

AColyte

Commencement 2021
A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things
at Austin College

It's Been a Long, Long, Long, Long,
Long, Long, Long, Long,
Long, Long, Long, Long Time

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A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things at Austin College

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

Early One Sunday Morning

Drinking Coffee on the Front Porch

Watching Cardinals

And Noticing the Trains

*...I like trains
I like fast trains
I like trains
That call out through the rain
I like trains
I like sad trains
I like trains that whisper your name*

--Fred Eaglesmith

A couple Sundays ago, I was sitting on our front porch with my wife.

We were drinking coffee and discussing whether or not we wanted to go back inside and watch/participate in the hybrid Covenant Presbyterian Church Worship service that was about to be streamed on Facebook.

We had a little time to make our decision, so we put it off and just sat there on the porch and drank our coffee.

It was a beautiful, sunny morning. I was enjoying the sunshine, and the warm beverage, and the company.

There are two cardinals who have a nest in a tree in our yard. Or maybe *we* have a house in *their* yard – I guess that depends on your perspective. Anyway, we all happily coexist there on Grand Avenue.

The cardinals took turns coming and eating out of the bird feeder on our porch.

I remember enjoying the peacefulness of it all. Everybody was just doing their own thing and it was good to be us.

Then I heard a train.

How do we describe the way we hear trains in Sherman? It's not really a whistle, but it doesn't exactly feel like a horn either.

Maybe it is.

But, however they make their noise, we all hear them. Sherman is still a busy railroad town. We all recognize the familiar sound of trains.

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THAT MADE ME THINK OF THIS...

For some reason, when I heard that train on that peaceful Sunday morning, it evoked a strong memory of my grandparents' back yard when my brother and I were little boys.

My mom's parents lived in a house in South Ft. Worth. There was no house immediately behind them. I'm not sure why. But maybe a hundred yards behind their back fence, there was a fairly busy railroad.

At intermittent times when my brother and I would be at our grandparents' house, we would hear the train whistle (or horn, or whatever it was) and we would immediately dash to the back fence to watch the train go by.

It felt close.

And loud.

And exotic.

And vaguely dangerous.

And exciting.

The trains were long, and made up of many different kinds of cars with the names of many different railroad companies.

Looking back, it's hard to know why Matthew and I always got so fired up when the trains came by, but I'm pretty sure we *always* did.

And I realized on that sunny Sunday morning a couple weeks ago that trains can still call up that excitement for me.

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THAT MADE ME THINK OF THIS...

Years later, I heard a Ft. Worth guy named Guy Forsyth sing these lines:

I remember listening to songs about trains

And feeling the rush of wonder

At the possibility that the world was

Infinite and Accessible

All at the same time.

That feels right.

The trains we saw from our grandparents' back yard were evidence of the existence of things we could not see; of a world bigger than our day-to-day experiences.

They were evidence that

- things had happened in the past,
- somewhere else
- in places beyond the limited world in which we lived and moved and had our being; and
- that soon other things were going to happen in still other locations.

Somehow, I think those trains represented all that. They were a link between *Here* and *Not Here*.

I think that's a pretty good way to talk about why my brother and I always got so excited to see trains go by. It was essentially

wonder at the possibility that the world was

Infinite and Accessible all at the same time.

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THAT MADE ME THINK OF THIS...

In Chapter 1 of the Book of Genesis, God starts creating (heavens, earth, light, sun, moon, plants, etc.) and eventually makes the human in Genesis 1:26.

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image,

according to our likeness;

So this book that lots of people all over the world find insightful and take very seriously (including me) contains this idea that to be human is to be made in the image and likeness of God.

Ideally, I think that notion should lead people like me who take that book seriously to recognize and remember that all those other people out there (*all* those other people) also bear the image and likeness of God as much as I, or people who I perceive as "like" me, do. That's a helpful concept.

But Genesis 1 doesn't go into much detail about what it might mean for humans to be created in the image of God.

The first suggestion the Bible itself offers of what that "image and likeness of God" thing might mean comes in Genesis 2:18-19:

¹⁸ Then the Lord God said,

"It is not good that the man should be alone;

I will make him a helper as his partner."

*¹⁹ So out of the ground the Lord God formed
every animal of the field and every bird of the air,
and brought them to the man to see what he would call them;
and whatever the man called every living creature,
that was its name.*

Think about what it would have been like to be Adam at that moment.

God had decided that there needed to be more characters in the story ("*every animal of the field and every bird of the air*") and then, according to Genesis 2:19, God "brought them to the man to see what he would call them."

A couple things about that:

First, there is no reason for gender-specific pronouns at this point. A better translation would probably be "God brought them [the animals of the field and bird of the air] to the human, to see what the human would call them."

That's important because I think this verse is meant to give all us human readers a suggestion of what it might mean for us all to have been created in the divine image.

And this verse suggests that God's first interaction with this newly-created human is to consult with that human about what to call the newly-created animals.

It's important to note that God does not tell Adam what the new animals are called. There's no suggestion that God had already made that decision.

Instead, God essentially asks Adam, "What do you think?"

And that leads to the easily-overlooked but astonishing conclusion of Genesis 2:19:

and whatever the human called every living creature,

that was its name.

After having finally been created on the sixth day of creation, now this new-fangled, created-in-God's-image human gets to name all the animals.

For real.

And for keeps.

That means the human functions as a sort of partner with God in the ongoing process of creation. It means the human makes real choices that have real consequences. ("That was its name.")

Maybe that's what it means to be "created in God's image."

Maybe bearing the divine image means being able to think about and study and identify and name things.

Maybe it means being able to *affect* the world even if we can't fully *control* it.

Maybe it means that it's still appropriate and essential and important for us humans to keep trying to figure things out, to keep talking to each other about what we learn, and to do something to help the process.

