

The burning bush or the plastic mulberry?

Jack Dueck

An aboriginal chief, hearing a Mennonite explain Anabaptist-Mennonite beliefs, responded with “If these are your beliefs, where are your stories?” The Mennonite held up his Bible. The chief said: “Those are just word etchings on paper. How do these words become your living story? Early in our encounter with the English whites, we noticed how they were people with words, words on paper. Treaties, with their many words, were never the real story enacted on the Canadian prairies between my people and the colonials.”

One young Mennonite explained how church services reminded him of the nursery rhyme “Here we go round the mulberry bush”: “This is the way we go to church, go to church, go to

church; this is the way we go to church, every Sunday morning.” When asked about sermons in church, many label them boring, predictable words.

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Words don’t really have a meaning; it’s the good news happening that gives energy and experiential meaning to the text. Have Jesus and the Gospel good news been preempted by safe word definitions? The result is paint-by-number sermons, a mind-numbing litany of clichés, the Bible words boxed into a Cliff Notes package. Faith then becomes mere

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The late David Ewert, who taught us New Testament Greek and respect for the text, remarked in a Mennonite Brethren Bible College class: “You’ll find that in a church service, people listen to the first few sentences of a sermon, and if they hear the usual safe words, they wander away in their own thoughts.”

When asked how his people enliven the sacred oral texts, the aboriginal chief replied: “We make the sacred stories into now, a present happening through singing, dancing, feasting, storytelling and enacting peace rituals and prayer to the Great Spirit. Sometimes it takes days to evoke the living stories among us.”

One Mennonite church invited a biblical scholar to give a talk followed by a sermon on the Psalms. He had completed an acclaimed dissertation on the Psalms. The presentation rendered structure, context, word usage, variations in translations; for the sermon he read a paper-lecture on some psalms. Sound material, and praised by the several academics attending. Asked about it during the week, few remembered anything about the sermon. During the service a psalm had been treated to a throw-away reading in utter disregard for the vibrant poetry, and no psalms were sung—though there are some fine renditions in hymn books. No felt experience was rendered of the many composers who have found the Psalms irresistibly inspiring. One parishioner said, “It was as if we were solemnly sitting around a cadaver and hearing it dissected.” So are the Psalms and the good news story just the sum of their parts?

This encounter with the Psalms accentuated my darkening suspicion that words had no meaning anymore, just definitions; even the Word had become only a word text. An insistent desperation attends the year: With the text deadened, no song, no groaning, no prayers or Bible readings lead out of the endless desert dotted with dry shrubs. No burning bush illumines my repetitive assent to the Anabaptist-Mennonite confession of faith, the inspiration of the scriptures, the words of the good news. Is this what it means to experience the postmodern? Faith deconstructed? Nothing happens late or soon; words no longer mean. Like a depressed person weeping before a counsellor, “I cannot love anymore,” I cannot find word-meaning anymore, only dead definitions. Joining T. S. Eliot’s character, I also realize that “these fragments”—words—“have I shored against my ruins.”

How fortunate—I think—were those living in an age of faith, encountering God now, in happening within and around them. Moses encounters a burning bush and stops in curiosity. No one else sees the bush burning, but he sees the flames and hears a voice. Pagan astrologers see the star and prepare gifts. Illiterate

shepherds, stunned in fright, hear angels singing in outlandish proclamation—and they must go and see. Herod understands all too well the incarnation story the wise tell him, and he marshals his military in response. The Salvadoran thugs understood the happening of Archbishop Oscar Romero’s good news story of Jesus living among the poor—*now*. The thugs abhor the meaning and then murder the archbishop at the communion table, giving the power of Jesus to the powerless.

With meaning tarnished, I live and even do god-talk from out of inner hollowness. Little did I suspect that I was already anointed for a pilgrimage to Bethlehem where a story knew me better than I had known it.

Gold

I had contracted to deliver two Christian motivational talks in Pennsylvania. Returning from Philadelphia and traveling into Bucks County for a talk at a Christian school, the fuel warning light flashes empty. A weathered sign promises a town, and the S-curve snakes into a tiny burg with some clapboard houses, a post office and tar shingle-sided general store. In garish contrast, like a foreign stage set, lowered into the town, stands a gas station, all aluminum and glass, and under a constellation of incandescent stars. The station provides not only fuels for combustion but shelves of life-shortening goods: tobacco, sugared caffeine, and “edibles” laced with additives.

Gliding to the pumps, I’m shocked to discover I’ve left my wallet in Philadelphia. To the young man behind plate glass I mumble my predicament and ask for two gallons of gas on credit. My words seem to startle him awake, and then he stiffens apprehensively: *Is this a con or a camouflaged hold-up?* When he carefully slides his arm below the counter, I fear he is pressing an alarm, alerting the police. Hurriedly I respond: “It’s OK. I’ll try elsewhere.”

