

A Greening of Imaginations

Walking the Songlines of Holy Scripture

Herbert O'Driscoll



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Prologue

 Early morning July 1937

I was nine years old and spending my school holidays on my grandfather's farm in the Townsland of Donaguile in the County of Kilkenny in Ireland.

About a quarter of a mile along the country road from the driveway gate of our farm, there was a thatched cottage. Three people lived there, two sisters and a brother. They were all, if memory serves, in their late fifties, though this would have been further along in the cycle of life than it is today.

One day I was sent over to the cottage to buy some eggs. Jim Brennan brought them out to me and I duly handed over the money I had been given. For the first time, I noticed something about Jim. I could see how hesitantly he walked, how weak and light his voice was, and how hollow-chested he had become. I was too young to realize that I was looking at the ravages of tuberculosis, a scourge that affected something like 40 percent of the population of rural Ireland in those long ago 1930s.

But something happened as I stood in front of Jim. Having become aware of his fragility, the fact that he lived in this cottage with his two sisters, Mary and Lizzie, struck me with an utterly new significance that was both thrilling and frightening. Suddenly in a child's mind two households

Prologue

merged—one was this cottage where I stood, the other a home in the pages of the Gospel according to John.

On one of the few journeys Jesus took to Jerusalem, he came to the village of Bethany. It was here that he met a woman named Martha who offered him and his friends hospitality.

This small house, where Martha lived with her sister Mary and their brother Lazarus, would come to be the one home where Jesus would feel deeply welcome. This is where, on another occasion, he would spend what would be his last hours of freedom before entering the city, sharing supper with his friends, being arrested, tried, and executed.

John writes, however, of something that happened before that—a mysterious, even terrifying event when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. To me, and indeed to all Church of Ireland children of my generation, this story from the pages of the gospel writer would have been as familiar as any other part of our education.

It was therefore quite natural that while I was walking very slowly homeward, as small boys are apt to do, I thought about all this. I remembered reading that Lazarus had died and that Jesus had called him back to life. I began to wonder about Jim Brennan and his sisters. After all, this household next door to our farm was a mirror image of that long-ago home in Bethany. In both houses there lived a brother with two sisters. In both families the brother had become ill. Could it be true then that Jim had died and been mysteriously called back to life? Was there some corner of the cottage property where I might find a dark and hidden place with a stone

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guarding its entrance? The very thought of this was at the same time both fascinating and fearful. I have no memory of mentioning these thoughts when I reached home.

Looking back across many years at that small boy returning to the farm with the newly purchased eggs, I realize now that he had just experienced what would become two lasting elements of his life flowing together. One was the world of Holy Scripture and the other was the gift of imagination.

Some years later, when I was thirteen, I went to boarding school. In those days the Church of Ireland set an annual examination in religion for all students in its schools. As the time for the actual examination would approach, all other subjects in the school's daily schedule were cancelled. From 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.—with of course breaks for mid-morning and lunch—we studied Old Testament, New Testament, and Church Catechism. This would continue for at least two weeks.

Naturally at that stage of our lives, the narrative passages of the Bible were especially fascinating. For me, and I am by no means alone in this, those narratives have never left. In fact, they have continued to intrigue and fascinate me all my life.

I realize now that scripture was offered to us in a very natural and uncritical way. Looking back, I think it was understood that we would grow into other ways of finding truths in the stories, not by rejecting our first understandings but rather by having them deepened. This has certainly been my experience.

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The second element that has always been part of my life is that of imagination. Works of literary imagination I find irresistible, whether they be classical myths, stories of quest, journeys to unknown lands, or travels in time. I have always been drawn to such tales.

There came a day in Calgary, Alberta when a conversation brought those two elements of my life together. I was rector of a parish in the city, and I got to know a local rabbi named Peter. He was a few years younger than I. We were talking one morning about the very ancient world of Jewish Midrash. I had long been aware of this rich tradition in which rabbis would enter into a biblical story to explore endless facets of the story that could be used for teaching about human experience. At some stage in our conversation, Peter remarked that in contrast to Jewish reflection on scripture, much Christian preaching tends to regard the text as being all there is to work with. The Jewish approach to scripture probes the text for ever more levels of meaning and application.

I recall that I had two reactions. The first was realizing that I had instinctively been doing something like this in my teaching and preaching; the second was feeling immensely encouraged that I had the good company of the long tradition of Judaism. There was a third reaction—a determination to develop this skill as much as I could in the way that I explored scripture from then on.

