

# **Stalking God**

## ***The Great Effort Required in Becoming a Christian***

by James E. Nelson

Becoming a Christian, in the fullest sense of that word, requires great effort, according to the Orthodox Church. This idea of effort is one of the great stumbling blocks among Protestants when they consider Orthodoxy. Much of the problem is semantics. John Calvin taught that one's justification is demonstrated by the fruits of righteousness. If there are no fruits of righteousness, chances are the person was never justified in the first place. (And his emphasis led to "the Calvinist work ethic.") By and large, no one believes that being a Christian is a free lunch. But Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant express this relationship between unmerited favor and using the gracious gift wisely in different ways.

It is also true that it is not *just* a semantic problem. Real differences exist between the three communions. We conceptualize our proper response to divine grace differently. There are at least two facets to our relationship with God: state of being and relationship. Protestants tend to begin with our state of being while Orthodox tend to begin with our relationship. This difference in starting point results in a different way of seeing things.

### **State of Being and Relationship**

The starting point of the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith is that we are changed by Christ's righteousness. It is this forensic change in our state of being that allows us to enter into relationship with God. God cannot abide sinfulness, so we must be made righteous (or receive Christ's righteousness—the language varies among communions and theologians) in order to enter God's presence and have relationship.

The Orthodox approach the matter from the other end. While it is true that God cannot abide sinfulness, it is also true that Jesus Christ, "very God of very God" and "of one essence with the Father" (as the Creed describes the matter) became human and dwelt among sinners. One of the miracles of the incarnation is that Holy God did the seemingly impossible and entered into relationship *with sinners*, and this relationship (rather than a forensic declaration of righteousness) is where the Orthodox begin. The Orthodox doctrine of salvation is that Jesus Christ entered into relationship with us and even gave us the Holy Spirit, and as a result of that relationship, we can be transformed by Christ's righteousness into righteousness.

And so the real "work" part of salvation, from the Orthodox view, is not doing good deeds, but entering into relationship. Of course one cannot make too great a separation between the two ideas. We enter into relationship with God by entering into relationship with God. Lest you think this a tautology, let me add that we also enter into relationship with God by entering into relationship with others. Relationship with God in absence of relationship with others would probably seem an easy thing because we could easily imagine (God being spirit and all) that

things were going swimmingly in the relationship. But when we enter into relationship with other flesh and blood humans, there is conflict. The other person reminds us of our faults which we so easily forget we have. Etc. Relationship with other humans, in other words, grounds our relationship with God in reality; it helps prevent us from deceiving ourselves.

But, entering into relationship with God is extremely difficult work. And this is the rub for most Protestants. Relationship (the sort that is involved in salvation) requires great effort, great diligence, and great training. Shouldn't salvation be easier than all that? Isn't salvation a free gift of God? Doesn't this whole idea of "great effort, great diligence, great training" sort of turn the whole idea of grace on its head?

Ah, that's the mystery of relationship (in contrast to state of being). Ask any married person. It's both sublimely easy to fall in love and maddeningly difficult to stay in love. On the other hand it is devilishly easy to stop into the Clerk of Court to get a marriage license, and find a minister to listen to the "I do's." State of being (like getting married) is easy: "Once saved, always saved," and all that, you know. But this staying in love stuff—the mystery of relationship—is tricky and requires constant vigilance.

## **Muskrat Love**

In the Orthodox view of things God is constantly seeking after us (as in the *Song of Solomon*) and faithful Christians are, in turn, constantly seeking after God. But God, being a different order of being—no, that's not right at all—God, being the creator of "being" in the first place, is ever so difficult to have a relationship with because we continually underestimate God. We look for God in all the wrong places. The fullness of God always remains a mystery just beyond our grasp. So, even though we are seeking after each other, the relationship tends to be curious and enigmatic while at the same time beautiful and decisive in its effects. But how do you describe the process?

Annie Dillard, in her book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, begins innocently enough when recounting how she learned to observe muskrats: "Learning to stalk muskrats took me several years" (p. 190). Dillard is a naturalist and poet in the tradition of Edwin Way Teale. Although not a conspicuously Christian book, Dillard dips deeply into her Christian tradition (as well as other religious traditions) when describing what she observes for a year around her home near Tinker Creek in North Carolina. It is a nature book, but for those with eyes to see, it pictures Christian faith in remarkable and insightful ways.

