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The Falling and Rising of Many

by Herb Montgomery

In the gospel of Luke, we read these words about the child Jesus:

"Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: 'This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel.'" (Luke 2:34)

We mentioned this passage briefly in part 9 of our Advent series last month. This small statement offers insights that are worth a closer look.

In physics, we typically speak of things rising first and then falling: what goes up must come down. But this passage isn't talking about physics. It's talking about pulling some people downward economically, politically, and socially while raising or lifting up others. It harkens back to the language in Mary's Magnificat in Luke 1:

"...he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty." (Luke 1:46-55)

These are passages about wealth disparity, not wealth alone.

Last March, Renewed Heart Ministries' monthly recommended reading was Kate Pickett's and Richard Wilkinson's book *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger*. In

page after page of statistics, Pickett and Wilkinson show that once a society reaches a certain level of wealth, the amount quickly becomes irrelevant. What determines the overall health of that society is the degree of equity or disparity that exists there, whether the distance between the haves and have-nots is great or limited. Inequity disproportionately impacts people in regards to education, health care, crime, substance abuse, mental health, and much, much more.

In a different book, *Behave*, Robert Sapolsky shows that social economic inequity, over time, even damages individuals and the communities they comprise biologically.

This is the intrinsic reason why our collective thriving depends on raising up some in society while those who have gained too much power, privilege, property, or profit must fall back down. Ancient societies also knew this, and the jubilee in the Torah is just one practice they developed to demonstrate it.

I think of those like Jeff Bezos, who became the world's first centi-billionaire during a global pandemic where many have suffered losses of unimaginable magnitude. A dear friend of mine, for example, just lost a brother-in-law to COVID. He just had just become a father 11 months ago, and died on Christmas day. We are now over 19 million cases, with many hospitals overrun, and an unnecessary 333,000 now dead.

What could the "pulling down and raising up of many" mean for us today?

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When Everyone Has Enough

Chapter 6 of Luke's gospel continues the theme of redistribution or balancing of resources in Jesus' community. This was a society where an elite few had more than they could possibly ever need while a multitude of others were being bled dry economically. Their thriving was impossible, their very survival was being threatened as well, and many who had once had modest means were pushed into poverty, much like America's shrinking middle class today.

Consider how these words would have been heard in that context:

"Looking at his disciples, he said: Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets. But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you,

for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets. (Luke 6:20-26)

So much can be said about these words! Notice the parallel to “falling and rising” from Simeon’s words to Mary and Joseph. Here, the poor, the hungry, those whom the present unjust system had reduced to tears, and those labelled trouble-makers for speaking out against injustice are being lifted up in Jesus’ vision for a just community. And those the present system has left rich at others’ expense; those well-fed because others go hungry; those rejoicing because of their great, disproportionate wealth, and those whom the system praised would now be brought back down. All of these groups would experience a fall from their places of privilege as their community came back into balance: no one would have too much while others didn’t have enough.

I was once troubled by the idea of the well-fed going hungry. I want to be careful not to interpret this passage in a way that body shames anyone, including myself. In that context, “well-fed” had a political-economic meaning—similar to the elites being referred to as “fat cats.” But some experience hunger at the beginning of a healthy weight loss journey. Not all hunger is bad. In the same way, the elite will experience temporary hunger whenever society is brought back into balance. They may even weep and mourn as they see billions of their net worth lost on their balance sheets as society itself is rebalanced. A return to social equity always feels like “loss” for those who are privileged and powerful. This is why Jesus’ vision of a just society was so threatening. It also explains why that group felt his voice must be silenced and he must be removed from among the poor, those who hunger and thirsted for things to be put right.

Yet Jesus’ teachings of economic redistribution was part of his Jewish heritage and sacred text.

Economic Falling and Rising in the Torah

In the book of Leviticus we read:

“Count off seven sabbath years—seven

times seven years—so that the seven sabbath years amount to a period of forty-nine years. Then have the trumpet sounded everywhere on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land. Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each of you is to return to your family property and to your own clan. The fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; do not sow and do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the untended vines. For it is a jubilee and is to be holy for you; eat only what is taken directly from the fields. In this Year of Jubilee everyone is to return to their own property.” (Leviticus 25:8-13)

“However, there need be no poor people among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, if only you fully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today.”

Deuteronomy 15

This jubilee year, also referred to as the year of the Lord’s favor, was an additional sabbatical year when slaves were released, debts were forgiven, and property/land was restored to the original families of ownership (see Isaiah 61:1-2).

