

“A.J. Swoboda reveals a Bible chock-full of lives filled with God’s presence but fraught with blunder, betrayal, and frustration. All human beings are a mess and prone to mess things up. But in the midst of all this messiness, which the author details with humor and charm, Swoboda shows how a Divine Messenger breaks through with messages of hope, messages of beauty, and safe passages of peace.”

—LEONARD SWEET, best-selling author, professor at Drew University and George Fox University, and chief contributor to sermons.com

“A.J. Swoboda made me laugh so hard I forgot we were talking about the Bible. I want to say this book is a ‘breath of fresh air’ but it’s more than that: this book is a reminder to breathe. Every chapter is another glorious gulp of pure oxygen.”

—MATT MIKALATOS, author of *My Imaginary Jesus* and *Night of the Living Dead Christian*

“Swoboda describes what we rarely discuss—that the journey of becoming a Christlike community, a church, is not a pretty line from A to Z but a dizzying mess of contradictions and struggles. Through story, humor, and biblical and theological insights, Swoboda gives us a refreshing picture of hope for the church as a real place for real people who want to love and live like Jesus. Fun and provocative, this book is a must-read for any Christian who wonders about the church today.”

—MARYKATE MORSE, author of *Making Room for Leadership*

“The reality is, we all live messy lives cluttered with disarray and mayhem. As Jesus followers, we desperately need a major revision of how we see ourselves from God’s perspective. A.J. Swoboda brilliantly portrays the picture of God wading deep into the mess of our reality, eager to embrace us fully. Through each chapter, A.J. gives us a fresh

and profound insight that will stimulate and ignite our relationship with God. You will find *Messy: God Likes It That Way* inspiring, compelling, authentic, and funny.”

—MIKE TATLOCK, lead pastor of Grace Chapel and
author of *Faith in Real Life*

“A.J. has a way with words. He’s a master at taking ancient, well-known truths and wrapping them up in fresh, creative language that captures the mind and the soul. At a time when young people are leaving the church in droves, *Messy: God Likes It That Way* comes as a glimmer of hope on the horizon. It’s a must-read for anybody who wants to recapture the beauty of Jesus and his messy church.”

—JOHN MARK COMER, pastor of Solid Rock Church,
Portland, OR

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MESSEY

God Likes It That Way

A.J. SWOBODA

 Kregel
Publications

Messy: God Likes It That Way

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For Quinn.
'Til glory hands we'll hold.

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INTRODUCTION

My rickety old house has this little room full of cleaning supplies, brooms, bleach, and little yellow gloves. This room has never been organized. It's our cleaning room and it's always messy. Every once in a long while, I take a Saturday to clean up our house: dusting, vacuuming, arranging DVDs, scrubbing the little metal cup that holds my toothbrush. It's a momentous affair. And it always takes me back to that little messy cleaning room.

The messiest room in my house is the one full of things that make it beautiful.

That's what Christian faith is like. It's a thing that gives beauty and meaning and purpose to life yet it's still messy like that little cleaning room.

Here's to finding God in that mess.

CHAPTER ONE

A Bush That Shakes: The Mess

In ancient Greek and Latin theatre, there would often be a character representing the gods. This character's name was the Deus ex Machina. It means "God of the machine." It was a character who had an exceptionally important role in the plot of the story. At the moment in the play when everything seemed at its worst, when all problems seemed beyond control or resolve, when the main character is about to be killed by the villain and everything is beyond fixability, this character would come out on stage. This was Deus ex Machina: the machine-god. And at just the right moment, the machine-god would swoop on stage, wave his magic wand over the whole messy thing, and the mess would be fixed. *Kazam. Whammo.* Finis. Curtain. Play over. Happy ending. Pay the babysitter.

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We could use one of those gods right about now, couldn't we? It sounds like the very thing we need to fix this whole mess we seem to have gotten ourselves into. But we may be in for a long wait. And we probably shouldn't quit the day job.

Because that god only does theatre.

It Is What It Is

I once heard a guy say that Santa is the ultimate hipster; he works one day a year and spends the rest of it judging you. Jesus is like that for a lot of people. And they're finding out it doesn't work.