One hot evening three years ago, I was standing more or less *in* a bush. I was stock-still, looking deep into Tinker Creek from a spot on the bank opposite the house, watching a group of blue-gills stare and hang motionless near the bottom of a deep, sunlit pool. I was focused for depth. I had long since lost myself, lost the creek, the day, lost

everything but the still amber depth. All at once I couldn't see. And then I could: a young muskrat had appeared on top of the water, floating on its back. It's forelegs were folded languorously across its chest; the sun shone on its upturned belly. Its youthfulness and rodent grin, coupled with its ridiculous method of locomotion, which consisted of a lazy wave of the tail assisted by an occasional dabble of a webbed hind foot, make it an enchanting picture of decadence, dissipation, and summer sloth. I forgot all about the fish. . . .

But in my surprise at having the light come on so suddenly, and at having my consciousness returned to me all at once and bearing an inverted muskrat, I must have moved and betrayed myself. The kit—for I know now it was just a young kit—righted itself so that only its head was visible above water, and swam downstream, away from me. . . .

That summer I haunted the bridges, I walked up creeks and down, but no muskrats ever appeared. You must just have to be there, I thought. You must have to spend the rest of your life standing in bushes. It was a once-in-a-lifetime thing, and you've had your once.

Then one night I saw another, and my life changed. [*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, pp 190-192]

I don't know whether Dillard is consciously being a theologian, or whether it just oozes out of her naturally, but she is quite good at it. Neither do I know how studied she is in the Christian tradition, although she seems to quote Thomas Merton, the Desert Fathers, and the Catholic mystical writers effortlessly as she observes her neighborhood.

In the description of her first sighting of the muskrat she notes that she had lost herself, she had lost the creek, the day, she had lost everything but the depth of the water. Anyone who has tried to observe fish in the quiet eddy of a creek bed understands. But this is also a remarkable description of fellowship with God. As long as I remain self-conscious, God will remain at a distance, for there is simply no room in my ego for both God and me. The trick is to lose myself, to leave myself behind, so that when I happen upon God in the still of the evening, I won't get in the way.

And when it first happens, we are so delighted (and shocked!) by the presence of God—my heart's most persistent longing—that we are jolted out of that loss of self, and suddenly my consciousness crowds in and crowds God out. As suddenly as God is there, he's gone, and like Peter, at the foot of the mount of Transfiguration, we are left babbling: "Oooh, ahhh! Let's erect a tent and stay here. Let's build a shrine. Let's capture this moment for all eternity . . .

But the moment is gone. In Dillard's words, "You must have to spend the rest of your life standing in bushes. It was a once-in-a-lifetime thing, and you've had your once."

## The Work of Losing Myself

So you see, entering into sublime relationship with God so that we can be transformed by God's righteousness is not the sort of work we usually associate with the word "work." It's not so much doing good. It's certainly not earning my keep. It's rather the work of losing myself. As John the Baptist says, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (Jn 3:30).

The first intimate encounter with God is always a shock. Even if you are specifically seeking it, when it occurs it's nothing you expect, and so the moment itself ruins the moment and it's gone. And once it occurs we have a choice: we can bask in the memory of the moment or do the work necessary to return to that spot where "I lose myself, I lose the creek, the day, lose everything but the still amber depth."

That innocence of mine is mostly gone now, although I felt almost the same pure rush last night. I have seen many muskrats since I learned to look for them in that part of the creek. But still I seek them out in the cool of the evening, and still I hold my breath when rising ripples surge from under the creek's bank. The great hurrah about wild animals is that they exist at all, and the greater hurrah is the actual moment of seeing them. Because they have a nice dignity, and prefer to have nothing to do with me, not even as the simple objects of my vision. They show me by their very wariness what a prize it is simply to open my eyes and behold.  
[p. 192]

But the step from initial delightful shock to the point where "I have seen many muskrats since I learned to look for them" is not a single step. It is a process; it is hard work, which Dillard alludes to as she continues the story. "But with a modicum of skill and a loss of human dignity, such as it is, I can be right 'there'" (p. 194). The key, when it comes to muskrats—and God—is that loss of human dignity.

