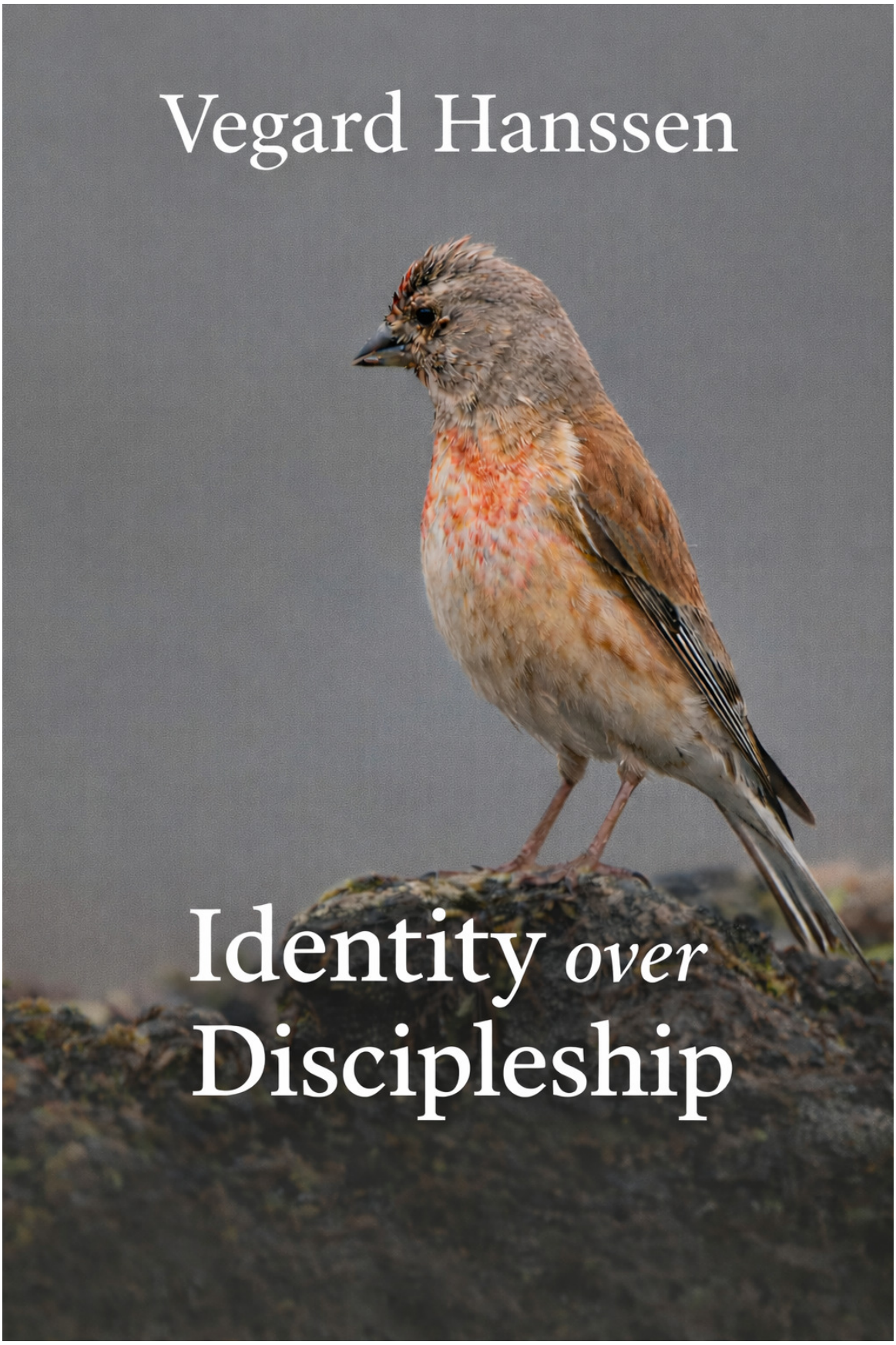
Vegard Hanssen



Identity *over* Discipleship

Identity over Discipleship

We are always one crisis away from our next golden calf

Vegard Hanssen

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Foreword

This book is not an attack.

Nor is it a defense, a debate, or a reckoning. It takes no side. It points no finger at any particular group, any particular party, or any particular theological tradition.

It is written in grief.

Grief that we who call ourselves Christians — we who bear the name of Him who washed the feet of His enemies — are in our time more often known for our positions than for our love. That we have become more recognizable by what we are against than by whom we follow.

The book asks a simple question: What happens when faith becomes identity rather than discipleship?

It is not a new question. The Bible asks it itself, again and again — from the golden calf at Sinai to the letter to Ephesus. God's people have always stood in danger of losing direction while preserving form. It is a human pattern, and it is a pattern we share.

The chapters in this book move between narrative, reflection, and silence. Between the longer texts are poems and prayers — not as decoration, but as breathing space. Places where the words may rest, and where the reader might pause to feel.

They are written with a conviction: that the gospel survives our failures, but that it is worth asking whether our credibility does.

And with a hope: that we are always one repentance away from a new beginning.

The Stones

The stones skip
two, three, four times
before the sea takes them back

The sun sets
like a prayer
no one hears

There was a time
when we carried each other
with open hands
without counting the cost

Those who saw us
knew us not by our words
but by how we bent
toward one another

The bread was broken
and with it we broke
ourselves for each other

Then the sky fell silent
and the silence grew too long
We built walls of certain answers
and called it faithfulness

Behind the walls
a different silence
than the one we knew at first

The first was rest
this one is absence

Some evenings by the sea
when the light fades
and the stones skip across the water
we still hear it
far away

See how they love one another

Still the stones skip
but the ripples do not reach as far

Still the bread remains
but who breaks it now

First Love

> But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. — Revelation 2:4

It is a strange letter to receive.

