

Selected Excerpts from
Tables in the Wilderness:
A Memoir of God Found, Lost, and Found Again
By Preston Yancey

During Epiphany I meet with my spiritual director, Barbara. We have been meeting for about a year. When I was first introduced to her in the small room adjoining the nave, she had drawn three chairs into a small triangle. Taking one and indicating that I should take one as well, she waited for me to be seated and then gestured to the third chair.

“This,” she explained, “is for the Holy Spirit.”

Her point was clear. God is always present. Present in every place and at every time, more sensed in some places than others. The third chair was the reminder of that continual, perpetual, ever Presence.

The Presence that right now I cannot feel.

The chair is an icon, a reminder that when Barbara and I speak to one another, this can be prayer.

Barbara is a tiny woman, graciously wrinkled, with kind eyes. When we meet each month, she lights a candle, lays a cross beside it, and waits in silence in her chair as I take my own. When we are finished and I am ready to leave, she prays for me. She thanks God for me. She prays more for what is to come than what we have talked about. According to Barbara, the third chair has meant that we have been praying about the things we talked about for that hour. So at the close, we have no need to pray again on those things. They have been prayed for.

When I've left in the past, I have gone unburdened, even when I didn't come feeling oppressed. I have encountered for a moment how *chronos*, human time, time which is linear to us and we move forward in progressively, intersects with *kairos*, divine time, time which does not move forward in seconds and minutes but in vertical directions and in circles. For it is in this place where the real that we know, the real of tables and desks and chairs and lattes and Netflix and subways, and the Real that we are meant to know, the Real of Angels and Beauty and Glory and Light and Truth and Grace, converge, or come so close to touching that you can tell, in an instant of *chronos* time and in an eternity of *kairos* time, that the Presence is more felt in that space than in others.

But I can no longer feel God. I tell Barbara about this, again, after months of telling her. I tell her about forcing myself to pray. I tell her about my icon stack of prayer books and theology. I tell her about the people I think are keeping vigil for me. I tell her about everything I have tried to do to bring Jesus back, to convince him to unpack the boxes and live in this space with me again, instead of just hanging around, but that he's not coming back, that he's standing around and refusing to speak. I told her about Jesus on the couch, about the trust, about how I managed a few months on handicapped prayers before I slipped completely into wordless ambivalence.

Barbara studies me.

“As has just been said: ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.’”

She says it quietly, calmly, but her eyes pierce me.

“What else have I been doing?” I nearly shout. She has quoted the anonymous epistle to the Hebrews. She's pointed to the passage about the Israelites grumbling against God as God led them through the desert.

“God's not talking. What is there to hear?”

Barbara considers me, seems to see something that wasn't there before.

“Can God prepare a table in the wilderness?”

A few months ago, I had shared that scrap from Psalm 78 and said something about maybe it keeping me afloat, back before I started buying the prayer books and filling my time with talking about God instead of to God.

“Yes,” I respond sheepishly but annoyed. I mean yes intellectually. Yes as in it's the thing you're supposed to say.

“Can God prepare a table in the wilderness?” she asks again, refusing to break my gaze. “Yes.” Now I’m frustrated. I’m staring at the third chair, the empty third chair.

“Can God,” she asks a third time, “prepare a table in the wilderness?”

“Of course! Of course God can! God does all the time for everyone else, but right now God has not chosen to prepare one for me.

There are tears, tears that I had not expected.

Barbara raises her hand, and, with the movement, my tears stop.

“This is the table,” she speaks simply, taking her free hand and casting it over the empty space between us, in the midst of the three chairs.

“This is the table, Preston. It’s time for you to stop spending all your time trying to get God back and realize that God truly is right here, right in your midst, and God’s spread a table before you. Maybe this is how God is speaking to you. In the icon stack. In the faces of those keeping vigil for you. Maybe, maybe it’s time for you to stop chattering away and finally keep silent so that you can actually hear God whisper. Stop doing. Stop striving. Stop.”

She holds up both hands, commanding.

“You’re in the middle space. You’re on the plateau. Here is the table before you. This is the wilderness. You have arrived somewhere. God has brought you to somewhere. He said it would be about trust, and, you see, it is. You’re in this somewhere space, this wilderness space.” She sits back in her chair and gives me a solemn nod. “Now, go have a look around.”

I entered Baylor determined to study political science. After my summer in East Asia and having grown up on Aaron Sorkin and NPR, I reasoned that even if I were to end up being a missionary someday a background in governmental affairs, particularly those of countries hostile to Christians, would be valuable. I paired this desire with one of Baylor’s honors tracks, the Baylor Interdisciplinary Core, or BIC.

BIC is not a major in and of itself, but a humanities program that couples history, literature, the arts, science, and social theory into a four year, holistic survey of human anthropology from primordial age to present. It acts as the replacement for all common core requirements for majors in the College of Arts and Sciences. BIC is team taught, so you have a rotation of instructors and a combination of large group and small group discussion and lectures. It’s an intensive program, but it can leave you wanting if you bend more toward literature, like I do.

A shorthand way of explaining BIC would be to say it’s the track that doesn’t read all the books. Because there is so much material to engage with and cover, BIC is unable to fit all of the reading into the courses as it would like to, so you end up reading only half of *The Odyssey* and supplementing the rest with summary, or you’ll only read Dante’s *Inferno* and skip over *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* altogether.