Christianity is surprisingly messier than what I signed up for. I'm sure many of us would admit that. A famous pastor's kid once said near the end of his life that he'd have become a Christian if he'd ever actually met one. His problem was, the only one he'd ever heard of apparently died on a cross.¹ He saw the mess. And ran. Few of us admittedly accept it, but it's true. This whole thing is just one big mess, isn't it? Preaching a beautiful message of grace, we so rarely, if ever, practice it on each other. Let alone ourselves. Christians not acting like Christians. Churches not being the thing we think church should be. People renouncing God because of the hypocrisy of the people who follow him. Churches splitting like multicell amoeba. So on and so forth. You have to admit—most of the time, it all feels like one big fat mess.

Look, I get it. Really. And of course, not helping is the minor detail that God sometimes seems oddly quiet about the whole thing. We all secretly wish God would fix it all up with one fell swoop by some magical moment with divine lightning. *Kazam. Whammo.* It's understandable to me why some continue to predict this soon-coming apocalyptic catastrophe that'll apparently magically fix everything.

1. The kid's name was Friedrich Nietzsche. Oddly enough, sadly, in the history of the world, pastors' kids (PKs) are notorious for becoming atheists, existentialist nihilists, and the like.

They describe a really angry God who descends in all his divine cruelty to fix it all by judging nonbelievers and pagans and liberals with storms and earthquakes and gnats. And then, just *then*, it will all return to the way it's supposed to be. Problem fixed. But for those who watch the news, there has yet to be such a resolve, for we're still here. And so are the nonbelievers, the pagans, and the liberals.

And me too.

This is somewhat problematic. For a God of order that the Bible appears to describe, there seems to be a lot of messiness in the world. So either God is hopelessly out of control, or God, in all God's God-ness, fancies himself content with letting us, the human race, run around invariably being human, making fools of ourselves. And this because the point isn't about everything here on earth being fixed. It's about something else. Something that we don't want to hear.

About how important the mess is to being authentically human.

Mind you, it's not just Christianity that's got a mess on its religious hands. No doubt, Christianity from page one has been surprisingly messy. But you have been too. So have the Muslims and the Green Party and ToysRUs. It's all messy. Christian or not. Religious or not. It's not like Christianity is all screwed up but we're walking around with halos on our head. We as humans are the messed up ones. Sometimes I sit up late at night and wonder why I'm so messed up. Why I can't change myself. Why there's not some Rosetta Stone CD set that can fix me and teach me how to be better in four easy installments.

Sometimes we lose hope. We feel so alone. And in our weaker moments, we secretly judge those who appear on the outside to have it all together. This isn't a book for them. Because *their* story has never been *my* story. Nor has it been yours. Your story is messy like mine. There are lots of books that sell by falsely encouraging you, the reader, to flee church, community, and God altogether. They say to flee the faith. Flee Christianity. Flee it all. Flee the mess. Become your own person. You don't need those crutches anymore. And those books are

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right about one thing. *The mess*. But what's so surprising is how those who have left God, left the faith, left community, *are still screwed up*. They're just screwed up without God, without faith, without community. What they're disgustingly wrong about is how central the mess is to being a human. And how the mess is necessary.

And how it is what it is.

The Flying-Monkey God

I met God in math class. It was during second period, spring sophomore geometry in high school. I hate math but that's where I met God, so math is always going to be part of my story. God's a comedian like that.

Some people tell their story about meeting God miraculously when they were coming off a crack high or had just finished stripping or something like that. And those are beautiful, incredible stories. I wish mine was more like that. Mine was ten minutes before lunch in Homeroom 221B. To this day it remains a very mysterious memory to me. I remember sitting in math next to my friend Robert and these two girls for a group project on the Pythagorean theorem. These two girls started talking with Robert about God, Jesus, and the end of the world. They started arguing about this book I'd never heard about from something called the Left Behind series. It was this enigmatic story about how a really ticked-off Jesus was soon coming back and appeared to be really perturbed at everyone and how the president of some European country turns out to be Satan with horns and stuff, and people that didn't like Jesus were in a real heap of trouble if they didn't submit. Apparently those who liked Jesus would be fine. So I just sat there, glibly considering my eternal situation that put me a little south of paradise. But I listened. Not minding my own business. That was my introduction to God. The God they spoke of sounded mean. And bent on destruction. Like the witch from Oz. The bad one. With the flying monkeys.

