Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





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“The violent bear it away” (Matthew 11:13).

Isa 41:13-20; Matt 11:11-15

Readers of Southern writer Flannery O’Connor’s stories meet characters often described as “God-haunted.” Writing for an American culture she saw as blinded by secular materialism, O’Connor displays the intensity of people steeped in a biblical landscape where prophets preach salvation as a matter of life and death. Hazel Motes, Francis Marion Tarwater and O.E. Parker cannot escape the fire of God’s call. By all normal standards, their behaviors shock readers with the mystery of grace that shatters modern sensibilities and forces the basic questions and decisions of faith to the surface.

O’Connor chose the phrase from today’s Gospel, “The violent bear it away” as the title of her second novel. Jesus praised John the Baptist as the greatest person who ever lived, yet the least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he. What God has hidden from the wise and learned and even from John, who preaches the perfection of the Law, Jesus reveals as the mystery of divine Mercy. It defies all human notions of righteousness and merit and is given freely to the least, the marginalized and outcast, including sinners.

This reversal of first and last, greatest and least, righteous and sinner, enraged the scribes and Pharisees because Jesus was undermining the order and hierarchy of religion. He was yielding salvation to the “violent” who were so desperate for mercy they were “storming heaven” to take hold of God. Believers for whom salvation is a blessed assurance that they are good enough to go to heaven will never know the cost of it until life plunges them into the fiery embrace of love that burns away their virtues and confronts them with the shocking holiness of God.

Jesus identifies John as the Prophet Elijah. An empty seat is reserved for him at every Passover as the unknown guest who will herald the advent of the Messiah. Had Elijah appeared in Millidgeville, Georgia, he would have fit right in with the God-haunted figures in O’Connor’s stories. His confrontation with the prophets of Baal, his departure in a fiery chariot, dropping his cloak and a double portion of his spirit onto his servant Elisha, are part of the treasury of images that reappear again and again in great literature as glimpses of the transcendent power that stirs the imagination of God-seekers in every generation.

Jesus ends by challenging “everyone who has ears to hear.” Advent invites us to sharpen our hearing and eyesight to apprehend the closeness of God in the shimmering light and hint of music in the wind passing though the chimes. What is always on the outskirts, at the margins and edges of our consciousness, summons us in this season of waiting. God lies hidden in the lowly, the last and the least, appearing when we least expect his fiery embrace. Do not be afraid to open your heart.

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