



THE SANCTUARY
BETWEEN US

A Retreat for Women's Christmas

JAN RICHARDSON

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ABOUT THE LIGHT
A Blessing for Women's Christmas

As of yet
I cannot say
which I love best
about the light:

that it gathers itself
even in what goes hidden,
no stranger to
the seed, the stone,
the labyrinth of night,

or that it is wildly
generous in where
it lands, glad the same
to touch the face of
the one in laughter,
the one in tears,
the one in trouble,
in fear, in pain.

But it may yet be
that this is what
woos me most
about the light:

that it knows
what to do with distance,
how it arcs
across the space
between a heart
and a heart,
illuminating that ache
through which
the farthest of stars
might be seen.

Introduction

There is a custom, rooted in Ireland, of celebrating Epiphany (January 6, which brings the Christmas season to a close) as Women's Christmas. Called *Nollaig na mBan* in Irish, Women's Christmas originated as a day when the women, who often carried the domestic responsibilities all year, took Epiphany as an occasion to celebrate together at the end of the holidays, leaving hearth and home to the men for a few hours. Celebrated particularly in County Cork and County Kerry, the tradition is enjoying a revival.

Whether your domestic commitments are many or few, Women's Christmas offers a timely opportunity to pause and step back from whatever has kept you busy and hurried in the past weeks or months. As the Christmas season ends, this is an occasion both to celebrate with friends and also to spend time in reflection before diving into what this new year will hold.

The Women's Christmas Retreat is offered in that spirit. Within these pages is an invitation to rest, to reflect, and to contemplate where you are in your unfolding path. Mindful of those who traveled to welcome the Christ child and who returned home by another way, we will turn our attention toward questions about our own journey.

WISE WOMEN ALSO CAME

Years ago, when I was first starting to discover the artist layer of my soul, I sat down to create a collage to use as a greeting card for Epiphany. I found myself imagining who else might have made the journey to welcome Jesus. A trio of women began to take shape, carrying their treasures to offer the child. I named the piece *Wise Women Also Came*.

Years have passed since those wise women showed up in my life. My style as an artist has changed greatly, and the journey has taken me across much terrain—some that I had dreamed of, some that I never could have anticipated even in dreams. This image of the wise women continues to travel with me, posing questions that linger with me still.

Over this past year, many of the wise women's questions have had to do with how we connect across the distances that have confronted us—those caused by the pandemic as well as other divisions and fractures, none of them particularly new but now brought into the light and made more visible. As I think about what God might be inviting us to do with the distances between us, the word that most often comes to mind is *sanctuary*, in its constellation of meanings, all of which have to do with sacred space that provides shelter, communion, and transformation.

I am curious about sanctuary as a space we hold together: where conversation and connection happen, where the grace of hospitality is given and received, and where we find a blessing that enables us to continue to engage the world, to keep turning toward it even when the distances between us seem vast.

This year's Women's Christmas Retreat—our tenth!—invites you to ponder the ways that sanctuary happens. With reflections and images from some of my experiences of the spaces we hold with each other, the pages of this retreat invite you to pray, to imagine, to rest, and to dream as you contemplate how sanctuary takes place in your life, and how it calls you deeper into the life of the world.

NAVIGATING THE PATH

There are many ways to work with these readings. You can set aside a day—on or near Women’s Christmas, or another time that suits you. You can spread out the reflections over several days or weeks. You might share the retreat with others—a friend, a family member, a small group—and use it as a way to connect in this time, perhaps selecting just one or two of the readings as a starting place for conversation together.

As you move through these pages, you will likely find that different readings invite different kinds of responses. For one reading, you might feel drawn simply to sit in silence or go for a walk as you engage the questions. With another reading, you might want to respond with words of your own: a journal entry, a poem, a prose piece, a letter, a prayer. A reading could inspire a collage. Or a drawing or painting or sculpture.

With each reflection, as you contemplate the words and the questions—including your own questions that these pages might prompt—I invite you to consider what helps you put the pieces of your life together: the experiences you carry, the scraps of your story, the fragments that seem jagged and painful as well as those that you think of as beautiful. What response—in words, in images, in prayer, in movement, in stillness, in conversation, in solitude—helps you recognize and honor the pieces and put them together in a new way, making your path as you go?

BLESSING OF COMFORT, BLESSING OF CHALLENGE

I pray that in these pages, you will find a space of comfort as well as a space of challenge. If you have arrived at this point in your path feeling weary and depleted, I hope that you will find something here that provides comfort and rest. At the same time, I pray that you will find something that stretches you into new terrain, that invites you to think or move or pray in a direction that will draw you into uncharted territory in your soul, and there find the God who ever waits to meet us in those spaces that lie beyond what is familiar, comfortable, and habitual for us.

In the Gospel of Luke, we read that on the night of Jesus’ birth, shepherds arrive at the manger with a story of angels who brought them astounding tidings of a Savior’s birth. Luke tells us that all who hear the tale of the shepherds are amazed. *But Mary*, Luke writes—Mary, who well knows about the crossing of distances and the making of sanctuary—*treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart* (Luke 2:19).

As you engage this retreat, may you enter into a space where you can gather up the words, the stories, the fragments and pieces, the gifts and challenges of the past year. May you ponder them in your heart, and there find treasure to sustain you and illuminate your path. May you have comfort and challenge in good measure, and may you be accompanied by many graces. Know that I hold you in prayer and wish you blessings on your way. Merry Women’s Christmas!



The Sanctuary Between Us

THE SANCTUARY BETWEEN US

*In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town
in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah
and greeted Elizabeth.*

—Luke 1:39–40

The archangel Gabriel has extended his astounding invitation. Mary has given her astonishing *yes*. Now she is alone—suddenly, entirely, dangerously alone—save for the unlikely child she now carries.

She flees: toward her kinswoman, toward refuge, toward sanctuary.

In the home of Elizabeth, in the company of her cousin who is herself pregnant in most unusual circumstances, Mary finds what she most needs. Elizabeth gathers and enfolds her. Welcomes her. Blesses her.

