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Luke: Surprising Prophets,
Exemplary Disciples

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Luke: Surprising Prophets, Exemplary Disciples

Three of the articles in this issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission* provide incisive interpretations of particular passages in the Gospel of Luke that engage many of the major themes of the Gospel and offer hermeneutical lenses that can be applied in preaching and teaching through the year of Luke. In “An Overture to the Gospel of Luke” **Barbara Reid** shows how Luke casts the three women in the birth narratives as prophets who set the stage for Jesus’ prophetic ministry. She highlights Mary’s prophetic task of proclaiming God’s alternative rule which challenges imperial power and economic structures that are exploitative and unjust. The image of Mary that emerges from this reading of the Magnificat is that of an empowered person who serves God rather Caesar, and who along with Elizabeth acclaims God’s delight in lifting up those who have been humiliated. The prophetic witness of these women is one that is born of their experience in community, and in this respect anticipates Luke’s continuation of the story of those who continue the prophetic mission of Jesus in Acts.

The theme of Jesus as prophet is continued in **Jennifer English’s** article on the woman who anoints Jesus in Luke 7:36-50. After noting how Luke’s anointing story gets confused and conflated with the anointing of Jesus in the other Gospels, she explores the distinctive character and purpose of this episode in Luke. As in the other Gospels where the anointing proleptically reveals Jesus as crucified Messiah, in Luke’s account Jesus is shown to be prophetic Messiah who forgives and restores to community those who have been marginalized. Although Simon the Pharisee complains that if Jesus were a prophet he would have known that this woman is sinner, the question Jesus poses for him and all readers is, will you persist in seeing her through a patriarchal lens only as sinner and as object? For those who have eyes to see, what this provocative and compelling episode unveils is not only the nature of Jesus’ prophetic ministry but also an exemplary disciple who shows great love and follows Jesus’ model of humble service.

The Parable of the Pounds in Luke 19:11-28 does not appear in the lectionary, but it is strategically situated at the conclusion of Luke’s travel narrative linking the economic material featured throughout the Gospel with his arrival in Jerusalem. **Adam Braun** in his article disentangles Luke’s parable from the Parable of the Talents in Matthew with which it is usually associated and explicates its rhetorical force in Luke’s narrative strategy. While Matthew’s parable lends itself to an allegorical interpretation, Luke’s distinctive

description of the protagonist as a nobleman who “went to a distant country to get royal power for himself” is a less than subtle evocation of the machinations of the Roman Empire with its tyrant rulers (Luke 22:25) and economic system of exploitation. Here in Luke this parable serves as a bridge connecting Zacchaeus’ righteous use of wealth with Jesus’ coronation in Jerusalem. This political reading of the parable integrates Jesus’ teaching on economic relations in the kingdom with his entry into Jerusalem and his embodiment of very different kind of leadership.

“Participation and Evil: The Problem of Doing Evil When Attempting to Fight Evil,” the final essay in this issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission*, was written by **Benjamin Splichal Larson** for a senior theology class one month before he died on January 12, 2010, in the earthquake that took the lives of 300,000 people in Haiti. Recalling how Ben died singing a song of Christ’s peace while buried under the rubble of a collapsed building, Ben’s wife, Renee Splichal Larson, submitted the essay many months ago in the hope that it would “intrigue, challenge, and strengthen [readers who] look forward to God’s reconciling work in the resurrection of the dead and the fullness of the New Creation” (see footnote number one of the essay). Including it in this issue, near the third anniversary of the tragedy in Haiti, witnesses to an continuing chain of surprising prophets and exemplary disciples who, in the midst of all that can overwhelm and even destroy, embody—in life and death—the transforming, trustworthy love of Jesus Christ.

Ray Pickett

Editor for the December Issue

An Overture to the Gospel of Luke¹

Barbara E. Reid

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Prophetic Ancestors

Luke opens his gospel with a series of scenes in which each character is cast in the role of a prophet. This sets the stage for the reader to understand Jesus as a prophet who comes from a long line of prophets. While only Anna is explicitly called a prophet (2:36), Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, and Simeon are all said to be filled with the Spirit and make prophetic utterances. In this essay, I will focus on the female prophets, noting how their speech and actions foreshadow that of Jesus and exemplify how his followers are to do likewise.

Prophetic Call of Mary (Luke 1:26–38)

The Annunciation to Mary resembles closely the form of other biblical annun-

ciation of birth stories.² But the scene also has the elements of a call story of a prophet: 1) encounter with the divine; 2) commission; 3) objection; 4) reassurance; 5) sign; 6) assent. Like other prophets, Mary's encounter with God's messenger comes in the midst of everyday life. Moses, for example, was tending his father-in-law's sheep when God's angel appeared to him (Exod 3:1–2). Likewise, Mary is presented as an ordinary Galilean girl making wedding plans when God's messenger comes to her.

Prophets always resist the call, knowing that what God asks is beyond their capability. Moses protested that he couldn't speak well (Exod 4:10). Jeremiah objected that he was too young (Jer 1:6). Isaiah worried that he was "a man of unclean lips," living among "a people of unclean lips" (Isa 6:5). Mary objects that what she has heard from Gabriel is impossible (Luke 1:34).

The prophet is then given an assurance that the divine assistance will help them overcome all obstacles. For Moses, God provides a companion, Aaron, and guarantees "I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do" (Exod 4:15). To Jeremiah, God says, "Do not be afraid . . . I am with you to deliver you" (Jer 1:8). Isaiah is given a seraph who touches his lips with a live coal, declaring that his sin is blotted out (Isa 6:5–8). Mary is given the assurance

1. Much of this essay has appeared in my previous publications: *Choosing the Better Part? Women in the Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996); "Prophetic Voices of Elizabeth, Mary, and Anna in Luke 1–2," in *New Perspectives on the Nativity* (ed. Jeremy Corley. London: T & T Clark, 2009), 37–46; "Women Prophets of God's Alternative Reign," in *Luke—Acts and Empire. Essays in Honor of Robert L. Brawley* (ed. David Rhoads, David Esterline, and Jae Won Lee. Princeton Theological Monograph Series. Eugene, Ore.: Picwick Papers, 2010), 44–59.

2. See Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1977) 155–159, 292–296.

that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and the power of the Most High would overshadow her (1:35). In the remainder of his two volumes, Luke stresses that Jesus is filled with the Spirit, and that the mission of his followers in Acts is likewise driven by the Spirit.

Prophets also resist because they know that they risk rejection and suffering if they respond affirmatively to God's call. In the scene of the presentation in the temple, Luke hints at Mary's suffering when Simeon says to her that a "sword will pierce your own soul" (2:35). Her son later laments that Jerusalem always kills the prophets (13:34).

These same elements of a prophetic call story are also evident in the call of Jesus' first disciples (Luke 5:1–11). Simon and his partners, James and John, are going about their everyday work, cleaning their fishing nets, when they encounter Jesus. After Jesus instructs them to put out into the deep and let down their nets, which then fill to the breaking point, Simon objects that he is a sinful man, a detail unique to Luke's version. Jesus reassures him, telling him not to be afraid, and commissions him to catch people from now on. The huge catch of fish serves as a sign. The fishermen then leave everything and follow him.

Proclamation of an Alternate Rule (Luke 1:46–55)

Mary's prophetic task involves both giving birth to the one who will succeed David and who will rule forever (1:32–33), and singing out what this rule of God will be like. She follows in the footsteps of other female prophets: Miriam (Exod 15:1–21),³

3. It is likely that originally the whole Exodus hymn was led by Miriam, and not simply v. 21, which mirrors v. 1. That women were the ones who would lead victory songs and dancing is reflected in 1 Sam 18:7. See further George J. Brooke,

Judith (Jdt 16:1–16), and Deborah (Judg 5:1–31),⁴ who also proclaimed God's victorious power in song and dance. These songs are not sweet lullabies; they are militant songs that exult in the saving power of God that has brought defeat to those who had subjugated God's people. In the same vein, Mary's song declares the overthrow of Roman imperial ways and the triumph of God's reign. Familiarity with the Magnificat as well as the tendency to interpret Mary as sweet, docile, and submissive, can cause us to miss the subversive power of Mary's song. The Guatemalan government, however, recognized its revolutionary potential and banned the public recitation of the Magnificat in the 1980s.

Lord, Savior, Mighty One

One of the ways in which Mary's song challenges imperial might is with the titles she uses of God: *kyrios*, "Lord" (v. 46), *sôtēr*, "Savior" (v. 47), and *ho dynatos*, "the Mighty One" (v. 49). There are many known instances, both literary and archaeological, where these titles were used of the emperor. No one in Luke's day would have missed that Mary's hymn is not so subtly proclaiming: "Oh, no, you're not! Only God is Lord, Savior, and Mighty One!" Luke reinforces this message by using "Lord" some two hundred times in his two volumes, in reference to God and Jesus, and repeatedly uses the title "Savior" of Jesus.⁵ In addition, Luke contrasts Jesus' lordship with that of the Gentiles: "The

"A Long-Lost Song of Miriam," *BAR* 20 (1994), 62–65.

4. There are also many parallels with Hannah's song in 1 Sam 2:1–10.

5. Luke 1:47; 2:11; Acts 5:31; 13:23. This is unique among the Synoptics. "Salvation," *sôtēria* occurs 11 times; in the Fourth Gospel these terms occur twice: 4:22, 42. Matthew uses the verb *sōsei* once: 1:21.

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kings of the Gentiles,” he says, “lord it over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you, rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves” (22:25–26).

Mary sings of God’s might that brings down the powerful from their thrones and lifts up the afflicted (v. 52). Rather than a reversal of fortunes that would only invert the systems of domination, Mary exults in God’s might that brings a leveling of the distribution of goods and power. Mary sings of a simultaneous movement of relinquishment on the part of those who have power, privilege, and status, and an empowerment of those who have not. In the remainder of the Gospel, Jesus embodies this kind of divine power, and in the final chapter, Cleopas and his companion assert that he was “a prophet mighty (*dynatos*) in deed and word before God and all the people” (24:19).

Slavery and Servitude vs. Service

Mary reiterates what she had said to Gabriel at the Annunciation (1:38), that she is God’s servant (literally “slave,” *doulē*, 1:48). This has often been used to hold up Mary as a model of passivity, docility, and submission for women. In the context of this militant hymn, however, Mary’s servitude takes on a much different meaning. She declares that she is not the servant of Caesar, only of God.

The term “slave” calls to mind that anyone who dared to rebel against Rome could be enslaved. Luke noted that Mary was from Nazareth (1:26), which was only a few short miles away from Sepphoris, whose inhabitants were enslaved after revolting at the death of Herod in 4 B.C.E. (Jos., *J. W.* 2.68; *Ant.* 17.289). Another mode of enslavement was through Roman imperial economic practices. Many were forced to sell lands and family members into debt slavery when they could not meet the excessive demands of tribute, temple taxes and offerings, and tithes. Mary subverts systems that enslave subjected peoples by presenting herself as an empowered person who chooses to serve. She is not a person upon whom servitude is imposed. Luke reinforces this message when Jesus declares, “I am among you as one who serves” (22:27), and instructs his disciples, “the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves” (22:26).

Humiliation

Another challenge to Roman imperial ways is found in vs. 48 and 52. In contrast to powerful elites who delight in humiliating those whom they dominate, God “looks upon,” *epiblepsen*, Mary’s “humiliation,” *tapeinōsis*, with the intent of alleviating her affliction. While the reader of the Gospel

knows that Mary's pregnancy is by the power of the Holy Spirit, it is not likely that the townspeople of Nazareth made that conclusion. She has probably endured judgmental looks and accusatory gossip. Perhaps this was a factor in her going to Judea to be with Elizabeth. Mary sings of how God sees her humiliation, and raises her up. There are three other instances in the LXX where the same combination of "looking upon," *epiblepō*, with *tapeinōsis*, "humiliation," is found to speak of God's merciful intent toward those who are afflicted. Hannah prays for God to look upon her misery and grant her a male child (1 Sam 1:11). Likewise, in 1 Sam 9:16, God reveals to Samuel the one whom he is to anoint to be ruler over Israel to save them from the Philistines, "for I have seen the suffering of my people." Judith implores God to "have pity on our people in their humiliation, and look kindly today on the faces of those who are consecrated to you" (Jdt 16:19). The resonances of these texts with the Magnificat convey the message that God delights in relieving suffering that comes through humiliation,⁶ quite the opposite of the ruling powers in the imperial system, who impose humiliation on their subjects. Mary's song declares that God has done this not only for her, but for all those who are humiliated (*tapeinous*, v. 52).

The verb *tapeinoō* is also used in the LXX to refer to the sexual humiliation of a woman, as in the case of the rape of Dinah (Gen 34:2), the abuse of the concubine of the Levite (Judg 19:24; 20:5), Amnon's rape of Tamar (2 Kgs 13:12, 14, 22, 32), and the ravishing of the wives in Zion and the maidens in the cities of Judah (Lam

5:11).⁷ The Magnificat voices the dream of a time when women have no more fear of sexual humiliation by men who overpower them or of rape being used as a weapon of war.

Mercy and Meals

Another way in which the Magnificat speaks of how divine power differs from that of imperial Rome is that God acts with mercy (v. 50). Throughout the Gospel, Jesus embodies this divine mercy by healing those who cry to him for mercy (17:13; 18:38, 39). He teaches his disciples to be merciful by loving enemies, doing good, and giving to those who beg without expecting recompense (6:27–36; see also 10:29–37; 18:13). This teaching subverts imperial ways of violent retaliation and equal reciprocity.

Filling up those who are hungry and emptying out the pockets of rich people is also an affront to Roman imperial power. While Rome claimed that its citizens enjoyed abundance, this was true for only a tiny fraction. The majority faced a daily struggle at the edge of starvation. Throughout the Gospel we see Jesus intent on filling up the hungry, as Luke places Jesus in meal settings more than any other evangelist.⁸

When Mary sings of God sending the rich away empty, she introduces another prominent Lukan theme. Mary prophesies an end to economic structures that are exploitive and unjust. She dreams of a time when all enjoy the good things given by God. Jesus frequently warns

7. Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus. A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 100, points out these references. See also Deut 21:14; 22:24; Isa 51:21, 23; Ezek 22:10–11.

8. Luke 5:30; 7:36; 9:10–17; 10:38; 14:1; 19:7; 22:14–20.

6. In two other instances *tapeinōsis* refers to affliction suffered by barren women, which God alleviates by giving them a son: Gen 16:11; 29:32.

about the dangers of riches (12:16–21; 16:13, 19–23; 18:25). A particularly vivid parable, that of the rich man and Lazarus (16:19–23), is unique to Luke. The first disciples of Jesus leave everything behind to follow him (5:11). Others, like Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna, keep

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their possessions, but place them at the service of the mission (8:3). Salvation comes to a rich tax collector who gives half his possessions to the poor (19:1–10). The ideal presented in Luke's second volume is that all share their possessions, each taking only what is needed, so that no one goes wanting (Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–34).

Elizabeth: Prophet of Grace (Luke 1:25, 39–45, 57–66)

The opening chapter of Luke also features three prophetic utterances by Elizabeth. The first is when she has conceived her child and exclaims, "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people" (1:25). Elizabeth, like Mary, acclaims God's delight in lifting up those who have been humiliated. She, too, would

have endured reproachful looks, as people would have interpreted her childlessness as punishment from God. Luke insists, however, that Elizabeth and Zechariah are righteous, blamelessly keeping all the commandments (1:6). It is not because they have sinned that they are childless. Elizabeth has continued to believe in God's goodness and graciousness, even while enduring humiliation. In this she prefigures Jesus, who remains steadfastly faithful, even while pleading with God to remove the cup of suffering from him (22:39–46), and entrusting himself into God's hands at his execution (23:46).

The second of Elizabeth's prophetic utterances is in the scene of the visitation, where, filled with the Spirit, she pronounces a triple blessing on Mary: blessed among women, blessed the fruit of her womb, and blessed for believing that what she heard from God would be fulfilled. Elizabeth prophesies that blessedness is everywhere, even in the midst of very messy and painful situations. Mary echoes this proclamation in her hymn, "Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed" (1:48). Elizabeth and Mary foreshadow how this same message will be proclaimed by Jesus: that through revilement and hatred can come blessing and salvation (6:22).

Another important theme is sounded in this scene: that of communion. Elizabeth and Mary know their need for one another and for shared wisdom. They are like Ruth and Naomi (Ruth 1–4) and Moses' mother and sister and Pharaoh's daughter (Exod 2:1–10), who collaborate together to accomplish God's purposes. They know that the prophetic word arises from the midst of their experience in community, not only in individual, intimate communion with God. Just so, throughout his public ministry, Jesus is not a lone, itinerant prophet, but surrounds himself

with a community of disciples, whom he sends on mission two by two (10:1).

Elizabeth's final prophetic word is at the circumcision and naming of her son (1:57–66). When everyone else was saying that the child should be called Zechariah after his father, she intervenes, declaring that the child's name is "John"—*Yôhânân*, "gift of God," "grace of God." Elizabeth has spoken rightly, but the gathered assembly doubts it. This painful reality still occurs all too often: when women proclaim the word they have heard, they are not at first believed, and people turn to a male authority for confirmation. The same thing happens at the end of Luke's gospel, when Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other Galilean women proclaim the good news of the resurrection to the other disciples (Luke 24:9–11), their words are considered "an idle tale" (*NRSV*) or "pure nonsense" (*NJB*). Just as Peter goes to the tomb to verify what the women have reported (24:12), so Zechariah has to confirm Elizabeth's word before it is believed.

Persistent Prayer and Presence (Luke 2:36–38)

We turn now to the scene where Mary and Joseph take the child Jesus to the temple for the presentation and purification ritual. There they encounter Simeon, and the prophet Anna, who has stationed herself in the temple for eighty-four years,⁹ worshiping there with fasting and prayer, night and day. She embodies another characteristic of prophets: constant prayerfulness. Mary is portrayed as deeply contemplative as well. Twice Luke notes that Mary treasured everything in her heart (2:19, 51). Elizabeth, too, after becoming pregnant, stays in seclusion, reflecting on

God's grace and favor (1:24–25). More than any other evangelist, Luke portrays Jesus at prayer,¹⁰ and teaching his disciples to pray.¹¹ In Acts, the early Christians are constantly at prayer.¹²

Anna also exemplifies the persistence needed to fulfill the prophetic mission. For more than eight decades she fasts and prays, day and night, watching and waiting for the propitious time. This readies her for the moment when God's salvation is revealed in the person of Jesus. And then she doesn't stop speaking¹³ of this revelation, as she persists in announcing God's new act of redemption.

Prophet Jesus

These prophetic ancestors in the Infancy Narrative prefigure and prepare the way for the prophetic mission of Jesus in the remainder of the Gospel. More than any other evangelist, Luke emphasizes Jesus' role as prophet.¹⁴ When Jesus first announces his mission in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:18–19), he employs the words of the prophet Isaiah (61:1–2) and

10. Luke 3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28–29; 10:21–23; 22:32, 39–46; 23:46.

11. Luke 6:28; 10:2; 11:1–13; 18:1–14; 20:45–47; 21:36; 22:40, 46.

12. Acts 1:14; 2:42; 3:1; 6:4; 10:4, 31; 14:23; 16:13, 16.

13. The imperfect tense of the verb *elalei* connotes repeated past action, "kept on speaking."

14. In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus is called a prophet in 14:5; 21:11, 46, and his words and deeds are said to fulfill those of the prophets who came before him, particularly Isaiah (Matt 1:22; 2:5, 15, 17, 23; 4:14; 5:17; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 24:15; 26:56; 27:9). There are only three allusions to Jesus as prophet in Mark (6:4, 15; 8:28). In the Gospel of John references to Jesus as prophet occur in 1:45; 4:19, 29; 6:14–15; 7:40–41, 52; 9:17; 12:38.

9. The Greek is ambiguous; it could also mean she is eighty-four years old.

recalls Elijah's ministry to the widow of Zarephath (Luke 4:25–26) and Elisha's cure of Naaman the Syrian (4:27). Throughout the Gospel, Luke portrays Jesus' mighty deeds in parallel lines to Elijah and Elisha.¹⁵ As with all prophets, there is a dual response to Jesus' message and deeds. Those whom he raises up with his liberating vision and his freeing actions praise God and follow Jesus; those whose power, privilege, and status are threatened by his alternate vision of life in the realm of God set themselves in opposition to him. The theme of Jesus as rejected prophet builds, becoming the dominant theological explanation for the crucifixion of Jesus in Luke's gospel.¹⁶

15. Compare Luke 7:2–10 with 2 Kgs 5:1–14; Luke 7:11–17 with 1 Kgs 17:17–24 and 2 Kgs 4:18–37; Luke 9:10–17 with 2 Kgs 4:42–44. Jesus is also “taken up” into heaven (Luke 9:51; 24:51; Acts 1:9) like Elijah (2 Kgs 2:11). One difference between Jesus and Elijah is that Jesus refuses to “call down fire from heaven” against his opponents (compare Luke 9:54 with 1 Kgs 18:36–38; 2 Kgs 1:9–14).

Conclusion

The prophetic utterances by Mary, Elizabeth, and Anna in Luke's Infancy Narratives prepare the way for Jesus' prophetic ministry and introduce this Gospel's prominent theological themes. As we hear and put into practice the message of the Third Gospel, we are invited to emulate God's might visible in Jesus through acts of mercy, healing, feeding the hungry, blessing, constant prayer, persistence, and a stance of service to the least. For Luke, all are entrusted with this prophetic mission, as in the Pentecost speech of Peter, he prophesies (quoting Joel 2:28–29): “I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy” (Acts 2:17). All are called to articulate God's dream for us and our cosmos and to mobilize energies for transformative action that will help to bring about that reign.

16. Luke 11:29–32; 13:33–34; 22:64; 24:19, 25, 27. See further Barbara Reid, *Taking Up the Cross. New Testament Interpretations through Latina and Feminist Eyes* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 87–121.

Which Woman? Reimagining the Woman Who Anoints Jesus in Luke 7:36–50

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Whenever the occasion arises to preach or teach on Luke 7:36–50, I feel torn. On the one hand, this is one of the richest narratives in Luke's gospel, full of vivid imagery, deeply complex social interactions, and a clear proclamation of the gospel. On the other hand, I am all too aware of the ways this text has been interpreted in the past: a shameful, sexually promiscuous woman (we are told) makes a spectacle of herself at Jesus' feet and then receives Jesus' forgiveness. In this telling, the woman is nothing more than an object of the men's conversation, which happens literally over her head. Too often that is exactly the role she plays in our preaching and teaching of this text. The woman is an object, both sexual and theological. She is too easily disdained and dismissed.

What makes this worse is that we are familiar with the anointing stories in the other three gospels. In Matthew (Matt 26:6–13) and Mark (Mark 14:3–9), an unnamed woman pours a jar of expensive ointment over Jesus' head while he is at table with the disciples just prior to his crucifixion. There is no weeping at his feet, no unbound hair, no hint that she is known to be a sinner. To the reader with eyes to see, this woman is a Samuel-like character, who anoints the Messiah before his coronation on the cross. In fact, when his followers protest her actions, Jesus

silences them, saying, "Wherever the good news is told in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her." And yet, too often the anointing scene is cut out of the long Passion Sunday readings. Too often we fail to see even *this* woman as anything but a sinner.

Even the anointing story in John's gospel (John 12:1–8) is tainted by the story in Luke. In John, Jesus is anointed by Mary of Bethany, his dear friend. She anoints his feet, pouring out her love and thanks on the one who has raised her brother from the dead. Yet we rarely read this story, either, without the lens given to us by Luke. We almost cannot see the woman who anoints Jesus in any of the Gospel texts as anything other than a "sinner" in need of forgiveness. We cannot see her as prophet, because we have too often been taught to see her as a prostitute. In her article on this passage, Monika Ottermann asks, "How could he ever do that to her?!"¹ Many have asked the same. Why did Luke choose to transform the anointing woman from the one whose dignified and poignant

1. Monika Ottermann, "How could he ever do that to her?!" or, how the woman who anointed Jesus became a victim of Luke's redactional and theological principles." In *Reading other-wise* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 103–116.

actions will be told “in remembrance of her” into a sinner groveling at Jesus’ feet? Has Luke intentionally damaged the image of the anointing woman, either for his own theological purposes, as Ottermann suggests, or in order to make the story “more palatable to a patriarchal Greco-Roman audience,” as Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza contends?² Or is something else going on here?

