

# An Exilic Landscape

*Postville, Iowa*

*To be a diaspora church means that there is no longer any discernible difference between missiology and ecclesiology.*

—DANIEL L. SMITH-CHRISTOPHER<sup>1</sup>

In June 2010, on the way home from a denominational meeting in Minneapolis, I decided to make a short detour to Postville, Iowa, about an hour or so north of our home in Dubuque. I wanted a firsthand look at this otherwise unremarkable town that had become the epicenter of a national debate on the issue of illegal immigration.

Almost two years before, on 12 May 2008, Immigration, Control, and Enforcement (ICE) agents descended on Agriprocessors, Inc., in Postville, which at one time served as the nation's largest supplier of kosher beef. On that day, while black helicopters circled above, ICE used several dozen agents from sixteen local, state, and federal agencies to arrest nearly four hundred undocumented workers, sending the small town into a tailspin from which it has yet to recover.<sup>2</sup> The dynamics leading up to this raid go back at least as far as 1987, when Aaron Rubashkin and about two hundred Hasidic Jews moved to Postville from New York, reopening a defunct meatpacking plant with the help of cheap labor imported from all over the globe. Agriprocessors

1. DANIEL L. SMITH-CHRISTOPHER, *A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF EXILE* (MINNEAPOLIS: FORTRESS PRESS, 2002), 202.

2. Nigel Duara, William Petroski, and Grant Schulte, "Claims of Fraud Lead to Largest Raid in State History," *Des Moines Register*, 12 May 2008, <http://www.desmoinesregister.com/print/article/20080512/NEWS/80512012/Claims-ID-fraud-lead-largest-raid-state-history>.

and its workers helped turn Postville into a veritable Midwestern boomtown, effectively reversing decades-long trends of decline. But like other “boom” economies, this one was also deeply flawed, as later court proceedings would demonstrate.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, according to the *Des Moines Register*, the arrival of Agriprocessors turned this community of just over two thousand people into one of Iowa’s most diverse cities.<sup>4</sup> Diversity wasn’t the only thing Agriprocessors brought to Postville: it also thrust Postville into the eye of the national debate about illegal immigration, a debate that reached a dramatic climax with the ICE raid of 2008.

The U.S. attorney for the Northern District of Iowa, Matt M. Dumeroth, declared the 2008 raid “the largest operation of its type ever in Iowa.”<sup>5</sup> The Postville school superintendent, David Strudthoff, likened the arrest of more than 10 percent of the town’s population of 2,300 to a “natural disaster—only this one [was] manmade.”<sup>6</sup> Others, like Antonio Escobedo and his wife, went into hiding, taking refuge inside St. Bridget’s Catholic Church of Postville along with hundreds of other Guatemalan and Mexican families hoping to avoid arrest.<sup>7</sup> On the day of the arrests, then mayor Robert Penrod repeated ICE assurances that “kids [of undocumented workers] were going to be taken care of.” Penrod believed that most people in town understood the economic value of Agriprocessors. But, he added, “there’s people who hate the Hispanics, and there’s people who don’t like the Jews and would like to run them out of town.”<sup>8</sup>

3. Workers alleged a variety of abuses at the plant. At the time of the raid, the Department of Labor was conducting an investigation of labor abuses at the plant. Most of the witnesses for that investigation were arrested and many deported, thus subordinating human rights to legal status (see note 12 below). One of these abuses included a charge that a supervisor blindfolded a Guatemalan worker with duct tape and hit him with a meat hook. Duara, Petroski, and Schulte, “Claims of Fraud.” See for other examples of exploitation, Julia Preston, “Life Sentence Is Debated for Meat Plant Ex-Chief,” *New York Times*, 28 April 2010, [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/29/us/29postville.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/29/us/29postville.html?_r=0). A follow-up story by Liz Goodwin notes that fifty-seven minors were employed there, one as young as thirteen years of age and “many . . . said they had been physically or sexually abused at the plant.” See Liz Goodwin, “Years after Immigration Raid, Iowa Town Feels Poorer and Less Stable,” *Lookout*, 7 December 2011, <http://news.yahoo.com/blogs/lookout/years-immigration-raid-iowa-town-feels-poorer-less-133035414.html>.

4. Duara, Petroski, and Schulte, “Claims of ID Fraud.”

5. *Ibid.*

6. Spencer S. Hsu, “Immigration Raid Jars a Small Town,” *Washington Post*, 18 May 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/05/17/AR2008051702474.html>.

