October 2015 Volume 42 Number 4

The Vocation of Lutheranism in North America: Toward the Next 500 Years

CURRENTS in Theology and Mission

Currents
in Theology and Mission

Published by
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago
in cooperation with
Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary
Wartburg Theological Seminary

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CURRENTS IN THEOLOGY AND MISSION (ISSN: 0098-2113) is published bimonthly (every other month), February, April, June, August, October, December. Annual subscription rate: $24.00 in the U.S.A., $28.00 elsewhere. Two-year rate: $44.00 in the U.S.A., $52.00 elsewhere. Three-year rate: $60.00 in the U.S.A., $72.00 elsewhere. Many back issues are available for $5.00, postage included. Published by Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, a nonprofit organization, 1100 East 55th Street, Chicago, Illinois 60615, to which all business correspondence is to be addressed. Printed in U.S.A.

CURRENTS is indexed in *ATLA Religion Database, Elenchus, IZBW, NTA, OTA, Religion Index I (formerly IRPL), Religious and Theological Abstracts*, and *Theologische Literaturzeitung.*

MICROFORM AVAILABILITY: 16mm microfilm, 35mm microfilm, 105mm microfiche, and article copies are available through NA Publishing, Inc., P.O. Box 998, Ann Arbor, MI 48106.

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Taking Stock of the Lutheran Witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in North America

Family reunions can be quite interesting. Aside from the awkwardness of getting reacquainted with cousins you haven't seen since you were a chubby-cheeked toddler and the quirkiness of an odd uncle, it can happen that those gathered in the present take stock of the past with arms open to the future.

This taking stock, at least in part, revolves around narrating the family tree. Origin stories. Immigrations. Marriages. Divorces. Births. Adoptions. Deaths. Just to name a few of the themes that run through these narrations. Most family trees, after all, are not symmetrical but rather gnarly — more like a burr oak than a Norway spruce.

My own family had a reunion recently. Two branches of it, anyway. There was plenty of reminiscing as we recalled stories that decorate our particular family tree. Over meals, card games, and an occasional beer, we caught-up with one another. We took stock.

In a quiet moment with one of my uncles toward the end of our time together, he reflected on the convergence of past, present, and future that had happened over these days. In his 80th year, he interpreted this gathering as a sign of hope. His focus was on the future, on the relationships built over those few days between the youngest ones — the children. His hope, I think, was in building connections that would, in essence, foster the tree's health and growth beyond simply sharing a common root system and a common surname.

In a real way, the authors of the essays in this issue of *Currents* are all cousins who can trace their theological and Confessional roots back 500 years to the Protestant Reformation and a particular Augustinian monk in Wittenberg who was calling the church to repentance. We all share the theological surname "Lutheran." In North America, we are all children of immigrants, and we have Confessional cousins now around the globe. While the Lutheran family tree is far bigger than the little gathering that is this issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission*,[1] this particular gathering of cousins represents a good chunk of the North American branches of the global Lutheran family tree. Were the Wiscon-

1. For the fullest sweep of Christians of a Lutheran theological/Confessional heritage worldwide, we would need to include member churches of the Lutheran World Federation, the International Lutheran Conference, and the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference.

sin Evangelical Lutheran Synod to have participated, all of the most significant Lutheran groups would be included.[2]

Lest we foolishly assume that family and harmony are synonyms, it is important to acknowledge that families do not always get along. In part, this is what makes reunions so very interesting! Disagreements and discord can persist sometimes for generations. So it is in our rather motley Lutheran family in North America. (This is to say nothing of the global Lutheran family or the wider Christian church around the world!). I consider it a gift that we have the voices in this issue that we do, and I trust that you, the reader, will notice some of these differences as well as some profound similarities as you read the essays.

The focus of this issue is not on differences and disagreements. Rather, the focus of this "family gathering" is on the future of our common theological, Confessional witness in North America.[3] What does a Lutheran witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ in North America sound like and mean today and tomorrow? (It is the gospel of Jesus Christ, after all, that is persuasive.) If someone is perusing the religious smorgasbord available in contemporary North America, why is a Lutheran offering desirable? I would bet that we are all in agreement that a simple reliance on the attractive qualities of the Northern European ethnic cuisine of choice is no longer sufficient. In fact, it may well be that the misguided coupling of Lutheranism with these particular ethnic dishes (consider lutefisk and sauerkraut as just a couple fragrant examples) throughout recent decades has undermined the clarity and persuasiveness of Luther's foci of justification by grace through faith and the theology of the cross.

Admonishment may not be welcome at family reunions, but it does seem sound to suggest that within our gnarly (and interesting!) Confessional Lutheran family muddling the clarity of the gospel is actually worth an argument at the dinner table, whether the gospel be replaced by ideologies or judgementalism, good works or cheap grace.[4] We all fall short and stand in need of God's forgiveness. It is not necessarily a bad thing that we work together as collegially as possible to hold one another accountable to the heart of a particular

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2. Efforts were made to include a voice from WELS in this issue regrettably without success. Also, it is important that we acknowledge that there are a number of smaller Lutheran church bodies in North America, e.g., the Association of Free Lutheran Churches, the Lutheran Brethren, etc. - SG

3. I commend to you the most recent history of the Lutheran movement in America: Mark Granquist, *Lutherans in America: A New History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015).

4. As one of those responsible for forming preachers, the winds of North American pop-Christianity blow strong–perhaps as much in Lutheran pulpits as elsewhere. A distinct contribution that Lutheranism offers to the wider church is clarity about the gospel. Worth reengaging are C.F.W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel,* W.H.T. Dau, trans.; (St. Louis: Concordia, 1928), and Herman G. Stuempfle, Jr., *Preaching Law and Gospel* (Ramsey, N.J.: Sigler, 1990).

Lutheran articulation of the gospel. Yes, there are divisions. Yes, we have legitimate disagreements among us about the interpretation of the Lutheran witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Yes, we have done plenty of admonishing of one another. At the same time and when at our best, our disagreements are important because what we disagree about is what is ultimately important — God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ for the sake of the world.

The thing about this particular family reunion, however, is that its focus is not merely backward and inward.

I invite you into this reunion to consider what it means to be of a common Lutheran Confessional family for the purpose of taking stock of the vocation of the North American branch of the global Lutheran movement — a particular tradition within the broader Christian witness within God's *oikoumene*[5] — as the ticking of time shuffles us all into the start of the next 500 years.

The contributors to this issue were asked to envision within our North American context the Lutheran witness to the gospel moving into the future. Together with my editorial colleagues and our staff at *Currents in Theology and Mission*, I am grateful that our authors were willing to take on this challenge for the sake of better understanding our common heritage for the purpose of the present and future witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The lead essay for this issue comes from Dr. **Sarah Ruble**, Associate Professor of Religion at Gustavus Adolphus College, St. Peter, Minnesota, a specialist in twentieth-century American church history. She has the distinction of being a Christian from the Free Methodist tradition within North American Christianity as well as being a church historian who lives out her vocation within the context of a distinctly Lutheran college. With one foot in the Lutheran tradition and one foot elsewhere in the Christian family, she assesses the vocation of the Lutheran witness in North America. Her essay was provided to the other contributors of the issue, so the reader will on occasion see reference made to her work. I encourage you, the reader, to spend some time drinking in Dr. Ruble's observations and to consider them in relation to your own perceptions of the vocation of the Lutheran church in North America.

On to the contributors from within North American Lutheranism…

The intent of this issue of *Currents* is to gather a variety of voices from across the varied spectrum of Lutheranism in North America. It would be

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5. Lest we suffer from theological, Confessional aggrandizement, it is always important to have somewhere in mind that we who share the Lutheran heritage live and breathe within the diverse, global Christian witness, which itself lives and breathes within God's cosmic household. Keeping this in mind may play some role in striking a posture of humility as well as reminding us of the value of the Lutheran witness within the broader ecologies of church and world.

inaccurate to say that our contributors are serving as representatives of their respective Lutheran denomination or group, as there is diversity within each of our particular Lutheran families.[6] That said, I am grateful to our contributors for offering their voice from within their respective Lutheran bodies — five denominations and one pan-Lutheran organization.

The Rev. Dr. **Robert Kolb**, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri. A voice from within **The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod**,[7] he has served as a Reformation historian for many years, including co-editing the most recent English translation and critical edition of the Lutheran Confessions.[8] The Rev. Dr. **Gordon Jensen**, Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon, a voice from within the **Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada**,[9] is a systematic theologian who focuses on Luther's theology of the cross. The Rev. Dr. **Maria Erling**, Gettysburg Seminary, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, a voice from within the **Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**,[10] is a church historian with a focus on American church history. The Rev. **Kip Tyler**, senior pastor of Lutheran Church of the Master, Omaha, Nebraska, a voice from within **Lutheran Church in Mission for Christ**,[11] serves as Chair of the Board of Trustees for LCMC. The Rev. Dr. **Amy Schifrin**, STS, Trinity School for Ministry, St. Ambridge, Pennsylvania, a voice from within the **North American Lutheran Church**,[12] is a scholar of liturgics and homiletics and serves as Director, North American Lutheran Seminary, the seminary of the NALC. The Rev. **Steve Shipman**, STS, an ELCA pastor and a voice from within **Lutheran CORE**,[13] recently retired from his position as Director of Lutheran CORE, which he held from 2012 until early 2015. In his retirement, he is serving as a part-time chaplain for SpiriTrust Lutheran LIFE in Enola, Pennsylvania, as well as doing pulpit supply.

In addition to approaching the question from within their varied portions of North American Lutheranism, each of these contributors writes from her or his own area of expertise, wisdom, and passion. This means that the essays offer different takes on the same basic question. These different approaches are welcome and beneficial. I trust that the individual reader, our Lutheran churches, and the broader Lutheran witness in North America will be well served by

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6. Noted with each contributor is a link to their denomination's / organization's website. These links are intended to serve as guidance for the broader ecclesial and theological landscape of contemporary of Lutheranism in North America.

7. www.lcms.org

8. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church,* Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

9. www.elcic.ca

10. www.elca.org

11. www.lcmc.net

12. www.thenalc.org

13. www.lutherancore.org

prayerfully pondering the essays offered here. While any one of us who ventures to envision the Lutheran witness into the future risks missing the mark, I am confident that the common threads that weave throughout these essays cannot but serve our common calling to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I write this little introduction on the 600th anniversary of the martyrdom of Jan Hus, who was burned at the stake on 6 July 1415. While Hus' call for the reform of the papacy was not the same call as Luther's, Luther understood Hus to be a forerunner, whose prophecy at his death[14] Luther understood to apply to his own reforming work of a century later. This introduction started out with the image of a family reunion. Admittedly, this is a dangerous image to use within a discussion about Christianity, wherein unity is not something that we pass down from generation to generation by birth and blood. The memory and witness of Jan Hus serves to remind us that what we are about is ultimately a common Christian vocation. The only true unity is in Christ and him crucified. May this issue of *Currents* serve this unity in Christ and him crucified.

S.D. Giere, 6 July 2015

14. In short, Hus prophesied that those now his executioners were roasting a goose (Hus means goose), in a century people will hear a swan's song that cannot be silenced. Cf. Heiko A. Obermann, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil,* Eileen Walliser-Schwartzbart, trans. (New York: Image Books, 1989), 55.

The Lutheran Vocation in America: Past, Present, and Future

Sarah E. Ruble
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During my job interview at Gustavus Adolphus College, one faculty member posed a question I had not expected. What, he wondered, did I think was the Lutheran contribution to American religion? He then offered me an unexpected out. It was quite all right, he said, if I didn't think there had been one. Although my answer was forgettable, the exchange itself proved worth pondering. When I had interviewed with Reformed or Methodist colleges, they too had wanted to know how I would talk about their traditions' significance. None, however, had suggested that, perhaps, their traditions were not significant. In that, the Lutherans stood alone.

I could chalk up my interview experience to Midwestern modesty. The question of Lutheran significance in American religion, however, does not only arise in AAR interview rooms. As historian Mark Noll, who has addressed the issue several times, notes, the "superficial" view of Lutherans suggests that they have offered nothing distinctive to American religion. In this view, "Lutherans may now and then have their eccentricities, but they are on the whole, and given their place on the immigrant curve, quite ordinarily American."[1] Not culturally dominant like the Reformed, not as feared as Catholics or Mormons, not as distinct as the Amish—Lutherans largely blend into the Protestant backdrop of American religion. Yet Noll himself is not content with this appraisal. He has suggested various ways in which Lutherans have contributed or could contribute something significant. In the 1992 edition of their textbook, *Religion in America,* historians Winthrop Hudson and John Corrigan also argued for a special place for Lutherans on the religious landscape. The Lutherans, they argued, were "best positioned" among "old-line churches" to "participate effectively in the dialogue of a pluralistic society" owing to their grounding in a rich confessional and liturgical tradition.[2]

Noll, Hudson, and Corrigan were trying to discern something distinctive about American Lutheranism. My goal in this article is similar, although not identical. The editors have requested a reflection about the Lutheran vocation in American religion, past, present, and future. Because a vocation need not be unique to those practicing it, some of what I will say about Lutherans could be said about other traditions. Nor do I argue that Lutherans necessarily set out

1. Mark A. Noll, "The Lutheran Difference," *First Things* (February 1992): 34.

2. Winthrop S. Hudson and John Corrigan, *Religion in America: An Historical Account of the Development of American Religious Life,* 5th ed. (Prentice Hall, 1992), 423.

to do or to be what they did or became in America. Historical contingency may well have driven what Lutherans did as much as calling. Still, whether through intention, historical accident, or some combination of both, I believe that Lutherans have had and continue to have three vocations in America: their critical distance from the Protestant mainstream, their expertise in building and sustaining institutions, and their emphasis on justification by grace through faith.

Apart from the Protestant mainstream

In 1950, the *Christian Century* offered American Lutherans a bit of advice: unite. After commending the Augustana Synod for its recent movements toward unity, the *Century* editorialized that if the United Evangelical Lutheran Church, the next body to vote on a proposed merger, "should follow the example of the Augustana Church, the emergence of a new Protestant denomination, capable of assuming the leadership with which the word Lutheran should be associated, will be assured."[3] In addition to demonstrating the *Century's* sense of itself as the arbiter of what was good for American religion, the editorial also indicated the ambiguous place of mid-twentieth century Lutheranism in the religious landscape: undeniably Protestant, yet not part of the Protestant mainstream; a group not so easily dismissed by the *Century* as American evangelicals, yet one dedicated more to its own issues than to what the magazine's editors thought important.[4]

What to the *Century* looked like wrong-headed parochialism was part of a longstanding Lutheran ambivalence toward both cultural assimilation and the various iterations of the Protestant mainstream. In his seminal *A Religious History of the American People,* historian (and Lutheran) Sydney Ahlstrom placed his discussion of nineteenth-century Lutheranism under the section "Countervailing Religion."[5] The placement was apropos, but it also connoted more consensus against the prevailing religion than had been the case. Many Lutheran battles occurred between those who wanted to assimilate and those who did not, or between those willing to downplay Lutheran doctrine in order to make common cause with other Protestants and those who would not. Still, that Lutherans thought these matters worth fighting about is precisely the point. Whether on the subject of language, public schools, or reworking the Augsburg Confession (to take three significant cases), many Lutherans believed that the particularity of the Lutheran tradition demanded differentiation, if not separation, from other Protestants.[6]

All of the battles could, of course, be

3. "Lutherans Vote for Unity," *Christian Century* (June 21, 1950): 747.

4. On the *Century's* self-understanding, see Elesha J. Coffman, *The Christian Century and the Rise of the Protestant Mainline (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).*

5. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1972).

6. Steven M. Nolt, *Foreigners in Their Own Land: Pennsylvania Germans in the Early Republic* (University Park, Pa.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002); Friederike Baer, *The Trial of Frederick Eberle: Language, Patriotism and Citizenship in Philadelphia's German Community, 1790 to 1830* (New York: NYU Press, 2008); James S. Hamre, "Norwegian Immigrants Respond to the Common School: A Case Study of American Values and the Lutheran Tradition," *Church History* 50 (September 1, 1981): 302–315.

seen as a normal part of the immigrant experience.[7] New immigrants resist changes in language, belief, and practice while later generations more and more closely resemble the host culture. In this reading, it was successive waves of Lutheran immigration, more so than any particular Lutheran commitment to being distinctive, that kept the issue of assimilation at the fore. Yet, again, historical contingency does not exhaust what we can say about this pattern, nor does it negate what Lutherans have offered to America through it. I see at least two services.

First, as a civic matter, Lutherans made the argument that immigrants did not have to be Anglo-Protestant or become like Anglo-Protestants in order to be Americans. R. Laurence Moore has made this case for nineteenth-century Catholics, arguing that those who lobbied for national parishes and resisted the Americanizers laid claim to the religious mainstream by refusing to let Anglo-Americans define it.[8] With the exception of World War I anti-German hysteria, Lutherans did not incite the same distrust as did Catholics (nor the same amount of interest by historians), but they had a similar function. Historian Steven Nolt, for example, in his examination of both Lutheran and Reformed Germans in Pennsylvania notes that they "had drawn on the language and ideology that animated the new nation, absorbed American notions of liberty and citizenship, and incorporated them into their group discourse and self-understanding… But Pennsylvania Germans were also able to mobilize those ideas and that rhetoric to defend cultural particularism; in one sense, then, they turned the success of Americanization against those who had hoped that such a process would naturally lead to cultural assimilation."[9] Against those who claimed (or claim) that there is an American "essence"—one often defined as Anglo and Reformed/Methodist Protestant—Lutherans argued (implicitly and explicitly) that there were a variety of ways to be American. You could speak German, send your children to parochial schools, and oppose sabbatarianism and still be a good citizen of this country.

Although the majority of Lutherans in America today speak English as a primary language, attend public schools, and have no more idea about what sabbatarianism was than do the descendants of those who died on its hill, the experience of creating an American identity outside of the Anglo-Reformed mainstream remains germane. Lutherans are well-positioned to be advocates for those who must fight this generation's battle about what, if anything, constitutes the essence of American-ness and find their own place in our civic life. They boast both a recognized place under the American sacred canopy—so they have a secure place from which they may help others—and the experience of finding their way inside—so that they can identify with those who are not.

Second, as a theological matter, the Lutheran ambivalence about becoming part of the Protestant mainstream demonstrated the power of a theological tradition with a sense of itself as a theological tradition. Certainly, Lutherans have disagreed about the extent to which their tradition demands differentiation and what in it is sacrosanct. Samuel Schmucker is part of the Lutheran heritage too. Yet fighting about what is necessary within the tradi-

7. See Noll, "The Lutheran Difference."

8. R. Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (Oxford University Press, 1986).

9. Nolt, *Foreigners in Their Own Land,* 130.

tion is still an affirmation that you have one. Here, again, Lutherans are a "countervailing" force, for much of American Protestantism has a strong primitivistic impulse, or a belief that we can jump back over history to the supposed purity of the early church. In a paradox that Lutherans might appreciate more than some others, this primitivism can lead to a naïve and arrogant presentism. It is naïve because it refuses to see the myriad ways history shapes us; it is arrogant because it presumes itself not only superior to the generations of people who have gone before but also utterly without need of their witness and wisdom. While Lutherans certainly quarrel among themselves about the meaning of their tradition, they have at least tended to remember that they have one. In acknowledging the pull of their own history, they are realists. In recognizing that it can offer insight, ballast, and guidance, they are humble ones. They offer a reminder that history is not a shackle to escape, but a deep stream to be mined.

Creating and sustaining institutions

In the 1933 Augustana Synod Minnesota Conference's annual convention minutes, the Board of Christian Service celebrated completing Bethesda Hospital in St. Paul. The hospital, a source of pride for the board, was one of the conference's several social service organizations. As the board lauded these organizations, it also noted that the worsening depression had created an untenable financial situation. In debt, the board had retrenched. One cut involved inner city mission work in the Twin Cities. The works of mercy and evangelism previously undertaken by Augustana-supported missionaries would now occur under the auspices of the Lutheran Welfare Society, a pan-Lutheran group. When discussing the change, the board began on a positive note: "We trust that the new arrangement in the two districts will work out satisfactorily to all concerned. Lutheran cooperation in Inner Mission work…is one of the steps that will eventually bring the various groups of Lutheran Churches closer together." It ended with a cautious tone: "We trust, however, that the work will be conducted by the Lutheran Welfare Society in such a sympathetic and understanding way that it may contribute to the spirit of Lutheran unity and solidarity. It must not be lost sight of by either the Welfare Society or our own people that our own Conference program is so large and comprehensive in scope that it must have the continued support of our own membership and not be overshadowed by any cooperative effort among Lutherans in which we may engage."[10] Lutheran cooperation was good, but not at the expense of Augustana's own organizations.

The board's minutes are nothing extraordinary. The details of a new hospital and a Great Depression notwithstanding, the minutes show an organization doing what organizations do: deciding how to allocate resources, balancing various interests, and trying to maintain loyalty to ongoing work. Such activities are all part of the fabric of organizations. They can also feed anti-institutional sentiments. They are time-consuming and can descend into the petty. Good work can become bogged down by loyalty to outdated methods, redundant organizations, or simply to one's own group. Even at its best, institutional work can be tedious.

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10. *Minutes of the Seventy-Fifth Annual Convention* (Lutheran Minnesota Conference of the Augustana Synod, 1933), 75, College and Lutheran Church Archives, Gustavus Adolphus College. https://collections.gac.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/LCAPub/id/6731/rec/7.

Yet, in their very mundanity, these minutes reflect an important contribution Lutherans have made and continue to make in America: they build and sustain institutions. Indeed, that work is so much a part and parcel of the Lutheran tradition in America that it is easy to overlook. We should not. While historians point out that Lutherans have not exercised as much political muscles as we might expect given their numbers (that there has never been a Lutheran president is sometimes offered as evidence of Lutheran political underachievement, as if what tells us the most about Quaker contributions to America is Richard Nixon), such observations ignore the number and range of Lutheran institutions. Lutherans built churches, to be sure, but also a dizzying array of colleges, hospitals, and social service organizations. Today, Lutheran Social Services in America has over $20 billion in annual revenues, rivaling Catholic Charities and making it one of the largest church-related non-profits in the nation.[11]

The Lutheran emphasis on building institutions is, again, a matter of historical contingency. Like Catholics, Lutheran institution building stemmed, at least in part, from an impulse as an outsider community to take care of its own people. Ronald Thiemann also notes that for some Lutherans, pietism compelled service, although that service did not usually lead into broader social reform.[12] So Lutherans boast lots of agencies but no presidents. By emphasizing what Lutherans did not do (lead reform movements) and underplaying what they did do (build and sustain institutions) historians and Lutherans alike miss a past and potential contribution both to American Christianity and our larger civic life.

To say that institutions are a necessary part of civic life may seem commonsensical, but, like the reminder that kale is good for you, it's a bit of sense that goes against many people's taste. Even Robert Putnam's famous book, *Bowling Alone,* which bewailed the growing lack of civic involvement among Americans, emphasized small, interpersonal groups, like the eponymous bowling league.[13] Although people sign up for them less frequently, they fondly remember the days when people bowled together. Denominational bureaucracies or even social service organizations, if they are not local, tend not to elicit such affection. As sociologist Robert Wuthnow notes, however, the revitalization of civic society does not depend on "charismatic leaders and social

11. See "Future Forward: Leading Change, Renewing Mission, *Lutheran Services in America* Annual Report 2013," Lutheran Services in America, 2013, http://lutheranservices.org/sites/default/files/u82/Annual%20Report%202013%20FINAL.pdf; "Catholic Charities USA Financial Statements Ending June 2012," *Scribd*, accessed June 17, 2014, http://www.scribd.com/doc/191317305/Catholic-Charities-USA-Financial-Statements-Ending-June-2012; "50 Largest Charities in the U.S.," *Forbes,* accessed June 17, 2014, http://www.forbes.com/top-charities/list/.

12. Ronald F. Thiemann, "Lutheran Social Ministry in Transition: What's Faith Got to Do with It?" in *Taking Faith Seriously,* Mary Jo Bane, Brent Coffin, and Richard Higgins, eds., (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 177–209. On nineteenth-century Lutheranism and social reform, see also Christa R. Klein, *Politics and Policy: The Genesis and Theology of Social Statements in the Lutheran Church in America* (Fortress Press, 1989), 1–16.

13. Robert Wuthnow, "Can Religion Revitalize Civil Society? An Institutional Perspective," in *Religion as Social Capital,* Corwin Smidt, ed., (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2003), 191–209.

movements" alone (much less on bowling teams) for it "often occurs within institutions and because of them."[14] Historian Christa Klein has made a similar argument. She argues that "the ordering of society through the creation, modification and sustenance of religious institutions is also a characteristically American activity, one necessarily *a priori* to social reform."[15] By creating and sustaining institutions, Lutherans are contributing to civil society and to social reform.

Beyond that contribution, I argue that, in an anti-institutional age, Lutherans have a history of institutional *praxis*. They have done it long and well. As Thiemann shows in his history of two Lutheran social service agencies, sustaining an institution demands meeting the changing needs of your service population, navigating the evolving relationship among organizations and the government, and maintaining a sense of mission while performing the day to day work of the organization. Creating institutions may be what immigrant groups (among others) do to survive in a new place, but that does not mean that doing so is easy nor that broadening their focus beyond the original group is a given.

