

Why Gather?



**The Hope
and Promise
of the Church**

Martha Tatarnic



**CHURCH
PUBLISHING
INCORPORATED**

Copyright © 2022 by Martha Tatarnic

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher.

Unless otherwise noted, the Scripture quotations are from New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Church Publishing
19 East 34th Street
New York, NY 10016

Cover design by Paul Soupiset, Soupiset Design
Typeset by Denise Hoff

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Tatarnic, Martha, author.

Title: Why gather? : the hope and promise of the church / Martha Tatarnic.

Description: New York, NY : Church Publishing, [2022]

Identifiers: LCCN 2022001333 (print) | LCCN 2022001334 (ebook) | ISBN 9781640655515 (paperback) | ISBN 9781640655522 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Church. | Public worship. | Fellowship--Religious aspects--Christianity.

Classification: LCC BV600.3 .T38 2022 (print) | LCC BV600.3 (ebook) | DDC

262--dc23/eng/20220210

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022001333>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022001334>

For Gordon & Cecilia,
Whose inquiring and discerning hearts
inspired this book.

Contents

Introduction	ix
------------------------	----

Part I • Everything Is on the Table	1
--	----------

1 Stuck	3
2 A Bad Body Image	13
3 Urgent and Essential	19
4 The Songs That Are Too Big	27
5 “Martha, We Are the Church”	37

Part II • Not Another Hypothetical Version of What the Church Could Be.	47
--	-----------

6 I Had Another Plan	49
7 The Church Is a Bad Mother	53
8 Why I Didn’t Start My Own Church	63
9 The Flaws Are Kind of the Point	75
10 Jesus Looks Like Dirty Feet	83
11 God Will Cut You Down (and That’s a Good Thing)	89
12 Truth Will Not Remain Unseen	97

Part III • Acceptance—How the Community of Faith Reveals the Power of God	107
--	------------

13 Maybe Time Running Out Is a Gift	109
14 “We Didn’t Choose This”	117
15 God Is Not Indifferent to Our Sin	129
16 Does God Answer Prayer?	143

17	I Don't Trust God	151
18	God Is Not Helpless among the Ruins	159
19	God Doesn't Magically Show Up, but God Shows Up	169
 Part IV • The Gathered Church: Embracing		
	Who We Really Are	177
20	Change Is the Constant	179
21	Embrace the Infection	191
22	Embrace No Walls	203
23	Embrace Our Prayer	213
24	Embrace the Story We Share	221
25	Embrace Apocalypse	233
 Acknowledgments		243

Introduction

This book's initial spark came from bedtime conversations with my son Gordon, who was ten years old at the time and was struggling with his faith. I responded to his struggle, first by telling him his questions were good and faithful; at baptism, we pray that each newly minted Christian will grow to have an "inquiring and discerning heart." I said the prayer was being answered in his seeking and searching. He needed to know what we all need to know: there is blessing and love in both our belief and unbelief.

The second thing I said came right from my gut—it was instinct and nothing else. I advised him to stay close to the church. I am a priest of the Anglican Church of Canada, and as this book will show, I wear no rose-colored glasses when it comes to the church. I have despaired about it, I have wanted to leave it, I have been hurt by it. But in that moment, I knew a basic, burning truth: when I consider my own faith—why I believe in God and follow Jesus—it is because of the community of faith. Every tenet of our belief system is real and meaningful to me, not because of philosophical arguments or brilliant apologetics, but because of experience—because of how I see real flesh-and-blood people embody and bear witness to the things we believe.

That unalterable truth became a touchstone almost a year later when COVID-19 shut down the world, and I found myself embroiled in questions of whether I had a future in the church and whether that church had any sort of future ahead for itself. It became clear to me that my advice to Gordon was a reality check for me too. I couldn't leave the church, even if I wanted to. The church isn't the institution or the buildings, it's the living, breathing reality of the God Who Draws Near and is even now at work in the hot mess of our lives. As COVID-19 made clear, we are radically affected and infected by one another's oxygen and water vapors and germs and skin molecules, and at the same time our souls actually can't know and love God without one another.