This paper will seek to show that Luke’s editorial choices in telling the story of the anointing are not intended to sully the image of the anointing woman. In fact, Luke uses the anointing story for the same purpose as the other evangelists: to reveal Jesus as the Messiah. However, since Luke understands Jesus’ role as Messiah differently from Matthew, Mark, and John, his account of the event must necessarily be different. Luke’s account of the anointing will reveal Jesus as the prophetic Messiah, whose primary purpose is the ministry of release. The anointing woman is not dismissed or degraded at all, but rather is set as an exemplar of a Christian disciple.

Which Story?—Setting the Story Straight

Few other Gospel texts have been as clear a victim of mangled interpretation and tradition as the story of the anointing woman. Since the time of Gregory the Great, Western church tradition has conflated the four anointing stories, typically resulting in a narrative in which Jesus is anointed immediately before his death by Mary Magdalene, who is depicted as a prostitute. A simple reading of the four accounts clearly shows that there is no evidence for such a reading of the anoint-

ing, or of Mary Magdalene, for that matter. In fact, a simple reading might leave one asking whether Luke’s account of the anointing is related to the other three at all. Is it the case that all four evangelists shared a common source? If so, then why did Luke choose to re-write the material so dramatically? Is Luke, perhaps, describing an entirely different event than the anointing at Bethany?

These source-critical questions have been asked by numerous scholars and there is little consensus on the issue. Yet, whatever the source behind Luke’s version of the anointing, he clearly made unique editorial choices. He alone chose to set an anointing earlier in the Gospel, in Galilee rather than Bethany, and to include no anointing scene near Jesus’ death. Luke chose to include the detail that the woman was “known in the city to be a sinner.” He chose to use this as a story about forgiveness, rather than one in which Jesus is anointed for his death. Yet, while Luke’s telling of the anointing seems radically different from that of the others, its purpose is the same: the anointing woman reveals Jesus as the prophetic Messiah.

Which Woman?—Understanding the Anointing Woman

Does the anointing woman anoint Jesus as the Messiah? There is even some debate as to whether the anointing in Mark and Matthew should be understood as a prophetic anointing of Jesus as the Messiah. The texts lack the Greek verb *chrīō*, used for Messianic anointing. However, both evangelists write that the woman “poured the ointment on his head.” This is the same language used in the LXX in 1 Sam 10:1, when Samuel anoints Saul as Israel’s king. Thus while the woman’s action might not be perfectly linked with messianic anoint-

2. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983), xiii.

ing, it certainly calls on the image of the anointing of a king.

The situation is quite different in Luke, however. As in the Gospel of John, the woman anoints Jesus' feet rather than his head. This shift removes any sense of a royal anointing from the scene. Anointing of the feet in this way was rare, though not completely unheard of, in the ancient world. However, in John, the anointing scene still carries the function of revealing Jesus as the Messiah. Mary of Bethany anoints Jesus for his death, which is his ultimate Messianic function in John. In Luke, however, all vestiges of a Messianic anointing seem to be lost, leaving us again with the question of whether Luke's redactional choices have done an injustice to the anointing woman and to her act of anointing. Yet, Luke also uses the anointing to reveal Jesus as the Messiah. Unlike in the other Gospels, however, Luke's understanding of Jesus' messianic role is found primarily in Jesus' ministry of forgiveness and release.

Forgiveness, or release, is a primary theme in Luke's gospel. In this passage Jesus describes the forgiveness of sins, and one's response to such forgiveness, through a parable that compares the forgiveness of sins to the forgiveness of a monetary debt. This image harkens back to Jesus' speech in Nazareth (Luke 4:18–21), in which he declares "the year of the Lord's favor," the Jubilee described in Leviticus 25. The Jubilee year was intended to be a time in which all debts would be forgiven, people would be returned to their own land, and slaves would be made free. This year of release would restore the community to one of equality, each with their own land, none beholden to another. This, indeed, is the purpose of forgiveness as it plays out in Luke's gospel. People are forgiven (released) by God not only to experience a restored relationship with God, but also

so that they will be fully included in the community. As Joel Green writes, "...Luke portrays both forgiveness and healing in social terms.... 'Release' for Luke signifies wholeness, freedom from diabolic and social chains, acceptance."³ This type of release is not just a psychological adjustment in which one no longer feels guilt over one's sin; rather, this type of release is something that the individual and the society experience in very real terms.

The woman who anoints Jesus in Luke 7 experiences just such a release through God's forgiveness. The text does not make it clear whether the woman experienced release from the debt of her sin at the table or through a previous encounter with Jesus in the city. Either way, Jesus declares her forgiven in no uncertain terms, thereby releasing her from the debt of her sin. And this release rejoins her to the community, cleanses her, and makes her whole. Again, Jesus makes this clear with his final pronouncement (used elsewhere only when someone has received physical healing), "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace." The woman is sent back out into the community in "peace" or "shalom," meaning "wholeness."

The unanswered question at the end of the text is whether Simon and the others at the dinner party accept the woman as a released and restored member of the community. Barbara Reid understands the central question of the text to be, "Do you see this woman?"⁴ The question is whether

3. Joel B. Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 79.

4. Barbara Reid, "'Do You See This Woman?' A Liberative Look at Luke 7.36–50 and Strategies for Reading Other Lukan Stories Against the Grain," in *A Feminist Companion to Luke*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 106–120.

Simon will persist in seeing the woman only as “a sinner” or if he will now see her as a full member of the community. How Simon sees the woman at the end of the text determines whether or not Simon has been able to perceive Jesus’ true identity as the one who has the power to forgive sins and restore people to wholeness. Reid notes that this same question, “Do you

is whether or not the reader will persist in seeing her only as “a sinner” and thus have missed the point of the narrative and the Gospel as a whole.

Which Messiah?—Jesus’ Identity in Luke 7

Ultimately this text, like most passages in the Gospels, is not about the woman, but about Jesus. As noted above, this episode reveals Jesus as the one with authority to forgive sins. But this is only part of the picture of Jesus’ identity that Luke draws in this section of the Gospel. Throughout chapter seven, Luke seeks to identify Jesus clearly as prophet and Messiah. The narrative of the anointing serves to reveal Jesus’ identity and purpose as the prophetic Messiah.

As in much of Luke’s gospel, prophetic imagery permeates chapter seven. Specifically, the narrative evokes the prophets Elijah and Elisha in 1 and 2 Kings.⁵ The healing of the centurion’s slave mirrors the story of the healing of Naaman (2 Kgs 5:1–19). The raising of the widow’s son in Nain resembles the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath (1 Kgs 17:17–24). The question from John’s disciples (7:18–23) as to whether Jesus is the “one who is to come” could be asking either if he is the Messiah or if he is the return of the prophet Elijah whose appearance will signal Israel’s restoration.

At the climax of this section is the narrative of the anointing. As the woman weeps and anoints Jesus’ feet, Simon says to himself, “If this man were a prophet he would know who and what sort of woman is touching him, that she is a sinner” (v.

The irony of the passage is that Jesus knows exactly what Simon is thinking, showing that Jesus is, indeed, a prophet.

see this woman?” can also apply to the reader and interpreter of the text. If our primary identification of the woman is as a “sinner” or “prostitute,” this indicates that we have failed to see her as one who had been forgiven and restored to wholeness. We might more aptly identify her as the woman who showed great love (v. 47), the woman who revealed Jesus’ authority to forgive sins (v. 49), or the woman of great faith (v. 50). The failure to identify the woman in these ways indicates a failure on the part of the reader to acknowledge the new reality created by Jesus’ authority to forgive. Thus Luke has not sullied the woman’s image at all. Ultimately he has described her as a whole, fully restored member of the community. The question

5. For further treatment of this topic, see D.A.S. Ravens, “The Setting of Luke’s Account of the Anointing: Luke 7.2–8.3,” *New Testament Studies* 34, no. 2 (April 1, 1988), 282–292.

39). The irony of the passage is that Jesus knows exactly what Simon is thinking, showing that Jesus is, indeed, a prophet. What's more, Jesus not only knows who is touching him and that she is a sinner, he alone has the prophetic eyes that allow him to see the woman and know that her identity is no longer as "sinner," but as a fully released and restored member of the community. Thus the passage reveals Jesus' identity as the prophet whose appearance signals and enacts restoration.

Yet, the text also reveals that Jesus is "more than a prophet." While Luke emphasizes Jesus' prophetic role, Jesus' primary identity continues to be Messiah. As Green notes, "Jesus is portrayed as a prophet, but as more than a prophet; he is the long-awaited Davidic Messiah, Son of God, who fulfills in his career the destiny of a regal prophet for whom death, though necessary, is hardly the last word."⁶ Yet, while the other evangelists see Jesus revealed as Messiah most clearly in the crucifixion and resurrection, Luke sees Jesus' Messianic identity revealed most fully in his ministry of release, begun in the ministry in Galilee. It was for this purpose that Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit (4:18–21). Therefore one might argue that while Luke has moved the setting of the anointing scene from its narrative position in the other Gospels, he does not remove it from its narrative purpose. In Mark, Matthew, and John the anointing is set in the midst of Jesus' revelation as Messiah through the cross ("she has anointed me for my burial"); in Luke the anointing is set in Galilee, in the midst of the revelation of Jesus as the prophetic Messiah through the ministry of release.

6. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 23.

Which Host?—The Woman as an Exemplar of Discipleship

Yet we are still left with a somewhat troubling picture of the woman in this scene. The woman comes to Jesus while he is reclining at table at a banquet in the house of a Pharisee. The table setting is common to all four anointing scenes. What one notices in Luke's telling, however, is the posture the woman takes. She is at his feet, presumably kneeling and hunched closely enough to his feet that her tears wet them and her hair can reach them. She is rubbing ointment into his feet. She is in a state of absolute humility. The picture of the woman in this position, presumably in a room full of men, causes some feminist interpreters to question whether Luke's treatment of women is as liberating as once believed. Once again, however, things are not entirely as they might appear, for this position of humble service is not intended to be demeaning. In Luke's gospel this is exactly the position of a disciple.

Luke's gospel has a strong focus on serving, *diakoneō*, and service, *diakonia*.⁷ The verb *diakoneō* primarily carries the sense of serving at the table. This verb is used exclusively of women in the first chapters of Luke. Beginning in Luke 12, however, both *diakoneō* and *diakonia* are used by Jesus to describe the life of a disciple. In Acts *diakonia* is the word often used to describe the work of the apostles.

A key passage for understanding the role of serving in the life of a disciple is found in Luke 22:26–27. The setting is the table of the last supper and a dispute

7. Turid Karlsen Seim has an excellent treatment of *diakoneō* and *diakonia* in the Gospel of Luke in chapter three of *The Double Message: Patterns of Gender in Luke-Acts*, Brian McNeil, trans. (Nashville: Abingdon Press; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994).

has just arisen among the disciples as to which of them is the greatest. Jesus replies,

The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. (Luke 22:25–27, NRSV)

Jesus upends the role of the servant. The greatest is the one who serves in humility.

While the verb *diakoneō* is not used in the narrative of the anointing, the connection between table service and the woman's actions is apparent. One might see the woman as a person who has not been liberated from the traditional female role of serving and who is humiliated by her

actions at a table full of men. However, the rest of the Gospel points to the fact that her response to God's forgiveness is exactly the response that God asks for from all disciples of both genders. Once again our failure to understand Jesus' words results in our inability to see. Jesus does not call his disciples only to an *attitude* of service or the *ideal* of humility; he calls them to service that actually stoops down to help another and humility that is embodied and expressed relationally. The anointing woman is a prime example of both.

Indeed, Jesus points out to Simon and the others around the table that the woman, in her humble service, has, in a sense, become greater than the host of the meal. Jesus says to Simon,

I entered your home and you did not give me water for my feet; but she has watered my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but she, since she entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil but she anointed my feet with ointment. (Luke 7:44–46, author's translation)

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As the host of the meal, Simon has not provided these acts of hospitality, but the woman has done what Simon ought to have done and more. She has offered service and hospitality to Jesus, not out of social obligation wrapped in the careful dance of benefaction, but by pouring out love and service in response to the release she has experienced. Thus the woman, in response to the forgiveness she has received, has become a servant and in serving she has shown herself to be greater than her host.

Conclusion: Who Has 'Done This' To Her?

We began with the question, "How could he ever do this to her?" Did Luke indeed take the story of the woman anointing

Jesus, as written in the other Gospels, and change it in ways that served his theological purposes but ultimately demeaned the woman and, thereby, women? This essay has sought to answer that question with an emphatic “no.”

Luke knew the story of the anointing from Mark; yet Luke chose to use material from oral traditions and other sources to make redactional decisions that resulted in a remarkably different story. While Luke has moved the setting of the anointing and dramatically changed both the details and the meaning of the text, he has given the anointing story a narrative purpose much like that in the other three Gospels. Specifically, Luke has used the anointing scene as a key piece to reveal Jesus’ identity as the prophetic Messiah. Jesus is identified as Messiah through his ministry of release, begun in his ministry in Galilee.

The woman in Luke’s anointing is described at the outset as “a sinner.” Yet Luke writes the narrative in such a way that the reader discovers that “sinner” is no longer an adequate way to describe her. The woman is to be seen as released from her sins and thereby as a whole and fully restored member of the community. The question the text poses is whether Simon the Pharisee, and the reader, will see the effect of Jesus’ ministry of release on the woman. If we as readers fail to see her as anything

other than a sinner or a prostitute, that is the result of our failure to see, rather than of Luke’s redactional choices.

Finally, the woman is presented as an exemplar of Christian discipleship. In her humble service at Jesus’ feet at the table, we are to see not a humiliated woman, but rather, the picture of discipleship. Through her humility and service she becomes the greatest one at the table, apart from Jesus, because she is the one who serves. Once again, our failure to see her humble service as anything but demeaning is the result of our failure to understand Jesus’ call to servant discipleship in the Gospel as a whole.

So, who has “done this” to the woman? Not Luke. In these fourteen verses Luke has presented a vision of the Gospel in miniature; he has presented the radical upending of identity and society that is created through Jesus’ prophetic ministry of release. Yet the church has persisted in approaching this text with a patriarchal lens that demeans the woman as a “sinner” in a way that excludes her and thereby excludes women in general. This is why we must set the story straight. We must continue to ask the types of questions that have been posed in this essay so that not only the woman in the text, but women and men everywhere can experience Jesus’ release and enter into lives of full discipleship.

Reframing the Parable of the Pounds in Lukan Narrative and Economic Context: Luke 19:11–28

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The Parable of the Pounds (Luke 19:11–28) will not be found in the Revised Common Lectionary cycle of Gospel readings. The most likely reason for this is its narrative similarity with Matthew's Parable of the Talents. But as sometimes happens, Bible readers interpret synoptic passages through the lens of the Gospel of Matthew, a bias attributed to its priority in the canonical sequence. In this article, I aim to call attention to what the author of Luke is doing overall in his critique of wealth and consumption through the Parable of the Pounds separated from the lens of the Parable of the Talents.

Removing the Matthean Lens

How many slaves were there? How many coins did they begin with and what was their rate of return on their investment? What happens to the “lazy” slave in the end? Most would answer these questions remembering the version told in the Parable of the Talents (Matt 25:14–30).

A master goes away and gives money to three servants: five talents to the first, two to the second, and one to the third. The first and second double the master's investment, giving back to the master ten and four talents respectively. The third buries the talent, and is cast into the “outer darkness” where there is “weeping

and gnashing of teeth.”

In the context of Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the temple (Matt 24:2), his discussion of the signs of his coming (Matt 24:3–28), his apocalyptic description of the Son of Man's coming (Matt 24:29–35), and the revelation that “no one knows” the day or the hour of these events (Matt 24:36–44), Jesus tells four parables in succession: the Parable of the Wicked Slave (Matt 24:45–51), the Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matt 25:1–13), the Parable of the Talents (Matt 25:14–30), and the Judgment of the Gentiles (Matt 25:30–46). In this narrative sequence, we see the apocalyptic conclusion of the Old Age and the rising of a New Age, and the question Matthew's Jesus is keen on answering is, “How does a faithful and wise slave remain vigilant until the New Age is here?” Now, let us do a simple comparison of the Matthean and Lukan parables in order to see where the aims of Luke's Jesus lie.

Reading Matthew first, we notice that a “man,” who is later called “master,” goes on a journey and entrusts his slaves with his *property*, including talents. In Luke, the man is a “nobleman” (lit. “a man who [was] born noble”, v.12), who is only interested in a business exchange (v.13). Luke's nobleman does not simply go on a journey, but travels to a “far country to receive for himself a dominion (*basileian*, v.12).”

There are three slaves in Matthew, who each receive five, two, and one talent respectively (Matt 25:15). However, in Luke there are ten slaves who all receive only one "pound" (*mina*) each (v.13). The difference in type and value of coins is not as significant compared to the rate of return. While the first and second slaves of Matthew double their original amount, Luke's first slave brings a ten-fold return (v.16), while the second brings a five-fold return (v.18). Matthew's master rewards the first two slaves with the vague "much" (Matt 25:21). Luke's nobleman, once again rather specifically, puts the first slave in charge of ten cities (v.17) and the second slave in charge of five (v.19).

In both parables, the third slave critiques the master for being harsh, and the master repeats the critique back to the slave as if it ought to have been motivation to have taken the money to help it gain interest. While it may be difficult for some to understand this harsh master to be an allegorical representation of "God," it appears to be the case in Matthew. Still, in considering Luke, it is crucial to understand the difference in the master's retribution. As stated above, the third slave is sent to torture, but not so in Luke. In Luke, the third slave has only his pound taken from him (v.24), which causes a complaint from onlookers (v.25). Greater punishment is reserved for the so-called enemies of the nobleman (v.27).

Recent interpretations have challenged the normative reading of the Talents. First, *The Gospel in Solentiname*, a script of Nicaraguan peasants discussing the weekly Gospel readings with their priest, calls the Parable of the Talents "a lousy parable" because it was about "giving the money to others so they can work and work with it and hand over the profits to the owner of the real money."¹

1. Ernesto Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname*. Translated by Donald D. Walsh.

Both Rohrbaugh and Herzog stepped back from this interpretation slightly, and argued that the original tradition which preceded both the Parable of the Talents and the Pounds was a critique of the master rather than of the third slave.² Either way, it is important to be honest to Matthew's narrative sequence and admit that the Parable of the Talents is a critique of the lack of vigilance in the third slave, rather than a critique of the economic practices of the master. For this reason, we are unable to rely only on cultural anthropological analyses of peasants (as recent studies have) in order to conclude that peasants would have easily understood this parable as a critique of the master (which is still a possibility).

There are, among others, two distinct problems with an allegorical reading of Luke in its context. First, allegorical interpretations lack an explanation for the "delegation" which is sent to defy the nobleman. If this is allegory, then who follows Christ to heaven to beseech God that Christ not be given the authority over the earth? Second, there is another unexplained verse unique to Luke in v.25, where, after the nobleman takes the third slave's coin and gives it to the one who has ten, the onlookers complain: "Lord, he has ten minas."

If the Parable of the Pounds is a composite of the early tradition of the Parable of the Talents and of other allegorical readings, where does this complaint fit in? Is it not possible that this points to an economic interpretation that has been missed?

Consider a similar parable found

(Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2010), 480.

2. See Richard L. Rohrbaugh, "A Peasant Reading of the Parable of the Talents/Pounds: A Text of Terror?" *Biblical Theology Bulletin: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 23, no. 1 (February 1, 1993): 32–39, and William R. Herzog, *Parables As Subversive Speech*. 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 150–169.

in the writings of the Church Father Eusebius:

For he [the master] had three servants:

[A] one who squandered his master's substance with harlots and flute-girls,

[B] one who multiplied the gain,

[C] and one who hid the talent and accordingly ...

[C'] one was accepted (with joy),

[B'] another merely rebuked,

[A'] and another cast into prison.³

The structure of the parable makes clear that the one who hid the talent "was accepted (with joy)." Therefore, we must at least say that an obvious and parallel possibility exists to interpret the parable outside the Matthean lens in a manner that does not condemn the third slave as guilty. If this is true, then when the Parable of the Pounds pits the third slave against the master, this could likely be a critique of the master, an interpretation that is quite contrary to the Parable of the Talents. In order to take this argument further, we must look beyond the "delegation" and the complaint, and examine the Parable of the Pounds in the context of the Lukan narrative.

The Narrative Context of Luke's Economic Vision

We will examine first the immediate context of the Parable of the Pounds, before we look at the whole of the narrative of Luke. A good place to begin might be to have a quick synoptic comparison of Jesus' stop in Jericho before his death in Jerusalem. In all three, there is a blind man on the side of the road near the gate to Jericho. In Mark,

Jesus encounters Bartimaeus as he is leaving Jericho on his way to Jerusalem (Mark 10:46). In Matthew, Jesus encounters two blind men (20:29) on his way out of Jericho. But Luke's Jesus encounters the blind man upon *entering* Jericho (18:35).

Taking the strong hypothesis of Markan priority along with the sequence in Matthew, we reasonably deduce that Luke moves Jesus' encounter with the blind man to the entrance. In Luke's sequence, Jesus enters Jericho, meets the blind man, and eats with Zacchaeus (a story unique to Luke). When Jesus leaves Jericho to go to his death in Jerusalem, he tells the Parable of the Pounds. Luke appears to have moved the blind man to accommodate the Parable of the Pounds. In short, he does this to directly link the Zacchaeus account, which happens in Jericho, to the Parable of the Pounds and the parable to Jesus' final steps toward Jerusalem.

Verse 11 gives two narrative reasons for the parable being here. First, Jesus tells this parable because he is near Jerusalem. Second, Jesus tells this parable because the people listening to him think the "Divine Dominion" (*he basileia tou theou*) would appear immediately.

Another popular interpretation, championed by Luke Timothy Johnson, calls our Parable of the Pounds "The Kingship Parable." Johnson argues against the eschatological allegory present in the Talents, and claims that the Pounds is actually a story about Jesus' immediate kingship. Jesus will be proclaimed king when he enters Jerusalem, "dispose of *basileia* to his followers, grant entrance to the thief, and as risen Lord, continue to exercise authority through his emissaries' words and deeds."⁴ According to Johnson, Jesus

3. Quoted from Rohrbach to show his chiasmic rendering, p. 36.

4. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke: Sacra Pagina* ed. Daniel J., S.J. Harrington (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2006), 294.

tells this parable to confirm the listener's expectation that the Divine Dominion will appear immediately.

Still, there are problems here as well. Johnson still gives no answer for the delegation that is sent. The nobleman goes to a faraway country and returns. Jesus is going to Jerusalem, but to where shall he return and rule? And finally, if in Jesus' coronation the Divine Dominion is appearing, then why when asked about the restoration of the kingdom does Jesus say in Acts 1:7, "It is not for you to know times or seasons"? In Acts, it is clear the Divine Dominion is not fully apparent, even though Jesus is king, and has assigned "a kingdom" to his disciples (22:29–30).

But Johnson does set us on the right track, claiming that the Parable of the Pounds is about the Divine Dominion. In our parable, the root "king/to rule" (*basil-*) is found five times (vs. 11, 12, 14, 15, 27). In Luke's gospel, the Divine Dominion figures many times over, but it is difficult to set a cohesive theology around it. At the very least, one could say that the various uses are in tension with one another. In some instances, the Divine Dominion is delayed (see 9:27 or 14:15), and in other instances it is realized in the present (see 10:9 or 11:20). So while at one point in the narrative Jesus suggests that the Divine Dominion has come (11:20), later it is clear to the Pharisees that it has not come (17:20). And yet, Jesus responds to those same Pharisees, in a passage unique to Luke, "the Divine Dominion is in the midst of you"⁵ (17:21).

Having pointed out the Divine Dominion in their midst, Jesus tells the Parable of the Persistent Widow (18:2–5), the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (18:10–13), when finally a rich ruler asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

(18:18). Among other instructions, Jesus says, "Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor" (18:22). When the rich ruler becomes "sad," Jesus gives the final blow: "How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God" (18:24). Having answered this rich ruler's question, Jesus enters Jericho.

