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WHEN FAITH FALTERS: “A BRUISED REED; A DIMLY BURNING WICK”

Those who know me and who have observed me at worship will frequently remark that I rarely make the Sign of the Cross. That’s perhaps a surprise, in someone who is often identified as “high church”. Aren’t “high church” people supposed to cross themselves frequently during worship? Don’t those little red crosses in the texts of our liturgies encourage you to cross yourself at those moments?

Hey: Martin Luther himself urges Christians to “make the sign of the holy cross” upon your breast regularly, at least upon arising and when going to bed. See his *Small Catechism* in *ELWorship*, page 1166 and 1167.

Well, yes. But one of my mentors makes the case that it’s pretty heavy stuff: to cross yourself. To mark yourself, your own flesh, your own body, your own psyche, with the cross of Jesus’ suffering. That’s nothing you want to do hastily or casually or without thinking, like the members of a sports team at half-time.

To make the sign of Jesus’ cross upon yourself is a pretty potent gesture. So I don’t do it very often.

Aside: Actually I think I’ve earned the right to do it, if I may say so. I’m a basically cheerful person, but I’ve had my share of this world’s sorrows. I’ve lost a beloved brother at a too young age. Suffered several heart attacks. Sustained open heart surgery not once but twice, my breastbone split open, on two separate occasions, like a Thanksgiving turkey, first to repair a faulty aortic valve and then, thirty years later, to remove a monstrous aortic aneurism. I’ve suffered two very painful and very public professional humiliations. (Don’t ask.) And more recently I lost a beloved wife of 37 years to cancer. So I think I could say I’ve paid my dues. I can relate to The Tribulations of St. Paul. (*2 Corinthians 11:21-29.*)

I'm alluding, of course, to *Isaiah 42:2-4* in my subtitle this month, and that's meant to be a signal that my posting today is more than a little personal. I've come through the Valley of the Shadow in recent years — another Biblical allusion, this time to *Psalms 23* — and I've found my own faith faltering on more than one occasion.

But what's shaken my faith in these last months is not so much any of the items I recount in that aside above, as this: recent American military misadventures abroad. I find my eyes filling with tears at TV footage of the latest American barbarity, old women weeping over their dead, starving children with hollow eyes and swollen bellies. I curse the country of my birth. And I curse God.

If God is good and loving, why does this happen? Is God indeed powerful to prevent our human atrocities? Or not? My faith falters.

So: How can a person find faith again, once lost? How can that smoldering wick be re-ignited? That bruised reed grafted with new life and vigor? Here's my personal prescription. I've taken three routes back to faith.

1) My first route was aesthetic. It centred in the arts. Surely it must be a great faith tradition to animate so imposing an outpouring of inspired art. The Christian valuation must not be altogether preposterous, altogether a hoax, if it can inspire a J. S. Bach, a Michelangelo, a Mozart.

I love that second stanza of *Jesu, Meine Zuversicht* in its *LBW* translation: "Jesus, my redeemer lives; / I too unto life shall waken. / He will bring me where he is; / Shall my courage then be shaken? / Shall I fear, or could the head / Rise and leave his members dead?..." Even in translation, those verses are a terrific poetic invention.

The hymn "O God, our help in ages past" is great poetry too, by anyone's standard. If Isaac Watts believed, so can I.

2) My second route back to faith — I'm presenting these in chronological order, as I discovered them — was ethical. The Christian Way simply seems to me to be a good way to live. Islam and Buddhism and Hinduism each have their merits, I'm sure. Hey, I'm willing to affirm the gifts of simple secular humanism, of Godless agnosticism and atheism. I'd be willing to learn from each of them, and to cherish their gifts. But it would be hard to surpass the ethical challenge, the ethical reaching, of the Christian tradition, when it's at its best.

Simply as a way of life, without counting in anything transcendent, the Christian way seems to me to be mighty impressive.

As for the *Lutheran version* of the Christian Way — that's how I'd put it: One version, among many, of the Christian Way — that's plenty persuasive to me too. Among all the possibilities for living out the Christian promise, the Lutheran possibility continues still to

seem to me to be convincing.

