

THE  
BETWEEN  
TIME

Savoring the sacred moments  
of everyday life

DAMARIS ZEHNER

Twenty Third Publications  
Sample

## ≡ { ACKNOWLEDGMENTS } ≡

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I dedicate this book to my mother, who long ago introduced me to the joys of essays and to a taste for contemplative Christian literature. She can no longer understand this dedication and would be surprised by it if she could, but still she has my deepest gratitude.

*Damaris Zehner*

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≡{ INTRODUCTION }≡

# The Between Time

**T**he paradox of the Christian life is that we live in a between time. Our race exists between the original creation and the unveiling of the new heavens and the new earth. Our brief years between birth and death can seem endless as we await salvation. We hold on with faith between God's promises and their distant fulfillment. Life breaks us and heals us, healing us to break us again. We never quite fit in the world and in our skins, because they are always changing, and so are we. We've left, but we're not there yet. This is the between time.

Scripture expresses the same awareness of the between time. A concordance search for the phrase "How long?" will yield laments throughout the Old and New Testaments. How long will God forget us? say the psalms. How long before God will restore us? How long will God remain hidden, and how long will the wicked exult? Habakkuk wonders how long he will cry for help and God not hear him. Revelation asks how long before God will judge and avenge.

God hears our lament and answers it. The Book of Isaiah is a perfect and consistent expression of the universal human experience of dissonance and the unfolding of God's glorious redemption. But when will that redemption be complete? Although Scripture cautions us that with God "a day is as a thousand years," it also tells us that Jesus is coming quickly.

That's good news to me. I suppose I'm an expert on living in the between time. Much of my life has been spent in the no-man's-land of travel—on airplanes, ships, trains, cars, cargo trucks, even canoes. The sense of being no longer here but not yet there underpins my experience of the cosmos. Travel was in my family: my father was a diplomat in the Foreign Service who moved to new posts every few years. I also spent two years in the Peace Corps in Liberia, where I met my husband. Later he and I and our children lived in Kyrgyzstan for seven years. Since returning, we have no plans to move. Still, though, life moves around us. Our children grow and leave; we age; people are born and die—even staying put we're traveling, and we're not there yet.

I'm still on my journey of faith as well, although recently I have found, if not a harbor, at least a rest stop. As a child I was baptized and confirmed in the Anglican Church, but while I remained content with Anglicanism, the church changed around me, and I discovered in my twenties that I no longer belonged. My husband came from a different background, so we compromised by attending evangelical Protestant churches for many years. We began to feel—to hope, desperately—that there was more to our historic faith than we were finding in the churches we attended. Our seven years in the mission field in Kyrgyzstan strengthened our conviction that do-it-yourself Christianity, churches with stages rather than altars, and the sovereignty of individual interpretation of Scripture were not for us. Thus began a time of searching that culminated in our entrance into the

Catholic Church in 2011. These stories, written over the last five years or so, trace aspects of the between time of faith and finally recount my sense of having found a place of peace from which to continue my journey.

When we were getting ready to move to Kyrgyzstan as mission workers, I took an anthropology course at a local Bible college. One thing especially struck me. The professor explained that the Genesis account of Adam and Eve's first disobedience was really the story of broken relationships: with nature, with self, with others, and with God. In these areas, we know stress and sin. In these areas, Christ brings us healing through his incarnation, death, and resurrection, revealed in the sacrament of communion, which reunites the fruits of nature, the work of human hands, and the grace of God.

The professor's point made sense to me, and I've decided to use it as the structure for this book. In Part One I write about our relationship with nature, in Part Two our relationship with ourselves and others, and in Part Three our relationship with God. These three sections explore the mixed experience of the between time. Perhaps I should have written them entirely from one perspective or the other; I could have focused only on the burdens and disappointments of everyday life, or I could have written only a triumphant declaration of faith. But most of us don't live in one state or the other. We are tossed up with the wave tops and splashed down into the troughs every day we spend negotiating the deeps. Separating the struggles from the triumphs paints a false picture of the between time we all live in. This book bears witness to the brokenness of sin, but it also expresses faith in the ultimate healing of all God's creation.

