

EX NIHILO

ORIGINAL PROSE AND POETRY

THE SPIRIT SEARCHETH ALL THINGS

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Daniel J. Haas became a preacher by the time he was 24, a drunk by 26, and a corpse by 30. Since it had been so long since he looked presentable, this lattermost stage gave the family a greater sense of dignity when the mourners arrived at the church. He was 6'2" when he was 17 and kept his slightly muscular build even in death. His jagged face fit the nature of his clothes, and on the day of the funeral, his jawbone threatened to snap the lid when it was time to close the casket.

During the service, his sister Amy rang out "Amazing Grace" in her most beautiful soprano that immediately caused her mother to beam and make a quick glance around just to be sure that the other ladies knew that it was she who had raised the girl to sing like that. Even on a day like this Mrs. Haas could still find a way to be proud, for she knew a preacher's wife ought always to hold her head up high. "It befits women like us to set the *tone*," she'd explain.

During the ride home from the burial, Amy started to sing "In the Sweet By and By." About a minute in, she realized that she forgot most of it so she had to keep repeating the first

verse and refrain, slower each time, trying not to cause any more discomfort for herself. When the family was dropped off at the house by Brother Clark who had volunteered to be their chauffeur, her father was exhausted from all the attention of the day and had heard enough singing. He told Amy to hush now so that “mama could get some rest” and that he could work on his sermon for the morning.

The summer after he received his high school diploma, Daniel set out an hour north just outside of Atlanta for Holy Spirit Seminary. This was the closest to a city that he had ever been, and he wrote to his family within the first week of his move that he felt as if he had “finally arrived.” Where he couldn’t say exactly, but he knew as he wandered the busy streets in the evenings that he would do something noteworthy for this world.

Society, as Daniel saw it, had stopped paying attention to basic truths. Jesus was just another name and figure of the past to scoff at. The Gospel was irrelevant, Bible stories were old news, and a growing number of people in the modern generation were defining themselves as “post-Christian.” He longed to bring Jesus to *everyone*: Christian, Hindu, Jew, agnostic, whoever would listen. The faith just needed some flexibility, and Daniel J. Haas was just the man to give it a healthy stretch. On the weekends, he’d participate in as many church or temple services he could find, which didn’t exclude the bars and nightclubs (which were temples in a way, he told himself). He had to know how others lived were he to bring Jesus to them, after all.

Before taking a single step in life, the hope-filled youth would listen to the Spirit. From the clothes he wore to the groceries he bought and down to which armpit to swipe with deodorant first: never was a decision made without consulting the Spirit. This proved to be a very fitting way to live as an aspiring preacher, for everywhere he looked he began to see Jesus: Jesus in the mosques, the temples, the bars, the strip clubs, the shoe stores, the produce

aisle. It was all the same. Wherever the Spirit led him, he'd keep an eye out for where Jesus might fit next.

In seminary, Daniel could go days without being seen, emerging from whatever cocoon he had been hiding in to come prepared for his preaching lessons twice a week with his jet-black hair perfectly parted to match his flawless grin. He would perform such moving sermons at times that his classmates would brag that he could convince a hog to bathe or the pope to get saved. His grades were satisfactory and he knew just what to say to whomever, regardless of his personal belief in what came out of his mouth. He only ever had one run-in with a professor. During his first semester he sat in Rev. Moody's office for three hours one afternoon arguing against the old man's insistence on the physical resurrection of Christ. Moody never showed it if he had been convinced by the young Haas, but Daniel knew that the outdated preacher was at least knowledgeable now of a more fitting principle: a dead body stays dead. A risen body only gets up to die again. Daniel conceded that the Gospels' stories were helpful for an age before science and reason, but ultimately pitied the professor by the end of the dispute. Moody listened to dead preachers; Daniel listened to the living Spirit.

Without detailing any of his newfound knowledge, Daniel promised his father to take over the family business once he graduated. Rev. Haas could preach for a hundred years more according to his wife, but no one denied that he looked a little older every Sunday and it wouldn't be long before he had neither the energy nor the health to holler out God's abiding truth.