But knowing that I need the church and can't really be whole in my relationship with God without it is not the same as choosing the church. It's not the same as embracing that hot mess with a sense of joy.

I wrote this book because of the church and for the church. This is my embrace of the reality of who we are, how God has been at work in us, why that matters, and how it might all be connected to an offering of joy and love—not just for ourselves but for the world. It is a clear-eyed, unsentimental love letter to the church I can't get away from, and that I can choose with joy once again.

In this love letter, I hope you find space to consider your own worries for the future of the church: the strain that puts on our leaders and congregations, the burn-out that is a constant risk in our clergy, the truths that COVID-19 revealed, and the change that we fight for in the institution. This book is going to name those realities but not dwell in them, because the truth of the church—of who we are and what we have to offer—isn't located in our institutional worries but in relationship with God, revealed in one another. And so my greater hope for you, the reader, is that the stories that form the core of this book, of God at work in real flesh-and-blood lives, will sharpen your own senses in their awareness of God's presence and activity. I hope these stories will be empowering to the people of our church in naming and claiming what this is really about: the God of love promising to walk with us, even now, in the fragile and uncertain circumstances of our lives.

That hope is a compass for the church going forward. The problems in the world are myriad and urgent. The future of the church has seemed, for several generations now, to be on shaky ground. Anxiety around decline can be a distressing and all-consuming reality, and it can be especially paralyzing when coupled with the distress and anxiety of the world in which we live. And yet, the reality of God's love and presence in the church and in our lives is unshakeable, is not in decline, and always and forever reminds us who we really are.

The reality of all of our lives, whether we like it or not, is that the world is set up for us to be biologically, spiritually, and emotionally affected by one another—even infected by one another. Whether we see it or not, God is already at work in our massive inextricably infected reality of what it is to be alive in this particular universe. Our lives are bound to one another, and God meets us right in the thick of that binding—in the joy and pain, the heartbreak and wonder and disappointment—of how we love and serve and mess up and try to live and eventually die.

That reality is the church's reality too. Not the church that could be or that we wish we were. The church that is. Let's start here; let's gather here. Let's lift up and tune in and look again for the God who is drawing near in the mess, the infection, the binding, the truth of how we are stuck together, and the truth of how we can choose one another. This is what matters; this is what can't be taken away. This is what must be centered in the life of the church if we are to go forward into all of the uncertainty of the future with a hope that doesn't just bless us, but also blesses our world.



I

Everything Is
on the Table

Stuck

March 6, 2020

I was out running on March 6, 2020, when Cheryl called.

I was a few miles in, which is important to note, because the thing I always say about running is that the first ten minutes are the worst. In those first ten minutes, I am a prisoner in my own mind. No matter how physically fit, no matter how much I know in my head that I enjoy running, when I first put shoe to pavement, my lungs feel like they are going to explode, my muscles ache and rebel, I am sure I have to pee even though I went just before leaving the house, and all of the miles that I have planned stretch endlessly and impossibly in front of me. If I can stick it out for those first ten minutes, what feels like prison opens into a surprising freedom.

Getting to that freedom takes a major shift in perspective. Every single time I go out, I need to know that my mind is going to take me down every available rabbit hole about why I shouldn't be there, why I can't do it, what isn't working about the conditions in front of me, why this whole enterprise is doomed from the start. Yet somehow what happens after those rabbit holes feels like nothing short of a miracle. It's not that I go somewhere different, it's that I land somewhere real. My body gets into enough of a rhythm that my mind lets go of "what if" and "why am I here anyway." What is actually happening takes over from the mind game of wondering what else I could be doing or what might lie around the corner.

I was nicely into that rhythm on March 6. My plan was to run and then come home and pack, but at that moment I was lost in the mix of shoe on pavement. My "Under Pressure" ringtone interrupted me midstride. When I saw Cheryl's name on the display, my mood and mind frame shifted abruptly. I knew the news

4 WHY GATHER?

wasn't good. I could hear the hesitation and worry in her voice. She had tried to engage me a number of times over the previous weeks, and I had refused to listen.

"Martha, we really need to talk."

