



Patricia C. Thomas

This week we join some biblical friends, listening as they “bump into God.” In the process I invite you to recall times when you encountered the Divine.

During the past year my adventure has involved jumping into the world of book publishing. *Cast Me Not Away* is the first novel in a series I’m calling *The Pastor and the Professor Mysteries*. In creating the protagonist Ruthalice Michels, I have drawn inspiration from my own experience as the campus minister at Wilmington College. I enjoy the challenge and wider scope of writing a full-length novel and the discipline of writing meditation pieces for *Fruit of the Vine*. *Cast Me Not Away* is available from lighthousechristianpublishing.com and from Amazon.com.

BIBLE READING: Exodus 14:19-22

The county roads of Ohio are peppered with warning signs. My favorite sign, shaped like a diamond with a bright yellow background, displays a black lump on a horizontal line: the smaller square sign underneath proclaims “Bump Ahead.” Both beg the question—just how big is this bump going to be? We get jostled about regularly in life, whether walking along the city sidewalk or pushing a grocery cart down a crowded aisle. Most of the time our daily bumps are the casual “excuse me” variety; but every now and then they feel more like collisions. We look for damages, check for our wallet, and make any necessary adjustments.

This week we are in a crowd listening to biblical folks share their own “bumping into God” stories with those of us eager to hear. “Epiphany,” “Way opening,” “the moment I was saved”—the specific language doesn’t matter. Rather, they reveal how all of us are changed in our encounters with the living God.

Running from captivity toward freedom a fleeing band of slaves reached the banks of the Red Sea, falling into despair. Trapped between Pharaoh’s ruthless army and the sea’s watery grave, they could not see a way out. Hope seemed to be lost, so they pled with Moses to take them back to Egypt, preferring slavery to death in the wilderness. As they hugged the shoreline, the seas suddenly parted, and then this band of brick makers and straw cutters realized they had just been rescued by God. The Way lay open before them.

SONG: Oh Mary, Don’t You Weep

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Dear God, as I go through this week, may I be aware of areas you open for me when all I can see is the vast ocean before me and the menacing army behind me.

—Patricia Thomas

BIBLE READING: Acts 22:3-11

“Patsy, you’re not listening to me.” True. I was bent on doing what I wanted to in my own way. My determination closed my ears to my mother’s suggestion. But, I’m not alone in the stubbornness department; the apostle Paul’s story of not listening tops mine any day.

Saul wasn’t seeking God’s advice, either; he didn’t feel the need to ask for God’s guidance or to wait humbly before the Lord. Inordinately proud of doing things his way in persecuting “the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women” (v. 4), Saul threw himself into his task, being “as zealous for God as any of you are today,” (v. 3). He was so *not* open to suggestion and so *not* in the mood to notice God’s new movements, Paul’s “bump” had to be a train wreck—a no-holds-barred attention getter.

And what drama! Saul, persecutor of followers of the Way, became Paul, apostle to the Gentiles. Chosen by Jesus the Christ, Paul bore witness to all the world about what he had seen and heard (v. 15): Paul shared the good news that God’s kingdom is here on earth and that God’s saving grace is available for people everywhere.

Bumping into God has the potential to discombobulate our perceptions and restructure our relationships. The major “aha” moments I’ve experienced have occurred only because of God’s involvement. Paul’s story bears witness to God’s awesome power. We can be turned and pointed in a different direction. Saul’s journey from persecutor to apostle—only God saw the possibilities.

SONG: Holy Spirit, Faithful Guide

PRA YER SUGGESTION: I am grateful that you care enough to go to great lengths in getting our attention, sticking with us as we feel our way along.

—Patricia Thomas

BIBLE READING: Matthew 8:14-15

When viewed through twenty-first century eyes today's vignette can be off-putting. Our concerns about the subservient role of women can paint the healing of Peter's sick mother-in-law as out of self-serving motivation. Was she healed because Jesus and his companions wanted dinner? Imagine her muffled retort: "Can't you fix your own pb&j for once?"

However, when I trade places with this woman, my perspective changes; now I'm the one groggy with a fever and a throbbing head. My son-in-law approaches in conversation with his new friend, Jesus of Nazareth. Peter is bringing the carpenter's son into *my* home. I wish I felt well enough to participate in his visit by presenting what I have to contribute: my gift of hospitality. Eager to express my gratitude to Jesus for stopping by our humble home, I then want to absorb his words and watch his face when he smiles. I want to receive his rich blessing, but, my bed linen is damp with sweat and the sour odor of illness. Even a simple greeting is beyond my ability.

I have come to love the speed with which Peter's mother-in-law is back in action—on her feet preparing the evening meal. I love to imagine the joy she feels as she resumes her daily activity. The disappointment and shame that probably added to her feelings of illness were banished along with the fever. She has her life back.

SONG: He Touched Me

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Thank you, God, for the times you lift the burden of sickness off of our shoulders. How good it feels to "get back to normal."

—Patricia Thomas

BIBLE READING: Numbers 27:1-8

We stand on the shoulders of many faithful people, such as the daughters of Zelophehad. If these women don't usually come to mind, perhaps they should. The five sisters (Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah) did a gutsy and remarkable thing: going to the Tent of Meeting they stood before the male leadership—Moses, Eleazar the priest, and the leaders of the whole assembly—to plead their case.