The church in Ephesus is doing much right. They endure. They do not tolerate evil. They have tested those who call themselves apostles and found them to be false. They have perseverance. They have not given up.

And yet Jesus says: You have abandoned what matters most.

Not doctrine. That is intact. Not endurance. That is in place. Not the ability to tell true from false. That still works.

What is missing is the simplest thing. The first thing. The thing that was once so self-evident it needed no explanation.

They no longer loved one another the way they did in the beginning.

In the first decades after the resurrection, something happened that the Romans did not fully understand. In an empire built on power, hierarchy, and honor, small communities began to emerge that operated according to an entirely different logic.

They cared for their own sick — but not only their own. During the epidemics that ravaged the Roman Empire, the Christians stayed with the dying when others fled. They tended neighbors who did not share their faith. It was so unusual that it was noticed.

They took in children who had been left to die — infant girls, the disabled, the unwanted. In a culture where the exposure of infants was accepted practice, these communities bent down and carried them home.

They shared meals across boundaries that were otherwise impossible to cross. Slaves and free. Jews and Gentiles. Poor and wealthy. Around the same table. It was not a political project. It was the consequence of something they believed to be true about what it means to be human.

Emperor Julian, who attempted to restore the old Roman religion, complained in frustration: "These godless Galileans care not only for their own poor, but for ours as well."

He meant it as criticism. But it was, in truth, the highest recognition Christianity could have received.

They were known by how they loved one another.

Something happened along the way.

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when, because it was not a dramatic break. It was more like the tide — a slow, almost imperceptible shift.

The communities grew. They gained influence. In time, they gained power. And with power came new questions. No longer simply "how do we live faithfully?" — but "how do we preserve what we have built?"

It is a natural question. Perhaps even a responsible one. But it changes the direction of the gaze. From looking outward — who needs us? — to looking inward — who threatens us?

Slowly, faith began to be less about who we are for others, and more about who we are in contrast to others.

This is where identity begins to take the place of discipleship.

Discipleship is movement. It asks: Where is Jesus going? And it follows — often to uncomfortable places, to people we would not have chosen ourselves, into situations where we lose control.

Identity is position. It asks: Where do we belong? And it draws boundaries — between us and them, between right and wrong, between those who are inside and those who are outside.

Both exist within faith. It is not wrong to know who you are. It is not wrong to hold fast to truth.

But when identity becomes the primary thing, something happens to us. We begin to define ourselves more by what we defend than by whom we follow. We become more concerned with the boundaries than with the direction. And slowly, almost imperceptibly, we begin to need enemies in order to know who we are.

It is a dangerous shift. Not because it is evil, but because it feels right. It feels responsible. It feels faithful.

But it is a different kind of faithfulness than the first.

The first love was not naive. The early Christians lived under pressure, under persecution, under suspicion. They knew what it cost to believe.

But they did not respond with walls. They responded by loving beyond what fear would dictate.

That is what makes the letter to Ephesus so unsettling. For the church has not stopped believing. They have not stopped working. They have not stopped holding fast to the truth.

They have simply stopped loving the way they did in the beginning.

And the letter says that is enough to shake everything.

What was it they lost?

Perhaps the simplest answer is this: They lost the order.

Truth without love became hardness. Endurance without warmth became duty. Right doctrine without right spirit became ideology.

They had everything in place — except what held it all together.

It is not difficult to recognize ourselves.

For the question in Revelation 2 is not addressed only to a church in the first century. It is a question that meets us today, just as quietly, just as directly:

Do we love one another the way we did in the beginning?

Or have we become so preoccupied with being right, with preserving, with defending — that we have lost what was once our clearest mark?

Not doctrine. Not endurance. Not the ability to expose what is false.

But the simplest thing. The first thing.

That we loved one another.

That we loved our enemies.

The Waiting

The mountain burns
but gives no voice

At its foot
sand between the fingers
and a silence
that weighs more than stone

The hands search
long before the mind understands

What we reach for in the dark
reveals more
than all we hold in the light

The Golden Calf

> When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, “Up, make us gods who shall go before us.” — Exodus 32:1

It is easy to read this story from a distance. With a small laugh, almost. Who fashions a calf of gold and falls down before it — only weeks after the sea parted before their very eyes?

But distance blinds us to what matters most in the text.

For this was not a rebellion. It was not atheism. It was not even conscious apostasy.

It was fear.

Moses is gone. He has been gone a long time. The mountain is veiled in cloud and fire, and no one knows what is happening up there. The people are left standing in the wilderness, without the map, without the voice, without the one who stood between them and the invisible God.

And this is where it begins. Not with wickedness, but with a question that feels entirely reasonable:

What do we do now?

Who will lead us forward?

Who can we hold on to?

These are questions we all recognize. They surface when the future is uncertain, when what we trusted is no longer visible, when God’s silence lasts longer than we can bear.

The most revealing moment in the text is what the people say when the calf is finished.

They do not say: “Here is another god.”

They say: “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.”

They use God’s own story. They clothe the new in the old language. They rationalize, wrap it in the vocabulary of faith — and perhaps they truly believe this is the same thing, only in a form they can see and touch.

It is not a rejection of God. It is an attempt to make God manageable.

That is where the golden calf always begins.

The golden calf never presents itself as an idol.

It presents itself as necessary. As reasonable. As the responsible choice in a difficult situation. It does not say "abandon God" — it says "God is silent, and we need something now."

That is why it is so difficult to recognize. It does not look like sin. It looks like wisdom.

And it is always faster than the revelation. Moses is still on the mountain. The revelation is on its way. But the waiting feels impossible, and the golden calf offers something immediate: form, direction, security.

Faith requires waiting. The golden calf offers speed.

One of the most uncomfortable aspects of this story is that Aaron — the high priest, God's chosen — is the one who casts the calf.

He does not do it out of conviction. He does it because the pressure is too great. The people demand. The situation escalates. And instead of standing in the uncertainty, he gives in.