Something unexpected happened inside of me. Something awoke, like a monster that came to his senses deep down in the crevices of my soul. So I did what I saw Christians do in movies and coffee shops; I went home and opened my Bible. That's all I knew what to do. I clamored through some dusty boxes and found the only Bible I could. It was this King James Version with all of the untos and thous that my old man gave me from when he was in college. I thought for something holy, it was surprisingly dusty. Sitting there in my room I just stared at it, waiting to see what would happen. Silently. Not knowing what to do with it, I did that thing where you just open up wherever it opens up and half-jokingly whisper to heaven, "Okay, God of the universe, I'm going to open up your Bible wherever I opened it and you will speak to me out of the randomness of chance." I opened my Bible and started reading from this section at the beginning. It was called Leviticus. It was filled with blood and sacrifice and Moses making lots of rules; I was pretty sure it sounded like a handbook for a cult.

Setting it on the green carpet of my bedroom floor, I almost gave up. But then I gave it a second chance. Flipping it open again, I read the stuff to the right, where the words were different colors, some in red. I started in this book named after a guy called Matthew; it had stories about these two brothers who started to follow this Jesus, and finally I thought, *These are intriguing stories.*

This Jesus fellow was so mysterious and beautiful to me. No question. What I was struck by was how the people who followed Jesus were low-level chumps. It was wonderfully disturbing that Jesus associated himself with losers, because it would make sense that he would hang out with someone like me. And even more than that, Jesus called the chumps and changed the world with them. *Jesus and the chumps.* Sounded like my kind of club. Jesus said to the chumps, "Come and follow me." And the chumps did.

That phrase rang in my heart all night long. "Follow me."

A week later, driving to the YMCA to play basketball downtown,

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I became a Christian in my car. I wasn't listening to K-LOVE or anything. It was just simple. Those words wouldn't go away. Like a ringing in my ear; a humming that wouldn't end. *Come. Follow. Me.* In my red Mazda pickup, at sixteen years old, driving downtown to play basketball at the YMCA, I gave my heart and soul to what I thought was this voice in my head with all I had and all I was and all I would be. It just happened. I wept in my car. All alone. Alive. I'm convinced to this day that this was the only time in history that God has ever worked in a math class. I'm also the only person I know who accidentally became a Christian by not minding his own business in math class.

God was so new to me. A girlfriend at the time told me that Jesus wanted me to go to church. So I went. After asking around, a friend told me about this little Baptist place with a youth group. This was where I met Christianity. For me, Christianity was weirder than Jesus. But good at the same time. In Christianity, I found, there were lots of cute girls. They were weird though. They wanted to pray and read the Bible with me, which was slightly different than my agenda. I dated one of them. She was very helpful. She told me about God and the Bible and that I couldn't have sex with her. Again, *very* helpful. We all need boundaries. After a year or so, I began to make some important changes in my life. Some of the stupid things sixteen-year-old boys do, I learned, weren't the most valued in the Christian tradition. I tried with all my might to stop those things because it seemed they made Jesus mad. Soon, the church became my family. I brought my mom to church and she became a Christian. It was all so exciting.

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Ten years later, things have changed. I've started hearing things that I didn't hear in years past. In private conversations behind closed doors when no one is looking. Over coffee. At dinner. On the phone at 11 PM. There's this one thing that keeps coming up that no one really wants to talk about on Sunday; like a dirty little secret. It's about Christianity,

faith, God, the Bible. You name it. All these things. How all these things are way more messy than we put on. How we don't have them all figured out like we think we should. And there's a reason why we don't talk about this stuff in public. It makes us look bad. It makes us look like we're a joke. It makes us look like we don't know what we are doing. But we're secretly talking about this stuff. Just, *quietly*. It's like there's this secret club within Christianity of people who have given up on the idea that Christianity, or faith, or the church are these perfect pristine things that will save the world. So we have quiet conversations amongst ourselves when no one else is listening and the microphone is off. In dark corners. In coffee shops. Behind closed doors. So no one gets in trouble. So no one thinks we're traitors. But ultimately, if the club got together, lots of us would probably be there.

