

Q&A with Preston Yancey, author of *Tables in the Wilderness: A Memoir of God Found, Lost, and Found Again*

You are still in your twenties, Preston, so your memoir captures a Millennial's view of life. What do you think is distinct or unique about the spiritual journey of 20-somethings today?

We can't escape that the Internet has played a dynamic and significant role in shaping spirituality in my generation. Particularly, I think it is because of the collective memory that the Internet creates. If you go back fifty years and read archival documents or journals, a genuine knowledge of people outside of one's physical sphere is uncommon. Someone might have a few ideas about what people living on the other side of the world are like and are doing, but they may have the same kind of fuzzy knowing of the people who live sixty miles away from them. The Internet changed that and in turn changed faith.

Now, a person sitting in a church in Scotland who is puzzled by something said during a sermon can share that wonder with an international audience. All she needs is 140 characters and a Wi-Fi connection. She tells readers of her concerns and this international tribe pushes around some ideas. They comment on their own church experiences. They suspect and question their own beliefs. Her context is no longer a sermon preached in Scotland; her context is a large conversation of diverse perspectives all commenting on the same question of faith.

This is what I mean by the collective memory: Millennials walk around with other people's experiences informing their own. Moreover, we walk around with a significantly more diverse set of experiences than any generation before us. That kind of diversity complicates faith beautifully, but also troublingly. We ask our pastors, "What about X that's happening over in Y?", and they have no answer for us because they are perhaps not from a generation where much weight was given to a Christianity that existed beyond the confines of the local church. The collective memory has made us fall in love with the diversity of God but has also made us question more, because the resources of experience we have by which to form those questions is so vast, so accessible, and never at rest.

Your journey has moved you from Southern Baptist roots into a more liturgical form of worship, including the lectionary and the Eucharist. How did that process begin? What elements of liturgical worship are most meaningful for you today?

My process toward liturgical formation was both dramatic and ordinary. The dramatic: I was driving around downtown Waco one Sunday morning after the ministry a friend and I had started had completely fallen apart. I told God that I didn't know how to pray anymore, that I just couldn't muster the words, and for reasons that still don't make sense to me, I parked my car across from St. Paul's Episcopal Church, and God told me to go inside. The ordinary: once I got inside I was handed a leaflet with printed prayers on it. So it appears that God was listening, because when I said I didn't know how to pray I was handed a script. And that was how it all started, really, and from there it just kept becoming more ordinary. It was ordinary to pray these things again and again, because they didn't stop being true and they didn't stop needing to be prayed. The more ordinary it became, the more peaceful I was. That was the early days. Spirituality and the religion we use to express it, the working out, the doing of it, has seasons. For a time it was the written prayers that kept me rooted, but that shifted eventually, too.

Say what you will about interpretation, Southern Baptists love their Bibles and the greatest gift they gave me was a love for Scripture. The liturgical tradition nurtures that love and directs toward a rhythm and habit of being. The lectionary, as it's called, is a cycle of readings for each day within the Church Year, Psalms, Old Testament, New Testament, Gospel, in cyclical harmony. We journey with Jesus, with Israel, with the early church. We learn to pray like the psalmists and to expect of God like the prophets. We are given the eyes to see how Scripture comments on itself, how God, as Augustine of Hippo phrased it, writes with people and events the way an author uses grammar and rhetoric. This season of my life finds its roots here, in the stories of our shared faith, in the nearness of the events to us and how time is more wheel than line.

However, in season and out, the constant that has been meaningful to me about the liturgical tradition is the Eucharist. Anglicans maintain a healthy sense of wonder regarding the Sacrament. We say that Jesus is made known to us in the breaking of the bread, in the wine, just as He was made known to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. It is a mystical and yet ordinary thing, for at its core we are fed by Jesus in order to go out into the world to feed others in Jesus' name. I've danced around a lot of different understanding of the mystery, but it has remained fixed at the center of my being, that Jesus is the source of all life, that in Him

we live and move and have our being, and that in the Eucharist, in Communion, we are once again reminded of that life of God we have been caught up into, that we live our lives always seeking to point back to, to where other may go to encounter God.

Your personal experience of wilderness includes a great deal of silence on God's part. How do you recommend a person keep listening when God seems profoundly silent?

Begin by realizing that your presumption that everyone around you is still hearing God is likely false. More often than not, it's simply that the people around you don't feel particularly bothered by a silent God and so can't quite work out why it is so significant to you. That's worth remembering, because while the silence can be isolating, it also can be a gift.

