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"This book is a remarkable meditation on the deep loves of the heart, how these have difficulty finding a home within a misdirected imagination, and how they can alternatively express themselves fruitfully and faithfully. The Sweedens have given us a timely and fitting gift for our moment; those who feel restless or who seek to care for the restless will find here a pertinent, clarifying, edifying, and hortatory word."

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"*Holiness in a Restless World* is a wonderful read about pilgrimage, finding our home in God, laying down our heroic instincts, voluntarily displacing ourselves, and discovering how God is at work in us in normal, everyday practices. Nell and Josh have drawn deeply from Scripture, contemplative writers, and the words of John Wesley to weave together an engaging and important book for all who are serious about following Christ. It's time to settle in a comfortable spot, brew some tea, and listen to what God might be saying to you through these pages. I highly recommend this book."

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"How wonderfully fitting that spouses—who share everyday routines and moments—put their heads and hearts together to write *Holiness in a Restless World*, encouraging us to be open to holy encounters with God in the 'improvisation of daily life.' Rather than pursuing a heroic Christianity, which has had detrimental consequences, the Sweedens invite us into holiness as an ordinary, earthy endeavor, rooted in love of God and neighbor. For anyone who has ever felt restless or wayward—i.e., everyone—you'll find yourself wandering home through these pages."

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"Nell and Josh have provided new whimsical metaphors for helping us understand that the holy life is both a home to be found and a journey to be walked in wonder. The narrative role of a theologian is to take the grand truths of Scripture and historical doctrines, and translate them in such a way that they are understood in new contexts and new eras. This book is a much-needed resource in that translation task, bringing fresh insight to the experiential realities of holiness and sanctification today."

Diane Leclerc, PhD
Northwest Nazarene University
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"Coalescing the biblical notion of home with the theme of holiness, the Sweedens help us recapture the value of ordinary practices in Christian life that are essentially communal in nature and serve as a responsible corrective to variegated forms of individualistic heroism lodged in our contemporary context. *Holiness in a Restless World* is insightful, reflective, and powerfully generative; it is a must-read for all who take seriously the task of Christians to respond with discernment to the questions of many who remain restless today."

David Sang-Ehil Han, PhD
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HOLINESS *in a* RESTLESS WORLD

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WANDERING HOME

Home is an ever-present theme in Christian Scripture—not a nostalgic or romanticized vision of home but a home centered around peace, promise, and belonging. Much of Scripture tells of a type of homelessness—being cast out, sent forth, exiled, or stripped of land. Occasionally, God's people are "at home" even as they reside in foreign lands, living in the liminal spaces and margins somewhere between their past and promised future. God's people do a lot of wandering, which only enhances and reiterates the narrative of home in Scripture. Wandering is not the absence of home, but it represents the temporality, transience, and insecurity that can occur when we do not feel at home, and so remains a testimony to the theological significance of home and the ultimate importance of God's people finding peace and belonging with God and in the world. While alienation from home is sometimes construed as a type of punishment for unfaithfulness, equally common are the images of a God who makes a home and dwells among his people. When it comes to God and God's people, home matters.

The parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11–32 offers one of the most decisive and recognizable narratives of home in Christian Scripture. Like a microcosm of the narrative arc of Scripture, the parable gives as much attention to the son's separation from home—his own restlessness and sense of urgency in establishing self-identity—as it does to descriptions

of home itself. The clearest characteristic of home, besides the apparent prosperity and security afforded by this household, is the familial bond represented in both the misguided love of the older brother and the unconditional love of the father. The latter, of course, represents the nature and character of God. At the climactic point when the father embraces the lost and wandering son, the meaning of the parable is clear: home is in and with God. The son is lost—without familial identity and lacking heirship—until the parental, all-encompassing embrace restores the son to the peace, promise, and belonging that only comes with participation in the household of God.

