

*TrailNotes* speaks to forward movement, paying attention to the "landscape" we are passing through in this trail-laced wooded hillside and valley, not to mention the world beyond. *TrailNotes* is an unfolding, ongoing journal of the people who share the trail with us and the things we're learning and doing.

## ElderTalk

Deuteronomy 28:6

"You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out" is one of the verses displayed on our bedroom wall. In our culture, we use this word, "bless" (or a tense of it), in many ways:

"May the Lord bless you."

"Bless his heart!"

"Bless this food."

"That was such a blessing!"

"Bless the Lord!"

"You are blessed."

"Please say the blessing."

"God bless you!"

If you think about all the uses (verb, adjective, and noun), and all the applications, it can be confusing. Ah, the English language and how it evolves. God bless it!

Scripture also uses the word "bless" many ways. Personally, I have long been intrigued by the idea of people blessing people. Is this just Christian-ese, or is it valid? As it turns out, it *is* scriptural. In the Old Testament, it was a custom for people to bless each other. Fathers would pronounce a blessing on their children, family members would "bless" others when they were at a pivotal point in their life. But how does it work?

In Genesis 24:60 did Rebekah's family have some special super-power to make her increase and her offspring be many? In Genesis 27:27, was Isaac able to supernaturally give Jacob the dew of the heavens or



"Christ Blessing the Children" by Adriaen van Nieulandt, c. 1620-1630

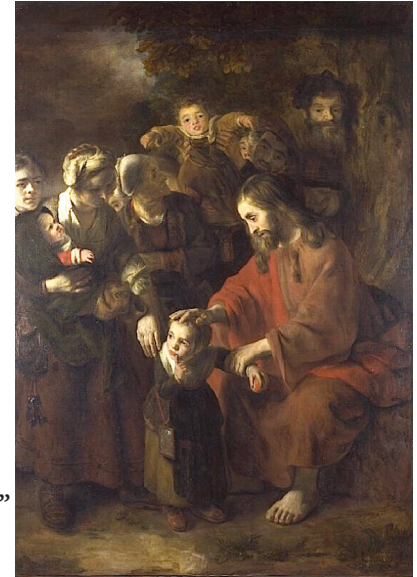
## Blessed!

the earth's riches?

You see my questions, and there are many more Biblical examples. These were Old Testament heroes, but they were still human, just like you and me. Their prayers told the answer. In each instance, the one speaking the blessing says, "may God bless you with..."

They are not presuming to have the power to do great things for the person they care about. They are simply asking the One who does possess the power to provide what that person needs.

Do we need to ask God to do what He already does? Certainly not. But God, in His infinite wisdom, knew from the beginning that man needed fellowship. We need other human beings. We need to know that others care enough about us to ask the Father to take care of His children. We are not alone. There is a second effect in the hearing of blessings. In Proverbs 14:1, it says that "the wise woman builds her house, but with her own hands the foolish one tears hers down." Were the women of the Old Testament into real estate? I guess it's possible, but what is more likely is that God is telling us the power that our words possess. Those wise women were building up their husbands and their children with positive, life-giving words. If you speak good things to your child, they usually respond by doing good things. If you speak ill of people, do they start doing good? Typically, no. They usually continue down a more destructive path. The power of suggestion is not just for commercials. Speak good to someone, and they gravitate to a positive response.



"Christ Blessing the Children" - 1652 by Nicolaes Maes (1634-1693)

(Continued on page 3)

# The Divine Dinner Table

*Family gatherings foreshadow God's coming kingdom*

SANDRA McCracken

The late Miranda Harris was best known for the international conservation organization she and her husband founded 35 years ago called A Rocha (“The Rock” in Portuguese). She and her husband, Peter, traveled the world to share their love of God and of creation.

But Miranda was also known for the beautiful letters she sent from all those places around the world. I was fortunate enough to have received many of them. They arrived in my Tennessee mailbox postmarked from France, Malaysia, and South Africa.

Her letters came alive with words from the Psalms, with family updates and encouragements, written in lovely script all the way to the edges of the page. She wrote the way she lived—as an overflow.

Miranda's faithful habit of letter writing was part of her gift for bringing others into her life. So was the Harrises' family table.

In the early days of the couple's ministry, Miranda famously spent their first earnings on a large dining room table. The A Rocha house, on the coast of Portugal, was a study center that, in those first years, also served as their family home. They welcomed travelers and scientists, binocular-toting bird observers, note takers, and researchers (and the occasional special guests of a recovering owl or songbird).

Miranda's extravagant purchase of a dining table made hospitality a priority. Community orbited around this table through conversation, feasting, and regular time spent face to face over meals.