I have tried to show muskrats to other people, but it rarely works. No matter how quiet we are, the muskrats stay hidden. Maybe they sense the tense hum of consciousness, the buzz from two human beings who in the silence cannot help but be aware of each other, and so of themselves. Then too, the other people invariably suffer from a self-consciousness that prevents their stalking well. It used to bother me, too: I just could not bear to lose so much dignity that I would completely alter my whole way of being for a muskrat. So I would move or look around or scratch my nose, and no muskrats would show, leaving me alone with my dignity for days on end, until I decided that it was worth my while to learn—from the muskrats themselves—how to stalk. [pp. 198f]

If you want your proper American sensibilities shocked beyond comprehension, slip into a midweek service (such as the Wednesday Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts) at an Orthodox Church during Lent. Preferably choose a traditional church which has no pews, except possibly

around the edge of the nave. What you will see are Americans prostrating themselves in an eastward direction, flat on their face, arms stretched out on the floor in front of them, as if they are Muslims (who, I remind you, inherited this practice from the Judeo-Christian practice), or Byzantine posers in the court of some Persian calif and sultan. Talk about loss of dignity!

I don't know that God requires such exorbitant demonstrations of abasement, but I have discovered that we humans do. We humans are a self-conscious folk. Find a mirror in a coffee shop, order a tall latté, sit back, and observe the humans walk by the mirror. Observe how they glance at themselves, straighten their hair, check their chin for unsightly dribble, preen and perform for themselves. Ah, how we love ourselves, our Versace sunglasses, our Rolex watches . . . or maybe we're proud of our more pedestrian and practical sensibilities, as we lift our drug store sunglasses and straighten our Wal-Mart shirts before getting into our very sensible used economy car.

It is amazing how self-conscious we are. It is even more amazing how difficult it is to get past "self" in order to become conscious—truly conscious—of the other, and ultimately of God. Dillard is right, whether stalking muskrats or the Divine, we need to lose our dignity as the first step toward losing ourselves. And that requires a great deal of effort.

One time, after a perfect stalk, a muskrat climbed up the bank right beside her and began to eat grass, because the muskrat never knew she was there.

I never knew I was there, either. For that forty minutes last night I was as purely sensitive and mute as a photographic plate; I received impressions, but I did not print out captions. My own self-awareness had disappeared; it seems now almost as though, had I been wired with electrodes, my EEG would have been flat. I have done this sort of thing so often that I have lost self-consciousness about moving slowly and halting suddenly; it is second nature to me now. And I have often noticed that even a few minutes of this self-forgetfulness is tremendously invigorating. I wonder if we do not waste most of our energy just by spending every waking minute saying hello to ourselves. [p. 198]

## **Perfection**

The Orthodox faithful are taught that they can achieve perfection, and that is a patently offensive idea to the average Western mind. But the offense goes back to the difference between "state of being" and "relationship" that we began with so many pages ago. From the "state of being" perspective, once I have achieved perfection I will remain perfect. Sanctification, in this perspective, is like a stair-step and perfection is the plateau, the goal. The idea that we could achieve this plateau, this ultimate state of being, in this life is unthinkable.

And rightly so.

Such a perception inserts the divine attribute of unchangeableness into the scriptural call to perfection; it assumes that the divine attribute of unchangeableness is a necessary part of perfection. It is a subtle idolatry to think that we can become unchangeably perfect, and thus achieve God's very essence.

Perfection, in the Orthodox view, grows out of our relationship rather than our state of being. We are called to be perfectly in relationship with God so that God's righteousness may perfectly flow into our perfectly emptied being, perfectly transforming us into that which God intended us to be. And on certain days, the spiritual athlete will enter into such a relationship and it will change him forever.

St. Silouan the Athonite had just such an experience as a relatively young man. He met Jesus Christ in a manner profound beyond words. At that moment his perfect emptiness, his purity of heart, allowed God's perfect love flow into him and he saw God. Following the event he slowly fell into despair. His despair grew out of the same false impression that Annie Dillard had when she first saw her muskrat: "It was a once-in-a-lifetime thing, and you've had your once." But slowly Silouan returned to his disciplines, his "work," the task of losing self, and on occasions he again was given the gift of perfection and sublime vision of seeing God.

One might think Silouan lucky to be given such a grand gift. He himself saw it rather differently, closer to curse than blessing. Once you have witnessed the unsurpassable beauty of God, the world remains dull and flat. Once you have been momentarily given the fullness of the joy of the kingdom, the world becomes a place of sorrow and longing. Once you have been given the gift of purity of heart and have seen God, every other day of fellowship is experienced as Divine absence. Even God's blessed gifts are experienced as a sort of Divine denial because they are not experienced in their fullness.

But that sounds too harsh. For the denial leads to longing, which leads to an inexpressible joy in the knowledge of the beatific nature of God's goodness and the hope that you will participate in it eternally. And it leads to even greater effort and desire to serve this good God and the good creation which he graciously gave us.