This book is about wandering and belonging, restlessness and peace. It is written for wanderers attempting to make their way home through all the snares, distractions, and fleeting visions of peace and belonging that compete for our attention. The Christian life is a journey juxtaposed by a destination—a home, a place. The journey finds its meaning through the promise of belonging and participation in the household of God. But what if the wanderer loses sight of the house? It can be easy to wander in vain. There are enough false and mistaken destinations to fill many lifetimes. Although a journey may warrant or benefit from detours, endless wandering without trajectory or purpose may eventually lead to nihilism. If the parable of the prodigal son is at all analogous to the Christian journey—God's call, our grace-empowered move toward God, and God's full-fledged embrace of us—then the purpose of this book is to help Christians distinguish between the mirages and the true promised land.

More specifically, this book is written for Christians who have been taken captive by the restlessness of our age—prodigals themselves who have taken the path of the misguided hero,

pursuing rest in the wrong places: achievement, importance, approval. Such heroes are never satisfied and never fulfilled. They are always chasing, always consuming, always frantic. Like the adventure junkie dependent on the next rush of adrenaline, the misguided hero is afraid to slow down and let go of a perceived sense of control. To rest, we must face our demons, instead of conquering the next mountain that serves as both a welcome distraction and an opportunity to earn admiration. The church is entwined with our restless world and has shared in the idealization and idolization of the hero. This error has stalled and stunted the story's arc, leaving the prodigal child plagued by endless wandering toward fleeting fulfillment. The story's culmination and the full embrace of God remains, maybe more so than ever, only a reflection, as in a mirror (1 Cor. 13:12).

The following chapters are expansions of lectures we first offered in the spring of 2019 as the Hicks Holiness Lectures at Mount Vernon Nazarene University. Those lectures, directed toward an undergraduate audience, intended to offer an alternative vision of Christian faithfulness to the commonly elevated narratives of heroic and extraordinary Christianity. Such narratives offer a misconstrued vision of holiness that neglects the primary, more general, and sometimes more difficult task of living faithfully in the ordinary and everyday matters of life. Savior mentality runs rampant in contemporary evangelicalism and for various reasons has also found a strange resonance within the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition. Our aim is to counter this mentality with a message that is timely and applicable to all Christians no matter their life experience or faith development.

Poetry can offer insight and perspective where prose fails, and we have learned that the oft-concealed theological imagi-

nation of a Wendell Berry or Mary Oliver may be exactly what our contemporary world needs to encounter. Our earlier lectures followed a recitation of the opening stanza of the poem "Allegiances," by William Stafford. Like Berry and Oliver, Stafford is a poet and essayist who employs overtones of land, community, and commonplace to speak to (or against) our modern selves. The chapters of this book draw from Stafford's opening lines:

> *It is time for all the heroes to go home*
> *if they have any, time for all of us common ones*
> *to locate ourselves by the real things*
> *we live by.*[1]

The connection between our thesis and Stafford's opening stanza will become increasingly evident with each chapter. Little needs to be expounded here, save for the underlying theme that the empty promises of heroism are exposed by the common, real, and placed things of life. Heroes lack a home—a place and community. The absence of home is the absence of rest and peace. From a Christian perspective, the absence of home disconnects a person from true purpose and identity as one who belongs to and with God. In contrast to the heroic impulse, it is time for Christians to recover what it means to be placed in the commonwealth of God—to locate ourselves faithfully in the daily interactions and transactions of life with God's creation. Stafford does not write for a specifically Christian audience, nor is his project explicitly framed by a concern for greater theological understanding or embodiment of holiness. Yet his stanza is

1. William Stafford, "Allegiances," *Allegiances* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 77.

a succinct, far-reaching reminder of the limits of our commonly commodified version of holiness that idealizes heroism.

Holiness is characterized in two ways throughout this text. First, holiness is the pursuit of rest with God. This description is developed more fully in chapter 1 in connection with Augustine's adage that "our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee." Pursuing—as much as being or arriving at—home with God remains central to the experience and embodiment of rest.