Creating and sustaining institutions has been and could continue to be part of the Lutheran vocation. So too could telling the stories of these institutions. Christa Klein made this suggestion in a 1994 essay, "Denominational History as Public History." She was quick, however, to explain the kind of telling she meant. She emphasized that institutions are moral communities and their histories the stories of moral discernment and debate. In other words, she was not suggesting the kind of institutional history that substitutes for Ambien. Institutional history as a recounting of office holders and name changes is precisely the kind of a history we expect of institutions because we expect them to be boring. But institutional history as the history of competing visions of the good, the navigation of external and internal pressures, and the attempts at maintaining identity amid change could be compelling. More importantly, it is the kind of history that gives guidance to people struggling with their own institutional reality and reminds those awash in the romanticism of anti-institutionalism that change, energy, vision, and virtue are not the sole property of charismatic leaders or "anti-institutional movements."

To return to the board minutes from 1933, we can see a complex discussion about mission, identity, and money, a conversation in which the good and the practical both play a prominent role. The desire to keep Augustana money flowing to Augustana institutions might seem (and might have been) somewhat parochial—it was also a financial necessity should institutions serving real people in a time of financial distress survive. Concerns about joining with other Lutherans could have been about the protection of unnecessary borders, but it was also a recognition that institutions are not theologically or ideologically neutral sites. Working with other people toward common ends demands some sort of shared vision and can eventuate in changed perspectives. These rather mundane minutes are shot through with the moral and practical quandaries regularly encountered by people who sustain institutions, people who know that institutional failure has real consequences for people needing food,

14. Ibid., 208.

15. Christa R. Klein, "Denominational History as Public History: The Lutheran Case Study," in *Reimagining Denominationalism: Interpretive Essays,* Robert Bruce Mullin and Russell E. Richey, eds., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 312.

medicine, clothing, and shelter. People who understand how to navigate these mundane yet deeply significant issues are ever more necessary in an age of skepticism about institutions as are those who can craft engaging institutional history.

Finally, to unite the themes of distinctiveness and institution-building, Lutherans have a history of creating and sustaining institutions without expectations of exercising significant social or political power. Lutheran political quietism could, in an age when religious organizations are losing (or perceiving themselves to have lost) public power, be a strength. It is one thing to sustain institutions when they bring cache and seem to bolster a privileged place in society, as mainstream Protestants once enjoyed. It is another when you have less pretense to power, your institutions are struggling, and the road ahead might lead to some glory, but looks only to be a very long haul. In these times, people who built hospitals during the Depression, using the contributions from first, second, and third generation immigrants, might have some helpful perspectives to offer.

Justification by grace

In October 1967, on the eve of Reformation Sunday, the *Christian Century* noted the 450th anniversary of Luther's 95 theses with an article less condescending toward American Lutheranism than those that had graced it pages during the early 1950s. Although the *Century,* not approvingly, noted that Luther's hidden God could have contributed to the death of God movement, they ultimately had some kind words for the tradition.[16] Lutheranism, they said, "looks at the wounds of Christ and speaks of God; it stares at the cross and announces love and grace; it remembers the activity of God in Christ and dares to hope and to act."[17] Whatever its weaknesses—and the *Century* editors admitted that all Protestant traditions had some—Lutheranism offered to other Protestants a long history of standing upon grace.

Naming the witness to justification by grace through faith as a Lutheran vocation might seem too easy. Praising Luther's key insight and commending it to his spiritual heirs requires no great creativity. Certainly Lutheran theologians have trumpeted the doctrine and argued over its implications. But the extent to which this emphasis and wrangling works its way down to the pews is much harder to discern. Regardless, whether American Lutherans have, on the whole, a greater appreciation for their tradition's central doctrine than do other Protestants, they do, as the *Century* pointed out, boast a long tradition to mine.

Other Christians and the culture at large need Lutherans to mine that tradition, for justification by grace through faith remains a necessary word. From the myth of the self-made person that permeates our politics to the myths of domestic perfection that clog Pinterest and Facebook, American life is rife with attempts at justifying ourselves. Such attempts are not only spiritually deadly, but politically and socially pernicious. Self-justification can manifest as a kind of benevolent but oppressive perfectionism in which we try to force others to live up to our exacting standards (think prohibition). It often demands condemning some "other," separating sheep and goats by criteria most amenable to whoever is making the distinction precisely so one

16. "Protestant Yang and Lutheran Yin," *Christian Century,* (October 25, 1967): 1340.

17. Ibid.

group can demonstrate its superiority. Finally, self-justification binds us, demanding we give our time to our own self-salvation rather than "wasting" it on those we perceive as too young, too old, too helpless, too broken, or too hopeless to aid our narcissistic project.

Our churches and our culture need a word of grace. A word that reminds us that we are no more capable of justifying ourselves than we were of creating ourselves. A word that frees us from ourselves so that we can serve our neighbors. Lutherans are not the only Christians who know this word, but they are able to speak it in a particularly unequivocal way. If some of our cultural ills need some Wesleyan holiness or Thomistic virtue, others demand a bold, even bracing, Lutheran grace.

Conclusion

Like many Protestant traditions in America today, Lutherans are a house divided and dividing. None of what I offer as ideas for Lutheran vocation would end those battles. Indeed, all three vocations can be the scenes of fierce fighting. That is to be expected. We fight about what matters most to us, what we see as fundamental to our survival, what we believe is essential. In this, Lutherans are not at all distinctive.

Still, even in their fighting, Lutherans might have a particular vocation. Return, for a moment, to my interview question and the out I was offered. It was all right if I did not think Lutherans had made a contribution to American religion. There is a freedom in that caveat, a freedom that has woven its way through the Lutheran experience in America. When theological fights become twined with memories of being part of the establishment and fears about not just dwindling numbers but declining dominance, what is at stake for the gospel and what is simply at stake can be hard to distinguish. Lutherans, not completely but more so than some of their fellow Protestants, have distance from those concerns. As anxiety about the decline of Christianity in America takes hold in many quarters, Lutherans may be better poised, or at least differently poised, to consider what witnessing to the gospel looks like in the twenty-first century. Not as accustomed to enjoying the dominance that once came with being part of the religious mainstream, theologically predisposed to seek identity in God's grace rather than their own success, Lutherans might be a witness for a more faithful kind of theological fight.

Believing, Teaching, Confessing: A Vision for North American Lutherans

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By the first decade of the twenty-first century Lutheran churches had become indigenous in North America. In 1950 Lutherans may still have told jokes about the sacramental nature of Jell-O and coffee in a Norwegian accent, but today Lutherans simply are an integral part of the denominational landscape in the United States and Canada. They no longer struggle to cope with their status as immigrants, at least not consciously. They are us, U.S.

This confronts them with the challenge, to put it in the terms of H. Richard Niebuhr, of ascertaining how they might continue to bring "Christ"—the church—into its proper place within culture in what he called their traditional "paradoxical" way.[1] In fact, the sixteenth-century Lutheran understanding of the relationship between Christ's church and culture was not as much of a paradox as other elements of Wittenberg thought truly were. It is not paradoxical to distinguish two distinct aspects of human life, a relationship comparable to that with the parents who have given the gift of life, quite unrequested by the newborn recipient, and a relationship with siblings, for whom one has specific responsibilities according to parental obligations.[2] It is not paradoxical to recognize the difference between our relationship with our Creator and that with other creatures.

So long as they were the establishment or felt close enough to Puritan or Roman Catholic establishments in the new worlds (Australia as well as the Americas) to be comfortable with public values, Lutherans have been able to exercise thanksgiving for their cultures as gifts while exercising their critique of their cultures' sinful straying from God's ways and will. In a culture increasingly oblivious to, if not hostile to, biblical definitions of what it means to be human, Lutherans are tempted to drift into what Niebuhr labeled a "Christ of culture" stance, conforming as closely to cultural values as did nineteenth century Liberals or twentieth century German Christians. They may also be tempted to retreat into a "Christ against culture" stance that also eviscerates the insight into God's lordship in the world and the seriousness of evil bequeathed by the Wittenberg tradition. North American Christians can learn much for times like this from sisters and brothers who practiced living in this situation in the Soviet Empire or in other modern totalitarian states.

In the evolving shape of North American culture, can Lutherans be of any use to church or world in the twenty-first century? Do we have a contribution to make to our fellow believers or to the

1. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951).

2. Robert Kolb, "Niebuhr's 'Christ and Culture in Paradox' Revisited," *Lutheran Quarterly* 10 (1996): 259–279.

society at large? Attributions of "sleeping giant" and other expressions of hope for bringing the Lutheran witness to the gospel onto the agenda of the larger household of faith and into the public square have been largely disappointed, due to our own failures to make that witness effective. That has been due to a variety of reasons. In part, this failure to fulfill our own hopes and others' expectations arose from a failure to take our own treasures seriously, either by finding our immigrant origins embarrassing or by getting caught in a historical time capsule, repeating formulae that have lost their meaning. That has happened because we have too often abandoned Luther's habit of reviving the biblical message in fresh ways that communicate with an ever-changing culture. Luther spent his life experimenting with formulations while refusing to discard or compromise the biblical worldview and presentation of who God is and what it means to be human. The legacy left by him and his colleagues in Wittenberg offers an excellent basis for a vision of the future of the Lutheran church in North America in the recognition of what the Wittenberg reformers discovered 500 years ago and the spirit in which they conveyed it to their students. Both the method and the content of their theology offer a more than sufficient *raison d'être* for bold witness to that which has been passed on to us. Such a witness can enable us to responsibly fill our place within the household of faith.

Historians of religion suggest for purposes of comparison that all worldviews and philosophies of life have six elements: doctrine, narrative(s), ritual(s), ethics, views of the community, and some element that binds together, whether it be faith, or submission, or the search for nothingness.[3] Martin Luther grew up with a definition of Christianity that placed human performance of rituals, above all the mass, at the center of the relationship between God and the believer, even when divine grace played some, even an important, role in the relationship. Luther came to believe that Scripture defined Christianity as a relationship which God initiates and does so by speaking. The Creator brought reality into existence by speaking in Genesis 1. He re-creates sinners into his children by speaking, through the Word made flesh, the second person of the Trinity born as Jesus of Nazareth, and through the bestowal of the benefits wrought by Jesus Christ's death and resurrection through oral, written, and sacramental forms of the message of Christ. Luther's intense sense of the importance of personhood, both in the biblical presentation of the person of God and in the scriptural definition of being human, led him to focus on God in human flesh and blood, Jesus of Nazareth, as the one whose self-sacrifice and resurrection victory have altered the reality of human life under sin.

This regard for a very personal presentation of God and his Word as focal point and initial impetus for the trust that governs human life fits well into twenty-first century understandings of the potential for human speech as performative.[4] Indeed, Luther recognized that God's talking gospel and giving his promise of new life in Christ is actually re-creative speech. The Holy Spirit invades the prisons into which our false preferences, priorities, and predilections cast us. They bind us, and the habits of our minds resist being bent in other directions. Only God liberates.

3. Cf. Ninian Smart, *Worldviews: Cross-cultural Explorations of Human Beliefs* (New York: Scribner's, 1983), 62–158.

4. Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way,* Jeffrey G. Silcock and Mark C. Mattes, trans. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 125–138.

He frees those who miss the mark—set by God certainly but also set by each human being in some fashion or other—from the burden of our failures and from the burden of having to extricate ourselves from the consequences of our failures. Material prosperity enables us to buy time and space in which to make more false choices, but finally both patience and possibilities run out. Lutherans have a sober view of the realities of the boundness of our choices and the stubbornness of our determination to find our own way that is inherent in North American perceptions of what it means to be human. Our heritage does not provide answers that solve the mystery of the existence of sin and evil in this world or the mystery of the continuation of sin and evil in the lives of those who trust in Christ. But it does provide us with Paul's answer. God has justified himself in view of our wretchedness by coming to the cross to end sin's power over us and its grasp on our imaginations (Rom 3:26).

It is often said that Luther's theme song of justification proffers a concept that has lost its currency among modern Westerners. Oswald Bayer shows that justifying oneself is the anthem of every day in the life of most Western Europeans and North Americans.[5] We strive to justify ourselves to spouses, parents, children, employers, and fellow employees. We strive to prove our worth and existence on the sports field, on the job, in our homes, and in our neighborhoods. We are constantly asserting our own merit and value, our own right to be the person we want to be and the person we are. And we do so largely on the basis of our own performance. We are as works-righteous as the most Pelagian of Luther's contemporaries. Often we are inwardly just as filled with doubt and even despair as they were.

To those who regard themselves as less worthy than others because they do not perform as well or do not have the proper connections, God's Word comes, Luther taught, with the message that God determines reality, and he does so with his regard for them. He renders them okay by pronouncing them worthy, right, upright, forgiven. Those who are so disgusted with themselves or so apprehensive about their status at work or in their relationships in the family that they wish they were dead can come to Christ. He wants to bury their sinful identities in his tomb and to raise them up to a new life that has no need to justify itself but rather simply to live out God's love recklessly, with abandon, because Christ has justified them and secured their future forever. In Luther's German "to justify" referred not only to the judge's verdict of innocent. "Rechtfertigen" could also mean "to do justice to" a person. Luther's understanding of the justification of sinners in baptism used this definition.[6] Sinners receive their just deserts in God's justification. They are buried as sinners so that they may be re-created through the resurrection. The forensic judgment of God kills before it makes alive.

But when it makes alive, it does indeed bring forth a new creature, whose trust in the promise of God reshapes every aspect of life. It produces the fruits of faith, the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Luther understood that justification meant that the justified sinner acts like a child of God

5. Oswald Bayer, "Justification as the Basis and Boundary of Theology," *Lutheran Quarterly* 15 (2001): 273–292.

6. Werner Elert, "Deutschrechtliche Züge in Luthers Rechtfertigungslehre," in *Ein Lehrer der Kirche, Kirchlich-theologische Aufsätze und Vorträge von Werner Elert,* Max Keller-Hüschemenger, ed. (Berlin, Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1967), 23–31; Jonathan Trigg, *Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther* (Leiden, Brill, 1994), 2.

and combats temptations, killing desires to act against God's will, in daily repentance. Luther scholars have wasted much time debating whether Luther understood justification as "forensic" or "effective." As Gerhard Forde observed, "The absolutely forensic character of justification renders it effective—justification actually kills and makes alive. It is, to be sure, 'not only' forensic but that is the case only because the more forensic it is, the more effective it is!"[7] God's forensic judgment—his imputing regard and his re-creative verdict of innocent—determine reality, effectively!

The other flaw in criticizing Luther's "theme song" of justification is that it was certainly not his only way of describing what Christ does for those who trust him. The word "justification" does not occur in the Small Catechism, his primer for the faithful. Instead, Christ's saving action in dying and rising for sinners is described as "redemption," which he often defined as "liberation" in his writings. In fact, he called his primary treatise on justification *On Christian Freedom* (1520). Luther and his students did not hesitate to address guilt with their preaching of Christ's death and resurrection, but they also proclaimed him against the fears and anxieties of their hearers, against their feelings of estrangement, alienation, and abandonment, against their terrors in the face of death. "Justification" meant for them the abolition of perceptions of their own identities that threw human beings back upon themselves or their creaturely substitutes for God. It meant for his hearers the restoration of righteousness, that is, of their proper identity in God's sight, that enabled them to live out secondary identities in daily life in such a way that harmony proceeded from their love and service.

This perception of God and what he does contrasted with medieval visions more or less sharply. Luther's characterization of what it means to be human also departed from medieval definitions. First, Luther viewed the human creature not as Aristotle's *animal rationalis,* but rather as a creature who is designed above all else to fear, love, and trust in God above all his creatures.[8] Luther anticipated Erik Erikson's insights into human personhood and personality as founded on trust by more than four centuries.[9] The Wittenberg theologians followed the biblical writers in defining God as faithful and the heart of humanity as faithfulness to God, trust, confidence, and reliance on him that frees from fears and dependence on all creaturely devices, including one's own performance. This trust in the Ultimate and Absolute, as Erikson observed, permeates all human thinking and willing. It shapes our character and forms our attitudes, and that produces actions that reflect the object of our trust.

Even Saint Augustine defined the fullness of humanity in terms of human performance albeit performance enabled only by God's grace. Martin Chemnitz demarcated the Lutheran vision of humanity from that of the medieval church and its Roman Catholic successors instead as centered in God's gift of a new identity through Christ, his love-wrought regard for his children apart from any performance of their own. Chemnitz focused on

7. Gerhard Forde, *Justification by Faith: A Matter of Death and Life* (1982; Ramsey, N.J.: Sigler, 1991), 36.

8. Notger Slenczka, "Luther's Anthropology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology,* Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and Lubomir Batka, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 212–232.

9. Erik Erikson, *Child and Society* (New York: Norton, 1950); *Insight and Responsibility* (New York: Norton, 1964), esp. 81–107.

the question of what makes those who have been brought to faith in Christ righteous in God's sight. He contended that it was not, as the Council of Trent had taught, the good works of the regenerate, "the newness which the Holy Spirit works in them and the good works which follow from that renewal," but instead simply God's merciful disposition, his will that dispenses favor freely, without regard for human performance, even that of the justified. Their performance is the result, not the cause, of God's view of them.[10]

Luther called this the distinction of two kinds of righteousness.[11] This two-fold way of looking at human identity recognized one aspect of humanity that takes place and is anchored in our relationship with God. Comparable to our relationship with our parents, that relationship with God is purely his gift. He neither requested nor gained the consent of the sinner. He simply comes to create anew by burying sinful identities with Christ and restoring these individuals to life on the basis of Christ's resurrection. Parents bestow on their children their DNA, and God's promise gives this new righteousness, this new identity, to his people. Luther called that passive righteousness, an identity bestowed from outside our own power and will. But as human parents have expectations for their children and want them to mature—nearly all children stem from Lake Wobegon—so God expects his children to act out their identity as his children. Their performance cannot alter God's promise to them although, in the mystery of the continuation of sin and evil in the lives of the baptized, they can run away from home, deny their godly identity, and never return to the Father's supper table, dying on the streets of a foreign city.

In the struggles experienced as the Deceiver attacks the truth that God gives (John 8:44), Luther saw the experience that he shared with every believer. In the midst of that struggle with its *Anfechtungen*—attacks—God comes with his Word as it becomes concrete in law and gospel. The Wittenberg distinction of law and gospel simply expressed what dramatists and storytellers have known throughout human history. We have problems, and we are searching for solutions. The law comes in many forms to focus our attention on our problems. Luther realized that it did not have to be spoken. It helps us feel the cracks and aches caused by our rebellion against God in many ways. The root problem—the origin of our sinfulness—according to Luther is our failure to fear, love, and trust in God above all things. Therefore, the law works on us as perpetrators but also as victims of misbehavior, false trust, and other forms of sin and vice. Whatever points to the hole in the middle of our lives that produces false and inadequate senses of our identity, security, and meaning for life is functioning as God's reminder that we have trashed his structure and bent the hell into his shape for human life. As God's good design for being the human being he created us to be, the law quickly turns to judge, jury, and executioner when we do that.

The gospel, the promise, in contrast to the law, must be spoken, for it is a specific message delivering Jesus Christ that cannot be ascertained apart from its oral, written, and sacramental forms. The gospel restores our trust in our Creator through Christ's coming to us as the one

10. *Examination of the Council of Trent, Part I,* Fred Kramer, trans. (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1971), 481–482.

11. Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology. A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 21–128.

who has claimed our sins as his own and who presses his life upon us as the revival of our own. Luther regarded the incarnation, his obedient life, his suffering, and his ascension as necessary component parts of the story of salvation, but he centered God's restoring action in Christ's death and resurrection (Rom 4:25) and in the Holy Spirit's delivery of the benefits of his death and resurrection in the baptismal form of his Word (Rom 6:3–11).

Wittenberg theology is inherently eschatological. Luther interpreted the daily experience of the Christian as a battle between God and Satan, between the way reality really is and the deception regarding life that kills (John 8:44). His view of life speaks directly to those who are undergoing conflict within themselves and with others, who are encountering day after day disappointment, dissatisfaction, and disillusionment. The Small Catechism promises a life of drowning of all that disturbs and distresses life. It conveys the promise of the emergence of that new person we all hope—often against hope—we could be.[12] That is an attractive offer for many of our contemporaries.

Luther anchored his message in Scripture, and it alone spoke the first and last word for him in delivering God's presence, pardon, and power to human beings. But the Word acts in human lives today by rising from the biblical page into a variety of oral, written, and sacramental forms—to which we may add electronic today. The performative nature of the gospel takes place whenever the Holy Spirit wills[13] but always through his Word as it delivers Christ's goods to human beings by others. All these forms effectively build bridges to those outside the Christian faith in our day. At one time the prevailing religious culture in North America caused us to shy away from much talk of the sacraments. In the twenty-first century our fellow citizens yearn for the community that Baptism offers and that the Lord's Supper expresses. They need the concrete, material, tactile contact with the elements that accompany the Word of forgiveness and life. They crave the promise of a new start and a fresh look at self that the sacraments as well as oral and written forms of the Word of life transmit.

These thoughts could be expanded and other themes from the thoughts of the Wittenberg reformers, especially as summarized in the *Book of Concord,* added to them as potentials for translation from Luther's world into ours. One vision for North American Lutherans in the coming decades projects a bold witness to the unique specifics and the shared emphases of our tradition. That witness will give God glory and will bring the pastoral concern and care for which Lutherans have always been specialists to a society and culture searching for many of the promising answers we by our Lutheran nature can give.

12. Small Catechism, Baptism, 4, *The Book of Concord, the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church,* Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 360.11–14.

13. Augsburg Confession V, *Book of Concord*, 40.1–4 / 41.1–4.

Challenges for North American Lutheranism: A View from Canada

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In his classic work, *The Crucified God,* Jürgen Moltmann identified a tension between identity and relevance.[1] This tension is also something that Lutheran churches in North America encounter. On the one hand, they have struggled to uphold their identity as Lutheran churches, respectful of their tradition and the great theological harvest from the sixteenth century reformers. On the other hand, many Lutherans have also worked tirelessly to be a North American church, relevant and attractive to people shaped by North American culture, while moving away from a northern European ethnicity that so dominated early Lutheranism.

The tension generated between those emphasizing identity and those accentuating relevance gives a helpful insight into understanding the historical clashes between "Old Lutherans" (*altlutherisch*) who emphasized identity and the new, or "Moderate Lutherans" who were committed to being a relevant church in North America.[2] Countless debates and controversies arose among these two camps, and the resulting tensions have shaped and defined North American Lutheranism. Nor is there any sign of these tensions easing up in the near future. This tension between an emphasis on Lutheran identity and a Lutheranism relevant to society is something that will continue to shape the future of Lutheranism on this continent in at least five crucial areas that also need to be kept in a creative and healthy tension.

The tension between morality and theology

North American Lutheran churches have spent an incredible amount of energy and resources in the last twenty years fighting some major battles over "moral issues." In the current calm after the storm, so to speak, some Lutheran church bodies in North America are recovering from their wounds, while other newly established Lutheran bodies have arisen.

These battles over morality have come at a cost, however. One of the side effects of this focus on morality, at least in Canada, has been an increasing isolation of the church from society. In their preoccupation with morals, especially those surrounding same-gender marriages,[3] Lutherans have sent society a message that they are only interested in moral standards, which, at least in Canada, are quite dif-

1. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology.* R.A. Wilson and John Bowden, trans. (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 7.

2. Eric W. Gritsch, *A History of Lutheranism,* Second Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 182, 194.

3. In personal conversations, a vast majority of youth insist that same-gender marriage is not a moral issue but a matter of justice, regardless of the church's view.

ferent from those of society. These moral issues under debate are, for the most part, not even an issue for young people—even among those who still attend church with any regularity. They are not interested in the church as an institution that monitors compliance to what they consider outdated moral positions. In fact, this is one of the reasons that a recent survey revealed that a majority of Canadians feel that religion is detrimental to society.[4] They feel that the church is "out of touch."

This is not to say that the church should wash its hands of all moral issues. But when all the energy of the church is used up fighting against the moral standards accepted by a majority of Canadians, attendance and membership numbers are going to decline. One way some Lutherans have responded is to further highlight their moral positions as a counter-cultural alternative to society. This stance will always attract some. However, before making this stand, Lutherans might do well to consider Johannes Heckel's study of Luther,[5] in which he argued that moral issues derive their authority, not from scripture, but from human natural law. Thus, morality falls predominantly in the domain of the temporal, rather than spiritual realms. However, not all Lutherans accept his conclusions, thus adding to the tension.

No one would likely have heard of Luther today if he had stuck to calling for moral reforms in the society in which he lived. The monastic orders were tripping over themselves in trying to provide the most gifted moral reform preachers they could. Luther himself was assigned to this task by his superior, Johann von Staupitz.[6] Calling for moral reforms (and hierarchical and structural changes) are common practices in all societies. After all, there is always a lot of immorality and hierarchical "clutter" to criticize. That is

The revitalization or reformation of the church—and society—in North America today will not work if Lutherans insist on morality as its primary focus.

a given, when people are *simul iustus et peccator*—simultaneously justified and sinner. As a colleague has stated, "Why are we surprised when Christians do dumb, sinful, and immoral things, or try to build their own personal kingdoms?" If Luther's namesakes in North America want to take his agenda seriously and be a reforming force in the future, they need to re-examine what they are saying to society. The revitalization or reformation of the church—and society—in North America today will not work if Lutherans insist on morality as its primary focus, as important as it may be. Morality is the fruit of reformed lives and churches, not

4. Teresa Smith, Postmedia News, "Religion is harmful, many Canadians say," *Saskatoon Star Phoenix,* (Saturday, September 24, 2011).