And in Jericho, Zacchaeus, a rich tax collector (18:10–13), seeks out Jesus. When he finds him he declares, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold" (19:8, ESV). Immediately, Jesus proclaims salvation upon Zacchaeus, directly linking Zacchaeus' righteous use of wealth and his salvation. Zacchaeus is the lost drachma (15:8–10) and the lost sheep (15:3–7), and Jesus finds and saves him at the moment he exemplifies righteous economics. The people around Jesus in Jericho heard these things, and thought "the Divine Dominion was about to appear immediately." It is in this context that Jesus tells the Parable of the Pounds.

Since Luke was very particular about the sequence of the scenes around Jericho, then the question can and should be asked: what does the righteous use of wealth have to do with Jesus' coronation in Jerusalem? First, let's examine Luke's understanding of the righteous use of wealth.

A large number of passages unique to Luke stress the reversal of fortune of the poor and the rich (e.g., The Rich Man and Lazarus, 16:19–31) and exhorts his audience toward the correct use of wealth (The Dishonest Steward, 16:1–9; Zacchaeus, 19:1–10). Luke begins with five canticles, the first being Mary's Song, which includes the reversal of fortunes where the mighty are brought down and the rich sent away so that the humble are exalted and the hungry are filled (1:52–53). When John the Baptist proclaimed a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins"

5. Or "inside of you."

(3:3), he is posed the same question by the crowd (3:10), tax collectors (3:12), and soldiers (3:14): "What shall we do?" For Luke's John, repentance was sharing food and clothing with those who had none (3:11), collecting no more taxes than what was required (3:13), not extorting money by threats or false accusations (3:14), and being content with one's wages (3:14).

Likewise, in a shared double-tradition passage with Matthew, Luke's Jesus includes added economic imperatives. In the Sermon on the Mount/Plain, Luke's Jesus continues beyond Matthew's "love your enemies" to say "Lend, expecting nothing in return" (6:35). Not only does this go beyond Matthew, but it also goes beyond the Torah's commandments against exacting interest (Exod 22:25, Lev 25:37, Deut 16:6–8). Luke's Jesus goes against seeking repayment.

Recently, two monographs highlight the economic vision of the Third Gospel. First, Hays' *Luke's Wealth Ethics* argues that the rhetorical force of economics in the Lukan narrative is unified in the proclamation: "anyone of you who does not renounce all (*panta*) that he has cannot be my disciple" (14:33). He shows that *panta* need not mean one hundred percent (although it certainly suggests more than half, as in the case of Zacchaeus), and the method and amount differs by case, according to one's wealth and to whether or not one was an itinerant.⁶

In the second example, *Consumption and Wealth in Luke's Travel Narrative*, Metzger shows that within the narrative sequence of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem (9:51 onward), the critique of over-consumption and wealth become stronger and stronger climaxing in the proclamation of Zacchaeus.⁷ While

he ends his analysis at Zacchaeus' house, avoiding our controversial parable, both of these works demonstrate the intention and importance of Luke's rhetoric in critiquing wealth and exhorting would-be disciples toward righteous economics. "Sell your possessions, and give to the needy" (12:33), share (3:11), do not overcharge (3:13), do not extort (3:15), and lend without repayment (6:35) are all Lukan imperatives that call into question the practices of the nobleman and his first two slaves. Let us turn now to the Parable of the Pounds.

Reading the Pounds

As mentioned above, Jesus tells the Parable of the Pounds for two reasons. First, he was near to Jerusalem. I, like others,⁸ believe "Jerusalem" forms an *inclusio* (rhetorical brackets) in v.11 and v.28. I will explore the Jerusalem connection as we come to the final verse. Second, those listening to Jesus believed the Divine Dominion would appear immediately. Now, having placed this parable in the larger context of Luke's economic vision, it is most likely the case that, having heard what righteous economic practice is, they see it exemplified in the wealthy tax collector Zacchaeus. But will the Divine Dominion appear immediately? Reading Acts 1:6, it is hard to believe that Luke thinks the Divine Dominion appeared with Jesus' coronation. Therefore, it is reasonable that Jesus told this parable to show that the Dominion would not appear immediately.

So the nobleman visits a far-away land to take for himself a dominion and to return to rule over the place he began his journey. If we accept this storyline at face value before

Wealth in Luke's Travel Narrative (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2007), 25.

8. Elizabeth V. Dowling, *Taking Away the Pound: Women, Theology and the Parable of the Pounds in the Gospel of Luke*. 1st ed. (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 79.

6. Christopher M. Hays, *Luke's Wealth Ethics: A Study in Their Coherence and Character* (Philadelphia: Coronet Books Inc, 2010), 186–187.

7. James A. Metzger, *Consumption and*

we allegorize it, it is a picture of the workings of ancient empires, in this case Rome. When a leader wanted to rule a land, they traveled to bring gifts to the emperor so they might be promised stability and assistance. Josephus recounts such a case:

At the same time also, did Antipas, another of Herod's sons, sail to Rome, in order to gain the government; being buoyed up by Salome with promises that he should take that government; and that he was a much more honest and fit man than Archelaus for that authority, since Herod had, in his former will, deemed him the worthiest to be made king; which ought to be esteemed more valid than his latter will.⁹

Josephus also tells of a delegation that had been sent abroad (*Antiquities*, 14.302) to oppose an earlier Herod. With Jesus heading toward Jerusalem, to Pilate and Herod, and with the two being named complicit in Jesus' death (Acts 4:27), we are better able to place our nobleman in his historical context.

The nobleman begins to look more and more like a tyrant (even compared with the Talents), thereby making it difficult to allegorize the nobleman into the cruciform of the servant-king (22:27), Jesus. The nobleman who becomes king resembles the "kings of the Gentiles" who "exercise lordship" (22:25), while Jesus exhorts his disciples to serve (22:26) as he has done. For this reason, Jesus tells this parable to show that the Divine Dominion will not appear immediately on account of such rulers still in existence.

But it is not only the lording over of others that makes the nobleman a tyrant, but also the economic system of exploitation he perpetuates. Consider, while the slaves of Matthew only double their return, the

first and second slaves of Luke increase their return 1000 and 500 percent respectively. Vinson describes it vividly:

There was no ancient stock market or buying of oil futures; ordinary money-lenders could hardly get away with charging 1,000% interest; no commercial venture, such as investing in shipping grain or buying property to rent to others, could have turned so large a profit without years of patience. In their world, such a huge return could only have come at someone else's expense, and bribery, influence-peddling, or outright theft would probably strike the audience as likely. Tenant Number One is thus most likely a rapacious "anything for a buck" kind of guy, and his master calls him "good" and puts him in charge of ten of his new cities.¹⁰

When the nobleman approaches the third slave, in his anger, he asks why the slave had not taken it to "the tables" so he could have collected interest on it, the practice which is condemned in Torah. The third slave is not punished, though. It is the enemies of the nobleman who are slaughtered. Here, there is an interesting word to note in the Greek, used in v.27 and repeated in v.28.

v.27: But as for these, my enemies, who did not want me to have dominion over them, lead them here and slay them *in front of (emprosthen)* me."

v.28: And having said these things, he proceeded *onward (emprosthen)*, going up to Jerusalem.

Most commentators miss this, simply because they often analyze up to v.27. But this repetition coupled with the marker "Jerusalem" (vs. 11, 28) allows us to see

10. Richard B. Vinson, "The Minas touch: anti-kinship rhetoric in the Gospel of Luke," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 35, no. 1 (March 1, 2008): 74–75.

9. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 17:224.

Jesus telling this parable while he is “near to Jerusalem,” a parable ending with the nobleman killing his enemies (not the third slave), and finally transitioning to Jesus’ completion of his journey to Jerusalem where he will be executed by “noble men,” namely, Herod and Pilate.

Conclusion

The reading I have offered here is one that critiques the wealth and power of the nobleman. We need not go so far as to herald the third slave as the hero of the story. Still, while the dominant reading of the Parable of the Pounds is one that calls the third slave “lazy,” we might ask questions of what it means to be lazy. In our capitalist time where individual labor production is important, laziness can be seen as the root of economic problems. But laziness must also be seen as a critique of power, for certainly if one believed in the leadership and creeds of the ones who shape the economic system, one would work toward those ends. This is even more so in an agrarian peasant society (or a slave society). James Scott, an anthropologist, has analyzed the “foot-dragging” practices of peasants and their “everyday forms of resistance.” Alan Kirk summarizes:

These stratagems reflect the preoccupation of subsistence producers with survival; therefore they aim, within the framework of existing hierarchical relations, at minimizing expropriation and securing subsistence. Accordingly these tactics are marked by retreat from the threshold of open defiance; in other words, they tend not to be disruptive of the public transcript of conformity and consent. Those engaging in them “disavow, publicly, any intention of challenging the basic principles of stratification and authority.” Such practices as squatting, poaching, pilfering, tax and tithe evasion, shoddy, slow,

or shirked labor for landowners, and dissimulation are preferred over direct but perilous forms of resistance such as open breaches of deference protocols, land invasions, attacks on grain stores, tax revolts, and strikes.¹¹

Thus, while the third slave may be no hero, it is easier to understand his actions and convictions. It is likely that—if our interpretation is correct—it would have been easy for Luke’s audience to follow this line of thinking as well. A nobleman, whom the people dislike, must gain his power from colonial rule. He rewards those who can make economic profit at any cost. He ignores those who will not, and destroys all those who oppose him. Indeed, this is not Luke’s Jesus.

Where Luke’s narrative challenges his readers to give and share all or as much as possible for the poor, the captives, and the oppressed (4:18), the challenge of the Luke’s telling of the Parable of the Pounds is one of caution. Those listening to Jesus had thought the Divine Dominion had come. But the Parable of the Pounds reminds its readers that the Divine Dominion does not come in the lording over of others nor in the profit margins of successful investments.

11. Alan Kirk, “Going Public with the Hidden Transcript in Q11: Beelzebul Accusation and the Woes.” In *Oral Performance, Popular Tradition, and Hidden Transcript in Q*, edited by Richard A. Horsley (Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006) 184.

Participation and Evil: The Problem of Doing Evil When Attempting to Fight Evil

Benjamin Splichal Larson

Introduction

On August 17, 2008, the popular writer and religious leader Pastor Rick Warren asked Senator John McCain in a nationally televised interview, “Does evil exist, and if

1. *[A note from Renee Splichal Larson]*

This paper was originally submitted by my husband, Ben, as an assignment for a senior theology course at Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa. One month later, Ben died in the Haiti earthquake of January 12, 2010, along with 300,000 other people. Central to Ben’s theology and person was his faith in the God who creates new life out of the most evil and devastating circumstances through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Even in his dying moments, Ben profoundly witnessed to this core of his faith. I heard Ben singing as he was buried under the rubble. His last song witnesses to something that is far greater than evil, death, and destruction:

O Lamb of God, you bear the sin
of all the world away;
eternal peace with God you made,
God’s peace to us we pray.

Ben did not ignore the reality of evil in our broken world, but he proclaimed God’s redeeming work in and through Jesus Christ for all of creation. May his paper intrigue, challenge, and strengthen you as we all look forward to God’s reconciling work in the resurrection of the dead and the fullness of the New Creation.

so, should we ignore it, negotiate with it, contain it, or defeat it?” McCain’s answer was short, concise, and met with thunderous applause: “*Defeat it.*” This answer came on the heels of five years of war in Iraq, where the United States had engaged in combat against a country it called part of the “Axis of Evil.” Iraq, the Axis of Evil, lost far more noncombatant, dare I say innocent, citizens in that war than the United States has lost in its entire history.

Here we have a clear example of how humans, including Christians, often participate in evil when attempting to fight evil. This is why it is of utmost importance that we look deep into that dark and cold term, *evil*. This paper will not try to solve the problem of evil; it will not even try fully to understand evil. Instead, it asks: Are we able to participate in God’s plan to bring about an end to evil, and if so, how? To tackle this question, we will look first at how humans participate with God. Then we will look at how humans participate with and understand evil. We will address the timeless questions: Where does evil come from? Did God create it? Finally, we will ask what we can do about evil, if anything.

What is the Source of Human Participation in Evil?

To lay the groundwork, let us begin with an early Christian theologian who thought deeply about participation: Maximus the

Confessor. Maximus “understands” God on two levels. There is God in God’s essence, about which we can know absolutely nothing. Then there is God in God’s activity out of God’s essence, which is the revealed God. We cannot know anything about God apart from the activity of God.

Why did God create Satan?

Why did God create a tempter? If God wants us to choose right over wrong, why create someone or something to tempt us into transgression?

When something is created, it cannot exist outside of the activity of its Creator. This means that creation is the initial and continued activity of God. There is no existence without God creating and sustaining that existence. Therefore, all communion with God is communion with the action of God. Participation with God and God’s activity is done only through created reality.²

The source of human participation in

2. Torstein Theodor Tollefsen, *The Christocentric Cosmology of St Maximus the Confessor*, ch. 5, “The Concept of Participation” (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), 190–224.

evil is often called the “fall.” What is the fall? It is usually summed up in this way: God gave humans free will. Since God honors that gift, God allows us to choose wrong. Therefore, God is not to blame for creating evil; God just allows it to exist. “God even knows, in a mysterious way, how to bring a good from the consequences of an evil, even a moral evil, caused by God’s creatures; but for all that, evil never becomes good.”³ Yet, going back to the story of the fall, there is one character who throws this for a loop: Satan. It is impossible to discuss evil without discussing Satan.

The serpent in Genesis is never identified as Satan; however, throughout history, both Jews and Christians have read Satan into the serpent—“the tempter.” If Augustine, Luther, and countless others attribute the fall to Satan as the tempter, we must ask: Why did God create Satan? Why did God create a tempter? If God wants us to choose right over wrong, why create someone or something to tempt us into transgression?

Theories about Evil’s Place in Creation

Where does evil come from? Did God create evil? Christian tradition offers a number of answers to these questions.

In light of Scripture, Christians have commonly assumed that evil either originates in the tempting serpent or in humans’ act of eating the forbidden fruit. However, although eating the fruit is a transgression, and it leads to suffering and death, Genesis 2–3 does not explicitly state at this time

3. Julio Terà Dutari, “The Origin and Overcoming of Evil: Original Sin and God’s Suffering in Christianity,” trans. Richard Schneck, S.J., in *The Origin and the Overcoming of Evil and Suffering in the World Religions*, Peter Koslowski, ed. (Dordrecht; Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), 49.

that “evil” has come into the world. Not even when Cain murders Abel does Genesis mention the presence of “evil.” Instead, the first mention of evil comes in Gen 6:5, right after the “sons of God” see the fairness of the daughters of humans and have children with them called the Nephilim. This is likely Genesis’ interpretation of the origin of evil: it is related to the crossing of a boundary between the sons of God (angels) and daughters of humans.

This understanding creates a stark difference between transgressions and evil. Transgressions are punished; evil is destroyed. Evil here in Genesis 6 is not created by God. Instead, evil is a result of created beings breaking the boundaries of heaven and earth. If heavenly beings bring evil about by breaching the boundary of earth, since heaven and earth are created together with beings of their own, is it not also evil for humans to cross into the heavenly realm? Isn’t this what happens when humans speak and act in place of God or pursue the desire to be like God—able to define the boundary between good and evil?

That is one option, and it is compelling. However, Genesis is perhaps best used as an interpretation of life rather than as a chronology of events. This approach adds value to the story of Adam and Eve. A common interpretation of evil is that it is what takes life from the living; it makes something that was alive into an object. In short, it is objectifying being: “[Evil transforms] living being into objects to be manipulated, and since a living being dies when it becomes an object, evil is a force against life.”⁴ This means that evil and death go together.

The real issue here is whether or not God created evil. This is fundamental. If God created evil, in one way or another, it is ultimately God’s to deal with. This

question of the source of evil kept some of our church fathers up at night: “It is more worthy to believe that God is free, even as the Author of evil, than that He is a slave. Power, whatever it be, is more suited to Him than infirmity.”⁵ Here we see that Tertullian finds more comfort in the idea of God being all-powerful and the Author of evil than God not being the source of evil. Tertullian chooses the idea he can live with—the idea that does not circumvent the power of God. Others, such as John of Damascus, are not willing to attribute evil to God, so they work their way around it:

His permission, therefore, is usually spoken of in the Holy Scripture as His energy and work. Nay, even when He says that *God creates evil things*, and that *there is no evil in a city that the Lord hath not done*, he does not mean by these words that the Lord is the cause of evil, but the word “evil” is used in two ways, with two meanings. For sometimes it means what is evil by nature, and this is the opposite of virtue and the will of God: and sometimes it means that which is evil and oppressive to our sensation, that is to say, afflictions and calamities. Now these are seemingly evil because they are painful, but in reality are good. For to those who understand they became ambassadors of conversion and salvation. The Scripture says that of these God is the Author.⁶

5. Tertullian, “Against Hemogenes,” ch. xiv in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder Tertullian, The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, III, A. Cleveland Coxe (American Reprint of the Edinburgh Edition; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 485. [Retrieved from www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf03.v.v.xiv.html, December 2009.]

6. John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, trans. S.D.F. Salmond, Book IV, ch. xix, “That God is not the cause of evils,” in *Nicene and*

4. Scott W. Gustafson, *Evil and the Followers of Jesus* (Bradwell Books, 1996), 31.

With these statements, John of Damascus separates evil into two ideas: that which is in opposition to God and that which seems evil at the time but is actually good. John of Damascus attributes only good to

attempt, common in theology, to make evil and good dependent on each other. Augustine lays out the idea that good and evil cannot exist without each other. Knowing one means knowing the other. This, however, creates an issue with dualism. If good *requires* evil, then God must be both evil and good. If God is only good, then evil is an eternal power that God is dependent upon. That would mean God is not free.

Augustine has another idea that “What is called evil in the universe is but the absence of good.”⁸ This may seem to contradict his earlier statement, but it doesn’t necessarily. Evil is not secretly good; instead, it is the lack of good. Evil exists only when good does not. This is a useful idea that will come back later.

Martin Luther is known for living with contradictory ideas, and he lives up to that reputation with his thinking on evil. Luther also speaks a great deal about evil in connection to Satan. Like most of medieval Europe, he considers Satan an evil being, an enemy of God:

Thus God, *finding* the will of Satan evil, not *creating* it so, but leaving it while Satan sinningly commits the evil, carries it along by His working, and moves it which way He will; though that will ceases not to be evil by this motion of God.⁹

Luther asserts in *The Bondage of the Will* that evil was not created but *found* in the will of Satan. This means that God does

8. Ibid., ch. 11, 240. [Retrieved from www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf103.iv.ii.xiii.html, December 2009.]

9. Martin Luther, *De Servo Arbitrio* (*On the Enslaved Will* or *The Bondage of the Will*), trans. Henry Cole, 1823, section LXXXVI. [Retrieved from www.ccel.org/ccel/luther/bondage.xii.xi.html, December 2009.]

Martin Luther is known for living with contradictory ideas, and he lives up to that reputation with his thinking on evil.

God; he emphasizes that what seems evil might not actually be so. The idea that evil is opposition to God is easy to agree with, but the argument that evil might not actually be evil is not so convincing to the post-World War II world.

Augustine makes room in creation for evil by saying that it is necessary. “There can be no evil where there is no good; and an evil man is an evil good.”⁷ This is an

Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series, Vol. IX, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Reprinted; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 93. [Retrieved from www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf209.iii.iv.xix.html, December 2009.]

7. Augustine, *The Enchiridion*, trans. J.F. Shaw, ch. 13, in Philip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Vol. III (Reprinted; Edinburgh: T&T Clark; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 241. [Retrieved from www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf103.iv.ii.xv.html, December 2009.]

not control wills, but uses even evil wills to do good. For Luther, God controls the entire cosmos, yet at the same time leaves the creature free. In this quote, Luther does not attribute evil to God, but he confesses that it is God who makes room for evil. However, Luther does not stop there.

Above we saw Luther's claim that God did not create Satan's will as evil. This seems to imply that Luther did not believe God created evil, but on the other hand, foundational to Luther's theology is the idea that "God works life and death, good and evil, everything in everything."¹⁰ Luther's theology is consistent with Christian thinking throughout time: All that is, is God's creation. Nothing can exist apart from God. Luther agrees with Maximus the Confessor and most theologians on this point. I find Luther to be the most intriguing thinker on the problem of evil because he never lets himself be bound to systematizing, which both frees him and makes him impossible to represent in a paper like this.

So how can Luther do that? How can he say two seemingly contradictory things? Luther thinks about God on two levels. First is the revealed God, primarily revealed in Jesus Christ, and second is *Deus absconditus*, the hidden God. This reminds us of Maximus: the revealed God (Christ) is the activity of God, while God in God's essence would be the *Deus absconditus*. For Luther, God is also largely hidden in God's activity. If God works "everything in everything," what God is doing is largely ambiguous (see Eccl. 8:16–9:1). It is only in God's Word spoken in God's Son that God's purpose is revealed. But even there, God's love is hidden under signs of God's wrath, God's power under the weakness of the cross, and God's life under death.

The God revealed in Jesus Christ is an enemy to evil. Jesus Christ reigns until all evil is defeated, and even death is defeated (1 Cor. 15:20–28). Jesus Christ has power over evil and the power to work good through evil. However, when Luther speaks of the *Deus absconditus*, the "terrorizing hiddenness is so oppressive and unavoidable that the question is posed: Does God work not only indirectly, in evil, but does *God* also work evil?"¹¹ This is not to propose that the hidden God has a different will from the revealed God, and especially not to claim that the Son has a different will from the Father. That would be heresy. What Luther is saying is that our experience of God is twofold. We can only witness the hidden God with mystery and terror. It is through the revealed God that the terror is overwhelmed by love, for it is there that we learn that everything must ultimately serve God's love. Therefore, God in the vast mystery of God is free to be the author and worker of evil. Who is the creature to question the workings of God in the hiddenness of God? Yet the God who is revealed to us through Jesus Christ is revealed as love.

Conclusion: Chaos, Evil, Death vs. Creation, New Creation, Life

So, we have done the important and impossible task of thinking about evil along with some of the great minds of the church's history. However, rather than getting closer to understanding evil, we are actually only getting closer to understanding the problem of evil. Therefore, in this conclusion I will not pretend to answer the problem of evil. I will not be able to explain evil in a way that gives humans the ability to control it. The goal here is merely to understand evil in a way that is

10. Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 206.

11. *Ibid.*, 204.

helpful to a creature of God.

Here is what I am convinced of: everything that exists is created and sustained by God. Therefore, there are two options for contemplating evil based on existence and nonexistence. If we believe that evil has being, then we must believe that evil is created and sustained by God. If we believe that Satan is an evil being, whether or not Satan is an enemy of God, Satan has to be God's creation. So the first option is that evil does exist and God did create it and does sustain it.

The second option is more complex and, I think, more powerful: that is, that evil does *not* exist. Evil does not have being. The only way evil cannot be attributed to God is if evil lacks being. I will now argue this second option biblically and logically.

When discussing evil, theologians usually go back to Genesis 2 and look at the serpent, the forbidden fruit, and original sin; however, I would like to take us back to Genesis 1.

Gen 1:1–2 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth,² the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. (NRSV)

Creation is God's action over and against a formless void. Hence God made existence. I am going along with Augustine and many others in asserting that God created *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). By creating out of nothing, God defeated nothingness with creation. Here's where I turn to Karl Barth. According to Daniel Migliore,

Evil for Barth is the alien power of "nothingness" (*das Nichtige*) that arises mysteriously from what God does *not* will in the act of creation. As Barth explains, "nothingness" is not nothing. While neither willed by God nor an equal of God, it has its own formi-

dable and threatening power. ... God alone is able to conquer the power of nothingness."¹²

For Barth, evil is not a being but a power. It does not exist as being. In the language of Maximus the Confessor, evil has no existence of the essence. Evil is not a thing but an action, just as love is not being but action. This idea works. Love is not created by God but is the relationship God has with God's creation. Love does not exist as a being, but it has great power. Similarly, if evil is the "alien power of 'nothingness'... [that] God does *not* will in the act of creation," it can still have great power. Thus, the evil power of nothingness corresponds to the formless void in Gen 1:2, over and against which God wills creation into being.

Genesis 1 is echoed in the Gospel of John.

John 1:1–4 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.² He was in the beginning with God.³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

This adds a third and forth dualism to our discussion. There is creation against void, good (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31) against evil (nothingness), life (John 1:3) against death (implicit), light (John 1:4, Gen 1:3) against darkness (Gen 1:2).

12. Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 127. For Barth's discussion of this, see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, iii, *The Doctrine of Creation*, 3, trans. G.W. Bromiley and R.J. Ehrlich (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), § 50, "God and Nothingness," 289–368.

If God defeated the formless void with creation out of nothing and defeated darkness with light, how does God defeat evil and death? Every Christian should know the answer to that question. The void was defeated by creation; evil and death are defeated by new creation. The Word through whom all things came into being, the Word through whom creation came *ex nihilo*, went into the nothingness of evil and death by way of the cross. The new creation comes through the action of *the one through whom creation came into being out of nothingness* going into the nothingness of death and evil. Death and evil are defeated in Christ because it is impossible for death to hold Christ in its power (Acts 2:24).¹³

2 Cor 5:17–19 ¹⁷ So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation;¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself....

Reconciliation, then, is not God's fallback plan for the sin of humanity, but rather God's plan from the beginning of creation. Creation from the very beginning is God's plan to destroy evil, death, and nothingness through the Word. This view makes the most sense to me. It has the most good news in it and seems not only to honor Scripture, but also actually helps much of it make sense in new ways.

So what does this good news mean for our original problem? What does the Christian have to say to Senator McCain

and much of the United States? Based on his experience of history, Karl Barth believed that

...only God is able to conquer the power of radical evil. When individual human beings, groups, or nations, sure of their innocence and convinced of the utter wickedness of their enemies, claim for themselves the right and the power to rid the world of evil, they often become themselves agents of evil.¹⁴

If humans participate in evil by identifying other beings as evil,¹⁵ then it is of utmost importance that humans begin to understand that evil does not have being. Anything that *is* cannot be evil on account of the fact that it *is*. If it exists, then it is created and sustained by the activity of

Creation from the very beginning is God's plan to destroy evil, death, and nothingness through the Word.

the Creator who creates and sustains over and against evil. It is not possible for any person or any part of creation to *be* evil.

All participation in evil is essentially participating in death rather than life. Evil

13. See Martin Luther, "Lectures on Galatians 1535: Chapters 1–4," trans. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 26, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), 280–282.

14. Migliore, *Faith*, 128.

15. This would be entailed by the human desire to "be like God, knowing good and evil" as well as by our desire to pass judgment on others.

makes a living being into an object. Evil makes God's creation into less than God's creation. We know this. In our society we participate in evil through the same process. We participate in evil through language in which a person ceases to be a being and becomes a label, such as "fag" or "slut." We participate in evil when we cease to see people as beings but view them instead as consumers. We participate in evil when we think of third-world countries as sources of cheap labor and not nations of people. We participate in evil when we label other people or societies as evil, for example, in the political label, "Axis of Evil." This process of making being into object is not limited to humans, but could even be extended to all of creation. Nor is it limited to language. Evil is participated in by action, rooted in and supported by the language we use. All action that uses beings as objects is evil.

Martin Luther was clear about the link between the way we speak of others and the issue of evil. Satan "accuses us and makes our evil conscience worse in the presence of God ... disparages what is good about us and vilifies our merits and the faith of our conscience." Satan is imitated by people who "exaggerate, enlarge, and expand the sins" of others and "minimize, find fault with, and disapprove of their good works."¹⁶

Humans can fight against the power of evil, not only outside ourselves, but also within ourselves. We are creation and new creation. "It is precisely confidence in the superiority of God's grace that empowers believers to fight against evil and suffering in the world against seemingly impossible odds."¹⁷

This confidence in God is faith. It is through faith, trust in God, that we are able to participate in God's action of creation, new creation, and reconciliation. It is through faith that we can give up trust in the objectification of being. It is through faith that we speak and live in new language shaped by God's love for the world in Jesus Christ. This is the language of the Holy Spirit, who, when our conscience accuses us, "protects us in the presence of God and comforts us by giving a good testimony to our conscience and to our trust in the mercy of God... excuses, extenuates, and completely covers our sins...magnifies our faith and good works."¹⁸ It is through faith that we can fight evil as an already defeated power.

16. Martin Luther, "Lectures on Galatians 1519: Chapters 1-6," trans. Richard Jungkuntz, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 27, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964), 388.

17. Migliore, *Faith*, 128.

18. Luther "Galatians, 1519," 388.

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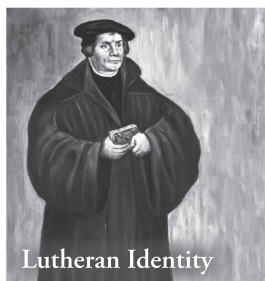
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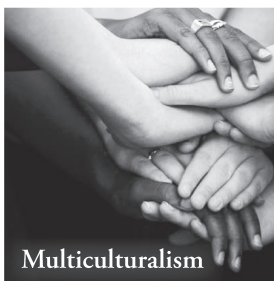


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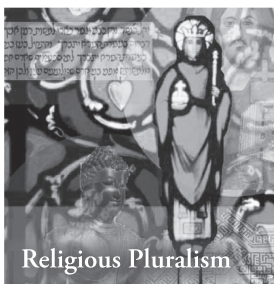
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Special Book Review

The Reformation of the Dead: Death and Ritual in Early Modern Germany, 1450–1700. By Craig M. Koslofsky. New York, N.Y.: Palgrave, 2000. xiii and 223 pages.

A Review¹

In his illuminating work, Craig M. Koslofsky focuses on the separation of the living *and* the dead, which the Reformation positively forged (cf. 3). Indeed, Koslofsky asserts, this “new separation of the dead from the world of the living [was] institutionalized by the Protestant Reformation” (3). Koslofsky paints a sobering, unflattering picture of how the Reformation shattered the mediaeval world of religious practices in Germany, especially in relation to the dead. Prior to the Reformation, “rituals of death, burial and intercession for the dead” were attended to with great care (22). Here Koslofsky is indebted to Joachim von Pflummern’s catechism, which was written just after 1531. With the Reformation, the “close proximity between the living and dead,” which burial in the consecrated ground of the churchyard emphasized, was no longer the experience of those who joined the Reformation. Extramural burial became the pattern and thereby the visible reminder to the living “of the need to intercede for the souls of the departed” was clearly ended.

Koslofsky begins his work with a brief and dramatic description of the death of Hermann Bonnus, the first Lutheran superintendent of Lübeck. Koslofsky notes that “he asked no one to pray for his soul after death

or offer any suffrages to God on his behalf as he prepared to leave this world” (1). Koslofsky illustrates the clear and decisive demarcation between the realm of the living and that of the dead by quoting from Gerlach’s (Hermann’s brother) letter to their parents in which he mentions his own response to his brother’s death:

Then [Hermann] leaned back with his hands on the arms of the chair, closed his eyes and mouth, breathed heavily three times and departed quite gently, (thank the Lord!) like a person falling peacefully asleep...And I stood by him and held him by the hands, and prayed *until he had departed*.²

A reading of Koslofsky’s work leads one to ask: *What practices were continued that were pre-Reformation? What were discontinued? What new practices were introduced? How did all this reflect Lutheran/Reformation theology?* It is instructive to note that the Reformation theology of justification by faith alone meant that the centuries-old practice of intercession for the souls of the dead by the living was discontinued. Neither could the departed do anything to affect positively the status of the living before God. (This belief was to have severe, physical consequences in the determination of the lines between purity and pollution and the treatment of the dead and their burial: “The living could no longer affect the salvation of the dead, but the dead body could pollute the community of the living” [132]). Further, the existence of Purgatory was rejected (2f.). Summarizing

1. This review was presented at a meeting of the U.S. Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue, April 20–23, 2006, Phoenix, Arizona, and is now being published with slight editing, with the conclusion of round XI and the publication of *The Hope of Eternal Life*, eds. Lowell G. Almen and Richard J. Skiba (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2011).

2. Friedrich Runge, ‘Hermann Bonnus’ Tod und Begräbnis (Bericht seines Bruders an die Eltern in Quakenbrück)’ [sic], *Mitteilungen des Vereins für Geschichte und Landeskunde von Osnabrück* 16 (1891), 263, as quoted in Koslofsky, 2; emphasis Koslofsky’s. The foregoing details are found in endnote 1 of chapter 1 in Koslofsky.



Jacques Le Goff's fine work (*The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer [Chicago, 1984]), Koslofsky writes: "Le Goff shows how Purgatory developed at the intersection of three distinct concepts in the Christian tradition: first, prayer (and other suffrages) for the dead; second, postmortem purification as part of the process of salvation; and third, the localization of this postmortem purification in a unique eschatological time and place" (20). In the theology of justification by faith there was no place for either Purgatory or indulgences—both were rejected outright. In short, justification by faith meant that the continuity of the dead in the community of the living was ended. Koslofsky writes:

In his pious account of Hermann's death, Gerlach makes clear that their spiritual relationship is severed at the moment Hermann dies. Gerlach reports that he prayed for his brother until Hermann died—beyond death's divide there was, according to the new Protestant doctrine, neither the need nor the possibility of intercession by the living for the dead. Prayers for the dead, a central part of the Christian economy of salvation since the second century, had been made obsolete by the new doctrine of salvation by faith alone (2).

This decisive break stands in stark contrast to the fundamental belief in the Middle Ages that there was *continuity* between the living and the dead and a *unity* in the community of the living and the dead. Even death did not end this fellowship.

The theology and piety of the later Middle Ages treated intercession for the dead, postmortem purgation and the place called Purgatory as inseparable elements of Christian death ritual. From the historical development of the doctrine of Purgatory, and from the objections of the Greek Church to this doctrine, we know that these concepts did not have to form a whole (27).

Koslofsky is quick to note that "[d]espite its broad acceptance, in the fifteenth century the Church's expanding intercession for the dead was challenged on several levels. Heretics, orthodox theologians, reformers and city

councils questioned both the theory and the practice of intercession for the dead" (27).

Koslofsky places the break in the broader context of the religious *and* non-religious life of the German communities. The authorities in Germany had become increasingly concerned about the commercialization of the practice of intercession for the dead. Religious belief and desire for economic gain became so intertwined that the spiritual benefits of the practice of intercession for the dead were yet another occasion for exploitation of the poor that fueled the objection to the practice. While noting that the "practical complaints about clerical venality and intercession for the dead were disparate and limited in scope," Koslofsky writes:

Alongside these challenges to the doctrines of intercession for the dead, religious and secular authorities sought to reform the practices of intercession for the dead, criticizing its expense. The Gravamina of the German nation, presented at Imperial Diets in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, single out the growth of intercession for the dead as a new burden of the common people. The creation of perpetual rents to pay for clerical intercession for the dead was a recurring problem as well (27).

It is instructive to ask: *How did the influence of the Reformation teaching on justification affect the move to extramural burial, whereby cemeteries were located outside the city limits and not in the churchyards?* Koslofsky is clear that religious, political, economic and other non-religious factors played a crucial role in the move to extramural burial. He repeatedly notes that mediaeval Catholic theology and practice saw an essential connection between the living and the dead. The Reformation severed this essential connection—obviously helped by such non-religious concerns as hygiene and population growth (cf. 58). For Luther and the other Protestant Reformers, the community of the living and the dead was fundamentally a spiritual one and the location of cemeteries outside the city reflected this view and accentuated the separation of the dead from the living. This was well illus-



trated in the 1536 Leipzig burial controversy over Saxony's Duke George's decision that proscribed burial of the dead in the city's churchyards, which were to be replaced by the expanded churchyard of St. John (cf. 54). "The closure of Leipzig's urban churchyards had religious and political implications far beyond those of a late medieval dispute over privileges and revenues. Both within Leipzig and across Germany, the rise of extramural burial had become intertwined with the course of the Reformation" (56).

Having devoted approximately half of his work (Part I) to the theme "Separating the Living from the Dead," Koslofsky turns his attention in the second half (Part II) to "The Lutheran Funeral Ritual to 1700." The doctrine of justification by faith meant that the Lutheran funeral ritual ("the framework... was established by 1550"), with the central place given to the sermon (133), focused on doctrine and honour. Koslofsky writes:

From the early funeral sermons of Luther and Spangenberg, which avoided praise of the deceased, the Lutheran funeral developed to reflect the social roles of the funeral in general. As its clerical critics realized, the funeral sermon became the culmination of a ritual focused on the living and on the honour their dead brought them. The overriding importance of the funeral sermon in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries arose from its ability to expound doctrine and honour the dead, thus balancing the distinctive religious and social meanings of the Lutheran funeral in early modern Germany (113f.).

On "[t]he practice of the funeral centred on honour," Koslofsky continues:

Although Luther described the funeral as an occasion to honour the doctrine of the resurrection, his retention of the traditional concept of the 'honourable funeral' carried with it the display of the worldly honour (Ehre) of the deceased as a central feature of the funeral. In the confessional age Lutheran funerals were held in an uneasy balance between this social display of honour and the religious

meaning of the ritual. The funerals of Disstelmeier and Schütz are representative of the Lutheran funeral in this period: both are seen as definitive public displays of the honour and social status of the deceased (116; cf. 117–122).

Koslofsky provides us with an insightful, engaging, and suggestive cultural and anthropological study of death and its rituals in early modern Germany—"this book brings together research on the history of death with anthropological interpretations of death ritual" (4). Social distinctions—inclusion and honour, and exclusion and dishonour, including violence—marked funerals that reflected the break with the pre-Reformation past. Daytime funerals with a procession of the well-to-do present, along with the boys' choir and clergy, were reserved for the selected. Nocturnal funerals without ceremony and with no clergy present were inflicted on many (cf. 151). It was only later that nocturnal funerals came to be seen as respectable (cf. 151f.). The rise of nocturnal funerals by 1700 in Lutheran Germany—towns and cities—marked a critical shift in focus on honour and the family (cf. 158). The family now replaced the very presence of the wider Christian community at the funeral.

In the exclusive nocturnal burials of the late seventeenth century, the tension between Christian worship and the display of social status shifted decisively in favour of the latter. In the longer term, honourable nocturnal burial opened the way for the family to replace the Christian community as the framework of the funeral. When Lutheran funerals returned to the daylight hours at the end of the eighteenth century, they had shed their communal focus to become a more private family ritual (159).

When considering the theme of "the hope of eternal life," it is well for us to keep in mind Koslofsky's timely reminder that religious and non-religious factors were thoroughly intertwined in the political and theological decisions about rituals and practices concerning death, burial, Purgatory, indulgences, and



the afterlife. Such a nexus is inevitable and, indeed, welcome. Acknowledgement of this and appropriate attention to history, culture, politics, economics, and secular forces in the theological perspective of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* would remind us that the three-fold commitment of our dialogue over the decades to the gospel, unity of the church, and the mission of the church is even more timely in our increasingly interconnected world.

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Book Reviews

***The Quest for the Historical Satan.* By**

Miguel A. De La Torre and Albert Hernandez. ISBN 978-0-8006-6324-7. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011. xii and 248 pages. Paper. \$15.80.

This co-authored work, lucid and well-written, addresses the large cluster of topics associated with "Satan." The authors bring their differing theological perspectives to this work: "historian, Albert Hernandez...[is] interested in how evil has been manifested throughout the centuries; the ethicist...[Miguel A. De La Torre is] interested in how moral agency is constructed in response to how evil is defined and which people-group signifies said definition" (ix). Together they offer an overview of fascinating topics: "Satan in the Modern World," "The Birth of Satan: A Textual History," "Satan Through the Ages," "Satan Comes of Age," and "The Devil Made Me Do It."

The authors are not only well-grounded in their thorough-going discussions of the Bible, theology, culture, ethics, and history but they surface questions which continue to need attention. For example, "Satan, as a meta-narrative that personifies evil, is a term

today's Christian ethicists hesitate to use as a moral category" (43). Why is this so? Here the authors probe what happens to the category of "the Other" when "the figure of Satan, and the theme of 'satanic' intentions and actions, has become an institutional construct employed to control the masses" (43). The book also explores another set of arguments embedded in historical Christian theology: "The quest for the historical Satan... shed[s] new light on Christianity's age-old emphasis on absolute Good versus absolute Evil" (4). One response to the problem of this dichotomy is posed in a later chapter by discussing the historical, etymological, and theological roots of the figure of Satan by viewing it through the cultural lenses of the figure of the 'the Trickster.' This is a valuable work which would make a useful classroom text in several theological disciplines.

*Susan K. Hedahl
Gettysburg Theological Seminary*

Sustaining Preachers and Preaching: A

***Practical Guide.* By George Lovell and Neil G. Richardson. London: T & T. Clark 2011. ISBN: 978-0-5671-8141-1. Cloth. \$120.00. ISBN: 978-0-5675-0785-3. Paper. xiv and 248 pages. \$32.38.**

This co-authored work on preaching was written by two British Methodists. They state: "This book has been written for Christians of all traditions, both for preachers who have been engaged in preaching for many years, and also for those who are just beginning" (212). Their work may seem to have thrown the audience net far too wide, but it also (perhaps inadvertently) speaks to the fact of rapid changes in global theological and homiletical education.

In America the four-year divinity degree is fading as seminary enrollments for such decline. Yet this does not change the importance of the question: "How shall the gospel be preached?" This book offers a comprehensive look at preaching which would fit well academically with a two-year seminary cur-



riculum and with synodical and judicatory lay preaching instruction programs. Church leaders would do well to read this book as they work with the issues of homiletical leadership preparation. In this book, one finds templates both for those structuring such events and those participating in them.

The authors examine preaching through five major grids: what it means to preach today; the vocational, congregational and personal dynamics affecting preaching; preparing a sermon; and developing local programs for preaching preparation. Each grid is illustrated through charts and lists. In one chart the life cycle of the preacher's work over a life time is set against an eternal backdrop: "Phase 5: Death and Resurrection. This brings the vocational life cycle to an end, but not necessarily its influence, which can continue indefinitely in the providence of God" (42).

Readers will not find chapters of theoretical information focused on a few topics, nor will they find much to surprise them. They will, however, find a life-encompassing view of what it means to preach. For that reason this work is worth reading.

Susan K. Hedahl

No Longer the Same: Religious Others and the Liberation of Christian Theology (New Approaches to Religion and Power). By David R. Brockman. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. ISBN: 978-0-2301-0855-4. 208 pages. Paper. \$89.00.

What is the thread running across the works of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Karl Barth, George Lindbeck, and Gustavo Gutierrez? David Brockman finds that these four heavyweights share one distressing thing in common: their theological construction is overtly and covertly a boundary-drawing mechanism that sets Christianity apart from other religious traditions, defining who has truth to tell and who does not.

Brockman makes the following arguments. Schleiermacher does not allow truth to happen outside his definition of religious situations. He defines religion as fundamen-

tally monotheistic, affective (the feeling of absolute dependency), a personal phenomenon, and thus a human need for redemption. Christianity is the only religion that fits all his categories. As long as Christianity stands for the real religion, interreligious encounter has no internal value for the Christian faith.

Brockman analyzes Karl Barth's concept of the Wholly Other. Barth's grounding of the Wholly Other in the dogma of divine revelation is found problematic. If Christianity is the only form of religion that is based on God's special revelation, truth becomes singular. The divine other becomes captive to the self-referential nature of Christianity. Barth undermines his basic premise that the divine other is the truly other, excluding multiple manifestations of the divine. As a result, Barth mistakenly perpetuates the marginalization of religious others.

Regarding Lindbeck, Brockman agrees that his linguistic component takes into consideration the experience of the divine. Doctrine reflects the grammar of a particular language and not merely propositions. Yet for Lindbeck, diverse religious convictions have no positive role to play within the Christian doctrinal framework. Other scriptures are extra-textual to Christianity. Consequently, Christianity becomes inward-looking and self-affirming.

Lastly, Brockman reviews Gutierrez on the poor and the oppressed. Though Gutierrez is open to religious others, he insists that these socially constructed others are included in the salvation of Jesus Christ. The treatment of marginalized others as homogeneous makes non-Christians subservient to the salvation of Christianity. Thereby Gutierrez ends up domesticating the divine.

No Longer the Same is an important work for all Christians, not only for those interested in interreligious issues. Brockman unveils theological assumptions about religious others. If religious others are *discursively constructed*, to merely acknowledge the destructive power being imposed on them is not enough. In comparative theology, Brockman makes clear that love for Christ compels serious engagement with the otherness of others. A still larger question emerges: What



is scripture? Brockman questions the assumption that the Christian Bible is the only form of scripture that carries authority to understand the relations between humanity and the divine. How may Christians make use of the scriptures of other religious traditions as *sources* and *norms* for theological construction? To affirm we are “no longer the same” requires a repentance of heart from ignoring to recognizing the gifts of others. Taking this journey with others in the task of theological construction is an adventure.

Man Hei, Yip
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After Heresy: Colonial Practices and Postcolonial Theologies. By Vitor Westhelle.
Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2010.
xix and 181 pages. Paper. \$22.

After Heresy is a study of colonization as embedded within the Western hegemony which emerged in the sixteenth century and propagated through the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. The logic of Western hegemony reached its climax in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which witnessed the awakening of the consciousness of subaltern people. For the pre-text of colonization, the author undertakes analysis of the conquest in terms of interest and desire which breaks through the binary juxtaposition between oppressor and oppressed and its interpretive tools. The Western world has imposed its logic, leading to global domination; this imposition has been described in terms of conquest, colonialism, and imperialism. The theory and practices in postcolonial literature are *generally* patterned by deconstructive passion of the globalized Empire, following in the footsteps of postmodern thinkers such as Derrida and Foucault.

Westhelle, however, seeks to locate the eschatological discourse of liberation theology in the understanding of history, society, and eschatology, cutting through postcolonial consciousness and praxis in the aftermath of World War II. The author is skillful in ana-

lyzing the incomplete project of modernity (Habermas), the genealogy of knowledge, discourse, power (Foucault), and deconstructive *différance* (Derrida). Spivak's poignant question—can the subaltern speak?—comes into focus. The author adumbrates the logic of representation (for example, speaking by proxy in politics) and re-presentation (as in art or philosophy through portrait) in a provocative manner. Spivak's reluctance about a discourse of victimization remains a field of debate, because she worries about the inscription of the subalterns into essentialist and utopian political categories.

Westhelle underscores the Lutheran notion of gospel in the sense of *viva vox evangelii*, which provides a space of communication with others, as expressed and translated in the different languages of a particular context. God in the living voice of the gospel awakens us to the politics of eschatology, participating in God's protest against colonization of the life-world. The substantial contribution of this book begins with empathic listening to the voices of the voiceless, through whose face God continues to speak, thereby advancing the hybrid task of a subaltern and liberating theology today.

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1 Enoch 2. By George W. E. Nickelsburg
and James C. VanderKam. Hermeneia.
Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011. ISBN:
978-0-8006-9664-1. xxx and 618 pages.
Cloth. \$82.

1 Enoch is a long (108 chapters), difficult, and very important intertestamental work. Nickelsburg published the first volume of his Hermeneia commentary in 2001 (chs. 1–36, 83–108), and in this work he addresses The Book of Parables (chs. 37–71) while VanderKam tackles The Book of the Luminaries (chs. 72–82). Nickelsburg's monumental achievement in his two commentaries on Enoch culminates nearly forty-five years of work. Until his retirement he taught at the University of Iowa; he is on the clergy roster of the ELCA.



Written over several centuries by its pseudonymous author (see Gen 5:18–24), 1 Enoch was composed in Aramaic, translated into Greek, and then translated into Ethiopic in the sixth century C.E. The best Ethiopic manuscripts hail from the fifteenth century C.E. In the Parables none of the Aramaic original or the Greek translation remains. Hence the commentator must learn Ethiopic and then must wrestle with the late manuscript tradition and the obscurity about both the origins and the contents of the work.

The Parables deal with the oppression of the chosen and the righteous by the kings and the mighty of the nations, and with the coming judgment that will vindicate the righteous and the chosen and condemn their oppressors. God's agent in the Parables goes by several titles: the Righteous One, the Chosen One, the Son of Man, and the Lord's anointed (messiah). The expected Davidic messiah of the Old Testament has been replaced by a heavenly figure, enthroned for judgment; the same can be said of the one like the Son of Man (Dan 7:1314). These facts alone make this book highly relevant for understanding the origins of Christian theology.