Second, holiness is encountered in the choreography of the quotidian. This characterization of holiness as an aspect of everyday life is an underlying theme of this book and rests on two assumptions. Foremost, holiness is an *encounter*. Holiness is sometimes misconstrued as something earned, achieved, or rewarded. But it is more properly a surprise, an experience, or even a confrontation with the beauty of God that is made evident through the effervescent work of the Spirit. Holiness is not a human work but the activity of a *wholly other* God who, in love, comes to and alongside creation. Like travelers on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24), holiness breaks in to our lives in unexpected ways, illuminating God and putting the reconciliation of all things on full display (Rom. 5:10–11; 2 Cor. 5:18–19). Understanding holiness as an encounter does not diminish the call to pursue holiness or to be holy as God is holy, but it does suggest that to pursue holiness is to have a posture of openness, having eyes to see and ears to hear (Mark 8:18). Additionally, holiness is an encounter that occurs in the improvisation of daily life. Scripture testifies to a God made known most commonly and consistently in simple and ordinary ways. God comes to us in our humanity. In the case of the Emmaus travelers, their eyes were opened after "he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them" (Luke 24:30). Daily

living, like the Christian journey, is anything but a linear path or clear-cut road. As humans, we engage in a choreography—a dance—with other persons and with all God's creation. In the creativity, responsiveness, imagination, and even missteps of the dance, we encounter holiness. The beauty of God finds us in such moments in surprising and unexpected ways. Even still, the call to pursue holiness is not relinquished. We do not passively wait on God but strive for God's kingdom and righteousness (Matt. 6:33). On occasion, we may even surprise ourselves as, by God's grace, we are empowered to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8).

In several ways (not every way), the titular character and protagonist of Wendell Berry's heralded novel *Jayber Crow* is an expression of the holiness journey. Jayber Crow is not the hero readers expect. In many ways, he is an antihero. As a young man, he leaves his community and his perceived calling in search of meaning and personal identity. He is driven by typical notions of heroism—significance, exotic experiences—but his journey away actually takes him home to Port William, Kentucky. There he finds himself and his true purpose in the simple and ordinary rhythms of community life. His path meanders. He becomes the town barber, the church custodian, and the city's gravedigger. In most ways, his life is mundane and uneventful, yet he is the embodiment of love for his neighbor and community. He enriches the lives of those around him as he works for the harmony and preservation of his community. By the end of the book, readers cannot help but be captivated by the peace and power that come with belonging. Jayber Crow is home and knows who he is. For Christians, such belonging includes place, people, and connection with God. There is peace

and power on the other side of misguided heroism. Jayber's openness to being shaped by the Port William community and its needs—to going where called and filling the voids in everyday life—symbolizes a type of Christian pilgrimage. Jayber's journey is not bound by a destination or a prescribed arrival. Instead, it is the accumulation of little moments, twists and turns, many unexpected.

John Muir, the American naturalist and evangelist for the revealed beauty of God in creation, is known to have disliked the word "hike" and its connotation with a linear path and specified destination. Albert Palmer, traveling with Muir in the Sierra Nevada, once asked:

> "Mr. Muir, someone told me you did not approve of the word 'hike.' Is that so?" Muir replied, "I don't like either the word or the thing. People ought to saunter in the mountains—not 'hike!' Do you know the origin of that word saunter? It's a beautiful word. Away back in the middle ages people used to go on pilgrimages to the Holy Land, and when people in the villages through which they passed asked where they were going, they would reply, *A la sainte terre*, 'To the Holy Land.' And so they became known as sainte-terrers or saunterers. Now these mountains are our Holy Land, and we ought to saunter through them reverently, not 'hike' through them."[2]

Whether in the mountains or not, pilgrims in the holy life must learn to saunter.

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2. John Muir, *Spiritual Writings: Selected with an Introduction by Tim Flinders* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2013), 106.