Back home after five years in school, the determined-looking young man knelt in front of his father's pulpit after service one afternoon. All the deacons and retired pastors in the congregation stood up and came forward to lay hands on his head to pray that the Holy Ghost would "get down on this boy"! Brother Frank was the last to lay hands, and his prayer must have misdirected the Holy Ghost to a degree, since his 76-year-old knees unexpectedly

loosened and burst into what some might call a dance on his way back to his pew.

Daniel's stomach soured and recoiled in on itself during the whole process. An age of technology, gender theory, and a newfound level of tolerance was not the time to be calling on such an outdated concept so termed the "Holy Ghost." Such a term concretized and weighed down the Spirit that ought to be leading men to explore the newness of the world and all it has to offer, not forcing their heads further down their own preconceived delusions. He made a resolution to scrape the barnacles off this Church soon enough and head in a better direction, one soaked with a rationality that embraces the present moment. He would make the Gospel attractive to a world void of meaning.

A pro-forma trial sermon was scheduled for the following week, the day before Homecoming Sunday. It would just be the pastor, deacons, and elders in attendance to listen and make sure his theology was correct and offer suggestions on style if the need arose. Rev. Haas had put announcements in the town's paper and the church bulletin for a month that after the service, they would have a potluck supper where he intended to give his blessing to the successor of Grace of God Bible Church.

Grace of God was a prized relic of the town. The congregation always seemed willing to step into the modern age, but unsure of how to do it. This privation of confidence made the church stall in collective thought, worship style, theology, and design. Caution is always a smoother means in travel, and the folks at Grace of God were not the type to venture down the rough roads of change.

Sunlight would pour in every morning equally from the clear windows that lined the wall and from the cracks in the wood that held them up. The off-white rectangular building was completed in 1953 and behind the pulpit beamed one stained glass window of *Christ the Good Shepherd*. The white-robed, red-sashed, bearded figure gazed over the choir loft and the two rows of wooden pews holding his pet lamb, who seemed perfectly content to rest in his captor's oversized arms. Hymnals and Bibles rested in the backs of

each pew, containing a musty smell and plenty of dust even though they were put to hard use every Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night. An old piano, slightly out of tune, sat in the front corner of the choir loft flanked by the American, Georgian, and Christian flag.

Homecoming was a stressful time for the parking lot and on the church's furniture. The usual crowd had to show up an hour early if they were to set their dish in the gym and hop into the church to find their usual seats. Those that forgot about the influx of guests were displaced from their normal pews and had to endure sitting in another spot like the exiled Israelites or even stand in the back with the heavy-duty sinners who didn't want to get within eye-locking distance of the preacher.

On a usual Sunday, Rev. Haas would peer down from the dark wood of the pulpit to preach to about two hundred painted up, caffeine produced faces. He could usually hold their attention for an hour and a half after a handful of hymns, were he to make his points in an acrostic or give subtle promises in his sermon that the end was near. As soon as he started talking up the sinner's prayer and the "plan of salvation," little packs in his flock would sit up straight, preparing to stand and sing a soft closing hymn, swaying a little as the sinners wept down the aisle to get redeemed, baptized, or recommit their life.

This ritual saturated Daniel's childhood memories: The choir would dolefully intone "Just As I Am," as a heavy exhortation bellowed out from the bottom of his father's oversized torso. With his arms extended over the people, eyes shut in a pained squint, one hand holding a Bible and the other open in invitation, he'd beg for sinners between each line of every verse. "I want every head bowed, every eye closed, nobody's lookin' around...Do you know that Jesus offers you this gift of salvation right now?...Jesus died for you today...for this moment...He's calling you today, young man... He wants your heart, little girl, will you give it to him today?...Do you know where you're goin' when you leave this parking lot and get T-boned by that semi?"