The Parables come from the last decades B.C.E. or the first decades C.E., making the villains in the book either the Roman rulers of Palestine and/or their clients in the Herodian house. The parallels between the teaching on the Son of Man in the Parables and in the New Testament suggest a common milieu for the early Jesus movement and the community that produced the Parables. The Son of Man in these two works is the executor of the final judgment. The Book of Daniel is the Parables' next of kin among the Jewish apocalypses. The Book of Revelation's portrayal of a savior who is Son of Man, Servant (Lamb that is slain), and Messiah draws on the tradition that dominates the soteriology of the Parables.

In the Parables (chs. 37–71) and the Book of Watchers (chs. 1–36) we find Enoch's sustained narrative of Enoch's heavenly and cosmic tours, with a special emphasis on the final judgment. And yet the author believes that the place of final salvation will be a transformed earth. Nickelsburg emphasizes Enoch's otherworldly

guarantee of the future. Heaven is the source of salvation but not its goal. The New Testament Book of Revelation also presumes ultimate salvation on a newly created earth. It is the earth-boundedness of biblical hopes for the future, which constitute the roots of both Jewish and Christian eschatology.

James C. VanderKam is a professor at Notre Dame. VanderKam's commentary on *The Book of the Luminaries* (chs. 72–82) is equally competent and deals with some of the most obscure parts of the Book of Enoch. This astronomical book is probably the oldest composition associated with the name of Enoch. The angel Uriel reveals to Enoch the immutable laws of the luminaries and the equally unchangeable calendars defined by them. In the fifteenth century C.E. an Ethiopian king defended the scriptural status of Enoch in the "Book of the Nativity." He wrote: "Listen, unbeliever, whether Christian or Jew: without the Book of Enoch nothing is possible for you.... How do both of you, Jew and Christian, know your Easter, your Passover, the first of your month, your festivals, your years, your weeks, and all the signs of the sky so that you may understand? Of what are you capable of knowing without the book of Enoch?"

Nickelsburg, VanderKam, and Fortress Press are to be congratulated for making such sterling scholarship available!

Ralph W. Klein
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Apocalypse against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism. By Anatheia E. Portier-Young. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011. ISBN: 978-0-8028-6598-4. xxiii and 462 pages. Cloth. \$50.00.

In the year 167 B.C.E. the Judeans were subjected to an unprecedented attempt by the Hellenistic rulers of the Seleucid Empire to reconquer them by destroying their religious practices. This attempt was motivated only in part by cultural and religious zeal; it was much more the empire's attempt to subdue



a rebellious province. But many Judeans resisted this state terror, some by violent means, some by non-violent. At the heart of this resistance were three apocalyptic writings, Daniel, the Apocalypse of Weeks (found now in *1 Enoch* 93:1–10 + 91:11–17), and the Book of Dreams (found now in *1 Enoch* 83–90).

These three early historical apocalypses used similar strategies of scriptural reinterpretation and historical overviews of past, present, and future in order to counter the violence, propaganda, and ideology of the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes. So runs the thesis argued in this important book by Anatheia Portier-Young. The book is based on her doctoral work done under the direction of James Crenshaw at Duke. She combines a helpful discussion of a theoretical framework for understanding resistance to empire (Part One), a rereading of the history of Hellenistic rule in Judea (Part Two), and a rich interpretation of the three apocalypses as resistance literature (Part Three). She argues that Daniel advocated a non-violent resistance revolving around the role of wise teachers, the Apocalypse of Weeks envisioned the participation of the Judeans in God's final judgment on the oppressors, and the Book of Dreams encouraged resistance through armed revolt. This is a persuasive scholarly work, but it will also be useful to pastors and religious leaders who want to gain a fresh understanding of this crucial moment in the history of Judaism and to explore ways of resisting the seductions and oppression of empires today.

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Ascension Theology. By Douglas Farrow.
New York: T & T Clark, 2011. ISBN:
978-0-5673-5357-3. xiv and 177 pages.
Paper. \$27.95.

Douglas Farrow's *Ascension Theology* will inspire readers to view Jesus' ascension as a central doctrine of the church. After locating the ascension within larger biblical themes of descent and ascent, Farrow examines the importance pre-modern Christians

assigned this doctrine and its eclipse in the nineteenth century. This volume is an attempt to counteract this trajectory. It demonstrates that the ascension is at the heart of Christian faith because it points to questions about Jesus' identity. Just after the ascension, the disciples experienced Jesus' absence and were forced to ask who Jesus was. Their reply should be the same as that of his followers today: Jesus is Lord. The ascension encourages contemporary Christians not to seek new messiahs but to confess that Jesus of Nazareth, in all his historical particularity, is Lord. The remainder of the book highlights the ramifications of the ascension for sacraments, Mariology, politics, and atonement. A collection of prayers for Ascensiontide is included as an appendix.

Farrow's careful and engaging study will help a range of audiences engage this doctrine. His lengthy treatment of politics roots a lofty theological topic in everyday concerns. Farrow's advocacy of Roman Catholic doctrines will challenge Protestant readers to reevaluate their own traditions. Although some will find his casual references to contemporary theologians and philosophers prohibitive, clerical and lay audiences alike will find this book a valuable resource for communicating the importance of the ascension and thereby encouraging the celebration of this oft neglected feast.

Philip Michael Forness
Princeton Theological Seminary

Couples in Conflict: A Family Systems Approach to Marriage Counseling. By Ronald W. Richardson. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010. ISBN: 978-0-8006-9628-3. x and 249 pages. Paper. \$25.

Richardson's previous books have helped shape my approach to ministry, as has this volume, which consists of two parts: an introduction to couples therapy alongside a primer on the main elements of Bowen Family System Theory, followed by a quite detailed case study of "Martha and George." Richardson chronicles their highly conflicted marriage,



systematically unfolding his approach as he tells their story through narrative and verbatim excerpts from their several-year journey. His approach to his clients, like his narrative style, is enlightening and easy to read.

Richardson offers a succinct, practical primer on many Bowen concepts. His sections on anxiety and emotional systems are quite elegant and particularly helpful. For example, in his discussion of "Emotion, Thinking and Feeling in Bowen Theory" (17–20), he suggests that if we recognize ourselves as part of powerful of emotional systems we "have a better chance of managing our selves, of being different in our relationships, and of developing some degree of mastery over our automatic emotionality." His distinctions, especially between emotion, feeling, thinking and emotionality, help clarify that Bowen was not against human feeling as he is sometimes accused. Pastors who can recognize the systemic patterns in their own families and in the families of the congregation have a powerful tool for promoting healthier functioning, especially with couples in conflict.

For most families, when a difficulty occurs in the relationship system, one of four processes kicks in: (1) emotional distance; (2) marital conflict; (3) emotional, social, or physical dysfunction in one partner; or (4) projection of anxiety to a child (69). Richardson shows how all these responses become part of pastoral work with conflicted couples. As couples discover awkward differences in their relationships, they utilize patterns from their earlier lives to try to navigate the rapids. Richardson's aim in the therapy is to help clients slow their automatic triggers, while encouraging greater self-focus. His four counseling goals are: reducing anxiety, altering the emotional climate, being in charge of process, and tracking the emotional process. Tracking refers to "how people get from the perception of what the other has done or said to the decision to behave a certain way in response. I want to introduce the idea that there are choice points in the process" (127).

Richardson has invited me to slow down and pay more attention to the steps of

interactional processes, both my own internal process and those of the couples I work with. For this I am grateful.

John Beck
Lebanon Lutheran Church, Chicago

The Practice of Prophetic Imagination:

Preaching an Emancipatory Word. By Walter Brueggemann. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012. ISBN 13: 978-0-8006-9897-3. xv and 158 pages. Cloth. \$25.

Walter Brueggemann's rhetoric takes your breath away. In this latest book he demonstrates, with numerous references to the biblical prophets and extensive commentary on biblical texts, the shape of the prophetic imagination. Beginning with the premise that "YHWH, the creator of heaven and earth, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ whom we name as Father, Son, and Spirit, is a real character and the defining agent in the world" (71), Brueggemann details what it meant to the biblical prophets to take God seriously. Prophetic preaching involves "sustained, disciplined, emancipated imagination" (Chapter 2). The elements of the prophetic message include full participation in the reality of loss and grief, naming the hard truth about divine judgment, accompanying the people in the need for relinquishment, recognizing the reality of waiting, and, at the right moment, declaring the promise of divine innovation. Each aspect is described with reference to specific prophetic authors in their historical settings.

The imagination of the biblical prophets is juxtaposed with particular features of our contemporary world: "therapeutic, technological, consumerist militarism," "self-invention in the pursuit of self-sufficiency," "competitive productivity," and "U.S. exceptionalism" (4–5). As the classical prophets were daring to confront "totalizing ideology," contemporary preachers are challenged to engage in "emancipatory, subversive utterance" (147). The limit of this book is that although it challenges and inspires with powerful references to the prophetic imagination in



the Bible, it does not make clear how contemporary preachers actually are to practice such prophetic imagination and utterance in their conventional congregations today. While doing an exquisite job of interpreting the practice of the biblical prophets, it offers less guidance on how preachers practice such imagination today. Those looking for a manual on the actual practice of preaching with prophetic imagination will leave disappointed. Those looking for insight and courage from the imagination of the biblical prophets will be rewarded.

Referring to the novel, *Imagining Argentina*, by Lawrence Thornton and its creative, theological appropriation by William T. Cavanaugh, Brueggemann writes: "It is the bite of the prophetic tradition that it can out-imagine the dominant imagination, because it is in sync with the truth of YHWH and because it touches the bodily reality of life that the dominant imagination must, perforce, disregard" (28). If you are intrigued by such an assertion, this is the book for you.

Craig L. Nesson
Wartburg Theological Seminary

Theological Education Underground:

1937-1940. By Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 15. English edition edited by Victoria J. Barnett. Translated by Victoria J. Barnett, Claudia D. Bergmann, Peter Frick, and Scott A. Moore. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-8006-9815-7. xxiv and 726 pages. Cloth. \$60.

This next-to-final volume of the English edition of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works offers insight into one of the most significant transition periods in Bonhoeffer's life. The first item in the book documents the closing of Confessing Church seminaries in August 1937, including the one at Finkenwalde, where Bonhoeffer was director. By November 1937, twenty-seven of these seminarians were in prison and in January 1938 Bonhoeffer was issued a travel ban. Nevertheless, theological education continued in "collective

pastorates," a modified apprenticeship system with periodic gatherings, improvised to allow sixty-seven additional seminarians to complete their studies under Bonhoeffer between 1937 and 1939. The book incorporates many materials that Bonhoeffer developed for this purpose: circular letters written to his students, Bible studies, sermons, meditations, and correspondence. These were prepared in the face of the pervasive mood of anxiety and depression that haunted the times, including the temptations to accept "legalization" as offered by the German Christian church and in 1938 the swearing of a loyalty oath to Hitler.

In 1939, Bonhoeffer undertook, under the threat of military conscription, departure from Germany to New York, with the possibility of remaining in the U.S. Strongly encouraged by his American friends, such as Paul Lehmann, Bonhoeffer was plagued by doubts and second thoughts, especially over abandoning his students. His diary from the period reflects his experiences and reflections from this time, including on June 20 the decision to return to Germany. Writing to Reinhold Niebuhr at the end of June, Bonhoeffer divulged his thinking: "I have come to the conclusion that I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of the time with my people" (210). The correspondence with Lehmann regarding this decision is particularly moving. During this period, Bonhoeffer also composed an important treatise on Christianity in the U.S., "Protestantism without Reformation," appealing for dialog between the American churches with the churches of the Reformation (438-462).

With the outbreak of the war, the time of the collective pastorates came to an end in March 1940. More than eighty of the seminarians prepared by Bonhoeffer (over half of them) would die in the war. The heart of Pastor Bonhoeffer is revealed in the correspondence he composed in the face of this tragedy. By October 1940 he would be ready to enter the penultimate phase of his life as he began



his service to the military intelligence unit, in which, with others, he would collaborate in the plot to assassinate Hitler. Never to the end of his life did Bonhoeffer express regret for returning to his homeland from the safety of the U.S.

As with all the volumes in this series, the translations are impeccable and critical apparatus a service to future generations of Bonhoeffer scholarship in the context of the Third Reich. Fortress Press is to be commended for undertaking this major publishing project with such excellence.

Craig L. Nesson

The Global Luther: A Theologian for Modern Times. Edited by Christine Helmer. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009. ISBN: 978-0-8006-6239-4. xiv and 326 pages with music CD. Cloth. \$39.

The title of this volume might lead the reader to anticipate interpretations of Luther that are contextualized to particular regions. While the editor and sixteen essayists do justice to the historical interpretation of Luther that locates him in his sixteenth century context, the purpose of the volume is to draw implications from Luther's thought for our contemporary global era. In this undertaking the book succeeds remarkably well.

The five parts of the book offer an overview of its contents: "Luther's Global Impact," "Living in the Midst of Horrors," "Language, Emotion, and Reason," "Luther's Theology for Today," and "Politics and Power." I found the essays in the last half of the volume to be the most compelling. Hans-Peter Grosshans constructively analyzes Luther's differentiated references to human reason in Chapter 11. Antti Raunio clarifies the goal of Luther's social ethic as the well-being of the neighbor in Chapter 13. Ronald F. Thiemann, in a subtly argued essay, finds Luther's theology of the cross a valuable hermeneutic for engaging in inter-religious dialogue: "*Mutatis mutandis*, we should hardly be surprised if, in our own times, authentic witness to the truth comes not from those who are the apparent insiders

within Christianity, but precisely from those religious Others who too often have been consigned a place beyond the pale of truth but may in fact be carriers of it" (244).

The final two essays are among the most provocative. Peter J. Burgard makes a challenging case that Luther's own rhetoric, specifically in *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (1520), prompted the very egalitarian aspirations of the peasants that led to their uprising in 1525: "To the nobility he says 'rebel' and to the peasants and commoners he says, ultimately, 'behave and serve,' but only after he has included them in the call to rebellion" (283). In the concluding essay, Vitor Westhelle places Luther's usage of the "three estates" in their historical and philosophical trajectory, and thereby contributes to a more accurate understanding of the two kingdoms doctrine: "The two kingdoms doctrine tends to collapse economy and politics into the earthly realm; the economy's production and reproduction differ from practice or political action" (296).

The book includes both an essay on "The Catholic Luther and Worship Music" by Paul Helmer and a beautiful CD recording of Luther's Easter hymn, *Christ lag in Todesbanden*, related to that contribution. Overall, rich fare for Luther connoisseurs.

Craig L. Nesson

Eucharist: A Guide for the Perplexed. By Ralph McMichael. New York: T & T Clark International, 2011. ISBN: 978-0-5670-3229-4. viii and 164 pages. Paper. \$24.95.

McMichael's study is an odd fit as a "guide for the perplexed." The publisher describes the series as "concise and accessible introductions to thinkers, writers, and subjects that students and writers can find especially challenging" (back cover). In the introduction, McMichael explicitly states that this is not a compendium of different views or a rehearsal of standard arguments, but rather "a companion to several other studies of every facet of the history, liturgy, practice, and theology



of the Eucharist" (6). Half of the book consists of McMichael's proposal that the Eucharist is the church's defining activity and point of view for its theology.

The first chapter covers the historical development of Eucharistic texts. Chapter Two focuses on Christ's presence. Chapter Three covers sacrifice. Chapter Four argues that the Eucharist is the proper work of the church. Chapter Five follows piece by piece the Roman-Book of Common Prayer liturgy, meditating on how each part informs Christian life. In Chapter Six McMichael asserts: "Theology operates from the Eucharist within the church, and not within the church while gazing upon the Eucharist as an object of study, perhaps one among many such objects" (155).

Favorable as I am to McMichael's argument, I find the book dependent on familiarity with technical language that is likely beyond that of a "perplexed" parishioner reading an introductory text. For example, the introduction contains sustained probing of the notion of the Eucharistic "gaze," yet without a definition of this term. I also disagree with McMichael's rendition of Luther's theology of Christ's presence. McMichael calls Luther's view "consubstantiation." While he is careful to say that Luther never used the term, he says it is what Luther meant. He also speaks of Lutherans "consecrating" the elements, which is not an accurate description of Luther's notion of real presence.

Timothy Andrew Leitzke
Tree of Life Lutheran Church, Odessa, Del.

Finding Language and Imagery: Words for Holy Speech. By Jennifer L. Lord.
Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010. ISBN:
978-0-8006-6353-7. viii and 93 pages.
Paper. \$12.

Jennifer Lord persuades and teaches preachers to be custodians of words in an era when the average person is bombarded with empty words, writing, "For preachers, word choice is an action of custody, or, better, custodianship.... We are custodians of words when we

wonder about the best way to say things for a particular gathering of people." (3)

Breadth is this book's strength. Lord argues in Chapter One that while all people must communicate, some must discern which words they use; this group includes preachers, who are called to "sift through all the words available to us to find gospel words." (4) In Chapter Two Lord summarizes six theories of communication, asking the reader to ponder which theory best reflects the reader's understanding. Lord concludes each summary with pointed questions about the theory and its ramifications. Lord packs Chapter Three with guidelines to practice finding figurative language and imagery, discerning the right words, and delivering them effectively; one gets the sense that Lord's homiletics classroom is like this chapter, as Lord provides insights from two decades of preaching and teaching experience. Chapter Four is a sample sermon by Lord with commentary. Chapter Five is called "Leftover Words," and includes eighteen topics of import for the would-be word-custodian, such as inclusive language and self-disclosure.

Breadth is also the weakness of the book. I wanted more *depth* in each chapter. Lord mitigates this with suggested further reading at the end of Chapters One, Two, Three, and Five. I also would have appreciated insight into Lord's choice of "custodianship" as an image. I do not think I am alone in thinking of a school janitor when I hear the word "custodian." Fortunately, I think that Lord means something like: insofar as a preacher is a custodian of words, she is to keep the language clean and serving its designated function.

Timothy Andrew Leitzke

Great Christian Thinkers: From the Early Church through the Middle Ages. By Pope Benedict XVI. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011. ISBN: 978-0-8006-9851-5. ix and 316 pages. Paper. \$16.99.

Pope Benedict XVI demonstrates that authors from the first fifteen Christian centuries still speak to the church today in a collection



of addresses on seventy key figures delivered from 2007 to 2010. He examines the lives, literary output, and theological teachings of these thinkers, reflecting on their relevance for the contemporary church.

Several other collections of these papal addresses have appeared in English, but none are as wide-ranging as this one. It is the only one that features figures from both the early and medieval church. This will help readers evaluate the continuities and discontinuities in the geographical spread of Christianity over time. Particularly noteworthy are the inclusion of often neglected but influential early medieval authors, ten women from the high and late middle ages, and authors whose influence is most recognized in Orthodox traditions.

Pastors will find this volume a helpful tool for introducing others to key figures from the pre-reformation church. Readers will find the homilies approachable and their historical background explained in a concise manner. However, this volume is not consistently accessible. The citations contain a number of abbreviations that are not decoded elsewhere in the volume and generally refer only to editions of these works in their original languages. Likewise, there does not appear to be a method for the editors to determine whether Latin titles of works should be translated into English. These unfortunate problems will make it difficult for readers to pursue these authors further and less than ideal as a classroom resource. However, this volume is well worth its price for the pope's remarks on the importance of these figures for the church today. It is best suited for individual or small group settings.

*Philip Michael Forness
Princeton Theological Seminary*

Martin Luther's Anti-Semitism: Against His Better Judgment. By Eric W.

Gritsch. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012. xiii and 158 pages. Paper. \$25.

This topic hits close to home for Eric Gritsch, who in the closing days of the Second World War was a member of the Hitler Youth. In

this book, Gritsch lays out in detail the painful evidence for Luther's anti-Semitism as well as anti-Semitic trajectories in European history before and after the reformation. He leaves no stone unturned in poring over sources of Luther's anti-Semitism and the ripple effect which Luther's views on the Jews had on post-reformation thinking. In such matters, Luther is not alone. Kant, Hume, and Thomas Jefferson all asserted the "superiority of the white race" (5). In a word, anti-Semitism is hatred of Jews, that conviction that Jews are evil (31). With respect to the Jews, a dominant tradition developed in Christianity called the "teachings of contempt" which claimed that as punishment, the Jews have been deprived of their homeland, that the Christian new covenant supersedes the original Hebrew covenant, and that in killing Jesus, the Jews are guilty of deicide. At times Europeans conducted pogroms and killing of Jews outright—for instance as a result of blaming Jews for the bubonic plague (12–13). There were exceptions, such as Bernard of Clairvaux's conviction that the Jews are Christians' "forefathers" in the faith (19).

Gritsch believes that the distinction between "faithful Israel," known through the prophets, and an anti-Christian Judaism is the basis of Luther's anti-Semitism. For Gritsch, Luther is to be contrasted with the apostle Paul, for whom (as Paul argues in Romans 9), there was a "double grafting" of "broken branches," the self-righteous Jews, and "wild branches," the faithful Gentiles, into the trunk of the people of faith (38). For Paul, Gentiles and Jews belong together while for Luther Jews, not Gentiles, refused such "grafting" and so are now punished by God (39). For Paul, Jews and Gentiles are in a never-ending covenant. Hence, if Luther were to be true to Paul—his "better judgment"—he would lose any basis for anti-Semitism. Throughout Luther's work, the leitmotif of the Jews' bad fortune as divine punishment is operative (39).

As is known, the early Luther was less anti-Semitic than in his maturity. The early Luther had believed that since "popery" deprived Jews of property, Jews were not open to the gospel. However, Luther's reform did little



to promote Jews to convert to Christianity. Repeatedly, in Luther's writings, his affirmation of a "theology of supersession"—that the promise given to the Jews is fulfilled for Christian Gentiles—reinforces the above teachings of contempt (68–69ff). Indeed, for Luther, the hatred that the Jews experience is tantamount to God's hatred of the Jews. Yet, that conviction surely runs counter to Luther's conviction that we are not to speculate about the intentions of the "hidden God" (77).

After Luther, neither Orthodoxy nor Pietism seemed to be as anti-Semitic as Luther. Ironically, Enlightenment thinkers tended toward anti-Semitism in their quest to affirm human autonomy by debunking the authority of the Old Testament. Affirming a direct line of anti-Semitism between Luther and Hitler is too simplistic. However, Hitler and his minions had more than enough ammunition from Luther to sanction their anti-Semitism as grounded in the teachings of the reformer.

Mark Mattes
Grand View University

Nature and Altering It. By Allen Verhey.

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010. ISBN: 978-0-8028-6548-9. x and 150 pages. Paper. \$15.

From the late twentieth century to the present, environmental issues in theology have come to the fore. As technology has advanced, so has the awareness of its effects, both positively and negatively. In *Nature and Altering it*, Allen Verhey presents both a reference for viewing nature and a call to be responsible within the world.

The text is divided into five chapters and two appendices. The chapters are titled: "'Nature': What Is It? Sixteen Senses and Still Counting," "'Every *Ethos* Implies a *Mythos*,'" "The Problem of Arrogance: Reading Scripture Regarding Nature – A Response to the Accusation of Lynn White Jr.," "An Alternative *Mythos* and *Ethos*: Revisiting the Christian Story," and "From Narrative to Practices, Prophecy, Wisdom, Analysis, and Policy." The first chapter lists sixteen different ways

of viewing nature, helping the reader to see various viewpoints on what is "natural." This allows one to frame the discussion by stating varying views from which all people may enter the environmental dialogue. The second chapter lists various "myths" ranging from the gene myth to the romanticism myth and presents the reader with cultural and historical contexts to see how others have framed the environmental debate.

The remaining three chapters construct an environmental approach which attempts at balance between the realities of being human and the ideals of caring for nature, an even-handed approach. For this Verhey should be commended, as it is often hard to find both a respect for environmental care and traditional theological categories. This is evident in his use of Scripture as a foundation for Christian ethics (63), and his view that finitude is not a bad thing in itself (98). Thereby the realities of sin are addressed without tying them to the original creation. He also avoids the trap of accepting sin as a natural good. The good of creation is contrasted with the difficulties of sin, a balancing act that is difficult in this era of scientific and theological dialogue.

Overall, the text is accessible for pastors and academics alike. I appreciate Verhey's attempt at balance. Although his conclusions are not surprising, they are infused with theological insight that many environmental scholars do not typically take seriously. This in itself makes the constructive portion worthwhile and a contribution to church and scholarship.

