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## Imagining a World According to God

At a summer picnic, a four-year-old boy solemnly passes a plate of raw vegetables to his father with the words, “A carrot, Daddy, given for you.”

I wheel my mother-in-law around the halls of a nursing home. She does not recognize me this time, and her conversation follows a logic increasingly difficult to discern. But as we follow the long hallways around, we sing the first two verses of the hymn “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling.” She summons the words from a part of her brain as yet untouched by this ravaging disease, and they come readily to her lips. The lilting melody of the hymn comforts us both.

My urban parish hosts its monthly Loaves and Fishes dinner. From all corners of the city, forty-odd homeless men, women, and children gather for a meal cooked and served by a team of parishioners. As they sit at linen-covered tables lit by candles, these people shed the labels they bear on the streets—“welfare queens,” “clients,” or “urban blight”—and become honored guests.

A woman turns on the evening news to hear of the Columbine High School shooting. Images of terrified students pouring from campus buildings flicker across the screen. From the audio feed the sound of gunfire fills the darkened living room. The woman sinks leadenly into the couch and makes the sign of the cross.

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A family picnic, a visit to a nursing home, a soup kitchen, the evening news: these are snapshots from ordinary life. Each of these snapshots draws on a core practice in the Christian tradition. Asked to pass the carrots, a young boy instinctively makes a connection to another meal closely observed. In a parish hall around candlelit tables, parishioners look at the same eucharistic meal and see in it a dimension of radical hospitality. The visit to a relative with Alzheimer's becomes the occasion of praise-making. A woman supplies the gesture of redemption a tragedy cries out for. The practices of discipleship reframe ordinary life.

For centuries Christians have sung hymns, gathered at table, and offered prayer to God. Practices like prayer, praise, and table fellowship are too lively to be locked down in worship services; they burst out of liturgical boxes. Writer Annie Dillard hints at the power that practices bear: "I often think of the set pieces of liturgy as certain words which people have successfully addressed to God without their getting killed."<sup>1</sup> Dillard's insight strikes home. These timeworn and tradition-honored practices of the faith crackle with energy.

I want to gather these snapshots into an album with the title "A World According to God" because I am convinced that these core practices are neither random acts nor ritual tics. They are more like eye exercises, designed to correct and strengthen weak vision. Doing them over time and in community, we learn to see things from a God's-eye view. We come to know the world according to God.

This book is for all those disciples who long for a glimpse of God's world. It is time to rediscover the power in these core practices of practicing Christians. Practices of discipleship place our lives in a new context. *What we do* in those practices informs what we do in the crises great and small that intrude unbidden into daily life. These core faith practices shape us in ways that directly influence how we negotiate everyday life. They have everything to do with the moral life, if we could but pause to make the connections. This

book offers that pause by addressing three questions at the outset: Why do practices afford us a glimpse of the world according to God? What are practices anyway? What do they do to us?

## Disciplines of Disciples

The Christian faith is not primarily about doctrines that tell us what to believe, nor is it about rules that tell us what to do. Certainly, doctrines and deeds matter, but what matters most is following Jesus. The Christian faith grows out of an encounter with the risen Lord.

This is very different from religions that organize themselves around commitment to a cause or belief in a set of abstract ideas. These religions create adepts or devotees or adherents. In contrast, Christianity distinctively names its followers “disciples.” Personal relationship to the risen Christ sustains Christian discipleship. The faith practices of Christianity develop as disciples seek to stay close to the One whom they love, the One whom they follow. A psychotherapist would probably regard these faith practices as exercises in building and sustaining intimacy. Christian disciples thus need to sustain their intimacy with the risen Christ. And as the disciplines of disciples, practices keep us in close proximity to him, allowing his presence to pattern our lives; they offer ways of acting out our relationship with Jesus; and they give us a view of the world from his perspective.

## Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time

In his teachings and healings, in his life and death and resurrection, in his dealings with rich and poor, Jew and Greek, woman and man, Jesus lived in a world according to God. We can see it still, if we stop to look. The disciplines of discipleship resurrect the view. Each of the core faith practices traces its origin back to the life of Jesus. Disciples do these things because he did them. They pray the way

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Jesus taught them to pray: “Our Father, who art in heaven.” Jesus forgave his disciples’ disloyalty, and he asked them to forgive others’ failings. He was baptized in the Jordan River, and he commissioned the disciples to baptize in his name. He asked the disciples to break bread and drink wine “in remembrance of me.” The original disciples passed on the disciplines they had learned from their Lord. We do these things to remember him. As we remember, we “meet Jesus again for the first time.”<sup>2</sup>

For Christians, the question “What would Jesus do?”—abbreviated on wristbands, T-shirts, and bumper stickers as “WWJD?”—is important but not primary. What animates discipleship and directs the way we live is not so much identifying what Jesus would do as “meeting him again” in daily life. Christian discipleship follows from encounters with the risen Lord.

