

I picked up our granddaughter from dance. It was after 8:00 pm in late October in Vermont; darkness covered the earth. The closer we came to her home in the country, the darker it became and I remarked, “Where we live, it never gets this dark.”

She was born and raised in northern Vermont and found that hard to believe. If it weren't for high beams, I couldn't see far enough down the winding dirt roads to drive more than 25 miles an hour. Her eyes, more accustomed to the dark, spotted deer on the side of the road, ready to cross.

We live in a world saturated with light, with artificial light, a virtual world which we inhabit more comfortably than the dark and winding roads of reality. Luminaries, lives that reveal perspectives and horizons that are unpredictable and enriching, abide in the shadows of TikTok and Instagram stars.

John says one life held the light of creation and this life became the light of the world. Francis Spufford tells the story of this life slant. Imagine a man, he says, in whom the overwhelming, all-at-once perspective of the God of everything is a continual presence.

He sees the world at every moment with the thwarted tenderness of its creator. He's the creator in the midst of the thing made, in the place where he will be subject like the rest of us to the logic of biology, and the logic of human politics, and the logics of fear and loss and uncertainty.

What does he look like? No idea. No one is ever going to write down a description. He's made a male Jew in first-century Palestine, so he's probably bearded, a bit smelly by modern standards, and quite short. He is in his early thirties in an age of hard labor and rudimentary medicine, when the average life expectancy is forty-something, so he may well be rather worn out and middle-aged. But we don't know.

His name is Yeshua, later Latinized as “Jesus.” What has he come for? To say some things; to do some things. The place he has come to is a province of the empire, an empire that controls much of the known world. The empire has owned it for two generations, but it has not been independent for much longer. Before this empire there was another one, and another one before that.

The imperial authorities rule as much as possible at arm's length, using the local proxies left over from the previous empire as their proxies. They police with a light touch. But the inhabitants hate the empire anyway. What they want is what the empire will not give them: independence. So the province simmers.

The high officials of the one God's temple perform a difficult balancing act, trying to keep the people happy while trying to keep the occupiers sweet so they don't take away even more of the province's limited autonomy. Low-level terrorism flourishes, followed by example-setting public executions.

Preachers and would-be prophets are everywhere, prominent for a season and then gone. Some people say the rules of purity should be even stricter. Some people say you should abandon everything and go into the desert. A lot of people think the world will end soon; fear it will end soon; hope it will end soon, because then a more than human justice may put things right.

All the time, there are whispered rumors of someone, somewhere, claiming to be the one to start a holy war and get the kingdom back. The religion has made a space for this figure, the man whom the God of everything will choose to lead this uprising. He is called “the anointed one.” His title translates as *christos*.

In summer the tension gets specially bad; and also at festivals, which are supposed to celebrate things being right, and make it feel much worse that they aren't. The soldiers are jumpy and resentful too. They don't like it here. The locals are loons. Say the wrong thing, eat the wrong thing, touch the wrong thing—any little thing can kick off a riot. Any moment, some teenage boy may try to stab you with a kitchen knife.

Into this setting comes Yeshua and he says: don't be careful. He certainly isn't careful himself. He and his friends come wandering into town on the holy Saturday when you're not supposed to work or travel, or to do anything much, and they're chewing and laughing, they're picnicking in the street as they stroll along.

Challenged, he says (with his mouth full) that the rules are for the people, not the people for the rules. When crowds gather, to check out this new source of entertainment or outrage, to see if he's conducting himself like a teacher or a prophet or just possibly like a revolutionary looking for recruits—when crowds gather, he sits them down in the sheep pasture, and he says: behave as if you never had to be afraid of the consequences.

Behave as if nothing you ever gave away could make you poorer, because you can never run out of what you give. Behave as if *this* day were the whole of time, and you didn't have to hold anything back, or to plot and scheme about tomorrow. Don't try to grip your life with tight, anxious hands. Unclench those fingers. Let it go.

If someone asks for help, give them more than they've ask for. If someone strikes out at you, let them. Don't retaliate. Be the place the violence ends. Life flourishes from behaving, so far as you can, like God, who makes and makes and loves and loves and is never diminished in the giving and the loving.

God doesn't want your calculating virtue; God wants your reckless generosity. Try to keep what you have, and you'll lose even that. Give it away, and you'll get back more than bargaining could ever get you.

By the way, you want a king? Look at the flower there by the wall. More beautiful than any royal robe, don't you think? Better than silks; and it comes bursting out of the ground all by itself, free and gratis. It won't last? Nothing lasts; nothing but God.

When we catch a glimpse of the reality revealed by Yeshua, it is easy to understand why we prefer virtual reality, why would rather remain in the dark. Light always has a source: a candle, a street lamp, the sun and other stars, a life. But what of darkness?

John says the source of darkness lies within us, in our resistance to the light, more specifically, to the reality revealed by the light. Our resistance is futile. The light that is the life of the world cannot be conquered. Reality will not, cannot, bend to our will.

Owning our resistance to giving and loving like God is the beginning of hope for our redemption.