In response to Elizabeth's blessing, Mary sings. And how she sings! She sings of a God who brings down the powerful, who lifts up the lowly, who fills the hungry with good things. Strangely, wonderfully, Mary sings of a God who not only *will do* these things, but who *has done* these things. She sings as if God has already accomplished the redemption and restoration of the world.

This is what a blessing has the power to do. The blessing that Elizabeth speaks and enacts through her words, her welcome, her gift of sanctuary: such a blessing has the power to help us, like Mary, speak the word we most need to offer. Such a blessing gives us a glimpse of the redemption that God, in God's strange sense of time, has somehow already accomplished. Such a blessing stirs up in us the strength to participate with God in bringing about this redemption in this time, in this world.

Where will we go, like Mary, to find and receive such a blessing? How will we open our heart, like Elizabeth, to offer it?

A BLESSING CALLED SANCTUARY

You hardly knew
how hungry you were
to be gathered in,
to receive the welcome
that invited you to enter
entirely—
nothing of you
found foreign or strange,
nothing of your life
that you were asked
to leave behind
or to carry in silence
or in shame.

Tentative steps
became settling in,
leaning into the blessing

that enfolded you,
taking your place
in the circle
that stunned you
with its unimagined grace.

You began to breathe again,
to move without fear,
to speak with abandon
the words you carried
in your bones,
that echoed in your being.

You learned to sing.

But the deal with this blessing
is that it will not leave you alone,
will not let you linger
in safety,
in stasis.

The time will come
when this blessing
will ask you to leave,
not because it has tired of you
but because it desires for you
to become the sanctuary
that you have found—
to speak your word
into the world,
to tell what you have heard
with your own ears,
seen with your own eyes,
known in your own heart:

that you are beloved,
precious child of God,
beautiful to behold,*
and you are welcome
and more than welcome
here.

**Thanks to the Rev. Janet Wolf and Hobson United Methodist Church in Nashville, Tennessee, for the story in which these words—"beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold"—were offered to help transform the life of a member of their community. The story appears in The Upper Room Disciplines 1999 (Nashville: The Upper Room).*



The Welcome Table

THE WELCOME TABLE

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me.”

—Matthew 10:40

In a beautiful town on the southwest coast of Ireland, there is a magical restaurant. My sister and I discovered it last summer. It is a wondrous combination of coziness, loveliness, deliciousness, and friendliness. I couldn't help but fall in love.

After our sister time, I remained in Ireland for two more weeks to work on the blessings for *The Cure for Sorrow*. The restaurant became a regular spot for me. During that solitary time of working on these grief-borne blessings, it was an extraordinary gift to know I had a place I could go—a place where they called me by name, welcomed me to the table, talked with me, fed me in belly and soul.

I had left for Ireland feeling like a stranger in my own skin, so altered by the loss that was compelling me to make a new life. That new life is still in the making, but when I left Ireland, still enfolded in the welcome I found there, I felt less like a stranger to myself. When I returned to that coastal town this summer and walked into that restaurant once again, I heard a voice say, *Jan! You're back!*

My experiences in Ireland gave me a new glimpse of the power of welcome, of what can happen when someone gathers us in and invites us to be at home when we are not at home, or have had to leave our home, or do not know where home is.

This blessing was inspired by that enchanted restaurant. May we know—and create—places of welcome that help us become something other than strangers to one another and to ourselves. May we learn how to make one another at home in this world.

WELCOMING BLESSING

When you are lost
in your own life.

When the landscape
you have known
falls away.

When your familiar path
becomes foreign
and you find yourself
a stranger
in the story you had held
most dear.

Then let yourself
be lost.
Let yourself leave
for a place
whose contours

you do not already know,
whose cadences
you have not learned
by heart.
Let yourself land
on a threshold
that mirrors the mystery
of your own
bewildered soul.

It will come
as a surprise,
what arrives
to welcome you
through the door,
making a place for you
at the table
and calling you
by your name.

Let what comes,
come.

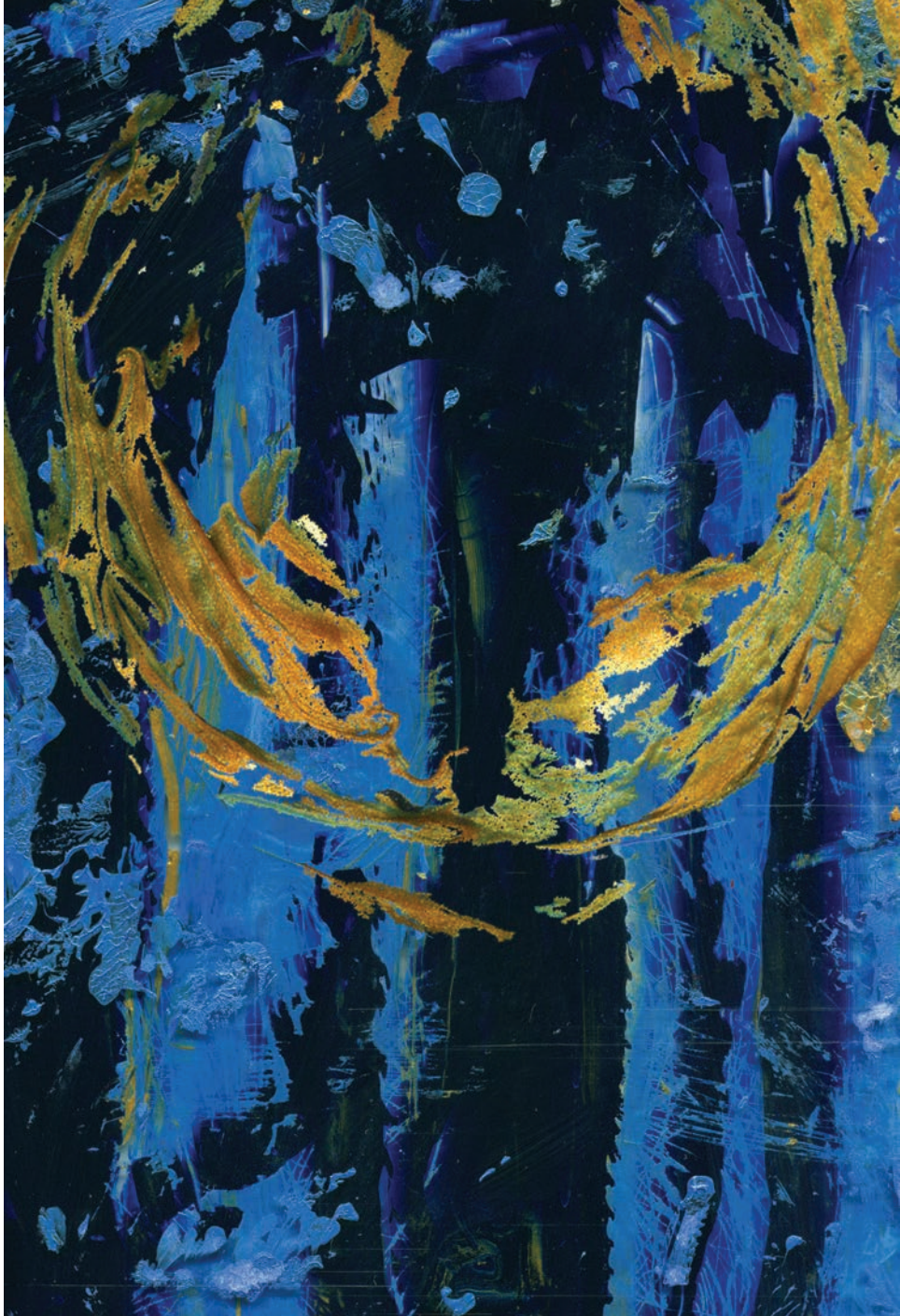
Let the glass
be filled.
Let the light
be tended.
Let the hands
lay before you
what will meet you
in your hunger.

