FEAR IN THE GARDEN
The State of Emergency and the Politics of Blessing

Scott Bader-Saye

In the history of Christian interpretation, much has been made of the “two gardens” that frame the story of redemption in the Bible—in Eden, the first Adam sins through disobedience and pride; in Gethsemane, the second Adam redeems the world from sin through obedience and humility. In the first garden humankind falls and receives the curse; in the second garden humankind is redeemed and receives blessing. The tree in the first story that occasions sin is replaced by the tree in the second upon which Christ dies for sin. The figurative connections are striking and fruitful. John Donne imagined the human soul as the meeting place of these two gardens:

We thinke that Paradise and Calvarie, 
Christ's Crosse, and Adam's tree, stood in one place; Looke, 
Lord, and finde both Adam's met in me; As the first Adam 
sweat surrounds my face, May the last Adam blood my soule 
embrace.¹

Yet one connection has, as far as I know, never been commented upon. That is, in the first garden, humankind knows fear for the first time and hides from God. In the second Jesus knows fear for the first time and remains faithful to God. Each knows fear, but they offer us alternative paths for responding to that fear.

In what follows I explore the ways in which fear, left unchecked, provokes the twin impulses of hiding and sacrifice—desperate attempts to cut off community and secure life at the expense of another. Fear thus interrupts the flow of blessing, invites a state of emergency, and perpetuates an economy of curse. In contrast, when we deny fear the power to determine our actions and acknowledge that security is not our highest good, a new politics becomes possible, based not on the friend/enemy distinction, nor on the exceptional state of emergency, but on the true exception which is the gift of blessing.

Eden: The Economy of Blessing

The creation stories of Genesis situate the created order in an economy of blessing. God blesses the animals and humankind with the power of fertility—"be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:22, 28)—thus granting the ability to fulfill life by extending life and creating the opportunity for blessing to flow between generations. In his extensive study of blessing, Keith Grüneberg concludes that "the content of blessing is . . . prosperity, i.e., everything required for a good life." Grüneberg takes "prosperity" to mean something like "flourishing" and even suggests a parallel to the Greek concept of eudaimonia (happiness). As Kendall Soulen describes it, God's blessing communicates "life, wholeness, well-being, and joy to that which is other than God." Blessing involves the provision of those things, spiritual and material, necessary for human beings to reach our highest end. These benefits are received first and foremost as gifts from God, but are then passed on between persons to create an ongoing exchange of blessing which is the origin and the telos of creation as well as the fundamental economy of the heavenly city.

The pattern of blessing narrated in the early chapters of Genesis suggests that blessing thrives in relationships constituted by difference and mutual dependence. Blessing does not circulate within the same but between those whose difference makes possible a sharing of good that neither would possess on his or her own. Thus blessing passes between creator and creature, between man and woman, between parent and child. Human dominion over the earth, insofar as it constitutes one aspect of the human imaging of God (Gen 1:26), involves the ordering of blessing among creatures and between the earth and its inhabitants. In Gen 12 the natural economy of blessing is supplemented by a political economy of blessing. Abraham and Sarah are chosen to parent a nation, a people who will be blessed and who will be a blessing to others. The gift bestowed on this people is not simply to be

4. Ibid., 101–2.
7. The translation of Gen 12:3 is difficult, given that the niphal in 3b can be read as passive or reflexive, thus altering the meaning of the text. Abraham can be seen as either the mediator of blessing (passive voice, i.e., the nations will "be blessed" by Abraham and his offspring) or as example of blessing (reflexive voice, i.e., the nations will "bless themselves" using Abraham's name). Here I follow
returned to God in the form of thankfulness or good works, for such a direct return threatens to nullify the gift by turning it into a contractual exchange constituted by debt. Rather the blessing is to be passed on, extended, allowed to flow through God's people and beyond them. The logic of blessing is not to pay it back but to pay it forward, to disseminate it.

