

God With Us

The Biblical Message of Jesus
Life in the Spirit, Not in Religion

By Jeff Neuman-Lee

For these women whose faith and faithfulness have shaped me.

Char

Ruth

Judi

*And to Harold Mack, a man of quiet faithfulness
who taught me to “watch and wait.”*

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The cover photograph is by Lori Neuman-Lee, 1998. The lace-like wisps hanging off the reeds of this photo are spider webs covered with morning dew.

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to see if you want to read this book

read this

*Of making many books there is no end,
and much study is a weariness of the flesh.*

Ecclesiastes 12: 12b

Have you ever been curious about God? Maybe you have your own opinions, but you are wondering if there might be other, interesting ways to look at that thing called God.

And then there is “Jesus.” Lots of people seem to talk about that guy, he’s a baby in a manger at the Winter holiday display, but what was he about?

People claim to “follow” Jesus. How would someone do that? What would it look like? Are people who claim to follow Jesus actually doing it? And is there really something truly valuable happening when people do change things in their lives to “follow” Jesus?

Is there something deeper, something which is there beyond all that we see? Is it something which connects each of us to all of this world, this life which we find around us?

What you get if you read this book:

A proposal for one way to understand “God” which offers a basis for conversation for anyone from any considered faith position (i.e. from confirmed Atheist to conservative radical Christian or Jew or Buddhist, etc.)

A description of Jesus’ message based on the most ancient texts of the Christian faith.

A simple pattern for how to live in the pattern seen in Jesus’ message.

And behind this all, perhaps you will perceive a spirit that aims at the Spirit, and finds itself beyond our words, our forms and our religions.

If you are interested in that, then read on.

I will not advocate for any particular religion. The reader will find no categorical arguments against any religion including other faiths. If you look through the correct lens, you may find good everywhere. However, this book does reflect a faith stance which is, broadly speaking, a thing called Anabaptist.

Anabaptism is a tradition which extends back at least five hundred years and at its outset attempted to reflect the earliest followers of Jesus who wrote down his stories and sayings and were so taken by him they sought to embody his message. Today this is typically found in the Mennonites, the Friends and others. The author is a member of the Church of the Brethren, one of the small Anabaptist denominations. Still, it is not my purpose to encourage the reader to join this or that religion. In fact, you, dear reader, may not even want to join any church after reading this. That's how it works.

This book understands that the way of Jesus is a spiritual way of being. Jesus' way can suit to your religion with its rituals and does not have to negate it. Or Jesus' way can suit no religion at all. It is flexible.

Following Jesus turns out to be something simple, practical, livable, and unexpected. Sometimes dangerous. "Jesus," no matter how you think about him, is not a religion, but rather, Jesus leads us to a spiritual way of being.

I have no claim on being extraordinary. I've been a minister, I've lived in different places in America, I've loved, I'm still married and have a couple of wonderful kids. I read and pray. I've suffered the normal, but deep losses of loved ones. You might say that I'm a normal guy.

Yet, somehow I felt that God wanted me to set aside my day job and write this particular book. By reading this book, you may find new, deeper ways to look at spiritual things. I hope you see how Jesus is not the head of a religion, but something far deeper, some that connects you to life in a full way. However, this book is not easy. It is not meant to be easy. What if you came for easy? Only if you allow yourself to struggle through change might you hope to find something as difficult as life. What if you came for life? Well, then you might be willing to attempt something new, to try something else on, to challenge yourself.

Jeff Neuman-Lee
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Jeff

Biblical quotations within the text are *italicized*.

the matter

*What is the matter with the people,
that they are weeping?*
I Samuel 11:5b

Our canoe slides silently past the island's shore. A birch tree hangs out over the edge. White bark, as only bark from a birch can do, scrolls down toward birch seeds wobbling with the surface of the shaded water.

Colors reach across the sky in the far northwest, double on the water, and leap like bounding, playful otters. The bright sun-yellow resonates and flows, a slow swirl. Watch patiently; the evening certainly is a living thing. Clouds and water bounce the fragmented yellow into squinting eyes. With almost no breeze, the light barely flicks off the few quivering birches interspersed among the masses of fir and pine, themselves glowing deep golden green in the evening.

Three loons—a mother, father, and juvenile—swim out from behind the island. When they are very young, loon chicks—sometimes two at once—ride on a parent's back. This one's a bit older now, just learning the ropes of swimming, but protected by mom and dad.

In the distance there is a call. It is a different loon hidden from sight. A “hoot” is sounded. Brief and neutral. It reverberates off the water and the trees. Its source is almost impossible to discern. Way off, in a cove on the other side of the lake, floats a lone loon. Was that one the one that called? One of the adults in our trio responds. Short and sweet. They are saying “hello” to each other. They stroke each other with sound, like a physical touch of reassurance.

The bird across the lake takes up the conversation, confirming that the original call was from a different bird, out of sight.

One thing about these large, gangly black with white and dark iridescent-green birds—which fly like slow, low missiles over the water, swim smooth and playfully like otters, and barely manage a waddle over land— is that their songs are so distinctive, and so distinctly heard.

As these birds are built for their setting, so are their vocalizations. Their strong calls travel for miles, bouncing off the walls of trees surrounding the northern lakes.

And they don't just hoot. They also tremolo, yodel, and wail, with multiple variations on these basic patterns. Paddle too close to a bird and it will give off its

call of warning: the tremolo. Males announce their stuff and defend their territories with a yodel.

And in the North Woods, just as you are getting settled into your bag, or awake alone in the blackness to hear the others in your tent breathing the breath of sleep, the deep night is haunted by the wail of the loon. From the lake next to you, from the lakes around you and away, the long note rises sweetly, then diminishes and trails off. And it hits your heart, for no good reason.

What are they talking about?

They are talking, aren't they?

Or are they really talking at all? Are they making this noise just because they can? What does it mean? What's the matter?

Really. What's the matter?

What does it mean? What is the matter? What's important? Is anything important? Why?

Are we just animals, like the loon? Is our communication, with all its seeming sophistication, mainly just animals stroking each other? Or habit? Or perhaps some good information, but mainly emotional reassurance? What is it to be a human?

We long for something out beyond ourselves. We desire to live in some way that feels right. Most of us desperately need each other. We set boundaries between each other and we cross them. We talk and talk and talk; and along the way we make up all sorts of language. We stumble around a lot.

In all this there is a wondrous, stunning glory, a beauty in the potential for great things which is living life and living it with joy and depth and living with each other and within this time, this place, with all its problems and creating something good. All these things make our lives full of meaning. There is something the matter, it is being within the meaning in life.

But is everything we do what we want to do? We seek control over our lives by clutching material things; we attempt to find human "unity" by conforming to irrational magical thinking, we attempt to quiet our fear with violence and terror. This seems only natural to us. Yet, it results in wars: war between nations, war between races and classes, war between neighborhoods, war between gangs, economic war, war against our own earth, war between brothers and sisters, war between lovers, war between parents and children, war against our own selves. There is something the matter, it is seeing and finding something larger to life than what seems to come naturally.

I will speak a language which I have worked to develop. I've been in school to develop it and I've lived life to see how it works. I think and consider. And I've asked for feedback from many friends and listen to their suggestions. I use English

words, but words have different meanings. Sometimes they mean more than one thing and sometimes I let them be more than one thing. I have to draw it up from the core of my being. As if it were the light I would pull from my chest, pressed into a ball in my palms, I pass it to you. I hope only that you receive it as my loon wail and take it with the same care with which I offer it.

God with us. The Biblical message of Jesus. Life in the Spirit, not in Religion. That is my answer to what's the matter. But then, what does all that mean?