The mystical tradition of the Church shows us that the feeling of God's absence can be a sign of God's desire to bring you further into relationship. Gregory of Nyssa wrote of Moses on the mountain that the darkness that Moses enters when he seeks to see God face to face is not darkness at all, but a superabundance of light. It blinds Moses for a time, but God was closer than ever before. Keep doing the rooted things, the things that keep you connected. In a paraphrase of the apostle, don't give up coming to church, reading the Bible, prayer. How you do those things may look different, but keep the spirit of them alive in you.

Simone Weil wrote that "the action of grace in the heart is secret and silent" and on the other side of the silence or, in my case, on the other side of my need for God to not be silent as proof that God was still around, you'll discover that the doing of the faithful things kept you more rooted than you realized, kept you listening, kept you fed. God is never so far, but the knowing of that is a journey that no one can measure for you. For a little while, it's just going to be you and the ghost of the Holy Ghost, wrestling it out, this mess of being we call a life.

Your early twenties were spent unraveling what you thought you knew for sure – a scary process at any age. What encouragement do you give others who are questioning the very foundations of their faith and life?

Sociologists describe a three-generation cycle whenever a jarring event takes place in the life of a community. The first generation feels the strongest break and flees often to the extreme farthest away from where they began. The second generation, recognizing problems within the opposite extreme, push the community back toward where it originated, though not quite where it began. The first generation resents the second generation for this and further splits may result, with fragmented groups across the ideological spectrum. The third generation tends toward the middle of the extremes and has the ability to mediate concerns of both sides, often pulling to itself some of the fragmented groups.

When you first begin questioning, there is a tendency for the question itself to be enough of a catalyst to run from the origin to the opposite of what was once believed. Over time, either from fear of rejection or insecurity of new belief, there is a tendency to retreat back toward the origin. Eventually, you will likely end up somewhere in the middle. I think, right now, I am in the middling season of my belief. To be sure, I'm not done questioning, so it's quite likely I'll experience the same cycle again or, perhaps even more likely, I'll be in a larger group that undergoes the same process.

I don't find anything unfaithful about the progression, but I do offer a caution: not every foundational belief needs to change. You may need to look at it differently, you may need to prioritize it more carefully, but outside of extreme circumstances, there's often more good in the faith of the past than we are want to realize when we are kicking at it. We should be careful to not too readily define ourselves by what we are against. We should also remember that it is possible to question and wrestle with a belief while still standing within it. You don't have to be on the outside in order for the hard work of discernment to prove itself to you. You also don't have to question every single thing all at once. Sometimes it happens, but sometimes God also makes room for you to wonder after one thing for a while. Be as patient with yourself as God is.

Friendship is a powerful theme within your book. Do face-to-face friendships have more or less significance for a Facebook generation?

I'm not sure I can give a satisfactory answer to whether or not face-to-face friendships have more or less significance for a Facebook generation, in part because I'm careful in speaking for my generation and in part because I'm not sure how we would measure the comparison. More or less than a generation ago? Five?

But I can say this: in the Incarnation, God hallows bodies. God empties Godself to become as we are so that we might, as Irenaeus wrote, become like God.

Scripture weights physical presence, it takes seriously the nearness of the God who has flesh, and so in turn I find myself favoring physicality along similar lines. I wonder sometimes if we're at risk of believing in a polite Gnosticism online. We argue and wax poetic without much consideration of the en-fleshed, fellow human on the other side of the screen. An argument that has a body, that sits across from you at a table, which kneels beside you in church, is a lot harder to dismiss out of hand. I have some online relationships that are deep and significant to me, that are maintained only by the miracle of wires and data streams, but that doesn't change that if I had my preference, they'd be sitting at my kitchen table while I rolled out a pie crust and Hilary poured them wine.

There's something about presence that is so unique, that is Martha marching up to Jesus and saying, Lord if you had only been here, my brother would not have died! something about how the nearness of another person is a kind of icon of the nearness of God, in whose image we are made, by whom bodies are made holy.

What advice do you have for the 2014 freshman class at Baylor University? Or for the parents of those freshmen?

To the students I say be brave. Be brave with your questions, with your wondering, with your conviction. Go to a different kind of church than you would normally, learn to pray with a people who do so in ways that are foreign to you. Run as far as you can to the edges of belief and see what you discover, how God surprises you or calls you back. Don't be in such a rush to find the one and settle down and get married. There is life after Baylor, even when single, and you'll be grateful for the seasons you had the freedom to figure out what it was you really did believe. It's okay to not know what you're going to do when you leave and don't forget that friendships have their seasons, too. There is no certainty in these years but uncertainty. Walk slowly through this life and savor it. Listen.