Afterward, when Moses confronts him, Aaron says something almost comical in its evasion of responsibility: "I threw the gold into the fire, and out came this calf."

As if it simply appeared on its own.

But perhaps that is more honest than we think. For golden calves have a way of emerging like that — not through one deliberate choice, but through many small surrenders. One concession. One adjustment. One moment where we choose the safe over the faithful. And suddenly there it stands, and we do not quite know how it happened.

In the Bible, the golden calf is not an isolated incident. It is a pattern.

Saul begins as a humble leader. But when power slips, he starts offering sacrifices without waiting for Samuel, building monuments to himself, hunting the one he perceives as a threat. All of it wrapped in religious language. All of it experienced as necessary.

David, the man after God's own heart, numbers the people — not out of wickedness, but out of a need for control. To know the strength. To measure the resources. Trust replaced by statistics.

In Jeremiah's time, the people cry out: "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!" They believe the symbol protects them — regardless of how they live. Identity has become talisman.

And the Pharisees. Those who love Scripture, take the law seriously, wish to preserve purity — yet who, as Jesus says, neglect the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faithfulness. They defend God with a zeal that blinds them to God's own heart.

It is the same underlying pattern, again and again. Not rejection, but displacement. Not rebellion, but substitution. Not a deliberate choice, but a slow drift.

What drives it?

Almost always the same thing: the waiting grew too long. The silence grew too heavy. We needed something now — something visible, something tangible — and what we found seemed reasonable at the time.

It is not malice. It is human psychology under pressure. But that is precisely why it is so dangerous — because it does not feel like a fall. It feels like survival.

And perhaps the most uncomfortable question is not why they made the golden calf at Sinai.

It is why we believe we would have done differently.

We read the story and think we see it — that we recognize the idol, that we would have stood firm. But history's heaviest lesson is that people almost never recognize their own golden calf in real time.

It always looks different from the last time. It always speaks our own language. And it never comes with a warning attached.

We are always one crisis away from our next golden calf.

The question is not whether we are immune.

The question is whether we are honest enough to ask ourselves what we have cast — perhaps not in gold, but in convictions we refuse to examine, in loyalties we dare not challenge, in securities we have begun to worship without calling it worship.

For the golden calf is never what we think it is.

It is what we cannot bear to let go of.

Prayer after Sinai

We did not mean it, Lord.

The gold was still warm from our earrings
when we gave it up
and we felt the shape grow
beneath our hands
like something we almost recognized

We gave it your name
and thought that was enough

We did not know
that what we were forming
had already begun
to form us

Lord,
give us eyes
before you give us answers

The Theology of Fear

> For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control. — 2 Timothy 1:7

Fear is not sin.

It is important to begin there. Fear is human. It is built in. It has kept us alive for thousands of years. When something threatens what we love, fear is the natural response.

The Bible is full of frightened people. Abraham is afraid. Moses is afraid. Elijah flees in fear after his greatest victory. The disciples are afraid in the boat, afraid in Gethsemane, afraid at the cross. Peter is frightened enough to deny three times.

Fear is not the problem.

The problem is what happens when fear begins to shape the theology.

There is a subtle difference between being afraid and thinking through fear.

Being afraid is a moment. A reaction. Something we feel in the body.

Thinking through fear is something else. Then fear begins to organize how we read the Bible, how we see the world, how we understand God's will. Fear is no longer something we feel — it becomes something we build with.

And it always builds the same things: walls, categories, enemies.

Ten spies return from the promised land. They have seen the fruit. They know the land is good. But they have also seen the giants.

And fear does something remarkable to them: it makes them shrink in their own eyes. "We seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers," they say, "and so we seemed to them."

Fear does not only change what we see. It changes who we believe we are.

Joshua and Caleb saw the same giants. But they drew a different conclusion — not because they were braver people, but because they measured the situation against a different reference point. Not the enemy. God.

These are two entirely different theologies, facing exactly the same reality.

One asks: How great are the threats? The other asks: How faithful is God?

Both are honest about the landscape. But only one can enter it.

When fear shapes faith, certain predictable things happen.

We barely notice it. First it is the love of enemies we release — not because we have stopped believing in it, but because it became too heavy under the pressure. We set it quietly aside. Not openly. Just practically.

Then it is humility that erodes. For humility requires that we hold space for being wrong, and fear cannot afford that. When everything feels like survival, doubt becomes a threat in itself.

And gradually, mercy narrows. It retreats to those closest, to those who are like us. The others are quietly pushed beyond the circle of care.

Finally, it is the tone that changes. We may not hear it ourselves. But the words grow harder. More absolute. And the room for nuance shrinks, because fear needs clarity, and clarity is most easily achieved by simplifying.

The strange thing is that all of this can happen while the doctrine remains intact.

We can still say the right words. Confess the right sentences. Sing the right songs. But the tone has changed, and with it the direction.

Paul writes to the Galatians about the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

It is a peculiar list. It contains nothing of what fear produces. No fighting spirit. No strategic sharpness. No triumph over opponents. Only qualities that make us vulnerable.

And perhaps that is the point. The fruit of the Spirit is not designed to win power struggles. It is designed to resemble Christ. And Christ, in the eyes of the world, lost.

It is nearly impossible to bear this fruit and at the same time live in the mode of fear. The two exclude each other. Not theologically, for we can believe in both. But practically — in how we meet people, in how we speak, in what we prioritize.

We recognize the fruit of fear in ourselves: the small suspicion, the hardness that creeps in, the restlessness for control. It creates security, but not fellowship. It protects, but it does not warm.

Elijah is the prophet's prophet. He has just stood alone against 450 prophets of Baal on Carmel. Fire fell from heaven. The people fell on their faces. It was the most spectacular victory in the entire Old Testament.

And the next day he flees for his life. Because Jezebel sent him a threat.

A threat. After fire from heaven.