In Genesis God's blessing extends beyond creatures to include time as well. The blessing of the seventh day opens the possibility that we can take time to rest, to enter the slow rhythms of the divine gift that require waiting, patience, and receptivity. A frenetic posture toward time, the fear that there is not enough time or the fear created by "emergency time," defeats blessing because it turns us into those who grasp and hoard rather than those who receive and release. The sabbatical year and the Jubilee year formally structure Israel's economy according to the logic of the blessed time of Sabbath. In the seventh year debt is cancelled and slaves are freed. In the Jubilee year, the seventh seventh year, land that has been sold is returned to its original owners. These measures are intended as ways to keep blessing flowing through the community, to reduce the possibility that the material goods that make human flourishing possible will be hoarded in the hands of a few to the exclusion of others. For those whose misfortune or bad choices have left them in debt or enslaved, there is a fresh start. God refuses to underwrite a polity in which a permanent underclass remains excluded from the goods necessary for human fulfillment.

When slaves are released in the sabbatical year, God commands that they not be sent out "empty-handed." Rather the slave holder is commanded to "provide liberally out of your flock, your threshing floor, and your wine press, thus giving to him some of the bounty with which the Lord your God has blessed you" (Deut 15:13–14). With the giving of blessing comes the expectation that it will be passed on, even, or perhaps especially, to those who in conventional terms have not earned it.

The story of the gift of manna in Exod 16 displays quite nicely the logic of blessing as well as the results of the refusal to allow blessing to flow in excess beyond one's grasp. In response to Israel's cries of hunger in the wilderness, God provides manna, bread for the day (16:14). Each is told to gather only what is needed for the household, no more and no less, so that "those who gathered much had nothing left over, and those who gathered little had no shortage" (16:18). Those Israelites who

Grüneberg, who has persuasively argued for the passive voice reading in Abraham, Blessing and the Nations, 2–3, 176–90. Acts 3:5 and Gal 3:8 support this reading as well, interpreting the extension of blessing to the nations in a christological sense. The reading is also reflected clearly in the Vulgate of Gen 12:3.
took more than they needed for their daily bread learned the next day that blessing hoarded turns it into curse, leaving a spoiled gift of worm-infested fare.

**Spoiling the Gift, Consuming the Blessing: Sin, Fear, and Curse**

This spoiling of gift, which is the refusal to participate in the economy of blessing, echoes the paradigmatic story of curse in the Bible, the fall of humankind in Gen 3. Simone Weil gives a fascinating reading of this story, construing it as an attempt to consume beauty. She writes,

> It may be that vice, depravity, and crime are nearly always, or even perhaps always, in their essence, attempts to eat beauty, to eat what we should only look at. Eve began it. If she caused humanity to be lost by eating the fruit, the opposite attitude, looking at the fruit without eating it, should be what is required to save it.⁸

Weil refuses to let us read this story through a Gnostic lens. When the text tells us that the tree was a “delight to the eyes” (3:6), it is neither denigrating such delight nor equating beauty with temptation. Quite the contrary. The beautiful is meant to be gazed upon, to be delighted in, but it is not meant to be plucked and consumed. A proper response to blessing allows the beauty of another—another person, another object—to exist outside of oneself in such a way that its integrity is maintained and its gifts can be extended. As Augustine reads Gen 3, even the beauty of God becomes an object of human grasping. He observes,

> ... instead of staying still and enjoying [God's beauty and excellence] as it ought to do, [the soul] wants to claim them for itself, and rather than be like [God] by his gift it wants to be what he is by its own right. So it turns away from him and slithers and slides down into less and less which is imagined to be more and more.⁹

Humankind refuses the gift by seeking to grasp and possess it, to consume the beauty that is God rather than patiently receive a blessing that cannot finally come under human control.

Here we begin to see the connections between blessing, curse, and fear. For it is in the story of the first garden, just following the act of consuming the beautiful, that fear enters the story in two forms—the fear of the other and the fear of death,

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each fear symbolized by an act of hiding. The first act of hiding occurs as soon as
the couple's "eyes are opened" and they see that they are naked. They are suddenly
aware that they are laid bare, transparent to one another and to God and they are no
longer comfortable with the vulnerability of their exposed bodies. Once the human
beings have shown themselves willing to transgress the boundaries of God, naked-
ness becomes frightening, since even the boundaries of their bodies no longer seem
secure. So they make clothes and hide from each other.