The club has figured out that Christianity far underperforms the Christ it talks about.

It's not like those in the club have given up. Not at all. There are things that we can't get away from. Things we can't escape. Jesus, as God in the flesh, is unbelievably beautiful and saves us from everything about ourselves. Check. God is majestic and still makes room for morons. Check. The Holy Spirit is real and makes life so much more exciting and real. Check. No doubts about any of these things. It's just the marketing systems around Jesus that we've built, our broken religious systems, our attempts to understand God in logical and compartmentalized ways—*are all inherently flawed and imperfect*. Our faith is much more messy, more gray, than we like to put on. We're messed up. We've all attempted to fix ourselves in one way or another, only to fail time and time again. We've tried to make church look so good on the outside that everyone thinks we've made it and have it all together. It becomes Chia church. Hollow and empty with a glossy look of life on the outside without the sprouts on the outside. And for lots of us, it just isn't working.

After trying, we go home and realize what we've done—like we're

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waking up from a dream. Even if it did seem to work under a thin veneer of deception, the real us knew it was fake. Deep down, the real us groaned for freedom. We in the club know the feeling. We have unending questions about God, faith, church, you name it. The list goes on because there's no limit to the mess. Others of us are in a mess of unanswered prayers, of painful choices, of regrets unresolved, of faith falling apart at the very seams. Sadly, no quick fix has been found. Like fingerprints, every messy life is different. We catch ourselves thinking about the mess in the shower. We just can't seem to get it all right. But what if the mess is holy? What if the mess is the way it's all supposed to be? What if the mess is not something to "fix"? Just look at how God made the world.

Because God invents the mess.

Bereshit

Bereshit. This is the Bible's opening word. Loosely, it means "in the beginning." Mind you, it's pronounced "bara-sheet." I discovered that the hard way early on a Thursday morning in a class on biblical Hebrew at the seminary I went to. Sitting in a circle, we slowly read the Old Testament out loud in Hebrew, and I quickly learned that a slight variance in the pronunciation of the first word in the biblical narrative, and the Bible's introduction takes on a somewhat darker, PG-13 undertone. Maybe even R. *Bereshit bara Elohim 'et hashamayim v'et ha'arets*. That's the Bible's entire first sentence. It translates roughly into, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." This is an important point of the story. Now like most music, you can tell a lot about the rest of the album from the first couple of songs.

There is some interesting stuff in sentence numero uno. For instance, the first name used for God in the Bible is *Elohim*.² It has a couple

2. Much of this material has been inspired by the classic *From Creation to the Cross: Understanding the First Half of the Bible* by Albert H. Baylis (Zondervan, 1996), first published as *On the Way to Jesus* (Multnomah, 1986).

of meanings; *Elohim* can simply mean “god” or in Hebrew the word *Elohim* is often plural and can mean “gods.” Smart Bible people tell us this can have a number of interpretations. First, it can mean that God is in some sense, even from the beginning of the Bible, one and many. It’s interesting because later on God comments that he will make Adam and Eve in “our” image. That is, *Elohim* (God and gods) speaks to the fact that God is one and many. Sure, you could say that’s the Trinity, which is fine. But it is unlikely the writers of the Old Testament had that in mind. Yet it is one interpretation. It can also mean that God is being referred to as what some call a “plural of majesty,” meaning God is much larger than the very pronouns we use to describe him. Common in the day of the writing of the Old Testament, kings and queens would be regarded as “us” or “we” because such terms were much more glorious than “I” or “me.” The writers of the Bible picked up on this and thought, “Well, God is like way more glorious than them, so let’s use this interesting literary device.” But perhaps most interesting is how uncreative a name *Elohim* is for God in this first sentence of the Bible. Oddly enough, the word *Elohim* was not a name for God that the Jews came up with. God never revealed this as his own name to Israel. So then, where did it come from?