Disciples reencounter Jesus in the practices he left behind: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matthew 18:20). As we engage in the disciplines that Jesus himself did, we meet the risen Lord. Practices are places where Jesus promises to be. Luke’s Gospel suggests this in its account of a postresurrection encounter. A stranger joins the disciples on the road to Emmaus, and he asks them about events that took place in the city of Jerusalem, specifically the crucifixion of the alleged King of the Jews. The stranger draws them into conversation about the scriptures, opening to them fresh interpretations. The disciples invite the man to dinner, but it is only in the breaking of the bread that they recognize him as the risen Christ (Luke 24:31). They have “met Jesus again.” Just as the first disciples reencountered their beloved Lord at table, so we meet Jesus again whenever we gather to celebrate the Lord’s meal, whenever we bow our heads in prayer or lift our voices in song. The risen Lord is present, and we meet him again for the first time.

Certainly these disciplines of discipleship are not the only places where Jesus walks in the world today. But if we recognize him in these practices, we will begin to see him in less obvious, more

hidden places. One of my favorite preachers explains this process of recognition with an irreverent analogy: “To a pickpocket, all the world’s a pocket!” He asks his listeners to think how sharply focused a pickpocket’s eyes are on pockets with a slight bulge. The eyes of disciples, he implies, are focused differently. Practices train them on the One whom they follow. Having met Jesus again and again, disciples gradually discern his presence in all things. In his poem “As Kingfishers Catch Fire,” nineteenth-century poet Gerard Manley Hopkins describes how the world looks to a disciple:

For Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his  
To the Father through the features of men’s faces.<sup>3</sup>

### **Acting Out Our Relationship to Jesus: Making His Gestures Our Own**

As the vignettes at the beginning of this chapter demonstrate, faith practices are embodied actions, not abstract concepts. Practices require bodies, and disciples have them to offer. Jesus cared enough about bodies to spend much of his earthly ministry healing them and making them whole. Some of the best “teaching moments” in the Gospels happen when Jesus and his followers were hungry, angry, lonely, or falling asleep on their feet. Remember the feedings of the five thousand (Matthew 14:13–21; Mark 6:30–44; Luke 9:10–17; John 6:1–13), the woman who washed Jesus’ feet with her tears, anointed them with fine oil, and dried them with her hair (Luke 7:36–50), or Jesus’ long night of prayer in Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36–46; Mark 14:32–42; Luke 22:39–46). Bodies matter in the life of faith, and for that reason practices engage them.

But bodies matter because practices deal with basic human needs: the need to eat, the need to drink, the need for companionship, the need to listen, the need to mark and be marked as members of a particular group, and so on. Addressing these basic human

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needs, practices use the body to mentor the soul. Practices inscribe the encounter with Jesus on the body of the disciple. For example, Jews and Christians have sung or chanted psalms for centuries, often in an ancient call-and-response pattern. As a child, I was a member of the junior choir, and we routinely sang the introit and gradual, those scraps of psalms woven into the opening of the worship service. We were only in grade school, and we struggled with the strange cadences of old plainsong melodies and with the lost eloquence of the King James Version of the Bible, but these fragments of psalms remain with me. Decades later, I can resurrect a psalm simply by humming one of the plainsong settings. This practice of singing planted the psalms deep in my body.

### Seeing as Jesus Sees

Faith practices also refocus our vision. Christian practices invite us into the world Jesus traveled and enable us to see it through his eyes. Several cascading parables in Matthew's Gospel paint pictures in words. All begin with the same refrain: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls. The kingdom of heaven is like a net thrown into the sea" (Matthew 13:31–50). The people who listened to these parables knew a world of fields and seeds and fishing nets. They did not know God's kingdom, but fortified with these vivid images, they could begin to imagine it. In the word pictures, Jesus invited his disciples to connect the ordinary with the extraordinary, the known with the unknown, the visible with the invisible. The kingdom of heaven filtered down into their everyday lives, and Jesus' followers gradually gained a new way of looking at the world around them. The practice of reading and meditating on this string of parables helps us begin to see things as Jesus does; they offer a God's-eye view.

