

Protagonist Corner

Waiting for Death. Choosing Life.

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I really don't want to go. Jack's visit is the one I save for the last visit of the day, knowing that it will be a time of resting in his friendship, listening, laughing at his wild stories, and knowing something of the journey toward God. But this is the part of the journey I do not want to take, and this is not about me. I am not alone. Long-time pastors to the imprisoned—Randy Loney, Murphy Davis, Eduard Loring—and Jack's long-time and faithful legal team will be there waiting, watching and praying. Underneath my fear and rising grief, there is nowhere else I want to be. There is, after all, holy space at the foot of the cross.

On the hour drive from Atlanta to the prison in Jackson, Georgia, I ask myself how in the world I can accompany someone awaiting his own murder. What does it mean to be a pastor for someone who knows the hour of his unwelcome and unnatural death? There are no answers. Showing up and paying attention seems all I have to offer. As so often before, Jack would show me the way.

Jack Alderman has lived for 34 years on Georgia's death row. The year I was born, he went to prison and hasn't felt the earth since. I am a gardener. Holding the earth in my hands gives me life and hope. How has Jack remained alive for 34 years without touching the earth? We never talked about; it seemed too close to a living death.

The death machine is at full throttle at the prison in Jackson where Georgia's death row is housed. Muscle pumped guards wearing full black uniforms and combat boots have replaced the regular prison staff, cement barriers block the road way to make access to the prison difficult, and the prison is on lock down: no family visits for the other inmates, no visits for anyone. There is the cold sense of a hard wait ahead.

Two guards came to Jack's cell with a multiple page chart to collect Jack's belongings in order for the prison to list them, bag them up, and after Jack's execution, deliver them to his family. When the guards asked for Jack's belongings, Jack said that he had none. "What do you mean you don't have anything?" one guard asked, confused. "I don't have anything," Jack replied. They looked around his cell for what he might be hiding. It was empty. They could not complete their job for the executioner and did not know what to do. Bewildered, they turned to the next form. "What do you want for your last meal?" the guards continued. "Nothing," Jack answered. "Nothing?" they asked again, surprised. Knowing he was from Savannah, they asked, "C'mon Jack, not even a pile of fried shrimp?" "No, nothing," Jack replied. They wrote down "no meal request." Perplexed and unsatisfied, unable to complete the machinery of death's checklist, they left Jack's cell. Later, as Jack was recounting this story to us, he said, "Of course, I would love a pile of fried shrimp, but not here, not from the people who are going to kill me. If I wasn't about to be murdered here in this prison, I would want a spoonful of every kind of ice cream that has been invented that I've never tasted in the last 30 years, but not here. I will not allow the ones who are killing me to pretend that they can both be kind to me and kill me at the same time."

Before the officers came to Jack's cell, Jack had given away all of his belongings.

He gave to a loved one the cross which he wore every day. He gave away his shoes, books, towel and cup. Every meager possession that Jack had, he gave to another prisoner on death row. In his last weeks, as loved ones made sure he had money in his jail account for items at the commissary, Jack emptied his account and bought food for everyone on his cell block. He gave away everything he had so that even as the prison tried to murder him in shame, he would walk toward God with compassion and dignity.

The week before Jack's execution, I came to visit him. He was already segregated from the other death row inmates and under watch by a squad brought in to guard him under his death warrant. A guard in combat boots escorted Jack to the visiting room and ratcheted his handcuffs so tight that Jack winced in pain. When the cuffs were removed in our visiting room, they left deep red imprints on his wrists. After the death squad left, Jack rubbed his wounded wrists and then with a warm smile, he introduced me to the staff prison guard who stood outside the door where we were visiting. He introduced us, as a pastor introduces parishioners at the church house door. We greeted one another. At the end of our visit, the guard turned to me and said with honest sincerity, "Thank you for coming to visit. It was nice to meet you, and I'll hope to see you again sometime." I thanked her, and we shook hands as we departed. Even at this moment when Jack was being humiliated and harmed, he remained rooted in love. In a moment of suffering, this prisoner on death row was filled with grace. Jack brought out the best in both of us and made us more human and more fully alive.

In the Lenten journey towards the cross, Jesus resists the death of the empire that oppresses the poor and the most vulnerable. Jesus transforms moments of suffering and judgment into life-giving moments of grace. Yet the cross looms ahead of him. In those days with Jack, I felt both the weight and the mystery of Lent. While we were waiting for death, he was immersed in life. Jack was able to spend all day with his aging father, his closest loved ones, his pastors, his lawyers who had fought so hard at every turn. And over and over again in the face of death, Jack chose life. I remember the story of the Hebrew peoples' long journey through the wilderness and Moses' final teachings before they entered the promised land, just before his death. Moses, who had been guilty of murder as a young man, said to his people, "I am now giving you the choice between life and death, between God's blessing and God's curse, and I call heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. Choose life" (Deuteronomy 30:19).

In those last two days Jack was allowed to make a visitation list of those whom he wanted to visit him on his last two days. In addition to our names, Jack wrote the names Jesus and Buddha. This was both Jack's wry sense of humor and his deepest truth. The guard looked at the form and laughed, "Seriously, Jack? You want me to turn it in like this?" "Yes," Jack said. "You asked who I wanted to visit me in my last two days, and I want them on my visitation list." Not understanding that he was a vehicle for grace, the guard took the form as it was written and turned it in. Yes, Jesus and Buddha were there with Jack and, by God's mercy, with us too.

Jack Alderman was executed by the state of Georgia at 7:15 p.m. on Tuesday September 16, 2008.

Jack had given away his few personal items to fellow inmates. In the weeks following his execution, his friends remarked how healing it was to see everyone with a little piece of Jack's kindness. Even in the long and dark wait for death, there is life, there is grace, and yes, hope of resurrection.