I've thought of this image often this year, as our family tables

have been reduced in size during pandemic life. Whether you live alone, with a spouse, with friends, or in other family configurations, the compression of our social rhythms has likely left you feeling isolated.

It would be easier to choose to eat in front of a screen, apart from others, or hidden in headphones. While we all need time apart, especially in close quarters, maintaining the ceremonial rhythms of a regular family meal can bond us together, even when we feel the inevitable strain of intimacy. (For our loved ones who are close in heart but not in proximity, regular phone calls or cheerful notes can similarly bring tangible comfort and remind them they are valued.)

Holy habits are often quiet habits. Meeting together for a meal at the same time with the same people is a reminder that we belong. This kind of nourishment is more substantial than just the vegetables on a plate. Who we are begins here. In the long view, relationships are sustained by habits of hospitality, no matter the scale.

We bought our simple, round dining room table from a neighbor on Craigslist. It's just what we need for now, but one day we hope to have a table that allows us to host a feast with friends and neighbors.

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**OF HOSPITALITY, NO**  
**MATTER THE SCALE.**

Miranda and two of her colleagues died in a tragic car accident in the fall of 2019. I still have the last letter she sent me in my nightstand, and I miss being able to sit across the table from her. In celebrating Miranda's life, I smile when I think about her splurging on her big table. The legacy of her hospitality shines all the more brightly during this extended season of social distancing.

While for a time we may be apart from loved ones and our place settings may be few, the habit of meeting together with the few people we do have near us will shape our hearts toward the time when we can again gather everyone around one big table.



How rich, then, that God Himself prepares a table for us (Ps. 23)! At God's own table, He is the nourishment, the celebration, and the Host. Throughout history, the church has often been scattered, and the Lord's Supper is a demonstration of God's hospitality to us as we remember Jesus' death and resurrection until He comes again.

In this way, Miranda's lavish table purchase had an even deeper meaning. One day, we will again gather at a table together for a homecoming feast.

In that light, setting out plates and forks can become a liturgy of fellowship. Just by showing up, we receive God's provision as we pass the green beans and potatoes. When we gather, God's Spirit infuses hope into the rhythms of our lives.

*Sandra McCracken is a singer/songwriter in Nashville. From Christianity Today, January/February 2021. Used by permission.*

## MAY 2021

- 2 Elder Eric Byrom preaching on Mark 7:1-23.
- 3-8 GFC Spring Work Week!
- 6 National Day of Prayer.
- 9 Eric Byrom preaching on Mark 7:24-37.   
Circle Church leaders' Zoom meeting 2:00 pm.
- 16 Elder Jadaé Fox preaching on Mark 8:1-21.  
GFC Members meeting 6:30-8:00 pm.
- 22 Visitation for Tom Nichols 4:00-6:00 pm.
- 23 **Pentecost Sunday!** Elder Eric Byrom preaching on Mark 8:22-9:1.   
Visitation for Tom Nichols, 2:00 pm.  
Tom Nichols Memorial Service at 3:00 pm.
- 30 **Celebration Worship Sunday!**

## Barabbas Explains the Bible

ANDREW WILSON

One of the great marvels of Scripture is the way minor characters embody an entire narrative. The Bible is full of obscure individuals about whom we know little besides their names. Yet many of them, instead of shuffling on and off the stage to advance the story (like they would in Homer or Shakespeare), become living examples of the story itself.

The most dramatic examples, for my money, occur in the crucifixion story. Think, for instance, of Simon of Cyrene carrying the cross, as Christ told His disciples they would (Mark 15:21). Or the criminal crucified next to Jesus who receives forgiveness at the last minute, becoming the archetypal deathbed conversion (Luke 23:39-43).

But my favorite example is Barabbas. At one level, his is a simple story of exchange. Barabbas is due to die for his sins, and he deserves to. Yet without doing anything to merit mercy, he discovers that Jesus is going to die instead. Having awakened on Friday morning expecting nothing but a slow, horrible death, by evening he is home with his family to celebrate Sabbath. We are clearly intended to see ourselves in this man: destined for death but finding freedom and life through the death of another.

If we reflect for a moment, it becomes clear this is not merely an exchange, but a *substitution*. Jesus doesn't just die *instead* of Barabbas; He dies in his place as his substitute, his representative. We know this because (and this is often missed) Barabbas and Jesus stand accused of the same crime: sedition, insurrection, treason. Barabbas is a revolutionary who has directly challenged Roman rule (Luke 23:18-19). And from a Roman point of view, Jesus' claim to be King of the Jews poses a threat to Caesar. Few examples of substitutionary atonement in Scripture are clearer than Jesus, the innocent Man, taking the penalty so that none remains for the guilty Barabbas.

