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Alanna Lastiwka

We are privileged to have a sermon by Alanna Lastiwka. LGBTQ people frequently experience a crisis of faith, because their churches have homophobic and transphobic doctrine. Alanna's sermon speaks to those who have lived through a faith crisis.

Alanna has the blog "100 Churches 100 Sundays," where Alanna describes services at different churches. The Edmonton Journal, Metro News and Canadian Broadcasting Corporation had news articles about her blog. We encourage people to follow Alanna's blog.

100churches100sundays.blogspot.ca/



Jesus Heals a Boy Possessed by an Impure Spirit- Mark 9: 14-29

by Alanna Lastiwka

When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.

"What are you arguing with them about?" he asked.

A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not."

"You unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me."

So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?"

"From childhood," he answered. "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."

"If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for one who believes." Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the impure spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again."

The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him

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New Creature

2 Corinthians 5:17 (paraphrase)
Therefore anyone who is in Christ is a new creature. The old things are passed away, and, look, everything is new.

I grew up in a small town. The town was so small that it felt like everyone knew everyone and knew everything about everyone's life. At best, it felt a little like living in a goldfish bowl.

My father held a professional position in the community. Many people within a fifty mile radius of the small farming community knew my father and were his clients. Because my father was the only person of his profession in town, he was often referred to by his occupation. By extension, I was not infrequently referred to by my father's occupation. He's the doctor's son. My identity was tied to my father's occupational identity.

That started to change when I went to college. At college, not many people knew my father's occupation. While there were advantages in being associated with my father's profession, at college I found the freedom to be known for who I was, not for who my father was.

October is coming out month. In coming out, many LGBTQ people step away from the lifelong straight and cisgender identity of their families and of their churches and they start to live in harmony with a new identity. All of the old stuff from the closet is passed away. All is new. And the God of creation, the God of new beginnings and the God of new identities is pleased that you are able to live out who you are.

privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?"
He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer."

This is the sermon that I hoped I would never have to give.

This is a story of my fall from the divine, the suffering, and the oncoming of a new revelation. And maybe, if I am lucky, a new life.

This story all beings in the cumbersome and questionable world of online dating. One day when I was skimming thru a website, I saw a profile of a guy who was moderately good-looking and described his faith as being Catholic. We agreed to meet at the mall for coffee. As we started talking, I learned many things about this person, he had a few brothers and sisters, grew up in the N.W.T. He also later confessed to me that he used to work as a male stripper. (Eyebrow raise)

But when I got to ask him about his faith, he said that he was devoutly Catholic *up until* the age of 15, when he needed to go in for surgery on his leg. That day when he was put under for surgery, he awoke *not 30 minutes later*, to discover that no surgery had been done. He was then informed that the anesthesiologist had made a critical error, causing an accidental overdose. He had actually died on the operating table. But luckily he had also been *revived quickly*, avoiding brain damage from oxygen denervation.

But the spiritual damage he suffered was lethal.

He explained to me that he expected to see the tunnel of light, that many people have described in "near death" experiences. But he saw nothing. He said to me "I just floated there in the dark."

The great nothingness.

I am not sure why it bothered me so much. It was almost beyond my logic. I was raised Ukrainian Catholic and orthodox. The teaching I understood, said that the soul stayed on the earth until the third day, and on that day, it would rise into heaven. It shouldn't be a surprise to me, that he saw nothing in that brief moment. Yet I could feel this story crushing my soul, in the same way, it destroyed him.

My defenses were failing, as I was being attacked from many sides.

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Movie Review - Why Does God Hate Me?

Title: *Why Does God Hate Me?*

Studio: Spoon Studios

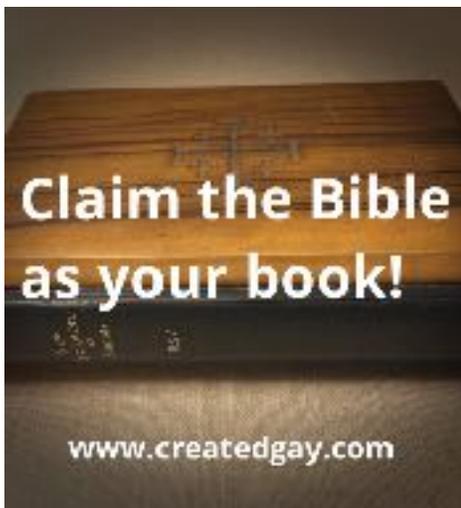
Year: 2016 on YouTube

Length: 16 minutes

Available: YouTube

Movies and documentaries can easily be 60 to 90 minutes long. Short films have the advantage of telling a story in an abbreviated manner, making the themes more obvious.