Maybe it means we're entirely capable of learning more about the world than we know now.

If you'll forgive the Call-Back:

Maybe it means the world is "Infinite and Accessible at the same time."

In my squishy Chaplain's head, Guy Forsyth singing about how songs about trains lead him to feel

the rush of wonder

At the possibility that the world [is]

Infinite and Accessible

All at the same time,

is related to the notion in Genesis 2:19 that the divine-image-bearing human is capable of addressing and affecting all of creation.

I think the fact that God's brings the newly-created animals to the human to see what the human will call them suggests that, for that newly-created and divine-image-endowed human, the "world is infinite and accessible at the same time."

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THAT MADE ME THINK OF THIS...

On Saturday, Austin College will award around 400 degrees to members of the Classes of 2020 and 2021.

I'll be on the stage at Commencement.

All those graduates will walk right in front of me on their way to shake President O'Day's hand and then get hooded.

I know many of them very well, but not all of them.

I know some of their personal and academic stories and struggles and hopes and dreams, but not all of them.

But I won't be surprised if I hear trains as they walk past and smile for the cameras.

Sentimental old Chaplain that I am, I fully expect that every one of those graduates will make me feel

the rush of wonder

At the possibility that the world [is]

Infinite and Accessible

All at the same time.

Who knows what they will do with and through their lives?

I've been around long enough to know that we certainly can't predict the future details of the lives of those who will graduate this week.

But I've also been around long enough to know that, while we don't and can't know exactly how their lives will continue to affect and improve the world, we can certainly expect them to change the world.

The possibilities are infinite.

The means are, and will be, accessible.

I can't be a pessimist.

Because I know Austin College students and graduates.

Because I know the world is Infinite and Accessible at the same time.

Because I know every Austin College Commencement, including the one this week, is good news for that world.

Until Next Time, I Remain,

Just Another Cowboy Preacher,

Sinfully Proud of the Classes of 2020 and 2021,

Eager to Meet the Class of 2025,

And Still Excited Whenever I Hear Trains,

JOHN WILLIAMS
Chaplain

ONE MORE THING:

As you can tell, I really like that Guy Forsyth song.

You can hear it here if you're interested:

<https://youtu.be/GWCZILCfQAA>

Spoiler Alert:

The song is a little bit cynical in some ways, but it's kind of compelling.

As you know by now, I really like his line about trains.

But mostly in that song, he sings:

It's Been a Long, Long, Long, Long,

Long, Long, Long, Long,

Long, Long, Long, Long Time

He does that several times and then, at the end of the song, he sings:

It's Been a Long, Long, Long, Long,

Long, Long, Long, Long,

Long, Long, Long, Long Time

Since I felt fine.

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Think back on the last 15 months.

It's Been a Long (cancelled events),

Long, (mask mandates),

Long (social distancing protocols),
Long (QR codes for contact tracing),
Long (suddenly-virtual classes),
Long (mandatory COVID tests),
Long (constant concern for our own health),
Long (Zoom bombings),
Long (constant concern for the health of others),
Long (frustration with those who don't follow the rules),
Long (frustration with those with whom we disagree),
Long Time
Since I felt fine.

You don't need me to remind you that this has been a brutal year—
for students,
for faculty,
for staff,
for administrators,
for trustees,
for our families,
for our neighbors (local and global),
for all of us.

Some days it definitely feels like it's been a long long time since we felt fine.

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THAT MADE ME THINK OF THIS...

Isaiah 40:1-2 says:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,

and cry to her

that her warfare is ended

The context in the book of Isaiah has to do with sharing the news that the exile of the Israelites is coming to an end.

That exile, in which many Israelites were forcefully removed from their homes by an invading power, was a huge, catastrophic event in Israelite society that touched the lives of many.

"Huge catastrophic event."

"Touched the lives of many."

Sound familiar?

We might have something in common with the people Isaiah was addressing. That's probably why people like me keep reading and referencing this ancient text that was written a long way from here and a long time ago.

Here in chapter 40, Isaiah is saying that he has been called to share words of comfort, assurance, and hope to a community that had endured many hardships.

Sometimes communities facing difficulties need to hear words of judgment, and correction, and challenge. The Bible includes lots of clear, relevant, and pertinent calls for justice and repentance.

And this year we've heard similar urgent and appropriate calls for justice and repentance on our campus and in our larger culture.

Those calls are still legitimate and still important. They will never not be relevant.

But that's not what's going on at the beginning of Isaiah 40.

As we come to the end of this trying and difficult academic year, Isaiah's tender words of comfort seem appropriate.

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THAT MADE ME THINK OF THIS...

<https://youtu.be/UnPMoAb4y8U>

Otis Redding sang that in 1966.

He was singing about a girl.

But maybe not only about a girl.

*But it's all so easy
All you got to do is try
Try a little tenderness*

What if we decide to spend a moment or two this summer being agents of comfort in these hectic days?

What if all us smart, wordy, critical thinkers make a conscious effort to speak tenderly, to "try a little tenderness"?

We still have struggles to face here in Roo Nation.

We're not out of the Wilderness yet – as a College, a nation, a species.

But we can see the light from here.

Let's help each other get there.

Here's one more train song for good measure:

Down around the corner,

*Half a mile from here
See them long trains run,*

*And you watch them disappear
Without love, where would you be now?*

--The Doobie Brothers

Take care of each other.

Hang in there.

Relax for a bit.

Speak tenderly.

Try to bring some comfort.

Let yourself receive some comfort.

Remember that the world is Infinite and Accessible all at the same time.

So do what you can for who you can.

This sweet old world deserves and needs what you've got to offer.

Lucky for us, you're up to that ask.

Seriously.