Let the laughter.
Let the sweetness
that enters
the sorrow.
Let the solace
that comes
as sustenance
and sudden, unbidden
grace.

For what comes,
offer gladness.
For what greets you

with kindly welcome,
offer thanks.
Offer blessing
for those
who gathered you in
and will not
be forgotten—

those who,
when you were
a stranger,
made a place for you
at the table
and called you
by your name.



Kinfolk

FINDING MY TRIBE

As I write this, I am sitting on the porch of a house overlooking a river in Washington State. I have spent much of the day in this spot, writing, drinking tea, visiting with the cat who is the true owner of this porch, and surfacing for meals with the other people who have found their way to this piece of holy ground.

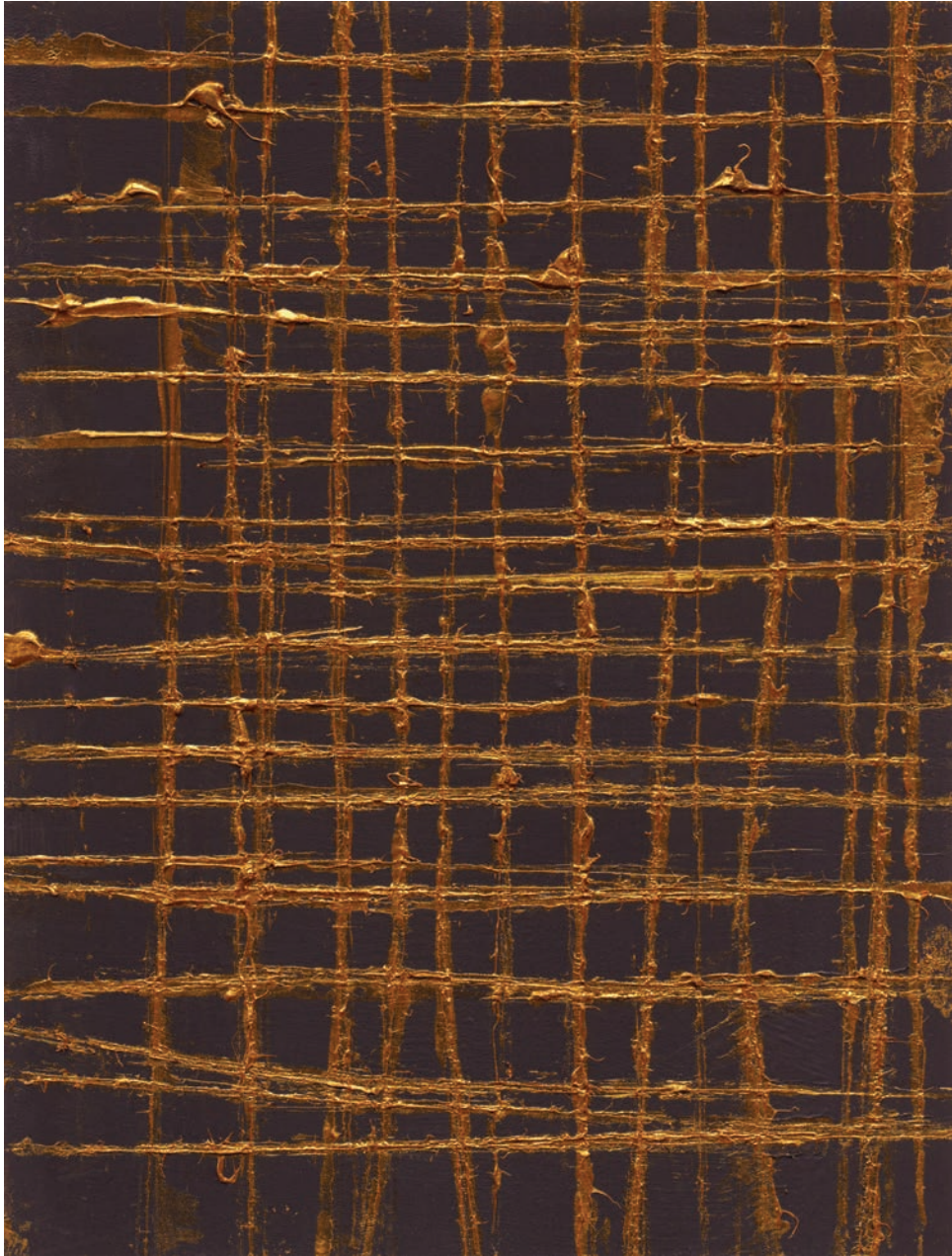
This sacred place is a remarkable retreat center called the Grünewald Guild. Nestled among the Cascade Mountains, the Guild was founded by Richard and Liz Caemmerer thirty years ago as a retreat center devoted to exploring and celebrating the connections between art and faith. For ten weeks each summer, as well as at other times of the year, the Guild offers classes in a wondrous variety of media including stained glass, ceramics, fiber arts, painting, and printmaking. What especially compels me about the Guild is that our creative work takes place in a rhythm of community life, with morning and evening prayer, shared meals, informal gatherings, and many conversations in the in-between places.