## God-Shaped and God-Shaping Activities

Faith practices are the disciplines of discipleship. We may at times do them by rote or routine, but they orient us to the journey of discipleship. We do not make the journey alone: we travel with a whole company of disciples from around the world and across the centuries. We do not make the journey without a map: practices orient us to the One whom we follow. In John's Gospel, Jesus promised to send the disciples the Holy Spirit. He did not leave them without comfort (John 14:18). Nor did Jesus leave them without compass. As they did for the first disciples, practices point us to the person we love and illumine the path we follow. Like the polestar, they show disciples the direction of "true" north.

Practices are God-shaped and God-shaping activities that form the way of life called discipleship.<sup>4</sup> Faith practices find their roots in the life of Jesus and their place in the world. For those wishing to become a part of the way of life called "Christian," faith practices describe the way of life that constitutes discipleship. Many Protestant traditions shy away from talk of "spiritual exercises" or "disciplines of discipleship." They fear that this constitutes "works righteousness," a code phrase for the idea that disciples must earn their way into heaven by doing good deeds or becoming saints. There was no greater enemy of "works righteousness" than Martin Luther. Yet again and again, Luther counseled his parishioners to practice their faith. He saw faith practices as "gifts" given by God to God's people—and he urged people to receive these gifts with delight. As God-shaped gifts, faith practices point us to where we can find the body of Christ in the world today.

Practices are not only God-shaped; they are also God-shaping. Practices shape us into being certain kinds of people; they confer identity, identifying us to ourselves and to others. Initiated by these practices into a certain way of life, we come to identify ourselves as people who do these kinds of things. For example, a friend is a writer, and he is a writer because he does the things that writers do.

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He became a writer by writing in a disciplined way on a daily basis, whether he felt particularly inspired on that day or not. Some days the words simply would not come, and after five hours of work he had only a paragraph. On other days the paragraphs would roll out. Being away from his writing desk left him disoriented and grouchy. “Whether I’m churning out pages or not, being in front of the computer makes me feel like myself again.” Writing identified him to himself.

Being a practicing Christian is like being a writer. I am a Christian, and part of the reason is that I do the things Christians do: show up in church, study scripture, pray for my neighbors. These are often not “mountaintop” experiences—in fact, they rarely are. More than doing something *for* me, engaging in these practices does something *to* me. They invite me to participate more deeply in the way of life called “Christian.” Through practices, a tradition enters the heart; through practices, beliefs enter the body. Practices provide the soil for sustained religious experience.

These God-shaping practices not only identify us to ourselves but also identify us to others. Religious practices function as the public face of a tradition in the world. Campaigning for the civil rights of African Americans in the 1950s, Martin Luther King Jr. did not try to speak a religious Esperanto that would hide who he was or where he came from. He believed that racial discrimination ran against the grain of the biblical witness, and he was not afraid to say so. No one would have remembered words like: “I have an idea I’d kind of like to share with you.” But it was more than an “idea”; it was a “dream,” and behind that dream were words from the prophet Joel for those who had ears to hear:

I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;  
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
your old men shall dream dreams,  
and your young men shall see visions.  
Even on the male and female slaves,  
in those days, I will pour out my spirit [Joel 2:28–29].



Martin Luther King Jr. drew these distinctive images from the world he knew as a Christian. He spoke in his mother tongue, and he had a religiously tutored first language to use. That language expressed his deepest convictions. King did not talk about oppression in general or hope in the abstract. Rather, through particular biblical images, he talked concretely about what enslaved him as a black man and what he hoped for his children in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States of America. Drawing on biblical images and metaphors, King invited his hearers to provide their own concrete examples of oppression and hope.

We need to give our own children no less. A swimming buddy of mine boasts that she will let her children choose their own religion. I bury my shock in the bath towel, wondering on what basis will her children choose? How will they learn a rich language for hope, for despair, for fidelity? There are lots of dialects out there, not all of them articulate or truthful. Rather than the freedom to choose their own religious faith practices, we must teach our children a first language of faith. If they do not already have a language for religious experience, they will have trouble identifying it.

## Doing Something to Us

“I stopped going to church because it just wasn’t doing anything for me anymore.” The complaint is common. People in a consumer culture expect a return on every investment. They expect their cars to run, their employees to work, and their children to be grateful. Even time is a commodity, to be “spent” or “saved” like money. In this universe of values, Christian practices describe a world made strange. Dismantling consumerist mentality practices does something *for* us by doing something *to* us. More precisely, these disciplines of discipleship shape all of our relationships, instruct our emotions, link us to a past and a future, and refocus our vision.