Deuteronomy 15 states, “However, there need be no poor people among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, if only you fully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today.”

These economic laws were intended to be protective. They limited both extremes, preventing anyone from amassing too much or losing too much and therefore risking poverty. These offered a type of “falling and rising” that pulled those at the top back down and lifted those at the bottom, all to prevent societal disparities and inequities becoming too great. These laws were not utopian by any means. They assumed disparities and inequities as both inevitable and damaging to the degree that the growing society’s disparities needed to be limited so that its potential for damage and harm would also be limited. Re-distribution of amassed wealth in this context mitigated harm. (See *Debt jubilee: will our debts be written off?*, written last March to wrestle with the concept of jubilee and the pandemic’s economic challenges at moneyweek.com/economy/uk-economy/601055/debt-jubilee-will-ourdebts-be-written-off)

It’s telling that out of all the passages the author of Luke’s gospel could have chosen from the Hebrew scriptures to summarize Jesus work, they chose Isaiah 62:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:18-19, emphasis added.)

What could limits toward amassing too much wealth look like in our context today?

What could limits on poverty through redistribution of that amassed, superfluous wealth look like?

Could this redistribution, which will be seen as a threat to the elite, be life-giving to the masses?

Do we find support for redistribution in the Jesus story and in the Jewish sacred texts?

These are questions worth wrestling with as we enter this new year.

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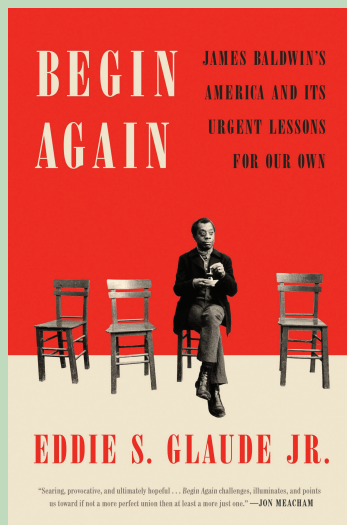
RHM's Recommended Reading for February

Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own
by Eddie S. Glaude Jr.

NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLER • James Baldwin grew disillusioned by the failure of the civil rights movement to force America to confront its lies about race. In our own moment, when that confrontation feels more urgently needed than ever, what can we learn from his struggle?

NAMED ONE OF THE TEN BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY CHICAGO TRIBUNE AND ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY THE WASHINGTON POST AND TIME • Shortlisted for the Goddard Riverside Stephan Russo Book Prize for Social Justice • "A powerful study of how to bear witness in a moment when America is being called to do the same."—*Time*

We live, according to Eddie S. Glaude Jr., in a moment when the struggles of Black Lives Matter and the attempt



to achieve a new America have been challenged by the election of Donald Trump, a president whose victory represents yet another failure of America to face the lies it tells itself about race. From Charlottesville to the policies of child separation at the border, his administration turned its back on the promise of Obama's presidency and refused to embrace a vision of the country shorn of the insidious belief that white people matter more than others.

We have been here before: For James Baldwin, these after times came in the wake of the civil rights movement, when a similar attempt to compel a national confrontation with the truth was answered with the murders of Medgar Evers, Malcolm

X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. In these years, spanning from the publication of *The Fire Next Time* in 1963 to that of *No Name in the Street* in 1972, Baldwin transformed into a more overtly political writer, a change that came at great professional and personal cost. But from that journey, Baldwin emerged with a sense of renewed purpose about the necessity of pushing forward in the face of disillusionment and despair.

In the story of Baldwin's crucible, Glaude suggests, we can find hope and guidance through our own after times, this Trumpian era of shattered promises and white retrenchment. Mixing biography—drawn partially from newly uncovered interviews—with history, memoir, and trenchant analysis of our current moment, *Begin Again* is Glaude's endeavor, following Baldwin, to bear witness to the difficult truth of race in America today. It is at once a searing exploration that lays bare the tangled web of race, trauma, and memory, and a powerful interrogation of what we all must ask of ourselves in order to call forth a new America.

Remember, you don't have to order this book through amazon.com, but if you do, please consider using Amazon Smile (smile.amazon.com) and selecting Renewed Heart Ministries as your designated charity for a portion of your purchase to be donated to RHM at no additional cost to you.



Photo by Tim Mossholder on Unsplash.com

Are you getting RHM's *free* resources in your inbox?