The second act of hiding occurs when God enters the garden looking for them.
God has stated that if the human beings eat of this tree they will die. So when God
approaches, the human beings hide as if from death itself. Both Adam and Eve seek
to deflect the punishment, each offering up another to be sacrificed, to bear the pun-
ishment of death. It was her fault, Adam says; it was the serpent's fault, Eve says. In
some ways this story in the garden narrates for us all of our fears, for they all return
in one way or another to the fear of death, the fear of the other, and our willingness
to sacrifice the other to make ourselves safe.

God responds to these attempts to deflect death onto the other by pronouncing
a curse on all three of the creatures. For the woman and man the curse strikes at the
point of their own creating, bringing forth children and bringing forth food from
the earth. Those who would sacrifice another for their own security are fated now to
struggle for goods, and those things that should have come as blessing—offspring
and sustenance—are now brought forth in pain. Curse constitutes the reversal, the
dark underside, of the blessing for which humankind was created. As Soulen writes,
"God's curse is simply God's blessing as seen from the backside, that is, as seen from
the perspective of the creature who has repudiated it."

To echo Barth, curse is God's refusal of our refusal to participate in the economy of blessing. In the wake of the
exile from Eden fear becomes an enemy of blessing and thus an enemy of human
happiness. The impulse to hide or to sacrifice the other for one's own sake—i.e.,
the tendency to contract or attack in the face of danger—makes human beings that
much less able or willing to extend themselves in blessing to another.

As the biblical story moves forward, it is disordered fear as much as anything
that keeps humankind trapped in sin and curse, for insofar as self-preservation be-
comes the highest good, humans find themselves unwilling to risk the release of
blessing to another and all the more willing to destroy even potential threats to their
safety. Further, fear tempts humankind to trap blessing in an unending parody of
gift. Goods remain safely managed in a circle of exchange between those who have

and so can give. Jesus’ parable of the great feast challenges this tendency by calling his hearers to host those who cannot repay, to break the gift free from the mannerly exchanges of the well-off and to continue its flow among those whose need makes direct return impossible. Fear tempts us to control and contain. Fear tempts us to withhold blessing from those who cannot repay. In this way, fear perpetuates curse, and it does this, at least in part, through the logic of emergency.

The State of Emergency

Emergency names a particular quality of time that underwrites exceptions to ordinary practice. In an emergency, for instance, we assume that an ambulance will not follow ordinary traffic laws. Thomas Aquinas argued that in an emergency the poor person is justified in taking from the superabundance of the wealthy.\(^\text{11}\) Emergency time changes the rules we live by. The state of emergency is the state in which laws, rights, and liberties are set aside or curtailed in order to engage a pressing threat. It is a sovereign consolidation of power. There is a pragmatic logic to setting aside normal rules and expectations in an emergency, but as philosophers such as Walter Benjamin, Giorgio Agamben, and Slavoj Žižek have argued, the logic of emergency can lead quite easily to the normalizing and exploitation of the exception.\(^\text{12}\)

Consider three examples of how the logic of emergency functions today. First, and most obviously, there is 9/11 and the war on terror. Just after 9/11 Dick Cheney, being interviewed by Tim Russert on “Meet the Press,” said that America was going to have to “work the dark side.” Russert followed up, “There have been restrictions placed on the United States intelligence gathering, reluctance to use unsavory characters, those who violated human rights, to assist in intelligence gathering. Will we lift some of those restrictions?” Cheney responded, “Oh, I think so. I think the—one of the by-products, if you will, of this tragic set of circumstances is that we’ll see a very thorough sort of reassessment of how we operate and the kinds of people we deal with.”\(^\text{13}\) Clearly, we have here an example of the state of emergency being used

\(^{11}\) Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II–II, Q. 66, art. 7


to justify activities that, under other circumstances, would have been ruled out of bounds as acceptable tactics. There are many for whom Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, and even the Iraq war itself stand as prime examples of the exploitation of emergency to consolidate power, throw off moral restraint, and pursue interests that press well beyond a specific response to the actual emergency of 9/11.

