

Rocking-chair reading: So little time

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [September 4, 2007](#) issue

"So little time, so much to do," Winston Churchill once commented. I think about that observation as I assemble my summer reading list. I organize my reading in four categories: 1) devotional: to be read and pondered in the early morning—if possible, while sitting in a rocking chair at the ocean or on a cabin porch; 2) scholarly: the substantial books I never found it possible to read during the work year, requiring a daily hour or two at a desk, facing a blank wall, with no distractions—the position Annie Dillard recommends for serious writing; 3) fiction; and 4) personal interest: books on topics I find fascinating and enjoyable, which for me include biography, baseball and World War II.

My rocking-chair books were particularly engaging this summer. A friend gave me *My Soul Finds Rest: Reflections on the Psalms* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. This small book draws on a sermon Bonhoeffer delivered at a Berlin preachers' seminar in 1926; his sermons and lectures of 1935-1937, when he was struggling with how to be faithful under a totalitarian government; and fragments of poems and letters written in prison. I was struck especially by lines from his last poem: "Let candles burn, both warm and bright, / Which to our darkness thou hast brought / . . . Night and morning, God is by us faithfully / And surely at each newborn day."

Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief, by Rowan Williams, archbishop of Canterbury, is based on Lenten lectures explaining the Nicene Creed. The book is centered in Williams's assertion that "Christianity is really about knowing who and what to trust."

He utilizes the work of the 20th-century poet and painter David Jones, whose remarkable paintings appear throughout the book. I found myself lingering over them—particularly *The Annunciation*, which has a very subtle angel you have to work hard to see. Frankly, I haven't thought much about angels, but Williams caught my imagination by describing them as "mysterious agents of God's purpose . . . a powerful symbol for all those dimensions of the universe about which we have no idea."

Williams uses a series of striking photographs, one of the late Jacqueline du Pré playing Elgar's Cello Concerto, to illustrate incarnation: "A human being at the limit of their skill and concentration. All their strength, freedom, love focused. . . . That surely is what we're trying to say about Jesus. . . . He is performing God's love, without a break, without a false note." When people ask you for an accessible book on Christian beliefs, think of this one.

Also in that category is another of my rocking-chair books, Michael Lindvall's *A Geography of God: Exploring the Christian Journey*. Lindvall is pastor of Brick Presbyterian Church in New York and author of two novels, *The Good News from North Haven* and *Leaving North Haven*. He is a careful scholar, a faithful pastor and one of the best storytellers I know. The 20 chapters are short, well written, funny and moving. Katie Couric endorses the book, and so do I.

The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus: What's So Good About the Good News? by Peter J. Gomes, rounded out my early morning reading. The book will be published later this fall, but I had access to page proofs. Gomes, who will be the speaker at this fall's annual Century dinner, urges us to pay attention to what Jesus preached about. Full of engaging anecdotes from his life and ministry at Harvard's Memorial Church, this book is good news for all of us who stand where Gomes so firmly and faithfully stands: in the endangered middle, between the strident voices of right and left, secularism and fundamentalism. Gomes writes as elegantly as he speaks, which is saying a lot.