7. Hsu, “Immigration Raid Jars a Small Town.”

8. Duara, Petroski, and Schulte, “Claims of ID Fraud.”

Churches in the area seemed likewise conflicted by the raid, maybe even more so than the general public. Rev. Lloyd Paul Ouderkirk, the parish priest of St. Bridget's Catholic Church, the church where many sought sanctuary during the raids, expressed outrage in October of the same year, saying, "I think every elected politician—no exceptions—should bow their heads in shame." As he was speaking to a reporter, about two dozen women, along with two men, began arriving at St. Bridget's. They were among those released by ICE on humanitarian grounds because they were parents to American citizens. But their release hardly meant liberation, the electronic ankle bracelets they wore bearing mute testimony to their captivity. "They walk the streets here monitored wherever they go," said Ouderkirk. "They can't leave, they can't work, they all have children. So effectively, they are prisoners in our town and in this parish."<sup>9</sup>

St. Paul's Lutheran Church in downtown Postville had this plaintive account of the raids on their website almost four years after the event:

On May 12, 2008, an immigration raid executed against the Agriprocessors meatpacking plant in Postville led to the arrest of 389 members of our community. The impact of the raid continues to be felt to this day. Families were torn apart, the majority of those arrested were given criminal identity theft charges and forced to serve five month jail terms. Dozens of women were released with GPS tracking devices [*sic*] affixed to their ankles. One year after the raid many were still wearing those devices as they waited for their cases to be dealt with by the judicial system. Some family members who were arrested had lived in Postville for 15 years. The raid has done little to curb illegal immigration at an enormous cost to taxpayers. The raid has done much to destroy the economic viability of Postville. The removal of so many workers at one time made it impossible for Agriprocessors to recover. The owners declared bankruptcy within five months of the raid. While our town has been devastated by the raid, the residents of Postville and its civic and religious organizations continue to work together to build a future for our town.<sup>10</sup>

9. Wayne Drash, "Priest: 'Nobody Can Tell Me to Shut Up,'" CNN U.S., 15 October 2008, [http://articles.cnn.com/2008-10-15/us/postville.priest\\_1\\_meatpacking-plant-illegal-immigrants-postville?\\_s=PM:US](http://articles.cnn.com/2008-10-15/us/postville.priest_1_meatpacking-plant-illegal-immigrants-postville?_s=PM:US).

10. St. Paul's Lutheran Church (Postville, IA), "Our Ministries: Immigration Reform," <http://stpaulpostville.org/immigration.html>.

The confusion and outrage of churches is understandable, especially when people are being turned into meat, officially processed for deportation. But in truth, the undocumented were treated that way to begin with, as human supplements to a hungry financial system. The raid only turned that raw flesh out into the street, dumping it into the public square where no one could ignore it.

In what Allison L. McCarthy, a legal scholar, calls a “sad irony,” the people ICE arrested in the slaughterhouse of Postville were delivered by police-escorted tour buses to the National Cattle Congress in Waterloo, a place normally used to show livestock. This would serve as temporary detention center and makeshift courthouse.<sup>11</sup> The detainees were then thrust into a process of “expedited justice” or “fast tracking,” a legal procedure criticized by Professor Erik Camayd-Freixas for treating immigrant workers “like the livestock prepared for slaughter at Agriprocessors . . . efficiently packaged, convicted, and ordered deported.”<sup>12</sup>

Driving into Postville two years later, I saw just one stoplight on the main street and hardly any traffic. The apocalyptic raid, black helicopters, and swarms of police of two years ago seemed remote, something out of Hollywood. The town almost seemed abandoned; I wondered whether I would see or hear anything at all. I parked the car and walked into the Taste of Mexico restaurant on Lawler Street. From the looks of the 1950s-style booths and tables, it was probably once a typical diner, a greasy spoon, hole-in-the-wall café. On that day, true to its name if not to its decor, I sat down to chorizo tacos, black beans, and a cilantro-rich salsa. My booth faced out onto the street, and in the space of forty-five minutes, I watched as a Latina pushed a baby carriage through the crosswalk, a toddler clinging to the hem of her dress; noted a Somali Muslim stroll down the sidewalk; observed a White family packed into the cab of a beat-up truck, waiting at the intersection; and saw two Hasidic Jews, dressed in traditional black garb, walking along the same street, all of them betraying familiarity with those streets, spaces they seemed to inhabit with confidence.

As I took this in, I also struck up a conversation with a middle-aged White male, shoulder-length hair, unshaven, his shirt (a work uniform) open to his

11. Allison L. McCarthy, “The May 12, 2008 Postville, Iowa Immigration Raid: A Human Rights Perspective,” *Transnational Law and Contemporary Problems* 19 (Winter 2010): 295, [http://www.uiowa.edu/~tlcp/TLCP\\_Articles/19-1/mccarthy.finalfinal.mlb.022710.pdf](http://www.uiowa.edu/~tlcp/TLCP_Articles/19-1/mccarthy.finalfinal.mlb.022710.pdf).