As I live out a ministry that requires much explaining about what I do, and how, and why, the Guild offers me the experience of being in my element. In this place I find my tribe. Among this diverse gathering of people from around the continent and beyond, I encounter kinship, a shared language, a camaraderie that is much more difficult to find in my daily life. Although this kind of community is elusive the rest of the year, what I find here at the Guild helps to fuel my creative work at home. The Guild reminds me how crucial it is to seek allies on the creative path. It pushes me to ponder how to find and create an artful community in the place where I live, as daunting as this sometimes seems.

Where do you find people who sustain you on your path? Where do you meet the kinfolk who nourish your spirit and your creative work and whom you can support in turn?

BLESSING

That we who need each other
will find one another.
That we may follow the lines
that will lead us
to the kindred of our souls.
That our tribe will grow
and prosper
and be a blessing.
That we may be the beauty
in which we long to dwell.



Joy Is What We Make Together

A COMPLICATED JOY

Every occasion of joy I can think of is linked to an experience of connection. If I were to make a map of my joys, to trace a path of the points where it has entered my life, every X on that map would mark a location where some kind of relationship has been at work—where I have connected with another person or with a place, or where I have been visited with the understanding that I belonged to something larger than myself, and I knew in my bones that I was not alone.

Joy loves company. It depends on relationships, on connections, on becoming larger than itself. It is full of doors that have the power to open when we least expect and to draw us where we did not imagine to go.

Even as joy thrives on connection, it can sometimes seem fragile or fleeting when our sense of connection falters. We know the things that can chip away at what holds us together, how joy can become more difficult to find amid all the ways that pain manifests in the world and in our own lives.

Joy can get complicated. Our lives grow convoluted. So often, when joy comes to us, it is accompanied by other emotions that seem to be in conflict but somehow enter our lives all mixed together: *joy and sorrow and gratitude and grief and...*

Yet when I think about joy being complicated, I am not thinking only about how it frequently has to make its way to us in the midst of other emotions. *A complicated joy* has to do with an older sense of what *complicate* means. *Complicate* has its roots in Latin words that mean *to fold together*, as when a recipe calls for an ingredient to be incorporated into the mix: an intentional introduction of a substance that is brought into concert with everything else in the bowl. The word refers to more than simply combining things; it gets at how they become intertwined and entangled.

When it comes to joy being complicated, it's not just that it is so much of a piece with sorrow and other emotions, so bound together that they cannot be separated again. It's that *we* are bound together, linked together, folded together so inextricably that we are forever altered. *A complicated joy* means that joy is born of those connections. It means that our joy is not isolated from that of others. It means we hold joy for one another when it is hard to hold it for ourselves.

This kind of joy recognizes the realities of the world; it does not come from naiveté or from ignoring what makes this life hard. We see this with wondrous clarity in the stories that accompany us in the seasons of Advent and Christmas. When Elizabeth calls out in welcome to Mary, and the child she is carrying leaps with joy; when Mary raises her voice in the Magnificat; when Zechariah sings his canticle; when Mary and Joseph bring the infant Jesus to the temple, and the prophets Anna and Simeon cry out in recognition and delight—in every case, these people are not unmindful of the state of the world. Each one gives the impression that the joy that courses through them, that radiates from them, is a habit and a practice; that it's something to which they have routinely made themselves available, not by resisting the world but by entering more deeply into it, so that they can welcome the God who shows up in the midst of it.

The joy that animates the characters of Advent and Christmas is something distinctly other than a personal joy they have hoarded in their own private reserve. This is the joy that infuses creation. They have developed a capacity to tap into it, to let it enter them, to tangle itself up with them. They have allowed it to complicate things in the way that matters most. They know that joy is what becomes possible when we turn toward one another; that it is a blessing we make together.

When joy is difficult to find, are there people or places that help? If you were to make a map of your joys, what locations would you mark with an X? What do you notice as you remember those spaces of refuge?

BLESSING TO SUMMON REJOICING

When your weeping
has watered
the earth.

When the storm
has been long
and the night
and the season
of your sorrowing.

When you have seemed
an exile
from your life,
lost in the far country,
a long way from where
your comfort lies.

When the sound
of splintering
and fracture
haunts you.

When despair
attends you.

When lack.
When trouble.
When fear.
When pain.

When empty.
When lonely.
When too much
of what depletes you
and not enough
of what restores
and rests you.

Then let there be
rejoicing.

Then let there be
dreaming.

Let there be
laughter in your mouth
and on your tongue
shouts of joy.

Let the seeds
soaked by tears
turn to grain,
to bread,
to feasting.

Let there be
coming home.



No Between

THE DISTANCE BETWEEN US

for Gary

The dreams last night helped also because even as I've been writing in these pages while I've been in Ireland, I have been feeling the weight, the expanse, of the distance between us. Having a hard time sometimes sensing you near and sometimes wondering if I'm merely talking to myself in these pages. I think of a conversation I had with Christianne a good while ago, when I was feeling that distance on another occasion. I told her I hoped the sensation was because there's nothing between you and me that happens at the surface anymore. Not that anything ever happened at a surface level between us; that was true right from the start. You have gone deeper and deeper into my bones, and that's where the conversation happens between us, at those levels that are deep and where movement can seem so subtle.

