

One New Book for the Preacher

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FOR THE TIME BEING by Annie Dillard.

New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999. 204 pages

Those of us in the profession of using language know that one of the best tools for honing our skill is to sit at the feet of a master. And those of us who use language largely for theological purposes know that one of the best ways to clarify our own thought and speech is to hear the thought of one outside our guild. Annie Dillard gives us the opportunity to “sit” and to “hear” in her latest book, *For the Time Being*.

This personal narrative comes on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Those who read it were introduced to her remarkable capacity to observe the significant and profound among the commonplace. In her personal memoir, *An American Childhood*, we saw her ability for self-reflection that urges us into our own. Those who read her novel about the settlement of the Pacific Northwest, *The Living*, were drawn into a vivid portrayal of the vagaries and the willfulness of life and death. Her skills and these themes come together in this latest non-fiction work.

Employing a unique style that juxtaposes her thoughts on Teilhard de Chardin, numbers, birth defects, Midrash, natural phenomenon, and God (among other things), she weaves a work that is not only coherent but breathtaking in its scope and insight. Along the way, Dillard tackles some weighty topics like the unsolvable theodicy question, the immensity of creation, and the vastness of time. Though she grew up a Pittsburgh Presbyterian, she reaches to resources well beyond the Protestant milieu that make us stretch our thinking about these matters.

For instance, the question of the continuing presence of God in creation persists in the book. It may be easy to see God at the dawn of creation or as the animals march off the ark two-by-two, but what about in the particularity of everyday, modern life? To start our pondering with a jolt, she takes us into the world of birth defects—from a safely clinical perspective. Specifically, she gives us a peek into *Smith’s Recognizable Patterns of Human Malformation* and its description of bird-headed dwarfs:

“Friendly and pleasant,” the text says of bird-headed dwarfs; they suffer “moderate to severe mental deficiency.” The stunning thing is the doctor’s hand [in the picture], which you notice at third glance: It shows the children to scale. The doctor’s hand props the boy up by cupping his shoulders—from behind. The six-year-old’s back, no longer than the doctor’s open hand, is only slightly wider than a deck of cards. The children’s faces are the length of the doctor’s thumb. (4-5)

But she goes on to note: “The bird-headed dwarfs and all the babies in Smith’s manual have souls, and they all can—and do—receive love and give love.” Then she recalls the Talmudic blessing one says upon seeing a hunchback or a midget or anyone else deformed from birth: Blessed are Thou, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe, *who*

changes the creatures (5-6). This weaving of cold observation, keen reflection, and apt tradition runs through the book.

Dillard draws from another source beyond traditional Protestantism, the Jesuit priest and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, whose person and praxis hold together a thoughtful agnosticism alongside an obedient Catholicism. His life is a paradox, a marvel that Dillard holds up to the light. Already a priest at the outbreak of World War I, he enlisted in the French army as a stretcher-bearer. “One of the officers serving with him wrote, ‘Two features of his personality struck you immediately: courage and humility’” (126). One morning, finding he had neither bread nor wine to offer at Mass, he had an idea that he reworked five years later: “What God’s priests, if empty-handed, might consecrate at sunrise each day is that one day’s development: all that the evolving world will gain and produce, and all it will lose in exhaustion and suffering. These the priest could raise and offer” (128). That, it strikes me, is a sacramental theology even the most low-church among us could adopt. “‘Plunge into matter,’ Teilhard said—and at another time, ‘Plunge into God.’ And he said this fine thing: ‘By means of all created things, without exception, the divine assails us, penetrates us, and molds us. We imagined it as distant and inaccessible, whereas in fact we live steeped in its burning layers’” (171).

Then there is the Baal Shem Tov, the eighteenth century rabbi who founded modern Hasidim. Dillard studied him and other Jewish writers because, she says, “he and his followers knew God, and a thing or two besides” (22). The Baal Shem Tov was born Israel ben Eliezer in the Ukraine. After he worked as a beadle to a poor congregation, he taught school, slaughtered animals, and dug clay—all the while studying, praying, and fasting. After seven years of digging on the side of a mountain, he climbed down to his wife’s village one day. “There, in Miedzyboz, the clay-splattered peasant startled everyone when he revealed his learning. There, intimate and radiant, he started to teach, and he taught until he died in 1760” (113). He startled a few folks, too, when he danced and turned the occasional cartwheel at prayers.

And, so, with Dillard, we not only read and revel, we travel and explore as well. Along the journey, she shows us the sands of the Gobi Desert and the sky over Galilee. She takes us into the arcane world of Kabbalist Torah study and the insane world of the first Chinese emperor, Emperor Qin, who buried 7,000 life-size statues—and 7,000 live people, who apparently served as their models—in the construction of his tomb. We end up knowing some of the deeper things of God and a delightful thing or two besides. But, you might ask, will it preach? *Very carefully.*

One of the deeper things of God that Dillard explores is an immanence she makes palpable. It is also an immanence which may trouble the more orthodox among us in its dependence upon humanity.

God’s being immanent, said Abraham Joshua Heschel, depends on us. Our hearts, minds, and souls impel our spines to lift or dig, our arms to give or take, our lips to speak good words or bad ones. God needs man; kenotically or not, he places himself in our hands (200).

Maybe the best argument for investing your time in *For the Time Being* is made in a story Dillard tells:

In Highland New Guinea, now Papua New Guinea, a British district officer named James Taylor contacted a mountain village, above three-thousand feet, whose tribe had never seen any trace of the outside world. It was the 1930s. He described the courage of one villager. One day, on the airstrip hacked from the mountains near his village, this man cut vines and lashed himself to the fuselage of Taylor's airplane shortly before it took off. He explained calmly to his loved ones that, no matter what happened to him, he had to see where it came from. (204)