To the parents I say be prayerful. Give room for the doubt and the struggling and the splintering and mending that are the college years. Trust that God can keep safe all that is of God. God needs no defending and even in the seasons of uncertainty there is life and abundance. Challenge your children, but love them for their wildness or their uncertainty or their passion. Temper it with prayer and wisdom, but leave enough room for them to own their faith while at the same time handing down to them what God has entrusted you to know of God. Listen.

The title of your book is taken from Psalm 78. What has this scripture come to mean to you?

The psalmist recounts how the children of Israel, having gone through so much, having seen so much, nonetheless still demand of God food as if God, who has led them out of Egypt across the Red Sea, cannot meet the need. It says they grumble against God, asking if God can make tables in the wilderness. What's interesting about the psalm as a whole is it's an exercise of the command God gives Israel in Deuteronomy 6, that they are to pass down to their children the stories of their exodus, of what it means to be called the people of God. The psalm does this, make the recounting, so when you arrive to the line about tables, you as the reader, or more aptly, the prayer of the psalm, already can see the joke. Of course God can; look at everything else God has already done!

And yet, we live the same way as the Israelites. We forget the stories of our exodus, the stories of God's faithfulness to us, and we suddenly stumble over or into or along something and throw up our hands and wonder where God went. All the while God is likely standing beside us, tapping a foot patiently until we get the point. My memoir is an exercise of its own in this regard, it is a recognition that when God went silent I threw up my hands, but God waited me out until I recounted the stories that formed the story of my own exodus, caught up in the great stories of the Church, and I realized that there had been tables all around me, that the testimony of the past was prophecy of the future, that God does not abandon.

Other than Scripture, what books have most influenced the trajectory of your faith?

Considering I majored in books and included a reading list for each chapter at the end of *Tables in the Wilderness*, I will work very hard to limit myself here and identify three books in particular.

The first that comes to mind is the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*. This was the first prayer book I ever encountered, and it has and continues to dramatically shape my faith. The words get into your bones, into

your imagination, and you find when you pray for Christ to be all in all, world without end, that the very earth looks different to you, that you are constantly reminded that God pervades throughout the cosmos. They are also the prayers that need praying, like for neighbors and for ministers, which we sometimes forget to pray. They are the words that remind us of the work of prayer, of the living out of prayer.

The second would be Madeline L'Engle's *Walking on Water*. L'Engle talks about the difference between truth and fact: how all facts are true but not all truth is fact. While this has certainly influenced the way I read and understand some portions of Scripture, it more significantly influences how I understand my responsibility in writing memoir. Not all facts need telling and sometimes the truth of a thing can be offered without offering facts that are unfair to hand over. It's a question of responsibility, of whether or not a story is really yours to tell, of how you honor the memory of friendships severed without cheaply glossing over the breaking of them.

The third would have to be *The Life of Pi* by Yann Martel, which I read nearly a decade ago. It's such a rich text, and I could wax poetic for hours about it, but chief among the reasons I love it is the patchwork of faith that the protagonist embodies. Though all my threads are drawn from the Christian tradition, while his reflect Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, there was something about the way he makes peace between the faiths that appeals to me. That is my imagined visual explanation of why you'll find an Orthodox icon in my living room or a copy of the Roman Catholic catechism on my nightstand, or find a smile on my face over sappy, cheesy "Jesus loves you" songs. I am in love with the wild ways in which God comes into the midst of us, and *The Life of Pi* was a kind of first step in my journey toward reconciling the possibility of that wild God in my own life.

You were raised the son of a Southern Baptist pastor. How did your parents respond as you moved toward the Anglican tradition?

Graciously. Considering I spent several years navigating this territory with them, we had a lot of ebb and flow in the back and forth. In the early days, when I was militant about terminology and spiritual superiority, I didn't steward the vocabulary of faith well and wielded it like a dagger at the dinner table. But over time, the edges of my desire to be "other" softened, and I began to listen for the common language among us, the language of Jesus and God's presence and ordinary faithfulness, and the doing of prayer and Bible reading and blessing. Through it all, my parents challenged me, convicted me, asked more questions than they made speeches, but pushed against my pride when I spent my time making my own. In the end, they were with me at my confirmation last year. My dad preached the sermon at the service, and he and my mom knelt beside me at the altar during Communion, receiving it alongside me. It was their silent affirmation that we speak the common language of Christ the Lord, that divisions of belief within the Church do not make it any less the Church, any less the people of God.

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***Tables in the Wilderness:
A Memoir of God Found, Lost, and Found Again***

By Preston Yancey

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