So it came as a gift to glimpse you in the dreaming last night, to waltz with you and to be somewhere you were performing. Just to see your face and feel some normalcy between us, when nothing is normal. I pray I'm not dreaming this up, that the reason—or one of the reasons—you sometimes feel so distant is because the conversation, that mysterious exchange between us that the word *conversation* doesn't begin to capture because it's only partly about words, happens so far beneath the surface.

That was part of my anguish a couple nights ago. Having such a hard time hearing. Not knowing how I should be listening. Remembering how I sensed you, early on, wanting me to know, *You don't have to work at it—to hear me*. Not always knowing how to relax into that conversation. And not always knowing how to have the conversation while also listening for my life, how it wants to unfold here, in this place where you are not, where you are no longer in the flesh. But sensing also that listening for my life and listening for you are not two different things, as I sometimes feared early on. They are part of the same movement. One that requires a sort of yoga that is difficult and beautiful.

In the body of Christ and in the heart of God, death does not release us from being in relationship with each other, though the distance can feel vast and painful. Across time, who continues to inspire you to enter into this life more deeply because of the sanctuary you found with them?

SPARROW SAYS

Who told you
this would be
so final,
so complete?

Be at peace.
It will not be
so endless
as that.

Feels like a wall,
yes.
Feels like a door
never stops closing,
yes.

But listen.
We have ways
and ways.

INTERLUDE

Wise Women Also Came

Wise women also came.
The fire burned
in their wombs
long before they saw
the flaming star
in the sky.
They walked in shadows,
trusting the path
would open
under the light of the moon.

Wise women also came,
seeking no directions,
no permission
from any king.
They came
by their own authority,
their own desire,
their own longing.
They came in quiet,
spreading no rumors,
sparking no fears
to lead
to innocents' slaughter,
to their sister Rachel's
inconsolable lamentations.

Wise women also came,
and they brought
useful gifts:
water for labor's washing,
fire for warm illumination,
a blanket for swaddling.

Wise women also came,
at least three of them,
holding Mary in the labor,
crying out with her
in the birth pangs,
breathing ancient blessings
into her ear.

Wise women also came,
and they went,
as wise women always do,
home a different way.



The Longing

MAPS

I love maps. I don't always read them incredibly well, mind you. Just last night I spent a great deal of time traveling the unfamiliar streets of Nashville because I was feeling more game for adventure than for dealing with the map. But I like to look at maps, especially the really old ones. The ones made by people who understood map-making as an art. The ones made before all the corners of the earth had been charted, and adventurous souls approaching the boundaries of the known world were warned by the cartographer's hand, "Beyond here be dragons."

I like maps for their notion of order, for their presupposition that the lines, directions, and paths they offer will show us the way if properly read. It is a heartening thought that if we study a piece of paper long enough, it will show us the way to our destination. Most of us these days live, I think, with a sense that we've wandered beyond the known world, that we're making the path as we go, with the breath of dragons hot on our necks.

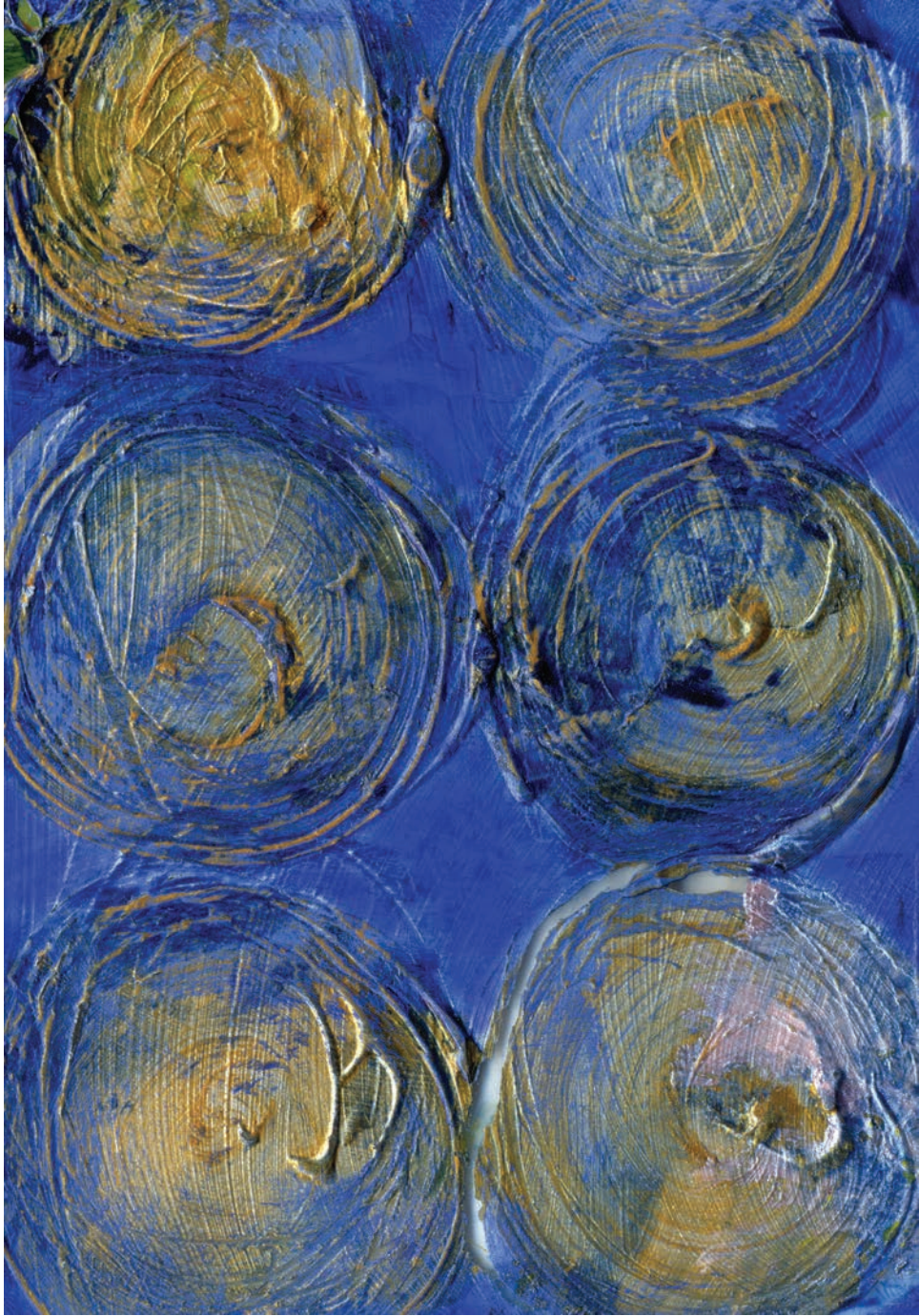
I also think, though, that we come into the world with a scrap, a shred of some cosmic map in our grasp. It's lined onto the palms of our hands that emerged with us, fisted, from our mother's ocean. There are days when I believe that if we touch enough hands, place them side by side, we'll finally see the map. Across the landscape of our palms, across the terrain of our hands that come in different sizes and colors and have wrinkles or scars and are smooth or leathery with work and are missing fingers or are twisted with illness, across their flesh lie the lines that if we look closely enough are connected and will tell us which way to go.