George Tsakiridis
South Dakota State University

Jesus, An Historical Approximation. By

José Antonio Pagola. Translated by Margaret Wilde. Miami, Fla: Convivium Press, 2009. ISBN: 978-1-9349-9609-6. 539 pages. Paper. \$32.49.

Pagola has done considerable academic study in Rome and Jerusalem. He is presently professor at St. Sebastian Seminary and at the Faculty of Theology in Northern Spain. He



has been especially concerned with the historical Jesus, that is, the Jesus described historically. This volume makes available the result of his studies. It includes thirteen chapters on the life of Jesus and the context in which he lived. A final chapter deals with his resurrection. The book is written in a straightforward manner. As such it could be a useful introduction at a collegiate level.

Graydon F. Snyder
Chicago

Proclaiming the Gospel: Preaching for the Life of the Church. edited by Brian K. Peterson. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009. ISBN: 978-0-8006-6331-5. x and 229 pages. Paper. \$20.

This collection of fourteen essays is intended to help preachers reflect upon preaching. The idea, according to Peterson, is that "if the faculty [of Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary] focused attention on...preaching from the whole spectrum of theological education, something useful might be offered to the church and particularly to those called to preach to and for the church" (2). Although the essays are within the understanding of any pastor, their success in fulfilling Peterson's "idea" is mixed.

Of the fourteen essays, six stand out as the strongest. Those by Ridenhour, Hannan, and Baker press preachers with critical questions about the purpose and structure of their sermons. (Respectively, What is God doing? What is your understanding of the Law? and What is your understanding of mission?). Those by Root, McCarver, and Mays argue, respectively: for a relational understanding of justification; that theological education in the nineteenth century contains lessons for preaching today; and that preaching must address transition as opportunity in a biblically based model. The other eight articles contain interesting and potentially helpful information and ideas, but take the form of exhortations that preachers remember what they learned in places besides homiletics class. Of these, Driggers' is the most cohesive.

A pervasive weakness, primarily in Peterson and Bell, is a lack of contact with current homiletical conversations. Peterson and Bell insist upon the sermon as an "event," as in the "Word-event" popularized by Gerhard Ebeling and the New Homiletic. The notion of the sermon as event is new (since the 1960s), not necessarily Lutheran (despite Ebeling's insistence that Luther used an Ebeling-like model for preaching), and increasingly difficult to maintain in light of many postmodern and liberation critiques, not to mention contemporary theories of communication.

That said, the six strong articles are worth the price of admission.

Timothy Andrew Leitzke

I & II Samuel. The Old Testament Library. By A. Graeme Auld. Louisville: Westminster John Knox. 2011. ISBN: 978-0-6642-2105-8. xxii and 686 pages. Cloth. \$75.

Most Old Testament introductions state that the author of 1 and 2 Chronicles used as his principal source the books of Samuel-Kings in their present shape even if the Chronicler's copy of Samuel-Kings had numerous readings that were different from the Masoretic Text. For some years Auld has turned that theory on its head and argued that the authors of Samuel-Kings and Chronicles drew on a common source. That source was much shorter, containing only those passages that are now in *both* Samuel-Kings and Chronicles. So the source began with the death of Saul (1 Sam 31:1-13//1 Chr 10:1-12) and lacked all of 1 Samuel 1-30 (the stories of Samuel, Saul's kingship, and his rivalry with David). It also lacked almost all of 2 Samuel (2 Samuel 1-4; 9; 11:2-12:25; 13-20; 21:1-17; 22; 23:1-7). Auld calls this purported source "The Book of the Two Houses" (namely the house of Yahweh [the temple] and the house of David [David's royal descendants in Judah]). This hypothetical source contained almost nothing about the Northern Kingdom.

Auld has defended this hypothesis in



a number of previous publications and now works out how this affects the composition and meaning of the books of Samuel. The original draft of Samuel was supplemented in his view in two stages: First, in what roughly corresponds to 1 Samuel 9–30, the rise and demise of Saul and the rise of David, and in almost all of 2 Samuel, the tales of David's reign (e.g., the incident with Mephibosheth, David and Bathsheba, Absalom, etc.); Second, in what roughly corresponds to 1 Samuel 1–8, the story of Samuel, and also additional materials about the Saul-David rivalry in 1 Samuel 15; 19:20–24; 20; 25–30; and in 2 Samuel 1–4 (the rival kingship of Ishbosheth), 20.

Auld's starting point and style make for difficult reading, and his commentary will be of more interest to those dedicated to reconstructing how biblical books came together or to historians of Israel than to parish pastors. Auld pays close attention to the Hebrew and Greek texts of Samuel and the Dead Sea Scrolls in his literal translation and tries to represent the variant readings through the use of regular and italic typefaces and brackets, and this results in translations like the following: *Cast [Attach] me [please] to one of your [the] priesthoods, to eat [a piece of] food.* 1 Sam 2:36.

While I disagree strongly with Auld's approach (see my commentary on 1 Samuel in the Word series and my commentaries on 1 and 2 Chronicles in the Hermeneia series), Auld is a major contemporary scholar, and this commentary breaks new ground on many passages, but will also evoke many scholarly debates. Perhaps the most surprising assertion in this commentary is his treatment of 2 Sam 24:1 where Yahweh's anger continued to burn against Israel and enticed David to number the people. The parallel verse in 1 Chr 21:1 states that Satan incited David to number Israel. The reading in Chronicles is usually understood as an attempt to exonerate Yahweh from leading David into sin. Auld proposes, however, that Satan is the original reading.

Ralph W. Klein

Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible. By Marvin A. Sweeney. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-8006-3743-9. xv and 544 pages. Cloth. \$59.

Sweeney attempts to reclaim the concept of biblical theology for Judaism, admitting that this has often been a Christian enterprise and that some Jewish scholars have deemed such a theological proposal inappropriate. His introduction lays out his method and reviews what other Jewish scholars have already contributed to a theological understanding of the Bible.

The rest of the book surveys the contents of the Tanak (Torah, Prophets, Writings) from a critical perspective. Throughout, Sweeney presupposes standard, twenty-first century scholarly positions (e. g., no Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch), but often with his own take on them (e.g., J is a revision of E). He weaves back and forth between synchronic and diachronic readings, occasionally dipping back into rabbinic sources or disclosing characteristic Jewish approaches to the text (e.g., the first commandment for Jews begins with the sentence "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt"). Much of this book could be read by Christians without raised eyebrows, except where one might want to debate a critical hypothesis (e.g., the many layers he proposes within and before the Deuteronomistic History in the Book of Kings). Occasionally the book comes across as a standard critical introduction rather than a theological proposal.

As a Christian reader, I often wanted to hear his Jewish perspective on passages that have been understood as central in Christian theology. In the eighteen lines devoted to Jeremiah 30–31, for example, the words "new covenant" never occur. Sweeney side-steps the one clear reference to resurrection in the Hebrew Bible, Dan 12:1–2, remarking only that "the knowledgeable would be like the stars." He understands the servant in Isa 52:13–53:12 as Israel and notes that the sacrifice of the servant plays a part in the expiation of sin. He too quickly moves on to write of the danger of understanding exile as divinely ordained since this notion has been



used to justify the killing of Jews as an act of divine will. On the other hand, I think he is correct in noting that the meaning of Immanuel in Isa 7:14 is that YHWH would be with Judah to punish it for Ahaz's refusal to accept Isaiah's reassurances. There are occasions in Isaiah 7–8 where "God with us" is understood in a more positive way, as it is in Matthew's gospel.

It is almost impossible for one person to control the issues in every book of the Bible, and I found Sweeney particularly weak on Daniel. I do not think that Daniel's purpose was to encourage Jewish warriors led by the Hasmonean priestly family. In fact, Daniel offers a proposal for resistance to Seleucid oppression quite different than the violence of the Maccabees. I also do not think that the "son of man" figure in Daniel 7 is a priest or points to the role of the Hasmonean priestly family, or that the Holy Ones of the Most High, that is, those dedicated to YHWH under the leadership of the Hasmonean priests, would rule on YHWH's behalf. But these are scholarly rather than confessional objections.

In a brief conclusion Sweeney sums up his theological hopes. His best point here is the multivalent character of the Tanak. The Jewish Bible does not represent a consistent viewpoint concerning God, the nature of Israel's relationship with God, the character of the Jewish people, the role and understanding of the temple and divine Torah, and life in the land of Israel. Those points are surely made in his book-by-book introduction to the Tanak although I believe that the genre of introduction often let those issues get lost in the overwhelming amount of critical data.

Ralph W. Klein

The God Who Is: The Christian God in a Pluralistic World. By Hans Schwarz.

Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2011. ISBN: 978-1-6089-9434-2. xi and 288 pages. Paper. \$33.

Prolific author Hans Schwarz is especially gifted in that he accurately conveys the most important theological loci as well as how

they pertain to various non-theological disciplines, and he cuts to the chase with what is most important in the intersection between those loci and their bearing on wider society. This volume deals with what in traditional theology was called the article on the one God (*de deo uno*) (in contrast to the article on the triune God [*de deo trino*]), and which has always carried apologetic import. Masterfully, Schwarz approaches his topic in three overarching themes: (1) approaching the God phenomenon, (2) discerning God among the gods, and (3) the God who entrusts.

In the first section he presents the claims of the classic masters of suspicion, atheists such as Feuerbach, Marx, and Freud, for whom God is a projection of the human, a "figment of the human mind," and which alienates humans from claiming their own power. Within this debate, Schwarz notes that religion cannot be reduced to a projection since religious matters also contain some historical remembrances (18). He also presents Dawkins' critique of religion as "memes," socially produced ideas which take over the mind like viruses taking over a host (27). Yet he notes that this approach already assumes what it aims to prove, "metaphysical naturalism," which is not itself subject to scientific verification (27–28). After this, Schwarz presents the classical arguments for God's existence, the 1) ontological, 2) cosmological, and 3) teleological, deftly expounding on their strengths and weaknesses. Appealing to a kind of apophaticism, Schwarz notes, "if there is God, however, God cannot exist like you and me or even like a tree or mountain. God does not exist as something that stands forth and is clearly discernible... God is, but does not exist" (61).

In the second part, Schwarz examines various theories of the nature of religion, leaving no stone unturned, including John Allegro's conviction that religion is a product of "orgiastic drum and fertility cults" (80), again a stance which Schwarz sees as reductionistic (81). From here, he offers an overview of the major religions, focusing particularly on Islam and Buddhism. Pausing on the question of religious pluralism, Schwarz spends some time with the teachings of John



Hick for whom “religion is not just a cultural phenomenon...[but] a way of life...In the various forms of religious experience we have human encounters with the divine reality, and there are on the other hand theological doctrines or theories which humans have developed to conceptualize the meaning of those encounters” (174). For Schwarz, while all religions have some insight into the nature of spirituality, for Christianity, God as incarnate in Jesus Christ accentuates a “personal I-thou encounter” between God and people; likewise the Judeo-Christian tradition emphasizes grace and not a legalistic approach to God, “the total primacy of God’s invitation to salvation out of which humanity’s response follows” (189).

The last section examines the biblical witness of God active in history providing salvation for the world. Ultimately it is the resurrection of Jesus Christ as a “proleptic” event including all people: “Jesus’ resurrection meant that that which was envisioned for the end of time had already occurred in an individual so that all others could then know what was also in store for them” (223).

After decades of scholarly contributions, the name Hans Schwarz signals erudition mediated with pastoral sensitivity—in the case of this book especially for those who at some point question God’s existence or goodness. It is highly recommended for pastors, students, and thoughtful laity.

Mark Mattes

The Lives of Ordinary People in Ancient Israel: Where Archaeology and the Bible Intersect.

By William G. Dever.
Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012. ISBN:
978-0-8028-6701-8. x and 436 pages.
Paper. \$25.

Dever is the leading American archaeologist of Syria Palestine of our time, and this book enables him to showcase his expertise in “what it was really like” in ancient Israel. His primary focus is on archaeological data from the eighth century B.C.E., and he frequently argues that the Bible has little to contribute

to our knowledge of ancient reality (376).

His chapters describe cities, towns, villages, and farms, as well as the general geographical conditions. He investigates socioeconomic structures (palaces, everyday houses, literacy, economy, and trade) and cult and religion. Unfortunately, the temple area in Jerusalem cannot be excavated so the data on cult and religion come from sites like Arad, Beersheba, Kuntillet-ajrud, Khirbet el-Qom, and household shrines. He reviews what we know about Israel’s neighbors from archaeology and about how Israel fought and defended itself. Some gleanings: A family of six in antiquity would spend four hours a day milling grain. The “palace” in Samaria measured 55 by 32 feet and contained 1,800 square feet. The average American home has 2,500 square feet. No more than one percent of the population was literate. All this is fascinating “new information” gleaned from the last century or so of archaeology.

Mixed with this good stuff is Dever’s tiresome polemic against revisionists and postmodernists. I, too, find some fault with the so-called “minimalists,” but Dever calls postmodernism a failed value-system and finds it repugnant because of its “arrogance, cynicism, relativism, and nihilism.” That, as they say, is a bit one-sided. Some modern critics think we should analyze what texts say rather than what the authors intended, but Dever claims that for them the text can mean anything the critic wants it to mean. That is hardly a fair and balanced observation. He is defensive about the charge that archaeological data are mute, and counters with the charge that the biblical texts are mute. His book is full of *obiter dicta*, that may be true, but I failed to see the data to support many of his generalizations. Here are some examples: “The inherent insularity and conservatism of rural folk everywhere” (204). Everywhere? Most ancient Israelites had never seen the Temple or met an official Levitical priest (251). The soldiers at Arad would have been moved to appeal to any gods they knew (not just Yahweh) (262). The failure of the biblical writers to describe in detail the fall of Lachish and Sennacherib’s capture of forty-six Judean towns dis-



qualifies these writers as anything like reliable historians (367).

Dever, who once was a Christian minister, now identifies himself as a secular humanist. He eschews theology, and when he ventures into theological discussion it is usually disastrous. For example, "If religion had anything to offer in coping with reality, it had to deal with the ultimate reality: survival" (204). When Jerusalem barely survived Sennacherib's invasion, it must have seemed to many that God was dead (367). Or did people express their laments to Yahweh or consider switching to another god? I thought it was the fool in the Bible who said there was no God. Or again: "The separation of faith from history advocated here will be particularly unsettling to Protestants, even those of liberal persuasion, for whom the motto has been *sola scriptura* [Is it I, Bill?]. . . . Genuine religion should be more about ortho-practice, moral earnestness, than orthodoxy" (378). Is that really an either-or?

Stick to the "good stuff," and you have a very interesting and rewarding read.

Ralph W. Klein

The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture. By J. Todd Billings.

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010. ISBN-10: 0-8028-6235-7. ISBN-13: 978-0-8028-6235-8. Paper. \$18.

This book is both a theoretical introduction to the task of interpreting the Bible and an argument for a certain kind of theological approach to that task. Billings organizes his argument around a fundamental opposition between what he calls a Deistic approach and a Trinitarian approach. In his view much contemporary interpretation is functionally Deistic, viewing God as distant and humanity largely responsible for its own fate. A Trinitarian approach sees the text as mediating God's saving action in Christ through the agency of the Holy Spirit. Approaching the text with a Trinitarian presupposition, the canon of the Old Testament and New Testa-

ment is seen as a theological unity, regardless of the historical particularity of individual writings. Billings recognizes that the reader's context influences any theological reading of the text. Yet he also insists that experience is not an absolute criteria of validity; a reader's experience and culture must also be open to critique from the Scriptures.

This book is useful for pastors and seminary students who have been immersed in historical approaches to the Bible. For such people Billings provides a helpful way to see that a theological reading can learn from but is not limited by historical study. Although I agree with his basic argument, I offer two points of caution. First, his canonical approach needs more willingness to place some texts as more central witnesses to Christ and some as less central. Second, Billings too quickly moves past the historical individuality of writings to seek a theological and canonical unity.

David Kuck
United Theological College, Jamaica

Briefly Noted

In *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, Third Edition (Fortress, \$49), editor William R. Russell again has honored the late Timothy F. Lull with an enlarged and improved version of this incredibly useful book. Lull's single-volume collection has been an indispensable study resource now for already a generation. The excellent supplemental material (including "Treatise on the Blessed Sacrament" from 1519, "A Meditation on Christ's Passion" from 1519, together with additional sermons), improved translations of selected texts (including "On the Freedom of a Christian" from 1520), updated bibliography, and revised index, extends its value for another generation of teachers and students of Luther. Those who are preparing to recollect and celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017 would do well to



renew their engagement with Luther himself through this carefully selected collection. Russell's introduction to the volume and his revised introductions to the various texts locate the *Sitz im Leben* for each of the essential writings that are incorporated into this outstanding resource.

Craig L. Nesson

Everyday Law in Ancient Israel. By Raymond Westbrook and Bruce Wells (Westminster John Knox, \$25). Writing with a deep understanding of Old Testament laws, yet in a very accessible style, the authors explain laws dealing with litigation, the family, crimes, property and inheritance, and contracts. Each chapter concludes with stimulating questions for review *and* it provides answers for these queries. The legal explanations cover not only the biblical laws themselves, but biblical narratives involving legal issues and parallels from the Ancient Near Eastern and later rabbinic understandings. We learn that marriage was essentially an alliance between two families and was a private matter, with neither the state nor the clergy involved in any direct way. Since most of the sexual acts in Leviticus 18 and 20 are acts of incest, the authors suggest that the biblical text does not forbid all homosexual activity, but rather it offers a general prohibition on male-to-male incest.

Ralph W. Klein

In ***Prophecy and the Prophets in Ancient Israel***, edited by John Day (T & T Clark, \$180), twenty-three scholars present revised and expanded versions of their contributions to the Oxford Old Testament seminar in 2006–2008. There are ten essays on aspects of the prophetic books, three on the ancient Near Eastern context, and two on specific themes, with the remaining eight covering a wide range of important prophetic topics (e.g., psychological interpretation, prophets

in Chronicles, prophecy and psalmody, and prophecy and the New Testament). John J. Collins writes an authoritative interpretation of the Immanuel prophecy (Isa 7:14), identifying its original reassurance to Ahaz, but also noting how Isaiah 7–8 and 36–37 in their final form interpret the Assyrian invasion as punishment for Ahaz's lack of faith. There is no pre-Christian Jewish text that reflects a messianic understanding of this passage.

Ralph W. Klein

Beyond the Qumran Community. The Sectarian Movement of the Dead Sea Scrolls. By John J. Collins (Eerdmans, \$25). In this well-balanced and exhaustive assessment of the current state of Dead Sea Scrolls studies, Collins provides an extensive exegesis of the Damascus Document and the Community Rule, identifies what we can know of historical figures referred to in the scrolls, and surveys the Essene question and the findings of archaeology. He concludes that the Teacher was active in the first century B.C.E. rather than the second, and as a consequence the Wicked Priest was not either of the Maccabean brothers Jonathan or Simon. He thinks it probable that the Wicked Priest was either Hyrcanus II or Alexander Jannaeus. The Temple Scroll was written before the Qumran Community was formed. He thinks that the evidence for identifying the community at Qumran as Essene is substantial, but concedes that the Greek and Latin accounts do not give a very reliable picture of the sect. The Essenes were not confined to Qumran but had multiple settlements throughout the land. While numerous scholars have contested the archeological interpretation of Qumran as a religious site, Collins defends this hypothesis, largely on the basis of the ten ritual baths at the site. This magisterial study also admits that there is much that we still do not know.

Ralph W. Klein

Preaching Helps

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany—Resurrection of our Lord/Easter Day

Soft on Sin...

I've been criticized for being soft on sin. Part of my problem is theological. Christian theology since Augustine has been rightly wary of any stark dualism between good and evil, since God created *all* things and called them good. To make too much of the powers of evil bestows on them a status they do not possess—equality with God. Besides, the church has used accusations of sin and demon possession to target powerless people, including people who are sick or disabled. Finally, threats of spending eternity cut off from God in unquenchable fire as punishment for bad behavior here on earth has a way of drowning out proclamations of God who loves the whole world and desires that all be saved. Part of my problem is theological.

Part of my problem is that many preachers are not explicit about what they mean by sin. They don't name it. Other preachers tend to make sin too small by using the word to promote their own agendas. If Jesus had to die on a cross to forgive me for failing to compost or voting for a political candidate who isn't pro life, we have a pretty petty God.

Part of my problem is, as my predecessor, Dick Jensen, observed, "Most law preaching doesn't kill; it just wounds people." Rather than leaving me crying to Jesus to rescue me and to raise me from death to new life, I resolve to rely on my inner resources to do better so that I won't be wounded any more. And, if I try real hard, the preacher tells me, in the final thirty seconds of the sermon, Jesus will help me. Jensen writes, "I'll do my best and Christ will do his best and between the two of us we will get my life shaped up." Or, like a wounded animal, I growl, bare my teeth, and try to defend myself from the one who wounded me. I suspect that people who know they're "rock gut sinners" don't need to be reminded, and people who don't know can't be convinced that they are.

Part of my problem is that, in more ways than they can count, most people get law preached at them in ways that kill all week long. The last thing they need is for the church to be one more place where they feel really bad about themselves—better to stay home. To paraphrase Jesus, if your faith community causes you to stumble, cut it off.

Who's the church to tell me about my sin, anyway? Maybe the church should claim a few sins of its own. Here's one: if people confess their sins in church, forgiveness and reconciliation cannot be assumed and, in fact, it might not be safe for them. To protect itself, the institutional church heeds the earthly wisdom of litigators more than the heavenly wisdom of James. In so many faith communities, when someone's sin is known, justice tempers mercy, accountability conditions grace, righteous indignation replaces prayer, consequences mute genuine repentance, and the church forgets it's in the business of forgiveness.

Yet, my main problem with preaching sin at age 53 with the same vigor I

had at age 23 is that I stand on feet of clay. I stand on feet of clay. Thirty years of preaching and serving and living leave me mindful of my own sinfulness in ways that I sometimes can hardly bear. “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me,” Jesus says, “it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.” And I see the faces of little ones—not children, but students and parishioners and people I love and care about—who believed in Jesus and whom I caused to stumble. Jesus is right. Given a do-over, I’d gladly head down to Lake Michigan with a millstone around my neck or cut off my hand, tear out my eye, or cut out my tongue than live in the hell of causing a little one, who believed in Jesus and was entrusted to me, to stumble. So, “rock gut sinner” that I am with feet of clay, I’d rather proclaim a God who is a reconciling the world to God’s Own Self and a Jesus who died on a cross that I might have abundant life, because that’s the good news I need to hear.

Luke Bouman, who penned these Preaching Helps, served as pastor for three ELCA congregations, spanning 20 years, in Texas, and two years as an administrator in the development office of Valparaiso University. He holds degrees from Valparaiso University (BA), Trinity Lutheran Seminary (M.Div) and The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (D.Min, Preaching). In addition to articles for Preaching Helps in *Currents in Theology and Mission* he is a frequent contributor to *Lectionary Homiletics*, and has provided English sermons to the online preaching journal of the University of Goettingen in Germany since 2003. He has been a full-time church consultant with The Enrichment Group since 2009, helping numerous congregations with mission/vision discernment, organizational development, stewardship/fundraising, and leadership coaching. Luke has been married to his wife, Kathy, since 1983. Together they are the parents of Nathan, a high school junior, and the proud owners of Merlin, the “wunderschnauzer.” Luke lives and works out of a home base in Valparaiso, Indiana.

God bless your journey through Lent to Easter!

Craig A. Satterlee, Editor, Preaching Helps
<http://craigasatterlee.com>

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany February 3, 2013

Jeremiah 1:4–10

Psalms 71:1–6

1 Corinthians 13:1–13

Luke 4:21–30

First Reading

The call vision of Jeremiah sets the tone for today's readings. Jeremiah is called "to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." The pattern of deconstruction and restoration is in all three texts, at times more explicitly than others. These texts remind me that before I can hear what God is really up to and how I participate in God's mission, I often must turn loose of those things I wish God were up to, or things that I think are part of God's mission but really aren't, or at least not the way I think they ought to be.

