

When I was in the Fourth Grade, I'd draw maps of what I imagined Heaven would be like. There would be the pearly gates, where I'd finally meet my grandfather who died before I was born. We would order buckets of mash potatoes from a street vendor--Yes, because in my Heaven, we have *buckets* of mashed potatoes--that we would then eat with our bare hands. We'd skip to Uncle Danny's, go shopping at Dillards, and finish the afternoon off with frappuccinos--grande.

This is the place in my mind where I'd go when times got tough. After my family moved from Arkansas to Texas and I suddenly found myself at a new school, surrounded by unfamiliar faces, I'd often retreat to this place. At recess, while the other kids played tag, I'd crawl beneath the slide and vanish into that faraway place, roaming its streets of gold.

And so when I read this week's passage from Paul's letter to the Romans, when I read verses like, "Those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit....you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit," my inclination is to heed his advice and to escape to that golden city atop the clouds, far from my anxieties and from this world's woes.

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There is the temptation, especially now, in a world embroiled in what feels like a perpetual state of crisis, to fix our gaze on our heavenly home. But is Paul really advising that we escape from this world's suffering, resting in the knowledge that we are headed to a place far better than here? According to this logic it is easy to see where Karl Marx might describe religion as the "opiate of the masses."

Yet every week we pray, "Our father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy Kingdom come; thy will be done *on earth as it is in Heaven.*" *On earth as it is in Heaven.* The Lord's Prayer distills our aim, our charge, as Christians-- and this is to be God's instruments, transforming a broken, hurting world into a place of justice, peace, and togetherness. This is not a call to absent ourselves from this world's immense suffering to focus on some city in the sky. This is a call to sacred activism, a call to enter deeply into the wounds of this hurting world and to see to their transformation. We're not to passively await God's Kingdom; We're to build it.

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I imagine the Spirit that Paul describes in Romans to be the seed of Christ's vision of a just and inclusive world, implanted into our souls at our baptism. While our baptism is an occasion for rejoicing, it is also the moment we are endowed with a great responsibility. For this seed of Christ's vision of a world restored to wholeness creates in us a deep ache that this--this world, so consumed in hate, greed, envy, sickness--that this is not the way that things ought to be. This seed of Christ's Spirit operates like a compass on a ship, steering us toward the more beautiful world our hearts know is possible.

A few verses later Paul writes, "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, for the redemption of our bodies." Paul describes the world to be birthed through us using the same words as one might use to describe a woman in labor, an incredibly perilous experience in the ancient world. Which is to say that our sacred call as Christians, to usher in this new world of wholeness, justice, and beauty, that this is going to be, at times, a risky endeavor, that this is going to be, at times, painful.

There are going to be times when this world of beauty and joy and togetherness feels beyond our reach. Inundated with news of countless deaths and corruption, we might feel like a ship far from harbor, our trusty compass pointing us in a direction shrouded in fog and darkness.

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St. Catherine of Siena offers us an unlikely model for how we might cultivate a muscled, resilient hope in the world we have been entrusted with mending. In the summer of 1375, in the city of Siena, Italy, Catherine began visiting a prisoner by the name of Niccolo di Toldo. I imagine the prison guards snickering as this frail woman in a cassock shuffles by to sit with a shackled man with downcast eyes. Catherine saw value and dignity in this man whom the rest of society had cast aside. Her gaze said to those prison guards, Where you see someone lost, I see someone found. Where you see someone hated, I see someone loved. I wonder if Niccolo had committed such atrocious crimes because he had never before seen someone look at him in the way Catherine looked at him. He had never before known what it was to feel seen, heard, and loved.

When the day finally came and the guards escorted Niccolo to the guillotine and lowered him to his knees, placing his head beneath the blade, Catherine too got down on her knees and instructed him, "You look at me when they do this. You look at me." And so, in his final moment, it was not the hateful crowd of onlookers he saw. It was the face of someone who loved him. It was Christ's gaze of love and life.

I envision this scene and I see Catherine in her cassock, stained with blood. I see this unsuspecting, delicate woman with a mighty, fierce vision of goodness who refused to give up on a broken world even when it seemed the most lost.

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And so that boy in the fourth grade, I'd like to coax him out from his hiding place beneath the slide. I'd like to hold him close and whisper in his ear, "I know this is hard. I know you are scared and I know you are hurting. But, Beloved, you belong to a magnificent world that is just on the horizon. Now, soldier up, little guy, and let's get going. We got work to do."