

Footprints of an Unseen Hand **(The Trusting Christian)**

#1 in the series:

Christus Paradox: Oxymorons for Christian Living

*The man gazed at her in silence to learn whether or not
the LORD had made his journey successful.
(Genesis 24:21)*

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the 14th Sunday after Pentecost, **September 10, 2017**
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This is the first of five sermons I've titled *Christus Paradox*, a series highlighting what I'm calling *Oxymorons for Christian Living*.

Christus Paradox points to Jesus as the ultimate paradox, the Divine One becoming in Bethlehem the Human One – the Word made flesh to dwell among us. The paradox of Christ, however, hardly ends there. Jesus also taught using paradox, saying things like, “*Take my yoke upon you, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*” Easy yoke. Light burden. Here are two examples of oxymorons no less obvious than jumbo shrimp or minor crisis or open secret or clearly confused.

An oxymoron is a co-mingling of opposites and Jesus often spoke this way, saying things like, “*I am Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore.*” The heart of our resurrection faith as Easter people, then, is oxymoronic. Nor is that all. Jesus taught that “*the first shall be last and the last shall be first*” and that “*the one who seeks his life will lose it but whoever loses it for my sake will find it.*”

These and more function as oxymorons, thus presenting us with paradox, with mystery, thus inviting us to embark on a treasure hunt, a search for deeper meaning.

In this first message of the series I want to introduce you to a particular type of oxymoron known as the Irish Bull. I think you'll find fun, and it will be my challenge to make it instructive in a theological and spiritual way, so that it will become for us, coupled with our reading of Genesis 24:1-21, an *Oxymoron for Christian Living*.

An Irish Bull is not a branch of the Angus family, but refers to an unintentional verbal blunder which, while at first seeming to make sense, after only a moment's reflection is wildly illogical. The Irish like colorful metaphors, but metaphors can play tricks, morphing into mischievous little literary leprechauns. Metaphors in the mixmaster can result in accidental absurdities of self-contradiction. It's no wonder to me why these verbal gaffes are called bulls, since any public

speaker knows the danger of making a verbal snafu which, once loosed, runs like a bull through a china shop. An Irish Bull, then, functions as an oxymoron – *Jumbo Shrimp* with a dash of literary pizzazz. Comedians try to imitate *Irish Bulls*. One of my favorites is George Carlin, “*A rain dance has been scheduled for Friday night, weather permitting.*” You have to think about it, but only for a second, before the absurdity sets in.

Being artificial and composed, though, Carlin’s example is not an undiluted *Irish Bull*. To be a genuine *Irish Bull* a speaker need haplessly tumble into the gaffe. For example, you have Al Gore in the heat of the 2000 presidential campaign saying of Mr. Bush’s record as governor of Texas, “*a zebra cannot change its spots.*” Well, we understand what he meant, aiming for the biblical phrase, “*a leopard cannot change its spots,*” so we smile at the mixed metaphor. That’s the charm of a genuine *Irish Bull*. Far from confusing us, we know exactly what is meant so that we smile and sympathize with the speaker.

An *Irish Bull*, then, is a logical absurdity offered unintentionally by the speaker. I can’t resist offering a few of my favorites, such as the man in a job interview who, asked if he had any children, replied thoughtfully, “*No. It’s hereditary in my family not to have children.*”

President Gerald Ford once loosed an Irish Bull, saying in a speech, “*Things are more like they are now than they’ve ever been before.*” Interesting historical observation, I must say! British politician Arthur Balfour said in Parliament, “*Why can’t the Jews and the Arabs just sit down together and settle this like good Christians?*”

Irish Bulls even make their way into advertisements, such as a food label at Safeway which read, “*There is more chocolate in our all-butter cookies than any other ingredient.*” Really?

I’ll stop there though I could go on. There are collections of hundreds on the net. If you are so inclined, Google *Irish Bull* and enjoy the long lists of examples.

The history of the term Irish Bull has its origins in 18th century Ireland with a member of Parliament named Sir Boyle Roche. Known for verbal gaffes he once, when challenged in Parliament to make sacrifices for future generations, famously replied, “*Why, Mister Speaker, should we do anything for posterity? What has posterity done for us?*” Another time he said, “*Why should Ireland stand with arms folded and our hands in our pockets when England has called for aid?*”

My favorite, leading us back to our text in Genesis 24, is when Sir Roche, seeking to inspire Ireland, said, “*All along the untrodden path of the future, I can see the footprints of an unseen hand.*” A double *Irish Bull* in a single line! In the first place, *Untrodden paths* have no prints at all! Secondly, hands don’t make footprints. A double *Irish Bull* from the man who gave rise to the term itself.