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### Shaping Our Relationships

Religious practices describe a relationship to the sacred. As a religion Christianity is not primarily about assenting to doctrine or obeying a code, though these certainly figure. Christianity is primarily about being in relationship with the God revealed in Jesus Christ. The life of discipleship flows out of this relationship with the crucified and risen Christ.

Fourth-century North African theologian Saint Augustine was the quintessential “seeker,” and he sought Truth by trying to relate himself to beauty, rhetoric, philosophy, women, and a variety of religions. Conversion to Christianity inspired Augustine to write his spiritual autobiography, *The Confessions*, in which Augustine chronicles his discovery of a central insight about Christianity: Christianity is all about relationship. Surveying the twists and turns of a rich life, he discovered that at the very moments when he had been seeking to fasten himself to Truth, he had already been found by a God who had been with him all along. He sought a “What” and was found by “Someone.”

This relationship to Someone shapes all our other relationships. Loving God is like the love of a good marriage, which binds two people together and never seems to run dry. Love operates on a principle of surplus, not one of scarcity. The more love is tapped, the greater the supply, and it touches everything around it. Indeed, the nature of love is to spill over into all other relationships. As the Jews did before him, Jesus drew on love’s quality of abundance in his Great Commandment: “You shall love the Lord with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:38–39; compare Deuteronomy 6:5). The command describes three edges of a triangle: God, self, and neighbor.

Each edge is crucial. If the relationship to *God* is left out, practices become mere group activities, like a car wash, a bake sale, or some civic group activity. Practices lose their connection with the holy or create it in human form. If the relationship to *self* is erased, practices become the tools of self-erasure. The individual

risks being lost in the community. As many Christian feminists have pointed out, self-sacrifice works only when there is a self to offer freely. If the *neighbor* evaporates, practices become experiments in spiritual introspection. The presence of the neighbor takes spirituality out of the psyche and into the actual world of other people. The neighbor helps us test our spiritual vision, lest that vision grow dim.

Church historian Roberta Bondi discusses this triangle of relationships as she reflects on the daily practice of prayer. As a feminist, she struggled with the Lord's Prayer and naming God as a "Father." However, the hardest part of the prayer turned out to be the word *our*. She found herself betrayed by a close friend and colleague, and she had a hard time recognizing this person as another child of God. The prayer to "Our Father" meant she couldn't think of her colleague only as an adversary. Jane Ann was also her sister in Christ. To ease her anger, she deliberately prayed to "My Father—and the Father of Jane Ann." Repeated over a period of days and weeks, that practice made space for reconciliation that Bondi would not have sought on her own.<sup>5</sup>

### Instructing Our Emotions

Just as sinews connect bone to bone, emotions connect people one to another. They are the connective tissue of human society, and they can build up or tear down. We tend to regard emotions as the raw material of human experience: the heart's knee-jerk reaction to stimuli. But emotions are scripted, and we learn from others which ones to summon in response to a situation. We watch how others respond, judge the impact of their anger or joy, and either imitate the response or choose something different. A Croatian American described his childhood neighborhood in Peoria, Illinois. Along with a cluster of other Croatian American families, his family settled across the alley from the Serbian American immigrants. They had learned their hatreds well, and it defined them. Even in the New World, these immigrants needed to be near their Old World

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enemies. Of such an upbringing, the man wondered: “Who would we have been without our enemies?”

Because of their powerful potential for good and ill, the emotions beg for direction. Sixth-century Italian abbot Saint Benedict of Nursia understood the need for guidance. As abbot to several monastic communities in his lifetime, Benedict gained his wisdom the hard way. A group of unruly monks once tried to poison him, and he knew the perils of community life, particularly a community of people who did not choose to be together. He also knew that many monks did not freely choose monastic life; the monastery had been chosen for them by parents who could not afford to raise them. Judging from the literature of the period, monastic life drew out both the best and the worst emotions in the brothers.

In his *Rule*, Benedict describes eight periods of common prayer that organized the monks’ days, beginning with Matins at 2 A.M. and ending with Compline as darkness fell. He devotes a large portion of his *Rule* to these periods of common prayer, outlining with precision which psalms should be said at which time of day. The monks would move through all 150 psalms within the space of a week. Benedict felt this journey through the psalter would direct and instruct the monks’ emotions.