Matthew is a 14 year-old gay kid growing up in a conservative and homophobic Christian home. In an act of courage, Matthew come out to Ester, a close friend, who tries to help cure Matthew of his homosexuality. Pray away the gay does not work. Because his parents insist, Matthew ends up at a homophobic, anti-gay protest in San Francisco. The trip to San Francisco turns out to be a life changing experience. After meeting gay people in San Francisco. Matthew feels relief to meet gay people and thinks that gay people were “. . . nice, friendly and some of them were even Christians.”



I made the mistake of reading a book, that I understood as being composed of progressive, well studied and respected authors. I soon discovered that this book had become the spiritual equivalent of slitting one's wrists. Needless to say, I don't recommend it. I had committed to an interfaith retreat which I was too spiritually-immature for, I discovered that I was a raging hypocrite, and that caused me to have a meltdown in upstate New York. I had been diagnosed with chronic anxiety that no amount of prayer could relieve. I was becoming borderline suicidal, before I gave in, and filled my prescription for psych meds. My church journalism that I had become famous for, had become an impossible task. I was too weak to get out of bed, for fear of it causing further damage to my already fragile health. And too ashamed to go on writing, as someone who could not honestly stand up in a church and say the words "I believe".

In that time I had been reading a lot. Notes, research, studies, historical insights. I don't know if I am bold, stupid or simply a sucker for self-punishment. But at almost every given turn, I crossed phrases like *"edited latter"*, *"copied"*, *"attributed to"*, *"probably never happened"*, *"not actually written by this person"*, *"we are not really sure who wrote this"*, *"likely didn't happen"*, *"we now know in the modern world...."* The list goes on. Reading these works I can feel for the 9 disciples arguing with the teachers of the law. The teachers spotted a weak moment when the disciples were unable to lift the spirit from the boy. Therefore the teachers took the opportunity to do everything to dispute and discredit the disciples and Jesus. I know this feeling. And it's crippling and soul-sucking.

Faith was failing me.

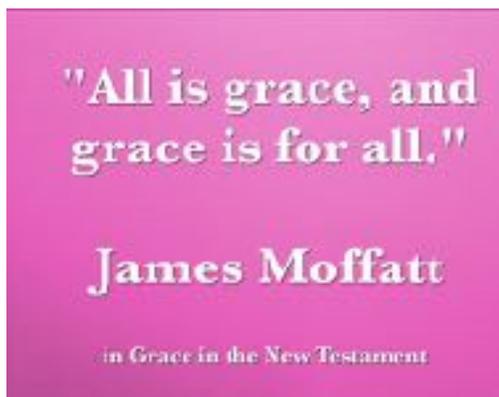
And then came all the questions. I had everyone from family members, to my liquor store customers, asking "Why have you quit writing?". Sadly I had no honest answer to give them.

At that point in my life I practically gave up praying, why do something so utterly useless?

I started to detest the items in my home. My crosses, rosaries, I even asked myself what I would do with my one of a kind finger-painted canvas that portrayed Christ in his final hours covered in blood dirt and a crown of thorns. (show painting) I had bought the original work of art from the artist, on the condition that it would always have a good home.

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I was not about to go back on my word.

Near the end, I felt like I had no bricks left in my house. It was like a nuclear blast had wiped away everything except for a few foundation stones.

In this passage from Mark 9, we learn that some demons in our lives can be stronger than others. And like in the case of the young boy, some will take you all the way to the edge before death, before they finally let-go.

In all of these books, there was a message that I could not understand. The argument put forward said, that the *metaphors* of the bible can be profoundly true even if they are not *literally or factually* true.

But how can this be? In the technological age we are being bombarded with information, much of it skewed or misrepresented or just plain old made-up BS. Knowing factual truth has become essential. And accepting false information has become dangerous if not deadly. I live in a generation that needs fact.

And the tradition I was raised in accepts much of the bible as fact. It has built a beautiful tradition steeped in rituals (show images) that glorify all of these little divine phrases and weaves them all into a great blanket in which I can wrap myself, and bask in the divine truth.

But these great thinkers have pulled the blanket off of me, and have left me frozen and alone.

And they stand before me and proclaim that they love the faith, and want it to grow into the modern truth.

Then I ask myself, how abusive can these people be? But yet as I read them, I cannot help but agree with them.

The year is 2017. We now know that the earth is round, the world grew and progressed thru an evolution like process, and is much older than what a lot of creationists would ever like to admit.

As quoted by John Shelby Spong; *"The heart will never worship what the mid rejects"*.