But Annie Dillard says it far better than I can.

Moses said to God, "I beseech thee, shew me thy glory." And God said, "Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live." But he added, "There is a place by me, and thou shalt stand upon a rock: and it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a clift of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by: And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: But my face shall not be seen." So Moses went up on Mount Sinai, waited still in a clift of the rock, and saw the back parts of God. Forty years

later he went up on Mount Pisgah, and saw the promised land across the Jordan, which he was to die without ever being permitted to enter.

Just a glimpse, Moses: a clift in the rock here, a mountaintop there, and the rest is denial and longing. You have to stalk everything. Everything scatters and gathers; everything comes and goes like fish under a bridge. You have to stalk the spirit, too. You can wait forgetful anywhere, for anywhere is the way of his fleet passage, and hope to catch him by the tail and shout something in his ear before he wrests away. Or you can pursue him wherever you dare, risking the shrunken sinew in the hollow of the thigh; you can bang at the door all night till the innkeeper relents, if he ever relents; and you can wail till you're hoarse or worse the cry for incarnation always in John Knoepfle's poem: "and christ is red rover . . . and the children are calling/come over come over." I sit on a bridge as on Pisgah or Sinai, and I am both waiting becalmed in a clift of the rock and banging with all my will, calling like a child beating on a door: Come on out! . . . I know you're there.

And occasionally the mountains part. The tree with the lights in it appears, the mockingbird falls, and time unfurls across space like an oriflamme. Now we rejoice. The news, after all, is not that muskrats are wary, but that they can be seen. [pp 204f]

[The falling of the mockingbird refers to another remarkable story she tells earlier in the book, which I will not recount here.]

And this is the "great effort" of the Orthodox manner of salvation. We can easily reduce it to little things: Doing good works, saying good prayers, thinking good thoughts, living a good life. But such little things diminish salvation unspeakably. We can also easily turn it into a story about me, *my* efforts, *my* prayer, *my* thoughts, *my* life. But only when I am truly absent and God's grace and presence truly becomes everything, do I glimpse who I truly am. And I recognize that who I truly am is purely gift, purely grace, and because it comes from God himself, purely glory.

This "great effort" to which we are called is *great*. It is a big thing. It is a hard thing, and sadly, precisely because it is hard, and precisely because we are prone to sloth, we settle for little graces which God leaves about like grandma's candy plate, which we can pick up and pop in our mouth as we pass her reading chair, her kitchen counter, her table by the entry door. We confuse these *little* graces freely offered with God's *great* sacrament of love. And we are poorer for it.

Thomas Merton wrote, "There is always a temptation to diddle around in the contemplative life, making itsy-bitsy statues." There is always an enormous temptation in all of life to diddle around making itsy-bitsy friends and meals and journeys for itsy-bitsy years on end. It is so self-conscious, so apparently moral, simply to step aside from the gaps where the creeks and winds pour down, saying, I never merited this grace quite rightly, and then to sulk along the rest of your days on the edge of rage. I

won't have it. The world is wilder than that in all directions, more dangerous and bitter, more extravagant and bright. We are making hay when we should be making whoopee; we are raising tomatoes when we should be raising Cain, or Lazarus.

Ezekiel excoriates false prophets as those who have "not gone up into the gaps." The gaps are the thing. The gaps are the spirit's one home, the altitudes and latitudes so dazzlingly spare and clean that the spirit can discover itself for the first time like a once-blind man unbound. The gaps are the cliffs in the rock where you cower to see the back parts of God; they are the fissures between mountains and cells the wind lances through, the icy narrowing fiords splitting the cliffs of mystery. Go up into the gaps. If you can find them; they shift and vanish too. Stalk the gaps. Squeak into a gap in the soil, turn, and unlock—more than a maple—a universe. This is how you spend this afternoon, and tomorrow morning, and tomorrow afternoon. *Spend* the afternoon. You can't take it with you. [pp 268f]

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Annie Dillard. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Harper's Magazine Press (Published in Association with Harper & Row, New York). 1974.

Ideas for this essay were also generated by Robert C. Koons, "A Lutheran's Case for Roman Catholicism," found at [http://www.utexas.edu/cola/depts/philosophy/faculty/koons/case\\_for\\_catholicism.pdf](http://www.utexas.edu/cola/depts/philosophy/faculty/koons/case_for_catholicism.pdf)

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