5. Johannes Heckel, *Lex Charitatis: A Juristic Disquisition on Law in the Theology of Martin Luther,* Gottfried G. Krodel, trans. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

6. Franz Posset, *The Front-Runner of the Catholic Reformation: The Life and Works of Johann von Staupitz.* St Andrews Studies in Reformation History (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 7–30.

its starting point. Besides, if reforming the church and society through moral demands has not worked for nearly 2000 years, it is foolhardy to think this will suddenly change now.

Starting with moral standards will always be an obstacle to any deep reform. People will either be pushed away if they feel judged for their continued moral lapses, or else they will be misled into thinking that their good moral lives indicate they are leading the race to capture God's heart. Judging people only on moral standards too easily collapses the reality of being simultaneously justified and sinners into an unhealthy—and unrealistic—one dimensional church.

If Lutherans want to keep a healthy tension between identity and relevance, it will be necessary to promote a deliberate focus on justification by grace through faith, as both a basis for pastoral care of the neighbor and as a transformative word. An emphasis on justification, as Sarah Ruble notes, remains necessary.[7] It is necessary for at least two reasons: one, because God's word of grace, promise, and life is a word that counters the quest for self-justification (as she notes), but also because it forces the church to re-examine its use of the law, within the law-gospel dichotomy. Hopefully, Lutherans can recapture the law's focus on original sin, the attempt to be gods in God's place, rather than morality.[8] As Luther notes in the Large Catechism, it is because of this original sin of trying to be gods in God's place, or to trust their life to anything or anyone other than the Living God, that a person commits sins and acts immorally.[9] To simply tighten up moral standards does not address the cause of these moral lapses. Hence, Lutherans will need to move beyond the idea that preaching the law is simply condemning moral sins, to identifying sin as the chronic human condition that insists that everything is "all about me." Until that happens, the message of justification will be dismissed by a North American society holding different moral standards than the church. A focus on theology, especially on justification as the restoration of damaged, broken, and hurting relationships with God and society, on the other hand, may provide Lutherans a voice that society is willing to consider. The death knells will toll for Lutherans, however, if the proclamation of the gospel is drowned out by a fixation on morality.

The tension between justice and justification

In 1987, the journal *Word and World* devoted an issue to the theme of "Justification and Justice." In his introduction, Arland Hultgren ably stated the tension between the two:

> There are at least two ways of relating the two themes. One is to say that by means of justification a person is set free from any and all preoccupations with seeking God's favor and is thereby directed to the world to seek justice for all of God's children. Another is to say that justification and justice belong together in the singular action of God to set things right—both in the divine-human relationship and in

7. Sarah Ruble, "The Lutheran Vocation in America: Past, Present, and Future" above, page 272.

8. The article on original sin (rather than a discussion on morality) is prior to the one on justification (Article IV) of the Augsburg Confession. Justification addresses original sin. Luther's definition of sin as trying to be gods in God's place is taken from Luther's letter to George Spalatin of June 30, 1530; LW 49:337.

9. LC I.1-4, 48.

> the relationship between people—liberating people from death and recreating life for all; and so the gospel of justification without the summons to justice fails to attend to the totality of the biblical witness concerning God's work and will.[10]

The forgiveness of sins, of being made right with God and the neighbor, is a justice issue and not just a theological doctrine.

While justification and justice are related in at least these two ways, Lutherans have not always kept these two in a healthy tension. A quick glance at recent church publications and minutes from national and international Lutheran assemblies would give one the impression that justice, not justification, has become the primary focus for many Lutherans. While applauding this passion for justice in Lutheranism, it cannot come at the expense of justification. The tendency that Lutherans will face in the future is to forget to keep these in a healthy tension. The forgiveness of sins, of being made right with God and the neighbor, is a justice issue and not just a theological doctrine. Whatever way Lutherans chose to relate justice and justification, the two will both need to be emphasized.

Lutherans will also need to be careful to not discard justice and justification for the sake of "being nice to each other" in ecumenical conversations. Being nice to each other is not enough when confronted with difficult divisive issues. While Lutherans must engage ecumenically in society, justice and justification cannot be put aside. To do so would be to lose Lutheran identity and relevance.

The tension between comfortable cocooning and challenging engagement

In *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church,* Kenda Creasy Dean bluntly states that American Christians are "restless people who come to church for the same reason people once went to diners: for someone to serve us who knows our name, for a filling stew that reminds us of home and makes us feel loved, even while it does a number on our spiritual cholesterol."[11] One way this "comfort" is fostered, suggests Dean, is through the dominant religion practiced in America, namely, a "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" or "moral nicety." As the Canadian sociologist Reginald Bibby notes, most religious Canadians claim that being generous and nice to others is important.[12] This comfort is also sought through "cocooning," a popular term in society that describes a withdrawing from the world into "gated communities." North Americans, including Lutherans, are clearly uncomfortable around those who are "different," espe-

10. Arland J. Hultgren, "Justification and Justice," *Word and World,* Vol. 7 No. 1 (Winter, 1987): 3.

11. Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 8.

12. Reginald Bibby, *Beyond the Gods and Back: Religion's Demise and Rise and Why It Matters* (Lethbridge: Project Canada Books, 2011), 153.

cially Evangelicals. Bibby discovered that 31% of all Canadians (including 50% of those who are non-religious) claim they would feel uneasy around a born-again Christian—compared to only 18% who felt uncomfortable around Muslims. Whenever theology is "pushed," even by those "in their own camp," defenses rise. The response is to cocoon.

Among many young people however, cocooning is replaced by challenging engagement. For example, "service/working vacations" such as those offered by Global Volunteers,[13] GlobeAware Adventures in Service,[14] or the ELCA's Young Adults in Global Mission[15] programs are rapidly growing in popularity. Rather than cocooning, there are growing numbers of Lutherans who want to engage the world. They will give credibility to those seeking opportunities for justice and service. As this tension plays out in Lutheranism, it remains to be seen whether these two polarities are mutually exclusive or complementary.

The tension between technician leadership and theologically grounded pastors

Another challenge that Lutherans will have to face in the near future concerns what they seek in terms of leadership standards. There is great pressure to refocus theological education from training pastors who can "think the faith," to simply equipping facilitators as "religious technicians." Significant numbers of small congregations cannot support pastors with eight years of university and seminary training (and their corresponding high student debt). It takes less time to train leadership technicians. Certainly, it is important to engage all the baptized in living the faith in society, and to move away from a "Herr Pastor" model of leadership. But at the same time, the Lutheran churches will have to decide if they still need theologically trained leaders who can think their way through the complex issues that Lutheran churches and society are going to face in the future. Nor can the training end with competently skilled technician-leaders and theologian-pastors. To thrive, Lutheran churches will need to engage all the baptised in the art of thinking theologically and building engaged, gospel-centered communities. Living the way of Christianity, including Lutheranism, cannot be, nor has it ever been, a spectator sport.[16] A healthy tension is needed between theological insight and skills at doing tasks competently, for both clergy and laity.

The tension between Lutheranism as an institution and movement

Lutheranism originally developed as a movement of reform within an institutional church. Over a short period of time, however, this movement became institutionalized.[17] As a movement, Lutheranism focused on proclaiming the

13. http://www.globalvolunteers.org/ accessed December 5, 2014.

14. http://www.globeaware.org/, accessed November 27, 2014.

15. http://www.elca.org/Our-Work/Global-Church/Global-Mission/Young-Adults-in-Global-Mission, accessed November 27, 2014.

16. Daniel Erlander, *Baptized, We Live: Lutheranism as a Way of Life* (Chelan, Wash.: Holden Village, 1981).

17. The institutionalization of Lutheranism can be marked with the development of *Church Orders (Kirchordnungen)* and the formation of the "State Church" in sixteenth century Europe.

gospel. Luther himself called the church a "mouth-house" or community (*Gemeinde*) rather than a *Kirche* (an institutional church).[18] Its primary purpose is to proclaim the gospel, which, in simplest terms, is the "forgiveness of sins."[19] The basic job description of the "mouth-house" church is to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments.[20] Without this, the church will lose its Lutheran identity.

It is very tempting, however, to focus on restructuring institutions in times of stress, rather than the message the church should be proclaiming.

There is, however, also an institutional aspect to the church. This allows the church to organize itself and relate to others with some modicum of structure and authority. While Lutheran churches on this continent are organized in a variety of ways, their structures have been indispensable for both Lutheran identity and to help the church engage contemporary society. It is very tempting, however, to focus on restructuring institutions in times of stress, rather than the message the church should be proclaiming. Lutheran churches have placed a lot of energy into restructuring the institution. It's the default mode for churches. Even Luther recognized that the church of his time was tempted to focus on structural things. When a call went out for a council to renew the church, he expressed his skepticism:

> Nothing of salutary worth, nothing of sacraments, the faith which alone makes righteous and blessed, nothing of good works and pious ways and living piously. Rather, all they will discuss is the work of fools and children, the length of the vestments that pastors and preachers are to wear, how wide their cinctures should be, which rules should be added to further control nuns and monks and further confuse them as to when foods and drinks are to be consumed, and other puppet works.[21]

The focus on restructuring adiaphora, in order to "modernize" the church, however, will not make it more attractive to people. Most people in North American society are cautious or even highly skeptical of all institutions and their leaders, including the church.[22] In Canada, there has been a significant decrease in the number of people attending worship or affiliating with an institutional church, yet engagement in personal spiritual practices has remained stable.[23] This suggests that

18. LW 75:39, n. 36; LW 75:51, n.72.

19. LW 36:56 (*The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,* 1520).

20. AC VII.1-2.

21. WABr 5,638.41-639.4. No. 6388.

22. A 2014 Gallop Poll shows that in the United States, less than 50% of people surveyed had confidence in most major institutions, including churches and religion. The only institutions that more than 50% of the people trusted were the military, small businesses, and police. http://www.gallup.com/poll/1597/Confidence-Institutions.aspx, accessed November 28, 2014. In Canada, already by 1995, less than 50% of the people had confidence in any institution (including only 36% having confidence in religious groups), except for the police. Reginald Bibby, *The Bibby Report: Social Trends Canadian Style* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1995), 110.

23. In 2008, 20% of women and 26%

people are moving away from institutionalized religion.

Thus, the tension remains. Institutional structures cannot detract from the

People are looking for the gospel that transforms lives, relationships, and society.

task of proclaiming the gospel. To avoid extinction, the "mouth-house" movement of Lutheran identity will need to temper the focus on the institution. People are looking for the gospel that transforms lives, relationships, and society. The structures of the church will need to be oriented around this proclamation of good news.

Conclusion

Many of the tensions described above are tensions Lutherans in North America have been facing ever since they first came to this continent. Others, such as the recent tension between ecumenical identity and Lutheran identity, will also need to be dealt with. In an attempt to be both relevant and faithful to their identity, Lutherans have struggled to be a church engaged in society without being "of the world" or totally against the world.[24] In a world that is increasingly secular, multifaith, and multicultural, the struggle has intensified. Should Lutheranism refocus its energy on being a movement, even if it means an end to its comfortable institutional structures? Is it enough to simply focus on the gospel and God's justification? Will Lutheranism keep morality from becoming its *raison d'être*? Will shifts in leadership requirements change Lutheranism into something that the reformers themselves would not recognize? Will Lutheranism overcome its tendency to cocoon (theologically, ethnically, and socially), and instead engage the world? How Lutheranism develops remains to be seen. What is exciting, however, is to see the creative and life-giving possibilities that are being discovered by Lutherans in the attempt to be relevant in North America without losing their identity as living proclaimers of the gospel.

of men reported no religious affiliation. "However, 42% of women and 31% of men … said their religious or spiritual beliefs were 'very important' to the way they live." Only "31% of women and 26% of men attended a religious service at least once a month." Statistics Canada, *Canada Year Book 2012*. Catalogue no. 11-402-X (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2012). 426. http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-402-x/2012000/pdf-eng.htm accessed November 28, 2014.

24. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951) suggested five approaches to society, models that must still be considered today, including "Christ against Culture," "The Christ of Culture," and "Christ and Culture in Paradox."

The ELCA at the 500th anniversary of the Reformation

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This essay, part of an ensemble by writers from Lutheran churches in the United States in anticipation of the next celebration of the Reformation, will focus on the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). The complex history of the ELCA, involves a century of mergers from 1917, 1930, 1960, 1962, to 1987. It is a history of adapting and giving up cherished and familiar patterns, practical decision making and confidence, now built into the marrow of the church. It is important to recognize and appreciate that those who merged let go of all of the networks and connections that an autonomous history entailed, but gained broader responsibilities and greater visibility.

One hundred years ago, U.S. Lutherans prepared for the 400th anniversary of the Reformation. Those who worked on the 1917 event had high hopes that this would make Lutheranism better known to Americans coming of age in the new century. They expected that the celebration would highlight the contributions Lutherans made to religious freedom and democracy. They sought to project an American identity. This opportunity to articulate what Luther, the German reformer, could mean to Americans was foiled by the war against Germany. European guests invited to attend celebrations could not travel and promoters de-emphasized the Germanness of Luther. To downplay American Lutheran identity with Germany, a special calendar of commemoration featured the "greats" of American Lutheranism, coursing through Muhlenberg, Schmucker, Hasselquist, and Walther, including, of course the Iowa Synod's Fritschel brothers.[1]

The organizers of the anniversary celebration monitored the image of Lutherans in the press, and when the United States entered the war, they engineered the signing of a statement of loyalty to the United States by the three Lutheran presidents of the General Synod, General Council, and United Synod of the South. Such common action and promotion was deemed necessary to overcome the reputation that Lutherans had for standing aloof from the cultural life of the nation. Those streams of Lutheran experience that have come to the fore in the ELCA have sought to reckon with challenges by making adjustments, adapting to new situations, and accepting that changes will be necessary to remain faithful. A vocational obedience

1. Missouri, Augustana, and the Norwegian churches were also included along with John Bachman of the United Synod of the South, and Samuel Simon Schmucker contested leader of the General Synod. It was an eclectic group.

to God's future characterizes the ELCA.

The ELCA carries this orientation forward, not because the ELCA endorses everything that American society presents for consumption, but because ELCA seminaries, congregations, agencies, schools, and programs do not perceive themselves as alien to the culture in which they seek to work and serve. God has placed us here to be in the world as a church that listens, serves, and gives. Our seminaries are all accredited and measure up to the standards of professional theological education, so too our colleges, and our care facilities. We have adopted the language of social services for our diaconal work. As a church, the ELCA accepts that it is a part of a conflicted, less than perfect world, in which God provides the power and will to serve others. Congregations and individuals experience the sinful, broken nature of our lives together, situated as we are as imperfect beings in a society that we do not control. The calling we receive as Christians, however, is one that frees us for service and witness. Weaknesses need to be acknowledged, but do not ultimately define us, as our theology strongly affirms. We are both saints and sinners. So, too, there is in this confession a confidence that God gives us, every day, new energy to rejoice and serve.

In this review of the prospects for the ELCA, I focus on three areas: diaconal and service ministries, ecumenical and intercultural relationships, and young adult leadership. They provide my best guess as to what will be an enduring legacy of the ELCA into the next generation.

Diaconal and service orientation

Shrewd planning created Lutheran orphanages out of government-funded homes for orphans of the Civil War. Lutheran groups in the Midwest founded orphanages and homes for the aged so that vulnerable children, elderly, and infirm could get care in their own language. Lutherans caring for their own were inspired by William A. Passavant, a pastor and indefatigable promoter, who started hospitals and then prayed for them to succeed, and who also brought deaconesses from Europe and plopped them into place with a local pastor, hoping that it would work. Passavant's newspaper, *The Lutheran Worker*, brought social needs and ministries to light, and provided a way for Lutherans to support each other. Each of the several Lutheran groups competed to be more generous, responsive, and visible in their benevolent work. Focus on diaconal ministries was a way for women to be involved, and it also helped to sideline incessant doctrinal squabbles and personality feuds that filled the church newspapers.

The organization it takes to be up to speed on messaging, to seize brief moments when the world is paying attention, and to muster a collective voice showcases skills and commitments of a denomination that seeks partners and invests its message in language conversant with civil society. In the world, where we live as citizens, God calls us to be workers, caretakers, minders of each other. Our neighbor lives here and needs us. This emphasis on the material circumstances of the world, which orients us to have pity for our neighbor, also pushes us to respond compassionately when we vote. This is an interpretation of Lutheranism that goes beyond a devotional pietism to stretch into social action. Along with fellow churches in the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), the ELCA works to understand and respond to issues of climate justice, food security, and poverty through coordinated responses with other relief agencies. Lutheran theology

teaches us that none of these good actions will save us, or make God love us more, but they do help our neighbor. Another ELCA conviction is that when we help our neighbor, the gospel will sound in those actions.

I use the word diaconal to describe service ministries because the term has theological and biblical resonance making it recognizable around the world, especially for churches in the LWF. Social Services terminology in use in the civil realm made our ministries transparent to the public and helped make Lutheran agencies eligible for public funding. The ELCA predecessors greatly expanded capacity through adopting standards to comply with this expanded funding, such as ramping up professional competence in all areas of service and accounting to be eligible to receive Medicaid, Medicare, welfare and housing subsidies. As Lutheran diaconal ministries received funding from new sources, they grew less dependent on church member support, and in part lost touch with an explicit Lutheran identity.

Having accomplished the internal work of professionalizing these ministries, leaders have more recently ramped up attention to their Lutheran identity. A coordinated network called Lutheran Services in America (LSA) serves as an umbrella network for ELCA and the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS) agencies, to improve elder care, health, adoption, disability, and other social services.[2] The LSA makes Lutheran ministries visible, and consequential, even while relationships between church bodies have become more strained. Roughly two-thirds of the agencies affiliate with the ELCA. Coordination between the ELCA and LCMS is difficult due to their fundamental disagreement over homosexuality.[3] Because these diaconal ministries are so valuable to both churches, there is a reluctance to let the doctrinal and social differences marking the ELCA and LCMS undermine their diaconal commitments. This important vocational reflex, or obedience, is certainly one reason that I have marked this aspect of the ELCA's identity as enduring.

Diaconal ministry has a prophetic dimension. On the day President Obama signed the executive order protecting undocumented immigrants from deportation,[4] the ELCA Conference of Bishops, along with the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS), issued statements endorsing the action, based on the principle of welcome. "Stand for Welcome," a banner statement of the LIRS, continues their work begun in 1939 when Lutherans organized a system to receive and resettle displaced refugees from World War II.[5] Based on concern for other

2. Founded in 1997, Lutheran Services in America (LSA) is the umbrella organization linking more than 300 Lutheran nonprofit ministries throughout the United States and the Caribbean. As one of the largest and most effective health and human services networks in the country, LSA works to connect and empower our diverse member organizations to provide the very best care. Our members reach 6 million people annually, touching the lives of 1 in every 50 Americans every year. http://www.lutheranservices.org/AboutUs accessed December 19, 2014.

3. LCMS convention decisions have ended official budgetary support by the LCMS itself for any shared ministry with the ELCA, such as Lutheran World Relief and Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, though LCMS congregations and individuals continue support for ministries with an approved ministry designation.

4. November 20, 2014.

5. Richard W. Solberg, *As between*

Lutherans, this ministry has become the second largest U.S. resettlement agency, second only to Catholic charities.[6]

The ELCA is poised to make public statements because they see this action as deeply evangelical: a speaking of the gospel to the world. Any moment when the church's message of welcome can be proclaimed, the ELCA is ready and eager to speak. Basing their statement on "Toward Compassionate, Just and Wise Immigration Reform," a social policy resolution on immigration adopted by the ELCA Church Council in 2009, the Conference of Bishops had at their fingertips language they needed to be spot ready for political developments in Washington, D.C.[7] The ELCA is prepared to speak publicly because they wish to speak to the broadest, most-diverse public that they can reach, committed to making known that the church's message begins with the foundation of welcome: God equips us to reach out and serve others, without any preconditions.

Diaconal ministries are actively present in congregations. The annual "God's work. Our hands." Labor Day Sunday brings Lutherans into neighborhoods. Service opportunities at youth gatherings, summer mission trips, and campus ministry programs make diaconal ministry familiar to youth. The volunteer spirit and generosity support the popular hunger appeal and disaster relief efforts. In mobilizing to serve others, ELCA Lutherans give expression to gratitude, and learn the lesson of giving: when you help others you become stronger. God's hand is at work in the generous response, and this transcends dogma, race, worship style, whether women say anything useful for men to hear, or any other hurdles designed to impede relationships between people. Diaconal ministry sustains churches. As God forgives and frees us, and empowers us to serve, we grow in faith. This is why diaconal work will continue to define the ELCA into the future.

Ecumenical and intercultural

A commitment to Christian unity and cultural diversity inspired the leaders who shaped the 1987 merger. Using the clumsy and controversial quota system for representation, the ELCA attempted to move beyond an ethnic heritage and make diversity a goal. This was not new. Decades of work focused on urban ministry and mission strategies that sought to overcome social barriers, geographical realities, and political structures were underway in the several Lutheran churches in the 1970s as a response to racial injustice and white flight. Urban ministry pushed the ELCA to experiment further, choosing social justice models rather than individual conversion as a mission strategy. Community development and organizing went hand-in-hand with evangelical Lutheran witness.[8] Cross-cultural ministries chal-

Brothers: The Story of Lutheran Response to World Need (Augsburg, 1957), passim, and *Open doors: the story of Lutherans resettling refugees,* (Concordia, 1992).

6. The Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, a ministry supported by the ELCA and LCMS, was on that same day on hand in Texas, running a conference on immigration.

7. "Toward Compassionate, Just and Wise Immigration Reform," http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Immigration_ReformSPR09.pdf, accessed December 3, 2014.

8. A good description of the distinctive approaches of the three Lutheran groups is covered in Richard Luecke, "Themes of Lutheran Urban Ministry, 1945-1985" in *Churches, Cities, and Human*

lenged local congregations to seek collaboration with other Christian churches and religious groups. In encountering other churches, the ecumenical movement gave Lutherans a way to look at their own heritage as a resource to foster relationships with other Christians. Ecumenical work achieved unprecedented recognition among Christian churches, and pushed them to identify first what they held in common before focusing on differences. Ecumenical dialogue on an international level, moreover, achieved concrete milestones: The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ) between the Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity of the Roman Catholic Church was endorsed by the ELCA in 1997, then signed in historic Wittenberg, on June 25, 1999, the anniversary of the signing of the Augsburg Confession. Full communion relationships with several mainline Protestant churches have also committed the ELCA to deep partnerships, and to mutual admonition and practical adjustments.

Investment in ecumenical relations fosters further work in interfaith relationships, particularly a focus on repairing, even apologizing for Martin Luther's extremely harsh statements about the Jewish people. Through dialogues carried on through the Lutheran World Federation, the ELCA experiences reconciliation and forgiveness with the Anabaptist/Mennonite family of churches and with the Roman Catholic Church. Other dialogues with the Orthodox and Pentecostal traditions make good on the commitments of the ELCA to seek new relationships and to seek forgiveness for the wrongs that have occurred in our history. In this way, the ecumenical, and increasingly the interreligious, dimensions of the ELCA's mission keep us honest as a church and call us to account for our ministry and proclamation in the world.

The future prospects of the ELCA as a church depend upon the integrity of its witness, and this means accountability. The ELCA honors and stewards its confessional identity by testing it, presenting it, rehearsing it, and applying it in the light and scrutiny of the voices and commitments of other faith traditions. As a church, the ELCA is applying its confessional tradition to new challenges. God's welcome to us triggers hospitality toward new cultural communities; a hospitality that also changes us. Such welcoming does not build a fortress.

Ecumenical work forces us to be transparent. Bilateral dialogues that once secluded themselves until they had a technical report have emerged into the web-light, for example there is a Facebook page for the Episcopal and ELCA joint commission. Social media colonizes the networks that institutional forms of dialogue have created. The ELCA social media has created online conversations about theology, worship, ecumenical outreach, diaconal work, fostering further the stance of open engagement to build trust through being publicly accountable and known.

The competitive, market-oriented patterns often lure churches into antagonism and separate enclaves, but should define the horizon of an ELCA congregation. To pay attention only to local concerns, for instance, would understandably result in a small vision and a small-minded congregation. Young people outgrow things, like faith, or generosity, that is too small.

Young adults

Much of what I say here also ap-

Community: Urban Ministry in the United States, 1945-1985, Clifford Green, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 123–150.

plies to active seniors. There could be an intergenerational alliance.