When he was younger, little Danny wanted to be just like him. As he grew up and came to his senses, though, he knew this style of religion was far more than past its prime. He still yearned to preach the Word, but knew that times were different now. His parents grew up breathing in a social air infused with hints of racism and segregation, Catholic/Protestant battles, politically infused disputes among the small-town churchgoers, and a constant fear of Communists and homosexuals. He, of course, had risen above all this. Not only had Daniel met a Catholic, a Communist, and a homosexual within his first year after leaving home, he befriended every such social outcast, showing just how accepting he had become. The Spirit showed him Jesus everywhere, no matter what.

The new Rev. Haas, who would insist on just going by “Daniel,” was eager to preach his trial sermon. He mounted the old wood pulpit, which bore a large empty cross on the front and had dents along each side to serve as evidence of the sermons when his father got the most excited. Even though it was autumn and the ladies’ dresses had less color and more material and the younger men had stopped complaining about their suit coats being too heavy, the humidity in the building still made the air just as thick as it was on “God and Country Sunday” the weekend after July 4th. Wiping his forehead, the pastor-elect introduced himself in exaggerated formality to the gaggle of deacons that had known him since he was in diapers crawling across those same sawdust-covered floorboards. He wrapped his fingers around each corner of the pulpit that looked about as tailored to him as his new Atlanta suit. After asking the men, like his father had always asked the congregation, to hold up their Bibles so God could see his Holy Word being exalted in his house, Daniel turned with them to Galatians 3, emphasizing verse 28:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.

The young Haas scanned each face in front of him and even turned around to catch a glimpse at the imaginary choir. When speaking in general, his words were always coordinated with his gaze. When speaking to a smaller group, each member received the impression that Daniel had locked eyes with them alone for the entirety of the episode. Any sharpness in his voice was cut by his unexplainably sedating comportment. He carried fierce tones of rebuke, but his honest face and paternal body language suggested an immaculate concern for the other's well-being.

With his Bible held tightly over his head like Moses' bronze serpent, Haas began by explaining God's plan in the beginning to bring creation back to himself. Adam and Eve were given a whole garden just for them, as the Almighty wanted his creatures to know of his desire for their happiness. Cain couldn't reconcile the fact that God would show love to anyone else. No, Cain wanted that love all to himself, so he killed his brother with whom he was forced to share it. A couple shouts of "Amen!" arose from the men already. Daniel pressed further.

"Now, y'all've heard that Adam and Eve were the first sinners. Y'all've heard that their sin caused The Fall. They stained our souls with Original Sin. Now I'm tellin' you right here this mornin' that this is the longest run heresy in human history! Fact is, fellas, that God wanted Adam and Eve out of that ol' garden to fill the earth with more people that would love him and each other."

An icy-tongued Pentecost descended over the gathering that froze them to their seats as Daniel explained that Cain was forgiven since God showed him (and all of us through him) the law about his brother's keeper and that it was *Noah* who committed the gravest fault in the ancient days by not building a large enough boat.

"God told Noah to build an ark for his family and Noah thought that meant kin. No sir, Noah, God meant everybody! Didn't you learn from Cain? Who is your neighbor whom you have to love?! *Everybody!*" Puzzled and frustrated looks appeared

on some faces, and only a couple heads nodded along as they pondered this new proposition. Most of the deacons simply leaned forward with their elbows on their knees and chins on their fists to see just where Preacher was going with this, hoping that he was simply setting up some elaborate example to preach on the false gospels in today's world.

“Do y'all think Elias really *killed* all those prophets of Baal? Would God tell you today, sir, to go and kill a Methodist? No sir! Not the God I know and love! Ya see, not even dear old David really killed Goliath with that stone. The 'death' of the pagans was the conversion in their hearts! They got saved! Amen?! They formed idols *they* made, they were worshipping *themselves* for the longest time. God taught his people to love him however they saw fit, as long as that love was open to everybody.