PART I

Not All Who Wander Are Lost

It is time for all the heroes to go home
if they have any, time for all of us common ones
to locate ourselves . . .[1]

1. Stafford, "Allegiances."

It is time—time to imagine a world and the Christian life beyond the narratives and frameworks that have been fashioned by modern, Western paradigms. It is time to dismantle the hero within ourselves who owes its prototype and ideal not to the gospel but to our own restlessness. This, of course, is no easy task. We are captive to our contexts and the formation and perspectives that have taught us how to see and engage the world. But new imagination requires introspection and a willingness to be self-critical. In this sense, it must come from within, from a yearning for change.

The first part of this book acknowledges that we are lost, though not without hope. Being lost is different from wandering or meandering. Lost is a condition of missing identity, like forgetting who and whose we are and abandoning our *place* in the world. Wandering or meandering, on the other hand, are components of a journey. Sometimes that journey may be contra-directional, but it is nonetheless still formational and informative. God invites us on a journey, and the first step of that journey is to dislodge ourselves from any distorted visions of Christian life and formation that undermine the Christlike character we are to pursue.

Established Christianity in the Western hemisphere is facing an identity crisis. Such statements seem increasingly ubiquitous as churches experience declining membership and attendance or mourn their waning cultural and societal influence. It is appropriate to lament loss, especially because much of it remains ambiguous. There is no clear personage to blame, no decisive moment, no irrefutable logic that can explain the church's loss of social and cultural status. Of course, that hasn't stopped persons from trying to override ambiguity with certainty. Yet God's unfolding work cannot be envisioned if God's people simply long to return to Egypt (see Exod. 14:10–12; 16:3; Neh. 9:17). Nor can it be encountered if, in our arrogance, we

try to forge our own path and establish our own promised land. There is a balance in the Israelite exodus story from Egypt. Though they wander in the wilderness, uncertain of their future, they are also guided by the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night (Exod. 13). Their journey is not aimless. God never leaves them even though their impatience and idolatry must be confronted and their trust in God repeatedly renewed.

The identity crisis of established Christianity in the West is deeper than the symptoms of institutional or cultural loss. It demands laying bare or uncovering the assumptions that have guided Christian practice so that we may sift through the pressing narratives and formations of our contemporary lives. Part I attends to the prevalence of heroic narratives in Christianity and calls attention to their influence on modern expressions of holiness. Heroism, of course, is but one idol, one mirage, in our journey with God. Yet it is particularly potent, especially in the way it exchanges trust and peace with God for constant restlessness.

one

OUR HEARTS ARE RESTLESS

Augustine of Hippo, a fourth-century theologian, famously wrote, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee." Holiness is the pursuit of a heart at rest—not a dormant, inactive, or idle heart but a heart properly oriented toward God; a heart at peace that *rests* in the full assurance of God's faithfulness and reconciling power. A heart at rest is a free heart. It is free *from* the distorted desires that define our world (influence, material gain, social approval) and free *for* an ever-deepening life in Christ for the sake of the world. A free heart is not an empty or autonomous heart, and it is not a heart that is absent of relationship or responsibility. That is a modern and narrow version of freedom. Instead, a free heart is full of right affection toward God and neighbor that is bound by relationship and constantly moved toward action.

A heart at rest translates to a life on the move. Yet the movement of the holy life is different from the frantic, directionless movement of a restless world. It is not the busybodies

about whom the apostle Paul warns in 2 Thessalonians 3, nor is it constant movement in pursuit of a world after our own image as we satisfy our personal need to save and be seen as saving. A heart at rest moves in the way of Jesus, which is squarely defined in the Christian tradition as *kenosis*: the act of self-emptying (Phil. 2:6). A holy heart has its home in God and is able to resist the common temptation to make its home in the world by being a physical, spiritual, or political savior.