And altogether unique. Lutheran Bible interpretation, Lutheran theology, Lutheran ethics, Lutheran liturgy, even Lutheran church order: Each of these seems to me to be utterly unlike any of the other possibilities. Unlike Roman Catholic, unlike Orthodox, unlike Anglican, unlike Mainline Protestant, unlike Neo-Revivalist. (See [Essay 96](#) for a case in point.)

I'm sure each of these other Christian traditions has distinctive gifts to give. I'm celebrating here the *Lutheran* gift.

To continue this semi-chauvinist reflection: I've sometimes said, only partly joking, that there are only five truly civilized countries in the world today: Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and Iceland. Mixed economies with systems of justice for all, free medical care for all, free education for all, up to and including University — even a non-paranoid attitude toward human sexuality. And one hundred percent literacy. Those standards would be hard to match in any other country in the world!

And still only partly joking: Can this be because they are each of them still at least nominally Lutheran? (Or should I say Post-Lutheran? Church commitment there these days is pretty dismal.) Can it be because for four hundred years each of these countries has been shaped by a Lutheran ethos, a Lutheran valuation of what it means to be human? Just posing the question...

Martin Marty says somewhere that being a Christian seems to him to be a pretty good way to live as a human being. And to be a Lutheran seems to him to be a pretty good way to live as a Christian. Fill in your own denominational affiliation, if you'd prefer.

3) Finally — Surprise! — the liturgical route back to faith. I have learned to acknowledge that everyone has a liturgy. Even agnostics and atheists. In that context, the Christian liturgy stands up pretty well. Gives a good account of itself.

Strictly by the standards of "Religion" — as I define the term in [Essay 91](#), and not taking "Revelation" into account at all — the Christian cultus is mighty impressive. No Christian has to apologize for the traditions of Christian worship. The rituals of the secular "religions" — of Sex or Sports or Politics or Patriotism — the "liturgies" of each of these begin to look pretty pale, pretty vacuous, pretty anemic when you put them alongside the Holy Communion of the Christian tradition, when it's at its best.

Alas, Christian liturgy is not always, or perhaps even often, at its best. But when it is — and even when it isn't — you can't beat the Christian Eucharist as a Working Model of Human Life at its Fullest and most satisfying. Even in my darkest hours of existentialist despair in the Valley of the Shadow — not to be too melodramatic about it — I'll take the Mass over any of those others. In my experience, it's simply a truer, fuller enactment of

What Counts in Life. Add to that the Gospel and it's unbeatable.

Finally, some specifics. Here's what I do when my lamp burns low. "Imitate me", says the Apostle:

a) Seek out a community of faith. You need those others to keep your embers alive. As I used to tell Seminarians: You're not at corporate worship regularly simply for the health of your own soul. You're here for the health of my soul too, your neighbour's soul. I need, your neighbour needs to see you here, to hear you sing those hymns and songs, to hear you confess that Creed. Even when I can't. Especially when I can't.

b) Receive Communion regularly, even if you don't believe. Especially if you don't believe. Those molecules of bread and wine will work their work in you. Those molecules are a precious reminder that the Infinite Absolute intends to rescue you — to rescue the creation! — to the level of your atoms.

c) Pray those words of the Liturgy, sing those texts of the hymns, as if you mean them. As if. Even if you don't. (*So much* of the Christian life is lived "as if"!) As the Jesuits would say, intention is the moral equivalent of action, of actuality. Action and actuality may come later. First comes intention.

d) Find a program of daily devotions at home, and use it daily. Even if you can't believe the words. See [Essay 117](#) for one possible system for daily prayer.

e) Finally and most important, be prepared to change your theology. Focus your thoughts and feelings on the Frailty of God: God on a cross. See [Essay 67](#). Acknowledge that there are some things God simply cannot do, and still remain God, the Infinite Absolute. Be prepared to call God "Almighty" only within the severest limits and qualifications.

The problem of human suffering challenges your view of God's power. It pits God's power against God's love. Irreconcilably. Your view of God must change. [Essay 67](#) again. Either God is Love, or God is Power. You must choose.

Oh yes. There is one time, one place in worship where I *do* make the Sign of the Cross on myself. That's in the Creed. At the words "...the resurrection of the body..." I always cross myself. It's *this* body we're talking about. The body I'm touching. With all its scars. With its twice broken breastbone.

And of course this other Body as well, the rest of you, my corporate companions. With all *your* scars and brokenness.