In two days, Cheryl and I were supposed to get on a plane to fly to Jerusalem for a ten-day pilgrimage to the Holy Land. COVID-19 had been simmering in the daily news cycle for months. "It's a nothing burger," I had quipped to friends and acquaintances, thinking myself clever for not getting caught up in the hype and fearmongering. Many news stories predicting dire illnesses, deadly insects, and various other upheavals have cycled through our collective consciousness and have left us relatively unscathed. I assumed the relentless worry about this virus was going to go much the same way.

But that wasn't why I was insisting that we fly to Jerusalem. It wasn't even that I was so totally invested in the opportunity to walk among the same places as Jesus and to see with my own eyes scenes from the Bible stories I had been reading my whole life come into three-dimensional color. I understood, as Cheryl had been trying to tell me, that we could reschedule.

The truth was that I was desperate to get away. I wanted to unplug. I wanted to be immersed in a different world. I wanted to physically and literally leave everything behind and be given permission to be away from my life. I had been running myself ragged. I had published and promoted a book; I had helped lead a massive initiative at our church to open a resource center for the troubled young people in our downtown; I was a full-time working mom in charge of a busy urban parish.

Even that wasn't really the problem, however. There is a time of life for these pedal-to-the-metal lifestyles; there is a season for that constant state of juggling around which parts of our overflowing plates get the lion's share of our attention at any given time. The problem was that I didn't feel like any of it was working anymore.

I'm good at organization and strategically putting ideas into action. But I am even better at following my gut. I govern the

biggest decisions of my life by instinct. I can feel the power of an idea as a burning energy in the pit of my stomach, making my whole body tingle. When I get that feeling, I know I need to act.

For the last few months, that gut instinct had been failing me. My entire job had devolved into one never-ending task of conflict management as my supposedly good ideas were causing nothing but misunderstanding and anger. I needed to get on that plane. I needed a break. I needed it now. I knew what Cheryl was going to say. I stopped running. A crushing weight of disappointment settled on my chest before she even had to say the words.

"We can't go," she said. "It's not safe."

"Is It Because of That Coronavirus Thing?"

I understood I would be stuck at home, but I didn't understand much else. I was shocked when, later that day, the schools announced, just before our kids came home for spring break, that they would remain on break for two weeks beyond their scheduled time off. I wildly tried to fill up my suddenly empty week with overnights in Toronto and fun plans for Cheryl's birthday, which we were supposed to have celebrated in the Holy Land.

Others were slow to understand too. My Mom and I discussed the school closures: "Maybe if everybody just stays home for a few weeks, then we can put this behind us," we commented naively. We had a packed party at the church that night, a farewell reception for Michael, a friend and colleague at the church leaving for another position. We had no idea that this would be the last such gathering for the foreseeable future. We breathed each other's air and smudged our germs all over plates, glasses, and smooth surfaces with abandon. When I shared the news with a few people at the party asking about my canceled trip, they expressed mild surprise that we weren't going.

"Is it because of that coronavirus thing?" they asked.

From that evening onward, plans fell through one by one, and the world began the domino effect of shutdown. Even trips to Toronto became unsafe. Restaurants, shopping centers, theaters,

public spaces of all kinds, became spookily empty. By the following weekend, just eight days later, we received the dictum to close our churches to in-person worship.

There was much hand-wringing about this most of all, but we comforted ourselves with happy thoughts about how good it would be when we could be together again and have a big party after the service to celebrate getting through a tough patch. Duchesses Kate and Meghan were pictured gloveless and shaking hands with their adoring public after a royal event around this time, and they were framed as brave and compassionate—like Diana before them, hugging AIDS patients—because the threat of illness wasn't standing in the way of their willingness to be close to their people.

"I feel so guilty," people said to me over the phone and by email, which became the only ways we had to connect. Our church is full of people who devote their lives to service, to their care for others, to being in the thick of the community's need.

"People are dying. Frontline workers are risking their lives. And I'm just stuck at home."

Our church's daily breakfast program had to move to a take-out model, closing the in-person dining that was so much a feature of the compassion we were seeking to offer people—not just food, but a warm and safe place to sit and to be fed.

"We're acting on fear," was the lament. "We're not acting out of love for God's people."