As you think about sanctuary, about spaces of welcome, whose hands do you see? Whose gestures of grace have shown you the presence of God and have helped make both a refuge and a way for you? How do you dream of doing this for others?

BLESSING

At the edges of our borders
you wait,
and at our territorial lines
you linger,
because the place where
we touch
beyond our boundaries
is where you take
your delight.

And when we learn to read
the landscape of our fears,
and when we come to know
the terrain of every sorrow,
then will we turn
our fences into bridges
and our borders
into paths of peace.



Remembering Is What We Do Together

REMEMBERING IS WHAT WE DO TOGETHER

*Remember these things, O Jacob, and Israel,
for you are my servant;
I formed you, you are my servant;
O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me.
—Isaiah 44:21*

I once met a woman who works with a group of people whose memories have been damaged. Living with Alzheimer's disease, traumatic brain injuries, or other conditions that have eroded their ability to remember, the group gathers together to help each other navigate a once-familiar path now made foreign and often fearsome by the gaps and fissures in their memories.

I was fascinated to hear this woman talk about the group and the tools she invites them to use in their work together. Art, photographs, writing, conversation: each word and each image becomes a tangible piece of their life they can hold and share with one another and with those beyond the group. These pieces cannot fill all the holes or mend every gap in the individual memories of the group members. But together, the work of the group helps make a larger kind of memory possible.

Ever since that conversation, I have found myself wondering, *Who are we, if we cannot remember? Where does our memory live, if we cannot recall it on our own? How might our memory become something larger than ourselves, something that we hold with one another?*

In the body of Christ, we are called to remember together. One of the places we see this call most clearly is in the sacrament of Communion or Eucharist, when we gather at the table and live out the words that Christ spoke to his friends at their final meal before his death: *Do this in remembrance of me* (Luke 22:19). At this table of memory, we stand in the thin place where our history and our hope meet in the present. We remember backward, recalling what Christ has done for us; we remember forward, leaning into Christ's longing for what will yet be, and we open ourselves to the *now* of Christ with us as he offers the sustenance we need for the work of re-membering his broken body in this world.

Gathered at the table and sent into the world, we know ourselves held in the larger story that has been unfolding for millennia. As the people of Christ, this is our body memory. *Anamnesis* is the Greek word for it. It means we remember—at the table and beyond it. It means we work against forgetting. It means that when we do forget, we are part of a body, a community, that remembers for us. It means we belong to a God who remembers us always.

How do you experience—or desire to experience—remembering in community? Who are the people who hold your memories with you? Are there ways you experience memory as a sacrament, a space where you know the presence and grace of God at work in your life? For whom might you be (or become) a sanctuary of memory as you help them hold their stories and their lives?

BLESSING OF MEMORY

You were born
remembering this blessing.

It has never
not been with you,
weaving itself daily
through the threads of
each story, each dream,
each word you spoke
or received,
everything you hoped,
each person you loved,
all that you lost
with astonishing sorrow,
all that you welcomed
with unimagined joy.

I tell you,
you bear this blessing
in your bones.

But if the day should come
when you can no longer
bring this blessing
to mind,
we will hold it
for you.
We will remember it
for you.

And when
the time comes,
we will breathe
this blessing to you
at the last
as you are gathered
into the place
where all that
has been lost
finds its way back
to you,
where all memory
returns to you,
where you know yourself
unforgotten
and entirely welcomed
home.



Grace in the Gaps

GRACE IN THE GAPS

for Gary

I am thinking about the gaps—the gaps in our story that were caused by your death; the gaps (huge, gigantic, aching gaps) in my life as I live without having you here, in the flesh; the gaps in my own telling of the story—my story, our story—in these pages. I don't want to dwell overmuch on what I haven't been able to do in these crushing years and what I haven't been able or willing to write in these pages, this space.

Thinking of how often, when it came to writing here, I have been saddened into silence. Grieved into silence. Wearied into silence. Depressed into silence.

But thinking also of how my silence here has sometimes been because so much was stirring—connections being made, illumination suddenly showing forth—and I could hardly begin to capture it here, on the page. I hope something of this made its way into my artwork, especially over the past year—the stitching, stitching, stitching I have done, looking for the threads and trying to make a way.

Sitting down at my (our?) writing table when I arrived a few minutes ago, gathering myself as I entered this space in Ireland that has gathered me in, I found myself thinking of John O'Donohue, where he writes about there being a place where our un-lived lives gather. I have found this enormously comforting as I think about pathways that closed themselves to me, to us, as not meant for this life. Is there a place where we get to live some of those lives?