Even Paul's words to the Corinthian church, words of a gentle love, are part of this same pattern. While the second readings, often in a semi-continuous pattern from week to week, do not always neatly fit with the other lessons, in this case there is a better connection than we might see at first. Paul is offering this chapter on love (ἀγάπη) as a corrective to the Corinthian church. They had thought certain spiritual practices, such as ecstatic speech, elevated them in the community. Paul writes this chapter to encourage them to return to following Christ's way of the cross. The fact that this chapter comes as a corrective, announced at the end of chapter 12 should not be lost on the preacher, even if the preceding verses aren't part of today's reading.

Jesus' own people likely worked with a conception of what the Messianic age might look like. While it is too early in Luke's gospel to say that anyone other than the disciples were expecting Jesus to be

that Messiah, it is clear from the reading of Isaiah's scroll at the start of the sermon that Jesus is referencing their messianic hopes. These expectations could have included many things, but the blessings were for God's people of Israel, not for the Gentiles. When Jesus suggests otherwise he is messing with powerful and foundational stories. The reaction of the people is swift, vicious, and somewhat understandable. You don't mess with people's mythology without paying a price. This won't be the last time that Jesus does this. In order for the people to have a chance to understand what the Messiah was there to do, they would have to lose their preconceptions. Something must be torn down before a new and better thing can be built in its place.

In all three cases, we must be careful to find what is different between God's way and the human way. Ultimately these lessons are not, after all, about us finding the right way, even as we are being corrected, but rather they are about demonstrating that, apart from faith in God, our wrong ways will only continue to reflect the brokenness of all of human endeavor. It isn't finally about us or our group. It is much bigger than just us.

Pastoral Reflection

Preaching words of deconstruction is always dangerous. It is impossible to preach the depth and breadth of these texts without disturbing one's congregation. In every place, inadequate visions of what God is about need to be stirred up, examined, and often discarded and replaced. But the same thing is true of every preacher. We all grasp God "in a mirror, dimly." We are not masters of God's will. We are only occasional bearers of it. If we are honest, like Jeremiah, we are not up to the task. Only prayer and humility separate us from the people of Nazareth who take Jesus to the precipice.

We do well to remember, as we prepare these texts, that the deconstruction and restoration process does not exempt us. In reality it begins with us!

I would not shy away from preaching these difficult things, but only remember that we stand under them with our people rather than apart from them. Jeremiah's proclamation was about a judgment that he himself endured with the people. Paul doesn't leave himself out of the need to get beyond his shadowy mirror. Jesus himself takes on the sin of the people and the world on the cross. When we look about us for things in need of correction, let us not forget that we will stand with those being corrected, not the one who corrects.

But be sure to spend less time on the problems, the needed corrections than you do on what God is doing to restore us to his intended path. By less time, in this case I mean a lot less time. Ultimately it is what God is doing with us that offers us hope beyond what we imagine. Our faulty vision is much easier to give up when we have the much more compelling vision and action of God to consider.

With these things in mind, carefully think about those things that you consider God is doing and compare them with the texts for today. How does God take those things and tear them down? What does God build in their place? Where do we see a vision too small (the healing of a person or town) where God's dreams and vision are much larger (the healing of all peoples)? How, in God's grace, are the best things of our faulty visions taken up and made a part of the wider vision of God? As we consider what God is calling us to be and do, we are challenged beyond our own imaginings, so that we can embrace what God is doing.

Aside from these things, the appearance of the 1 Corinthians 13 text in the lectionary offers the preacher a unique

opportunity to engage this text apart from its common cultural setting in a wedding service. This text means a lot to people who have heard it in weddings. But it is so much more than a wedding text. This day in the church year provides the preacher with the opportunity to go that extra distance. Resist the temptation to pull the wedding interpretation out of the file. Enter into the controversy out of which these wonderful words are born. See what can come from setting Paul's chapter on love side by side with the hate that Jesus endures in Nazareth and on the cross. It will be time well spent if you do. LB

Transfiguration **February 10, 2013**

Exodus 34:29–35

Psalm 99

2 Corinthians 3:12–4:2

Luke 9:28–36, (37–43a)

First Reading

These texts for the festival of the Transfiguration offer a different kind of challenge to the listener when laid side by side. Both first and second readings center on the shining of Moses' face and the veil that is used to protect the people from the reflected glory of God. This conditions us to center our thoughts on the same thing when we get to the Gospel text. If we do that, we might miss some of the unique features of Luke's account of the Transfiguration. Here are just a few of the things that I see.

First, Luke positions this pericope as happening "eight days after these sayings" as opposed to Matthew and Mark's "six days." While some might dismiss this as in both cases meaning approximately one week, I would also point out that the author of Luke/Acts might well want us to keep

our focus on something that happens on the eighth day (or the first day of the new week) as we read this text. Perhaps he is alluding to this as a vision of the resurrected Jesus. Perhaps he is pointing his readers to the post-resurrection church. Perhaps there is some other reason. Whatever it might be, Luke is too careful an author to include something like this by accident, in my opinion.

The second very unique feature of Luke's version of this story is that Jesus does not simply talk with Moses and Elijah. We are given the content of the conversation. Jesus is talking with them about his "departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem." Coming as it does in the context of the passion prediction that precedes this story, and knowing that another prediction is coming before the end of this chapter, we might note this as significant. When we further note that the Greek word for departure is ἔξοδος (exodus), we should perk up immediately. Given the context of the mountain, the shining figure, the "dwellings" (booths or tents), etc., we should see clearly that Luke's use of this word in this story is important, perhaps even central. I think it likely that Luke is pointing to Jesus' work in Jerusalem as a new "exodus" and new salvation event. How is God once again "tenting" among the people in Jesus? What will the coming events in Jerusalem have to say about all of this? These are important questions raised by one little and often overlooked word.

Finally the elements of "theophany" in this story, though common to Matthew's and Mark's accounts, should not be overlooked. The cloud and voice are reminiscent of Jesus' baptism. No matter what you make of Jesus' own divinity in this text, the presence of God in symbol and description is unmistakable. I think it likely that this story is here to let us

know that Jesus as Messiah is more than simply a new Moses or a new Elijah (c.f. Luke 9:18–20). What this "more" means is still unknown to the disciples. But the readers are already "in" on the secret.

Pastoral Reflection

The Festival of the Transfiguration stands as a "bridge" of sorts, both in terms of its place in the church year and in the ministry of Jesus. It strikes me as necessary to understand, precisely at this point, an affirmation of the creedal doctrine of the two natures of Jesus. It is clear from how Luke has presented his narrative from the start (even if you discount the first few chapters as original to the Gospel itself) that Jesus is human and more than human. Here, Jesus is seen, not as one, like Moses, who reflects the light of God, but as one who is the source of that light itself. Jesus is both very human and also the very self-expression of God within humanity. This story serves to reinforce that, in case the reader has not seen yet.

This understanding makes a tremendous difference as we approach the season of Lent and especially as we approach Good Friday. The passion predictions that flank this reading, along with the questioning of the disciples at Caesarea Philippi, make it clear that we are pointing toward Jerusalem and the cross. Here is how I have tried to articulate it. If Jesus is simply human, whether prophet or would-be messiah, then his crucifixion is just another sad ending to a prophet or a failed messiah. If Jesus is only God's self-expression within humanity, but somehow unable to know pain and death as we know them, then the cross and resurrection are nice for Jesus, but they lose any power over sin and death for humanity. It is only as we see Jesus here that the depth of what God is doing in Jesus on the cross becomes most poignant

and powerful. It is precisely because we see the transfigured Jesus that the Crucified One has any meaning at all!

Theologians from Luther to Moltmann to Douglas John Hall have recognized something distinct and important here. When Jesus is seen, at the Transfiguration as both God and human, then one must begin to understand the nature of God very differently, indeed paradoxically. God is known, not only as the powerful one who commands and who saves with mighty acts, but also, and perhaps primarily, God is known as vulnerable, weak, even dying. Thus, to my mind, it is impossible to look at the cross without remembering the Transfiguration. For this day, it is also impossible to see the Transfiguration without looking ahead to the cross. That's the "exodus" that Jesus discusses. It is God who acts as no one could conceive of God acting. It is God who saves from death by dying. That God is the one whom we see on the mountain. LB

Ash Wednesday **February 13, 2013**

Joel 2:1–2, 12–17 or Isaiah 58:1–12
Psalm 51:1–17 (1) or Psalm 103:8–14
2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10
Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

First Reading

The three lessons for Ash Wednesday call for repentance, reconciliation with God, but with a piety that reflects inward devotion, not outward show. Many are familiar with the text from Joel, a portion of which some congregations use as a generic "Gospel Verse" to announce the main reading of the day. But while the snippet we sing is comforting, inviting us to return to a gracious God, the surrounding text is not. It announces the "day of the Lord,"

and not as a gentle return, but rather as a terrible day of wrath and judgment. "Who knows whether he (sic) will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him...?" This does not sound like a question from a person confident in that outcome.

Paul encourages his flock to be reconciled to God in the second lesson. Paul also announces the "day of salvation," quoting Isaiah 48. But his description of the faith life of following Christ sounds far from appealing. Paul and his traveling companions have indeed endured much for the sake of their faith. Few today know so many hardships as Paul knew. But few today undertake such radical following as Paul did either. One wonders if Paul is simply describing hardships he endures, or proscribing hardship as the Christian way. A lingering question for Paul might be, why is reconciliation with God needed?

The Gospel text from Matthew 6 is from the larger set of material we know as the "Sermon on the Mount." Here Jesus is assailing the kind of piety that makes a show of faith. Those who seek to use their piety as a way of earning respect or honor, Jesus suggests, will get that reward, but not understand the deeper rewards that come from a piety that seeks only deeper relationship with God. While Lutherans in particular might be reluctant to think about being rewarded by God for our piety, I can't find evidence in this text for a "cause and effect" relationship. Jesus never suggests that being rewarded by God for what we do in secret is a motivation for the act of piety. He only suggests that the wrong motivation for our piety will prevent our reward from God. Still open, even in this text, is the question, "Why?" Why are such acts of piety needed?

Pastoral Reflection

Lent is a difficult season of the Church Year. It is out of step with our culture.

Everything around us begs us to pursue individual pleasure and satisfaction with things that are bigger, better, or just more things. Lent invites us to strip our lives of everything but the bare essentials. Our culture tells us that we can be forever young, perhaps inviting us into the illusion that we can live forever. Lent invites us to remember—especially at the outset—that, “we are dust and to dust we shall return.” Our culture encourages us to lie to ourselves and to everyone around us. Lent invites us into brutal honesty.

The question is why? Part of the answer lies in the very nature of our surroundings. They invite us into relationships that take life from us rather than giving life to us. Even as we are honest about death, there is something about that honesty that gives life and meaning to our moments that the denial of death takes away from us. Today’s youth seem fixated as a culture on fictional characters that have a certain kind of immortality. Whether it be vampires, zombies, or some reanimated creature like Frankenstein, there is a fascination with this kind of continuing life. But in each sense, the life that is portrayed is a pale reflection of life as we know it. Anne Rice’s vampires are sad creatures, weary of existence and angry or dissociated from the living. Zombies have no life, no words, no relationships, nothing but the ability to spread their toxic existence to others. Each of these fictions is a warning about the dangers of the denial of death in our culture. Each describes, as they go, an aspect of our lives that is less than fully human.

Lent in general and Ash Wednesday in particular invite us to turn from this way of being and become fully human again. This involves an acknowledgement of our limits. Our lives will end. We will die. Nothing we can do will change that. It also involves an acknowledgement of God whose love knows no limits. Not even the limit of death. The

ashes on our foreheads serve as reminders of both our death and the baptismal sign claiming us as God’s beloved children. They remind us that we do not repent in order to be seen by others (even if others see our ashes), or to get anything from God, even forgiveness. Instead they remind us that God’s forgiveness is what gives us the freedom to repent, to turn away from the things that make us less than human, and face God who, by entering humanity in Christ, has made even our existence, even our death, a place where we encounter God and life in their fullness. LB

First Sunday in Lent February 17, 2013

Deuteronomy 26:1–11
Psalm 91:1–2, 9–16 (11)
Romans 10:8b–13
Luke 4:1–13

First Reading

The first two readings for today remind us of the importance of keeping God’s word and covenant close to our hearts and on our lips. The Gospel text includes this same concept as part of the story of the temptation of Jesus.

The text from Deuteronomy, especially from vs. 5 and following, are an early creedal statement. It is a remembrance of the story of God’s rescue of the people but it functions as so much more. Note that the language changes as the text moves through the recounting. It begins talking about Jacob, as a wandering Aramean, third person singular. But Jacob soon becomes the whole nation, Israel (Jacob’s new name, of course, adopted by his descendants). Then we shift suddenly to first person plural. He/they become we/us! This type of remembrance is one in which the past action of salvation is brought forward

into the present. It happened to them and it happens to us.

Paul is possibly describing the same thing in Romans 10, when he says in vs. 9–10 “if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.” Paul is suggesting that even Gentiles, in recalling God’s saving acts, participate in the kind of “anamnesis” or remembrance that brings past action forward and applies it in the present.

The Gospel text brings the past forward in a different way. At one time it may have been thought that Luke’s gospel was written by and for Gentiles. More recent scholarship proposes that Luke is a well-educated Jew of the diaspora, but thoroughly educated in the traditions and ways of the Jewish faith. Here, as we read the temptation narrative of Jesus, we find Luke is connecting us (and bringing forward) the temptation of Israel during the 40 years wandering in the wilderness. Jesus is in the wilderness, led by the Spirit, for 40 days, all of which have echoes of the experience of Israel. He is tempted by hunger (as was Israel when God provided the manna). He is tempted to worship something other than God (as was Israel with the Golden Calf), and finally, Jesus is tempted to test God (as Israel did many times during their wandering). These things are, to my mind, not coincidental to such a careful writer as Luke the Evangelist. The salvation story of Israel, including the temptation in the wilderness, is being brought forward and is repeating itself in the life and ministry of Jesus.

Pastoral Reflection

I am almost always left wanting by sermons on the “temptation of Jesus.” For some reason, the outline almost always seems to be “this is how Jesus overcame temptation,

here’s how you can also.” Beside the fact that none of us are Jesus, this approach to spirituality, where it is all about something that we must do, leaves little room for God. At the end of the day, when I do everything suggested and still, somehow succumb to temptation, I end up only feeling worse about myself.

Luke’s temptation narrative is not about how we can avoid temptation. It is about Jesus bringing the salvation narrative of Israel forward. Luke is making the point that God is on a project of salvation again. (We saw this also in the transfiguration story with its “exodus.”) Thus I find it much more helpful to talk about how God in Christ is in rescue mode again. But this time, Jesus does what Israel could not do. He is faithful to God, even through temptation. The way we are included in this temptation narrative is not that we somehow are able to follow Jesus’ example and resist, but rather that we are bound to Christ.

At this juncture, only four days into the Lenten season, the ashen crosses are not such a distant memory that they cannot be invoked. They bind us to Christ. His resistance is not to be repeated by us, it is now also ours, just as his death is ours and we are promised the resurrection is ours. The ashes bring that action forward, and just as with the creed in Deuteronomy, our remembrances of Baptism in the ashes, our remembrances of the passion in the Eucharist are not so much examples for us to follow as they are bringing into the present the saving acts of God. Jesus resists temptation with and for us. We remember and are renewed and strengthened in the process.

Because we are joined to Jesus, these things that happened to him, happen to us in the remembering. This is a pattern of the faith that is often neglected or at least ignored as we think of remembering only as history, rather than as the bringing forward of events into the present. In our

Lenten journey we will be remembering many stories from our Holy History (what in German is called “Heilsgeschichte”). Each one, in the retelling is brought out of history and becomes our own story. Even the death and resurrection of Jesus, at the end of our journey, becomes ours as well. The old spiritual asks “Were you there?” We were. We are. We will be. LB

Second Sunday in Lent February 24, 2013

Genesis 15:1–12, 17–18

Psalms 27 (5)

Philippians 3:17–4:1

Luke 13:31–35

First Reading

There is little in terms of common links joining our readings today together. Our first reading continues our journey through the “Holy History” of the Old Testament with the story of God’s covenant with Abram (which means *exalted ancestor*, not yet called Abraham, *ancestor of a multitude*). Complete with the split carcasses of death animals and a smoking pot and flame as symbols for God in a dream, this story is one in which God surprisingly joins in covenant with Abram, using an ancient ceremony to demonstrate his intention. This covenant is not one in which Abram has duties. It is a one-sided covenant. God will do all the giving and acting.

Paul’s writing to the Philippians is both warning and exhortation. We are warned not to be enemies of the cross of Christ, but rather to wait patiently for his return and our salvation. One of my favorite New Testament insults is in this passage. Enemies of the cross are described as ones whose “god is the belly.” The desires of life, seeking pleasure for ourselves or to satisfy ourselves with things our bodies

crave, is mocked here. It is important to note that what allows us to stand firm and hold fast against this is not something we have in ourselves, but rather is a function of God’s action, which has made us “citizens of heaven.” This echoes one of the possible Lenten themes, which would be to strip our lives of those things that hinder us from being the children of God we were created to be.

The Gospel text is an exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees about Herod, but also about Jesus’ status as prophet, especially one who will be killed in Jerusalem. Jesus doesn’t concern himself with threats against his life, instead declaring that he will continue his ministry of healing and casting out demons. Jesus then warns these Pharisees that too often Jerusalem has neglected to accept God’s offer of protective providence. This image is also one of my favorites: the image of the mother hen (a nice feminine image for God) who gives her life sheltering the chicks under her wings in a barnyard flash fire. This is the first image we will collect along the way to Calvary during the lectionary’s journey through Lent.

Pastoral Reflection

I will likely choose to preach on only one of these texts rather than trying to treat them as a whole. But with any of them, my temptation is to use them to describe something we must be doing on our Lenten journey. Giving in to that temptation always leads me to a lousy sermon. It is always much better, in my estimation, to keep focused on what God is doing in the texts.

In the first reading, God is giving Abram a promise. Even though Abram is not trusting at this point (the whole covenant ceremony is because Abram doesn’t believe God’s promise), even though he tries on several occasions as Genesis progresses to give the promise

away (either by giving away Sarai, his wife, or by offering Lot the promised land at one point), God will be faithful and keep the promise. I think we do well to remember that the keeping of God's promises doesn't depend on our action or faith. It all is dependent on God. What promises does God make to us? Do we live like we trust them? Maybe not. But God keeps them despite our lack of faith. Eventually Abraham lives into his covenant. He begins to trust God's promise and his life and the destiny of his descendants are changed forever.

In the second reading, we remember that it is God who has given us a new identity, a new citizenship. This is not because we have somehow deserved it. We haven't and we don't. But we do live into the promises that God made. We are declared children of God in baptism. We may do nothing with this gift and promise. Or we may unwrap it, layer by layer for the rest of our lives, living into the promises of God and learning to stand firm, trusting the one who makes the promises rather than our own desires or "bellies."

In the Gospel text Jesus declares that he would love to gather Jerusalem (here a symbol of the children of Israel) as a hen gathers the chicks. Though the people have rejected God's messengers in the past, and will reject even Jesus, he still offers his life, and now not just for the people of Jerusalem, but for all the people of the world. For those people connected to Jesus in Word and Baptism and Eucharist, we know we do nothing to deserve this, in fact the opposite. But once captured by God's great love, we are invited in. We are invited to live as Jesus did, not in fear, but serving others in lives of thankfulness to God. LB

Third Sunday in Lent March 3, 2013

Isaiah 55:1–9

Psalm 63:1–8 (1)

1 Corinthians 10:1–13

Luke 13:1–9

First Reading

Why do bad things happen? That's one of the questions addressed by our readings for this day. In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, we are told that one cannot just assume participation in the group will make you safe from bad things. Using the example of the people of Israel, Paul points out that some of their activities, violations of the new covenant that God made with the people, brought about their downfall in the wilderness, and not just once. Here, Paul seems to say that there are consequences to ignoring God's commandments. While stopping short of suggesting there is a cause-and-effect relationship between misbehavior and God's punishment, Paul is warning the Corinthians not to take God's grace for granted. Take an example, he suggests.

Jesus directly addresses whether the tragedy that befell a group of Galileans at the hands of Pilate in Jerusalem was a result of their worse sin. He asks a similar question in regard to people who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them. In both cases he answers with an emphatic, "NO." But he follows this with a warning, to the effect, this and worse will happen to you if you don't turn away from the path you are on. The question about bad things seems to be answered with the following: Not everything bad happens because someone has sinned. But turning away from God's covenant does have consequences. This is followed by the curious and seemingly disconnected parable of the Fig Tree and the Gardener. The Gardener begs for mercy

for the unproductive fig tree, offering to care for it further to give it a chance to produce fruit. The analogy is actually well-suited. God's mercy in Christ offers care and concern where others would just give up. God's way is different than our way.

This last thought is exactly where the Old Testament reading ends as well. It proclaims a patient God who will "abundantly pardon." This text begins with an image of God as a street vendor, barking out his daily offerings. But this is no ordinary vendor. The goods are offered without price, to people without the ability to pay. God's ways are strange indeed.

Pastoral Reflection

The image of the gardener from the Gospel parable for this day is very compelling for me. This is a gardener who loves the garden and sees the lack of production from the tree as something he will take responsibility for. This extraordinary gardener captures my attention especially because of the comments that Jesus makes prior to this parable.

It should not be lost on any of us that Pilate and Galileans are, in part, the subject of Jesus' commentary. Perhaps the people listening do not know the story of Jesus' passion. But the readers of the Gospel are, no doubt, aware of the reality of Jesus' condemnation and crucifixion. Jesus himself, though guiltless, is condemned to a cruel death by the same Roman governor. Jesus himself perishes. He who does not need to repent is the one who dies this death.

If we are to take the image of the gardener as a metaphor for Jesus himself, then this understanding changes everything. One who is willing to suffer unjustly with us and for us, one who relents from cutting us off from God's love, dies abandoned and cut off on a cross. This is a profound statement coming from Jesus. It is perhaps

the profoundest response to the question of theodicy that we can make. We do not know why people suffer unjustly in the world. Indeed there are many possibilities but none of them ultimately help us to understand why God would allow them. We sometimes rush to God's defense, but even that rings hollow. We might suggest that people deserve what they get, but Jesus doesn't. What helps us in this regard is the ability to look at Jesus as God's response to our suffering. The loving gardener suffers because of the suffering of the garden. Jesus suffers not only because of us. Jesus suffers with us.

What can we make of all of this? Not much in one short sermon is the answer. But what we can say is that as we get ever closer to the celebration of the mystery of Jesus' death on the cross, that only in the cross does God's response to suffering even begin to make sense to us. Just as a parent aches with a child when that child hurts, so God, the creator of all, aches with creation when it hurts and is broken. God aches with us, too. So God tends to us and nurtures us as a patient gardener. God beckons us to answer the call to come and live and feast again even though we have no means to pay. God joins us in the depths determined to restore us even at the cost of God's own self. LB

Fourth Sunday in Lent March 10, 2013

Joshua 5:9–12

Psalm 32 (11)

2 Corinthians 5:16–21

Luke 15:1–3, 11b–32

First Reading

Today's readings include one of the most famous and beloved of all the parables in the New Testament, the so-called parable

of “The Prodigal Son.” At first glance it seems to be a story about reconciliation, and indeed pairing it the lectionary with the reading from 2 Corinthians, imploring us to be reconciled to God and become ambassadors of reconciliation to others. This is perhaps well and good.

It is always wise to catalog the characters in the story, even if it is occasionally difficult to assign meaning to any of them. That is not the case in this story. What is interesting to me is how we would answer the following question: Why is the younger son hungry? I wish I could recall the lecturer who posed this question and all of his answers, but he suggested it would depend on where we are from. In the prosperous west, for example, the answer is because he has squandered his resources. Our puritan-influenced culture still carries the residual influence of the value of thrift. Thirty years ago in the former communist Eastern European countries, the answer was different. The son was hungry because there was a famine in the land. In a time and place where resources were scarce, the famine would jump out at folks as the reason for the predicament of the younger son. Finally, in developing countries, especially in Africa, where communal responsibility and hospitality rules for strangers are stronger than in the western world, the reason would be immediately apparent. He is hungry because no one gave him anything to eat.

