

**Somewhere Over the Horizon**  
**Luke 12:32-37; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Isaiah 1:11-20**

**Isaiah 1:11-20**

<sup>11</sup>What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD;

I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts;  
I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.

<sup>12</sup>When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand?

Trample my courts no more; <sup>13</sup>bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me.

New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.

<sup>14</sup>Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates;  
they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them.

<sup>15</sup>When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you;  
even though you make many prayers, I will not listen;  
your hands are full of blood.

<sup>16</sup>Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;  
remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes;  
cease to do evil, <sup>17</sup>learn to do good;  
seek justice, rescue the oppressed,  
defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

<sup>18</sup>Come now, let us argue it out, says the LORD:  
though your sins are like scarlet,  
they shall be like snow;  
though they are red like crimson,  
they shall become like wool.

<sup>19</sup>If you are willing and obedient,  
 you shall eat the good of the land;  
<sup>20</sup>but if you refuse and rebel,  
 you shall be devoured by the sword;

for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

### **Luke 12:32-37**

<sup>32</sup>“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

<sup>33</sup>Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. <sup>34</sup>For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

<sup>35</sup>“Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; <sup>36</sup>be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks.

<sup>37</sup>Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them.

### **Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16**

<sup>1</sup>Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. <sup>2</sup>Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval.

<sup>3</sup>By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

<sup>8</sup>By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going.

<sup>9</sup>By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. <sup>10</sup>For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

<sup>11</sup>By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered faithful the one who had promised. <sup>12</sup>Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.”

<sup>13</sup>All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, <sup>14</sup>for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. <sup>15</sup>If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. <sup>16</sup>But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.

Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, God has prepared a city for them.

### Introduction and Prayer

Last week, the New York Times published what you and I would call a prayer, written in the form of an open letter to God by a philosophy professor at Emory named George Yancy who is not even sure if he believes there's a God who will hear it.

It's a long, thoughtful, [to me] startlingly respectful prayer that addresses two major concerns: the tragedy of heartlessness and blind hatred that are fed by hate speech and result in death, and the hope that there is a God who sees and cares.

He wrote:

Dear God,

This letter was prompted by the 22 precious lives taken in El Paso on August 3, 2019 [and] the horrible killings of nine more people, this time in Dayton, Ohio...

How much can any of us take? We are failing ourselves. We are not asking the right questions; we are failing to use truthful and courageous discourse to describe the suffering from human violence....

So, why write this letter? Ralph Waldo Emerson argues: “The foregoing generations beheld God face to face; we through their eyes.” [Emerson raises] a legitimate question...: Why can’t I have an original relation to You, God? There is nothing about our universe that proves, *ā priori*, that this letter will not be heard by You. So, I’ll just take the leap.

I realize that the act of writing such a letter is itself hasty as it assumes that You exist. Of course, if You don’t, and there is no absolute, faultless proof that You do, then this letter speaks to nothing at all. The salutation is perhaps a bit silly. Yet, that is the risk that I take. In fact, it is a risk worth taking. ...

I’m often possessed by a visceral angst, at times unbearable, a sense of suffering that I feel isn’t satisfied by atheism, agnosticism or, paradoxically, theism. ... You, of course, remain hidden (*Deus Absconditus*). Why? Is it too much to ask, as a philosopher in the 21st century, to reveal yourself to me, to the world, to have an original relation to You, like Moses?

...I define myself as a hopeful Christian theist, the kind who hopes, without any certainty, that You exist and that the strength of *agape*,

Christian love, is possible and liberating in a world filled with so much existential, social and political catastrophe, where anguished parents cry long into the night because their children have been taken too soon by acts of mass violence.

This letter is a lamentation; it speaks to our human pain and suffering—[this is still George Yancy speaking about himself]—but it also speaks to this philosopher’s dread in the face of apparent silence. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said, “It is not just that we are in search of God, but that God is in search of us, in need of us.” That is not a philosophical argument, but I eagerly respond: I am here!

...As a philosopher, I realize that I’m supposed to be “philosophical,” objective, calm under pressure. As You already know, I’m not that kind of philosopher. I weep too much. I feel too deeply. I’m impatient when it comes to human suffering, especially forms of suffering that I helped to create.

My anger and my frustration overflow, the existential devastations that I witness are too great to remain philosophically poised.