Jesus himself faced these temptations. As Matthew 4 notes, Jesus was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness, where the tempter came to him—first tempting him to turn stones into bread, then to throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple so the angels would carry him, and finally to bow down to the tempter in exchange for all the kingdoms and splendors of the world. The temptations correspond with Jesus's messianic calling as savior of the social, religious, and political world: Feed the hungry! Demonstrate your divinity! Exert your dominion! In a single moment, the messianic mission could have been fulfilled. A restless heart could not have resisted such temptation because a restless heart has no peace, no home. But Jesus responded as one whose heart is truly free and full of right affection toward God. Rather than turning stones to bread Jesus cited the scripture, "one does not live on bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4; Deut. 8:3). Rather than leaping from the pinnacle of the temple for all to see, Jesus cited the scripture, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test" (Matt. 4:7; Deut. 6:16). Rather than bowing to Satan, Jesus cited Scripture a third time: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him" (Matt. 4:10; see Deut. 10:20). Though subtle at first, there is a clear theme in the passage. Jesus subverts the temptation to save the world *by the*

terms of the world as he responds to the tempter by reemphasizing his relationship with God. Jesus responds as one whose heart is at rest in the power and provision of God—as though a Son in God's home. The call to holiness is the call to pursue such rest, to become children of God's household.

Yet our world promotes restlessness with variant and competing desires that each seek to tempt and lure and together shape us into a constant state of what one theologian called "cosmopolitan homelessness."[1] This kind of transience—billed as freedom—only increases the likelihood of our individual and communal exploitation. A fickle and displaced heart is the easiest kind of heart to manipulate, and our societal, economic, and political systems are astute at using our impulses and insecurities to meet their ends while ensuring our wandering affections never find peace.

There may be no better symbol of our restless reality than our all-pervasive culture of consumerism. Consumerism is *built* on restlessness—specifically the restlessness of desire. It seeks to exploit that restlessness by ensuring the consumer is never satisfied, never content, never at peace. Products become obsolete by design. If planned obsolescence is not built into the product itself (a cell phone whose operating system is so outdated as to be virtually unusable within a few years), then perceived obsolescence is (new features and styles that make previous iterations of the same product seem old-fashioned and stale). Consumerism is also driven by the creation of desire, which is an incredibly scientific enterprise, as anyone in marketing knows. The industry of

1. John Howard Yoder, "See How They Go with Their Face to the Sun," *For the Nations: Essays Evangelical and Public* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 51.

creating, satisfying, and manipulating desire produces a powerful cycle that feeds more than an economic system. It shapes our worldview and our interactions with others—including God. It also distorts our vision of the holy life.

Love of Heroes

Heroes, and our love for them, are an enduring symbol of human restlessness. The hero, and the narrative in which the hero is cast, can easily reflect and even nourish our misdirected desires if not weighed against the self-emptying way of Jesus. This recognition is especially important in our contemporary context, which merges paradigms of modernity and Western culture, making the heroic lens both pervasive and enticing. The concern here is not with heroes or heroism, per se, but with the uncritical adoption of a heroic lens, especially if that lens nurtures affections and dispositions that are contrary to the affections and dispositions of a heart at rest in God.

Heroes have long served an important role in the social construction of culture. Stories of heroes' perseverance and triumph instill and reassert values; their lives are examples, even if flawed, that inspire and shape generations. Christianity also relies on heroes to model Christian virtue and practice. From biblical heroes to ancient, medieval, and modern accounts of saints, martyrs, and missionaries, Christianity shows a strong tendency to celebrate the heroic. Even the Gospel stories are not free from the overlay of a heroic lens. Consider Gustaf Aulén's development of the *Christus Victor* atonement theory, which reflects heroic prose, borrowing triumphal military images from Rome

and demonstrating the pervasive influence of Greek mythology on Western thought, including patristic Christian theology.[2]

