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Reaching for the Extra[ordinary] Life

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Sharpening Intellect | Deepening Christian Faith | Inspiring Action

Messiah College is a Christian college of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society.
Holly Perozzi

ENGL 498

Dr. Helen Walker

30 November 2009

Reaching for the Extra[ordinary] Life

Introduction to My Honors Project: the Process behind Both Pieces

To My Esteemed Professors and Friends:

The English Department at Messiah College prides itself on graduating students who are equipped to live out their lives of service, leadership, and reconciliation with an eye ever on the power and poverty of language within an audience-driven environment. Our words are carefully chosen, measured, cut, and tailored to suit the hearers of our messages, lest we fail in our all-important task of communicating and offer language ill-suited to those we ought to flatter, like a seamstress who painstakingly creates a garment without considering the build, complexion, and carriage of her client.

Consistently throughout my creative journey I have held -- sometimes more solidly than others but always at least lightly -- a mental image of the type of woman I hoped to reach through my words. (I say “woman” because I have more experience relating to women than to men but I hope my words will find their way into the ears and hearts of both.) I know her well: whether young or old, she is oftentimes insecure. She gives and gives and gives yet values herself lower than the multitude she would be jealous of. She is highly Churched and thoroughly Christian yet the fruits of that Spirit somehow elude her; she knows many of the right answers but finds little deep satisfaction in them. The language of her religion sounds immovable and exacting, built on a
modernist structure of clearly defined black-and-white boundaries. She firmly believes in Truth and wonders if her free-of-fancy engagement with religion somehow disqualifies her from the realm of spirituality.

I aim to write in such a way that this Christian woman (or man) can connect through my words to the realization that their experiences, though perhaps seemingly different, remain equally valid, significant, and spiritual. Accordingly my tone is highly informal and pervasively personal: for what closer story can I share than my own? Personal anecdotes, because they draw from the persistent power of story and the deeply human tradition of oratory, remain one of the most effective ways of establishing connection and beginning a conversation with the reader.

Conversing leads to questioning, which in turn produces a deeper engagement with the topic at hand, providing a potential avenue for growth within the hearts and lives of those involved. The written word at its best is highly experiential, possessing still the power to transition writer and reader into the realm of a charitable, mutual reading. Together we can reach into “the substance of things unseen” buried beneath our religious lexicon, re-grounding our faith in the concrete lived wisdom of our daily lives.

Our lives are indelibly underwritten with the sacred in every seemingly secular pastime, project, and pursuit. Though I began with the goal of writing a short book of devotional literature “designed to broaden, pluralize, and perhaps even subvert the unconscious box that many evangelical-fundamentalist Christians have put God into,” I now believe that the printed word alone is not necessarily the best method of sharing my thoughts about God with you. The difference lies akin to the distinction between handing you a CD with music on it or inviting you to a rock concert in which you also can have a chance to be on stage amidst the blaring polyphonics and mesmerizing neon lights. In order to explain why this has become such a dominant chord in my life and why my honors project has transformed into an interactive worship experience, I need to further explain my personal faith journey over the past couple of years.
My experiences living, working, and worshiping for two summers in Scotland with the ecumenical Iona Community have largely challenged and changed the way I view the meaning of the Divine present in all aspects of our daily lives. The ethos of daily worship at the Abbey on Iona is that our formal corporate worship exists as simply another part of our day, equally spiritual as the cleaning, baking, gardening and conversing we do both before and after the morning service. To illustrate this conviction that, as the Iona Community founder and Reverend George MacLeod put it, “to work is to pray [and] to pray is to work,” there is no benediction at the end of the morning service. We simply transition from one form of worship within ancient stone walls to other forms of worship within the newer, noisier walls of the kitchen or the common room or the craft room.

To further demonstrate this broadened view of spirituality, the services are led by a variety of ordained and lay people of both genders and multiple different faith backgrounds and sexual orientations. Though most of the services are led by the resident staff of the Iona community, the responsibility of participating in and leading the services is extended to any seasonal volunteers who are interested. Taking advantage of the offer and all the available support, I led two liturgical morning services both last summer and this summer, as well as two creative “Inner Space” Friday evening services this past June and July.

The first time I had the opportunity to stand at the front of the church and look out from the leader’s desk at the congregation I was surprised and concerned to see that many of the people seemed tired and slightly bedraggled. They had the look of people who were seeking something more: sheep without a shepherd. I tried extra hard to make them feel safe and comfortable by maintaining eye contact, smiling consistently, and singing wholeheartedly when we lifted our voices together in song. Frequently after I led a service -- and sometimes even several days after -- people would thank me for making them feel welcome and accepted.

Accordingly, when I decided to lead one of the longer evening services this summer I kept
as a central concern the standard amount of distance and disconnection that a typical church service entails when people sit scattered over the entire sanctuary and never once (or only superficially) interact with or consider the perspective and personality of the others beside them. It remains a problematic aspect of many of our Church services and still deeply concerns me today. I did everything in my power to combat the physical separation and normal unconscious isolation by creating an unusually packed circle of chairs and benches in the central crossing so that people would sit as close to each other as possible and be able to clearly see the faces of their fellow worshipers.

In organizing and leading my first evening service I discovered a sense of deep purpose and fulfillment in making Church my own; what’s more, I found that it blessed many of the people who attended and participated. The ideal for me is not that I would structure and lead all services everywhere, or even all the services at the church I am attending -- as if that would be possible or beneficial! -- Ultimately my ideal is for each person to experience the joy and freedom of having a say in what our corporate worship looks like. I’m a passionate advocate for the corporate ownership of worship, believing that the more thought, energy, and creativity we collectively put into our services the more we will realize the full potential of Church.

The subtext of my service resides upon a question that’s preoccupied me since I began worshiping at Iona and reading some of George MacLeod’s seminal works: “What is it that we do in Church, exactly?” After spending most of my life passively participating in church services, my active involvement in worship on Iona began to open up a new realm of creative possibilities as it prompted me to consider the question of what is Church for. Are we simply gathered to hear a sermon? Because, in my experience, that’s what the majority of the services I’ve attended seem to be about. Worshiping at Iona has encouraged me to think outside the box of the standard ‘song and sermon sandwich’ model of corporate worship: sometimes the sermon would be supplemented with other creative expressions, and sometimes it would be entirely supplanted with a skit, a wordless
ritual, or an individual symbolic action. By simply altering, sometimes replacing, and on other occasions entirely subverting the expected aspects of our corporate expression of Church, worship on Iona remained fresh, inquisitive, and explorative. Consider the words of the Reverend George MacLeod as he articulates the importance of renewing the forms and contexts of our worship experience:

Call forms of worship ‘husks’ if you will; yet God fashions husks as truly as He fashions kernels--indeed He fashions them to keep alive the kernel. Call the technicalities of worship ‘mere scaffolding,’ if you like; yet scaffolding is necessary both to erect a building, and, from time to time, to keep it pointed and true. Nothing matters but the kernel of our Faith--that we are alive in Christ Jesus; but, to retain the experience, the modes of keeping it alive are of complementary importance. Nothing matters but the upbuilding of our Faith and the keeping of it pointed; but, to keep it straight and true, ‘disciplines’ are necessary. . . It is a live Church, and not unprincipled, that changes the nature of its scaffolding to fit alterations in its expression of the Faith; a live Church that looks to the material in which its living kernel is preserved, if a change of climate makes the old encasings outmoded. (We Shall Rebuild 32)

Essentially I believe that the two most important functions of Church are to create a time and space for a collective and individual experience of God and to provide an opportunity for people to see one another more clearly as genuine people with authentic and vulnerable hopes, struggles, relationships, and ambitions. By being just a little more intentional about the forms we use to structure our services and the actions we corporately participate in as we worship together we can increase the power and personal significance of our practice of church. Certainly my ideas are not the only means to reach this end, and perhaps there are better alternatives out there; what’s most important is that we as bodies of believers keep actively attempting to find deeper and truer ways of
being together as a Church even as we come to recognize God’s presence more and more fully in the fullness of our lives
Reaching for the Extra[ordinary] Life

Preface & Welcome to My Life

I stepped out the door of academia and back into the unbridled enthusiasm of summer spontaneity. It was one of those gloriously warm last days of summer in September that are reminiscent of days in early June and I intended to make the most of it. Putting on my swimsuit under shorts and a shirt, I headed toward the covered bridge on campus. First I walked along the Yellow Breeches creek to see if it was deep enough to swim in -- not quite -- so I headed off campus to the concrete bridge where I knew the water was deeper, but I discovered the surface of the creek was scummy and the water there was stagnant. Instead of advancing I backtracked to the swinging bridge, following a deer trail through the wooded undergrowth until I reached a favorite sitting-tree of mine, one that grows at a 45 degree angle out over the bank stretching almost halfway across the creek. Leaving my purse nestled next to a surface root and some prickly branches, I took to the water. Walking downstream was easy: I was traveling with the current and the water was only mid-calf range.