And yet. And yet. There’s something here, isn’t there, that people of faith can appreciate. Perhaps not only appreciate, but actually hold as essential to our Christian Living -- a sense of the sovereignty of God which, briefly stated, affirms that God holds the future in his hand.

The future may be, indeed, an *Untrodden Path*, but people of faith tend to see God's prints already there. This sovereignty is powerfully expressed by Isaiah, "*I am God and there is no other, I am God and there is no one like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times the things not yet done, saying, 'My purpose shall stand, and I will fulfill my intention.' I have spoken, I will bring it to pass; I have planned, and I will do it*" (46:9-11).

To be sure, while Isaiah's cosmic sense to understanding of God's sovereignty transcends any one person, you and I are more interested in God's personal leading, the idea that God has a plan for MY life, for YOUR life. When we sing (as we did to open our worship) "*Guide ME, O thou great Jehovah, pilgrim in this barren land,*" we are singing our faith, our trust, that the barren land of our untrodden future is not unknown to God, that his grace-prints already there and that he will lead us on right paths.

While we might respond with glad affirmation to the thought of God implementing a sovereign design for our lives, something else recoils at the thought of such a sovereignty that could devolve into fatalism. The theological oxymoron of *Predestination* and *Free Will* is an unsettling and unsettled mystery, not merely in the ornate halls of theological thought where the debate has raged as long as the thought of a sovereign God has existed, but also in the believer's heart, where while we at once we may respond with joy to know God has a plan for us we also wonder that, if so, is not our living like mere puppets played out on a stage? To offer a more modern image, what if our lives play out according to an algorithm, as if we but our play roles in a cosmic computer game (a theme explored in our time by films such as *The Matrix* and *The Thirteenth Floor* which conjecture about our true existence being not at all what it seems, but rather being a hologram of sorts, virtual reality).

So as we delight to know God has a plan for us, yet we want to feel that God is coaxing us toward that plan rather than constraining us within it, that endowed with free will we can and often do thwart the *Untrodden* path of the future, veering off course, so that one of the purposes of faith and spiritual growth is to re-align us to God's leading.

I think this human proclivity to observe an unseen divine hand in our living is a more basic, more reflexive impulse in the human psyche than we might realize, giving rise both to the questions of "Why?" and "Wow!" "Why?" is the question we reflexively ask when our world seems to fall apart: "*Why would God allow this?*" "Wow!" is our response when some extraordinary blessing appears. "*Wow! Thank you God!*" The idea of pure chance and coincidence are diminished in the thinking of the believer whose spiritual impulse is to observe the Unseen hand of God in our everyday living.

Which is why I chose Genesis 24, the description of a treasure hunt, Abraham's servant (Eliezer) sent on a journey to seek a wife for Isaac. This is the dramatic story of a long journey resulting in an arranged marriage between Isaac and Rebecca, with images of wells in the desert and a beautiful young maiden who, meeting the "test" Eliezer has set up, offers water to the stranger and his camels. It's that last element, watering the camels, which is hinted at in this extraordinary 16th century work (painted in Venice in 1580) by Paolo Veronese which now hangs in the Palace of Versailles in France. This is the moment of Eliezer encountering Rebecca for the first time.

The camels stand in the background, just as suggested in the text of Genesis, but once Rebecca turns her attention to them, Eliezer will know that she is the one to whom he is being led, that God has given him success in story of trust on the part of had led him along the footprints of his providential promised him, saying that send his angel before Eliezer.



his mission. Genesis 24 is a Abraham's servant that God *Untrodden* path by the hand, just as Abraham had God will

When Rebekah meets the test the camels, verse 21 describes "*The man gazed at her in learn whether or not the made his journey successful.*"

moment I wanted to capture with you, which is why I isolated the bulletin and offered a painting which is expressive of that moment of gazing in silence to ponder the sovereign hand of God in our lives.