12. The focus on immigration status rather than human rights led to the deportation of nearly three hundred potential witnesses to an ongoing U.S. Department of Labor investigation into labor violations, including the violation of child labor laws, by Agriprocessors. See McCarthy, “Immigration Raid: A Human Rights Perspective,” 299.

waist, who came in a few minutes after I did. The only two people in the restaurant, separated by one table, we began a halting conversation. At first we talked about the food but eventually the conversation moved toward how he had come to live and work in Postville. He explained that he had taken one of the jobs at Agri Star Meat and Poultry, the company that eventually took ownership of the plant after Agriprocessors declared bankruptcy. Now, when he wasn't working at Agri Star, he stayed in a rented apartment nearby. And he was lonely, in some ways the most displaced person in that whole town. He wondered out loud whether he should join his sister in Wyoming, and how long he might stay in Postville. Like a piece of driftwood, he was stranded on a nameless beach, only waiting for the tide of happenstance to pull his narrative into its currents once more, to let this place and this story disappear, swallowed up by the waters. His story resembles the stories of the terminally poor, who take up temporary residence in church-supported homeless shelters as they drift from one low-paying job to the next, dulling the absence of roots with alcohol, often traveling on bus tickets purchased on their behalf by employee-starved businesses, but never finding a home, never a land to grow.

#### EXILES: LOST IN TRANSLATION

While Postville may be unique in some respects, in many others it looks like a lot of other “typical” towns and cities across North America along with their “typical” constellations of churches and church-supported charities. The raid only made Postville into the most obvious display of the commodification and consumption of peoples, both at home and abroad. The churches that were confronted by this experience offered mixed responses. On the one hand, at least one church, St. Bridget's, served as political sanctuary of last resort as people fled persecution. One wonders how the church embodied political sanctuary before the raids. At a minimum it served as belated political sanctuary, but where was the witness of the church when Agriprocessors violated child labor laws, among others? Given the way the undocumented employees identified the church as sanctuary, it might have been aware of ongoing exploitative practices by the company itself. Even if it was not aware of exploitation by Agriprocessors, those who took refuge in St. Bridget's clearly viewed the church as political sanctuary. This is a good sign. But it only begs the question: what of the church's relationship to the financial system? To what extent was the church an agent of resistance and transformation in this regard? Positively, the outcry of the churches, ranging from the almost startled outrage of St. Bridget's to the conflicted response of the St. Paul's congregation, suggests their sensitivity to narratives of socioeconomic displacement and deportation.

Whether consciously or unconsciously, their communities are inextricably linked to that of the exile. At the same time, their belated outrage and transparently conflicted response to actual exiles suggest a struggle to respond to those narratives in a coherent manner. A mixed response to narratives of exile in itself is hardly unusual; in one sense that is the definition of exile, the unmaking of coherence.<sup>13</sup> But that loss of coherent *theological response* to exile by churches does suggest that congregations are struggling to link their life as “spiritual” exiles to those who are actually exiled.

This loss becomes all the more difficult to reconcile when we take into account the burgeoning literature on the theology of exile. These days, few can pass through seminary without being reminded of the church’s decline, its disestablishment, its cultural irrelevance, its peculiar narrative, and so on. Few, if any, entertain notions that the church still enjoys the cultural privileges of Christendom. We talk about exile as if it were second nature, and yet, when confronted by actual exilic experience, the church seems, at best, startled and confused, uncertain about the way it ought to respond or, at worst, unresponsive, as if it didn’t exist at all. One would think that, having been exposed to at least two decades’ worth of exilic scholarship, there would be some sense of coherent response. But, if Postville is any indication, that coherency is in short supply.

How did this come about? When did we start thinking of exile almost exclusively in terms of its symbolic quality rather than in its concrete substance? How did the church come to segregate its “spiritual” reflections on exile from those who actually experience exile? What are some of the tacit sociological assumptions behind prominent spiritualities and ecclesiologies of exile? And what are the consequences?

Perhaps one clue to the exile of exile appears in Gary Eberle’s book *The Geography of Nowhere: Finding One’s Self in the Postmodern World*.<sup>14</sup> Eberle uses the metaphor of a map as a way of charting the “spiritual geography of the modern and post-modern world.” The map, he claims, represents the way world religions, myths, and rituals organizes a chaos of experience into a field of meaning. As metaphor, it is not, in itself, constitutive: “You must know that highways are not blue and red lines, that bridges are not inverted parentheses. .

13. Elaine Scarry, in *The Body in Pain* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1985), speaks of how, when the body is systematically tortured, it unmakes the human being. Torture, she argues, is a systematic act of unmaking the creation. Likewise, exile as a political, ethnic, and economic construction “unmakes” human wholeness, human community.

14. Gary Eberle, *The Geography of Nowhere: Finding One’s Self in the Postmodern World* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1994).