As I progressed past familiar territory, however, the water level gradually deepened until I stood with it just below the bottom of my shorts, wavering over whether or not to continue. I knew I had canoed there before, but I was suspicious of the nearby water treatment plant (what if I’m swimming in poop?) and aware that if I continued it would be painfully obvious on my return walk to my dorm that I had jumped in the creek. My sense of adventure and desire to swim no matter what kind of water tugged me forward along with the impatient pull of the current. The fear that I was a complete and total freak to want to do this held me back, my feet planted in rapidly shifting sand.

I wavered for a long moment before coming to the realization that I had already committed
and must press forward. I strode hip-deep into the water. Deciding it might be more prudent to scout it out by land before I waded further into waters of questionable sewage content, I slowly moved across the current until I reached the opposite bank. I pulled myself up on the exposed tree roots but in so doing lost my left flip-flop into the hungry mud. I wasn’t dressed appropriately to scramble through the thorny bank and accordingly returned to the water. Big mistake! My feet plunged through the swampy dirt and the riverbed ate both my flip-flops simultaneously. When I finally recovered them I placed one sandal on each hand like a flipper and walk-paddled my way until I found water deep enough to swim in. My bright aqua tank top turned drastically darker at the water mark that was my belly button: I, a human rope, was measuring the depth of the cool creek water in my curiosity.

The funny thing is, even though I was already irreversibly wet I still hesitated before I let go of my last shred of self-restraint and dove head first into the water. Losing my inherent self-consciousness momentarily like flip-flops to the mud, I swam downstream and back upstream, laughing for the sheer joy of it. I reveled in the fluid coldness all around surrounding me, suspending me in the slow circular flight of arms and legs. My antics startled a Great Blue Heron hiding nearby and he winged his way downstream.

\textit{What a beautiful day.}

Swimming in the Breeches that day was for me more than just a swim: it was summary and symbol of my enthusiasm for life and my hope for an increasingly adventurous future. Although it was just a schoolgirl’s summertime frolic, it nevertheless possessed all the hallmarks of a great adventure: uncertainty, possible danger, and reward for persistent effort. The freedom from self-consciousness and the sheer pleasure of swimming reminded me how glad I was to be a part of this ever living-growing-flowing life.

Reflecting on how privileged I was to play in the creek and make artistic ripples in the
current with my hands, I walked home and gushed to my journal about the beauty of the natural world: *It makes me wonder to think that they can label this miracle “water” and tell me it’s made of hydrogens and oxygens... what does this all mean except they understand a little of how the substance works, not that they get it. Water is something much much more, much freer and without definition, created and animated solely by the great I AM.* In the joy and freedom of swimming alone I unexpectedly experienced a fuller sense of life; ruminating on the experience afterward, I saw it as a way of encountering the Divine, as an opportunity of interacting with the Life that gives us and everything around us life. By letting myself experience the reality of the creek in a new way I discovered a new appreciation for and more intimate understanding of the channel of cool clear water that I had previously thought that I knew.

I share this story with you to illustrate one of the times in my life that I felt most alive. Far too often we live huddled under the gathering clouds of stress, anxiety, worry, fear, and isolation, believing all the best we can do is eek by an existence until something changes or we can escape somewhere. By together reconsidering the fabric of our “ordinary” lives, however, I believe we can discover that the beauty and significance we have been wrapped up in all along, without anything extra, already is extra[ordinary].

Opportunities to perceive God’s presence in the work, worship, and recreation of our lives abound all around us, if only we look for them. Too often many of us remain, figuratively, with the waterline just below our shorts, waverling over whether or not to stride more fully into the reality of God in our lives. It might be messy. We might look like freaks for trying. We might get in over our heads. Or maybe we don’t really want to, or haven’t even considered it, or think it’s just plain crazy -- well, what then?

When we learn (or perhaps re-learn) to dive in and whole-heartedly embrace the reality that God is involved in every level of our lives, from the large over-arching stages of our development
to the most intimate details of our hearts, we find ourselves swimming in the cool, invigorating spaciousness of God’s surrounding presence. By experiencing more and more deeply the truth of the verse “in Him we live and move and have our being,” we can continue to transfer the truths we know of God to all aspects of our lives as we further saturate our lives with glimpses of God.

I invite you to join me, therefore, as I adventure down the creek of seeking the saturation of God’s all-abiding presence. As an adventure-based person, I tend to see life in terms of significant, identity-forming experiences that define who and where I am in each chapter of my life. I realize that not everyone thinks this way, but I hope that the stories, metaphors, and lessons from my life within the following pages can lead you to glimpses of truth that resonate with your heart and soul. Most importantly, I hope that my efforts to share what I’ve seen and known of God with you will prompt you to re-evaluate your own life and more fully apprehend and appreciate what God has been saying to you through your experiences.

As with any quest, this adventuring book of mine will make more sense if I provide you with a map. Each chapter revolves around one central idea and consists of two parts: the first part introduces a rough line sketch of the questions and background surrounding the idea and the second part provides the coloring of various interpretations, examples, and metaphors of what this idea has meant to me at different points in my life. Think of it this way: the central idea of each chapter, outlined out in the first part, articulates a main branch of my personal theology out of which the various scenarios, metaphors, and images grow like so many individual leaves. Another way of saying it is that the second part of each chapter contains separate but tangentially related growths off the central idea, each “leaf” of which can both be considered separately or as part of a larger collage of colors and textures.

So, if you would, please join me in kicking off your flip-flops of predetermined perception and let’s reach together for the extra[ordinary] life of God with, within, and among us.
Chapter 1: God as Found in Our Daily Lives

Part I: The First Branch -- Contemplating God

That which we cannot speak of is the one thing about whom and to whom we must never stop speaking.

-- Peter Rollins, xii

Who is God and where is God in our day-to-day lives? How do you experience God? Which means of perception do you privilege in seeking the Divine? Your intellect? Your emotions, perhaps? Your sensory experience? If you belong to one of the many Christian Churches of America, chances are you believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God (though some of you may disagree about the exact implications and meaning of that phrase) and that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6). I agree. Rather than arguing theology or splitting hairs over doctrine, I simply offer myself via my life lessons, experiences, and perspectives learned along the way.

I have known God to be many things in my twenty-one-odd brief years of existence, and I am sure my knowing will continue to expand as I continue journeying through life. Growing up in a Christian household and attending a Christian high school as well as a Christian liberal arts college, I have largely taken it for granted that God exists and that “God” can be easily and simply referenced in any number of conversations throughout the day. The very fact that I am writing a book about glimpses of God in my life evidences a degree of certainty that seems untenable considering that God in essence remains an infinite mystery; yet I believe that the experiences I have been given and the pieces of wisdom others have so generously shared with me are valid perceptions because, at the end of the day, they are all that I concretely have to offer. We can only
share what we have been given and say what’s stored up inside us to say. And so here I am, attempting to articulate the practice of discovering God in our daily lives.