George Bush's decision to describe 9/11 as a "war" rather than a "crime" created an ongoing state of emergency in which it has become unclear how we would even know when the "war on terror" is over and when emergency powers should be relinquished. Giorgio Agamben reminds us that "because the sovereign power of the [American] president is essentially grounded in the emergency linked to a state of war, over the course of the twentieth century the metaphor of war becomes an integral part of the presidential political vocabulary whenever decisions considered to be of vital importance are being imposed."\(^{14}\) Richard Nixon's "war on drugs" and Lyndon Johnson's "war on poverty" preceded Bush's "war on terror" in calling for an exceptional response to a crisis, thus requiring a consolidation of powers and decision making which would otherwise be extended across a larger web of conversation and deliberation. While emergency measures may at times be necessary, the questions of which measures and for how long are questions that are rarely asked or answered with much clarity. Part of the problem is that these questions require the kind of deliberation that is precluded by the posture of emergency. Because it demands immediate action, emergency shuts down ordinary processes of deliberation, reflection, and conversation in favor of quick and decisive measures. A state of emergency is a state produced by fear but also productive of fear. We are reminded, for instance, via the Homeland Security Threat Advisory System just how fearful we need to be on a given day.

A second example of the logic of emergency can be found in some of the rhetoric regarding climate change. In recent years the environmental lobby has been more than willing to create a sense of emergency in order to convince people to take seriously issues of climate change. In an article in *Vanity Fair* in 2006 Al Gore wrote,

> The climate crisis may at times appear to be happening slowly, but in fact it is a true planetary emergency. . . . unless we act boldly and quickly to deal with the causes of global warming, our world will likely experience a string of catastrophes. . . . All of this, incredibly, could be set in motion in the lifetime of the children already living—unless we act boldly and quickly. Even more incredibly, some of the leading scientific experts are

now telling us that without dramatic changes we are in grave danger of crossing a point of no return within the next 10 years! So the message is unmistakable. This crisis means danger! ... Today, there are dire warnings that the worst catastrophe in the history of human civilization is bearing down on us, gathering strength as it comes.¹⁵

In a time marked by fear, the language of emergency has become our lingua franca—the standard rhetorical form for all political or activist appeals. The assumption seems to be that if it is not an emergency, we do not have time to think about it. Emergency time drives out precisely the kind of patient reflection needed to respond to something like climate change.

So Gore, while deploying the rhetoric of the age, may also be diminishing the possibility that this issue will receive the kind of sober and sustained analysis it needs. Jérôme Bindé calls this the "tyranny of emergency," which he says, "leaves no time for either analysis, forecasting, or prevention." We sacrifice the "sober quest for long-term solutions" in favor of an "immediate protective reflex." Bindé argues that "Devising any durable response to human problems such as environmental ones requires looking at a situation from a distance and thinking in terms of the future. Conversely, the logic of emergency responds to a need for immediate results and for the direct viability of the efforts made."¹⁶ The central point here is that responding to something like climate change is going to require a thoroughgoing rethinking of our habits and patterns of living that cannot be properly addressed if we allow fear and emergency to drive us to seek quick solutions.

A third example of the tyranny of emergency has arisen in the last few months as we have watched the meltdown of the financial industries on Wall Street. In response to what is by all counts a real moment of crisis, the Bush administration sought to consolidate unprecedented power in the hands of the treasury secretary. The original proposal that was sent to Congress stated that "Decisions by the Secretary [Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson] pursuant to the authority of this Act are non-reviewable and committed to agency discretion, and may not be reviewed by any court of law or any administrative agency." It went on, "The Secretary is authorized to take such actions as the Secretary deems necessary to carry out the authorities in this act, without regard to any other provision of law regarding public contracts." The funding of this proposal would be entirely at the discretion of the Treasury


secretary: "Any funds expended for actions authorized by this Act, including the payment of administrative expenses, shall be deemed appropriated at the time of such expenditure." The mere fact of spending the money constitutes it having been appropriated to be spent—except that no actual appropriation would be going on, because there would be no oversight of the Secretary's actions. As one reporter put it, "[The proposed bill] is the financial equivalent of the Patriot Act."\(^{17}\)

A perpetual state of emergency functions to make our security against some impending evil more important than the goods that we ordinarily hold to constitute our goals as a people, whether those are the democratic goods of public debate and government accountability or the Christian goods of loving God and neighbor. We take refuge in the fantasy that "there is no alternative," that we are driven to these responses by circumstances beyond our control, and that we are victims whose self-protective reflexes cannot and should not be questioned.\(^{18}\)

