

## NORTH STAR

2 Timothy 1:1-14

A Communion Meditation by Robert E. Dunham  
Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost    October 6, 2019

At the beginning of Ron Rash's novel, *Above the Waterfall*, the county sheriff, Les, is just three weeks from retirement. Les might have hoped his last weeks would be straightforward and simple, but instead he finds himself dealing with an escalating conflict between the owner of a local fishing resort and an elderly mountain man suspected of poaching. There is other unfinished business, too, especially out in the backwoods hollers, where crystal meth labs have become dangerous replacements for moonshine stills. After one particularly disturbing meth bust, with events getting darker and more difficult, Les gets in his squad car to head back to town, and suddenly has a flashback to his childhood.

I had been bad to sleepwalk as a kid [he says]. There were times, for some reason always in the summer, I'd [sleepwalk] my way out of the house and end up in the yard. Folks back then, at least country folks, didn't see the need for a porch bulb burning all night. I'd open my eyes [from my stupor] and there'd be nothing but darkness, like the world had slipped its leash and run away, taking everything with it except me. Then I'd hear a whip-poor-will or a jar fly, or feel the dew dampening my feet, or I'd look up and find the stars tacked to the sky where they always were, only the moon roaming [and make my way back to the dark house].

I turned onto the main road and drove back toward town, all the while remembering what it had felt like when the world you knew had up and vanished, and you needed to find something to bring that world back, and you weren't sure you could.<sup>1</sup>

I've been thinking a lot about that reflection in recent days, thinking about how darkness seems to be dominating the news – about how the world we thought we knew has up and vanished, and we need to find something to bring it back, but aren't sure we can. I have been longing for some North Star to reorient us and light the way home again!

I think some such disorientation must have plagued Paul in the days when he composed his second letter to Timothy. Now, scholars aren't sure if it was really Paul the apostle who wrote the letter, but for our purposes today, let's assume it was Paul, writing to Timothy, his young friend in the faith. Paul found himself in prison, where the darkness was palpable. Reckoning with the possibility that his life would end soon in that hard place, he wrote a testamentary letter to this young man he considered his "child" in the faith. And perhaps in the writing, he found a reorientation in the midst of the darkness, for he speaks not of regret, but of gratitude and of hope.

Paul remembers Timothy's faith, and how it was kindled. He remembers that Timothy's faithfulness was rooted not in some theological truth, but in relationship. He remembers laying

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<sup>1</sup> Ron Rash, *Above the Waterfall*, New York, Harper Collins, 2015, 73.

his hands on Timothy's head – a rich enactment of the passing of the faith and Christ's calling from one person – from one generation – to another. He remembers the power of that moment and invites Timothy to remember it, too. Paul's words evoke that moment in a service of ordination when so many leaders come forward to lay their hands on those being ordained. I love the way Mississippi poet James Autry described such a moment in one of his poems:

Brother Jim Thompson came,  
 the oldest,  
 with overalls and a white shirt buttoned at the collar,  
 with a walking cane and a Bible  
 that had stood fifty years of pounding,  
 and with that old fire burning through his cataracts.

Didn't need no seminary.  
 Always preached the Bible  
 and the Lord Jesus Christ  
 crucified and buried and  
 raised from the dead.

Brother Hamer came  
 and Brother Ewart  
 and the three Walker boys,  
 preachers all.  
 They came through rain,  
 wrestling with the wheels of their out-of-county cars,  
 sliding in ruts so deep the tail pipes dragged.  
 They parked under the trees and along the road,  
 then walked, shined shoes and all,  
 through the mud,  
 picking their way along the high spots  
 like children jumping puddles.  
 Into the church of their fathers,  
 the place they had felt the call,  
 the old home church  
 where thousands of hands had pressed  
 on the bowed heads of new preacher boys,  
 of sun-reddened young men called by the Lord,  
 called from the cotton fields to preach the word.  
 They had felt the hands,  
 these old preachers,  
 felt those blunt-fingered, work-hardened hands,  
 felt them like a blessing,  
 like an offering,  
 like a burden.  
 Felt them at weddings and baptizings,  
 felt them in the heat of a summer revival sermon,

in the agony of a baby's funeral,  
 in the desperate prayer against some killer disease,  
 in the frustrating visit with a mind gone senile.  
 And now the old preachers came to lay their hands  
 on the head of a new kind of preacher,  
 a preacher from the seminary,  
 a preacher who studied the Bible in Greek and Hebrew,  
 who knew about religions they never heard of,  
 who knew about computers  
 with memory banks full of sermons  
 and many other modern things.  
 A new kind of preacher,  
 and yet,  
 a preacher who still would feel on her head  
 the hands  
 like a commandment  
 from all the preachers and deacons who ever were.<sup>2</sup>

