

# Wittenberg Trail: From Despair to the Real Presence of God

by Lyman Stone

Reflecting on his faith when he was my age (mid 20s), Martin Luther said that he had “Lost touch with Christ the Savior and Comforter, and made of him the jailer and hangman of my poor soul.” I keep that in mind when I consider how to tell my own story: how different might this story look told fifteen years from now versus the way I will tell it today? But it is fitting to begin there, because my story, though it may sound presumptuous, begins in a similar place as Luther’s: despair.

I was born into a family of living and vibrant faith. My father is ordained in the United Methodist church and teaches Old Testament at Asbury Seminary. My grandfather at age 90 is still a globe-trotting evangelist and preacher who packs stadiums when he speaks. My mother is the most passionately and faithfully confessing person I have ever known, and my grandmother was, before she went home, the finest model of Christian service and humility a person can hope to have. I have been, from birth to the present day, spoiled with rigorous and winsome examples in the faith. I was raised in an environment where conversancy in theology was necessary for dinner-table conversations and the bookshelves had books in at least three dead languages on them; but where we also spent some of our holidays serving homeless people instead of decking out our table, where we read mission support letters together nightly at dinner, and the quiet liturgies of prayer and study in the home were given first priority. The town I grew up in was, and remains today, packed with similar families; it is a living, breathing community of faith that I genuinely believe has few equals on the earth (that may be my local patriotism

showing). Over the course of my school years I had the normal teenage doubts, skepticisms, rejections, and returns. But, at the end of the day, my upbringing gave me no inspiring target for rebellion. I could not rage against inconsiderate parents, or unkind siblings, or corrupt church politics. I attended a nondenominational megachurch for my formative years, and, truth be told, was well-formed as a result, schooled in good theology by my parents, and urged on to faithful vocation by my pastors.

And yet, when I look back on those days, I see despair. Not despair as just emotional anguish, but despair as my favorite faithful believing Lutheran from the past, Soren Kierkegaard, described it: “Wanting in despair to be oneself.” That is, I wanted desperately to be “truly myself,” and yet resisted actually having that as well, because, as Kierkegaard realized, “becoming a self” is not actually about self-actualization. It is about “relating to the infinite,” that is, receiving a new self, a call to renewed identity and humanity in Christ. I wasn’t ready to give up being who I wanted to be, in order to become something, someone, I did not truly understand.

The trouble was that although I had a good theological education, although I knew that I was justified by grace through faith, and although I could recite councils and creeds and Bible verses, I could not have told you where my faith, where my actual identity, really rested. If asked, “How do you know that you are saved?” I would have given you a rhetorically satisfying answer that, on reflection, you would have realized boils down to, “Because I feel saved,” or, perhaps, “Because I feel that I ought to feel saved.” I had numerous facts about faith, and beyond that I had passionate feelings about faith, I burned with fire and zeal, but when I look back, I wonder what it was I thought I had faith in. It was not my baptism. It was not communion. It was not prayer. It was not even scripture: yes, I believed it was an inerrant and inspired book, God’s Word even, and I could perhaps have described

broadly what that meant. But did I have any real grasp of the incarnate Word, what it actually means to have that Word given to us in a form we can read and understand? Hardly.

And so even though I have no doubt today that the Holy Spirit had already worked faith in me through the Word in a valid Trinitarian baptism, orthodox preaching, and exposure to scripture, at the center of my faith was a hazy, ethereal emptiness. The final ground of my faith amounted to some degree of hand-waving away the basic problem: I could not even begin to venture an explanation of how God comes to man, how He meets us, how He works in our life, and what that means for our broken lives. I could not see the Cross.