Part of the church's role in a time like this is to call us back to the critical work of analyzing and judging these reflexes in the light of the gospel. We must ask what sorts of concessions to fear are *pragmatically* warranted? What concessions are *morally* acceptable? Perhaps most importantly, when is the emergency over? At what point do we return life to normal, knowing that even normal life poses risks that cannot be entirely repelled or avoided but which are accepted because they constitute the unavoidable vulnerability of living well as human beings, i.e., living in relations of mutual self-giving and radical reciprocity.

**Courage and Patience**

That emergency time is a threat to the virtue of patience should be a clear and rather straightforward claim. But, I want to argue that it is also a threat to courage, precisely because true courage, as opposed to rashness or recklessness, requires patience. In his discussion of courage (or "fortitude") in the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas argues that "Fortitude is more concerned to allay fear, than to moderate daring. For it is more difficult to allay fear than to moderate daring, since the danger which is the object of daring and fear, tends by its very nature to check daring, but to increase fear." Daring and fear, for Aquinas, correspond to the fight and flight impulses we have in the face of danger. Daring he defines as our tendency to move out against a threat

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while fear is our tendency to withdraw from it. Aquinas continues, “Now to attack belongs to fortitude in so far as the latter moderates daring, whereas to endure follows the repression of fear. Therefore the principal act of fortitude is endurance, i.e., to stand immovable in the midst of dangers rather than to attack them. Endurance is more difficult that aggression” (Summa Theologica, II—II, Q. 123, Art. 6). Since fear naturally moderates our tendency to become rash, that is to be inordinately daring, courage is most needed to moderate fear, which is our tendency to retreat or contract. Thus, real courage is shown primarily in our ability to endure, to stand with fortitude, rather than in our willingness to attack. It is no accident that immediately following his discussion of courage in the Summa Thomas takes up the topic of martyrdom, since Thomas sees the martyr, not the soldier, as the paradigm case of Christian courage. Emergency time is the enemy of courage in so far as it tempts us to think that courage is the same thing as daring, that acting quickly is the same thing as acting wisely, suggesting, in fact, that courage and recklessness are indistinguishable.

Courage not only helps us face our fears with faith, it helps us fend off the temptation to make security our highest good, that is, to make security an idol. This temptation is arguably at the center of the state of emergency, since it suggests that security can be justifiably pursued by any and all means, sacrificing all other goods to this one necessary thing. Yet the gospel calls us away from this logic. Security cannot be the highest good because Christians are not called to pursue existence for its own sake. In the biblical story human beings are created to image God, and if God is the self-giving love of the Trinity, then we only achieve our full humanity by mirroring that vulnerable self-giving love in our own lives and in our communities. As human beings our highest calling is not to be safe but to be good. As Christians, we understand goodness to be a participation in the reign of God which mirrors the trinitarian exchange of blessing.

Gethsemane: Dethroning the Idol of Security

Having begun our reflections in Eden, the first garden that images for us both the peaceful harmony of the Sabbath and the disruption of sin which introduces the fearful temptation to secure ourselves at the expense of the other, we now turn to the second garden, Gethsemane, which marks the starting point of Jesus’ road to the cross. Here we have the only time in the Gospels when Jesus is said to be afraid (ekthambeö). Yet he neither hides nor offers up the other to save himself. Unlike Adam and Eve he moves toward God in his fear; he seeks relief, but his prayer is not
“save me at any cost.” He subordinates his desire for safety—“remove this cup from me”—to his desire to be faithful—“not my will but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). Even here, or especially here, Jesus lives out his own command to “love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you” (Luke 6:47–48). Jesus continues to participate in the economy of blessing despite the fact that his own life is threatened by those who live the way of curse. So when Peter seeks to defend Jesus with a preemptive strike, Jesus rebukes him and heals the slave who was wounded (Luke 22:50–51). Jesus refuses to allow fear to keep him from doing the good, which is to say, he refuses the idolatry of security. He goes to the cross in an act that extends blessing in the face of curse, and he pronounces forgiveness upon those who put him to death.

