

9A 2023

“We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.”

In other words, we shared our hearts with you, and you did not receive them.

When a joyful person shares her joy, it is an invitation to celebrate with her.

When a mournful person shares his sadness, it is an invitation to mourn with him.

We find God in the connection.

We can, of course, reject the invitation, as did the generation who rejected John and his cousin, Jesus, who came sharing their hearts.

John was abstemious, but rather than joining with him, some accused him of having a demon.

Jesus ate and drank wine with people, but rather than join with him, some called him “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!”

People have many excuses for not sitting with God, who appears in countless different ways in different people.

One person is vivacious; another is quiet.

One person is elated; another is deflated.

One person is rugged; another is polished.

One is full of heart; another is driven by the mind, and there God is in all of them.

We never know how God will manifest Godself, but it is almost always a surprise.

When we look at the world, we can find where God is and join in.

There is much to discover.

People and institutions are engaging in fascinating projects.

Thanks to a worldwide ban on CFC gases in 1987, for example, the ozone layer is healing.

It is expected to recover fully by mid-century.

Now that HFCs also have been banned in the US, it should heal even faster.¹

The most populated country, India, has made remarkable advances in poverty reduction.

In 2005-06, 55.1 percent of Indians lived below the poverty line.

By 2019-21, just fourteen years later, India had reduced poverty to 16.4 percent of the population.²

For comparison, during that same period, the US poverty rate was 12.8%.³

According to Tina Knezevic, this is due in part to “India’s efforts towards sustainability, its providing skills training to women and youth, and its increasing services to vulnerable communities.”⁴

God is at work, sometimes through governments, sometimes through individuals, sometimes both.

1 <https://mashable.com/article/2023-news-good>

2 <https://www.readersdigest.ca/culture/good-news-stories-world/>

3 <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2022/10/poverty-rate-varies-by-age-groups.html>

4 <https://www.readersdigest.ca/culture/good-news-stories-world/>

In 2019, in North Macedonia, their president, Stevo Penderovski, heard that a girl with downs syndrome was being excluded by teachers and harassed at school.

One morning, he visited her family and walked with the girl to school, where he issued the following statement: children with atypical development “should not only enjoy the rights they deserve, but also feel equal and welcome at their school desks and in the schoolyard. It is our obligation as a state, but also as individuals, and the key element in this common mission is empathy.”⁵

In addition, fine particulate matter pollution in the US has fallen by 41 percent since 1990,⁶ and China is planting a Belgium-sized forest every year and has reduced its fine particulate matter pollution by 41 percent in just *ten* years.⁷

Despite all this, we tend to focus on where God is being opposed.

Researchers Adam Mastroianni and David Gilbert found that people overwhelmingly believe that others are less kind and ethical than they were in the past, in a supposed golden age.

Mastroianni and Gilbert ascribe this to two cognitive biases—biased exposure and biased memory.

5 <https://www.readersdigest.ca/culture/good-news-stories-world/>

6 <https://mashable.com/article/2023-news-good>

7 <https://mashable.com/article/2023-news-good>

Biased *exposure* means that people are more likely to encounter and to pay attention to negative information in the present because such topics dominate the news and our conversation.

Biased *memory*, on the other hand, refers to negative information's fading from memory faster than positive information.

When we think about the past, we tend to remember more forcefully the good things.

We think of the fun we had in our teenage years, for example, but have trouble recalling the constant angst.

Because of these two biases, Mastroianni and Gilbert argue, the past looks better than the present, which creates the illusion of decline.⁸

This is why, in other words, for generations people wandered the streets of big cities with sandwich boards proclaiming "The end is nigh!"

We mistakenly think that it has never been this bad, but it has. Often.

Parishioners recently told me they toured Moore's Creek, where, on February 27, 1776, the militia of the North Carolina Provincial Congress fought with British governor Josiah Martin's forces near Wilmington.