As the first few days of shutdown turned into the first few weeks of the global pandemic, our collective understanding shifted. Masks, physical distance, closed doors, and stay-at-home orders all became not just regular features of our lives, but also the new signs of how we cared. Slowly, we started to realize our changed state of affairs was not going to be over in a few weeks or even a few months.

Is This a Prison or a Path to Freedom?

"Do you actually enjoy running, Mommy?" my daughter, Cecilia, has asked on more than one occasion, wrinkling their nose in

disbelief. Although I talk a lot about how much I love running, I understand their skepticism. At their age, I also would have been horrified by the thought of doing this for any reason other than being forced to in gym class. But the thing that I have come to love about running is the same thing that I have loved about being a musician, and it's the same thing that I recognize as being essential to the spiritual life as well. When you're practicing scales or kneeling in prayer or engaging in any sort of discipline that requires a lot of showing up and going through the motions, there is the opportunity to get so hemmed in by the specific boundaries of what that discipline requires that a new sort of freedom opens up. Instant gratification is easy to come by, but a lot of what makes life worth living requires a measure of patience and openness to stick it out past beginnings that aren't comfortable or fun.

This is at the heart of the spiritual tradition of the wilderness. What looks like the wild and wandering circumstances that never would have been our choosing is actually terrain that is ripe for finding out who we really are. Jesus threw himself into the rigorous discipline of a forty-day wilderness period after his baptism and prior to beginning his public ministry. I wonder if he knew, though, that this wilderness was leading somewhere. I wonder if he felt like he chose the wilderness or if it found him.

More than that, I wonder what sort of wilderness he experienced prior to that forty-day fast. He was thirty years old, we understand, when he began his public ministry. This man who had so much ballyhoo about him when he was born was, by first-century standards, practically an old man by the time anything began to happen for him. Did he feel stuck? Did he wonder what he was doing or where he was going? Did he wish that something would happen? Did he fear that this something might not be what he wanted? In those thirty years leading up to when it all got started, did he know that being stuck was also part of it? That he had to have those quiet, unremarkable years in order to be clear enough about who he was that he could offer himself for the world?

I might willingly go out and subject myself to the relentless pavement pounding, to the boredom, to the numbing repetition of long-distance running, and I might know that this is going to allow me—body, mind, and spirit—to become centered in ways that are refreshing and transformative and freeing. That doesn't mean that I don't often wonder what I'm doing out there or wish I were somewhere else. It also doesn't mean that when I have felt stuck, bored, anxious, depleted, and frantic about other circumstances in my life, circumstances not of my choosing, that I have been able to keep track in those times that something good and necessary might actually be unfolding too.

I happened to feel stuck at the same time that most of the world was literally stuck. Most of us had our experiences of panic to sort through as our minds went down the rabbit holes of doubt and distress in which we can so easily dwell when it looks like miles of unchosen terrain are stretching out relentlessly in front of us. The pain and suffering, the loss and fear of COVID was real and significant. It claimed millions of lives and livelihoods and it has left permanent marks on our souls. The cost of lockdown isolation on us spiritually and mentally is a cost that we will be grappling with for years to come. These are stark and difficult truths and not to be minimized.

Also, there was a potential gift in the sudden enforced discipline of having nowhere to go than to be exactly where we were. In churchier (or more Hollywood) language, we talk about apocalypse. Apocalypse isn't actually that fancy of a concept, even if it is a big word. It means a revealing. It is the pulling back of the curtain to unveil what has been true and real all along. Christians would begin talking about apocalypse a lot in the 2020 pandemic. We were inspired in part by the pictures from around the world of those busiest of public spaces suddenly looking like postapocalyptic ghost towns. But our faith also gave us language for accessing the spiritual invitation that might be on offer too. When you can't go anywhere, you can figure out who you really are. Hard truths were being revealed to us at a staggering rate: truths about who and what really matter, who and what hasn't

mattered enough, who and what we want to matter more going forward.