It is nearly incomprehensible — unless one understands what fear does. It lets us forget yesterday. It shrinks God to the size of the last threat we received. It isolates us. Elijah sits alone under a bush and wishes himself dead.

And what does God do?

He does not send fire again. He does not send a plan. He sends bread and water. Rest. And then a still, small voice.

Not more power. More nearness.

This is perhaps the most revealing moment in all of Scripture for understanding the difference between the theology of fear and the theology of faith. Fear demands more power. Faith needs more nearness.

When we look around us today, it is not difficult to recognize the fingerprints of fear.

We live in a time when many feel that something fundamental is at stake. Values, culture, security, the future. And it is not necessarily imagined — there are real changes, real challenges, real losses.

But fear is a poor counselor. Not because it lies about the threats, but because it magnifies them and shrinks everything else. It shrinks God. It shrinks our memory. It shrinks our ability to see people rather than enemy images.

And it disguises itself. That is perhaps the most dangerous thing about the theology of fear: it speaks in a voice we recognize as our own. "We must protect our children." "We must stand up for truth." "We cannot just sit still."

None of this is wrong in itself. But when fear is the engine, the direction shifts even while the words stay the same.

There is a question worth asking ourselves at regular intervals. Not as judgment, but as self-examination:

What is driving me right now — fear or trust?

Not what I say is driving me. Not what I believe is driving me. But what is actually shaping my reactions, my words, my view of those who disagree with me.

For the answer is not always what we wish. And that is all right. Fear is human. Even Elijah was afraid.

But God did not meet him with more fire. He met him with silence.

And perhaps that is where the way back begins — not in stronger defenses, but in becoming still enough to hear a quiet voice that says:

What are you doing here?

Echo

The room was large once
Full of voices
that did not sound like ours

We built walls of answers
and the doors grew narrower

For every question we set aside
a voice disappeared

We did not notice
— it grew quiet on its own

Now we speak
and hear ourselves
come back

We call it peace

But the peace we were promised
had room for more

Peter and the Sword

> Then Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant and cut off his right ear. (The servant's name was Malchus.) So Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?" — John 18:10–11

It is the middle of the night. Torches in the olive grove. Soldiers with weapons. Judas has just kissed him.

And Peter does the only thing he knows to do. He draws a sword.

It is an impulse we understand. Perhaps the most recognizable act in all the Gospels. Someone threatens what you love most, and you strike back. Not out of malice. Out of loyalty. Out of desperation. Out of love, even.

Peter does not betray Jesus in this moment. He tries to protect him.

And still Jesus says: Put it away.

There is something unsettling about this confrontation, because it is not really about the weapon itself. It is about what Peter believes this is.

Peter believes this is a battle. A battle between God's kingdom and the power of the world. And in a battle, you draw a sword. It is logical. It is brave. It is even self-sacrificing — Peter risks his life for Jesus.

But Jesus sees something else. He does not see a battle to be won. He sees a cup to be drunk. And that is an entirely different logic.

Peter's logic says: We must defend the good with force. Jesus' logic says: The good prevails through suffering.

Peter's logic says: The enemy must be stopped. Jesus' logic says: The enemy must be loved.

It is not that Peter is wrong about who Jesus is. He is wrong about how God's kingdom works.

Luke adds a detail the other Gospel writers leave out.

After Peter strikes, and after Jesus says stop, Jesus bends down and heals the ear of Malchus. The servant of the high priest. One of those who came to arrest him.

In the very moment Peter wounds the enemy, Jesus heals him.

It is almost too much. For in this single scene we see two utterly different responses to threat — side by side, in real time. One uses force. The other uses grace. One defends with a sword. The other heals what the sword destroyed.

And Jesus does it without saying a word about it. He simply does it. As if it were obvious. As if this is the only possible response for the one who knows who he is.

Peter had good reasons.

That is important to say. Because we often reduce this story to a simple lesson about violence versus peace. But what makes it so uncomfortable is that Peter's motives are good.

He loves Jesus. He has left everything to follow him. He has confessed him as the Messiah. And now, in the darkest hour, when everything seems to be falling apart, Peter refuses to just stand by and watch.

That is faithfulness. That is courage. That is decisiveness.

And it is entirely wrong.

Because loyalty that chooses the wrong means becomes something other than what it started as. Love that resorts to violence transforms in its own hands. Defending truth with methods that contradict the truth undermines the very thing you are trying to protect.

This may be the hardest lesson in the Gospels: It is possible to fight for Jesus in a way that works against him.

We rarely draw physical swords. But we draw swords nonetheless.

We draw them with words. With the tone we use. With sharpness we call honesty. With righteous indignation as a weapon against those we believe are wrong.

We draw them more often than we think. In conversations where the goal is no longer to reach the other person, but to defeat them. In rhetoric that does not invite, but shuts down.

And almost always we do it for the same reason as Peter: We are defending something we love. We are fighting for something we feel is threatened. We are acting out of loyalty.

But the sword always does damage, no matter how noble the motive.

And the question Jesus asks is not whether we are right on the matter. It is whether our methods resemble him.

There is an earlier scene that sheds light on this one. In Matthew 16, Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah. And shortly after, when Jesus tells them he must suffer and die, Peter takes him aside and says, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you."

And Jesus responds with the harshest words he ever directs at a disciple: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

It is brutal. But it reveals something decisive.

Peter wants a Messiah who conquers without suffering. A God who wins without losing. A kingdom that comes with power, not with a cross.

And Jesus says: That is not God's way of thinking. That is human thinking.

Gethsemane is the same scene, played out in action. Peter still wants to save Jesus from the cross. The sword is simply the physical version of what he said with words months earlier.

And Jesus says the same thing, only quieter now: Put it away.

The cross is the opposite of the sword.

The sword says: I protect myself and my own. The cross says: I give myself for others.

The sword says: The enemy must fall. The cross says: I fall, so that the enemy may be raised up.