Bible scholars believe that many ancient Near Eastern cultures, such as the Canaanites, who are discussed in the Bible, had been using the name *Elohim* for their gods some time before the Jews borrowed it as a name for their own God. There’s evidence of this in writings and hieroglyphics. So when the Jews needed a name to refer to their God in the Old Testament, they didn’t invent one; they looked at their pagan neighbors and borrowed one from them. Positively, I would imagine naming your God the name used by your pagan neighbors most certainly made talking religion much more favorable to both parties. But negatively, it also added to the confusion. Because you could be referring to “god” (*Elohim*) and be talking about some cult god and not the God of the Israelites. This is why people in the Old Testament often

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refer to their God as “the God of our father Abraham” or the “God of our father Isaac.”

This was deeply practical. So we don’t get our gods confused.

Lincoln Log Creation

Genesis, the story of the God with the borrowed name, continues; God invents the whole creation from the ground up, both the stuff that’s up in the air, and the stuff that’s below it.³ Everything. The whole kit and caboodle. But how God creates the world in the Genesis account is surprisingly different from the way many of us had imagined he would when you observe *how* God creates.⁴ Before reading the Bible, I’d always imagined that God made the world like some manufactured home in some heavenly warehouse and then just came down and put it in place on some predetermined concrete foundation. Yet when we read the story of Genesis, we discover a process that is rather unorganized, messy, and even *chaotic*. In fact, the second verse talks about how God’s Spirit hovers over the “waters,” or the *tohu vavohu*, which means something like “the emptiness and darkness.” One translation of the Bible calls this “the chaos.” Then God’s Spirit hovers over the water and brings it to order.

Think about that. First, God makes stuff. Then after pulling that off, when God makes stuff he doesn’t make it the way a manufactured home is made. Rather, God makes stuff *unorganized* and then spins it into meaning and beauty as his Spirit hovers over it before day one.

3. I love the idea of the Bible as one big coherent story. This idea is developed and expanded upon by Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen in *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Baker Academic, 2004).

4. For a very heady but helpful treatment on both the creation story and how it informs the way we live and think, read slowly William P. Brown’s *The Ethos of the Cosmos: The Genesis of Moral Imagination in the Bible* (Eerdmans, 1999).

Then, out of the *tobu vavohu* God invents trees and cows and clouds and Adam. It's as if God is like a little girl. She stands above a chaotic pile of Lincoln Logs her dad threw on the hardwood floor. Then, piece by piece, she stands over it and builds and spins something majestic out of the primordial mess of little wooden pieces. It evokes the idea of possibility, of creativity, and of creativity that is ongoing: a Lincoln Log creation over Manufactured Home creation. In Genesis, pouring out the logs takes only two short verses. The ordering or the organization of it all, the spinning of the beauty, takes the rest of the Bible. So like a movie, the camera pans away from the pile of Lincoln Logs and begins to focus on a little girl who stands above, dreaming and scheming with possibility, just yearning to make something awesome out of the little logs before her. Let me introduce you to the girl.

Her name is *Ruach*.⁵

Ruach is God's Spirit. In the story of Genesis, the Spirit, *Ruach*, hovers over this primordial chaos like a little girl ready to build and construct something majestic, helping to order it all to perfection.⁶ *Ruach* is all over the Bible. Throughout the rest of the Bible, there are many images of *Ruach*. A dove. Fire. Wind. Water. Cloud. In fact, one of the images of the Spirit in the Old Testament is that of the cloud.

The cloud was very important for Israel; it was the cloud that led them through the wilderness during the day just as the fire led them by night as they fled from Egypt. That meant they could never get too far ahead of God, even if they wanted to, without the chance of getting eaten by wolves in the desert. It was the cloud that *overshadowed* the

5. Yes, in the story of Genesis, *Ruach* is portrayed as a female character. More on this later.

6. One of the most profound books on the Holy Spirit, who is portrayed as the power and entity that holds all things together since the creation of the world, is the incredible *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life: The Theological Basis of Ethics* by Karl Barth (1938; Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993).