Running gave me a new metaphor: ultrarealism, which is a technique long-distance runners use for mental fitness. It is the practice of seeing, accepting, and embracing the actual circumstances in which you find yourself.¹ It is about responding to the moment in front of you rather than the moment you worry might be coming or which circumstances you wished were different. When people talk about positive thinking, I instantly lose interest. Ultrarealism, however, isn't about training the mind to squeeze reality through the frames of any sort of rose-colored glasses. It's about getting real.

At the beginning of March 2020, it had been a few years since I had trained for any longer distance running races, and I had never heard of ultrarealism. I ended up clocking a lot of miles that year. Ultrarealism became important to me as a runner, but it became even more important to me in the wilderness in front of me as a priest and in front of us as a church. There were some things ahead for me to better understand. There was a pile of acceptance that had to be hard-earned. Figuring out any sort of embrace, joy, choice was still countless miles away. I didn't know it, but the church I wanted to fly away from was going to be key in my understanding of what was actually most real—not just for me, but for all of us.

Nowhere to Go

When Cheryl called on March 6, I was hell-bent on getting on that plane to Jerusalem because it felt like my life was coming apart at the seams. I didn't want to admit to anyone, least of all myself, why leaving it behind felt like the only solution. Instead, I had to stay put and figure some things out. I began considering that key components of my life might be up for negotiation. It

1 Matt Fitzgerald coins the term *ultrarealism* in his book, *The Comeback Quotient* (Boulder, CO: VeloPress, 2020), as a mental fitness technique that he applies particularly to endurance sports. I adapt his definition slightly in applying it to the life of the church.

was like I was at the bargaining table of life, with myself—and maybe God—the only one sitting across from me. I was putting stuff on that table that hadn't felt up for grabs for a long time.

The last time I had considered running from my calling to be a priest had been in the final months of seminary, with parish ministry and ordination right around the corner. My temptation then had been to stay in the academic world, where at least I had a whisper of a clue of what I was doing. A number of friends and professors encouraged me to join them in the writing, research, and teaching sphere.

I would have liked such a clear alternative at this juncture. With nowhere to go, no plane to catch, no getaway car, I was stuck. And in being stuck, I considered whether God was still calling me to be a priest or whether there might be something else I could do with my life. The burnout that had been creeping ever closer to my heart and soul didn't get any better with COVID. The question of whether I still had a way forward in leadership in the church was my constant companion—not just when our trip got canceled but for all of the coming year.

On March 8, Cheryl and I were supposed to fly to Jerusalem. We went to an overnight spa instead, comforting ourselves with a little treat while I nursed my crushing disappointment. We were sharing a glass of wine by the fireplace when my sister-in-law, Jessica, sent a text to ask where I was and if I was okay. She had heard the news that Jerusalem had just made the decision to shuttle every arriving visitor into a mandatory two-week quarantine. Were we safe at home, or had we gotten stuck?

Cheryl and I both shed a few tears and called loved ones to tell them of our near miss. As the snowball effect of COVID spread continued, we realized just how much of a near miss it really was. Well before that two-week quarantine would have expired, most international travel had ground to a halt. We heard stories of Canadians all over the world stuck abroad and massive government-led initiatives to extricate them from those situations and bring them home.

I had thought I was stuck staying home, but my perspective suddenly tilted to reveal just how stuck I might have become if I had gone away.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ① Where were you and what were you doing when the COVID-19 pandemic became real to you? Can you look back on that time now amazed at how little you and we understood about what was happening?
- ② “Instant gratification is easy to come by, but a lot of what really makes life worth living requires a measure of patience and openness to stick it out past beginnings that aren’t comfortable or fun.” Where do you experience the truth of this statement?
- ③ In our religious tradition, the wilderness is seen as ripe terrain for spiritual growth, for learning more about who we are and where our lives have gotten off track. Without minimizing the loss and horror of COVID, what do you think the pandemic taught us about who we are and how we have gotten off track?
- ④ Looking back on your life, are there times when you have felt stuck that have actually been important times of learning and growth for you?
- ⑤ Ultrarealism asks us to shift our focus from what you wish were different, or what you’re worried might happen, to instead “see, accept, and embrace” the circumstances in which you actually find yourself. Martha gets this term from long-distance running, but how might this shift in focus be applicable to other aspects of life?