If the world construes sovereignty in Carl Schmitt’s terms that the sovereign is the one “who decides on the state of exception,” then Jesus is clearly the anti-sovereign king. He tells Pilate in John’s Gospel, “If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here” (John 18:36; cf. Luke 22:25–27). The distinctiveness of Jesus’ kingdom, and thus of his rule, is that he refuses the violence of the sovereign exception, even to save his own life. In so doing he refuses the logic of emergency, though not simply for the sake of a return to normalcy. Rather, Jesus provokes a different kind of crisis through his excess of gift. We might say this excessive gift provokes the true emergency and embodies the true exception, which is the excess of charity.

Writing in Paris in 1940 the German, Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin observed, “The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency.”¹⁹ Just a few months after he wrote these words, the German army took Paris and Benjamin died trying to flee to America. Many philosophers and political theorists have wrestled with the idea of a “true state of emergency,” one that does not foreclose options through coercive power but which offers up new possibilities by breaking open oppressive structures. Slavoj Žižek writes, “When a state institution proclaims a state of emergency, it does so by definition as part of a desperate strategy to avoid the true emergency and return to the ‘normal course of things’ . . . In short, reactionary proclamations of a state of

emergency are a desperate defense against the true state of emergency itself.”  Žižek, among others, has turned to the apostle Paul as one who gives voice to the apocalyptic urgency of a revolutionary messianism—in other words, as one who gestures toward a Christ who exceeds emergency through gift and grace and thus invites us into the risky business of inaugurating the reign of God that is always yet to come.

Christians, then, insofar as we live beyond the constraints of fear, embody a kind of patient and peaceful revolution that is characterized by Paul’s injunction to “bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them” (Rom 12:14). This determination to extend blessing in a world marked by fearful refusal of the gift means that Christians are called to embrace and enact the “true emergency” the true unbalancing of all false economies. There are few cultural voices helping us imagine what it would look like to enter into this kind of risk, but, interestingly, the Harry Potter series has done just that. The children in these stories are allowed to take real risks and face real dangers in a world where goodness is more important than safety. Alan Jacobs observes,

Our culture is so deeply risk-averse, so determined to punish anyone who might cause injury to us or our children, or even might fail to take precautions to prevent us from being injured, that we can scarcely imagine an environment in which risk is so blithely accepted and injuries dealt with so matter-of-factly. But it is just because Hogwarts is a place which allows young people to take such risks—and therefore to test themselves and grow in capability and confidence—that its students and graduates love it so much.

J. K. Rowling has recognized that young people are hungry for the risk from which we work so hard to protect them. They have latched onto the world of Hogwarts because they sense that they are being told the truth, i.e., that risk is unavoidable if we are to be people who love and make friends and keep commitments in a transient and vulnerable world.

We might go further and say that risk is not just unavoidable, but that it brings with it a certain kind of good. Martha Nussbaum helpfully reminds us of the beauty that is made possible by the fragility of goodness. She argues:

There is in fact a loss in value whenever the risks involved in specifically human virtue are closed off. There is a beauty in the willingness to love

20. Žižek, "Are we in a war?

someone in the face of love's instability and worldliness that is absent from a completely trustworthy love. There is a certain valuable quality in social virtue that is lost when social virtue is removed from the domain of uncontrolled happenings.  

So, as vulnerable creatures, we can embrace risk, embrace a properly ordered fear, as a gift that helps us seize the moment to love, to rejoice, and to embrace the good.

Jesus calls his followers to renounce the false security of violence and power and so to risk everything in order to gain everything—or, as he puts it, to lose life in order to find it. Jesus calls his followers to embrace an ethic of risk even as the culture of fear views risk-taking as morally questionable. Jesus calls his followers to participate in God’s economy in such a way that the blessings poured out upon them continue to circulate, not only across the differences of gender, race, tribe, and nation, but across chasms of fear and through walls of hate. We are left with two gardens and two choices in the face of fear. One is to hide and sacrifice the other for our own safety, making security our highest good; the other is to embrace a cruciform ethic of risk, losing our lives to find them, extending blessing in the face of curse because we trust that our true flourishing comes not from controlling or consuming the good but from extending it.