**Sign up today so you
don't miss a thing! Go to
renewedheartministries.com
and click "Sign Up!"**



SOCIAL JESUS

A Blog Exploring the Intersection of Faith and Societal Justice



Recent Posts from RHM's "Social Jesus" Blog on Patheos



Reimagining Our World in 2021 (Part 1 of 3)

"If Mark could offer good news or 'gospel' in the midst of such loss for its intended audience, maybe we can find some here, too."

Begin reading this series at patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2021/01/reimagining-our-world-2021-part1/

Reimagining Our World in 2021 (Part 2 of 3)

"Today, we must hold on to the hope that a different iteration of our world is possible, too."

Continue reading this series at patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2021/01/reimagining-our-world-2021-part2/

Reimagining Our World in 2021 (Part 3 of 3)

"This vision is of a world of social structures rooted in love for all. In the words of Mark's gospel, when we start with love, a just future 'has come near.'"

Continue reading this series at patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2021/01/reimagining-our-world-2021-part2/



Desecrating Sacred Spaces

"We are witnessing a disparity of values, a disparity of treatment and response, and disparity of analysis. These should be a warning to each of us."

Read more at patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2021/01/desecrating-sacred-spaces/

***Find many more articles at
patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/***

Quotable Quotes

"Belief in miracles is concentrated here on the specific situations of distress, on possession, disease, hunger, lack of success, and danger, in other words on situations which do not strike as hard in all social groups... the popular character of these stories is that in them people whose social and economic position left them no other outlet to articulate their hopes...it seems to me that a degree of class correlation in the primitive Christian miracle stories can hardly be denied."

– Ched Myers;

*Binding the Strong Man:
a political reading of Mark's
story of Jesus*

Weekly Zoom HeartGroup on Wednesday Nights

Each Wednesday evening, Glendale City Church will be hosting a Zoom-HeartGroup led by Herb Montgomery. Our discussion each week will focus on the content in Renewed Heart Ministries weekly eSight articles and the Jesus For Everyone podcast published each Friday. The time of each Zoom session will be on Wednesdays at 7 p.m. Pacific/10 p.m. Eastern.

Email info@renewedheartministries.com to receive the link for the Zoom meeting.



HeartGroup Application

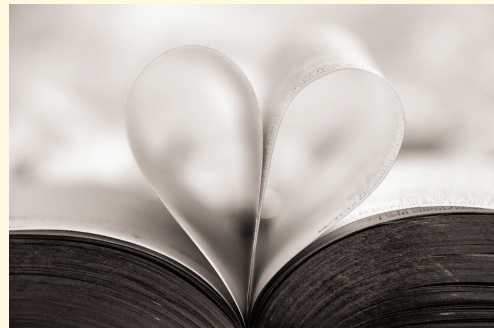
We at RHM are continuing to ask all HeartGroups not to meet together physically at this time. Please stay virtually connected and practice physical distancing. When you do go out, please keep a six-foot distance between you and others, wear a mask, and continue to wash your hands to stop the spread of the virus. This is also a time where we can practice the resource-sharing and mutual aid found in the gospels. Make sure the others in your group have what they need. This is a time to work together and prioritize protecting those most vulnerable among us.

1. Share something that spoke to you from this week's eSight/Podcast episode with your HeartGroup.
2. What are some of the subtle differences between equality and equity? Discuss what social, racial, and economic equity would look like in our society.
3. What can you do this week, big or small, to continue setting in motion the work of shaping our world into a safe, compassionate, just home for everyone?

Right where you are, keep living in love, choosing compassion, taking action, and working toward justice. ■

A Special Message to Our HeartGroups

We at RHM are continuing to ask all HeartGroups not to meet together physically at this time. Please stay virtually connected and to practice physical distancing. You can still be there for each other to help ease anxiety and fears. When you do go out, please keep a six-foot distance between you and others to stop the spread of the virus.



This is also a time where we can practice the resource-sharing and mutual aid found in the gospels. Make sure the others in your group have what they need. We are more interconnected than we realize, as this has proven. And we need each other during this time.

This is a time to work together and prioritize protecting those most vulnerable among us. We'll get through this.

Episode 357: The Falling and Rising of Many

“This is the intrinsic reason why our collective thriving depends on raising up some in society while those who have gained too much power, privilege, property, or profit must fall back down. Ancient societies also knew this.”