The sword says: Victory looks like dominance. The cross says: Victory looks like defeat.

It is a logic that has provoked for two thousand years. Paul called it foolishness to the world. And it is. It makes no sense — unless God truly is who he says he is. Unless the resurrection actually happened.

For if it did, it means the way of the cross was not a defeat. It was the ultimate victory. And then the sword is not merely unnecessary — it is a detour.

The hardest thing about this story is not that Peter was wrong.

It is that we would have done the same.

We would have drawn the sword. We would have defended. We would have fought with everything we had for what we love — and we would have called it faithfulness.

And that is precisely what makes Jesus' words so demanding. He does not ask us to stop caring. He does not ask us to become passive. He asks us to lay down the weapon that feels most natural.

And trust that God has another way.

A way that looks like defeat, but bears fruit that no sword can create.

After the Sword

The steel hits the ground
and the sound rings longer
than we expected

The hand still feels
the shape of the grip
like a memory in the muscle

It is the wind that surprises most —
it reaches the skin now
with nothing between

Stand here
with open hands
in a world
that did not become what we prayed for

Stand here
and know that this is something other
than weakness

Exile as Norm

> "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." — Jeremiah 29:5–7

It is one of the strangest letters in the Bible.

The people are in Babylon. Everything is lost. The temple is destroyed. The land is gone. The king has been led away in chains. And the prophets in captivity proclaim what the people want to hear: It will be over soon. We are going home. God will intervene and crush Babylon.

And then comes Jeremiah's letter. Not with promises of swift victory. Not with plans for revolt. Not with the comfort that the enemy will soon fall.

But with this:

Build houses. Plant gardens. Marry. Have children. Put down roots.

And the most provocative of all: Pray for Babylon. Seek the welfare of the city. For in its welfare you will find your welfare.

It is hard to overstate how radical this was.

Babylon was the enemy. Babylon had torn down everything sacred. To pray for Babylon was not merely unexpected — it was nearly unthinkable.

And yet it is exactly what God asks them to do. Not because Babylon deserves it. But because God's people are not called to survive in bitterness. They are called to bear fruit, even in foreign soil.

Jeremiah does not ask them to fight to reclaim what they have lost. He asks them to live faithfully where they are. Not as victims. Not as occupiers. But as people who plant trees whose fruit they may never harvest themselves.

Large portions of the Bible were written from exile, or in its shadow.

The Psalms carry exile's sorrow: "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept." But they also carry exile's trust: "Where shall I go from your Spirit?"

The book of Daniel is a story of faithful living in the heart of a foreign empire. Daniel serves the king. He does his work with excellence. He refuses to worship what he cannot worship — but he

does so without hatred, without contempt, without rebellion. He lives as a stranger who respects his hosts, while holding fast to what cannot be negotiated.

It is a remarkable balance. Not withdrawal. Not assimilation. But neither a struggle for power. Daniel never attempts to overthrow Babylon. He attempts to live rightly in Babylon.

Some of what we believe we have lost may be something we were never meant to have.

For over sixteen hundred years — from Constantine to our own day — Christianity in the West has lived with power. With cultural dominance. With legislation shaped by Christian ethics. With churches at the center of towns and crosses on flags.

It has been so long that we have begun to believe this is normal. That Christian influence in society is something we are entitled to. That when it weakens, it is a sign that something has gone wrong.

But what if the opposite is true?

What if the first three centuries — the powerless, persecuted, vulnerable centuries — are closer to God's intention for the church than the sixteen that followed?

For it was in those centuries that the church grew fastest. It was then that it was most recognizable. It was then that love was the first thing people noticed.

There is an important difference between two postures toward the world.

One is a siege mentality. It says: We are surrounded. The enemy is outside the walls. We must defend what we have. Every cultural shift is an attack. Every loss is a step closer to ruin.

The other is an exile mentality. It says: We are strangers here. This world is not our final home. But while we are here, we will plant, build, serve, and pray for the city we live in.

We may recognize both in ourselves. And they live out the faith in entirely different ways.

Peter — the same Peter who drew a sword in Gethsemane — writes later in his letter:

"Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles."

It is a remarkable choice of words from a man who had learned it the hard way. Sojourners and exiles. Not rulers. Not defenders of a Christian territory. Strangers.

And what are these strangers to do? "Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation."

That is the strategy of exile. Not conquest, but witness. Not power, but life.

There is something liberating in this, even though it is also painful.

For the siege mentality is exhausting. It demands constant surveillance of what threatens us. It turns every cultural shift into a crisis. It makes us rigid, defensive, afraid.

The exile mentality frees us from the burden of saving the world. Not from responsibility — but from the illusion that it is our power holding everything up.

Jeremiah says it almost casually: Build houses. Plant gardens. Live.

Not in protest. Not in resignation. But in the trust that God is God, even in Babylon.

This does not mean that everything is indifferent. Daniel's three friends refused to worship the statue and walked into the furnace rather than bow. Daniel himself refused to stop praying, even though it sent him into the lion's den. There are boundaries that cannot be crossed.

But notice what they did not do. They did not organize a revolt. They did not mobilize resistance. They did not plot to overthrow the king. They simply said: We cannot bow to this. And then they left the consequences to God.

That is a different kind of courage than the courage of the sword. It is the courage to stand without striking. To say no without demonizing. To hold fast without grasping for power.

Perhaps what we are experiencing today — the loss of cultural self-evidence, the feeling of losing our footing, the unease that the world is changing faster than we can keep up — perhaps it is not a crisis.

Perhaps it is a homecoming.

Not to power. But to the position where the church has always been most itself: as strangers who love the city they live in, without owning it.

It is a heavier road than the road of power. But it may be a truer one.

For Jeremiah did not promise that Babylon would be comfortable. He promised that God was with them there. And that fruit could grow, even in foreign soil.