Forming new leaders for a global church, the ELCA has leveraged its diaconal, intercultural, and ecumenical commitments to help members experience their faith in partnership with a much larger communion of Christians. This expanded self-awareness has triggered efforts to define the ELCA as having a fourth expression beyond that of congregation, synod, and the churchwide organization, one that recognizes the important worldwide existence and importance of the international, cross-cultural, and boundary-crossing reality of the church.[9] Young adults in the ELCA will live and serve into the time when national boundaries mean less, and international work is more necessary. In the challenging issue of climate change, the Lutheran World Federation chose to send a delegation that was entirely made up of young adults from Asia, Africa, Latin America, Europe, and North America. Climate change has become a human rights issue also, bringing in advocates from those churches and civil organizations that are committed to development work. They see the effects of climate change in their aid work. There are connections between climate degradation and violence, and justice issues that cross boundaries of nation, race, and generation. The Lutheran World Federation, Lutheran World Relief, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, and civil organizations—like Habitat for Humanity—or climate justice groups much too numerous to mention, are important partners for us when we think about the future ministry of the ELCA. Young people and young adults especially hone their conscience in these social justice venues.

Young adults, active seniors, and other ELCA members seek ways to explore how their faith brings them into active service in new venues, even international friendships. Synodical partnerships with other LWF churches provide opportunities for exchanges.

The ELCA's Global Mission unit taps the leadership potential of ELCA young adults (age 20-29) as volunteers. Young Adults in Global Mission (YAGM) keeps growing. The 60 selected this year could have been doubled with similarly effective candidates; funding needs to expand in order to keep pace with the expanding interest. Volunteers serve in countries that presently include Argentina and Uruguay, Cambodia, Hungary, Jerusalem/West Bank, Madagascar, Mexico, Rwanda, southern Africa (South Africa and Swaziland) and Great Britain. YAGMs hold alumni gatherings, and continue advocacy work from their year of service; they have learned the way that a denomination works. YAGMs who served in the Jerusalem/West Bank program gain a perspective on Middle East politics anchored in actual relationships with congregations and schools where they also worked. They know what the separation wall feels like, and the indignity of check points in the hands of border guards.

Outdoor ministry, a fixture in the history of Lutheran churches for almost a century, has been responsible for stimulating much creativity among ELCA Lutherans. The 135 affiliated camp and conference centers rely on young adults to staff their programs. These young adults hone leadership skills, discover the wider church, and discover their vocations. Seminary admissions departments know

9. An ELCA task force working on ways to recognize the global dimension of the ELCA's commitments and identity presented their work in progress to the Association of Teaching Theologians at their 2014 meeting at Luther Seminary.

that many candidates hear God's call in outdoor ministry. Programs that enlist the energy and commitment of young adults further, like the Lutheran Volunteer Corps (LVC), similarly help young adults to see the church's relevance in the public realm. The LVC was modeled on the Jesuit Volunteer Corps and the Mennonite program for its youth, and shows that ecumenical relationships have a stimulating effect.[10] Volunteers have been significantly shaped by this experience to see the way that the church can be a public witness and advocate.

Individuals who gain this experience know its value, but the full potential of the ELCA's investment in their rising leadership, trained both in global and national connections, is yet to be realized. These ambassadors are able to experience on the ground how the justice issues we need to work on cross boundaries of generation, race, religion, and nation, and can also tell us, personally, how to create and foster long-term relationships with ecumenical and interreligious partners, as they make friends wherever they work. As committed Christians, these young adults are an indispensable personal and leadership resource for the ELCA, as it lives into fuller commitments to its diaconal, ecumenical, and intercultural future. The church will gain by the measure of its capacity to integrate into its own life the experiences and accomplishments that young adults have made already. The ELCA is working to find ways to incorporate new leadership to foster a vibrant, gospel community life, one globally and locally connected. Congregations are enriched and strengthened through the extension of their ministries. This is something built into the marrow of the body of Christ: through mutual recognition of ministries, fellowship, and prayer, we know each other as members of that same body around the world. The ELCA is not alone in its ministry, but joined by many partners.

10. http://www.lutheranvolunteercorps.org/index.cfm/history, accessed December 22, 2014.

2517 AD

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I am a Lutheran pastor of thirty plus years with a pastor's heart for the gospel of Jesus Christ. Over my short years in the pulpit I have witnessed much turmoil, change, upheaval, assimilation, schism, birth, death, arguments, agreements, stability, and growth happen in North American Lutheranism. Therefore to project into the future by 500 years is not only daunting, it is overwhelming.

I could be a simplistic realist and say it will be more of the same and end my contribution right there. And I believe I would be correct. Or I could proclaim the Lord's return and go mute and wait. However, I believe there is more to be said.

I believe in our North American culture of Postmodernism now is the time for Lutherans to crystalize a faithful and pragmatic theology of discipleship.

I cannot begin to paint a picture for the future without stepping back and looking at the landscape to cast a vision. I believe Lutheranism has a profound treasure in the Lutheran Confessions, many agencies of Christian service and great congregational legacies. My concern is in the area of discipleship within Lutheran circles. We have a tremendous expression of the Law and Gospel dynamic, but seem to be very sheepish in sharing that wonderful message. This perhaps is nothing new, but I believe in our North American culture of Postmodernism now is the time for Lutherans to crystalize a faithful and pragmatic theology of discipleship.

I know what some of you are thinking, "Oh great, here is another one of those 'discipleship technique fad' people!" I know it seems to be all the rage right now to talk about discipleship and books are being cranked out on the subject. Many of these works I find theologically suspect when they devolve into a works righteousness I often call "Neo-Phariseeism."

What I can't shake, nor do I want too, are Jesus' words in Matt 28:19–20a, often translated as, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."[1]

Many of us agree with God's objective, but we are often hesitant or confused for whatever reason to discover our call in that objective. Or we turn the passage into a list of imperatives that we can ac-

1. All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted, (Crossway, 2011).

complish, throwing the gospel out with the baptismal water and returning to the self-centered perception that we can accomplish it on our own.

I have found something striking in this passage when examining the Greek. There are not four imperatives for us as the passage is often translated but rather one. The others are participles. The first is *poreuthentes*, which is an aorist passive plural participle with the sense of "having been coming and going." It is in the predicate position so we might start the translation as "After having been coming and going then."

The second participle is *baptizontes*, which is an active present plural also in the predicate position, which has the meaning of "while baptizing." The third, *didaskontes*, is also an active present plural participle in the predicate position, which could be translated as "while teaching."

The only imperative is *mathēteusate*, which presents all kinds of interesting issues in translating. It is an aorist imperative rather than a present. A present imperative would suggest making discipleship an ongoing life style repeated over and over. An aorist imperative implies a decisive choice or a completion of an action. It is a verb of disciple of which English has no such verb. Disciple is a noun in English. Often the choice is made in translating to render the phrase "make disciples." I think the Greek is conveying a sense of "discipling" which captures an emphasis on following Christ while helping others to follow Christ as well, being and making disciples if you will. In reality, I am not sure one can disciple others if they are not a disciple themselves.

We are to disciple all the *ethnē* (accusative neuter plural noun) meaning all the Gentiles, the pagans, the foreign nations, the peoples. Imagine instead of thinking of an amorphous geography to evangelize, we focus on a specific pagan neighbor to disciple. Would we even know how to begin?

I don't have a PhD in New Testament Greek, but just ponder the possibility of Matt 28:19–20 reading "After having been coming and going (in life) then 'commit to' 'disciple' all the pagans 'you know,' 'disciple' them while baptizing them into the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 'disciple' them while teaching them to observe all just as I instructed you."

I realize in certain Lutheran circles there is suspicion of works righteousness in such activity, but let's be clear on the Law and Gospel dynamic and the role of the Holy Spirit in our sanctification. We "disciple" not to be saved, but rather we "disciple" because we have been saved. I fear without an intentional conversation about a Lutheran understanding of discipleship, Lutheranism may not be around in 500 years.[2]

I fear without an intentional conversation about a Lutheran understanding of discipleship, Lutheranism may not be around in 500 years.

Despite our rich tradition of a solid theological understanding of the theology

2. For a great starting point in contemporary writing see Mark Mattes, "Discipleship in Lutheran Perspective," *Lutheran Quarterly* (Volume XXVI, 2012), 142–163.

of the cross, the Law and Gospel dynamic and the priesthood of all believers, Lutherans have, are and will be tempted by "church-isms" to draw us from keeping our eyes on the cross of Christ. At best they are a distraction for the church, at worst they can become a new gospel within the church.[3] Let me share some of what I consider potential pitfalls and challenges for us today and into the future.

Culturalism

Lutherans have long been tempted to find identity in ethnic cultural habits and behaviors. This tended to insulate the church from reaching out to others not of a particular ethnic culture and even relating to other Lutherans. I would argue that our cultural identity should be found in following Christ, which will probably call us to a life that is counter-cultural to the world. This is called discipleship.

Confessionalism

I know you are probably asking, "I thought proper confessional expression is a necessary thing?" I would respond, "It is!" The danger is when a proper theological expression becomes idolatrous and tries to usurp God and become the thing of worship! Studying under James Nestingen in Lutheran Confessions set a fire within me to understand how the Scriptures and confessions could empower me as a pastor to disciple others in the faith of Jesus Christ. The confessions give me tools to witness the Gospel and the recognition that it is the Holy Spirit who brings the faith.

Pietism

Pietism argues for personal faith and holiness lived out in the life of the believer. While sounding good it stands in direct opposition to the Lutheran premise of the theology of the cross. Ironically the danger for many discipleship movements today is the lifting up of the individual. Many come up with a prescribed procedure in their religiosity and seeming devotion to God, while in reality they are lifting themselves up and diminishing the power of God. It can become the Garden of Eden all over again where we seek to be our own god.

Spiritualism

Spiritualism can walk a very close line with pietism. Spiritualism can speak of being free in the spirit while at the same time looking suspiciously at those who do not engage in the same spiritual activities. For instance I have heard some say one can learn how to speak in tongues **with practice**. To me this does not sound like a true gift but rather something we do, a pietism disguised in "spiritual" activities. Discipleship does not lead us to just a new spiritual high, but rather to Christ.

Socialism

I am not using the term "socialism," as it is traditionally understood within the context of Marxism. Rather I am using it as a new gospel where the church finds its identity solely in social reform and political activism. Helping the poor flows out of our discipleship relationship with Christ, but it cannot replace salvation through Jesus Christ with the salvation of the world through our charitable deeds and political involvement. The danger in this is we may ultimately be pointing to ourselves and all we have done instead of what Christ has done for us.

Structuralism

There are some in the church who act as if the church can only be structured in one way or another. They argue for bishops or against bishops. They argue for hier-

3. Note 2 Cor 11:1–6.

archical or congregational answers. They point their fingers at the inadequacy of other positions. If one looks to Scripture, what you find is not so much an endorsement for a particular structure but rather a focus on the character of church leaders. This is a discipleship issue.

Ecumenism

Like many of the other "isms," ecumenism can, on the surface, seem noble and right, but lurking within can be the lure of a new gospel. I fear the desire to create our church in our likeness, because by doing so it flies in the face of the fundamental understanding that this is Christ's church and Christ's Holy Spirit who brings unity and mission. I believe the focus of ecumenism should be how God's Holy Spirit can lead us to carry out the co-mission of the Great Commission. This is discipleship in action.

Legalism

Nomism has raised its head in the life of the church throughout its history. While many legalistic proponents in the church would deny that they are promoting works righteousness for salvation, by their actions you would find it easy to believe otherwise. Behind legalism are usually issues of power, control, and self-justification, which stand in stark contrast to being a disciple rooted in the grace of Jesus Christ.

Secularism

There are some in the church engaged in secularism disguised as outreach. The thought is if we just look and act more like the world and less like the church we will be attractive to people outside the church. I understand this thinking as being similar to Paul's words.[4] The danger is to throw out the gospel with the churchliness. I have heard some argue to eliminate the confession of sins and absolution from worship because it is a downer. They are afraid of hurting people's feelings. This becomes a very slippery slope. Fortunately Christ himself prayed for us.[5] As the phrase goes, "We are to be in but not of the world."

Traditionalism

Traditionalism can be a safeguard for the church and at the same time it can be a barrier to outreach. For me the traditionalism question should be, is it preserving the proclamation of the gospel or is it preserving something I like, something that makes me comfortable or nostalgic. If it is the latter, I am more likely to have a conversation to let it go if it is becoming problematic in gospel proclamation. The church should never sacrifice mission just because we have never done it that way before!

So now that I have probably ruffled the feathers of every sector of Lutheranism, let me proceed in a more positive vein. I believe the fundamental call of the church by our Savior is found in Matt 28:19–20. I know that is not a very earthshaking statement, but do we really believe it? Do we believe in the role to which God has called each one of us? Either the church embraces its fundamental task to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ or it will continue to decline because of the lure of other gospels. Are we convinced as the church that we are called by God's Holy Spirit into the world to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed?

One of my other Lutheran Confessions teachers was Gerhard Forde who wrote, "The risen Christ, our Lord, speaking to his astonished and somewhat bewildered and confused disciples says,

4. 1 Cor 9:19–23.

5. See John 17:13–19.

'You are witnesses.' As Christians, we are witnesses. That's the bottom line."[6] My fear is that the church spends too much of its time playing church in the image we want it to be, rather than being the church Christ called and empowered us to be through the Holy Spirit. My fear is that North American Lutherans have had their heads stuck in the sand of their pews, not aware of the changing world around them.

The perception of many people outside the church seems to bear this out. One study points out, "the unaffiliated say they are *not* looking for a religion that would be right for them. Overwhelmingly, they think that religious organizations are too concerned with money and power, too focused on rules and too involved in politics."[7] This report should not sway our call to witness, but open our eyes to how our worldly "isms" have gotten in the way of our witness.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his great work, *The Cost of Discipleship*, wrote, "By recalling the Christians into the world he called them paradoxically out of it all the more. That was what Luther experienced in his own person. His call to men to return to the world was essentially a call to enter the visible Church of the incarnate Lord."[8]

I am excited about being and making disciples not as a fad in popular books, but rather embracing it in a Lutheran Christian context.

Conclusion

I have to be honest and say I don't know what the Lutheran Church of North America will look like in 2517, but I do have hope. Not because of us, but because of our Lord. I have hope it will not only exist, but will be vibrant in reclaiming its fundamental call to "disciple." I am excited about being and making disciples not as a fad in popular books, but rather embracing it in a Lutheran Christian context. I look forward to the discussion and activity among Lutherans over the next 500 years in living out our call from Christ to be his disciples.

6. Gerhard Forde, *The Preached God: Proclamation in Word and Sacrament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 298.

7. *'Nones' on the Rise,* (October 9, 2012), http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/.

8. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), 265.

Living Together in Sacred Time: North American Lutherans and the Liturgical Year

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As I sit down to write about what shape/s Lutheranism in North America might assume in the coming decades, I am surrounded by blue. It is Advent 2014 and here in western Pennsylvania it is foggy and misty, but with a subtle hint of blue coming through my window as the skies start to clear. Of course, at church this morning, there was blue everywhere as well, from vestments, to the candles, to water in the font reflecting the royal color surrounding it. Judgment and hope came to our ears, and a longing to behold and to be held by the God of the all the ages lodged in the tears right behind my eyes.

In contemplating the future of North Americans who claim the name "Lutheran" in these early decades of the twenty-first century, I find myself looking to the liturgical practices of the present from which our future will grow. Blue, white, gold, green, purple, and red: how we live out the festivals and seasons of the year binds us to the One who set the year in motion, the One in whom all years will be fulfilled. And being bound together in the love of the Holy and Righteous One, Jesus Christ our Lord, we are most pointedly bound to each other.

The linguistic content of our prayers within this holy cycle of the liturgical year speaks of what we all desire to come. The structure of our Sunday and daily prayers regularly tells of our connection (or lack of thereof) with the historic traditions of the Western Church. The manner in which our prayers are expressed reveals the disposition of hearts within that grand spectrum of indifference to fervency. And if, with Prosper of Aquitane, we believe that what we pray is what we believe, (*ut legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*) then, as in the fullness of the Psalter, our laments, imprecations, confessions, thanksgivings, and praises are a window to the future that we desire to live under God's gracious and mighty rule. *Stir up your power. Stir up our hearts.*

As Lutherans in North America, we are far from Muhlenberg's desire for one common hymnal, and we find ourselves with an ever-expanding diversity of liturgical languages to express our aching hearts.[1] In spite of those differences, many of us are still bound to the supporting beams

1. In regard to the NALC, that diversity does not include an abandonment of classical Trinitarian language (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) nor an adoption of the gender neutralized "Godself."

and joists, that is, the inner beauty of the symmetry and balance of an English language variant of a Lutheran interpretation of the Western Rite.[2] Unless a congregation has been swallowed up whole by American Evangelicalism, the grammar, i.e., the basic shape of our gatherings (The Entrance Rite, The Liturgy of the Word, The Eucharistic Liturgy, The Dismissal) is holding a steady course. Just as body language and tone of voice generally tell more about us than our actual spoken words can tell, so the common shape of our gatherings is in an immediate juxtaposition to the multiplicity of shades that comprise the outward expressions of our current theological, social, and cultural denominational mix that appears to the rest of Christendom simply as a bowl of alphabet soup. (I am not saying that the specific words are unimportant—they are often at the head of our internal Lutheran disagreements, but what I am saying is that the words tell more about who we believe God to be and how we believe him to act, than about the affections and desires of the human heart who simply long to know him.)

If we look back to Luther's interpretations of the Western Rite, the *Formula Missae* of 1523 and the *Deutsche Messe* of 1526 we see an underlying structure that was connected to their immediate predecessor rites. Changes were not simply conjured up apart from what was then the current Western Rite, but were offered against that backdrop for which they were presented as a corrective. (Certain Saints days were omitted and the direction of the offering of the Son was reversed, but the overarching structure of the ordo and of the liturgical year were not abandoned.) Whereas the *Service Book and Hymnal* (*SBH*) of 1958 is the offspring of its close relative, the *Common Service Book* of 1888, the *Lutheran Book of Worship* of 1978 looked back to first millennia roots alongside its immediate predecessor, the

Whatever hymnal happens to rest in our hands, it was not created *ex nihilo*, but through some relationship with its forerunners.

SBH. Whatever hymnal happens to rest in our hands, it was not created *ex nihilo*, but through some relationship with its forerunners, and in some way it simultaneously highlights its own peculiar ratio between continuity and discontinuity.

In the grand landscape of North American Lutheranism in this Year of our Lord 2015 there are more variations on a Lutheran interpretation of the Western Rite than we can almost imagine, and these variations crisscross through denominational demarcations. Besides all that the Internet or non-denominational publishing houses provide for those who choose not to use a liturgical order from a denominationally published hymnal,

2. A liturgical detective could analyze the structural differences with regard to how close a denomination, pastor, and/or congregation leans toward Rome, toward mainline Protestantism, or toward Evangelicalism by their particular "bending" or Lutheran interpretation of the Western Rite. Lutheranism as its core is a confessional and doxological movement within the church catholic more than it was meant to be a cluster of denominational affiliations.

many ELCA congregations use *ELW* or *LBW*, and many NALC congregations use *LBW*, but some had previously purchased *ELW* and continue to use it. There are LCMS congregations who use the *LSB*, but some use *LW* (which is a fraternal twin, or at least a close sibling to *LBW*). LCMC congregations often use *LBW* or *Reclaim*, and there may be a few congregations within every expression who yet use *SBH* or *TLH*. (There is always duct tape, which supersedes any denominational differences when the bindings start to fray.)

Within the course of a given Sunday's liturgy, we all pray collects and intercessions, as well as offertory, Eucharistic, and post-communion prayers. With only a few exceptions, I would be so bold as to say that we all pray some translation of the Lord's Prayer. It is my sincerest hope that we still pray the appointed psalm, which is quite often the key to helping us receive the substance of the biblical texts of the day, the psalter having been shaped by and the shaper of the liturgical life of ancient Israel, and having expressly being the prayerbook/hymnbook of our Lord himself. Hymns, in their polysemy, are a type of prayer, and it is repeatedly through the singing of such prayers that we sense our most immediate connection to the communion of saints, as their voices surprise us by sounding their eternal joy in ours. Underneath all our of words and gestures the Holy Spirit is quite busy on a Sunday morning, breathing life into every prayer, whether sounded aloud or in the silence of our hearts, in sighs that are so much deeper than our tiny words.

It's Advent 2014 as I write, but we will be approaching Advent 2015 when you read this issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission* (*CTM*). It will be sometime in the New Year (or maybe later if it sits on the shelf for a while), but that future into which this essay is looking starts with a day; a day in the liturgical life of the church, a day in which God our Father, the author and giver of all time, is revealed through his Son, in the breath of the Holy and life-giving Spirit. We cannot talk about 500 years ahead apart from thinking about a day in this year and what we know about our ecclesial life now. So, I'd like to invite you think about the future to come by reflecting upon one Sunday in the year, a Sunday that we only receive in the liturgical calendar four times every seven years: Christmas II. Living between the Holy Name of Jesus and the Feast of the Epiphany, January 4, 2015, was the first time that our assemblies have gathered on a Sunday in this New Year of our Lord. Since *CTM* is a printed medium, we will look at words, remembering that such words are crafted with regard to who we believe God to be and how we hope he will act, and we can add, how we might live out is love in speech, song, gesture, and deed.

The Collect (Prayer of the Day), often preceded by the salutation and summons (oremus), gathers and beckons to the hearts of the assembly, further preparing them to receive the coming Word and Holy Sacrament. The form in which the Collect for Christmas II comes in the *LBW* has its roots in the Gregorian Sacramentary[3]:

> Almighty God, you have filled us with the new light of the Word who became flesh and lived among us. Let the light of our faith shine in all that we do; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you

3. "Almighty and everlasting God, the glory of those who believe in you: Fill the world with your splendor and show to every nation the radiance of your light." Philip H. Phatteicher, *Journey into the Heart of God: Living the Liturgical Year* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 105.

and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. (*LBW* p. 15)

ELW has a small adaptation and speaks of "incarnate" rather than "who became flesh and lived among us," and also provides a collect for each year of the liturgical cycle. The Prayer for Cycle B is:

O God our redeemer, you created light that we might live, and you illumine our world with your beloved Son. By your Spirit comfort us in all darkness, and turn us toward the light of Jesus Christ our Savior, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. (*ELW* p. 21)

Lutheran Worship follows a similar incarnational theme:

O God, our Maker and Redeemer, who wonderfully created us and in the incarnation of your Son yet more wonderfully restored our human nature, grant that we may ever be alive in him who made himself to be like us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. (*LW* p. 19)

The *Lutheran Service Book* breathes the same historic language:

Almighty God, You have poured into our hearts the true Light of Your incarnate Word. Grant that this Light may shine forth in our lives; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. (*LSB Pastoral Care Companion,* p. 542)

SOLA Publishing, which uses the LCMS rather than the RCL provides both a historic and what it labels a "thematic" collect.

Historical Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, direct our actions according to your good pleasure, that in the name of your beloved Son, we might be made to abound in good works. Grant this, we pray, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. (*Evangelical Lutheran Liturgy,* 1894)

Thematic Collect

God of Majesty, may your Spirit provoke us to follow your Son in all obedience and humility, growing in spiritual wisdom and maturity so that through us, all creation will come to know the praise of your glory; through Jesus Christ who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. [4]

The Collects from *SOLA* take some different theological turns from those that rest in the spirit of the Gregorian Sacramentary, putting more emphasis on the specificity of the human side of the divine/human encounter, not an uncommon move for those who seek to use the lectionary pedagogically rather than within its doxological intent. What is even more intriguing is that *SOLA* follows the LCMS Lectionary (which differs from the RCL), and so these differing prayers will also be preparing the hearts of the assemblies to receive varying sets of biblical texts depending upon congregational practices. Yet even without a uniform emphasis we can see that through the long-standing form of a collect (address to God, divine attributes/actions, petition proper often followed by the desired outcome, and doxology) we are all praying

4. http://worship.solapublishing.com/weekly-worship/christmas2-b

to live under God's gracious and mighty rule: (*through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever*).

I include all four, because in the expression of the church catholic in which I serve, the North American Lutheran Church (NALC), on January 4, all of those prayers will be sounded in particular assemblies, and undoubtedly that will include some who use the LCMS/*Sola* lectionary and the *LBW*/*ELW* collect.

(Churches who do not follow any lectionary or churches who follow the singular lesson lectionary known as "narrative," have all these options for prayer, and others as well, but there the liturgical year and its internal moves to the future have been well-buried, for when the liturgical beams and joists have fallen, another building emerges with its own lifespan.)