“This may be some high theology, folks, but just you listen and hang on with Preacher for another minute. Sometimes God's Holy Word uses language that only speaks to people of a certain age, it's gotta be updated. The Jews understood what these words really meant. They wasn't the literalists we are today, no sir. We're more advanced now in other ways, but we still don't interpret right and I'll tell ya it's high time we learnt better.”

As the preacher carried on, Elder James had had enough. He stood up in a fury and started for the door in protest, only to be halted by a voice so thunderous that not even Daniel himself knew where it originated:

“YOU WALK OUT THAT DOOR AND YOU DAMN YOUR SOUL, YOUNGIN!” he screamed. A 24-year-old boy calling an elder of the church “youngin” didn't seem strange on his lips for some reason, so he continued his warning with perfect prophetic zeal. “Will you answer to Jesus when he asks you why you stomped out of his own house? Will you answer that the Spirit was steppin' on your toes too hard and you couldn't bear his truth? Will you spend an eternity in hellfire 'cause you couldn't keep one hour with him? Sit back down! I'm here for y'all's salvation, for the world's!”

After the old man reclaimed his post in the front pew, he stared down at his feet, thinking that perhaps the Holy Ghost *was* stepping on them and he should just endure his trials like St. Peter said to. Perhaps today he'd have to recommit to walk the straight and narrow, which he hadn't realized he wasn't on until just now.

Like a road to a new Emmaus, tales of the Scriptures' heroes and anti-heroes were refashioned to describe God's inclusive love for creation. Those in front of him were hearing their Bible stories for the first time. It took two hours to get to the New Testament.

"Paul says it himself! We're all ONE! It's a message you may not want to accept, but it's the truth I bring today as the Spirit has laid it on my heart to give! You may get upset, but that's no matter. You leave me out of your conscience. I'm a messenger of the gospel you've never heard, because no preacher was ready to give it. Not even my daddy could give you this truth.

"We're one in Christ Jesus. *You'll know them by their fruit.* You've been too long in making distinctions and squabblin' amongst yourselves and what *fruit* do you have to show for it? Hypocrisy! Gossip! Bickerin'! Pride!

"Jesus didn't die so you could keep to your own ideas of'im. His death was for everyone! What does it matter if you call yourself a Christian? Go ahead and be a Muslim! A Jew! An Atheist! It's the same Jesus for everybody, whether anyone admits it or not. Yessir, we have different ways of thinkin' and of goin' about, but don't you hear the words of Paul? We're *one!*"

Daniel leaned forward with the most sincere look on his face that he had ever given. His voice was somehow simultaneously deafening and gently coaxing.

"Now y'all listen. I want every eye on me. Nobody's gettin' *saved* today, 'cept from your own tight grasp of your own tight reality. Understand me? You still may need redemption, but only by today's Jesus, an overdue Jesus that should've been innerduced long ago. Your sin is culturalism, and I'll preach against y'all's stubbornness til the day God calls me home. Thank you Jesus! Praise us all!"

The undersized captive audience sat in a silence that could have been tasted. The skin on the sweat-soaked necks and foreheads could barely contain the blood-swelled veins that threatened to burst from them. Rev. Haas couldn't feel his feet when his son glided down the steps from the pulpit and out the door, making it clear that he never planned to tend his father's sheep. This sermon was only for the mind-scattered men that sat immobilized in the front two pews. After finding the energy to stand up, the old pastor silently left for his office and wasn't seen for the remainder of the day. He had a sermon to put together on "loving thy enemy" for Homecoming Sunday, where there was no mention of Daniel, only an announcement that Rev. Haas would be preaching as normal every week until Grace of God found itself a new pastor.

Daniel wasn't seen for the whole of the Sabbath but came home Monday morning and announced to his still sullen-faced family at the breakfast table that he felt the Lord calling him to plant a church two miles down from Grace of God Bible Church. He wasn't certain of its name or who would attend, but he just knew the word had to be preached. He intended to follow the Spirit wherever it led.

So Daniel did just that.

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