. . .” His point is straightforward: “There is always a danger in this business that one can begin to confuse the metaphor with what it describes, to take the map for the landscape it represents.” However, when he wants to help his readers see this spiritual exile, he draws from socially and politically located analogies, in effect constituting our experience of displacement in the rhetoric of colonialism: “Spiritually, I believe, we are in the position of those early cartographers, the first to reach what they called The New World. . . . We, too, stand at the edge of a brave new continent. After past centuries of ‘progress’ we seem to have found ourselves in the middle of a dark forest with no stars, no discernible landmarks to guide us or locate us in space or time with any accuracy.”<sup>15</sup>

The problem with this metaphor is twofold. First, it uses the colonialist rhetoric that was the ideological basis for the dehumanization of indigenous peoples in the Americas. The characterization of the “new world” as “a dark forest, with no stars, no discernible landmarks” is based largely on the assumed ignorance of the “native” population, that they have no culture, or at least no culture capable of slowing or rivaling the expansion of a “new” empire. The inhabitants of the “new world” have no intrinsic worth. This in itself should be a troubling move, since it evokes the memory of a massive cultural and ethnic genocide, one that arguably continues to this day.

Second, when Eberle warns us not to confuse the “map” for the reality, he makes the mistake of believing that metaphors do not contribute to the formation of reality. Metaphors invariably contribute to the formation of reality just as they contribute to the formation of meaning. A striking example of this appears when we think of what is commonly taken as the “metaphor” of the U.S. citizen: mostly White, probably male. That this contributes to the formation of reality was suggested when, some years ago, a newspaper reported that U.S. immigration officials rejected the applications of Asian-African-American descendants of African American soldiers in Vietnam and Korea. The reason? They did not “look” American. In this instance, immigration officials screened out those whose physiognomy did not fit the metaphor of the U.S. citizen, a metaphor that was, at heart, a political construction designed to preserve and perpetuate the myth of American whiteness. The point: metaphors are never politically innocent, never merely decorative, but always contribute to the formation of meaning that, in turn, shapes (or prescribes) our understanding of what it means to be human and in community.

15. Eberle, *Geography of Nowhere*, 144.

Diana Butler Bass, who has written extensively on what she claims is a resurgence among mainline, left-of-center congregations, shows similar problems. One of Bass's favorite metaphors for the exilic experience is that of the tourist being transformed into the pilgrim.<sup>16</sup> Churches that innovate will be in the business of turning tourists into pilgrims: "In an age of fragmentation, it may well be the case that the vocation of congregations is to turn tourists into pilgrims—those who no longer journey aimlessly, but, rather, those who journey in God and whose lives are mapped by the grace of Christian practices."<sup>17</sup>

A tourist, in this context, counts as a metaphor for exile, but, as metaphor, it draws from actual political and economic assumptions about life: "Being a tourist takes us outside of daily life, and when we are at the beach, we know that we experience the place in an entirely different way than do the year-round locals."<sup>18</sup> But a tourist, as William Cavanaugh points out, depends on the figure of the migrant, its countersign: "Tourism is the aesthetic of globalism in both its economic and political forms."<sup>19</sup> Tourism, as a form of consumerism, is impossible without systems in place to perpetuate the migrant's poverty and captivity.<sup>20</sup>

Sometimes Bass pairs the word "tourist" with its socially marginalized counterparts, "vagrant" or "nomads," but even here she speaks of people whose lives, in terms of socioeconomic class and educational background, remain at some remove from actual poverty. At one point, she uses the tourist metaphor anachronistically (a tourist is a quintessentially modern figure) and confusingly: "Ancient and medieval church history is rife with accounts of vagrants and tourists, mostly people [including "tourists"?] uprooted by social turmoil and war, who find their way to monasteries for temporary shelter or safety and wind up as novices, later to become brothers and sisters"<sup>21</sup> She compares the spiritual nomad's pilgrimage to commercial air travel: "The plane [tourists take in order to be transformed into a pilgrim identity] lands to be refueled or, perhaps, to tinker with the mechanics. These pilgrims understand that, in the contemporary

16. Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004), 59–63, 102. See also Diana Butler Bass and Joseph Stewart-Sticking, eds., *From Nomads to Pilgrims: Stories from Practicing Congregations* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2006), xi–xiii, 176.

17. Bass, *Practicing Congregation*, 60.

18. Bass, *From Nomads to Pilgrims*, xii.

19. William Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2011), 77.

20. Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy*, 72–79.