Autry's poem speaks of a young pastor, but the hands that pass on the faith and Christ's calling and the heads that receive those blessings belong not just to clergy. We all feel the expectations, and the hopes, and the internal wrestling that the Gospel places on us like a blessing, like an offering, like a burden. Paul writes to Timothy, "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and now, I am sure, lives in you." Paul is describing nothing less than the communion of saints – the faith community that extends the Gospel's welcome to us and its claim on us across time and space.

Timothy's faith and his call to ministry did not happen out of the blue, like a voice from heaven. His faith and call came, at least in part, from the nurture and love of his mother and grandmother. He learned from them of the goodness of God and the demands of faithfulness. The hands that were laid on Timothy were reminders of the mysterious ways in which God reaches out and claims us, often through the gracious gift of other people.

A dozen years ago, another poet, Christian Wiman, found himself in the struggle of his life – a struggle for life itself. Newly married, newly published, a rising star on the American poetry scene, but diagnosed with a terminal cancer, Wiman suddenly was facing seemingly certain death. As he described it, he found himself "gazing into the Abyss." He and his wife began to grieve the future they would not be able to share. In an essay in the *American Scholar*, Wiman recalled how lost he felt: "Then, one morning we found ourselves going to church. *Found ourselves*. That's exactly what it felt like... so that we were casting aside the Sunday paper and moving toward the door with barely a word between us; and as if, once inside the church, we were discovering exactly where and who we were meant to be."<sup>3</sup> The faith community, like the faith itself, became for Chris Wiman a reorienting lifeline. It has been the

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<sup>2</sup> James Autry, "Ordination," *Life After Mississippi*, Oxford, Mississippi: Yoknapatawpha Press, 1989, 37.

<sup>3</sup> Christian Wiman, "Gazing into the Abyss," *American Scholar* 76, no. 3, June 2007, 64, as cited by J. Peter Holmes, "2 Timothy 1:1-14: Homiletical Perspective" in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 4, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, 139.

same for many of us, I suspect, at various times of our lives. Often it is also a body that touches us by its investment of love and faith and hope in us and moves us toward a deeper faithfulness.

Paul knows that the path of such faithfulness is not easy. In its most authentic forms, it always kindles opposition. It had landed Paul in prison. Faith won't always keep the darkness at bay, won't keep it from overwhelming the faithful at times and leaving us disoriented and feeling like we need to find something to bring the world back and aren't sure we can.

But Paul also knows the power of the One “who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works [or to any merit of our own], but according to his own purpose and grace.” He says to Timothy, “This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our savior...” And then, he reminds Timothy that he has been called to be a steward of such grace. “Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good treasure entrusted to you with the help of the Holy Spirit.”

That “good treasure,” friends, is the Gospel that we have received. It is our North Star in times of deep darkness. It is the keel we sink deep into the water when we are battered by the storm. It is the tether by which the Spirit holds us fast.

In the life of the church we talk often about stewardship in terms of sharing resources and time and abilities...and all of those forms of stewardship are life-giving to us and essential for the church. Yet, at the heart of all stewardship is stewardship of the treasure that is our North Star...our guiding light... our reorienting grace in every time of darkness and dread.

Timothy received that treasure from his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice, and under the blessing, burden and offering of Paul's heavy hands. I received it from my mother Marjorie and my grandmother Ruth, but even more through the saints who were my earliest mentors in the faith – Saint Esther, Saint Margaret, Saint Ray, Saint Bill, and Saint Bob.

When was the treasure first entrusted to you? Within your family? Within a family of faith? And who bore that gift to you? Perhaps more importantly, what will you do to be a good steward of the treasure, and how will you pass it on, and to whom? It is so important to do so, you know. Important for the Church. Important for each of us. Important for those who depend on us to help them discover who *they* are meant to be. Indeed, otherwise, we all know how easily we can get lost sleepwalking our way into the darkness.