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TO A GOD WHO HAS MADE HIMSELF KNOWN

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One of John Steinbeck's most fascinating novels is a macabre tale entitled *To a God Unknown*. In it, an idolatrous man named Joseph Wayne leaves his home in Vermont and travels to California sometime in the early nineteenth century, driven by the quest to possess land and see it flourish. The images of the land that Joseph finds upon his arrival are those of green hills, clear brooks, flower-covered valleys with luxuriant vegetation, birds, cattle, and wildlife of every sort. He is enthralled with fertility—he feverishly longs to see the land filled with life—and Steinbeck writes, at one point, that “the land was as a woman to him.” In these early parts of the novel, Joseph Wayne has found his heaven here on earth—and *it is good. Peace, wholeness, and optimism fill the air.*

In the story of creation we find the earth, under God's care, producing vegetation; cattle, creeping things, and wild animals are abundant; and humankind is given dominion over all other creatures. Every facet of creation is the product and gift of a faithful God, and the refrain “and God saw that it was good” surfaces throughout. God forms man from the dust of the earth, breathes into him the breath of life, and places him in a bountiful, well-watered garden called Eden. God blesses the man with the greatest gift of all—woman, and the two enjoy fellowship with God and with one another. Humans enjoy something of their heaven on earth, and surely *this too is good. Peace, wholeness, and optimism fill the air of Eden.*

All of us have arrived where we are by travelling different spiritual paths. I did not grow up in a family that went to church regularly, but my parents did much for which I am thankful. More than anything, they communicated to me that I was loved. Thus my recollections of childhood are filled with memories of visits to our grandparents and extended family, trips to high school football games that my father coached, hours spent reading good books, and more hours spent in the gym playing basketball with friends. These images from my childhood parallel, to some extent, the images depicted by Steinbeck and those of the Genesis narrative. In my own experience, gymnasiums took the place of Steinbeck's green hills, and books provided something of the pleasure of

Eden, and it was good; and peace, wholeness, and optimism filled the air of my childhood.

Things go well for Joseph Wayne in California. His good fortune culminates in the birth of a son to his wife Elizabeth, and to his delight Joseph's own life begins to reflect the fruitfulness of the land around him. Time passes, however, and there are hints that something has gone terribly wrong with Joseph's heaven on earth. The rains which nourish the land cease, and Joseph's anxiety grows as the greenness around him fades—death is at work in the land, and Joseph begins to experience the down side of a never-ending cycle. The death which is at work in the heart of nature is punctuated by the death of Joseph's own wife, Elizabeth. The peace, wholeness, and optimism which Joseph had first experienced are gone; in their place are *chaos, fragmentation, and pain*.

In the story of creation, the peaceful harmony that pervades Eden is ruptured by the prideful self-exaltation of two rebels who cannot bring themselves to trust God in the midst of plenty. They eat of forbidden fruit and reap the consequences of their sin: The woman will bring forth children in great pain and be subordinate to her husband, and the man will eke out a living from the ground, which is cursed. While the land *is* cursed, the emphasis in the narrative is on the damaged relationship between people and their creator. From this time forward, people will struggle with the "sin problem," and their rebellion against God sets them at enmity with one another. The peace, wholeness, and optimism that once surrounded Adam and Eve in Eden are fractured; henceforth, their relationships and experiences in life are marked by *chaos, fragmentation, and pain*.

One evening late in my junior year of high school, I arrived home after playing basketball. My brother came in to meet me as I entered the door; he was both shaken and protective. I went to my parents' bedroom in the back of the house. At that moment my previously secure world, which had seemed relatively peaceful, shattered like thin glass and fell to the ground where the body of my mother lay in a pool of blood. She had taken a gun and ended her life, and the one who had been mother to me for seventeen years—and a good mother, a gift from God—was gone. I had no way to process what I saw; I had never even been to a funeral. While for weeks, months, and even years I would occasionally dream of her coming back, at that moment looking down on her body, I knew that there was no doctor anywhere who was going to bring back this one I loved and that I would never again be able to tell her I loved her. The peace, wholeness, and optimism that I had experienced were gone—in their place were *chaos, fragmentation, and indescribable pain*.

As the land around him dies, Joseph Wayne travels to an area that has sacral importance in Steinbeck's story, climbs onto a large moss-covered old rock, lies down, and slits his wrists. As life ebbs from his body, the rains begin to beat upon the parched ground. Joseph has brought relief to the land, but the reader is left with no real sense of victory. One reason for this lack is that the God who stands behind all of these events is unknown. We are given no

insight into his personality or character; we have no idea what feelings, if any, he has for his creatures. The verses from the Hindu Veda entitled “To a God Unknown,” cited at the beginning of the novel, portray the sentiment. Each stanza ends with the refrain, “Who is he to whom we shall offer our sacrifice?” and the last stanza begins, “May he not hurt us?” before concluding with the same refrain. There can be no sense of victory when the God who stands behind it all is such a shadowy, ominous figure.

The God who lovingly fashioned the man and woman in the Genesis narrative and placed them in Eden is of quite a different sort from Steinbeck’s unknown God. He desires fellowship with people and wants them to be happy, though he grants them the freedom to make choices. When God’s people reject him, there is chaos, but signs of God’s grace are never far away. He continues to reveal himself throughout the OT, but Israel continually rejects him. The overriding theme of God’s suffering love and graciousness is prominent, and this story line is continued in the NT, where God’s self-revelation culminates in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. At the cross God embraces the pain, suffering, and confusion of a lost world and provides hope for a rebellious lot who have demonstrated time and again that they cannot order their lives—a group so rebellious and confused that they crucified the King of kings. With the resurrection of our Lord, real victory is wrought—not of the type found in Steinbeck’s novel, but *real victory* where those who are at enmity with God and with one another—whose lives are filled with chaos and pain—might be reconciled to their creator and find peace, wholeness, and reason for optimism in this life.

The evening of my mother’s death was the first in a series of evenings that found me crying in bed into the morning. Her death was a tragedy—there was nothing good about the event itself. But God in his grace reached down and covered me with his love. In the midst of complete brokenness and pain, my own heart was turned to God, and I was able to receive healing, love, and grace that he had wanted me to have all along. And he has brought peace and wholeness to all of our lives—to all of us who are found together in Christ. Without him there would be chaos.

Those who wear the name of Christ and have received from him grace upon grace have every reason to go forward in life with a renewed desire to so live among others as to call attention to this one who has “graced” us so richly—to serve as what Henri Nouwen calls “living reminders” of God’s love to a world that desperately needs the peace, wholeness, and basis for hope that only he can provide. The charge, of course, demands that we be transparent enough for others to see our scars; at the same time, our lives should reflect something of the peace and wholeness that we proclaim as we move among the “broken.” This witness through brokenness is made clear in the lives of those who have experienced the love of God, who made himself known completely and fully in the person of Jesus Christ. To him be glory and honor, forever and ever. Amen.