom of this world. The voice that speaks for God outside the accepted stream will create an uncomfortable and eventually intolerable dissonance. Sometimes it is so intense that it may get you killed, as it did Martin Luther King Jr. and others.³

As C. S. Lewis puts it:

The enemy has not yet thought it worth while to fling his whole weight against us. But he soon will. This happens in the history of every Christian movement, beginning with the ministry of Christ Himself. At first it is welcome to all who have no special reason for opposing it; at this stage he who is not against it is for it. What men notice is its difference from those aspects of the World which they already dislike. But later on, as the real meaning of the

Christian claim becomes apparent, its demand for total surrender . . . men are increasingly “offended.” Dislike, terror, and finally hatred succeed: none who will not give it what it asks (and it asks all) can endure it: all who are not for it are against it.⁴

What we need to make clear with our bumper stickers and culture-current writings is that the love that wins is a holy love. The love that won on the cross and wins the world is a love that is driven, determined, and defined by holiness. It is a love that flows out of the heart of a God who is transcendent, majestic, infinite in righteousness, who loves justice as much as He does mercy; who hates wickedness as much as He loves goodness; who blazes with a fiery, passionate love for Himself above all things. He is Creator, Sustainer, Beginning and End. He is robed in a splendor and eternal purity that is blinding. He rules, He reigns, He rages and roars, then bends down to whisper love songs to His creatures.

His love is vast and irresistible. It is also terrifying, and it will spare no expense to give everything away in order to free us from the bondage of sin, purifying for Himself a people who are devoted to His glory, a people who “have no ambition except to do good” (Titus 2:14). So He crushes His precious Son in order to rescue and restore mankind along with His entire creation (Isaiah 53:10-12). He unleashes perfect judgment on the perfectly obedient sacrifice and then pulls Him up out of the grave in a smashing and utter victory.

He is a God who triumphs.

He is no Auntie. He is a burning cyclone of passionate love.

Holy love wins.⁵

The Jesus we love and follow reaches down to the alienated and the dispossessed. He goes to the fringe and draws in the

rejected. He lays gentle hands on the dirty and the ostracized. But He does not only touch and heal, He also instructs and warns. He tells the woman caught in adultery, “Go now and leave your life of sin” (John 8:11, NIV). He tells the invalid by the pool, “See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you” (John 5:14, NIV).

Our accommodation to our culture’s insistence on a half-truth puts us in danger of declawing and domesticating the mighty King, whose presence made demons scream in terror and death flee in shame. He came on an invasive, dangerous, and unwelcome mission of mercy to cut open and expose what was hidden in men’s hearts (Luke 2:34-35). His coming was not to be marked by peace and tranquility—He came to impose a test of absolute allegiance. He forced people into a divisive crisis of choice (Matthew 10:34-39). The peace He came to bring first triggered a war. He was on a guerrilla mission to infiltrate territory controlled by His enemy, raid his camp, and set the prisoners free (Mark 3:23-27; Luke 4:18).

That’s why from His carpenter’s tool belt there also hung a sword.

Which is why David, Israel’s poet laureate, got it just right:

Let me proclaim Yahweh’s decree;
 He has told me, “You are my son,
 Today I have become your father.
 Ask and I will give you the nations for your heritage,
 the ends of the earth for your domain.
 With iron scepter you will break them,
 shatter them like potter’s ware.
 So, now, you kings, learn wisdom,
 earthly rulers, be warned:

serve Yahweh, fear Him.
tremble and kiss His feet,
or He will be angry and you will perish,
for His anger is very quick to blaze.
Happy, all who take shelter in Him. (Psalm 2:7-12)

That is why I love this Jesus—but fear Him, too. For though He is a King of fools, He is also the King of kings.

And so at the outset of this book, I begin with a blessing. It is a blessing for the outcast, for the displaced and misplaced, for the desperate and the lonely, it's a blessing for the alienated and expelled, for those who have lost hope or are hanging on by a hair. It's a blessing for you, and it is a blessing for me.

Blessing

*May the Lord of the outcast, the King of fools,
the great shepherd of our souls,
come and place a kiss of peace on your cheek.
May He say to you, "You are mine and I am yours."
May He give you the embrace of the Father
that will heal a thousand wounds and speak a thousand
hopes into life.
As He takes the dry ashes of misspent passion
and gives you in its place a garland of praise,
may you rejoice.
No, may you shout with a bold, confident joy
at the dizzying delight of being chosen,
of being welcomed in by your true Father
and invited to sit with Him at the banquet table reserved*

for His friends.

But,

*as you celebrate your delightful privilege,
may you never forget that the one who called you His own
is friend but also sovereign King—
that He who gave everything up for you
calls you to give everything up for Him.*