*When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,  
we were like those who dreamed.  
Our mouths were filled with laughter,*

*our tongues with songs of joy.  
Then it was said among the nations,  
“The Lord has done great things for them.”  
The Lord has done great things for us,  
and we are filled with joy.  
Restore our fortunes, Lord,  
like streams in the Negev.  
Those who sow with tears  
will reap with songs of joy.  
Those who go out weeping,  
carrying seed to sow,  
will return with songs of joy,  
carrying sheaves with them.*

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*Part One*

# NATURE

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≡ { CHAPTER ONE } ≡

# The Good Land

Only recently did I discover that the monastic vows of Saint Benedict included the vow of stability: poverty, chastity, obedience, and stability—staying in one place.

This was a revelation to me. By the time I was thirteen, I had lived on four continents, in five countries. Since the age of twenty-five, I have added another nine years overseas, in Africa and Asia. Even when I stayed in one country for a while, I moved from house to house. There were some constants in my life, but stability as Saint Benedict understood it was entirely absent.

Nine years ago my family and I came back to Indiana from Central Asia and bought an old brick farmhouse in the middle of cornfields. I prayed then, and I still pray now, that I would be taught the strange skill of staying put. There would be no more escaping from myself by moving to another house or around the world. Eventually I would have to face the ups and downs of the people around me—I can't be always a casual stranger, comfortable as that is. I would have to tackle the long-term tasks that

never arise if I move every year, such as painting walls, cleaning the oven, and dealing with people I've offended. I would have to learn to be content with this place, this weather, these plants and trees and soils.

Living in one place has not turned out to be a prison sentence, though; it's a friendship, a long-term relationship that grows in love as it grows in familiarity. Every time I go outside and look, "the heavens are telling the glory of God; the firmament proclaims his handiwork" (Psalm 19:1). God is revealed through the place that God has given me: "a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing... And you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land he has given you" (Deuteronomy 8:7–10).

After staying put in this good land for almost a decade, I've learned its moods and many faces. I've noticed the movement of the sunrise and sunset along the horizon as summer changes to winter. I know where the wild berries grow and where the kingfisher perches. I've become accustomed to the improbable screeching of the peacocks on the farm south of us. I know which dogs will chase my bike and which roads are best to ride on. I know who is related to whom, who shears sheep and who sells eggs, who has been married or widowed. And I am myself known.

But a passive failure to move isn't all that I'm called to. There is a virtue not just to **staying** where I am but to **being** where I am—and that's the real challenge. Too often I'm not really here. I stare at the computer (as I do now), or read a book, insulated from the uniqueness of the place I live. Sometimes even when I'm working in the garden or hiking or bike riding outside, my body occupies a vague, in-between world while my mind is editing the past or worrying about the future.

A few years ago I came across this parable: A prisoner spent many years in a cell. He prayed daily that God would appear to him. All the rest of his time he stared out the tiny window at a patch of sky and imagined the world and people outside. Eventually he died and met God face to face. “Lord,” he cried in reproach, “for years I prayed that you would come to me, and you never did.” “My son,” God replied, “I was in that prison cell every day; but where were you?”

Saint Benedict wasn’t talking just about my body staying put. My mind, too, must be stable. Both mind and body must be together in one place in order to practice the presence of God, as Brother Lawrence would put it. God will never be in the imaginary places, the greener grass springing from my discontent—God is too real to occupy those vague lands—and neither will I. This place where I am is the only place I can meet God. This old farmhouse is the doorway to the kingdom of heaven.

*God, you have planted me here.*

*Teach me to be present and to be whole.*

*May I grow in gratitude in this good land,*

*and may I meet you and know you in the paths of my daily life.*

*Amen.*