21. Bass, *The Practicing Congregation*, 61.

world, the gospel means that one never finally arrives”—or perhaps ever actually “lands” in anything remotely like exilic reality.<sup>22</sup>

It is not as if Bass is unsympathetic to justice concerns. She points to experiences of not only spiritual nomads but also “nomads [who] were strangers—children, the unchurched, gay and lesbian members, the homeless, artist, or social justice activists—seeking to connect with God.”<sup>23</sup> More promisingly, she has this to say about actual homelessness and those who experience themselves as only figuratively homeless: “It intrigued us to see how many of the congregations had ministries serving the homeless. Many people mentioned how, despite the fact that they live in houses, that they, too, ‘felt homeless’ and experienced a surprising kinship to the actual homeless people they befriended.”<sup>24</sup> Some of the contributors to *From Nomads to Pilgrims* allowed the exilic experience to shape ecclesiological identity. J. Mari Luti of First Church, Cambridge, for instance, chronicles the way the church acknowledged and then sought to address the absence of children in how they imagined the church: “We began to realize,” she writes, “that a new focus on kids would not be just for the kids’ sake, but for everybody’s. We felt called to reshape our community to ensure *everyone* an honored place.”<sup>25</sup> And yet, with Bass, this seems mostly like a one way street, the experiences of the poor enriching the figuratively poor: “. . . Homeless people had taught them [spiritual nomads] about the spiritual life, trust, stewardship, healing, and commitment.”<sup>26</sup> When Bass announces that in each of the congregational case studies, “the pastor and people sought to create or renew a congregation that would touch the lives of spiritual nomads—serving as spiritual bridges from the nomadic life to a life of faithful discipleship,” one gets the distinct sense that these bridges, at least in her own mind, were being built predominantly for the spiritual benefit of one socioeconomic class.<sup>27</sup>

22. *Ibid.*, 101–2.

23. Diana Butler Bass, “Conclusion,” in *Nomads to Pilgrims*, 168.

24. *Ibid.*, 172.

25. J. Mary Luti, “Enlarging Hospitality: Where Are the Children,” in *Nomads to Pilgrims*, 37 (emphasis in original).

26. Bass, “Conclusion,” 172.

27. *Ibid.*, 168 (my italics). While not all the communities represented in *Nomads to Pilgrims* were affluent, many of the contributors ministered in places of significant economic privilege. They bear names (chosen at random) like Cornerstone United Methodist Church in Naples, Florida (median income in the City of Naples, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, ,322); First Church Congregational in Cambridge, Massachusetts (median income in the city of Cambridge, ,420); Scottsdale Congregational United Church of Christ in Scottsdale, Arizona (median income the city of Scottsdale, ,040). Another contributor served a church in Xenia, Ohio, where the Census Bureau reports a median income of ,741

While a critical reading of the language of exile is important in order to name the problem that makes a book like the present one necessary, the purpose here is not primarily critical but rather, in the best sense of the word, imaginative. Imagination, true, betrays a critical element, just as parables of Jesus evoke critical reflection. But the lasting and revelatory quality of Jesus' parables is not so much found in the *world they criticize* as in the *world they imagine*. The heart of this work is not primarily to critique the church or churches, but to imagine a church in the borderlands by joining communities that forge their worship and witness amid actual exilic realities. These communities, the interactions between the church and the world they imagine, supply something like a "parabolic" expression of being the church in America's borderlands. They do offer criticism, but even more they offer communally dynamic and contemporary evocations of God becoming human in our time and place.

#### METHOD, COMMUNITIES, AND ORGANIZATION

The following chapters entangle the theological imagination with the realities of exile in order to energize a deeper knowledge of what it means to be the church in the twenty-first century. Each chapter includes metaphors that evoke the character of being the church at worship in exile. Through metaphor, they probe the boundaries and borders of our ecclesiological, political, and economic imaginations. I offer them as personal narrations that remain open rather than conclusive, invitational rather than decisive, creative rather than exhaustive. In this way, I hope they feel a bit like the reflective life of the local church even though they are exposed or disclosed in settings of exilic experience. They reflect interaction between the realities of exile and theologically laden activities—namely, worship, and witness in the borderlands. They do not replace theological thought but make theological thought possible. Soundings of sociological and political exile will be made, but these will be undertaken in the framework of a pastoral theology.

A word about the method of research: interviews were digitally recorded wherever indicated. Otherwise, the quotes were written down, again as indicated in the notes. In some cases, interviewees requested that they not be identified. In those instances where interviewees might experience reprisals,

(see <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/index.html>). The Census Bureau reports considerably lower percentages of non-White peoples residing in the wealthier cities as compared to outlying regions. See for example the statistics for Scottsdale, Arizona, at <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/04/0465000.html>.

I have also changed identifying details. Members of the communities also reviewed the chapters that dealt with them.

My main point of contact with the communities that make up the bulk of this book was through their leaders or the visionaries behind the communities. They, however, were not my primary or exclusive concern. Although the background of these visionaries figured as part of my research, my main focus was on the communities themselves and how they gained expression through metaphor, symbol, and practice.