Discover God? Does God need discovering? I think... Perhaps. Perhaps “uncovering” or “recovering” are equally useful words. Any way you look at it, God is not apparent to or within our contemporary culture. We are distracted as a society and even as a Christian subculture. Though many spiritual leaders emphasize the need for quiet, the need for space, and the importance of centering our focus on God through the scriptures, we struggle to discern the still small voice of [God] in our lives.

By placing [God] in brackets I simply want to denote the unknown-ness inherent in any discussion of [God.] Perhaps I ought to follow the old Jewish tradition of removing vowels and speak simply of Gd. (Anything to help us remember to know that we don’t know!) Gd is beyond, beneath, and throughout all our definitions and dialogue about Her. (Or Him.)

Our ideas of Gd are born out of a smattering of experiences, teachings, associations, feelings, and connections with Yahweh, Jehovah, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Father of Jesus Christ. Gd has been one of the most prevalent and outstanding ideas/persons of my entire life.

Because good days and bad days aside, I have found that Gd remains available, accessible, and always interested in possessing our attention. In so many ways, through so many unexpected kindnesses, Gd provides such an infinite sweetness! Often Gd surprises me with an incredible sense of humor as the apparent irony of a situation suddenly dawns on my consciousness. Sometimes Gd just brings pure comfort through the arms of a friend, and other times Gd offers pure instigation and challenge through the presentation of injustices. Though frequently Gd seems to be stretching and challenging me through trying situations, just as often I feel Gd pulling me in for a hug and some rest with unanticipated mercy from others. Gd is excessively -- exceedingly -- so
achtely -- beautiful like nothing and no one else I’ve ever known. In so many little ways -- in rainbows given on request and encouraging text messages sent out of the blue -- Gd’s romance has surrounded and enfolded my life. If I am quiet I can often feel Gd’s stillness lying ever-present at the heart of things, waiting for me to be still and know the intensity of the attention that is always lavished on me (and you).

My current theology of God rests on three basic tenets:

First off, God is real. God is more real than poetry or music or dance, than any of those tiny sparks of inspiration that light us up. God flows in us, around us, and sometimes (if we’re open) through us. The Reality of all realities, God can be perceived with all our senses and in all situations, in doctrine, prayer, and experience alike. God calls us out of ourselves and our selfish concerns to God’s self and to others: thus we are given the chance and choice either to hide, constrict, and isolate ourselves or to seek, expand, and become more and more connected with the reality of God. We are given the choice to seek (and thus find) God or to confine ourselves within ourselves and our own interests. Because whether we know it or not and whether we acknowledge it or not, God is, I believe, the deepest reality that everything and everyone is yearning for at the most basic level.

Secondly, nothing can hold God. Not walls, not borders, not books, not words, not thoughts, not doctrine, not theology, not organized religion, not philosophy, not experience, not the cosmos, not heaven or earth. Everything holds something; everything contains some meaning or purpose. But nothing holds God. God holds all. Since God holds everything and exists entirely everywhere (not in a scary “Big Brother” sense but in an amazingly free and abundant sense, like fresh air) and is fully involved with sustaining all life (so that the whole physical realm doesn’t just burst into a trillion particles of dust), everything contains significance. Every branch and bud, every leaf and flower, every cloud, every beast of burden and consumption all exist out of God’s
generosity. Every glance between friends, every word between acquaintances, every person you come in contact with in every circumstance all contain incredible meaning because God contains all.

Thirdly, God communicates to us in any and every way that we’re willing to listen. Some listen to verses of scripture; others accept God’s wisdom in the voice of a friend; others meditate. In the Bible we read stories of God communicating in all manner of ways including dreams, visions, signs, direct speech and the casting of lots. God’s creativity is only limited by the creativity of our perception. How open are we to listening for the voice of God in our everyday experience?

There was one time, two summers ago, God spoke to me through the unexpected attention of a couple of lambs. I was volunteering with the ecumenical Iona Community on the Isle of Iona in the Scottish Hebrides, and I was worried about my friend Chris who was traveling at the time in a particularly volatile part of Bolivia on a school trip. Concerned for his well-being and troubled in spirit, I went on a walk to the north end of the island to sit beside the ocean for a while. On my way down the one-lane track I passed several fields of sheep and young lambs without incident. In one particular field, however, these two lambs looked up and caught my eye as I passed. Surprised by their unusual behavior, (lambs tend to either ignore or flee my presence) I stopped by the fence and they came trotting over to greet me, excitedly licking my hands and expressing their over-all enthusiasm at my presence. Their behavior caught me entirely off-guard and made me laugh -- really laugh -- and shed the burdens of fear and worry that I had been almost entirely consumed by. I had no doubt that it was God’s way of telling me that Chris was completely safe and cared for.

Because our God is real, pervasive, and highly communicative, everything in our lives takes on increased significance. The world around us is wonder-ful. Our lives are all literally amazing, miraculous even. None of this had to be, but yet it is and does. (Just as God is and does and is the resounding “I am” of the universe.) We only come to think our lives are ordinary because we grow
immune to our initial sense of childlike wonder. Every day we wake up to life; we bathe in it, we
breath it, we eat it, we talk to it, we tread on it, we brush our teeth with it and bake our bread with it.
Yet none of this had to be, and it all resounds with purpose. In our daily lives God entirely
surrounds us with beauty, significance, and speech.

Adding to the significance of our daily lives and reinforcing the fact of God’s reality,
omnipresence, and omni-communicativeness is the passage in Luke 24 about the two disciples on
the road to Emmaus who walked for miles chatting with Jesus and yet failed to recognize him.
Only when Jesus gave thanks over dinner did they finally see him for who he was, and as soon as
they realized it was him he disappeared from their sight. I believe there is a very real sense in
which this is still the way of things: once our eyes are opened to one way that Jesus is working in
our lives, he disappears from our sight and we must again keep looking and expecting his
(unexpected) presence again in our lives. We never know when Jesus will again appear beside us
and walk with us for a while.

(Keeps you on your toes, doesn’t it?)

God is constantly challenging us, constantly provoking us to further growth. Oliver
Wendell Holmes has this lovely quote (I came across it reading a psychology textbook last year)
that suggests that “once expanded to the dimensions of a larger idea [the mind] never returns to its
original size.” Perhaps then this (dis)appearing act of Jesus’ is a way (perhaps the only way, the
truth, and the life) to get us to keep looking, keep growing in our perspective and our belief in
possibilities. For the Jesus we proclaim is not only resurrected, but he walks the path beside us and
engages us in conversation. Is there anything Jesus can’t do, anywhere Jesus won’t go, or any curve
ball God can’t throw at us in our oh-so-settled opinions?

Each glimpse we have of God cracks the door open a little wider. Even if we turn our back
to the ever-growing light or slam the door shut in bitterness, fear, and shallow living, we shall still
retain the memory of the light and the impression of vivid color left on our imagination. Hope, and the feeling that things could be better, persists. If you don’t think you see God in your life right now, don’t give up. Keep watch. Listen for the quiet whisper. Look Around. He’s walking beside you, explaining things all the way through the people, places, and circumstances around you, as well as whispering truths within your heart.

May you continue to see more and more clearly God’s work in your own life as I share glimpses from my experience, and may we together begin to appreciate the larger patterning of the Spirit’s work all the world over. Perhaps if we make watching for God (or [God] or Gd) in our lives and in the lives of those around us more of a common place activity, we will find the veil in front of our eyes growing thinner, the light increasingly entering between the perpendicular fibers. Let us not be too surprised, then, when we discover that God resides not only beyond the veil but also within the veil and behind the eyes through which we gaze.

