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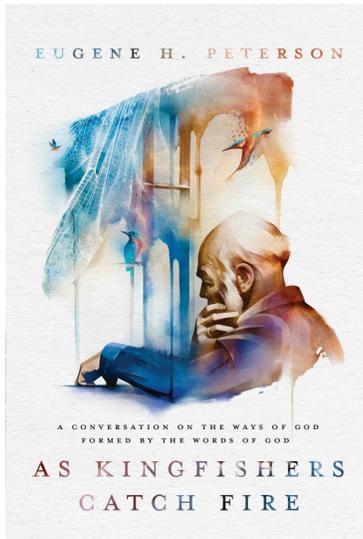
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A Jesus-Soaked Imagination An Excerpt from *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*

AUGUST 24, 2017 BY EUGENE H. PETERSON 1 COMMENT



As Kingfishers Catch Fire: A Conversation On The Ways of God Formed by the Words of God

By Eugene H. Peterson
[WaterBrook](#), May 2017

Popular author and pastor Eugene H. Peterson recently announced that he is retiring from public life and that his latest book, [As Kingfishers Catch Fire: A Conversation On The Ways of God Formed by the Words of God](#) (Waterbrook, 2017), is his last. The book is a collection of his sermons and the following excerpt is from a section titled "Yes and Amen and Jesus: Preaching in the Company of Peter." Peterson is a former writing workshop facilitator at the Collegeville Institute.

The Bible as a whole comes to us in the form of narrative, and it is within this large, somewhat sprawling biblical narrative that we encounter the form of gospel, which I would render more precisely as "incarnational storytelling," God revealing himself in human form: "the Word became flesh and . . . we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father" (John 1:14). In this sense Mark's gospel is a unique genre that is further developed in Matthew, Luke, and John.

Wallace Stegner, one of our great contemporary storytellers, tells us, "If the forms are bad, we live badly." Gospel is a true and good form by which we live well. Storytelling creates a world of presuppositions, assumptions, and relations into which we enter. Stories invite us into a world other than ourselves and, if they are good and true stories, a world larger than ourselves. Gospel invites us into a world of God's creation and salvation and blessing. God in human form in action on the very ground on which we also live. It is an incarnational story, that is, a flesh-and-blood-on-the-ground story, a story worked out in actual lives and places, not in abstract ideas or programs or inspirational, uplifting anecdotes, but a story in which we recognize the action of God in the everydayness of a local history in our stories.

Gospel is a true and good form by which we live well.

This is important, for there is a widespread practice in our postbiblical church culture to take the story and then essentially eliminate it by depersonalizing it into propositions or "truths" or morals or ideas. The story is eviscerated of relationships and persons. Jesus, the center of the Christian faith, is thus

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depersonalized into an abstract truth, and men and women are depersonalized into “problems” to be fixed. Eventually there is no story left.

We don’t read very long in this text by Saint Mark (and his successors, Matthew, Luke, and John) before we realize it is about events that actually took place in a thin slice of ancient history in Palestine under Roman rule. Before we have finished, we realize it is about God working out our salvation personally in Jesus Christ, God “in the flesh” (*incarnate*) in our lives and in the places and times in which we now live.

The story of Jesus, the mature completion of all the stories, insists on our participation.

The distinctiveness of the gospel form is that it brings the centuries of Hebrew storytelling — the Holy Spirit telling the story of creation and salvation and blessing — to fulfillment in the story of Jesus, the mature completion of all the stories, in a way that is clearly revelation (that is, God’s self-disclosing), in a way that invites and even *insists* on our participation.

In some respects this is an odd kind of story, this Jesus creation-salvation-blessing story. It tells us very little of what ordinarily interests us in a story. We learn very little about what we are really interested in. There is no description of Jesus’s appearance. Nothing about his friends or schooling and very little about his childhood. Very little reference to what he thought, how he felt, his emotions, his interior struggles. There is a surprising and disconcerting reticence in regard to Jesus. We don’t figure Jesus out; we don’t search for Jesus; we don’t get Jesus on our terms. If we stay with the story long enough, we recognize that Jesus and the life he embodies are not consumer items.

There are others in the story, of course, many others: the sick and hungry, victims and outsiders, friends and enemies, and, by implication, all of us. When we join the company of Peter in our preaching, more often than not our sermons turn out to be an attentiveness and response to the God-revealing Jesus, gospel texts shaping our attention and responses. Line after line, page after page: Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. None of us provides the content for our own salvation; it is given to us. Jesus gives it to us. The text allows for no exceptions.