How would chanting the psalms instruct the monks’ emotional lives? Poet Kathleen Norris describes how they worked on her. She spent time in a Benedictine community, living in the world of the psalms and following St. Benedict’s *Rule*: “Quite simply, the Rule spoke to me. Benedict’s language and imagery come from the Bible, but he was someone who read the psalms every day—as Benedictines still do—and something of the psalms’ emotional honesty, their grounding in the physical, rubbed off on him. Even when the psalms are at their most ecstatic, they convey holiness not with abstraction but with images from the world we know: rivers clap their hands, hills dance like yearling sheep.”<sup>6</sup>

The psalms display a broad range of emotions in relationship to God: rejoicing and despair, consolation and abandonment,

judgment and mercy. As the brothers chanted them, they could surface these feelings and point them toward God for direction.

### **Linking Us to a Past and a Future**

Every year I teach a required course on the history of the early church. About the fourth week of the semester, we discuss the ancient Christian creeds: Where did they come from? What were they used for? How do they function today? One year I had a student from a tradition that does not use creeds in its worship, and she posed a question to classmates who used them regularly: "What does saying a creed do to you?" I watched as her classmates struggled to imagine worship without these set pieces of the liturgy. They fumbled for the "right" explanations, then fell silent. The whole truth resisted language. Only part of it could be put into words. The rest was embedded in a lifetime of practice.

Not all Christians recite creeds, but for many this remains an important practice. Creeds rehearse the basics of belief in a way that invites participation rather than offers some pious explanation. I think this is why the students had such a hard time putting into words what it was like to be in a community that uses creeds. Spoken with voices rising and falling in unison, a creed rolls out a sacred story in timeless words of praise and wonder. This is who God is; this is what God has done. To understand what happens, you have to be there. As Christians recite the creeds, they reenter the world the creed opens up.

Christians have spoken these words for centuries; they will continue to be spoken in awe and reverence for centuries to come. In saying the creed, believers take what children's author Madeleine L'Engle calls "a wrinkle in time." The practice invites into the present moment a whole host of witnesses who have spoken the same creed in countless languages across the centuries and around the world. Moreover, the practice anticipates the witness of generations of Christians to come. As these voices past and future swell the chorus, time breaks open and crowds into the present moment.

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In such moments, practices reach into the past. That past has solidity and shape; it provides a foundation to build on. Christians do not need to walk into Holy Week or the Christmas season wondering, "What shall we do this year?" The services follow a flexible pattern that believers have observed for centuries. Reenacting the rites of these foremothers and forefathers in the faith, Christians join them across time and space.

Practices also anticipate a future. In engaging in activities that have defined what it means to be a believer for centuries, Christians hand them on by example to generations to come. For example, children learn the practice of prayer through table grace. Invited to add their own thanksgiving, they offer contributions that inform and even delight the rest of the table: "I am grateful that Mom hasn't looked in my room yet." Or "God bless all chocolate cows." A child accustomed to being grateful lives in a world filled with gifts. Gratitude functions like a magnet. A grateful person finds things for which to be thankful. Perhaps the parable of the talents refers to the thankful person and his habit of gratitude in its conclusion: "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away" (Matthew 25:29). The grateful person anticipates a world of abundance; he feels that everything is gift. He sees himself blessed with whatever he has. In contrast, scarcity, envy, and jealousy are the constant companions of someone who is ungrateful. He never feels he has what he deserves. Everything and everyone remind him that he has less, and the ungrateful person anticipates a world of scarcity. Practicing envy builds toward a different future than practicing gratitude.

### Refocusing Our Vision

Christian practices shape us in peculiar ways, and in the shaping we gain a distinctive angle of vision, a God's-eye view. From this point of view we gain a fresh perspective on the world around us. We pay attention to it in new ways. Moreover, this God's-eye view invites

us not only to see the world in new ways but to *reimagine* it, to see it as a world created and sustained by the beneficent God. What is the difference that seeing a world according to God might make?

As novelist and occasional philosopher Iris Murdoch reminds us, “We can only choose within the world that we see.”<sup>7</sup> Should I give money to the man panhandling outside the post office? The question gets asked only if I have seen him. If I am distracted by the next errand or the last conversation, he may not even enter my field of vision. In a culture dedicated to distraction, attending to what is in front of us presents a real challenge. Cell phones go off in the middle of a symphony or a lecture; TV provides background noise in too many households, a substitute for conversation. Headsets, video games, digital watches beeping the hour—is it any wonder we have trouble focusing on what is in front of us?