*Part II: Visions of God in My Everyday Life*

*Lessons in Seeing*

One of the most startling new glimpses of God I have experienced came about from two friends --one old, one newly met and barely an acquaintance-- sharing their life perspectives with me. It all came together one day as I was lying on my back in the damp spring grass near the creek that runs through our campus (the same one I mentioned earlier), staring up into the budding tree branches that fore-grounded the blazing blue dome of sky above me. For me there was no literal physical perception, no glimmering lights or dazzling heat or swarm of angels; yet at the same time all there was there was a physical perception and the sudden sweet realization that God was dancing everywhere around me. I saw beauty in the way the light played off the rippling water, breathed joy in the mossy scent of the damp earth, felt significance in the joyfully swaying buds
above me -- here, beside me, beneath me, around me, above me -- God was living, thriving, celebrating new life. I was struck with the immensity and precision of it all: everything was alive with purpose, everything an extension of the divine.

Before that moment at the creek side, I thought, like most people do, that I had things pretty well figured out. I had accumulated many details and definitions concerning God over the course of innumerable Sunday school lessons and during my 13 years of Christian school education. I had a hard time distinguishing God from what was written about God in the black and white print in my Bible. Religion for me was primarily a system of “do’s” and “do not’s,” “should’s” and “should not’s” on the well-outlined path to Heaven. Without knowing it, possessing all the best intentions, I had unwittingly closed my eyes to the possibility of God in the present tense.

My waking came by slow degrees. Bob, a Christian-Buddhist friend of mine from several years back, started emailing me out of the blue. He wrote about God in a way I’d never heard before. Every single thing is infinite, worlds spiraling into and out of each other. The lines we draw around things in our physical world do not exist in reality. They are constructions of our minds. I began to notice these lines -- the innumerable borders I had established to maintain order in my life. I began to think about how the labels were a false pretense of intimacy. Just because I knew that the small insect crawling over my dorm room carpet was an “ant,” did I really know anything about it at all? There was life pulsing in that little brown body, life marching bravely over the dense blue and teal fibers of our throw-rug, and that life was something I could barely comprehend.

I began to find myself steeped in unknowing. A woman named Immaculee Ilibagiza came to speak at one of our weekly chapels at Messiah. A survivor of the 1996 Rwandan genocide, she spoke powerfully about the horrific tragedy and how it enabled her to encounter God and eventually forgive those who destroyed her family. After chapel I had the opportunity to speak with this strong, dignified, beautiful woman for a few minutes. Dressed regally in a lavender purple suit,
with the air and grace of a queen, she spoke simply and honestly about God in a way I had never heard before. Her presence exuded a profoundly deep sense of peace and wholeness that was entirely new to me. I awoke to the startling realization that I did not know God.

Awake and groggy, I began to stretch my imagination as I shook off years of false pretenses. I strained my blurry eyes to see. I read the Bible asking, “Is that you, Lord?” I began to tap into the undefined, uncensored flow of feeling within me. I found myself often reflecting on Immaculee’s wisdom and Bob’s compelling words. When you erase the lines you’ve drawn around the trees and yourself you will see that in this case as in all cases what Is There is the universe, or god, or whatever little finite construction you want to try and use for an infinite thing, dancing with itself. That sunny spring afternoon under the newly budding tree, with the grass and the breeze and the water all harmonizing into one single statement of purpose as the clouds vaulted overhead in the sky, I at last saw the blazing truth of what both Bob and Immaculee had been hinting at: God is found in the present tense of each moment. God is the here and now, the great “I AM” at the heart of what every living thing is. It was more real than I had thought possible, and more recognizable than I had imagined it could ever be. Just open your eyes and you will see that you and God have been staring each other in the face all along while you daydreamed.

I Have Decided. . .

Three young children were playing outside in a sandbox on the first warm day of spring. Their mother looked out at them from the kitchen window, smiling bemusedly as they piled the cold damp sand into moulds and created misshapen walls and towers. Little green army men dotted the miniature desert, engaged in countless simultaneous battles and rescue missions. The children carried on in this manner like this for quite some time before their mother came out and asked them to come inside for a bit and tidy their toy room. The eldest child got up quickly, out of obligation.
The middle child, ever the peace maker, followed suit. The youngest child smiled blithely at a passing butterfly and immediately frolicked off to chase it.

How many different expressions of following God exist? Is it possible that each of these children equally pleased their mother?

Hum with me this familiar hymn:

\[ \text{I have decided to follow Jesus}, \]
\[ \text{I have decided to follow Jesus}, \]
\[ \text{I have decided to follow Jesus}, \]
\[ \text{No turning back, no turning back.} \]
\[ \text{The world behind me, the cross before me}, \]
\[ \text{The world behind me, the cross before me}, \]
\[ \text{The world behind me, the cross before me}, \]
\[ \text{No turning back, no turning back.} \]

I grew up sing this hymn as part of my spiritual lexicon. Always before in my experience, however, I heard it and sang it with great solemnity. It seemed something like a battle cry or a monumental decision. We sang it like deciding to follow Jesus was a profoundly arduous task only chosen for our final great reward; perhaps this is one way of looking at it. Another perspective came to me one day out of the blue, and for the first time the song “I have decided to follow Jesus” seemed to describe the most logical and joyful way of living possible. Something about the way the morning liturgy encouraged us to return to our daily tasks with the knowledge that “it is Christ who goes before” us clicked in my mind and heart in a new way, and suddenly following Christ seemed
less and less like a chore, as it did when I was young, and more and more like a banquet, a lover, or a very great adventure. The change in my perception of how Jesus can be followed altered everything about how I felt about following Him. Rather than simply seeing duty, I caught of vision of God’s wooing in my life and that, as Robert Frost has so famously said, “made all the difference.”

**Learning from Weaving**

To use a metaphor very near and dear to my heart right now -- I’m currently taking a weaving class in school -- I believe that in life every string is attached: our roots reach forward into our future, molding our personalities and perspectives while providing the framework for every truth, task, and trouble that comes our way, all of which God weaves over and under, under and over through us to speak into our lives and to bring us, if we’re willing to accept it, a little further on in this redemptive task of life. The weft of our experiences, knowledge, encounters, and hope runs in and out, backwards and forwards across our lives, often surfacing at multiple different points and meaning different things each time as God works in us anew. We are literally and metaphysically wrapped in the Word that sang creation into being, as well as woven into a network of words (including the textual Word of God) about God and from God, past and present, scripture and prophesy. These words, like so many strings of varying textures, colors, widths and lengths, cross and re-cross in an endless patterning of mystery and meaning.

Trying to perceive God’s mysterious movement in one’s life involves not only the steady exertion of keeping both eyes fully open but also the challenge of looking backward, forward, and around all at once. Weaving helps me understand and process life by providing a holistic way of considering the multifaceted dimensions of God working in my life, past/present/future, nature/nurture, thinking/feeling all included, all-inclusive. As Peter Rollins so beautifully explains
in his book *How (Not) to Speak of God*, “This God whose name was above every name gave birth, not to a poverty of words, but to an excess of them” (xii).

In seeking to understand this glorious excess of God-words around me, I view some of the themes and lessons of my life as “warp” fibers and some as “weft” fibers to help my understanding of God’s working in my life. The warp fibers remain constant throughout the project -- they are the backbone, the framework, the structure and tensile strength of the cloth. In order to prepare the loom for weaving, you have to get a WHOLE lot of warp threads in a very specific order, all roughly equal in length. They go through and through, on and on, giving purpose, direction, and setting to the variable wefts. For me the warp threads of fundamental identity that have molded me from cradle on up include a persistent belief in the existence of God, a long-time relationship with the Protestant Church and Christian subcultures, a familiarity (or seeming familiarity) with the name and person of Jesus, a deep-rooted hope that things will always get better, and the centrality of living in the moment and embracing life.