Published intercessory prayers (i.e., The Prayer of the Church or the Prayers of the People), are another place for exploration as to how we live into and frame the future. They are meant to be localized, fully enculturated and appropriate to the

Published intercessory prayers are another place for exploration as to how we live into and frame the future.

life of each assembly, yet intercessions are made available for parish usage through a multiplicity of online platforms from lectionary-based Lutheran and non-Lutheran denominations. Publishing houses engage a cadre of writers who do their best to reflect the biblical and hymnic language of the day to address the specific concerns of the gathered people. In the framework of praying for the church, the world, and all those in need, here is a sample of intercessory petitions for Christmas IIb (1/4/15) that look with hope in the New Year:

> O God, you are the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Fill us with joyful hope in this new year, and guide us to have courage amid all the changes and chances of life. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.** (ELCA, *Sundays and Seasons*[5])

> O Lord, Creator and Preserver of all, we ask Your blessing upon the year that has just begun. Although we do not know what trials and joys are ahead, we give great thanks that You have predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ and redeemed us through His blood. We pray, therefore, that You would lavish Your grace upon us and strengthen our faith by Your Gospel of salvation, so that in every circumstance we might be confident that You work all things for our good for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.** (LCMS, *Let us pray*[6])

> Heavenly Father, as we begin this new calendar year, grant that we may live in grateful obedience to your will as we look to the glorious future that you have promised us in Christ Jesus. Be present to all who have any need of you for healing, [especially…]. Comfort them by your compassion even as they wait upon healing and health, and give them relief from all that ails them. Lord in your mercy …

5. http://sundaysandseasons.com/

6. *Let us pray* does not mention the new year on 1/4/15 but did so on 1/5/14. Christmas IIa. http://www.lcms.org/page.aspx?pid=907

hear our prayer. (*SOLA*[7])

You have brought us to the beginning of a new year. Bless us in its unfolding seasons. Be compassionate to all who struggle with temptations and who fall into sin. Give strength to those who have grown tired, weary or old. Give hope to those who are burdened with afflictions of body, mind, or spirit, especially your servants [names]. Shelter the homeless from the storms of winter. Provide for those who hunger for the fruits of the land. Have pity on all your human family, and lead us to minister to their needs. Lord in your mercy… **Hear our prayer.** (Lutheran CORE[8])

Tied to the passage of time and the cycles of life, each provides a snapshot of the desires of our hearts. (Note that each of the prayers use the phrase "new year" to address differing concern on this Sunday, and these examples do not cover the full expression of any one set of intercessions.) In examining these published intercessions through the passage of a year's time, the theological flavors of each denomination or reform group do emerge. *Sundays and Seasons* takes a concise yet somewhat generic form, not unlike Form VI in *The Book of Common Prayer,* but with a decidedly action-oriented twist (as in *SOLA's* collects), but tending toward an expression of corporate rather than private/personal action. *Let us pray* leans toward the homiletic/doctrinal, so that if you somehow missed the sermon of the day, you will have another chance to hear it. *SOLA* seeks the pastoral and personal, and Lutheran CORE's is typically rooted in forming disciples. As long as the intercessions remain rooted in the overarching doxological intent of the liturgy and avoid self-righteousness, moralizing, judgmentalism, or the worship of the creation rather than the Creator, they have a place in the living out of the new year in God's time. In the spirit of living together in such sacred time, when we see a glimmer of God's truth and beauty in another denomination or reform movement's word, we might try praying them, if not on Sunday, maybe in one of our gatherings in the course of a week; and then in that fine spot where "other intercessions are to be offered" to pray for those "other" Lutherans who wrote and published them. By so doing, all of our prayers might take on the essence of unceasing praise, as we do precisely what God wants us to do, and what he made us for—every life honoring and glorifying him in whose image and likeness we all are made.

For above, beyond, and through (and even in, with, and under) from the first to the final Sunday of this new year, we will be travelling together into the future that God is preparing for us. I pray that in the coming years of journeying in God's sacred time, our gift as those who bear the name "Lutheran" within the church catholic will be marked by the unceasing commitment to all time being his (Rev 1:4). Let that be our common witness: day and night, night and day, Sunday to Sunday, year to year, for all those years will come to a day when the Year of our Lord is caught up in the Day of the Lord, from green, to blue, to red, to purple, to white-hot gold, all of time refined in a holy fire, and there will be nothing left but praise.

7. http://worship.solapublishing.com/weekly-worship/christmas2-b

8. http://www.lutherancore.org/prayers/

Faithfulness In-Between: Reflections from within Lutheran CORE

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I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet. Nor can I claim to be a scholar. As the century of great Lutheran mergers seems to have morphed into a century of Lutheran fragmentation, only the Almighty knows whether Dr. Ruble's descriptions of the Lutheran vocation in America will continue to be true. My reactions are those of a 66-year member of the ELCA and its predecessors the LCA and ULCA, and an ordained pastor of more than 40 years. I also navigated the often murky waters churning amidst the ELCA, LCMC, and NALC during nine years as secretary and then as director of the Lutheran Coalition for Renewal. Whether my anecdotal observations are universally valid must be for others to decide.

While it is true that Lutherans have stood apart from the Protestant mainstream, the abandonment of significant catechesis for new members and youth diminishes how distinct we can be going forward. Most congregations offer only cursory instruction to those transferring in from other traditions, and examining the catechetical materials offered by Augsburg Fortress, the publishing house with which I am most familiar, I see a definite "dumbing down" from the "I Believe" series of the early 1960s to the current offerings.

Lutheran emphases such as the Law/Gospel distinction, the Two Kingdoms, and the Solas tend to get lost in the sea of Calvinism and Arminianism, not to mention semi-Pelagianism, of popular religion. The "moralistic therapeutic deism" identified by Christian Smith and his research team has definitely invaded Lutheran congregations.

If we were looking for a Lutheran vocation in our time, a healthy dose of the Two Kingdoms could contribute to the political debates among Christians. While the North American Lutheran Church (NALC) and Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (LCMC) are disinclined to political activism on the official levels, the ELCA and the Missouri Synod tend to be polar opposites on issues they address. I have yet to see evidence that either has had significant influence on public policy. In spite of the money and other resources devoted to social statements by the ELCA, the question someone asked a while back remains: Has any person's mind ever been changed by a church social statement? The ELCA on public matters is indistinguishable from the so-called mainline, while Missouri blends in nicely with the Conservative Evangelicals. Too often theological "conservatives" come across as chaplains to the Republican Party, and "progressives" to the Democratic. A Lutheran vocation might be to uplift the

> A Lutheran vocation might be to uplift the Two Kingdoms understanding, instead of the boringly predictable partisan advocacy we see.

Two Kingdoms understanding, instead of the boringly predictable partisan advocacy we see. But there are no signs that it will happen any time soon.

A few groups, particularly the Society of the Holy Trinity (disclosure: I am a long-time member), make a serious effort to recover a distinctively Lutheran faith and practice. Yet with fewer than 300 members spanning (according to its website) eleven different Lutheran denominational groups, one cannot claim that the Society represents anything close to a majority of Lutheran clergy.

There is no reason to believe that ELCA, Missouri, or Wisconsin will be able to reverse their steady membership declines. Lutherans represent a significantly smaller percentage of the North American population than we did even a generation ago, which in itself casts doubt on what our unique vocation might be. With most of those who leave the ELCA apparently not joining other Lutheran bodies, one has to hope that Dr. Ruble is correct about Lutherans maintaining a distinction from the Protestant mainstream. It remains an open question whether Lutherans will be able to offer a historically grounded, confessional vision as our numbers diminish and our catechesis atrophies.

Lutherans indeed have been good at the second vocation Dr. Ruble cites, building institutions. But as funding from the churches has dried up, many of these institutions have needed to turn to governments or other non-church sources to meet their budgets. Some seminaries are working hard to appeal to a variety of constituencies, not only Lutheran ones. The faculty for ELCA seminaries include many non-Lutherans, and the North American Lutheran Seminary at this point is connected with Anglican and Evangelical schools. LCMC Annual Gatherings include displays from many institutions offering to train clergy, some of which seem (in my observation at least) to have at best a minimal Lutheran identity.

Dr. Ruble raises the obvious question regarding her third point, whether the emphasis on justification by grace has worked its way down to the pews. Given the constant media barrage of "decision theology" and self-help religion, along with the lack of solid biblical study by most Lutherans, our congregations may well have abandoned the field. On a more academic level, when one separates the doctrine of justification from the person of Jesus, grace muddles into a general niceness that validates every possible antinomian claim. The current infatuation by some in the ELCA (and one could suspect other groups) with "radical hospitality," or inviting everybody present in the building to the Lord's Table, is but one example of grace gone wild. Questioning anybody's sexual behavior marks a person as hateful and is claimed to be a denial of God's love.

Too often I hear justification by grace not as a statement of how Christ works his salvation in us, but as a generic principle that because God loves everybody, He affirms everything they do. "Repent and believe the gospel" is a foreign concept to this ideology of grace. Increasingly

one hears faith in Jesus dismissed as quite irrelevant to one's relationship with God, or at best as one of many equally valid options. And this does not only happen among the laity.

A stress on the work of Jesus in his cross and resurrection is the only possible answer to both decision theology and the trivialization of grace into niceness. Would that Bonhoeffer would rise from his grave and teach us again about costly grace.

A stress on the work of Jesus in his cross and resurrection is the only possible answer to both decision theology and the trivialization of grace into niceness.

I have watched some of the teachers and pastors who have most influenced me throw up their hands at the possibility of a serious Lutheran witness and, as we say, "swim the Tiber," becoming Roman Catholics. A smaller number have become Orthodox. Solid Lutheran theologians such as Richard John Neuhaus, Leonard Klein, Robert Willken, Michael Root, and most recently Russell Saltzman have navigated those waters. Jaroslav Pelikan and Jay C. Rochelle, among others, found their way across the Bosporus. To see theologians and leaders of such stature leave cannot encourage us who desire to see a Lutheran vocation continue in North America.

The proliferation of Lutheran denominations and associations also raises doubts about the viability of a vital Lutheran presence. While there have always been more than two dozen Lutheran groups in North America, the rise of Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ, which may have replaced the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod as the third largest group, and the rapid growth of the North American Lutheran Church, must leave outsiders wondering just who we Lutherans are. In some cases members of these groups actively attack one another, and there are several ongoing lawsuits over property ownership of congregations that have left the ELCA.

NALC and Missouri have a very friendly official relationship, but they have agreed not to discuss ordination of women and the nature of church fellowship, so just how much they can work together is unclear. LCMC is committed to congregationalism in principle, and the question for them is whether they will be distinctively Lutheran at all, or simply blend into American evangelicalism. The ELCA is at this point the fastest-declining church body in North America, and its demographics lend little support to the notion that it will turn around any time soon. Missouri is wracked by its own internal struggles, which occasionally gain media attention when, for instance, a pastor dares to participate in a public prayer service after a community tragedy.

Is it possible, as Dr. Ruble suggests, that Lutherans might demonstrate a faithful kind of theological fight as Christians struggle to find how to witness to the Gospel in the twenty-first century? So far the evidence is not good. In a society fragmented between blue and red, global warming as settled science or a concoction of charlatans, and increasingly violent racial divides, one can wish that Lutherans will find their unique vocation in showing how a faithful theological fight

might proceed.

On the short term, I am obviously pessimistic about the Lutheran vocation in North America, more so than I realized before writing this article, and I hope these reflections are only the grumblings of a cranky old man. But on the long term, Jesus is Lord. Whether or not there are Lutheran organizations that have a distinctive vocation, I believe that God will see that the Gospel of justification by grace through faith in Jesus is proclaimed, and the Holy Spirit will create faith as the Gospel gets out, sometimes through and sometimes in spite of us.

Lutheran CORE has claimed from the beginning that our Lutheran struggles are about Jesus, and our focus is the faithful proclamation of the Good News that is and is about Him. To the extent that "moralistic therapeutic deism" defines the environment in which we live and witness, clarity about Jesus is essential. Lutherans have always understood our vocation as uplifting "Christ alone," and the doctrine of justification teaches us how to proclaim Jesus faithfully. The Common Confession around which our movement coalesced is not primarily about sexuality but about how we proclaim and witness to Jesus in faithfulness to the Holy Scriptures and the Great Tradition, which for us includes the Lutheran Confessions.

For Christians in North America, the twenty-first century may very well be very similar to the pre-Constantinian era. But unlike those early believers, we have tools for communication and transportation that transcend many physical barriers. Just as ancient Israelite faith came to thrive in exile, we Lutherans may do best when we cease trying to be accepted by the larger culture. Our vocation is to proclaim the Gospel faithfully in Word and Sacrament, and let the Holy Spirit take it from there.

God doesn't need our particular organizational forms to get the Gospel out into the world. Perhaps we have taken ourselves too seriously and are worried about the wrong things.

Our distinctive Lutheran vocation will only matter if it enables us to proclaim Jesus Christ faithfully, calling people to repentance and faith in him. Lutheranism is a means, not an end. And the end of all things is Christ.

Lutheranism is a means, not an end. And the end of all things is Christ.

Book Reviews

***Acts of the Apostles.* Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries.** By Ronald J. Allen. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013. ISBN: 978-0-8006-9872-0. xviii and 233 pages. Paper. $22.00.

Ronald Allen is Professor of Preaching and Gospels and Letters at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, ordained in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and a prolific author especially regarding matters of preaching. This commentary is also one of the first published in Fortress Press's new series of preaching commentaries. Between the series approach and Allen's careful reading, *Acts of the Apostles* is a fine blend of biblical interpretation with an eye for effective preaching—making for a resource on Acts unrivaled in its contribution.

As a commentary, the book follows the text of Acts, broken down into major divisions and subdivisions. Each subdivision includes a commentary on the text, followed by smaller sections on lectionary connections (if applicable) and chiastic parallels to passages in Luke's Gospel. Unique to this book, Allen sees a chiastic ('X') structure through all of Luke-Acts (see Appendix 1), which prompts a "Chiastic Parallels" section for each text. The commentary is concise but perceptive, lacking scholarly discussion but socio-historically aware, and highly attuned to questions of modern relevance. Allen excels most at swiftly discerning the interpretive high points, preaching challenges, and theological problems of each text. He also regularly highlights points of dissonance between first-century and modern cultural norms in order to offset potential misunderstandings.

The commentary's greatest contributions are its concise interpretation, readable prose, attentiveness to preaching obstacles, and explicit insights for lectionary preachers. The book's brevity and lack of explicit dialogue with Greek and biblical scholars will disappoint some but refresh others. Two potential drawbacks are: (1) Allen's assumption that a distinctive chiastic pattern for Luke-Acts is worth considering at every text, even when correlations are not obvious, and (2) that Acts occurs sparsely in the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), which makes a book so geared toward preaching Acts less essential. (Allen does, however, offer suggestions for preaching Acts apart from the RCL in Appendix Three.) The overall product is a commentary that is exceptionally focused on preachers (i.e., RCL preachers), which is entirely unique among Acts resources. For these reasons, *Acts of the Apostles* is a distinctive and substantial contribution for preachers of a particular stripe. While its scope and focus will not please all readers, it is an excellent resource for those who wrestle with preaching Acts from the vantage point of the RCL.

Troy Troftgruben
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Imagine a New World: Reflections on the Sermon on the Mount. By John D. Herman. Mechanicsville, Va.: Rambling Star, 2015. ISBN: 978-0-6924-2060-7. Paper. 298 pages. $13.99.

John D. Herman is deeply committed to the formation of congregations as discipleship communities. He is the author of the five-volume curriculum, *Going Deeper: A Journey with Jesus,* which can be used either as a devotional guide for personal study or a resource for small groups. This is the initial volume in a new series, titled "Imagine..." The content of this book is divided into two sections with the first focusing on the Sermon on the Mount (13 chapters) and the second on the Lord's Prayer (8 chapters) plus a concluding chapter giving guidelines for participation in small groups. Each chapter is subdivided into five subunits (Day 1-5) and concludes with summary questions. The author has intentionally organized the book in a modular format, allowing for varied use according to local circumstances.

Imagination is a lost facet of Christian faith. Often when we define "faith" we refer to two aspects: belief and trust. Belief involves the content of that in which we be-

lieve, for example, the convictions named in the Apostles' Creed. Trust involves a posture of surrender to God in Christ as the one on whom we can always depend. Imagination builds on belief and trust, but adds another dimension. Jesus, by telling stories, invited his hearers to enter into a world in which God is alive and active to re-construe our engagement with others and with creation according to the space and time coordinates of the kingdom of God. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus invites us now, as in the time of the early disciples, to enter into an alternative universe constituted by unconventional blessedness (the beatitudes), light shining in the midst of darkness, reconciliation, unconditional respect, love for enemies, and trust in God above all things. The Lord's Prayer consolidates the wisdom of Jesus about God's kingdom into petitions that shape us as practitioners of that new world.

This study material is deeply informed by the author's own encounter with the Sermon on the Mount as a way of life and by keen insight into human longing for life-giving relationships with God, others, and creation. The book is printed in an 8.5 by 11 inch format and provides the reader opportunity to interact with the contents by writing responses and reflections in reply to the study questions. This book is extremely well-designed and very user-friendly. Most importantly, the content is solid and thoughtfully presented. I highly recommend it as a valuable resource for congregations and leaders desiring to deepen the connection between Christian faith and following Jesus in all the arenas of daily life.

Craig L. Nessan
Wartburg Theological Seminary

Distance in Preaching: Room to Speak, Space to Listen. By Michael Brothers. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014. ISBN: 978-0-8028-6969-2, xvii and 233 pages. Paper. $20.00.

How close is too close? Social context often allows for various experiences of personal distance. Whether across a desk for professional conversation or arm in arm while on a date, distance matters to how we experience the words we share with one another. Brothers considers the concept of distance in relation to preaching, and in particular, how sermonic devices that create dynamics of distance allow for faithful engagement between sermon, preacher, and audience.

The book relies heavily upon the use of distance in performance, both ritual and theatrical. These enactments intentionally use space to affect audiences and participants, and so Brothers suggests that preachers may want to utilize distancing techniques within their speech and person to convey a sermon's meaning.

In particular, Brothers lifts up Fred Craddock's use of inductive preaching to allow congregations to overhear the sermon, a concept in itself that suggests a critical distance between preacher, text, and hearer. Such effective distance includes the use of not only narrative devices, but also of body language, to create a space that allows listeners an identity apart from the sermon, and yet enables them to participate in that sermon with integrity. After confronting the challenges brought to Craddock by postliberal preachers Mark Ellingsen and Chuck Campbell, Brothers uplifts Craddock's method as a paradigm that invites individuals within diverse communities to find appropriate levels of distance within the space created by the sermon. The book concludes with a brief review of recent considerations of space within homiletics, as well as sample sermons that exemplify the author's ideal use of distance in preaching.

Readers will find that this is complex academic work. Those seeking a casual read ought to look elsewhere. However, *Distance in Preaching* provides an accessible introduction to the concept of homiletical space. This challenges preachers to consider the role of distance in the formation both of the sermon and of the hearers through the sermon.

Andrew Tucker, pastor
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Learning Mission, Living Mission: Churches That Work. By Glynis LaBarre. Valley Forge: Judson, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-8170-1725-5, xxi and 120 pages. Paper. $20.00.

Have you ever wondered if established churches can truly develop a missional identity? Through her work with the Missional Church Learning Experience (MCLE) in the American Baptist Church, Glynis LaBarre developed a paradigm where even struggling congregations may find new vibrancy through missional living. This text both reviews that paradigm and introduces the theological principles of missional theology.

Easily read within an afternoon, the book offers a glimpse into the development of MCLE cohorts, where six to twelve churches band together to consider the commission to become missional. LaBarre defines missional congregations as those who believe God intends the congregation to practically engage the communities in which they minister. The MCLE, then, intends to foster a ministry culture that seeks to transform our neighborhoods as a reflection of God's kingdom. The paradigm includes both online and intensive in-person sessions intended to help congregations discern how God might call them to missional work alongside their neighbors. This model relies on the development of teams that help disseminate the missional principles, identify missional priorities already at work within the congregation, and develop partnerships with others in order to affect good within the community. The appendices carry valuable resource tools that may help readers to bring parts of the MCLE into their own congregations without developing the cohort.

For those looking for a simple, practical introduction to missional thinking, LaBarre deftly presents a missional mindset. Though clearly undergirded by Baptist theological assumptions, all readers will find a succinct definition of missional ministry that is translatable to their own contexts. Written for practitioners, *Learning Mission, Living Mission* challenges churches to consider the benefits of a missional paradigm like MCLE to their congregations as they seek to share and live the transformative gospel of Jesus Christ in twenty-first century communities.

Andrew Tucker

Pope Francis: Untying the Knots. By Paul Vallely. London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. ISBN: 978-1-4729-0370-9. xii and 227. Paper. $20.95.

Archbishop Jorge Mario Bergoglio's election to pontificate in 2013 caught the attention of the whole world and this pope remains in the spotlight. His gestures and decisions evoke a wide variety of responses ranging from awe to shock. He remains an enigma to many. In this book, Paul Vallely unties the knots of ambiguity that surround Pope Francis. Drawing from interviews with the pope and his acquaintances, Vallely weaves a story of Pope Francis, providing the reader with insight into the pope's mind.

To begin this riveting and nuanced rendering of Pope Francis's life, Vallely gives readers an inside view of the papal election in 2013. Chapter 2 describes Bergoglio's childhood in Argentina, locating his faith development in the context of his family and community. The following chapter focuses on different phases of Bergoglio's ministry as a Jesuit novice, provincial, rector, and auxiliary bishop, identifying the sources of his theology. The following three chapters analyze Bergoglio's tenures as bishop and archbishop, examining his role in the so-called "Dirty War" (1976–1983) as well as his ministry in the slums. Chapters 7 and 8 identify how Pope Francis is distinct from his predecessors and what gifts he brings to the Roman Catholic Church from his unique background.

Vallely's biography is a helpful introduction to the life and thought of Pope Francis. It identifies historic contingencies and social realities that shaped the pope as a person, theologian, and administrator. This captivating book has all the traits of a popular biography, amplifying both the shrewdness and the saintliness of the pontiff. With illuminating explanations of complex doctri-

nal matters, it is accessible to intelligent non-specialists. Using his exceptional storytelling skills, Vallely walks his readers into the theology and spirituality of Pope Francis.

James Taneti
Campbell University

The Right Church: Live Like the First Christians. By Charles E. Gutenson. Nashville: Abingdon, 2012. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007. ISBN: 978-1-4267-4911-7. xvi and 176 pages. Paper. $16.99.

Charles ("Chuck") Gutenson is a church consultant, former chief operating officer of Sojourners, former professor of theology at Asbury Theological Seminary, and author of several recent books. As his writings show (e.g., *Church Worth Getting Up For,* 2013), his current interests are matters that inform church renewal—interests that this book addresses with substance, discernment, and clarity.

The book's premise is the vitality of early, post-New Testament church voices for informing faith and practice today. As Gutenson writes "this book is about church renewal. In a sense, it is about going forward by looking back. …The question that lies behind this study is this: how did the early church understand the nature of faithful discipleship? And, then, how should that impact and influence how we live today?" (x). The book's nine chapters are grouped into three sections of three chapters each (Church Life, Social Life, Civil Life), with each chapter addressing a topic pertinent to church practice today: reading scripture, unity and division, discipleship, human freedom, wealth and poverty, stewardship of creation, society and government, war, and monastic simplicity. Each chapter leads off with a catchy introduction, then discusses ideas from various ancient writers (often one writer in particular), and finally raises questions about how these inform current practices.

The book's greatest virtues are its overarching idea, engaging prose, relevant topics, awareness of American church trends, and selective use of early Christian writings. These features make Gutenson's book highly engaging for lay and clergy readers, and an excellent book for congregational study. Toward this end, the book would be enhanced by concluding questions for each chapter (only chapters 1 and 4 have "ideas to consider"), resources for further study, and a conclusion to the book as a whole. More a taste of early church writings than a substantial tour, the book is not written for the Patristics scholar but the newcomer to a world scarcely known by most church people. While Gutenson's audience is primarily Evangelicals (see chapters 5, 7, and 8), which contributes to some prescriptive language (e.g., the title), this book's ideas pertain widely to Christians of all stripes. All in all, *The Right Church* addresses with selectiveness and clarity a topic that is both underserved and increasingly relevant, and for that reason Gutenson's voice is most welcome.

Troy Troftgruben

The Call of Abraham. Essays on the Election of Israel in Honor of Jon D. Levenson. Edited by Gary A. Anderson and Joel S. Kaminsky. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013. ISBN: 978-0-2680-2043-9. xvi and 390 pages. Cloth. $64.00. e-book $44.80.

These fifteen essays were presented to Harvard Professor Levenson on the occasion of his 65th birthday. Levenson has written a number of books and articles that deal with central theological issues: resurrection, the book of Esther, Sinai and Zion, child sacrifice in both testaments, and the election of Israel. Challenging to fellow scholars, Levenson's books are accessible to non-specialists.

Most of the articles in this book deal with the election of Israel, a theme dear to Levenson's heart. He notes that both Jesus and Paul loudly affirmed Israel's special election, but that the truth claims of both religions are difficult to reconcile.

Three of the articles are written by Lutherans: Matthias Henze of Rice University, Kathryn Schifferdecker of Luther Seminary, and Brooks Schramm of the Lutheran Theo-

logical Seminary at Gettysburg.

Henze explores the chosenness of Israel in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha. He concludes: We should be wary of any overly facile understanding that can only think of election as an expression of Israel's superiority and a condemnation of the Gentiles. The picture is much more complex, and the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha contribute immeasurably to our understanding of this complexity.

Schifferdecker continues her earlier studies on the book of Job. The biblical book itself and later Jewish commentaries vacillate between the idea that Job was an Israelite or a Gentile. Job is described in terms reminiscent of Israel's own election, and make him similar to the patriarchs; he clearly is in relationship with the God of Israel. The book of Jubilees compares the testing of Job with the testing of Abraham in Genesis 22. Job's story of new life after terrible tragedy is a story that mirrors Israel's own, and leads to the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. In the speeches from the whirlwind, God calls Job out of his death-like existence into life again, with all of its risks and rewards.