Moses made a habit of presenting cases to God, followed by a report of the Lord's decrees for the Hebrew tribes to implement. It's my hunch that our five courageous gals were counting on this *modus operandi*, trusting Yahweh to look favorably on their plea. I picture the sisters holding their collective breath with fingers crossed behind their backs and butterflies flapping in their stomachs as they waited for the Lord's decision. Are they caught by surprise when God concurs with their claim?

Then the Lord goes even further, adjusting the existing laws that governed inheritance: if a man dies without a son, "you shall transfer his inheritance to his daughter" (v. 8, NASB). What a tale of human longing and divine sensibilities converging! Five loyal daughters, yearning to keep their father's land in the family, appear before the prophet of God. The Divine's desire for equality is made manifest when God sweeps away restrictive inheritance laws and writes a new legal requirement into the law. Who would have predicted the result of five Hebrew sisters bumping into God to be a set of society-altering directives?

SONG: God Will Take Care of You

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Thank you, God, for taking all of us seriously and for considering all of our pleas and demands for justice.

—Patricia Thomas

BIBLE READING: Luke 24:13-21, 30-32

What a melancholy seven-mile trek lay before them. I picture two people desperately trying to make sense of the events of the last few days. Periodically one of them glances nervously over a shoulder. They confer and shake their heads in bewilderment, continuing to trudge along the dusty road. Luke tells us the men were so upset that they were *debating* among themselves. Let's listen: "Didn't Jesus teach that he is the Son, sent by God the Father, to exemplify the life of unconditional forgiveness and open-armed love?" "That's right, and unless I totally misheard, he also proclaimed that God's unconditional love has defeated evil." "So, what's wrong with this picture?"

My heart aches for these dear, befuddled disciples. Jesus' words that promised so much good news a few days ago seem totally out of touch with this day's reality. When I suspect that I've been snookered, I feel miserable. What if I'd quit *my* job and left *my* family to follow the man I believed to be the long-expected Anointed One of God, only to discover he is dead and his body has disappeared?!

But wait. In the little village of Emmaus the forlorn disciples break bread with the sojourning stranger, and their eyes are opened. They were not left alone in their sorrow and loss after all; the Lord accompanied them. At times life can feel bleak and unforgiving, and then we bump into God who reminds us that we never walk alone.

SONG: The Comforter Has Come

PRAAYER SUGGESTION: I am so grateful that you, Lord, are not put off by my torrent of emotions. You remain ever-present even in the midst of my despair.

—Patricia Thomas

BIBLE READING: Isaiah 6:1

I'd just left my sociology class at the University of Michigan when a friend grabbed my arm and began screaming, "The president's been shot!" For my generation the question of "where were you when...?" revolves around the horror of President Kennedy's shooting. My children's definitive date centers on 9/11 and the attack on the Twin Towers. Pearl Harbor and D-Day are the red-letter days for my parents.

In the aftermath of human-induced tragedies people often bear witness to Divine Presence in the chaos. Powerful prayers may arise: "Oh God, I have no easy answer to acts of terrorism against the innocent. When the defenseless are murdered without reason, I am tempted to retaliate with vengeance, to place the flag above the cross, to put my faith in the state rather than the Sermon on the Mount.... But I recommit myself to nonviolence as a witness of Your love." (Mary Lou Kownacki, OSB, after 9/11 www.monasteriesoftheheart.org/blogs/prayer-time-terrorism).

Fortunately, not all "where were you when...?" events center on disasters. Listen as Isaiah recounts his life-altering experience: "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne." His encounter with the living God was so momentous that Isaiah remembers the year and the date. Isaiah draws us in as spectators: the Lord appears "high and lifted up," we see the seraphs praise, and feel the thresholds shake. Then we hear the Lord's query, "Whom shall I send?" Empowered by the Lord God's presence Isaiah responds without hesitation, "Here am I; send me!" (v. 8)

SONG: Here I Am, Lord

PRAYER SUGGESTION: When you call my name, Lord, grant me the wisdom and courage to reply along with Isaiah, "Here I am."

—Patricia Thomas

BIBLE READING: John 5:1-9

The decision to step in and affect a situation is known as “intervention.” After much prayer and discussion my siblings and I moved our mother to an assisted living community in the Midwest where family lives. She and Dad had spent thirty years in southern California, so Mom experienced disorientation for a while, unsure of the state she lived in [What’s round on the ends and high in the middle? O-hi-o]. Mom had to make new friends and attend a new meeting for worship. In return she gained wonderful neighbors, a welcoming worship community, visits with grandchildren, and Sunday dinner with in-laws.

Intervention intends to interrupt a current behavior, pointing the individual in a new direction. When the lame man lying beside the Bethesda Pool bumped into God that morning long ago, his life changed course. The routine he had followed for the past thirty-eight years was snatched out from under him. At this moment Jesus performs a divine intervention. He begins by asking an unexpected question: “Do you want to be made well?” (v. 6). The lame man’s response sounds like a standard justification to explain the reason he’s never in the pool in time for a cure. Instead of letting the excuse sidetrack him Jesus “steps up to the plate,” interrupting the dysfunctional behavior patterns. With a command of “stand up and walk,” the intervention is complete. The lame man collects his mat and turns his face toward a new tomorrow.

SONG: He Touched Me

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Thank you for interrupting harmful behavior, calling us forth into a new day and way of living.

—Patricia Thomas