Woven throughout these warp strings are the weft fibers of my experience, knowledge, learning and perception that sometimes match the warp, sometimes complement it, and sometimes clash. These are the more variable aspects of life which change daily or weekly and influence and inform the stronger warp fibers of my central identity. Viewed another way, you could say that the two sets of fibers are in constant dialogue with one another, and the dialogue itself is the emerging cloth. Sometimes the colors and textures interweave evenly and other times one thread dominates, creating beautiful contrast or an eyesore clash. Sometimes the weft is so thick or bright that it eclipses the warp altogether and you only know the warp fibers are there by the structure of the cloth itself.

The dialogic cloth that emerges out of the interplay of identity and experience becomes for each person an individualized icon. By “icon,” I mean symbol that points to God. Rollins provides
a helpful perspective when he writes that

To treat something as an icon is to view particular words, images or experiences as aids in contemplation of that which cannot be reduced to words, images or experience. Not only this, but the icon represents a place where God touches humanity. Consequently, icons are not only the place where we contemplate God; they also act as the place that God uses in order to communicate with us” (38)

I whole-heartedly believe that this place of contemplation and communication exists already within the everyday fabric of our lives, without any extra adornment or embellishment to “spiritualize” things. God meets us where we are and communicates to us in as many ways as we are willing to listen. For example, my current testimony to God in my life is woven primarily from my recent experiences and the spiritual wool-gathering that I have been doing over the past several years; your testimony might be built on the survival of a personal tragedy or on the faithful service and commitment you have given for as long as you can remember. If we each share where we see God in our lives, is there any way we can fail to leave one another enriched? Just as the combination of Bob and Immaculee’s perception of God allowed me to grow in ways I never thought possible (or necessary, at the time), so your and my unique interactions with God can inform our mutual belief and overall experience of the Divine.

I doubt we can ever know the full extent of the patterning of this fabric, but it’s possible see, at least partially, the most recent past couple of inches of weaving and the current fibers that are intersecting around and within you. The cloth of your past is already wound around the cloth beam, packed tightly on itself and residing at a fixed point in the center of your soul, unconsciously influencing your present while the weft fibers still to come as more and more warp is unwound from the warp beam remains a mystery. All we ever have is our present, a phenomenon which I believe includes the recent past and the up-and-coming future; and this is enough to work with
(more than enough!) to get a glimpse of our individual life-icons. All we have to share with one another are our “ordinary” lives -- the little moments of seeming significance, passing conversations, moments of sublime beauty, impressions of and lessons from the people who have touched and taught us, quotes, ideas, and questions we pick up along the way, memories made and memories remembered, brief flashes of insight and golden threads of hope -- lives so chock full of God that they are extra[ordinary].

Implicit in this living-weaving process lies the audacious hope that this is a worthwhile investment of our time and energy, and that we each have something to share as well as many things to learn. Ultimately, it is a quest for redemption. We thirst for meaning in our daily tasks and interactions. Can the sacred be found in the secular? I believe so. For me right now everything boils down to three things: love, hope, and redemption. God is love and I hope that everyone and everything will one day be redeemed.

The weaving process speaks significantly of redemption: nearly anything remotely fibrous can be used to weave, with enough time, effort, and physical manipulation. Just as disparate threads find their home in a network of crisscrossing widths and hues, so seemingly disjointed lessons and experiences take on greater significance as you view the fabric from a distance. Similarly, I have to believe that even the ugly mistakes and sordid experiences in the fabric of our lives can be redeemed, worked into the weave in a way that brings us closer to the Divine in the end, the deep shades adding hard-won contrast, interest, and complexity to our cloths. Though we can’t ever know the full patterning of our lives until the entire piece is finished and unwound from the cloth beam, we can choose to see God’s providential involvement in each section that is woven even as we remember that the whole cloth, warp and weft alike, exists only because of and through God’s continued presence in our lives.
What Does God Look Like?

Suppose an energetic young artist, full of initiative, decided to attempt the largest-scale and most comprehensive image of God yet created -- something that would make the pyramids pale in comparison. Funding was not an issue: all the world’s available resources were at his disposal, and a myriad of willing volunteers donated their lives freely to the task. Soon it became apparent that the project would need more than a terrestrial sized platform, and they moved their efforts to outer space. After thousands of years, the image was complete: an entire earth-sized replica of earth, with all the civilizations and peoples, edifices, wonders, Kings, Queens, animal and plant life that had ever existed over all the centuries. It was a work of amazing fancy, loving detail, and indescribable scope. It was the closest attempt yet in capturing God’s essence, and yet it was missing one vital element: Life. Breath.

What do we learn by creating images of God?

The idea of attempting to create an “accurate” vision of an infinite God came to me while listening to a sermon about the danger of attempting to capture God in an image. I began wondering what it would look like if we did our best to make the most comprehensive image possible? Surely we would have to begin with a rendering of creation -- and not just the aesthetic parts of it but all of creation, good and bad, graceful and bawdy, over all the centuries. A sculpture seems most likely. But even this image would fall short of life, lacking the passion, the hope, the joy, the pain -- the energy of each moment -- it would still be like taking a bad Polaroid of the Grand Canyon. Our images of God (both visual and textual) all fall unimaginably short. Even as we attempt to “see” visions of God within our daily lives, we must keep in mind that even our best glimpses are only the quickly fading Polaroids of something vastly truer, deeper, richer, and more complex than can ever be captured adequately on the insubstantial film of our lives.
Chapter 2: Church as How We Treat Others

Part I: The Second Branch -- Perspectives Gained from Living & Worshiping in Community

All the believers were together and had everything in common. -- Acts 2:44

Is church an interruption to our daily routine and rotating schedules, or could we possibly conceive of it as the totality of our day-to-day thinking and acting as we form relationships? These two extremes of perspective both encapsulate views I have held of the Church at one time or another. We have probably all, if we’re honest, occasionally thought of attending the Sunday morning service as a drain and a hassle amidst our busy lives. I can’t deny that I have slept in on more than one occasion. However, much can be gained by broadening our view of Church; just as God can be found in our daily lives, so Church is fundamentally found and formed in our relationships with others.

To begin, let’s consider the common ground we share as believers and church-goers. I mean literal ground -- earth -- and physical space. How often do we spend time out of church with the other members of our congregation aside from our close friends? The practical mechanics of our various conflicting schedules and our multiple obligations make the idea of spending loads of time fellowshipping with people from our churches practically impossible on multiple levels. This is probably because, at least in part, we tend to think of church as a one and a half to two hour weekly Sabbath commitment and fellowship as spending “free” time, outside-of-our-normal-life time with people from church. It’s enjoyable but it’s something other than laundering dirty socks, scrubbing toilets, and preparing our family’s evening meal. “Church” and our real lives only intersect at pre-established weekly intervals.

I began developing a broader definition of Church largely from living two summers as a volunteer within the framework of the Iona Community’s “conviction that worship is all that we are and all that we do” (Iona Abbey Worship Book 11). To illustrate, consider the following parable:
I woke up late for Church. Throwing on jeans and a t-shirt, I tied a bandana around my head and slipped my feet into close-toed shoes while brushing my teeth and rinsing my face. I hurriedly stumbled down the stairs, passing others also on their way to worship or already busy worshiping, vacuuming floors and setting tables for breakfast. As I entered the sanctuary that was our kitchen, I caught a scolding glance from my boss Fran as I put on my blue and white pin-striped apron and mumbled excuses about being up late last night fellowshipping. Fran didn’t necessarily buy it, but she let the issue go as I mixed up a double batch of wheat bread and started measuring out ingredients for ginger scones while she chopped leeks and potatoes for the afternoon’s lunch of soup. Soon it was 8:45, nearly time for the service at the Abbey to begin. Having reached a stopping point in our kitchen worship-work of preparing the daily meal, we headed off to the work-worship of the Morning Service.