Fictional heroes display extraordinary humanity, and their factual historic equivalents are understandably rare. The stories of such heroes have complexity and power that are shaped by context, elevated by circumstance, and reified by continued significance. In this sense, they cannot be replicated but serve an aspirational purpose. They are persons of legacy and legend, testimonies to human potential when "used by God." In this sense, it is entirely appropriate that biblical interpreters have applied the title "heroes of the faith" to Hebrews 11. Hero is an apt description so long as we read Hebrews 11 alongside Hebrews 12. In doing so, we are reminded that the faith of our ancestors was, by itself, incomplete. Hebrews 12:2 identifies Jesus as "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." The exemplars of Hebrews 11 are "so great a cloud of witnesses" (12:1), models for our own journey but not heroes in the modern, self-reliant, individualized sense.

While heroes can play a vital role in the formation of Christian virtue and practice, it must also be acknowledged that Christianity's love of the heroic often extends too far. The heroic lens now permeates notions of Christian faithfulness and has established the idealization of the extraordinary. Many Christians believe they must *be* something more and *do* something more; they must stand apart and above in some way to demonstrate their faithfulness. Undoubtedly, conversion implies change—the Christian life includes *something more*—but that should not be equated with heroic narratives or grand gestures. In fact, conver-

2. See Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*.

sion foremost requires the transformation of our *ordinary* loves and habits. Popular culture contributes to the elevation of the extraordinary. Books, TV shows, news stories, and movies all testify to society's obsession with heroes. By and large, Christianity has found consonance rather than dissonance with society's elevation of the heroic.

The Lure of the Extraordinary

When I (Josh) was in junior high, my church youth group was holding a fundraiser by selling t-shirts with Christian sayings and images on them. I recall one t-shirt with an image of Jesus and bold words stating, "One Man CAN Change the World!" I remember being moved by the t-shirt's slogan and its implicit message. While Jesus was the *subject* of the shirt's image, I was its *object*. The slogan was actually for me. It said, *You can be special and extraordinary. You can do great things. Like Jesus, God wants you to change the world!* At this point you might see how, in my young mind, God was something like an image of Uncle Sam saying, "I Want YOU!"

Though harmless in many ways, this memory remains emblematic of much of my earliest understandings of Christian holiness. The stories told, and the exemplars most embraced, often reflected a common narrative strangely consistent with a John-Wayne-like rugged individualism. I remember feeling inadequate as a Christian due to my lack of extraordinariness. Such overt misunderstandings of holiness are, of course, relatively easy to identify and dispel. What we should find disconcerting is that underneath each explicit employment of a heroic lens lurks an implicit framework or worldview with great power to define and determine a vision of Christian faith.

Clergy and laypersons alike experience the pressure to be extraordinary. While few Christians would go so far as to argue that human salvation is dependent upon *extraordinariness*, the dangerous assumption that eternal, or heavenly, rewards are assigned according to the significance of one's earthly life is still common in Christianity. The assumption here is that God grants the great women and men of history extra reward. There is, of course, within Christian tradition a privileging of extraordinary saints, and to be considered among them has appeal. Stronger yet is the way notions of personhood and community have become captivated by the pretense of extraordinariness. More than ever it seems we are obsessed with what makes us unique and special, our identity being rooted in our individuality rather than the communities and traditions in which we participate.

Contemporary critiques of late-twentieth-century church models provide an interesting example. Despite being quick to name the dangers and flaws of attractional models of church growth, numerical calculations of success, and the church's overt pursuit of distinction, influence, and profile that is common in modern Christendom, some of the contemporary models of ministry success reflect the same elevation of the extraordinary—the same concern to stand out. In this regard, the metrics of a successful or ideal ministry only changed on a surface level. The influence and success of a minister or community that was once measured by church attendance, building size, or political significance is now being measured by online following, number of impressions, and how much influence a minister or community consistently generates. It appears the modern church's edifice complex has been replaced by a social-approval complex (social approval indicators are employed by social media platforms to

