

Editorial

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I once heard Old Testament scholar J. Gerald Janzen reflect on growing up in a small Canadian prairie town situated at the end of the rail line. As a child he imagined that the trains waiting at the local grain elevator had their origins in his hometown, and after traversing the wide world, they returned home to his town. As an adult he came to see these trains as an image of our human lives: they begin with God, and after their sojourn on earth, they return

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to God. A year ago *Vision* focused on the beginning of life, on how our lives originate with God; in this issue we explore our return to God.

At the center of Christian thinking about return to God stand the resurrection of Jesus and his teaching about life and death. We offer you three biblical reflections on our Jesus-based hope: one focusing on Paul's understanding of resurrection, one dealing with Jesus's teaching in the synoptic Gospels, and one exploring the Johannine concept of eternal life. "We teach by what we do," a pastoral colleague used to remind me. The

four funeral meditations in this issue, each occasioned by a different kind of death, teach us how we can sensitively proclaim our Jesus-based hope in the midst of grief and loss.

Other articles deal with the process of dying or reflect on funerals. The writers address both practical and theological issues, illustrating that the two ought not be separated. The church's real-life practices should be grounded in sound theology, while theology ought to be informed by what we have discerned through experience to be faithful practice (such as praying with those who are dying). In addition, our theology should be concrete enough

to provide a basis for faithful practice. Several pastors describe how they help people prepare to die, how they offer pastoral care to the bereaved, and how they guide the process of funeral planning. More theologically oriented articles discuss convictions that should inform the church's funeral practices or explore what it means to die in Christ.

Not surprisingly, Christian hope in eternal life emerges as a dominant theme in this issue. Such hope can have two different effects. To quote an old adage, "Some Christians become so heavenly minded that they are of little earthly good." Preoccupation with preparing souls for heaven can detract from Christian discipleship and from passionate participation in the coming of God's reign to this broken and hurting world.

But Christian hope in resurrection can have a very different impact. During a visit to the Martin Luther King Center in Atlanta, I was deeply moved to learn how King continued his Christian ministry despite repeated death threats and even the bombing of his home. King carried on courageously, partly because he—and the black church that nurtured his faith—had a profound conviction about the life hereafter. If the current life is all we have to look forward to, then we might do well to live by the philosophy "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." But as Christians we know that another life awaits us, so we can be free to make sacrifices for a cause greater than our own pleasure. Christians around the world who have faced hardship, persecution, and even martyrdom, have often been empowered to persevere because Jesus promised that "those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 10:39).

My hope is that this issue of *Vision* strikes an appropriate balance between this-worldly and other-worldly. May the articles provide insight and inspiration for those who minister to the dying and bereaved, may they nurture a hope in eternal life that inspires us to faithful living, and may they help prepare each of us for our own return to God.