But humor me for a moment; what if all these great minds have it right? And there was nothing that special about this one rebellious Jew from Nazareth. If all the texts were "edited latter", and the

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Pictorial Prayer - Give us today our human rights

Few groups in the world face the systemic prejudice and discrimination experienced by gender and sexual minority peoples. The basic human rights of queer people are denied in many countries.

We hear the cries of members of our queer tribe around the world. Our prayers join with the prayers of LGBTQ people living in countries where oppression is the rule, not the exception. "Give us today our human rights" is a prayer that ranks close to "give us today our daily bread", because we cannot thrive without safety and without human rights any more than we can thrive without food.



miracles were not so miraculous, and if truths were stretched around this man Jesus, to make him appear to be the "messiah" of prophecy, when he didn't quite meet the bill.

Then I am left with one question.

Why?

Why did the people who knew him best go to the ends of the earth proclaiming the message of this mediocre Jew named Yeshua? Why would people risk life and limb to stand under the name "Christian" even if it meant certain death? How could all of these questionable and "*embellished*" stories turn the minds and hearts of some of the most heartless and abusive people in history? So they may walk the earth the next day, as holy men? And furthermore generate actual miracles, which have been testified thru history, and told to me personally, by people living in the city of Edmonton?

Why?

Christ says that "*everything is possible for one that believes*" But in that moment the father was broken and desperate, and he knew his faith was weak. He barely had a leg to stand on, so in that moment he reached out to Christ and cried "*I do believe! Help me overcome my unbelief!*". And even in that moment of confessing his severe lack of faith, God reached back and answered his cry.

It is true that nothing is impossible to faith, yet such a height of faith is required for such triumphs, is not to be reached in a moment, or without effort.

The disciples had not adequately prepared themselves to tackle such a challenge. I know what it feels like to be unprepared.

After swimming thru this sea of information, I have come to a conclusion.

Even if it is all a myth, it is the *greatest, most powerful* and most *holly* myth the world has ever known.

Regardless of its factuality or accuracy, these words have connected us to the divine. They have provided the lamp at our feet to guide us on life's highway, and protect us from on-coming danger. They have made us thankful for the everyday blessings that make our lives rich, even if we barely get by. It caused us to

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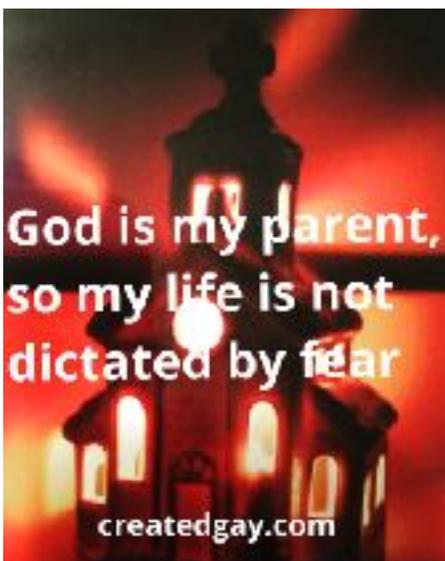
Oh for a Thousand Tongues to Sing

The words to the old hymn of the faith "Oh for a Thousand Tongues to Sing" were written by Charles Wesley in 1739.

Songs can preach powerful sermons. We will focus on the second verse of "Oh for a Thousand Tongues to Sing".

Jesus! the name that charms our fears,
That bids our sorrows cease—
'Tis music in the sinner's ears,
'Tis life, and health, and peace.

John Wesley's words continue to charm people hundreds of years after they were written. The word charm can mean soothe. Jesus soothes our fears. According to Christian tradition, Jesus is God in flesh. God soothes our fears away. For queer and trans people, God soothes our fears. Jesus, the Son, especially soothes the fears of sexual and gender minority people who are closeted because they do not feel safe to be open. Jesus soothes our fears. Jesus charms our fears away.



reflect on our sins and find it in our hearts to forgive those who have wronged us. Rising us above our primal nature. And most of all, they have taught us that showing that little bit of extra love and care to our fellow earth dwellers, may bring forth the heavenly kingdom we seek.

No, king, Army or Government has ever had such power.

Because divine love can strike stronger than any human sword.

In this lies the answer. The value of the scriptures are not a matter of accuracy, factuality or provability. If we wanted that we could just spend our days reading lab test reports, checking reference materials, and watching law court dramas unfold.