Schramm explores how Luther treated the election of Jacob in Genesis 25. Luther developed a visceral antipathy toward the rabbis and their biblical interpretations. The stories of the descendants of Jacob are, in Luther's telling, designed to show what the fallen human is by nature. Luther even accuses the Jews of the crime of the crucifixion of the Son of God and the messiah. Luther is a kind of supra-sessionist, in the sense that for him the true Jew has always been a de facto Christian. Schramm and his wife, Kirsi Sterna, have shown in a 2012 book-length Fortress publication (*Martin Luther, the Bible, and the Jewish People, a Reader*) that Luther's antagonism toward the Jews is by no means limited to the scurrilous documents written in his old age.

The quality of the essays in this book is a tribute to the stature of Levenson.

Ralph W. Klein
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The First New Testament: Marcion's Scriptural Canon. By Jason D. BeDuhn. Salem, Ore.: Polebridge, 2013. ISBN 978-1-5981-5131-2. xii and 440 pages. Paper. $29.00.

Typical discussions of Marcion (ca. 95–165 CE) characterize him as someone who altered texts and traditions to suit his own ideology, and that he broke from a Christian community more or less contiguous with later orthodox forms. In BeDuhn's illuminating analysis of Marcion and Marcion's canon of scripture (Luke's gospel and ten Pauline letters), the author calls these assumptions into serious question. BeDuhn also provides the first translation of Marcion's New Testament into English (or any other modern language) in order to offer to a wider audience the textual evidence of the first New Testament.

In his reassessment of Marcion in early Christian history, BeDuhn forcefully argues that he played an important role in the formation of early Christianity. For example, Marcion is the first figure (of whom we know) to collect Christian texts into a fixed canon of scripture (around 144 CE). Prior to Marcion's "innovation," oral traditions about Jesus were regarded as most authoritative. But within a generation, Christians of all sorts looked to written scriptures as the source of authority. Furthermore, in the mid-second century, Paul's place in Christianity was rather muted, but Marcion's inclusion of Paul's letters helped reestablish Pauline influence in the community. Marcion also shifted permanently the meaning of "gospel" from a message to a text, and thereby established the shape of the New Testament canon so familiar today: Gospel(s) plus Epistles, sharing equal scriptural status and authority. Even more, Marcion is the first unqualified witness both to the letters of Paul and to Luke's gospel. To mention one last point of significance: Marcion attests to the ongoing tension within early Christianity regarding its relationship with Judaism, in a way that historians have ignored for far too long.

BeDuhn further suggests that historians have generally accepted the evidence from early Christian sources like Tertullian and

Epiphanius too blindly. These ancient critics, writing at least a generation after Marcion, disparage Marcion with broad strokes, claiming (for example) that Marcion altered Luke's gospel and Paul's letters to suit his own ideology. By examining the evidence closely, however, BeDuhn finds that, apart from occasional rewording, Marcion's New Testament was quite close to what would become the accepted version. In fact, Marcion seems often to have included passages that would have undermined his ideology, and no evidence exists in Marcion's canon of additional passages. Also, later critics claimed that Marcion omitted or rearranged certain books, but since Marcion was the first to collect a canon of Christian writings, such criticism is anachronistic, and should be ignored by modern scholars.

Beyond this discussion of Marcion, the bulk of the book contains a discussion of the Gospel and Letters in Marcion's canon, as well as a translation and explanatory notes. Here the reader can see firsthand the kinds of differences between Marcion's canon and the later catholic version: they are few, and unremarkable. BeDuhn's translation allows for a reconsideration of Marcion's texts in their transmission, as Marcion may in many instances attest to an older reading of Luke or Paul than later received manuscripts. The translation itself is sometimes idiosyncratic (e.g., "John the Baptist" as "John the Washer"), but it remains overall very readable. The notes, too, provide more than enough information for further analysis of any text included in the translation.

As a whole, the book is illuminating, carefully argued, and fully informed on the difficulty of exploring second-century Christianity. It may be a challenging book for a non-specialist, since the material warrants a demanding analysis; a concluding chapter to summarize key points might have been helpful in this regard. Also, while some may take issue with certain points of BeDuhn's argument (particularly where evidence is scarce), all will agree that BeDuhn has done a service by reexamining the figure and texts of Marcion. Even so, all interested in the formation of the Christian canon, the transmission of texts in early Christianity, or the dynamics of second-century Christianity should read this book, and with BeDuhn reassess Marcion's influence in Christian history.

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The Gospel of Luke. The Scholars Bible.
By Richard I. Pervo. Salem, Oreg.: Polebridge, 2014. ISBN: 978-1-5981-5141-1. x and 221 pages. Paper. $25.00.

Richard Pervo's name is familiar to students of Acts, due to his extensive publications like *Dating Acts* (Polebridge, 2006) and *Acts: A Commentary* (Hermeneia, 2009)—to name just a few. In this book Pervo brings refined familiarity with Luke's writings to a new translation of the Third Gospel, which features Pervo's way with words and his informed reflections on Lukan motifs.

The Gospel of Luke is one of four translation volumes now available in the Scholars Bible (SB) series. Each volume offers a new translation accompanied by the Greek text, some commentary, textual notes, and a brief introduction. The series is a product of the Jesus Seminar aimed at translations less bound by historic liturgical and "intra-Christian" usage (10). Pervo's translation, for instance, renders "blessed are you who are poor" as "Congratulations, you poor!" (6:20), and "woe to you who are rich" as "Damn you rich!" (6:24). As these examples show, the book gives interesting new renderings of traditional translations, although whether these colloquial traits truly make the translation "written for the use of all" (10) is debatable, since the Jesus Seminar has its own set of historical-critical assumptions.

The greatest strengths of the book is Pervo's expertise on Lukan literature, the relevance of his select commentary, and his talent for writing attractive English. As a scholar whose work has invested heavily in the context of the second century, moreover, Pervo is keenly aware of how Luke's Gospel is used in later times. Finally, the layout of the volume is neat and attractive, and the commentary very judicious. Whether the series gains a wide audience is debatable, since its

orientation is more toward the religiously impartial than the devoted. Some may take issue with Pervo's understanding notion that Luke's writings stem from the second century, although an increasing number of scholars have become persuaded by this notion. Many Christian interpreters will not appreciate Pervo's estimation of Luke's theology as "of a 'popular' sort," "not always reflective," and superficial enough to display "a willingness to submit to competition and be judged by the standards of the religious and cultural marketplace" (8). Here I find that Pervo undervalues the significance of Lukan theology, as if its differences from, say, Pauline theology are due simply to lack of profound reflection. To Pervo's credit, since his very first major publication (*Profit with Delight,* 1979) he has regularly championed the cause of demystifying traditional NT interpretation by reading sacred texts from more "secular" angles. The result is a distinctive interpretive voice that is at once provocative and innovative, and anything but bland. For these reasons *The Gospel of Luke* is a fitting contribution to the SB series from an interpreter whose voice is informed, original, and worth taking seriously.

Troy M. Troftgruben

Love Leads: The Creative, Missional Leader and Church. By Frank D. Janzow. Waukesha: Frank Janzow, 2013. ISBN: 978-1-4903-7177-1, 166 pages. Paper. $16.99.

In recent decades, many churches seeking to fortify ministry utilized the paradigms of either the missional movement or the multiplication movement. Janzow draws upon nearly four decades of ministry to suggest that faithful church growth relies upon a missional identity. At the core of this commitment is the love of God not only for the church but for all creation. Effective leaders, in Janzow's view, must learn to love their congregation.

The book falls in two sections. The first considers how love relates creativity, mission, and leadership within the congregation and, in particular, the staff. The second rehearses the eight patterns of missional churches originally found in Lois Barret's *Treasure in Jars of Clay.* Janzow interjects both personal experience and wisdom from the multiplication movement under each pattern.

The text appears designed for breadth rather than depth. This will bless some readers and frustrate others, for Janzow touches on numerous theologies, saturates the book with scripture, and moves quickly to the next point. Yet, as the product of Janzow's most recent sabbatical, the book also stands as a testimony to a life shaped by missional ministry that served to grow a congregation. Some may desire to read this not as a guide to missional multiplication, but rather as a witness to a pastorate that transformed alongside a changing culture.

Love Leads offers a helpful introduction to missional thinking, which ultimately takes precedence over multiplication principles. Rather than truly embrace the church multiplication movement, Janzow recasts how church leaders ought to think about multiplication, namely from the missional heart of God and the love we find realized in Jesus Christ. Those seeking congregational growth but wanting a fresh view of what that looks like may find a fit with *Love Leads*.

Andrew Tucker

Secret Scriptures Revealed: A New Introduction to the Christian Apocrypha. By Tony Burke. Grand Rapids, Mich./Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2013. ISBN 978-0-8028-7131-2, vi and 164 pages. Paper. $18.00.

As Tony Burke notes in the beginning of *Secret Scriptures Revealed,* there tend to be two responses to the Christian Apocrypha: embracing such works as indicative of "true" Christianity at the origins, or dismissing these texts as dangerous, deceptive, and destructive. Yet Burke seeks to bypass both options in an effort to make scholarly findings accessible to the public, apart from such hyperbole and inflated claims. In other words, he aims to attract attention to the fascinating, intriguing, and downright *weird* texts labeled "the Christian Apocrypha": early, non-canonical Christian texts that expand upon the life of Jesus, reinterpret his death and resurrection, or convey legends about

the apostles.

In his first chapter, Burke lays out the many conceptual hindrances to the study of the Apocrypha, especially the anachronistic categories of "canonical/apocryphal", and "orthodoxy/heresy" with texts written in the first to fourth centuries. In Chapter Two he highlights material barriers to studying the Apocrypha, such as the fact that many texts are in peculiar ancient languages, in only a handful of manuscripts (often fragments), and in collections to which there is limited access. From here, Burke summarizes several categories of known Apocryphal texts: "Apocryphal Lives of Jesus" (chap. 3; these usually focus on part of Jesus' life, but not all), "Passion and Resurrection Gospels" (chap. 4; these texts variously interpret the significance of Jesus' death and/or resurrection), and "Legends of the Early Church" (chap. 5; these include particularly the lives of apostles such as Peter, Paul, or Thomas).

The last substantive chapter explores the various misconceptions and myths surrounding the Apocrypha. He especially notes that misnomers like "Gnostic," "forgeries," and "heretical" do little to aid understanding of these works. His final chapter, "Parting Words," reminds readers that the Apocrypha do not provide that much information on Jesus or the apostles. What they do reveal, however, are the diverse movements and individuals in early Christianity, and as such the Apocrypha demand greater attention from specialists and laypeople alike.

For the non-specialist in early Christianity, one would be hard-pressed to find a better introduction to these texts. Burke writes with the insight of someone who has lived with these texts for some time, but with the clarity of someone who knows how confusing these texts can be to the uninitiated. Moreover, his brief discussions of canonization, "orthodoxy," and Gnosticism together provide an unusually concise and insightful overview of early Christianity. Overall, not only does Burke succeed in drawing attention to the Christian Apocrypha, he also illustrates clearly the significance of these texts, which help us understand better the early Christian movement and the very real individuals who were a part of it.

Jason S. Sturdevant
North Carolina State University

Book Briefs

In ***The Caring Congregation: How to Become One and Why It Matters*** (Abingdon Press, 2011, $12.99), Karen Lampe provides basic steps to equip pastors and lay volunteer care ministers to pray for and support people during times of sickness, crisis, and grief. For her, redemption is the key to caregiving, redemption meaning restoration to being the whole person God intends and living a grace-filled life in service to God and others. A Methodist pastor, Lampe emphasizes anointing. She helps people make hospital visits and prepare for funerals. Nine appendices complement this brief, usable book.

Norma Cook Everist
Wartburg Theological Seminary

Preaching Helps

Lectionary 27/19th Sunday after Pentecost – First Sunday of Christmas

Dissonant Calendars: From Ordinary Time to Happy New Year!

On our wall calendars the daily squares are filling up: a new school year, meetings that had taken the summer off and, hopefully, pews filling up as people know vacation is really over. In the midst of things starting up, the Church year is winding down. Then, at Thanksgiving, when secular calendars begin the countdown not only to Christmas, but also to the end of 2015, the Church will shout, "Happy New Year!" as Advent begins.

How do congregational traditions affect preaching in Advent? Perhaps a choir concert or children's pageant preempts preaching on the Sunday before Christmas (Dec. 20). If so, you don't want to miss the gospel for the Fourth Sunday of Advent. Consider reading both lections about John (Luke 3:1–18) on the Second Sunday. Move Luke 1:39–45 to the Third Sunday so you don't miss Mary and Elizabeth. Perhaps the whole season of Advent can be framed with a version of Mary's song such as "Canticle of the Turning," singing one verse each Sunday. Another option is a revised version of Veni Immanuel. Many will not want to give up the traditional connection with "the great O antiphons," and that is understandable. I rewrote this hymn some years ago after singing "ransom captive Israel" too many times and to pick up images from the Advent readings. The verses below alternate between Old Testament readings (vs. 1 and 3) and Advent Gospels (vs. 2 and 4). You might sing the appropriate verse each week, then all four on the Fourth Sunday of Advent.

O Come, O Come, Immanuel

O come and hear the songs by prophets borne
When home was lost and ev'ry hope was torn:
A righteous Branch and leaves on the tree,
God's signs so small we often fail to see.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Take heart and do not fear;
God's promised one, Immanuel draws near.

Come listen to God's messenger foretold —
He sings a song Isaiah sang of old:
Prepare the way for hope through despair
Until we see God's justice ev'rywhere. *Refrain*

Come hear the song God's faithful daughters raise:
Jerusalem, take heart and sing your praise!
God gathers the oppressed and the lame,
And beckons shouts of joy instead of shame. *Refrain*

Editor's Correction: In the biographical section of the July 2015 issue of "Preaching Helps," Paul Bailie was incorrectly identified as John Bailie. Paul is pastor of Iglesia Luterana San Lucas in Eagle Pass, Texas.

Come tune your hearts to Mary's birthing song:
The lowly lifted up, the weak are strong;
While Caesar still holds pow'r on the throne,
She sings as though God's justice-time has come. *Refrain*

This is a season of endings and beginnings. While this is the last printed issue of *Currents* we look forward to a new, online version in January. Like Paul traveling on Roman roads to spread the gospel, we can use the Internet to reach people who know *Currents* well and those who will discover us for the first time. Wherever you live, I trust we will find each other online in January.

Barbara K. Lundblad
Editor, Preaching Helps

Writers for this issue draw on their experiences in parishes, seminary teaching, campus ministry and serving as synod and churchwide bishops. As always, I am deeply grateful for their insights on biblical texts and their love for the art of preaching:

Bonnie Wilcox is senior pastor at St. Mark's Lutheran Church in North St. Paul, Minnesota. She is a second-career pastor, having worked in health care management and the legal field prior to attending Luther Seminary. The stories of Jesus who called and reached out to those who had been set aside, pushed away or isolated, continue to shape her ministry.

Joanne Engquist joyfully serves as pastor in downtown Seattle with Gethsemane Lutheran Church. She previously served congregations in Maine and Massachusetts, and taught at Harvard Divinity School. Joanne's spouse, Kari, is pastor of a mission church focused on tending life together. Their household includes Narrah, an Australian Shepherd-Lab mix who excels in canine agility and delights in two cat siblings.

Mark Hanson is an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America parish pastor who has also served as synod bishop and as presiding bishop for twelve years (almost half of the ELCA's life). In addition, he served as president of the Lutheran World Federation. He is married to Ione; they have six children and five grandchildren. They are members of Redeemer Lutheran Church in north Minneapolis.

Wilk Miller is pastor of First Lutheran Church in downtown San Diego. He has also served as pastor of St. Paul's Lutheran Church-Ardmore, Pennsylvania, in suburban Philadelphia; Augustana Lutheran Church in downtown Washington, D.C.; and Calvary Lutheran Church, inner-city Philadelphia. After wonderful years in the East, Wilk and his wife, Dagmar, are delighted to be at home in San Diego.

Bradley Schmeling serves as senior pastor at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, St. Paul, Minnesota. A graduate of Ohio University and Trinity Lutheran Seminary, he did doctoral work at Emory University in ritual studies and pastoral care. He has served congregations in Columbus, Ohio and Atlanta, Georgia, and now lives in the Twin Cities with his husband, Darin, learning to love winter and trusting the promise of spring.

Lectionary 27/19th Sunday after Pentecost October 4, 2015

Genesis 2:18–24
Psalm 8
Hebrews 1:1–4, 2:5–12
Mark 10:2–16

Engaging the Texts

In the First Reading from Genesis 2, the creation story is retold a second time (though this story is older than the doxology of Genesis 1). This time the human is already present before the animals and birds are created. Adam is not really the human's name; rather, the word in Hebrew is from the same root as *adamah*—soil. God had molded the human from clay in the first part of this chapter. God provided a beautiful garden for *adam* but that wasn't enough. "It is not good that the human should be alone. I will make him a helper as his partner." This is the first *not-good* thing in creation. So God created the animals and birds—the fish must have come later! God instructs *adam* to name them all, but God could see that none was a fitting partner for the human. So God takes a rib from *adam* and creates another human being. "This at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh," he cries out. His loneliness is at last vanquished. These two humans have no ethnicity and are presented as the parents of all humanity. Jesus refers to this story in today's gospel: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh." This verse has often been interpreted as the foundation of marriage, but these two earth creatures had no mother or father to leave! In preaching on this text it is crucial to remember the theme sentence: "It is not good that the human should be alone."

"What are humans that you are mindful of them, mortals, that you care for them?" The writer of Hebrews asks the familiar question we know from Psalm 8, the great song of praise for God's creation. Jesus' divinity and humanity are affirmed in the letter to the Hebrews, a letter written before the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 C.E. As God had once spoken through prophets, now God has spoken through Jesus. His vulnerability as one who is human is distinguished from those who are angels, and Jesus defines himself by relationship, as one who is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters.

In today's gospel from Mark Jesus throws the divorce test question back to the Pharisees: "And what did Moses command you to do?" They respond that, in some cases, divorce was allowed. Jesus doesn't agree. He forbids divorce, for the sake of the vulnerable under the law of the day. A divorced woman in Jesus' day was destitute, without property, power, or protection.

Speaking of the vulnerable, some people were actually coming in front of Jesus with children! They wanted their children to see Jesus, perhaps to receive a blessing. "Children in the ancient world had few rights and essentially no social status. Therefore the disciples obstruct people who bring children to Jesus. Jesus blesses them, not because they conjure sweet images of cherubic innocence, but because he has concern for the vulnerable and scorned, for those ripe for exploitation." Protecting the vulnerable. It is what Jesus says and does, again and again and again.

Pastoral Reflections

These texts, taken together, are all about relationship and vulnerability. The intent of creation is to be a network of relationships with purpose, connectedness, and mutual benefit. The writer of

the letter to the Hebrews reminds us of Jesus' divinity and power and glory, as he also connects Jesus with you and me.

The Gospel reading puts the issues of the broken and abandoned, the least valued and the smallest, front and center. Don't tiptoe around the marriage and divorce questions. As a divorced pastor, I wear a scarlet "D." It appears in all my call papers. It is a part of my identity that will not disappear. For that I give thanks. I would not want to be the person I was without divorce.

Divorce is terrible. But there are circumstances when staying married is much, much worse than divorce.

If you do not wear the same letter that I wear, don't hide from questions at hand. Remember to consider the context of marriage in Jesus' day and the context of marriage today. Consider the centuries of work that have led to the equal rights of women within marriage, and our expanding questions of who may be married—at least in many places in the world. Consider how we have taken on the protection, rights, and safety of children from improved health care and child mortality to the passage of child labor laws and access to free public education.

After all, God IS mindful of each of them.

Let us call our communities of faith to exercise the same mindfulness. Make space in your sermon for those who have been hurt when we as the church have failed to protect the vulnerable. Make space to offer sanctuary for those who need the blessing of the church for their most sacred relationships, and challenge people to see the needs of the vulnerable within your community. Make space for a call to consider the place and role of children in your faith community, and the needs of their families.

Bonnie Wilcox

Lectionary 28/20th Sunday after Pentecost October 11, 2015

Amos 5:6–7, 10–15
Psalm 90:12–17
Hebrews 4:12–16
Mark 10:17–31

Engaging the Texts

Amos sets the day's stage with a disturbing word that calls people to "Seek the Lord and live, *or the LORD will break out against the house of Joseph like fire…*" (v.6). He further advises, "seek good and not evil *that you may live*" (v.14). Each is rife with a sense of foreboding about real consequences of action and inaction. Most preachers of grace recoil against such a word. Yet, in the text from Mark, even Jesus continues the theme as he reminds, "how hard it is to enter the dominion of God" (v.24). Between these, the letter to the Hebrews doubles down on judgment with its recollection of the living and active word of God: "sharper than any two-edged sword" and able to judge not only actions, but also "the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (v.12).

Most of us hear ourselves convicted in these texts. Even though we may resist the harshness of it all, and shudder at such "if/then" propositions, we do well to consider how these texts call us to awareness of injustice—in the ways in which we participate in it; how injustice is made known; and the burden injustice places on everyone, whoever we are in system or society.

The texts press for reflection on individual and community, in terms of both complicit and implicit injustice. Amos stands us at the gate—the biblical site for administering justice—pressing us to see whose lives and stories have

been trampled. Amos' words call us to look around neighborhoods and nations asking who today is being pushed aside. The prophet challenges us to come out of beautiful places of retreat that we have built for ourselves—our churches? our homes?—in order to seek what is good and to establish justice, particularly for those to whom justice routinely is denied.

In Mark's gospel, the story pulls in from Amos' wide-angle address to the Northern Kingdom, focusing instead on one individual's question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" An immediate rejection of works righteousness may lead us to miss a kind of loveliness embedded within this simple ask. But, if like Jesus, preachers start by looking at this questioner with love perhaps we will move more deeply into Jesus' teaching about the difficult relationship between wealth and the dominion of God. Maybe by appreciating the questioner's desire to live the commandments as he has been taught, we gain insight into how the dominion of God relates to economic justice inside the gates of this earthly realm. Notice that Jesus' reply begins by affirming commandments about interpersonal relationships; keeping these commands provides a starting place. But Jesus presses further: we also need to be unburdened of ownership, letting go of the hold that things have on us.

Pastoral Reflections

From the perspective of one trusting Jesus as the great high priest who emboldens us to approach the throne of grace where we receive mercy and pardon, it may seem offensive to dig around in the prophetic challenge to seek good and not evil in order that we may live and so that the LORD will be with us. Yet, we desperately need to recognize in ourselves whatever drives our need of grace and mercy in the first place. How similar we are to ancient forebears whose talk and action were greatly divided! Too often we close our ears to words pressing us to recognize ways that we "trample on the poor" or "push aside the needy in the gate." How much we twenty-first century Christians need the push of Amos as rendered in *The Message:* "Hate evil and love good, then work it out in the public square." (5:15a, emphasis added) Today, this challenge might engage in reflection on the Black Lives Matter movement and its underlying stories that plead for attention and action. Or maybe within your local community there is a story about how someone is "working it out in the public square" by actively countering injustices caused by poverty. What does seeking good look like in *your* neighborhood?

Similarly, one might engage the text from Mark by probing the appeal of a "formula" that would answer a simmering question about what and how much is necessary to secure one's inheritance (eternal life). When it comes down to it, folks find familiarity with this story's questioner, too. In our own ways we name how we have kept commandments. Still Jesus' words push toward something more. Consider Luther's catechetical explanations that teach the commandments not only as prohibitions (do not steal), but also as affirmations (assist your neighbor to earn a living wage). Might Jesus' reply be pushing for this deeper engagement? If so, how might preachers play with images of possibility and impossibility, of burdened camels and empty-handed people, in such ways that we all are invited to "let go" of possessions and positions, self-righteousness and, frankly, anything but God that has hold of us? To this end, perhaps Wendell Berry will assist us through his beautiful poetic question, "Why must the gate be narrow? / Because

you cannot pass beyond it burdened."

Joanne Engquist

Lectionary 29/21st Sunday after Pentecost October 18, 2015

Isaiah 53:4–12
Psalm 91:9–16
Hebrews 5:1–10
Mark 10:35–45

Engaging the Texts

A half-year removed from Holy Week, the Suffering Servant song from Isaiah offers another look at the one who "has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases." Language familiar to us stacks images of one who is crushed for us, oppressed and afflicted, a lamb led to slaughter. We hear of his "tomb with the rich" and call to mind the newly hewn sepulcher belonging to Joseph of Arimathea. The passage unfolds a theme of substitutionary atonement that also is found in today's reading from Hebrews. These passages press us to consider how such texts inform or are at odds with our understandings of sin and redemption. How do bearing "our transgressions" (Isaiah) and "reverent submission" in suffering (Hebrews) relate to our understanding of who Jesus is? What is the relationship of our obedience to Jesus as source of salvation?

When reading the Isaiah passage in relation to the gospel, one could pull back from the theme of atonement to see the overarching image of suffering, especially as epitomized in God's Servant. This, of course, connects to Jesus' reply to the shameless request of the sons of Zebedee who want Jesus to do for them whatever they ask. In considering this passage, we should recall this story's prompt. Once again Jesus has announced that they are headed to Jerusalem where the Son of Man will be killed and will rise again. In this "prediction," James and John hear their opening to secure a place in Jesus' reign. Their eyes fix on some latter day of glory, but Jesus pushes back with veiled references to his suffering and death. We note that the disciples' readiness to share this "cup," this "baptism," pours out in stark contrast to the quickness with which they will flee the scene when things actually get going in Jerusalem. More importantly, though, their expressed willingness to share Jesus' suffering has no place in how the Son-of-Man's reign will be organized or ordered. Notice how Jesus affirms that they will indeed share this cup and baptism, but (surprise!) that does not mean they will get what they are after in terms of desired positions of power.