### *THE COMMUNITIES*

The communities that supply the narratives of this book were formed out of a theological promise to exiles and as practical antidotes to different exilic realities: among Latina and Latino peoples in the borderlands of the Southwest, among the histories of the Nez Perce people in North America, and with the urban poor of the upper Midwest. Though different in contexts and challenges, they share at least two distinguishing characteristics: they are each innovative in worship and striking in the act of witness. Witness and worship, sending and gathering are mutually interdependent within these communities. As each of these communities gathers to worship, one witnesses its distinctive sending; and as each of these communities sends, one anticipates its imminent act of gathering. The dynamic relationship between the gathering and sending evidenced in these communities tests not only the boundaries of the principalities and powers but, crucially, the boundaries we have come to inhabit as normative for the life of the local church. They suggest the diaphanous nature of boundaries, the porous relationship between sending and gathering, witness and worship, the permeability of spirit and skin. They offer tantalizing glimpses into one part of what is being called the missional church, a broad movement in scope and diversity. Because these communities arise out of specific contexts of exile, they represent particular expressions of the missional church. These communities live and thrive on the sidewalks, reservations, and underpasses of North American society by inscribing cultures of deportation with the witness of God's sending and gathering activity.

### *THEOLOGICAL ORIENTATION*

The image of the indigenous person, the way they appeared or were portrayed around the period that historical anthropologists call the era of "first contact," best captures my theological orientation. This was a period that "clothed" the bodies of Native peoples with a "mixture" of indigenous and Western textiles and implements. Posing to be photographed by a missionary or an

anthropologist, Native peoples would combine Western jackets and boots, a conspicuous timepiece on a chain, perhaps a book resting on one knee, together with beadwork and headdresses, flowing hair, body tattoos and piercings, a center-fire rifle, and perhaps, just visible, the handle of a knife for closer, more intimate contact. The juxtaposition and violence of those symbols suggest the conflict of cultures and, more ominously, the colonization and disfigurement of Native peoples by White North America.<sup>28</sup> Another way of thinking about this odd jumble of symbols emerges when we think of these images as glimpses of exilic personhood. The exilic person, denied the privilege of purity, chooses instead the language of adoption, innovation, and boundary crossing. At the same time, exilic personhood practices a form of cultural salvage, recovering what still can be recovered and letting go, at least for the time being, what cannot be retained. This kind of activity reflects a decision to survive but to do so with dignity.

Theologically, the political and ethnic exile chooses something analogous, though not on the same order, to what Paul chooses when he invokes the body of a lactating woman in order to evoke the nature of his body in relation to the church as an apostle of the crucified God. Paul tells the churches that compared to the surpassing richness of knowing Christ Jesus, everything he knew and valued before—class, education, ethnicity, labors, gender—was as good as nothing and worse (Phil. 3:4-8). At this point, Paul sounds like an exile. In fact, he speaks as an exile, yet he does so with none of the despair or loss of coherence characteristic of exile. This is not the nakedness of exploitation but the nakedness with which one receives the sacrament of Baptism. And yet, at the same time, his new identity strains for a more fitting garment, a garment of celebration, a robe of honor, but a robe of unusual honor.

Beverly Gaventa's provocatively titled book, *Our Mother St. Paul*, asks us to reconsider the metaphors Paul employs to explain his relationship to the churches as well as his experience of a new humanity in Christ. For example, in 1 Thess. 2:7, Paul speaks metaphorically of his embodied relationship to the church as a lactating woman, the apostle's breasts ripe and swollen, nipples dripping with the milk of the gospel. Writing on Paul's use of this metaphor in 1 Cor. 3:1-2, Gaventa makes the following connection: "Paul compromises

28. Arguing from the standpoint of cultural-ethnic agency, these photos reflect culturally significant practices of adoption by Native peoples. When "adopting" Western clothing and technology, Native peoples were acting as Native people, doing what they had done for thousands of years: adopting new technologies, befriending new trading partners, and so on. When confronted with the threat of Babylonian deportation, some become martyrs; others plant gardens, marry, raise children. Either way you go, it remains a tragic and moral decision.

his own standing as a ‘real man.’ . . . [not unlike] the crucified Jesus, who is no more a ‘real man’ by the world’s standards than is a nursing Paul.”<sup>29</sup> The very incongruity of the apostolic metaphor, according to Gaventa, seems oddly fitting to one who serves in the name of Jesus Christ, the crucified God.

Paul’s metaphoric self-description also supplies a hint as to the character of the witness and worship of the faith community created by Christ, the way church acts as an antidote to exile amid exilic conditions. The church, constituted as it is by Christ, acts as a sojourner in this world, a stranger in a far country. Who or what can compare to the surpassing knowledge of God’s love in Jesus Christ? Thus, without any creaturely standard adequate to its Lord, the church seems, in one sense, to be naked, like the exile. However, unlike the destitution of the stranger, the sojourning body of Christ nurtures the drama of our humanization, clothing our naked humanity with joyful foretastes of the new creation amid the world’s ruins. Those “foretastes” of the new creation find evocation through alternative liturgy, politics, and economy. The beloved community may struggle, but it struggles in the knowledge that its victory is already won. The anthropology that ultimately counts in the economy of God’s salvation is the anthropology of the crucified God.