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tent of meeting for the Israelites when they were in the desert in Exodus 40:35. It was the cloud that *overshadowed* the temple Solomon built. It was the cloud that *overshadowed* Israel when they wandered through the desert. The cloud is everywhere and *overshadowed* God's people. So there is a very central connection in the narrative of the Bible of the same Spirit hovering over chaotic creation that similarly *overshadowed* Israel, *overshadowed* the temple, and *overshadowed* the creation of the world in the beginning. Now about two hundred years before Jesus was born, the Jewish people decided to translate the Old Testament, which is written in Hebrew, into Greek so that everyone who wanted to could read it. The problem was finding words they could use in Greek that were like the words in Hebrew. This was challenging because they are *very* different languages. It was an undeniably difficult process. They managed, and what came of it is this translation they call the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Hebrew Old Testament. And it was this translation that the earliest Christians read from, because most of them did not know the Hebrew of the Old Testament. And in this process, some hard-working rabbis, who had to find words to translate from Hebrew to Greek, had to find some Hebrew word for their word *overshadow*.

One of the words they picked to convey this image was the Greek word *episkiazō*.

Hover

Let's hover over *episkiazō* for a moment. The special thing about Mary was that she was perhaps twelve or thirteen when she gave birth to God. Talk about responsibility. When I was thirteen, I was still running up to my neighbors' during dinnertime to quick knock on the door so I could run and hide in the bushes to watch them stand in the doorway, frustrated with butter on their chins and wiping their hands with a paper napkin. That's how I got my kicks. I thought I was pretty sly, sitting there laughing and writhing in the bush. I'm pretty sure they

could see the bush shaking if they looked close enough. Compared to a twelve-year-old girl about to birth God, my childhood was a cakewalk.

Now it's one thing to give birth at twelve or thirteen. Try birthing God, as if birthing normal human babies isn't hard enough. Try birthing a member of the Trinity. Try birthing the person who invented you before the creation of the world. Try birthing the one who spoke your womb into existence. Try birthing the one who has the power to take away the sins of the world and not be somewhat concerned you aren't being a good parent.

These are real pressures.

Yet the gravity of Mary's pregnancy is actually not in three of the four gospels in the New Testament. Strangely, of the four gospels, Luke's gospel is the only one that takes the time to tell us the story of a teenage Mary getting pregnant. Now Luke, who may have been a doctor, has this whole agenda about the Spirit. In Luke 9:34, Jesus is being transfigured before three of his favorite disciples on top of a mountain. Luke writes, "While Jesus was speaking, a cloud appeared and *episkiazō*'d them, and they were afraid." This cloud from nowhere *overshadowed* them. This is the same idea we talked about from the beginning of the Bible at creation and the desert and the temple. Same thing going on. The Spirit does to the disciples and Jesus what it did to the creation in the Old Testament, what it did for Israel in the desert, what it did at the temple when God descended.

Luke doesn't stop there.

Earlier in his gospel, Luke, writing about Mary giving birth to God, says that this one time an angel came to her and that the "Holy Spirit will . . . *episkiazō* you." And when it has *episkiazō*'d her, she would give birth to God (Luke 1:35). Mary was *overshadowed*. And she gave birth to something. The Spirit hovered, *overshadowed*, *episkiazō*'d Mary. This same image is in Genesis 1, the desert, and the temple. Just like the *tohu vavohu* in Genesis, no doubt Mary was a chaotic mess when she discovered she was going to be having a baby. But the Spirit hovered

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over her and conceived a God within her who would eventually save the world. In the Bible, in the beginning, God watches as the Spirit *overshadowed* the chaotic world, the Spirit *overshadowed* the tabernacle in the desert in the midst of the Israelites' chaos, and in Luke the world watched as the Spirit *overshadowed* the otherwise normal twelve-year-old girl's life and chaotically made a mess of all of her plans in order to birth God. So in this faith, there is an oddly close relationship between chaos and God. The Spirit of God is either present over chaos or creating it.