Distraction is not only a problem for twenty-first-century Christians. The biblical record reveals that the disciples of Jesus had similar trouble focusing. They consistently tried to steer their master away from what was in front of him: a blind beggar, a crowd of rowdy children, a Samaritan woman. In their eyes, Jesus had more important people to speak with and more pressing matters demanding his attention.

Yet Jesus consistently breaks free of their agenda anxiety to pay attention. He heals the blind man; he blesses the children; he speaks to the stranger. Ignoring the disciples’ plans for his future, Jesus attends to what is in front of him. He is fully present to whoever crosses his path. This kind of attention stands as both a rebuke and a plea to the myopic disciples: “Look at what’s in front of you, and pay attention! What could be more important than this!”

Imagination plays an important role in seeing the world according to God. This capacity employs creativity and attention to see what is and understand it as part of a larger whole. The homeless person panhandling outside the post office could be seen as the sum of his deficits. After all, he is without money, without a home, without a family, without a job. This way of looking at him suggests a

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certain course of action. Having seen the man as homeless, jobless, and friendless, I would scurry past without meeting his gaze. I could also image this man as a child of God, an interpretation that suggests very different responses. I could meet his gaze and smile. I could give him some food or money. I could tell him where he could find shelter for the night. How a passerby treats a panhandler depends largely on how she sees him, not simply through the eyes of sight, but also through the eyes of mind and heart.

Faith practices train the vision of the mind and heart. They function as the eye exercises of the soul; they help disciples see better. Anyone who enters the world of the psalms, as Benedict's monks did, could not fail to notice the poor: "Who is like the Lord our God? He raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap" (Psalms 113:5–7). Those who worship this kind of God follow suit, and gradually they gain a God's-eye view of things. The Holiness Code of Leviticus gives another reason for such concern. At the heart of its message is "the widow, the orphan, the stranger in your land." Why is this? The writer is adamant: "For you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God" (Leviticus 19:33–34). God did not abandon the Israelites to slavery in Egypt, and they were exhorted to show similar compassion to the strangers in their midst. Such scriptural texts read in prayer and chanted in worship shape the heart and tutor the imagination.

Imagining the world according to God affects not only how we see others but how we see ourselves. Bringing imagination into an encounter with a panhandler changes how I imagine myself. Recalling the parable of the Good Samaritan, I refrain from cataloguing everyone as "neighbor" or "non-neighbor." Instead, I take the parable's counsel and think of how I might best be a "neighbor" to this man in front of me. The view of both the panhandler and myself alters.

This seems like a lot to think about in front of the post office. Or is it? The world of a disciple certainly looks different from the



world of someone who had never set foot in the biblical terrain of parable and psalm. The God-shaped imagination asks two questions: “How shall I interpret what I have seen?” and “How can I be a neighbor?”

## Reframing a World According to God

This book argues that the core practices of the Christian faith *reframe* some of the most intransigent moral issues we face in today’s world. The metaphor of framing is important. We frame something we want to look at: a picture, a photograph, an oil painting. A frame contains it, allows focus, showcases some parts and blocks out others. Often we frame with our hands something we want to look at in a landscape, focusing and blotting out blinding sunlight or a messy tangle of telephone lines. Another person, looking at the same landscape, might frame the telephone lines instead. Still another would simply find a frame large enough to capture it all.

A similar kind of framing happens when we consider an ethical issue. How we describe a situation determines its outcome. Take a familiar illustration. In its television commercials, Archer Daniels Midland presents itself as “supermarket to the world.” This is how the company wants to be seen in a global economy. The moral issue lies in how the company sees the world. “Supermarket to the world” assumes a world of consumers and shoppers, buyers and sellers, a kind of global Great Mall. Only in such a world would a supermarket make any kind of sense. But is the world really like this? This point of view obscures all the people who cannot afford to shop. They never enter the picture at all: they are literally outside the frame of this picture. They become invisible.

The practices of discipleship frame a world according to God. They accompany disciples along a journey that begins in baptism and ends in resurrection. Baptism inaugurates the journey; the

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Lord's Supper provides food and drink; prayer connects us to the One whom we follow; forgiveness allows us to go forward together; remembering the dead offers us the counsel of the saints who have gone before; and fidelity makes community possible in the first place. Let us begin the journey.