drive engagement). This shift is to be expected considering the stories we tell and the ministry models and exemplars we most embrace. While exemplars of faithfulness are needed, and should certainly be celebrated, the implicit and often dangerous elevation of the heroic suggests that ordinary lives and activities bear little significance in comparison to extraordinary acts of extraordinary persons. It hardly needs to be said that such a distinction couldn't be further from the good news Jesus continually offers in the Gospels. Whether it is Jesus's honoring of the widow who gave her last two coins (Mark 12:41–44), or his blessing of the children (Matt. 19:14–15), or his intentional, repeated, and countercultural engagement with tax collectors, prostitutes, the sick, and the dispossessed, Jesus summarizes it himself, frequently saying the first will be last, and the last will be first (see Matt. 19:30). The kingdom of God is upside down. We might wonder, then, what place the paradigms of heroism and extraordinariness have in the household of God.

An Embedded Worldview

We should find it interesting that the iconic superheroes in pop culture live in a state of constant restlessness. Consider the superheroes that comprise the DC and Marvel universes. In most cases, they are emotionally unstable, relationally isolated, and struggling to regain any true sense of home. To their credit, many of them have endured immeasurable loss and, though they have supernatural abilities, struggle the most to make sense of seemingly natural and ordinary things, like love and friendship. These superheroes' weaknesses, not their strengths, are what make them so compelling.

There is an age-old formula to the story of a superhero. The superhero must have a relatable element. They must, in some way, reflect *us*—full of capacity, possibility, and flaws all at once. Their supernatural abilities are just that: *natural* abilities that have somehow been "super-sized." And there is just enough there for us to connect with the superhero, to empathize. Once that connection is made, the power of the story takes over. We envision being like the superhero, living hypothetically in their shoes.

I recall when my eldest son declared he wanted to be Batman for Halloween. I didn't even know he was aware of Batman, but I soon found out he was familiar with a whole range of superheroes I had never heard of. Prior to that point, he had always been a dinosaur, and when you asked him what he wanted to be, even with his early kindergarten vocabulary he spilled out, "paleontologist." Now, in first grade, he was making a shift. The world of superheroes had captivated him. It was as evident in his play as it was in his desire to be Batman for Halloween. I started noticing in his play that there was always competition going on. Someone needed saving, someone had been captured, someone needed to escape. Some triumph had to happen, some force of good was opposing evil, and somebody with some extraordinary ability always prevailed.

Naturally, my son was always the protagonist in his own stories. What hit me, though, was how quickly the heroic lens took hold and encapsulated almost all of his play. Fewer were the days when he would build a pillow fort just to build a fort or push a train or car just to "drive" them. It no longer satisfied him to mimic ordinary life; there had to be an element of the extraordinary. The pillow fort became a military base. The car had to be escaping some pending disaster or villainous person.

Ordinary life now seemed insufficient to hold his attention. The impact of the heroic lens on understandings of Christian holiness is not dissimilar. Stories of heroism are powerful and transformative, and they satisfy, at least temporarily, some of the deep longings of our hearts: the need to be loved, to be noticed, to be important, to be valued. It is one thing for children to latch on to the stories of superheroes and integrate them into their play, but for many adults, the heroic lens is an escape. Like the prodigal son who leaves his home with visions of extraordinary experiences and in search of another self, the heroic lens can dangerously feed our wandering desires.

Heroism and Holiness

The intent of this chapter is not to criticize heroes or heroism. Heroes and their stories have an important function and can, if engaged properly, be fruitful for the development of Christian virtue and practice. The danger is when heroism becomes the lens for the Christian life—or, worse, when we begin to equate heroism with holiness. Heroism and holiness may have some compatibility, but they are undeniably distinct in that holiness is the pursuit of rest in God and heroism the outflow of restlessness.