Marshall McLuhan, a man of faith who studied culture as an academic, once wrote after years of reflecting on the chaos that our world has become, that to bring order into this jangled sphere, humans must find its centre (in his classic British spelling).⁷ But what is the centre?

I think McLuhan understood Mary. And us. For Mary, God not only created her mess, God *became* her mess. Literally. And if Mary made a bumper sticker, it probably would have said: KNOW JESUS, NO PEACE. Mary's centre was Jesus. I'm trying to make him mine.

The problem remains the mess this inevitably creates.

The Bush

You see, for Mary the mess was intentional. She had to embrace it. Because it was God. And letting it be what it is. We must do the same, whatever the mess is, because God is in it. Frankly, I sometimes worry that people sell Christianity because they've conjured it up in their mind as this solution that'll fix the mess of our life like some kind of drug with the long commercials. Jesus becomes almost therapeutic; like a vapor rub. With few to no side effects (that we know of). The only

7. Marshall McLuhan quoted in the phenomenal autobiography of this British technological saint by Douglas Coupland, *Marshall McLuhan: You Know Nothing of My Work!* (New York: Atlas & Co., 2010), 10.

problem with that Jesus is I haven't met him. Yet. If that is what the real Jesus is like, I want to meet him and apply him ASAP to my messy life. But honestly, my life is way messier *after* I started following the Jesus I met than it was *before*. With Jesus, there are new questions, with new possibilities, and new potentials. It makes room for a whole new mess. The Jesus mess. Trust me, it's a lot easier to not follow a guy who says you have to love *everyone*. Even your enemies.

That's why I think the writers of the New Testament say that when people come into and experience the person of Jesus, they are a *new creation*. I think back to what creation was like. It was chaos. Then God brought the order over time. For some odd reason our idea of "new" is so messed up. New doesn't mean perfect. New means that all the building blocks for something beautiful are now there. Like a pile of Lincoln Logs on the hardwood floor in the living room. And we stand there with God above this new thing called eternal life and envision what the whole thing could look like. New means possibility. And it's with that possibility that we get to work out this whole thing, because the Spirit, God's *Ruach*, is hovering over every little piece of chaos in our lives.

You see, I think God is like a little pubescent boy. He's that kid in the neighborhood who likes to run up to your door every once in a while during dinner and ring the doorbell, only to run away and hide in the bushes. He gets so much satisfaction out of it. Watching you stand there with dinner on your face as you look for the little brat who rang your doorbell. He just sits there. Hiding in your bushes. Waiting. Smiling. Wanting to play tag. And if you look close enough, you can see the bush shaking. He's out there. Just waiting for you to chase him. Because your chaos is his joy.

Here's the point. Our lives are chaotic; a running around. Yet in the midst of it, someone keeps knocking on the door. *Hovering* to me is coming to the awareness that the person knocking on my door is Jesus, and he is hiding somewhere in my front yard, waiting for me to come

MESSY

and find him. The difference is you can have no vision and still have vision. You can have no idea *what* you are doing and know *that will come in time, but for now, just follow me*. Now when I dream, and pray, and hope about the future, I open the Bible and see from page one a Spirit hovering over the chaos of our world. It hovered over Mary and birthed Jesus. It descended on Jesus at his baptism like a bird. It hovered over me in my math class. And it hovers over you.

Jesus reminds me of me when I was a kid.

It's like Jesus has nothing better to do with his time than run around the neighborhood, knock on all the front doors, and run and hide in the bushes of our life, ruining dinner. We stand at the door wondering who's getting between us and our tuna casserole bake. We stand there, knowing someone's out there. Somewhere. All we know is, *someone has knocked on my door*. Jesus is your chaos. He is the one knocking at your door. Part of me wonders where he's hiding. Somewhere he is there. Christianity, although it's deeply flawed, taught me one thing. A knock at the door is often surprisingly holy. As is the one who knocks. And I think, if you look closely, you'll see what I see. What Israel saw. What the disciples saw. What Mary saw.

That bush seems to be shaking.