I wonder if—I hope—there is also a place where my unwritten pages gather. The pages I was too sad or tired to write or where I was inexplicably visited with wonders that seemed too rich to try to capture in words. Is there a place where those pages have gathered themselves, or where you have gathered them? Is there a place where you have been able to write some of that for me, or a place you are keeping until I arrive and can write those pages down?

The room where the books begin, perhaps.

In thinking about the gaps in these pages, I have sometimes thought about the ancient Irish book-shrines, the exquisite containers worked in metal that held a book, usually a manuscript of the gospels. A book-shrine would have been kept on an altar. There are some that, once the book was enclosed, were never intended to be opened again. Viewing the book was not the point. It was enough to know that it was there, sacred and holy. That the power of the pages did not lie in being seen. That the story they contained did not depend on being read. That the story imbued the space, the people, with its presence. Took flesh in them.

It seems counterintuitive that something of such beauty should be hidden away. Greedy, somehow. And yet there is something powerful about it, something comforting. That looking, seeing, understanding is not always the purpose. That our story, the sacred text of our lives, gathers itself nonetheless—the terrible pages, the beautiful pages, the pages marked by pain and loss, the pages limned with wonder and unexpected joy—and there is something of this that is necessarily secret and hidden away, sometimes even from ourselves.

But I wonder if there are pages you can perceive—pages of your life, of mine—that were unreadable and unknowable in this life. If you have been able to get a glimpse into the pages that gathered themselves—those un-lived or unwritten pages. I wonder what you are writing now in the place where you are and whether you have mediums and dimensions at hand for creating things I can scarcely imagine from here. And I wonder what you see of my life. I think of your remarkable gift for knowing

me—I see you, you told me—and how adept you were at seeing what was stirring in my life and in my work, sometimes before it made itself known to me.

You were part of how my life made itself known to me.

And now, in the physical absence of you, so much of that knowing happens in secrecy, in silence. In the gaps. There are ways, in these past months, I have become intentional about moving with the silence and hiddenness. I think again of David Whyte and what he says about hiddenness. I have chosen to be less visible, less exposed—to secret myself away in the studio, for example, where I am exploring without agenda or deadlines, needing to see what happens there when I allow that room, that space, that time. To let what happens there be secret for now. Even, sometimes, from myself, as I stitch and paint without knowing just where it is leading me.

Praying there is something holy in that hiddenness. A shrine. Something that holds a story whose power, beauty, and grace are not lessened by not being visible.

Every sanctuary holds a space for mystery, for what cannot be fully known. Sometimes these gaps seem like fractures or voids that can be painful, yet there is also solace to be found as we come to know that the God of love and mystery is at work on our behalf, even when we cannot entirely perceive it. In the sanctuary of your life, where do you experience this mystery, this gap? How might this be a place of prayer and of rest?

SECRET BLESSING

This is the blessing
no one can write
for you.

This is the blessing
you will find
for yourself—

tucked into
the crack
in the wall,

scribbled in
the gap
between worlds,

sheltered beneath
the outstretched
wing,

inscribed within
the tender
wound.

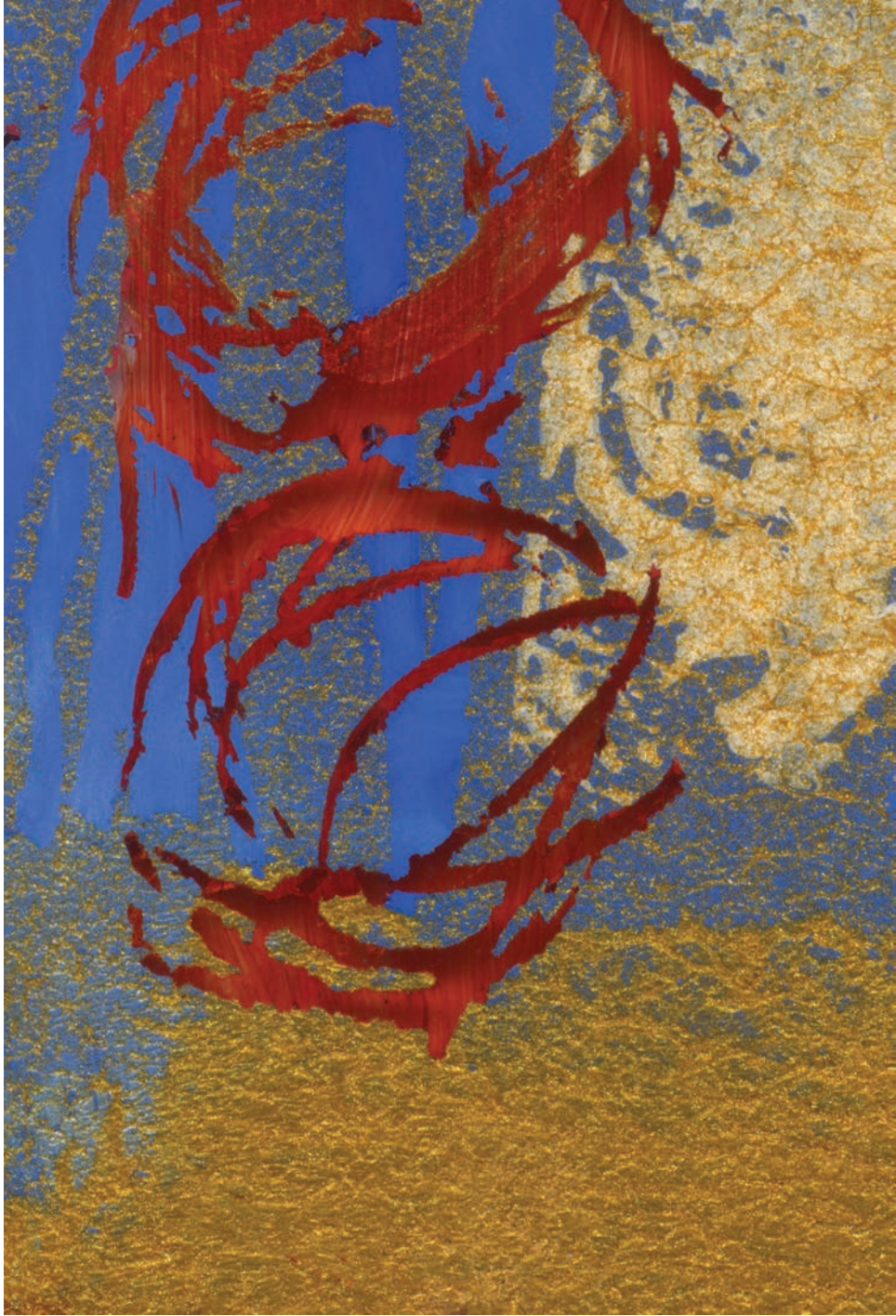
Secret blessing,
solace blessing,
soothing blessing,
shadowed blessing.