One can readily see that our usual understandings are not the only way to read this story. So as I go about my preparation to preach on this particular text, I will be sure to try a couple of different cultural lenses to see what impact this might have. How we see the story, who is being critiqued, and how that impacts the outcome will change depending on the point of view. When confronted with a very familiar story, this approach has

more advantages for preaching than we can at first imagine.

Pastoral Reflection

I am very interested in a couple of things. The opening verses of Luke 15, the setting for today's story and the two stories that precede it, make it clear that Jesus is telling this story to quiet those who criticized him for welcoming sinners to his table. Almost always, as I hear and read about this parable, the focus is on the wayward son who is welcomed home. Occasionally, following the lead of Helmut Theileke, we might hear about the “waiting father.” More popular today is preaching about the “prodigal father” who gives away, wastefully, half his estate to a son who is likely to waste it.

But my interest is primarily in the older brother. It is clear that this parable is directed toward the “older brothers” among the Pharisees who were critical of Jesus on this day. Unless our congregations are among the rare places where the truly prodigal children of our time are wandering back into worship, we are likely to encounter many more “older brothers” in our congregations than these other characters. How does the radical grace of the father impact the older brother? How does God's grace impact us? Are there ways in which the word that needs to be preached on this particular Sunday can take into account that any given congregation will include people who identify strongly with the grace of the father, others who will feel like returning younger sons, and perhaps a number who identify most, whether we admit it or not, with the older brother?

It is, of course difficult to assign parts to people as you preach. But it is less troubling to leave room for everyone to choose their own part. I myself have been more of an “older brother” throughout my life. (That is not to say I haven't had my “father” or “younger son” moments.)

I imagine that seeing a big deal made over someone returning to faith when I have been faithful and part of the church my whole life might indeed leave me standing on the outside looking in. Do the father's gracious words at the end of this story speak to me? You bet they do! I don't mean to suggest that we should ignore the father's grace and enthusiasm for the straying son as we preach. Nor do I mean to suggest that the welcoming of the straying son is unimportant. Indeed our communities should probably be more enthusiastic about the "lost ones" than we are. But there is grace here for the "older brother" too. Perhaps it is time we listened as God invites us back inside. LB

Fifth Sunday in Lent **March 17, 2013**

Isaiah 43:16–21

Psalms 126 (5)

Philippians 3:4b–14

John 12:1–8

First Reading

The people of Israel in exile likely told one another stories about the way things used to be, when they still had their land and their kingdoms in Canaan. Nostalgia can be a powerful sustaining thing, after all. But the writer of this second section of Isaiah will have none of this. Looking back only to how things were won't help. Looking back first on what God has done in the past (vs. 16–17) when he rescued Israel from Egypt alone is only a good start. Knowing that such things help the people to understand that the God who acted in the past stands on the edge of doing something new gives life and hope to the community. "Do you not perceive it?" Not yet, is the answer. To look ahead one must first stop looking back.

Paul refuses to rest on his laurels. What he has done in the past is not interesting to him. He even calls all of them "rubbish" compared to what is in the future. For Paul, the future is Christ, and only death and resurrection stand between him and that future. So his accomplishments mean nothing. Christ's victory over death, and the promise of that future for Paul, means everything. "Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal of the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." To move forward, first one must stop looking behind.

Jesus is anointed by Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, for burial ahead of time. Judas, for what John tells us are less than honorable motives, frowns on this. He thinks that the money could have been used better, citing the poor. Jesus protects Mary, asking others to judge her act for its own sake rather than for the sake of things that might have been done but weren't. Jesus knows that the poor, along with all others, will be far better served by his death. His future, which seems cut off, is something that is far more open than any at the gathering can imagine. Don't wish for what could have been done, seems to be his logic. Think instead about the thing that is coming. That's what Mary has done. The rest of the disciples are urged to follow her example. Moving forward confidently with God means not looking back with regret.

Pastoral Reflection

"Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old" (Isa 43:18). "Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ" (Phil 3:7). These verses from our First and Second Readings signal that God is always moving forward. We are not always as likely to do so. Some of us, like the people of

Israel in exile, are tempted to think about some time in our past when we imagined ourselves happy. I remember talking once to an elderly woman who wished for the good old days. She remembered all of the wonderful things about her youth (not a bad thing) but when I reminded her of all the hardships, the cruelties, the injustices, and the problems of those days, she began to rethink her statement. "You forget about that stuff," she said. Others are likely to want to relive their past accomplishments. For them the glory years are about times when they were recognized or rewarded for their deeds. Perhaps they have done nothing since, and the memory of the past is a cover for the emptiness of the present and the hopelessness of the future. Still others look back with regret. If only I had lived my life differently, made different choices, done better, somehow, then things today wouldn't be so bad. All three of these things have one thing in common. They keep us focused on the past instead of living in the future.

My son is currently learning how to drive. The process has involved classes and lots and lots of practice. He claims that among the most valuable lessons he has learned so far are the following: 1. Keep your eyes moving. Don't spend too much time looking anywhere but in front of you, especially not looking in the rearview mirrors; and 2. Keep your eyesight focused farther in front. When looking forward, look as far as you can see. Keeping your vision far down the road allows you to see more of what might be coming and respond to more things before they become problems or threats. These are valuable lessons for driving and for life.

If God is always moving forward, we are likely better off looking ahead with hope rather than looking backward with nostalgia, reliving the glory days, or regret. These things prevent us from liv-

ing into God's future with God. In this particular case the future we live into is "proleptic" which is to say something that is already accomplished, not yet fulfilled. In the cross and resurrection, God's future breaks into our past and present with surprising force. It allows us to see what God has done in the past and anticipate the fulfillment of what God is doing in the future in the same moment. It is like the remembering that Isaiah 43 invites us to do. It is like anointing Jesus for burial ahead of time. It is pressing on toward the goal, as Paul describes. It is something that happens to us when we encounter the risen Christ in word and sacrament. The flow of time changes. The future, the past, and the present all merge into one stream of hope in Christ. When all we do is look backward, we lose sight of what is happening all around us, and especially where God is leading us. LB

Sunday of the Passion/Palm Sunday March 24, 2013

Mark 11:1–11 or John 12:12–16 Procession with Palms

Isaiah 50:4–9a

Psalms 31:9–16 (5)

Philippians 2:5–11

Luke 22:14–23:56 or Luke 23:1–49

First Reading

The processional Gospel starts our readings for the day. The story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem is certainly impressive, especially when acted out by the congregation at the start of worship this day. But it is jarring as the transition is made in many congregations to the later passion reading. How does Jesus go from the adored to the scorned so quickly. What happens in a week in Jerusalem in the first

century happens in a matter of minutes in our worship service. Understanding “messianic expectation” and how Jesus both fulfills and upsets them will help both preacher and listener over that transition.

The Old Testament reading is taken from one of the servant songs of Isaiah. It is always helpful for me to remember that these were originally intended to describe Israel as a whole nation, even through the metaphor of a servant individual. How does Jesus, as an individual, come to stand in the place of the nation? Is it because he is messiah? What does Jesus’ own suffering have to do with the suffering of his people? Perhaps the added input from Philippians 2, the Christ Hymn, helps in this regard. It is unfortunate that this reading comes on Palm Sunday, when the service is full of other things and sometimes the theological depth of this reading is overlooked. Where we see suffering and defeat, God sees triumph.

The lengthy “Passion” reading from Luke has a lot of interesting material, too much in fact for comment. I will lift up just a few here: Several scholars point out that Luke’s telling of the “last supper” includes many more elements of the traditional Passover meal than the other synoptic accounts. It is interesting to note that the word for “upper room” that is used here where Jesus eats the Passover (“Kataluma” in Greek) is the same word that is translated as “Inn” in Luke 2, where there was no room for Jesus’ parents in the birth narrative. Luke alone reports a meeting with Herod (often cited as Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great). Luke alone includes the dialog with the thieves on the cross.

Pastoral Reflection

There are so many preaching possibilities within the lessons here. I recommend choosing between two options. First, select one section of the passion reading

or one of the shorter lessons for preaching on this day. Don’t try to comment on the whole day. It would be impossible. Context will be important in this regard. Does the congregation have a tradition of holding services on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday during Holy Week? If so, are they well attended? If people in the congregation do not regularly worship on those days, then you may well want to spend sermon time on the themes of these festivals. If your folks do observe and worship during Holy Week, then you are free to concentrate more on the Palm Processional. Either way, pick one, maybe two ideas and cover them thoroughly rather than trying to say a little bit about everything. The more we try to cover, the less we can truly open and experience.

The second option, and this one is truly my preference, is to find a way to involve the congregation in the readings. Of course many people have done this, and there are even pre-printed versions of the passion Gospel reading that have parts for various readers and participation by the whole congregation. Find ways to involve the congregation in both the pageantry and the pathos of this day. By putting them inside the reading, they will be able to find meaning, and often more and better than if they listen to a sermon. Then do what many have already begun to do. Let the texts and the people’s experiences of them speak for themselves. Don’t feel the need to comment at all. Let the Passion Reading BE the proclamation for the day. Don’t worry about the criticism that might come your way because of this. You aren’t neglecting the office of the Word. You are inviting the people more deeply into it. And these readings truly do speak powerfully without us as preachers.

Whatever you do, be blest as you enter into the mystery of this week of remembrance of Christ’s passion. It is

truly a remembrance that brings God's past action into the present. We experience these events anew in their retelling. LB

Maundy Thursday **March 28, 2013**

Exodus 12:1–4 (5–10) 11–14

Psalms 116:1–2, 12–19 (13)

1 Corinthians 11:23–26

John 13:1–17, 31b–35

First Reading

Our readings for this day, not surprisingly, deal with the ritual meals of Passover and the Last Supper. The Exodus text details the first Passover meal, how it was to be prepared and eaten, ending with a verse that suggests that the meal will be remembered each year to commemorate the mighty act of God. Likewise, the reading from 1 Corinthians details the instructions for the Lord's Supper, with Paul relating instructions that were handed down to him from the Lord. In both cases, the key word is "remembrance."

As suggested in commentary on earlier lessons and Sundays in the season of Lent, the kind of remembrance that is talked about here is not simply one of recalling past events. It is one in which the past event is brought forward and becomes a present reality for all who participate. The process of "anamnesis" is often mistaken as it is translated as "remembrance." It is more than a mere "memorial." It is also not a re-enactment. It is something different than either. These meals of remembrance thus have great significance as we hear these texts, and as we gather to relive this meal.

John's gospel is unique in dealing with the events of the night when Jesus was betrayed. John deals with the meal

and wine and bread elsewhere in his gospel (notably Chapters 2 and 6). He makes only passing mention of the meal itself in Chapter 13, but lingers over the act of foot washing that Jesus does with his disciples. This example of servant living becomes the backdrop against which Jesus gives the commandment that gives its name to the day (Maundy, from the Latin "mandatum," commandment). Much has been written about the significance of the use of the Greek word "agape" for love in this commandment. Whatever else people might think this word means, here it is used for the love that reflects Jesus' love for the disciples and for us. Later that evening Jesus tells us more about this love. In John 15:12ff he says that there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. Jesus does exactly that, of course. That's the love that Jesus is talking about, that he commands his followers to exemplify.

Pastoral Reflection

A saying attributed to Gandhi many years ago goes something like this, "Christianity is not a religion that has been tried and found wanting. It is a religion that by and large has yet to be tried by the majority of its adherents." If we judge our own faith in action by our willingness or ability to follow Jesus' commandment to love one another as he has loved us, then we probably would have to agree with Gandhi. Our ability to act lovingly toward one another seems to get worse, not better, even in the church. And that's with our friends, our families, and our congregations. What about loving the rest of the world? It certainly seems beyond us to do it.

If only it were as easy as repeating the commandment. If only we could just use this evening to remind ourselves and our congregations that Jesus told us to love one another, so let's just do it! That's the problem here. Love cannot be commanded.

Love can't be contrived. Love is not simply something we do because someone told us to do it. Love is not that kind of thing. It must be inspired. It comes as we respond to something beyond ourselves.

In this case, what we respond to is not each other. We all, of course, have moments when we do inspire love in others, and we are from time to time inspired. But we also, and likely more often, let one another down. We act, well, like the sinful creatures that we are. We don't often act much like Jesus. That's why, to my mind, the most important phrase in the Gospel text is "Just as I have loved you." It is for the love of Christ given to us that we are inspired to love one another. We don't do it because he told us to do it. We love because we have been loved, imperfect though we are. We are reconciled to one another because God in Christ was reconciling with us. Preaching on this night should, in my opinion, focus very much on the love of God in Christ. These meals bring those loving acts of salvation, Passover, the giving of Jesus' own self as bread and wine for our meal, from past into present for us to experience a love that we then are equipped to share. It is a love that gives all to us, and asks all from us. "To live with the Lord, we must die with the Lord." (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, #500, vs. 4, text by David Haas.) LB

Good Friday March 29, 2013

Isaiah 52:13—53:12

Psalms 22 (1)

Hebrews 10:16–25 or Hebrews 4:14–16;
5:7–9

John 18:1—19:42

First Reading

The Isaiah reading, probably the most familiar of the "servant songs" of Isaiah,

along with the alternate Hebrews reading from chapters 4 and 5, offer the picture of suffering that accomplishes a purpose. The image here is one whose suffering brings unlikely healing for others. As before, the Isaiah reading was initially written to offer an understanding of the national suffering of Israel, by which healing might come to many nations. By the time the New Testament texts were being written, this Isaiah passage had already been reinterpreted to refer to Jesus. The real question here is whether Jesus' own suffering and death is somehow a taking up of the vocation of Israel itself. Does Jesus, in fact, take this vocation upon himself? Do we simply grant that status to Jesus by placing his suffering and death into this framework? How we interpret these texts may very well depend upon the atonement framework of our own theology. Does Jesus suffer in place of the nation? Does Jesus suffer with us more than for us? How does Jesus' suffering bring about the restoration of relationship between God and humanity?

The lengthy passion reading from John's gospel continues to pose difficult questions for us, not the least of which is, why does Jesus die? Did Jesus intend to die? If so, for what purpose does he die? What is accomplished by his death? The stunning exchange between Pilate and Jesus is at the center of this reading. It is clear that Pilate sees Jesus' death as a dangerous thing, but he is backed into a political corner.

One of the most interesting things about this reading from John's gospel is that it follows a sort of "perverse" coronation procession. In many cultures, possibly in Israel itself in the first century, there was a process by which a king would ascend to the throne. He would be certified by the religious leaders, acclaimed by the people, and presented with robes, a crown, and

other items signifying his status, then he would ascend the throne and begin to rule after being granted a title.

In John's gospel, Jesus is questioned by the religious leaders and found wanting. When Pilate presents him again to the people he is branded a radical unfit for rule. When Jesus is presented to the people as "King of the Jews" they reject him and call for Barabbas. After he is whipped, he is mocked by being dressed in royal (purple) robes and given a crown of thorns. Finally he walks in a procession to be enthroned upon a cross, where he is given the title, "King of the Jews" inscribed on a sign that hangs over the cross. It may well be that John is using aspects of the coronation ritual to signify that, despite claims to the contrary, precisely at his crucifixion, Jesus is fully Messiah and fully King.

Pastoral Reflection

Preaching on Good Friday requires of us a careful balance of emotion and rhetoric. So often we are tempted to pretend that we do not know what happens on Easter Sunday. We play emotions of sorrow for all they are worth, both in the readings, and in the hymnody and the preaching. We cannot, of course, prevent people from feeling deep sadness at things such as crucifixion and death, but Good Friday should not be a day of mourning for poor dead Jesus.

This day is one of solemn but sincere triumph. It is a deep paradox that as Jesus dies he destroys the power of death. That Jesus' death is profound, yet positive in its impact for us and all humanity. Certainly some of the hymnody that we have from the early church helps us in this regard. Texts like "Sing, My Tongue, the Glorious Battle" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* #355 or #356) and "The Royal Banners Forward Go" (*Lutheran Book of Worship* #124) both with texts by Fortunatus from the sixth century, certainly give an air of praise and

victory to what is accomplished on the cross.

Certainly this is a time that Lutherans can celebrate as well. Our theology of the cross encourages us to see how God is powerful in weakness and by joining us in our death destroys the power of sin and death to condemn us. While the lessons might lead some to other kinds of atonement understandings, the most popular of which is the theory of substitutionary atonement (Jesus takes the punishment that we deserve), none of these are finally as satisfying as the understanding that we find God precisely where God cannot be, in our own weakness and death.

The celebration of Good Friday is subdued, muted if you will, but it is still a celebration. "We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you. By your holy cross you have redeemed the world." LB

Resurrection of our Lord/ Vigil of Easter March 30, 2013

First Reading-Creation

Genesis 1:1–2:4a

Response: Psalm 136:1–9, 23–26 (1)

Second Reading-Flood

Genesis 7:1–5, 11–18, 8:6–18, 9:8–13

Response: Psalm 46 (7)

Third Reading-Testing of Abraham

Genesis 22:1–18

Response: Psalm 16 (11)

Fourth Reading-Deliverance at the Red Sea

Exodus 14:10–31; 15:20–21

Response: Exodus 15:1b–13, 17–18 (1)

Fifth Reading-Salvation Freely Offered to All

Isaiah 55:1–11

Response: Isaiah 12:2–6 (3)

Sixth Reading-The Wisdom of God
Proverbs 8:1–8, 19–21; 9:4b–6 or
Baruch 3:9–15, 3:32–4:4
Response: Psalm 19 (8)

Seventh Reading-A New Heart and a New Spirit
Ezekiel 36:24–28
Response: Psalms 42 and 43 (42:2)

Eighth Reading-Valley of the Dry Bones
Ezekiel 37:1–14
Response: Psalm 143 (11)

Ninth Reading-The Gathering of God's People
Zephaniah 3:14–20
Response: Psalm 98 (4)

Tenth Reading-The Deliverance of Jonah
Jonah 1:1–2:1
Response: Jonah 2:2–3 [4–6] 7–9 (9)

Eleventh Reading-Clothed in the Garments of Salvation
Isaiah 61:1–4, 9–11
Response: Deuteronomy 32:1–4, 7, 36a, 43a (3–4)

Twelfth Reading-Deliverance from the Fiery Furnace
Daniel 3:1–29
Response: Song of the Three 35–65 (35)

New Testament Reading
Romans 6:3–11

Gospel
Luke 24: 1-12

The readings for the Vigil of Easter are stirring and dramatic, each in and of themselves, and as a whole group. They almost beg to be presented creatively. It is my habit and my sincere recommendation, that pastors resist any pressure

to comment on these lessons, including a sermon. Instead involve the people in their presentation, including many elements along with the readings. Some ideas that I have used, and some that I have seen include: Using pictures of artwork and other visual images projected in a darkened sanctuary on a wall or ceiling. Let the images accompany the readings. Use choral readings for things like “The Creation,” which has ample opportunity for congregational participation with its repeated choruses (“And God saw that the light was good” etc.). Perhaps you might use Orff Instruments for various aspects of the Exodus story. The three men in the fiery furnace might be done dramatically (it is actually a very funny story). Only imagination and congregational piety will limit what might be done to present these readings creatively and dramatically for the congregation.

In one setting of the Vigil Service, I was with a congregation (not one of my own) that began outside with a bonfire, moved inside to the fellowship hall for the readings (during a family-style evening meal that had been prepared and set out in advance), only moving into the darkened sanctuary for the baptismal liturgy and communion. This worship experience, though it was nearly two and a half hours long, didn’t seem like it because while we were eating and listening to the twelve readings, time went by very quickly. Our total time in the sanctuary was less than an hour. There was no sermon that day. The readings were allowed to speak for themselves.

In some congregations, the Vigil Service isn’t done on Saturday. Instead it is done early in the morning on Sunday, ending at about sunrise, and replacing the congregation’s former Sunrise Service. In these settings, where worshipers are unlikely to return for another service

later in the day, it may be that the twelve readings are reduced in number. In this case it might be necessary to preach, and if so, my advice would be for the preacher to use the same sermon as for the other services on Easter Sunday. The good news of the resurrection is, of course, the same news either way. LB

Resurrection of our Lord/ Easter Day March 31, 2013

Acts 10:34–43 or Isaiah 65:17–25
Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24 (24)
1 Corinthians 15:19–26 or Acts 10:34–43
Luke 24:1–12 or John 20:1–18

First Reading

Our second lesson always leads me into the Easter texts because it deals with the very real question, “Did it happen?” Rather than arguing about the answer, Paul simply states the fact as he sees it. “In fact Christ has been raised from the dead...” This answer may not be satisfying to most skeptics, but neither are many of the arguments convincing. In our Gospel texts for this day (we have a choice between Luke’s account and John’s) we have one of the few arguments that makes most sense to me.

One of the striking features of all four of the Gospel accounts of the resurrection are the inclusion of the first witnesses, the women of the community who are going to the tomb to minister to the needs of Jesus’ deceased body. They are the ones who first encounter the empty tomb and the two dazzling men (in Luke’s account) who tell them that Jesus has risen. This is striking because in the first century, the testimony of women was not accepted as evidence in court. Women were, for whatever reason, considered unreliable. Of course this is

nonsense to our modern ears. But it was the reality in the first century.

This immediately makes me wonder why, if they were making the story up, would the authors include the women as witnesses? Even the disciples do not believe them. Why would the authors give us evidence that could so easily be dismissed? Of course there may be many answers, but all of them lead me back to some understanding that the authors themselves trusted that the story happened this way, and that the women were telling the truth.

Beyond establishing some kind of basis for trusting the “good news” of these texts as, somehow, “true,” the other and most important question is what does it all mean? For that we return to Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. Paul does not dwell on the idea that because Jesus is risen we all get to live forever. Whether we do or not just isn’t the point. The point, for Paul, is that the power of death is broken. Life wins the great battle. Death’s power, the last great enemy to be destroyed, is broken forever.

Pastoral Reflection

On many Easter Sundays, my day is punctuated long after I return home from worship with a guilty pleasure. I listen to JS Bach’s great Easter Cantata, “Christ Lag In Todesbanden.” I have several recordings of it and now I can always find a new favorite on YouTube as well. I love this cantata not only for the music, but especially also for the way that it frames the Easter proclamation for me. Death and Life are personified and depicted in a great contentious struggle, culminating in the victory of Life. It is this thought that perpetually shapes my understanding of Easter.

Certainly it is important to hear and know the promise that we too will be

raised at the last day. I'm not discounting this part of our faith. But I also understand that my fate at the end of time is only possible because life wins. It isn't something I can do anything about. But knowing that life wins has a profound effect on who I am and how I live. The old beer commercial used to proclaim something different. "You only go around once in life, so you have to grab for all the gusto you can." Because of Easter Sunday's message that life wins, I know that this proclamation is a lie. I don't only go around once in life. I don't have to live my life in selfish pursuit of anything and everything that gives me pleasure. I also don't have to live afraid of death. I don't have to participate in the cultural denial of death. I don't have to live always acting to preserve my own life at the expense of others. In fact, I'm free to give my life, if needed, for the sake of others.

This message has profound influence on the way that we live in this day and age. The news media bombards us every day with disproportionately violent images, images that might cast our lives

into paralyzing fear. I can't go out into the streets at night. I can't drive into certain neighborhoods. I have to protect myself from people and things I do not know and understand. All of these messages are banished with the word that life wins. Oppressive governments who use the threat of death as the ultimate weapon of control find that their tools are no longer ultimate. Death doesn't get the last word, so death's threat becomes less powerful. (It is still powerful, but not ultimately so.)


The word that life wins is liberating not only for the future, when we will be raised, you see. It is also powerful in the present. It breaks down barriers and sets us free to live more honestly and with lives that are oriented toward life and not death. This does not mean, of course, that we escape death. It simply means that death's power is subverted to the power of life. In the process we are freed from living for ourselves, and for living for one another. Somehow, our Easter proclamation must claim this hope and joy, for what Easter does in the present and not just the future. LB



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For more information and to register, go to <http://tithing.lstc.edu/> or contact Laura Wilhelm at lwilhelm@lstc.edu 773-256-0741.

The October 2009 issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission* was published in partnership with the Tithing and Stewardship Foundation. It contains articles that explore the relationships of stewardship, liturgy and preaching and provides practical guidance for leaders. A single copy is available through the Tithing and Stewardship Foundation without charge. Additional copies may be purchased for \$2.50 each (includes postage and handling). Contact the LSTC Office for Advancement by e-mail at advancement@lstc.edu or call 773-256-0712.

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