Regardless of how often and how differently Jesus has said it, the inversion of power in Jesus' way still is not making sense. James and John do not get this, but neither do the other ten who are angered by this jostling for pride of place. Jesus seizes this new revelation of "not getting it" as one more opportunity to teach that his way of leading is rooted in humble service.

Pastoral Reflections

James and John look really bad in this story! Clamoring for pride of place, they begin with setting themselves at odds not only with the other ten disciples, but more fundamentally with Jesus' teachings. In what looks like a supreme grab for power, these two demonstrate that they have completely missed the point of Jesus' previous teaching about the inversion of those who are first and last. In some sense they remain stuck in the self-defense voiced by Peter about all that the disciples have given up to follow Jesus (10:28). They have missed Jesus' reply about how

payback for that surrender will come "a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, *with persecutions*—and in the age to come eternal life" (10:30).

Still, however much we recognize the absurdity and condemn the brazenness of the request of James and John, they serve as stand-ins for a large number of Christians who believe that following Jesus leads to some kind of glory and pride of place. What is more, as named by Dr. King in a February 1968 sermon, we also might see "deep down within all of us, an instinct, a kind of drum major instinct, a desire to be out front, a desire to lead the parade, a desire to be first." The preacher who acknowledges such instincts opens multiple points of connections to her listeners. Similarly, it could be powerful to explore how the community (both of disciples/the church and in the wider world) experiences such jostling for power and leadership.

But even if sermons explore the inclination toward and evidence of this power-seeking among Jesus' followers, let this also be countered with Jesus' teaching. After all, Jesus presses for and embodies servant leadership. First he calls for the greatest to be servants, then Jesus embodies as much in the cup and baptism of his suffering and death.

It seems this understanding of how Jesus' followers are called to live is reflected in researcher-storyteller Brené Brown's reminder that "Love is hard. Love is sacrifice. Love is eating with the sick. Love is trouble." She adds, "I thought faith would say, 'I'll take away the pain and discomfort,' but what it ended up saying was, 'I'll sit with you in it.'" Perhaps this sitting with others offers a picture today of one more way to share the cup with the one whom we would follow.

Joanne Engquist

Reformation Sunday
October 25, 2015

Jeremiah 31:31–34
Psalm 46
Romans 3:19–28
John 8:31–36

Engaging the Texts

Even familiar readings can raise questions:

1) Will our proclamation be more historical or eschatological? Much about Reformation Sunday gives occasion to look back. Yet Jeremiah begins, "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant…" The promise is that God is going to do a new thing. Walter Brueggemann writes, "Jeremiah's word borne among Judah's exiles is about the beginning of a new world wrought only by the mercy and freedom of God. There is a new possibility judged by hopeless former rulers to be impossible. They believe that there can be no new thing… But YHWH can do it. Life is given again when YHWH is known to be the giver of newness." (Brueggemann, *The Book of Jeremiah: Portrait of the Prophet*)

2) How shall we preach these texts to modern Americans who are inheritors of Enlightenment assumptions? We're told that being right means conforming to a set of norms, rules, ideals, or principles. Truth is often represented as knowing information that can be verified. To be free is to be independent of any social or political restrictions, obligations, or burdens. How will the Holy Spirit inspire us to proclaim how radically counter-cultural are the biblical understandings of righteousness, truth, and freedom?

3) Will our proclamation be attentive to the grammar of grace? In our readings God is the subject and the predicate, the

doer and the deed, the actor and the action. We are the objects. The case is declarative not subjunctive. Yet we make ourselves the subject of our narratives—be it my life's story, our congregation's work, our nation's self interests. So often we convey that there is something that we must do to complete God's action. The heart of the Reformation was the good news—You are forgiven and free. Now! All on account of Christ! The deed is done in the very proclamation of God's living word of promise! Yes, entrust your life to God's promise. Even your faith is the Spirit's gift.

4) How can our proclamation convey God's word of promise that in our readings is both deeply personal and radically inclusive? In our polarized culture preoccupied with defining boundaries of exclusion and inclusion will we hear and live the "no distinction" in our readings?

5) Will I proclaim with clarity, confidence, and passion what Jesus promises today? Christ is taking you into a relationship of mercy and forgiveness, beauty and joy, love and devotion that constitutes the profoundest and truest freedom one could imagine. The Spirit's reforming movement of reconciliation, liberation, and forgiveness continues! Thanks be to God!

Pastoral Reflections

How can we hold in tension the dialectic of this day—In Christ we are bound to be free and free to be bound? Is God's promise that in Christ you are free from the powers of sin, death, and the devil archaic language or descriptive of our reality? Dare we declare what I heard a preacher announce, that "the myth of self mastery is dead!"? There is no product one can buy, no candidate we can elect, no war we can win, no discipline we can practice or investments we can manage that will free us from the bonds of sin, death, and the devil.

When the worshipers at First Lutheran in San Diego are asked to renounce the forces of evil they are invited to stand and face the east. With arms outstretched in a gesture of defiance and resistance and with shouts they respond to the pastor's three-fold question with "I renounce them!" Christ's people of public resistance are bound into a community of engagement as they offer hospice for the homeless, food for the hungry, and work for justice for the oppressed.

Today is not for second-order discourse about the Reformation. It is for first-order proclamation of the promise "In Christ you are free!" A therapist once said to me, "Mark, you spend a lot of time dwelling on what you think you should have, wish you would have, maybe could have done differently. Who speaks God's word of forgiveness to you? When it is spoken, do you even believe it?"

Ah, yes, faith! How do we not make it our work but the Holy Spirit's gift through the gospel? Faith is confidence (*con-fide* in Latin) in God's faithfulness to God's promises. In a culture of deception and where often religious voices are heard speaking with such certainty that all of life's mysteries, complexities, and ambiguities disappear we are freed in Christ to live in the midst of life's realities with confidence in God's faithfulness to God's promises.

On the tombstone in a rural cemetery I read, "Hazel and Edward died in the faith of their Savior." Wow! Talk about getting the grammar of grace right!

In 1963 a major turning point occurred in the Civil Rights Movement in Birmingham, Alabama. Thousands of demonstrators faced high-pressure fire hoses, snarling dogs and went to jail. Night after night for almost three months the sixty-voice Birmingham Movement Gospel Choir sang, turning tired spirits jubilant.

Great Day for me!
Great Day for me!
I am so happy Jesus made me free
since Jesus came to Birmingham
I am happy as can be!"

Mark S. Hanson

All Saints Sunday
November 1, 2015

Isaiah 25:6–9
Psalm 24
Revelation 21:1–6
John 11:32–44

Engaging the Texts

The familiarity of our readings falls away as the power of God's promise resounds through them. It is a word spoken into the harsh realities of suffering, exile, oppression, death, and mourning.

To those experiencing the realities of separation from the land, people, and temple that gave their lives meaning Isaiah announces, "Lo, this is our God." *Who is this God?* Listen! The One who is making a feast for ALL, wiping away tears from ALL faces, swallowing up death FOREVER. Yes, death and disgrace will be gone from this God's presence. Division and despair are done! This God brings the joys of life lived in God's presence. It is a life lived fully in communion with God, with ALL humankind, and with the whole creation. God delivers abundantly everything intended in the creation and more, not less.

"Lo, this is our God." *Who is this God?* Listen to John's description to early Christians being persecuted and martyred for their faith. Into the midst of the harshest realities humankind knows and perpetrates—tears, oppression, violence, crying, pain, death—this God comes in the flesh making all things new! We are reclaiming the Book of Revelation from those who have co-opted it for their own tribe's GPS out of this world. The mystery and metaphors; the cast of characters—adversaries, angels, beasts; the scrolls, seals, and trumpets are John's means of conveying to the persecuted a word of promise and hope for their life in this world. Yes, and for our resurrected life in Christ. God's promise culminates in our reading from Revelation. The sea—in scripture a symbol of alienation and separation—will be no more. The home of God is with mortals. Death will be no more. The One on the throne is making all things new!

Who is this God? God is the one who is present in Jesus weeping over the death of Lazarus; the one who hears our voices echoing Martha's "if only you or I would have"; the one who commands "roll away the stone. Lazarus, come out!" Jesus did not say, "Lazarus, if you give ascent to these doctrinal truths, engage in these spiritual practices and political actions, uphold these moral standards, then there will be a strong possibility of life for you." No, Jesus is absolutely clear. "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me though they die, will live." Amid the stench of death, there God is. Resurrecting hope. Resurrecting love. Resurrecting community. Resurrecting faith. Resurrecting life! So, dare to let the stench of death scorch your nose. Dare to take away the stone. And see how God loves you through every death into life.

Pastoral Reflections

Something stinks. Wars rage; churches, theatres, streets, and homes become caves of violent deaths; life forms become extinct under the weight of our consumptive living. Can you smell the stench?

African-American men warehoused in prisons, women and girls trafficked for sexual slavery, immigrants fearing

deportation and separation from families. It all stinks!

We are weeping. Jesus is weeping. The cave of death is no place for God's creation. The tombs of poverty, discrimination, isolation, and violence are no place for God's beloved children. Being all wrapped up in a cave—be it of anxiety over controversy or timidity about our witness—is no place for Christ's church.

Take away the stone that keeps the church from getting too close to smelling the stench of death. Take away the stone that keeps hidden the dull ache lingering in our heart long after the death of a loved one.

All Saints Sunday is for taking away the stones that hide our tears. Jesus is weeping. Why not us? Stop the sermon, ask people to share the name and a brief story about the life of one for whom they give thanks this day. Light a candle in their memory.

"Lazarus, come out!" "Unbind him, and let him go." This is Jesus' declaration of your destiny and mine. Will we proclaim the gospel with such clarity, power, and specificity? Unbind all those who live entombed in guilt, shame, and fear. Let them go to live as forgiven sinners—saints! You are a new creation in Christ.

Unbind the church from a single dominant culture, from the shackles of white privilege, from our preoccupation with institutional survival more than the spiritual revival and reconciliation that come from the One who is making all things new.

"Unbind him. Let him go." It is Jesus' command performance. Live in the resurrected life into which you have been baptized. As people of the cross we call a thing for what it is, not sugar coating pain, masking fear, denying injustice or death.

How do we live as people of the resurrection in anticipation of God's promised future? Pastor Joe Bash said it means to get up every day and do our "eschatological calisthenics." Practice today God's promised future by wiping away the tears of those who mourn, being agents of reconciliation, giving water to the thirsty, rolling away the stones of injustice. Yes, share the good news. The home of God is with you. You will be God's people. Death will be no more. You can stake your whole life on God's promise. Saints alive! It is true!

Mark S. Hanson

Lectionary 32/24th Sunday after Pentecost
November 8, 2015

1 Kings 17:8–16
Psalm 146
Hebrews 9:24–28
Mark 12:38–44

Engaging the Texts

This week's readings point to unexpected people through whom God's generosity is made manifest. In 1 Kings 17 no sooner has Elijah begun his prophetic ministry than he ends up famished and must look beyond himself for help. This motif will relentlessly follow Elijah throughout his life, as he must look to God for food to eat, words to speak, and comfort for his troubled soul. God sends Elijah to Zarephath—a startling place for an Israelite to go—and it is from a poor widow's hand that he receives food and drink. This is an astonishing reversal as one of God's celebrated prophets receives sustenance from an outsider and a poor one at that.

The Hebrews text reveals another gift-giver who may easily be overlooked. This, of course, is Christ who has borne our sins and will appear a second time

"to save those who are eagerly awaiting for him" (v.28).

Mark 12:38–44 overflows with surprises. It is easy to imagine why the scribes are highly respected due to their accomplished learning. Jesus sits in Jerusalem and warns his listeners to beware of these esteemed ones who yearn for places of honor and love to dress the part. The gospel's reversal occurs as Jesus looks beyond the scribes to another poor widow—not of Zarephath this time but of downtown Jerusalem—making an astonishing offering of what paltry earthly possessions she has remaining. Jesus lauds her gift of two copper coins. Does the poor widow know she is being bilked by the hierarchy? Does she care? Does she even notice Jesus watching her? Hers is a gorgeous, yet humble offering. Jesus urges his disciples to take note for in a few days he will give his own offering, his life. As Jesus' final week unfolds, he does less and less and more and more is done to him. Finally, he is rendered passive (cf., Passion) with his hands helplessly nailed to the cross. It is such a lowly gift to which all today's readings point.

Pastoral Reflections

The gospel follows the appointed lectionary flow, yet appears strategically placed on this day when many congregations emphasize stewardship. Preachers may be inclined to point to the gifts given in every lesson to encourage congregational members to do likewise and give generously. We dare not forget that, while the scribes were fond of the best seats in the house and of playing dress up, Jesus also notes that they "devoured widows' houses." Homiletic gymnastics should be avoided that twist today's texts in order to devour faithful parishioners' resources to meet next year's budget. Let the texts work their own wonder as they point us to Jesus who gave everything he had, once and for all.

The congregation I serve in downtown San Diego has been providing a host of services for homeless and underserved people for forty years. "Providing" may not be the correct word. We who have been "providing" have actually been provided for by the poor in amazing ways that often go unnoticed. Like the widow of Zarephath and the widow in Jerusalem, people who come to us, ragged and hungry, have given us reason to exist. Rather than dying, our congregation is thriving. On our best days, we are mindful of Psalm 146 pointing us to God who is our help, God who gives food to the hungry and lifts up the bowed down—whether on Sunday morning at the Lord's table or during the week when hundreds receive their daily bread at our patio tables. Who are the unnoticed people in and around our congregations who point us to God's goodness?

The Rev. John Steinbruck, the late pastor of Luther Place Memorial Church in Washington, D.C., was fond of speaking of vertical and horizontal statistics. He delighted in railing against what he called vertical statistics which pointed to heaven in the sky, measuring ministry only by how many were at Sunday worship, how many new members were received, how many baptisms occurred. Whether apocryphal or not, Pastor Steinbruck sent in his annual report to the synod, claiming thousands of horizontal members at Luther Place: the easily forgotten ones who came for a place to sleep and a meal to eat (never part of official statistics requested by church headquarters!). The so-called bag ladies were, for Pastor Steinbruck, like the biblical widows: they reinvigorated a ministry and helped countless others see Jesus in fresh and remarkable ways. They made ministry horizontal as heaven came

to earth and grace was unveiled on the city streets.

Many congregations are feeling poor these days. Pews are often empty, budgets are shrinking, and programs can be lackluster. Many frantically search for catchy gimmicks, overlooking the gifts already in their midst. Again, I think of the congregation I serve. Many parents would love to join our congregation in downtown San Diego but worry whether this is a responsible decision given the dearth of programs for their young ones. We have no glitzy youth room, no moon bounce on Saturday, no charismatic youth worker. What we provide, I trust, is the opportunity for children to behold God sustaining the bowed down, the blind, the prisoners, the hungry, and the sojourners. One prays that our little ones will learn to see how this generous God lifts them up, too, over and over again, throughout their lives.

Wilk Miller

Lectionary 33/25th Sunday after Pentecost November 15, 2015

Daniel 12:1–3
Psalm 16
Hebrews 10:11–14, (15–18)
Mark 13:1–8

Engaging the Texts

We pray at Compline, "O Lord, support us all the day long of this troubled life, until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes…" The shadows are lengthening at this time as the church year draws to a close. As darkness envelops our world and our lives, we look to God from whence comes our help. This week's readings provide comfort as the days shorten, the shadows lengthen, and the evening comes.

The book of Daniel offers a broad historical sweep of oppressive empires and ruthless rulers. Dan 12:1–3 focuses on Antiochus Epiphanes IV who desecrated the Temple in Jerusalem and treated the Jewish people with appalling viciousness. This reading provides hope to those caught in any brutal empire's web. The angel Michael shall rise up and protect God's people. There is a stunning vision of resurrection that trusts that "many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to everlasting contempt." As so often occurs with apocalyptic literature, curiosity will lead many to try to figure out when these end times will occur. Daniel calls faithful people to trust that God is present amid the vagaries of life, no matter how harrowing the challenges may be.

The Hebrews text presents a striking vision of Christ who has offered a single sacrifice for sins and now is seated at the right hand of God, "then to wait until his enemies should be made a stool for his feet."

The so-called "Little Apocalypse" is Jesus' longest uninterrupted speech in Mark's gospel. The shadows lengthen as Jesus walks closer and closer to Calvary. All the while, the disciples are mesmerized by the "wonderful stones and wonderful buildings." Jesus, sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the Temple, speaks to them of what soon will unfold and cautions against those who will come claiming, "I am he!" Jesus warns his followers not to be led astray by predictions of the end times, including rumors of wars, nations rising up against nations, and earthquakes and famine. Even in the face of such catastrophic events, the end is not yet here.

Pastoral Reflections

Whenever I hear of the disciples'

amazement at "what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings," I think of *Little Red Riding Hood:* "Grandmother, what big eyes you have." The disciples were much like Little Red Riding Hood as they came to the big city of Jerusalem. They grew up in backwater towns and were accustomed to quainter places of worship unadorned with breathtaking carvings and extraordinary stonework. They had never seen a place as massive as the Temple. All the while, as the disciples gawked, darkness was falling and Jesus was drawing nearer to Calvary.

In our own time, the darkness falls as well. We rarely attend an ecclesiastical event at which we do not eventually hear about the decline of the church as we know it. Congregations where we were baptized, married, and buried our loved ones are closing their doors. For many, it feels as if the end has come. These congregations are, after all, the places where our hopes and dreams were birthed and where we learned the old, old story of Jesus and his love. We are more mindful than ever of the church's apparent precariousness as seemingly invincible ministries, some with impressive church campuses, are in disarray and toppling. Perhaps we should not be surprised.

Douglas John Hall invites us to ponder: "How could we have been listening to Scriptures all these centuries and still be surprised and chagrined by the humiliation of Christendom? How could we have honored texts like the Beatitudes ('Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you falsely on my account…' [Matt 5:11]), and yet formed in our collective mind the assumption that Christian faith would be credible only if it were popular, numerically superior, and respected universally? How could we have been contemplating the 'despised and rejected' figure at the center of this faith for two millennia and come away with the belief that his body, far from being despised and rejected, ought to be universally approved and embraced?" (Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context,* [Augsburg Fortress, 2003], 170–171).

Jesus warns his disciples to beware of false messiahs, those whose ministries are built on shabby promises and rickety foundations. We, too, should be cautious. We do well to tend carefully to the apocalyptic messages in biblical books such as Daniel and Mark that encourage us to discover God's presence no matter what we face.

Today's texts invite us to place our hopes on what can appear too puny, and yet is the firm foundation of God's eternal promises. The best of the Lutheran confessional tradition (cf., *Augustana VII*) points us not to the magical, stupendous, and gargantuan, but rather to the unadorned gifts of word and sacraments offered to us in good times and bad. It appears that God continues to provide every location, no matter how poor or desperate, with an ample supply of Bibles, bread, wine, and water for vibrant ministry—even when the shadows lengthen and the evening comes. And that, of course, is more than enough (*satis est*).

Wilk Miller

Reign of Christ Sunday
November 22, 2015

Daniel 7:9–10, 13–14
Psalm 93
Revelation 1:4b–8
John 18:33–37

Engaging the Texts

This is a dissonant day. Whether we call this Sunday "Christ the King" or "Reign of Christ," we still see a king who

doesn't fit kingly expectations. Daniel 7 opens with Daniel's vision of four beasts rising from the sea, the last the most ferocious. The Ancient One is dazzling—white as snow—and sits on a throne of fiery flames with wheels of burning fire. The arrogant horn of the final beast is put to death and burned; the other three beasts lose their power. "I saw one like a human being coming from the clouds of heaven." Some translations say one like "a son of man." Whoever he is, this human one is given dominion over all lands and peoples, and "his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed."

The text from the first chapter of Revelation doesn't include the later visions of beasts that will echo Daniel 7. Rather, John of Patmos greets the seven churches, bringing a greeting of grace and peace. The text connects us to the theme of this Sunday by proclaiming Jesus' eternal essence: he is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end.

But John 18 takes us not to a dazzling throne but to a courtroom where Jesus stands as an accused criminal before Pilate. "Are you a king?" Pilate needs to know because "king" is a political term and Pilate is a political person. In this chapter, Pilate goes back and forth between the Praetorium and the crowds outside. He moves from questioning Jesus inside City Hall to appeasing Jesus' accusers outside. Unfortunately, in John's gospel those accusers are always called "the Jews." Years after Jesus' death and resurrection, animosity toward Jewish people infected John's gospel with language that accused all Jews of condemning Jesus. We must repudiate every claim that Jews were responsible for Jesus' death. "Are you the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked. If so, you're guilty of treason because the emperor in Rome is the king of everyone everywhere, including the Jews.

"What is truth?" Pilate asked, and the question is left hanging in the air. Was he being sarcastic or was he searching for answers nobody else had given him? The answer was not a philosophical proof or a creedal proposition. Truth was the person standing in silence before Pilate. John's gospel began with claims that shocked the philosophers. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The philosophers nodded and pulled their chairs closer to listen. They knew this Word. It was *logos* in Greek—as in logic. This was the cosmic, eternal prime-mover, beyond time and space. But they weren't prepared for the next part: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us…full of grace and truth." (John 1:14) That was jarring—a dissonant sound. Eternal Word clashed with earthly flesh. We hear dissonance in the beginning and near the end of Jesus' life. The truth is a person, the Word made flesh.

Pastoral Reflections

Theologian Delores Williams grew up in the South. She remembers Sunday mornings when the minister asked: "Who is Jesus?" The choir responded in voices loud and strong: "King of kings and Lord Almighty!" Then, little Miss Huff, in a voice so soft you could hardly hear, sang her own answer, "Poor little Mary's boy." Back and forth they sang—"KING OF KINGS…Poor little Mary's boy." Delores said, "It was the Black church doing theology." King of Kings is always poor little Mary's boy.

The images clash. One is big and powerful, the other small and poor. The ancient creeds got something right when they named Mary and Pontius Pilate almost in the same breath. Jesus turned the word "king" on its head. This king is in handcuffs, standing before Pontius Pilate who has the power to condemn

him to death or set him free. Soon the crowds will shout, "We have no king but the emperor!"

To proclaim Jesus as king was a subversive act. To pray "Thy kingdom come" can be a dangerous prayer. One of my former students was an Anglican priest from South Africa. He shared a story about what it was like to insist that Jesus was king during the days of apartheid. "Our whole congregation was arrested," he said, "for refusing to obey the government." I thought I misheard him, but he went on to say that all 240 members of the congregation were arrested and put in jail—from babies to a 90-year-old man. "At least babies and mothers were kept together," he added. The pastor himself was imprisoned for a year. To claim that Jesus is king can be dangerous.

Jesus is a king who never rose so high that he couldn't see those who were down low. If we would see Jesus we will look in places kings seldom go. We see Jesus in tent cities where people live together after losing their homes to foreclosure. We see Jesus in shelters where women have sought refuge from abusers. We can't look so high that we miss the ones who are down low. Where do you see Jesus the strange king where you live?

Barbara Lundblad

First Sunday of Advent
November 29, 2015

Jeremiah 33:14–16
Psalm 25:1–10
1 Thessalonians 3:9–13
Luke 21:25–36

Engaging the Texts

Jeremiah 33 echoes the earlier promise in 23:5–6. Both promise that God will cause a Righteous branch to spring up for David. This branch is a person. Unlike King Zedekiah, "he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land." In the earlier passage, the promise was for both Israel and Judah (23:6). "The big shift comes in v. 16: only Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will dwell in safety. The geography of the land had been shrunk to fit post-exilic realities." (Ralph Klein)

In 1 Thessalonians Paul speaks words of thanks akin to those we will hear next Sunday in Philippians. Paul is responding to Timothy's report concerning the Thessalonian church. The connection with today's theme comes in the last verse where Paul prays that the people will have strength to remain faithful "…at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints."

Luke 21:25–36 is the kind of text that surprises us even when we know it's coming. People are preparing for the birth of the baby and instead they see signs of disruption in the heavens and among nations. "Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory." The quotation marks indicate that Luke is quoting Dan 7:13–14, the First Reading for last Sunday. Many will assume this text is about the end of the world, but Jesus doesn't talk about end times here. Instead, he declares that "your redemption is drawing near" and in the parable of the fig tree, he says, "the kingdom of God is near." In an earlier chapter Jesus seems to contradict what he says here about paying attention to signs. In chapter 17 he says, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things than can be observed…for in fact, the kingdom of God is among you" (17:20b–21). The expectation that this generation will not pass away until all of this takes place seems a lie for we are still waiting. Perhaps "this generation" is metaphorical, or perhaps each generation, including our own, is called to "be alert at all times."

It is important to remember that this text comes shortly before Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion. It is not Jesus' birth that saves us, but the cross that is our redemption.