Surely the bank, or someone in the bank, will advance me a dollar. The bank lobby is reverentially quiet: Christmas lights in soft glow, a crèche in the corner. Where cathedrals used to be at the center of the village and religious life, the modern age organizes its towns around banks. In respectful reverence, you wait until the money priests beckon, then you humbly present your

offering. It is scrutinized, and when approved, you leave reverently, humble.

A teller asks, "How may I help you?" I explain my predicament and suddenly all money counters freeze into tableau. It is as if I had committed flatulence in church. The teller expresses shock and then thin-lipped disdain. *How dare he! This is a bank!* "You will need to speak to the manager."

The manager, nervously arranging his notepad, says, "What seems to be the problem?" I make my confession and petition for a dollar for gas. The manager finds my confession unreliable: "Sir, this is a bank. You can't just walk in here and request a few dollars without credentials. How do we know you are who you say you are?"

To the lyrics of "I saw Mommy kiss Santa Claus" I walk through the lobby, past the nativity scene. Salvation Army bells jangle on the sidewalk.

Perhaps a farmer nearby will have a few gallons to spare. But on the outskirts of town on a pockmarked gravel lot stands a shack, and before it are two rusty gas pumps. *Abandoned?* But there's a wisp of smoke curling out of a wire-supported stovepipe. Entering the hovel I find an old woman wrapped in a mackinaw and bent to a smouldering coal fire.

She smiles in greeting. "Hello, traveler. You don't seem happy this Advent season." I explain that I'm out of gas and am scheduled to give a talk at a Christian school in a few hours but have forgotten my wallet in Philadelphia. "Good," she says. "You've got the need, and I've got the gas. Pull up to the pump." In response to my "I need only a gallon or two," she triples her offering. Noting her address, I promise to send her the money. She waves me off with "God bless."

At the rural Christian school I proceed with the god-talk, Christian clichés rolling off the tongue from religious word memory. Next day I decide to make a detour to pay the gas lady in person. She greets me: "Did your Christian talk go well?" I shrug my reply, but when I unfold some bills to pay for the gas, she flares in response: "Son, absolutely not." I protest: "But you sold me six gallons of gas!" "No, no, I did not. I gave them to you."

"But what made you decide to give gas to me—a stranger—and triple what I asked for? What if I had just been a conman?" Softly she answers, "No matter. No gift is ever fully lost. Even the

conman may at some juncture in his life really remember. My late husband used to say, 'Honey, during Advent and in all living, we join the wise giving gifts.' If you pay me, then our meeting and the gift become meaningless, a mere commercial transaction."

We sit at her fire. She offers me coffee from a battered pot on the stove. It tastes like a blend of tar and vermouth. Gently she observes, "Son, you seem somewhat downcast and sad. Yet you give Christian talks." Suddenly it seems safe and right to confess to my spiritual numbness and the dead Bible stories. I've become so tired, even numbed, by the inevitable recurring Advent songs, the candles, and the succession of homilies over four weeks reiterating the veracity of the historical events.

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"May I suggest that you may have locked the story into a chronology in the past? The Advent story is not contained by and in a church calendar, nor validated by our assent to a historical happening. You see, even the

wise, having been illuminated by a star in the heavens, needed to bow low to get through the Bethlehem stable door. Once in, they knelt in the manure-laced straw and gave a gift of gold to a baby. And *rejoiced exceedingly!*

"Son, all true gifts are gold, untarnishable. The Creator, who never deals in pig iron or tin, has given us only untarnishable gifts of gold: life itself, love, joy in serving others, the mass, nature. Bethlehem is now. Advent is a happening with us."

She embraces me as she says, "Perhaps you're on a path to Bethlehem. God bless."

Driving out, I look back and am jolted to see her backlit, incandescent as from a burning bush behind her.

Frankincense

I was to meet a client in a shopping mall food court. Malls always seem to lower one's IQ: cacophony of clashing sounds, glare of lightbulbs, cries of stressed babies, fitful neon promotions, and no angels descending under this garish iridescence. Is this how the world ends, not under an Advent star-studded sky but in fluorescent orgy and warring food odors?

Nearby an elderly gentleman in suit, top hat, and cane is confronted by two religious propagandists: “Here’s a list of things God wants you to know.”

Slipping to a nearby bench I pretend to read a newspaper as the story unfolds nearby. “But these are things God wants you to know.” Amid the racket, his mild response is inaudible. They insist: “But do you believe in the Holy Spirit?” “Yes, surely.” “By what proof?” “Schubert, the Psalms, Bach’s St. Matthew Passion, Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, my rose garden, people who love me and I them, and especially the Advent of Jesus. Now all is ours in Christ. The devil owns nothing; the Spirit pervades everything.”