Meredith chose BIC as well, majoring in history.

During the opening session of World Cultures I, the BIC history and literature intensive, a graying professor stood at the front of a room of two hundred largely evangelical college students and said, “Genesis is not the oldest historical account of the creation of the world.”

Meredith and I made eyes at each other, incredulous. We were purists in the realm of heathens. We had heard stories of how these university types liked to belittle God and the Bible. We were prepared to confront them. We had a wall of certainty as our hedge of protection, firmly constructed around our hearts and minds.

I stopped listening. Because I disagreed with one part, I rejected the whole.

I was carefully religious in those opening days of class, determined to make college a marked point of transformation, a recommitment to the cause of Christ. I read my Bible daily and prayed purposefully. I asserted my Christianity with vigor and treated conversation as a circuitous dance that always led back to talking about Jesus. Cheaply. I could spiritualize anything and I did. There was a lot of talking about God in those days. There was a lot of piety bought on my own merits.

I was completely sure of what I believed and I was terrified that no one would ever truly love me. It makes a terribly mangled soul.

We are sitting on the front porch of the College, chairs turned out and legs on the stone railing.

Chris, a mess of brown curls, is the wife of the College chaplain, and we've been slow friends for the past few months. We drop one-liners of theological maybes between us and see if the other decides to pick them up. We determine whether or not we'll have an extended discussion from that. Chris is studying at Truett, the seminary affiliated with Baylor, and she feels called to be a pastor.

I am certain about what I believe about these things. I have my prepared answers. I have my fixed feelings.

"So if the Holy Spirit speaks into my heart and says that I am called to this, you think I'm just making it up?"

She is not accusatory. Chris is remarkable this way. She speaks conviction slow, careful, just enough to prick your soul without puncturing you to the point of hemorrhage.

"Maybe you misheard."

"Ah."

She breathes, surveys the landscape of people changing classes in front of us, the scuffle to chapel and the dining halls, the bohemian transients in flowing dresses stretched out on blankets reading Thoreau.

"How are you so sure that you hear the Holy Spirit more clearly than I do?"

I have told her about my own calling, something years ago, to be a missionary, this is the first time she has addressed it directly.

"Because I don't want the call and usually that's a sign it's God."

Chris nods slightly, kicks her legs off the stone, and smiles.

"Yeah," she says sarcastically, "I really wanted to be called to preach in a world where my own people resent me for it."

She tosses her hair and grabs her bag.

"I have to head to class."

Chris turns and takes a half step before turning back.

"You know so much more than you know, Preston Yancey, but you know so much less than you think you do."

I started reading Madeleine L'Engle's *Walking on Water*. L'Engle describes art as a form of annunciation and incarnation. The Spirit comes to someone and tells them they are to create, and in the action of creating, they are partnered with by God, and what comes forth, if it is true, is both of that person and of God.

"And what does that have to do with your alleged brokenness?" Barbara asks me once, in the circle of three chairs.

"I'm not sure it has anything to do with it. I've just been thinking about it a lot when it comes to how I want to be a writer."

She tilts her head, "But being a writer is a giving task; it reaches into you and pulls all of you out and hands all of you over."

"And?"

"And how are you going to do any of that if you don't believe that God is already partnering with you in your life? Has already made the annunciation, is in the midst of realizing the incarnation that he has given for you to do."

"I don't know what you mean."

"You, Preston," and she points softly toward me, "you are the work of art that God wants to partner with you to work on right now. A broken vessel cannot control how it pours out. But you are not broken; you are simply afraid that you are. So you resist being filled."

The form pride takes can be surprising. The Church of No Windows prided itself on everything it wasn't, while I prided myself on everything I thought I was.

For a long time after I first began attending St. Paul's, I carried the word Eucharist around like it was a weapon. Anytime I was with anyone, I saw fit to forgo other words like *Communion* or *Lord's Supper* in favor of the "right" word for the event. Even if the other person had used *Communion* the entire time they spoke, I insisted on calling it the *Eucharist*, in a kind of pointed, knowing way.

Worse, I did this mostly with my parents. I carried around *Eucharist* like I was harpooning it into the word *evangelical*, tactlessly deploying usage whenever possible, from planning my attendance at church Sunday mornings to the general, dropped reference in ordinary conversations about building a porch in our backyard the following summer.

In Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, the same book I had scrawled the word *Eucharist* beside instructions about Communion my first year at St. Paul's, the actual Saint Paul writes, "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?"

I had missed the point of the Eucharist entirely by obsessing over how to name it. There's nothing more zealous than a convert—Paul is a good case study to go by—and in my joy of finding a place I had fit, I stumbled around trying to make everyone else fit there too. But the message of the Lord's Supper, Communion, Eucharist, transcends all that.

If we get tripped up by the words about God, we miss God in the process. It took me a long time, but I eventually gave up the need to always call the Eucharist the Eucharist and instead use the words Communion, Lord's Supper, and Eucharist with an interchangeable grace. I let circumstance dictate my word choice. I let context determine my response. Because there was a time there where I and The Church of the Windowless Resurrection were essentially one and the same. We were both fighting, clawing, thrashing to prove who we were not.

But grace comes into the cracked places, and one day I said Communion and meant it, profoundly, as much as I would have meant Eucharist. It was about that time I became comfortable again with the word *evangelical* too.

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