It was essentially a small civil war that preceded the larger War of Independence from Britain.

8 <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/20/opinion/psychology-brain-biased-memory.html?searchResultPosition=1>

Imagine the stress in the community at the time.

And speaking of Civil War, more Americans died in the American Civil War than in all other American Wars combined.

Communities and families were divided.

In fact, during the war, there were unionists who marched around Raleigh.

You would not do that in Columbia, of course—you would be shot—but South Carolina was the first state to secede, and North Carolina was the last.

My great great uncle lived in a tomb to avoid conscription.

If members of the Confederate army spotted a male 14 or older, they would force him into service, even when they had no gun or boots for him.

My great-great-great grandmother, Nancy, therefore would hang a quilt on the line when soldiers were in town so that her son knew when it was not safe to return home from the tomb for provisions.

My great-great-great-uncle Noah, on the other hand, lost an arm in battle and eventually died.

Eight years after the war, there was the Long Depression.

From 1873 to 1879, there was a period of deflation that brought economic pain worldwide.

In the US alone, 18,000 businesses, including 89 railroads, went bankrupt.

The contraction of the Long Depression lasted 65 months, compared with the Great Depression's 43 months.

It was, in fact, called the Great Depression until the 1930s.

The Grant administration ended in disgrace because he presided while the nation drifted without policy.

Then there was another huge market crash in 1893.

These two events left wealth concentrated in the hands of ever fewer people.

In 1898, the United States went to war with Spain, encouraged, in part, by false information in the newspapers of William Randolph Hearst.

Tens of thousands died, but newspaper circulation increased.

(Talk about exposure bias!)

And then, in 1914, there was World War I, followed by influenza.

A third of the world contracted it; fifty million died.⁹

And then the aforementioned Great Depression, and World War II, in which between 70 and 85 million people perished,¹⁰ or 3% of earth's population at the time.

In the 40s and 50s, during the McCarthy Era, the Keep America Committee fought fluoridation, the polio vaccine, and "mental hygiene," which was an oblique reference to those fighting anti-Semitism.

During the Red Scare and Lavender Scare, many promising careers were derailed.

9 <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/1918-commemoration/1918-pandemic-history.htm>

10 <https://www.worldatlas.com/world-wars/world-war-ii-fatalities-by-country.html>

Then there was the Vietnam War, with protestors killed at Kent State.

In 1969, the Cuyahoga River caught fire, and Love Canal harmed the health of hundreds of residents in the 1970s.

Are you convinced, yet?

We humans do seem to suffer from memory bias and exposure bias.

The world has always been churning, and today is no different.

Despite people's expectations, however, some researchers have found that cooperation among strangers has increased over the past 61 years.¹¹

My point is that people have always opposed God in the world, which means that we consciously have to seek God, who appears in the most inconvenient and unexpected of places.

God loves a surprise, which is why God came to us in a carpenter's son.

So when exposure and memory bias get us down, we need to remember that there was a breakthrough fusion experiment at Lawrence Livermore, that 80 percent of the species on the endangered list are on the path to recovery after the 1973 Endangered Species Act,¹² that Brazil got rid of Bolsonaro and, as a result, has slowed its deforestation, that the kava plant used in traditional medicine is being

11 <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/20/opinion/psychology-brain-biased-memory.html?searchResultPosition=1>

12 <https://mashable.com/article/2023-news-good>

researched as a PTSD treatment,¹³ that companies are developing hydrogen and solar cars, including one that promises an overall range of up to 1000 miles with solar cells that allow one to drive 40 miles¹⁴ with a starting cost of \$25,900.

And that is just a few things.

Joy and sadness both want to be shared.

As we look for God all around us, we dance and we mourn together; it is through those connections that God works.

13 <https://www.goodnewsnetwork.org/new-zealand-awards-landmark-grant-to-study-traditional-kava-plant-ceremony-for-ptsd-victims/>

14 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-solutions/interactive/2021/solar-car/>