#### *ORGANIZATION*

Each chapter builds on biblical and sociopolitical contexts of exile, exploring how worshipping communities interact with those settings, creating spaces amid the narrow places of the borderlands. These thick evocations of place and witness serve as catalysts for theological reflection on the nature of the church today. Chapter 2, “House of the Butterfly,” introduces the contemporary problem of exile through a reading of the book of Ruth as a narrative of migration and, theologically, as a narrative of unlikely return. Chapter 3, “Desert Shrines,” builds on the theology of return in the book of Ruth as it looks at different constellations of the act of returning, both north and south of the U.S. border with Mexico, as represented by the activities of No More Deaths and Frontera de Cristo, the latter being a bi-national mission of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Presbytery of Chihuahua, Mexico. Chapter 4, “A Broken Benediction,” critiques Christendom models of Christian community through an alternative reading of Matthew’s Gospel, especially focusing on Matthew’s community as an alternative to the violence and exclusivity of the Roman Empire. Chapter 5, “A Labyrinth of the Streets,”

29. Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 50.

focuses on concrete expressions of exilic spirituality, especially as they are embodied in the peacemaking and alternative economics represented in the Cherith Brook Catholic Worker House in Kansas City, Missouri. Chapter 6, “Changing Clothes,” introduces a theology of clothing and nakedness. Employing narratives of Native American assimilation as a form of coerced “stripping” or “skinning,” this chapter taps into biblical metaphors of nakedness and adornment, especially in the way God, electing nakedness in Christ, clothes the human condition with the compassion and mercy of Christ. With this pattern of Christ’s self-emptying, the community is both “externalized” in its “naked” or unapologetic relation to the crucified God and “clothed” through the companionship of Christ and cross. Rev. Irvin Porter (Pima, T’hono O’dham, Nez Perce), pastor of the Church of the Indian Fellowship, situated on a reservation in Puyallup, Washington, supplies a firsthand account of First Nations worship, holding together the painful history of missions, the particular struggles of Native Christians in North America, and symbols that evoke Christ becoming human for, among, and as indigenous peoples. This chapter points to the dangerous proximity between Baptism and Babylon, lament and doxology, in order to show the never-quite-finished work of mending the torn fabric of identity through the textiles of words. Chapter 7, “Setting Waters on Fire,” invites congregational leaders to reflect on ways the church is claiming its exilic condition as a theological and worldly reality.

#### PERSPECTIVE

Each journey within this book was significant for me, taking me along paths I was unaccustomed to walking and into communities unlike the ones I live in on a day-to-day basis. None were exotic, however. To begin with, as a teaching elder in the Presbyterian Church (USA), I was, predictably, predisposed toward Presbyterian-related communities. Two of the communities are part of the Presbyterian Church (USA), one as an organized congregation and the other as a binational mission of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Presbytery of Chihuahua, Mexico. My connection to Cherith Brook Catholic Worker House was, in significant part, formed through overlapping relationships within the PC(USA).

Many of these journeys found their beginning literally just down the hall or up the street, outside of the denominational connections. A homeless shelter here in Dubuque, about a fifteen minutes’ walk from our house, provided some of the basic questions that led to the writing of this book. Over a two-year period I led a Bible reflection group with residents at the shelter and shared in its regular worship services. Those experiences eventually led me to ask a

number of questions: How does one form faith communities among the poor? What sorts of challenges does one encounter? How does one offer shelter but also more than mere shelter? How do people explain these communities, and their part in them, in terms of their faith? Those sorts of questions led me to visit the Cherith Brook Catholic Worker in Kansas City, Missouri, in January 2012.

Likewise, my journey to the Southwest borderlands began in Dubuque about five years ago when I attended an immigration reform rally where a Latina spoke about her experience as an immigrant to the United States. Not incidentally, when she spoke at the rally, she was flanked by members of the Catholic sisterhood. Later, I would learn that she, along with some members of her family, were undocumented. Over time, our families formed a friendship. Eventually, in the summer of 2011, I spent about three weeks in the Southwest talking with people who live every day on the border, listening to their experiences, their faith, and their sense of the shape of the church in the often-volatile world of the borderlands.

In the same way, the connection with the Nez Perce at Talmaks grew out of Dubuque Theological Seminary's historic relationship with First Nations peoples. I stayed in Talmaks for about ten days in 2006, and that experience proved significant beyond my guessing, especially as it gave me a firsthand glimpse of how First Nations peoples today continue to respond to an exile that has been ongoing for the last five hundred years.