How can I explain it in a way that makes sense to you? We were a picture of the living Church: holistic, unified, and sincere, without pomp and circumstance. Church wasn’t just something for Sundays; it was something that happened, yes, three times a day in the Abbey (though we certainly didn’t/couldn’t all go to every service), but it really was something that happened all day everyday as we chopped carrots and courgettes, baked sponge cakes, and manually shredded 20 K blocks of sharp cheddar cheese. Church was swapping stories at tea break and working together in silence in the kitchen; church was getting up early on a Saturday morning to cook group breakfast and staying up late Sunday night for a costume party. We lived Church because we were sharing every aspect of our lives with one another, making our home together in the fullest sense.

The sense of togetherness among the 27 or so volunteers on staff is unlike anything I’ve come across before or after: though everyone wasn’t best friends, everyone was united and most people were generally willing to lend a hand or have a conversation whenever, wherever, at the drop of a hat. We were living out the sometimes gritty yet often rewarding reality of attempting
Christian community. We looked out for one another. We ate together, played together, worked together, worshiped together, and went out for drinks together. We were an incredibly “ordinary” group of volunteers. Our lives, which were centered around full days of work -- concrete tasks such as leading worship, scrubbing sinks and peeling pots of potatoes -- became our active spiritual practice.

As we shared the spiritual practice of living and working together, something truly unique and beautiful happened within the volunteer community: we learned to accept one another. Differences and distinctions that would ordinarily cause basic divisions like age, gender, and ethnicity essentially ceased to matter. Hanging out with one of the 50-something volunteers was just as fresh and fun as spending time with the younger crowd of 20-somethings. Living amongst this community of volunteers from all the world over spanning the ages of 18 to 72 -- volunteers who were alternately sarcastic, good-natured, neurotic, hopeful, insecure, laid-back, stressed, small-minded, generous, encouraging, witty, and unbelievably caring -- of many different faith traditions and various sexual orientations, manners and nationalities, I began to rework my definition of who exactly the Church was and how they lived together. I had tasted the kind of radical unity the original Church must have possessed when all the believers were committed to sharing their entire lives with one another.

Key to our experience and expression of Church is finding a way of renewing our sense of community. We need to envision new ways of sharing the fundamental, extra[ordinary] fabric of our lives with one another in such a way that we can rediscover our unity in the common ground of our places of work, education, and recreation. By expanding our view of worship to include all aspects of our living, we can begin to re-imagine Church as the sum total of all our relationships, bringing the possibility of creating and expanding our sense of unity down the manageable level of every individual conversation and interaction we have throughout the day. Though most of us can’t practically limit ourselves to living and working daily with the same 27
people, we can begin to expand our sense of the sacred and reach for a greater unity and wholeness within our lives and relationships as we learn to live a fuller sense of Church.

Part II: Visions of Living Church Daily

Learning about Letting Go

A few summers ago I learned how to dive. I began with several false starts: right foot apace of the other, fingers entwined, arms raised, I would consistently balk at the last second. Kids who had been swimming half of their young lives came over to help, announcing “Look, it’s easy!” before they arched into the chlorinated water, making barely a splash. I saw but I couldn’t duplicate; I was afraid. Everything in me rebelled against the idea of throwing myself head-first into anything. I remained stranded on the concrete, postured to dive, wavering back and forth in the tension.

An unexpected moment of humor shocked me out of my paralysis: my young instructor -- the ten-year old girl I was babysitting -- teased my hesitation, declaring “Time’s a’ tickin’!” Laughing, I released my death tight grip on self-preservation and dove. I was pleasantly surprised by how easily I cut through the water, and by how natural it felt. There was absolutely no cause for alarm, I discovered, as I was buoyed up by a pool of cool suspension.

The process of forgiving is akin to that of diving for the first time. When wronged, our natural reaction is to take a stand on the concrete reality of the event, remembering and nursing the pain we have experienced. Sometimes we simply rehearse the damage to ourselves silently, other times we actively seek revenge; but always we grow stiff with bitterness. We assume a rigid posture of fear, a paralysis of pain, because it seems the only sensible option. Propelling oneself head-first into the obedience of a man who walked the earth a couple millennia ago seems so
counter-intuitive. We vastly prefer standing vindictively, alone in our feigned righteousness, living with the law of gravity and consequence.

Most of us, whether Christians or not, have absolutely no desire to bend our wills and enter into the unknown cool of forgiveness, yet this is precisely what Christ requires. “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” (Matthew 6:14-15, NIV)

Previously I thought that this verse implied a stern God, one who stood tall and refused to grant forgiveness because I had been unforgiving. Now I read this passage and see a kind and generous God who makes sense. Forgiveness only occurs when we immerse ourselves in the pool of mutual giving and forgiving since we are all indebted to each other on many levels. In order for God’s grace to buoy us up, we must be supported by the undeserved favor we extend to and receive from others. Though it means going in over our heads, forgiveness frees us from standing rigidly on the sidelines, allowing us again to swim and thrive together in a living community. As we begin to perfect our practice of jumping out of our self-debilitating need to be right and into the supportive environment of mutual forgiveness we will inspire the other members of our communities, those with whom we live, work, and worship, to follow our lead and likewise jump in.

**How Then Do We Pray?**

Two roommates were in their last semester at school. Naturally, both were concerned about the wide open insecurity of their futures. The one had applied to grad schools almost a year ago and was still waiting to hear back from them; the other, more spontaneous in nature, had recently scoped out several internship positions and had several important interviews. Both students desperately wanted acceptance into their respective programs; both checked their email several
times daily. They both longed for and worried over the day they would hear their fate: day of most sweet or most sorrow.

In order to channel all the currents of hope, fear, expectation, and desperation that each was experiencing, one roommate journaled daily and repeatedly brought up the issue in conversation, while the other opted simply to carry hope, deep and wordless, day in and day out, until at last the hoped-for letter should arrive. Happily, both roommates received, if not their first choice, the choice that later, in hindsight, they would each affirm as clearly the best and most opportune.

How many different forms of prayer exist? I have found answers, both yes and no, to requests made directly to the Divine -- but I have also found (and perhaps this is oftener the case) that God anticipates my needs and answers “prayers” that I have yet to form into words or even thoughts. The most poignant example of this in my recent experience comes from a volunteer position I served this summer in Scotland. I arrived, expecting to work in the housekeeping position I was offered, the same day as a girl my age was arriving to fill in a vacancy in the kitchen. The girl assigned to the kitchen, however, had numerous facial piercings that she was unwilling to take out each day to work according to the requirement of Scottish industrial kitchen hygiene. Since she was unwilling and I enjoy cooking, I offered to switch, little knowing how drastically that switch would positively effect my summer.

The entire tenure of my time in Scotland was tinted and colored by my work in the kitchen: God used the setting, the work, and my boss to profoundly heal wounds and insecurities that I brought with me. Best of all, the blessing was not just one-sided. Chatting with her about it toward the end of our stay, the girl I switched positions with agreed that working in the kitchen would have suited her as poorly as working in housekeeping would have been for me. God answered two prayers (mine and hers) that we never even had the foresight to know to ask! Prayer, part of our daily practice of church, permeates our lives at every level whether we know it or not, whether we even consciously pray or not.
Chapter 3: Joy as a Seasonal Delight

Part I: Branch 3 -- Learning that Joy, like Fun, Must Be Experienced in the Present-Tense

[As you can see, this chapter remains yet to be written formally, though the seeds of experience have long been incubating and will soon sprout a crop of spindly green attempts to reach the light from the soil of this topic]

Part II: Visions of the Joy-full Life

Gifts

A young girl once wished that every day was Christmas. And, as the way of things in this life often surprises us, so this unlikely request was granted to her, for a period of time. Since the girl wished her wish on Christmas (it was her birthday wish), the wish took effect the next day, which should have been the day after Christmas. The day after Christmas (which was now Christmas Two) dawned sunny, as opposed to the icy mist of the day before. Since things looked
different, the girl assumed her wish had been refused until she trundled down the stairs to discover her parents waiting patiently by the tree. She had overslept on Christmas morning!!! The girl noticed that her presents from the day before where still piled in a heap by the mantle.