I am not like René Descartes sitting in his stove-heated room delineating “proofs” for Your existence. I am facing a non-ideal world where I witness haunting images of unspeakable tragedy. I’m thinking here, as You know, of the Salvadoran father Oscar Alberto Martinez Ramirez and his 2-year-old daughter, Valeria, who were found floating face down in the Rio Grande; they drowned as they attempted a border crossing. In what world do I live such that it continues after their deaths? We should stop in our tracks, refuse to go on living as normal and bring an end to this level of suffering—today. And what about the lifeless body of 3-year-old Alan Kurdi, who lay face down on a Turkish beach after his family tried to flee violence from Syria. When I look at those photos, or think about the tragic deaths in El Paso and Dayton, or about the three killed at the

Gilroy Garlic Festival in Gilroy, Calif., on July 28, it is my death that I see. John Donne had it right. All human death “diminishes me.” ...

Yahweh, I die just a little when Palestinian children are killed by Israeli forces. Allah, I die just a little when Israeli children are killed by the hands of Palestinians. According to one report, 2,175 Palestinian children and 134 Israeli children have been killed since September 29, 2000. There is a deep feeling of personal moral failure when I read about such deaths. Allah, if you are there, please hear the cries of those Israeli children. Yahweh, if you are there, please hear the cries of those Palestinian children...

The weight of myopic fanaticism and dreams of white national purity takes its toll. I’m thinking of the nine who were killed at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C., on June 17, 2015; the 11 who were killed at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh on Oct. 27, 2018; the 51 who were killed at the mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand, on March 15, 2019.

So, it is with this letter that I seek You, that I ask for something more than we seem to be capable of, more than the routine prayers that are said in response to tragedy and sorrow. I don’t want to simply repeat clichés and recall platitudes. I am a philosopher who weeps; I am a human being who suffers.

This letter is not for me alone. It can’t be. The suffering of others is too great not to be moved by it, not to feel somehow partially responsible for it. So, it is with this letter that I seek an original relation, one that seeks our collective liberation, one that desires to speak especially on behalf of children and to free them from our miserable failure as adults to honor their lives more than we honor flags, rhetorical mass distraction, political myopia, party line politics, white nationalistic fanaticism and religious vacuity.<sup>1</sup>

Yancy’s letter to God ends there; I’ll just add just the word *Amen*.

## The Sermon

Where is this all going?

Traveling over 67,000 miles per hour, the earth goes on a 584 million-mile journey every year in one cycle around the sun.<sup>ii</sup>

Each year of your life, you've been riding through space on a rock as it simultaneously spins on its own axis at more than 1,000 miles an hour.

We experience it as a succession of days and nights, with seasons that go in cycles, and bodies and minds and maturity levels that remind us that our journey isn't just the circular path of a planet orbiting in space; it's also a linear journey through time.

And one segment of that, hopefully as long and good as possible, is our life.

Every two years of your life, you've traveled over a billion miles; that's pretty impressive. How many trips around the sun have you made so far?

What did the world look like at the beginning of that journey? What were your surroundings as far back as you can remember?

And what all has happened since then—in the world around you and in the world of your mind? What developments have taken place in the world, and in society, and in you, since the year you were born?

It's an epic journey that you are on, and it's kind of wonderful that in addition to our own private, interior worlds, we're also on it together. I'm glad to be making this journey with you.

Between God's plan for you—God's purpose in having brought you into the world—and your hopes for what you will want to have done during

your tens of billions of miles around the sun, and what you want the world to look like, if you have anything to say about it, and what God's will is for the world—between all of that, at one time or another it falls on all of us to consider: Where is this all going?

Is all of this God-following even leading anywhere?

Or are we just going around in circles?

In a world shaken by tragedies, many of them preventable, many of them imposed by despots or enabled by the comfortable, some celebrated or egged on by irresponsible people in positions of responsibility;

in a world where many things are far from ideal and some things are entirely unacceptable,

the voices echo through the centuries and reverberate in our bones, bidding us, calling us, inviting us to pay attention.

Some time between the years 60 and 95<sup>iii</sup>—thirty to sixty years after Jesus' crucifixion—a religious tract appeared in the form of a sermon written to a second-generation Christian congregation, possibly in Rome.

We call it Paul's Letter to the Hebrews. As is so often the case, it's almost certainly not by Paul, definitely not a letter, and obviously written to a Greek-speaking Christian congregation—and anyway nobody, including the Jews, had used the term "Hebrews" for ages. Within one generation after it was written, scholars already doubted it was written by Paul or sent to any group of quote-unquote "Hebrews."

Anyway, "Paul's Letter to the Hebrews" says:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received “approval,” or commendation.

That last word, ἐμαρτυρήθησαν (*emartyrēthēsan*)—approval, commendation—comes from the word for *testimony*: “By faith, the ancients—the πρεσβύτεροι, Presbyterians! Our elders—received testimony: that is, God’s testimony. As Tom Long says about the use of that word:

it means *God* bears witness. *God* is saying: “I saw what these people did, and I testify that they are on the true and right path.”<sup>iv</sup>

Of course, right in the middle of that word for approval, commendation, testimony, ἐμαρτυρήθησαν (*emartyrēthēsan*), is the word *martyr*.

