

The Events Before Us

—Peter Stockland—

Last week, our family was present as my wife's mother took inevitable steps toward a death whose arrival is countable in days.

On Thursday night, returning from her bedside, my son and I were almost killed when a pickup truck ploughed into the suddenly out of control taxi in which we were riding.

During the weekend, I attended a three-day conference on The Inexorable Positivity of Reality. Most normal, *compens mentis* people would see the first two events as an active negation of the third.

Had the conference been some happy-clappy sales pitch on the seven essential steps to achieving eternal happiness, lifelong financial security, and winning Olympic gold medals in your sixties, I would have heartily agreed. Actually even that isn't true. I would have shunned it.

But no. On the contrary, the conference message affirmed vigorously the positivity in the long, slow, debilitating tearing away of my mother-in-law through Alzheimer's and in the instantaneous, violent collision that left my son and I unhurt by sheer grace and good fortune. The message affirmed, in a name, Jesus Christ.

Not, it must be made immediately clear, Christ merely as doctrinal marketing brand or universal good luck charm or omniscient babysitter or supernatural day planner or Someone to pay respects to on Sunday mornings before the NFL play-off games start or even as moralistic ready reckoner hectoring us little boys and girls to colour mostly within the lines.

Rather, Christ as Event. Historic event, of course, locked down in time, traceable—as we testify in the Apostles Creed—by placement in a geographic setting through verifiable personages such as Pontius Pilate. But more, much more: a capital 'e' Event, ever present, as a something, as a reality, that is happening to me now. Happening to me whether I am sitting by a hospital bedside attending the inevitable death of a woman who has treated me like a son for almost 30 years, or whether I am coming back to dazed consciousness in the rear seat of a wrecked vehicle desperately asking my own son if he is all right.

It is Christ as reality made utterly unavoidable by hard, cold, crunching facts forcing themselves upon reason. Let me assure you there can be fewer facts harder, colder or of greater impact than staring at an unstoppable black truck pointed toward you on a snow blown road, waiting for it to bring death, then awakening with terror in your heart that it might, in fact, be your beloved son who has died beside you. Such a moment is as positively real as life can get.

There, in that positively real, is Christ present. Again, not as lucky charm. Nor even as the exhalation of inexpressible relief that both of you, and most importantly your son, escaped relatively unscathed. But as the ultimate, and ultimately merciful, primary meaning within those discrete events, at the point that reason itself tells us is the end of all human events.

As Father Julian Carron, president of the lay Catholic organization Communion and Liberation expressed it at the conference: "We don't have to deny the painful face of reality. In fact, we can affirm that reality is positive because (any given event) is not the last word of Christ."

As Father Carron put it, Christ's eternal Word is the "gaze of mercy that confirms our humanity." Whatever we are involved in, whatever we are waiting for, long and slow and abrupt and frightening, that merciful gaze is present to us, not just upon us for, indeed, we are as essential to its love as its love is to us.

"The Christian Event," Father Carron said, "is not present because 'it is' but 'it is' because it is present."

I have believed, all my life, in the Something Happened nature of that Christian event. After the confluence of events last week, I begin to see the inexorable, positive reality of my place before it.

The Instant Super Cities of Oil Empires

—Robert Joustra—

Washington was built on a swamp, Ottawa on an old sleepy lumber town, St. Petersburg on a swampy patch of Baltic seacoast. Imperial exercises in urban planning don't always go wrong, or at least not while the empires which sustain them persist. Dostoyevsky called St. Petersburg "the most theoretical and intentional town on the whole terrestrial globe." It was not meant to flatter.

National Geographic dedicated a beautiful spread in its latest issue to the new capital of Khazakstan, Astana, described as "brash and grandiose—and wildly attractive to young strivers seeking success." Lavished with billions of petrol power, the new capital lacks for none of the astounding achievements of modern civilization, including its central monument, the Baiterek. Baiterek, which means "tall poplar tree" in Kazakh, is a 318-foot tower buttressed by an exoskeleton of white-painted steel, designed by Nursultan Nazarbayev, a steelworker become strongman who has run the country since the collapse of the Soviet Union. On its observation deck, from which your 360-degree view is periodically refreshed by cold Turkish beer, sits a malachite pedestal capped by a 4.4-pound slab of solid gold, in the centre of which is an imprint of Nazarbayev's right hand. Absent, one imagines, is the faint echo carried off the Euphrates, "Is not this the Babylon I have built as my royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?"

Nazarbayev has ordered his architects to explore the possibility of building a huge complex that would shelter a climate-controlled "indoor city" of 15,000 people.

There is nothing intrinsically draconian about the instant super cities of oil empires. National Geographic's John Lancaster recounts the swell of pride that Kazakhs feel over this gleaming, modern

marvel. One resident, Zharkeshov, laments that his country is often lumped in with its other unstable neighbours. "There is a problem being a 'stan,'" he says. Worse yet is being ridiculed, as in the 2006 hit movie Borat.

But what it takes to sustain these marvels is another matter. After the crash of 2008, eyes gradually turned to the super-rich city-state of Dubai. "Once the manic burst of building has stopped and the whirlwind has slowed, the secrets of Dubai are slowly seeping out." It is a city, says Johann Hari, built in a few wild decades on nothing but credit and ecocide, suppression and slavery.

It all underlines the dark side of Dubai's breakneck, centralized, super-rich dream: the army of foreign slaves from India to the Philippines to Ethiopia, housed in concrete bunkers outside the boundaries of its gleaming malls; the sharp suppression of dissent; the fake smiles masking fake lifestyles; the environmental catastrophe sustaining the short-lived financial genius. Dubai describes itself as a flower of materialist hope blooming amidst the arid deserts of the Arabian peninsula. But what hope there was is being swallowed back by the sand, and by the caprice of financial currents that take more than they give. Slow may not be sexy—it may not get modernist, technophile centrefolds—but slow endures.