Losing Without Losing Your Soul

> For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. — Matthew 16:25

There is a question that reveals more than we would like.

Not what we do when we win. But what we do when we lose.

When society moves in a direction we believe is wrong. When values we hold dear are no longer shared by the majority. When influence fades, and our voice carries less far than it used to.

What happens to us then?

Do we grow bitter? Harder? More desperate? Do we grasp for power with tighter fists, because the loss feels like something more than politics — it feels like an attack on the very thing we are?

Or is there a way of losing that keeps the soul intact?

Jesus lost.

It is a strange sentence to write, but it is true by every worldly measure.

He held no political power. He was abandoned by those closest to him. He was convicted in a trial that was a farce. He was executed as a criminal. The crowd that shouted "Hosanna" a week earlier now shouted "Crucify him."

If someone had stood at the foot of the cross and assessed the outcome, the conclusion would have been clear: This project failed.

And yet it is this moment — not the processions, not the miracles, not the speeches to thousands — that carries all of Christianity. The defeat became the turning point.

Not because loss is good in itself. But because it revealed who God is. That his road to victory runs through the very thing we fear most.

There is something about the logic of the grain of wheat that we never quite manage to take in.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

It is not a metaphor we like. Because it says that fruit requires something we instinctively resist: letting go. Not clinging. Accepting that something must die for something new to grow.

We would rather have fruit without death. Victory without a cross. Influence without vulnerability.

But the gospel insists it does not work that way.

One of the most striking things about the New Testament is how little it concerns itself with political victory.

Jesus says nothing about taking over Rome. Paul organizes no resistance movement. The early letters are not about strategies for cultural dominance.

Instead we encounter sentences like these:

"When I am weak, then I am strong." "Blessed are those who mourn." "Blessed are those who are persecuted." "Rejoice when people hate you."

This is not masochism. It is an entirely different understanding of what victory means.

Victory, in the logic of the gospel, is not winning over someone. It is resembling Christ — regardless of the outcome. It is keeping the right spirit even when you lose everything else.

But we live in a culture that has made losing the worst thing that can happen.

Loss means irrelevance. Loss means weakness. Loss means we were wrong, or that we did not fight hard enough. Everything in us screams that we must win.

And this pressure shapes faith too. We begin to read the Bible as a book about victory — and skip over all the places where it tells us that we will lose. That we are meant to lose. That loss is not the opposite of faithfulness, but sometimes the very proof of it.

When loss becomes unthinkable, something dangerous happens. We begin to justify almost anything to avoid it. The tone grows harder. The means grow coarser. Alliances we would never have made in calmer times suddenly become necessary. And slowly we lose the very thing we are trying to save — not because the enemy took it, but because we sacrificed it in the fight.

Some victories cost more than they are worth.

Paul writes from prison. Not as a man who has lost, but as a man who is free.

It is incomprehensible by the world's logic. He is chained. He is powerless. He has no influence over Roman politics. He cannot even choose what to eat for dinner.

And from this position he writes about joy. About peace. About not letting circumstances determine who we are.

Elsewhere he writes something that reaches even further: that nothing — neither death nor life, neither rulers nor authorities — can separate us from the love of God.

These are words from a man who knew what loss cost. And that is precisely why they carry weight. Because they are not words from a winner who can afford to be generous. They are words from a man who has lost everything except what truly matters.

The Sermon on the Mount does not begin with the strong. It begins with the poor in spirit. The mourning. The meek.

That is not a coincidence. It is an overturning of everything we believe about happiness and power. Jesus opens his most famous address by saying that blessing does not dwell where we think it does. It does not dwell in strength, influence, or victory. It dwells in the emptiness that makes room for God.

It is provocative. Not because it is beautiful — it is. But because it means that our desperation to win may be the very thing that keeps us farthest from the blessing.

There is a quiet mark of faith that has matured.

It is the ability to lose without growing hard.

To see the world moving in a direction you believe is wrong, and still keep the warmth. To lose influence without losing compassion. To stand firm without becoming rigid.

It is rare. And it is beautiful when it happens. Because it testifies that one's identity is not built on victory, but on something deeper.

The one who cannot lose without bitterness has built their faith on the wrong foundation. Not necessarily wrong doctrine — but the wrong center of gravity. A center of gravity that rests in outcomes rather than character. In results rather than direction.

Jesus prayed in Gethsemane. Not for victory. For the cup to pass from him. But he ended with the words: "Not as I will, but as you will."

That is the ultimate surrender. Not passivity — he had just been sweating blood in prayer. But a willingness to lose by the world's standards, in the trust that God has a way through the defeat.

That is the surrender we are called to. Not to stop caring. Not to withdraw. But to hold fast to Christ even when it costs us everything else — and trust that the grain of wheat that falls into the earth does not fall in vain.

For the church that can bear loss without losing its soul is the church that truly has something to offer the world.

Not power. Not victory. But something the world cannot manufacture on its own: a freedom that does not depend on the outcome.

The Mirror

We find it easily in others
Clear as fire
on another man’s mountain

Harder
to catch the smell of smoke
in our own hair

The mirror has no enemies

Only a face
that resembles something
we just condemned

With gold between our fingers
and an excuse
on the tip of our tongue

What Is My Golden Calf?

> Little children, keep yourselves from idols. — 1 John 5:21

It is easy to see other people's golden calves.

We see them in history: Israel's calf, Saul's lust for power, the Pharisees' self-righteousness. We see them in the present: in other people's priorities, other people's loyalties, other people's blind spots.

But the golden calf we do not see is always our own.

Because it does not look like an idol. It looks like something we need. Something we deserve. Something we would be irresponsible to let go of.

And that is precisely what makes this the hardest chapter to write. It is easy to point outward. Far harder to turn the mirror around.

Augustine, who thought more deeply about this than most, used a phrase worth lingering over: *ordo amoris* — the right ordering of love.

He did not mean that we love the wrong things. He meant that we love the right things in the wrong order.