As she began unwrapping the second round of presents, however, the girl began to realize that something was amiss. Today, instead of dolls and doll houses, sweets and easy-bake ovens, she was opening boxes full of pans (“I need your help making dinner tonight, sweets,” softly suggested her mom) and diapers (“so you can babysit your little brother this afternoon,” explained her father. These were not the kind of presents she had wished for. The girl fled the room full of her toys and parents and tasks, sobbing, to her bedroom.

The next morning, Christmas Three, the girl again woke and went downstairs to discover her parents, again, waiting by the Christmas tree. Tentatively she approached the pile, shook the presents. They sounded interesting, but what if she found the same horrible surprises as the day before? Though her parents encouraged her to see what was inside, the girl shied away and opted instead to play with her presents from two days before, leaving today’s gifts to chance. “At least open this one, honey,” her father crooned. She refused, saying perhaps she’d reconsider the on the following day.

But on Christmas Four, it was gone. New boxes lay under the tree, with not a trace of the unopened boxes from the day before. The girl eyed the new gifts with great uncertainly.

What if everything, absolutely everything in this life, is a gift from the divine? Are we willing to open and accept everything God places under the tree? Can we “count it all joy?” (James 1:4)

Chapter 4: Salvation as Spaciousness

Chapter 5: Hospitality as Communion
Sacred Space: Living Within the Word (Leader's Copy)

As my personal copy of the order of service, this should give you a rough idea of the practical mechanics of the service. Beware, however, that at most this only provides a frame or a snapshot of the actual experience.

Setting: Hostettler Chapel, 4pm on Friday December 4th. I closed off the doors at the back of the chapel and hung signs telling people to enter through outside the door nearest Boyer. As people entered I greeted them with a hug and thanks, made sure they picked up an order of service and told them they could take their shoes off if they wished. I directed everyone up to the stage to sit, where choral risers were set up instead of chairs with plenty of cushions and pillows scattered about to make the environment more comfy and homey. Candelabras full of tea lights decorated the sanctuary, accented by several scented candles of various types. The congregants were sitting in a semi-circle so that they could see one another as well as the empty sanctuary before them.

Prelude & Welcome, followed by Thanks, Invitation, and Opening Prayer

I have dearly desired this time, this space, and this opportunity to meet with you all, even if just for a few minutes, to worship and celebrate our God among us. It’s what makes life worth living.

Prayer – (Remain seated)

Our Father in the Heavens, our God in the air around us and the floor beneath us and people beside us, hallowed be your name. Help us to open our hearts to you here, now, in this moment. Take from us all anxiety, worry, and the constant need to be somewhere and help us just to be here, with you, and with one another. We breathe in, asking for your blessing. We breathe out, resting deeper in your peace. Your will be done. Awaken us to the needs and hearts of others, and give us opportunities to minister to more and more people daily. Keep us from evil. Help us to find our rest in you.

As we begin I’d like to take a few minutes and connect with each other. Three questions:

1. What you would be doing if you weren’t here?
2. What you will be doing when you leave here?
3. What’s looming largest in your life right now?

Opening Responses:

Leader: God-with-us, all around us, we gather together at the end of the week

All: Bring quiet to our minds and stillness to our souls. Let us find our rest in You.

Leader: Christ-with-us, all around us, we seek to know you more; we long to follow you as you dance throughout the world
All: Give us eyes to see, Give us ears to hear, Give us courage to follow, Give us strength to press on

Leader: Holy Spirit-with-us, all around us in our midst, you buoy us up in an ocean of grace; your word and your wisdom surround and enfold us

All: Whisper truth in our ears, plant fire in our hearts, stir up hunger in our spirits for your presence.

Leader: The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. All: Thanks be to God.

Reflective Reading [read by two different readers sitting across from one another]

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD “All about us, in earth and air, wherever the eye or ear can reach, AND THE WORD WAS WITH GOD there is a power ever breathing itself forth in signs, AND THE WORD WAS GOD now in daisy, now in windwaft, a cloud, a sunset; HE WAS IN THE BEGINNING WITH GOD a power that holds constant and sweetest relation with the dark and silent world within us. ALL THINGS CAME INTO BEING THROUGH HIM The same God who is in us, and upon whose tree we are the buds, if not yet the flowers, AND APART FROM HIM NOTHING CAME INTO BEING THAT HAS COME INTO BEING also is all about us -- inside, the Spirit, outside, the Word. IN HIM WAS LIFE, AND THE LIFE WAS THE LIGHT OF MEN And the two are ever trying to meet in us; THE LIGHT SHINES IN THE DARKNESS and when they meet, then the sign without, and the longing within, become one in light, AND THE DARKNESS DID NOT COMPREHEND IT and the [person no longer walks in darkness, but knows where they are going]”

-George MacDonald in Thomas Wingfold, Curate. spliced with John 1: 1-5 NASB

Time of Song: As we move into a time of song I want to encourage you to really try and enjoy the singing and relish the time we have to make a joyful noise together. We’re not rushing to get through anything; I’ve chosen to do more than the traditional 3 songs on purpose, to give us time to rest in the singing. Additionally, we’ve included a few non-traditional verses - a verse of whistling, of “ooo-ing” and of humming to help us focus on the melody and the process of joining together in song.

Joy to the World, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And Heaven and nature sing,
And Heaven and nature sing,
And Heaven and nature sing.

Joy to the World, the Savior reigns!
Let men their songs employ;
While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat, repeat, the sounding joy.

(whistle a verse)

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found,
Far as the curse is found,
Far as, far as, the curse is found.

He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders, wonders, of His love.

Come thou long-expected Jesus,
Born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us,
Let us find our rest in Thee.
Israel's strength and consolation,
Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear Desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.

Born Thy people to deliver,
Born a Child and yet a King.
Born to reign in us for ever,
Now Thy gracious kingdom bring.
By Thine own eternal Spirit
Rule in all our hearts alone;
By Thine all-sufficient merit
Raise us to Thy glorious throne.

Oh, come, oh, come, Emmanuel
(first verse on “ooo”)

O come, oh come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to you, O Israel!

Mount of Thy redeeming love.
Here I raise my Ebenezer;
Here by Thy great help I've come;
And I hope, by Thy good pleasure,
Safely to arrive at home.
Jesus sought me when a stranger,
Wandering from the fold of God;
He, to rescue me from danger,
Interposed His precious blood.

Oh to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be!
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, O take and seal it,
Seal it for Thy courts above.
Oh, come, our Wisdom from on high,
Who ordered all things mightily;
To us the path of knowledge show,
and teach us in her ways to go.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to you, O Israel!

Oh, come, O Key of David, come,
And open wide our heav'nly home;
Make safe the way that leads on high,
And close the path to misery.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to you, O Israel!

Oh, come, our Dayspring from on high,
And cheer us by your drawing nigh,
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows put to flight.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to you, O Israel!

Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
Naught be all else to me, save that Thou
art.
Thou my best thought, by day or by night,
Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my
light.

Be Thou my Wisdom, Thou my true
Word;
I ever with Thee, Thou with me, Lord;
Thou my great Father, I thy true son;
Thou in me dwelling, and I with Thee
one.

