

One New Book for the Preacher

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GOD: STORIES edited by C. Michael Curtis New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998. 400pp.

It is a pleasure for me to introduce my friends to each other. This book review allows me that pleasure. I am pleased to introduce you to Michael Curtis and to encourage you to read this excellent book of stories about God which Curtis edited. Not only will reading this book enhance your appreciation during Pentecost of how God's Holy Spirit like the wind "blows where it will," but as we like to say: "It'll preach."

Michael Curtis is senior editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*. He has edited four anthologies of American stories. We became friends when Michael fell in love with and married my friend and parishioner, Elizabeth Cox. She is a novelist and professor of creative writing at Duke University. Her latest novel, *Night Talk*, which recently won the Lillian Smith Award for literature, is about two girls, one black and one white, growing up in the same house in the South. When the lights are out at night they talk about their differences and their common humanity. It is also "a good book for preachers," but that is another review.

My friendship with Michael was strengthened because of his appreciation of the finer things in life, especially basketball! I was also struck by his knowledge and concerns about the life of the Spirit. Unlike some, Michael did not grow up in the church. He had never opened a Bible until 1977. A family member had a conversion experience which became the occasion that began his own faith journey.

He wanted to take a closer look at this "phenomenon" that had the power to transform lives. As one deeply involved in the worlds of literature and academics, he went to a book store and discovered the "religion" section. He read books, by Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Hans Kung, and William James. He describes what happened: "I read these books as if I were learning a new language, and in a sense I was. I opened the Bible for the first time and found there, to my amazement, cultural artifacts — metaphors, similes, other figures of speech — that I realized had been a part of my literacy and cultural armament for years."

Michael describes his journey in the introduction to the book. His own story makes this book worth having. He joined a discussion group of ministers and theologians at Andover-Newton Theological School. He also became a member of Boston's Old South Church. The collection of stories is the result of his attempt to find a book to use with an adult education class he was teaching. It is an excellent resource for an adult study, and it is available in paperback.

The stories Michael has assembled in this volume are about divine revelation. In the background of this book you are aware of the insights of William James in his classic work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Michael has drawn from stories published in *The Atlantic* as well as from the best writers available to give us a rich collection. These stories are about the variety of ways people experience and don't experience the presence of God in our lives and what those experiences mean.

My relationship with writers has given me a valuable insight into a common bond between these artists and us preachers. Writers hear voices. Their characters talk with them. They are not sure where a story is going or what the conversation might reveal. In order for this to happen, writers have to make space and time in their lives to listen. It is not too different from listening for the Spirit and preparing a sermon. Writers are in touch with another dimension of life than what we can see, hear, and touch. Call it the transcendent, the spiritual, or God, it is about a reality beyond us who wants to communicate with us. Several writers have told me they don't talk much about this phenomenon because people in our culture won't understand or will suggest they see a shrink.

In this volume there is a marvelous story by Peggy Payne which was the seed for her novel, *Revelation*. The story is about a Presbyterian minister in Chapel Hill who hears the voice of God. He is in his back yard cooking on the grill when God speaks to him. After much reflection, he tells his congregation about the experience. They are shocked and suggest that he get help or take a leave of absence.

A story by Joe Ashby Porter reminds us of our discomfort with those whose experience of God does not occur in "acceptable" ways and threatens our understanding of God. Richard Lischer, a Lutheran minister and professor of homiletics at Duke University's divinity school, writes in a recent article in *Christian Century* that if a person at the university announced that he had been the recipient of a direct revelation, the repercussions would be predictable: "We would do deep background investigations, recheck his transcripts, reread his references, and eventually he would have to go, because he was claiming to see things to which we are blind."

There is a profound story by James Baldwin about how the metaphor of "Exodus" in biblical literature was used by slaves in their emancipation and how a young African-American woman was set free by God's promise of liberation. On the lighter side, Elizabeth Spencer has a wonderful story about a grandfather and grandchild defying the strict Sabbath restrictions in order to enjoy God.

The list of writers who contributed to this book is impressive: John Updike, Flannery O'Connor, Bobbie Ann Mason, Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud, and others. The variety of style and content speaks to the different ways God speaks to us.

Recently in an interview on Charlie Rose's television show, the actor Kathy Bates suggested that we are all storytellers. According to her, we sit around a camp fire exchanging stories. All of us are listening for an image and experience, a word which helps us make sense of our lives. Similarly, Reynolds Price reminds us that behind all of our stories we listen for the one story we hope is true — that God knows us by name and loves us and cares about this world in which we live.

I hope you listen for the Spirit of the living God in this marvelous collection of stories. Listen as Curtis describes their purpose: "This is a collection of stories about spiritual experiences of several sorts....Holding them together is a recognition that God, however conceived, challenges our deepest yearnings, provides our greatest comfort, assures us of our fundamental worth, grants us the only absolution we fully trust, makes possible, in ways both mysterious and immense, a loving regard for other characters in the larger narrative of life."

Enjoy these stories. May they enable you to appreciate the various ways God addresses all of us and may they strengthen your belief that divine revelation is a present reality.