Family is good. But when family becomes more important than God, the order has shifted.

Truth is good. But when truth is wielded as a weapon rather than offered as a service, something has changed places.

Security is good. But when the need for security governs our decisions more than trust in God, security has slipped into something else.

The golden calf is almost never something evil. It is almost always something good that has been given too much room.

There are some quiet questions that can help us see more clearly. Not as judgment, but as examination. Like holding something up to the light to see what it truly is.

What do we turn to when God seems silent?

That is what Israel did at Sinai. Moses was gone. The sky was silent. And in the silence, the waiting became unbearable.

We all have something we reach for when prayer feels empty. Control. Opinions. Activity. Affirmation. What we turn to most quickly often reveals what we trust most deeply.

What do we defend with the greatest intensity?

Not what we say matters most — but what we react most strongly to losing. What is it that, when someone challenges it, awakens not merely disagreement but anger? Perhaps even panic?

It might be a theological position. A political conviction. A role we hold. An image of ourselves. A vision of how the world should be.

There is nothing wrong with holding fast to things. But it is worth asking: Are we holding fast — or are we clinging?

What can we not bear to lose?

If something feels as though our identity unravels without it, it is not merely important to us. It has become part of us. And anything that carries our identity apart from Christ is potentially a golden calf.

It is not a comfortable thought. But it is an honest one.

One of the golden calf's most effective disguises is a sense of duty.

"Someone has to speak the truth." "We cannot just sit here in silence." "This is about protecting the vulnerable."

All of this can be true. But it can also be the language fear uses when it wants to justify itself.

It is nearly impossible to tell the two apart in the moment. Duty and fear often speak with the same voice. They use the same words. They point in the same direction.

But there is one difference: Duty driven by trust is calm. It has patience. It can endure not being in control. Duty driven by fear is restless. It always rushes. It cannot tolerate stillness.

It is tempting to make a list. Golden calves of our time. Things we as Christians worship without calling it worship.

But that list would become a new way of pointing at others. And the point here is the opposite.

The point is that our golden calf is ours. Personal. Unique. Fashioned from our own gold earrings — the things we sacrifice a little of ourselves to preserve.

For some it is political influence. For others it is theological self-assurance. For some it is the need to be seen as good. For others it is the fear of being seen as weak.

It has as many faces as there are people.

In Joshua's final address, he says something both simple and disarming:

"Choose this day whom you will serve."

Not: Choose what to believe. Not: Choose the right theology. But: Choose whom you will serve.

It is a question of direction. Of who actually sits on the throne of our lives — not who we say sits there, but who in practice gets to govern our reactions, our priorities, our time, our energy.

The answer is not always what we wish it were.

There is a scene in Mark where a rich young man comes to Jesus. He has kept all the commandments. He lives rightly. He is sincere.

And Jesus looks at him with love — the text says so explicitly — and says: You lack one thing. Go, sell what you have.

The man turns away. Sorrowful. For he had much.

There is no condemnation in this passage. Only a quiet unveiling. The man did not know what his golden calf was — until Jesus pointed to it. And when he saw it, he discovered he was not willing to let go.

It is perhaps the most human scene in the Gospels. Not wickedness. Not rebellion. Just a quiet no to what Jesus asked, because the cost was too great.

Aaron said: "I threw the gold into the fire, and out came this calf."

We say the same, in our own ways.

"It just turned out that way." "Everyone does it." "It is not that serious." "It is for a good cause."

Golden calves never appear out of nothing. They are shaped by something we gave away — a little time, a little loyalty, a little of ourselves — without noticing what it became.

So what do we do with this?

Perhaps nothing more than this: We ask. Quietly. Honestly. Without having the answer ready in advance.

What is it I cannot bear to let go of? What gives me security faster than prayer? What is it that, if it disappeared, would make me doubt everything?

Not to condemn ourselves. But to see clearly.

For it is only when we see the golden calf that we can choose to release it. And it is only when we release it that our hands become free enough to receive what God actually wants to give.

It is always less tangible than gold.

But it is always worth more.

Prayer before Communion

We come to the table, Lord.
Not because our hands are clean —
they still smell
of gold and steel.

We come because we are empty
of the one thing
that cannot be shaped
by ourselves.

The hands that reach for the bread
are the same
that formed the calf
gripped the sword
shut the doors.

Break us
as you broke the bread.

So we may be shared
as it was shared.

Communion

> For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” — 1 Corinthians 11:23–24

There is a table.

Not a podium. Not a fortress. Not an arena. A table.

And around that table, on the last evening, they all sit. Those who will soon betray. Those who will soon flee. The one who has already decided to hand him over. The one who will soon deny him three times.

Jesus knows it. And he breaks the bread anyway.

It is worth lingering over who is present.

Not the worthy. Not those who have passed a test. Not those who have understood everything correctly.

Judas is there. Peter is there. Those who have just argued about which of them is the greatest — they are there.

Jesus washes their feet. All of them. Including Judas.

It is almost unbearable to consider. That he kneels before the one who will deliver him up. That he serves the one who has already taken payment for the betrayal.

It is not naivety. Jesus knows what is coming. It is something else. It is a demonstration of what love does when it meets betrayal: it kneels.

Communion has become many things through the centuries.

A sacrament. A ritual. A theological battleground — churches have even split over exactly what happens to the bread and wine, who may partake, and who is excluded.

There is a bitter irony in the fact that the meal Jesus instituted as a sign of unity has become one of the clearest signs of our division.

Perhaps we have sometimes made a fellowship meal into something narrower than it was meant to be. A place where we draw lines between who is inside and who is outside.

And perhaps we have sometimes forgotten what it was that Jesus actually did that evening.

He shared the bread with those who failed him.

There is something about a meal that is unlike anything else.

You can hear a sermon without being moved. You can read a book without letting it in. You can sit through a service and remain unchanged.