Atana is not Dubai. Its money comes directly from oil, and that oil promises to fund Kazakh experiments in identity and city building for generations to come. But what Paul Collier calls the resource curse, and what other economists call Dutch disease, faces Kazakhs still: their challenge will be exploiting Kazakh oil for not just a city to be proud of, an urban dream that points to hope, but something that realizes that hope in a sustained way. Building tall towers with golden eggs is probably the easy part.

Go Inquire About What is Written in the Book that has been Found

—Brian Dijkema—

There is a passage in the Old Testament book of Kings where the temple of God—the cultural centre of the people of Israel—is given a thorough cleaning and refurbishment after years of desecration and abuse.

In the midst of this cleaning of cobwebs and repointing of masonry, the book of the law—the other cultural pillar of the people of Israel—is re-discovered. The accidental nature of the find reads like an event that occurs when one cleans the dusty attic of a grandparent who has stored odds and ends there for years. The king's secretary says, "The priest has given me a book" as if he hasn't a clue of its importance.

I was reminded of this story when I came across an article about a new translation of the Bible that came out last year in Norway. The launch of the Bible "saw Harry Potter-style overnight queues, with bookshops selling out on the first day as Norwegians rushed to get their hands on the new edition."

Smemo Strachan, a member of the Norwegian Bible society which sponsored the translation, noted that "there were people sleeping outside the day before the launch because it was embargoed—it's a bit ironic seeing that the content has been available for quite some time now." The translation was Norway's bestselling book in 2011.

A high percentage of Norway's population claims membership in a church—over 80% according to its national statistics—but Norway has an extremely low level of church attendance—about 3% according to its national church. In short, it's a country living off of a cultural legacy of Christianity, but which, as a whole, is quite post-Christian.

In the face of a culture which has largely turned its back on Christianity, what to make of the wildly popular Bible?

Perhaps it is, as Strachan notes, the fact that it is a compelling read. The Bible society published a version that did not contain chapter and verse numeration. The Bible is as popular as a novel because it reads like one.

There are those Christians who might scoff and note this as one further example of how deaf to the gospel the ears of Europe are. But I'm inclined to think of such an outpouring of interest in the Bible—even as a cultural artifact—as a good thing. The Bible is, as Marilynne Robinson notes, "the book of books," and interest in Scriptures, even if they are understood allusions,

demonstrate[s] that in the culture there is a well of special meaning to be drawn upon that can make an obscure death a martyrdom, and a gesture of forgiveness an act of grace. Whatever the state of belief of a writer or reader, such resonances have meaning that is more than ornamental, since they acknowledge complexity of experience of a kind that is the substance of fiction.

Robinson, of course, is speaking about the Bible's importance for literature, but is this not even more true for the lives of those who read Scripture directly? Scriptures "acknowledge complexity of experience of a kind" that is, in fact, the substance of life. One can only hope that as thousands of Norwegians "inquire . . . about what is written in this book" as Josiah did so many years ago, they will be struck by the strength of its story, and the gifts of grace—the gift of the knowledge of God—contained inside.

Vocation Takes Patience

—Alissa Wilkinson—

I read an interesting blog post by Oliver Segovia on the *Harvard Business Review* last week: "To Find Happiness, Forget About Passion." Segovia recounts the story of a peer who was primed to pursue her passion (in this case, earning a Ph.D. in the liberal arts, which we all have been told *ad nauseum* is not a, shall we say, profit-making enterprise these days), but found when she got out of school that there were no jobs, and ended up teaching part-time in a small research centre. And, he says, "She suffered the anguish of an uncertain future, became socially withdrawn, and felt a sense of betrayal."

Whether this is because Millennials insist on instant results, or because they have been proselytized to pursue their dreams, Segovia's point is a good one. He says in his final paragraph:

Happiness comes from the intersection of what you love, what you're good at, and what the world needs. We've been told time and again to keep finding the first. Our schools helped develop the second. It's time we put more thought on the third.

In other words (and in some contradiction to the title of his blog post), it's not so much that we ought to "forget" our passion as that we ought to recognize that our vocation lies at the intersection of our passion, our skills, and the big problems that the world has. If we're so focused on what everyone else wants us to do that we don't look at what delights us, then we'll often be boxed into a direction we hate—but if we're so focused on ourselves that we barely look at the world around us, we'll just be an anachronism.

I've certainly experienced this in my own brief but very winding career path. Furthermore, I didn't find out what my passions were until I had done a bit of wandering around in the vocational wilderness, and even last month I was still uncovering new things I didn't know I loved.

This is a good rubric for those seeking God's direction for their future work. But I'd like to return to Segovia's story to illustrate one more thing: our vocation (or, more accurately, vocations) *evolves* over the course of our lives. We don't find it and then we're set. For Segovia's friend, earning a Ph.D. was her vocation for those seven years. But when that vocation winds down, the next may not present itself immediately. There may be a little wandering. "Happiness" in our work is not a right—it's a gift, and sometimes it's withheld for a time so we might mature in other ways.

This is what I tend to tell students who come to my office, nervous about what they're going to do when they graduate. For now, I say, being a student is your vocation. Don't think of it as merely training grounds for what comes next. Be prudent, keep your eyes open, but don't hop past this as if it were only a place to prepare for what comes next. Seek first how you are to serve God's kingdom now . . . and the rest will be added to you. Even if it doesn't happen right away.