Among the many results of that morning are these pages, a small collection of biblical passages where I do what I simply love doing: applying my imagination to var-

Prologue

ious moments in the Bible, asking myself questions. What would it have been like to be there at that moment? What were those men and women feeling then? Why did they act and react as they did? Such questions abound and draw one deeper and deeper into the text.

Come back with me to childhood—to the moment when my imagination made a link between the cottage in Donaguile in which Mary and Lizzie and Jim Brennan lived and the house in Bethany where Lazarus lived with his two sisters, Mary and Martha. For me, my lifelong relationship to that moment is rather like hearing a wonderful piece of music when one is very young and hearing it again in mature years. It is of course the same music, but it speaks on many more levels than it did in childhood.

“When I was a child,” wrote Paul to the community at Corinth, “I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways” (1 Cor. 12:11). The only way in which I would dare to correct the great apostle is to suggest humbly that perhaps life is not so much a putting away of childish things as it is to experience their maturing in wonderful ways.

I would like to offer you these reflections on Holy Scripture, not merely that you read how the text has fed my imagination, but to allow your own imagination to go voyaging down the songlines of Holy Scripture.

Victoria, British Columbia, Canada
All Saintside 2018

PART I

Our Lord's
Childhood



CHAPTER 1

Annunciation

 A reflection on Luke 1:26–38

Within each of us there is a country, its landscapes as varied as the outer landscapes we travel, sometimes haunting and captivating, sometimes barren and forbidding.

As with the landscapes of outer geography, so it is with our inner life; there is always more to be explored. We ourselves may be the explorer or it may be someone else who wishes to know us intimately because they love us or perhaps because we have sought their guidance. In fact, if our relationships are to remain healthy, our mutual exploring must never end, and every discovery is prelude to another.

The village girl in our story is young. We are told nothing else about her at the moment we meet her in scripture. Later, we will see that this young woman had a remarkable capacity to remain faithful under great stress.

We know too that she was visited by an angel. There is nothing unusual in this. Since angels are the messengers of God sent to offer direction for our lives, all of us have been visited by an angel, most often quite unknowingly. Sometimes we have ignored their calling and gone our own way.

Annunciation

At other times we have heard and obeyed, setting off in the direction in which we have been pointed, doing the tasks for which we are fitted, and living the fulfilled lives God has in store for us.

Luke names the angel who comes on this mission. Perhaps this is to point out that this is not just any angel but one of the greatest of them, Gabriel, who is nothing less than an archangel. By naming the great messenger, the evangelist is almost certainly implying that this particular angelic mission is of surpassing significance.

If a friend had asked this young woman about the moment when she felt visited, she might have said only that she had received a message. She might have tried to describe how she felt fear in the first moments of becoming aware of a presence, how that fear passed, how she felt strangely reassured, and how she then knew that she would give birth. I would think it almost certain that she would have told these things to her husband Joseph. Perhaps years later she told them to her son in some moment of intimacy.

About the months of her pregnancy we know almost nothing. We have to assume that it went normally. However, we know also that those months were not always untroubled. For instance, at an early stage in her pregnancy she felt impelled to make a dangerous journey to see her cousin Elizabeth, an older relative who was also pregnant. Then toward the end of those months, when she was very near her time, she found herself having to make a longer and more dangerous journey at the demand of the Roman authorities occupying her country. We know that she came to a crowded

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town and that she and her husband Joseph were directed to a hillside cave which was used as a stable. There, amid their few belongings, she gave birth to her child.

The business of an angel, like the one who came to Mary and—let us not forget—also to Joseph, is to point us to further exploration within ourselves. Because they come from God, angels know how much in us has been brought to realization and how much is still waiting to be explored. The angel knows and can help us to discover what gifts given to us at birth have never yet been used. When they come to us, these messengers of God ask us to give birth within ourselves in some way. They may ask us to give birth to a work of art, or to a new relationship, or to a time of self-discovery. As we live those experiences we may learn, sometimes with great astonishment, that we are capable of things far beyond our imagining, whether it be bearing a great burden, serving in a great cause, facing a daunting crisis, or nourishing another life.

Whatever we are called to do or to be, we will find this young woman Mary's experience speaking to our lives.

When, led by some angelic visitation, we explore and give birth to new possibilities within us, then we find meaning and vocation in our lives.

We call this young woman blessed because her willingness to give birth to her promised child became a blessing to the whole world. We also call her blessed because she and her child Jesus who has become our Lord and Savior have become a blessing to us. The gift of life that she gave to her son is prelude to the gift of life he gives to us.