A *martyr* is one who *gave testimony* for their whole life, with their whole life, even at the cost of their life—they lived and died to testify to the Truth, and their living and dying for the Truth was itself testimony.

They believed in something stupefyingly vast and good and beautiful, something that was by definition not plainly visible right now, in this broken world with its casual cruelties, its cynical manipulations and profane desecrations.

They believed we were going somewhere. And they died as they lived: testifying that God was leading us, was actually taking us, somewhere and to something that is good beyond our most spectacular imagining of what goodness can be—and not waiting for it in a next life, far away from here, but in *this* world and *this* time and *this* creation.

The voices echo through the generations and reverberate in our bones, inviting us, calling us to pay attention.

Seven hundred years before Jesus was born, there was a prophet in Jerusalem who was part of a tradition that understood and worshiped God as the “great king of heaven and earth,”<sup>v</sup> saw Jerusalem as the seat of God’s kingdom, and understood King David and his descendants as God’s chosen leaders of the Covenant People.<sup>vi</sup>

His name was Isaiah, which means God Is Salvation.

Things were not going well in Isaiah’s world. In the vision of his call, he identifies his people, the People of God, the Chosen People, the People of the Covenant—the ones who should be the *most* righteous—as people of unclean lips. And he didn’t distance himself from them; he owned his place as one of them and neither said nor did anything to suggest that he was any better than anybody.

Isaiah railed against not only the pointlessness but the profound offense of the hypocrisy of “religious vacuity.” Isaiah heard God saying:

*I have had enough of burnt offerings;  
I take no delight in the blood of bulls, or lambs, or goats.  
You bring offerings; you burn incense;  
New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation  
and your appointed festivals —*

*I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.  
You stretch out your hands to make prayers,  
but your hands are full of blood.*

You do all this quote-unquote “worship”? And you talk about God? And then you go and treat people—especially poor and desperate people—like *that*?

Religious vacuity—emptiness—it’s unacceptable, it’s appalling, *it makes God sick.*

The voices echo through our lives and reverberate in our bones, demanding that we pay attention.

Jesus told his disciples, according to Luke:

Don't worry: God *wants* to give you the kingdom.

Get rid of all that earthly stuff you accumulate and carry around; get rid of it so you can give to the poor.

Instead, make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

But be ready—dressed for action, with your lamps lit. Don't wait for God to sort everything out; you're here to be God's hands and feet and arms and voices in the world.

We can only get somewhere if you are doing what you were put here to do, and doing it right now.

Isaiah says that God says: I don't need so-called religious liturgies and practices if meanwhile you are unjust, inequitable and pitiless. I am not interested in all of us just going around in circles.

Luke says that Jesus says: *You* be doing your part to make this the kingdom of heaven right now. God is already doing God's part; for us to get where God is leading us, *we* need to do ours—and to start right now.

Hebrews says that our forebears say: this is leading somewhere, and it is about something greater and even more important than our own lives—which *are* important because God gave them to us—so important that Jesus died for them.

But they are part of a whole which is even *more* important.

The testimonies echo through time and reverberate in our bodies,  
pleading with us to pay attention.

We are not just going around in circles.

God is leading us somewhere good.

And it's up to us to engage this precious life God has given us, and  
summon every ounce of faith and hope and love we have received, to  
take everything we possess and convert it into tangible, literal, physical  
care for the poor, and gather families and colleagues and friends and  
enemies and neighbors and nations and peoples and all creation, and  
never stop saying to each other with joy, wonder and awe: God is  
leading us to something, somewhere just over the horizon. Let's get  
going.

Keith Grogg  
Montreat Presbyterian Church  
Montreat, NC  
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<sup>i</sup> George Yancy, "Dear God, Are You There?" New York Times, August 7, 2019 (excerpted)  
(<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/07/opinion/gun-violence-god-philosophy.html>)

<sup>ii</sup> Astronomical information presented here is widely available online; I recommend NASA.gov.

<sup>iii</sup> Harold W. Attridge, "Hebrews: Introduction," in Wayne A. Meeks, ed., The Harper-Collins Study Bible (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 2250

<sup>iv</sup> Thomas G. Long, Hebrews [Interpretation commentary] (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 115

<sup>v</sup> J.J.M. Roberts, "Isaiah: Introduction," in Wayne A. Meeks, ed., The Harper-Collins Study Bible (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 1012

<sup>vi</sup> Roberts, "Isaiah," 1012