There is also an Exodus dimension here. The Gospels point out that freeing prisoners is a Passover custom. In other words, it happens in honor of the night when Pharaoh's firstborn son died so that God's firstborn son (Israel) could be released. But the Gospels raise a subtle question. Which of these two accused men is really God's firstborn son? The one whose name, *Bar-abbas*, means "son of the father"? Or the One claiming to be the Son of God? And is God's Son playing the part of Israel, escaping to freedom—or that of the Passover lamb, shedding His blood to liberate others?

(concluded on page 4)



"Christ Before Pilate, Liberation of Barabbas"  
from the "Codex Purpureus Rossanensis," 6th century,  
discovered in 1879 in the Rossano Cathedral in Rossano, Italy.



### Blessed! (concluded from page 1)

Encourage others and they are encouraged.

So that is my encouragement to you, Church Family. Speak blessing to your people. Build them up. Do it both in your prayer closet and in their presence. Bless them in your coming and going and do not tear them down. It is one of the super-powers the Father has given you!

With much love and blessings,

Andy and Marie Heinger

## Barabbas Explains the Bible *(concluded from p. 3)*

Another layer to the story is the question of how Israel should respond to Roman rule. Barabbas represents the way of war, strength, and violent insurrection. Jesus represents the way of peace, innocence, and sacrifice. When Pilate asks the crowd for their preference, this is the point at issue. And Jerusalem chooses the way of violence--“No, not Him! Give us Barabbas!” (John 18:40) as Jesus tearfully predicted it would (Luke 19: 41-44). But the Prince of Peace will enjoy vindication—not the least through the mouths of Roman soldiers, the men of violence *par excellence* (Matt. 27:54).

For a final lens on the Barabbas story, consider the Day of Atonement. On this crucial day in the Jewish year, the high priest would cast lots over two goats. One would be the sacrificial goat, whose blood was spilled. The other would be the scapegoat, who was released from the camp into the wilderness. The parallels with the Barabbas story are fascinating—one dies while the other is released—not the least because it was the chief priests who wanted Barabbas released and Jesus killed (Mark 15:11). When, like a priest scrutinizing a sacrificial animal, Pilate explains that he has “examined” Jesus and found Him faultless (Luke 23:14), the Levitical echoes grow louder still.

Barabbas was a revolutionary and a murderer. He has no right to be remembered at all, let alone be held up as an example of divine grace. But that is the whole point. Neither do I, and Christ died for me anyway. And through His substitution, I became a Barabbas myself, a son of the Father.

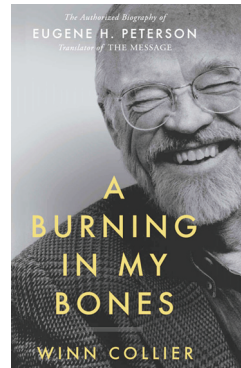
**JESUS DOESN'T JUST DIE**  
**INSTEAD OF BARABBAS,**  
**JESUS DIES IN HIS PLACE**  
**AS HIS SUBSTITUTE, HIS**  
**REPRESENTATIVE.**



Andrew Wilson is teaching pastor at King's Church, London. From Christianity Today, April 2021. Used by permission.

## Jerry & Laura King's Pastor Writes Biography of Eugene Peterson: *A Burning In My Bones*

Just off the press! Before his recent move to Michigan, Winn Collier, the Kings' pastor in Charlottesville, Virginia, was named the writer of the authorized biography of Eugene Peterson. The author of many books, Peterson is perhaps best known for *The Message*.



Pastoral care can be achingly lonely work, making faithful companions essential on the journey. Winn Collier's biography—*A Burning in My Bones*—portrays Presbyterian minister Eugene Peterson as a thoughtful, kind, fiery, and whimsical man of God and a consummate storyteller whose love of Scripture deepened his commitment to practical care, the pursuit of wisdom, and the common good. Peterson's deep knowledge of the Bible, open heart for wounded and wandering souls, and wise boundaries around his family life and Sabbath rest are an encouragement to all who seek to love God and neighbor well while caring for a community of faith. This biography is a love letter to those who pastor locally, reminding them that “honoring the presence of God made visible in one place” is perhaps the hardest, holiest, and best work of all.

-Courtney Ellis

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Eric Byrom	Presiding Elder/Pastor
Jadaé Fox	Elder
Andy Heining	Elder
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Rick Widener	Treasurer
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Lori Barker	Missions
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Judy Nichols	Prayer Chain
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Andy Anschutz	Sound/Power Point
John and Donna Kurtz	TrailNotes