Although I am not related tribally to the Nez Perce, going to Talmaks was somehow like visiting a distant cousin, providing a window into how my narrative might have been had things been different. As it is, I am the son of three generations of Athabascan (Alaska Native) women who married White men. My great-grandmother's marriage was "arranged" as a trade, and that is important to understanding what came after. But it doesn't explain everything, certainly not the motives of my grandmother and mother. I have a better sense of the politics, the vulnerabilities of gender and poverty, the power of racial inequality, the way assimilation (a polite word for cultural genocide) was held out as a "promise" to Native people. My mother, like other First Nations peoples, must have believed the story of assimilation, too, but maybe not completely. My mother told me once that White men were mostly "drifters" in Alaska, unhinged from the land of their ancestors. In a sense, that's not too far removed from the way my mother must have felt herself, a mixed blood caught in a "neither nor" world. It's in this way that my life reflects one strand of the broad and systematic act of racial and cultural deportation in the United States.

So, perhaps ironically, Talmaks played a part in the most deeply personal and impossibly long journey of all, one that spans generations, continents, and skins. My own journey began a long time ago, but my first memory of that journey came about on the day my mother took my siblings and me to the graveyard in Cordova, Alaska. Cordova is a small, landlocked fishing town, and it holds the remains of one part of my story. On the day we went to the graveyard, my mother told us we were looking for her mother's grave, the grave of my grandmother. I was a boy, probably six years old, and my younger brother and sister were in tow. I remember following my mother as she went from grave marker to grave marker, looking for her mother's burial place. Although I didn't have words for it then, I still remember the feeling of searching for something or someone that one should never have to search for, not even in death. But still searching.

We eventually found her, my mother's mother and my grandmother, an Athabascan woman. My first and closest encounter with her was her plot overgrown with weeds, a spindly aluminum stand holding an index-card-sized piece of paper inside a plastic sheath, with my grandmother's name typed on it. Over the decades, I would only get parts of her life, mostly tragic, including the story of her death. One picture of her came to us, however. In the photo, she's an adolescent, perhaps fourteen or sixteen years old. She's wearing a checkered dress, sitting luxuriously atop a bench. I recognize the landscape around her as the subarctic landscape of the region around Fairbanks, flat and quiet. It looks like summer. She's smiling.

In 1989, I returned to Alaska, my ancestral home, to visit with family. While there, my maternal uncle underwent surgery so I went to visit him at the Native hospital in Anchorage. While at the hospital, I visited its gift shop, full of baskets and carvings by Alaska Native artists. Among these I saw a yellow cedar face mask, its features smooth, unblemished, and circular, its eyes vacant. That was the "dominant" image, the whole face, so to speak. As an image, it speaks to First Nations' belief in reciprocity, balance, and the presence of the Spirit that gives things shape. However, as artists do, the artist who crafted this mask introduced something that did not seem to quite fit: pressing through the left temple, pulling away from the dominant skin as if it were a tumor or a captive, was another face, this one smaller, but fierce and determined, or in terror.

As an Alaska Native descendant, I am bound to be intrigued by this image, this face or faces, especially since, at least on first glance, I only appear to have one face, the face of the dominant skin. Being born to the third generation of First Nations women who married White men, some might say I am one face, assimilated, smooth, without "blemish" of color. As a children's book puts it,

“Two eyes, a nose, and a mouth make a face.” Assimilation was conceived as a way of “erasing” the color and language, land, culture, and religion from the faces and skins of indigenous peoples.

For the descendants of assimilation, some of us lost not only language (the more subtle expression of human skin) but also our physical skins. Now the dominant face, the face the world sees and expects, the face we sometimes represent as primary, is the face of the Western world. And yet, still the other face, smaller but all the more determined because of its displacement, cries out. Our ancestors cry out, like Abel continued to cry out from the face of the earth. Cain had become the “face of the human being” through an act of fratricide, and yet, though Abel’s life was gone, his blood cried out all the more, so that neither God nor the human being could ignore the absence of Abel’s voice, his detectable expression.

The poet Eleanor Wilner writes, “There are always in each of us these two: the one who stays, the one who goes away.”<sup>30</sup>

Maybe that explains why, sometimes, I dream my skin is red, my hair black, and sometimes I feel an ancestor against the inside of my temple, so real it seems like others might see it too, and their fingers touch its expression, their ears hear its voice.

*And yet, mostly, they do not.*

I am trying to find a place for this one I apparently am not, these faces sharing one body, one a citizen, the other a fugitive, a remnant of what was left and what still remains, though not the same, still here, reconciled in one body, Jew and gentile, slave and free, male and female, Christ’s body, fully God and fully human, without confusion, diminishment, terror, or disfigurement.

One body, a multitude of faces. . . .

30. Eleanor Wilner, “Emigration,” in *Vital Signs: Contemporary American Poetry from the University Presses*, ed. Ronald Wallace (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 91.