Blessing that steals
into the clench
of your first.

Blessing that blooms
in your opening
hand.

Blessing that lights
the beckoning
path.

Blessing that sings
your new name
to you.



Holy Even in Pain

HOLY EVEN IN PAIN

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

—Psalm 139:14

*Do you not know that you are God's temple and
that God's Spirit dwells in you?*

—1 Corinthians 3:16

We hold a mystifying tension.

Our bodies are wondrous, resilient, more intricate than we can fathom, strong beyond imagining.

Our bodies are fragile, vulnerable, astonishingly permeable to pain.

There is no explanation equal to the presence of pain in our lives, nothing that will excuse it, make sense of it, or reduce it to something whose purpose we can understand. Even if there were, it is likely the explanation would provide little comfort or satisfaction. When I was in high school and in the hospital again because one of my lungs persisted in collapsing—the cure for which was having tetracycline poured through a tube into my chest cavity so that the acid would form scar tissue on my lung—no theological construct could have eased or explained away that searing pain. What did help was having people by my bed—my mother on one side, a nurse on the other—who stayed with me through the procedure, letting me grip their hands (with no small force) until the pain began to recede.

And this, of course, is one of the primary gifts that can come in pain: that though pain tends to propel us inward, it can also, if we let it, draw us out toward connection. This connection does not resolve the pain, it does not justify it, but when our vulnerability makes itself known to us with piercing particularity, it comes as a grace and a balm to reach out our hands and find that we are met, and that sanctuary can happen between us even there. Especially there.

In the presence of pain, there is a door. The door does not depend on whether we are cured, or on what length of time the pain lives with us. The door comes in the form of choices about where we will allow God to lead us in our brokenness, and how we will let the brokenness open us to one another and to new terrain in our lives. In time, we become the door, discerning where and how and to whom we will open in both our vulnerability and our resilience, those twin gifts that, as we go along, become increasingly indistinguishable.

Compassion is one word for this opening that can happen in our brokenness. Compassion is not the point or purpose of pain, but, if we are receptive, it can become one of pain's enduring gifts. Compassion is the ability to perceive the presence of the sacred that shimmers through each of us even—and sometimes especially—at the point of our greatest fragility. It means looking at one another in our brokenness and being able to say, in wonder, *holy still*.

Have you had an experience of brokenness or pain that drew you toward connection and became a place of meeting? What did you find there; what did you carry with you from there?

BLESSING THE BODY

This blessing takes
one look at you
and all it can say is
holy.

Holy hands.
Holy face.
Holy feet.
Holy everything
in between.

Holy even in pain.
Holy even when weary.
In brokenness, holy.
In shame, holy still.

Holy in delight.
Holy in distress.
Holy when being born.
Holy when we lay it down
at the hour of our death.

So, friend,
open your eyes
(holy eyes).
For one moment
see what this blessing sees,
this blessing that knows
how you have been formed
and knit together
in wonder and
in love.

Welcome this blessing
that folds its hands
in prayer
when it meets you;
receive this blessing
that wants to kneel
in reverence
before you:
you who are
temple,
sanctuary,
home for God
in this world.



In Reverence

MEDICINE WOMAN

All during the dark year you kept the vigil light burning. When I lost track of the turning of seasons, you reminded me of the passage of time and that all had not remained idle beneath the terrain of my life. You might as well have been in another country for all the distance between our two coasts. But some things I held close, like memories of tables once shared and offerings that arrived from your far reach: native wine on my doorstep, a book in the mail, cards on which you inscribed words that helped tell me who I was on the days I had trouble remembering.

Three time zones to the east of you, I could call you in the middle of my night when the ghosts kept sleep at bay. Still awake, you uttered the charms that settled their troubled souls long enough to let me rest. *Use your voice*, you told me. *Know your anger*, you reminded me. *Anticipate resurrection*. Your words were a potent bundle I would place under my pillow. I'm hoping someday to give it back to you, my medicine woman.

How have you experienced the gift of sanctuary across the distance? In these days, how are you offering—or how might you offer—sanctuary to another who is in need of that grace?

BLESSING

For all that enfolds us
for each word of grace
and every act of care;

for those who offer refuge
for each shelter given
and every welcome space;

for the healing of our souls
for balm and rest
for soothing and sleep;

for vigils kept
and for lights kept burning;

blessed be.

POSTSCRIPT

Blessed Are You Who Bear the Light

Blessed are you
who bear the light
in unbearable times,
who testify
to its endurance
amid the unendurable,
who bear witness
to its persistence
when everything seems
in shadow
and grief.

Blessed are you
in whom
the light lives,
in whom
the brightness blazes—
your heart
a chapel,
an altar where
in the deepest night
can be seen
the fire that
shines forth in you
in unaccountable faith,
in stubborn hope,
in love that illumines
every broken thing
it finds.

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Jan Richardson is an artist, writer, and United Methodist minister who serves as director of The Wellspring Studio, LLC. Her work has attracted an international audience drawn to the spaces of welcome, imagination, and solace that she creates in both word and image. She frequently collaborated with her husband, the singer/songwriter Garrison Doles, until his sudden death in December 2013. Jan's most recent book is *Sparrow: A Book of Life and Death and Life*. She makes her home in Florida.

You can find Jan's books, artwork, and more at her blogs and websites:

The Painted Prayerbook
paintedprayerbook.com

The Advent Door
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