Line after line, page after page: Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.

After Peter’s death by crucifixion in Rome, Mark went to Alexandria in Egypt and became the church’s first bishop. Now he had the time and protected leisure to reflect upon and write what he had experienced during those years in Rome in the company of Peter as he preached Jesus. Mark wrote the gospel of Jesus as Peter had preached it. The story of Jesus then became the first gospel of Jesus with Mark as Peter’s “secretary.” That, at least, is the fairly well authenticated tradition.

Mark worked day by day in the company of Peter, listening to Peter, and writing what he heard Peter preach.

Somewhere along the way, Saint Mark acquired a nickname: *Colobodactylus*, “Stumpfinger.” One suggestion accounting for the name is that Mark was a large man whose stubby fingers didn’t quite fit his stature. The nickname was an affectionate one, the kind we give to friends we joke around with: Shorty, Slim, Blondie, Kitten — *Colobodactylus*, “Stumpfinger.” Perhaps it originated in the circle of friends in Rome who saw Mark working away day by day in the company of Peter, listening to Peter, and writing what he heard Peter preach, with those short, thick fingers pushing his stylus pen back

and forth across the parchment, those short, thick fingers contrasting with the swift-paced drama of the sentences laid down. The American novelist Reynolds Price imagines a different origin of the nickname, namely, the similarity of the inelegant fingers to what he observed as Mark’s “pawky roughness of language.”

The apostle whom Mark had served, Simon, also had a nickname: Peter, Greek for “Rock.” But unlike his master’s, Mark’s nickname did not stick. The tradition is that after Peter was martyred in Rome and Mark became bishop of Alexandria, “Stumpfinger” probably did not seem appropriate for a bishop, so Mark recovered his proper name.

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An immersion in the company of Peter, the first of the apostles to recognize and confess Jesus as the incarnation of the Trinitarian Godhead, the Christ, is the best way I know for preachers to develop an incarnational imagination. The first followers, Peter and his fellow apostles, saw it take place in their company and before their eyes, saw that the “Word became flesh” (John 1:14) in the humanity of Jesus and actually lived among them. Peter was the first to name what they had seen and heard as God took human form and, over an extended period of time (three years), lived in their neighborhood.

An immersion in the company of Peter is the best way I know for preachers to develop an incarnational imagination.

Reynolds Price uses the term “narrative hunger” to call attention to our “need to hear and tell stories . . . second in necessity apparently after nourishment and before love and shelter. Millions survive without love or home, almost none in silence; the opposite of silence leads quickly to narrative, and the sound of story is the dominant sound of our lives.”

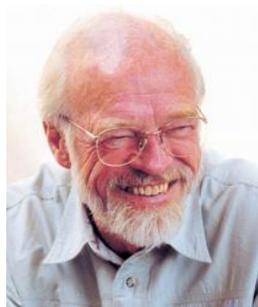
The American poet Christian Wiman, exploring his newly realized Christian identity, says it like this: “I begin to think that anything that abstracts us from the physical world is ‘of the devil.’ . . . Christ speaks in stories as a way of preparing his followers to stake their lives on a story, because existence is not a puzzle to be solved, but a narrative to be inherited and undergone and transformed person by person.”

We need a Jesus-soaked imagination.

We need an incarnational imagination, a Jesus-soaked imagination, so that every truth becomes a lived truth, lived in the homes and workplaces that our congregations face us with every time we preach a sermon.

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Eugene H. Peterson

Eugene H. Peterson, translator of *The Message Bible*, is professor emeritus of Spiritual Theology of Regent College, British Columbia, and the author of *As Kingfishers Catch Fire* (from which this excerpt was taken) and *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* and *Leap Over a Wall*. He earned his B.A. in Philosophy from Seattle Pacific University, his S.T.B. from New York Theological Seminary, and his M.A. in Semitic Languages from Johns Hopkins University. In 1962, Peterson was founding

pastor of Christ Our King Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) in Bel Air, Maryland, where he served for 29 years before retiring in 1991. He and his wife, Jan, live in Montana. Peterson is a former writing workshop facilitator at the Collegetown Institute. For more information, visit eugenepeterson.com.