Pastoral Reflections

Like Jeremiah, we are called to speak a word of hope and promise in a world filled with fear and uncertainty, even despair. Nations are in turmoil and people's personal lives may be, too: lost jobs, lost loved ones, lost confidence in our political leaders. In the midst of despair, hope erupts. "The complete fulfillment of God's promises has not yet happened, but it is coming. Such is Advent faith, and Advent hope." (Kathryn Schifferdecker)

Advent is from the Latin—*ad venire*—to come, to arrive. Something is coming. Luke's community must have doubted that anything was coming. The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple seemed to be signs that the day of redemption was near. But that day didn't come. Will Willimon reminds us how hard that was: "By the time Luke's Gospel was written, the church had been waiting for 75 or 80 years for the return of Christ, and that was a long time to be standing on tiptoe." How much harder it is to stand on tiptoe for over 2000 years!

We are tempted to stop believing that God is active in history, tempted to give up on the promise that all will be fulfilled. We become, in the words of Parker Palmer, "functional atheists." In his book Let Your Life Speak, Palmer describes functional atheism as "…the belief that ultimate responsibility for everything rests with us. This is the unconscious, unexamined conviction that if anything decent is going to happen here, we are the ones who must make it happen—a conviction held by people who talk a good game about God" (p.88). We come to believe that we're the only ones who can make things happen. This becomes a huge burden and a sure cause of burnout when our best efforts fail.

But Jesus is calling us to trust that God is acting within history and we are part of God's activity. History is going someplace rather than no place. From Moses to Martin Luther King Jr., history is full of examples of those who glimpsed the promised land. They stood on tiptoe! They believed God's promise even when they would not see it in their lifetime. Some signs are already in our midst. But these signs won't predict the exact date no matter how many books claim to know for certain.

In his book titled *Standing on the Promises*, Lewis Smedes says, "The hardest part for people who believe in the second coming of Jesus Christ is in living the sort of life that makes people say, 'Ah, so that's how people are going to live when righteousness takes over our world.'" We can never do this on our own, only and always with the help of God. Perhaps you and I are called to be signs of the in-breaking of God's kingdom in this time of history.

Barbara Lundblad

Second Sunday of Advent
December 6, 2015

Malachi 3:1–4
Psalm: Luke 1:68–79
Philippians 1:3–11
Luke 3:1–6

Engaging the Texts

"See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me…" The writer's so-called name, Malachi, comes from this verse: in Hebrew the word messenger is malachi. In this chapter God responds to the people's cynicism in 2:17: "You have wearied the Lord..." by saying that those

who do evil are good, by complaining that the God of justice is absent. God's response proclaims that there will be a future judgment in which justice will be meted out. (Ralph Klein) In the Christian canon, Malachi is the final book of the Hebrew Bible, though it is not so in the Jewish canon. When the prophet says, "the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple," there is little doubt that canonical shapers had Jesus in mind. In the next book of the canon, the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus indeed shows up and eventually comes to the temple.

Pastors often quote Paul's words in Philippians when they leave a congregation: "I thank my God every time I remember you…" (Hopefully, they also say this before leaving!) We can feel the deep closeness between Paul and believers in Philippi. Perhaps portions of this prayer could be read as a dialogue between people and pastor or between members of the congregation to one another.

Today's gospel is the first of two lections about John in Luke 3. Preachers will be wise to think about what to preach today and what to save for next Sunday. Luke begins with a long list of Roman rulers and their territories. He also includes the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas. This fits Luke's intention to "write an orderly account" (1:3) and to set John and Jesus within human history (at least, Luke's sense of history). Into this world of imperial and religious powers, "the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness." This is strange: John's father belonged to the priestly order of Abijah and his mother Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron! (1:5) Why is John in the wilderness rather than the temple? Because that's where the word of God came to him, even as Isaiah had prophesied: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord…'" Luke makes no reference to John's clothing or diet as Matthew does in portraying John as Elijah. But Luke quotes a fuller passage from Isaiah 40. Luke is especially fond of the later chapters of Isaiah. Jesus' first "sermon" is based on Isaiah 61 and Luke's story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 fulfills Isa 56:3–8. Luke doesn't call John "the Baptist" (Matt 3:1) or "the baptizer" (Mark 1:4), though Jesus will call John by that title later on (7:33). In Luke's account John was already in prison when Jesus was baptized (3:19–20). Those two verses will not be included in next Sunday's gospel reading—perhaps to avoid the perplexing question: who baptized Jesus? (3:21–22)

Pastoral Reflections

Some people will hear Handel's *Messiah* in Malachi: the earth-shaking bass solo, "For he is like a refiner's fire" and the soaring chorus "He shall purify the sons of Levi." Some may hear the tenor singing "Every valley shall be exalted" when Luke quotes Isaiah 40. This may be a day to hear one of these pieces of music during worship.

Luke wants readers to hear that John was preaching in a world ruled by the powers of Rome. He was preaching in the wilderness even though he could have been in the temple like his father. Remember when John was born? Everyone assumed he would be named Zechariah after his father. But his mother Elizabeth said, "No, he is to be called John." Even as a baby, John didn't follow tradition. The reversals of Isaiah 40—valleys filled, mountains brought low, crooked made straight and rough ways smoothed—echo the reversals of Mary's song which we'll hear on Advent IV.

In the NRSV, the Isaiah text reads "all people" shall see the glory of God. Luke 3 reads, "all flesh shall see the sal-

vation of God." In other translations the word in Isaiah is also "flesh" rather than "people." Does it matter? When Dr. King spun out his dream in Washington, D.C., in 1963 he reached a crescendo in the words of Isaiah:

> "I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places shall be made plain, and the crooked places shall be made straight and the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh shall see it together."

Dr. King heard "all flesh" to mean all flesh, including his dark flesh and the flesh of every African American man, woman, and child. Before hash tags and protest signs, he believed that "Black Lives Matter." Before we rush in to say, "All lives matter," we need to foreground those whose lives still do not matter. In this year of too much dying, "all flesh" is important for us to hear and to preach.

Barbara Lundblad

Third Sunday of Advent
December 13, 2015

Zephaniah 3:14–20
Psalm: Isaiah 12:2–6
Philippians 4:4–7
Luke 3:7–18

Engaging the Texts

Zephaniah 3 is filled with singing—not only does Jerusalem sing, but God also sings! This singing assumes that the restoration promised in 3:8–13 has taken place. The enemies who have been the vehicles of God's wrath are turned away. God says, "I will save the lame and gather the outcast…"—not "cure the lame" as we might expect. It seems that the lame will be saved as they are. "I will bring you home," says God. This can be especially meaningful for people with disabilities and very reassuring to people who can't go home for whatever reason this season.

Philippians offers more joy—not once but twice: "Rejoice!" Paul's words would be a fitting Benediction at the close of worship. Perhaps people could echo phrases spoken by the worship leader, speaking this blessing to someone standing near them: "The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Luke 3:7–18 continues where last Sunday's gospel left off. It's important to remind people that John is preaching in the time of all those rulers named last Sunday. He's preaching not in the halls of power or inside the temple, but in the wilderness. He doesn't seem interested in attracting new members: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" This is harsh language to people who have come to the river; after all, they could have stayed home! Outward washing is not enough: this is a baptism of repentance. Holy lineage is not enough: God can raise up beloved children from these stones! John's message is urgent for the ax is lying at the root of the tree. Repentance must be genuine: bear fruit, change, turn around. "What then should we do?" the people ask. John directs his answer to the crowd, tax collectors, and soldiers. Are the soldiers there to prevent an uprising? If so, their question seems genuine. Each act of repentance has *economic* implications.

John doesn't name the one who will come after him, only that he isn't even worthy to untie the thong of his sandals, the task of a slave. Whoever this one is, he will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. From what we know Jesus didn't baptize anyone. But Holy Spirit and fire figure prominently in Luke's second volume,

beginning with the story of Pentecost (Acts 2). John also says that this unnamed one will "gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. So, with many other exhortations, John proclaimed the good news to the people." Will the congregation want to say, "Praise to you, O Christ" after hearing that news?

Pastoral Reflections

Perhaps you will decide that one Sunday on John is enough and focus instead on Zephaniah. The image of God singing is wonderful and may be fitting if this is also a Sunday for special choir music. If you're not finished with John, you might consider focusing on one of the following themes, but not all of them in one sermon!

Children from stones: we can't depend on heritage or bloodline or long-time membership. God is able to raise up children to Abraham—and we'll add Sarah. Who is being stepped on like stones in your community? Where does God see beloved children where we see people we'd never invite to dinner? In this very long year of political campaigning we have already heard groups of people diminished and demeaned. John isn't running for office. God cherishes people we may despise. God is able from these stones to raise up children of promise.

Active repentance: what then should we do? The people at the Jordan might have wished they had never asked! John didn't give generic answers; he was specific. Whoever has extra coats or food, share with those who don't have enough. John said this to "the crowd" which would seem to include everybody who was there! This is a call to tend the common good: make sure everyone has enough. John's words to tax collectors and soldiers are specific answers to their questions. Some people may hear John saying: "It's time to cut taxes!" or "Don't raise the minimum wage!" But John's words to the crowd are for everybody, pressing us to ask: Why do some have two coats when others have none? Why are some people hungry in a world with an abundance of food? We're in the crowd: what then should we do?

The chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. Some people will hear John talking about hell even though he doesn't use that word. The Bible says very little about hell—is it hades or sheol or the outer darkness where there is gnashing of teeth? Even though we've banished hell from the Apostles' Creed, some people are still afraid of going to hell. Most of our pictures of hell come from Dante's *Inferno* or comic books or gospel tracts. In those sources, wheat and chaff are people—some go to heaven and some burn in hell. But what if both wheat and chaff are within us? Then it is good news that the chaff—whatever separates us from God—will be burned away.

Barbara Lundblad

Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 20, 2015

Micah 5:2–5a
Psalm: Luke 1:46b–55
Hebrews 10:5–10
Luke 1:39–45, (46–55)

Engaging the Texts

Honoring smallness connects Micah to Luke: the insignificant little town of Bethlehem and the lowly servant Mary, both bearing the promised Child. Bethlehem is also the home of David who was himself the smallest of Jesse's sons. This promised ruler will be a person of peace, reflecting not only the absence of war, but also the presence of justice implicit

in the word *shalom*. [Ralph Klein] This *shalom* takes on flesh in Mary's song of praise where the hungry will be filled with good things and the rich will be sent away empty—because they have enough already (1: 53).

Hebrews 10 reminds us again that the little one to be born grows up and offers his very body for us. When people urge us to "Put Christ back into Xmas," we might remind them that X in Greek is *Chi*, the first letter of Christ's name. Xmas and the writer to the Hebrews call us to put the cross back into Christmas.

The Luke text begins "In those days," so we look back to see what those days were. In those days the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary with astonishing news: "You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the son of the Most High…and of his kingdom there will be no end." Now that was something to sing about! But Mary didn't sing. She went with haste to see her cousin in the hill country. Mary "entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth." Of course Zechariah couldn't greet anybody because he had been made mute by the angel Gabriel (1:20). Whether or not Luke purposely set up a contrast between Zechariah and Elizabeth, the male priest's house called forth women's liturgy: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb," cried Elizabeth when she heard Mary's greeting. She calls Mary "mother of my Lord"—the first confession of faith in Luke's gospel. What authority did Elizabeth claim for her bold proclamations? "The child leaped in my womb" (vs. 41 and 44). Luke also said she was "filled with the Holy Spirit" and tradition has often separated Spirit from flesh. But, in her commentary on Luke, Sharon Ringe says, "Elizabeth's body was teaching her theological truths." Elizabeth's liturgy ends with a benediction: "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." In contrast to Zechariah who did not believe and was made mute, Mary speaks, shouts, sings! Some scholars put the words in Elizabeth's mouth, but we don't know if or when the Lord spoke to Elizabeth.

Mary borrowed her words from Hannah, another pregnant woman who sang centuries before. Mary's song is personal—"You have looked with favor on your lowly servant"—and political—"you have brought down the powerful from their thrones." She sings in past tense as though the world has already been changed, even though her son will be born during the census ordered by Emperor Augustus (2:1). Some commentators urge us to focus on the acts of God in this text, rather than on the two women. Perhaps some might also claim that John was a precocious prophet, bearing witness to Jesus even *in utero*. This is the only Advent gospel with women characters—let's not make them mute.

Pastoral Reflections

This is a story about the actions of God, but hopefully we'll also hear the powerful testimonies of two women. We can imagine Mary wondering what to do after hearing Gabriel's message. Could she keep this to herself? Did she want validation that she hadn't been dreaming? A pastor friend told me a story shared by an older woman in the congregation. This woman was taking care of her granddaughter who came to her in the night. "I can't sleep," she said, "it's so dark." Her grandmother held her close and said "You know God is with you in the dark, don't you?" The little girl replied, "Oh, I know God is with me but sometimes I need somebody with skin on."

Elizabeth was somebody with skin

on. She is the only person in Luke 1 who was NOT visited by an angel. Did God give her womanly wisdom to trust the stirring in her womb as a sign? Do we dare to hear and see "ordinary" events as God's revelation? Christian tradition has long separated spirit and flesh—surely the Holy Spirit from the uterus! Elizabeth would never have been allowed to testify at the congressional hearing on contraceptives. She would have been too biased to speak on that all-male panel. What is it about women's bodies that is so dangerous?

Elizabeth didn't know she was dangerous. Even without an angel, she was a prophet. Trusting the stirring in her womb, she greeted Mary as "mother of my Lord." Elizabeth's benediction is for all of us: "Blessed are those who believe there will be a fulfillment of what was spoken by the Lord." Hearing that benediction, Mary began to sing. Hopefully, we will sing, too—not a lullaby but of a world turned upside down.

Barbara Lundblad

Christmas Eve
December 24, 2015

Isaiah 9:2–7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11–14
Luke 2:1–14, (15–20)

Engaging the Texts and Pastoral Reflections

Carols, the glow of candlelight, and the promise of presents under the tree make a genuine exploration of these texts difficult. Yet each of these texts provides a significant counter-narrative to both the world of the writer and our own political, social, and economic context. First Isaiah is speaking to a nation terrified at the impending threat of its nearest neighbors. The ruling elite were tempted to engage in what seemed like a logical alliance with Assyria, the world's "evil empire." Caving to the political and social realities would seemingly protect their nation. Yet Isaiah announces that the future turns, not through real-politik, but through God's ongoing promise to David. The zeal of the Lord is to destroy the mechanisms of war and ensure peace. Isaiah urges the king to look into the future, into the reign of a new-born king, to find wisdom to trust God for light in the darkness. The promise of a new future changes the politics on the ground now. Isaiah urges the people to expect more—not just a fragile peace, but a day when the very mechanisms of war will be destroyed. Everything that is soaked in blood will be destroyed. The oppressor's rod will be broken. Maybe it's too much to ask the Christmas Eve sermon to shift our political perspective, but God's message is certainly born in the midst of our crazy political maneuvering and our ridiculous strategies for security and protection. How often do we cave because it seems logical? As our nation enters an election year, filled with spin and crafted images, what does it mean for us to trust that only God can bring the peace the world requires?

Reading Titus on Christmas Eve always feels like a big downer. With our breakfast casseroles waiting in the refrigerator for the morning's binge, Paul urges us to renounce our worldly passions and to exert self-control. In the midst of our feasting, we're told that grace trains us to renounce the present age and wait for our redemption. Paul is quite literally urging us to be stoic, as these qualities were typical of Stoic philosophy. Self-restraint and a godly life, however, were not for Paul simply a caution about too much joyous desire, a distrust of all that is delightful and sumptuous. Paul is urging Titus to

live from the place of God's grace, to enter life saved, rather than working so hard to be saved. So often our Christmas celebrations are filled with a desperate desire to find happiness or genuine joy, or to be held in community. In the end, our frantic celebrations will not provide the depth for which we yearn. Only the grace of God that has appeared bringing salvation to all, can meet our longing for resurrected life. Rather than making us stingy on Christmas, grace leads us to our true and deepest joy, and it's there that the light shines.

This counter-narrative continues in the angels' song in Luke. As Raymond Brown has pointed out, the announcement to the shepherds is a direct social and political critique of Roman imperial power. Rather than looking to Caesar Augustus for God's face, we are sent to the manger to adore the face of the child. History turns around the birth of Jesus, not around the power of the empire. We are still tempted to seek our future in the strength of our political or economic system. So much of our lives turn around the expectations and structures of postmodern life. We look to our status or success, even to our physical or emotional health, as the starting point for a life of peace and joy. Our children worry about how to fit in. Racism and poverty seem so entrenched we're at a loss as to how to change them. Our daily life turns around the power of these barriers and divisions. Christmas Eve is our beautiful opportunity to say "no" to all these voices, tuning our ears to hear another song that breaks through from heaven. Unless we can grapple with all the songs that clamor for our loyalty and obedience, we cannot hear the shockingly profound message that is present in this story. We risk creating a beautiful myth without grounding this birth narrative, both in its original history, and, more significantly, in our own.

"To you is born this day, a savior." Those words, "to you," are like lightning splitting the darkness. Most certainly, this message is for the whole world, yet it's also for your very own heart. Martin Luther loved to say, "The body of Christ, given *for you*." The bread of life, our hands outstretched as a manger, is the gospel that touches us in the solar plexus of our being. It is "for you." The angel's announcement is not only long ago. It is occurring again as we gather in our darkened churches to light candles, to sing beloved carols, to hear good and saving stories, and to receive the bread of life. The Eucharist, Christ's body given, is our counter-narrative. Bread broken and wine outpoured is the moment around which our life and future turn, our beginning and our end, our manger and our song.

Bradley Schmeling

Christmas Day
December 25, 2015

Isaiah 52:7–10
Psalm 98
Hebrews 1:1–4, (5–12)
John 1:1–14

Engaging the Texts and Pastoral Reflections

How beautiful are the feet of the messenger who brings peace. Perhaps the preacher should be barefoot on Christmas morning. There's something about feet that is surprising here. Feet carry us forward, but they're rarely beautiful. Maybe there's a sermon on our ugly feet that is beautiful to the ears. Maybe the entire assembly should be barefoot, rushing from the piles of crumpled wrapping paper to church to announce that there is good news yet to come. There is hardly time to

dress. Get out of your house before you have time to cover your vulnerability or your ugliness. It's not over! Good news is on the horizon. It's headed our way. Isaiah is writing to exiles settling into their routines in a foreign land. They were coming to terms with the judgment that had been meted out by the Babylonians, making due in a foreign city. Their old life was a ruin. Their faith had been challenged to its core. The old beliefs didn't function as they once did and the idea of Jerusalem as the dwelling place of God was receding into the past. It was hard to imagine there had once been a vibrant sense of God's presence in a temple. Perhaps it seemed naïve to believe that God's promise could last forever. As God's history settled into the past, Isaiah issues a call to the sentinels to lift up their voices, to sing together, "Your God reigns." With the ruins in plain sight, a new word of comfort and redemption is running toward them. God is showing the divine bicep, rolling up the sleeves to save the people. In the sight of life's ruins, God is at work. This is not naïve optimism. It is realistic proclamation. It doesn't deny the ruins lying around us, but suggests that even the ruins can sing a new song. Our past cannot contain the God who brings peace. Wake up! Watch for it. New life is on the horizon, not yet fully in our grasp, but close enough to change our perspective on what tomorrow means. Something is being born before our very eyes, and all we can do is welcome it.

As it turns out, it was God's intention all along to dwell among us. From the very beginning of time, God's wisdom has been at work in our ruins, in our past, in our future, in the Christ. On Christmas morning all we can do is enter the mystery that God's holy wisdom has become flesh and dwells among us. In the bright light of morning, we may see more clearly than we do on Christmas Eve. We see our lives, our families, our attempts at Christmas-making, a bit more realistically after the presents are unwrapped, the food eaten, and the relatives are snoring loudly in the guest room. By the next day, trees will already be on the curb. Yet for the faithful who gather on Christmas morning, we trust that there is more. There is always more with God: there is always light coming in the darkness and divinity in fleshy life. God in Jesus is God in all flesh. The rest of John's gospel is the recitation of this poetic beginning. The story of Jesus is a sign because it is the type for God's story. It is the glimpse behind the scenes, the truth beyond the words—Word in word. John's gospel is the way to read all human stories, light shining in darkness, God embedded in bodies.

The poetry of Hebrews is particularly appropriate this morning. Using the language of Jewish history and faith, the writer sees Jesus as the fulfillment of ancient hope. In these last days, God speaks to us through a child, the heir of all things. To borrow Isaiah's metaphor, he is the messenger who is running toward us. Reading Hebrews—and it should be read well and beautifully—is like looking at an icon. It touches the world beyond the world. The face of Christ is the face of heaven, yet not far away, so near we can touch it, a reflection of God's glory. Jesus, the Christ, is past and future made present to us. It's as if the entire Bible and the story of Jesus come together in the writing of Hebrews, itself an incarnation of the divine.

Perhaps preaching on Christmas Day requires more poetry than explanation, more story than theology. Perhaps the preacher dares to risk in the brightness of morning's light the fleshy ways that God is incarnate, the ways God dwells in our bodies, the ways our "ruins" speak with holy wisdom. Perhaps we dare to see the

feminine side of God, the *logos,* in the wisdom that stands at the beginning of all time. Scholars debate how John has used *"logos"* in his prologue. Does he mean it like the Greek philosophers? Or does he mean it like the ancient writers of the wisdom literature, lady wisdom standing in the marketplace, cajoling us to join the dance, to sing with the angels, "God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father, through him all things were made."

Bradley Schmeling

First Sunday of Christmas December 27, 2015

1 Samuel 2:18–20, 26
Psalm 148
Colossians 3:12–17
Luke 2:41–52

Engaging the Texts and Pastoral Reflections

In both the Old Testament and Gospel texts there are themes of tenderness and anxiety, as well as trust in the ongoing work of God in our families and relationships. The scene in Samuel describes Hannah and Elkanah's annual visit to their child, Samuel, who had been dedicated to God as an answer to Hannah's prayer. Her song of thanksgiving at the birth of Samuel serves as the inspiration for Mary's song at the conception of Jesus. Already little Samuel is dressed in priestly garments, an ephod, representing his growing holiness and stature. Every year, Hannah brings him a new robe. There is such tenderness, love, and a hint of sadness in this meeting and giving of gifts: a mother's annual gift to her child, a sign of their relationship across their separation. The little garment represents the love of his mother, wrapping him all year long as he serves in the house of the Lord. The faithfulness of Samuel's family is in stark contrast to Eli's family. His sons have "sinned in the sight of the Lord." They steal sacrifices meant for the altar and have sex with women who come to worship. Eli is in distress but unable to stop them. The sins of the family will bring judgment to Eli's house and bring an end to the period of the judges. Samuel, growing up in the house of the Lord, surrounded and shaped by this conflict, represents a new chapter emerging in Israel's history. His presence in the temple is a sign of hope that God is at work, a child growing in God's favor. Soon Samuel will hear God calling his name. In just one lifetime, God will give Israel a new way of organizing itself and becoming more fully the community of the covenant. Hope is to be found in the next generation. The sins of the parents cannot end God's favor for the people.

Perhaps it's the garment that connects the Samuel reading to the beautiful text from Colossians. What is the garment that dresses us? Compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience—love that binds everything together in perfect harmony. These loving qualities are gifts of a tender and loving God who shows up, not just once a year with a gift, but every moment of our lives. The Word of God dwells in us and has already made a home within us. So often in the Christmas season we long with nostalgia for home and family. Paul suggests that the better affection for these days is gratitude, rather than longing. In everything you do, give thanks to God the creator through the child Jesus. Wrapped up in the love of God, we find peace that is deeper and more surprising than we can create for ourselves. If God's work through family is one of the themes of these texts, Paul also gives us important advice. Bear with one another. If you have

a complaint against a brother or sister, forgive as you have been forgiven. These may be important words for those of us who have just spent more time with our families than we normally do. Forgiveness is often the most appropriate conclusion to family celebrations.

Clearly, the author of Luke remembered the Samuel story as he tells the story of Jesus' own childhood. Again, we find a child in the temple, this time by the child's own choosing. Whether this is an example of 12-year-old adolescent defiance or a sign of Jesus' own deep spirituality, we're not clear. Jesus astounds his teachers with insight and wisdom that may only be possible from the adolescent brain, the time when childhood and adulthood merge together. We see the faith of the child held up as a sign of the reign of God, paired with the deep desire to be about God's work. "Where else would I be?" Jesus asks his parents when they finally find him, terrified they might have lost him. Perhaps it's a lesson to us adults that the work of God is present in our children already. It's striking that Jesus' parents don't understand what he's saying. This is a typical family! Parents and children talk past each other. They lose one another, then are angry and relieved when they find one another again. For parents, there is a mystery about how our children grow and learn. They think and dream in different ways than we can imagine. They surprise us by their insight. We wonder, "Where did they pick that up?" We see them develop, despite our inattention and our failures. Their defiance or their own failures become the door for new insights and growth. There is deep within our families a spirit of wisdom and growth, God's own favor that stirs and moves us, despite ourselves. As in the Samuel story, Jesus grows up in a world in which fear and loss, misunderstanding and confusion, are ingredients in the crucible through which God fashions the future. In our stories, there is always this mix of terror and favor, death and resurrection. Already, this gospel points forward to cross and empty tomb, with Mary watching Jesus die, only to peer into his empty tomb, astonished and amazed that this child is alive with God.

Bradley Schmeling

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