Be Thou my battle-shield, sword for my
fight,
Be Thou my dignity, Thou my delight.
Thou my soul's shelter, Thou my high
tower.
Raise Thou me heavenward, O Power of
my power.
I saw a statue this summer in Northern England called “Angel of the North.” It’s incredible - this HUGE bronze statue of a female angel atop the highest hill in the area. She doesn’t look like your traditional angel: she has almost 200 feet, wings the size and width of a jumbo jet. It’s such an **unusual blending of aesthetics -- industrial and sacred**, the angelic airline. Yet somehow, it works. She’s really rather inspiring. You can see her from the A1 -- one of the major highways that runs vertically along Britain’s interior. And there she stands, the figure of a woman with the wings of a jumbo jet, **proclaiming the fusion of the sacred and the secular**.

I entitled this service “**Sacred Space: Living within the Word**” because I want to focus on **what the Incarnation means within our everyday lives**. “The Word became flesh and lived among us,” we read in John 1. And we know that Jesus has promised to be with us always: Jesus is here among us now, and at all stages of our life and all hours of the day and night.

Makes me think of one of the **bedtime songs** my mom sang to me growing up:

“Jesus is with me, all through the day; Stays close beside me, all through the day; So I am happy, at work or play; Jesus is with me, all through the day.”

What does this mean? How can we more fully realize that our lives are enfolded and surrounded in God? What does it **mean to be living within the word**?

I have you sitting on the stage on purpose. (For several purposes.) **You are the actors, the participators, the co-creators with God**. Already I am sure **you know far more about God than I could ever tell you**. All I’d like to do is offer you a new -- or renewed -- or other **way of seeing life** that I’ve been learning and growing in.

George MacLeod, founder of the Iona Community, explained it this way:

**We don’t have to climb to God, or circle the world with intellectual flight or devotional achievement. God comes down and God comes in. . . Closer is He than breathing, nearer than hands and feet. We have been given union with God, whether we like it or not, know it or not, want it or not. Our flesh is His flesh and we can’t jump out of our skins. It isn’t pantheism. It is not a necessary or inherent fact of our being. It is a free, spontaneous and unnecessary gift of eternal life by the living and loving God. And it happened for everyone. He took on the flesh of the whole world.**

I think this is so, so important for us to see. The **Incarnation means that God is with us. Period**. God is in **airlines as well as angels**. Thus **all spaces are sacred**, and all areas and events of our lives are full of God’s presence and key to the creation and growth of the Divine life within us.

This is the truth we live within and the challenge we have to daily meet: **Our flesh is His flesh and we can’t jump out of our skins.**

We are used to thinking of **Christ’s death** on the cross as the expression of God’s supreme **Love** toward us. But I think that the Incarnation is equally moving, perhaps even more so an expression of deep, deep intimacy and unending concern because when Christ came into the world he stayed. Jesus entered our physical realm and it has never been the same since. Our God is among us. Our Jesus walks besides us. **Our Savior hangs out with us.** He’s here to stay and he’s not going anywhere fast. **His toothbrush is in the bathroom, his towel is on the floor, his dishes are in the sink.** Christ’s birth in Bethlehem means that God decided it was time to move in.
Therefore the Incarnation challenges us, asking us to find God in the everyday seemingly mundane aspects of our lives: in the bills we need to pay, in the toilets we must weekly scour, in the papers that we grade and we write.

Our God is inescapable. Our marvelous God refuses to remain in one color or shape for very long, for our God lives within all colors, all shapes. Our God is infinite. Even reality doesn't hold God; reality's just the largest experience we have, the only context we have to learn and grow within.

The Incarnation means that God is equally present in angels and airlines, Jesus as relevant and real, airy and earthed as a jumbo jet.

What do you see as you look out into the empty sanctuary? Pews? The possibility of comfort and normalcy denied when you were told to sit up on the stage? Beauty? Nothing much? God?

Consider the space before us. Notice the way the late light filters through the frosted panes of glass. Feel the stillness of the air between the pews. Breathe in the upward reaching height of the rafters and the depth of the isles. Look at it. Really look. This chapel has long been used as a Sacred Space, as a place of meeting with and experience God. It is a place of openness, of invitation.

I'd like to invite you to physically explore this space in a new way, with a heart that is open to the possibility of hearing from God in these explorative moments ahead.

I've taken the liberty, you see, of placing a wide array of items on the first couple of pews in the sanctuary. -- Some you might expect, others that may perhaps surprise you -- These objects come from the many aspects of our life, work, play, and worship. All represent valid pursuits, and all are worthwhile activities.

The challenge I offer you, if you choose to accept it, is to explore this sacred space filled with seemingly “secular” items and choose one that represents for you a facet of your life that you don’t usually think of as sacred.

Find an object that seems to you completely temporal, completely physical, entirely ordinary -- or perhaps something representative of an area of hopelessness in your life. Anything that can picture, for you, a place or a way that you do not usually think of as sacred. The object can be taken literally or as symbolic of something larger.

When you find something, pick it up. Feel it. Ponder it. Ask God if, indeed, He is present there also. And if you feel so led, place your object in the manger at the end of the isle. By so doing, you are acknowledging that Christ's Incarnation can inform this area of your life as well. You are saying, in faith, that God can be found even in your most material, seemingly God-less pursuit. You are affirming the truth of the verse that “in Him we live and move and have our being.”

[Stress that we are not deifying the ordinary, we are acknowledging Christ’s presence & glory throughout.]

[Time allotted for people to get up and wander around sanctuary.]

Message: Reprise.

* Special Thanks to Melissa Hardy for her beautiful voice, Dave Rosentrater for his talents on guitar and drums, Helen Walker for her guidance, insight, and collaboration, and my Mom & Dad for supporting me all the way.*
As we return together I'd like **to offer you an open time and safe space for sharing anything at all you’d like to say.**

When a bunch of people give presentations, they always say that the first and last ones are the ones presenters are the ones that everyone remembers and I’d like to open up a space for you to have the last word of the day, since I believe that God speaks to and through all.

To help facilitate our conversation, I’m going to pass around this water bottle. If you have anything to say -- whether it be a single word that has struck you anew or a thought you’ve had since you’ve been in this room or maybe something you’ve been longing to share about where you've seen God working in your life or something that you’re genuinely concerned about right now in the world or on campus or in your own life --- anything at all -- this is your time, when you receive the water bottle. If not, simply pass it to someone near you until everyone has had a chance to speak.

[In my opinion, this time of personal sharing was the highlight of the service because of the depth, breadth, and honesty of people's comments.]

**Group Prayer – Holding Hands** [silence + doxology]

**Benediction & Postlude**

In the words of Fredrick Buechner, I encourage you to Go, “*Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than the excitement and gladness; touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace*”
*Special Thanks to Melissa Hardy for her beautiful voice, Dave Rosentrater for his talents on guitar and drums, Helen Walker for her guidance, insight, and collaboration, and my Mom & Dad for supporting me all the way.*
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows put to flight. (Refrain)

Oh, come, Desire of nations, bind
In one the hearts of all mankind;
Oh, bid our sad divisions cease,
And be yourself our King of Peace. (Refrain)

**Be Thou my vision.** O Lord of my heart;
Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art.
Thou my best thought, by day or by night,
Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.

Be Thou my Wisdom, Thou my true Word;
I ever with Thee, Thou with me, Lord;
Thou my great Father, I thy true son;
Thou in me dwelling, and I with Thee one.

Be Thou my battle-shield, sword for my fight,
Be Thou my dignity, Thou my delight.
Thou my soul's shelter, Thou my high tower.
Raise Thou me heavenward, O Power of my power.

(hum a verse)

Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise,
Thou mine inheritance, now and always:
Thou and Thou only, first in my heart,
High King of heaven, my Treasure Thou art.

High King of heaven, my victory won,
May I reach heaven's joys, O bright heav'n's Son!
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
Still be my vision, O ruler of all.
Message

Time of Symbolic Action

Interlude
*Everything* by Lifehouse

Message: Reprise

Closing (Group) Prayer

Benediction

Postlude
*Snow* by Chris Tomlin
Works Cited