We come to the bible looking for the divine truth, and in between the quotes, stories and passages we are flooded with it! We know that God seeks those who have become lost, and that he has a place in his heart for those who have been rejected. We see's the God who is unphased by our sin, and accepts us with open arms. The god that brings redemption that stretches to even the most unworthy. We know of the God that answers us when we cry out in the night. And we know that this God, despite our endless falls from grace, allowed himself to suffer as one of us, in order to make one last great push at opening the kingdoms doors onto us.

We know that love that we have been taught, has the ability to bring forth the kingdom of god within ourselves, in or current world, and the world to come.

Those of us that have come to accept our free salvation, know how it has changed us. This is the divine force that comes beyond measure. This is something no one needs to prove to us.

Weather the bible is literal, embellished, manufactured, inspired, or just plain questionable. I will rejoice! I will adorn my nativity at Christmas, bless my paska at Easter and, dance in the street like King David (hopefully with more clothes on!)

I leave you with Romans 5: 1-2

"Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction, by faith, into this grace, in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God."

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Put Christ in Christians

You may have heard people complaining that Christmas is not Christian enough. In some cases, they may express concern about how commercial and secular Christmas has become. In other cases, they may be unhappy that many people say "Happy Holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas" and about the fact many Christmas cards do not have the word Christmas written on them.

This Christmas try putting Christ in the Christian. We can start by not being rude to those who wish us Happy Holidays. And we can continue by trying to root out the racism, ableism, classism, misogyny, Islamophobia, transphobia and homophobia from our lives. An important way we can put Christ in our lives this Christmas is to not let shame, self-condemnation and self-hate crowd out the joy of the incarnation from our lives.

This Christmas . . .

Put Christ in
Christians

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Amen.

God, the Activist

by Gary Simpson

The book of Exodus is believed to have been important in the Civil Rights movement.

Exodus 3:1-2, 4, 7-8, 13-14 (*New English Translation*) Now Moses was shepherding the flock . . . The angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire from within a bush. He looked—and the bush was ablaze with fire, but it was not being consumed! When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him from within the bush and said, "Moses, Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am."

The Lord said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt. I have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows. I have come down to deliver them from the hand of the Egyptians . . .

Moses said to God, "If I go to the Israelites and tell them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?'—what should I say to them?"

God said to Moses, "I am that I am." And he said, "You must say this to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.'"

This passage in Exodus shows God as an activist God, empowering people who are oppressed.

There is another, richer meaning in the name God chose to Come Out with at the burning bush. Rabbi and Bible scholar Gunther Plaut states that the Hebrew means "I will be what tomorrow demands."¹ When the children of Israel were told God's name, the

¹ Gunther Plaut. "Exodus." *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*. (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981), 405.

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Lovest Thou Me More

John 21:15 (KJV) So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my lambs..

The disciples traveled together, and, at times they ate and lived together with the Master. The disciples were close. And Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me more than the other disciples?" Jesus was essentially asking Peter if he loved Jesus more than all of the others disciples loved Jesus.

There is nobody who is closer to us than our own self-talk. The voices we listen to that come from deep within the identity of our souls are our constant companions. The words of Jesus come to us "lovest thou me more than these"? Do we love Jesus more than we love the voices of the internal tapes that say we are not good enough, that we are not worthy, that we are not capable? When we love Jesus more than these, we hear voices of affirmation in our heart. Do we love the affirming voice of Jesus more than the negative tapes that play in our thoughts? And to those haunted by self-doubt, Jesus continues, saying, "Feed my lambs," because Jesus thinks that you are plenty good enough to serve God.



name of God, "I will be what tomorrow demands," gave assurance as they stepped forward into an uncharted and an uncertain future.

God the Activist - Activity 2

There are many burning bushes where God shows up and asks us, as God as Moses, to be activists. Just a few that catch my attention:

- San Francisco - the murder of Harvey Milk.
- Stonewall - the Stonewall gay bar riot.
- Laramie, Wyoming - the murder of Matthew Shepard.
- The stretch of highway in northern British Columbia where so many Indigenous women lost their lives or disappeared that it is now commonly referred to as the Highway of Tears.
- The many people who died of AIDS, while governments took the "moral high ground" by looking the other direction, so they did not have to risk offending homophobic voters.
- Robert Pickton in British Columbia who is reported to have told an uncover policeman that he killed 49 women and wanted to make it an even 50 women.²

I invite you to think of burning bush experiences in your life. At the end of each burning bush experience you recall say, "I am not alone. My God will **be what tomorrow demands.**"

² Tom Leonard. "Pig farmer 'killed 49 women but wanted 50'". *The Telegraph*. January 23, 2007. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1540339/Pig-farmer-killed-49-women-but-wanted-50.html> (accessed August 19, 2017).