When I went to college, two providential interventions bent my path towards confessional Lutheranism. The first was that I went to a college where there were very few Christians of any kind, and indeed a large amount of active antagonism towards Christians. The pressure-cooker environment where my outspoken beliefs could earn me, at best, respectful disagreement and, at worst, actual violence, forced me to take stock of myself. How far was I willing to go? What sacrifices were worth making? I had nowhere to turn to besides Scripture. My church was great in many ways, but seemed more focused on winning over the culture than on helping me survive its onslaught. My family was always supportive, but a college student (and indeed any adult) cannot just run home every weekend for relief. Our Christian fellowship group was invaluable, but I was too-rapidly placed in leadership, when above all else I felt that I needed to be led, and, what's more, to be fed, rather than asked to lead others. As a result, I poured my energies into scripture, reading and re-reading the Psalms and Prophets every day.

Jeremiah 15:15-18 became my lonely prayer:

*You who know, O Lord,  
Remember me, take notice of me,  
And take vengeance for me on my persecutors.  
Do not, in view of Your patience, take me away;  
Know that for Your sake I endure reproach.  
Your words were found and I ate them,  
And Your words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart;  
For I have been called by Your name,  
O Lord God of hosts.  
I did not sit in the circle of merrymakers,  
Nor did I exult.  
Because of Your hand upon me I sat alone,  
For You filled me with indignation.  
Why has my pain been perpetual  
And my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?  
Will You indeed be to me like a deceptive stream  
With water that is unreliable?*

As I saw possible friendships wither, a romantic relationship end, and my life narrow to a small circle of faithful companions, all because of this strange mystery of faith, I could barely even articulate, this prayer became my encouragement. I had no rock left except the Rock. I was forced to see that there were several ways my life could go: I could acculturate, despairing of any hope for Christian vocation in my life, or else, I could accept what was, in hindsight, not actually a terribly heavy cross to bear: I could despair of the admiration of my peers. I could cease the striving-in-despair to be who I wanted to be, and allow God to form me in the vocation into which He was calling me.

A second providence made my college years truly productive: I met my wife! She was the only Lutheran at my university. I wasn't Lutheran, but I had read quite a bit of Luther (an irritating side effect of being raised by a theologian), and so I would torment my then-friend Ruth by playing "Luther vs. Lutherans." I'd look up the faith statements of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, then find quotes from Luther's

writings or table talks which seemed to contradict those statements. While this frustrated my eventual-wife to no end (I have continued to be endlessly frustrating), in hindsight I realize that I was accidentally taking a catechism class. I was finding Lutheran confessions or Luther's writings, and asking that simple, but dangerous-to-the-skeptic, question of the catechism, "What does this mean?"

And as I, in despair of finding solid ground on which to stand, tormented my Lutheran interlocutor, one fact came up again and again: while she did not always have the answers to my questions, she knew with a mighty assurance what her faith was in. It was in her baptism, which was the Word in the water. Her faith was in the fact that Christ said, "This IS my body," and she took Him at His plain word, and received communion on that basis. I was intrigued, even unsettled, by the plain solidity of this faith. In time, as I read and studied more and more, I was more than intrigued. I became convinced of Lutheranism, but not because I was argued into the faith, nor because I was rebelling against the faith of my upbringing. Truth be told, I think I "won" most of the theological arguments my wife and I had (she may disagree), and to this day I see continuity between the faith of my childhood and my Lutheran confession, not contradiction. Rather, I came to see the truth of the Lutheran Confessions, because they were the only firm ground I could find in a culture cracking at the seams, because they were the only thing that could change that uncertain object of faith into certain, objective means, which in their humble appearances masking the Real Presence of God, situated all the power and humility of the Incarnation at exactly the place I needed it to encourage me in my daily vocation.

In time, after Ruth and I moved to Washington, DC, we were fortunate enough to attend Immanuel Lutheran Church, where, with enough remedial coursework and a very patient pastor, I was able to, as I explained to my family,

“Get Lutheranized.” We strive to fill our home today with liturgies oriented towards the substance of faith: morning canticles and hymnody, bible study with friends, and hospitality for all comers. And now, God has called us to another change in circumstances. While Ruth and I love our church, our jobs, and our home in DC, we will move to Hong Kong this summer to serve as missionaries in the local Lutheran school system. While we are sad to leave, we are excited to go, and would encourage readers to keep the Lutheran Church-Hong Kong Synod, and our work there, in their prayers.



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