Renewed Heart Ministries is a nonprofit organization working for a world of love and justice. We need your support to impact lives and provide the kind of resources and analysis RHM offers.

Intersections between faith, love, compassion, and justice are needed now more than ever.

Help Christians be better humans.

Please consider making a tax-deductible donation to Renewed Heart Ministries today.

To do so online go to renewedheartministries.com and click "Donate."
Or if you prefer to make a donation by mail, our address is:

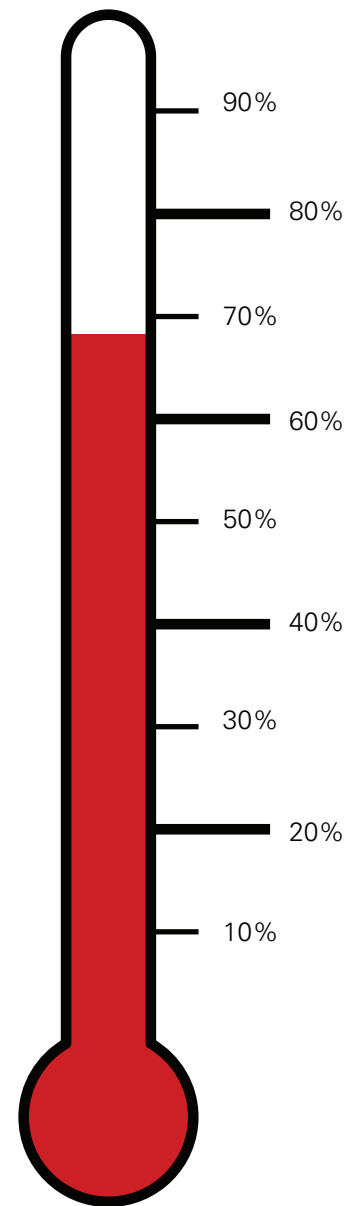
Renewed Heart Ministries
PO Box 1211
Lewisburg, WV 24901

And to those of you out there who are already supporting this ministry, I want to say thank you. We could not continue being a voice for change without your support.

**2020 Projected Budget Goal:
\$185,000.00**

**November's & December's
Year End Contributions:
\$64,129.41**

**2020's Total Contributions
Received for the Year:
\$126,580.38**



**Whether you give \$5 or \$5,000,
every amount helps us continue our work.**

Testimony

"I have been listening to you for several years. You were placed in my life as I was reclaimed by a God of Love. Now years later your activism, highlights of others and work on LGBTQIA has helped me as I have gone through a traumatic year. Resilience is born in struggle, I have seen both deep compassion and deep violent responses born from deeper trauma poured out in my life over the last year. After a year of turmoil filled with deep conflicts on how to live out life maintaining lovingly understanding in one area and actively lovingly fighting violence with appropriate limits. I count you as a voice that has actively blessed me in this struggle. Now I can also count you as an advocate for my children who I strongly believe will be able to hold in their hearts that God loves them no matter where on the spectrum they express the image of God. Thank you for your work." – A

Renewed Heart Ministries is a not-for-profit group that is passionate about rediscovering, following and helping others rediscover the teachings and sayings of the historical Jesus of Nazareth. We believe these teachings have an intrinsic value in informing the work of nonviolently confronting, liberating and transforming our world into a safe, more just, more compassionate home for us all.

Everything we do here at Renewed Heart Ministries is for free. Even the many educational events that we hold in various venues. You can support our work either with a one-time gift or by becoming one of our monthly contributors by going to RenewedHeartMinistries.com and clicking the **donate** tab at the top right.

Or you can mail contributions to:
Renewed Heart Ministries
P.O. Box 1211
Lewisburg, WV 24901

Also, please sign up for our free resources and remember, every little bit helps.

Anything we receive over and above our annual budget we happily give away to other not-for-profits who are making both personal, systemic and structural differences in the lives of people who are less privileged.

And to those already supporting the work of Renewed Heart Ministries, your generous support makes it possible for us to exist and to continue being a presence for positive change in our world. So with all of our hearts, "Thank You."

Together we are making a difference, till the only world that remains is a world where only Love reigns.

RENEWED
HEART
MINISTRIES



Front cover artwork by Ali Montgomery.

"IT'S BECAUSE BEING
AMERICAN IS MORE
THAN A PRIDE WE
INHERIT,
IT'S THE PAST WE
STEP INTO AND HOW
WE REPAIR IT."

Amanda Gorman
January 20, 2021
Presidential Inauguration

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