

## FOREWORD

*Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove*

In the desert south of Tuscon, Arizona, just north of the U.S.–Mexico border, paved roads turn into dirt paths that wind through dried up river beds called “washes.” When I was traveling those borderlands a few years ago with a group of Christian peacemakers, our guide assured us that crossing the washes would be a little bumpy, but no problem. The rivulets that wound their way over that dry ground were no challenge to our four-wheel drive. But then it started raining.

When it rains in the desert, it pours. In a matter of minutes that late summer evening, I watched tiny rivulets rise into streams that merged into one mighty river. Parched land that had been cracked before was overcome by rushing waters. In a moment, the whole landscape changed. Those of us who had witnessed it stood in awe—then quickly ran for higher ground.

My friend Diana Butler Bass says the kind of transformation I witnessed in an Arizona wash is unfolding around us in American Christianity. In her *People’s History of Christianity*, Diana describes the conventional liberal/conservative divide where “two thin streams wind alongside each other between the boulders and pebbles of a great river bed, following separate ways.” This is the world I was raised in. An evangelical in the Bible Belt, I struggled to find my way with Jesus quite apart from Mainline Protestants or Roman Catholics (when we talked about the Methodists at my Southern Baptist Church, we worried about their souls). On the whole, the Christian landscape felt pretty parched.

But since 1945, the river has been rising. In the latter half of the 20th century, as the last vestiges of Christendom slipped away, many Christians have found themselves caught up in a current that defies conventional wisdom. I certainly have. Trying to make sense of the Scripture verses I'd memorized in the King James Version, I got to know a Catholic sister who worked with addicts in inner-city Philadelphia. An Episcopalian professor introduced me to monastic wisdom, and I started learning from Benedictines. I ended up studying at a Methodist seminary (Lord, have mercy). The landscape is indeed changing.

*Longing for Spring* is a book that has grown out of Scott and Elaine's love for the people called Methodists. They are especially sensitive to the questions and longings of a new generation of their particular flock that has sat in their classrooms and come to their offices for counsel. Love compels them to be specific, and I am grateful that they have written to the church they know. I pray this book finds its way into the hands of bishops and district superintendents and annual conference members and all the other offices of Methodism that I know little to nothing about.

But this isn't just a book for Methodists. Given the rising tide we are experiencing all around us, a Baptist like myself can learn a great deal from listening in on the discernment that is happening on these pages. What the "New Methodists" want is, as a matter of fact, intimately bound up with what the new Baptists and Catholics and Quakers want. As we learn to navigate a rising tide, we are all increasingly aware of the degree to which we're in the same boat, whether we want to be or not. You might call it "Noah's ark ecumenism." Sharing a space with all God's critters ain't always easy, but it sure beats the alternative.

Because Scott and Elaine are professors of evangelism, they see clearly that riding these turbulent waters is not just about self-preservation, but rather about the good news we've been entrusted with for the sake of the whole world. We attend to the longing for spring for the sake of a world that is aching for the reconciliation of all things in Jesus Christ. If new monasticism has any gift to offer the church, I pray it is a reminder that we do well to focus our whole lives on Jesus because God has revealed in this one man the destiny of the universe. *Longing for Spring* points us in that direction.

One of my favorite images from the book of Revelation is the picture of the heavenly city, filled with the light of God, with a river of life flowing through it. The river is lined with trees that bear fruit in every season, John says, and their leaves are for the healing of the nations. Sometimes I feel like my whole life has been the result of falling into a river much wider and deeper and longer than I could have ever imagined. This great tradition that stretches back to Abraham and Eden gathers up all the tributaries of a fragmented church and, looking downstream, gathers us into something that gives life and heals divisions. In a world divided by war and economic policy, by water rights and ethnic identities, I can think of no vocation more important than joining the river that ultimately heals the nations. As we long for spring's swelling waters, may we learn to navigate them together. And may we trust our selves entirely to the God who has said he will do it.

Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove

Series Editor

New Monastic Library: Resources for Radical Discipleship (NML)