

## INTRODUCTION (an excerpt)

“Merciful God, send dreams . . . .” Send not just any dreams, but merciful dreams—and specifically, that prayer bids, dreams that will give purpose and courage to youth in a time when their futures have been shrouded by the heedless pursuits of their elders. Send dreams, O God, that bear mercy to young and old alike, women and men, oppressed and free, people of all nations. Gather tender dreams, eager dreams, deferred and abandoned dreams, burnished dreams; reorient and redeem them in your surpassing righteousness and love.

This book reveals persons and communities who seek and scrutinize, accept and celebrate the mercies of God through the practice and art of public prayer. They seek and celebrate through songs of God’s glory and grace, through prayers that bear the burdens of personal and shared life to God, through calls to turn from self-preoccupation toward others, through cries of sorrow and of joy, and through dreams of flourishing in human cities and in the city of God.

Prayer, simply understood, is address to God. Yet prayer is not altogether simple. It places us on holy ground and enters us into great mystery and vast complexity. Who is this One to whom we pray? Does this One meet and answer us? Who are “we” who presume to present ourselves in prayer? How do understandings of the One and of the “we” shape when, where, and how we pray?

The prayers collected in this book imply varied answers to these questions. The One addressed here is often addressed simply, “O God,” and named in attributes—holy, gracious, creative, living, loving, eternal, almighty, wise—but also more vividly: O Living Vine, Alpha and Omega, Father, Mother, Creator, Lord, Christ, Great Life, Source and Sustainer. This One is recognized in biblical images—moving on the faces of the deep, creating clean and generous hearts, providing manna in the wilderness, announcing the terrifying and joyful news of an empty tomb—and in christomorphic patterns—where teaching and healing occur, where love and justice are borne in the world, where even broken bodies resist and rise. This One is glimpsed in mundane and in extraordinary places: in living and in dying, in pursuits of knowledge and truth, in contrition and in transformation, in the glories and devastations of interpersonal and global relations, and in acts of fidelity, justice, and compassion.

The audacity of these and all prayers is that “we” who presume to pray, dare to place ourselves before the mysterious wideness of God’s mercy. Public prayer also presumes to approach God on behalf of others, and ventures to draw others together before God as a “we.” Such an address demands the best of us: honest words wrought of hard-won theological insight, long historical perspectives, keen understanding of human plights and possibilities, imaginative attention to an already present but still-hidden and already known but still-revealing God, and artistry sufficient to raise the prayer above the everyday roar of human life. Yet, such understanding and art themselves cannot be the point of prayer. Rather they must serve to attune heart, mind, and strength to God. Then and already—through and despite our best efforts—the God of Grace and Glory may align, proportion, and bless creaturely life.