

I learned to pray at Notre Dame Cathedral

Was the familiar God I knew as a preacher's kid the same one who inspired such greatness?

by [Bromleigh McCleneghan](#)

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Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris, April 15, 2019. [Wandrille de Préville, some rights reserved.](#)

On Monday, Notre Dame de Paris was engulfed in flames. The spire fell. The organ is gone. All that stained glass. I couldn't watch the video; [the photo that Rebecca Solnit posted on Facebook](#) was hard enough. Her caption reads, "Drone picture from earlier (which I find shocking, like seeing open-heart surgery: this structure has not been open to the sky for 800 years)."

I've only been to Paris once, many years ago, but I remember it well. I remember coming up close to the cathedral—not knowing where to start looking, feeling unable to take it all in.

I'm a preacher's kid. (Half my stories start this way.) I grew up in United Methodist church buildings; they were my home away from home. I knew those churches intimately, their ins and outs and secret closets and ladies' bathrooms. I knew which sink didn't work and which floor tiles were loose and the best spots to hide while playing sardines. I knew their people, their songs, their stories. I loved them, and they loved me.

When I got to college, I encountered for the first time evangelical narratives of choosing to be a Christian and of falling in love with Jesus. I was confused. I had always been a Christian; my infant baptism offered an outward sign of an inward grace. The church had been my home (along with owning my house).

I was actually delighted to spend time away from that home as a college student. To indulge in Sunday morning lie-ins before dining hall brunch and studying. I did not seek out a campus ministry.

But then I went to study and wander abroad for a bit. It changed my life, as those sorts of adventures often do. I studied and I drank, I wrote endlessly, and I sort of fell in love. I got a rail pass and wandered through ancient cities of the sort we just don't make in Illinois.

I wandered into cathedrals. I sat. And I prayed—for maybe the first time outside the unison prayers in my mainline congregations. Not words selected for me, not concerns and thanksgiving offered by others, but my own. I sat, breathed in air that felt old and mature but also alive, curled in on myself, and prayed.

In Notre Dame, I tilted my face to the ceiling, took in arches and color, and then closed my eyes. I knew myself to be in a holy space, one so many had labored to bring into being, one where God was wholly beyond my imagining. I was safe, resting in a place that felt familiar. Yet somehow—in the centuries-old pews, surrounded by both humanity and so much empty space, by echo and quiet—God was new.

How, I wondered, could this God—whose existence and love I had taken as given in my 20th-century midwestern life—have also moved in the hearts of minds and hands of artists so many years before? Was the average, everyday God I knew the same one who had inspired such greatness, such beauty?

I came home to the States, returned to worship, applied to M.Div. programs. I wanted to know that God, that mysterious God who had always been so familiar before.

There are reasons to feel some guilt over grieving a building, even or especially a magnificent one. The children's song tells us the church is not the steeple but the people. The grandeur of the church has been complicit in so many of the evils of history. Other churches have been destroyed by flames in recent weeks—[three black churches in one Louisiana parish alone, where the alleged arsonist has been charged with hate crimes](#)—and the world hasn't been nearly so moved.

There is a tradition on the Monday of Holy Week of remembering the story of Jesus "cleansing" the temple. It's a fraught story, for multiple reasons. And at first glance this Monday, Jesus' call for people to examine their priorities and intentions seemed to clash with all the people revering a space, a grand building.

But I wonder if there is some critique in this biblical story for me, as one whose faith was for so long quotidian and whose goal, in much of my ministry with young children and their under-churched parents, is to help them feel comfortable and at home in the church. Jesus reminds the people that the temple is a dwelling place of God. Church is a place for worship, not just a place for us to feel at home and to play sardines. I want my people to know God's love, to know that faith is about grace and not fear. Still, I wonder and worry, especially for my own kids, that enabling these glimpses behind the curtain might be rendering God too small.

One of the things I loved about Notre Dame is that you can simply go in and sit. Visitors are everywhere reminded that this is a house of worship. The bishop presides almost daily over mass. Pilgrims and Parisians alike can gather. The cathedral provided sanctuary to the fictional Esmerelda and has offered an experience of the holy to so many others.

Watching the flames climb in Paris, I grieved—and wondered if my daughters will ever feel the presence of the divine there. I'm sad, because even if the cathedral is rebuilt, the new walls will not tie us to the past faithful in the same way. Part of what made that space so holy for me was that it had endured across ages, that it had welcomed countless numbers of the faithful.

I am not alone, of course, and I have read the sorrow-filled words of countless others with closer and deeper relationships to Notre Dame than my own. But if there is a

week for Christians to mourn together what is lost, to mourn something precious slipping so quickly away, it is this one. Standing at the grave, staring at the island in the middle of the city, we grieve for what we have known and wonder what will come next.