by watering Eliezer, *silence to LORD had* It's that verse 21 in

Have you ever experienced that moment? Something happens that seems so providentially significant that you pause to soak in the moment, a reverential gazing in which you assessed that you had been guided by an unseen hand? Perhaps you stumbled into the moment, but you felt yourself guided, as if by accident, into a life-changing encounter? Perhaps, like Eliezer, it was an encounter with a person who touched your life. Perhaps a business opportunity opening out of nowhere. Perhaps you visited a church and just knew immediately that you had found your spiritual home. Or, perhaps you picked up a book in a casual browsing, but there discovered such light that you paused, sensing that this new insight would take you to new and exciting vistas of the imagination. Whatever the treasure you encountered, you felt not just lucky, but led, guided by a providential hand. And you pause gazing, as it were, in wonder.

"*It's a God thing,*" we may say, a "*God wink,*" expressing casually what prophets and theologians and philosophers have sought to grapple with through the ages.

Blessed is the one whose eyes are opened to detect the hand of God in their daily living, in their friends, their community, their church, in meeting the stranger in the restaurant or at the market, or in discovering a treasure in a bookstore when an unknown, unsought book unexpectedly opens shafts of light which you somehow recognize could change you forever, as if the words were themselves an elixir of transformation in an Aladdin's lamps of possibility. In this moment you may feel yourself touched and transformed not by your own seeking, but by happening to be in the right place at right time.

But did it just . . . Happen? Looking back we may feel our path had been divinely directed. Like the Emmaus disciples we may not have recognized at first the significance of what was happening, but soon enough eyes opened to what had really transpired, as their eyes were opened in the breaking of bread.

C. S. Lewis, the famed 20th century Christian author from Oxford, tells how at age sixteen he encountered the divine when he happened into a bookstore and picked up George MacDonald's *Phantastes*. Years later he wrote, "That night my imagination was baptized, though the rest of me took a little longer . . . I had not the faintest notion what I had let myself in for," when I bought *Phantastes*. For C. S. Lewis, it was a gazing moment such as Eliezer had with Rebecca, a moment in which he felt the footprints of an unseen hand had led him to an elixir of transformation that would open a world of possibility.

I want to conclude by telling you of a similar moment in my own life, a moment of transformation I yet gaze upon these 17 years later. I was pastor at First United Methodist Church in Fordyce when, on a trip to the hospital in Little Rock, I stopped at Barnes and Noble. By chance (or was it?) I picked up while browsing the current issue *PARABOLA*, a quarterly journal of essays from various faith traditions, each quarter's essays clustered around a unique theme. The theme of that Spring 2000 issue -- the 25th anniversary issue of *PARABOLA* which began in 1975 -- was *Threshold*.

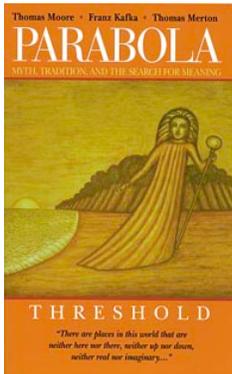


When I was crossing a threshold. It was different writers than I had previously read in the 42 year library of *PARABOLA* that led me to my life -- in public life making me a better equipped teacher and pastor and in private life challenging me to cross the necessary thresholds of growth.



possibility I am yet to receive such blessing was an elixir of

Now, you may after hearing these words run out and seek the next issue of *PARABOLA*. Yes, but realize you may find it lifeless and dry, just as I might have, reading *Phantastes*, found myself utterly unmoved by what inspired C. S. Lewis. As *Phantastes* was what Lewis was ready for, *PARABOLA* was what I was ready for, and when the student is ready, the teacher will appear.



Like Eliezer with Rebecca, I gaze yet upon that trip to Barnes and Noble as if I had been led by the *Footprints of an Unseen Hand*. May you have, over the course of your life's journey, many precious moments of silent gazing at the *Footprints of an Unseen Hand*. May you experience many moments when you know, you just know, that something important has happened -- an intrusion of higher meaning into the otherwise ordinary.

We often have the sense, looking back over our lives, of a story well-crafted, composed. What may have seemed chaos, somehow comes to seem like order. Oddly enough, even the most unfortunate twists sometimes become the most defining and formative moments of our lives. It is then our eyes are opened to recognize that, throughout our lives, we "pilgrims through this barren land," have been inexplicably guided by the *Footsteps of an Unseen Hand*.

Examples of Irish Bulls