Three patterns are generally evident when heroism becomes the lens of the Christian life and is equated with holiness. First, Christians struggle to celebrate the small things. What a hero sees is generally tainted by some pending doom or problem to be overcome. This lens disables the hero's ability to recognize the goodness of God's creation and celebrate beauty in the midst of tragedy. Similarly, holiness is narrowly identified with rare and exceptional things. The heroic lens privileges the newswor-

thy and attention-grabbing acts of our world, losing a vision of holiness as encompassing all of life—a vision that values the ordinary alongside the extraordinary. When Christians struggle to celebrate the small things, we ultimately struggle to recognize and receive the gifts of God and others. Heroes miss the simple gifts since an epic horizon is always the dominating view. But Christians are called to receive and respond to the gifts of God, which come to us daily in simple yet profound ways. Holiness entails an ever-deepening recognition of the gifts we receive and the ways we can, in turn, become gifts for others.

Second, when heroism becomes the lens of the Christian life and is equated with holiness, Christians fail to trust and depend on God. Lack of trust leads to insecurity, and insecurity breeds anxiety and defensiveness. Not surprisingly, the heroic lens supports a world of conflict and competition. In such a world, binaries are reinforced and established: right or wrong, good or bad, black or white. Christians become forced to adopt a posture of defense, inclined to judge people, cultures, communities, or ideas as for or against us. In a similar way, narratives of heroism predispose us to expect grand gestures and dramatic escapes. We look for and value the dramatic and then overlay those expectations onto our conception of God, the church, and others. Such misguided expectations not only set us up to be frustrated and discouraged, but they also invert the relationship between Creator and creation. Our expectations now set the rules for God's engagement with creation. And true to form, we quickly make ourselves the hero of the story: "One man *can* change the world—me!"

Trust in God, on the other hand, spurs faith in God as the Sustainer and Redeemer of the world. Holiness corresponds with

assurance (security), not lack of confidence (insecurity). Assurance cultivates the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23), not anxiety and defensiveness. The notion that *we* have to save the world and that *we* have to usher in the kingdom reflects the heroic temptation. Much like Jesus in Matthew 3, our posture should instead be to reflect and point to God, the one who saves, conquers, heals, and redeems.

Third, when heroism becomes the lens of the Christian life, we confuse others' needs with our own need for self-worth. There are many examples of this confusion in Scripture, but few are as obvious as that of Jonah, who—after finally going to Nineveh to proclaim God's judgment—becomes angry with God for showing compassion to the Ninevites. What cause does Jonah have to be angry? Should God not be gracious and abounding in love? Jonah's anger is driven out of his own self-righteous indignation and a misconstrued sense of justice that revolves around his own perspective and self-interest rather than around God's desires for others. Such self-centeredness, taking the various forms of egotism, selfishness, and narcissism, is common in heroic narratives. But—much like Achilles, who makes the conscious decision to commit his own life and the lives those around him for the sake of personal fame—self-centered heroes are supposed to be warnings for us, not role models. When our love for heroes displaces or outweighs our love for God and neighbor, it becomes difficult to see past ourselves. The same misdirected affections that prioritize triumph prompt heroes to view themselves as God's archetypal agents in an epic storyline. Inevitably, even if accidentally, our love turns inward, and the story becomes about us rather than about God. Like Jonah, we lose sight of God's redemptive purposes, and we struggle

to accept an outcome that doesn't satisfy our own need to win in what we believe is a story of heroes and villains.

The Christian tradition employs the language of idolatry in instances when we prioritize ourselves and our desires over God and God's desires. When our love turns inward, we are in danger of becoming idols unto ourselves. Holiness requires that we keep our gaze ever upon Jesus Christ, the founder and perfecter of our faith. The way of Christ is found in self-emptying, cruciform love. As long as our affections remain distorted, the way of Christ doesn't have quite the same allure as our own reflections in the water. Yet self-emptying, cruciform love is how we find our home in God. It is how our restless hearts truly find rest.