But to sit around a table with someone is something different. It is bodily. It is vulnerable. You see each other's faces. You share the same bread.

Jesus did not choose a lecture as his final message. He chose a meal.

Not because teaching is unimportant. But because what he wanted to leave behind was not a doctrine. It was a fellowship.

Paul writes to the church in Corinth because the Lord's Supper has been distorted.

The rich eat their fill before the poor arrive. Some are drunk. Some have nothing. And Paul says something sharp: You eat and drink judgment on yourselves.

Not because they have wrong theology about the bread. But because they have forgotten one another.

That is what makes communion dangerous, in the biblical sense. It is not merely a remembrance of the death of Jesus. It is a test of whether we actually live what we remember.

The bread is broken. And the question is: Are we broken too? Do we give ourselves for one another, as he gave himself for us?

Or do we hold fast — to position, to rights, to boundaries — while speaking the words of fellowship?

There is a moment in communion that easily slips past.

Jesus says: "This is my body, which is broken for you."

For you. Not for the worthy. Not for those who understand. Not for those with the right doctrine. For you — the disciples who within hours will prove themselves cowardly, confused, and weak.

It is undeserved. And that is the point.

Communion is not a reward for the faithful. It is a gift for the weak. It is God's insistence on fellowship with people who do not deserve it.

And if that is true, it has consequences for how we treat one another. For if Jesus shares the table with those who fail him, what gives us the right to refuse the table to those we disagree with?

We have spoken throughout this book about golden calves, about fear, about swords, about power.

Communion is the answer to all of this. Not as an argument, but as an act.

The golden calf offers visible security. Communion offers a broken bread — almost nothing, and yet everything.

The sword strikes the enemy. Communion invites him to sit down.

It is not a strategy. It is an existence. A way of being in the world that says: We own nothing, we control nothing, we have no power — except this bread, this wine, and one another.

Communion reminds us of something we keep forgetting.

That Christianity is not primarily a position. It is a fellowship. And fellowship does not begin with agreement, but with shared bread.

At that table there are no seats of honor. No right opinions that entitle you to sit closer. No wrong opinions that send you to the end of the bench.

There is only bread. Wine. And the words: For you.

For all of you.

Perhaps this is where the book has been heading all along.

Not toward a conclusion. Not toward an action plan. But toward a table.

A place where we lay down the golden calves, the swords, the fear, and the need to be right — and simply sit down. Together. With those we agree with, and those we do not. With those we understand, and those we do not understand.

And receive what is given.

Broken. Shared. For us.

The Way Home

The stones lie at the water’s edge
The sun still holds

It is not far back
just past the walls
past the smoke
past everything we called necessary

Over there
a table with broken bread
and someone waiting
with a question
we already know

First Love (Again)

> Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. — Revelation 2:5

The letter to Ephesus does not end with condemnation.

It ends with a way back.

Remember. Repent. Do the works you did at first.

Not new works. Not better works. The first ones. The simplest ones. The ones that were once so self-evident they did not need a name.

It is evening again.

The stones lie along the water's edge, smooth and flat, shaped by thousands of tides. The sun sinks below the horizon. The sea receives the light and gives it slowly back.

Something has happened through these pages. Not a solution. Not an answer. More like a journey — through golden calves and fear, through swords and exile, through loss and broken bread.

And now we stand here again. At the beginning. At the place where it all started.

First love.

What was it, really?

Not a feeling. Not a nostalgic memory of when everything was simpler. Not the early enthusiasm that fades with time regardless.

The first love was a direction.

An orientation toward Christ so strong that it shaped everything else — how they treated one another, how they met strangers, how they bore suffering, how they shared what they had.

It was not perfect. The early churches had conflicts, misunderstandings, weaknesses. The letters of the New Testament are full of corrections.

But the direction was clear. The center of gravity was unmistakable. And that is what made them recognizable.

To return to the first love is not to go backward.

It is not to pretend we live in the first century. Not to idealize a past that was never as pure as we want it to be. Not to cast off everything we have learned since.

It is to recover the direction.

To ask: What distracted us? What took the place of what mattered most? When did discipleship stop being what defined us — and when did identity begin to take its place?

It is not a question that demands a dramatic answer. It demands honesty. And perhaps enough stillness to hear it.

Peter was given a new beginning.

After the denial. After the flight. After everything he had promised and failed.

Jesus meets him by the sea. Once again by water. Once again a meal. Fish over coals. And a question, three times, as many as the denials:

Do you love me?

Not: Do you have the right doctrine? Not: Have you understood everything? Not: Will you never fail again?

Only: Do you love me?

And Peter answers, without self-assurance this time, without the grand promises: Lord, you know that I love you.

It is enough. For Jesus answers: Feed my lambs.

Care for the vulnerable. The small. Those who need someone willing to bend down.

That is the first love, distilled to its purest form.

We have been through much in this book.

We have seen the golden calf and recognized the fear that shapes it. We have felt the temptation of the sword and the scandal of the cross. We have stood in exile and discovered that perhaps that is where we belong. We have asked what we cannot bear to let go of. We have sat at the table and received the bread.

And now we are here. Not with answers. But perhaps with a more honest question.

Not: How do we win? But: How do we love?

Not: How do we preserve our position? But: How do we recover our direction?

There is no guarantee that we will not cast new golden calves. History shows that we will. The fear will return. The sword will tempt again. Power will offer its shortcut.

We are always one crisis away from our next golden calf.

But we are also always one act of repentance away from a new beginning.

That is the secret of the gospel. Not that we become immune to falling. But that the way back is always open. That the table is always set. That the question is always waiting:

Do you love me?

The stones skip across the water. The ripples spread outward. The sun sinks.

There is not much we can do about the world tonight. Not much we can fix, win, or control.

But we can begin again. Quietly. Without grand promises.

Simply by doing the first things once more.

Love one another.

Love our enemies.

And trust that it is enough.