They leave him—*just another unbeliever*.

We sit over coffee in the food court and converse. He comments: “Wherever there’s creativity, there the Spirit is also. How sad that they seek my assent to some prose words. And if I gave assent to the words, they’d declare me saved.”

In the middle of a shopping mall food court, the Spirit’s perfume envelopes me in the fragrance of another world.

Myrrh

Returning to Ontario I receive a message that my oldest sister—who mothered me through the deaths of two mothers—has end stage pancreatic cancer. Then—out of the blue—a person puts an airline ticket into my hand: “I feel that you should visit your sister before her funeral.” “How much?” I ask. “Come on, Dueck, it’s an Advent gift—don’t ruin it!”

She says, “Once Jesus has come into your life, so many actions become obvious. You think different. Life becomes a pleasure, living right inside the many stories of how Jesus treated people.”

A taxi deposits me at the hospice which the taxi driver describes as “diss vonderfoll plece.” Some years ago a wealthy Calgary woman donated and endowed an elegant mansion on a large lot for use as a hospice.

The hospice mission is to give meaning and peace to the terminally beset: rather than using myrrh to embalm the dead, this place offers those in their final days of physical life the loving embrace of myrrh’s incense.

A brief tour opens to spacious hallways, quiet private rooms all windowed to trees and sky, a stained-glass chapel for visits and

meditation. When Susie first arrived, a kindly matron sat by her side to hear of her children, grandchildren, and pleasures in life—and to ask her questions: “What is your favorite soup?” Within hours Susie was served her favourite—tomato soup—prepared for her from scratch in the hospice kitchen.

When she thanks me for coming, I tell her it was also to hand-carry a thank-you for mothering me in terrible times and being a confiding and consoling sister all these years. Paging the Mennonite cookbook, memories crowd in, of food in community and of songs at table. Soon we’re singing duets to the accompaniment of its recipes!

At fifteen Susie took on the task of replacing a mother of eight. I tell her that I remember clothes freshly ironed for school, with flowers for the teacher “so you give her something too.” Often losing her own appetite in fear the children would not enjoy her cooking, she woke every morning asking Jesus to help her to “plan my day. He never failed me, giving me health, energy, and love for you all.” Arriving at school herself, she would first dash into the school garage and commit the siblings to Jesus’ care for the day. In all the years, especially in acutely difficult Coaldale Mennonite Brethren Church-related experiences, she always expected Jesus: “Now Jesus, please help me live in and through this.”

When asked, do you consult Jesus on everything? she says, “No, once Jesus has come into your life, so many actions become obvious. You think different. Life becomes a pleasure, living right inside the many stories of how Jesus treated people. If one joins his story, he never disappoints.” Asked how her church observes Advent, she replies: “Aren’t we always experiencing Advent, receiving Jesus into our daily living?”

When a classmate and new school friend began stealing lunch items from Susan’s youngest, she doubled the special treats in his lunch. “But why?” her son retorts. “He must be hungry. So give it to him as a gift.”

In backyard conversation with a neighbour, Susan discovers a mother in grief over losing a son to cancer. This leads to coffee at each other’s houses. Susie shares her pain over a grandson dying with leukemia; the neighbor laments losing a son. They share pastries out of their traditions: Susan’s Mennonite and the Muslim

neighbor's eastern recipes. Asked, what do you visit about? Susie remarks: "Among sharing about family, ideas about cooking and fabric patterns, we hear each other about our grief and burdens. Then we pray together, each in our own way." "M&M," I say: "Muslim and Mennonite." She laughs and adds: "We both have faith, expecting God to join us."

She asks, "How are you doing? I've listened to some of your story sermon tapes. Are you still doing that?" I'm thinking: *Pancreatic cancer, last days in a hospice, least appropriate time to talk about*

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my situation. She prods: "You're still my baby brother." Unwilling—and the tears flow—I tell her the Bible has gone dead for me, all just words. After some conversation, she smiles and says: "Perhaps you've worked too hard telling the good news. But you know that God, Jesus, and even the Bible will take care of themselves. Just know this: the Bible stories believe in you; and they'll find you again."

When her oldest daughter asks if she has any worries or concerns as she approaches dying, she replies: "Of course not. Jesus always came when I expected him. Now he's expecting me." In her very last hour, her breath shallowing, her children's voices waft her into the world of her long-expected Jesus, singing "What a friend we have in Jesus."

Gold, frankincense, myrrh—O death, where is thy sting?
Grave, what victory?

About the author

Jack Dueck grew up in Coaldale, Alberta, and studied music and theology at Mennonite Brethren Bible College in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He received an MA in literature from University of Washington, followed by a PhD in literature from the University of Notre Dame. He was a professor at Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana, and now resides in Waterloo, Ontario, and is a writer and storyteller.